

AMERICAS - Bush versus Chavez, The Imperial President and the Bolivarian Democrat (Roger Burbach, ALAI)

Wednesday 30 November 2005, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

2005-11-07 - [ALAI](#) - Bush's woes just keep piling up on him. The summit of hemispheric leaders he attended in Argentina was a total embarrassment, revealing the emperor has no clothes. Bush did manage to avoid shaking hands with his main adversary at the summit, Hugo Chavez. But the president of Venezuela stole the show, drawing 35,000 to hear him speak at a packed stadium. In Bush's only comment on the massive demonstrations against his stay in Argentina, he lamely joked with the country's president, Nestor Kirchner, "It's particularly not easy to host, perhaps, me."

Declaring "I will of course be polite" in the presence of Chavez, Bush waited until he flew off to Brazil to levy a savage attack on the leader of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela: "Ensuring social justice for the Americas requires choosing between two competing visions," he proclaimed at a banquet. "One offers a vision of hope. It is founded on representative government, integration in the world community, and a faith in the transformative power of freedom in individual lives...the other seeks to roll back the democratic progress...by playing to fear, pitting neighbor against neighbor, and blaming others for their own failures to provide for their people."

This Orwellian declaration upended the realities of Chavez's Venezuela and Bush's America. Elected to the presidency in 1998, Chavez received 56 percent of the vote, while as the world knows Bush in the 2000 elections lost the popular vote to his Democratic opponent.

During Chavez' seven years in office, Venezuela has proved to be the most democratic government in the recent history of the Americas. Eight elections or referendums have taken place, including the election of a constituent assembly to draft a new Bolivarian constitution that established the principles for a participatory democracy. In each instance of voting, fifty-six to sixty percent of the participants have supported Chavez or his initiatives, including his reelection as president under the new constitution in 2000. Bush it should be noted in his reelection in 2004 received only 51% of the votes, the lowest for an incumbent since Woodrow Wilson in 1916. No international observers have uncovered fraud in any of the Venezuelan balloting, while in the United States there are still serious questions about the fairness and integrity of the 2000 and 2004 elections.

The Bush administration's most ignominious assault on the new democratic spirit in Venezuela occurred with a coup attempt in April 2002. After meeting with the coup conspirators in Washington for months beforehand, the United States was the first and only government in the hemisphere to recognize the "golpistas" headed by Pedro Carmona, the president of the Venezuelan business association. Chavez was restored to power in 48 hours, thanks to a massive popular demonstration combined with military support, principally among junior officers and common soldiers.

As in the lead up to the Iraqi war, the US media, including the liberal press, proved to be a conveyor belt for the Bush line on Chavez. While the coup was in progress the New York Times editorialized: "Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator." The Times, also echoing the position of the Venezuelan elites, insisted that Chavez was a "demagogue."

Demagoguery is apparently a label imposed on any leader who attempts to mobilize and improve the lot of the popular classes at the expense of the wealthy. In a country of 25 million, illiteracy has been virtually eliminated as 1.4 million learned to read and write during the early years of Chavez' tenure. Three million

adult Venezuelans previously outside the education system due to poverty enrolled in schooling programs.

When Chavez took office 80 percent of the population was largely excluded from the benefits of an oil rich economy. Few had access to even minimal health care. Today, thanks in large part to an "oil for doctors" program that has brought 20,000 Cuban doctors to Venezuela, seventy percent of the population enjoys access to free health care. Malnutrition and hunger have been eliminated as three-fifths of the population now receives subsidized food via cooperatives, special food programs and government distribution centers.

As to Bush's allegation that Chavez is pitting "neighbor against neighbor," the President of Venezuela proudly points to his efforts to foment cooperation in the hemisphere while opposing "the frightening neo-liberal globalization" embodied in Bush's call for a Free Trade Area of the Americas. Chavez in August launched PetroCaribe, a program providing Venezuelan oil to the countries of the Caribbean at a 40 percent discount with long term loans at 1 percent interest. In opposition to Bush's neo-liberal agenda, Chavez is calling for the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas that would include political as well as economic integration for South and Latin America.

The ultimate hypocrisy in Bush's proclamation that he stands for improved international relations while Chavez opposes "freedom in individual lives" came at Bush's last stop in Panama. There in an effort to rebuff international criticism of the secret U.S. prison system abroad used to detain and torture alleged terrorism suspects, Bush stated he would continue to "aggressively pursue" terror suspects and insisted that "any activity we conduct" is "lawful." Small wonder Chavez labels the Bush regime a "terrorist administration" that is a "threat to humanity."

- Roger Burbach is director of the Center for the Study of the Americas based in Berkeley, CA. His most recent books are "The Pinochet Affair: State Terrorism and Global Justice," and "Imperial Overstretch: George W. Bush and the Hubris of Empire" (co-authored with Jim Tarbell).

<http://www.alainet.org/active/9675&lang=en>