

Obama Is Right about Hugo Chavez

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President Obama recently created a stir when [he stated](#) that Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez did not pose a “serious security threat” to the United States. Mitt Romney’s campaign pounced on that supposed verbal gaffe, [criticizing](#) Obama for being naïve about yet another foreign policy issue. But Obama is right about Chavez, and Romney’s failure to understand that point makes him the one to exhibit worrisome signs about a lack of foreign policy judgment.

There is no question that Hugo Chavez is an obnoxious, tin-pot dictator who has been [a political and economic disaster for Venezuela](#). It will likely take Venezuela a generation or more to recover from the damage he and his corrupt cronies have inflicted. But even the fear that existed a few years ago that Chavez’s brand of leftist authoritarian populism might sweep through much of Latin America has proven to be exaggerated. Initially, other similar figures did come to power, most notably Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega’s resurgence in Nicaragua. But Chavez’s ambitious goal of a “Bolivarian revolution” throughout the hemisphere did not materialize. Indeed, Chavez’s own ugly police-state tactics and dismal economic performance in Venezuela probably served to inoculate other countries from the disease of authoritarian populism.

The Chavez regime has managed to cause some problems for neighboring countries, with the support for the Marxist insurgency in Colombia being the most prominent example. But the disruptive actions of Caracas have been more of an irritant than a threat to those countries, much less a threat to the United States.

To most American hawks, Chavez’s principal offense has not been his effort to export a Bolivarian revolution. Instead, it has been his flirtation with countries that the hawks hate. In particular, his agreements (limited though they are) in the economic and security spheres [with Iran](#) and [Russia](#) have provoked their wrath.

It is disappointing that Romney has apparently succumbed to the same exaggerated fears as the hyper hawks about Chavez’s associations with Tehran and Moscow. But it should not be too surprising that he has done so. His views on Iran are taken straight from the neoconservative playbook. And he astonished and appalled knowledgeable observers this spring when he [described](#) Russia as America’s principal global adversary—a position that only the most extreme hawks have adopted.

All of these developments raise troubling questions about his foreign policy judgment. So, too, do reports that he is inclined to go first to former vice president Dick Cheney and his acolytes for advice on international issues. Given the horrific foreign policy track record of the Cheneyites, that is akin to a presidential candidate consulting Jimmy Carter and the ghost of Herbert Hoover for advice on economic policy.

Hugo Chavez has been a catastrophe for his country and an annoyance to his neighbors. But those offenses are quite different from posing a security threat—much less a *serious* security threat—to the United States. Venezuela is a small country with very limited military capabilities, while the United States is a large country with vast military capabilities. Chavez is a gnat, not a rattlesnake.

It is more than a little worrisome that a man who stands a very good chance of becoming president of the United States after the November elections can't seem to make the basic distinction between an annoyance and genuine security threat.