

When a Mother Country Tells Its Kid, 'Shut Up'

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EVEN though they achieved independence more than a century ago, the Spanish-speaking nations of Latin America often look to Spain as a reference point. Sometimes the mother country is a foil, sometimes a support, sometimes a mirror, for what unfolds on this side of the Atlantic.

In recent weeks, Spain clearly has been cast as both a punching bag for Latin America's leftists and a bastion of valor for its moderates, after a dissing match in which a king of Spain took offense at a Venezuelan president's remarks and told him, very publicly: "Why don't you shut up?"

The dressing down quickly took on a life of its own. King Juan Carlos's blunt question instantly became the campaign slogan of the day for enemies of President [Hugo Chávez](#). It blared from YouTube clips everywhere, rang out from cellphones in both Spain and Venezuela, and screamed from T-shirts all over Caracas.

In the excitement, the context of the exchange was largely brushed over: In addition to an epic spectacle, the comic opera offered a terrific glimpse into the unendingly complicated relations between Spain and its former colonies.

First, what happened: Seizing on a moment when the king had returned from a polemical tour of small Spanish enclaves near Morocco, Mr. Chávez used a summit in Chile of Latin American and Iberian leaders to taunt the Spaniards, applying the word "fascist" to a right-wing former Spanish prime minister who wasn't even there.

The king's rebuke followed, and then threats from Mr. Chávez to review Spanish investments in Venezuela. Before it was over, the president of Nicaragua and even [Fidel Castro](#) had chimed in to defend Mr. Chávez with allusions to Spanish economic colonialism and ancient racial grievances.

There is a history to all this. In the 1980s, when Spain and much of Latin America were emerging from authoritarian rule, Spain was something of a model as it moved beyond Gen. [Francisco Franco](#)'s long dictatorship. In 1981, leftists across the region applauded King Juan Carlos after he helped thwart a reactionary coup attempt at home.

In the 1990s, the relationship changed. Cash-strapped Latin American countries were privatizing state enterprises and offering them for sale. Spaniards snapped up banks, electric utilities, telephone companies and road concessions. Latin Americans called it "the reconquest."

Now, global migration aggravates resentments. Spain draws hundreds of thousands of immigrants, largely from the Andean countries, and many complain of xenophobic

treatment. Last month, a beating of a teenage Ecuadorean immigrant on a train in Barcelona was caught on video, and prompted an outcry across the Andes.

Meanwhile, Spain's investment in the region has slowed drastically, a result of a surge in trade within the region, new investment from China and India, and complaints against some Spanish companies. So it has become easy for a populist to make points with poor voters by bashing Spain.

The spat at the summit offered a good example. When [Daniel Ortega](#), the former Marxist rebel leader who is now Nicaragua's president, took the microphone to defend Mr. Chávez, he also denounced a Spanish utility with a virtual monopoly on power distribution in Nicaragua.

Mr. Castro, from his seclusion in Cuba, framed the episode as the Spanish monarchy's "ideological Waterloo." Himself the son of an immigrant from Spain and a Cuban woman, he raised old race issues by invoking his ancestral connection to the Taínos, Cuba's pre-Columbian inhabitants. "I have Taíno, Canarian, Celtic blood and who knows what else," he wrote in an essay published last week in his government's signature newspaper, Granma.

In his attack on the absent Spanish prime minister, Mr. Chávez employed a rich Venezuelan tradition that still shocks more gentlemanly parts of Latin America and the Iberian peninsula: the political insult. The tradition "has been part of our culture since the early days of independence, when insulting a political rival's virility was the norm," said Francisco Javier Pérez, author of "The Insult in Venezuela." Mr. Chávez has used it against President Bush, [Tony Blair](#) of Britain, [Vicente Fox](#) of Mexico and [Alejandro Toledo](#) of Peru.

Mr. Chávez has outlasted all of them in power, except for Mr. Bush, and may outlast him as well. The Santiago confrontation came just weeks before a referendum scheduled for Dec. 2, which Mr. Chávez hopes will allow him to run for an indefinite number of terms in office. His critics say the incident could have been a distraction ahead of the referendum, but it may not end that way.

There are now about 300,000 Spaniards in Venezuela, many of whom moved here in search of opportunity before Spain's economy lifted off in the 1990s; many of them are less than thrilled about the insults to Spain.

The influx, in fact, has strengthened bonds between Venezuela and Spain, and they are reflected here in cuisine, music, trade, even novels. One book published this year, "La Caraqueña del Maní," by the Spanish writer José Luis Muñoz, captures the complexity. The protagonist is a Basque exile seeking a new life amid the demimonde here of salsa bars and Iberian eateries.

Over a meal of Txakolí wine and Idiazábal cheese, he sums up how the New World, despite its occasional outbursts against Spain, still fascinates the Old. "Venezuela is a friendly country," Mr. Muñoz says, "and if one is lucky not to be caught in the middle of a gunfight, well, it's almost paradise."