

PRESIDENT'S DAY DOWN SOUTH

✖ Here it is, another glorious President's day, and wouldn't you know it world leaders are exchanging presents. And Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has sent one President Obama's way:

President Hugo Chávez handily won a referendum on Sunday that will end presidential term limits, allowing him to run for re-election indefinitely and injecting fresh vibrancy into his socialist-inspired revolution.

The results, coming after voters had rejected a similar effort by Mr. Chávez just 15 months ago, pointed to his resilience after a decade in power, as well as to the fragmentation of his opposition, which as recently as November had won key mayoralties and governorships.

The vote opens the way not only for Mr. Chávez to run for a new six-year term when his current one expires in 2013, but could also bolster his ambitious agenda as an icon of the left and a counterweight to American policies in Latin America.

It also creates a new foreign policy challenge for the Obama administration, strengthening a leader who has made a career of taunting and deriding the United States, even though Mr. Chávez just this weekend seemed to open the door for a different relationship.

Chavez is not going away anytime soon, and with the petro status of Venezuela remaining significant, both as to the US and as a vehicle for Chavez to spread influence in Latin America, Barack Obama needs to fashion a coherent policy

for Latin America as a whole and Venezuela in particular. President Obama has shown a refreshing tendency in foreign policy to address glaring problems head on and, unlike the previous Bush Administration, actually use intelligence instead of muscle.

A heavy fist and a thumbed nose was about all the subtlety George Bush showed in his Latin American foreign policy; it is time for that to change. With the decline and fall of Fidel Castro in Cuba, and brother Raul being both slightly more progressive and not long for office himself, coupled with Chavez's newfound extended lease on power and inability to know what to do the Obama agency of change, it is time for a new direction on both. We don't need to all be best friends, but we need to quit being intransigent enemies for the sake of nothing more than needing to make each other a villain to play off of. President Obama can stop the stupid; he should.