

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Obama goofed by not including caveat

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One in an occasional series on presidential candidates' views about Latin America.

I was not terribly surprised when Sen. Barack Obama said in the Democratic presidential debate Monday that he would sit down with Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez if elected president. He had told me so a day earlier -- and much more -- although with a very important caveat.

In a wide-ranging interview on foreign affairs, and Latin America in particular, the Democratic presidential hopeful criticized President Bush's foreign policy as excessively "based on the dislike of Hugo Chávez." And he told me that he would not only sit down with the Venezuelan president "under certain conditions" but would travel to leftist-ruled Bolivia -- Venezuela's closest ally in South America -- at the start of his presidency.

"We've seen our influence diminished in the world," Obama said in the Sunday interview. "We've seen an inability to recognize constructive opportunities with countries that may be leaning left, but that are trying to do the right thing by their people. That is a fundamental difference that I think will be reflected in an Obama presidency."

What would he do? I asked.

"The starting point is to rebuild the alliances that have been frayed in the past several years, to travel early to key countries like Brazil, Argentina, Chile, but also Bolivia -- countries where the assumption is that we don't have common interests. I think that we do."

A day later, at the CNN-YouTube Democratic Debate, Obama raised eyebrows nationwide when he responded affirmatively to a question on whether he would be willing to meet -- without preconditions -- in the first year of his presidency with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea.

Asked the same question at the debate, Sen. Hillary Clinton seized the moment to portray Obama as a rookie on foreign affairs, saying that she would not hold such meetings right away because "I don't want to be used for propaganda purposes."

In our interview, the senator from Illinois had been a bit more cautious. When I asked him whether he would meet with Chávez, he had said, "Under certain conditions, I always believe in talking. Sometimes it's more important to talk to your enemies than to your friends."

On other issues, asked whether he had ever visited a Latin American country, Obama told me that he has not. "Obviously, I have only been in the U.S. Senate for three years, so the opportunity for me to travel [to the region] has not yet come up. But my interest and regard for Latin America is one that has been developing for a long period of time."

Could he name two or three Latin American leaders he admires? I asked.

"I think that the current president of Chile has been doing terrific work, and seems to be a very thoughtful person," he said, referring to Michelle Bachelet. "Part of what I am seeing in her and many other leaders in Latin America, and hopefully that we are going to see in the United States, is a de-emphasis on ideology and more emphasis on practical solutions."

Asked about his vote against the U.S. free-trade deal with Central America and the Dominican Republic, Obama said, "Our opportunities are enormous to expand trade with Latin America, but making sure that our trade agreements reflect the interests of workers, not just that of corporations."

Obama added, ``NAFTA [the U.S.-Canada-Mexico free trade deal] is a good example: It has undoubtedly increased profits for U.S. companies and Mexican companies, but if you look at the consequences for Mexican farmers, it has not been a good policy for them."

My opinion: Obama is wrong on trade -- NAFTA has actually been largely good for Mexicans, as well as for Americans -- and he may be too tied to U.S. labor unions that cite alleged concerns for foreign workers as an excuse to protect their members from foreign competition.

But I don't think that, if elected, he would be naive enough to rush into a tte-à-tte with Chávez for the fun of it, and risk being insulted by him a minute later.

More likely, Obama is playing politics: as the No. 2 in the race for the Democratic nomination, he needs to project himself as the candidate of change -- while depicting Clinton as that of the establishment -- and appeal to the most liberal wing of his party, whose activism will be critical in the party's primaries.

So I'm not surprised by what he said at the debate -- although he would have done much better if he had added what he told me a day earlier.