

Using Chávez as Counterpoint, Bush Pursues Latin Trade Pacts

Steven R. Weisman
New York Times
October 24, 2007

WASHINGTON— The Bush administration has enlisted an unlikely ally in its international trade agenda: Hugo Chávez, the leftist president of Venezuela, who makes a practice of denouncing United States' influence in Latin America.

Facing opposition to his proposed trade accords with Peru, Panama and Colombia from labor unions, social activist groups and many Democrats, President Bush has unleashed an intense campaign to win approval for the deals, arguing that they will strengthen capitalism and democracy and weaken Mr. Chávez in a volatile region.

White House officials say Mr. Bush is passionate about the Latin American agreements, and also one with South Korea, considering them essential to his program in the waning months of his administration.

The effort includes trips to Colombia by two Cabinet members — Carlos M. Gutierrez, the commerce secretary, and Susan C. Schwab, the United States trade representative — accompanied by Democratic and Republican lawmakers. In a separate push, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is emphasizing security interests in Latin America.

In addition, Mr. Bush has invited Democrats to the White House to discuss trade issues, and the president's lobbyists have been frequent visitors to Capitol Hill.

With some Democrats, the arguments are persuasive. The trade pact with Peru is expected to be approved, although the Panama and Colombia deals are less certain. The one with Colombia has been held up by Democratic concerns over the killings of labor leaders there.

Bush aides say the president is especially determined to help Colombia's president, Álvaro Uribe, who is credited with cracking down on crime and drug trafficking, even if officials agree that Colombia could do more in this area.

"The economic arguments are very strong for the Colombia deal," Mr. Gutierrez said in an interview. "But the political arguments are equally strong. Colombia has been one of our closest allies in the region. What an irony it would be if it is punished for its support of the United States."

Many Democrats have opposed trade deals, even those pushed by President Bill Clinton. The administration hopes to win over enough Democrats to pass the Latin American

pacts this year or next. There is, however, considerable disagreement whether the argument of countering Mr. Chávez as a security matter will persuade Democrats.

Democrats say that the House speaker, Representative Nancy Pelosi, has warned the administration not to invoke the specter of Mr. Chávez but to focus on curbing the labor abuses under Mr. Uribe.

“The problem is that Hugo Chávez is not their main thrust — he is their only thrust,” Representative Charles B. Rangel of New York, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, said. “Nobody likes Chávez, but I don’t think a bogeyman is going to get people excited into voting for these trade deals.”

But two other Democratic Congressmen from New York City, Representatives Gregory W. Meeks and Eliot L. Engel, who traveled to Colombia recently, said in interviews that they agreed that the United States needed to help Colombia and other countries face up to the Venezuelan president.

“The Chávez issue plays on something important,” Mr. Meeks said. “What has to be considered is the difference between two economic systems. One is the capitalist model of friends like Colombia based on market access. The other is the failed socialist model of Venezuela. We have to show that our system works.”

Mr. Engel said of Mr. Chávez: “He’s saying, ‘Follow me, I’m the wave of the future in Latin America.’ We do have to counter that.” But he said he was not ready to endorse the Colombia deal without labor improvements there.

Trade has been a sensitive issue since Democrats regained control of Congress last year. Many Democrats blame free trade deals for the loss of manufacturing jobs. Some even cite trade-opening measures in connection with the influx of shoddy and unsafe imports. The leading Democratic presidential candidates have expressed concern about the effects of trade deals on American workers.

As a result, Democrats are generally opposed to the administration’s trade proposals. But in May, Ms. Pelosi won a major concession when the administration agreed to attach labor and environmental protections to all pending trade deals.

The accord with Peru is close to winning approval, but the one with Panama is being held up because a top Panamanian legislative leader has been charged with murdering an American soldier. The South Korea pact is also stalled.

Opponents of the Colombia deal do not deny that conditions have improved since the late ’90s, when President Clinton and Republican Congressional leaders put together a multibillion-dollar aid package. But they say conditions have not improved enough and labor organizers are still killed with impunity.

When Mr. Gutierrez said recently that labor violence was no longer a problem in the country, Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio, a Democrat who won last year in part by challenging recent trade agreements, said he was “astounded” by the comment.

“On the contrary,” Mr. Brown said in a letter to the commerce secretary, “there is overwhelming evidence that Colombia remains the most dangerous country in the world in which to be a labor leader.”

The dispute over violence in Colombia has all but overshadowed economic arguments. According to the administration, nearly 20,000 American companies sell products in Colombia, and Latin America is the fastest-growing region in the world for goods from the United States. This country is now Colombia’s biggest source for imports.

Secretary Rice joined the chorus this month. She was careful not to use Mr. Chávez’s name — administration officials say they do not want to emphasize his importance — but she said the Latin America deals were important to head off “authoritarian” influences in the region.

Colombia, she said, was a “failed state” seven years ago, but with American assistance had pushed back the influence of insurgents and narcotics gangs and lowered the number of kidnappings, bombings and other acts of violence. The trade deals, she said, were “essential to our strategic interests” in the region.