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My blog: The War Department and Peace Heroes
http://jamesrichardbennett.blogspot.com/
www.faypublic.tv/watch

Newsletters on Peace, Justice, and Ecology:
http://www.omnicenter.org/newsletter-archive/
Index:
http://www.omnicenter.org/omni-newsletter-general-index/
Send a Message to Secretary of State John Kerry

Respect Venezuela’s Democracy and Sovereignty!

Today, representatives of 47 countries will be present in Venezuela at the swearing-in ceremony for their president-elect Nicolas Maduro. One nation will be glaringly missing: the United States. The refusal of the US to recognize the winner of last Sunday’s election is damaging our own nation. Please click here to send a message to Secretary of State John Kerry to demand that the U.S. respect Venezuela’s electoral process and stop intervening in Venezuela’s democracy.

BREAKING NEWS: The Genocide Trial of General Efrain Rios Montt Has Just Been Suspended

SOA Graduate and former Guatemalan military dictator Rios Montt

For a while it looked like Guatemala was about to deliver justice.

But the genocide case against General Efrain Rios Montt has just been suspended, hours before a criminal court was poised to deliver a verdict.
The United States is once again standing alone on the wrong side of history. Following the coup of the democratically-elected government of Manuel Zelaya of Honduras on June 28, 2009, the United States' silence was the veritable elephant in the room. As governments across the world condemned the coup, the US stood alone in its quixotic "defense of democracy." The blood shed since has exposed the cost of that silence.

An electoral observation delegation sponsored by SOA WATCH and MITF (Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas) recently returned from Venezuela and verified the credibility and efficiency of their electoral system, as confirmed by electoral observers from around the world. We were all struck by the integrity of their voting system - its transparency and incredible system of checks and balances, including paper receipts and a built-in system of 54% auditing comparing those receipts against the electronic results. Jimmy Carter said it is the best voting system in the world.

The election was very close: Interim president Nicolas Maduro gathered 50.66% of the votes compared to 49.07% of opposition candidate Henrique Capriles (A 1.6% margin). But the vote was not as close as the Kennedy-Nixon election (with a mere 0.1% margin) or the Bush - Gore election (where Gore actually won the popular vote by a 0.5% margin) and was comparable to the Kerry - Bush election (a 2.4% margin). Venezuelans voted massively - over 78% of them. The US has not seen that many voters at its polls for a presidential election since 1898. The 2012 elections had a 57.5% turnout. More strikingly, 95% of eligible voters in Venezuela are registered to vote, while in the US, a mere 61.1% are registered.

Rather than congratulate the Venezuelan people for their outstanding expression of democracy, the US has taken the low road, backing the demands and behavior of Capriles, their candidate of choice. Within minutes of the announced results, Capriles took to the Venezuelan air waves to give an enraged discourse. He refused to accept the results, demanded a full recount, called Maduro illegitimate, and asked his followers to take to the streets to protest. Twenty four hours later, 8 people were dead, most of them supporters of Maduro, and over 60 injured. Eight health clinics staffed by Cuban doctors and three food stores were among dozens of public service buildings that were attacked by hoards of Capriles followers.

In the wake of this tragedy, a segment of serious opposition followers began to pull away, and international opinion began to question the democratic credentials of Capriles, who was linked to an attack on the Cuban embassy shortly after the US-sponsored coup of 2002. In an effort to save face, Capriles called off a march scheduled for Thursday and accepted the suggestion of Venezuela's Attorney General to file his complaint in a legal manner as outlined by the constitution.

Venezuela's independent National Electoral Board agreed yesterday to audit the remaining 46% of the votes that were not audited in the first round, bringing the audit to 100% of the votes. Spokespersons for the Maduro government expressed satisfaction with this decision, as did the Capriles campaign.

Last night the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) issued an official declaration endorsing Maduro as the legitimate president of the country and congratulating him on his electoral victory. In spite of these new developments, the U.S. fails to recognize Maduro as president in contrast to world leaders gathering at this moment to witness the swearing-in ceremony.

When will our government just take a seat on Latin America's bus of sovereignty and democracy, rather than burn its tires or subvert the route? Ask your government.

The last-second decision to kill the case was technically taken by an appeals court.

But behind the decision stands secret intervention by Guatemala's current president, SOA graduate Otto Pérez Molina, and death threats delivered to judges and prosecutors by associates of Guatemala's army. [...]

Read the full article: http://www.allannairn.org/2013/04/breaking-news-genocide-trial-of-general.html

SOA graduates formed the backbone of the presidential cabinets under the dictatorships of both Montt and his predecessor, Romeo Lucas Garcia. They were also deeply involved in the Guatemalan Intelligence Agency (D-2), in the formation of the notorious civil defense patrols, and in planning and executing “Operation Sofia,” which wiped out some 600 Mayan villages, part of a broader campaign “of genocide against groups of Mayan people,” the 1999 UN-backed truth commission concluded.

Click here to watch today's Democracy Now! coverage of the suspension of the genocide trial.
In Death as in Life, Chavez Target of Media Scorn

Peter Hart Wed, 06 Mar 2013 13:32:14 -0800

FAIR <http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/592/images/fair-header-cropped.jpg>

Media Advisory

In Death as in Life, Chávez Target of Media Scorn.

His independence, help for Venezuela's poor will not be forgiven.

<http://www.fair.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/chavez2-300x204.jpg>

3/6/13

Venezuela's left-wing populist president Hugo Chávez died on Tuesday, March 5, after a two-year battle with cancer. If world leaders were judged by the sheer volume of corporate media vitriol and misinformation about their policies, Chávez would be in a class of
Shortly after Chávez won his first election in 1998, the U.S. government deemed him a threat to U.S. interests—an image U.S. media eagerly played up. When a coup engineered by Venezuelan business and media elites removed Chávez from power, many leading U.S outlets praised the move (Extra!, <http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/dia/track.jsp?v=2&r=e08sJv0HeKlORE5HOhJKNSIJ%2FbvSBgjml> 6/02). The New York Times (4/13/02), calling it a "resignation," declared that "Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator." The Chicago Tribune (4/14/02) cheered the removal of a leader who had been "praising Osama bin Laden"—an absurdly false charge.

But that kind of reckless rhetoric was evidently permissible in media discussions about Chávez. Seven years later, CNN (1/15/09) hosted a discussion of Chávez with Democratic strategist Doug Schoen, where he and host John Roberts discussed whether or not Chávez was worse than Osama bin Laden. As Schoen put it, "He's given Al-Qaeda and Hamas an open invitation to come to Caracas."
There were almost no limits to overheated media rhetoric about Chávez. In a single news article, Newsweek (11/2/09) managed to compare him to Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. (Chávez had built a movie studio, which is the sort of thing dictators apparently do.) ABC (World News, 10/7/12) called him a "fierce enemy of the United States," the Washington Post (10/16/06) an "autocratic demagogue." Fox News (12/5/05) said that his government was "really Communism"—despite the fact he was repeatedly returned to office in internationally certified elections (Extra!, 11-12/06) that Jimmy Carter deemed "the best in the world" (Guardian, 10/3/12).

Apart from the overheated claims about terrorism and his growing military threat to the region (FAIR Blog, 4/1/07), media often tried to make a simpler case: Chávez wasn't good for Venezuelans. The supposed economic ruin in Venezuela was a staple of
the coverage. The Washington Post editorial page (1/5/13) complained of "the economic pain caused by Mr. Chávez," the man who has "wrecked their once-prosperous country." And a recent New York Times piece (12/13/12) tallied some of the hassles of daily life, declaring that such frustrations are typical in Venezuela, for rich and poor alike, and yet President Hugo Chávez has managed to stay in office for nearly 14 years, winning over a significant majority of the public with his outsize personality, his free-spending of state resources and his ability to convince Venezuelans that the Socialist revolution he envisions will make their lives better.

Of course, Venezuelans might feel that Chávez already had improved their lives (FAIR Blog, 12/13/12), with poverty cut in half, increased availability of food and
healthcare, expanded educational opportunities and a real effort to build grassroots democratic institutions. (For more of this, read Greg Grandin's piece in the Nation--


3/5/13.)

Those facts of Venezuelan life were not entirely unacknowledged by U.S. media. But these policies, reflecting new national priorities about who should benefit from the country's oil wealth, were treated as an unscrupulous ploy of Chávez's to curry favor with the poor. As the Washington Post ( [http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=bTozTf7e5e3syi7W4J%2FbvSBgjm1](http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=bTozTf7e5e3syi7W4J%2FbvSBgjm1)

2/24/13) sneered, Chávez won "unconditional support from the poverty-stricken masses" by "doling out jobs to supporters and showering the poor with gifts." NPR's All Things Considered (3/5/13) told listeners that "millions of Venezuelans loved him because he showered the poor with social programs."

Buying the support of your own citizens is one thing; harboring negative feelings about the United States is something else entirely. As CBS Evening News (1/18/13) recently put it, "Chávez has made a career out of bashing the United States." But one wonders how friendly any U.S. political leaders would be toward a government that had supported their overthrow.
Though this is often treated as another Chávez conspiracy theory--"A central ideological pillar of Chávez's rule over 14 years has been to oppose Republican and Democratic administrations in Washington, which he accuses of trying to destabilize his government," the Washington Post (<http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=gNgT7h%2BWZDNnkebLCA4SZYJ%2FbvSBgjml>) reported--the record of U.S. support for the coup leaders is clear.

As a State Department report (FAIR Blog, <http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=9Vr%2BcI316JpNH%2BBbWODg5YJ%2FbvSBgjml>) acknowledged, various U.S. agencies had "provided training, institution building and other support to individuals and organizations understood to be actively involved in the brief ouster of the Chávez government." The Bush administration declared its support for the short-lived coup regime, saying Chávez was "responsible for his fate" (Guardian, <http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=ZYaUq8YR01T%2Fz5242Yyuz4J%2FbvSBgjml> 4/21/09).

Of course, as with any country, there are aspects of Chávez's government that could be criticized. U.S. media attention to Venezuela's flaws, however, was obviously in service to an official agenda--as documented by FAIR's study (Extra!, <http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=WaKkDUwYWeDz0yo60SL%2FV4J%2FbvSBgjml>
2/09) of editorials on human rights, which showed Venezuela getting much harsher criticism than the violent repression of the opposition in U.S.-allied Colombia.

In reporting Chávez's death, little had changed. "Venezuela Bully Chávez Is Dead," read the New York Post's front page (3/6/13); "Death of a Demagogue" was on Time's home page (3/6/13). CNN host Anderson Cooper (3/5/13) declared it was "the death of a world leader who made America see red, as in Fidel Castro red, Venezuela's socialist president, Hugo Chávez."

"The words 'Venezuelan strongman' so often preceded his name, and for good reason," declared NBC Nightly News host Brian Williams (3/5/13); on ABC World News (3/5/12), viewers were told that "many Americans viewed him as a dictator." That would be especially true if those Americans consumed corporate media.

The fact that U.S. elite interests are an overarching concern is not exactly hidden. Many reports on Chávez's passing were quick to note the country's oil wealth. NBC's Williams asserted, "All this matters a lot to the U.S., since Venezuela sits on top of a lot of oil and that's how this now gets interesting
for the United States." MSNBC's Rachel Maddow (3/5/13) concurred: "I mean, Venezuela is a serious country in the world stage. It is sitting on the world's largest proven oil reserves."

And CNN's Barbara Starr (3/5/13) reported: "You're going to see a lot of U.S. businesses keep a very close eye on this transition in Venezuela. They're going to want to know that their investments are secure and that this is a stable country to invest in." Those U.S. businesses would seem to include its media corporations.

On the Legacy of Hugo Chávez

Greg Grandin
I first met Hugo Chávez in New York City in September 2006, just after his infamous appearance on the floor of the UN General Assembly, where he called George W. Bush the devil. “Yesterday, the devil came here,” he said, “Right here. Right here. And it smells of sulfur still today, this table that I am now standing in front of.” He then made the sign of the cross, kissed his hand, winked at his audience and looked to the sky. It was vintage Chávez, an outrageous remark leavened with just the right touch of detail (the lingering sulfur!) to make it
something more than bombast, cutting through soporific nostrums of diplomatese and drawing fire away from Iran, which was in the cross hairs at that meeting.

We Recommend

'The Nation' on Hugo Chavez (Politics, World)

A collection of The Nation's reporting and opinion on the Venezuelan president, who died on March 5 at the age of 58.

The Nation

About the Author

Greg Grandin teaches history at New York University and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His...

Also by the Author

The Audacity of Hugo (World Leaders, World)

In fourteen years, Chávez radically transformed Venezuela's economy and society—and the majority of country loved him for it.

Greg Grandin

El legado de Hugo Chávez

Así fue como el hombre que es comparado en Estados Unidos con Stalin sumó en silencio fuerzas con la administración del hombre a quien acababa de llamar Satán, con el noble objetivo de hacer un poco más fácil la vida de los más pobres de América.

Greg Grandin

The press of course went into high dudgeon, and not just for the obvious reason that it’s one thing for opponents in the Middle East to call the United States the Great Satan and another thing for the president of a Latin American country to personally single out its president as Beelzebub, on US soil no less.

I think what really rankled was that Chávez was claiming a privilege that had long belonged to the United States, that is, the right to paint its adversaries not as rational actors but as
existential evil. Latin American populists, from Argentina’s Juan Perón to, most recently, Chávez, have long served as characters in a story the US tells about itself, reaffirming the maturity of its electorate and the moderation of its political culture. There are at most eleven political prisoners in Venezuela, and that’s taking the opposition’s broad definition of the term, which includes individuals who worked to overthrow the government in 2002, and yet it is not just the right in this country who regularly compared Chávez to the worst mass murderers and dictators in history. New Yorker critic Alex Ross, in an essay published a few years back celebrating the wunderkind Venezuelan conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, fretted about enjoying the fruits of Venezuela’s much-lauded government-funded system of music training: “Stalin, too, was a great believer in music for the people.”

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Hugo Chávez was the second of seven children, born in 1954 in the rural village of Sabaneta, in the grassland state of Barinas, to a family of mixed European, Indian and Afro-Venezuelan race. Bart Jones’s excellent biography, Hugo! nicely captures the improbability of Chávez’s rise from dirt-floor poverty—he was sent to live with his grandmother since his parents couldn’t feed their children—through the military, where he became involved with left-wing politics, which in Venezuela meant a mix of international socialism and Latin America’s long history of revolutionary nationalism. It drew inspiration from well-known figures such as Simón Bolívar, as well as lesser-known insurgents, such as nineteenth-century peasant leader Ezequiel Zamora, in whose army Chávez’s great-great-grandfather had served. Born just a few days after the CIA drove reformist Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz from office, he was a young military cadet of 19 in September 1973 when he heard Fidel Castro on the radio announce yet another CIA-backed coup, this one toppling Salvador Allende in Chile.

Awash in oil wealth, Venezuela throughout the twentieth century enjoyed its own kind of exceptionalism, avoiding the extremes of left-wing radicalism and homicidal right-wing anticommunism that overtook many of its neighbors. In a way, the country became the anti-Cuba. In 1958, political elites negotiated a pact that maintained the trappings of democratic rule for four decades, as two ideological indistinguishable parties traded the presidency back and forth (sound familiar?). Where the State Department and its allied policy intellectuals isolated and condemned Havana, they celebrated Caracas as the end point of development. Samuel Huntington praised Venezuela as an example of “successful democratization,” while another political scientist, writing in the early 1980s, said it represented the “only trail to a democratic future for developing societies…a textbook case of step-by-step progress.”
We know now that its institutions were rotting from the inside out. Every sin that Chávez was accused of committing—governing without accountability, marginalizing the opposition, appointing partisan supporters to the judiciary, dominating labor unions, professional organizations and civil society, corruption and using oil revenue to dispense patronage—flourished in a system the United States held up as exemplary.

Petroleum prices began to fall in the mid-1980s. By this point, Venezuela had grown lopsidedly urban, with 16 million of its 19 million citizens living in cities, well over half of them below the poverty line, many in extreme poverty. In Caracas, combustible concentrations of poor people lived cut off from municipal services—such as sanitation and safe drinking water—and hence party and patronage control. The spark came in February 1989, when a recently inaugurated president who had run against the IMF said that he had no choice but to submit to its dictates. He announced a plan to abolish food and fuel subsidies, increase gas prices, privatize state industries and cut spending on health care and education.

Three days of rioting and looting spread through the capital, an event that both marked the end of Venezuelan exceptionalism and the beginning of the hemisphere’s increasingly focused opposition to neoliberalism. Established parties, unions and government institutions proved entirely incapable of restoring legitimacy in austere times, committed as they were to upholding a profoundly unequal class structure.

Chávez emerged from the ruin, first with a failed putsch in 1992, which landed him in jail but turned him into a folk hero. Then in 1998, when he won 56 percent of the vote as a presidential candidate. Inaugurated in 1999, he took office committed to a broad yet vague anti-austerity program, a mild John Kenneth Galbraith—quoting reformer who at first had no power to reform anything. The esteem in which Chávez was held by the majority of Venezuelans, many of them dark-skinned, was matched by the rage he provoked among the country’s mostly white political and economic elites. But their maximalist program of opposition—a US-endorsed coup, an oil strike that destroyed the country’s economy, a recall election and an oligarch-media propaganda campaign that made Fox News seem like PBS—backfired. By 2005, Chávez had weathered the storm and was in control of the nation’s oil, allowing him to embark on an ambitious program of domestic and international transformation: massive social spending at home and “poly-polar equilibrium” abroad, a riff on what Bolívar once called “universal equilibrium,” an effort to break up the US’s historical monopoly of power in Latin America and force Washington to compete for influence.

* * *
Over the last fourteen years, Chávez has submitted himself and his agenda to fourteen national votes, winning thirteen of them by large margins, in polling deemed by Jimmy Carter to be “best in the world” out of the ninety-two elections that he has monitored. (It turns out it isn’t that difficult to have transparent elections: voters in Venezuela cast their ballot on a touch pad, which spits out a receipt they can check and then deposit in a box. At the end of the day, random polling stations are picked for ‘hot audits,’ to make sure the electronic and paper tallies add up). A case is made that this ballot-box proceduralism isn’t democratic, that Chávez dispenses patronage and dominates the media giving him an unfair advantage. But after the last presidential ballot—which Chávez won with the same percentage he did his first election yet with a greatly expanded electorate—even his opponents have admitted, despairingly, that a majority of Venezuelans liked, if not adored, the man.

I’m what they call a useful idiot when it comes to Hugo Chávez, if only because rank-and-file social organizations that to me seem worthy of support in Venezuela continued to support him until the end. My impressionistic sense is that this support breaks down roughly in half, between voters who think their lives and their families’ lives are better off because of Chávez’s massive expansion of state services, including healthcare and education, despite real problems of crime, corruption, shortages and inflation.

The other half of Chávez’s electoral majority is made up of organized citizens involved in one or the other of the country’s many grassroots organizations. Chávez’s social base was diverse and heterodox, what social scientists in the 1990s began to celebrate as “new social movements,” distinct from established trade unions and peasant organizations vertically linked to—and subordinated to—political parties or populist leaders: neighborhood councils; urban and rural homesteaders, feminists, gay and lesbian rights organizations, economic justice activists, environmental coalitions; breakaway unions and the like. It’s these organizations, in Venezuela and elsewhere throughout the region, that have over the last few decades done heroic work in democratizing society, in giving citizens venues to survive the extremes of neoliberalism and to fight against further depredations, turning Latin America into one of the last global bastion of the Enlightenment left.

Chávez’s detractors see this mobilized sector of the population much the way Mitt Romney saw 47 percent of the US electorate not as citizens but parasites, moochers sucking on the oil-rent teat. Those who accept that Chávez enjoyed majority support disparaged that support as emotional enthrallment. Voters, wrote one critic, see their own vulnerability in their leader and are entranced. Another talked about Chávez’s “magical realist” hold over his followers.
One anecdote alone should be enough to give the lie to the idea that poor Venezuelans voted for Chávez because they were fascinated by the baubles they dangled in front of them. During the 2006 presidential campaign, the signature pledge of Chávez’s opponent was to give 3,000,000 poor Venezuelans a black credit card (black as in the color of oil) from which they could withdraw up to $450 in cash a month, which would have drained over $16 billion dollars a year from the national treasury (call it neoliberal populism: give to the poor just enough to bankrupt the government and force the defunding of services). Over the years, there’s been a lot of heavy theoretically breathing by US academics about the miasma oil wealth creates in countries like Venezuela, lulling citizens into a dreamlike state that renders them into passive spectators. But in this election at least, Venezuelans managed to see through the mist. Chávez won with over 62 percent of the vote.

Let’s set aside for a moment the question of whether Chavismo’s social-welfare programs will endure now that Chávez is gone and shelve the left-wing hope that out of rank-and-file activism a new, sustainable way of organizing society will emerge. The participatory democracy that took place in barrios, in workplaces and in the countryside over the last fourteen years was a value in itself, even if it doesn’t lead to a better world.

There’s been great work done on the ground by scholars such as Alejandro Velasco, Sujatha Fernandes, Naomi Schiller and George Ciccariello-Maher on these social movements that, taken together, lead to the conclusion that Venezuela might be the most democratic country in the Western Hemisphere. One study found that organized Chavistas held to “liberal conceptions of democracy and held pluralistic norms,” believed in peaceful methods of conflict resolution and worked to ensure that their organizations functioned with high levels of “horizontal or non-hierarchical” democracy. What political scientists would criticize as a hyper dependency on a strongman, Venezuelan activists understand as mutual reliance, as well as an acute awareness of the limits and shortcomings of this reliance.

Over the years, this or that leftist has pronounced themselves “disillusioned” with Chávez, setting out some standard drawn, from theory or history, and then pronouncing the Venezuelan leader as falling short. He’s a Bonapartist, wrote one. He’s no Allende, sighs another. To paraphrase the radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens in Lincoln, nothing surprises these critics and therefore they are never surprising. But there are indeed many surprising things about Chavismo in relationship to Latin American history.

First, the military in Latin America is best known for its homicidal right-wing sadists, many of them trained by the United States, in places like the School of the Americas. But the region’s
armed forces have occasionally thrown up anti-imperialists and economic nationalists. In this sense, Chávez is similar to Argentina’s Perón, as well as Guatemala’s Colonel Arbenz, Panama’s Omar Torrijos and Peru’s General Juan Francisco Velasco, who as president between 1968 and 1975 allied Lima with Moscow. But when they weren’t being either driven from office (Arbenz) or killed (Torrijos?), these military populists inevitably veered quickly to the right. Within a few years of his 1946 election, Perón was cracking down on unions, going as far as endorsing the overthrow of Arbenz in 1954. In Peru, the radical phase of Peru’s military government lasted seven years. Chávez, in contrast, was in office fourteen years, and he never turned nor repressed his base.

Second and related, for decades now social scientists have been telling us that the kind of mobilized regime Venezuela represents is pump-primed for violence, that such governments can only maintain energy through internal repression or external war. But after years of calling the oligarchy squalid traitors, Venezuela has seen remarkably little political repression—certainly less than Nicaragua in the 1980s under the Sandinistas and Cuba today, not to mention the United States.

Oil wealth has much to do with this exceptionalism, as it also did in the elite, top-down democracy that existed prior to Chávez. But so what? Chávez has done what rational actors in the neoliberal interstate order are supposed to do: he’s leveraged Venezuela’s comparative advantage not just to fund social organizations but give them unprecedented freedom and power.

* * *

Chávez was a strongman. He packed the courts, hounded the corporate media, legislated by decree and pretty much did away with any effective system of institutional checks or balances. But I’ll be perverse and argue that the biggest problem Venezuela faced during his rule was not that Chávez was authoritarian but that he wasn’t authoritarian enough. It wasn’t too much control that was the problem but too little.

Chavismo came to power through the ballot following the near total collapse of Venezuela’s existing establishment. It enjoyed overwhelming rhetorical and electoral hegemony, but not administrative hegemony. As such, it had to make significant compromises with existing power blocs in the military, the civil and educational bureaucracy and even the outgoing political elite, all of whom were loath to give up their illicit privileges and pleasures. It took near five years before Chávez’s government gained control of oil revenues, and then only
after a protracted fight that nearly ruined the country.

Once it had access to the money, it opted not to confront these pockets of corruption and power but simply fund parallel institutions, including the social missions that provided healthcare, education and other welfare services being the most famous. This was both a blessing and a curse, the source of Chavismo’s strength and weakness.

Prior to Chávez, competition for government power and resources took place largely within the very narrow boundaries of two elite political parties. After Chávez’s election, political jockeying took place within “Chavismo.” Rather than forming a single-party dictatorship with an interventionist state bureaucracy controlling people’s lives, Chavismo has been pretty wide open and chaotic. But it significantly more inclusive than the old duopoly, comprised of at least five different currents: a new Bolivarian political class, older leftist parties, economic elites, military interests and the social movements mentioned above. Oil money gave Chávez the luxury of acting as a broker between these competing tendencies, allowing each to pursue their interests (sometimes, no doubt, their illicit interests) and deferring confrontations.

* * *

The high point of Chávez’s international agenda was his relationship with Brazil’s Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the Latin American leader whom US foreign policy and opinion makers tried to set as Chávez’s opposite. Where Chávez was reckless, Lula was moderate. Where Chávez was confrontational, Lula was pragmatic. Lula himself never bought this nonsense, consistently rising to Chávez’s defense and endorsing his election.

For a good eight years they worked something like a Laurel and Hardy routine, with Chávez acting the buffoon and Lula the straight man. But each was dependent on the other and each was aware of this dependency. Chávez often stressed the importance of Lula’s election in late 2002, just a few months after April’s failed coup attempt, which gave him his first real ally of consequence in a region then still dominated by neoliberals. Likewise, the confrontational Chávez made Lula’s reformism that much more palatable. Wikileaks documents reveal the skill in which Lula’s diplomats gently but firmly rebuffed the Bush administration’s pressure to isolate Venezuela.

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Their inside-outside rope-a-dope was on full display at the November 2005 Summit of the Americas in Argentina, where the United States hoped to lock in its deeply unfair economic
advantage with a hemisphere-wide Free Trade Agreement. In the meeting hall, Lula lectured Bush on the hypocrisy of protecting corporate agriculture with subsidies and tariffs even as it pushed Latin America to open its markets. Meanwhile, on the street Chávez led 40,000 protesters promising to “bury” the free trade agreement. The treaty was indeed derailed, and in the years that followed, Venezuela and Brazil, along with other Latin American nations, have presided over a remarkable transformation in hemispheric relations, coming as close as ever to achieving Bolívar’s “universal equilibrium.”

* * *

When I met Chávez in 2006 after his controversial appearance in the UN, it was at a small lunch at the Venezuelan consulate. Danny Glover was there, and he and Chávez talked the possibility of producing a movie on the life of Toussaint L’Ouverture, the former slave who led the Haitian Revolution.

Also present was a friend and activist who works on the issue of debt relief for poor countries. At the time, a proposal to relieve the debt owed to the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) by the poorest countries in the Americas had stalled, largely because mid-level bureaucrats from Argentina, Mexico and Brazil opposed the initiative. My friend lobbied Chávez to speak to Lula and Argentina’s president Néstor Kirchner, another of the region’s leftist leaders, and get them to jump-start the deal.

Chávez asked a number of thoughtful questions, at odds with the provocateur on display on the floor of the General Assembly. Why, he wanted to know, was the Bush administration in favor of the plan? My friend explained that some Treasury officials were libertarians who, if not in favor of debt relief, wouldn’t block the deal. “Besides,” he said, “they don’t give a shit about the IADB.” Chávez then asked why Brazil and Argentina were holding things up. Because, my friend said, their representatives to the IADB were functionaries deeply invested in the viability of the bank, and they thought debt abolition a dangerous precedent.

We later got word that Chávez had successfully lobbied Lula and Kirchner to support the deal. In November 2006, the IADB announced it would write off billions of dollars in debt to Nicaragua, Guyana, Honduras and Bolivia (Haiti would later be added to the list).

And so it was that the man routinely compared in the United States to Stalin quietly joined forces with the administration of the man he had just called Satan, helping to make the lives of some of the poorest people in America just a bit more bearable.
DESPITE THE ATTEMPTED COUP AND MURDER AND EVERYTHING ELSE FROM TIO SAM, VENEZUELA KEEPS ITS SENSE OF HUMOR

Venezuelan Government Announces Transition to US Style Democracy
Miami, April 1st 2013 (Venezuelanalysis.com) – In a public broadcast yesterday the Venezuelan government announced the transition to democracy. Measures include the sale of community media to business giant Rupert Murdoch, and the privatisation of the health sector.

A Venezuelan government spokesperson told the press, “On the advice of a special US commission, the government will be expanding media diversity by selling all of its community media to Rupert Murdoch”.

“The media package includes Latin America’s Telesur, which will no longer report from the ground and talk to real people, but rather read US government press releases from an autocue,” the government spokesperson said.

Further, the government announced it will be bringing Monsanto into the country to advise on food reform.

“We realised that organised communities shouldn’t participate in politics, they don’t know their own needs, only transnationals like Monsanto and Macdonalds really understand these issues,” the spokesperson said.

On hearing of the transition plans, Donald Trump immediately offered to buy Venezuela’s Canaima National Park, in order to build a golf course. The government has accepted.

“Trump Greens will be South America’s premier golfing destination,” Trump told Venezuelan media yesterday.

“Imagine taking a putt off the world’s highest waterfall. This is my gift to all Venezuelans…and their caddies.”

The government will also sell its Barrio Adentro health system to Richard Branson.

The privatisations will be complemented by austerity policies, with the government hoping to deliver a
budget surplus by 2015.

“We have observed the unquestionable success of austerity measures in Europe. While we have struggled to reduce poverty by any more than 66% over the last fourteen years, the rise in living conditions across Europe recently is a testament to the universal fact that free markets make free people,” the spokesperson said.

The US based Human Rights Organisation, which recently declared that Guantanamo Bay is conforming with human rights standards, commented that the latest measures were “a step in the right direction”.

“We hope that within a few years our democracy will be just as good as it is in the US. They have so many types of plastic cheese there, not to mention TV snacks. The Venezuelan economy is a disaster if we don't have that sort of choice,” said the government spokesperson.

Government officials conceded what many in the international community have suspected for some time. As Simon Hooper wrote for CNN on 6 March, Chavez relied on drawing supporters using “force of personality”.

Indeed, his down to earth rhetoric, and appealing personality tricked many Venezuelans into supporting dictatorial policies such as investment in health and education.

“This day, 1 April, we have decided not to be fools any more and to start taking the international mainstream media seriously. We appreciate everything that the US has done for this continent,” the spokesperson concluded.

_Venezuelanalysis.com wrote this April Fools article to make a political point. Daily the mainstream media write lies about Venezuela and the Bolivarian revolution, and many of their readers believe those lies. One of the main ones is that Chavez was a dictator, or that there is some kind of "authoritarian regime" here, yet, as we tried to make clear in this article, that is far from the truth._
1. Cindy Sheehan Defends Hugo Chavez - YouTube
   www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7K2HdFZiKw
   Jul 5, 2006 - Uploaded by FreemanChase
   Cindy Sheehan defends Hugo Chavez; would rather live under Chavez than in America.

2. More videos for Cindy Sheehan and Hugo Chavez »

3. Images for Cindy Sheehan and Hugo Chavez
   - Report images

4. Hugo Chávez: The Threat of a Good Example (Cindy Sheehan ... my.firedoglake.com/.../hugo-chavez-the-threat-of-a-good-example-c...
Mar 9, 2013 – The death of Hugo Chavez has done little to soften the scorn lavished on him by the main stream media here in the United States-a few ...

5. Cindy Sheehan: In Loving Memory: Hugo Chavez Frias 1954-2013...
www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-bloggers/2995574/posts

Cindy Sheehan: In Loving Memory: Hugo Chavez Frias 1954-2013 – OpEd (Beyond belief) · The Albany Tribune ^ | March 5, 2013 | Cindy Sheehan. Posted on ...

6. Transcript of Cindy Sheehan's Interview with Hugo Chavez ...
venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/5233

Mar 30, 2010 – Cindy Sheehan: Welcome to this video and audio audition of Cindy Sheehan's SoapBox. Presidente Chavez, thank you for being on the show, ...

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