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Publisher

Pason Gaddis
pgaddis@florida-weekly.com

Executive Editor

Jeffrey Cull
jcull@florida-weekly.com

Creative Director

Jim Dickerson
jdickerson@florida-weekly.com

Reporters & Columnists

Roger Williams
Mark Welker
Ella Naylor
Karen Feldman
Betsy Clayton

Contributing Writers

Carl-John X. Veraja
Phyllis Ershowsky
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Photographers

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Carol Orr Hartman

Contributing Photographer

Jerry Smith

Proofreader

Joanne Anderson

Production

Alex Perez
Amanda Hartman
Kim Boone

Circulation Manager

Penny Kennedy
pkennedy@florida-weekly.com

Circulation

David Anderson
John Noe
Paul Neumann

Account Executives

Shelley Lund
slund@florida-weekly.com

Marilyn DiCharia
marilyn@florida-weekly.com

Jodi Fullerton
jfullerton@florida-weekly.com

Mary Beth Durso
mbdurso@florida-weekly.com

Patty Purtee
ppurtee@florida-weekly.com

Annamarie Cole
acole@florida-weekly.com

Accounting Manager

Kelli Carico

Marketing Consultant

Matt Hanson

Street Address:

Fort Myers Florida Weekly
4300 Ford Street, Suite 106
Fort Myers, Florida 33916
Phone 239.333.2135
Fax: 239.333.2140

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OPINION

Freedom marching in reverse under chavez

BY ROGER HERNANDEZ

Hugo Chavez may be a thug, but he's not dummy. He knows that with a packed Supreme Court, a rump Congress, a divided opposition and -- tragically true -- a good deal of support from The People, Venezuela's free press is one of the few remaining institutions strong enough to keep him from realizing his dream of grabbing absolute power.

So he has set out to destroy it. His government has refused to renew the broadcast license of Radio Caracas Television, Venezuela's oldest and most popular network. It went off the air for the first time in 53 years.

Tens of thousands of Venezuelans took to the streets to protest, but you'd hardly know it from watching the news as the Chavez-friendly operation that replaced RCTV ran an orgy of self-congratulatory cheesiness in its first hours of life, instead of covering the controversy.

Which is exactly what Chavez wants. A tame press that reports just the nice stuff. All those lovely stories about how thrilled Vietnam's deputy minister of agriculture is to be among his Venezuelan amigos.

Chavez and his supporters charged that RCTV supported the failed coup of 2002.

What actually happened? RCTV ran continuous live coverage of anti-Chavez protests, with little coverage of pro-Chavez marches.

Unbalanced reporting, sure. Irresponsible journalism, yes. But one price to pay for freedom of the press is that governments have no right whatsoever to censor journalists for being incompetent or biased. Only journalists should police journalists.

Of course, actual treason or openly calling for the assassination of the head of state crosses the line and can justify legal intervention. But RCTV did not cross that line. Instead, they are being persecuted for their political beliefs. The accusation of "coup-mongers" is a pretext to silence Chavez's opponents. The license-renewal issue provided the perfect opportunity to act, and Chavez is now gunning for another independent news operation, Globovision.

Venezuela still has at least two major opposition newspapers in Caracas, El Nacional and El Universal. They are not licensed like broadcast companies.

Chavez has not found a way to shut them up.

Human-rights organizations, journalist groups, Western Europe and the Bush administration condemned the lights out for RCTV. So did some fellow Latin Americans, including former Mexican President Vicente Fox (with whom Chavez has butted heads more than once) said it was "a step toward dictatorship."

But Fox's successor, Felipe Calderon, has kept a low profile, even though he and Fox are from the same party, and even though Chavez's government refuses to recognize Calderon's tight electoral victory over his Chavez-backed opponent last year. Latin America's other regional power, Brazil, has also kept silent; President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva called it an internal Venezuelan issue.

Ah, the precious principle of non-intervention, the last refuge of those who don't mind seeing freedom stepped on, as long as it's the left boot doing the crushing.

Roger Hernandez is a syndicated columnist and writer-in-residence at New Jersey Institute of Technology. ■

Not a poodle, but a bulldog

BY RICH LOWRY

It is the strange fate of retiring British Prime Minister Tony Blair to be called a lackey for adhering to his own deep-felt foreign-policy vision.

Long before President Bush arrived in the White House, Blair championed the idea that the West should intervene to stop human-rights abuses in other countries, putting morality above respect for the borders of sovereign countries. It wasn't until after 9/11 that Bush embraced a version of this expansive vision, essentially making him a convert to the Blair view rather than the other way around.

In the debate regarding the Iraq War, Blair merely applied his principles of liberal interventionism that had led him to support a war against another aggressive, human-rights-abusing dictator, Slobodan Milosevic, in the Balkans. In a 1999 speech, Blair linked Milosevic and Saddam Hussein as "dangerous and ruthless men" who had "brought calamity on their own peoples." Stopping one had been right, and so was stopping the other.

Many of Blair's fellow liberal interventionists, however, weren't going to let

consistency get in the way of opposing "Bush's war." Their support for a robustly moralistic foreign policy ended as soon as it was picked up by a conservative Republican. There were a handful of liberal interventionists who backed the Iraq War, but they dropped off when it turned from an easy liberation to a grinding counterinsurgency. Recognizing the evil of our enemy and the humanitarian stakes of failure, Blair held firm.

Blair has been nearly alone in keeping liberal-interventionist priorities throughout the Clinton and Bush years. Rather than "Bush's poodle," Blair has been a bulldog for his beliefs.

Those beliefs have meant that he took part in no less than four wars, and probably would have welcomed a fifth in Darfur. He supported humanitarian military action in Europe (Kosovo) and in Africa (Sierra Leone), with U.N. support (Afghanistan) and without (Iraq). President Bush once said, "When somebody hurts, government has got to move." Blair applies that (not the least bit conservative) insight internationally, with the government bringing along the paratroopers when it moves.

Since there is an overwhelming amount

of "hurt" in our broken world, the question becomes how to discriminate among proposed interventions. Which are important enough to warrant force and which aren't? Blair argues that they are all important. In the new, interdependent global environment, old distinctions between a foreign policy based on morality and national interest have collapsed. This is overstated, but it is true that threats to the international order come almost exclusively from regimes that also abuse human rights.

Blair acted on his liberal foreign-policy views -- a throwback to William Gladstone in the British tradition and to Woodrow Wilson in the American -- with honor. He confronted American presidents when he thought they were wrong -- pushing Bill Clinton to send ground troops to Kosovo, for instance -- and stood by them when they were embattled on behalf of things he too believed.

Blair's foreign-policy vision might have overreached and he had other important failings as a leader, but he was never anyone's poodle. ■

Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

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