

October 7, 2008

Editorial

## **Playing Into Mr. Morales's Hands**

We understand why the Bush administration and Congress are fed up with Bolivia's president, Evo Morales. Bolivia has become markedly less cooperative with American counternarcotics efforts, as evidenced by a large increase in coca cultivation. And Mr. Morales regularly stokes anti-Yankee sentiment to undercut his opposition and divert attention from his government's poor performance. Last month, Mr. Morales expelled the American ambassador, Philip Goldberg.

Congress was so annoyed that when it voted to extend Andean trade preferences last week, it limited tariff-free benefits for Bolivia and Ecuador (which is expelling the American military from the airbase in the coastal city of Manta) to six months, with the possibility of a six-month extension. The White House, meanwhile, is proposing to suspend Bolivia's trade benefits altogether. That is self-defeating. It would undermine the anti-drug strategy — which seeks to wean poor farmers from the coca trade by opening the American market to other products — and play right into Mr. Morales's hands.

Mr. Morales doesn't tire of saying Bolivia will neither "retreat nor submit" to Washington's will, and he has been talking up relations with Iran and Venezuela. After Bolivia was classified as uncooperative with American anti-drug efforts last month, the government in La Paz said it would seek help — and military helicopters — from Russia instead. Last week, it rejected an American request to fly an anti-drug plane over Bolivian territory.

Generally, it's a bad idea to tie foreign aid programs that are in the American interest to the behavior of foreign governments. "Decertifying" unhelpful countries in the drug wars always seemed particularly wrongheaded, a surefire way to anger allies and undermine support for Washington's objectives in Latin America.

The Bush administration seemed to understand this logic. When it blacklisted Bolivia last month, it also waived potential sanctions against the country. Unfortunately, the justified anger at the expulsion of Mr. Goldberg seems to be clouding that judgment. The administration should reconsider.