

# **U.S. officials escalate their criticism of Chávez**

**The verbal jousting between the United States and Venezuela is back as President Bush prepares for a trip to Latin America.**

The Miami Herald  
Feb. 14, 2007

**WASHINGTON** - The tough U.S. talk on Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is back.

After Chávez won reelection in a December landslide, Washington seemed to reach out to the feisty socialist leader who routinely calls President Bush as the main cause of the world's ills.

The U.S. ambassador in Caracas, William Brownfield, met with Venezuelan foreign minister Nicolás Maduro. And the top U.S. diplomat to Latin America, Thomas Shannon, offered to "look for ways to engage with the government of Venezuela to underscore the pacific nature of our relationship."

But in recent weeks, a parade of U.S. officials has stepped up criticism of Chávez's latest moves, like nationalizing telecommunications and electricity companies, and securing the right to rule by decree for 18 months without having to go to his congress. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told a House panel last week that Chávez was "really destroying his own country economically, politically."

And on Tuesday, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns told reporters that "if he continues to nationalize, if he continues to wall himself off, it goes against the grain where the rest of the world is going."

Burns and Shannon were in Argentina and Brazil last week to discuss everything from energy collaboration with Brazil to dealing with nations like Venezuela and Cuba, with which the United States has strained relations.

The trip also laid the groundwork for President Bush's visit next month to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala. Burns called 2007 "a year of engagement" with Latin America.

U.S. officials say they want to talk with Venezuelan authorities but note that there appears to be little enthusiasm on the other side. "We're still open to dialogue," Shannon said at the same briefing. "We still believe that the rhetoric that we hear from Caracas does not accurately reflect the potential of the relationship and that there are important areas where dialogue could be fruitful. But ultimately, dialogue requires two. We can't talk to ourselves."

Burns said the U.S. government has reached out to Venezuelan allies President Rafael Correa of Ecuador and President Evo Morales of Bolivia as part of the U.S. "ecumenical" approach to establish ties with governments of all political stripes, but drew a line on the "radical" governments in Caracas and Havana.

"Venezuela is a country that's isolating itself," he said.

Venezuelan officials also have been dishing out their share of criticism.

When the administration cut \$2.2 million from the fiscal year 2008 budget counterdrug aid money from Venezuela, Foreign Minister Maduro accused Washington of giving money to countries that "submit to its commands." Earlier this month Chávez branded Bush a "war criminal."

After bashing Chávez, Rice told lawmakers that Washington did not want a tit-for-tat confrontation.

"One thing that we want to avoid is to get into a rhetorical contest with the president of Venezuela," she said, "because frankly it takes the spotlight off of our very positive agenda in Latin America."