

VIPS Urge Trump to Avoid War in Venezuela

VIPS warn that Trump's policies regarding Venezuela appear to be on a slippery slope that could take us toward war in Venezuela and military confrontation with Russia.

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: Avoiding War with Russia over Venezuela

Mr. President:

Your Administration's policies regarding Venezuela appear to be on a slippery slope that could take us toward war in Venezuela and military confrontation with Russia. As former intelligence officers and other national security practitioners with many decades of experience, we urge you not to let yourself be egged on into taking potentially catastrophic military action in response to civil unrest in Venezuela or Russian activities in the Western Hemisphere. With the recent arrival of two transport aircraft and enduring political support for the government of Venezuela, the Russians are far from crossing any "red line" emanating from the 1823 Monroe Doctrine.

Unfulfilled Objectives in Venezuela

Inside Venezuela, U.S. actions have failed to do more than plunge the country into deeper crisis, cause greater human suffering, and increase the prospects of violence on a national scale. President Maduro's mishandling of the economy and authoritarian reactions to provocations are

impossible to defend, but they result in part from the fact that he has been under siege since he was first elected in 2013 and has faced sanctions aimed ultimately at removing him from office. In our view, the advice you've received from your top advisors – Florida Senator Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor John Bolton, Special Representative Elliott Abrams, and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo – was and apparently continues to be wrong.

- Recognition of Venezuelan National Assembly President Juan Guaidó as “interim president” did not prompt the military to rise up against President Maduro. Neither did attacking the officer corps as merely corrupt opportunists and drug-traffickers enriched through loyalty to former President Chávez and Maduro, nor did repeatedly threatening them with harsher sanctions. Those actions reflected a fundamental misunderstanding about the Venezuelan military, which has never been free of corruption and political compromise but has also never been so totally isolated from the Venezuelan people that it hasn't felt their suffering. U.S. policies incorrectly assumed that the officers – while probably fed up with Maduro's shortcomings – would support Guaidó despite his faction's commitment to dismantle *Chavismo*, which most officers believe brought historically necessary changes to the country, including enfranchisement of the poor.

Similarly, your Administration's repeated hints at military intervention have been counterproductive to your regime-change objectives. Your policy and intelligence advisors were correct in interpreting the disparate polling data

showing popular support for Guaidó as actually being support for the U.S. to extricate the country from its crisis – the National Assembly President was a political unknown until the United States and others recognized his claim to the Presidency – but your team showed a lack of understanding of Venezuelan nationalism. Venezuelans do not welcome the destruction that would be caused by U.S. military attack; they recall the death toll of Operation Just Cause, when the United States killed more than 3,000 Panamanians (by its own count) to remove one corrupt authoritarian, Manuel Noriega. Threats of invasion have pushed people to circle around Maduro, however reluctantly, not reject him.

- Your Administration's strategy of punishing the Venezuelan people, including apparently knocking out their electricity, seems based on the false assumption that humanitarian crisis will prompt a coup to remove Maduro. In fact, the U.S. sanctions have allowed Maduro to shift blame from his own failings to U.S. malice – and it has left Guaidó, whom your advisors portray as the moral equivalent of our Founders, looking like a sell-out to Yankee imperialists at the cost of the Venezuelan people's health and welfare and magnified civil disorder.

Lost Opportunity for Diplomacy

Senator Rubio, Mr. Bolton, Mr. Abrams, and Mr. Pompeo have also squandered a formidable moment to build on common values with allies in Latin America and Europe. Even though most Latin Americans find your aides' public assertion that the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well to be insulting, the right-leaning Presidents of most of South and Central

America rallied with you to support Guaidó's self-proclamation. But Guaidó's lack of leadership – he appears totally scripted by U.S. Government agencies – his inflexibility on negotiations, his open call for U.S. military intervention, and your own Administration's dangling threat of war are rapidly alienating all but the most subservient to U.S. policy dictates. Negotiation proposals, such as those being developed by the International Contact Group, are gaining momentum.

Internationalizing the Conflict

National Security Advisor Bolton and others have sought to internationalize the Venezuela issue since before Guaidó's proclamation. Bolton's reference to a "Troika of Tyranny" in November – which he called "a triangle of terror stretching from Havana to Caracas to Managua" and "sordid cradle of communism in the Western Hemisphere" – was a veiled Cold War-era swipe at Russia and China. Mr. Bolton, Senator Rubio, and other advisors have made clear on numerous occasions that the overthrow of President Maduro would be just the first stage in efforts to eliminate the current governments of the "Troika" and "Communist influence" in the Western Hemisphere.

- They have repeatedly asserted that Cuban advisors have been crucial to the Maduro government's survival without providing evidence. Indeed, the reportedly "hundreds" of Venezuelan military defectors, including many managed by U.S. agencies, have not provided even credible hearsay evidence that Cubans are doing more than providing routine assistance. In addition, the threats coming out of Washington have preempted any willingness that Cuba

might have had to contribute to a regional solution to the Venezuelan crisis as it has in similar situations, such as Colombia's recent peace process, the Angola peace process in 1989-90, and the Central American negotiations in the early 1990s.

Provocative Rhetoric about Russia

Most dangerous, however, are aggressive statements about Russia's engagement with Venezuela. Russian oil companies, particular Rosneft, have long been in Venezuela – bailing out the Venezuelan petroleum company (PDVSA) as its mismanagement and falling oil prices have caused production and revenues to plummet. Most long-term observers believe Rosneft's decisions, including throwing good money after bad, have been motivated by business calculations, without a particularly ideological objective.

- Your advisors' rhetoric imposing an East-West spin on the issue presented President Putin and his advisors an opportunity to try to poke the United States in the eye – especially as Administration efforts to remove Maduro foundered and diplomatic support for Guaidó cracked. Maduro and Putin have not enjoyed particularly close personal relations in the past, and their shared strategic interests are few, but U.S. rhetoric and threats have given them common cause in tweaking us. A meeting in Rome between your special envoy, Elliot Abrams, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov achieved nothing amid further U.S. sanctions against Venezuela and continued threats that “all options” were on the table.

Publicly available information is insufficient for us to know exactly what was aboard the two Russian aircraft that landed at Maiquetía last week – two months after your Administration publicly proclaimed its intention to remove Maduro – but precedent suggests Moscow had two main objectives.

- One, and probably primary, is to embarrass your Administration by defying your rhetoric, just to rub your nose in Moscow's sovereign right to have the relations, including military liaison, with whomever it pleases. In this sense, Russian behavior resembles its intervention, at Bashar al-Assad's request, in Syria. And it is not a far cry from Moscow's reaction to the Western-supported coup in Kiev.
- Another objective, if press speculation about the Russian advisors and equipment aboard the aircraft is correct, would be to shore up Venezuela's ability to warn of and respond to a U.S. military strike. Your Administration has publicly asserted that the Russians are helping repair S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, which have a *purely defensive* purpose. There is no evidence, not even circumstantial, that Russia has any offensive objectives in this relationship.

The U.S. reaction has suggested a much greater chance of military confrontation. Mr. Bolton "strongly caution[ed] actors external to the Western Hemisphere against deploying military assets to Venezuela, or elsewhere in the Hemisphere, with the intent of establishing or expanding military operations." Without defining what activities he would object to, Mr. Bolton said, "We will consider such

provocative actions as a direct threat to international peace and security in the region.” Your Special Representative said the “Russian presence” is “extremely pernicious.” Your Secretary of State said, “Russia’s got to leave Venezuela.” You said, “Russia has to get out” and reiterated that “all options are open” – including presumably forcing the Russians out militarily. And we note that Russia has not closed its embassy in Caracas as your Administration has.

Avoiding the Slippery Slope

As intelligence officers and security experts, we have given many years to protecting our nation from a host of threats, including from the Soviet Union. We also believe, however, that picking fights, including ousting governments, blocking negotiated settlements, and threatening other countries’ sovereign decision to pursue activities that do not threaten our national security – is rarely the wise way to go.

We repeat that we are not defending Maduro and his record, while at the same time pointing out that many of his troubles have been exacerbated by U.S. policies and efforts to oust him. We believe that due process and practical, realistic policies better protect our national interests than threats and confrontational rhetoric. It strains credulity to believe that your advisors picked this fight with President Maduro without realizing that Venezuela would seek help fixing its defensive capabilities.

Moreover and very seriously, rhetoric challenging Russia could all too easily lead to a much more consequential confrontation.

- Invoking the 1823 Monroe Doctrine is unhelpful. For Russia to provide assistance for purely defensive purposes to a country in which we seek to create regime change and threaten military attack would not be widely seen as violating the Monroe Doctrine or crossing a “red line.”
- We realize that some in the media are trying to egg you on into taking forceful action, perhaps even of a military nature, to punish Russia in any case. We urge you not to fall into this trap. This is not 19th century Latin America, and it is a far cry from the Cuba missile crisis of 1962.
- The best way to prevent dangerous miscalculation would be for you to speak directly with President Putin. Washington’s energies would be better spent clearing up differences, adjusting failed policies, and promoting a peaceful resolution in Venezuela.

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

Fulton Armstrong, former National Intelligence Officer for Latin America & former National Security Council Director for Inter-American Affairs (ret.)

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

Richard H. Black, Senator of Virginia, 13th District; Colonel US Army (ret.); Former Chief, Criminal Law Division, Office of the Judge Advocate General, the Pentagon (associate VIPS)

Marshall Carter-Tripp, Foreign Service Officer & former Division Director in the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (ret.)

Bogdan Dzakovic, Former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security, (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Mike Gravel, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC, Iraq; former Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

Larry Johnson, former CIA Intelligence Officer & former State Department Counter-Terrorism Official, (ret.)

Michael S. Kearns, Captain, USAF (ret.); ex-Master SERE Instructor for Strategic Reconnaissance Operations (NSA/DIA) and Special Mission Units (JSOC)

John Kiriakou, former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and former Senior Investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Karen Kwiatkowski, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003

Clement J. Laniewski, LTC, U.S. Army (ret.)

Linda Lewis, WMD preparedness policy analyst, USDA (ret.)

Edward Loomis, NSA Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

David MacMichael, former Senior Estimates Officer, National

Intelligence Council (ret.)

Ray McGovern, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA presidential briefer (ret.)

Elizabeth Murray, former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East & CIA political analyst (ret.)

Todd E. Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Peter Van Buren, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Larry Wilkerson, Colonel, U.S. Army (ret.), former Chief of Staff for Secretary of State; Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary

Sarah Wilton, Commander, U.S. Naval Reserve (ret.) and Defense Intelligence Agency (ret.)

Ann Wright, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S. Diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War

Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) is made up of former intelligence officers, diplomats, military officers and congressional staffers. The organization, founded in 2002, was among the first critics of Washington's justifications for launching a war against Iraq. VIPS advocates a US foreign and national security policy based on genuine national interests rather than contrived threats promoted for largely political reasons. An archive of VIPS memoranda is available at Consortiumnews.com.

Intl Trade Unions Condemn Recognition of Guaidó

Even a labor group currently at odds with Caracas opposes foreign interference in the matter of the presidency, reports Ivar Andersen.

By **Ivar Andersen**

in Stockholm

Inter Press Service



More than **60 countries** have recognized Juan Guaidó as legitimate interim president. But among international trade unions, support for Venezuelan self-determination is resolute.

On Jan. 23, the leader of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, declared himself interim president of Venezuela. His claim on the presidency was immediately recognized by the United States which, through Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, called for the world to **"pick a side."**

On Feb. 4, Sweden joined the U.S. side. "Sweden supports and acknowledges Juan Guaidó as the leader of the National Assembly and, in accordance with the country's constitution, his attempts to serve as interim President of Venezuela, now responsible for making sure free and fair democratic elections will be called," Margot Wallström, minister for foreign affairs said, **in a statement** that stressed the importance of solving the crisis peacefully.

The international trade union movement has chosen a

different approach. On the same day as Guaidó declared himself president, the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas released a harsh statement:

“We condemn the unilateral decision adopted today, January 23, by a group of governments of the region, notably led by the USA, to ignore the legitimacy of the government of President Maduro and to recognize the self-proclaimed ‘president of the transition’, representative Juan Guaidó.”

Calls for Dialog

The Trade Union Confederation of the Americas is calling upon the government of Venezuela and the opposition to seek out dialog, and for the international community to support this, but also calls the support for Guaidó “a grave act of interference and intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign country, setting back the region to times we thought belonged to the past, in which coups d’état and military dictatorships were instigated.”

Many national trade union confederations have taken the same position. South Africa’s largest confederations, Cosatu and Saftu, condemn what they both call a “coup attempt.”

Trade unions in Canada are protesting the government’s decision to recognize Guaidó. The trade union confederation CLC writes that it supports “the Venezuelan people’s right to peaceful self-determination.”

The country’s largest trade union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, states that Canada “has chosen to side with Donald Trump and US foreign policy,” while the Canadian Union of Postal Workers calls the Canadian standpoint

“deeply disturbing” and “ in direct violation of international law.”

The global union IndustriALL condemns the acknowledgement of Guaidó and “also rejects the external boycott, which has clear political and economic motives that violate Venezuela’s sovereignty.”

Presidential Election 2018

On May 20, 2018, the sitting president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, was reelected for a second, six-year term. The EU and the United States, as well as associations like OAS and the Lima Group, rejected the election process.

In a statement on May 28, the Council of the European Union wrote: “The substantially reduced electoral calendar, bans and other major obstacles to the participation of opposition political parties and their leaders, as well as the non-respect of minimal democratic standards as indicated by numerous reported irregularities, notably the widespread abuse of state resources, voter coercion and unbalanced access to media, led to these elections being neither free nor fair.”

The election result was recognized by some countries, including China, South Africa, Cuba, Iran, Syria, and Turkey.

The voter turnout was 46 percent, the lowest since the fall of the military dictatorship in 1958.

Tense Relationship

The relationship between the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and Venezuela has been tense for some time, due to the fact that the country’s leadership doesn’t

acknowledge ITUC's affiliate ASI. But the ITUC also opposes foreign interference in the matter of the presidency.

“Concerning the presidency of Venezuela, that is a matter for the people of Venezuela to decide, not any other entity outside of the country,” ITUC's Director of Communications Tim Noonan told *Arbetet Global*.

The ITUC also refers to its [statement on Venezuela](#), which was adopted by the organization's world congress in December last year, before Guaidó's challenge.

“The ITUC supports its affiliates in Venezuela in their struggle to strengthen democracy and dialogue, and the workers and people of Venezuela in dealing with the enormous difficulties that they are experiencing due to the economic blockade imposed on Venezuela.”

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, is in favor of humanitarian aid and UN-led reconciliation efforts. The international department stresses that the LO does not take sides in the question of the presidency, but does take a swing at foreign involvement.

“The unstable political situation is worsened by superpowers like China, the United States, and Russia trying to manoeuvre the political map,” says Åsa Törnlund, union officer responsible for South America.

[Ivar Andersen](#) reports [Arbetet Global](#).

Translation by Cecilia Stude.

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VIDEO: Pro and Anti-Venezuela Coup Protestors Face Off in Front of White House

UPDATED: Demonstrators for and against regime change in Venezuela converged on the White House on Saturday and there were some angry scenes as D.C. mounted police took their positions in Lafayette Park.

Updated to include video of the entire anti-coup rally below.

By **Joe Lauria**
in Washington

Special to Consortium News

Rising tensions in Venezuela boiled over in front of the White House on Saturday as a protest rally against U.S. intervention to overthrow the elected government in Caracas was met by counter-demonstrators who asked Donald Trump, at home in the president's mansion, for help in overthrowing the government of Nicolas Maduro.

Washington's open support for self-declared president Juan Gavidó has so far failed to dislodge Maduro from office as the Venezuelan military digs in and U.S. officials strongly hint that American military intervention could be next. After a week of nation-wide power failures blamed by the Venezuelan government on U.S. cyber attacks, American Airlines abruptly cancelled all flights into and out of the country.

Among the speakers denouncing Washington's attempted coup

were activists Cindy Sheehan, Medea Benjamin, Lee Camp and Brian Becker, who called the Trump administration's moves a naked grab for the world's largest oil reserves in Venezuela. The anti-coup protestors, numbering about 2,000, later marched through the streets of the capital, stopping in front of the Trump International Hotel, where Becker denounced the billionaire president for serving billionaires' interests while ignoring those of the Venezuelan and American people.

"This is what Trump really wants: the triumph of wealth over people," Becker said. "Donald Trump: that is a fantasy. The coup is rejected by the people of Venezuela. "

The protestors then marched to the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church where they were addressed via Skype by Pentagon Papers whistleblower Dan Ellsberg and Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein, as well as by activist groups who traveled to Washington from around the country.

The following 17-minute video by **Consortium News** Editor Joe Lauria shows confrontations by protestors from both sides and then moves from the counter-demonstration to the anti-coup rally, which is addressed by journalist Max Blumenthal.

Watch the entire anti-coup rally here (1 hour, 38 minutes):

Watch the anti-coup protestors converge on the Trump International Hotel (3 min.):

Burning Aid: Apparent Deception on Colombia-Venezuela Bridge

Marco Rubio and coup leaders are accusing the Venezuelan National Guard, but Max Blumenthal lines up opposing evidence.

By [Max Blumenthal](#)

in Caracas

[Grayzone](#)



The Trump administration's [coup against Venezuela](#) culminated on Feb. 23 with U.S.-backed opposition attempting to ram several trucks loaded with boxes of [USAID](#) “humanitarian aid” across the previously unused Francisco de Paula Santander bridge connecting Colombia to Venezuela.

The trucks failed to reach the other side – but that was never really the point of the stunt. As Father Sergio Munoz, a right-wing Venezuelan activist posted on the Colombian side of the border, explained to journalist [Dan Cohen](#), the humanitarian “aid” was a purely symbolic provocation aimed at discrediting Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in international eyes and generating waves of destabilizing violence.

By the end of the day, the trucks lined up on the Francisca de Paula Santander bridge were flanked by gangs of guarimberos.

These were the nihilistic masked youth who form the shock troops of the right-wing opposition, and who placed Caracas

under siege with violent barricade protests, known as guarimbas, at several points between 2014 and 2017. A mob of guarimberos burned to death Orlando Figuera, a 22-year old black Venezuelan accused of supporting Maduro, on an eastern Caracas street in broad daylight, back in June 2017.

On the Santander bridge this Feb. 23, the guarimberos rained down a hail of rocks and molotov cocktails on Venezuelan national guardsmen holding the line against the USAID trucks. Suddenly, the trucks caught fire and the masked youth began unloading boxes of aid before they burned. Within minutes, pro-opposition media reported that the Venezuelan national guard forces were responsible for the fires.

A reporter for the private anti-government channel NTN24 claimed without evidence that the Venezuelan security forces had caused the fires with tear gas:

Another false flag at the border with Colombia. A "reporter" from [@NTN24ve](#) (opposition tv known for fake news) said a truck went on fire because the Venezuelan police launched tear gas. Let me know if you've seen tear gas burn a truck before [#Venezuela](#) [#HandsOfVenezuela](#) pic.twitter.com/P5uRWEBgCd

– taseenb (@taseenb) [February 23, 2019](#)

The claim was absurd on its face. I have personally witnessed tear gas canisters hit every kind of vehicle imaginable in the occupied Palestinian West Bank, and I have never seen a fire like the one that erupted on the Santander bridge.

In 2013, the San Bernadino Sheriff's Department deployed special incendiary teargas canisters ("burners") to

torch the house where fugitive cop killer Chris Dorner had holed up. But it is highly unlikely that the Venezuelan national guardsmen had anything like this weapon in their arsenal when they confronted the rioters on Feb. 23.

The total lack of evidence of Venezuelan culpability did not stop Cuban-American Sen. Marco Rubio from tweeting this accusation from nearby in Cucuta, Colombia:

They may not realize it yet but today the Maduro Regime made it easier to isolate them internationally.

After today it will be difficult for nations to remain neutral. And for their allies to continue to support it defend them. (Cont)

– Marco Rubio (@marcorubio) February 24, 2019

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who is facing calls for her own resignation after video appeared of her condescendingly browbeating a group of environmentalist children, repeated Rubio's baseless allegation, using it to call for Maduro to step down.

By blaming the Venezuelan government for burning the USAID trucks, Rubio was clearly attempting to establish the casus belli he had been seeking. Yet neither he nor anyone in the "whole world" had seen the national guard set the fire, as he claimed. In fact, the evidence pointed in the exact opposite direction, suggesting that the masked opposition youth had torched the trucks themselves.

Colombian writer Humberto Ortiz produced footage from a pro-opposition channel showing what appears to be the exact moment when a guarimbero sets the aid on fire with a molotov cocktail:

Creo que [@NoticiasUno](#) nos puede ayudar a aclarar si la molotov lanzada por este muchacho pudo causar el incendio del camión. pic.twitter.com/UCR7x9qNkA

– Humberto Ortiz (@graffitiborrao) [February 24, 2019](#)

Telesur reporter Madelein Garcia published photographs showing a guarimbero with a gas canister next to one of the burning trucks:

1. [#ÚltimoMinuto](#) en [#exclusiva](#) [@teleSURtv](#) aquí las evidencias de quienes quemaron el camión con supuesta ayuda humanitaria en [#Ureña](#), fueron los mismo guarimberos pic.twitter.com/4gv2K54NpE

– Madelein Garcia (@madeleintlSUR) [February 23, 2019](#)

Drone footage also published by Garcia shows how far away the trucks were from Venezuelan national guardsmen when they caught fire, and demonstrates that they were clearly on the Colombian side of the border:

2. Ahora veamos las imágenes aéreas este fue justo el momento cuando quemaron los camiones pic.twitter.com/M66Wy7n0QM

– Madelein Garcia (@madeleintlSUR) [February 23, 2019](#)

Even *Bloomberg News*, which has run a relentless stream of pro-opposition reports, published video showing guarimberos on the bridge making molotov cocktails, which could easily set a truck cabin or its cargo alight:

MORE: A member of the Venezuelan army defects during clashes at the Simon Bolívar border bridge. The defector was dragged to a building of the Colombian Migration office and protected by the Colombian police [#tictocnews](#) pic.twitter.com/NJkPxln4Lq

– TicToc by Bloomberg (@tictoc) [February 23, 2019](#)

Meanwhile, the International Red Cross issued a statement condemning Venezuelan opposition activists disguising themselves as Red Cross workers – a blatant breach of humanitarian protocol. A screenshot from pro-opposition NTN24 coverage shows a fake Red Cross worker near one of the burning trucks:

The International Red Cross condemns yet another deception by the Venezuelan opposition <https://t.co/3NhQfGjtTP>

– Max Blumenthal (@MaxBlumenthal) [February 23, 2019](#)

Days ago, self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaidó announced that he would lead a “human wave” across the bridge and into Venezuela. But as darkness fell on Feb. 23, Guaido found himself at a stormy press conference with other right-wing, U.S.-aligned Latin American leaders. By his side was Colombian President Ivan Duque, who repeated the evidence-free allegation that Venezuelan security forces had burned the aid trucks.

Having failed miserably at every phase of the coup he had attempted to engineer, Rubio ended the day with a Twitter tantrum that peaked with a call for “multilateral actions” against Venezuela’s government. What form that action could take is still unclear, but it will certainly be justified by a series of baseless claims about what took place on the Santander bridge.

Max Blumenthal is an award-winning journalist and the author of books including best-selling “Republican Gomorrah,” “Goliath,” “The Fifty One Day War” and “The Management of Savagery,” which will be published in March

2019 by Verso. He has also produced numerous print articles for an array of publications, many video reports and several documentaries including "[Killing Gaza](#)" and "[Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie](#)." Blumenthal founded the *Grayzone Project* in 2015 to shine a journalistic light on America's state of perpetual war and its dangerous domestic repercussions.

JOHN PILGER: The War on Venezuela is Built on Lies

The reporter as clown – for whom the truth is too difficult to report – may be the final stage of much of mainstream journalism's degeneration, writes John Pilger for **Consortium News**.

By [John Pilger](#)

Special to Consortium News



Travelling with Hugo Chavez, I soon understood the threat of Venezuela. At a farming cooperative in Lara state, people waited patiently and with good humor in the heat. Jugs of water and melon juice were passed around. A guitar was played; a woman, Katarina, stood and sang with a husky contralto.

"What did her words say?" I asked.

"That we are proud," was the reply.

The applause for her merged with the arrival of Chavez. Under one arm he carried a satchel bursting with books. He wore his big red shirt and greeted people by name, stopping to listen.

What struck me was his capacity to listen.

But now he read. For almost two hours he read into the microphone from the stack of books beside him: Orwell, Dickens, Tolstoy, Zola, Hemingway, Chomsky, Neruda: a page here, a line or two there. People clapped and whistled as he moved from author to author. Then farmers took the microphone and told him what they knew, and what they needed; one ancient face, carved it seemed from a nearby banyan, made a long, critical speech on the subject of irrigation; Chavez took notes.

Wine is grown here, a dark Syrah type grape. "John, John, come up here," said El Presidente, having watched me fall asleep in the heat and the depths of *Oliver Twist*.

"He likes red wine," Chavez told the cheering, whistling audience, and presented me with a bottle of "vino de la gente." My few words in bad Spanish brought whistles and laughter.

Watching Chavez with the people, *la gente*, made sense of a man who promised, on coming to power, that his every move would be subject to the will of the people. In eight years, Chavez won eight elections and referendums: a world record. He was electorally the most popular head of state in the Western Hemisphere, probably in the world.

Every major chavista reform was voted on, notably a new constitution of which 71 percent of the people approved each of the 396 articles that enshrined unheard of freedoms, such as Article 123, which for the first time recognized the human rights of mixed-race and black people, of whom Chavez was one.

Their First Champions

One of his tutorials on the road quoted a feminist writer: "Love and solidarity are the same." His audiences understood this well and expressed themselves with dignity, seldom with deference. Ordinary people regarded Chavez and his government as their first champions: as theirs.

This was especially true of the indigenous, mestizos and Afro-Venezuelans, who had been held in historic contempt by Chavez's immediate predecessors and by those who today live far from the barrios, in the mansions and penthouses of East Caracas, who commute to Miami where their banks are and who regard themselves as "white." They are the powerful core of what the media calls "the opposition."

When I met this class, in suburbs called Country Club, in homes appointed with low chandeliers and bad portraits, I recognized them. They could be white South Africans, the petite bourgeoisie of Constantia and Sandton, pillars of the cruelties of apartheid.

Cartoonists in the Venezuelan press, most of which are owned by an oligarchy and oppose the government, portrayed Chavez as an ape. A radio host referred to "the monkey." In the private universities, the verbal currency of the children of the well-off is often racist abuse of those whose shacks are just visible through the pollution.

Although identity politics are all the rage in the pages of liberal newspapers in the West, race and class are two words almost never uttered in the mendacious "coverage" of Washington's latest, most naked attempt to grab the

world's greatest source of oil and reclaim its "backyard."

For all the chavistas' faults – such as allowing the Venezuelan economy to become hostage to the fortunes of oil and never seriously challenging big capital and corruption – they brought social justice and pride to millions of people and they did it with unprecedented democracy.

Stellar Election Process

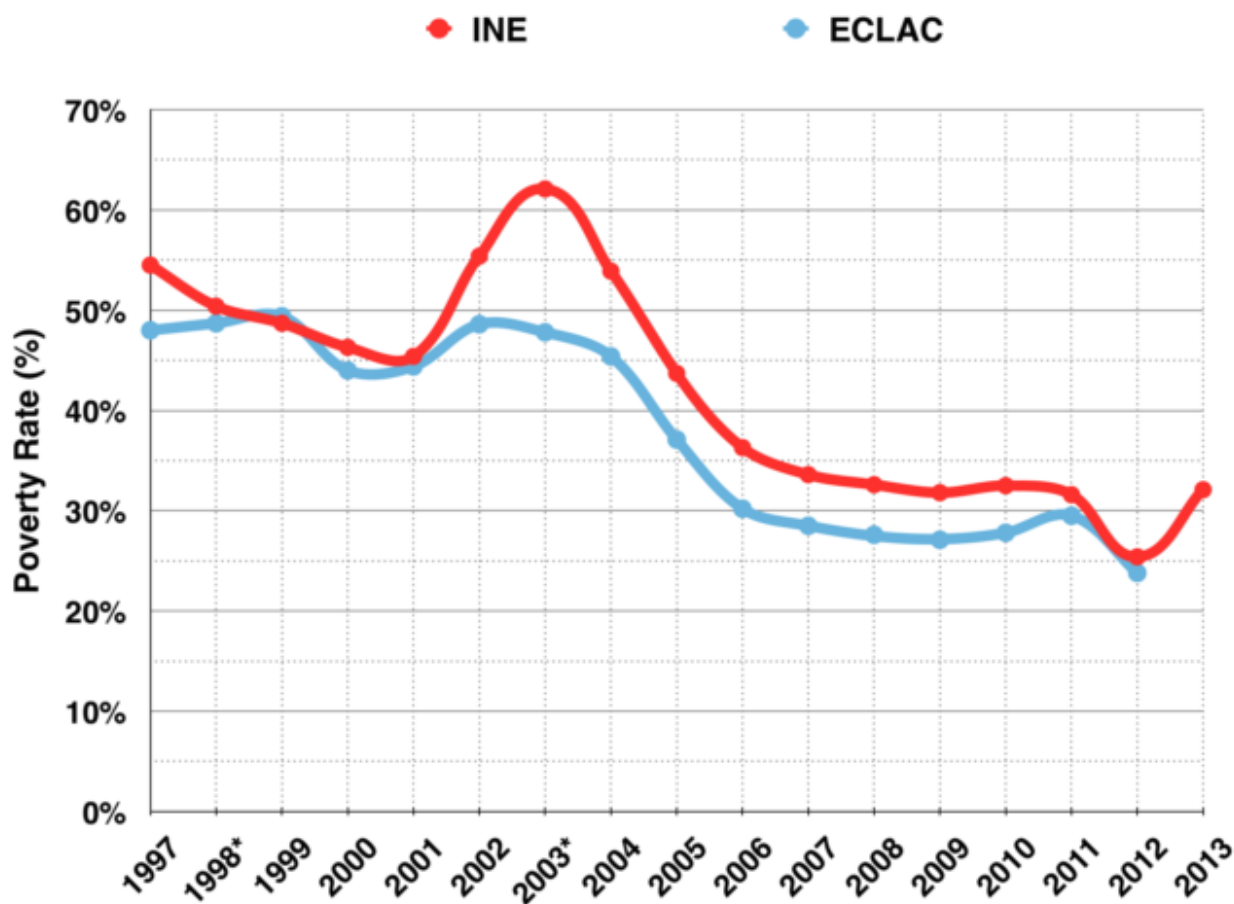
"Of the 92 elections that we've monitored," said former President Jimmy Carter, whose Carter Center, is a respected monitor of elections around the world, "I would say the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world." By way of contrast, said Carter, the U.S. election system, with its emphasis on campaign money, "is one of the worst."

In extending the franchise to a parallel people's state of communal authority, based in the poorest barrios, Chavez described Venezuelan democracy as "our version of Rousseau's idea of popular sovereignty."

In Barrio La Linea, seated in her tiny kitchen, Beatrice Balzo told me her children were the first generation of the poor to attend a full day's school and be given a hot meal and to learn music, art and dance. "I have seen their confidence blossom like flowers," she said.

In Barrio La Vega, I listened to a nurse, Mariella Machado, a black woman of 45 with a wicked laugh, address an urban land council on subjects ranging from homelessness to illegal war. That day, they were launching Mision Madres de Barrio, a program aimed at poverty among single mothers. Under the constitution, women have the right to be paid as

caregivers, and can borrow from a special women's bank. Now the poorest housewives get the equivalent of \$200 a month.



In a room lit by a single fluorescent tube, I met Ana Lucia Fernandez, aged 86, and Mavis Mendez, aged 95. A mere 33-year-old, Sonia Alvarez, had come with her two children. Once, none of them could read and write; now they were studying mathematics. For the first time in its history, Venezuela has almost 100 percent literacy.

This is the work of Mision Robinson, which was designed for adults and teenagers previously denied an education because of poverty. Mission Ribas gives everyone the opportunity of a secondary education, called a bachillerato. (The names Robinson and Ribas refer to Venezuelan independence leaders from the 19th century).

In her 95 years, Mavis Mendez had seen a parade of

governments, mostly vassals of Washington, preside over the theft of billions of dollars in oil spoils, much of it flown to Miami. “We didn’t matter in a human sense,” she told me. “We lived and died without real education and running water, and food we couldn’t afford. When we fell ill, the weakest died. Now I can read and write my name and so much more; and whatever the rich and the media say, we have planted the seeds of true democracy and I have the joy of seeing it happen.”

In 2002, during a Washington-backed coup, Mavis’s sons and daughters and grandchildren and great-grandchildren joined hundreds of thousands who swept down from the barrios on the hillsides and demanded the army remained loyal to Chavez.

“The people rescued me,” Chavez told me. “They did it with the media against me, preventing even the basic facts of what happened. For popular democracy in heroic action, I suggest you look no further.”

Saddam Hussein Incarnate

Since Chavez’s death in 2013, his successor Nicolás Maduro has shed his derisory label in the Western press as a “former bus driver” and become Saddam Hussein incarnate. His media abuse is ridiculous. On his watch, the slide in the price of oil has caused hyperinflation and played havoc with prices in a society that imports almost all its food; yet, as the journalist and film-maker Pablo Navarrete reported this week, Venezuela is not the catastrophe it has been painted.

“There is food everywhere,” he wrote. “I have filmed lots of videos of food in markets [all over Caracas] ... it’s Friday

night and the restaurants are full.”

In 2018, Maduro was re-elected president. A [section of the opposition](#) boycotted the election, a tactic tried against Chavez. The boycott failed: 9,389,056 people voted; 16 parties participated and six candidates stood for the presidency. Maduro won 6,248,864 votes, or 68 percent.

On election day, I spoke to one of the 150 foreign election observers. “It was entirely fair,” he said. “There was no fraud; none of the lurid media claims stood up. Zero. Amazing really.”

Like a page from [Alice’s tea party](#), the Trump administration has presented Juan Guaidó, a [pop-up creation](#) of the CIA-front National Endowment for Democracy, as the “legitimate President of Venezuela.” Unheard of by 81 percent of the Venezuelan people, according to *The Nation*, Guaidó has been elected by no one.

Maduro is “illegitimate,” says Donald Trump (who won the U.S. presidency with 3 million fewer votes than his opponent), a “dictator,” says demonstrably unhinged Vice President Mike Pence and an oil trophy-in-waiting, says “national security” adviser John Bolton (who when I interviewed him in 2003 said, “Hey, are you a communist, maybe even Labour?”)

As his “special envoy to Venezuela” (coup master), Trump has appointed a convicted felon, Elliot Abrams, whose intrigues in the service of Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush helped produce the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s and plunge central America into years of blood-soaked misery.

Putting Lewis Carroll aside, these “crazies” belong in newsreels from the 1930s. And yet their lies about Venezuela have been taken up with enthusiasm by those paid to keep the record straight.

On Channel 4 News, Jon Snow bellowed at the Labour MP Chris Williamson, “Look, you and Mr. Corbyn are in a very nasty corner [on Venezuela]!” When Williamson tried to explain why threatening a sovereign country was wrong, Snow cut him off. “You’ve had a good go!”

In 2006, Channel 4 News effectively accused Chavez of plotting to make nuclear weapons with Iran: a fantasy. The then Washington correspondent, Jonathan Rugman, allowed a war criminal, Donald Rumsfeld, to liken Chavez to Hitler, unchallenged.

Overwhelming Bias

Researchers at the University of the West of England studied the *BBC*’s reporting of Venezuela over a 10-year period. They looked at 304 reports and found that only three of these referred to any of the positive policies of the government. For the *BBC*, Venezuela’s democratic record, human rights legislation, food programs, healthcare initiatives and poverty reduction did not happen. The greatest literacy program in human history did not happen, just as the millions who march in support of Maduro and in memory of Chavez, do not exist.

When asked why she filmed only an opposition march, the *BBC* reporter Orla Guerin tweeted that it was “too difficult” to be on two marches in one day.

A war has been declared on Venezuela, of which the truth is “too difficult” to report.

It is too difficult to report the collapse of oil prices since 2014 as largely the result of criminal machinations by Wall Street. It is too difficult to report the blocking of Venezuela’s access to the U.S.-dominated international financial system as sabotage. It is too difficult to report Washington’s “sanctions” against Venezuela, which have caused the loss of at least \$6 billion in Venezuela’s revenue since 2017, including \$2 billion worth of imported medicines, as illegal, or the Bank of England’s refusal to return Venezuela’s gold reserves as an act of piracy.

The former United Nations Rapporteur, Alfred de Zayas, has likened this to a “medieval siege” designed “to bring countries to their knees.” It is a criminal assault, he says. It is similar to that faced by Salvador Allende in 1970 when President Richard Nixon and his equivalent of John Bolton, Henry Kissinger, set out to “make the economy [of Chile] scream.” The long dark night of Pinochet followed.

The Guardian correspondent, Tom Phillips, has tweeted a picture of a cap on which the words in Spanish mean in local slang: “Make Venezuela fucking cool again.” The reporter as clown may be the final stage of much of mainstream journalism’s degeneration.

Should the CIA stooge Guaidó and his white supremacists grab power, it will be the 68th overthrow of a sovereign government by the United States, most of them democracies. A

fire sale of Venezuela's utilities and mineral wealth will surely follow, along with the theft of the country's oil, as outlined by John Bolton.

Under the last Washington-controlled government in Caracas, poverty reached historic proportions. There was no healthcare for those could not pay. There was no universal education; Mavis Mendez, and millions like her, could not read or write. How cool is that, Tom?

John Pilger is an Australian-British journalist and filmmaker based in London. Pilger's Web site is: www.johnpilger.com. In 2017, the British Library announced a John Pilger Archive of all his written and filmed work. The British Film Institute includes his 1979 film, "Year Zero: the Silent Death of Cambodia," among the 10 most important documentaries of the 20th century. Some of his previous contributions to Consortium News can be [found here](#).

PATRICK LAWRENCE: In Venezuela, US Forgets What Century It Is

Destabilizing other nations in gross violation of international law will no longer go unopposed, writes Patrick Lawrence.

By **Patrick Lawrence**

Special to Consortium News



The Venezuela crisis worsens by the day. Early last week the U.S. sanctioned PdVSA, the state-owned oil company, by sequestering income from U.S. sales in a blocked bank account. On Sunday President Donald Trump confirmed in a television interview that deploying American troops is “an option.”

Little of what Washington has done in the weeks since it recognized an opposition legislator, Juan Guaidó, as Venezuela’s “interim president” has any basis in international law. But there is much worse to come and much more at risk if the U.S. follows through with its recently disclosed plans to reshape Latin American politics to its neoliberal liking.

Administration officials now advertise the effort to depose the government of Nicolás Maduro as merely the first step in a plan to reassert American influence among our southerly neighbors. The next two targets, Cuba and Nicaragua, are what John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser, calls the continent’s “troika of tyranny.”

“The United States looks forward to watching each corner of the triangle fall—in Havana, in Caracas, in Managua,” Bolton said in a not-much-noted speech in Miami late last year. “The troika will crumble.” There is cold comfort to derive from knowing this forecast reflects the single most deranged worldview of anyone now active in the Trump White House.

But therein lie considerable dangers. In effect, Trump and his policy minders intend to revive the Monroe Doctrine, in which the fifth U.S. president effectively declared the Western Hemisphere America’s to manage however it wished.

But it is 2019, not 1823, when James Monroe made his case in a State of the Union speech to Congress. It is frequently remarkable how blind Washington is to the limits the 21st century imposes on its power, and we are about to watch it crash into two of them.

Era of Coups Is Over

For one thing, the long era of U.S.-cultivated coups—"regime changes" for those who cannot quite face this aspect of America's conduct abroad—is over. First in Ukraine and a year later in Syria, Moscow has put Washington on notice: Destabilizing other nations in gross violation of international law will no longer go unopposed. One way or another, this will again prove true in Venezuela.

The Ukraine case ranks among the worst foreign policy calls former President Barack Obama made during his eight years in office, and there are many from which to choose. State Department-sponsored NGOs and "civil society" groups such as the [National Endowment for Democracy](#) had been up to their customary chicanery in Kiev for years before Obama took office. But it was Obama who green-lighted the operation that led, five years ago this month, to the ouster of Viktor Yanukovich as Ukraine's duly elected president and the division of the country into pro-Western and pro-Russian halves that remain at war with one another.

It is now de rigueur in the Western press to date the Ukraine crisis—and the sanctions regime that remains in place—to Russia's re-annexation of Crimea after a referendum held in March 2014. This is ahistorical nonsense. It is [a matter of record](#) that Vladimir Putin convened his national

security advisers the night of Feb. 22, a day after Yanukovich was forced to flee Kiev. By dawn on the 23rd, the Russian president had decided there was no alternative to reclaiming Crimea if Russia was to prevent NATO from assuming control over its only warm-water naval base.

A middling graduate student in international relations could have told the State Department's Victoria Nuland and Vice President Joe Biden, who carried the administration's Ukraine portfolio, that precipitating a coup in Kiev was a reckless, amateurish business. And so it has proven.

In the Syrian case, the U.S. had been training, arming, and financing radical Sunni jihadists since 2012 at the latest. But it was only in September 2015, a year after the Ukraine debacle, that Moscow—at the invitation of the Assad government in Damascus—entered the conflict militarily. The result speaks for itself: The Syrian Arab Army is now finishing its mop-up phase and the European powers, along with Turkey and Russia, are negotiating a variety of political, social, and economic reconstruction plans.

It is stunning, in the context of these two events, that the U.S. now proposes to embark on a series of three coup operations in Latin America, the first of which unfolds as we speak. But learning from past errors has never been among Washington's strong suits, to put the point too mildly. The Maduro government warns the U.S. of "another Vietnam" if it intervenes militarily in Venezuela. Moscow warns of "catastrophic consequences."

Let us not misread this last remark. It is highly unlikely, if not unimaginable, that Russia would counter direct U.S.

intervention in Venezuela through military support. Moscow has all but said as much, indeed.

Russian and Chinese Interests

But we now come to the second limitation on American power in the 21st century. In an era of virtually unlimited economic interdependence, Russia and China have considerable interests in Venezuela, and you can bet your last ruble or renminbi that they will exert themselves to protect them.

China has developed a series of oil-for-loans agreements with Venezuela over the past dozen years, and these total more than \$50 billion in value. At this point Caracas is some \$20 billion in arrears on these deals, according to official Chinese sources as quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*. Russia has also invested many billions in Venezuela since the years of the Hugo Chávez presidency. Logically enough, both Moscow and Beijing question whether a post-Maduro government would honor these obligations.

China and Russia are also Venezuela's largest arms suppliers, and both have intelligence-gathering installations on Venezuelan soil. Two days after Washington recognized Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim leader, reports surfaced that Moscow had dispatched a team of private contractors—read: mercenaries—to support the Maduro government.

The Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank known for its anti-Russian biases and its close ties to various intelligence agencies, put out a paper over the weekend suggesting that the Venezuela crisis marks the beginning of “great-power competition” in Latin America. For once, the

council seems to have gotten it roughly right.

No, this is not likely to resemble the Cold War in its superficial aspects. While Washington appears likely to fight it with hunger-inducing sanctions, semi-covert subterfuge, and possibly armed interventions, Russia and China will rely on diplomatic and possibly military support, economic aid, and investment. Both Moscow and Beijing continue to back the Maduro government and have encouraged political negotiations between the Venezuelan president and his adversaries.

The best way to read this competition at the moment is to recall the years prior to the Obama administration's diplomatic recognition of Cuba (which the Trump administration has all but officially dismantled). Obama was more or less forced to act, because decades of merciless economic embargo and non-recognition had thoroughly alienated the rest of Latin America. Depending on how events turn in Venezuela, Trump and his policy minders could easily land Washington back in the same unenviable predicament.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, author and lecturer. His most recent book is "Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century" (Yale). Follow him @thefloutist. His web site is www.patricklawrence.us. Support his work via www.patreon.com/thefloutist.

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The Dirty Hand of the National Endowment for Democracy in Venezuela

Written in 2014 during the Obama administration, this article by Eva Golinger gives insightful background to the current crisis in Venezuela and Washington's role in stirring it up.

By Eva Golinger

[Chavezcode.com](#)



Anti-government protests in Venezuela that seek regime change have been led by several individuals and organizations with close ties to the U.S. government.

[Leopoldo Lopez](#) and Maria Corina Machado- two of the public leaders behind the violent protests that started in February (2014) – have long histories as collaborators, grantees and agents of Washington. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have channeled [multi-million dollar funding](#) to Lopez's political parties Primero Justicia and Voluntad Popular, and Machado's NGO Sumate and her electoral campaigns.

These Washington agencies have also filtered more than \$14 million to opposition groups in Venezuela between

2013 and 2014, including funding for their political campaigns in 2013 and for the current anti-government protests in 2014. This continues the pattern of financing from the U.S. government to anti-Chavez groups in Venezuela since 2001, when millions of dollars were given to organizations from so-called "civil society" to execute a coup d'etat against President Chavez in April 2002. After their failure days later, USAID opened an Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) in Caracas to, together with the NED, inject more than \$100 million in efforts to undermine the Chavez government and reinforce the opposition during the following eight years.

At the beginning of 2011, after being publicly exposed for its grave violations of Venezuelan law and sovereignty, the OTI closed its doors in Venezuela and USAID operations were transferred to its offices in the U.S.. The flow of money to anti-government groups didn't stop, despite the enactment by Venezuela's National Assembly of the Law of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination at the end of 2010, which outright prohibits foreign funding of political groups in the country. U.S. agencies and the Venezuelan groups that receive their money continue to violate the law with impunity. In the Obama Administration's Foreign Operations Budgets, between \$5-6 million have been included to fund opposition groups in Venezuela through USAID since 2012.



A Principal Financier of Destabilization

The NED, a “foundation” created by Congress in 1983 to essentially do the CIA’s work overtly, has been one of the principal financiers of destabilization in Venezuela throughout the Chavez administration and now against President Maduro. According to NED’s 2013 annual report, the agency channeled more than \$2.3 million to Venezuelan opposition groups and projects. Within that figure, \$1,787,300 went directly to anti-government groups within Venezuela, while another \$590,000 was distributed to regional organizations that work with and fund the Venezuelan opposition. More than \$300,000 was directed towards efforts to develop a new generation of youth leaders to oppose Maduro’s government politically.

One of the groups funded by NED to specifically work with youth is FORMA, an organization led by Cesar Briceño and

tied to Venezuelan banker Oscar Garcia Mendoza. Garcia Mendoza runs the Banco Venezolano de Credito, a Venezuelan bank that has served as the filter for the flow of dollars from NED and USAID to opposition groups in Venezuela, including Sumate, CEDICE, Sin Mordaza, Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones and FORMA, amongst others.

Another significant part of NED funds in Venezuela from 2013-2014 was given to groups and initiatives that work in media and run the campaign to discredit the government of President Maduro. Some of the more active media organizations outwardly opposed to Maduro and receiving NED funds include Espacio Publico, Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS), Sin Mordaza and GALI. Throughout the past year, an unprecedented media war has been waged against the Venezuelan government and President Maduro directly, which has intensified during the past few months of protests.

In direct violation of Venezuelan law, NED also funded the opposition coalition, the Democratic Unity Table (MUD), via the U.S. International Republican Institute (IRI), with \$100,000 to “share lessons learned with [anti-government groups] in Nicaragua, Argentina and Bolivia...and allow for the adaption of the Venezuelan experience in these countries.” Regarding this initiative, the NED 2013 annual report specifically states its aim: “To develop the ability



of political and civil society actors from Nicaragua, Argentina and Bolivia to work on national, issue-based agendas for their respective countries using lessons learned and best practices from successful Venezuelan counterparts. The Institute will facilitate an exchange of experiences between the

Venezuelan Democratic Unity Roundtable and counterparts in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Argentina. IRI will bring these actors together through a series of tailored activities that will allow for the adaptation of the Venezuelan experience in these countries.”

IRI has helped to build right-wing opposition parties Primero Justicia and Voluntad Popular, and has worked with the anti-government coalition in Venezuela since before the 2002 coup d’etat against Chavez. In fact, IRI’s president at that time, George Folsom, outwardly applauded the coup and celebrated IRI’s role in a press release claiming, “The Institute has served as a bridge between the nation’s political parties and all civil society groups to help Venezuelans forge a new democratic future...”

Detailed in a report published by the Spanish institute FRIDE in 2010, international agencies that fund the Venezuelan opposition violate currency control laws in order to get their dollars to the recipients. Also confirmed in

the FRIDE report was the fact that the majority of international agencies, with the exception of the European Commission, are bringing in foreign money and changing it on the black market, in clear violation of Venezuelan law. In some cases, as the FRIDE analysis reports, the agencies open bank accounts abroad for the Venezuelan groups or they bring them the money in hard cash. The U.S. Embassy in Caracas could also use the diplomatic pouch to bring large quantities of unaccounted dollars and euros into the country that are later handed over illegally to anti-government groups in Venezuela.

What is clear is that the U.S. government continues to feed efforts to destabilize Venezuela in clear violation of law. Stronger legal measures and enforcement may be necessary to ensure the sovereignty and defense of Venezuela's democracy.

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*Read this interview with Eva Golinger about Venezuela in Jan. 2013 published on **Consortium News**.*

Eva Golinger, winner of the International Award for Journalism in Mexico (2009), named "La Novia de Venezuela" by President Hugo Chávez, is an attorney and writer from New York, living in Caracas, Venezuela since 2005 and author of the best-selling books, "The Chávez Code: Cracking US Intervention in Venezuela" (2006 Olive Branch Press), "Bush vs. Chávez: Washington's War on Venezuela" (2007, Monthly Review Press), "The Empire's Web: Encyclopedia of Interventionism and Subversion", "La Mirada del Imperio sobre el 4F: Los Documentos Desclasificados de Washington sobre la rebelión militar del 4 de febrero de 1992" and "La

Agresión Permanente: USAID, NED y CIA”.

Since 2003, Eva, a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and CUNY Law School in New York, has been investigating, analyzing and writing about U.S. intervention in Venezuela using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to obtain information about U.S. Government efforts to undermine progressive movements in Latin America. Her first book, “The Chávez Code,” has been translated and published in 8 languages (English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Farsi & Turkish) and is presently being made into a feature film.

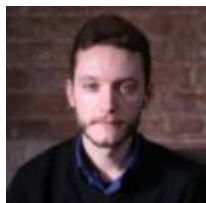
Venezuela’s US-Backed Coup Leader Immediately Targets State Oil Company and Requests IMF Money

Unelected U.S.-backed coup leader Juan Guaidó immediately moved to try to restructure Venezuela’s state-owned oil company and seek financing from the neoliberal IMF, reports Ben Norton of *The Gray Zone*.

US Anointed ‘President’ Moves to Seize National Petroleum Company

By Ben Norton

The Gray Zone



The right-wing opposition leader that the United States is trying to undemocratically install as Venezuela's president immediately set his sights on the country's state-owned oil company, which he is hoping to restructure and move toward privatization. He is also seeking money from the notorious International Monetary Fund (IMF) to fund his unelected government.

On January 23, U.S. President Donald Trump recognized the little-known, U.S.-educated opposition politician Juan Guaidó as the supposed "interim president" of Venezuela. Within 48 hours, Guaidó quickly tried to seize control of Venezuela's major US-based oil refiner and use its revenue to help bankroll his US-backed coup regime.

Guaidó is attempting to fire the directors of Citgo Petroleum, which is owned by Venezuela's state oil company PDVSA, and seeks to appoint his own new board.

Reuters described Citgo as "Venezuela's most important foreign asset"; Bloomberg calls it "the crown jewel of PDVSA's assets."

Citgo is the largest purchaser of Venezuelan oil, although crippling sanctions imposed by the Trump administration have prevented the company from sending revenue to Venezuela, starving the government of funding.

Citing US officials, The Washington Post reported that the Trump administration's strategy "is to use the newly declared interim government as a tool to deny Maduro the oil revenue from the United States that provides Venezuela virtually all of its incoming cash."

Move Toward Privatizing Venezuela's Oil

Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves. But leftist presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have over the past two decades resisted attempts by US oil companies to exploit the South American nation's plentiful natural resources.

The oil reporting agency S&P Global Platts reported that, in the immediate wake of the U.S. anointing Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's supposed "president," the opposition leader already drafted "plans to introduce a new national hydrocarbons law that establishes flexible fiscal and contractual terms for projects adapted to oil prices and the oil investment cycle."

This plan would involve the creation of a "new hydrocarbons agency" that would "offer bidding rounds for projects in natural gas and conventional, heavy and extra-heavy crude."

In other words, these are rapid moves to privatize Venezuela's oil and open the door for multinational corporations.

As The Grayzone previously reported, Venezuela's right-wing opposition has already stated clearly in its "transition" plans: "Public companies will be subject to a restructuring process that ensures their efficient and transparent management, including through public-private agreements."

S&P Global Platts also indicated that US sanctions are hitting Venezuela hard, and Trump administration officials could soon tighten the screws.

Coup Financing from Neoliberal IMF

The attempted restructuring of Citgo would just be the beginning of the neoliberal capitalist policies implemented by Venezuela's U.S.-backed coup regime.

Reuters also reported that Guaidó "is considering a request for funds from international institutions including the IMF to finance his interim government."

The International Monetary Fund is notorious as a vehicle for U.S. political and economic influence. For decades, the IMF, along with the World Bank, has trapped ostensibly independent Latin American nations in debt and imposed so-called "structural adjustment" programs that force governments to impose brutal neoliberal shock therapy on their populations, including austerity measures, privatization of state assets, deregulation, and gutting of social services.

In addition to seeking financing from the IMF, Guaidó is likewise trying to send a new representative to the Inter-American Development Bank.

Venezuela's right-wing opposition has made it clear that it plans to pursue aggressive neoliberal capitalist reforms. The opposition-controlled National Assembly has also declared in its "transition" plans that the "centralized model of controls of the economy will be replaced by a model of freedom and market based on the right of each Venezuelan to work under the guarantees of property rights and freedom of enterprise."

This plan might be a dream for foreign corporations, but

even many Venezuelans marching against their government might soon decide that stripping state assets is not worth fighting for.

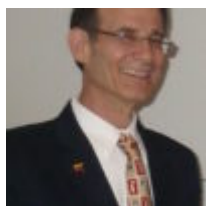
Ben Norton is a journalist and writer. He is a reporter for The Grayzone, and the producer of the Moderate Rebels podcast, which he co-hosts with Max Blumenthal. His website is BenNorton.com, and he tweets at @BenjaminNorton.

The Radicalization of US Policy on Venezuela

Not since the Cuban revolution, has the U.S. government played such an overtly activist role in Latin America, writes Steve Ellner.

By Steve Ellner

Special to Consortium News



Washington's recognition of the shadow government headed by Venezuelan National Assembly president Juan Guaidó is one more demonstration of how the Trump administration has radicalized foreign policy positions and in doing so violates international law, including the charter of the Organization of American States.

On this issue like others, the Obama administration laid the groundwork for Trump's radicalization, but it was usually more discrete. Obama issued an executive order calling Venezuela a threat to U.S. national security and created a list of Venezuelan officials who were sanctioned.

The Trump administration's escalation included financial sanctions against the Venezuelan government and measures against the nation's oil industry, prohibiting the Venezuelan majority-owned refinery, CITGO, from sending profits back to Venezuela. Until then the Venezuelan government had been receiving one billion dollars a year from CITGO.

The Trump administration is now threatening a total oil embargo on Venezuela and is leaving the "military option" open.

Throughout Region

In addition, top administration officials have played an openly activist role by traveling throughout the continent to promote the campaign to isolate Venezuela.

The first signal that the pro-U.S. international community would recognize the Guaidó government came from Washington along with its most right-wing ally, the Jair Bolsonaro government of Brazil. As of last year, Great Britain had intended to not recognize President Nicolás Maduro after he took office for his second term on January 10, but it intended to maintain diplomatic relations. Washington pushed for a more radical position, that of not only not recognizing Maduro but establishing diplomatic relations with a shadow government.

The activist approach to diplomacy was put in evidence the day after the January 23 opposition protests, when U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo offered \$20 million of "humanitarian assistance" to the Venezuelan population. Many Venezuelans see this as humiliating and nothing short of a

bribe designed to pressure the country into submission.

Further Polarization

*Ellner spoke Friday morning about Venezuela on Democracy
Now!*

Not since the Cuban revolution, has the U.S. government played such an overtly activist role throughout the continent in favor of the isolation of a government that is not to its liking. In the process it has further polarized Venezuela and the continent as a whole. The moderates in the Venezuelan opposition, including two former presidential candidates of the two main traditional parties, Claudio Fermín and Eduardo Fernández, have favored electoral participation and recognition of the legitimacy of the Maduro government. Washington's actions pull the rug from under the moderates and strengthen the hands of the extremists in the opposition.

Opposition parties have contradicted themselves, first accepting in August 2017 a National Constituent Assembly's (ANC) call for gubernatorial elections in October of that year and then refusing to participate in the May 2018 presidential elections, also called by the Assembly, on the grounds that the Assembly itself was illegitimate. Hence most of those same parties refuse to recognize the Maduro government.

The Trump administration has promoted a similar radicalization throughout the hemisphere. Most of the countries that have recognized Guaidó are on the right (as opposed to the center). But previously, the rightist

presidents of Chile (Sebastián Piñera), Argentina (Mauricio Macri) and Brazil (under then president Michel Temer) rejected the Sept. 2018 statement by OAS secretary general Luis Almagro that military intervention in Venezuela should be considered. Trump, Bolsonaro and recently elected Colombian president Iván Duque have pushed these rightist presidents to an even more extreme position on Venezuela.

But just as there are moderates in the Venezuelan opposition who support dialogue, which the mainstream media have pretty much ignored, there are moderates in the international community who are also in favor of dialogue. These figures include Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Pope Francis, UN secretary general Antonio Guterres, and the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights and ex-president of Chile Michelle Bachelet. What they are proposing represents the best hope for this battered nation.

Steve Ellner is associate managing editor of "Latin American Perspectives" and is the editor of "The Pink Tide Experiences: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings in Twenty-First Century Latin America" (2019).

How Venezuela Re-elected Maduro, Defying the U.S.

Nicolás Maduro overcame intense opposition from Washington and rich Venezuelans to be re-elected, but he's not out of the woods yet, as Roger D. Harris explains.

**By Roger D. Harris
in Caracas**



The Venezuelan people reelected Nicolás Maduro for a second presidential term on May 20, bucking a U.S.-backed political tide of reaction that had swept away previously left-leaning Latin American governments – often by extra-parliamentary means – in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Honduras, and even Ecuador.

The United States and the right-wing opposition in Venezuela had demanded an election boycott and Maduro's resignation. Instead, a majority of Venezuelans defiantly voted for Maduro, affirming the legacy of Hugo Chávez.

Chávez was first elected in 1998 and died in office on March 5, 2013. He had spearheaded a movement that turned Venezuela from an epigone of Washington into an independent force opposing U.S. hegemony. The Bolivarian Revolution reclaimed Venezuela's history and forged a new national identity that no longer looked to Miami for affirmation. Even some of the most *anti-chavismo* now take pride in being Venezuelan. Such has been the depth of the sea change in national consciousness.

Venezuelan society became more inclusive for the poor, especially women, people of color, and youth. Of the 300-odd mayoralties in Venezuela, over 100 mayors are under 30 years old. As historian Greg Grandin observed, this inclusiveness has awakened "a deep fear of the primal hatred, racism, and fury of the opposition, which for now is directed at the agents of Maduro's state but really springs from Chávez's expansion of the public sphere to include Venezuela's poor."

On a geopolitical level, the Bolivarian Revolution placed a renewed focus on opposing U.S. dominance. While some on the left have become confused about opposing imperialism, Washington has made regime change in Venezuela a priority.

Maduro inherited all this and more: a dysfunctional currency system, deeply engrained corruption, an entrenched criminal element, a petro-economy dependent on the international market, and the eternal enmity of Washington.

Maduro's First Election – *Yo Soy Chávez*

The Venezuelan people first elected Maduro president on April 14, 2013, in a nation still reeling from the death of Chávez just five weeks before after snap presidential elections were called according to the constitution.

Chávez was bigger than life when he was alive. In death Chávez emerged even larger. Even for the 6' 3" former bus driver and union leader, these were very big shoes for Maduro to fill.

In graffiti on the walls of working class neighborhoods and on red tee-shirts worn by the chavista faithful, the slogan of the 2013 election was *Yo Soy Chávez* (I am Chávez). Maduro had been Chávez 's foreign minister starting in 2006 and vice president and then Chávez 's designated successor in 2012, though he remained largely unknown.

Maduro's Baptism by Fire

Chávez's death was a traumatic moment for the Venezuelan people, and an opportunity not to be missed by the U.S. and largely well-off Venezuelan opposition to roll back the revolution. Maduro had no grace period, nor did he waver.

The main opposition candidate in 2013, Henrique Capriles, appeared on national TV within moments of the announcement of Maduro's election victory and declared the election a fraud. He then called upon the Venezuelan people to "express their rage."

What ensued was the opposition incited violence (*guarimbas*) of 2013, followed by the 2014 wave of escalated violence, and then the even more destructive violence of 2017. Mainly confined to middle class opposition neighborhoods, the violence destroyed billions of dollars of public property including buses and public transportation facilities, health clinics and hospitals, schools and universities.

Even more costly were the loss of more than one hundred people who perished in the violence: some opposition, more chavistas, and many bystanders. In the most recent round of violence, the most extreme opposition elements have burned suspected chavistas alive because of their skin color.

The game plan (see for example [here](#)) for the U.S. and its [funded](#) opposition appears to be:

Declare close election losses as fraudulent; boycott elections they don't have a chance of winning and then call those results as fraudulent; and finally initiate street violence to provoke an over-reaction from the government.

U.S.-aligned big business in Venezuela has contributed to the opposition offensive by creating selective shortages in consumer goods as part of what has become known as the [economic war](#). While liquor stores are fully stocked, according to a young woman from the state of Táchira bordering Colombia, items such as feminine hygiene products and diapers are scarce, targeting the grassroots chavista leadership, which is mainly female.

The Obama administration declared Venezuela an "extraordinary national security threat" in 2015 and has since, continuing with the Trump administration, piled on ever increasing [economic sanctions](#). U.S.-led diplomatic efforts have been designed to isolate Venezuela and further pressure Maduro simply to give up and [resign](#).

After Maduro's accession to the Venezuelan presidency, international petroleum prices plummeted, dealing a near decisive blow to the country's economy. Revenues from petroleum sales fund the vast social programs of the Bolivarian Revolution, as well as paper over the economic inefficiencies that Maduro had inherited and the outright mistakes and corruption under his own watch.

Both the opposition and Maduro have targeted corruption within the ranks of Chávismo. But for Maduro there has been no winning for trying. When he attacks corruption in his own ranks, he is accused of being authoritarian. His former attorney general, Luisa Ortega Díaz, who was [removed for corruption](#), and fled the country on a speedboat, has been elevated to a political martyr by the opposition.

Why Maduro was Reelected

Under normal conditions, Maduro's prospects for reelection in 2018 would have looked dismal. Venezuela was experiencing hyper-inflation,

GDP growth was negative, and critical shortages were piling up. The U.S. and its hemispheric allies in the anti-Venezuelan Lima Group were trying to invoke the charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) militarily to intervene in Venezuela based on a “humanitarian crisis.”

While hardship today in Venezuela is undeniable, it does not rise to a level of humanitarian crisis. That’s the fake news. Well-stocked stores and lively commerce are plainly in view in much of Caracas.

The real news is that even though Venezuela has the funds to buy vital medicines and food stuffs, such efforts are being blocked by U.S., Canadian, and European Union sanctions. In other words, the enemies of Venezuela are hypocritically condemning the very conditions they are exacerbating.

The rightwing opposition is united in their class antipathy to the main beneficiaries of the Bolivarian Revolution: the poor and working people of Venezuela. But the opposition, despite assistance from the U.S., has been divided over whether to try to overthrow Maduro by illegal means or electorally.

The opposition has won only two of some two-dozen major national elections since 1998. On that basis it complains of a “dictatorship,” while former U.S. President Jimmy Carter calls Venezuela’as the best electoral system in the world.

When the opposition won the National Assembly elections in December 2015, they had no program to address the dire economic problems facing the country. Instead, they passed an amnesty law for illegal activities some in the oppositon had engaged in, such as narco-trafficking, perpetrating coups, and terrorism.

A constitutional stalemate between the opposition-dominated National Assembly and the chavista-dominated Supreme Court then paralyzed government. Maduro exercised a constitutional provision to call for a national election to create a Constituent Assembly with power over both warring branches of government. The chavista electoral victory in July 2017 so demoralized the already divided opposition, that they

ceased mounting violent actions. Venezuela has enjoyed relative domestic peace since.

Meanwhile a resilient Maduro government has maintained and extended core social programs such as building two million housing units for the poor. Measures taken include creating the Petro crypto-currency, revaluing the regular currency, distributing food through the CLAP program, setting up subsidized trucks selling *arepas* (Venezuelan equivalent of the taco), diplomatically forging closer relations with China and Russia, and most of all relying on the strength of the chavista base.

The Opposition to Maduro's Second Election

First the U.S. and the Venezuelan opposition accused Maduro of not calling a presidential election. So Maduro called an election, and then they accused him to setting it too early. In on-again-off-again negotiations with elements of the opposition, the election was moved to a later date and then again to a still later date, settling on May 20, 2018.

The U.S. and the main opposition coalition, *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD), instead called on Maduro to call off elections and resign. In effect, any election they could not win had to be fraudulent. The opposition called for yet more punishing U.S. sanctions on their own people and echoed the U.S. in threatening a coup, all in the name of "restoring democracy."

Henri Falcón broke ranks with the MUD and ran a weak campaign against Maduro, despite intense pressure from the U.S. and the non-electoral opposition to boycott the election. Falcón had been the campaign manager for Capriles, the 2013 opposition candidate.

Falcón's main program was to replace the Venezuelan currency with the U.S. dollar, which would address inflation but would also prevent the government from using fiscal means to manage the national economy. He also advocated taking massive loans from the IMF and other institutions of international capital. The chavistas characterized his program as selling out Venezuela to foreigners.

Falcón had signed a pledge to recognize whomever won the election, which he promptly reneged on within minutes of losing, predictably claiming "irregularities."

Maduro's Second Election – *Vamos Nico*

Only 46 percent of eligible voters cast ballots on May 20, a turnout comparable to many U.S. elections and the election of French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017, but low by Venezuelan standards. Nevertheless, Maduro received a larger percentage of the eligible vote in Venezuela than did Barack Obama in 2012 or Donald Trump in 2016 in U.S. presidential elections.

Besides the opposition boycott, people sympathetic to Maduro were not motivated to vote in an election they saw as not tightly contested.

Not only did Maduro sweep the contest with 68 percent of the vote, but he emerged as his own man from Chávez's shadow. Maduro had forged deep personal ties with his supporters, evident from a red sea of supporters triumphantly chanting "*vamos Nico*" ("go Nico," with Nico, short for Nicolás) when Maduro went to the National Electoral Council for the official notification of his campaign.

Maduro won reelection on a playing field tilted against him. But will his movement succeed in righting the economy as he promised on a playing field tilted even more precipitously against his government? Already the Trump administration has imposed new sanctions designed to prevent recovery, further punishing the Venezuelan people for voting the way they wanted.

A version of this article first appeared on Venezuela Analysis.

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