

Americas / By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Don't

Republican Con-  
% tax rate on  
Is?Jim Jicha  
lain City, Ohioan egregious  
book at the run-  
of the past six  
claim to have  
control insults  
and plant.irresponsibility  
ending from his  
well-known ele-  
most new pork  
ed in the guise  
grades—where  
national borders  
-capita as seri-Republican spend-  
s John McCain  
atively respon-lead the effort  
n his position  
ingularly lead  
appen. With a  
his veto, and  
to use the veto  
pp. Lewis re-  
problem as allJerry Cohen  
Ashville, N.C.an  
sisBill Owens's  
r eagerly, for I  
recr ideologue,

Senator Chris Dodd's call for Donald Rumsfeld's resignation is a badge of honor that the secretary of defense might like to put on his resume. After all, the best thing that can be said about the Connecticut lawmaker's instincts on national security is that they are a leading contrary indicator.

One need not dig up Mr. Dodd's embarrassing record of support for the Soviet-backed Sandinistas in Nicaragua in the 1980s to make the point. His more recent foreign-policy wisdom features a defense of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who the senator has repeatedly championed for being "democratically elected" despite a widely publicized clamp down on civil liberties.

Chávez is also a vociferous supporter of Iranian nuclear aspirations and seeks to stir nationalist hysteria against the U.S. with daily warnings that an attack from the "empire" is imminent. Is there any doubt that if the mullahs get the bomb they will want to use their new power on behalf of their Western Hemisphere ally?

Military ambition is not the only threat that Chávez presents to hemispheric security. There is also his obsession with ending pluralistic democracy around the region. Energized by his own success at home in consolidating power under the guise of legality, the *enfant terrible* from Caracas is now financing and guiding such power grabs in some of the region's weakest democracies.

Bolivia is his most advanced project, where democracy is collapsing in an all-too-familiar manner into authoritarian rule under President Evo Morales. If it succeeds Bolivians will not get their very own strongman but instead a diluted version with Evo controlled by Hugo. The

blended outcome, perhaps best described as *egoismo*, is shaping up to be a political philosophy aimed at promoting the ambitions of one man across a continent rather than serving the nation.

Since taking office in January, Mr. Morales has purged the top generals in the Bolivian military and promised to nationalize the country's natural resources. Cuba has been given an active role in *egoismo*, providing security agents and advisers to Evo's government. Over 500 Cuban doctors now spread Fidel Castro's word in Bolivia and the Cuban dictator is hosting trainees from Mr. Morales's Movement to Socialism (MAS) party in Havana. MAS trainees have been sent to Caracas as well. Further aping Hugo, Evo has prevailed in his goal of holding a national vote in July to form a constitutional assembly that will rewrite the law of land over the next year.

All of this is distinctly Venezuelan. But the Bolivian's maneuvering features some new twists too. One of these is a draconian salary cut for legislators, judges and commissioners.

This is a stroke of brilliance in a country with strong populist traditions. First, because the majority poor widely believe that the political class is too richly rewarded. Second, because it is likely to act as a purging mechanism to rid the government of the educated middle-class, which might be inclined to resign and return to the private sector for better salaries. Spaces will open up for party hacks and coca growers who are far more likely to toe the line of the strongman. Third, those who accept the pay cuts and remain on the job may be more open to bribery as a way to supplement incomes.

Despite these obvious disadvantages

for the opposition, the president has already gotten his way with salary slashing in congress. To do so, he first cut his own salary and then announced that the legislature should do the same, stipulating that no one in government ought to earn more than he does. Legislators at first resisted the poison pill but by threatening to unleash notoriously violent street protestors, which brought down two presidents in less than 20 months, MAS prevailed.

### Mr. Morales is pulling a Chávez in Bolivia.

Still, as Chávez well knows, controlling the legislature is only part of the game. The big prize is reeling in the independent judiciary. And while a rewrite of the constitution might deliver that power in 18 months, that's a substantial wait. So instead Mr. Morales has extended the salary cut proposal to the courts, which like the legislature, stand to lose qualified judges if incomes drop precipitously. The judges, who jealously guard their independence from the executive, are in open rebellion against the idea but it remains to be seen whether they can win out. This month the entire Bolivian judiciary sent a letter of protest to their peers in the Western Hemisphere decrying the executive's attempt to "damage the fundamental principles of the rule of law."

Mr. Morales spins all of this as great courage against a corrupt traditional status quo and a system that he says has "institutionalized" corruption. The Aymara Indian, who wears pullover sweaters as a symbol of his populism, claims to be above it all. Yet early signs suggest that corruption could get worse, as it has

in Venezuela, under a government that successfully consolidates power and wipes out its opposition.

On the heels of the congressional pay cut, a scandal has already broken with an opposition congresswoman alleging that the anti-corruption MAS tried to bribe her on an important vote related to the constituent assembly. But it is the case of 67-year-old José Maria Bakovic that speaks loudest about where Bolivia may be headed if one-man rule takes hold.

Mr. Bakovic, who was thrown into prison without due process at the behest of Evo on March 31, has a stellar reputation as the president of Bolivia's National Highway Service (SNC) since 2001 and a former World Bank infrastructure specialist. During his tenure at the SNC he instituted a competitive, transparent bidding process for Bolivia's road works.

At his inaugural address Evo began accusing the SNC of corruption. Mr. Bakovic's supporters say that the SNC president immediately requested a meeting with Mr. Morales so that he could get to the bottom of it. That failed and he was forced to resign on Feb. 13. The kicker was that, on March 3, Evo signed an executive decree for a new road project, bypassing the transparent bidding process.

It didn't take too long for Mr. Morales to realize that he had overplayed his hand and he has rescinded the contract for the road. But his critics theorize that his backtracking has more to do with public opinion ahead of the constituent assembly than any honest repentance. Mr. Bakovic was released from jail this week but is not permitted to travel. Unfortunately, his future, like that of his country, will depend heavily on the success of *egoismo* in La Paz.