

The Atlantic Century

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Throughout the previous decade, strategists and statesmen asserted that we were about to enter the “Pacific Century.” Global power and wealth would shift to East Asia. American interests, power, and investments would follow. The Atlantic would become a dead sea strategically, its littoral states and their continents declining to marginal status. Economic opportunities, crucial alliances, and the gravest threats would rise in the east, as surely as the morning sun.

An alternative view of the evidence suggests that the experts were wrong. Although the United States will remain engaged in the Far East—as well as in the Middle East, Europe, and nearly everywhere else—the great unexplored opportunities for human advancement, fruitful alliances, strategic cooperation, and creating an innovative, just, and mutually beneficial international order still lie on the shores of the Atlantic. The difference is that the potential for future development lies not across the North Atlantic in “Old Europe,” but on both sides of the South Atlantic, in Africa and Latin America.

Especially since 9/11, the deteriorating civilization of the Middle East has demanded our attention. But we must avoid a self-defeating strategic fixation on the Arab Muslim world and self-destructive states nearby. Any signs of progress in the Middle East will be welcome, but the region overall is fated to remain an inexhaustible source of disappointments. While Africa suffers from an undeserved reputation for hopelessness (often a matter of racism couched in diplomatic language) and Latin America is dismissed as a backwater, the aggressive realms of failure in the Middle East always get the benefit of the doubt. When the United States places a higher priority on relations with Egypt than on those with Mexico or Brazil, and when Jordan attracts more of our attention than does South Africa, our foreign policy lacks common sense as much as it does foresight.

Our obsession with the Middle East is not just about oil. It’s about intellectual habit. We assign unparalleled strategic importance to the survival of the repugnant Saudi regime because that’s the way we’ve been doing things for half a

century, despite the complete absence of political, cultural, or elementary human progress on the Arabian Peninsula.

Certainly, the United States has genuine strategic interests between the Nile and the Indus, and the threats from the region's apocalyptic terrorists and rogue regimes are as deadly as they are likely to be enduring. But we must stop pretending there is a bright, magical solution for the darkest region on earth, if only we Americans could discover the formula. The Middle East will remain a strategic basket case beyond our lifetimes. We will need to remain engaged, but we must be careful not to be consumed. If you are looking for hope, look elsewhere.

Apart from crisis intervention and measured support for any promising regimes that may emerge in the region (such as, perhaps, an independent, democratic Kurdistan), we need to begin shifting our practical as well as our emotional commitments away from the Middle East—and even away from Europe and northeast Asia—in order to help Africa and Latin America begin to realize their enormous strategic potential. Our past lies to the east and west, but our future lies to the south.

This is not a utopian vision. On the contrary, the returns of such a shift in our commitments would be practical and tangible. Turning our focus to Africa and Latin America would be the strategic equivalent of a “dogs of the Dow” approach, investing in “stocks” that are out of favor and unwanted, and placing our resources where the potential returns are highest, instead of continuing to throw them at strategic investments with, at best, marginal rates of return.

Nor is this about forging a neo-classical American empire. Rather, it's about creating strategic partnerships to supercede our waning relations with continental Europe and about structuring alternatives to an overreliance on the states, populations, and markets of East Asia. Although the United States, where all the relevant cultures converge, would be the most powerful member of an Afro-Latin-Anglo-American web of alliances, this would be a new kind of informal, democratic network, based on shared interests, aligning values, cultural fusion, and mutual advantage.

Turning our attention to Africa and Latin America is also the right thing to do, although that will not impress the advocates of Realpolitik. For them, the argument would lie in the security advantages, the profit potential in developing human capital, the expanded markets, and the enhancement of American influence even beyond our current “hyper-power” status.

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Old Asia and Old Europe have devoured American lives and consumed our wealth. The regressive societies of the Middle East are sick—and contagious—with hatred, jealousy, and congenital disrepair. Whenever the United States is forced to engage cultures whose glory days are behind them, we win, but we often pay a bitter price.

America always has done best on frontiers, from our own West through technological frontiers to our pioneering of the society of the future, in which gender, racial, and religious equality increasingly prevail (to the horror of our enemies, foreign and domestic). And the great human frontiers of the 21st century lie to our south.

As this essay is written, President Bush visits Africa, having asked Congress to increase our funding for counter-AIDS initiatives in Africa and the Caribbean to \$15 billion. The Administration is contemplating the dispatch of Marines to Liberia, and the people of that long-abandoned country are begging for the Yankees to come and stay. During a visit to Zimbabwe last winter, the commonest question asked of me was, “Why, please, does the American Army go to Iraq, but not come here? We *want* you to come and free us, sir.”

Of course, Zimbabwe is a problem for the Commonwealth of Nations, but what’s striking in much of Africa is the desire for American involvement that one encounters below the level of bureaucrats and intellectuals still blinded by the ideology of the liberation struggle. The people of sub-Saharan Africa harbor the most pro-American sentiments of any population outside of our own country. Even in francophone Ivory Coast, last autumn’s violence resulted in signs, written in English and held aloft by demonstrators, begging Uncle Sam to rescue them from Paris and its support for Islamic insurgents.

One of the many unintended consequences of the 9/11 attacks, as well as of al Qaeda strikes in East Africa, has been the sudden realization in Washington that Africa matters. At present, the focus is heavily on security issues. But, as the Administration is already learning, enduring security is inseparable from development, opportunity, justice, and the rule of law. In the long term, President Bush’s journey to Africa could prove of even greater strategic significance than our war-on-terror campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In an unfortunate symmetry, however, the same terror events that led to a new appreciation of Africa’s relevance stopped the President’s initiatives to improve relations with Mexico and the rest of Latin America dead in their tracks. The hopes of Mexico’s reformist President, Vicente Fox, became unintended victims of 9/11, and recent elections decreased the number of seats in the legislature held by Fox’s National Action Party. Fox, whose country may be the most important of all foreign powers for America’s security, economy, and society, was forgotten amid the dust and rubble of the World Trade Center towers.

Nonetheless, much of Latin America is on the threshold—or already across the threshold—of genuine reforms and profound cultural changes. For the

first time, traditional political parties throughout Latin America are losing the power to resist the popular will—and the popular will wants real democracy, economic opportunity, and an end to the plague of corruption. There are now two generations of Latin American technocrats, almost a critical mass, educated in the United States. Miami is the informal financial and cultural capital of Latin America. Yet, the United States pays more attention to Pakistan than it does to all of the countries south of the Panama Canal. We bribe our enemies, while ignoring our greatest potential friends.

Latin America's family secret is that everybody really wants to be a gringo, though it dare not be said in public. The "Yankee go home" era is over, except for the dwindling revolutionary hardliners who have failed the continent as badly as did their nemeses, the *caudillos*, the strongmen and the land barons. Latin Americans don't want to Latinize the United States—they want to Americanize their own countries by creating responsible governments, lawful economies, and social regimes that respect human rights and human dignity. Yet the United States shows greater respect for Saudi Arabia, a regime founded on the principle of religious intolerance that permits no political dissent, routinely abuses human rights, and denies the most elementary freedoms to its female citizens. It would be hard to design a more counterproductive, nearsighted foreign policy.

During the buildup to Operation Iraqi Freedom, a fascinating constellation of allies emerged. When President Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Spain's Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar posed in front of the cameras after their mini-summit, an unwitting world got a snapshot of a strategic triumvirate of North Atlantic powers positioned to change the world and their own situations for the better, if only they could continue to work together (both Britain and Spain should be viewed as members of a great Atlantic community, not primarily as European states). Indeed, if Portugal could be persuaded to join the group, you would have the ideal combination of North Atlantic democracies to work with Latin America and Africa in the coming decades.

The linguistic and cultural ties are there, as is a surprising degree of goodwill on the part of previously colonized populations. While the most oppressive and corrupt colonial powers of the 20th century, notably France, watch their influence fade in Africa (President Bush's visit to Senegal was calculated to show the flag in a developing power vacuum), the British legacy has been profoundly different. The French, Belgians, and others left behind a system of corrupt economies in service to statist governments. The British left behind a belief in the rule of law, democracy, and human betterment.

Despite the suffering and tribulations of black Africans in British colonies, the colonized learned to value the colonist's ideals for his own country even as they despised and fought against the colonist himself. The vile Apartheid regime in South Africa and the white-supremacy policies of Ian Smith's Rhodesia could not destroy the legacy of the missionary school's lessons about the Magna

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Carta, elected parliaments, and fair play. Those colonized by the British kept more than the sport of cricket for themselves. They also kept a belief in constitutions.

The Spanish legacy in Latin America was much harsher, but Spain’s rule was cast off almost 200 years ago. The old wounds healed, while the cultural affinities remain. Indeed, in much of the 20th century, it was Spain, slumbering under the Franco regime, that wasn’t moving forward. Now, with Spain vibrantly democratic and economically successful (for the first time in four centuries), Madrid has rediscovered its long-lost empire and seeks to engage it in emulation of Britain’s Commonwealth.

In Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, Spain found a visionary. While his party may suffer because of his unpopular support for the war to depose Saddam Hussein, he did not let opinion polls dictate his actions. Aznar did what he believed to be necessary and right, not only in the sense of ridding the world of a dangerous dictator, but in recognizing that Spain’s greatest potential for market expansion and diplomatic influence lies in working constructively with the United States, its fellow Atlantic power, rather than slavishly following the dictates of continental states with profoundly divergent interests. Spanish investors have sunk billions into Latin America, and they are in for the long haul. They want cooperation, not confrontation, with the United States.

Aznar recognizes that the best route to an Atlantic future runs through Washington. While fashionable anti-Americanism in the streets of Spain may limit intense cooperation in the near term, in the longer term ever more Spaniards, chafing under European Union restrictions dictated by Paris and Berlin, will see opportunity to the west, not east. And it is hard to imagine any coalition that would be better for Latin America than a strategic partnership between the United States and Spain.

The Portuguese legacy is the most peculiar under consideration here. Portugal was the first European colonial power and the most enduring. While Lisbon withdrew from Brazil in the mid-19th century, it continued to occupy its African colonies into the 1970s. The prevalent post-colonial model would suggest that Portugal has no role to play for the present, given the degree of alienation manifested by recently liberated colonies. But Portugal’s small size and lack of strategic power paradoxically offer it recuperative advantages. Mozambique and Angola, for example, do not fear creeping recolonization from the Iberian Peninsula—they’re more concerned about South African “economic im-

perialism.” Portugal has a surprisingly laissez-faire relationship with its former colonies, where its cultural influence is still felt profoundly and welcomed. Should Portugal recognize its future where its past greatness lay, in Africa and South America, it could serve as an essential bridge between its former colonies and other states in the Atlantic strategic network.

The United States, however, offers the model of success others wish to emulate. While the empty hubris of much of the Arab world leads it to anathematize all things American, the populations of the South Atlantic continents admire the social and economic success of the United States, our cultural totems, and our political values.

Certainly, a significant—though shrinking—number of leftists and populists in Latin America cling to yesterday’s image of a ruthless, interventionist Uncle Sam bringing his guns to bear on behalf of the United Fruit Company. But the average citizen yearns for his or her voice to be heard as the voices of citizens are heard in the United States. They want a fair shake, economically and legally. They hate the corruption that torments their lives and robs them of their potential. They despise their inheritance of nepotism and a rigid class system. And, thanks to the information revolution and increased economic migration, they now know that things are better elsewhere.

Centuries of Latin American awareness that things were wrong were not enough. The people of Latin America also needed to know that change was possible, that things truly could be different. Now they know. And we will see decades of heady change south of the Rio Grande.

The people of Latin America do not want another Juan Peron or Fidel Castro. They want their FDR and JFK.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the reluctance to embrace the United States and its ideals is generational. The leaders and intellectuals who waged Africa’s long independence struggle were shaped by the decades in which socialist solutions and communist rhetoric seemed indispensable tools of liberation. Now, even though statist socialism has collapsed or turned capitalist everywhere else, many of those aging heroes of the independence movement—even giants such as Nelson Mandela—cannot fully overcome the prejudices of their youth. And with sadly few exceptions, most notably Mandela, the old maxim that successful revolutionaries fail at governing certainly has been proven by the African experience.

The first European conquest of Africa was accomplished with guns. The second European conquest was achieved through the inspiring rhetoric and practical folly of Marxism-Leninism and related theories of “rational” social organization. Today, Africans must achieve a third conquest of their continent by themselves, a liberation from the poisonous cant of their liberators. The progress some African countries have made in just the last ten years in embracing practical, humane solutions to societal problems has been remarkable. But vicious wars and genocide make headlines, while African initiatives that slowly improve econo-

mies, gradually increase literacy, limit the spread of AIDS, or battle against corruption do not. Journalists flock to scoundrels, not to dull, dutiful bureaucrats.

In much of Africa, the transition from the revolutionary generation and its tainted protégé generation is already underway. Africa has been allowed to fall so far that progress will be slow and wildly uneven, but the willingness to embrace the rule-of-law and market economics is there, impeded only by the corrupt political class in far too many sub-Saharan countries. And the old, automatic anti-Americanism is passing from the scene where it has not already disappeared entirely.

Instead, younger Africans increasingly see the United States as a model of a racially integrated society in which blacks are accorded opportunity and dignity. It is impossible to overstate the contrast in African eyes between uniformly white European politicians on state visits to Africa and the arrival of Colin Powell or the sight of Condoleezza Rice standing beside the American President.

Where can sub-Saharan Africans turn for models, for support, for friends? To the north, the Islamic world is profoundly bigoted against them, religiously and racially. Muslims were the original slave traders, the worst exploiters, and, except for the Belgians, the most savage oppressors of sub-Saharan Africa. Today, the collision between North African Islam and black African Christianity is not only a matter of daily violence, from Nigeria to Sudan, but of growing confrontation and conflict. Indeed, the new “church militant” is emerging in Africa, and the struggle with expansionist Islam may lead to the most savage religious wars of our century. This is the dynamic that should most concern us about the continent’s future, since Africa’s religious fault line is largely a racial divide, as well—a combination that, historically, has made for especially virulent hatreds and merciless wars. The African deserts, grasslands, and cities where Christianity and Islam collide already offer a textbook example of Samuel Huntington’s theory of the “clash of civilizations.”

If the Islamic world’s North African crusaders are viewed as implacable enemies of Christian Africa, neither can the populations of sub-Saharan Africa turn to Europe and their former colonial masters for social or political models. Even Britain, which has an enormous, positive role to play in Africa’s future, remains a racist, stratified society, despite much progress since the 1960s. On the continent, states such as France and Germany are rabidly racist, and despite protestations to the contrary from Paris and Berlin, the people of Africa know it. (A recent, severe miscalculation by President Chirac of France occurred when he insisted on hosting Zimbabwe’s dictator Robert Mugabe in Paris, even though the European Union had imposed a travel ban on Mugabe. The visit was so deeply resented by the half-starved population of Zimbabwe that it guaranteed the French will not be welcome between the Zambezi and the Limpopo for a long time to come.)

Indeed, one of the key lessons Africans have drawn from comparing foreign societies is that, while anyone can become an American, no one can be-

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come French, or German, or Swedish. Of course, the global popularity of black American sports and entertainment figures helps, too. But they do not play the primary role we often imagine for them. The people of Africa don't just want good music and jump shots. They want good government. And jobs. And justice. The Statue of Liberty is still a better draw than Beyonce Knowles.

We don't think of Latin America and Africa as similar, despite their cultural ties and geographic proximity. Yet, the identical dreams of the average residents of Monrovia or Mexico City are to claim the best of America for themselves.

This vision of affinities and strategic connectivity between the Americas and Africa isn't new. It's the vision Fidel Castro tried—and failed—to apply 30 years ago. Castro simply connected the historical lines on the map. His mistake was to see Havana as the nexus, when the lines actually converge in New York City.

For all his many faults and stubborn cruelty, Castro was one of the great visionaries of our time (and whether we like it or not, he did as much good for Cuba as harm; his great mistake was outliving his virtues). He recognized that the slave trade from Africa to the New World hadn't created a one-way street (or sea lane), but that the chronically underestimated African influence on the Americas paved the way for the development of mutual strategic ties. Culture opened the door for power and influence.

Castro had the vision, but lacked the resources to implement it successfully—although his forces repeatedly defeated the Apartheid-era South Africans in Angola. The United States had the resources, but, blinded by the prejudices and priorities of the Cold War, failed to grasp the vision. We saw only an attempt to spread communism with a Cuban accent, while Castro was trying to build strategic bridges across the seas that once carried slave ships.

Indeed, for all the oppression and problems of Cuban society, it offers the best example of racial integration outside of the United States; by some practical measures, integration is even more advanced in Cuba. Castro understood that he could offer a model no one else was advertising (and 30 years ago, integration certainly had not progressed as far in the United States as it has today). He didn't just offer soldiers and doctors to Africa. Castro tried to offer a model of empowerment. His was, perhaps, the greatest strategic dream of the last half-century. His failure must be bitter to him.

Now we have inherited Castro's dream of trans-Atlantic peoples bound together by culture, common interests, and mutual aspirations. Americans have the resources to do what Castro and his expeditionary forces could not achieve. But will we have even half the vision of that aging revolutionary in fatigues?

Whenever Africa comes up in a Washington conversation, eyes roll, shoulders shrug, and an entire continent is dismissed with a few phrases about AIDS, civil wars, genocide, and corruption. The unspoken message is that Africa is hopeless, that it's "just the way those people are."

But it's *not* just the way "those people" are. Africa is the way brutal colonization, fatal borders, the struggles of the Cold War, foreign ideologies, and, finally, utter neglect have made it. Few of the arms used in those wars or tribal massacres were made in Africa. European governments—most notably France again—not only didn't fight corruption in their former colonies, they fostered it as a tool for continuing their control. French presidents and prime ministers have a long tradition of mutually profitable, personal relationships with African dictators. Indeed, corruption as a form of exploitation may have done even more damage to post-independence Africa than any other catastrophe prior to the advent of AIDS.

And what about AIDS? Has the disease doomed Africa to failure and backwardness? Considering the scope of the human devastation, with HIV infection rates that may range as high as 60 percent in some populations, unrestrained pessimism may, indeed, be in order. Tens of millions of Africans have died or will die, leaving millions of orphans behind. Professionals, the educated, and skilled workers are especially hard hit, since they have the disposable income to acquire more sexual partners. Military establishments are being gutted by AIDS.

Yet the effects of catastrophes are rarely linear. On the contrary, human collectives react unexpectedly to disasters, and the greater the scope of the loss, the more nonlinear the ultimate reaction may be. AIDS is, unquestionably, so great a tragedy for today's Africa that its devastation cannot be measured simply in the number of deaths. But that does not mean that the reverberations in tomorrow's Africa will necessarily take negative forms.

Consider a historical event that may have been even more lethal to a continental population: The Black Death, which reached the edges of Europe in 1346, is believed to have killed between one-third and two-thirds of the continent's inhabitants. Nothing known to human history killed so high a proportion of victims with such speed. A linear extrapolation would have predicted Europe's economic collapse, a faltering culture, and, at best, centuries of slow recovery.

The real results were decidedly nonlinear. Despite recurrent bouts of the plague, modern Europe was born in the disease's shadow. The epidemic fatally weakened the feudal system, opened Europe's cities to fresh blood, undercut Rome's religious monopoly, challenged the tradition of static, Aristotelian knowledge, and led to a flowering of the arts. The labor shortage created by the Black Death laid the foundations for collective bargaining and put talent at a new, far higher premium.

Instead of triggering a European collapse, the Black Death exploded the established order and was followed by the Renaissance, Europe's voyages of discovery, the Reformation, foreign colonization, the scientific revolution, and the rise of the West to centuries of global domination.

This observation is not intended to make light of the vast misery caused by AIDS in Africa (or elsewhere), but only to warn that those who assume that disaster can only lead to further disasters are wrong. Catastrophe, paradoxically, unleashes human creativity and great energies. Out of the many imaginable post-AIDS scenarios for Africa, one certainly would be economic and governmental failure. But an alternative scenario could see an Africa reborn. We simply do not know. But the smart money will always bet on human ingenuity, innovation, and will.

AIDS could lead to militarized societies based along tribal lines, or to the breakdown of tribal control, to the rise of violent millenarian sects, or to more egalitarian societies, to an opening of markets or their collapse. The results simply are not predictable at this point. But it is fair to observe that our continued insistence that Africa can only fail runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Saints, con-men, politicians, and smart investors see opportunity in disaster. The correct question isn't whether or not there are opportunities in Africa, but which of the many opportunities Africa offers its people and the world are the most promising. In the Arab world, we play down the negatives. In Africa, we ignore the positives. As a nation proud of our rationality, we are behaving very irrationally, indeed.

Consider, briefly, the most promising major country on the continent—South Africa. If you only read the statistics from afar—HIV-infection rate, 30 percent or higher; unemployment rate, 40 percent or higher; up to three million AIDS orphans; low levels of literacy; astronomical crime rates—you would conclude that South Africa is on the brink of becoming a failed state. The visitor, on the other hand, sees a coalescing multiracial society that has done an astonishing (if still imperfect) job of overcoming historical hatreds. Much of the infrastructure is world-class. The government is serious about fighting corruption, improving living conditions for the poor, and expanding educational opportunities. South African boardrooms are no longer populated only by white faces, and South African firms invest in the rest of the continent and beyond (earlier this year, for example, South African Breweries bought Miller Breweries in the United States, and SAB-Miller also has extensive investments in China). Elsewhere, some Africans fear South African “economic imperialism.” And the infamous “white flight” of the early days of majority rule has reversed itself, with emigres returning to South Africa from abroad.

Despite many grave challenges, South Africa appears programmed for success on a continental scale. Events still could derail the country's future, but it now appears that South Africa, not Nigeria, is destined to become the continent's leader and moral beacon. Indeed, any Africa policy that does not strive for close

relations with South Africa as a fundamental objective could achieve only partial, localized successes.

As noted above, the liberation generation and its protégés continue to suspect the United States of all sorts of deviousness, too often breaking out into ludicrous public accusations. But those men and their rhetoric will pass. We need to lay the groundwork now to work with the practical men and women who will succeed to government posts and positions of leadership in business across the next generation. What is especially striking to an American visitor to South Africa is how similar our two countries are, in so many respects, from a multi-ethnic society, to a can-do frontier spirit, to the varieties of landscape. We share elementary values, an English constitutional heritage, and a belief in the future (as opposed to Europe's fixation on the status quo). We are natural allies.

Elsewhere on the continent, the United States has already established a military presence in the northeast, on the Horn of Africa, in formerly French-occupied Djibouti. If we are both wise and humane, we will assist Liberia on Africa's west coast, considering—if the people of Liberia approve—the establishment of a permanent naval and Marine base in the country. In the continent's southern third, however, we need to allow South Africa to take the lead, to continue its effort to build regional military cooperation among democratic states, while we explore ways in which we can work more closely with Angola on the Atlantic coast and Mozambique, Tanzania, and Kenya on the eastern coast. In the north, more and more former French colonies will turn toward us, especially those that are black and majority-Christian. Through a strategy of “triangulation,” of positive engagement (with a limited permanent presence) in converging spheres of influence on Africa's west coast, east coast, and in the southern cone, we and our allies would be well-positioned to help Africa and thereby help ourselves throughout this century.

This is not a recommendation for trying to do everything, but a suggestion that we have neglected even the minimum commitments that could bring us enormous strategic advantages. After all, seen from one perspective, the United States is simply the most successful African country.

Less need be said here about Latin America, since so much has been written elsewhere on the subject, at least in comparison to our neglect of Africa. But the same admonition applies: The routine Washington response to the mention of Latin America, as with Africa, suggests that “those people” just can't put all the pieces together. While many arguments might be made about the complex history of Latin America—multiple histories, really—what matters is the here-and-now and the future. And, despite setbacks, much of Latin America has begun to change, profoundly, over the past generation.

Mexicans have gone from blaming the United States for everything that goes wrong to blaming their own political leaders and their own society. One gets the feeling from Chile that its opinion leaders believe all parties concerned would

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be better off if Chile could swap places with California. In Colombia, the elite finally has begun to take responsibility for the country’s internal war with its narco-guerrillas and paramilitaries (in the past, the poor were drafted to die, the lower-middle-class supplied the combat leaders, and the elite decamped to their mansions in greater Miami).

The election of a labor leader Washington feared as Brazil’s head of state resulted in increased dialog, responsible economic policies, and a surprising personal rapport between the leaders of our two nations. After their turn-of-the-millennium economic collapse, Argentines don’t want another demagogue. They want fair, transparent government, and they just might get it. Venezuela is led by a populist who yearns to be Fidel Castro, but the democratic system that put him in office also restrains his most authoritarian impulses—the repeated street crises in Caracas are a rough form of democracy in action. And Mexico, which defined itself through much of the last century as the anti-US, now recognizes the criticality of working constructively with Washington on multiple fronts, from fighting crime to economic immigration to fostering democracy elsewhere in the Western hemisphere. Unfortunately, Washington’s attentions are elsewhere.

We have much to repair in our relations with Latin America. Some of the errors that long plagued our relationship have been theirs, but not a few have been our own. Arrogance and condescension toward our southern neighbors need to be banished from our diplomatic fashion show. We need to begin to build a serious, long-term partnership of equals—not yet equal in wealth, or in quality of government, or in raw power, but equal in our human dignity and our popular aspirations. Working together, we can develop our mutual potential far more efficiently and rapidly than by continuing along our far-too-separate paths.

Imperial Spain looked to Latin America for the silver in its mountains. We must look toward Latin America for the gold in its population. In a century when Europe’s populations are aging toward fiscal and societal crises (the truly old Europe) and our ties with East Asia may become more limited, rather than expanding, even America’s progressive immigration system will not be able to supply all the human power needed to fuel our continued economic expansion. It will not be a matter of “exporting American jobs,” but of creating new jobs elsewhere that generate wealth for both host states and the United States.

For the next several decades, Africa will need its talent to focus primarily on internal development, but the better-educated, more urbane pools of talent in Latin America are the natural resource to which we can turn. Especially given the deepening cultural impact of American Latinos on our own society, we will have in place human bridges that no other country will be able to match. Even Spain, which will play an ever-greater role in much of Latin America, will have only a shared language and heritage in common with local populations, while we will have their relatives—carrying American passports.

As with Africa, if we look only for problems in Latin America, we will have no difficulty in finding so many that we might easily convince ourselves to stay home. But the current trend in the wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom to downplay our recent differences with France, Germany, and other European powers is wrongheaded. Increasingly, continental Europe's interests, values, and aspirations diverge from our own. Certainly, we will continue to work together productively in many spheres. But the United States and Europe are growing apart, not converging.

The future—our future—lies elsewhere, in those long-neglected realms where human wastage has been blithely dismissed and every local misfortune was seized upon as proof that “they” simply weren't in our league. We have been seduced into playing 19th-century European great-power politics in the 21st century; indeed, considering our current involvement in the Middle East, one is tempted to claim that we're playing 12th-century European power politics.

To the extent strategic requirements allow, we need to reduce our commitments to Europe, as well as combating our psychological dependence on the Eurocentric worldview. We are the children of Mark Twain, not of Proust. Like Huck Finn, we need to avoid Aunt Polly's attempts to put too many table manners on us. We always need to light out for new frontiers. And the human frontiers of the 21st century are in our own country, in Latin America, and in Africa.

Try a simple experiment. Lay out a map of the world. With a pencil and ruler, connect the United Kingdom, Spain, and Portugal with all the countries in the Americas or in Africa to which they have historical or cultural ties. Next, connect the countries of Africa to those states of the Western Hemisphere to which they have ethnic and cultural ties. Now connect the United States to the countries in Latin America and Africa to which we have ties of population and culture. You have just drawn the most promising strategic network of this century.

It is time for the United States to begin making Castro's dream a reality, leaving behind his socialist baggage and replacing it with respect for the popular will, individual rights, and truly free markets. We need to begin to bind together North America, Latin America, Africa, and the Atlantic powers on Europe's western frontier in a mutually beneficial, ocean-spanning network of rule-of-law democracies. Our history laid the foundation. Now we need to build the Atlantic Century. □