Bush vs. Chavez in Latin America

by Robert_J_Caldwell

It's easy enough to portray President George W. Bush's five-nation tour of Latin America as too little, too late to restore this administration's depleted standing across the region. But a longer-range, broader perspective yields a distinctly more positive assessment.

If, as some on the Latin left assert, this was George W. Bush vs. Hugo Chavez in a contest for Latin loyalties, the ultimate winner won't be Venezuela's vulgar demagogue.

Bush visited Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico. Chavez, striving to upstage Bush's tour, made his own rabble-rousing stops in Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Jamaica and Haiti. As always, it wasn't hard to decipher Chavez's message. "Gringo, go home," bellowed Venezuela's leftist strongman.

Notwithstanding that rude taunt, Bush was graciously received by heads of state, including the left-of-center presidents of Brazil and Uruguay, at every stop. Anti-Bush, anti-U.S. demonstrations were raucous but small, and featured mostly the usual retinue of leftist radicals and anti-global economy zealots. Appropriately, Bush espoused a positive agenda and pointedly ignored Chavez's failed bid for equal billing.

Bush's message for Latin America echoed Washington's agenda for the past two decades: freer trade, market economics, democratic governance, suppression of drug trafficking and, in Mexico especially, a renewed promise to push for enactment of fair and comprehensive immigration reform by the U.S. Congress. To this litany, Bush added new appeals for fighting poverty and respecting human rights.

Chavez sings a decidedly different siren song.

He is steadily dismantling Venezuela's democracy. In its place, he rules by decree at the head of what has become a one-party government. He denounces capitalism as "hell on earth" and the global economy as

American imperialism. He makes common cause with the Castro brothers in Cuba, solicits state visits by Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and compares Bush to Hitler.

Chavez's "21st century socialism" is wrecking a Venezuelan economy previously weakened by years of overspending and mismanagement. Only Venezuela's gushers of oil revenue disguise, for now, the spreading economic chaos.

This isn't a record or a road map that anyone in Latin America with any sense wants to emulate. Half of Latin America now has left-of-center, social-democrat governments but only Bolivia's Evo Morales looks even remotely like a Chavez clone. In recent elections, Chavez's support for left-wing populist candidates in Peru and Mexico helped elect their opponents. Meanwhile, sensible left-of-center governments in Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and Peru are preserving democratic norms along with the free-market model and policies that undergird their economies.

Bush, burdened by an unpopular war in Iraq and a globally negative image, is undeniably unpopular in Latin America, too. For all of Bush's evident sincerity toward Latin America, his administration's ineptly executed foreign policy in the region has further diminished his standing there. Mostly, Latins feel neglected if not ignored by the United States. Given Iraq, Afghanistan and the larger struggle against global terrorism, Washington's preoccupation on these priorities is understandable but it still leaves Latin America feeling slighted.

Bush's advocacy of freer trade during his Latin tour rang a tad hollow given the new, more protectionist Democratic Congress. If Congress won't approve the new free-trade pact with Colombia, which is the staunchest U.S. ally in Latin America, what hope is there for other countries in the region to gain more access to the vast U.S. market?

On immigration, a country seemingly poised to fence off its border with Mexico while raiding work places for illegal immigrants inescapably looks hostile to many in Latin America.

Bush's weakened status at home, marking him as a president who can no longer deliver, only compounds his difficulties in Latin America.

And yet, for all that, the American model of economic prosperity and opportunity, individual liberty, democracy and the rule of law remains widely admired across Latin America. It's the United States, not Cuba or Venezuela, that is the preferred destination for millions of Latin immigrants.

No amount of bombast by Hugo Chavez can change this reality.

Beyond specific agenda items, the larger mission of Bush's tour was to re-engage the contest of ideas and ideals in Latin America. In this struggle on which the destiny of a continent rides, it's the message more than the messenger that counts. That message, the vision of a free and prosperous future, still trumps all others.

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