

We should thank Chávez

Opinion
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By Froma Harrop

Joseph P. Kennedy II has been savaged for many things. For such offenses as bullying his ex-wife and burning his son with illegal fireworks, the former congressman deserves the blows. But for his dealings with the government of Venezuelan bad man Hugo Chávez -- a magnet for ardent outrage -- he is to be praised.

Kennedy runs the Citizens Energy Corp., a nonprofit that provides low-cost heating oil to poor people in the Northeast. At issue is a television ad in which he says: "I'm Joe Kennedy. Help is on the way. Heating oil at 40 percent off from our friends in Venezuela at Citgo."

A USA Today editorial called Kennedy "a self-promoting shill for the Chávez government." A Wall Street Journal editorial also bashed him, adding that, "It's worth asking what the price of this largesse is to Venezuelans."

The last point is my point. Chávez has been giving away the country's oil bonanza in his quest to become the next Fidel. With their own infrastructure in shambles, Venezuelans haven't been keen about spreading the charity thick even in poor parts of Latin America. Imagine their displeasure over selling their precious oil at a steep discount to the Yankees. So why stop Joe Kennedy from digging it in, however unwittingly?

Yes, Chávez is anti-American and an aggravating figure. But he's also a buffoon whose party goes away with any significant drop in oil prices. Puffing Chávez into a "threat" makes him only more eager to hold one of his U.S. nemesis conventions. Nonetheless, The Wall Street Journal editorialists fret that Kennedy's ad might help the Venezuelan "shape U.S. public opinion in the hope that more gringos will come to see the Chávez government as benevolent."

No. 1: Chávez is never mentioned in the ad.

No. 2: Had the Chávez name been mentioned, 90 percent of the TV audience would have confused it with Cesar or Linda.

No. 3: Of the few viewers who know who Hugo Chávez is, most probably think, "If you want to give us cheap oil, step right up."

Back to the point. Chávez's ability to sell *Chavismo* is directly linked to Venezuela's oil revenues. Not to belittle the Chávez charm, but a five-fold increase in the price of oil since he assumed power had much to do with his popularity.

"I don't think that he can pull off anything like what he's trying to do without the type of oil market that we have right now and the type of oil prices that we have right now," Francisco Rodríguez, the former chief economist of the Venezuelan National Assembly, said recently on PBS's *Newshour*.

A look at recent elections in Latin America shows little interest in following the man's radical game plan. In Peru, former populist Alan García was elected president as the non-Chávez candidate. In Chile and Brazil, left-leaning, but market-oriented, candidates won presidential elections. And in Mexico, President Felipe Calderón scored a narrow victory after campaign ads linked his opponent to Chávez.

There doesn't seem to be a long future for Hugo Chávez, unless Americans care to make one for him. His recent announcement of plans to nationalize key industries sent Venezuelan stocks plunging 20 percent in one day. Meanwhile, oil prices have dropped appreciably from only a few weeks ago.

As for Kennedy, sure, he's a publicity hound and wouldn't care if he were helping Chávez. But in fact, he's hurting him in ways his critics don't get. If America's Chávez-haters wanted to be clever, they'd erect a giant billboard in the middle of Caracas that reads, ``George Bush joins Joe Kennedy in thanking the Venezuelan people for their generosity."`