

HUGO CHÁVEZ IS NOT GOING AWAY SOON

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OXFORD, OHIO – Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's recent proclamations that President Bush is the devil and that he could still smell the sulfur from Mr. Bush's visit to the UN the day before have largely been covered by the media as laughable and absurd.

But if you found yourself guffawing or rolling your eyes - perhaps the way that many rolled their eyes at Bush's "axis of evil" speech - you'd be missing the underlying strategy of Latin America's most powerful and problematic leader. What's more, you're probably not who Mr. Chávez is talking to, anyway.

Beyond the glittering generalities and name calling is an expertly crafted appeal to Latin America's masses. For many Latin Americans, to see Hugo Chávez step up to the podium of the United Nations and berate the leader of the United States in front of, quite literally, the whole world was more gratifying than winning the World Cup during Mardi Gras.

Chávez's use of religious symbolism is, of course, no accident. In Venezuela, Chávez refers to the four private media stations that oppose him as "the four horsemen of the apocalypse." He says the Catholic leaders who speak out against him are possessed and need to be exorcised, and it is no coincidence that the president's weekly talk show is held on Sunday morning.

This religious rhetoric has made Chávez extremely attractive to Latin America's devout Roman Catholic population, and many of them see Chávez - as he admittedly sees himself - as a Messianic figure come to raise Latin America out of its long history of subordination to the developed world. In fact, some evangelical pastors openly preach that Chávez has been sent by God.

While you can blast Chávez for overseeing a regime that has destroyed labor unions, stifles free speech, and is rotten with corruption, it cannot be denied that the Venezuelan president is a brilliant orator and populist. Rhetoric is Chávez's forte: He has the ability to tap into people's emotions and belief systems. He makes people feel that they can become part of something bigger - that they are playing a role in history by joining his cause.

The other crucial ingredient in Chávez's successful appeal to Latin Americans is his militant nationalism, embodied by his employment of Simón Bolívar as a political symbol. Chávez had Venezuela renamed "The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" and reportedly likes to set a place for Bolívar at the dinner table.

Just as Bolívar expelled the Spanish from much of South America, Chávez wants to expel US influence from the region, an idea that is welcomed by millions of Latin Americans who view Washington's long support of the neoliberal model - the combination of privatization, free trade, and austerity policies - as the cause of what former Venezuelan president Carlos Andrés Pérez called the "neutron bomb" of third world development policy, a policy "that killed people, but left buildings standing."

While the track record of the US in the region was already poor, the Bush administration - with its increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, questionable human rights record, and neglect of Latin America - has given Chávez all the fuel he needs to fire up his constituents and stoke the flames.

In his private moments, I'm sure that Chávez knows that Bush is not the devil, but a godsend. For to have such a perfect scapegoat, such a piñata, helps Chávez rally his constituents while, at the same time, it distracts the electorate from the shortcomings of his Bolivarian revolution. For example, when the Venezuelan government was slow to respond to torrential rains that caused extensive flooding in 2005, Chávez blamed the rains on global warming and hinted that US leadership was at fault for not ratifying the Kyoto Protocol.

Moreover, overextended by the war on terror, the Bush administration - particularly the State Department and US intelligence services - has proven to be completely incapable of stymieing Chávez as he buys arms, builds a million-man militia, forges political ties through petrodplomacy, eats pudding with Fidel Castro, and continues to broadcast his ideological message throughout the hemisphere.

In short, Chávez can advance his leftist agenda - Bush-bashing the whole way - without fear of reprisal. While some may laugh at Chávez, he will almost certainly be reelected in December to another six-year term and has even alluded to changing the Constitution so that he can stay in power until 2021. The firebrand who sits atop the largest oil reserves outside the Middle East is not going away anytime soon.

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