

## Chávez's War of Words

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Last week Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad held a news conference at which he launched into a vitriolic denunciation of Israel, "the usurper Zionist regime," for its bombing of civilians in Lebanon. For a politician who has repeatedly denied the Holocaust and called for Israel's extinction, it was pretty routine stuff.

Then the visiting head of state standing next to Ahmadinejad piped up. "Do they want war because they have the devil inside them?" demanded Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, speaking of the Jewish state. "I say to them from here, from Iran, once and a thousand times: Murderers! Cowards! Frankly, their fate has been sealed, from the depths of the people's soul."

No wonder Ahmadinejad had just described Chávez as a "brother and trench mate." But the Venezuelan wasn't finished. Israel's acts, he said, reminded him of a time when Simon Bolivar had invoked the story of Cain and Abel to talk about an enemy. "Bolivar said that day: 'God, if you have justice, throw a lightning bolt at the monsters,'" Chávez pronounced. "I would say today: 'God, throw the lightning bolts at the monsters.' *Inshallah*."

According to BBC Monitoring, Chávez won a round of applause from his Iranian friends. Curiously, though, his tirade got almost no attention outside Tehran. In a week during which a movie star was pilloried for a somewhat milder anti-Semitic outburst (and Mel Gibson at least could say he was drunk), no one seemed to care about the hate speech of the president of a large South American country and one of the world's biggest oil exporters -- a man who has been conducting a frenetic campaign to win his government a two-year term on the United Nations Security Council.

In fact, Chávez's performance was in keeping with the character of an eight-nation tour that took him from Argentina to Benin. But Israel was not his main concern. At each stop, the self-styled "Bolivarian revolutionary" delivered superheated denunciations of the United States and called for a global coalition to combat "the U.S. imperialist monster."

In Minsk, where he met Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, commonly known as "Europe's last dictator," Chávez said the United States is "a senseless, blind, stupid giant that understands nothing about human rights, humaneness, culture, consciousness and awareness."

In Moscow, where he signed a contract for a \$1 billion purchase of advanced SU-30 fighter planes, raising Venezuela's arms buys from Russia to \$3 billion in the past 18 months, Chávez said that "the biggest threat in the world is the U.S. empire." In Hanoi he discoursed at length on the "pre-animal" depredations of the U.S. military, including the bombing of Japanese cities in World War II. Then he praised the Vietnamese for their

defeat of "the monster," while warning it "will never give up its plot to stop and undermine us."

Chávez's next-to-last stop was the poor African country of Mali, where "imperialism" usually means France, the country's former colonial master. Never mind: "We must unite, we countries of the South, against the hegemony of the United States," proclaimed the unlikely visitor to Bamako. "Or we will all die."

What to make of all this? One easy explanation is that Chávez has come unhinged, and his hatred of the United States -- not to mention Jews -- is pathological. But I find another theory more persuasive: Chávez is betting that resentment and anger toward the United States has become so entrenched around the world that by becoming its champion he can make himself a global leader. First, in his reckoning, Venezuela will brush aside Russia and France to lead the opposition to U.S. initiatives at the United Nations. Then, who knows?

This offers an interesting test of just how far other countries are now willing to go in challenging the U.S. global role. The answer is: not too far, if Chávez is the alternative. In Argentina, South American governments swiftly rejected his suggestion of a joint military force. In Belarus, he got a bear hug from Lukashenko, a diplomatic pariah; but Vietnam's top leaders, who are hoping to host President Bush in November, appeared embarrassed by Chávez's rhetoric, which they pointedly did not second.

In Moscow, Chávez's attempt to score a hug was icily evaded by Vladimir Putin, who, as the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* sarcastically described it, literally held the Venezuelan at arm's length. Having pocketed Chávez's cash and listened to his rant, Putin responded with a single sentence: "The cooperation between Russia and Venezuela isn't aimed against anyone."

It remains to be seen whether Chávez will get his Security Council seat in a vote by the General Assembly in October; thanks to some inept diplomacy by the Bush administration, he just might. But Bush at least managed to win last week's war of words. Asked by a Fox television interviewer if Chávez posed a threat to the United States, Bush responded with the cruelest cut possible for the Bolivarian: "No, I don't view him as a threat."

Neither, it seems, does anyone else.