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Gulf crisis overshadows regional economic plight:  
Bush trip to Latin America represents major failure

Aside from the aborted Argentine military uprising on the eve of President Bush's stopover in that country, his six-day, five-nation visit to Latin America went hardly noticed in the U.S. and international media. Given the magnitude of the region's current problems, it produced painfully few tangible results for Latin America, as well.

The main factor militating against a successful presidential visit was the Gulf Crisis and fast-breaking events surrounding it. Rather than using the occasion of the president's visit to educate North Americans on Latin America's grim financial prospects arising from its huge debt, its deflationary policies mostly affecting the poor, its falling standard of living, shrinking economies, and financial stringencies, evening TV segments and newspaper headlines back in the United States were dominated by Bush's pronouncements on the Gulf Crisis. The final coup de grace to any possibility that the U.S. media would devote any substantive attention to regional affairs was prompted by Saddam Hussein's pronouncement that he would release all U.S. and other foreign hostages, which totally dominated coverage of the final days of the president's Latin America visit, during his stay overs in Chile and Venezuela.

Regretfully, it can be said that Latin America merely provided an exotic foreign platform for what the president would have been doing had he remained in Washington -- carrying on daily press briefings on Persian Gulf developments and generating photo opportunities-- with the result that most North Americans were hardly aware that the president was even in Latin America.

While it is self-evident that few tangible results were produced during the president's Latin American trip, even the obvious and commendable good will that was created simply by his decision to travel there may have a very short half-life, as Latin America's economic situation dramatically worsens. It is understood that with higher priority commitments elsewhere in the world and with the U.S. economy now entering into a recession and the government's budget reflecting an extremely large deficit, along with spending restraints placed on it by Gramm-Rudman, the president hardly was in a position to offer his hosts big-ticket promises. But his Latin American colleagues may have expected the presentation of proposals that provided more than \$100 million a year for five years for the entire region and more than a theoretical total of \$12 billion in debt relief when the region's total foreign obligations add up to over \$400 billion.

Rather than begin his discussions with his regional counterparts with a realistic analysis that he is aware of Latin America's economic plight and that they must be familiar with the unpleasant fact that Washington will be able to do little to ameliorate conditions there, the president came forth with a spate of statements touting a fantasied and grandiose vision of hemispheric free trade. These speeches, many of them drafted by former Reagan administration pro-contra speech writer Bernard Aronson, who now serves as Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, were filled with far-fetched generalities which in no way informed their audiences that the U.S. Congress is hardly prepared to pass legislation that is bound to cost this country millions of blue collar jobs. This is particularly the case as this country is about to enter into a recession, and that there is absolutely no prospect that a hemispheric free trade measure will come into being in its present form in the foreseeable future.