

U.S. Intervention in Venezuela: A Clear and Present Danger

Strategies and Tactics Used by the U.S. Government to
Undermine Democracy, Sovereignty, and Social
Progress in Venezuela During the Chávez Era –
And What U.S. Citizens Can Do to Stop It

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Relations between the United States and Venezuela are often referred to as hostile, and in fact, Presidents George Bush and Hugo Chávez frequently trade political barbs. But the biggest test of a relationship is in actions, not words. And in the sphere of actions, the difference is marked. While the U.S. government has repeatedly attempted to undermine Venezuelan democracy, the only action taken by the Venezuelan government in the U.S. has been providing low-cost heating fuel to poor Americans.

Starting with its support for the military coup against the country's democratic government in 2002, the Bush administration has attempted to undermine Venezuela's sovereignty through media, intelligence, financial, and political channels. Since Chávez's election, the Bush administration has used destabilization tactics, many of which parallel the documented maneuvers used against progressive governments such as Chile in 1973,¹ including massive financial and other support to develop an oppositional civil society and shape and unify political party opposition; a media campaign against the government designed to undermine democracy and create a sense of instability; and carrying out illegal activities of espionage. Throughout this time period, the U.S. government has also repeatedly attempted to portray the Chávez administration as an undemocratic government; supporting terror; failing to fight illegal drugs; a danger to the region; a human rights violator; and an unstable supplier of oil to the US. Yet none of these allegations are backed by proof, nor do they hold up to scrutiny.

The Bush administration's hostility towards Venezuelan democracy has other causes. These include the importance of right-wing Cuban-Americans in U.S. Presidential and electoral politics, as well as the United States' traditional hostility to independent, nationalist governments of any political leaning in Latin America. The U.S. has pointedly failed to appreciate the vast success of the Chávez government in directing billions of dollars of oil profits to social programs for poor Venezuelans. The fact that the Chávez government has become a leader in Latin America's current move away from the failed neoliberal policies of the last 25 years, and against the further consolidation of these policies in commercial agreements such as the now-defeated Free Trade Area of the Americas, only deepens the conflict. The Bush administration is further disturbed by Chávez' support for Venezuela's neighbors through regional integration, including for his role in helping to revitalize OPEC at the beginning of his presidency in 1999. But most worrying for the Bush administration is the fundamental underlying goal of the Bolivarian project: a change in the global balance of power from a "uni-polar" world dominated by U.S. economic and strategic interests, to a "multi-polar" world of real economic and political independence for the global South.

In spite of the ongoing media campaigns of the Bush administration and the opposition in Venezuela, support for President Chávez in Venezuela continues to grow. In fact, according to the premier Latin American opinion poll, Latinobarómetro, Venezuelans are more likely than citizens of any other Latin American country polled to describe their government as "totally democratic." And they have the second highest satisfaction level with the way their own democracy functions, according to the poll.² That's predominantly because the social programs that the Chávez government has carried out have been achieved with the massive participation of the majority of the country's citizens, who have witnessed vast improvements in their daily lives in the last several years.

These facts point to the need for a rethinking of the fundamental premise of the US-Venezuela relations, and for a policy based on both the U.S. and Venezuela's shared economic interests, as well as on respect for each country's sovereignty and democracy.

Part 1. Annual U.S. Strategies to Undermine the Chávez Government

Each year, the U.S. Administration has embarked upon a new strategy to oust and/or destabilize the democratically elected government of Venezuela. In April 2002, the U.S. Administration supported a military coup that briefly ousted the democratic government; in December 2002 through 2003, through an economic sabotage campaign; in 2004 through the political strategy of the referendum; and through international diplomatic means in 2005.

Each of these tactics appear to be continuing this year, as the Bush administration's strategy seem to be focusing on an attempt to de-legitimize the December 3rd Venezuelan presidential elections.

2002: Year of the Military Strategy to oust Chávez: U.S. Government Supports an Illegal Military Coup

Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (www.venezuelafoia.info) show that in late 2001 and early 2002, the U.S. substantially increased in funding of Venezuelan opposition groups, in an effort to create a viable opposition to President Chávez, strengthen that opposition by creating and nurturing political parties, and unify that opposition. This funding has been primarily carried out through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a Congressionally-funded group that funds four core grantees: the National Democratic Institute (NDI); the International Republican Institute (IRI); the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center; and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). The amount of aid allocated to NED and USAID for Venezuela skyrocketed from about \$200,000 in 2000 to about \$4 million in 2002.³ The IRI had a budget of \$50,000 in Venezuela in 2000; the year after Bush took office, that budget mushroomed to \$340,000, to "train national and/or local branches of existing and/or newly created political parties on such topics as party structure, management, and organization; internal and external party communications; and coalition building."⁴ This is similar to the IRI's role in Haiti, leading up to a successful coup in 2004 there that overthrew the democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.⁵

But in early 2002 it became clear to U.S. officials that the opposition, including groups that the U.S. government was funding, were focused primarily not on strengthening democracy, but on ousting Chávez. Declassified cables from the U.S. Embassy in Caracas actually reveal that White House and State Department officials knew that NED grantees were, with financial support from the US, developing a plan for a "transitional government" which was announced with great fanfare on March 5, 2002.⁶ There is no evidence that the U.S. government funding agencies attempted to ensure that their grantees remained committed to democratic process; in fact, the cables present the opposition's plan for a "transitional government" as part of the overall political strategy, noting: "another piece falls into place."⁷

Declassified CIA documents show that State Department and White House officials knew that the Venezuelan opposition was planning a coup. A CIA Senior Intelligence Brief from April 6, 2002, reads: "Dissident military factions, including some disgruntled senior officers and a group of radical junior officers, are stepping up efforts to organize a coup against President Chávez, possibly as early as this month... To provoke military action, plotters may try to exploit unrest stemming from opposition demonstrations slated for later this month or ongoing strikes at the state-owned oil company PDVSA."⁸ This document was prepared for senior administration officials.

Five days later, on April 11, 2002, the top command of the military of Venezuela, during an opposition demonstration at a strike at PDVSA, took President Chávez prisoner and established a coup government. The coup “president” Pedro Carmona, head of the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce, had recently toured the U.S. and met with high-ranking officials at the behest of the U.S. Embassy. He immediately dissolved the National Assembly, the Supreme Court and other institutions – effectively abolishing all branches of government that were not the executive. The next day, April 12, 2002, top military and media leaders made clear on television how they had planned to use an opposition march to create a cover for their military coup so that it appeared as though the coup had been a popular uprising.⁹

That same day, State Department spokesperson Adam Ereli conveyed the Administration’s perspective on the Venezuelan situation. Ereli said that “the details still are unclear. We know that the action encouraged by the Chávez government provoked this crisis. The results of these events are now that President Chávez has resigned the presidency.”¹⁰ Since the State Department, according to the CIA documents, had prior knowledge of the coup, Ereli had to know that this description of events was false.

These false statements to the public and the press by the administration are a definite form of involvement in the coup, whether or not the administration had a role in planning or other direct support of it. By trying to convince the world that this was not a coup, while they knew the truth, the Bush administration was actively participating in the crime and willfully trying to make it succeed.

To this day, Bush administration officials routinely deny the U.S. government’s involvement in the coup, in spite of U.S. official documents that prove otherwise. In fact, even the investigation of the Office of Inspector General of the U.S. Department of State noted that, “...it is clear that NED, Department of Defense (DOD), and other U.S. assistance programs provided training, institution building, and other support to individuals and organizations understood to be actively involved in the brief ouster of the Chávez government...”¹¹

When the majority of Venezuelans, as well as middle and lower-ranking military officers, found out that Chávez had been kidnapped – rather than having resigned, as the coup leaders had informed the public – a mass outpouring brought him back to office, and democracy was restored on April 14th, 2002.

NED grantees were even named to the coup government. Leopoldo Martinez, Finance Minister in the coup government,¹² of the political party Primero Justicia, received extensive training and support from the IRI, a direct NED grantee. Leonardo Carvajal, Education Minister in the coup government,¹³ Director of the Asamblea de Educación, continued to receive direct NED funding through 2003, well after the coup, and he himself received a direct salary from the NED as part of this funding. Many NED grantees signed letters commending the new government in the days following the coup. Indeed, one NED grantee even signed the Carmona Decree, which abolished the democratic government: Roció Guijarro, Director of the Center for the Dissemination of Economic Information (CEDICE)¹⁴. A full accounting of coup leaders who received direct funding from the U.S. government is available at <http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/vionedfinal.htm>.

Shockingly, there is no evidence that NED, USAID, or any other U.S. agency involved in “promoting democracy” expressed any public dissatisfaction with the new coup dictatorship, nor is there any evidence that they threatened to cut off funding for “democracy promotion activities” to groups that participated in the coup. Instead, George Folsom, President of the IRI issued a statement lauding, without any apparent irony, the “efforts to bring democracy to the country,” on April 12, 2002.¹⁵

In addition, according to Mexico's Foreign Minister at the time of the coup, the U.S. government actually led international efforts to encourage other countries to recognize the coup government as well. Jorge Castañeda, Foreign Minister of Mexico under President Vicente Fox, told the press in 2004 that "Effectively, there was a proposition made by the United States and Spain, to issue a declaration with Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and France recognizing the government of Pedro Carmona."¹⁶

While U.S. government funding for the opposition groups that participated in the coup has received some news coverage¹⁷, the U.S. government's previous knowledge of the coup, and subsequent lying to the public about that knowledge, has received scant media attention.¹⁸ In addition, Caracas-based U.S. and many international reporter still allow Administration officials to deny participation in the coup, generally referring to Venezuelan denunciations of U.S. involvement as "allegations" rather than as an established fact.

The U.S. government involvement in the coup is widely known in Venezuela, however, and forms the basis for the antagonism that plagues the US-Venezuela relationship. To be fair, Chávez also engages in verbal tirades against Bush and Rice which go beyond traditional limits of presidential diplomacy. It is only necessary to imagine how the U.S. government would treat a foreign government that had financed domestic groups that participated in a coup attempt against the U.S. government, and tried to help the coup succeed, to understand the Venezuelan perspective. Instead of abating in the post-coup period, however, U.S. government collusion with anti-democratic forces continued during the following year.

2003: Year of the Economic Strategy: U.S. Government Supports an Insurrectionary Economic Sabotage

In the aftermath of a year in which groups funded by the U.S. government to promote democracy participate in a coup against a democratically-elected government, it might seem normal to expect that the U.S. would re-evaluate its funding priorities, and shift support to groups that had remained committed to the Constitutional order. This, unfortunately, was not the case. *In fact, the U.S. government stepped up funding of groups that participated in the coup in its immediate aftermath.* NED allocated an immediate \$1 million to its Venezuela budget, and USAID set up the Office of Transition Initiatives – technically a branch of USAID, but without the same bureaucratic and accounting constraints of USAID. OTI has an overtly political focus, and "works particularly closely with the Department of State, which has often used OTI's programmatic instruments to translate diplomatic and foreign policy goals," often in close coordination with the U.S. Embassy.¹⁹

The OTI in Venezuela was allocated a budget of \$7 million after the coup, and the list of grantees includes many of the same actors who had participated in the coup, including Fedecamaras, the Chamber of Commerce, whose head, Pedro Carmona, was the coup "president."²⁰ And while OTI's declared purpose may be to strengthen democracy²¹, even analysts critical of the Chávez administration aren't fooled. "The [Bush] administration's nation-building mission includes trying to weaken or challenge the Chávez administration," said Riordan Roett, director of Latin American studies at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington.²²

In December 2002, opposition forces – including many of the same ones that had participated in the coup – decided to take a page from the Chile 1973 playbook of U.S. intervention²³, and organize a throttling economic sabotage in an attempt to bring the government to its knees. The CTV, Fedecamaras, and the opposition political parties aligned in the Democratic Coordinator (CD) launched a massive insurrectionary management strike/worker lockout on December 2, 2002. Both the CTV²⁴ and

Fedecamaras²⁵ were NED grantees at the time. In addition, the IRI spent \$300,000 from a NED grant working with leading political parties of the CD, such as Primero Justicia, that were part of the insurrectionary economic sabotage, during this time in “training in negotiation and conflict resolution.”²⁶

It is important to note that President Chávez had been elected in 1998 by 59% of the vote, on a platform of fairly sharing the national oil wealth with all Venezuelans. But the traditional recipients of the lion’s share of that wealth – the business elite and the managers of the state-owned oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), proved intransigent. The management strike in December 2002 - February 2003 was a reaction to the President’s shifting of the leadership of the company to a board of directors more sympathetic to the majority’s needs to have access to oil revenues – through the state – for health care, education, and other basic needs. During the strike, which cost the Venezuelan economy over \$10 billion, thousands of small and medium-sized shops were put out of business, gas and food were difficult to come by, and unemployment increased dramatically.

The oil strike also clearly exhibited the media’s collusion with the insurrectionary opposition. Canadian author Naomi Klein noted that “Venezuela's private television stations are owned by wealthy families with serious financial stakes in defeating Chávez. Venevisión, the most-watched network, is owned by Gustavo Cisneros, a mogul ... [who] has partnered with many top U.S. brands--from AOL and Coca-Cola to Pizza Hut and Playboy. ... All this helps explain why, in the days leading up to the April [2002] coup, Venevisión, RCTV, Globovisión and Televen replaced regular programming with relentless anti-Chávez speeches, interrupted only for commercials calling on viewers to take to the streets: "Not one step backward. Out! Leave now!" The stations carried them free, as "public service announcements."²⁷ Researcher Eva Golinger has alleged that these are the same commercials supported by a USAID grant involving the creation of radio and television ads, in conjunction with the CTV and Fedecamaras.²⁸

Resolution – and Corporate Collusion

In the next two months, the government labored with great difficulty to re-take control of the national oil company. The previous PDVSA management had partially privatized the computer system of the company, entering into a joint venture called Intesa with Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), a San Diego-based company with strong ties to the CIA²⁹ and which receives millions of dollars in defense and intelligence contracts from the U.S. government. During the summer of 2001, newly-installed PDVSA officials decided that they could provide for their own information technology needs and, after a provisional six-month extension, asked for the existing contract with SAIC to be dissolved. However, SAIC refused to accept an international arbiter to reconcile accounts and PDVSA could not indemnify SAIC without an audited financial statement. That was before the strike.

During the strike, Intesa employees were given paid vacations and sent home. They then blocked the government’s access to PDVSA’s computer systems. The PDVSA employees were forced to engage in a “hacker war” with the striking Intesa employees to gain access to information about the company’s contracts, shipping obligations, machinery, etc. In the end, PDVSA was successful. They then offered again to move forward with international arbitration to dissolve the expired contract for Intesa.

But SAIC was not satisfied with the damage they had caused. They made claims against Venezuela for “expropriation” under the auspices of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), the insurance agent paid for by U.S. taxpayers for U.S. companies to invest in foreign corporations. OPIC ruled in SAIC’s favor.³⁰ From then on, the U.S. was able to circulate warnings that Venezuela was expropriating foreign oil company assets, thereby seeking to discourage foreign investment in Venezuela.³¹ PDVSA president Ali Rodríguez Araque expressed surprise at the ruling, noting that “I

personally find it astonishing that a government agency such as OPIC would pay out millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars based purely on the self-serving allegations of the company making a claim and in the absence of any certified financial information.”³²

In the end, the strike served to wrest control of the national oil company from the traditional oil elite and further consolidate public oversight over its operations. Now, the government actually had access to the resources necessary to make good on its promises of massively increasing health care, education, and infrastructure budgets for the majority poor. Unfortunately, the country had paid an enormous economic price; the oil sabotage caused a massive economic contraction of approximately 17% in 2003.³³

2004: Year of the Political Strategy: U.S. Government Supports Coup Leaders and others to Organize a Referendum

After the failed management strike, the opposition kept focused on its goal of removing the democratically elected President from office. But in 2003, the Organization of American States (OAS), working together with the U.S.-based Carter Center, was finally able to get the opposition to agree to a legal means of ousting the government: a referendum. This new constitutional tool provided a mechanism for holding any elected government official accountable to the people, provided certain criteria were met.

The opposition in Venezuela proceeded to gather signatures to trigger the referendum, but they did so before the legal timeframe for gathering signatures began; the National Electoral Council (CNE), following the rules, found the signatures invalid. The opposition started gathering signatures again, gaining what appeared to be the minimum number required to trigger the referendum. But when the CNE reviewed the petitions, they found that thousands of them had been filled out in the same handwriting, breaking an explicit CNE regulation that signers had to print their own name, address, and required information... Rather than throwing the illegal signatures out, the CNE allowed people a second chance to confirm their signatures, in an event called the “reparo” or “repair”. Yet Roger Noriega, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, made repeated statements – and even published an op-ed in the widely-read Venezuelan newspaper, *El Universal* – stating that the referendum must place whether or not the legal steps had been taken to trigger it, and referring to the CNE compromise decisions as “arbitrary”.³⁴

The group that spearheaded the signature-gathering process, *Súmate*, was created expressly for the purpose of organizing the referendum petition drive. The leader of *Súmate*, Maria Corina Machado, is one of several NED grantees who attended, as witnesses, the “swearing-in ceremony” of Pedro Carmona’s coup government, signing a document titled “Witnesses to the swearing-in of the government.” Presence at this ceremony and signing of this document were understood at the time in Venezuela to mean endorsement of the coup government and of the Carmona Decree. *Súmate* received a grant from NED of \$53,400 in September 2003.³⁵ While *Súmate* claims to be an electoral watchdog, the obvious goal of the referendum was to oust President Chávez.

Opposition Political Party Unity, Forged by NED

NED funding also supported the development of the opposition’s political platform during the referendum, called *Plan Consenso País*. NED awarded a grant to conservative think tank CEDICE for a project called “Building Consensus on a National Agenda.”³⁶ CEDICE’s general manager, Rocío Guijarro, signed the coup decree that abolished Venezuela’s Constitution, Supreme Court and National

Assembly. Several members of CEDICE's project advisory committee attended Carmona's swearing-in.³⁷

The organizations that participated in strategic planning for the Plan Consenso País include civil society organizations, political parties, business groups and unions, which have been linked to the failed coup of 2002 and/or the subsequent failed oil manager's lockout of 2002-2003, as supporters, endorsers, or participants. According to an in-depth investigation by the Venezuela Information Office (VIO), these include, most notably: the Confederación de Trabajadores Venezolanos (CTV), Gente de Petróleo, Liderazgo y Vision, and Fedecamaras (the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce). Besides being funded by the United States under the rubric of the "Building Consensus on a National Agenda" project, the CTV, Liderazgo y Vision, and the Christian Democrat political party COPEI have also received separate funding from the NED for other projects, either directly or via its core grantees.³⁸

The Referendum

The referendum took place on August 15, 2004. Several days before, members of the opposition announced that they would release exit polls on the day of the vote, contravening CNE regulations against the release of exit polls before the close of elections. The U.S. consulting group that had been working with the opposition, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, denied the accusations. But on 5pm the day of the referendum, a memorandum circulated from another U.S. consulting firm, Penn, Schoen, Berland, and Associates, alleging that President Chávez had been soundly defeated, by a margin of 59 to 41 percent – the exact opposite of the actual result. Fortunately, international journalists had been alerted to the potential of such an illegal exit poll, and almost all decided to ignore it. The majority of the coverage focused on the long lines at the polls that were a testament to Venezuelans' commitment to democracy, and across the country people waited for the official results to be released.

At 4:30 am on August 16th, the CNE announced that Chávez had won, 59% to 41%. The opposition went into a tailspin, putting all their hopes into the international observers, the Carter Center and the OAS, to nullify the referendum. But that was not to be. Using the same techniques they have employed in myriad other elections, both institutions gave the Venezuelan the "free and fair" stamp of approval at a press conference the next day.³⁹

So how does that reconcile with the erroneous exit poll? It turns out that the polling data was actually gathered by members of Súmate – the same group that had organized the petition drive.⁴⁰ Later, two economists published a paper purporting to show evidence that the vote was stolen through a massive electronic fraud.⁴¹ This study was later found by economists at the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) to have provided no such evidence.⁴² A panel of experts subsequently put together by the Carter Center reached the same conclusion as the CEPR study.⁴³

In the end, President Chávez emerged from a referendum intended for his ouster with a strong democratic mandate of 59% of the electorate, certified as free and fair by international observers in one of the most closely monitored electoral processes in history. What became clear in the aftermath of the referendum was that the overwhelming majority of Venezuelan citizens accepted the results, while respecting rights of the minority to dissent. The victory was widely interpreted as a "blow to the Bush administration's strategy in Venezuela."⁴⁴

However, the political leadership of the opposition was unable to do so. Súmate, which continues to receive support from the U.S. government, has failed to accept the democratic results of the referendum

for which they had organized. There is no evidence that NED or any U.S. agency has criticized opposition parties such as Súmate for failing to recognize the democratic will of the electorate.

When the U.S. government began supporting the idea of a referendum, the result that President Chávez would win resoundingly doesn't seem to have been taken into consideration. So when the unthinkable happened, the opposition - that the NED and USAID had labored to fortify, train, and unify - splintered into a myriad of factions and lost credibility with the Venezuelan public due to their refusal to accept the sovereign electoral will of the Venezuelan people. The Bush administration's strategy went into a tailspin.

2005: Year of the Diplomatic Strategy: U.S. Lobbies Regional Leaders to Isolate Chávez

After having suffered an incredible defeat in 2004, the Administration launched a new strategy that would focus on attempting to isolate Venezuela in Latin America. In her confirmation hearings in January 2005, the new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice named Chávez a "negative force in the region."

That same month, the U.S. attempted to exacerbate tensions between Colombia and Venezuela when the two countries temporarily clashed after Colombia admitted to having paid bounty hunters to kidnap Rodrigo Granda, a leader of the FARC (Colombia's largest guerilla group), on Venezuelan soil the previous month – a clear violation of Venezuelan sovereignty. The dispute was later resolved with mediation from Brazil, Peru, and Cuba, leaving the US's exhortations to countries to blame Venezuela on the sidelines.⁴⁵

Soon afterwards, in March of 2005, Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America testified in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Bush administration was campaigning to "increase awareness among Venezuela's neighbors of President Chávez's destabilizing acts with the expectation that they will join us in defending regional stability, security, and prosperity."⁴⁶

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld then toured Latin America that March, using his three-nation tour to Brazil, Argentina, and Guatemala to step up criticisms of Venezuela and to pressure regional leaders to criticize Chávez. He criticized the purchase of 100,000 AK-47 rifles from Russia,⁴⁷ which Venezuela is using to modernize its regular army, as a threat of a "military buildup in the region."⁴⁸ This seemed strange to many Venezuelans, coming from a country with a \$451 billion military budget that spends close to \$1 billion a year arming Venezuela's neighbor, Colombia. As well, the purchase of 100,000 rifles for a 124,000-person army does not strike a casual observer as an alarming event.

Despite the pressure from Washington, Latin American leaders have continuously backed Venezuela's sovereignty and democratic governance, defending Chávez against "slanders and insinuations." At a summit of regional leaders in the days following Rumsfeld's comments, President Lula of Brazil was widely quoted as saying "I think that Venezuela has the right to be a sovereign country, to make its own decisions."⁴⁹

During Condoleezza Rice's April 2005 trip to Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and El Salvador, she allegedly shifted her tactics from open criticisms of Chávez "in favor of working behind the scenes in Latin America against a country she says threatens the region's stability," after her harsh criticism "backfired" by burnishing the populist's anti-American credentials and irking governments in a region wary of U.S. interference."⁵⁰

Criticizing Venezuelan Democracy

Because the governing coalition in Venezuela had now won nine electoral processes (Chávez personally gaining victory in three and the governing coalition winning the majority in congressional, state and local elections), it would be difficult to say that the Venezuelan government was not democratically elected. So the Bush administration embarked upon a new rhetorical strategy, arguing that Chávez might have been elected but was not “governing democratically.” This gave the Bush administration carte blanche to criticize any aspect of the functioning of the government, bypassing the will of the Venezuelan citizenry, and setting itself up as the adjudicator of proper Venezuelan democracy.

The Bush administration unveiled this strategy at a meeting of the OAS in Florida in June 2005. At the meeting, Rice tabled a proposal to create a committee to “monitor the exercise of power” in the region. This committee was proposed to include NGOs, and Rice took the opportunity to invite Sumate leader Maria Corina Machado to a private photo opportunity with her.⁵¹ The proposal, which was widely viewed as a thinly veiled criticism of Venezuela’s democracy, was resoundingly defeated by other Latin American leaders, who saw it as an attempt to place a veneer of legitimacy on U.S. interference through the OAS in the region.⁵²

In fact, the June OAS meeting was the first for the new Secretary General, José Miguel Insulza of Chile, after having been elected by the member states that March after a deadlocked battle with Luis Ernesto Derbez of Mexico. It was the first time the OAS leadership elected by the members did not correspond to the candidate favored by the US, and was considered a hallmark of emerging Latin American independence from U.S. domination. It was also viewed as a bungled strategic maneuver by U.S. officials, including the US’s Ambassador to the OAS, John Maisto, who also happens to be a former Ambassador to Venezuela. Who had been the US’s first candidate to lead the OAS? None other than Francisco Flores, former president of El Salvador – the only other government in the western hemisphere to endorse the coup government in Venezuela in 2002.⁵³

The Bush administration’s new strategy of pressuring regional allies to isolate Chávez has fallen flat, and publicly so. It is widely accepted by those that favor U.S. dominance and those opposed, that Washington’s ability to leverage its power over the region is on the wane.

Another development in 2005 demonstrated the implications of the Bush administration’s hostility towards democracy in Venezuela. On August 22nd, right-wing televangelist Pat Robertson called for the assassination of President Chávez.⁵⁴ Robertson (a candidate for the GOP’s Presidential nomination in 1992) and the millions of supporters of his television show, *The 700 Club*, are a key constituency of the Republican Party. While Representatives José Serrano (D-NY) and Barbara Lee (D-CA) reacted with strong condemnations, State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack merely referred to Robertson’s statement as “inappropriate” – a reaction even anti-Chávez editorial pages across the country found wanting.⁵⁵ Calling for terrorist homicide against a democratically elected president is not merely “inappropriate” - it is illegal, unethical, and it should have been investigated for potential violations of federal and international law.⁵⁶

Venezuela has accused the U.S. government of making plans to assassinate President Chávez, but as of yet evidence has not been released to the public. The Bush administration’s mild response to Robertson’s comments certainly give increased weight to Venezuela’s claims. Although Robertson later apologized for the statement,⁵⁷ it is the U.S. government’s ongoing hostility towards President Chávez that created the climate in which a Republican leader felt comfortable in calling for the U.S. to kill an

elected head of state. Robertson's comments should have been a clarion call for a new foreign relations policy with Venezuela, but unfortunately that has not been the case.

In fact, only a few weeks later, U.S. officials denied visas for some of President Chávez's security and medical staff⁵⁸ when he traveled to the United Nations annual General Assembly on a trip that raised his profile in the U.S. when he visited poor communities in the Bronx with Representative José Serrano.⁵⁹

In September of 2005, long time right-wing ideologue Roger Noriega left his job as Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, a post now filled by career diplomat Thomas Shannon. But while many "had hoped that the arrival of a new face at the State Department's most powerful Latin America policy position would be the basis of a new and constructive dialogue with the region," unfortunately "the first few months of Shannon's tenure have at best brought continuity rather than reform, the same old anti-liberal boilerplate."⁶⁰

Though the extensive exposés about U.S. government meddling in the internal affairs of Venezuela have raised a furor within the country, U.S. officials are still expanding funding and support for foundations, business, and political groups opposed to the government, including groups that have refused to accept the democratic mandate of the referendum of 2004.⁶¹

2006: Increasing Hostility: De-Legitimizing Electoral Democracy in Venezuela

This year Venezuelans, like citizens of Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, and other South American nations, will go to the polls in presidential elections. Based on an examination of the policies of the U.S. government towards Venezuela in recent years, one can expect that funding for the opposition will continue to grow; that an unscrupulous media campaign to de-legitimize Venezuelan democracy will expand; that the rhetoric between the two countries will escalate; that regional leaders will be pressured to criticize Chávez; and that officials will attempt to portray Venezuela as an unstable supplier of oil to the US, in an era when Bush has admitted that the U.S. must wean itself from its addiction to oil.

There is another tactic being deployed by the U.S. administration – and while the details may not be known for years, a preview has surfaced. In January of 2006, Venezuela expelled the naval attaché to the U.S. Embassy in Caracas after he appeared to have been caught red-handed passing classified information from Venezuelan military leaders on to the pentagon.⁶²

But the main strategy that U.S. officials will use against Venezuela will be a strong campaign to de-legitimize the upcoming presidential elections in Venezuela. It is likely, based on past policy, that opposition claims of irregularities will be taken at face value, while Venezuelan CNE assurances of a free and fair electoral system will be doubted, despite the seal of approval by international monitors. In addition, U.S. officials already appear to be intimating that if the majority of the population vote for Chávez, which nearly everyone agrees is overwhelmingly likely, that he will have "consolidated a dictatorship." This view demonstrates a remarkable disrespect for the sovereign right of the Venezuelan people to elect their own government. While one would hope that the international media would pay especially close attention to the facts of the case, and monitor the unfolding electoral climate with judicious fairness, there is little reason to expect that that will be the case.

Part 2. Myths and Facts of the Anti-Venezuela Media Campaign

Just as during the U.S. campaign against the democratically elected President of Chile, Salvador Allende, in the early 1970s, the U.S. media widely circulate a set series of myths about Venezuela. These myths serve to generate negative opinion about President Chávez and the majority of Venezuelans who support their government, and often are used to justify negative U.S. actions towards Venezuela.

And while there are certainly policies or practices of the Chávez government that many people might criticize, the arguments regularly circulated by Bush administration officials, and in the media in general, fail to hold up to careful scrutiny.

The most pernicious myth about Venezuela is that it is not a democracy. In addition, press widely circulate allegations that civil rights, particularly freedom of speech, have come under attack under the Chávez administration; that poverty has increased; that Venezuela is a negative influence in the region; that Venezuela supports terror; and that the government isn't doing enough to curtail illegal drugs. In addition, media reports that Venezuela is not a reliable supplier of oil to the U.S. serve to raise fear among U.S. consumers.

Each one of these myths can be refuted with a closer study, because none of them are based on fact, nor is there proof offered for the allegations.

Myth: Venezuela is Consolidating a Dictatorship

Fact: Venezuelan Democracy is Thriving and Participatory

Bush administration officials have often referred to President Chávez as “governing undemocratically,” while Caracas-based U.S. reporters regularly use epithets such as “dictatorial,” “autocratic,” or “strongman.” In common usage, these terms generally refer to leaders who have not been given a popular mandate, let alone had that mandate affirmed by a landslide free and fair referendum. They also do not normally apply to leaders with governments whose legislative branches have been freely elected. A closer look at Venezuela’s system of governance reveals a functioning system of representative democracy, as well as other aspects that most Venezuelans refer to with pride as “participatory democracy.”

To understand democracy in Venezuela, it is important to put the country’s political development in historical context. In 1958, the two dominant political parties of the time, Acción Democrática (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI) created what is called the agreement of Punto Fijo. This system of “pacted democracy” shut all other political parties out of participation, and created a system of patronage and high levels of corruption. In addition, the economic policies followed by the parties of the Punto Fijo resulted in a massive economic failure of a 35% decrease in growth, and extremely high levels of poverty, as noted above. This “representative democracy” resulted in a massive marginalization of the vast majority of the country from the political process; yet during this time, Venezuela was one of the US’s strongest allies in the region.

This context of social, political, and economic polarization created the space for a new vision of the country based on ideals of social equality, political participation, and economic development that gave birth to the Bolivarian project. This explains why one of its first projects, after electing Hugo Chávez as president with 59% of the vote in 1998, was a re-founding of the Republic and the drafting of a new Constitution. While U.S. media often refer to this process as “Chávez rewrote the Constitution in 1999,” from a quick examination one can see that the new Constitution was approved in one of the most democratic processes in the history of Latin America.⁶³

Soon after Chávez took office, a popular referendum was organized in April of 1999, in which 88% of the electorate voted in favor of developing a new Constitution.⁶⁴ Another election was held in which the Constituent Assembly was popularly elected – which included voices from traditionally marginalized communities, such as Venezuela’s Indigenous populations and representatives from the country’s poorest barrios, as well as from vocal opponents of the Chávez administration. Then after months of deliberations, in December 1999, the new Constitution was approved by the voters, garnering 72% of popular approval in a referendum.⁶⁵

Under the new Constitution, the Venezuelan government is divided into five branches of power: the executive; the legislative; and the judiciary; as well as the electoral power, comprised of the National Electoral Council (CNE); and the citizen power branch, comprised of the attorney general, the ombudsman, and the comptroller general.

Venezuelan elections have been subject to regular monitoring by international observers, who have found Venezuelan elections to be “free and fair” according to widely held democratic standards. The CNE has instituted a wide range of new policies to ensure free and fair elections, such as universal implementation of electronic voting machines with a paper trail that can be easily monitored and verified; cleaning up the electoral rolls to ensure that deceased persons do not cast ballots,⁶⁶ and increasing the number of voting stations in poor areas that were previously underserved.

Other efforts at ensuring universal access to democracy include Venezuela’s massive education campaigns, detailed below, which have taught over 1.4 million people how to read and write, affording new access to political participation for previously illiterate adults. In addition, Venezuela has naturalized millions of immigrants, many of whom had lived in Venezuela for decades, but whom had previously faced enormous political and bureaucratic barriers to citizenship. And Venezuela has embarked upon a massive campaign to ensure that all citizens possess the proper identification cards,⁶⁷ which has massively increased access to voting.

Regarding the legislative branch, up until December 2005, the opposition held 48% of seats, and the parties aligned with the Chávez’s party, the *Movimiento Quinta Republica* (MVR), held a slim majority of 52%. Elections for the National Assembly were held on December 4, 2005. Polls heading towards the elections showed the parties aligned with the government holding a strong lead over candidates aligned with the opposition parties, which were only expected to take about 25% of the seats. This is not that surprising, considering that the opposition’s primary political platform has focused on the fact that it is “not-Chávez,” and President Chávez is one of the most popular leaders in Latin America.

Opposition leadership made demands that the CNE change certain policies, stating that they would not participate unless their demands were met. Their greatest concern was the practice of using fingerprint-reading machines at the polls, because they alleged that the government was somehow getting access to citizen’s voting records. The OAS negotiated with the CNE, which had implemented the fingerprint reading machines as an anti-fraud measure. The CNE then agreed to accommodate the opposition and discontinue their use, after which the OAS affirmed that it “expects that all institutions, in respecting the commitments they have assumed, the guarantees offered, and the existing laws, contribute to the realization of successful elections on December 4.”⁶⁸ But in the end, despite their demands for participation having been met, the opposition parties boycotted the election.⁶⁹ Candidates aligned with the government swept the legislature, and the MVR in particular picked up 114 of the 167 seats.⁷⁰ While there are certainly a sizeable number of people who oppose the Chávez administration, the leadership of the opposition has now ceased, of their own accord, to have an organized political presence. Secretary General of the OAS Insulza later commented that, “if the path of abstention is chosen, then one cannot

complain that the entire parliament is in the hands of one's political adversary."⁷¹

U.S. officials have also repeatedly accused Chávez of undermining judiciary independence for carrying out a judicial reform in late 2004. Most commentary in the U.S. implies that the problems of the Venezuelan judiciary either emerged under the Chávez government or are worse under the Chávez government than under previous administrations, or, more perniciously, are an attempt to subjugate the judiciary to the executive branch of government. An extensive analysis of the realities of judicial reform in Venezuela found none of these to be the case.⁷²

In fact, it is widely recognized that Venezuela's judicial system had very low credibility prior to the Chávez government.⁷³ In addition, the Supreme Court in 2002 ruled that members of the top military command who had participated in the coup could not be tried for orchestrating the coup, because a coup had not taken place, evidencing what many would call a clear bias towards the opposition.

In response to these problems, the National Assembly passed a judicial reform law in 2004, for which U.S. officials accuse the Venezuelan government of "stacking the courts." The new law allows the National Assembly to appoint the new judges with a simple majority instead of a two-thirds majority, when the legislature has failed to achieve a two-thirds majority after three attempts. Approval by a simple majority is not unusual by international standards, such as in the US. The law also created reforms in the judicial system, including making the judicial system more "modern and efficient."⁷⁴ In addition, the law expands the number of justices on the Supreme Court from 20 to 32, a change that was made necessary by the new Constitution, which placed additional demands on the Supreme Court.

In addition to creating five branches of power, the new Constitution added "participatory" and "protagonist" to Venezuela's representative democracy. Venezuelans often carry their Constitution in their pockets and quote from it regularly. Copies of it, and various laws, are available on many street corners along with baseball caps and phone cards. In a practical sense, this new participatory democracy has resulted in a massive participation of the majority of citizens in the social missions, described in detail below; higher levels of participation in voting; and mandates that varying percentages of state and regional budgets must be set aside for citizen-initiated participatory budget projects. This new sense of empowerment is palpable among the poor in Venezuela, yet is rarely acknowledged in the media.

Commitment to democracy by the opposition political leadership has unfortunately not been as marked. In addition to carrying out a coup in 2002, an economic sabotage in 2002-2003, and amidst calls to violence by many sectors of the opposition,⁷⁵ certain elements of the political leadership of the opposition have still refused to recognize the results of the referendum, including Súmate, the "electoral watchdog" that has received funding from the National Endowment for Democracy. In addition, while the government repeatedly campaigns for the importance of all citizens to vote, the opposition has called for electoral boycotts that drive down citizen participation in the electoral system, most notably in the legislative elections of December 2005.⁷⁶

It is also important to keep in perspective how Venezuelans view their own democracy. According to the 2005 poll of independent Chilean polling firm Latinobarómetro, enthusiasm for democracy has declined throughout the hemisphere, due to the failure of many elected governments to curb crime or decrease poverty. However, Venezuela has resisted this trend. In fact, Venezuelans are more likely than citizens of the other 18 Latin American nations polled to describe their government as "totally democratic." With a regional average of only 5.5, Venezuelans gave their government a high 7.6 on a scale of 1 to 10. And in a crucial response, *Venezuelans have the second highest level of satisfaction with the way their own democracy functions.*⁷⁷

It should not go unnoticed that the five countries whose citizens rated the “level of democracy” in their country the lowest (less than 5 on a scale of 1 (not democratic) to 10 (totally democratic)), three have just signed Free Trade Agreements with the U.S. (Peru, Guatemala, and Nicaragua); one is in negotiations for an FTA (Ecuador); and another just became the site of a Marine contingent (Paraguay.) So it does not appear that a country’s citizens’ own considerations about their own democracy weigh in heavily on the Administration’s view about that country, but rather, that a countries that receive a democratic stamp of approval correlate highly with those that agree to U.S. foreign policy goals in the region, particularly the promotion of the neoliberal economic model and military cooperation.

Venezuelan democracy, like all democracies, is a work in progress with many strengths, and many weaknesses. But Venezuela’s five distinct branches of government, traditional checks and balances, educated population, empowered citizenry, and energetic social debate offer its citizens a more vibrant democracy than many countries could boast.

Myth: Civil Rights, Particularly Freedom of Speech, are Under Attack in Venezuela
Fact: Civil Rights have Expanded under the Chávez Administration

One of the most constant criticisms of Venezuela by the Bush administration is that civil rights have been eroded under the Chávez government. Yet no serious human rights organization has alleged that civil rights have deteriorated under Chávez, and the civil and human rights record in Venezuela compares favorably to others in the region. In fact, Venezuela is the only major South American country that Amnesty International did not file a single report or media advisory on in 2005.⁷⁸

Claims that Chávez restricts freedom of speech are frequent in official U.S. government statements, and have become so commonplace that they seem to no longer require anything resembling proof. Criticisms particularly focus on the Law of Social Responsibility in Media and Television (LSR)⁷⁹, approved in November of 2004 (after widespread consultation with civil society, media corporations, and professional associations),⁸⁰ allegedly because of provisions that criminalize slander against certain government officials and incitements to war.

Any visitor to the country will easily notice that Venezuela has the most anti-government media in the hemisphere. The private television media in Venezuela are completely controlled by the opposition, leaders of which admitted having participated in the coup in 2002.⁸¹ It is almost laughable to watch journalists repeatedly use the very freedom of speech that they allege the government does not permit to denounce the alleged lack of freedom of speech. In fact, in organizing an unusual press conference in Venezuela appearing to create hype against the law, Human Rights Watch still had to acknowledge that “the Chávez government has largely respected press freedom even in the face of a strident and well-resourced opposition press. ... Private television companies have often adopted a blatantly partisan position, and their news and debate programs have been extremely hostile to the Chávez government.”⁸²

The new LSR actually serves to increase public participation in media production by mandating a percentage of airtime be dedicated to domestic productions, a common feature in many countries such as Canada, Spain, and Argentina.⁸³ The law incorporates the rights of citizens as producers as well as consumers of media, as well as protecting the rights of broadcasters. This is similar to the Fairness Doctrine in the US.⁸⁴ The law also contains public interest measures such as bans on advertising of tobacco, alcoholic beverages, gambling, and weapons. In addition, the law focuses its regulations on protecting children from daytime broadcasts of obscene materials, which were previously common, much like regulations in the US, which prohibit inappropriate sexual content from being shown between

the times of 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. It also set up a fund for the creation of dozens of new community based radio and television stations.⁸⁵

Strikingly, the U.S. administration (and other groups like Human Rights Watch) have remained strangely silent on the total media blackout instituted by the private media channels during the coup, when coverage of pro-Chávez rallies were completely censored, and channels broadcast cartoons rather than show the democratically-elected president's historic return to office on April 14, 2002.⁸⁶ One explanation came to light in May of 2005, when it was revealed that the French group Reporters Without Borders, frequently cited as an independent media association critical of the Chávez government's media policies, receives financing from the National Endowment for Democracy.⁸⁷

In addition, one must wonder what would be considered appropriate legal changes if media channels in the U.S. regularly broadcast "public service announcements" encouraging the population to overthrow the government in a coup, as the opposition media did.⁸⁸ And what have been the results of the law? While the LSR has created vast opportunities for community radio and television production, as well as for mainstream distribution of original Venezuelan production, anti-Chávez *Miami Herald* had to admit in a July 2005 editorial that "news media in that country are still independent," "there is no information blockade," and "there is no government monopoly on news."⁸⁹

Regarding the issue of political repression, in spite of the fact that the opposition has regularly called for violent demonstrations against the government, security forces in Venezuela have dramatically diminished repression against political protests. The country's most respected human rights organization, Venezuelan Program for Education and Action in Human Rights (PROVEA), has documented in a thorough study that there has been a decrease in violence by security forces at demonstrations as compared to previous governments.

But the situation in Venezuela continues to be misrepresented in the press and by the Bush administration. In fact, on June 1, 2005, PROVEA wrote a letter to U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela William Brownfield, which charges Condoleezza Rice, then-Undersecretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega, and members of the U.S. Congress with misrepresenting the human rights situation in Venezuela. It goes on to argue that U.S. concerns about Venezuela stem more from ideological discrepancies rather than genuine human rights concerns. And finally, it warns that a U.S. misinformation campaign in itself threatens "Venezuela's human rights and right to sovereignty."⁹⁰

Myth: The Venezuelan Economy is in Ruins

Fact: Venezuela Boasts one of the Fastest-Growing Economies in Latin America

One of the common myths perpetrated in the U.S. media is that the Venezuelan economy has taken a turn for the worse under Chávez.⁹¹ News media in the U.S. constantly allege that Chávez is mismanaging the economy, nationalizing businesses and turning Venezuela's economy into a "Castro-style Cuba."⁹²

Yet Venezuela is one of the fastest growing countries in the region. Per capita income growth was a whopping 17.9% in 2004, when the economy rebounded from the opposition's economic sabotage.⁹³ In 2005, Venezuelan per capita income growth topped 9%.⁹⁴ According to a recent poll by Chilean firm Latinobarómetro, Venezuelans have the second highest level of satisfaction with economic progress out of 18 Latin American countries polled.⁹⁵

Significantly, one of the greatest achievements of the Chávez administration has been to reverse an outrageous historical decline in per capita income growth. According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, “from 1970-1998 per capita income in Venezuela fell by 35 percent.⁹⁶ This is the worst economic decline in the region and one of the worst in the world -- much worse even than what happened to Africa during this period.”⁹⁷

In addition, the CEPR paper notes that “these data do not include the non-cash income of the poor -- including subsidized food and access to health care services. Since there have been enormous changes in these areas, any comparison would have to take these changes into account in order to accurately measure the change in living standards of the poor. With subsidized food now reaching 46 percent of the population, this one program alone could easily push millions of people over the official poverty line that is based on cash income only.”⁹⁸

Myth: Venezuela is a “Destabilizing Force” in the Region

Fact: Venezuela is a Leader in Regional Stability and Integration

Aside from the region’s rejection of U.S. interference in their sovereign affairs, there is another reason why Latin American leaders have stood by Venezuela: because the country is playing a major role in regional stability and integration. In 2005, Venezuela purchased over \$1 billion in government bonds from Argentina, and \$300 million in Ecuadorian bonds, moves which contributed to financial stability - and which were seen as allowing those countries’ more independence from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁹⁹ Venezuela has even suggested creating a “Bank of the South” in the future, to help wean Latin American economies off IMF dependence.

Regional integration is core foundation of the vision of the Chávez government, which sees Latin America’s future as less dependent on economic ties to the U.S. and more integrated with each other, not just through commercial ties, but also through cultural, social, and political bonds.

Venezuela’s vision of Latin American regional integration is based on the writings of Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of much of South America, and is united under the banner of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, or ALBA. ALBA is grounded in the principles of complementarity (rather than competition), solidarity (instead of domination), cooperation (not exploitation), and respect for sovereignty (instead of corporate rule). And in practice, ALBA is based on grassroots citizen participation, as the citizenry are both the implementers and the beneficiaries of the agreements under the banner of ALBA.¹⁰⁰

Energy security has been a cornerstone of Venezuela’s promotion of regional integration.¹⁰¹ Venezuela has pledged to provide for Latin America and the Caribbean’s energy needs in the foreseeable future. Currently, Venezuela provides low-cost oil to many Caribbean and Latin American countries, forming the basis of a regional integration policy of energy security and successful barter economy.

The “Energy Cooperation Agreement Petrocaribe” was signed by representatives of 14 Caribbean nations on June 29, 2005. Building on previous agreements, Petrocaribe provides for 40% long term financing when oil is over \$50 a barrel, and an ALBA-Caribe fund for social development projects.¹⁰² Petrocaribe builds on the historic Caracas Accords, founded in 2000 to provide preferential financing of Venezuelan oil to all Caribbean and Central American nations.

And Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina are discussing the development of a massive gas pipeline that would guarantee supply of Venezuela’s natural gas to its Southern neighbors.¹⁰³ Venezuela is also

investing in a refinery in Uruguay.¹⁰⁴ And Colombia and Venezuela have already started building a pipeline from Colombia's La Guajira gas fields to Venezuela's Paraguana Peninsula.¹⁰⁵

Under the Caracas Accords, countries may repay the discounted oil in goods and services. Venezuela recently sent the first shipment of oil to Argentina, in return for Argentine beef and dairy exports that will help revitalize that country's industries, which were decimated by the 2001 IMF-induced financial crisis. In addition, Venezuela is now having its oil tankers repaired in Argentina instead of the US, which will stimulate thousands of jobs in Argentina. Trade with Argentina tripled after bilateral pacts were signed.¹⁰⁶

At the World Social Forum in Venezuela, just days after the inauguration of Evo Morales as the new President of Bolivia, Chávez announced a series of new bilateral cooperation accords with that country, which include the export of oil in return for non-genetically modified soybeans, chicken, and other Bolivian products. Venezuela has also offered 5,000 scholarships to its universities for students for Bolivia, in an effort to help the poorest country in South America educate its youth.¹⁰⁷

Venezuela is also boosting alliances with regional groupings, joining Mercosur, the Common Market of South America, as a full member in December. Venezuela is also a founding member of the new South American Community of Nations, a fledgling political alliance of Andean Community of Nations and the South American Common Market of Mercosur.¹⁰⁸

But the bilateral and regional cooperation goes beyond just trade in goods. A series of 49 bilateral cooperation accords with Cuba include the provision of approximately 20,000 Cuban doctors and nurses who provide primary, preventative health care for Venezuelans in the Barrio Adentro program, in exchange for oil that keeps Cuban cars and factories running. It also includes a special program, Mission Miracle, in which Cuba and Venezuela cooperate to provide hundreds of thousands of people from all over Latin America with free eye surgery to overcome blindness.¹⁰⁹ The program is even open to U.S. citizens who cannot afford health care.

In addition, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba, and Brazil have together launched TeleSur, the first Latin American television news network, which offers news, features, documentaries, and sports created by and for a Latin American and Caribbean audience. This effort has drawn the ire of Florida first-term Republican Connie Mack, who introduced an amendment to the Foreign Relations Authorization Act in 2005 to beam US-produced anti-Chávez programming to Venezuela¹¹⁰, an overreaction that conservative Chávez critic and *Miami Herald* columnist Andres Oppenheimer said would be derided in the region as "TeleBush."¹¹¹

While the U.S. continues to cut its paltry aid of \$1.2 billion in foreign aid to the region, cutting development aid by a massive 28.5% in Bush's 2007 budget request, even Oppenheimer notes that the Chávez administration is supporting poor neighbors to the tune of \$3.7 billion this year.¹¹² Indeed, while President Chávez's popularity in the region skyrockets, Bush has become the least popular U.S. president in Latin America in history.¹¹³

Myth: Venezuela Supports Terrorist Organizations

Fact: Venezuela Fights Terror, without the Double Standard

In the fall of 2001, Venezuela earned the ire of the U.S. government by publicly denouncing the bombing of innocent women and children in Afghanistan in the US's "war on terror." U.S. officials, including then-Ambassador Donna Hrinak, attempted to chide President Chávez into recanting, a move

that only served to exacerbate tensions. That's when the Bush administrations seems to have decided that Venezuela was not "with the program" in allying with the U.S. in the "war on terror."

Venezuela has long had strong military ties to the US, including boasting the largest number of graduates of the School of the Americas – including two who participated in the coup in 2002. But over the last several years, that close collaboration has shifted. In February of 2004, after meeting with leaders of School of the Americas Watch, Venezuela became the first South American country to suspend collaboration with the SOA¹¹⁴, which has been widely documented to have trained numerous torturers and death squad leaders across Latin America.¹¹⁵

Beginning with an outrageous article in *U.S. News & World Report* in August of 2003, "unnamed U.S. officials" have repeatedly, and without ever offering proof, made specious accusations against the Venezuelan government of financially supporting the FARC guerillas in Colombia,¹¹⁶ an accusation that has not been echoed by that country's leadership. In fact in Colombia, the US's strongest ally in South America, Presidents Chávez and Uribe have a respectful friendship based on fighting terrorism and common economic projects.¹¹⁷ In fact, Colombia's President has publicly acknowledged President Chávez's assertions of a conspiracy against him between Colombian military personnel and exiled members of the Venezuelan military, and vowed cooperation in fighting terror against Venezuela based on Colombian soil.¹¹⁸ Also, Venezuela has captured and turned over FARC leaders to Colombia; something which would seem inconsistent with a country allegedly supporting the FARC.

On April 24, 2004, Chávez announced the termination of the 35-year old military cooperation agreement with the US, which allowed for several U.S. military personnel to be stationed in Venezuela, after questioning the appropriateness of allowing military personnel presence from a country that has supported efforts to topple the government.¹¹⁹

President Chávez has also repeatedly condemned the US's occupation of Iraq, denouncing Bush as a "terrorist," as have many U.S. citizens, for engaging in an illegal war against Iraq that has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent civilians.

But most riling to Venezuelans has been the U.S. government's handling of the case of Luis Posada Carriles, a former Cuban exile who escaped from jail in Venezuela during criminal proceedings for the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airlines that killed 73 people; who is accused of a Havana hotel bombing that killed an Italian tourist in 1997; and who was convicted in Panama in 2000 for his role in a plot to assassinate Fidel Castro.¹²⁰ Posada Carriles, formerly on CIA payroll according to recently-declassified documents,¹²¹ slipped into the U.S. illegally in April 2005 and filed requests for political asylum weeks later.¹²² He later rescinded his asylum request in order "to avoid embarrassing the American government."¹²³

But the U.S. has rejected Venezuela's extradition request, submitted under its longstanding extradition treaty with the US.¹²⁴ And a Texas judge ruled against deportation to Venezuela, allegedly because Carriles maintains that he would be tortured,¹²⁵ a practice outlawed in Venezuela¹²⁶ but widely practiced by the U.S. government in the Abu Ghraib prison camp.¹²⁷ In a related case, Posada's close associate, Orlando Bosch, has been "resolute and unwavering in his advocacy of terrorist violence," according to an order for his deportation that was later overturned, and he still resides in Miami.¹²⁸

The double standard of the U.S. in dealing with terrorists is mind-boggling in a post September 11th world.¹²⁹

Myth: Venezuela Is Not a Partner in the “War on Drugs”

Fact: Venezuela Fights Illegal Trafficking in Drugs, and has Increased Drug Interdiction

As far back as 1999, the U.S. government threatened not to certify Venezuela as adequately cooperating in the war against drugs for refusing to allow U.S. surveillance planes to enter into Venezuelan sovereign airspace.¹³⁰ The Venezuelan government has interdicted vastly more illegal trans-shipped drugs under the Chávez administration, according to the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela’s website.¹³¹ Yet “American officials” are often quoted indicating that Venezuela is not doing enough to combat this scourge.¹³²

However, the Venezuelan government temporarily ceased cooperation with the DEA in 2005 because the Venezuelans found evidence of DEA agents’ engaging in espionage.¹³³ The Venezuelan anti-narcotics forces continued to collaborate with European and other international drug-interdiction forces.¹³⁴ The State Department has recognized Venezuela’s recent gains in the combating drug traffic and securing its land, air, and sea ports.¹³⁵ In January of 2006, drug interdiction cooperation was restored between the two countries, under a new agreement, which Senator Arlen Specter helped facilitated during a visit last August.¹³⁶

Last year, Venezuela also negotiated the purchase of 12 military aircraft and four boats from Spain, which will be used to fight drugs: “Both Venezuela and Spain insisted the equipment was for peaceful purposes. Mr. Chávez said it would be used to combat the drug-trafficking in the Venezuelan-Colombian border... President Chávez said...that the boats would be used to step up Venezuela’s coastal patrols against the drugs trade, while the transport planes would be used mainly for humanitarian missions inside and outside the country.”¹³⁷

Nevertheless, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has criticized Venezuela for a recent purchase, and worked to block the transfer of the planes. Although the Spanish attempted to complete the sale, they were not able to due to the fact that several of the parts originate in the US. In fact, Rice did recently block the sale of aircraft from Brazil, an act that President Lula called “indefensible nonsense.”¹³⁸

Myth: Venezuela is Not a Stable Supplier of Oil to the US

Fact: Venezuela is a Stable Oil Partner to U.S. Consumers

Since the election of President Chávez and before, Venezuela has honored its oil supply contracts, and consistently supplied approximately 15% of the U.S. oil use. In fact, the only two times when this supply was interrupted during the Chávez era were during the opposition-led coup, and during the opposition oil sabotage of the end of 2002. Some leaders, including Representative William Delahunt (D-MA) have noted that Venezuela is the fourth largest provider of energy products to the US, so “both countries need each other, and a poor relationship bodes ill for Americans and Venezuelans alike.”¹³⁹ Administration officials however, seem bent on portraying Venezuela as an unstable supplier of oil by creating an unnecessary sense of alarm at Venezuela’s market diversification to China and India. In fact, Senate Foreign Relations committee chairman Richard Lugar (R-IN) has asked the Government Accountability office to study how the U.S. could cope if Venezuela diminished its exports to the US.¹⁴⁰

At the same time, President Chávez has warned the U.S. that if the U.S. were to invade, or to attempt to assassinate the President, that supplies to the U.S. would not be guaranteed. It might not strike an impartial observer as strange that a country would prefer to sell its natural resources to nations that respect its sovereignty. And considering that U.S. officials have repeatedly stated that they have no intention of invading Venezuela and no plans to assassinate him, there should be no cause for alarm.

In addition, Venezuela's PdVSA, through its wholly-owned subsidiary Houston-based Citgo Petroleum Corporation, has been the only oil company to respond to the U.S. Congress' request that oil companies address the needs of low-income Americans in helping them meet their heating bills this winter. Through Citgo, low-cost heating oil has been available to families in Massachusetts,¹⁴¹ Maine,¹⁴² Rhode Island,¹⁴³ Pennsylvania,¹⁴⁴ and the Bronx, NY¹⁴⁵ this winter. Discussions for further expansion of the program are underway in several other states, including Delaware,¹⁴⁶ Vermont, and Connecticut. The program involves the provision of a total of 49 million gallons of discounted heating oil, and will benefit approximately 175,000 poor families, as well as homeless shelters. Many state and local officials have been involved, such as Representative Delahunt (D-MA) who noted that, "With temperatures dropping and oil prices soaring, we're all worried sick about people without the means to heat their homes. It is gratifying that at least one major oil company is willing to step up."¹⁴⁷

The heating oil initiative stemmed from a pledge made by President Hugo Chávez during a visit to low-income U.S. communities last September, in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Many of the poor beneficiaries of the program have heaped praise upon it, such as 70 year old Bridget Durkin, quoted in an Associated Press report as saying, "Why would it matter where [the oil] comes from? Venezuela is doing a good thing for people."¹⁴⁸ Even an article in the Washington Post acknowledged that "Venezuela's Chávez wins hearts among the poor" through the program.¹⁴⁹

Unfortunately, some Republicans have taken issue with the Venezuelan charity, claiming that Chávez is just playing politics. But even Republican Senator Richard Lugar has chastised this position, noting that "I will not take the position of opposing this program, because I don't... Actually I am pleased with this gesture... What would be an adverse impact would be if people who are uncomfortable with Venezuelan politics simply say that this is a bad thing..."¹⁵⁰

Fortunately, many editorial boards have joined with citizens in applauding the gesture. A local paper in Maine editorialized that "Given the recent cuts to federal energy assistance programs, the Baldacci administration would have been remiss if it didn't pursue the deep discount on home heating oil given to Massachusetts by Venezuela's leader, Hugo Chávez."¹⁵¹ A *Boston Globe* editorial noted, "it's difficult to fault his decision to provide low-cost heating oil to 45,000 needy families in Massachusetts... For now, the people of Massachusetts can recognize the self-interest but applaud the generosity."¹⁵²

Part 3. Real U.S. Policy Concerns Behind the Campaign Against Venezuela

U.S. officials are repeatedly state their concerns with issues of democracy in Venezuela. But considering some of the government with which the U.S. is aligned, and the strong satisfaction of Venezuelans with their own democracy, it is difficult for an impartial observer to take those professed concerns too seriously. That begs the question, what is the U.S. government so aggressive with President Chávez? A careful analysis and review reveals three overlapping policy concerns.

First, that Venezuela's current economy is organized around sharing its natural resource wealth with all of its citizens, focusing on health and education, and its economy is growing rapidly. Second, because Venezuela's rejection of the neoliberal model and promotion of alternatives is not just within its borders, but extends throughout the Latin American region. And third, and perhaps most importantly, because the basis of the Bolivarian project is much broader than the Latin American region or the current time period, but is an effort to fundamentally realign the power structures of geopolitics, to help bring about a shift away from U.S. global domination to a more balanced geopolitical structure, where the global

South countries of the Asia, Africa, and especially Latin America share power on an equal basis with the North in the global order.

The Threat of a Good Example: Oil Income Brings Massive Social Benefits to Majority

In 1998, President Chávez was elected on a platform of more fairly sharing the national oil wealth with all Venezuela's citizens. But it took until 2003, after the consolidation of public control over PdVSA, that the government actually had access to the resources necessary to carry out this mandate. That's when massive public resources began flowing from the national oil company to the slums and barrios of the country, to improving the basic standard of living for the majority poor.

Venezuela's social benefits are organized through Missions, which are funded by the high oil revenues through social planning and focused budget allocation. But the work of the missions is largely carried out by the mass participation of the population, without whom they would not exist, as opposed to just through the bureaucratic ministries. Having started with a strong focus on education and health care, missions and other social programs also address issues of Indigenous rights, women's rights, and anti-racism, housing, and job creation.

Access to Education: Article 102 of the Venezuelan Constitution states that, "Education is a human right and a fundamental social duty; it is democratic, free of charge and obligatory. The State assumes responsibility for it as an irrevocable function of the greatest interest, at all levels and in all modes, as an instrument of scientific, humanistic and technical knowledge at the service of society."¹⁵³

On July 1 of 2003, President Chávez launched the centerpiece of the educational missions, the massive literacy program, *Mision Robinson*. Incredibly, the previous oil-rich but neoliberal governments had left about 6% of the population in the dark regarding basic education. Within two years, tens of thousands of Venezuelan volunteers had taught over 1.4 million citizens how to read and write. Venezuela was certified as free of illiteracy by UNESCO in October 28 of 2005, a remarkable achievement that not one Caracas-based U.S. reporter covered. UNESCO estimates that there are 39 million adults in Latin America who are still illiterate, and special envoy María Luisa Jáuregui that "Venezuela is the first and only country to meet the commitments adopted by the region's governments in 2002 in Havana to drastically reduce illiteracy."¹⁵⁴ A follow-up program, Robinson II, ensures that newly-literate elders have access to a primary education as well.

In addition, Venezuela has built 650 new elementary schools and refurbished approximately 8,700 elementary school buildings, increasing the enrollment of elementary school by several million children, and now provides snacks, lunches, and other basic necessities to disadvantaged schoolchildren. Pre-school is also being expanded, which is also intended to provide women with additional opportunities for work and support in child-raising.¹⁵⁵

A program for high school dropouts to finish their schooling and get a GED was started in October of 2003, called *Mision Ribas*. Roraima, a 36-year-old maid and mother of two, commented about the program that she "had to drop out of high school in 9th grade to work, so my brothers could go to school. Now I'm getting my GED, and then I will go on to the Mission Sucre to study to become a social worker. Then I will be able to help others, and give back to my community."¹⁵⁶ As of the end of January of 2005, over 880,000 Venezuelans have participated.

The new college program for working class students who previously would not have had access to Venezuela's expensive, elite universities is called *Mision Sucre*. There are currently over 400,000 young

people attending classes, many of them under scholarship, at regional university centers. The most important of these is the national Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela, or UBV, which was inaugurated in a building formerly used by the national oil company, before the reduction in its management led the building to be vacated.

Right to Health: Article 83 of the Venezuelan Constitution states that, “Health is a fundamental social right and the responsibility of the State, which shall guarantee it as part of the right to life. The State shall promote and develop policies oriented toward improving the quality of life, common welfare and access to services.”¹⁵⁷

Since April of 2003, the government launched the Mission *Barrio Adentro*, which means “inside the neighborhood” in Spanish, to create a primary, prevention-focused and community-based network of free health care clinics for low income citizens. These clinics are readily apparent to any visitor in Caracas, as they are hexagon two-story red brick buildings with deep blue trim. There are now 6,420 clinics built with 2,359 in construction. Venezuelan officials estimate that the clinics have offered 162 million consultations (an average of over six per inhabitant) and saved 31,063 lives. These clinics are modeled on the health care system of Cuba, and in fact use a network of Cuban doctors, a country with a lower infant mortality rate than the US. Another layer of more specialized clinics called Diagnostic Centers and Centers for Holistic Rehabilitation are also being constructed.

Job Creation and Tackling Unemployment: Article 299 of the Constitution states that “the economic regime of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is based on the principles of social justice, democratization, efficiency, free competition, protection of the environment, productivity and solidarity, with a view to ensuring overall human development and a dignified and useful existence for the community.”¹⁵⁸ A complex mission called *Vuelvan Caras* (About Face) was created to address longstanding problem of unemployment in Venezuelan. A central aspect of the Bolivarian project is a re-vindication of the role of the state in the economy, that is a combining of both the freedom of the private sector with the responsibility of the state in promoting a healthy economy. The Venezuelan government identified the need to create a mechanism for helping to assure jobs for citizens, particularly at a time when so much emphasis was being placed on education. At the same time, Venezuela has placed emphasis on what it calls an endogenous development model, which includes basic principles such as focusing on national production, job creation, strategic use of natural resources, and cooperatives and small and medium sized businesses. This is a wholesale departure from a neoliberal economic model that emphasizes the primacy of the private sector over the state, and focuses on foreign investment, reducing tariffs, increasing exports, and consolidating rights of transnational corporations.

Launched in March of 2004, *Vuelvan Caras* has created about 6,814 cooperatives, a remarkable catalyst for putting more control of production in the hands of workers. At the same time, 130 centers for endogenous development have been created, which involve renovation of unused production facilities to provide job growth and increase consumption of locally made products. The unemployment rate hovered around 10-12% during 1996-2002, but skyrocketed to nearly 20% during the opposition strike/lock-out of the end of 2003. Since then, unemployment has decreased significantly each year, and currently stands at a seven year low of 8.9%.¹⁵⁹

The Right to Food: Article 305 of the Venezuelan Constitution reads, “the State shall promote sustainable agriculture as the strategic basis for overall rural development, and consequently shall guarantee the population a secure food supply, defined as the sufficient and stable availability of food within the national sphere and timely and uninterrupted access to the same for consumers.”¹⁶⁰

The program *Mision Mercal* was created as a network of neighborhood stores offering basic food products, such as beans, rice, cooking oil, and chicken, at low prices to guarantee nutrition. The program now includes over 14,000 local subsidized food stores, open to all Venezuelans, with an average discount of 37% from prices in private groceries. In addition, a Nutritional Supplement program offers low-income Venezuelans steeper discounts of the basic foods, similar to the food stamp program in the US. A network of over 6,000 Nutrition Houses, similar to U.S. soup kitchens, benefit over 900,000 people by offering free hot meals to the poor.

Agriculture and Land Reform: Venezuela is also carrying out a large-scale land reform program, to increase domestic food production and decrease rural unemployment – a major strategy for diversifying the country’s production base away from petroleum. Called *Mision Zamora* after a famous farmer leader, the program is intended to alter centuries-old feudal economic patterns of concentrating power in large *latifundios* in a country where a mere 5% of the population owns 75% of the country’s land, much of which is unused. Based on the 2001 Law on Land and Agricultural Development, the goals are “to set limits on the size of landholdings, tax unused property as an incentive to spur agricultural growth, redistribute unused, primarily government-owned land to peasant families and cooperatives and, lastly, expropriate uncultivated and fallow land from large, private estates for the purpose of redistribution. On the last and most controversial goal, the landowners would be compensated for their land at market value.”¹⁶¹

The program has distributed 5 million acres of government land to over 68,000 farmers, something that one might think would leave free-marketers cheering. Although the vast majority of the land being distributed is state land, it is one of the most controversial of the government’s programs because of allegations from large landowners that their land is being taken away by the state. In fact, this is one of the only missions that has received coverage in the mainstream press, because of the strong reaction to it from the elite sectors of Venezuelan society; all of the stories written about the program thus far have focused on allegations of two giant landholders, at El Charcote and Hato Pinero,¹⁶² rather than the concerns of the millions of rural poor and landless Venezuelans.¹⁶³ Unfortunately, peasant farmers continue to be killed by paramilitaries operated by the ranchers, a phenomenon which is lamentably common in Latin America yet receives scant media coverage. The key to the program’s success has coupling land reform with credit and technical assistance for farmers, widely viewed as the difference between programs that work and those that fail.

Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Although Venezuela has a much smaller population of Indigenous than its Andean neighbors, the rights of historically marginalized Indigenous Venezuelans has been a focus of the Chávez administration. Section VIII of the Constitution contains 8 articles addressing Indigenous peoples’ rights. It begins, “Article 119: The State recognizes the existence of native peoples and communities, their social, political and economic organization, their cultures, practices and customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitat and original rights to the lands they ancestrally and traditionally occupy, and which are necessary to develop and guarantee their way of life.”¹⁶⁴ These articles are implemented through *Mision Guaicaipuro*, launched in August of 2004, which has provided 21 collective land titles and other projects which regarding official recognition of Indigenous identity, languages and cultures and access to development funds. In addition, the Literacy Campaign has been carried out even to the most remote Indigenous villages, providing a bridge for those who want to overcome years of marginalization from Venezuela’s Spanish speaking culture. “I didn’t know how to read and write before. I knew how to plant the seeds and how to harvest the crops. Now I can also prepare the reports and the invoices,” said Hernan Garcia, a father of eight.¹⁶⁵

Rights of Women: Venezuela is one of the first countries in the world to offer a pension for housewives.

In addition, an extensive micro-credit program has financed small enterprise development through the only state-owned women's bank in the world, called BanMujer. A Guardian article explained it this way: "All the employees are women. By offering small loans of around \$1,000 per head, its aim is to increase the prosperity of women and transform them into entrepreneurial high-fliers. ... Since it started in March 2001, the bank has issued 51,000 credits for a range of ideas from cleaning co-ops and fashion design businesses to hairdressers and sweet manufacturers."¹⁶⁶ As the bank's director, Nora Castañeda has explained, "since 70% of the world's poor are women, women must be central to economic change to eliminate poverty."¹⁶⁷

In recognition of the low rates of participation of women in government posts, the CNE passed a resolution in April of 2005 which mandates all political parties to run an equal number of men and women to any decision-making body. While this is an important step forward, women's groups have called for a broader mandate for a women's rights agenda.¹⁶⁸ In addition, the Constitution mandates inclusive gender language, which has become much more commonplace in Venezuela.

As of yet, programs on other key concerns, such as violence against women, have not become prominent. And unfortunately, due to massive opposition to the Catholic Church in the drafting of the Constitution, the right to abortion was not codified. As in most of Latin America, it will take a legislature willing to stand up to the Church, or a legal challenge, to change the law.

Rights of Afro-Venezuelans: Descents of African origin in Venezuela are not accorded specific rights in Venezuela. However, because of the participatory nature of Venezuelan democracy, Afro-Venezuelans have been able to organize and gain official recognition of their contributions to Venezuelan society, including their inclusion in new primary curriculum.¹⁶⁹ The Afro-Venezuelan Network has also succeeded in lobbying the government to create a Presidential Commission against Racism, which is to be inaugurated in March 2006.¹⁷⁰ High-profile African Americans, including actor Danny Glover,¹⁷¹ singer Harry Belafonte, and political leader Jesse Jackson¹⁷² have traveled to and expressed support for Venezuela as well.

Right to Housing: Millions of Venezuelans, just like the poor across Latin America, live in precarious conditions, in slums with little or no access to electricity, water, or sewage, having built their houses on their own. The Constitution states that all Venezuelans have a right to a home that is "adequate, safe, comfortable, hygienic, and supplied with basic essential services."¹⁷³ A 2002 Venezuela law establishes a mechanism by which families living in a slum can organize and apply together for individual titles to their properties – which in turn allow them to get access to credit and state-funded infrastructure improvements.¹⁷⁴ This is carried out through the establishment of Urban Land Committees (CTUs).¹⁷⁵

The CTUs serve as a central community organizing space, because of their nonpartisan nature and their focus on community improvement. Although the Urban Land Committees are the largest form of social organization in Venezuela, comprising over 5 million people,¹⁷⁶ not one feature article has been written about them in the mainstream press.

The newest mission is dedicated to the mother of the famous tutor of Simón Bolívar, *Negra Hipólita*, and only began this past January 14. It is specifically focused on incorporating those who have been excluded or marginalized, from previous governments or from the other missions themselves; the homeless, indigent people, street children, and people with drug addictions or other severe problems. It will be an effort to reach out to the most marginalized of Venezuelan society, and ensure the vision of the new motto of *Venezuela: Ahora es de Todos*: Now, Venezuela is for All of Us.

Rejection of the Neoliberal Economic Model, Creation of Regional Integration Alternatives

Fortunately, the impacts of Venezuela's new economic model are not just benefiting the poor within Venezuela. A fundamental aspect of Venezuela's vision for the future of Latin America is creating an alternative to the neoliberal model of corporate globalization that will address the growing scourge of poverty in the region.

According to the UN, 222 million people - 43% of the population of Latin America - are poor, with 96 million – nearly one in five – living on less than a buck a day. But the vision for exactly how to create economic growth – and ensure that growth creates jobs and reduces poverty – remains mired in controversy.

During the last 25 years, many Latin American governments have followed the Washington Consensus neoliberal economic model of privatization, lowering tariffs, opening up to foreign investment, and eroding worker's rights, usually under pressure from "structural adjustment" programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund. During this time, exports have increased, and yet Latin America has experienced a spectacular failure of economic growth – less than .5% per capita income growth average since 1980. By way of contrast, the previous twenty years saw a total of 80% economic growth, or average 4% per person per year.¹⁷⁷

A strikingly candid assessment by the *Wall Street Journal* last November acknowledged that the "rise of Mr. Chávez, and of other more moderate leftist leaders in Latin America, reflects the disappointing results of the so-called Washington Consensus, a set of market-oriented policies like trade liberalization and privatization that the region and parts of Asia embraced during the 1990s."¹⁷⁸ Yet Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice still talk in Latin America about the need to promote the "twin pillars of democracy and free trade."

Citizens in the region, however, are increasingly electing democratic governments that prioritize economic growth and development strategies, turning away from the failed neoliberal models of the recent decades.¹⁷⁹ This has been the case in Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, and to some extent Brazil, although nowhere more prominently than in Venezuela.

In spite of the obvious failure of the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, to lower poverty or unemployment rates while increasing exports,¹⁸⁰ expanding NAFTA to the western hemisphere through the Free Trade Area of the Americas – the FTAA – has been the top political priority of the U.S. in Latin America for the last ten years. But in 2003 the talks faltered, and have been stalled ever since.¹⁸¹

So Venezuela has not just been active in promoting regional integration; it has also been active in fomenting opposition to the expansion of the neoliberal model, particularly to the FTAA. And it is this resistance to the imposition of a failed economic model that has earned President Chávez some of the ire of the Bush administration.¹⁸² This seems to be particularly the case because of a general trend away from these policies in and more towards the policies pursued by the Chávez administration in the region.¹⁸³

In November of 2005, Bush and Chávez both participated in the Summit of the Americas, in Mar del Plata, Argentina, at a gathering of leaders in the region that was intended to focus on creating jobs.¹⁸⁴ Instead, the summit turned into a referendum on free trade, with Bush attempting to jump-start talks for the FTAA. At the same time, Chávez headlined a giant rally with hemispheric social movement leaders

and proclaimed Mar del Plata the “tomb of the FTAA.”¹⁸⁵ The meeting was widely interpreted as a failure for the Bush administration.

Venezuela’s perspective on the FTAA and WTO is based on their popularly approved Constitution, and mirrors several key aspects of the social movement critique of the corporate globalization model.

A basic goal of neoliberalism is to reduce the role of the state in domestic policymaking and increase the control of foreign capital over local economies. Venezuela has argued that the state must maintain a role in promoting domestic economic development through strategic use of tariffs and government subsidies to protect nascent industries and promote local development of jobs, as in the *Vuelvan Caras* program. These are tools that governments around the world – including the U.S. – have used for decades to help promote national economic growth and create local jobs.¹⁸⁶ Yet the U.S. and EU proposals in the WTO¹⁸⁷ would drastically reduce the ability of developing countries from employing the same strategies we used, effectively “kicking away the ladder of development.”¹⁸⁸ Venezuela has opposed these measures in global arenas, signing on with a group of 11 countries calling for the right to protect developing country’s industrial policy space in the WTO, for example.

Another key aspect of Venezuela’s opposition to corporate globalization is in its approach to services. The “liberalization” of services involves privatizing services that are owned by the public to meet basic human needs including health care, education, and distribution of water and electricity. But these basic services are guaranteed to Venezuelans in the Constitution. Programs like *Barrio Adentro* and the education missions, detailed above, ensure access of Venezuelans to basic services. At the same time, promoting regional integration programs focusing on eradicating illiteracy have been a focus on the Chávez administration: on April 18th, 2005 Venezuela presented a proposal for a massive regional literacy program to a visiting UNESCO committee.¹⁸⁹ These programs exemplify the commitment to the right to basic services, and are incompatible with privatized education or health care. And the case of SAIC’s interference in the Venezuelan oil company’s PdVSA’s computer operations is a dire warning about the danger of allowing foreign ownership of domestic services in strategic industries.

Agriculture is another sector that exemplifies how Venezuela’s model challenges the dictates of the corporate globalization model. Venezuela has focused on agriculture as a key sector for moving out of dependence on oil exports and towards food sovereignty. Yet the failed model of corporate globalization treats food as any other commodity, to be traded on the global market, rather than in the context of the human right to food.¹⁹⁰ Domestically, Venezuela has been carrying out massive programs of land reform, credit and technical assistance for farmers, and providing food subsidies for the poor, outlined above. As well, many of Venezuela’s regional integration programs include the trade of oil for food, such as Argentine meat and Bolivian soybeans. Globally, along with developing-country political alliances in the WTO, Venezuela has called for the reduction of export subsidies of rich countries,¹⁹¹ and the right of countries to support their agricultural sectors to preserve food sovereignty, cultural diversity, and traditional rural livelihoods.¹⁹²

Venezuela’s leadership in opposition to the corporate globalization model has moved beyond Latin America into the global sphere. Venezuela took the courageous move of registering several “reservations” in the recent Hong Kong Ministerial of the World Trade Organization, in opposition to the U.S. and European agenda of expanding the WTO’s mandate to privatize services and cut off developing countries’ industrial policy space.¹⁹³

As Venezuela continues to express its leadership in the regional and global arenas in advocating for, and implementing, alternative models to corporate globalization that are more successful in promoting

development, the Bush administration and its corporate backers will likely become increasingly vocal about their concerns about Venezuela. And it seems likely that they will continue to couch their concerns about Venezuela's opposition to the failed model of corporate globalization under the guise of alleged concerns about democracy.

Turning the Tide: Transforming a World After 500 Years of Colonial Domination

In addition to the challenge to the corporate economic model, the fundamental antagonism between the U.S. and Venezuela also stems from a deeper source. That is the tension between the desires of the Bush administration to maintain the US's global geopolitical supremacy, which contrasts strongly with an underlying goal of the entire Venezuelan project: a change in the global balance of power from a "uni-polar" world dominated by U.S. economic and strategic interests, to a "multi-polar" world of real economic and political independence for the global South.

President Chávez often invokes the prescience of Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of Venezuela in 1810 and much of the rest of South America in years following, in his famous quote that "The United States seems destined by Providence to plague America with misery in the name of liberty." In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine set forth what would become U.S. policy towards Latin America: that the U.S. would regard any interference in western hemispheric affairs as a threat to its security. Since then, the U.S. has often been viewed in Latin America as failing to respect the independence and sovereignty of Latin American and Caribbean nations. Bolívar's writings focused on his dream for a unified Latin America, free of influence and domination from the US.¹⁹⁴ Chávez has often argued that Bolívar's dream has yet to be realized, and he sees it as a fundamental goal of the Bolivarian project to realize that dream. Hence Venezuela's emphasis on strengthening regional alliances, and supporting neighboring countries in times of crisis like Ecuador, Haiti, and Argentina, and most recently through support for the new government in Bolivia.¹⁹⁵

But the unity and independence from foreign domination Chávez has called for is not limited to the US, but includes the rest of the developing world as well. This helps put in perspective Venezuela's recent decision to support Iran in the International Atomic Energy Association, because Iran is an historic ally of Venezuela in the building of OPEC decades ago (when the two countries, along with Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, first came together to ensure that oil producing nations shared in some of the oil wealth along with the oil multinationals.) It also explains the increasing diversification of Venezuela's foreign relations, deepening its alliances in Latin American and the Caribbean but also reaching out to expand oil investment and other projects with developing country powerhouses such as China¹⁹⁶ and India,¹⁹⁷ as well as Russia¹⁹⁸ and Spain.

It also explains why the Bush administration seems so irrationally focused on antagonizing an economic ally and democratic neighbor. In essence, it is because of the neoconservative tendency dominating the Bush administration, and its unwavering ideological commitment to a corporate-oriented global economy and a world subjugated by U.S. strategic interests. Chávez seeks to challenge that vision, and build a more balanced geopolitical map. And to the chagrin of the Bush administration, his vision has met with tremendous support both within Latin America and globally.

Part 4. Winning Strategies to Stop U.S. Intervention

As in other times in the history of U.S. foreign policy, an educated U.S. populace can serve as a counter-balance to U.S. imperial aggressions. So far, the people of Venezuela have been able to defend their democracy from a coup, an economic sabotage, espionage, and an unabated media campaign, all backed by U.S. government financing and other support. As long as U.S. consumers, and US-based

multinational oil corporations, continue to need Venezuela's heating oil and gasoline, it appears to be in the long-term interests of the people of the United States to allow Venezuelan democracy to function.

But history also shows that unchecked U.S. government imperial desires can gain the upper hand in the White House and State Department. To put the brakes on U.S. intervention, Venezuela needs allies – political allies such as an educated populace, civic leaders, media, and Congress – that can become a strong political counterweight to the Bush administration.

1. Become Educated about Venezuela.

The most informative website in English on Venezuela for regular updates is www.venezuelanalysis.com. Released official U.S. documents demonstrating U.S. support for the opposition in Venezuela are available at www.venezuelafoia.info. The Venezuela Information Office offers daily and weekly listserves to keep updated, as well as background memos and news updates, at www.rethinkvenezuela.org. Global Exchange's website has information on monthly travel opportunities to Venezuela at www.globalexchange.org. The online magazine Z-net carries extensive coverage of Venezuela at http://www.zmag.org/venezuela_watch.cfm.

There is an extensive Spanish-language directory of websites located at the University of Texas at Austin's Venezuela page, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/venezuela/>. Spanish-language public media include the Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, <http://www.abn.info.ve/>, and President Chávez's weekly *Alo Presidente* show, available on <http://www.vtv.gov.ve/>. Opposition press include *El Universal*, <http://www.eluniversal.com>, and Teodoro Petkoff's *Tal Cual*, <http://www.talcualdigital.com/>.

The most widely-acclaimed recent book about Venezuela is Richard Gott's new semi-biography, *Hugo Chávez: The Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela*. For analysis of U.S. intervention in Venezuela, try Eva Golinger's *The Chávez Code: Cracking U.S. Intervention in Venezuela*. And the best scholarly compilation is *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization, and Conflict*, edited by Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger.

In addition, the more U.S. citizens travel to Venezuela and understand the process for themselves, the better. Many organizations now offer delegations where regular U.S. citizens can meet with a wide variety of actors, including government and opposition figures, journalists, professors, farmers, housewives, youth, and workers, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the various opinions of Venezuelans themselves. Global Exchange offers monthly delegations, at <http://www.globalexchange.org/tours/byCountry.html#100003>.

2. Advocate for truth in the media.

Most people in the U.S. scarcely know about the reality of US-Venezuelan relations. A more accurate public dialogue on Venezuela is essential in the U.S. to expose the antics of the Bush administration in Venezuela, and forestall further U.S. intervention.

Anyone can become an effective media watchdog, and promote a more balanced media by responding to inaccurate stories with letters to the editor; writing articles for local or community media about Venezuela; and writing letters to reporters reminding them of the facts when they get them wrong, or exhibit dramatic bias in their reporting. The Venezuela Information Office offers a helpful media action guide at www.rethinkvenezuela.org.

3. Support Citgo.

Encourage friends and colleagues to support the Venezuelan social programs by buying gas from Citgo. For the first time, the profits of the oil industry are being invested directly into education, healthcare and land reform. If you've got to buy gas, supporting the Venezuelan owned U.S. subsidiary Citgo is one way to guarantee continued financial support for these programs, www.citgo.com/CITGOLocator.jsp.

4. Demand a change in U.S. policy, led by the Legislative branch

Congress has been an important venue for putting the brakes on the Executive branch's efforts to undermine Venezuelan sovereignty. For example, during Condoleezza Rice's confirmation hearings, when she forwarded her theory about Chávez's "negative influence on the region," Senators Christopher Dodd (D-CT) and Lincoln Chafee (R-RI) rebuffed her, having just traveled to the region.¹⁹⁹ Chafee commented that Rice's attitude "seems disrespectful to the Venezuelan people" who voted for Chávez.²⁰⁰ Congressman Raúl Grijalva has hosted Congressional briefings on Venezuela, in an effort to bring a more balanced dialogue to the Hill, and has written letters to the Attorney General about the case of Luis Posada Carriles.

Congressional support has been key in the success of the Citgo subsidy program for poor Americans. Congressman Bill Delahunt (D-MA) was active in helping to secure "more than 12 million gallons of heavily discounted heating oil will flow to ... help ensure 50,000 low-income families and hundreds of homeless shelters, hospitals and daycare centers will have heat this winter."²⁰¹ Senator Jack Reed was instrumental in gaining 3 million gallons of discounted oil, which will help support 9,000 Rhode Island families through the winter.²⁰² José Serrano (D-NY) was one of the first to take up the Venezuelan offer, securing discounted fuel for 8,000 low-income Bronx residents after President Chávez's visit last fall.²⁰³ Representative Chaka Fattah (D-PA) helped broker the deal for more than 25,000 low-income families in the Philadelphia region.²⁰⁴ Thousands of low-income Vermonters, including the homeless, will benefit from about 2.4 million gallons of discounted fuel oil from Venezuela this winter under a deal arranged by Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-VT).²⁰⁵ Citizens Energy Corporation, a nonprofit founded in 1979 by Joseph Kennedy II (D-MA), is involved in distribution of the subsidized fuel.

In addition, members of Venezuela's National Assembly have met repeatedly with members of the U.S. Congress in search of improved relations.²⁰⁶

Sometimes, however, Congressmembers can act to repeat oft-heard Bush administration myths. Senator Mel Martinez (R-FL) and Bill Nelson (D-FL) seem to have been playing to the right-wing Cuban American constituency of their state with repeated negative comments about Venezuela.²⁰⁷ And Representative Connie Mack, a first-term member from Florida, has authored House Concurrent Resolution 328, a non-binding resolution intended to condemn the government of Venezuela. A full analysis of the "Myths and Facts" of H Con Res 328 has been developed by the Venezuela Information Office, available at <http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/hcr328.htm>.

Citizens can write their elected official to demand that the U.S. change course with Venezuela. They can ask them to oppose H Con Res 328. And they can ask that our representatives in Congress embark upon a new relationship with Venezuela; one based on shared economic interests, as well as respect for the sovereignty of the Venezuelan people and their democratic government.

Conclusion: A New Chapter in US-Venezuela Relations is Possible

Current US-Venezuelan relations are at a dangerous crossroads. It is likely that President Chávez and the Venezuelans will continue down the path of transforming their domestic economy, promoting alternatives to corporate globalization and regional integration, and working towards the eventual transformation of geopolitical alliances that challenge U.S. hegemony. As well, the Venezuelan government doesn't show signs of moderating their rhetoric against U.S. intervention.

At the same time, the U.S. government, led by President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, appears to be committed to the current failed path of attempting to isolate Venezuela in the region; impugning Venezuelan democracy; and maintaining a series of baseless myths in the media.

Many would note that this confrontation between the two historic neighbors could have been avoided, had the U.S. not set out on the wrong foot by supporting the coup against Chávez. Certainly, relations between the two countries cannot improve until the U.S. government renounces its efforts to support an opposition focused on removing the President from office, and takes responsibility for its previous activities. And both the U.S. and Venezuela have an interest in maintaining positive commercial relations, particularly regarding Venezuelan oil.

But in the context of the Bush administration, a change in the near future seems unlikely, because the issue goes far beyond a mere dislike of Chávez personally. A change in approach for the U.S. would indicate a fundamental shift in the role of the U.S. globally, from one of a nation working to impose its economic dominance around the world, and particularly in the hemisphere, to one which respects its neighbors sovereign right to choose economic models that might differ from that of the US's choosing. A sudden shift in policy along these lines from Foggy Bottom seems unlikely.

That means that it is up to other sectors of the U.S. to put limits on U.S. government intervention in Venezuela. As noted above, courageous Members of Congress have made a difference at key moments in the last several years, defending Venezuelan democracy and calling for a new bilateral relationship. These efforts circumscribe some of the Bush administration's worst aggressions against the country.

Likewise, citizens of the U.S. can play an important role shaping media coverage of Venezuela, which can have a positive impact on public debate. The humanitarian gesture of Citgo will have a far-reaching impact, not just among families who benefit from it, but among the public at large. Most Americans might not know where Venezuela is on a map, and likely have no idea what political philosophy Chávez subscribes to; but they do know that hundreds of thousands of Americans were able to stay warm this winter because a foreign oil company came to the rescue when the federal government and U.S. oil companies left them in the cold.

In the midst of a failed occupation of Iraq, many Americans are now questioning the basic tenets of U.S. government's foreign policy, particularly our role in foreign interventions. In the context of the history of U.S. overreaching involvement in Latin America, and the general shift to the left of many governments in the region, it is high time for a thorough review of U.S. policy. Perhaps considering the failure of U.S. adventurism in the Middle East, together with the rise of independence-minded governments in Latin America with rapidly growing economies that is forcing an increasing acknowledgement of the failure of the Washington Consensus economic model, the time is ripe for a fundamental shift in U.S. official attitudes towards Latin America, and towards Venezuela in particular. It is up to the public to ensure that the U.S. government recognizes this, and that a new path of respect among sovereign, democratic nations is forged.

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¹ “The United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) spent three million dollars in Chile in an attempt to direct the outcome of that country’s 1964 presidential elections. Between 1970, when Salvador Allende was elected president, and the 1973 coup that ousted him, the CIA covertly spent another eight million dollars in Chile. In 1975, the U.S. Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, under the leadership of Senator Frank Church, investigated the CIA’s activities, and found that the Agency had employed a stunning array of underhanded tactics to discredit Allende and foment opposition to his administration - opposition that ultimately staged a coup in 1973 and imposed 17 years of brutal dictatorship. According to the Church committee, the Nixon Administration employed widespread propaganda, instigated financial panic, knowingly distorted facts to portray Allende as violent and repressive, and actively supported Allende’s political adversaries. Summarizing these actions, the Church Committee noted that the Nixon Administration’s intervention in Chile was based not only on “extensive clandestine activities,” but rather “a triad of official actions” combining covert action with a “cool but correct public posture,” and “economic pressure, both overt and covert.” (Staff Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate, 18 December, 1975, p. 175.)” quoted from “U.S. Policy on Democracy on Chile and Venezuela,” Venezuela Information Office, July 21, 2004.

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