

From: "Bolivarian Circles Milwaukee" <mkecircle@gmail.com>
To: <mkecircle@gmail.com>
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Wrong direction on Venezuela

By BOB CHERNOW
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Venezuela last week made a good-faith effort to work with Milwaukee by offering discounted heating oil and free eye surgery to low-income city residents. Rather than reject this, we should see it as an opportunity.

The Journal Sentinel Editorial Board says Americans shouldn't be dependent on foreign governments for our energy needs and should conserve. I agree. But why dismiss Venezuela's overture? There is a disconnect.

From what I understand, Carora - Venezuela's proposed sister city to Milwaukee - wants an exchange between small business leaders, with a focus on minority-owned businesses. The last time I looked, business wasn't a socialist venture but something that we all want expanded. Cultural exchanges and tourism would also be part of the program.

The home heating oil program would discount fuel by 40% for Milwaukee's poor, but Carora wants Milwaukee to host its students to study English. It is not a gift but a barter.

The sister city program originated in the 1950s from Ed Zawacki, a conservative University of Wisconsin-Madison professor, who was my adviser and good friend. He thought that people who got to know each other would be less likely to go to war. President Eisenhower adopted part of the professor's idea for his Open Skies program. It was and is a good idea.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is often portrayed in a bad light, but what about President Bush's unsuccessful efforts to destabilize that country's democratically elected government? Bush has used U.S. tax dollars to support Chavez's opposition in at least two elections. And he did not condemn Pat Robertson's call last year to assassinate Chavez.

Even America's support of youth baseball in Venezuela has become a propaganda tool rather than a way to heal a rift that both sides have escalated.

Walter Reuther, who was United Auto Workers president from 1946 to '70, once exclaimed, "Henry Ford is my best union organizer!" The same could be said of Bush to Chavez, who won his last election with 60% of the vote.

Alienating Venezuela makes no sense. We get 17% of our oil imports from that country, yet our government does whatever it can to try to destroy Chavez. Perhaps that is why Venezuela has sought other markets for its product.

China now has contracts to explore for oil. A \$2.5 billion refinery is being built in Brazil. Venezuela's tanker fleet is expanding from 21 to 58 ships.

The only logical explanation for Bush's policies regarding Venezuela is that he wants to benefit his own financial base: independent oil and gas producers. This is not a good economic policy for our country.

Chavez is using his increased revenue to provide health and education to the poor, in hopes of improving their economic status. In the long run, this is good for all Venezuelans and good for America. An economically strong middle class in Venezuela provides new markets for our businesses.

What is needed is a way to mend the breach between Venezuela and the United States. A sister city program between Milwaukee and Carora is a good start and something that deserves support.

Bob Chernow is a Milwaukee businessman, chairman of the Regional Telecommunications Commission and a former River Hills trustee.

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Bolivarian Circle of Milwaukee
mkecircle@gmail.com