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Bush and Chavez: A Marriage Made in Hell

by Sheldon Richman

If President Bush didn't exist, Hugo Chavez would have to invent him.

Chavez, of course, is the dictator-president of Venezuela who in recent months has taken steps to centralize control of the country's economy. His accumulation of power is based on the need to resist U.S. hegemony. Some people think that his goading of Bush — for example, calling him a “devil” at the UN — shows he's crazy, but that is plain wrong. We'll never understand people if we attribute their actions to insanity. Chavez is crazy like a fox — he knows the formula for success: portray oneself as the valiant resister of U.S. power.

George W. Bush seems willing to accommodate Chavez by continuing the American tradition of treating Latin America like a backyard. This is epitomized by the U.S. policy of pressuring Latin American countries into destroying their farmers' coca crops on grounds that the resulting cocaine is dangerous to people in the United States. The farmers may not be well educated, but they are sensible enough to know that this policy is a monstrous violation of their rights, not to mention totally illogical. Americans who think cocaine is bad shouldn't use it. Why do they have to destroy other people's crops and livelihoods? What would Americans say if teetotaling Muslims destroyed U.S. grain crops before they could be turned into whiskey?

Crop eradication has played no small part in creating sympathy for Maoists, Castroists, and other assorted bad guys looking for a path to power. As usual, the U.S. government creates anti-Americanism, which then justifies more imperial activism. There's method in that madness.

Never one to rethink a policy, Bush, as he embarks on a Latin American visit, has announced what the *New York Times* calls a “an energy partnership plan to create jobs and decrease poverty and inequality.” Is that a proper activity for an American president?

Part of the new program is to use President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil to offset Chavez's radical anti-Americanism. This sort of manipulation has backfired in the past. Why should it succeed now?

The cynicism of the Bush policy is made clear by the fact that Lula's government intervenes heavily into the people's economic affairs, which is a recipe for poverty not prosperity.

As a former Brazilian diplomat interprets Bush's policy, "[The] United States wants to bolster Lula as a counterweight, to show that you can have a leftist government with a strong focus on social issues, income distribution and poverty reduction, without being radical."

If Bush were truly interested in seeing poverty diminished and freedom increased in Latin America, he wouldn't be playing these games, which will only give Chavez more grist for his propaganda mill. Prosperity and freedom require that governments back off, respect individual rights, and not try to direct economic affairs. Latin America needs neither socialism nor American-style state capitalism. It needs radical decentralization and genuinely free markets. Come to think of it, so does the United States.

The United States can't dictate such policies, nor should it try. But it can and should cease all intervention in the region and leave Latin Americans to work out their own future. One thing the United States can do affirmatively is to drop all remaining trade barriers unilaterally. Trade agreements with Latin America get a lot of attention, and they are helpful in some ways. But they always contain special-interest exceptions and other anti-trade elements. Far better would be the unconditional opening of markets here. Anyone from anywhere should be welcome to sell their goods in the United States.

Beyond that, it's up to the people of Latin America to get themselves free and prosperous. Their internal affairs are no business of the United States. Bush and Chavez need each other because power grows in the soil of such an adversarial relationship. But people who just want to live in peace have no use for either one of them.

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This article was originally published in March 2007.