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Thursday, April 23, 2009

### Summit of the Americas: Much Ado About Nothing

**Searching for substance in the summit's declaration is akin to looking for a polar bear in a snowstorm.**

BY JERRY HAAR

Summits of the Americas traditionally have been vacuous, mind-numbing conventions of inter-American heads of state and their acolytes in which pompous, sermon-style pontifications and amorphous and anodyne declarations—substance-free and coma-inducing—are delivered to the press and whoever else has a lot of time on their hands.


In this regard, the recently concluded Fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago did not disappoint. Searching for substance in the 21-page [Declaration](#) is akin to looking for a polar bear in a snowstorm. Platitudes, hopes, aspirations, and altruistic pledges laden in non-specifics embody the Declaration—a document issued *before* not after the Summit ended (sort of like going to the theater to watch a movie, then returning home to boot up the computer and watch the trailer). Moreover, the document itself was signed by one head of state only---Patrick Manning, prime minister of the host country.



Presidents Barack Obama and Hugo Chavez at the Summit of the Americas. (Photo Alfonso Ocando/Venezuela President's Office)



Trinidad Prime Minister Patrick Manning signs the final declaration. (Photo: Fifth Summit of the Americas)

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The only “highlights” of the Summit were, per usual, two. First, there was the attendees’ fixation with Cuba, a nation whose entire population is half that of the city of São Paulo and that, in a climate of growing embargo fatigue, presumably deserves to be welcomed back into the fold of OAS nations, or at a minimum have the United States remove its trade embargo—reward for an unblemished 50-year record of repression, authoritarianism, and sky-high levels of foreign indebtedness, to which it has offered its European creditors nothing more than the equivalent of the middle-finger salute. In turn, Cuba would pledge to continue to pledge *nothing*. Expecting change in Cuba is akin to a watching a tropical version of Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*.

Second, there were the predictable shenanigans of the dictatorial gargoyle and megalomaniacal media farceur who rules Venezuela. (All that was needed upon his entrance into the meeting hall was a salon orchestra playing *Send in the Clowns*.) Fearful that America’s rock star president would upstage him, Hugo Chávez censored himself (an extremely rare event) and adopted an air of civility.....to a point. The self-anointed reincarnation of Simon Bolívar, strutted into the conference room while most were seated to present President Obama with Eduardo Galeano’s *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina*, a 1971 left-wing diatribe against the historical record of European and American powers in the Western Hemisphere. Bizarrely, the widely documented fact that Latin American nations, post-independence, have done a truly exemplary job all by themselves in exploiting their own people and natural resources—in fact, even exceeding the misdeeds of the United States and Europe—is a small footnote to those who still embrace the asinine creed of dependency theory.

#### REALISTIC GOALS

If subsequent summits are to be taken seriously and have a Hemisphere-wide impact, they will have to be designed, planned, structured, implemented, and monitored with realistic, measurable objectives; achievable goals; and timetables---just as those of strategic and operating plans that businesses incorporate. Unfortunately, this will be very difficult to accomplish. First, the business community throughout the Hemisphere has never been fully integrated into the summit process, but relegated to a tangential role at best. Second, the summiteers come exclusively from the governmental and multilateral sectors; therefore, they do not have experience, nor do they comprehend, strategic planning and business thinking. (The “bottom line” to them is the line at the bottom where they sign their travel reimbursement requests.) Third, summits manifest the inherent deficiency of multilateralism itself. Countries of disparate political systems (Colombia vs. Bolivia) and economic status (Panama vs. Haiti) and leaders who may see little political benefit from committing to collective undertakings, impede the formulation and implementation of a results-oriented agenda. Since all politics is local, not just in Boston, Chicago and New York but Bogotá, Caracas, and Buenos Aires, there are no rewards



for achieving collective goals nor consequences for failing to attain results. Fourth, it is a penchant of high level groups to set bold and ambitious goals (to be nobler than thy neighbor, so to speak) rather than modest ones that are doable--given limited resources and time commitments--since it is the big ones that can garner larger media attention and constituency support. Invariably this is a recipe for always coming up short.

It remains to be seen whether future summits will learn the lessons of past ones and therefore, if substantive, measurable progress will be made in addressing at least *some* of the many of the pressing problems that Hemisphere nations have in common.

The bottom line for the recently concluded summit, regrettably, can best be captured in the title of William Shakespeare's most famous romantic comedy: *Much Ado About Nothing*.

[Jerry Haar](#) is an associate dean and professor of management and international business in the College of Business Administration at Florida International University. He wrote this column for Latin Business Chronicle.

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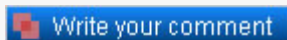
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