

*The Monterey Herald*  
October 8, 2006

**Just another thug bashing the U.S. president**

By **LAWRENCE J. HAAS**

**Guest commentary**

For the many Americans who are unhappy with President Bush, 'tis tempting to revel in Venezuela President Hugo Chavez's characterization of our polarizing leader as "the devil."

'Tis tempting, too, just weeks before elections that will determine control of Congress, for Bush's critics to use Chavez's speech at the United Nations as political fodder.

Iowa's Democratic Senator, Tom Harkin, sought to capitalize on it, saying, "I can understand the frustration, the anger of certain people around the world because of George Bush's policies."

But as we Americans subject our leaders to severe scrutiny, we must never forget the distinction between legitimate criticism and inappropriate personal attack. More important, we must never forget that distinction in the realm of global politics, where attacks on our leaders are often attacks on our nation itself, with huge implications for our national security.

That's surely the case here. Chavez is pursuing a three-legged strategy to replace the ailing Fidel Castro as leader of the Third World's anti-American bloc. Along with his public Bush-bashing that rallies the discontented in faraway lands, Chavez is building alliances across the globe with fellow autocrats while exploiting political divisions within the United States.

Historically speaking, Chavez broke no new ground in his America-bashing. Indeed, he was just the latest in a long line of two-bit dictators and would-be revolutionaries who, for the last half-century, have used the U.N. to launch anti-American or anti-Western tirades.

Fidel Castro called then-presidential candidate Sen. John F. Kennedy "illiterate and ignorant"; Che Guevara called the United States "the perpetuator of exploitation and oppression against the peoples of the world"; Yasser Arafat called Zionism "an ideology that is imperialist, colonialist, racist... profoundly reactionary and discriminatory"; and Cuba's foreign minister, Roberto Robaina, called President Clinton "a King Kong escaped from the cage."

But history is no defense. The Venezuelan strongman did more than call Bush "the devil," however much that remark dominated media attention. He said Bush's speech to the world body a day earlier deserved analysis by a psychiatrist, and he characterized the

United States as a “world dictatorship” that is “imperialist, fascist, assassin, [and] genocidal.”

The attack was absurd on its face; no one can seriously entertain thoughts of the United States as fascist or genocidal. But the absurdity only grows when the attack comes from a leader who is cracking down on freedom at home while building closer ties with ruthless dictators the world over.

More ominous is Chavez’s progress on the other two prongs of his strategy – to separate other nations from the United States and to separate Americans from their government, each of which is bearing fruit.

Abroad, Chavez is seeking a non-voting seat on the U.N. Security Council, which would give him another vehicle for anti-American mischief. There, he could back Iran and its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to whom he pledged support in Iran’s battle with the Security Council over its nuclear weapons program.

In the United States, as oil prices skyrocketed last winter, Chavez provided discounted home-heating oil to low-income families in Northeastern and mid-Atlantic states. In essence, members of Congress who negotiated deals with Venezuelan-owned CITGO chose to cater to constituent concerns rather than refuse the largesse of one of America’s sworn enemies.

Ironically, it’s one of those members -- an otherwise tough critic of Bush – who recognized the issues at stake in Chavez’s U.N. diatribe, providing an appropriate line for all Americans to adopt:

“George Bush... represents the entire country,” said Charles Rangel, the New York Democrat. “Any demeaning public attack against him is viewed by Republicans and Democrats, and all Americans, as an attack on all of us.”

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