

**THE HISTORICAL AND
THE HYSTERICAL
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“It is a tyrannical and imperial order and it pushes us back to the darkest days of the relationship between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean”. In the past you would have been forgiven for thinking that these were comments made by the Cuban government, but in fact they came from the Venezuelan government in March in response to steps taken by President Obama who has issued an executive order declaring the South American state a threat to US national security. A month later both presidents attended the seventh Summit of the Americas which was held in Panama for the first time; another first was the inclusion of Cuba.

While tempers have flared in Caracas, Washington and Havana have been cautiously stepping through the rubble of the wall of hostility that has separated the two countries for over 50 years. The two presidents shook hands (not fists) at the Summit in Panama. In the mind of Venezuela’s president, Nicolás Maduro, the destiny espoused by Americans since the nineteenth century is not so much manifest as manifesting and Venezuela’s national assembly has granted its president emergency powers, having passed “the Anti-Imperialist Law for Peace”.

Nicolás Maduro did draw support from fellow Latin American countries over the US executive order (significantly, this included strong US allies such as Colombia and Mexico) because of a shared historical experience during which the US, in the name of manifest destiny, believed that it had a providential mission to spread its influence and institutions not only across North America (the Oregon Territory, California and Mexican land in the Southwest) but beyond its continental boundaries into the Pacific and Caribbean basin. And because Cuba experienced America’s military intervention in the nineteenth century during its independence war with Spain, Raúl Castro in his Summit speech quoted his brother, Fidel, who had spoken of “conquest, colonisation, slavery and plundering”, all of which had been compounded by the US.

Although the 83-year-old Cuban president said that 77 per cent of Cubans were born under the American blockade, he acknowledged that President Obama was born after it began and was not responsible for the past. Both presidents struck a deliberate conciliatory tone, putting in place a bridge for each to walk across to meet in the

middle. Light relief occurred when the Cuban said he was entitled to 7 times the eight minutes allocated to each speaker because he had been excluded from all the previous Summits; as it was he spoke for just a little less than the hour he spent in private with the US president.

During his speech Raúl Castro acknowledged the important support that Dilma Rouseff, Brazil's president, had rendered in bringing a sense of cohesion within the region, particularly the development of social policies. Although Brazil was equally as vocal as Colombia and Mexico in criticising America's move against Venezuela, calling for more restraint, she recognises the need for things to change in Caracas. President Maduro, who suffers from hysteria, is a spectre from Latin America's past, one which most regional governments would prefer to forget.

Cross Words at the Crossroads

President Obama told his audience that 'Panama has often been called 'the crossroads of the world', and with Panama's leadership, our nations have come together to focus on the world, on the future...'. Unfortunately, there were cross words at the crossroads, willingly supplied by the vituperative Venezuelan president. He was out of step with the general mood of the Summit and, in fact, things went completely to pot for him when he was greeted at the Summit's convention centre by Latin Americans' classic form of protest, heard from a distance: the sound of banging pots coming from across the way where many wealthy ex-Venezuelans now live.

The bridge between the shores of America and Cuba is only built of rope at this point, but given good will on both sides, it can be replaced by one with steel girders. When Fidel Castro entered Havana in an open truck in early January, 1959, he shouted "Now we'll win the war!" and fired bullets into the air. But if the ideological war is to be won, it will be because of diplomacy and not bullets.