



# MEDIA MYTHS FREE MARKET PROJECT

AUDITING THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE FREE MARKET SYSTEM



FREE MARKET PROJECT . 325 SOUTH PATRICK ST . ALEXANDRIA, VA 22314 . (703)683-9733 . WWW.FREEMARKETPROJECT.ORG

March 1, 2006

## Hugo the Boss

### Media criticize 'greed' of energy executives, but go easy on Venezuela's oil strongman

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American media have covered the ports controversy with almost 24-7 dedication. But the networks have ignored a far bigger security threat. As energy prices have spiked and world demand increased, the United States' reliance on oil controlled by Venezuela's anti-American despot Hugo Chavez has become a real danger.

But it's a danger the networks barely even mention.

Chavez took over as leader of America's third-largest oil importer in 1998 and the broadcast media have done little to acknowledge the threat that entails.

Now, as relations between the United States and Venezuela deteriorate, Americans have been left in the dark about the danger of a man who is spending his



Fidel Castro gets \$1.5 billion a year in support from Hugo Chavez

nation's oil wealth to export "revolution" and threatens to cut off oil to America. Even those latest threats have been ignored by both ABC and NBC.

The Media Research Center's Free Market Project looked at all 139 news and news-related stories on the broadcast networks about Hugo Chavez since he took power in 1998.

Here are some of the conclusions:

- **'Left-leaning' Like John Kerry:** The media downplayed the radical politics of Chavez by using the same terms they used for Democratic presidential candidates John Kerry and Walter Mondale. Few stories even acknowledged the anti-American nature of Chavez's regime.

- **The Man Behind Citgo:** Chavez exerts complete control over the state oil company which, in turn, owns one of America's most famous gasoline retailers - Citgo. That amounted to \$785 million in profits for Venezuela in 2005. Only four stories (3 percent) acknowledged the connection with Citgo.

- **Wrongs Not Rights:** None of the networks paid any significant attention to the many human rights abuses of the Chavez regime.

(MORE)

Left-wing groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch complained about murders, detentions, assaults on press freedom and control of the judiciary, but only 10 percent (14 out of 139) of the news stories made any mention of any violations.

The phrase "human rights" was used in only one story about Chavez's regime.

"The imperialist, genocidal, fascist attitude of the U.S. president has no limits. I think Hitler would be like a suckling baby next to George W. Bush."

-- Hugo Chavez

- **Turning Up the Heat on Bush:** Each of the broadcast networks did a story about Chavez's oil "gift" to America's poor. Each one managed to find a Democratic spokesman and a recipient, who were happy to

ignore Chavez's politics. That low-cost aid, handled through Citgo, is now being looked into by Congress. The response from Chavez has been to increase the program.



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### Media criticize 'greed' of energy executives, but go easy on Venezuela's oil strongman

BY DAN GAINOR

THE BOONE PICKENS FREE MARKET FELLOW

Oil prices began to spike in 2005 and the news media eagerly criticized the "greed" of oil companies and their executives. Reporters complained about "jaw-dropping profits" or that oil firms were "taking spending money out of our pockets and making the country poorer."

But there was one oil man the network news shows went easy on - despite a career filled with human rights violations, radical rhetoric, crackdowns on the free press and an attempted coup that cost dozens of lives. He directs operations for the fifth-largest oil-producing nation in the world and controls one of the most common company names in the gasoline industry - Citgo. He's Hugo Chavez, the openly anti-American president of Venezuela.



**Hugo Chavez with another friend of his oil-rich regime - former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.**

While broadcast reporters worried about dangers of foreign firms running American ports, they paid little or no attention to Chavez and his latest threats to cut off oil to the United States. According to the Feb. 21, 2006, Financial Times, Chavez "insisted the U.S. would receive 'no more oil' if it 'crossed the line' in its supposed efforts to undermine his 'revolution.'" That new threat was

acknowledged only by CBS. But all three networks ignored much of the truth about Chavez and his control of the second-largest oil supply in the Western Hemisphere.

In January 2006, the "CBS Evening News" did admit "the volatile president of Venezuela made a veiled threat today to cut off oil shipments to the United States." When Chavez's threats became more direct in February, CBS didn't say a thing.

Chavez was elected president of Venezuela in 1998, only six years after being jailed for trying to overthrow that nation's government. Since that time, the three broadcast networks have reported 139 stories about him, but what is notable is not what's in the stories. It's what the reporters left out.

Talk of his or Venezuela's oil power was relatively common in those stories, but only four (3 percent) mentioned his control of Citgo. Chavez's much-criticized human rights record received only slightly better coverage (10 percent). This is the result of a Free Market Project study of broadcast news coverage of Hugo Chavez from Dec. 1, 1998, the month he took office, to Feb. 26, 2006.

Chavez has actively promoted anti-American protests and has funded left-wing revolution throughout Central and South America. Experts estimate he spent \$1.5 billion each year from oil profits to support regimes like Cuba's Fidel Castro.

Despite that, only 40 percent of the stories made any attempt to label his politics for what they really are. Roughly 12 percent of the stories called Chavez a "leftist," while others simply referred to him as a "Bush critic" or an "arch enemy of the Bush administration."

Chavez is far more danger than "critic." He has repeatedly sided with a rogues' gallery of America's enemies including Castro and Saddam Hussein, and recently has supported the Iranian regime's quest for nuclear weapons. Now, as oil has become even more essential to American security and prosperity, he sits atop roughly 14 percent of U.S. crude oil imports.

The confrontation between America and Chavez's Venezuela is heating up. In 2006, the two

nations have leveled charges and counter-charges at one another, including an ongoing Chavez claim that America had planned an invasion. That "threat" was later found to be a Spanish war game plan. Chavez recently expelled a U.S. military attaché, accusing him of spying, and Bush countered by doing the same to a Venezuelan diplomat.

On February 24, BBC News wrote that Venezuela has cut flights between the two countries. According to that article, starting March 1, "flights by Delta and Continental Airlines will be cut by up to 70%, and American Airlines flights will also be affected, officials say."

That news also went unnoticed by the broadcast networks.

## **A Windfall for Network News**

But not all oil men were as well-treated by the media as Hugo Chavez. Big profits for Big Oil were big news in the past year. Network reporters couldn't muster enough hyperbole to describe the success of the other major energy companies.

"America's largest oil company, ExxonMobil, is reporting some jaw-dropping profits tonight, record profits in fact for any American company ever," gasped anchor Brian Williams in a brief report on the January 30 "NBC Nightly News."

Williams's alarm was the typical media position on oil prof-

its - in this case, the \$36.1 billion Exxon earned in 2005. Business reporter Maria Bartiromo used an identical style in her Oct. 31, 2005, appearance on NBC's "Today."

"The oil business is booming, and it's the consumer that's getting hit the hardest," she said. "Last quarter alone, industry leader ExxonMobil made nearly \$10 billion, a staggering profit."

Those comments ignored key facts. Of course, Exxon's profit was a big number. Exxon is a gigantic company. But in 2004, Exxon reported lower profit margins than companies in other industries, including media companies like those that own and publish major newspapers.

In 2005, profits for the world's largest oil company were only 9.7 percent of its revenues - far less than the 2004 Bank of America's 21.6 percent or Johnson and Johnson's 18 percent, according to Fortune magazine.

Within its own industry, ExxonMobil was vastly outperformed by Communist China's state-owned PetroChina, which yielded nearly a 23 percent profit in 2004.

The media assault wasn't limited to Exxon. None of the American oil companies was exempt. When oil executives were asked to appear in front of Congress to discuss the rise in fuel prices, Chip Reid of "NBC Nightly News" took the opportunity to demonize them with a comparison to another much-criticized industry - tobacco.

Reid's Nov. 9, 2005, story complained that oil executives "discovered they had a protector, powerful Alaska Republican Senator Ted Stevens, who gruffly denied Democratic requests that the witnesses be sworn in."

That decision, Reid said, "allowed these executives to avoid the kind of incriminating photo that a decade ago put tobacco company executives on the nation's front pages."

On a "Nightly News" broadcast two weeks earlier, Chief Financial Correspondent Anne Thompson had turned her attack to another oil firm. Thompson's Oct. 28, 2005, story used familiar anti-industry imagery.

"In a summer marked by hurricanes and \$3 gasoline, the oil companies struck gold. Today, Chevron joined the eye-popping profits parade," Thompson said.

ABC was just as bad. "World News Tonight" anchor Bob Woodruff introduced his Oct. 27, 2005, "A Closer Look" segment on oil with another complaint about profits: "The oil companies reported earnings today that are almost beyond imagination."

That story followed with a lengthy list of oil critics who either blamed the high cost of gasoline on the industry or advocated an extra tax labeled a "windfall profits" tax. Woodruff reiterated, "Those numbers are just astounding." Reporter Betsy Stark agreed.

Summing up the network attack on Big Oil, reporter Anthony Mason blamed the industry for widespread harm.

His Oct. 27, 2005, "CBS Evening News" story depicted the energy firms as villains. "But those rising prices at the pump are taking fuel out of the economy, by taking spending money out of our pockets and making the country poorer," he claimed.

Meanwhile, another oil man was getting much kinder treatment from the networks.

### 'Terrific Danger' or a 'Real Star'

"Some people believe I am a threat to the United States, to democracy. I've told them time and time again that this is not true."

- Hugo Chavez  
May 12, 2002, CBS "60 Minutes"

Whether he's pitching for the Venezuelan baseball team or pitching his ideas of "revolution" to nearby nations, Hugo Chavez has worked hard at getting his face in the media. He has figured prominently in the news several times since taking office in 1998.

A failed 2002 revolt against his leadership thrust Chavez onto TVs across America. When a nationwide protest all but shut down oil production in 2002 and 2003, all three networks covered the story repeatedly.

In 2005, Chavez received extensive coverage when Pat

"When Chavez replaced the oil company's top executives with political appointees, some of whom were radical Marxists, there was a management revolt."

- Steve Kroft  
May 12, 2002, "60 Minutes"

Robertson, the founder and chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network, called for America to assassinate the Venezuelan leader. Matt Lauer of NBC's "Today" referred to it as "a controversy of biblical proportions" in his Aug. 23, 2005, report.

All three networks covered Robertson's initial comments and his subsequent apology repeatedly - 16 stories in all (12 percent). But Robertson's other charges that Chavez was a "strong-arm dictator" and posed a "terrific danger" to the United States went mostly unnoticed.

A few months later, Chavez did his part to prove himself a "danger" by leading anti-American protests at a South American free trade summit. That act still drew positive coverage from reporter Jessica Yellin of ABC's "Good Morning America."

Yellin portrayed him as the "wildly popular Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez" and added "it's clear the real star in these parts is Mr. Chavez, the protest leader" in her Nov. 5, 2005, broadcast.

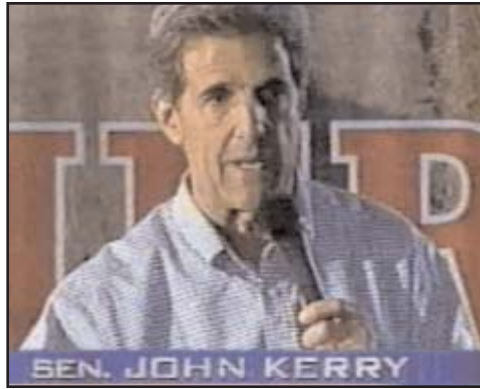
Ironically, an Aug. 16, 2004, "NBC Nightly News," report actually noted concern had Chavez lost the election. Anchor Tom Brokaw expressed that sentiment: "There had been concerns that a Chavez defeat could further disrupt oil supplies."

Oil has helped Chavez become a barrier to U.S. diplomacy. His verbal attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush and the Cabinet have brought the Venezuelan strongman a strong following including such well-known liberals as anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan, entertainer Harry Belafonte and the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

The United Nations also has honored the Venezuelan leader. In early February 2006, Chavez received UNESCO's 2005 Jose Marti International Prize in front of an audience of roughly 200,000 Cubans.

Chavez has paved his way to popularity with oil revenues. The Feb. 9, 2006, Miami Herald reported on a study by Venezuela's Center of Economic Investigations that detailed just some of the places he was sending the Venezuelan funds - "including a \$10 billion anti-poverty fund, \$2.4 billion for the purchase of Argentina's foreign debt bonds, \$4.3 billion in oil and energy projects in Brazil, another \$4.3 billion in oil subsidies and energy infrastructure works in Cuba."

A Nov. 25, 2005, New York Times article explained that he



**Former Democratic presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry, as "left-leaning" as Hugo Chavez.**

spent \$1.5 billion per year on "preferential oil deals aimed at shoring up friendly leftist governments and reducing Venezuela's dependence on U.S. sales for its primary source of income."

At the same time, Chavez has escalated the personal war of words with American officials in recent months. Not only has he threatened to cut off oil to the United States, he has been arming his nation rapidly.

The March 24, 2005, Los Angeles Times reported that U.S. defense officials were worried Chavez was in "a 'one-man arms race' that could destabilize South America for decades."

Those arms included buying 100,000 AK-47 assault rifles from Russia and as many as 50 Russian attack helicopters. The article added that Chavez was "discussing the purchase of 30 MIG-29 fighter jets."

The weapons purchases were just another piece of the puzzle that the networks left out.

## He's 'Left-leaning' Just Like John Kerry

The network news shows just couldn't decide how to characterize Hugo Chavez. He's made a career out of radical left-wing politics, leading one coup, supporting another and being briefly deposed by a third. He spends his nation's oil profits to export "revolution" to his country's neighbors, yet the most common term the networks used to describe him was as a "leftist." In 16 separate stories, network reporters decided that word was an apt description, but rarely did they go further. Overall, 60 percent of the stories didn't bother to describe Chavez's politics in any way.

Both NBC and CBS called him "left-leaning," a term "CBS Evening News" reporter Byron Pitts used for Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.). In a July 3, 2004, campaign story, Pitts said, "For the left-leaning senator from Massachusetts, the race for the middle hit high gear this weekend."

It wasn't just Kerry who was "left-leaning." Carl Quintanilla of "NBC Nightly News" mentioned how Kerry was "surrounded this week by a series of left-leaning surrogates - Howard Dean, Ralph Nader" in a May 23, 2004, story.

And CBS also referred to MoveOn.org and former Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale as "left-leaning" in two other reports.

ABC's "Nightline" used the term to refer to several of this year's Oscar-nominated pictures. On Feb. 1, 2006, Terry Moran discussed how few people had seen the nominees like "Capote," "Syriana," and "Brokeback Mountain." "These low budget, left-leaning movies have made less money combined than a single comedy, 'Wedding Crashers,'" Moran said.

One CBS report was particularly instructive. On the Nov. 4, 2005, "CBS Evening News," anchor Bob Schieffer showed the truthful labeling that many of the network reports lacked. In his introduction to a story about "anti-American riots," Schieffer called Chavez "left-leaning."

However, later in the story he explained his definition. "I think we ought to underline what you've just said in the piece that these demonstrations were stirred up by someone who is no friend of the United States. In fact, Hugo Chavez is Fidel Castro's best friend."

When Chavez wasn't "left-leaning" he was "leftist," but again with little information about what it really meant. Reporter Dan Harris of ABC's "World News Tonight" helped spell that out in his Nov. 6, 2005, report: "Venezuelan leftist leader Hugo Chavez, who led an anti-American rally while talks for free trade were taking place."

But "leftists" clearly did

more than just lead "anti-American" rallies. They were active in the U.S. Democratic Party, according to several reports. Cokie Roberts said as much on "ABC This Week" on Aug. 22, 1999: "Look, for 20 years, the Democratic Party ran on the left and with leftists as their nominees, and they lost."

Chavez also was called a "Socialist," "populist," or simply a "Bush critic." "CBS Early Show" reporter Julie Chen described him as "a fierce critic of President Bush" in her piece about the Pat Robertson comments on Aug. 23, 2005.

Other "Bush critics" included unhappy Democratic voters who were moving to Canada and "long-time Bush critic, Bill Burkett," who provided the infamous National Guard "documents" to CBS News.

Still, CBS was the best network about labeling. Forty-four percent of the stories (24 out of 54) gave some indication of his politics. NBC was the worst. Just 30 percent (9 out of 30) mentioned Chavez's political bent. The ABC total of 38 percent (21 out of 55) was exactly halfway between the two.

## **The Left Way to Go**

Citgo is one of those company names that can give Americans goose bumps. It conjures up about a century of serving the car-driving public from the Model T to the SUV. Baseball

fans will recognize the Citgo sign looming over the left field wall at Boston's Fenway Park.

Today, there are roughly 13,500 Citgo service stations around the United States - or an average of more than 260 for each and every state and the District of Columbia.

But while many individual gas stations remain unchanged, little else about the firm has. Citgo was founded in 1910 as Cities Service Co., but Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), owned by the nation of Venezuela, acquired 50 percent in 1986 and the remainder in 1990.

"In October 2000, the new president [Chavez] tightened control over Citgo by naming as company president a former army general, Oswaldo Contreras. He was the first Venezuelan to hold the position," according to the Jan. 12, 2006, USA Today.

That was only the beginning. On April 20, 2005, The New York Times reported the changes were far more widespread. "Nearly every high-ranking executive has resigned over the last two years, including the refining chief, the chief financial officer, the head auditor and the marketing director," stated the article.

The Times piece also told of "Mr. Chavez's efforts to put his loyalists, including some former military colleagues, in charge of the company."

The changing of the guard had begun much earlier, as "60 Minutes" co-host Steve Kroft explained in a May 12, 2002, report: "When Chavez replaced the oil company's top executives with political appointees, some of whom were radical Marxists, there was a management revolt."

In 2005, the firm moved its headquarters to Houston from Tulsa and, according to USA Today, "that saw several top American executives and the entire board replaced with Venezuelans."

Now, the Citgo profits help fund Chavez's regional "revolution." In December 2005, Citgo's board of directors announced the annual dividend for 2005 was \$785 million, all of which went directly to the state-owned PDVSA. The New York Times made it clear how Chavez spends his nation's wealth.

A Nov. 25, 2005, article showed he spent \$1.5 billion per year on "preferential oil deals aimed at shoring up friendly left-ist governments and reducing Venezuela's dependence on U.S. sales for its primary source of income."

Left-wing groups in the United States have rallied around Citgo as a way of opposing the Bush administration.

Truemajorityaction.org, founded by Ben Cohen, the co-founder of Ben and Jerry's, encouraged its 150,000 members to support the company with one-

time slogan "Citgo is the right way to go."

Writing for the left-wing Web site CommonDreams.org, Jeff Cohen, the founder of FAIR, urged readers to "Join the BUY-cott" by shopping at Citgo. "Looking for an easy way to protest Bush foreign policy week after week? And an easy way to help alleviate global poverty? Buy your gasoline at Citgo stations," he wrote.

## Charity Begins ... With Democrats and Despots

Network viewers recently got a close-up view of how Chavez uses his oil power for political purposes, and Citgo was the public relations tool he wielded - delivering low-cost heating oil to needy Americans right in front of the TV cameras. That giveaway was so controversial that the The House Committee on Energy and Commerce is looking into it.

According to the Dec. 7, 2005, New York Times, "Citgo's delivery of discounted fuel came after 12 Democratic senators, including Hillary Rodham Clinton, wrote a letter in October asking the chief executives of nine major oil companies to use some of their profits ... for government fuel assistance." The article said Citgo was the only firm to respond to the request.

All three broadcast networks covered the oil giveaway and even made the connection to Citgo. In fact, three of the four

stories connecting Citgo to Hugo Chavez in since 1998 were about his charitable efforts.

All three stories followed a similar template by focusing on prominent Democrats supporting the program - including former congressman Joe Kennedy II, Rep. Jose Serrano (D-N.Y.) and Rep. William Delahunt (D-Mass.). Reporters didn't have any difficulty locating recipients of Chavez's largesse. Each network found a poor woman who was more than happy to benefit and downplay the role of politics - even if ABC and CBS found the same woman.

On the Nov. 22, 2005, "World News Tonight" reporter Dan Harris introduced Linda Kelly, "a struggling mother of three" who was getting the oil "courtesy of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez." Kelly took her cue, saying "I don't see any political issues. I just want to keep my family warm."

Reporter Michelle Caruso-Cabrera made the connection to Citgo, but gave Chavez a pass for funding oil to America's poor. The poor woman Caruso-Cabrera found was Alice O'Neal who said, reliably, "To me, If President Bush wants to pay my oil bill, he can pick who supplies the oil."

Caruso-Cabrera ended her Jan. 15, 2006, "NBC Nightly News" story underlining that comment: "But to the poor of the Northeast, the politics don't matter when it comes to a lower heating bill," she said.

The "CBS Evening News" Dec. 10, 2005, broadcast showed the success of the Chavez political ploy. First, viewers met a familiar face – oil recipient Linda Kelly – who was struggling with a low thermostat until Chavez came to her rescue. "It's their oil. They can do what they want," she said. "If they want to give it to me, I will put – I will gladly take it."

Reporter Randall Pinkston's comments made it clear how impossible it was for the Bush administration to criticize the handout. "The gift is from Citgo, a company controlled by the Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chavez," he explained.

Then he showed the problem facing the White House. "It's pretty hard to criticize any corporation, even one that's owned by a self-styled socialist leader, that wants to give away fuel to hard-pressed Americans."

While the networks didn't necessarily see politics behind the gift, two members of Congress did. Reps. Joe Barton (R-Texas), chairman of the House Energy Committee, and Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.) expressed concern about the obvious ploy. They sent a letter to Citgo on Feb. 15, 2006, requesting details:

"Given President Chavez's clear anti-American sentiments, his current efforts must be viewed with concern that he is attempting to politicize the debate over U.S. energy policy. Indeed, CITGO's Chief Operating Officer, Jerry

Thompson, recently acknowledged as much in an interview with USA Today (January 12, 2006, page A1): 'Being owned by a political entity [PDVSA] ultimately means, from time to time, you have to do things with a political bent to them. Heating oil as an example of that.'"

## Human Rights Left Out

The whole issue of human rights was almost foreign to network treatment of the Chavez regime. The phrase "human rights" appeared only twice since December 1998 in any story about Chavez. One of those comments referred to U.S. foreign policy, not to concerns about rights in Venezuela.

The other was an Aug. 24, 2005, "Good Morning America" interview with the Rev. Jesse Jackson about Robertson and Chavez, where he made a casual use of the phrase. That was just one of the few stories (10 percent) that addressed Chavez's human rights activities.

The networks had plenty of information – if they had chosen to use it. On Feb. 21, 2006, the Christian Science Monitor explained that Chavez said "he may seek to lift presidential term limits to allow him to run for a third term in 2013."

The Dec. 12, 2002, "World News Tonight," showed that this wasn't a new idea, but didn't quite make it clear to viewers that a leader who won't leave power is a dictator pure and simple. "Chavez was democratically elect-

ed four years ago. But he is friendly with Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein, and like them, he has declared his intention to remain president as long as he wants."

The rest of the time, viewers were left trying to piece together clues from media reports. A Sept. 16, 2005, "Nightline" was unusually informative.

That report found numerous ways to paint Chavez, including "charismatic," "leftist strongman" and "champion of Venezuela's poor."

Reporter Chris Bury, who used the term "leftist strongman," and "60 Minutes" co-host Steve Kroft were about the only ones on the networks who labeled Chavez's despotic acts.

Kroft, who made his comments directly to Chavez, softened them by saying "Here's the way you are perceived in the United States by some people," before explaining it was "sort of a – a mixture between Fidel Castro and Juan Peron – power hungry, left-wing demagogue, dictator."

Even a clear-cut case of human rights abuse was softened on the April 17, 2002, "Nightline." Reporter John Donovan gave some essential background: "Chavez was no innocent. He had been cracking down on the media and the Catholic Church. He had ordered his troops to fire on demonstrators. He was forging close ties to Iraq."

However, then Donovan gave Chavez an out: "But here's the catch: Chavez was democratically elected."

"Good Morning America" anchor Robin Roberts also whitewashed the bad deeds of Venezuela's leader soon after the brief coup attempt against him. "Chavez says he reflected on his mistakes and is prepared to correct them," she said in the April 15, 2002, broadcast, though she made no mention what those "mistakes" might have been.

The Chavez regime's human rights record is notorious – so much so that several left-wing civil rights groups have complained about his actions. In its 2005 annual report, Amnesty International complained of deaths, detentions and torture.

"There were violent confrontations between supporters of the opposition and the security forces throughout the country. Scores of people were killed and injured. Hundreds more were detained amid allegations of excessive use of force and torture and ill-treatment," that organization said.

That was only the beginning. The analysis continued: "There were reports of unlawful killings of criminal suspects. Relatives and those who witnessed abuses were threatened and intimidated. The lack of independence of the judiciary remained a concern.

Attempts were made to



**Chavez with another world leader known for his dealings with the United States – Moamar Khadafy.**

undermine the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders."

The report went into more detail about the government excesses. "There were continuing reports of unlawful killings of criminal suspects by members of the police. Relatives and witnesses who reported such abuses were frequently threatened or attacked. No effective protection was granted to them despite calls by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for the authorities to do so."

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights took a similar view of the many abuses rampant in Venezuela. Their 2004 report identified "two issues of great importance relating to the independence of the judiciary, the provisional status of judges, and the failure to comply with constitutional rules in appointing judges, as a mechanism for guaranteeing their impartiality and independence."

It went on to explain that 84 percent of all judges were

appointed temporarily, leaving them at the whim of the government.

Human Rights Watch also released a June 2004 report on the issue of the judiciary titled: "Rigging the Rule of Law: Judicial Independence Under Siege in Venezuela."

According to that analysis, "When Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frías faced a coup d'état in April 2002, advocates of democracy in Venezuela and abroad roundly condemned the assault on the country's constitutional order. Today Venezuela faces another constitutional crisis that could severely impair its already fragile democracy. This time, though, the threat comes from the government itself."

Even Freedom House, a group founded by Eleanor Roosevelt more than 60 years ago, complained about Chavez's actions with the courts. "The Chavez government has made one of its central focus points the control of the judiciary, and they have accomplished it through a variety of means."

Freedom House showed how bad things really were. "Widespread arbitrary detention and torture of suspects, as well as extrajudicial killings by the often-corrupt military security forces and the police, have increased as crime continues to soar," said Joseph McSpedon, senior program manager, in his testimony to Congress Nov. 17, 2005.

Reporter Bill Whitaker of the “CBS Evening News” showed how far the networks went for “balance” that downplayed Chavez’s human rights violations. Whitaker’s Dec. 15, 2002, piece detailed the attacks on political opponents. “Three anti-Chavez demonstrators were gunned down last week. Everyone wants peace, but Chavez supporters insist he must stay.”

## Methodology

The Media Research Center’s Free Market Project analyzed all 139 stories on ABC, NBC and CBS news and news-related programs about Hugo Chavez since he took office in December 1998. Those stories were examined for various information including politics, human rights, labeling and Chavez’s connection to Citgo.

Any mention of Chavez’s political leanings – either by network personnel or the people they interviewed – counted as a way of informing viewers. Similarly, human rights stories included any mention of human rights failings in that nation – from his plans to extend the presidency to restraints of other freedoms. The stories had to include obvious violations of rights. Several stories mentioned violence or government response but included the backdrop of civil unrest, making it unclear whether any wrong had been committed.

## Conclusions

The way the networks have covered Hugo Chavez is not a

matter of right and left. It’s a matter of right and wrong, fact and fiction. The last year has easily proven the media willing to go after oil companies for almost any action – even running successful businesses. If that is the network strategy, then it should be fair to expect the same attitude when it comes to a man who is openly anti-American and anti-free press.

Chavez is working to become his generation’s Fidel Castro. Even in admitting that, the media treat Castro more like a quaint relic of the Cold War than the murdering thug history would indicate. Viewers don’t need fluff like the Oct. 30, 2000, piece on ABC’s “Good Morning America” about Chavez and Castro singing a “show stopper” of a duet as part of Chavez’s weekly radio address.

Although Chavez doesn’t have the backing of the old Soviet Union, he does have a massive reservoir of oil on which to float his goals of power. The media should have more than just a passing concern about that significant threat. Even by the networks’ scandalously incomplete coverage of the Venezuelan regime, Chavez is an enemy of liberty. That should be the Hugo Chavez who receives in-depth coverage and is clearly labeled each and every time he appears.

## Recommendations

1. **If It Walks Like a Duck:** If you put together what the broadcast media have said about Hugo Chavez, he has clamped down on protest, free speech, the Catholic

Church and is now considering staying in office as long as he wants. This coming from a man who openly used violence to try and take over the country. There are terms that accurately describe those kind of actions. “Dictator” would be one.

2. **Label Consistently:** Conservatives wouldn’t pretend to group Hugo Chavez with Democratic presidential candidates John Kerry and Walter Mondale. Why do network reporters? Is assuming dictatorial powers the same thing as creating “left-wing” movies like “Brokeback Mountain?” Clearly, there is no similarity. It is up to reporters to use accurate and specific terms to make that obvious.

3. **Look at Threats:** The ports controversy should have the media looking more aggressively for potential security threats. They could find plenty to report about Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez. Reporters should examine the looming threat of an oil cutoff coupled with a leader even the networks sometimes admitted was “anti-American.”

4. **Worry about Human Rights:** Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others have all expressed strong concerns about abuses in Chavez’s Venezuela. But just 10 percent of stories included any information about human rights violations. The term “human rights” was all but ignored. It’s a concern the network news reporters should include when they are covering Chavez.