

## Latin anti-Americanism a concern

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It was an infuriating incident to some, an amusing moment to others, but worrisome to just about everyone.

When Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez stood before the United Nations, joked that he could still smell the sulphur from President Bush's appearance there and referred to the U.S. president as "the devil," it claimed the world's attention.

The increase in anti-American sentiment across the planet is evident in every public opinion poll taken. In some countries, the U.S. is viewed as the greatest threat to peace and stability in the world.

The prospect of virulent anti-American sentiment in our own hemisphere raises all kinds of concerns.

So it is somewhat comforting to hear Alan McPherson say that things aren't as bad as the biggest pessimist might think. "I think the negative sentiment has essentially plateaued," the Howard University historian said last week. "Although I think what you've got in most Latin American countries is either a majority or close to a majority of people who are saying the United States has a negative rather than positive influence on Latin America or in the world.

"What's important, though, is that the negativity is higher in the more populous and, therefore, more powerful countries," McPherson said. "They're higher in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and maybe Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile. They're not that high in Venezuela, interestingly enough. While 60 percent of the people are pro-Chavez, some 40-50 percent are actually pro-American."

The authority on U.S. and Latin American relations said the vast majority of people in Venezuela and Latin America simply want better living conditions and a higher quality of life.

McPherson gave several lectures on the Indiana University campus last week, noting that he greatly admires the American studies program at IU precisely because it is inclusive of Central and South American issues and isn't simply focused on the U.S.

Much of McPherson's work has been in studying and analyzing U.S. relations with Latin America over the last century. It's an unfortunate history of the U.S. betraying its own pronounced ideals by propping up dictators and regimes friendly to U.S. business interests while professing to support democracy and human rights.

During the Cold War, he noted, polls conducted in Latin America asked residents whether they favored communism, capitalism or socialism — and socialism nearly always won out. The reason, McPherson said, was that peasants and working people associated communism with dictatorships and the loss of property and capitalism with grand plantations owned by the wealthy, offering few benefits to workers.

"If you asked a Central American peasant, socialism to him meant owning his own farm or at least having some investment in working the land, even if it was common property," the Howard professor said. "There's always been this disconnect between what Americans think Latin Americans want versus what they actually want."

From McPherson's point of view, U.S. and Latin American relations could be improved significantly and fairly quickly with diplomatic and economic initiatives that recognize the common goals and desires across the continent.

"We have so many natural affinities with the rest of the hemisphere and there's none of the religious hostility," he said. "We're essentially all Christians, and there are more and more Protestants in Latin America than ever before."

Even the antagonism between the U.S. and Cuba is not nearly what it once was, the Howard historian said. "If you abstract the fact that they are communists and live under a dictatorship, we have a number of common interests," he said.

"We both want to fight the movement of drugs. We both want to try to avoid the massive migration of poor people and boat people throughout the Americas," he said. "We all want development and programs for the poor, so there are all sorts of ways we can get along with every country in Latin America if we want to. And that includes the countries perceived to be somewhere along the axis of evil, such as Venezuela and Cuba."

Most significant is the human connection between the U.S. and Latin America, McPherson said. "In just about every village and along every street in Central America, you'll find people with family members in the United States trying to make some money and share it with their families back home. Say if you have a documented or undocumented Salvadorean male working construction in the U.S. and making, oh, \$20,000 a year. Conservatively speaking, if he sends just \$2,000 of that back home, that's going to double his entire family's annual income.

"So the U.S. is still seen as a place of opportunity in the poorer countries, which is why we are more popular there," the historian said. "In the more prosperous countries, they're trying to build up their factories, start unions and raise their standards of living. When they perceive us as supporting sweatshops and cheap labor, they don't see the United States operating in their best interests."

From left, Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega, Cuba's Vice President Carlos Lage, Dominica's Foreign Minister Roosevelt Skerrit, Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's President Evo Morales joint hands for a photograph Saturday during a tour at a medical school in Caracas, Venezuela. Chavez is hosting the ALBA Summit, a regional trade alliance intended to be an alternative to U.S.-backed free-trade deals. Miraflores Press | Associate photo

