

Looking south

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

President Bush has begun a six-day, five-nation visit to Latin America to promote the benefits of democracy and open markets in fighting poverty and improving health care. The trip also is designed to counter the growing influence of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, whose vast wealth from petrodollars is winning the hearts of Latin Americans who have not benefited from a decade and a half of U.S. policies designed to spur free trade and interdict drugs.

The president's first stop is the huge Brazilian industrial city of Sao Paulo, where he will seal a deal with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to promote ethanol production in Latin America. The United States and Brazil are the world's largest ethanol producers. The United States uses mostly corn, while Brazil uses mostly sugar cane.

Unfortunately, two things President Bush won't do are to push for an end to the 54-cents-per-gallon subsidy that the U.S. government provides for American-produced ethanol, making it impossible for Brazil to compete in this country, and to end trade protections for the American sugar industry.

In part because of Venezuela's Chavez, President Bush is hugely unpopular in much of Latin America, and he is expected to be met with loud demonstrations in each of the nations he visits. But with Chavez's growing influence, the White House is wise to attempt to stem the anti-Americanism with this trip, which marks a very visible shift in U.S. priorities for the region. As he campaigned for office in 2000, candidate Bush vowed to "look south, not as an afterthought but as a fundamental commitment." But after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Latin America - and just about everything else - diminished in importance to the United States. Indeed, during Bush's March 2002 visit to three Latin American nations, the focus was on anti-terrorism efforts and the war on drugs, with some free-trade discussions thrown in. Not so this time. There are different topics on the agenda in each of the nations President Bush will visit. For instance, during his last stop, in Merida on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, Bush and President Felipe Calderon will focus heavily on cross-border issues, particularly immigration. Bush also plans to visit Uruguay, Colombia and Guatemala.

But the overall focus is on improving living conditions for poorer Latin Americans. To this end, the White House has announced a series of modest initiatives to help provide housing, education and health care. To promote health care, for instance, Bush has ordered the Navy hospital ship *Comfort* to make port calls to 12 Latin American nations to treat 85,000 people and perform 1,500 operations.

It is a change in focus on Latin America for the United States, but it is one that we should welcome. Our hope is that skeptical Latin Americans will see it that way.

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