

US targets Venezuela: Bush plans aggressive policy in Latin America

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The incoming Republican Party administration in Washington plans to take a tougher and more aggressive line in Latin America, targeting nationalists regarded as opponents of American economic and political interests, including the leaders of Venezuela and Haiti as well as the traditional bogeyman of US imperialism, Cuban President Fidel Castro.

According to a report published December 28 in the *New York Times*—traditionally a sounding board for the foreign policy thinking of American governments—President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, the populist ex-paratroop officer who dominates politics in that oil-rich country, is being singled out for attention.

Citing “Republican officials and foreign policy analysts,” the *Times* reported “a growing belief in Republican circles that Mr. Chávez is undercutting American foreign policy by providing oil to Cuba, by opposing ‘Plan Colombia,’ which includes \$1.3 billion in United States counternarcotics aid for South America, and by giving political support to guerrillas and anti-government forces in neighboring Andean nations.”

Venezuela is the fourth largest supplier of oil to the United States, currently accounting for 13 percent of American imports. Chavez has taken advantage of the economic leverage provided by the tight oil market and rising oil prices to strike a more independent posture for Venezuela in foreign policy. He is the only Latin American head of state to visit Iraq since the end of the Persian Gulf War, defying the US-imposed economic blockade, and he recently welcomed Castro on a state visit to Caracas.

Chavez has openly opposed the Clinton administration's increasing military and political involvement in the civil war in neighboring Colombia, citing the danger of a flood of refugees into Venezuela

if the guerrilla struggle escalates into a wider conflict.

Republican foreign policy experts told the *Times* that the Bush administration would seek to increase reliance on Mexico as an oil supplier in order to lessen US dependence on Venezuelan imports. Until this year Venezuela was the largest single supplier to the United States, but it has slipped behind Canada, Mexico and Saudi Arabia as Chavez has aggressively cut production in order to drive up prices. Venezuela has taken a more prominent role in OPEC at Chavez's urging, and the country's oil minister, Ali Rodriguez, will become secretary-general of OPEC on January 1, 2001.

The other strand in a Bush policy toward Venezuela will be internal subversion of the Chavez regime. According to the *Times*: “The next administration is also expected to solidify contacts within the Venezuelan military, which is increasingly uncomfortable with Mr. Chávez, the Republican experts say. Unlike Mr. Chávez, many Venezuelan officers studied and trained in the United States and do not share his suspicions, they said.”

In plain language, this means that if Chavez does not toe the line, the US government will seek to organize a military coup against him. Even before Bush takes office, the US State Department has begun investigating charges by three South American countries—Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia—that Chavez is providing material support to leftist guerrillas or organizations of the indigenous peoples.

A renewed US aggressiveness in Latin America was signaled by Bush in the main foreign policy speech of his campaign, delivered August 26 before a largely Cuban-American audience at Florida International University in Miami. The Republican candidate declared that Latin America was a vital interest of the

United States, and he hinted that US military interventions in the Middle East and the Balkans might be repeated in the Western Hemisphere.

“This country was right to be concerned about a country like Kosovo,” he said, “but there are more refugees of conflict in Colombia. America is right to be concerned about Kuwait, but more of our oil comes from Venezuela. America is right to welcome trade with China, but we export nearly as much to Brazil.”

Bush also declared his support for the Clinton administration's “Plan Colombia,” the \$1.3 billion program for military aid to the Colombian government in its war against several guerrilla groups, which was passed by the Republican-controlled Congress. The Colombian military has announced that it will end a two-year-long cease-fire with the guerrillas on January 31, 2001 and move to reconquer the southwestern portion of the country, which has been controlled by the largest guerrilla group, the FARC, during the truce.

Another immediate target of American pressure is the government of Jean-Bertrande Aristide in Haiti. Aristide was elected president for a second time last month, returning to the office to which he was first elected in 1990. (The former priest was ousted in a 1991 military coup, returned to power after the US occupation in 1994, and left office in 1995 when his five-year term expired.)

Although Aristide and his Lavalas Party won by a landslide in both the presidential election in November and the congressional elections last May, Republicans in the US Congress are demanding that Washington bar him from the hemispheric summit to be held in Canada in April. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms denounced the elections in Haiti as a “sham,” although Aristide's popular support is overwhelming and his victory was more genuine than George W. Bush's.

A joint statement issued by Helms and Congressman Porter J. Goss of Florida, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, denounced “narco-traffickers, criminals and other anti-democratic elements who surround Jean-Bertrand Aristide” and called for an end to “all direct support for the Haitian government,” which is heavily dependent on US financial aid.

In response to Republican pressure, the Clinton administration dispatched former National Security Adviser Anthony Lake to extract a humiliating

declaration from Aristide, the latest demonstration of the Haitian president's prostration before Washington. Aristide agreed to a total of eight demands, including runoff votes for Senate seats challenged by his political opponents, an invitation to opposition parties to join the government, a new economic policy imposed by the IMF and World Bank, and a new political “reform” to be monitored by the Organization of American States.

Aristide even agreed to let the US Coast Guard patrol in Haitian territorial waters on the pretext of pursuing drug traffickers—a measure which will transform the present US policy of repatriating Haitian immigrants into something approaching a naval blockade of the Caribbean nation.



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