

Bi-Ignorant in Brazil by Warren M. Hern

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Although somebody mercifully taught George W. Bush how to say “good afternoon” in Portuguese as he began his sermon to the Brazilians the other day, the rest of his trip to South America was an exercise in delusional rhetoric and surreal images.

If the consequences of what he thinks, says, and does weren't so calamitous, George W. Bush's antic efforts to charm Latin Americans would be hilarious. He obviously does not understand that his credibility in Latin America on the subjects of freedom, democracy, human rights, economic justice and other basic issues is exactly zero. Even humble Native American fishermen in the Peruvian Amazon, where I principally work in Latin America, regard George W. Bush as the most dangerous man on the planet. This opinion was also volunteered to me by people in Mexico and Cuba, which I visited last month.

This is one of the reasons why Americans need to take the harsh rhetorical attacks on George W. Bush by Latin American leaders seriously. They resonate with views about the United States that were strongly held by many people in Latin America before Bush came to power. Bush has intensified this alienation.

Anyone who loves the Spanish language and listens to George W. Bush pretend to speak it understands why he is regarded in Latin America as bi-ignorant. Being in Portuguese-speaking Brazil allowed him to expand this dubious reputation. He comes across as a patronizing, hopelessly provincial, uninformed and shallow gringo.

My experience in Latin America began in 1962 in a jungle mining camp as a “camp doctor” near Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, which, I learned, was the launching point for the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. The Sandinistas were organizing. The low-budget trip home took me through Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. I listened to many stories of frustration and outrage from Central Americans, mostly students, about the role of the United States in that region. Stopping in Panama in 1964 on my way to the Peruvian Amazon, I encountered rage and hostility toward Americans and the American government. By listening to students and others who had rioted against the American occupation of the Canal Zone, I learned a lot about our history in that area. Angry as they were, people told me that they still revered the memory of John F. Kennedy and the *Alianza para el Progreso* (Alliance for Progress). They told me that there was a candle in every window the day after JFK was assassinated.

I returned to Panama for a year to do my internship at Gorgas Hospital in the Canal Zone, then went on to serve for two years as a Peace Corps physician in Brazil. My research in the Peruvian Amazon, which began in 1964, continues to the present. In 1992, I taught Latin American graduate students at a social science faculty in Quito, Ecuador. Work and research has taken me to many other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, and I remain in close contact with friends and professional colleagues throughout the region.

It was therefore with shame, embarrassment, horror, and disbelief that I watched the reports of George W. Bush lecturing Latin Americans as though they were schoolchildren and trying to get the leaders to like him by acting like a good ole boy. These people can spot a fraud from a mile away.

Let me try to tell you how I think many Latin Americans generally perceive George W. Bush and their relationship with the United States.

For one thing, the United States has been an aggressive bully toward many Latin American countries and Spanish possessions during the past 200 years. Andrew Jackson took Florida from the Spanish at gunpoint. The Mexican-American war took the Spanish southwest and California from Mexico. We stole Cuba and Puerto Rico from the Spanish in 1898 in a fraudulent imperialist war. We stole Panama from the Colombians. In the early twentieth century, we invaded Mexico and occupied Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. We overthrew the democratically elected progressive Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 and installed a dictator. We sponsored an invasion of Cuba in 1961. We intervened in the Dominican Republic in 1965. We engineered the assassination of Salvador Allende in Chile and installed one of the most violent and repressive regimes in that country's history. Ronald Reagan subverted Nicaragua and El Salvador and invaded Grenada. Bush 41 invaded Panama. We are currently mistreating if not torturing prisoners in Guantanamo. This is to say nothing of the “pre-emptive” invasion of Iraq, which causes everyone to fear us. These fears are inflamed by the outrageous remarks of George W. Bush's buddy Pat Robertson, who recently called for the assassination of Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez. It is a long and irretrievably sordid history.

There is no hope that the current American president can overcome this history much less the distrust, fear and ridicule directed toward him by many common people as well as leaders in Latin America. “Arbusto (shrub)” is toast.

Bio: Warren M. Hern, a physician, has visited, lived, worked, taught, and done research in fifteen Latin American and Caribbean countries since 1962. He is fluent in Spanish, Portuguese, and Shipibo, a Native American tribal language in the Peruvian Amazon. He currently practices medicine in Boulder. See www.drhern.com for additional commentary by Dr. Hern