

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Interview With Juan Carlos Lopez of CNN En Espanol

April 15, 2009

President's Visit to Mexico/Mexico-U.S. Relations/Border Security

Mr. Lopez. You're going to Mexico. It's your first trip to Latin America, and the White House already announced that the Mexican cartels are being included in the Kingpin Act. What does this mean, and what message are you bringing to Mexico?

The President. Well, first of all, the reason we're going to Mexico is because it is our neighbor, it is one of our largest trading partners, and it's a country that has enormous ties to the United States. And so it was very important for me to send a message that we are going to continue to partner with Mexico to accomplish common goals of lifting up people's incomes and growing economic opportunity on both sides of the borders. And I think that President Calderon has done an outstanding and heroic job in dealing with what is a big problem right now along the borders with the drug cartels.

The Kingpin law allows us to go after the finances, the financial underpinnings of the cartels in a much more aggressive and much more effective way. And so that's just part of a broader strategy in which the United States and Mexico will be partnering. We are putting more resources on the border. We are providing additional surveillance equipment. We are going to be dealing not only with drug interdiction coming north, but also working on helping to curb the flow of cash and guns going south.

And so there's a true partnership that's developing. And I want to make sure that the people of Mexico understand that we are going to do everything we can on our end to promote more security and more peace and more prosperity in the region.

Latin America-U.S. Drug Control Cooperation

Mr. Lopez. One of the issues that is discussed in Mexico is that that Government spends between \$7 billion and \$8 billion in their war on drugs, while the U.S. destined \$1.4 billion for the Merida Initiative that includes Central America and is spread out through several years. It's not seen as equitable.

The President. Well, first of all I think it's important to recognize that my budget has actually sought to increase by about 50 percent the amount of money that we're spending. We are already moving forward on, for example, Black Hawk helicopters to be sent to Mexico to help in the fight against the drug cartels.

So I want to put as much additional resources as we can into this effort. I think Mexico has been very serious about dealing with the problem. There are a number of Central American countries who are going to need our assistance as well. And my commitment is to make sure that the United States, working in a multilateral fashion with all the countries in the region, are finally putting an end to the power and the strength of these drug cartels.

Immigration Reform/DHS Assistant Secretary for International Affairs and Special Representative for Border Affairs (Border Czar)

Mr. Lopez. Will immigration reform be part of this whole process? And also, you've named a border czar. Was this consulted with Mexico, and what is he going to do?

The President. Well, the goal of the border czar is to help coordinate all the various agencies that fall under the Department of Homeland Security and—so that we are confident that the border patrols are working effectively with ICE, working effectively with our law enforcement agencies. So he's really a coordinator that can be directly responsible to Secretary Napolitano and, ultimately, directly accountable to me.

There has been a lot of interaction between Mexican officials and officials on our side of the border. And, you know, Janet Napolitano has already been there. She and John Brennan, who is part of my national security team, are currently there. We're going to continue to coordinate effectively.

Now, immigration reform has to be part of a broader strategy to deal with our border issues, and as I've said repeatedly, I am a strong proponent of comprehensive immigration reform. I've already met with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and committed to working with them to try to shape an agenda that can move through Congress. And this is something that I think is important not just because of the drug cartel issue; it's important because of the human costs of a ongoing flow of illegal immigrants into this country. It's something that we need to solve.

Cuba

Mr. Lopez. You're going to Trinidad and Tobago. Most of these countries, it's the first time you meet with the leaders. They've been—they want to bring Cuba up as an issue. You've lifted restrictions on Cuban Americans. How is this issue going to play out?

The President. Well, you know, I have no problem with them bringing up Cuba as an issue. I think I've been very clear about my position on Cuba. What I've said is, is that we should loosen up restrictions on travel and remittances. We have now acted on that. We also believe that Cuba can potentially be a critical part of regional growth in the region.

But Cuba has to take some steps, send some signals that when it comes to human rights, when it comes to political rights, when it comes to the ability of Cubans to travel, that there is some signs that we're moving away from what has been a set of policies that have really hampered Cuba's ability to grow.

I mean, I think—think about the irony, the fact that, you know, on the one hand we're loosening up travel restrictions, and yet there are a lot of Cubans who can't leave Cuba. That, I think, is an example of the kinds of changes that we hope we can promote over time. And I think that our partners in Central and South America can be very important in helping to move away from the past and into the future.

Latin American Systems of Government

Mr. Lopez. There's a movement in Latin America. Countries are resorting to democratic measures to change the constitution so that the current leaders can stay in office. It happened in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and it's also happening in Colombia. It's an internal matter, but how do you feel about those Presidents wanting to stay on, and will you bring it up at the summit?

The President. Well, you know, I think it's important for the United States not to tell other countries how to, you know, structure their democratic practices and what should be contained in their constitution. All I can say is that one of the strengths of the United States Government and our democracy, the reason it's been stable, is I think people have a sense that through

constitutional means they can replace people who are in power who may not be meeting the interests of their populations.

If I'm not doing a good job, ultimately, in some way I'm accountable because of elections. But I'm also accountable in the sense that at most I've got 8 years and there's going to be some turnover. So that's been a strength of our system. And ultimately, it's up to the people of those countries to make a decision about how they want to structure their affairs.

Meeting Latin American Leaders/Latin America-U.S. Relations

Mr. Lopez. Now, more than the issues at the summit, a lot of people are focused on how you will interact with other leaders, for example, how you will face Hugo Chavez. Have you thought about that? Is it going to be any different than any other President?

The President. No, look, he's the leader of his country, and we'll—he'll be one of many people that I will have the opportunity to meet. And the whole message that we've tried to send throughout my campaign, throughout my recent travels overseas, at the G-20 for example, has been that the United States, I think, has a leadership role to play in dealing with many of the big problems that we face.

But we also recognize that other countries have important contributions and insights. We want to listen and learn, as well as talk. And that approach, I think, of mutual respect and finding common interests is one that ultimately will serve everybody.

Cuba

Mr. Lopez. Fidel Castro reacted to your lifting of sanctions, saying it was a positive move, but that he expected the lifting of the embargo. And he said that Cuba won't beg, but that's what eventually they expect from the U.S.

The President. Well, I don't expect Cuba to beg. Nobody is asking for anybody to beg. What we're looking for is some signal that there are going to be changes in how Cuba operates that assures that political prisoners are released, that people can speak their minds freely, that they can travel, that they can write and attend church, and do the things that people throughout the hemisphere can do and take for granted. And if there's some sense of movement on those fronts in Cuba, then I think that we can see a further thawing of relations and further changes.

But we took an important first step. I think it's a signal of our good faith that we want to move beyond the cold war mentality that has existed over the last 50 years. And hopefully, we'll see some signs that Cuba wants to reciprocate.

U.S. National Security/Spaniards in U.S. Custody

Mr. Lopez. Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon is considering a lawsuit filed by attorneys representing six Spaniards who were at one point held at Guantanamo. And that lawsuit wants to go after President Bush's legal team. What is your reaction to that?

The President. Well, you know, obviously, I've been very clear that Guantanamo is to be closed, that some of the practices of enhanced interrogation techniques, I think, ran counter to American values and American traditions. So I've put an end to these policies.

I'm a strong believer that it's important to look forward and not backwards and to remind ourselves that we do have very real security threats out there.

So I have not had direct conversations with the Spanish Government about these issues. My team has been in communications with them. I think that we are moving a process forward here in the United States to understand what happened, but also to focus on how we make sure that the manner in which we operate currently is consistent with our values and our traditions.

And so my sense is, is that this will be worked out over time.

Latin America-U.S. Relations/U.S. Foreign Policy in Latin America

Mr. Lopez. There is a sense of mistrust in the region towards the U.S. You inherited—you said you inherited the economic crisis. Did you inherit this from previous administrations? And how are you going to convince Latin Americans that the U.S. is sincere and that you really want to——

The President. Well, you know, I don't want to overstate the degree of anti-American sentiment. I mean, I think that these things go in ups and downs. But there are an awful lot of people in Latin America who are inspired by traditions of equal opportunity and entrepreneurship. And there's a reason why there are consistently so many immigrants to our country from Latin America. I think people still see America as a place full of hope.

But what is also true is there has always been a tradition of concern that the United States has been heavy-handed when it comes to foreign policy in Latin America. And that's not something that just arose during the Bush administration. That's something that dates back to the Monroe Doctrine and a long history of U.S. involvement in Latin America.

So the important thing—the important message I think I have to send is that we live in the 21st century now. Times have changed. A country like Brazil is a economic powerhouse and is a big player on the world stage. My relationship with President Lula is one of two leaders who both have big countries, that we're trying to solve problems and create opportunities for our people, and we should be partners. There's no senior partner or junior partner.

When I sit down with President Calderon—you know, he's a very capable person, and Mexico is very important to the United States just as the United States is important to Mexico. And so we have this interdependence.

And if we have an attitude of partnership, then—there are going to be times where countries disagree, but that's not just true between the United States and Latin American countries, between Latin American countries there are disagreements. That's the nature of foreign policy. But I think that we can put our foreign policy on a solid footing so that moving forward it's constructive, and ultimately, we're making lives better for ordinary people in all countries.

Mr. Lopez. Muchas gracias.

The President. De nada.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 1:54 p.m. in the Library at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to President Felipe de Jesus Calderon Hinojosa of Mexico; Janet Napolitano, Secretary, and Alan Bersin, Assistant Secretary for International Affairs and Special Representative for Border Affairs, Department of Homeland Security; Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John O. Brennan; and President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil. Mr. Lopez referred to President Hugo Chavez Frias of Venezuela; former President Fidel Castro Ruz of Cuba; and Judge-Magistrate Baltasar Garzon Real of the National Court of Spain. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press

Secretary on April 16. Portions of this interview could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Interviews :: Cable News Network (CNN) En Espanol.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Bersin, Alan; Brennan, John O.; Bush, George W.; Calderon Hinojosa, Felipe de Jesus; Chavez Frias, Hugo; Lopez, Juan Carlos; Lula da Silva, Luiz Inacio; Napolitano, Janet A.

Subjects: Brazil : Economic growth and development; Brazil : President; Budget, Federal : Fiscal year 2010 budget; Cable News Network (CNN) En Espanol; Caribbean nations: Economic development and growth; Central America : Crime and narcotics trafficking; Commerce, international : Group of Twenty (G-20) nations; Communications : News media :: Presidential interviews; Congress : House of Representatives :: Congressional Hispanic Caucus; Cuba : Democracy and human rights issues; Cuba : Guantanamo Bay, U.S. Naval Base, closure of detention facilities; Cuba : Relations with U.S.; Cuba : Travel restrictions; Cuba : U.S. policy changes :: Remittances and communications regulations; Cuba : U.S. policy changes :: Travel-related transactions regulations; Defense and national security : Border security; Drug abuse and trafficking : Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act; Drug abuse and trafficking : Foreign narcotics traffickers; Drug abuse and trafficking : Interdiction efforts; Homeland Security, Department of : Assistant Secretary for International Affairs and Special Representative for Border Affairs; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Immigration and naturalization : Illegal immigration; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Mexico : Border with U.S., infrastructure and security; Mexico : Counternarcotics efforts, cooperation with U.S.; Mexico : Crime and narcotics trafficking; Mexico : Economic growth and development; Mexico : President; Mexico : President Obama's visit; Mexico : Relations with U.S.; Mexico : Trade with U.S.; Spain : Former detainees at Guantanamo Bay; Terrorism : Terrorists :: Interrogation procedures; Venezuela : President; Western Hemisphere : Americas, Summit of the; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.

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