

What the Pat Robertson affair reveals

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Before the Pat Robertson affair is completely swept under the rug by the American media and political establishment, the incident is worth more careful consideration for what it reveals about the state of political life in the United States. It is, after all, not every day that a prominent American and one-time presidential candidate openly advocates the assassination of a foreign head of state.

Robertson issued his call for the murder of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez on his “700 Club” television program Monday. On the same program Wednesday he tried to pull back from the statement, claiming that in urging the US government to “take out” Chavez he was advocating kidnapping rather than killing. After videotape footage was widely distributed on the Internet of his explicit use of the word assassination, Robertson issued a grudging retraction, claiming that he had been speaking “in frustration” over the policies of a foreign leader who had “found common cause with terrorists.”

The American media has largely dismissed Robertson’s comment as though it was a slip of the tongue that, however embarrassing to the individual involved, has no deeper meaning. The multi-millionaire television host and founder of the Christian Coalition has been derided as a buffoon, a crackpot, a political loose cannon—anything to obscure the fact that his remarks reflect the views of wide layers in the US political establishment.

Robertson’s statement followed weeks of intensifying verbal warfare between the nationalist and populist Venezuelan leader and the US government. There were tit-for-tat diplomatic gestures. The Bush administration claimed that Venezuela was not assisting in anti-drug efforts aimed at stopping the flow of cocaine from Colombia. Chavez in turn accused Drug Enforcement Administration agents of spying on his country and suspended cooperation. The State Department then threatened to remove Venezuela’s certification as an ally in the “war on drugs,” which would lead to sanctions against loans from international agencies and other foreign aid, and it denied entry visas to three Venezuelan military officers.

From August 15 to 17, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited the South American countries of Paraguay and Peru, holding talks on the deteriorating political situation in neighboring Bolivia, where successive US-backed presidents have been brought down by a peasant-based opposition movement, and condemning alleged outside interference by

Chavez and Fidel Castro. “There certainly is evidence that both Cuba and Venezuela have been involved in the situation in Bolivia in unhelpful ways,” Rumsfeld told the press.

Chavez responded to this heavy-handed intimidation with more bravado, making his fourth visit to Cuba in the last nine months and appearing side-by-side with Cuban President Castro on his weekly television show. “The grand destroyer of the world, and the greatest threat,” the Venezuelan leader told his audience, “is represented by US imperialism.”

The *New York Times* summed up the situation in an article August 19, with the headline: “Like Old Times: US Warns Latin Americans Against Leftists.” It observed that Rumsfeld’s visit had the “throwback feel of a mission during the cold war, when American officials saw their main job as bolstering the hemisphere’s governments against leftist insurgencies and Communist infiltration.” The *Times* quoted “a senior Defense Department official traveling with Mr. Rumsfeld” who said of Chavez, “A guy who seemed like a comic figure a year ago is turning into a real strategic menace...”

The *Times* did not spell out the obvious corollary of such a characterization: throughout the cold war, American policy in Latin America was to foment military coups to overthrow hostile regimes, kill their leaders and suppress popular opposition. This policy was implemented in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Guatemala and other countries.

Such methods are not a historical relic. In 2002, a similar effort was carried out in Venezuela, with open US support. From the perspective of Washington, it failed as a result of poor organization and insufficient ruthlessness: Chavez was detained at a military base rather than murdered, and the threat of a popular uprising produced a panicky retreat by the coup organizers, who released Chavez and fled, allowing him to return to power.

Since then, Chavez has prevailed over a “general strike” organized by the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce and Venezuelan union leaders in league with the AFL-CIO and State Department, and then won a convincing majority in last year’s referendum on whether he should be allowed to serve out his term in office, which ends in 2006. The huge run-up in oil prices—Venezuela is the fourth largest supplier of the US market—has given Chavez the resources to spend on social measures popular with the vast majority of his country’s

impoverished workers and peasants.

This is the context in which Robertson vented his spleen at the Venezuelan president, whose position, in control of a pool of oil of immense economic and strategic significance to the United States, is seen as a serious obstacle to US foreign policy. The TV preacher declared that assassinating Chavez made more sense than another \$200 billion war like that which overthrew Saddam Hussein. There was an inadvertent truth embedded in this comparison. Robertson was effectively confirming that the war in Iraq, too, was about oil.

The media commentary on Robertson has been largely aimed at covering up the seriousness of the affair. The right-wing *Cincinnati Post* observed, "Privately, most people might admit, Robertson's plan to cap Chavez has a certain forbidden appeal..." But most newspaper editorials have either ridiculed or bemoaned his remarks, while claiming that his sentiments did not reflect those of the US government.

The *Washington Post* set the tone in an editorial Thursday which expressed vexation that Chavez would be able to use the death threat to validate his claims that the US government seeks to destroy his government. "Mr. Chavez, who, like Mr. Robertson, is infatuated with the absurd, fancies that the United States is out to kill him," the newspaper said. The Venezuelan president "seems to enjoy portraying himself as a target of US assassins—a charge that he makes without evidence and that has been strongly denied by the Bush administration."

In its invocation of the "absurd," the *Post* conveniently ignores the well-established fact that US administrations, including that of John F. Kennedy, developed and approved of schemes to assassinate Castro. Revelations of US assassination plots became a sufficient political embarrassment in the 1970s to oblige President Gerald Ford to issue an executive order banning such practices.

The fact, moreover, that Chavez has faced a series of CIA-financed destabilization campaigns—and only narrowly survived a US-backed coup three years ago—apparently does not constitute "evidence" in the eyes of the *Post*, a newspaper which served as one of the principal mouthpieces for the Bush administration's fabrications about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

An even more cynical note was sounded by the *Los Angeles Times*, in an August 24 editorial that began, "A paranoid is never happier than when he discovers that he really does have enemies. So Pat Robertson's call for the assassination of Hugo Chavez may be just the moment of vindication the Venezuelan president has been waiting for."

People in the United States know Robertson is a crackpot of "questionable sense or even sanity," the newspaper added. "But South Americans may see things differently, causing considerable damage to the United States' already poor reputation in the region."

Those poor deluded South Americans! They apparently are prone to believe, after a century of US-backed coups and

military interventions, that Yankee imperialism is the biggest menace to their national independence and democratic rights.

The Los Angeles newspaper does not seriously examine the implications of its own characterization of Robertson. This is, after all, a man who has played a major role for a quarter century in the Christian fundamentalist right, which exercises immense sway in official Washington. As recently as the 2000 campaign, Robertson played a critical role in the selection of the Republican presidential nominee, throwing his support to Bush against Senator John McCain in the crucial South Carolina primary.

If Robertson is semi-deranged, the same can be said about fundamentalist spokesmen like James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, or Republican politicians like Tom DeLay or, for that matter, Bush himself. It is a reality of American political life that ideologies which would once have been considered part of the fascistic lunatic fringe are now treated with respect and deference in the media and official Washington.

Support for political assassination does not put Robertson out of this far-right "mainstream." We should recall that after the murders this spring of two judges and a judge's family, at least one Republican senator, John Cornyn of Texas, expressed understanding of the political frustrations directed against the judiciary, while DeLay declared (echoing Robertson) that federal judges were a greater danger than terrorists, and had to be "held accountable."

It was during the media furor over Robertson's comments that Christian fundamentalist Eric Rudolph was sentenced to life in prison for the 1996 bombing of Olympic Park in Atlanta, in which one woman was killed and a hundred people wounded, as well as bombings of a gay night club and an abortion clinic. Rudolph, like Robertson, is a representative of the "culture of life" so praised by Bush.

American imperialism is in a blind alley, facing an insoluble social crisis. It has embarked on a course of military aggression, using its residual military superiority in an attempt to offset a weakened economic position. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are only the prelude to even bloodier adventures. In that context, the ravings of a Pat Robertson give a more realistic view of the actual state of mind in Washington than all of the official bloviating from the White House and State Department about "democracy" and "freedom."



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