

***Televangelist Pat Robertson:
Selling Salvation, One Assassination at a Time***
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When Jesus said “Love Your Enemies,” he apparently wasn’t thinking about left-wing Venezuelan presidents with popular appeal and a lot of oil to sell. Not, at least, according to the version of Christian values practiced by celebrity televangelist Pat Robertson.

Robertson’s recent remarks on his Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) show, the 700 Club, that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez ought to be assassinated shocked many. The resulting storm of negative reactions quickly forced Robertson to issue an “apology,” one in which he basically explained that his approving reference to assassinating Chavez had been misinterpreted as an approving reference to assassinating Chavez.

Robertson said what he meant to say was that U.S. special forces should just try to remove Chavez in some manner, which could include the more humane criminal tactic of simply kidnapping Venezuela’s democratically elected leader.

Of course, Bush administration officials had little choice but to distance themselves from Robertson’s inopportune candor. But they did so as if the issue were more some remark over the housing market by the Federal Reserve’s Alan Greenspan than an issue of domestic and international law.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld shrugged off the call to state-sponsored terrorism by an important Bush supporter with ho-hum nonchalance.

Those darned “private citizens” will talk, seemed to be the attitude of the unperturbed Rumsfeld. A State Department spokesman would only say that Robertson’s remarks were “inappropriate.” President Bush said nothing.

It’s easy to imagine the loud outrage or worse that would have ensued from Bush country if someone like, let’s say, Michael Moore had called for the assassination of, let’s say, British leader Tony Blair. But in an age of apparently endless political hypocrisy, should we really have expected otherwise?

U.S. gives thumbs-up to murder

As far as assassinations go, Rumsfeld says the United States doesn’t engage in that sort of thing, but of course the history of U.S. foreign policy tells another story. After all, President Ford’s mid-70s executive ban on assassination as a tool of U.S. policy didn’t come about because it was a slow day at the White House.

In fact, at the time of the ban the CIA had been publicly implicated in multiple attempts to assassinate Cuban President Fidel Castro, including trying to spike his cigars with toxic bacteria, rig exploding seashells, and other creative extermination projects. There was also the CIA-implicated murder of Congolese President Patrice Lumumba in 1960, as well as connections to the murder of Chilean President Salvador Allende during the military coup in that country in 1973.

But neither are liberal Democrats

immune from Washington's history of giving the thumbs-up to state-sponsored assassination. In 1963, President Kennedy's administration was behind the coup in South Vietnam that led to the murder of President Diem. More recently, former Clinton advisor George Stephanopoulos openly advocated in a 1997 Newsweek article that the United States should assassinate Saddam Hussein.

In a sense, the muted response from the White House to Robertson's self-proclaimed role as some sort of murderous televangelist avenger is only the flip side to the shocked outrage to his remarks expressed in many major U.S. newspaper editorials.

The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, condemned Robertson's pro-assassination talk as the "rantings" of a TV preacher who uses controversy to raise money from his TV viewers. True enough. But in 2002 the Tribune editorialized approvingly of the military coup against President Chavez.

"It's not every day that a democracy benefits from the military's intervention to force out an elected president," declared the Tribune in a response echoed by many U.S. newspapers, as the media watchdog group FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting) noted in an April 18, 2002, media advisory. Unfortunately for the Tribune, the coup, which had the tacit support of the Bush administration, turned out to be short-lived, as mass mobilizations quickly restored the popular Chavez to power.

Obviously, the big-business press treated Robertson's remark as scandalous because it was so out of the blue, not because they aren't perfectly willing to look the other way at all sorts of violations of international law committed in the name of defending

"American interests."

It's also easy when it suits their purposes to mock Robertson's brand of loopy, right-wing theology politics (he believes God thinks about things like aiming meteors at Disney World for sanctioning Gay Pride events, for example). He's indeed a strange man in the already strange enough landscape of contemporary American politics.

Mostly, he's just another hypocrite who uses his Christian platform to self-righteously denounce anyone whom he considers a threat to his virtuously "free enterprise" way of life. But Robertson's "moral indignation" is also predictably selective, even by his own standards. That's because even more than the Bible or the Republican Party come his vast business holdings (his net worth is reportedly \$200 million or more).

Hence in 2003 the former preacher objected, for example, to the Bush administration's call for Liberia's President Charles Taylor to resign, as civil war waged and after Taylor had been indicted by a UN tribunal for war crimes. Robertson had an understandable soft spot for the brutal Taylor, thanks to the Liberian dictator's assistance in arranging Robertson's \$8 million investment in a Liberian gold mine.

Chavez: Another world is possible

So why now does Robertson go so far as to openly advocate the murder of Hugo Chavez? Actually, what rankles Robertson in his cartoon view of things is not that Chavez is some sort of dangerous dictator (never mind that he was elected by popular vote), bent on fomenting alliances with terrorists and/or continental-wide "left-wing" repression. It's rather that Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution dares to

challenge U.S. “neo-liberal” economic policies.

These are the policies that declare unrestrained access to foreign corporate investors (it is they alone who will set the price of oil, damnit!), economic privatization and “economical” (i.e., stripped-down) social services as the only conceivable model for Third World development.

Chavez doesn’t mince words in describing U.S. foreign policy as exploitative, an enemy of poor people. Most important, he tells his supporters that it is possible to stand up to First World powers, that another world is possible.

Indeed, Chavez has energized many of Venezuela’s impoverished communities by redirecting much of the country’s oil wealth toward new social, health, and education programs serving the poor. The “Inside the Neighborhood” program, for example, provides unprecedented access to free health care to almost 70 percent of the population, thanks in large measure to the agreement with Cuba that has brought 10,000 primary care physicians from the island nation to Venezuela’s poorest areas.

Venezuela’s Congress has also given poor farmers title to unused lands from the country’s large haciendas. In a country in which 77 percent of the farmland is owned by 3 percent of the population, this is not exactly an unpopular move. As well, reform measures now allow millions of Venezuelans who live in urban barrios to appeal for titles to land on which many self-built homes sit.

No doubt such “rabble-rousing” is an unforgivable sin to the good Christians who operate the 700 Club. It’s also not popular with U.S. energy corporations who for decades have made a killing in

Venezuela.

But why should they react any differently? The present system has served the George Bushes, Pat Robertsons, and Dick Cheneys of the world quite nicely. But their country-club ideas of what constitutes a well-oiled and profitable economy, smoothly chugging along on the virtuous rhetoric of “free trade” and “democracy” while millions languish in poverty’s endless crush, is a system ultimately bereft either of stability or hope.

This is why the Bush administration is quietly intervening in Venezuela, with the goal of destabilizing and ultimately overthrowing the Chavez government.

Nicaragua revisited?

Former CIA agent Philip Agee compares the current anti-Chavez campaign to that used against Nicaragua in the 1980s, short for the moment of the open terrorist war then waged. “These activities, with a 2005 budget approaching \$10 million, masquerade as ‘civic education,’ ‘support for the electoral process,’ and ‘strengthening the democratic system,’” writes Agee in a recent ZNet article (Sept. 9-10, 2005). “In reality, all these programs, carried out almost silently, support the opposition against President Chavez and his coalition.” (It’s worth noting that the anti-Chavez campaign takes place against the backdrop of President Bush’s 2001 decision to exempt members of al-Qaeda or other designated terrorists from the assassination ban.) In short, Chavez is hated by so-called Christians like Robertson because he has given the people of the barrios a taste for the power and hope they’ve been so long denied.

Can Chavez continue to sustain

those hopes under a Venezuela that remains fundamentally capitalist? It's less than unlikely (and perhaps a topic for another article). But the idea is alive now among Venezuela's working class that subservience to foreign exploiters is not their country's preordained fate; nor is social misery the only possible future for those who don't wear Brooks Brothers suits to work.

What's always telling is how the only real answer defenders of the existing corporate system have when confronted with an upsurge of nationalism and activism for social justice is bullets and disinformation, covert sabotage, and coup plots. As for Pat Robertson, all his praise-the-Lord posturing can't disguise the squalor of anti-democratic ideals that are at the root of this salesman of salvation's message to the world.