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**Crossing the Room to Greet Hugo  
African World**

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No, it was not on the scale of President Sadat's surprise visit to Jerusalem or President Nixon's visit to Maoist China, but President Obama's greeting Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez at the Summit of the Americas was certainly noteworthy.

First, contrary to the arrogance often associated with the US elite, President Obama did not wait for President Chavez to come and see him. Instead he crossed a lobby to greet Chavez. Second, Obama was unapologetic for this action in the face of right-wing criticism for his having taken this step. This latter point cannot be overstated in light of the outcries from conservative pundits who believe that the US should isolate, if not overthrow the likes of Chavez.

President Obama is determined to change the image of the USA, that much is certain. He wishes to break with the ignorant and cynical approach toward foreign policy associated with his predecessor, George W. Bush. What is far less certain remains how substantive the foreign policy changes will be.

At the same time that President Obama was exchanging pleasantries with President Chavez and also promising to improve relations with Cuba, the Obama administration renounced any intentions of sending an official delegation to participate in the United Nations' conference to review the 2001 Durban, South Africa process to address racism and xenophobia. Here was a grand opportunity for the new president to commit the USA to rejoining humanity by grappling with the impact and implications of the centuries of racism, colonialism, national oppression and intolerance, and the USA decided to take a pass. While the Obama administration hid behind the Israeli government's disingenuous criticism of the Durban process for allegedly being anti-Jewish, the deeper fear in the USA and Western Europe has been that the review process will raise the question of US and European accountability for much of the misery that the global South has suffered since 1500, and the need for reparations.

President Obama should be applauded for dismissing the political Right in recognizing that something is to be gained by improving relations with Cuba and Venezuela. At the same time, his failure to address race and racism during his presidential campaign--except when compelled to by circumstances--creates a self-imposed limit on his mandate to advance consistent change and consistent democracy.

Altering US relations with the rest of the world means more than the President becoming a global icon. Rather, it must mean that the USA is as accountable to its own people and the people of the world, for its history as any other country, be it Turkey with respect to the genocide against the Armenians, Morocco's colonization of the Western Sahara, or Indonesia for its multiple genocides in the 20th century. For the USA, the matter of accountability is not just about the slave trade, the system of slavery, the genocide against the Native Americans, the seizure of northern Mexico, or the persecution of early Asian immigrants, all of which took place more than a century ago. It is also behavior that is far more recent, including the invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan, the uncritical support of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinians and, just so we do not forget, the fact that African Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and many Asians in the USA remain subject to structural racist oppression, a part of our every day lives.

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**BlackCommentator.com** Executive Editor, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfrica Forum](#) and co-author of, [Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice](#) (University of California Press), which examines the crisis of organized labor in the USA. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.

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