



TERRORISM, FREE TRADE, AND VENEZUELA

Venezuela has nothing to do with Colombia's free trade agreement, but the Bush administration wants to scare people into thinking it does.

In a speech before the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on March 12, President George W. Bush called for the approval of a free trade agreement with Colombia by claiming that it was a national security imperative, and without it “terrorists and demagogues” like Venezuela’s President Hugo Chávez would defeat democratic leaders like Colombia’s President Alvaro Uribe.

He echoed that call on March 18 during a visit to Jacksonville, Florida, while Admiral John Stavridis, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, and Dan Fisk, director of Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council, made similar pleas in testimony and written statements that same week.

President Bush and his congressional allies have recently kicked off an aggressive campaign urging the U.S. Congress to endorse the free trade agreement with Colombia. Their main selling point has been the supposed threat that Venezuela poses to the region.

The same tactic was applied in 2005, when then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wrote in an op-ed that passing CAFTA would allow the countries of Central America to resist the “radicalism” represented by President Chávez. “The coming vote on CAFTA is a national-security vote,” he wrote. “Let there be no doubt.” And shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick similarly tried to convince the U.S. Congress to approve fast track negotiating authority for President Bush by arguing that free trade agreements were a necessary tool in fighting Islamic terrorism.¹

The use of national security for political purposes is nothing new, but it is irresponsible to inject Venezuela into a debate over a free trade agreement with Colombia that should be decided on its merits, not a phantom threat from an invented enemy. Relying on such tactics represents a dangerous politicization of an issue as important as the war on terror, and puts Venezuela at the center of a debate in which it has no place. Using the threat of terrorism to push a free trade agreement is not only irresponsible, but it is also insulting to those who have legitimate disagreements

¹ “Terrorism and Free Trade,” The Village Voice. <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=718>

with the agreement. As Adam Isaacson, a Colombia expert at the Center for International Policy has written: “So apparently, it’s Uribe’s way or the terrorists’ way. Needless to say, we reject this false, dishonest dichotomy in the most strenuous terms.”²

As the White House and the U.S. Congress debate over the free trade agreement with Colombia, it is important that Venezuela not be a factor.

VENEZUELA AND FREE TRADE

While the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela may have philosophical differences with concept of free trade agreements, it recognizes that such agreements are the sovereign decision of the countries that choose to negotiate and sign them. If Colombia and the United States choose to enter into a free trade agreement, it is the sole province of those two governments to do so.

Venezuela has an active commercial relationship with both the United States and Colombia. Within the region, Venezuela is second only to Mexico in the size of its commercial relationship with the United States, exceeding \$50 billion in 2007. Additionally, Venezuela and Colombia share a vibrant commercial relationship. In 2007, Colombian exports to Venezuela totaled more than \$5 billion, representing over 17 percent of the country’s total exports. In a recent statement, the Colombian ambassador in Venezuela noted that in January 2008 alone, exports from Colombia to Venezuela jumped over 50 percent as compared to the same month the year prior.

VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA

While Venezuela and Colombia have historically had differences on certain matters, the two countries share a common border, history, and culture. President Chávez and President Uribe have been able to work together towards a fruitful bilateral relationship and to resolve their differences peacefully.

Claiming that Venezuela and Colombia are somehow at odds – or that Venezuela is a threat to Colombia – simply ignores the facts. In an interview on September 20, 2006 on Fox News, President Uribe refused to

² “Friday Links,” Center for International Policy. <http://www.cipcol.org/?p=558>



criticize President Chávez, emphatically stating: “Colombia and Venezuela are sister nations. We have had a historic brotherhood. We have a common present and of course we need a joined future. Any expression I admit on Venezuela should be a friendly expression.”³

After the recent diplomatic dispute between Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, it was President Chávez that proposed and led a peaceful resolution at the Summit of the Rio Group in the Dominican Republic on March 7. According to Jose Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), “[Chávez’s] role was very decisive; it was very constructive.”

On March 10, full diplomatic relations between Venezuela and Colombia were re-established. More importantly, on March 13 President Chávez placed a call to President Uribe, in which they agreed to host a bilateral meeting in the near future to discuss issues of mutual concern.⁴ On March 25, President Chavez announced that he would seek to organize a meeting between himself, President Uribe, President Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. He similarly stated that during the first week of April he would meet with members of the Peace Commissions in the Colombian Senate and House of Representatives. He added that he seeks to work towards peace in Colombia.

VENEZUELA AND THE FARC

In early March, documents from a laptop recovered by the Colombian police after a raid on a camp of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Ecuador claimed that President Chávez had given \$300 million to the rebel group. This accusation has been uncritically reported in the media and repeated by Bush administration officials.

At the Summit of the Rio Group on March 7, President Chávez emphatically declared that such support was plainly false. Additionally, no explanation has been given as to how the laptops survived what was an intense bombing by Colombian forces, much less have the documents been found to be accurate or authentic. Independent analysts have also found a number of

discrepancies in the documents that would cast doubt on their credibility.

First, the amount “\$300 million” is never explicitly stated, much less is it stated alongside the name of President Chávez or any Venezuelan government official. Second, if the documents indicate anything, it’s that President Chávez entered into contact with leaders of the FARC *only* during the process of humanitarian negotiation that took place late last year – a process that President Uribe himself had agreed to. (So far, six hostages held by the FARC have been released to Venezuela.) And even in that process of communication, various analysts have noted that the FARC leadership expressed skepticism over

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- President Uribe

President Chávez’s role.

Intelligence officials quickly dismissed some of the claims included in some of the documents. According to an ABC report, U.S. intelligence analysts have expressed “extreme skepticism” over the claim made in one of the documents that the FARC was seeking to purchase uranium.⁵ Moreover, OAS Secretary General Insulza pointed out in an interview published on March 20 that even if the documents are proven authentic, it does not mean that their contents are truthful. “Just because Reyes [the rebel leader killed in the raid] says ‘We gave money to him’ does not mean that it’s true. On this issue I’d ask that people not lose their heads as has happened in recent days. I’ve seen many documents produced in the heat of the moment and many of them haven’t corresponded with reality,” he stated.⁶

PLAYING POLITICS WITH TERROR

By trying to sell a free trade agreement with Colombia by claiming that Venezuela is a national security threat – and even going as far as having his administration consider designating Venezuela a state sponsor of terror – President Bush is dangerously playing politics with the war on terror. As the Center for International Policy has written, “The administration is employing this argument in a specious, misleading and cynical way. As currently formulated, it could become a pretext for a host of irresponsible and counter-productive

³ “Uribe on Chavez on Fox News,” Center for International Policy.

<http://www.cipcol.org/?p=263>

⁴ “Venezuela Reiterates its Will to Restore Good Relations With Colombia,”

<http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=4119>

⁵ “U.S. Skeptical of Colombian ‘Dirty Bomb’ Claims,” ABD News.

<http://www.abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4395397&page=1>

⁶http://www2.elcomercio.com/solo_texto_search.asp?id_noticia=115731&anio=2008&mes=3&dia=20



policies in Latin America and the Caribbean.”⁷ A free trade agreement should be sold on its merits for the countries that sign it, not as a means to stop an attack from an invented enemy.

The war on terrorism needs to be taken seriously, and cannot be used as a political weapon against countries that might disagree with President Bush’s foreign policy practices. There have already been indications that any designation of Venezuela as a state sponsor of terror – especially when no evidence exists for such a move – could have serious and detrimental effects on the U.S.’s already difficult relationship with the countries of the hemisphere.

It is also notable that President Bush has accused Venezuela of siding with terrorism, when it is the Bush administration that has allowed Luis Posada Carriles, a dangerous terrorist wanted in Venezuela for the 1976 bombing of a civilian airliner that killed 73 people, to avoid prosecution and live freely in South Florida. Almost three years have passed since Venezuela requested Posada’s extradition (he is a Venezuelan national), and neither the State Department nor the Department of Justice have responded as they are required to do by the Extradition Treaty signed between the United States and Venezuela in 1922.

SELLING TRADE ON ITS MERITS

Trade agreements should be sold by promoting their socio-economic benefits – not by appealing to the politics of fear. While free trade might be an important part of President Bush’s foreign policy, it is irresponsible for him to claim that the agreement with Colombia will somehow aid in the war on terror, especially when his administration is creating an enemy of Venezuela for that very purpose.

Venezuela is a vibrant democracy that seeks to craft an independent path for its development. It is not a threat, and it should not be treated as one for the purposes of forcing free trade through the U.S. Congress.

⁷ “The Specious ‘National Security’ Argument,” Center for International Policy, <http://www.cipcol.org/?p=564>