

commentary

from other pens...

Chavez ouster draws backing; opposition

When Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez fell from power last week after a mass protest, the Bush administration said his departure was merely a matter of Venezuelans exercising their legal right to revolt.

Virtually all Latin American governments saw Chavez's ouster as unconstitutional, which made opposition to it mandatory.

After an extraordinary series of events, Chavez was back in power a bare 36 hours later, having returned from military captivity on the wings of a popular rising against his would-be successors.

The White House's acquiescence to Chavez's removal Friday seemed to contrast sharply with the pro-democracy stance the United States has adhered to for more than two decades.

The United States used military force to restore democracy in Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989 and Haiti in 1994. It imposed sanctions against Peru in 1992 after President Alberto Fujimori stepped beyond constitutional norms. It used diplomatic muscle to ensure constitutional outcomes in Guatemala in 1993 and Ecuador in 2000; both countries had been in the throes of political crises.

Last September, Secretary of State Colin Powell flew to Peru for the signing of the OAS Inter-American Democratic Charter. It empowers the OAS to take any measures it "deems appropriate," including expulsion from the OAS, to deal with the subversion of democratic processes in any member state.

Such interruptions most often occur when outside forces, usually the military, depose an elected government. In the Venezuelan case, the Bush administration says it believed the Chavez government was far more of a threat to Venezuelan democracy than his opponents.

Through referenda and other means, Chavez had accumulated considerable powers since taking office in 1999. He pushed through a new constitution and appointed a new Supreme Court, for example.

Chavez caused uneasiness in Washington by cozying up to Cuba, Iraq and Libya. At home, economic woes contributed to a decline in his popularity, as did his attempt to replace professional managers at the state oil company with political allies.

There were mass demonstrations against his rule last week, producing the drama that began with his surprise dismissal, followed by his storybook comeback.

The State Department believed Friday his ouster was a reflection of the will of the people, that he was a victim of his own supposed misrule.

Few outside Washington accepted that interpretation. Hours after the State Department spoke, 19 Latin American presidents meeting in San Jose, Costa Rica, said, "We condemn the interruption of constitutional order."

Mexican President Vicente Fox said his country would not recognize the interim government appointed after Chavez's departure. Fox's stand became moot just a day later with Chavez's return to office.

After it became apparent Chavez would be reinstated, the United States joined with its OAS colleagues Saturday night in condemning "the alteration of constitutional order in Venezuela."

It was an odd sequence, with the Bush administration criticizing Chavez's ouster just a day after it had offered tacit support.

For Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., the administration had waited too long to get on the pro-democracy bandwagon.

"I am extremely disappointed," Dodd said, "that rather than leading the effort to reaffirm the region's commitment to the democratic principles outlined in the OAS Charter, only belatedly did the United States join with other OAS members to respond to the Venezuelan crisis."

Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., the Foreign Relations Committee's top Republican, said he hopes Chavez has learned from his ordeal.

"I urge Mr. Chavez to make good use of this second chance to raise more strongly the principles of democracy than he has in the past," Helms said.

EDITOR'S NOTE — George Gedda has covered foreign affairs for The Associated Press since 1968.

HEY! I JUST HEARD THAT THE RECESSION IS OVER! YOU CAN COME BACK OUT NOW!



Too panicked to live



joan ryan

• commentary

With "Panic Room" topping the box-office charts, stories are emerging about the hundreds of people who have these rooms in their homes. Who knew?

Once the province of wacky survivalists in the hills of Wyoming, fear of predators has gripped the carpool-driving classes, raising the question: What, exactly, is everyone so afraid of?

One company called New Necessities sells sheets of Millibar, made of the same fiber used in bulletproof vests, for \$1,200 to \$1,400.

Homeowners use the 4-by-8-foot sheets to give their homemade safe rooms "certified ballistic protection." More professional safe rooms cost up to \$250,000 and include plumbing, ventilation, computers, oxygen scrubbers, television monitors and dummy vents and electrical panels to fool the bad guys.

So-called panic rooms are just an exaggeration of what is becoming a preoccupation with keeping safe. We are becoming a bunkered nation, and it has little to do with Sept. 11. We don't fear terrorists; we fear each other.

No one raises an eyebrow anymore when neighbors install motion detectors, panic buttons, electronic gates or elaborate entry codes to access their properties. Parents in all socioeconomic groups are driving their kids to and from school and equipping them with cell phones so that they can call 911 when trouble strikes.

In the building where I work, I see the same guard in the lobby nearly every day, and every day

I have to show her my identification card before she can allow me to pass. To reach my third-floor desk, I activate the elevator by brushing a security cardkey past a blinking scanner. If I step out of the building to buy coffee, go to lunch, mail a letter, take a walk, I go through the ID and cardkey routine each time.

I appreciate my employer's concern for my safety. But, the truth is that the crime rate is the lowest it's been in more than 30 years. According to the Department of Justice, violent crimes declined 44 percent, and household burglary declined 45 percent just from 1993 to 2000. In most communities, a person has roughly as much chance of being harmed by a stranger as he does of winning the lottery.

So, why do we feel so much less secure? It's because we see the outside world not through our windows, but through our televisions.

Almost everyone in the Bay Area will get through this day safely, but what you'll see on television tonight is the one person who didn't, the one person who was knifed in his carport for the \$53 in his pocket. Maybe you'll see another testimonial from

a man who was molested by a Catholic priest when he was an altar boy, adding to the perception that all priests are predators and all children are at risk.

If you watch the 10 o'clock TV dramas, you'd think that the world outside your quiet little bedroom was littered with murdered and mutilated bodies discovered accidentally by kids walking to school or office buddies heading to happy hour.

So, we spend thousands on security alarm systems, weapons and even panic rooms, money that could buy plane tickets to Mexico or a new barbecue for the patio — things that have to do with grabbing life instead of preventing death.

Here's the thing: There aren't as many bad guys out there as we think. In focusing so much on the phantom forces out to harm us, we damage the very thing we purport to protect: our quality of life.

Death isn't what we should fear. Death will get us one way or another, no matter how many hidden cameras and motion sensors we install. What we should fear is not visiting the folks back home more often, not watching our daughter play third base, not taking the community college class in American literature, not inviting the neighbors over for pasta at the last minute, not guiding a struggling reader through second grade.

Living is about more than staying alive. It's what happens when you close the brochures for Kevlar walls and open a window.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@sfgate.com.

Built for comfort



red green

• north of forty

A lot of men are a little vague on exactly when middle age begins. It has nothing to do with your chronological age, and it doesn't matter if your hair has gone gray, white or AWOL. You have officially arrived at midlife when the most important aspect of any given activity is comfort. In midlife, excitement, adventure and even finances all take a back seat. What you're looking for is comfort. You're not interested in physical fitness, you want heating and air conditioning. You want padding — on your furniture, on your paycheck and on your own butt. Even your love life is affected. Forget passion, what you want now is a "comfortable" relationship, where nobody yells at anybody, nothing changes and nine times out of 10 you fall asleep before your wife does. Your wild oats have turned to Wild Oat-Bran. As middle age progresses, you'll probably even become "comfortable" with yourself. Some call it giving up. I call it true success. When you can stand in front of a mirror or a banker and say proudly "This is as good as I get," hey, that has to be a comforting thought.

FOR WHOM THE CELL TOLLS

I want to talk about cellular phones for a minute. In the old days, when you saw somebody walking down the street jabbering away into thin air, you never thought of the word "phone," just the word "cell." Now, we have all these nuts driving around talking on the phone with just one hand on the steering wheel. Sure, in a fit of road rage you've often taken a hand off the wheel to communicate with other drivers, but that was a whole different kind of digital signal. And, these cell phones don't just ring. No, they play little tunes and jingles and go

off at the worst times — like in church. I mean, it's not even your phone, but everybody still turns around to see where it's coming from, and there you are, sound asleep. To me a cell phone is just a leash. And, you'd better come when you're called, or you'll lose your spot as top dog. Whenever I see somebody on a cell phone, they're always alone, talking to somebody as they walk around the room trying to get a clearer signal. I'll tell you how to get a clear signal. Go to the person's house and talk to them. Cell phones are OK in an emergency, but if you use them to communicate with friends and loved ones, you will eventually get disconnected. That'll ruin your weekend, no matter how many free minutes you get.

NO STEP

After you've been married for a while, you realize that your wife lays down what I call "verbal landmines." Here are a few that you should never step into:

- If we broke up, what kind of women would interest you?
- Would you find me more attractive if I lost weight?
- What's been the happiest moment of your life?

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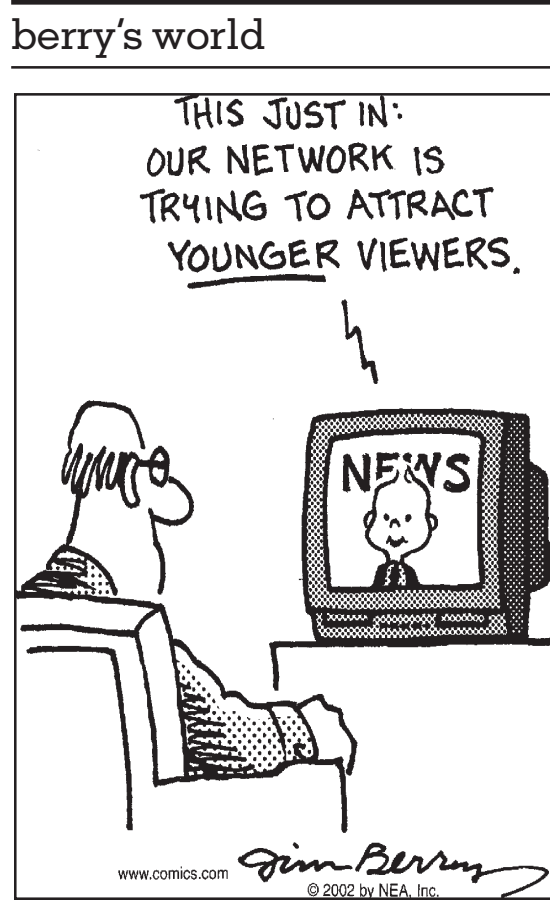
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