



“The incompetence charge has gained such traction that even many Republicans buy it.”

— RICHARD LOWRY April 2 Issue

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Symposium

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Chavismo

A Hugo problem.

By Symposium

This weekend, the dictator of Venezuela shadowed the president of the United States as he traveled through Latin America. In response to Hugo Chavez's behavior this weekend, National Review Online asked regional watchers: What can and should the U.S. do about Hugo Chavez? How much of a threat is he to us and to our allies in the region?

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CARLOS A. BALL

Attacking and insulting President Bush tends to increase the popularity of Latin American politicians, something that tells a great deal about the hemispheric un-neighborly relations.

It is deplorable that that the U.S. has been making enemies among its traditional Latin friends — with the explosion of red tape, unfriendly consular officials have been treating travelers as potential terrorists and investors as presumed drug dealers.

Chavez is openly pushing a Communist agenda, guided by the most experienced enemy of freedom and of the U.S., Fidel Castro. But the U.S. has not been selling capitalist ideals to Latin America. Quite the contrary, the so-called “free trade agreements” are long, complicated, and detailed negotiations to open the door on a few goods and services, while keeping it tightly shut for 15 years or more on those other that politicians want to keep under the control of their friendly lobbyists, businessmen, farmers, and labor unions.

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“Leveling the playing field” means more unemployment in Latin America, and “no child labor” does not mean poor youngsters going to school, but rather working under much worse conditions in the informal economy.

Latin businessmen accuse the U.S. of doubletalk, defending free trade in theory, while applying mercantilist and protectionist policies. At the same time, Latin American intellectuals and political leaders perceive the U.S. government as the spokesman for American big business. Thus, the problem keeps growing, and few understand the real tragedy.

Chávez is a scoundrel taking full advantage of that situation.

— *Carlos A. Ball is editor of [AIPE](#).*

ENEAS BIGLIONE

Hugo Chavez is a threat to Latin America and not to the U.S.

His future relies too much on the high price of oil and Venezuelan taxpayers’ money. President George W. Bush should unite the Americas pushing a bilateral free-trade agreement with every country interested and reminding them that the key to prosperity is open markets with a strong rule of law.

Open markets allow for the free flow of human and non-human capital, and the rule of law protects private property. On the other hand, international aid is proven to only boost corruption and not to be a long-term solution in the region.

It is just a matter of time until Latin America realizes Chavez's socialist programs are just empty propaganda promises and that the only path to sustained development is following America’s advice. The other path takes to Cuban-style desperation, isolation, and hunger.

— *Eneas Biglione is program director of the [Hispanic American Center for Economic Research](#).*

PETER BROOKES

Is Hugo Chavez a threat to us and our allies in the region? Hmmm, let’s see.

- He openly aspires to inherit Castro’s worn-out socialist legacy, and is committed to spreading his Cuban, er, “Bolivarian” revolution across a region.
- Awash in oil profits, he’s buying \$3 billion in advanced Russian arms, including fighters and helicopters, when no nation threatens Venezuela. Gotta wonder why, but interfering next door in Colombia is a good possibility.
- He’s bankrolling leftist political candidates across the region, leading to electoral victories for the likes of Nicaragua’s Sandinista retreat president, Daniel Ortega, and Bolivia’s nationalist prez Evo Morales. (His over-the-top antics thankfully worked against his chosen candidates in Peru and Mexico).
- He’s begun nationalizing industries in Venezuela, including the critical energy sector. *Fidelito* has threatened to cut off exports to the U.S., which gets 15 percent of its oil from Venezuela. China is glad to take the oil off his hands.
- Venezuela’s *caudillo* is chummy with Iran’s president Ahmadinejad, and has openly

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expressed interest in “nuclear power,” undoubtedly just *like* Iran’s “nuclear power” program. Talk about a nightmare...

It's tempting to write off Chavez simply as the latest tin-pot dictator. That would be a mistake. (Many dismissed Castro in his early days, too). Chavez has the potential to cause real trouble.

The best approach for dealing with the *Chavistas* includes working with other regional powers to contain and isolate him — like Bush is currently doing in Latin America — while not unnecessarily inflaming the dictator's sometimes wobbly support at home.

— *Peter Brookes is senior fellow of national-security affairs and Chung Ju-Yung Fellow for Policy Studies, Asian Studies Center.*

FRANK J. GAFFNEY JR.

President Bush's visit to Latin America suggests that his administration is finally paying attention to a vital region and the ominous strategic implications of the disorder being fostered there by Hugo Chavez, the elected president-turned-dictator of Venezuela. Yet, it also revealed that the Bush team is largely clueless about what to do about Chavez and his anti-American agenda.

This is surely due, in part to the fact that there appear to be few — if any — on that team interested in devising, let alone executing, a strategy for effectively countering Chavismo and the oil-enabled, radical leftist revolutions it is fostering throughout the hemisphere. For one thing, the State Department is seemingly intent on opening negotiations with every bad actor on the planet, no matter how unreliable or dangerous to the United States and its interests. Presumably, Chavez is eligible for the same treatment.

For another, the Defense Department is preoccupied with its problems in Iraq, Afghanistan and other distant regions. The military threats being enabled by Chavez's purchase and regional dissemination of 100,000 AK-47s and advanced armaments are largely going unaddressed.

And the new director of National Intelligence has just fired his organization's recently recruited “mission manager” for Venezuela and Cuba — Norman Bailey, a man who demonstrated an aptitude for fighting totalitarian foes during his service on the Reagan National Security Council.

Here's a modest suggestion for what President Bush should do about Chavez: 1) Put in place a group of first-class political warriors charged with working the Venezuela-Cuba problem creatively and aggressively. Norm Bailey should be asked to play a significant role in this effort. 2) Continue cultivating the Left-that-matters in Latin America (notably, the governments of Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile, as opposed to Chavez's cronies/puppets in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua) who share our desire to undermine the Venezuelan trouble-maker. And 3) assign every available intelligence asset to ferreting out and publicizing Chavez's corruption. The fact that he is ripping his people off to the tune of billions of dollars and misapplying still other Venezuelan resources to promote Chavismo outside his own country is contributing to the dictator's plummeting popularity at home — and increasing the chances of bringing him down.

— *Frank Gaffney Jr. is president of the Center for Security Policy.*

IVAN OSORIO

There is little the United States can do about Hugo Chavez's undermining of democracy in Venezuela. As long as high oil prices keep subsidizing his regime, he can survive. However, there is something that *can* be done to counter Chavez's efforts to throw his weight around Latin America: Improve ties with allies in the region by ratifying free-trade agreements with Colombia, Panama, and Peru.

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Despite his bluster, Chavez is an exception to a regional trend of political moderation — across the ideological spectrum. For a region where the Left was long characterized by Marxist insurgency and the Right by military dictatorship, the emergence of a democratic political center is a welcome trend.

But “national liberation” nostalgia acts like Chavez can still create major headaches for Latin American democrats. Colombia, which neighbors Venezuela, has been a strong U.S. ally under the center-right government of President Alvaro Uribe. Peruvian President Alan Garcia, whose leftist policies during his presidency (1985-1990) led the country to the brink of economic collapse, has moved to the center. American policy makers should encourage such moderation. Approval of the trade deals mentioned above will do just that.

— *Ivan Osorio is editorial director at the [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#).*

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