

The problem with Chavez

Was Linda Chavez a victim of corrupt politics, or was she just corrupt herself?

Following a trouble-ridden presidential administration, the actions of Linda Chavez, President-elect Bush's initial nominee for labor secretary, helped prepare Americans for the next round. Chavez, a prominent activist in Washington politics, disregarded her factual violations of U.S. immigration laws 10 years ago during her interview process with Bush's transition team.



J.J. TREVINO

Her apparent act of compassion, harboring illegal Guatemalan immigrant Martha Mercado, included providing Mercado with free room and board and so-called "monetary allowances." Chavez's actions undermined her qualifications to lead the Department of Labor; therefore, her withdrawal from Bush's nomination was the only correct decision. Trusting such a person to represent the working people of America and enforce U.S. immigration laws would be an insult to the hard-working, tax-paying individuals whom she would be representing for the next four years.

By concealing information from the public eye, Chavez destroyed her credibility and trustworthiness. Bush advisers noted that information about Mercado was never disclosed while they conducted their many interviews with Chavez. In fact, according to The Wall Street Journal, Chavez worried about her fate, calling a neighbor who had employed Mercado at one point to discuss a possible FBI investigation. She even asked if the neighbor planned to speak with the media in the event Chavez were named to Bush's Cabinet.

Chavez obviously went to great lengths to keep the story from surfacing. Once the story broke, Chavez called

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her violations of the law assisting someone in need, which is exactly the excuse labor unions hear when employers are found employing illegal aliens. The laws Chavez broke are the very laws that the labor secretary is supposed to enforce.

Ironically, Chavez found herself in the center of yet another issue. She publicly opposed one of President Clinton's Cabinet nominees in 1993 for essentially the same reason that others opposed her nomination. Zoe Baird, Clinton's 1993 nominee for attorney general, employed two illegal immigrants and failed to pay Social Security taxes on their wages. Now, eight years later, and faced with an identical scenario, Chavez said that Baird was treated unfairly.

Only when high-ranking officials across the nation caught wind of the allegations did Chavez reluctantly decide to withdraw her nomination. Some say Chavez should be commended for withdrawing. However, her withdrawal was not the act of a martyr, but simply an act of responsibility.

She said her future with the Bush administration looked grim as long as the politics in Washington focused on "search and destroy" tactics. Chavez must have forgotten that a background check is standard procedure for Cabinet nominees. She does say she made a grave mistake by not disclosing this information when she first had the opportunity.

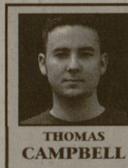
Regardless of her apology, the nation cannot trust the highest-ranking labor official to protect workers in America if she cannot abide by the rules herself. Chavez's actions, while compassionate, are not appropriate behavior for secretary of labor.

J.J. Trevino is a senior journalism major.



RUBEN DELUNA/THE BATTALION

A trusted friend showed up at Linda Chavez's doorstep with a young woman, a homeless victim of domestic abuse who was hungry and lacking basic language skills. Chavez did not ask for Marta Mercado's citizenship papers before inviting her into her home and taking care of the battered, homeless woman — an act of compassionate conservatism Chavez thinks exemplifies the necessary character for President-elect Bush's Cabinet. Bush is looking for people in his Cabinet who are not only qualified, but represent the same values he believes have not been seen in the executive branch in the past eight years. In this light, Chavez's withdrawal from the secretary of labor nomination was a mistake; she is a victim of the politics of personal destruction.



THOMAS CAMPBELL

As soon as Chavez was announced as Bush's secretary of labor nominee, the outspoken conservative pundit was attacked by liberals, to the pleasure of organized labor lobbyists.

Chavez's opposition to affirmative action and raising the minimum wage angered many union members. Like attorney general nominee John Ashcroft, Chavez has been the victim of "an organized effort to derail nominations," said Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.).

The same unrelenting attacks have not been made against Environmental Protection Agency head nominee Christie Todd Whitman, the current Republican governor of New Jersey, who admitted seven years ago she unlawfully employed two illegal immigrants without paying the proper taxes.

One can only assume that, because of Whitman's liberal ideology and support for ideas like abortion rights, gay rights and gun control, she is immune to attacks from the liberal elements of society.

Chavez, with experience as a columnist for USA Today, a delegate to the United Nations sub-committee on human rights, and the Civil Rights administrator under former President Reagan, has also served as a political analyst.

Zoe Baird, the former attorney general designee of President Clinton in 1993, stepped down amid similar accusations that she illegally hired and paid two illegal immigrants. When asked about what America thought about the Baird affair, Chavez stated, "I think most of the American people were upset during the Zoe Baird nomination that she hired an illegal alien. That was what upset them more than the fact that she did not pay Social Security taxes. I do believe that Zoe Baird was treated unfairly."

Chavez did not lead the charge against Baird, but merely answered a question about why she thought Americans were upset with Baird.

Chavez's history of compassionate conservatism would not compromise her ability to be labor secretary. Helping a homeless woman get back on her feet should not call one's ethics into question. If anything, it demonstrates a strong sense of morality, compassion and a belief in making America a better society.

Because of the drawn out election, the nomination process for the nearly 1,000 open executive positions had to be shortened by five weeks, thereby preventing a detailed examination into each nominee's background. The nominees should have been as open as possible about their pasts to expedite the nomination process and prevent disasters like this. Chavez should have been more forthcoming with the Bush team, and she admits as much.

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Because Chavez was not open with the Bush team, the team was unable to soften the impact of the revelation that Chavez harbored an illegal alien. Chavez refutes allegations that she tried to silence her neighbors about Mercado by stating, "That's false. I was trying to refresh my memory."

The Bush team did not have the time to defend someone who was not forthcoming with all possibly damaging personal actions.

Chavez was attacked for her staunch conservatism, not for her past association with Mercado. The Mercado incident was an excuse for political opponents to force Chavez out of a position for which she is well qualified.

The assertion that Chavez was instrumental in defeating Clinton's appointment of Baird is an unscrupulous attempt to make Chavez look hypocritical.

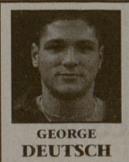
The fact that Chavez has been defeated, while liberal Gov. Todd Whitman remains unscathed, shows a clear double standard. Chavez helped an abused, homeless woman get on her feet, and because of her compassion, Chavez has become a victim of the politics of personal destruction.

Thomas Campbell is a junior agricultural journalism major.

Prison Blues

Texas prison system needs major overhaul; recent prison break shows current incompetence

The escape of seven armed inmates from Texas' Connally Prison Unit on Dec. 13 has top officials from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice searching for answers and somewhere to point the blame. The daylight prison break led to the death of Irving police officer Aubrey Hawkins, who was gunned down as he attempted to stop the robbery of an Oshman's Sporting Goods store. In a serious incident review, Gary Johnson, director of the state prison system's Institutional Division, cited human error and procedural noncompliance of three guards as the key reasons for the escape.



GEORGE DEUTSCH

While Texas Criminal Justice Department officials are quick to identify inept guards as the cause of the escape, they are hesitant to admit that departmental policy needs to be re-evaluated. To blame an elaborate prison escape, in which 16 prison workers and inmates were subdued, and 16 firearms were stolen, on a certain few corrections officers is laughable at best. There is a larger problem to contend than a few

prison guards, and the prison administration's knowledge of these unsupervised conditions is at the heart of this problem.

"This report is ludicrous. It's a joke," Jayne Hawkins, mother of the late Aubrey Hawkins, is quoted as saying in The New York Times. "You're using words like 'blame' and 'fault' when you should be talking about responsibility and accountability."

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice was aware the Connally Unit may have presented an ideal environment for an escape, according to Randy Albert, a corrections officer subdued during the escape.

Albert told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, "If you have people working for you, and they're not doing their job, and you just keep letting it happen, you're just as much at fault as those people working for you."

Various prison employees, speculated that it was only a matter of time before something like this happened. The Connally Unit is not the only Texas prison that lacks skilled staff; the growing complacency of underpaid, overworked corrections officers forced to work in understaffed prisons has led to loose security in prisons across Texas. This carefree atmos-

phere enabled seven convicted felons to overtake a maintenance warehouse and office, subdue and gag several guards, and impersonate prison personnel before escaping in an unattended Texas Department of Criminal Justice truck.

This poor pay has led to understaffed

Texas Prisons

- 160,000 inmates in 116 prisons
- Texas ranks 43rd in prison employee pay.
- Salaries begin at \$18,000 annually and do not exceed \$28,000

prisons throughout the state, and according to statistics, at least one in five Texas corrections officers quit last year.

Union officials also report that the Connally Unit was 22 officers short of staff requirements at the time of the escape. Other reports claim the unit to be as many as 80 officers short.

In addition to operating with skeleton crews, Texas prisons are becoming home to increasingly violent and hardened criminals who have nothing to lose. The number of prisoner attacks on guards in Texas was

2,267 in 2000, a dramatic increase from previous years.

The Texas prison system's only response to its weakening situation has been more prisons. The billions of dollars spent on building prisons corresponded with a tripling of the state's inmate population over the past decade.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice must take responsibility for the worsening condition of the state's prisons before an incident of this magnitude occurs again. Steps must be taken to ensure officers receive the best training available and are prepared to deal with escape and hostage situations. Pay should be increased in an effort to bolster employee self-esteem. Guards must be held responsible for even the smallest of procedural breaches, and problems must be isolated and eliminated before they get worse.

Electronic monitoring, which has proven to be effective elsewhere, may also become widespread as prison officials try to cope with the increasing inmate population.

The system should re-evaluate how prisoner security-risk classification is handled and must better enforce the use of

identification, within prison walls and along its perimeter. Above all, prisoners should never remain unattended or loosely supervised. Given the opportunity to escape, a person in prison will not turn it down.

A Texas prison system overhaul may be closer now than ever, but until such an overhaul is implemented, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice must learn the hard way the problem with prisoners: if you ignore them, they will go away.

George Deutsch is a sophomore journalism major.

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