



## Gustavo Coronel: Please Stop Referring to Latin America as “America's Backyard”

Latin American expert Gustavo Coronel explains why being called the “backyard” doesn't translate well south of the border.

By Gustavo Coronel

In German a telephone center is a “Hör center” but not here. What would a Chinese do if you shout: “duck under the table”? Look for the duck? In Italy “cin cin” means “Cheers” but if you say it in Japan it will sound like “a small penis”. IKEA once tried to sell in the U.S. a workbench called “Fartfull”. It did not sell very well. And a hotel in Poland kept wishing clients “sweat dreams”. The Japanese tried to market the “Homo soap” and the “Cool Piss” (a fruit juice) without success.

There are language and cultural traps at every turn of the corner, to the extent that Wittgenstein once said that most, if not all, philosophical problems were due to the language barrier.

Few expressions have been so damaging to the acceptance of the U.S. by Latin Americans than “backyard”, often used by U.S. politicians to refer to all countries south of the Rio Grande. I heard it from a U.S. Congressman last week and although he was attacking Hugo Chavez and defending Latin American democracy, it sounded demeaning.

In the U.S. “backyard” has a friendly connotation. It refers frequently to the heart of America, to the small towns and cities that have made the country great.

But when applied to Latin America it gets lost in translation, since it means the “corral”, as in the OK Corral. In Spanish America the “corral” is that part of the house where the family keeps the chickens and plant a few mango or banana trees. In time the “corral” has also become the place where old refrigerators, washing machines and even old cars are put to rest. The backyard, in some ways, has become a graveyard.



This is the image that springs to the minds of many Latin Americans when they listen to U.S. politicians refer to their countries as the “U.S. backyard”. Even those who know that no offense is meant feel hurt by the use of the term.

I can assure U.S. politicians that, south of the border, most consider this term as pejorative and as a reflection of the lack of esteem U.S. political elites have shown for our countries. Henry Kissinger once said to President Nixon: “ Do not worry about Latin America. Nothing important ever happens down there”.

“Our backyard” sounds almost as bad as the instructions for use printed on a Greek deodorant: “Please push bottom.”

Gustavo Coronel was on the Board of Directors of PDVSA from 1976 to 1979. He was Chief Operations Officer (COO) and acting CEO of the Corporacion Venezolana de Guayana (CVG), the \$35 billion Venezuelan government conglomerate designed to exploit and run all of Venezuela's mineral, metal and mining operations, from 1994-1995. He was President of Puerto Cabello -- Venezuela's main port -- from 2001 to 2002.

Coronel was author of the Cato Institute study "[Corruption, Mismanagement and Abuse of Power in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela](#)" and was the Venezuelan representative to Transparency International from 1996 to 2000. In 1994, he founded Pro Calidad de Vida, an NGO promoting anti-corruption techniques in government and civic education for children in Venezuela, Panama, Paraguay, Mexico and Nicaragua.

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