

Bush's Latin Trip: An Unusual Look At Ordinary Life

Modest Agenda Favored Symbolism Over Substance

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MERIDA, [Mexico](#), March 14 -- He dispensed with the formal state dinners and traveled through shanty neighborhoods. He met people struggling to make ends meet and called a visit to a Guatemalan village "one of the great experiences of my presidency."

For President Bush, the six-day voyage through Latin America that ended Wednesday proved to be unlike any of his previous foreign trips. It was one in which he tried ever so haltingly to escape the palaces and diplomatic salons long enough to see how people live and to emphasize that it matters to him.

The inspiration for the unusual itinerary was more about the vagaries of geopolitics than newfound curiosity, but the trip exposed the president to sights and sounds that he rarely encounters overseas. The rhetoric of security and terrorism that usually flavors his visits was replaced with discussion of "the human condition" and how to lift millions of neighbors out of deep, enduring poverty.

"We're allies in the cause of social justice," he told the Guatemalans. "The plight of the poor" has drawn U.S. concern, he explained in Uruguay. "We're all members of God's family," he said in [Brazil](#). "And when one of us hurts, we also hurt."

The unspoken message was that he cares just as much as Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and that the United States offers an alternative to the anti-American leftism that has gained ground in Latin America. But commentators in the region have said that message may be too little, too late. Latin Americans have already been abandoned by Bush, they reason, and he is on his way out soon enough.

Bush had more symbolism than substance to offer. He announced a few modest initiatives to help with housing, education and health care and boasted of increasing direct aid to Latin America during his presidency, but did not mention that he just sent Congress a budget actually cutting that aid next year. Beyond an ethanol agreement with Brazil, which was more ambitious than specific, there were no concrete outcomes of his talks.

"With the succession of political errors committed by the U.S. government," such as the invasion of [Iraq](#), "it is almost impossible that this same government would have been capable of reaping fruits in this visit that was seen as a crude maneuver to contain the influence of Chavismo," wrote Eugenio Anguiano, a columnist at El Universal, one of Mexico's largest newspapers.

Bush was met at every stop by protests that often degenerated into violent clashes with riot police. Chávez, too, shadowed him for most of the trip, at one point staging a massive demonstration just across the river in Buenos Aires when Bush arrived in Montevideo, Uruguay. "Get Out Bush the Murderer," read graffiti painted on a wall across Plaza Independencia from the president's hotel in Montevideo.

Bush avoided characterizing the tour as an anti-Chávez maneuver. By one count, he was asked about Chávez nearly a dozen times in the days leading up to and during the trip, and each time he refused even to utter the Venezuelan's name. Bush aides contend that would only embolden Chávez, provoking one of his hours-long polemics.

White House officials complained about the attention to Chávez on the trip. "What I've seen is Chávez seems to be tagging along with you all more than with us," Dan Fisk, the president's Latin America specialist, told reporters aboard Air Force One when they asked about the Venezuelan leader.

But a Freudian slip by the president seemed to indicate that Chávez was, in fact, on his mind as he crossed the region. During an interview in Uruguay, he started telling Greta Van Susteren of Fox News about the hospitality he had received. "[Venezuela](#) has got fantastic meats," he said, before quickly correcting himself. "I mean, Uruguay has got fantastic meats."

As attention focused on the angry reactions to Bush, the trip obscured the fact that Chávez is not entirely popular in much of Latin America either. Robert A. Pastor, director of the Center for North American Studies at American University, compared Bush's trip to the 1958 tour by then-Vice President Richard M. Nixon, when his motorcade was pelted with stones.

"It almost seems that Bush and Chávez are in a passionate contest to see which of them is the least popular leader in the Americas," Pastor said. "Of course, this is not the kind of contest that either can -- or rather should want to -- win."

The trip took Bush to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico, making it his longest sojourn in the region since taking office. The skepticism he encountered along the way was deep.

In Bogota, Colombia, where Bush was the first U.S. president to visit since 1982, many were unimpressed after he stayed on the ground for only seven hours.

"Bush: Is Seven Hours Enough?" asked a banner front-page headline in *El Tiempo*. "President George Bush left and Bogotanos, thank God, can go back to our normal life, after a few days in which the only thing we weren't prohibited from doing was using the bathroom, for fear the sewage tubes would be used for a terrorist attack," wrote columnist María Jiménez Duzán.

Here in Mexico, Bush's promises to push for immigration changes in Washington seemed unpersuasive to some. "He had all the time in the world during his first term in office," Santiago Creel, the Senate coordinator for President Felipe Calderón's party, told *El Porvenir*. "For this reason, we think that a new administration in the United States will benefit relations with Mexico."

But many who greeted Bush at some of his stops were happy to see him and surprised to find him expressing interest in their lives. Bush visited the Meninos do Morumbi community center in a Sao Paulo neighborhood where rich and poor live beside one another. He later said he was struck to see the vast wealth of the city juxtaposed against a run-down favela.

The trip was sprinkled with such "social justice" events, including a meeting with Afro-Colombians in Bogota, who described life in the minority there, and a trip to Santa Cruz Balanya, Guatemala, where U.S. military doctors were treating poor villagers.

The place that seemed to make the biggest impression on him was the Labradores Mayas Packing Station in the village of Chirijuyu, in the Guatemalan highlands. He met Mariano Can, an indigenous farmer who began tilling fields at age 7 and who, even as an adult, was barely growing enough corn and beans to survive.

Can teamed up with other farmers to set up a collective and, with a U.S.-backed loan and U.S.-financed irrigation 20 years ago, built it into a thriving business that today sells high-value crops such as lettuce, carrots and celery to large companies such as Wal-Mart Central America.

"Mr. Bush, I want you to know that there are people here who want to work hard," he told the president. "We want to export to the U.S."

"You have proven that if given a chance, you and hundreds of others can succeed," Bush replied, "and that's what we want."