

Democrats defend “our president” against international criticism

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The pretense that the Democratic Party represents some sort of opposition to the Bush administration was punctured again last week when leading Democrats vociferously condemned the anti-Bush speech given by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to the United Nations General Assembly.

Chavez, who narrowly escaped being murdered in a US-backed military coup in 2002, denounced President Bush personally as “the devil” and criticized American foreign policy as militaristic and imperialist. He told reporters afterwards that Bush was not a legitimate president because he “stole the elections,” and “he is therefore a dictator.”

The day after his speech, Chavez addressed an appreciative audience in Harlem, where he announced the doubling of a Venezuelan aid program to distribute low-cost home heating oil to poor American families. Chavez reiterated his attacks on Bush, calling him “the genocide president” for invading Iraq and sanctioning the Israeli devastation of Lebanon.

Harlem’s Congressman Charles Rangel, one of the senior House Democrats, took the lead in denouncing Chavez. In a statement issued by his Washington office, Rangel said, “George Bush is the president of the United States and represents the entire country. Any demeaning public attack against him is viewed by Republicans and Democrats, and all Americans, as an attack on all of us.”

Rangel amplified on this position at a press conference, declaring, “You don’t come into my country, you don’t come into my congressional district and criticize my president.”

The language is noteworthy, since it is doubtful that there are more than a handful of residents of Harlem who share Rangel’s view of Bush. Most working-class New Yorkers, and particularly minority workers, regard

Bush not as “my president” but as “their president”—i.e., the president of the wealthy and powerful. Installed in office in 2000 by the Supreme Court by methods that trampled on democratic principles, Bush is responsible for policies, from the war in Iraq to tax cuts for the wealthy, which serve corporate interests at the expense of working people.

Rangel’s defense of Bush took on the character of a nationalistic diatribe, as he added, “If there’s any criticism of President Bush, it should be restricted to Americans, whether they voted for him or not.” He told the news conference, “I just want to make it abundantly clear to Hugo Chavez or any other president: Don’t come to the United States and think, because we have problems with our president, that any foreigner can come to our country and not think that Americans do not feel offended when you offend our chief of state.”

Presumably Rangel feels that Afghans and Iraqis whose countries have been invaded, occupied and bombed by the US military, the victims of American-inspired aggression in Lebanon and Palestine, and those throughout the world who oppose the Bush administration’s foreign policy should all keep their mouths shut. These billions—the majority of the human race—have no right to voice their opinions of America’s “commander-in-chief.” This from a liberal Democrat who regularly postures as a friend of the Third World!

Rangel’s position was seconded by other House Democrats, including Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who issued her own statement castigating the Venezuelan president. “Hugo Chavez fancies himself a modern-day Simon Bolivar, but all he is an everyday thug,” Pelosi said. She added that Chavez “abused the privilege that he had speaking at the United Nations.”

As a matter of fact, the leader of any state which is a member of the United Nations may, according to

international law and US treaty obligations, go freely into New York City and address the General Assembly. It is a right, not a privilege, and Washington has no say in the matter.

Another black Democratic congressman, Chaka Fattah of Philadelphia, echoed Rangel's tone of offended national pride, saying of Chavez, "His personal attacks and ridicule directed at the president of the United States are unacceptable." The Reverend Jesse Jackson added his voice in defense of Bush, while saying he understood Chavez's hostility to the administration. "Of course he feels that the US government is part of trying to pull a coup on him," Jackson said. "But my appeal to him is get beyond the anger."

The comments by leading Democrats added fuel to the media reaction against Chavez's speech, which portrayed his characterization of Bush as beyond the pale. The tone was set by the New York tabloids, which denounced the Venezuelan leader as the "Caracas crackpot," with screaming banner headlines telling Chavez to "ZIP IT!"

In an ominous footnote to the incident, Venezuela's foreign minister was illegally detained for 90 minutes by customs and immigration officials at JFK International Airport when he attempted to leave the US Saturday to return home after attending the General Assembly session. Nicolas Maduro was threatened with strip-searching and a beating when he demanded that the US officials acknowledge his diplomatic status and act accordingly.

By one account, State Department officials went to the airport after Maduro was detained and supervised the provocation. Ultimately, the Venezuelan official was released without being searched, and he received a formal apology from the US government for his detention.

The uproar among the Democrats and the media is all the more revealing because the substance of Chavez's remarks—except for the sarcastic barbs directed at Bush—was relatively conventional. Chavez criticized US foreign policy on issues where the overwhelming majority of the governments represented at the General Assembly share his opposition, if not his rhetoric.

He condemned Bush's claim of a worldwide crusade for democracy, saying it was "a very original democracy that's imposed by weapons and bombs and

firing weapons." He attacked Washington's policy of demonizing foreign leaders such as Chavez himself, Bolivian President Evo Morales and others who head regimes that have, in one way or another, come into conflict with US foreign policy. He claimed to speak for people "who are rising up against American imperialism, who are shouting for equality, for respect, for the sovereignty of nations."

Chavez also contrasted the feelings of the average people in America with those of the US government. The American people want peace, he said. However, "The government of the United States doesn't want peace. It wants to exploit its system of exploitation, of pillage, of hegemony through war."

Chavez's remarks would have been considered quite within the norm of General Assembly sessions during the Cold War years, when both Soviet-bloc leaders and representatives of third-world countries frequently denounced the crimes of imperialism (while seeking to cut deals with Washington at the same time).

And the Venezuelan president's proposals were hardly radical. He called for restructuring of the United Nations to expand the membership of the Security Council, end the veto powers of the World War II victors, and establish a more effective peacekeeping process. No enemy of capitalism, he represents a regime which sustains itself largely through commercial relations with the United States, supplying nearly 12 percent of American oil requirements.

One can safely predict that nothing will come of Chavez's plans to reform the imperialist den of thieves at the United Nations, whether or not he achieves his immediate goal of a non-permanent seat for Venezuela on the Security Council. But the Venezuelan president's appearance in New York had one beneficial effect: it brought out into the open for all to see the real solidarity of the Democratic Party with the Bush administration and its role as a diehard defender of American imperialism.



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