

August 23, 2007

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Great Clock Plot

By GAIL COLLINS

This week, The Times reported that President Hugo Chávez is planning to move Venezuela's clocks ahead by half an hour. The story created one of those wonderful moments of newspaper community, as readers around the nation suddenly shared an identical thought:

Say what?

Chávez unveiled his plans on his regular Sunday television show, in what several other news reports referred to as a "rambling" address. Reaction was swift, with many people recalling the scene in Woody Allen's "Bananas" when a revolutionary hero becomes president of a Latin American country and announces that from now on, "underwear will be worn on the outside."

The other popular comment was that Americans are in no position to make fun of countries whose leaders make incoherent speeches.

Chávez has always been strong on the grand leftist gesture. (Remember the day that he called George W. Bush "the devil" at the United Nations?) But it's hard to quite grasp the populist appeal of having to use a calculator to figure out when the next plane arrives from Bogotá.

In his speech, Chávez connected the time change to his plan to reduce the Venezuelan work day in 2008. His administration believes that:

1) Cutting everyone's work day to six hours will increase national productivity; and 2) That if you change 7 a.m. to 6:30, it will create a "metabolic effect, where the human brain is conditioned by sunlight."

Now I know all this sounds extremely silly, but in the name of fairness, remember that:

1) You live in a country where the administration believes that cutting taxes for the heirs to billion-dollar estates will lead to increased prosperity for unemployed steel workers.

2) Every year, most Americans spring forward and fall back so that the Sun God will send extra rays to we who honor him with the ceremony of the changing of the clocks.

3) So far, Hugo Chávez hasn't invaded anybody.

Inquiring minds still want to know about that half-hour. The Venezuelan science minister says the government wants to return the country to the system it used before 1965.

When it was changed. For convenience.

Perhaps President Chávez just isn't a clock-watching kind of guy. His weekly TV program is six hours of him talking, which is an extremely long time to ramble on unless you're Fidel Castro or an American sports commentator.

But what if there's a trend under way here? The list of countries who use the half-hour system does not inspire much confidence. There's Burma. And Afghanistan. And then there's Nepal. When the countries around it are at 3 p.m., Nepal believes it to be 3:45. This may have something to do with the altitude.

Newfoundland is on the half-hour system, defying the rest of Canada to do anything about it. The reason, as Premier Danny Williams once explained, is that Newfoundlanders "like to be different." Their country is mainly about cod — very important, historically speaking, but not frequently in the headlines these days.

So people there like a little attention. They like having a Newfoundland Time Zone. They like the fact that the national broadcasters always have to say: "Stay tuned for the news on the hour. On the half-hour in Newfoundland."

We may be on to something here. How many countries do you think would feel better about the world if they just got mentioned once in a while? Probably won't work for Afghanistan at this point, but we could try getting the networks to say things like: "News is up next, and let's hope it's a nice day in Surinam."

Sooner or later, somebody in the White House will notice that the one other country whose clocks are running to the tune of a different drummer is Iran. Chávez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are extremely cozy, always pinning medals on one another and sending anti-Bush jokes back and forth. At this very minute, Vice President Dick Cheney is somewhere in his basement, working up a new theory about the Evil Axis of Half Hours.

Let's just not go there. Riordan Roett, the director of the Western Hemisphere studies program at Johns Hopkins University, says that the fact that the president of Venezuela announces something does not necessarily mean it's a done deal. "See if Chávez repeats it," he advised. "If it's just a one-time thing, the rational people who are still in the government will just ignore it."

If only we had a similar system in the United States, imagine all the things we might have avoided over the last six years.

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