

**Antagonism and Intervention:
Hugo Chavez and American Foreign Policy**
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Last night, led by every sector of civil society, the Venezuelan people rose up to defend democracy in their country.

—George Folsom, president of the US-backed International Republican Institute, responding to the unconstitutional 2002 military coup in Venezuela.

Venezuela has long been of large strategic and political importance to the United States. From oil interests to the Cold War, Venezuela's position, politics and natural resources have made it critical to United States interests in Latin America and the world as a whole. For many years, the relationship between America and Venezuela was, while not always perfect, in most ways a positive one. That traditionally close relationship, begun in the early 1800s, has been maintained for most of the intervening 200 years. The rise of Hugo Chavez in 1998, however, threw a large wrench into the machinery of US-Venezuelan relations. Chavez' politics, attitude and rhetoric led the United States to change its strategy in Venezuela, from acceptance to belligerence and subversion.

Hugo Chavez is really a new type of leader. He is a military populist and a leftist nationalist. He is a former coup-leader who now espouses the virtues of direct democracy. While Chavez has frequently been cast in the mold of former Latin American revolutionaries, his unique politics combined with his practicality make him a truly novel figure in Latin American politics. Chavez appeals frequently to the importance of the military, but in the context of working within a civilian society. He is not a traditionally socialist figure, but he is far from right-wing. Essentially, the one thing that one can say about Chavez is that he is pragmatic. He accepts those policies which work, and rejects

the others. This leaves him with a unique position in Venezuelan politics, as well as in the world as a whole.

This paper will examine one main issue: what are the reasons for the United States' continual fear of Chavez and its attempts to undermine his government? To answer this, I will examine the rise of Chavez from the beginning, and use the reasons for his ascent to power to analyze the US response to his regime. I will present the evidence for the reasons for Chavez' rise and US opposition, and link them together in the analysis section of this paper. I will also specifically analyze the 2002 coup in more depth, examining the breadth and depth of US involvement in that event. Most materials on Chavez, including the academic literature, tend to take all-or-nothing stances. They are either pro-Chavez, ignoring all his faults, or anti-Chavez, ignoring all the good that he has done. In this paper, I will attempt to take a middle road, taking both the positive and negative aspects of Chavez' rule and coming to an understanding about the future of Venezuela, and the role that the United States has played and should play in the future.

Chavez' rise can be understood from several perspectives. Surprisingly, Chavez' substantive policies, while appealing to many, were likely not the most important reason for his 1998 election and subsequent public support. More important to his success was his personal charisma, appeals to past radical leaders and his support of popular democracy, which can be summed up in his political philosophy, "Chavismo." The success of Chavismo lies mainly in its appeal to the poor and downtrodden of Venezuelan society. Members of the lower classes feel alienated from the mainstream political establishment; the image of the outsider, the crusader for justice, is especially appealing. Of course, Chavez' support does not come only from his charisma and populism. His

substantive policies, especially his redistribution of oil wealth to the lower classes and land reforms, contribute strongly to his continued popularity in Venezuela despite several attempts to remove him from power. Chavismo and politics originally combined to give Hugo Chavez a large electoral victory, and they will likely continue to provide him substantial support in the future.

The United States opposition to Hugo Chavez' regime has both legitimate and illegitimate rationales. The legitimate objections that Washington has to Chavez draw largely from his base of support. Chavismo is, in fact, a somewhat dangerous political philosophy. It is an ideology that can lead to blind support for a leader despite his faults. Thus, America may have the concern that Chavez may be difficult to remove by democratic means, even if his regime becomes autocratic (which some argue it already has). However, it is unlikely that all of America's concern with Chavez draws from worries about his power base. There are far, far more autocratic or potentially autocratic regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, with which Washington has a close relationship. More likely, the controlling rationale for United States opposition comes from a combination of fear of Chavez personally and concern about Venezuela's immense oil power. On a personal level, Chavez has close ties with Castro, and frequently includes anti-American rhetoric in his speeches. This belligerence is likely concerning to America, especially given that many US officials in charge of Latin American affairs are veterans of past American efforts to remove Castro and other Latin American socialist leaders. In addition, of course, Venezuela has massive power in its oil reserves. Chavez, unlike past Venezuelan leaders, has allied with OPEC in order to drive up oil prices to fund his domestic programs, and this has likely alienated the United States even further. It is

likely a combination of these reasons that lead to American opposition to Chavez' regime, and may have even provided US officials with internal justification for tacit support of the 2002 coup attempt.

Brief Historical Background

To understand Chavez' rise to power and the US response, it is necessary to understand a few important facets of Venezuelan politics pre-Chavez. Venezuelan politics have, as a whole, been more or less democratic, at least in name, for approximately the past 50 years. Following a period of dictatorship which was in fact overthrown by the Venezuelan military, Venezuela's two major parties signed the 1958 Punto Fijo pact. These parties, the moderate-left Accion Democratica (hereinafter AD) and the moderate-right Partido Social Cristiano de Venezuela (COPEI), agreed in the pact to essentially alternate power no matter who won the national elections.¹ This agreement eventually evolved into what was basically a one-party system, with each party sharing the country's oil wealth with the well-off few and largely ignoring the needs of the many.² This status quo was maintained, largely without opposition, until the 1989 administration of Carlos Andres Perez.³

Until 1989, Venezuela had a largely nationalized economy. The state-controlled oil company, PDVSA, was the main source of income for the country. Facing an economy heavily damaged by greed and corruption, Perez attempted to reorganize Venezuela's economy according to the neo-liberal Washington Consensus.⁴ This

¹ Ronald D. Sylvia and Constantine P. Danopoulos, "The Chavez phenomenon: political change in Venezuela," *Third World Quarterly* 24 (2003): 64-65.

² *Ibid.*, 65.

³ There were of course important events in this period, but for the sake of space, I will have to gloss over that history.

⁴ Richard Gott, *In The Shadow of the Liberator* (New York: Verso, 2000), 51-53. The Washington Consensus was essentially a group of economic policies espoused by the IMF and World Bank which

reorganization did not, however, lead to an immediate increase in wealth. Instead, it caused oil prices within Venezuela to rise, which, among other factors, led to a revolt in Caracas called the Caracazo.⁵

The Caracazo was violently put down by the Venezuelan military, including Colonel Hugo Chavez. Hundreds, possibly thousands, were killed.⁶ This violence left a mark on Chavez, who had already been planning with his allies within the military an overthrow of the government. Chavez and his allies were a group of leftist military officers who wanted to overthrow the corrupt political system that had been in place in Venezuela since 1958.⁷ They got their chance in 1992, when Chavez led his Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement in a coup attempt. The attempt was quickly foiled, and Chavez and other coup plotters were imprisoned. But before the coup ended, Chavez obtained national television time, which both raised his public image and allowed him to foreshadow his future political ambitions: Chavez conceded defeat only “por ahora,” for the moment.⁸

Chavez in Venezuela

In 1998, Hugo Chavez won Venezuela’s presidential election with 56% of the vote.⁹ His victory began a new chapter in Venezuelan history, and in Latin American politics. Chavez’ democratic revolution eventually led to a new constitution, a new

called for an almost entirely open economy with few trade restrictions. This program of deregulation and privatization is also referred to as neo-liberalism.

⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁷ Sylvia and Danopoulos, 65.

⁸ Gott, 70-71.

⁹ Jennifer L. McCoy, “Demystifying Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez,” *Current History* 99 (2000): 66, <http://proquest.umi.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>. Chavez’ next closest challenger had 40%.

Venezuelan republic¹⁰, and even a new name for the country. But what led to this rise, and what explains Chavez' continued popularity?

In the immediate sense, Chavez' electoral victory can largely be explained by his political maneuverings and coalitions with other minor parties. It was clear by the 1998 elections that candidates from the two major parties, AD and COPEI, were very unlikely to win. The Venezuelan people were simply unwilling to accept the greed and corruption that had come to characterize the major parties. Chavez understood this, and he obtained the endorsements of many of Venezuela's minor leftist parties.¹¹ However, many of these parties abandoned the coalition in the following years. While Chavez' alliances prior to the 1998 election may partially explain his election, they do little to explain his continued popularity.

To understand Chavez' popularity, we must understand his political philosophy and strategy, Chavismo. Chavismo is essentially a form of populism that combines Chavez' personal charisma, popular democracy and "Manichaeian discourse," pitting the lower classes of Venezuela against its upper-class elites.¹² Clearly, charisma is not something easily measurable or provable, but Hawkins' analysis of various biographies of Chavez lead one to conclude that charisma is an integral part of Hugo Chavez' personality.¹³ Almost as important as Chavez' charisma is his rhetoric of "us against them" in speaking of the elites. Chavez is the first black president of Venezuela

¹⁰ Chavez gave his new constitution and government the name "The Fifth Republic." Venezuela had had four republics before that point, and the fourth republic had lasted about 170 years.

¹¹ Sylvia and Danopoulos, 67.

¹² Kirk Hawkins, "Populism in Venezuela: The Rise of Chavismo," *Third World Quarterly* 24 (2003): 1153-1157.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1146.

(Venezuela is about 40% black, most of them poor).¹⁴ This gives him a unique position from which to attack the elites of Venezuelan society, leading to a fierce loyalty from many in the lower classes. Chavez exploits this loyalty through his use of popular democracy, through referendums and frequent elections. When Chavez wants to decide a major issue, such as the new constitution, he frequently prefers to take it directly to the people of Venezuela rather than going through the National Assembly. Chavez describes himself as a “Rousseauian democrat,” i.e. an advocate of direct democracy rather than Jeffersonian representative democracy.¹⁵ Of course, these approaches have both positive and negative aspects. Direct democracy certainly can be more representative of the will of the people than representative democracy, but it can also lead to a tyranny of the majority, which is especially a concern given the loyalty that Chavez induces. Thus, United States concern in this area is somewhat warranted, given Chavismo’s potential to undermine the rights of minorities within Venezuela. But while Chavismo is clearly an important source of support for Chavez, much of his support also comes from his substantive policies.

The centerpiece of both domestic and foreign policy for Venezuela is oil. Oil is Venezuela’s most valuable natural resource, and it pays for much of its government. Chavez seized on oil as an important opportunity to gain funding for his social programs. Venezuela had long been a member of OPEC, but during the 1990s it had not abided by the cartel’s quotas, frequently overproducing in order to cooperate with the Washington Consensus and please the United States and other western powers. Once Chavez came to

¹⁴ Alan Cisco, “Venezuela the Next Haiti?” *New African*, July 2004: 63, <http://weblinks2.epnet.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

¹⁵ Howard Wiarda, “Venezuela Alert: Understanding Chavez,” *Hemisphere Focus: 2001-2002*, 18 September 2001, <http://www.ciaonet.org.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

power, he reversed this policy, and led OPEC to decrease its production limits. This policy succeeded, both in increasing oil revenues for Venezuela and in alienating the United States.¹⁶ Chavez' oil policies bring both money and power to Venezuela, further appealing to his constituents.

In foreign policy, Chavez brings tough rhetoric and policies likely to alienate the United States and other western powers, but that appeal to his nationalistic base. He frequently speaks against the United States, particularly in the context of Venezuelan nationalism. It is no secret that Chavez is personally close to Fidel Castro, and he sells oil to Cuba at reduced prices. Cuba is also influential in Venezuelan politics.¹⁷ His support for the FARC in Colombia is unproven, but widely suspected.¹⁸ As a whole, Chavez seems to be interested in undermining what he sees as United States imperialism in Latin America¹⁹, and as such he finds himself in opposition to most American programs, and allied with most of America's foes in the area. The other main facet of Chavez' foreign policy, that of spreading his political philosophy around Latin America, is closely linked to his opposition to perceived American imperialism. Chavez hopes to provide an alternative to neo-liberalism, and in doing so create a new form of government for all of Central and South America.²⁰

Case Study: The 2002 Coup

Internal and external opposition to Chavez' regime came to a head on April 11, 2002. On that day, a large anti-Chavez march met a pro-Chavez march in the streets of

¹⁶ Gott, 168-170.

¹⁷ Moses Naim, "A Venezuelan Paradox," *Foreign Policy* 135 (2003): 96-97, <http://proquest.umi.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

¹⁸ Sylvia and Danopoulos, 71.

¹⁹ Chavez' idea of imperialism mostly derives from US-backed neo-liberal economic policies, which impose large restrictions on the freedom of action of nations that receive loans from the IMF and World Bank.

²⁰ Sylvia and Danopoulos, 71.

Caracas. It is unclear what happened next, but shots were fired between the sides and several people, including some anti-Chavez marchers, were killed. The opposition groups seized on this moment, accusing the pro-Chavez protesters of instigating the violence. While that story was believed by many at first, and propagated heavily in the largely anti-Chavez media²¹, it is far from clear from film from the scene who shot first and why.²² Despite the lack of clarity about the specific reasons for the shootings, they proved to be the immediate event that allowed the coup plotters to set their plan into motion.

Soon after the shootings, Venezuela's military seized control of the presidential palace, captured Hugo Chavez and installed Pedro Carmona, the head of Venezuela's largest business group, as the new president of Venezuela. Carmona quickly appointed a new cabinet, and proceeded the next day to dissolve the National Assembly and the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, public unrest grew. Over 100,000 people gathered at the presidential palace to demand the return of Hugo Chavez to power.²³ Elements of the army began to break with the new regime, and on April 14, two days after Carmona's coup began, he resigned the presidency and Chavez was returned to power. After Chavez' return, questions immediately began to be asked about the reasons for the coup and its possible backers. The United States was frequently proposed as a possible coup supporter, with theories ranging from tacit acceptance to direct orders. What was the real role of the US in the 2002 coup in Venezuela?

²¹ Naomi Klein, "The Media Against Democracy," *Guardian*, 18 February 2003, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>. The private media in Venezuela is owned largely by a few wealthy families, most of whom work with opposition groups. They frequently air anti-Chavez propaganda and ignore pro-Chavez news (including ignoring for several hours the news that Chavez had been reinstated as president).

²² *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, dir. Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Briain, 2003. A Human Rights Watch report concluded that "both sides bear responsibility for the shootings."

²³ *Ibid.*; Gregory Wilpert, "Coup and Countercoup," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35 (2002): 2-5, <http://weblinks3.epnet.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

To begin, there is essentially no evidence to suggest that the United States directly ordered the coup. However, there is significant evidence to show a pattern of tacit encouragement which may have led the coup plotters to believe that they had the support of the United States.²⁴ The first suggestions that the United States was not unhappy with the events in Venezuela come from public statements soon after Carmona seized power. Unlike most other Western Hemisphere countries, who strongly condemned the coup attempt immediately after it began²⁵, Washington gave ambiguous public messages at first.²⁶ At a press conference on February 12, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer stated that “the Chavez government provoked [the coup]” and that “the Venezuelan people expressed their right to peaceful protest.”²⁷ It was only two days later that the White House unequivocally condemned the coup.

In addition, it is a matter of record that the United States provided significant funding to Venezuelan opposition groups, many of whom were involved in the coup. Most of the funding came from the National Endowment for Democracy, in particular its subgroup, the International Republican Institute. This group, established by Congress, was “designed to run a parallel foreign policy for the United States, backing and assisting entities that Washington might not be able to officially endorse—say, an opposition party challenging a government with which the United States maintained diplomatic

²⁴ Steve Ellner and Fred Rosen, “The remarkable fall and rise of Hugo Chavez,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 36 (2002): 5, <http://weblinks3.epnet.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>. This and all subsequent citations of this article will use web database pagination.

²⁵ Including countries such as Mexico and Peru, which have a less than friendly relationship with Venezuela.

²⁶ Fred Rosen, “Venezuela: Washington Suffers a Setback,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35 (2002): 7, <http://weblinks3.epnet.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>. This and all subsequent citations of this article will use web database pagination.

²⁷ *White House Press Briefing* [Web site] (2002); available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020412-1.html>; Internet; accessed 7 December 2004.

relations.”²⁸ For years, the NED had been giving funding to Venezuela’s various opposition groups. These groups include COPEI, one of Venezuela’s former majority parties, and Primero Justicia, a new political party. Both of those parties were given positions on Carmona’s new government. In addition, CTV, the country’s largest labor union and another recipient of NED funds, was long suspected to have a role in the coup, though they denounced it following Carmona’s dissolving of the National Assembly.²⁹ Indeed, the head of the IRI, George Folsom, issued a statement the night of the coup stating that “last night, led by every sector of civil society, the Venezuelan people rose up to defend democracy in their country.”³⁰ This material support likely led the coup leaders to believe that they had US support, however passive.

In addition to material support, there were many meetings and personal contacts between American officials and Venezuelan opposition leaders. In the months leading up to the coup, there were several meetings between opposition leaders, including some of the generals who led the military wing of the coup, and senior White House officials.³¹ Many of the coup plotters were even received at the White House.³² These meetings continued throughout the period leading up to the coup, and even while it was going on. Pedro Carmona was contacted by the US Ambassador to Venezuela, Charles Shapiro, immediately following his seizure of power.³³ Though the US Embassy claims that the meeting was only to encourage Carmona to reinstate the National Assembly, a

²⁸ David Corn, “Our Gang in Venezuela?” *Nation* 275 no. 5 (2002): 1-2. <http://web2.epnet.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>. This and all subsequent citations of this article will use web database pagination.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ Sohan Sharma, Sue Tracy and Surinder Kumar, “Venezuela—Ripe For US Intervention?” *Race and Class* 45 (2004): 67.

³² Ed Vulliamy, “Venezuela coup linked to Bush team,” *Guardian*, 21 April 2002, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

³³ Duncan Campbell, “The Coup,” *Guardian*, 22 April 2002, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

Venezuelan congressman, Roger Rondon, claims that “[Shapiro’s] satisfaction was obvious” as he left the presidential palace.³⁴ Chavez himself claims that he has “written proof” that two US military officers met with the coup plotters at their headquarters.³⁵ While none of this provides hard evidence that American officials encouraged the coup attempt, the frequency of the meetings, including after Carmona seized power, suggest at least a positive relationship between opposition leaders and American officials.

Indeed, one of the main American officials to meet with Venezuelan coup leaders before February 11 is linked to past American military intervention in Latin America. Otto Reich, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere affairs, met frequently with Venezuelan officials, and also is largely responsible for American diplomatic policy towards Venezuela. Reich is a Cuban-American with a personal vendetta against Fidel Castro, and was heavily involved in the Iran-Contra scandals.³⁶ Though it is unsubstantiated, officials in the Organization of American States claim that Reich discussed details of the coup attempt in his meetings with Carmona.³⁷ Reich’s counterpart in the Pentagon, Rogelio Pardo-Maurer, was an aide to the head of the Contras in Nicaragua.³⁸ In the White House, Elliot Abrams of the National Security Council is partially responsible for policy towards Venezuela. Abrams was also involved in Iran-Contra, and was also responsible for the philosophy that led to US support for the 1973 coup in Chile that led to the rise of the dictator Augusto Pinochet. Abrams was in

³⁴ Duncan Campbell, “American navy ‘helped Venezuelan coup,’” *Guardian*, 29 April 2002, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

³⁵ Greg Palast, “Venezuela President Hugo Chavez: Interview,” *BBC Newsnight*, 2 May 2002 [transcript online]; available from <http://gregpalast.com/printerfriendly.cfm?artid=184>; Internet; accessed 7 December 2004.

³⁶ Duncan Campbell, “Bush’s Bay of Piglets,” *Guardian*, 24 April 2002, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

³⁷ Vulliamy, “Venezuela coup linked to Bush team.”

³⁸ Campbell, “Bush’s Bay of Piglets.”

fact convicted for withholding information from Congress about the coup, but was pardoned by the first President Bush.³⁹ With all these men with dirty pasts in Latin America involved in current American policy, it is no surprise that the coup plotters likely felt that there was US support for their actions.

In the end, it is impossible to know what was said at the meetings between American officials and Venezuelan coup plotters. Thus, we cannot know how much support the US was giving, at least verbally, to the coup attempt. All that we can do in this situation is attempt to infer the thinking of Carmona and his followers. From that perspective, it seems clear that the coup plotters could easily have felt that the United States would support their illegal seizure of power. Indeed, from its first public indications, the White House seemed to condone the coup and even try to frame it as a legal transition of power. This twisting of the truth, combined with the significant material and verbal support given to the coup plotters, suggests that America was, at the very least, not displeased by Carmona's new government.

Analysis: Why Opposition?

The question now, of course, is why the United States would support an illegal coup in Venezuela. US actions in this case smack of a renewed Monroe Doctrine, which was also applied in the 1970s and 80s to justify illegal American interventions in the affairs of Latin America. Combined with President Bush's Manichaeic view of world politics, this theory seems to hold some weight. Bush appears to view the world in terms of "friends" and "enemies," especially evidenced by his statement immediately following September 11th that countries were either "with us or against us." Chavez would likely be considered an enemy in this worldview. His opposition to most facets of American

³⁹ Vulliamy, "Venezuela coup linked to Bush team."

foreign policy, including the war in Afghanistan, does not endear him to American leaders. Chavez' harsh rhetoric against the United States, though it is largely directed against neo-liberalism, is, to say the least, alienating. Chavez also seeks to spread his "Bolivarian Revolution" throughout South America, and though the US does not appear particularly concerned with this spread⁴⁰, it must at least be slightly concerned that much of Latin America would be antagonistic to American interests if Chavez succeeds. The appointment of the above-mentioned officials also leads to the belief that Bush's White House is personally quite concerned with Chavez. But it is not only Chavez' personality and rhetoric that encourage US opposition to Chavez' regime.

A more substantive, policy-based reason for American opposition is oil. Chavez controls one of the most important oil reserves in the world, and what he does with that oil is of great concern to the United States, especially given America's goal of reducing reliance on oil from the Middle East. America's relationship with Venezuela had in the past been very good, and American officials had begun to rely on Venezuela as an easy source of oil. When Chavez came to power, he changed Venezuelan oil policy to benefit its domestic population, largely at the expense of the United States. Chavez' use of OPEC to manipulate oil prices led to a rise in revenue for Venezuela, but was damaging to American interests. In addition, his sale of oil to Cuba at reduced prices is at least nominally concerning to America. This leads to one conclusion: America would be much more pleased with Venezuelan oil in friendly hands. With oil so important to American interests, both domestic and foreign, it would not be surprising for American policy towards Venezuela to be significantly based on Venezuela's oil reserves. Chavez'

⁴⁰ Tim Weiner, "A Coup by Any Other Name," *New York Times*, 14 April 2002, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>.

manipulation of oil prices and his grip on the national oil company likely lead US officials to at least hope for his ouster.

Aside from these reasons, which are essentially selfish and disregard the needs of the Venezuelan people, the American government has at least one legitimate claim against Chavez. Chavez is, in fact, concentrating power with himself and the executive branch of government. Chavismo is also somewhat concerning as a ruling philosophy. Chavez uses his personal charisma and rhetoric to draw fiercely loyal support from the lower classes. Venezuela's downtrodden have waited decades for someone to represent their interests, and a man who even claims to do so, and is at least partially successful, draws very strong support. The worry with this philosophy is that it can lead to a "tyranny of the majority," and make it difficult to remove Chavez from power if he becomes dictatorial (many would argue that this is already so, but this is difficult to justify). Chavez makes great use of direct democracy, which can lead to a more accurate representation of the will of the people, but it also leads to under-representation of minorities. Chavez attempts to use Chavismo both to maintain his power and to assist the poor of Venezuelan society. It has been an effective philosophy so far, leading to increased wealth, and more important, increased hope, for the Venezuelan people. But it is not without its flaws. Chavismo likely concerns the United States, and for good reason: without moderation, it could lead to what could essentially become a dictatorship.

Conclusion

American policy towards Venezuela at this point appears to be that of at least mild intervention in order to remove Hugo Chavez from power. This policy has both justifiable and unjustifiable causes. Chavez is certainly a controversial person, and his oil

policies clearly are not helping the United States. But these are far from legitimate rationales to intervene in the politics of a foreign country. Indeed, intervention for these reasons is exactly the sort of American imperialism that Chavez denounces. The other American rationale for intervention, that of concern for the state of democracy in Venezuela, is legitimate, but it is still far from a justification for active intervention. The United States has friendly relationships with any number of other countries with significantly worse governing problems than Venezuela, suggesting that democracy is likely not the main rationale for intervention. Aside from that, any intervention by the United States would be seen, both by Venezuelans and by the world as a whole, as a sheer power play. Were a Venezuelan opposition party to come to power with support from America, it would have little to no legitimacy. Thus, it seems almost futile for the US to attempt to effect a regime change in Venezuela.

Of course, Hugo Chavez is also the democratically elected leader of a sovereign nation. While his form of popular democracy may seem foreign and dangerous to American officials, it is foolish to think that our form of democracy is the only one. Criticisms of Chavez' form of democracy could hold more weight were his support a slim majority. But in fact, Chavez still draws the support of 58% of the people of Venezuela, according to an August 2004 referendum.⁴¹ In addition, while the presidency has expanded its powers during Chavez' rule, the National Assembly is far from powerless, and that body is made up of significant numbers of both pro- and anti-Chavez politicians.

⁴¹ Mary Beth Sheridan, "Chavez Defeats Recall Attempt," *Washington Post*, 17 August 2004, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/>. Many within the opposition accused the government of fraud after the referendum, but election-watchers, including Jimmy Carter and the Organization of American States, assert that the election results are fair and accurate.

Chavez continues to enjoy large support for a reason. His reforms, while not all as effective as hoped, are far more than any previous administration had attempted in terms of helping the poor. He has succeeded in using oil to better fund social programs, returning idle land to the poor, and is beginning to encourage people to move out of Venezuela's densely-populated cities. While he is of course far from perfect, there is essentially no leader in Venezuela who could do a better job at the current time. The Venezuelan opposition parties are muddled, and seem to agree essentially only on the removal of Chavez. The man who seized power in 2002, Pedro Carmona, essentially imposed a rightist dictatorship for his short reign. Carmona repealed Chavez' land reforms and oil policies, and began to impose a neo-liberal economic policy before his ouster.⁴² While this alienated many of Carmona's more moderate allies, it also demonstrated the incoherence within the Venezuelan opposition. Indeed, even the country's largest labor union, CTV, formed an alliance with the main business group, Fedecameras, in order to attempt to remove Chavez. With this kind of muddled opposition, it is clear that Chavez is, at the current time, the best hope for Venezuela's poor and downtrodden.

Clearly, Venezuelan politics are not in a perfect position. A drastic dichotomy has formed, with most politicians being described as either pro-Chavista or anti-Chavista first, and addressing substantive policies second. Indeed, the literature on Venezuela is just as polarized as Venezuela itself. This seems odd for a man who attempts to take the middle ground economically, synthesizing socialist and capitalist ideas into a coherent policy that has, at the very least, given the poor of Venezuela some hope. But Chavez' rhetoric, which energizes his base, also alienates a large number of people at home and

⁴² Ellner and Rosen, 3.

abroad. At the very least, Venezuela needs a more coherent opposition. That opposition must have coherent policies separate from ousting Chavez, and it must be homegrown, free of American intervention, which would taint any legitimate opposition group.

Venezuela needs an argument about policies and direction, not Chavez the man. As politics stand today, however, Hugo Chavez, with all his faults, appears to be the man most likely to lead Venezuela toward economic and social improvement. And it is, in the end, none of America's business.

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