

LATIN AMERICAN IMMIGRATION AND TRADE

Some Preliminary Observations

By

Warren M. Hern, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D.

Prepared for

Hon. John Salazar

3rd Congressional District

Colorado

31 March 2006

Abstract: This preliminary comment, prepared at the request of Congressman John Salazar, is based principally on personal observations made over a period of 44 years of work, study, travel, and research experience in Latin America in the following locations and countries: Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Canal Zone, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, Jamaica, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. The author has served as a Peace Corps Physician in Brazil (1966-68), a faculty member of FLACSO (Facultad LatinoAmericano de Ciencias Sociales) in Quito, Ecuador under a USSD Pell Grant (1992) and has conducted continuous research in the Peruvian Amazon from 1964 to the present. The author is fluent in Spanish, Portuguese, and Shipibo (a native Amazonian language).

Summary of observations: While rich in natural resources, Latin American societies operated under colonial economic regimens from the 16th century until the late 20th century, and many economies can still be classified as colonial extraction economies. Systematic economic, social, and ethnic discrimination has often been reinforced by brutal military governments, many of them installed or supported by the US government. Population growth since 1950 throughout Latin American has ranged from 2.0 to 3.5 – 4% per year, with population doubling times ranging from 35 to 20 years. National governments have struggled unsuccessfully to keep up with population growth in meeting the needs for jobs, education, food, housing, education, health care, and other basic necessities. This growth has been accompanied by widespread ecological devastation compounded by ruthless economic exploitation by both national and multinational corporate interests. The devastation of natural resources has meant a downward spiral of poverty and hopelessness for those at the bottom of the economic and political heap, particularly people who are living on a subsistence farm/fishing economy. Ecological destruction has resulted in increasing malnutrition and vulnerability to infections and chronic disease among poor populations. Issues of trade and immigration with the United States cannot be separated from these human realities.

These observations are based on personal experience over more than 40 years and are not based, in this document, on scholarly or academic analysis.

At the time of my first visit to Latin America, in 1962, the population of Latin America and the Caribbean was estimated to be approximately 225 million. It is now approximately 562 million. The population has increased 2.5 times during that period. At current rates of growth, it will pass 1 billion by 2025 or sooner.

One of the countries that I passed through on the way back from my work site in Nicaragua in 1962, El Salvador, had a population of approximately 3,000,000. Notwithstanding a civil war with many thousands of deaths, the population today stands at about 7 million.

In Peru, which I visited as a medical student for the first time in 1964, the population was estimated to be about 7 million, although UN estimates put it at about 11 million at that time. The population of Peru is now thought to be approximately 28 million. From 1975 to 2005, the population of Peru grew from an estimated 15 million to 28 million for a growth rate of 2.3% per year.

Growth rates in other Latin American countries throughout this period have officially been estimated at about 2 – 2.5%. Research demographers have consistently told me estimates that were much higher, from 3 to 3.5%. An Ecuadorian sociologist told me in 1992 that he estimated that 1/3 of the population of Ecuador had left the country from 1960 to 1990 and was now living in Florida. He thought this was probably an underestimate.

The Ecuadorian population grew from 6.9 million in 1975 to 13 million in 2005 according to official estimates.

In 1950, the urban population of Latin America was approximately 70 million. In 1975, it was estimated at 235 million, and in 2005, it was estimated by the UN at 436 million.

Latin America has several countries that rank among the 50 largest populations in the world: Brazil (184 million); Mexico (105 million); Colombia (43 million); Argentina (39 million); Peru (28 million); and Venezuela (25 million). Some of the largest urban populations in the world are found in Latin America: Mexico City (22 million); São Paulo (19 million); Buenos Aires (13.25 million); and Rio de Janeiro (12 million). Lima was about 1 million when I first went there in 1964, according to information at the time. It is now about 8 million, almost one third of the country's population. São Paulo was 6.5 million in 1965, when I first arrived in Brazil, and at that time, it had a rate of growth of 5.3% per year, with the population doubling every 13 years. The São Paulo population has since tripled.

Haiti, with a population density of 280 people per square mile, is ranked the 25th "least livable" country in the world. El Salvador has a population density of 330 per square mile, and Barbados, with 1,672 people per square mile, is the 8th most densely populated country on the planet.

In my own research, I have seen many instances of subenumeration of high-fertility populations. In the case of Peru, where I have observed groups with the highest fertility of any human experience, most of the people with whom I have had contact have never had an official census and are not listed in Peruvian census reports.

A prominent Peruvian demographer, who is internationally known and respected in demographic circles, who is a superb and conscientious scientist, and whose work is widely published and quoted, told me essentially that no one knows how many people live in any given Peruvian city including Lima and other large urban settlements.

In Brazil, I heard various first-hand reports of census takers systematically excluding large portions of urban populations because the census taker considered

the people living in poor *bairros* to be *gente ruin* (bad people). These people were usually the most recent immigrants from the surrounding countryside and had the highest fertility among urban inhabitants.

Here's an example: As a Peace Corps physician in Brazil, my job was to make sure the Peace Corps volunteers were healthy and to take care of them if they got sick. My first trip out into the country to do this was through the southern part of the state of Bahia. One of the first towns I came to was Itabuna. When I arrived at the work site of the volunteer who worked there, Richard, he greeted me, and I asked him how things were. He told me that the census taker had just been in the *bairro* (neighborhood), which consisted of squatter settlements up and down the sides of the low hills that surrounded the main part of the town. On each ridge top was a dirt road, along which were mud-wall homes and small shops. The bus came from town, went down the road, and turned around at the end to go back to town.

So I asked Richard, "How many people did the census taker find living here?" "I don't think he found out," replied Richard. "We walked down the road to end where the bus turns around, interviewing people, then walked back, interviewing people on the other side of the road. When we got back to his car, he started to get in, and I asked him, 'What about the people living down the hillsides and at the bottom of the valley? Aren't you going to talk to them?' '*Não, são gente ruin.*' ("No, they're lousy people.),' he replied.

Richard's estimate was that about 90% of the people in the *bairro* lived in the hillside shacks and down at the bottom. They were the most recent arrivals, with the lowest status, and they tended to have the largest families. All the effluvia of the ridgetop residents, of course, ran down hill into the muck at the bottom.

Throughout the Amazon region, I have seen reports of urban growth rates of 10-12% per year as the result of both high fertility and in-migration. These growth rates have placed completely unsustainable pressures on food sources not to mention other basic necessities. When I was teaching in Quito, Ecuador in 1992, there was a highly publicized report of a growth rate of 12% of the population of settlements in the Galapagos Islands, nearly all the result of migration from the mainland. This growth was devastating for the fragile and unique ecosystem of that archipelago, parts of which have already been destroyed by introduced animals such as goats and pigs.

I begin with this overall demographic picture because one cannot discuss issues of trade and immigration policies with Latin America without this background.

If classical economics indicates that a 3% rate of economic growth is required to support a 1% rate of growth in the population, it is immediately apparent that Latin American economies cannot reach or sustain continuous economic growth rates of 5, 6, or 9% without uncontrollable inflation to say nothing of environmental degradation. In fact, this has happened in many countries, particularly those having oil resources in the Amazon. In Brazil, it has been catastrophic and permanent loss of forest cover in the Brazilian Amazon.

Since the Amazon rain forest plays a major role in evapotranspiration cycles throughout the eastern 2/3 of the South American continent, and since it plays an important role in the global carbon cycle and oxygen production not to mention ambient temperatures and climate stability, this destruction of the irreplaceable Amazon ecosystem is having terrible consequences for the people living in this area. It may have lethal ecological consequences for the global ecosystem.

In Brazil, nation-size tracts of land have been converted from a highly diverse, ecologically complex, stable ecosystem to desert, and from wetlands to scrub. Cattle ranching and subsistence farming follows logging and oil exploration operations. Large areas of the Amazon forest now appear in satellite images to have been eliminated by an atomic weapon. Other areas look like a fish skeleton with systematic deforestation.

Standing on the edge of the *Chapado dos Guimarães*, an enormous butte overlooking much of Mato Grosso, one is surrounded at night by a line of fire in the distance as the forest and savannah is burned to make room for cattle and crops.

In nearby Cuiaba, the capitol of the state of Mato Grosso, one finds the largest bus terminal in South America, the southern terminal of the Trans-Amazon highway that is the artery of destruction between there and Belem through the Amazon. The land around Cuiaba, once a canopy rainforest, is now red, sterile lateritic pavement on which nothing can grow.

The Pantanal, the largest wetland ecosystem in the Western hemisphere and perhaps the world, which is unique in the global ecosystem in its breathtaking variety of species and habitats, is being destroyed rapidly by deforestation, drainage, and conversion of prime wildlife habitat to low-productivity cattle ranches. Flooding of the Pantanal and rainfall, both essential to the maintenance of this habitat, is diminishing because of ecological destruction in surrounding areas.

Haiti, the most populous nation in the Caribbean and one of the most densely populated places on the planet, suffers one of the most degraded environments in the western hemisphere due to long-term deforestation of poor soils on steep mountainsides. Although official UN population estimates show Haiti at 2 -2.5% rates of population growth, many independent estimates put this at 3.5% rate of annual population increase over many years. Many Haitians leave the island of Hispaniola as economic as well as political refugees.

In 1944, the town of Pucallpa in the Peruvian Amazon had about 3,000 people, mostly Peruvian *criollos* who had moved there from the coast. The native Shipibo people had been displaced. By 1964, at the time of my first visit, Pucallpa, the eastern terminal of the Trans-Andean “highway” on the banks of the Ucayali River, was said to be about 30,000 people. It is now well over 300,000 people and growing rapidly. What was canopy rainforest along the shores of Yarinacocha, an oxbow lake near Pucallpa, is gone along with most of the 250 bird species counted there one time. The canopy rainforest out from Yarinacocha and between that place and Pucallpa has been replaced by urban squatter settlements or barren land that looks like Oklahoma. The changing climate accelerates the loss of the rain forest.

This is all background for the two main topics of interest – immigration from and trade with Latin America. These two subjects cannot be separated. Another subject looms as backdrop – the general welfare of the American people, all of whom are either immigrants to the North American continent or descendants of those immigrants. The first of these arrived somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 years ago. They displaced and competed with no one except the Pleistocene megafauna. More recent immigrants are often seen as competing with current human residents, although they are also seen as contributing a vital element to American society.

The main impetus for immigration from Latin America to the United States is economic. Although there are major resources of many kinds in Latin America, only a small proportion of the population has ever benefited from them. The class and

caste systems of Latin America prevent the development of a strong middle class by comparison with North American and European societies. Most people live a tenuous economic existence of subsistence, low-paid wage labor, and total uncertainty, and they are subject to many health problems without easy or any access to modern health care.

Most of my experience in Latin America has been with the people at the bottom of the social and economic heap, even if they didn't experience it that way – the Native Americans living a subsistence economy that has served them well for thousands of years until the destruction of the ecosystem and the influx of urban migrants forced them to the lowest-paid unskilled jobs in the national money economy; the urban poor living on garbage dumps and over tidal pools in Bahia, Brazil; the destitute squatters of the *barrios* of Lima, Peru, and the sharecroppers and small-plot farmers of the Brazilian *sertão* digging for water with their bare hands. I have also cared as a physician for the desperate *mestizo* women of the Peruvian Amazon and Panama who come to the clinic suffering the devastating effects of uncontrolled fertility and unattended childbirth, their babies dying of malnutrition and diarrhea because, instead of expensive milk, they are fed flour mixed with river water. Derrick Jelliffe, a pediatrician working in east Africa decades ago, referred to this practice as giving children “a concentrated solution of bacteria and a dilute solution of nutrients.”

Here's an example: When I was running a small hospital in the Peruvian Amazon as a medical student in 1964, a young woman came in to see me complaining of shortness of breath. She was seven months pregnant, and she was in congestive heart failure. She had so many intestinal parasites taking her blood, she was white as a sheet. Her hematocrit was about 18%, which is the percentage volume of red blood cells. That is half of normal. She was literally bleeding to death from the parasites. I put her on bed rest, gave her medicine to make her heart more efficient, diuretics, and intravenous iron to overcome her anemia. Then I treated her hookworm disease among other parasites. After a month, she left the hospital. A month later, she came back, and I delivered her baby, which had a very low birth weight. The placenta was small and infarcted (it had a lot of dead spots). Then I went out to my Indian village to do research. Four months after I delivered the baby, I was back at the hospital, and she came in with her baby. It weighed less than it did at birth, it was very sick, and it was dying of diarrhea and malnutrition. Partly because she had little breast milk and partly because she believed that breast feeding was something that only “savages” did, she was giving the baby a bottle filled with a white fluid that looked like milk. It wasn't. It was flour mixed with river water.

That baby, in my opinion, was condemned already to a life of stunted growth and limited mental development if not mental retardation. It probably had no future, even if it survived. I have seen many cases like this all over Latin America.

There were no programs to help this woman with prenatal care, and there were no programs to help her baby. The Peruvian government has tried to develop some since then, but it can't keep up with the increasing numbers of people who need them.

So people come north looking for a better life. Very often, they come from all over Latin America, find a way to stay, even illegally, and send money back home to the family. Maybe they go home, maybe they don't, but if they can't go home, they try to bring the family here.

The effects for American citizens are controversial. The immigrants, legal and illegal, often do work that Americans won't do. Dr. David Hayes-Bautista, a

medical sociologist, has pointed out that the Social Security system is unsustainable without the young workers from Latin America.

There are clearly limits at some point to how many people from other countries can be welcomed into the United States. But what are the limits? Population pressure is real, and increasing population with limited or diminishing resources has a finite limit. Do immigrants, legal or illegal, really compete for jobs with residents and citizens? What is the impact on the environment and natural resources of the United States itself? World population is doubling about every 40 years or less. For Latin America and the Caribbean, it is every 30 years. That means 1 billion in that region in 2025 and 2 billion by 2055. The US population, growing at a rate of 1.2% per year, will reach 300,000,000 next year. The pressures will increase.

Whatever the answers, unless there is economic development in Latin America that keeps pace with population growth, there will be pressure for immigration from all of Latin America. And the fact is, most people would rather stay home and have a comfortable life with their family and neighbors in a familiar community than take the chance on finding hope north of the border.

But how can economic development keep pace with population growth in Latin America under the circumstances? It can't. With population growth rates ranging from 2 to 3.5% per year, it takes constant rates of economic growth of 6 – 10% per year just to keep things from getting worse than they are. It isn't possible.

Some Latin American leaders like Alberto Fujimori of Peru have called for and supported family planning programs. But the response of the United States to third-world pleas for family planning assistance – especially from Latin American leaders – at the 1984 UN Population Conference in Mexico City was “suck it up.” Ronald Reagan sent UN Ambassador and former US Senator James Buckley, an opponent of all fertility control measures including abortion and contraception, with the message that what the third world countries needed was not birth control but economic development. But there was no money for this. It was the “trickle-down” theory applied to people who weren't even being trickled on, to quote Pat Schroeder.

At the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the US delegation, led by Vice-President Al Gore and Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs Tim Wirth, managed to get every single state in the world except the Vatican on board for a statement supporting numerous programs for women including education, job training, economic opportunities, family planning, maternal & child care, and general health care as a way of giving women opportunities to do something besides reproduce and to have better lives no matter what their choices. Every country in the world, including all from Latin America, made commitments to support this program with billions of dollars. The US share was about \$10 billion a year – a fraction of the US military budget.

The response of the US Senate, led by Senator Jesse Helms, was to denounce the budget objectives and attempt to fire Tim Wirth.

Unless women and their families in Latin America have total access to all forms of fertility control including safe abortion, there is no hope that economic development of any kind can keep up with population growth much less make progress for the lives of people. This is not to mention the fact that the leading cause of death among women in the childbearing age range in Latin America is unsafe abortion, and this has been true for the last 50 years. Yet the Bush administration has cut funds for family planning programs and maternal and child health programs, especially for the UNFPA, with disastrous effects all over the world. One of my friends and colleagues in Guayaquil, Ecuador, Dr. Paolo

Marangoni, who was in charge of the Ecuadorian Family Planning Association, told me that their efforts were crippled by cuts in US aid for these programs. Attacks on family planning programs and abortion in the US by political opponents undermined if not destroyed the credibility of Ecuadorian doctors and other leaders trying to do something positive about these issues in their country.

Economic development programs in Latin America must be tied to local resources and local labor so that local people can benefit and not just multinational corporations. Economic development must not occur at the cost of permanent destruction of the local ecosystems upon which people depend for their livelihoods.

Certain Latin American cities are among the most highly polluted in the world. Exhibit A is Mexico City, which, due to its altitude and topography, surrounded by mountains, is chronically affected by thermal inversion that traps automobile exhaust and particulate matter such as powdered feces in a toxic mix that is lethal to human health. Others in the same or similar situations include Bogota, Caracas, La Paz, Quito, Santiago, São Paulo, and, at times, Rio de Janeiro.

If real economic development occurs in conjunction with population stabilization in Latin America, the pressure for immigration to the US will diminish, and the growth of a middle class in Latin America will provide a market for US manufacturers as well as political stability. Information technology appears to offer an opportunity for low-impact, eco-friendly, high-gain economic development in Latin America.

Unfortunately, some of the most important extractive resources and crops and livestock raised in Latin America for export are some of the most ecologically destructive – coffee, soybeans, sugar for export and ethanol, tree farms for paper mills, cattle for cheap hamburgers, and tropical hardwoods for fine furniture. Oil exploration and exploitation by multinational corporations has destroyed much of the Amazon ecosystem, especially in sections near the eastern flank of the Andes.

The attitude toward the United States among Latin Americans is generally very positive, but the Bush administration policies have frightened and otherwise troubled people who are inclined to be our friends. George W. Bush is hated, feared, ridiculed, and generally despised in Latin America. Part of this is due to his bullying attitudes and invasion of Iraq, part of it is due to his swaggering and false *machismo*, and part of it is his insulting and patronizing manner toward Latin Americans, who can generally spot a fraud from a mile away. In Latin America, George W. Bush, who thinks he can speak Spanish, is regarded as a bi-ignorant bully.

Harsh populist and anti-American rhetoric coming out of democratically elected regimes in places like Bolivia and Venezuela resonate strongly with deep popular resentment of George Bush and hostile policies of the United States government. Venezuela, for one, is making friends and influencing neighbors by aggressively helping Cuba, which has suffered for 40 years under the American embargo that is ineffective, counterproductive and stupid.

In 1978, I visited Cuba with a Cuban-American study group and a professional medical group. We were well received by the Cubans at every level. I made a speech in Spanish in the town square in Santiago de Cuba one day and probably could have been elected mayor the next day. A local physician showed me how he had devised an intrauterine device out of fishing line since the American trade embargo prevented his getting the manufactured ones for his patients.

Everywhere I went, the Cubans were warm and hospitable to me and my colleagues, and they were proud of improvements in their lives since the revolution.

There were health clinics everywhere. But the economy was dependent on help from the Russians, whom the Cubans detested. There was a well-kept museum to remember the Bay of Pigs invasion sponsored by the American government.

Cubans everywhere expressed enthusiasm and affection for the American people while expressing distress about the actions of the American government. For my part, I couldn't help feeling that Americans are missing a lot by not being able to enjoy the exuberance of Cuban music, dance, food, art, and love of literature to say nothing of excellent rum and, for some (not me), superior cigars.

When I visited Cuba in the fall of 2005 to see a Cuban family that I know, things were different. The economy had collapsed with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and there was little hope. The American embargo was seen as an excuse for the economic problems, among others. But the Cubans with whom I spoke still loved their own country and wanted to stay. They just wanted a better life.

One of the best things we can do to improve our relationship with Latin America is to get a new President, preferably one who is truly bilingual in Spanish and English. Another is to spend time with Latin American leaders trying to find out truly what they want and need instead of telling them what to do. A third is to give genuine support for ecologically sensitive economic development that gives as much of the control and income to Latin Americans as possible. A fourth is to offer assistance in programs for education, health care, and technology that people need.

We are currently spending approximately \$170 million a day on the war in Iraq in a conflict that appears to making things much worse in that country and in the rest of the region. That's about \$5 billion a month. Just think what investment of that kind of money in the economic infrastructure and human services such as housing, education, health care, job training, etc. in Latin America could accomplish for our neighbors to the south. If they have jobs and hope, it just might be a more attractive place for people to live instead of feeling that they have to leave their own country for a chance to survive. There is a lot to enjoy in Latin America.

Helping the people of the Gulf Coast recover from the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita might send a message that we help people who are hurt starting with our own citizens. Latin Americans would see and applaud that.

Since the leadership of John F. Kennedy and the *Alianza para el Progreso*, Latin America has been forgotten and neglected by the United States except for the occasional invasion or denunciation of its leaders by our own leaders. After John Kennedy's assassination, there was a candle in windows throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in the memory of a man who was loved by many in that region. He gave them hope. So did his brother, Bobby, who visited "*Os Alagados*" of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil among other places of poverty and hopelessness in an attempt to understand the plight of the people there and to give them hope.

The invasion of and endless war in Iraq has sent a very different message, and it has cost us many opportunities to do things for our own citizens and people in Latin America not to mention people in other parts of the world such as the Middle East and Africa. And these people might be more likely to be our friends in the future if we offer them a helping hand and hope instead of bombs and bullets.

What about the idea of an *Alianza para el Futuro*, a "Marshall Plan" for Latin America and the Caribbean? I can't think of better Congressional sponsors for such a program than two guys from Colorado, one in the House of Representatives and the other in the Senate. *Que vamos hacer un camino mejor.*