

Bush cites Harper on free trade . . . sort of Brings PM into debate on Colombia; U.S. Congress approves treaty with Peru

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WASHINGTON—George W. Bush trotted out Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper yesterday to convince Democrats of the need for a free trade pact with Colombia.

It is not the first time Bush has engaged Harper in his determination to expand trade with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, a staunch ally, but the U.S. president appeared to edit previous statements from the Prime Minister to inject him directly in a fierce partisan battle in Washington.

At a White House news conference, Bush was telling reporters that democracy had won the day in Venezuela Sunday when voters turned down expanded powers for President Hugo Chavez, then pivoted and brought Harper into the Colombia debate.

"I like to quote Prime Minister Stephen Harper," Bush said.

"He said the biggest fear in South America is not the leader in Venezuela, but the biggest fear for stability is if the United States Congress rejects the free trade agreement with Colombia."

That was a variation on a comment Harper made before the Council on Foreign Relations in New York last September.

"If the U.S. turns its back on its friends in Colombia, this will set back our cause far more than any Latin American dictator could ever hope to achieve," Harper said.

Democrats have refused to consider a trade pact with Colombia, citing human rights abuses and the potential involvement of Uribe's top aides in the killing of more than 800 union workers, teachers and journalists over the past six years.

The president's cousin, Mario Uribe, is under investigation for his links to the illegal armed militias.

Some critics of Bush's Latin American policy say Harper has merely become a surrogate for the U.S. president's failed policies.

Bush, said Larry Birns of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, has often looked for other leaders to attach himself to, and Harper is just the latest, especially now that John Howard is no longer Australia's prime minister, having been defeated in an election.

"There used to be facets of Canadian policy in Latin America that distinguished itself from Washington, but, unfortunately, that is no more," said Birns.

"If Washington is irrelevant in Latin America, Canada is doubly irrelevant. We always knew Bush could mobilize Harper, but in terms of influence this is no home run, it is barely a bunt single."

Bush scored one victory yesterday when Congress approved a trade deal with Peru leaving pending deals with Colombia, Panama and South Korea on the president's wish list. But Colombia is clearly the president's priority.

Harper paid a historic visit to Colombia last July, committing to a trade deal with Uribe and giving him a much-needed political boost.

Harper's spokesperson, Sandra Buckler, said Bush's comments yesterday "were in the neighbourhood" with Harper's views.

"The Prime Minister has been very strong on the need for free trade with Colombia and we're working hard to conclude an agreement," she said.

Leading Democratic candidates for the 2008 presidential nomination, including New York Senator Hillary Clinton and former North Carolina Senator John Edwards, have loudly opposed the Colombian pact, citing human rights abuses.

Harper has rejected that argument. "We're not going to say fix all your social, political and human-rights problems, and only then will we engage in trade relations with you," he said.

"That's a ridiculous position."

It's not the first time the Bush administration has used Harper to try to boost its chance of a trade pact with Colombia.

In late October, U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez told a joint meeting of the Canada-U.S. Chamber of Commerce that Colombia had made an "incredible turnaround" and great progress in combating the drug trade.

"As Prime Minister Harper recently said in an article in the Latin Business Chronicle, Colombia needs its democratic friends to lean forward and give them a chance at partnership and trade with North America," Gutierrez said.

Earlier in October, in a Miami speech to Republican partisans, Bush said Uribe takes attacks on trade unionists seriously and is moving to punish the killers.

American credibility in the region would be damaged if there were no approval of a trade deal, Bush said, again quoting Harper to buttress his case.