

Bush's Latin America trip too little too late

by Luis Miranda

Despite trying to escape sagging poll numbers with a goodwill tour to Latin America, President Bush returns instead with poor reviews from the region after having highlighted a North-South disconnect not seen since the Cold War.

President Bush used the Colombian leg of his tour to praise the Colombian President, currently mired in scandal because his "domestic intelligence chief and eight congressmen have been arrested for collusion with paramilitary members," according to the Washington Post. Bush praised the Colombian government, saying it would earn "greater respect in the international community" despite the fact that Human Rights Watch calls that Administration's record "extremely poor, with serious problems over links between drug-running paramilitaries and the state, extrajudicial executions by the military, killings of trade unionists, disappearances and other abuses." [Washington Post, 3/12/07]

It was no surprise then that Colombia's largest daily newspaper reminded readers that Bush's visit was widely seen as coming "late" and being "irrelevant." The President's other stops brought similarly disappointing results. In Uruguay, the President's flub became the quote of the day when he referred to the great steak he had in that country's capital as Venezuelan. In neighboring Argentina, the country's #1 daily called Bush's tour a trip "with little results." And in Guatemala and Mexico, Bush left more questions than answers on immigration reform and the fight against drug trafficking than were answered. As Guatemala's "La Prensa Libre" declared, "very little can be said" about the usefulness of Bush's trip.

Below are highlights from editorial coverage of President Bush's tour in Latin America:

Colombia: El Tiempo, March 11, 2007

Bush's Trip "Late," "Irrelevant," and Not Receiving Major Coverage. "...the U.S. President embarks on a continental tour many have called not just late but irrelevant. It's understandable that the attacks of 9/11 abruptly changed the priorities and agenda of his Administration. But not to the point of forgetting almost entirely about the region. The trip has not received major coverage in the United States' own news media, whose concerns internationally remain focused on Iraq and Afghanistan."

Colombian Leg a Show of Support for President Embroiled in Paramilitary Political Scandal. "it's clear -- and Bush himself and other high officials said so already -- that this brief stop is, above all, a manifestation of support on the part of the U.S. President for his Colombian colleague, who is in the midst of the 'parapolitics' scandal, the major crisis he has faced."

Reading Children's Books Easier Than Overcoming Challenges in Latin America. "The only thing left is to wish Mrs. Laura Bush a happy reading of children's stories. Without a doubt, it will be easier for her to come out on top in that task than for her husband to overcome the immense challenges in a Latin America that changed so much while he looked away in the other direction."

Uruguay: El Pais, March 12, 2007

President's Flub Becomes 'The Quote of the Day'. "Lapses, which are the habit, of President George Bush: 'Venezuela has fantastic steak. I mean, Uruguay has fantastic steak.'" [President Bush's quote from an interview with Fox from Montevideo in which the President credited Venezuela briefly for the great steak he had in Uruguay.]

Guatemala: La Prensa Libre, March 13, 2007

Guatemalan Daily: Bush's 'Trip Bears Little Fruit'. "President Bush mentioned the idea of creating a regional plan against drug trafficking, but did not say how it would be prepared, when and with what goals. On the issue of immigrants, he said his country was compassionate, and decent, believes in the family and wants to treat people with respect, but at the same time respects the law. Having said that, the most logical and clearest interpretation is that very little benefit will come to Guatemalans living in the United States without their papers in order."

Optimism Aside, "Very Little Can Be Said" About Bush's Visit. "One optimistic interpretation suggests that in a prudent but short time frame the implicit promises espoused by President Bush would become reality, because he would have the political will to use his influence in favor of the two ideas presented. But the other interpretation is that very soon, the realities of politics inside the United States will take over and the matter will be relegated, if not to being forgotten, to a very secondary place. For these reasons, very little can be said about the practical usefulness of President Bush's visit."

Argentina: El Clarin, March 15, 2007

Argentina's Largest Daily Calls it: "Bush and a Tour With Little Results". "If the underlying intention of the North American government was to neutralize Chavez's influence, it can be estimated that its success was nothing more than meager."

Mexico: El Universal, March 15, 2007

"Good to Know" Bush Open to "Immediate Steps" on Border Relations With Mexico. "Although a conciliatory but limited attitude was expected on the part of President Bush regarding the issue of immigration, it was good to know that he's open to exploring not just the lengthy path of Congress for reform on the matter, but that there is a disposition to taking more immediate steps, trying to make our common border a tier of investments and not cops and walls. This implies a shared responsibility, since it commits both governments to creating better paid jobs in this zone. Hopefully they've understood in Washington that an orderly and productive border would be a good option to both have a secure border free of the threats that worry them so much."

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