

The Floridation of Venezuela

By Greg Palast
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Hugo Chavez drives George Bush crazy. Maybe it's jealousy: Unlike Mr. Bush, Chavez, in Venezuela, won his Presidency by a majority of the vote. Or maybe it's the oil. Venezuela sits atop a reserve rivaling Iraq's. And Hugo thinks the US and British oil companies that pump the crude ought to pay more than a 16% royalty to his nation for the stuff. Hey, 16 percent isn't even acceptable as a tip at a New York diner.

Whatever it is, our President has decided that their president has to go. This is none too easy given that Chavez is backed by Venezuela's poor; and the US oil industry, joined with local oligarchs, has made sure a vast majority of Venezuelans remain poor.

Therefore, Chavez is expected to win this coming Sunday's recall vote. That is, if the elections are free and fair.

They won't be. Some months ago, a little birdie faxed to me what appeared to be confidential pages from a contract between John Ashcroft's Justice Department and a company called ChoicePoint, Inc., of Atlanta to help fight the war on terror.

Justice offered up to \$67 million of our taxpayer money to ChoicePoint in a no-bid deal for computer profiles of private information on every citizen of half a dozen nations. The choice of citizens to spy on caught my eye. While the September 11 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon and the Arab Emirates, ChoicePoint's menu offered record on Venezuelans, Brazilians, Nicaraguans, Mexicans and Argentines. How odd. Had the CIA uncovered a Latin plot to sneak suicide tango dancers across the border with exploding enchiladas?

What do these nations have in common besides a lack of involvement in the September 11 attacks? Coincidentally, each is in the throes of major electoral contests in which the leading candidates – presidents Lula Ignacio da Silva of Brazil, Nestor Kirschner of Argentina, Mexico City mayor Andres Lopez Obrador and Hugo Chavez – have the nerve to challenge the globalization demands of George Bush.

The last time ChoicePoint sold voter files to government it was to help Governor Jeb Bush

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locate and purge felons on Florida voter rolls. Turns out ChoicePoint's felons were merely Democrats guilty only of VWB, Voting While Black. That little 'error' cost Al Gore the White House.

It looks like the Bush Administration is taking the Florida show for a tour south of the border.

However, when Mexico discovered ChoicePoint had its citizen files, the nation threatened company executives with criminal charges. ChoicePoint protested its innocence and offered to destroy the files of any nation that requests it.

But ChoicePoint, apparently, presented no such offer to the government of Venezuela's Chavez. In Caracas, I showed Congressman Nicolas Maduro the ChoicePoint-Ashcroft agreement. Maduro, a leader of Chavez's political party, was unaware that his nation's citizen files were for sale to U.S. intelligence. But he understood their value to make mischief.

If the lists somehow fell into the hands of the Venezuelan opposition, it could immeasurably help their computer-aided drive to recall and remove Chavez. A ChoicePoint flak said the Bush administration told the company they haven't used the lists that way. The PR man didn't say if the Bush spooks laughed when they said it.

Our team located a \$53,000 payment from our government to Chavez's recall organizers, who claim to be armed with computer lists of the registered. How did they get those? What was practiced in Florida, with Choice-Point's help, could be retooled for Venezuela, then Brazil, Mexico and so on.

With the Justice Department turning its gaze away from Saudi Arabia while spending our money on shoplifting voter records in Venezuela, it's only fair to ask: Is Mr. Bush fighting a war on terror or a war on democracy?