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Because freedom matters

BYLINE: By Connie Mack, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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Freedom of the press died in Venezuela on May 27, 2007, when self-declared communist President Hugo Chavez shut down Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), one of the oldest and largest networks in the country and one of the last remaining independent stations in Venezuela.

But, thanks to the swift action by the U.S. House of Representatives, the Venezuelan people may yet still have access to independent, objective news and information.

Signaling Congress' mounting concern with Mr. Chavez's continued efforts to control every aspect of Venezuela's print and broadcast media and his determination to dominate the thoughts and actions of the Venezuelan people, the House of Representatives on June 21, 2007, passed an amendment to the fiscal 2008 Foreign Operations Appropriations bill that will redirect \$10 million of the Broadcasting Board of Governors' budget to Voice of America for programming in Venezuela. Voice of America will now have an even greater ability to increase their broadcasts to Venezuela and provide Venezuelans with an alternative to Mr. Chavez's state-controlled propaganda machine.

In response to the passage of this amendment, Mr. Chavez reacted in panicked fashion. Mr. Chavez's Communication and Information Minister Willian Lara lashed out at Congress, calling its action an "an increase in the media war that Bush has untied against the Venezuelan Revolution." The next day, Hugo Chavez himself spoke before hundreds of military soldiers and proclaimed, among other things, that Washington was trying to "weaken and divide Venezuelan society through media warfare." Sympathetic ultra left-wing bloggers and others also protested this modest effort to help support the hope, opportunity and freedom to which the Venezuelan people so desperately cling.

The hysteria exhibited by the Venezuelan government shows the world that the single greatest threat to Hugo Chavez's continued iron-fisted control is a free and independent media. Yet this reaction should surprise no one, as this is merely the latest development in what has become a dark and sordid chapter of the systematic elimination of free speech that has become one of the cornerstones of Mr. Chavez's regime. Mr. Chavez said recently, "I am going to go after those who resist the revolution and eliminate them one by one."

And he has done just that. When Mr. Chavez came to power in 1999, he began planting the seeds to snuff out a free press by installing lawmakers sympathetic to his socialist Bolivarian Revolution. In 2004, for example, the Venezuelan National Assembly passed the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television. This law establishes ambiguous guidelines regulating broadcasting content. It further requires the stations to transmit the government's educational, informative, or public safety broadcasts for up to 60 minutes a week. Finally, the law requires stations to transmit in full Mr. Chavez's speeches and other political messages, some of which last up to five hours.

In today's Venezuela, independent journalists are sometimes arrested and frequently fined and harassed in an effort to intimidate those who speak against the Chavez regime.

Mr. Chavez's government has bullied the remaining independent media into self-censorship, and does not want the press to reveal the inefficiencies of his government. He has gone to great lengths to bar journalists of privately owned, independent media from covering government hearings, and he now requires stations to use government producers for documentaries and programs.

Mr. Chavez's reaction to the action of the U.S. House of Representatives proves that as the window closes on independent media in Venezuela, programs and initiatives like Voice of America will play a critical role broadcasting the truth about what is happening in the country. In addition, Voice of America serves as a significant counter to Chavez propaganda's export to countries at risk of following in his socialist footsteps, such as Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador.

The window on freedom in Venezuela is closing fast. The Venezuelan people are today just a heartbeat away from living under a complete and total dictatorship.

We must help the Venezuelan people shed the shackles of Mr. Chavez's communist regime and replace his tyranny with the foundations for freedom.

The media - free from government influence - is crucial to this process. It will help educate the population, reflect public opinion, and keep government officials honest. The free flow of information is essential to a flourishing democracy.

America has always been the beacon of freedom in our hemisphere. Now we must do all we can to be the pillar of hope for the people of Venezuela and our friends and neighbors in Latin America who fear Hugo Chavez and his communist revolution.

Connie Mack, Florida Republican, is a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and sponsored the amendment to the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill that redirected \$10 million for Voice of America to broadcast to Venezuela. Blanquita Cullum is a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors.