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“Pat Robertson: Bringing Assassinations Back to Life?”

Televangelist Pat Robertson’s call for a covert operation to assassinate Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, while not a crime, is an outrage. The 75-year-old founder of the Christian Coalition publicly advocates that the United States commit an act of state terrorism.

Speaking on the Christian Broadcast Network, the Reverend accused Chavez of exporting communism and Muslim terrorism. His proposed cure for this alleged evil is not to turn the other cheek, but to murder Mr. Chavez.

Besides, calculates Robertson, it’s cheaper: “We don’t need another \$200 billion war to get rid of one, you know, strong-arm dictator. It’s a whole lot easier to have some of the covert operatives do the job and then get it over with. ... I don’t know about the doctrine of assassination, but if he thinks we’re trying to assassinate him, I think we really ought to go ahead and do it.”

And soon: “We have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come to exercise that ability.”

Imagine the reaction in Washington if a prominent supporter of President Chavez publicly called for Venezuelan intelligence operatives to do in President Bush.

To date, however, the Administration reaction is to avoid ruffling the feathers of its political base. The White House maintains an injudicious silence. The State Department was left to comment only that Robertson “is a private citizen and ... his views do not represent the policy of the United States. We do not share his view and ... his comments are inappropriate ...”

Inappropriate? What about “outrageous”? Apparently our State Department is more concerned to be diplomatic to the Christian Coalition than to Latin America.

And “private citizen”? True. But as Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez points out, Robertson is no ordinary private citizen. He is a prominent person, former presidential candidate, and leading supporter of President Bush.

Washington’s wimpy response is unworthy of a White House that professes to lead a worldwide campaign against terrorism. It will also depress *gringo* poll ratings in Latin America – already near historical lows. This matters. Appearing to tolerate Robertson’s remarks by faint damnation risks damage to our foreign policy interests in the hemisphere on issues ranging from trade to terrorism.

Venezuela, says its Ambassador, takes the Reverend seriously. This is not surprising. Latin Americans know that the CIA has in the past attempted to assassinate Fidel Castro. Chavez and Castro are pals. What might seem implausible to us – an attempt to assassinate Chavez -- can look real to our neighbors. A clear condemnation by the White House is needed to dispel suspicion.

Although un-Christian and unwise, Robertson's ugly words are not unlawful. Yes, international law does prohibit assassinating heads of government. The US and Venezuela are parties to the Convention on Internationally Protected Persons, in force since 1977. And that Convention prohibits not only assassinations, but also threats to assassinate. Robertson's ravings, however, fall short of an outright threat.

US law makes it a crime to conspire or attempt to kill a foreign president, provided he is outside his own country at the time. The theory is that so long as he remains in his own country, the prosecution can and should take place there.

But conspiracy and attempt require more than mere advocacy. Compare, for example, the case of Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman. He was convicted in New York for, among other things, issuing a fatwa calling on Muslims to kill Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. But the Sheik also asked the UN about Mubarak's itinerary and took other steps to plan the assassination.

So Pat Robertson can join Richard Nixon in proudly proclaiming, "I am not a crook." He is merely an apologist for state terrorism. If Washington fails to put more daylight between the President and one of his most prominent cheerleaders, the rest of us will have to pay the diplomatic tab.

Doug Cassel's commentaries are broadcast Wednesdays during the 1:00 p.m. hour of the Worldview program. All views expressed are the personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.