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Chavismo: 21st Century Bolivarian Revolution

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**Chavismo:
21st Century Bolivarian Revolution**

Capitalism is not the path. Capitalism is the path to what we have seen and lived through in the last 100 years; that is, a perverse capitalism that makes a minority wealthy and a majority poor. This is the source, the cause for destabilization and wars at the international and domestic levels.

-Pres. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela on Radio Nacional de Venezuela (3/14/2005)

The 19th century was Europe's century. The 20th century was the United States' century. The 21st century must be Latin American's century.

-Pres. Luis Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil

In the eve of current Argentine President Nestor Kirchner's inauguration, an unprecedented mass of supporters in Buenos Aires hailed Cuban dictator Fidel Castro's arrival. The warm reception, to American outsiders, seemed irrational considering the controversial figure's political track record; yet, to the welcoming crowd, they were opening their arms to a man who is viewed by a portion of Latin Americans as the embodiment of an obstinate crusader against American infiltration of exploitative capitalism and interventionist foreign agendas. Whether the labels are true or not, the significance of such a mindset found in the inauguration represents the rising wave of thought, the initiative for the rest of Latin American to take a firmer stance against the major powers of the global North, especially the United States. Unfortunately, the anti-American sentiment is not new, rather an age-old and emergent perception ingrained in the Latin American psyche since the yesteryears of the revolutionaries Augusto Sandino, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Emiliano Zapata, and Pancho Villa. In fact, according to a recent report from the National Intelligence Council (an organization under the United States' Central Intelligence Agency), by the year 2020 the negative attitude towards the U.S. will mount as Latin America's economic and political influence wanes in world affairs, thus continuing to expand the gap between the region and advanced countries.¹ The forecast is not lost on most of Central and South American leaders who have in one manner or another sustained the initiative to strengthen their ties and enrich the region.

Surprisingly, at the forefront of the initiative is not Castro but his ally, President of Venezuela Hugo Chavez. Perhaps the most controversial figure to date in Latin America, Chavez is at the head of attempting to create a Latin American front, or as he envisions: “[A] new bloc of nations to negotiate with the North.”² The aspiration would appear justifiable in view of the region’s weak status in the global market and power hierarchy; however, his intentions and methods are under the constant scrutiny of the opposition based not only in his country, but also in the White House. In fact, the George W. Bush administration have never shied from expressing their concerns of Chavez’s political undertakings and radical reforms under his “Bolivarian Revolution,” while pointing to his threatening “anti-American” sentiment. From President Bush himself to U.S. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, the critics are quick to charge the Venezuelan leader of undemocratic policies. In April (2005), U.S. Department of State spokesman Richard Boucher put the consternation into words: “The United States has been concerned about the developments in Venezuela and of Venezuela in terms of its neighbors.... We think all countries in the region need to be supportive of democracy and need to call attention to these problems with democracy there.”³

But, how much truth is founded in Boucher’s statement, or for that matter, do the many, allegations, stemming from all opposing parties, against Chavez’s “Bolivarian Revolution” and socialist policies merit credibility? The reality of the situation, nevertheless, cannot be easily rendered without evaluating Venezuela’s significant socio-economic and political changes since Chavez’s presidency. Yet, investigating his relations amongst Latin American countries becomes more so imperative in order to decide whether Chavez is actually contributing to establish a more “united,” stronger Latin America, particularly in South America, or simply forming the *Western axis of evil*. In analyzing the aforementioned factors, the examination will ultimately demonstrate if Chavez can disprove the NIC report, which paints a weak Latin America, and put to rest his critics’ accusations, specifically that of the Bush administration.

The Initial Stage

Before delving into the Venezuelan leader's politics, it is essential to note how Chavez's 1998 electoral victory marked the beginning of a much-welcomed new era. For, the events leading up to his indoctrination in actuality set the stage for the unlikely candidate, Chavez, who bears no similar profile to the former presidents of Venezuela. Like many Latin American states during the 1980s, the country found itself with a host of economic and political problems although considered at the time a wealthy nation (due to oil revenues) and one of the more comparable democratic government systems to Western Europe.⁴ When Jaime Lusinchi took office in 1984, the country was in deep external debt; consequently, pressured by international creditors to seek International Monetary Fund (IMF) help prior to rescheduling the debt, the president decided instead to impose his own kind of austerity program to gain the approval of U.S. bankers and investors. In the end, he would only be able to rollover the loan payments and postpone others, while prompting massive public rioting due to his austere economic plan and cuts in welfare spending. Lusinchi also made Venezuela more vulnerable when he allowed foreign investors control the enterprises in order to get back the investment Venezuela had lost due to capital flight. Gradually, the country was falling into an economic meltdown. By the 1990s, the U.S. creditors would hold 85 percent of the country's foreign debt.⁵

For the second time, Carlos Andrés Pérez would take office in 1989. Unfortunately, his election would prove to be the wrong dosage for Venezuela. The economic depression of the country prompted Pérez to turn to the IMF as he embraced a neo-liberal agenda. In exchange for a loan, Venezuela entered an austere economic program, which hit the poor the hardest. The president increased the price of gasoline and the cost of public transportation while simultaneously cutting welfare expenditures. Class divisions were soon becoming visible. Known as the Caracazo of 1989, riots broke out, in which 300 to 2,000 people were killed, while a general strike culminated.

The lasting days of the Caracazo tore the image of the once-stable country into pieces, especially in view of what really lay behind the political parties in power: corruption.

Since 1958, Venezuela has held a two-party system made up by Accion Democratica (AD) and Christian Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente (COPEI); power alternated between both although other parties were represented in Congress and local offices. Years of their political monopoly was not sorely criticized until Venezuela began feeling the economic tribulations of the late 1980s and onward that prompted sharp cuts in wages and social spending, leading to an increase in poverty.⁶ That is, the AD and COPEI governments had unevenly distributed the nation's immense oil wealth; as in the historical infamy of oligarchies in Latin America, Venezuela had its own oligarchy who fought mostly over control of patronage, while also using political discretion to enable "clients' of the parties to obtain cheap dollars, siphoning an estimated U.S.\$11 billion of hard-currency reserves."⁷

Much of this illegitimate wealth distribution could also be attributed to political agendas that failed to recognize the country's ultimate social change. That is, Venezuela no longer resembled a classless society. Before 1980, the nation appeared free of class divisions due to the stable flow of income provided by oil rents, which provided (to all) the opportunity to benefit materially; in effect, the petrodollars "financed a positive-sum game" wherein the private sector enjoyed plentiful of protection and benefits, while the middle to low income groups profited from reduced taxation, openhanded welfare provision, and blanket subsidies.⁸ Important to note, as well, Venezuela's membership in the Organization of Petroleum-Exporting Countries (OPEC) allowed the country to reap considerable profit, especially during the 1970s political instability in the Middle East that increased the oil price tenfold.

It was clear to society there was little to complain about until the tumultuous circumstances finally destroyed Venezuela's fragile foundation. Both Lusinchi and Pérez implemented a neo-

liberal agenda that did not recognize the growing class cleavages; rather, the presidents ignored the consequences of cutting education, health, and other welfare expenditures in order to finance an export-oriented economy dependent not on oil, but the private sector. Pérez, specifically, highlighted the importance of privatizing the state infrastructure and even social security. By the 1990s, the standard of living and education deteriorated for the underprivileged that fell into the pot of unemployment (due to the cut in oil production and high inflation). Staring the political parties face to face was a class problem they chose to ignore or not identify [with], particularly the faces of a populace growing in numbers:

“...[T]he economic pie progressively shrank, it came to be distributed more unequally. The income share of the poorest 40 percent of the population fell from 19.1 percent in 1981 to 14.7 percent in 1997, while that of the wealthiest decile increased from 21.8 to 32.8 percent.... In short, during a period of generalized macroeconomic decline, income became more highly concentrated, and society became more sharply divided between elite and popular sectors.”⁹

All these factors gradually constructed two primary devices that would contribute to Chavez’s electoral win. One, the economic deterioration of the ‘80s and the failure of neo-liberal agendas incorporated by Lusinchi, Pérez (especiallly), and later Rafael Caldera would taint the type of economic movement, thus clearing the way for the need for an alternative. Second, as mentioned earlier, the economic deficiency of the state created more prominent social divisions, therefore rendering the current class cleavage between the elite or privileged (i.e. upper and middle classes) and the poor (i.e. lower and lower middle classes). Both of these facts will remain crucial in understanding the criticism and adoration surrounding Chavez.

Opening the doors for the future president was also his attempt to lead a military coup in 1992. Despite the failure of the coup, his imprisonment provoked sympathy and admiration for the military conspirator, especially when Pérez was charged with embezzlement. The memorable attempt offered a gateway into the major playing field of Venezuelan politics. Once pardoned by

Caldera, the self-proclaimed revolutionary would use the social and political circumstances to arouse the lower classes.

Enter Chavez

The fact was the poor were in desperate need of a spokesperson, and thus, when the charismatic paratrooper who came from humble origins began a pseudo-grassroots campaign, the underprivileged were ready to listen. They saw no reason why they should not considering Chavez's background and rhetoric. Born in the Venezuelan state of Barinas (1959), Hugo Chavez Frias completely shattered the atypical presidential profile of the country by not only coming from a lower middle-class upbringing, but also by simply being of mixed race. Undoubtedly the background was attractive to the poor, rural public that suddenly found their alternative party line in Chavez's Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR-200). The organization began essentially as a clandestine group of military officers, with little civilian ties, which gathered to study national and military history; but more notably, they discussed the current politics and how they intended to influence it. Not surprisingly, they reflected a leftist perspective that harbored the "goal of organizing a civil-military alliance in order to stimulate revolutionary change."¹⁰ The occasion would come upon during AD's Pérez presidency in February 1992 when Chavez and his military companions attempted to capture the president. The failed coup uplifted the imprisoned paratrooper's fame and that of the MBR-200, and by the time he was pardoned, the political environment was set for his arrival.

The organization began preparing to run for local and Congressional positions as well as the presidential office by creating an electoral front called the Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR), which integrated independent individuals and other groups holding different ideologies and political positions, but shared their support for Chavez's presidential candidacy.¹¹ Yet, the real mobilization occurred within the regions of the destitute majority, who could no longer identify with the parties

AD and COPEI, and even Causa R, a political party that emerged during the country's economic turmoil attracting labor unions with its leftist and democratic reformist undertones. To the low-income Venezuelans, Chavez was a much-needed revolutionary figure whose ideological and political break from the other parties showed promise. He won much support with his anti-neoliberalism rhetoric and condemnation of the past wrongs committed to *el pueblo* (the people or country). The odds were undoubtedly in favor of Chavez, especially when considering the challenger, Salas Römer, was a Yale-educated elite white whose campaign catered to the upper class with promises of a 200-day program of shock therapy: "... embracing deregulation of prices, value-added taxation, fiscal austerity, reductions in the public bureaucracy, and a review of Venezuela's membership in OPEC."¹² To the poor, the economic policies seemed all too familiar and unconvincing. There was no surprise that Chavez's social democratic platform, carrying nationalist overtones and promising constitutional revisions, would defeat the opposition.

Upon taking office in February 1999, Chavez initiated his plan for change beginning with a new constitution and a name change. That is, the country was renamed the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, clearly a tribute to Simon Bolivar (who as we shall see later plays an influential role in the president's fundamental rhetoric). Yet, a new nation title was the least of the issues when considering the entire overhaul of the old constitution. Before a popular referendum inducted the new document, Chavez was met with an entourage of political parties, various interest groups, and civil organizations that all wanted recognition of their demands within the contract. After treading rough waves, the document was drafted within three months, containing both drastic and subtle reforms, which would be under the careful scrutiny of the emerging opposition.

The points of controversy quickly revolved around the military's increased role in the state. The problem was not that the active-duty military members gained the right to vote, but rather the replacing the old label of an "apolitical" organization into an institution "without political militancy" at

the service of the Nation as an active participant in the development of Venezuela.¹³ In a few words, the president's critics view the article as a push towards a joint civil-military structure of the state. The more disconcerting aspect of it concerns the parliamentary body's lack of authority over approving military promotions. Chavez, instead, holds the power to oversee the promotions to generals or admirals. Additionally unsettling to the opposition is the military's constitutional power to regulate and control all issues pertaining to weapons (i.e. importation and exportation as well as storage of arms). Critics of the constitution argue that it "helps concentrate presidential power and further limits broader political oversight of the armed forces."¹⁴ Although the reforms undoubtedly strengthened the institution politically, the use of the military in social projects would further complicate the issue and divide the pro-Chavez constituency and his opponents.

However, before examining the armed forces' role in social policies, other changes drafted in the document deepened the opposition's worries. The new constitution eliminated financing of political parties, a disadvantage more so for smaller, less-privileged groups. Nevertheless, the reform was less alarming than the newly gained powers of the president. The constitution allows Chavez the ability to dissolve the National Assembly, appoint ministers and name their functions without parliamentary approval, and declare a state of emergency. In addition, the president's term was increased from five to six years. Opponents of Chavistas criticized the legislation along with the military's empowerment, claiming it was step towards a Castro dictatorship. According to Chavez supporters, the checks and balances instilled in the constitution prevent complete concentration of power in the executive body. Articles 71 to 74 of the Venezuelan constitution are often quoted as evidence of a balanced system. The clauses include four different kinds of referendums—the consultative, recall, approving, and rescinding:

"Generally referenda can either be initiated by the national assembly, the president, or by petition from between 10% and 20% of the registered voters. The consultative referendum is designed to ask the population a non-binding question of a "national transcendent"

nature, such as whether the country should join a free trade agreement, or a currency union.... [T]he recall referendum, which can be applied to any elected office... can only be implemented after half of the term in office has been completed. The approving referendum, just as the recall referendum, is binding and is used to pass important laws or to implement treaties that would infringe on national sovereignty.”¹⁵

Moreover, the recall referendum is also another form of approving amendments to the constitution, while the rescinding type does just that, repeals existing laws. The variety of referendums is seen by Chavez proponents as public accessibility to make institutional and legal changes. Even the opposition must admit its positive attributes, especially considering their use of the law in 2004 to unseat Chavez by recall. Although their efforts failed, the attempt in itself demonstrates the president’s vulnerability, and at another end, it is an illustration of the former colonel’s strong opposition and even greater loyal supporters. The angst between both parties will be reviewed in detail later.

Amongst the more neutral issues, however, were the inclusion of environmental and indigenous rights, updated protection over human rights, an enhancement of the branches of government, and “the deepening of political democracy through the incorporation of various forms of direct participation.”¹⁶ In the case of the governmental institutions, the constitution created two new branches, the “Citizen Power” and the “Electoral Power.” The citizens branch, in essence, holds three major offices—the prosecutor general, the “defender of the people,” and the comptroller general. Collectively they can challenge any actions by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (the judicial branch, which was also restructured) believed to be illegal.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Electoral branch oversees the coordination of elections on all levels. The creation of these two branches was a personal accomplishment to Chavez who along with his old MBR friends had envisioned the concepts since their clandestine days.

But, by far the most noteworthy constitutional change, transcending ideologically through most of the reforms, was developing avenues to establish a participatory democracy, especially for

the poor. The unfortunate reality before Chavez was a heightened social polarization that had silenced or ignored the voices of *el pueblo* or the lower classes. The rhetoric of *Chavismo* promised to include the masses while improving their conditions; thus, the constitution includes a slew of civil rights under Title III, obliging the government to provide social security for the elderly, disability payments, housing, unemployment insurance, and public health care through financial contributions.¹⁸ The clause also incorporates workers and housewives of the informal economy to enjoy such benefits. Complementing the ideology behind *Chavismo*, the constitution also guarantees the right to sufficient salary (Article 91). In the eyes of the critics, the state was accumulating too much centralized power through these “interventionist” amendments. Again, they saw the shadow of Communist Cuba.

Yet, the fact is that Chavez is not entirely a silhouette of the vintage system. His Bolivarian revolution walks the path of the third way, a combination of recognized capitalism and socialism harboring communist tendencies. As Chavez puts it, the political effort is a new “socialist model for the 21st century” that would be, amongst other things, the definitive helping hand to poverty and underdevelopment. The president has not ignored the necessary ingredients of the free market, such as privatization, in order to function a well-oiled economy. Still, the leftist ideology is not lost in the constitution as evident in Articles 301 to 307 where tariffs and subsidies are deemed essential to the development of the state. At the same time, according to Julia Buxton, the document also “reformed budgetary procedures and the fiscal management responsibilities of the Central Bank of Venezuela, while emphasizing the importance of the free market and recognizing private property.”¹⁹ The overall constitutional reforms, however, from the onset were vested in controversy mainly because of the opposition and their intense (many times personal) dislike of Chavez. There would be no surprise that his first few years in office would be filled with turmoil, especially as he began to implement particular social programs and policies.

The Coup, the oil-strike, the referendum ... the opposition (2000-2003)

Between 2000 and 2002, the Chavez administration was sinking in terse waters. In fact, the moment the Constitution attained the public's vote and the president gained legislative powers, the opposition was prepared to destabilize *Chavismo*. Adding to their ammunition was the economic environment of the country; for, the electoral and administrative changes of the mega elections of 2000 (in which Chavez won and acquired the executive seat until 2006) as well as the social reforms that were delayed had elevated the sense of financial risk, thus the increase rate of capital flight. Along with a decline in oil prices, the economy was suffering though inflation also dwindled. The opposition obviously had some leverage. Nevertheless, three factors once considered illustrate the grayness of the tense environment, which truly question the objective and justification of the president's rivals.

For one thing, upon taking office, Chavez was already entering a nightmarish socio-economic playing field. During Caldera's presidency, the country was producing high levels of oil production, yet there was low international demand: "Venezuela's basket of crude fell \$6 between 1997 and 1998 to U.S. \$10.57 per barrel and \$5 below the projected average oil price in the 1998 budget."²⁰ The negative effects remained into Chavez's term, and therefore the former paramilitary approached the conflict with a complete revision of oil policies; the most notable seen in the restructuring of PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela, Sociedad Anónima), the national oil company, which falls into the second factor.

Although the PDVSA was nationalized in the 1976, the company was close to being practically privatized, while raking in little profit due mostly to the squandering of oil revenues. The fact was that PDVSA's motto relied on attracting foreign investment, which in other words meant that lower taxation and flexible fiscal policies replaced the priority of using the nation's natural resources for the country's development. What's more, the oil company had also "publicly heralded

policy to maximize volume in disregard of OPEC quotas and price objectives,” causing the 1998 oil price crisis.²¹ Chavez knew drastic modifications had to occur. Consequently, the leader began by appointing Ali Rodriguez Araque to head the state oil monopoly, perhaps one of the most effective moves by the president. In 2000, the oil minister managed to strengthened Venezuela’s role in OPEC by defending and recovering prices, as well as enforcing the policy on quotas. Rodriguez would eventually become the secretary general of OPEC while maintaining his position as minister of energy. But more importantly, the enactment of the Hydrocarbons Law would completely transform PDVSA, simultaneously angering the opposition. Without the approval of the National Assembly, in 1991, Chavez legally passed the law (that came into effect January 2002), thus replacing the Hydrocarbons Law of 1943 and the Nationalization Law of 1975. Basically, the new initiative strengthened the state's control over oil production and distribution. In other technical terms, under the law, foreign or private investors "cannot own 50% or more of the capital stock in joint ventures involved in upstream activities... also provides that private investors may own up to 100% of the capital stock in ventures concerning downstream activities."²² Even so, Chavez did not have complete authority over the company that had rather remained a global company, nor could he at the time assert immediate order of the highly bureaucratic institution. That did not stop him, however, from appointing new board of directors for PDVSA in February 2002, a clear attempt to begin repairing the damages. On the other side, the president’s opponents interpreted his actions as exceedingly authoritarian.

The third factor further heating the controversy was the installment of particular land reforms, primarily the “Ley de Tierra” (Law of the Land). The law mandates a maximum of permissible hectareage of a farm, determined by the amount of agricultural production. If 80 percent of the proprietor’s land remains idle, the landowner is subject to inactivity tax or, in extreme cases, confiscation by the state, which would then be redistributed. Private farmers who increased

productivity are rewarded as well. Similar regulations applied to Coasts, Fishery, and Aquaculture Laws, hence “encouraging small-scale artisans.”²³ Of course, the opposition quickly jumped at the issue, accusing the Chavez administration of bypassing its boundaries and thwarting the interests of the private sector. The rationalization, nonetheless, behind Chavez cannot be easily dismissed. Coming from a socialist background, the president deems governmental involvement as a necessary means of shaping a self-sufficient, or “endogenous” Venezuela. The reality is it would be foolish to disregard the country’s fragile reliance on the exportation of oil and importation of seemingly everything, and Chavez was not ignorant to this fact. Rather, he introduced the laws with hopes to cut down on the massive imports of agriculture and raw materials in order to initiate the country’s endogenous progress: “...[W]e cannot allow the existence of even a hectare of idle land, because the land must be sowed, the land must be farmed.”²⁴ The reforms are presently in full gear and still controversial, but the debate was heated more so during their induction.

The tensions between the opposition and Chavistas augmented over these key issues. At the forefront of the Venezuelan leader’s rivals were the privately-owned media, the wealthy elite stratum, and the shrinking middle-class. Although the president’s constitutional and economic changes appeared drastic, they were hardly even given an opportunity to be fully appraised. Backed by the media, rival political pasties and other challenger, both made up of the old oligarch and elite, were quick to launch an anti-Chavez campaign. Painting a future of Cuban-like regime, the opposition rallied a portion of Venezuelans to protest the reforms. The first attempt came in the form of an attempted coup. One factor must be noted before discussing the aforementioned. Documentation of the news of the coup and oil strike must be assessed with a grain of salt and careful reading, while simultaneously considering the opposition’s power.

The reader must take into account anti-Chavez rivals’ accessibility to television, radio, and print media because they were either supported by or members of the organizations. Notorious for

their uninhibited attacks on the president are Venevision, Radio Caracas Television, Globovision (a 24-hour satellite news channel), and the two press agencies, El Universal and El Nacional. Each to a certain degree (at least under American standards) can be guilty of yellow journalism, questionable muckraking, bias, or all of the above. During the oil strike of December 2002, these independent media outlets broadcasted an average of 700 pro-strike advertisements,²⁵ and at the same time, featured or supported leaders of the opposition, such as Oxford-educated lawyer and leader of the First Justice party Julio Borges and even the former Venezuelan president Carlos Andres Perez though his credibility was shot by a conviction of embezzlement. Ultimately, what is essential to bear in mind is that the independent media represents not the poor, but the wealthy class, a stance taken the moment Chavez stepped into office with socialist lingo. His reforms were blamed for the economic woes of the country even though as shown before the oligarch shared the greatest guilt; however, dissidents like Gustavo Cisneros, owner of Venevision TV and head of various joint ventures with multinationals (i.e. Coca-Cola), interpreted Chavez's agenda as a threat to the free market and private property. As a result, with such power, render much influence... and alliances.

The opposition has done well in marketing its demands to the media and authorities abroad, especially in the United States. It is no coincidence or secret that many American news agencies have either downplayed or unrecognized Chavez's progress and his massive support base. Not to mention, the Bush administration indirectly funds anti-Chavez groups, like Sumate which received \$53, 000 for aiding in the coordination of the referendum of 2004, through the National Endowment for Democracy.²⁶ This sort of support, overall, gives the opposition immense leverage over Chavez as was evident in the 2002 coup attempt.

The events of 11 April 2002 could not be better captured in *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*,²⁷ a documentary of the coup as it occurred. The filmmakers displayed the influential

power of the media moguls as they rallied demonstrators to the Miraflores presidential palace. The protestors were met by Chavez supporters, including the Bolivarian Circles (grassroots organizations highly loyal to the president), which eventually resulted in a violent clash. Although the film clearly shows that gunshots were precipitated by the opposition, some of the armed Chavistas retaliated in defense; the image of their reaction was media-manipulated in favor of the president's challengers. To be fair, further investigation would render more accurate details. Nevertheless, the confrontation was both a divergence and catalyst to orchestrate the capture of the president. Despite the opposition's denial to the charges, the only government-run media channel was shut down, while the independent channels led the populace to believe that Chavez had resigned. The president, of course, had not signed any resignation, but was kidnapped by rivals; leading the pack was Pedro Carmona (chief of the Chamber of Commerce) and then army captain Eduardo Garcia. Within the first day of the takeover, Carmona was inducted as president of Venezuela and the constitution was eradicated. His fall from leadership was welcomed by the Bush administration. To their embarrassment, however, Chavez returned. Upon gradual news of the coup, an overwhelming crowd of Chavistas and other supporters of the government filled the streets of the Capital, protesting against the unconstitutional takeover and calling for the release of Chavez. The military soldiers loyal to the president regained control of the palace, and soon brought the president back into power.

Suddenly, the U.S. became a suspect of funding the coup. Based on BBC News reports, the secretary general of OPEC, Ali Rodriguez, contended that OPEC "had learned that some Arab countries were agitating for a new oil embargo against the U.S." since "they were angry at the U.S. stance following Israel's incursions into the Palestinian territories."²⁸ Consequently, the U.S. would fear Venezuelan support of an oil embargo. Chavez had attempted to avert the coup by sending a note to President Bush, assuring him that his country would not join any oil boycott. Even though

this would solidify the bad relationship between the U.S. and Chavez, the issue would be put in the back burner as the Venezuela government would have to find and arrest the coup plotters. Not surprisingly, opponents would charge that the president's administration was on a witch-hunt. Granted the leader was persistent on identifying what he called "terrorists," yet he soon had to divert his attention to the December 2002 oil strike. Lasting eight weeks, the general strike was crippling for the economy: "The oil sector shrank by nearly 26 percent as thousands of workers walked off their jobs."²⁹ The Venezuelan leader used troops and replacement crews to restart the oil sector; the protesting workers were sacked though 40,000 employees returned according to the Chavez administration.³⁰ The economy soon recovered, especially once the strike ended in January.

While the oil strike persisted, the most interesting development was the media coverage of United States and Venezuela. As much as there were demonstrators against Chavez, there were perhaps equally or more supporters of the government regime. According to Robert Palast of Britain's Observer, newspapers throughout the U.S. simply headlined protesters' appeals and apparent masses in pictures. Palast argues that everyone ignored other demonstrators: "I'd recently returned from Caracas and watched 100,000 march against President Chavez. I'd filmed them for BBC Television London. But I also filmed this: a larger march, easily over 200,000 Venezuelans marching in support of their president, Chavez."³¹ The previously-mentioned is indicated primarily for two reasons. First, the importance of approaching Venezuelan news with caution since reality of life in the country can be quiet effortlessly manipulated. Second, both the coverage and event are representative of the significant division found between the [wealthy] broad alliance (consisting of unions, political parties, and private businesses) and the Chavistas, mainly made of the poor and other grassroots groups. The vote on the recall referendum in August 2004, overseen by the Carter Center and the OAS (Organization of American States), would prove to

measure a greater following behind the president who defeated the recall, which asked citizens whether Chavez should serve the remaining two and half years of his term. The president won with 59% of the vote, stimulating allegations of fraud from the opposition.³² However, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter silenced Chavez opponents since he observed no foul play though the ballot system was new—these electronic ballots were the same type used in Florida during the 2004 U.S. presidential election (the author can vouch for their functionality). In response to the charges, Chavez stated, “I invite my countrymen to talk, even to my most bitter enemies I offer my hand.”³³ In truth, the opposition is still attempting to justify their claims against the president who as of late is proving the effectiveness of his social programs and regional alliances.

Three Rs: Rapid Results of the Revolution

With much of the turmoil calmed, Chavez’s efforts for *el pueblo* have been startling. Much of the success is owed to his administration’s ability to slow capital flight and, more importantly, the increase in oil prices. By implementing Cadivi, an exchange control agency, companies who wish to import products to purchase foreign currency are forced to do so through the government agency. The introduction of Cadivi in early 2003 has increased foreign reserves; in fact, currently they stand at \$26.262 billion, and at the end of last year, the “foreign reserves stood \$23.46 billion... in 2003 alone, the foreign reserves of the country expanded by over \$6.5bn to \$21.299 billion.”³⁴ Although the reserves are controlled by the central bank, Chavez has asked the bank to use a portion to finance the government’s public programs, which will be automatically delivered as in the past. The financial gain has effectively distributed the wealth amongst those in greater need of it though all of Venezuela has fared pretty well with substantial public expenditures.

But the major push behind investment in social projects is the oil revenue. With Venezuela’s oil price at \$40 a barrel, PDVSA has profited considerably, enough to back government initiatives: “PDVSA spent more than \$3.7 billion last [2004] on social and agricultural

programs, housing, and other public projects—about a third of its earning.”³⁵ According to Ian Bruce of BBC News, the oil company will continue investing in social projects, about another \$6 billion to public finances, against the recommendations of the IMF, which suggest the state save the extra money.³⁶ The likelihood of that, however, is slim when taking into account Chavez’s vision. The president is demanding to see what he calls the Three Rs, *rapid results of the revolution*; in other words, the Venezuelan leader is encouraging the government to move quickly in implementing, enforcing, and developing the different reforms and social projects. This includes the president’s missions, created earlier in his term, that cover areas from education to health. For instance, Mision Ribas gives thousands of Venezuelans the chance to finish their secondary education, amongst other educational opportunities. Figure 1 summarizes other missions that exemplify Chavez’s vision for a more egalitarian and self-sufficient country. The latter being a major goal for Chavez, thus the reason for his recent emphasis over the enforcement of the agricultural and land reforms.

In 22 March 2005, the Venezuelan leader reiterated during his regular broadcast of “Hello, President” (where he makes announcements and answers calls) the importance of creating an endogenous state by not only cutting down on importation, but also promoting agricultural growth. He contended that he had “approved approximately 70bn bolivars in additional resources to launch the expansion phase of his agricultural plan,” mentioning also that “both the production of staples and the yield per hectare would be increased, and urged private farmers to join the government in setting up endogenous development centers.”³⁷ Clearly, Chavez’s aims are to fortify the country’s agricultural foundation and minimize the dependency on oil by providing financial assistance to farmers (i.e. countless loans are granted) and achieving feasible ways to build the infrastructure of the industry, especially in the rural areas; that is, he has been able to utilize funds from reserves to construct processing plants for foods, such as soy and corn.

Figure I:

Missions	Objectives
Mision Vuelvan Caras	With participation of the people and government, the mission aims to transform society and the economy of the country through educational and vocational programs. The government grants scholarships to participants.
Mision Miranda	To effectively organize, register, control, and retrain the National Arms Force reserve (FAN) to ultimately develop the military defense and maintain cooperation of the internal order and their active participation in developing the nation.
Mision Mercal	To establish an effective market and commercialization of nutritional products and others of primary necessity, while maintaining quality, low prices, and easy access by incorporating groups, small businesses, and organized co-operatives within the Mercal program. Also plans provisions.
Mision Guaicaipuro	To restitute the rights of the Indigenous population in accordance with the Venezuelan constitution by stimulating internal development to guarantee their enjoyment of their civil rights (I.e. health, education, etc.).
Mision Sucre	To offer an alternative and accessible opportunity of achieving Higher Education for those who did not continue their studies because of the lack of available seats in universities. Includes the creation of the Bolavariana University of Venezuela.
Mision Piar	To achieve the sustainable development of the mining communities and thus to dignify the quality of life of the small miners.
Mision Identidad	It guarantees that all citizens of Venezuela from birth are offered a constitutional right to identity, indispensable so that citizens can participate in progressive actions of the State, such as the missions; essentially recognizes citizenship.
Mision Barrio Adentro	To offer neighborhoods with health care via construction of hospitals and infrastructure. The mission also includes the assistance of Cuban medical and international professionals.

Furthermore, Chavez has established strategic alliances with Latin American countries to continue developing the agricultural sector: "In 2004, Argentine exports to Venezuela tripled from 2003, while Venezuelan exports to Argentina grew five times. Venezuela exports to Argentina fuels worth

\$200 mln (155.5 mln euro) per year, which are paid back in agriculture machinery and livestock.”³⁸

Regional agreements such as the former, however, will be discussed in further detail later.

Ultimately, the president’s actions are commendable considering these are agricultural initiatives that most Latin American countries would embrace if accessible and undeterred by multinational corporations (MNCs). The problem in most, if not all, of the region is its lack of infrastructure and government’s public expenditure along with the unfair trade system of the global economy (this latter issue will not remain untouched). Just consider the typical situation in countries especially within Central America: If the state regains or buys land back within their soil, who will work it, where are the technological means and intellectual services, and will the state be able to subsidize? Hence, poor Latin American countries must depend significantly on importation and foreign [exploitative] privatization. As much as critics may point fingers at President Chavez for his reforms, the fact is that he has managed to work around the conflict in a more conducive manner. The Venezuelan leader recognizes the integral role of the private sector and foreign investments in a functioning economy, which demonstrates why the land laws are essential no matter how controversial. The Ley de Tierra has been pushed more pressingly as of late; many large estates have been under review to determine whether they are productive or idle. A national land commission created by recent decree (January 2005) has inspected various estates owned by the 5% of the country, occupying almost 80% of land.³⁹ In March 2005, the state actually confiscated a British owned cattle ranch, El Charcote, for providing property document that did not prove the land belonged to the owner—Vestey Group. Moreover, though Vestey deny charges, the land was deemed idle. The group will appeal, but as is the ranch has already been renamed Pedro Perez Delgado “Maisanta” Endogenous Development Center where many of the poor have begun ranching and working to set up cooperatives.⁴⁰

In another effort to fend off exploitation of the country, on 15 April 2005, the Chavez administration decided to revise numerous oil pacts with private companies to make certain they are complying with Venezuela's 2004 decision to raise the royalties paid by foreign oil companies: "The companies have to take all the necessary measures to bring the operating agreements in compliance with the latest legislation within six month, which includes that they should be turned into mixed capital companies."⁴¹ Indeed, the state now requires that the private oil companies pay their dues in a form rightly profitable to the host company. The raise in corporate income tax ensures that unlike the 1% in royalty they used to pay, the companies now pay 30% in royalty and 50% tax on profits. If they fail to do so, they must leave the country. Undeniably, this recourse is aided by the necessity and valued business of oil; for, in other Latin American countries, large firms control particular industries, having more power to control supply and price than do firms in more competitive industries, while managing to control resources (e.g. capital, technology). In view of such land and oil reforms, Chavez has definitely turned the tables in hopes of achieving *rapid results* for the state and people.

Other notable social initiatives, by the head of Venezuela, are Plan Bolivar 2000, Education Decree 1011 and 3444, and the "Buy Venezuela" policy. Plan Bolivar was conceived as joint civic-military operation, which centered on programs to reverse the deterioration of the public infrastructure. The plan provides food aid to the poor via the military's infrastructure, and puts soldiers to work in fixing houses in poor communities. Although an ingenious method to put the military to use, Chavez's opponents criticized because of the concept behind it: a civilian-military junta, reminiscent of Castro's Cuba. The education decrees also received some lip since it allows for the Ministry of Education to send professionals to inspect schools and teachers in order to evaluate the improvements necessary. Specifically, Decree 3444 gives the government the right to oversee university budgets and planning. Critics say that universities will lose autonomy and that

these efforts are hostile to private education.⁴² The argument, as of yet, is unfounded since Chavez's administration has merely been enhancing the education system that suffered in the past due to cut in public expenditures. The last policy above-mentioned is a government program that promotes small and medium size industries by giving them access to credit facilities disbursed by Banco Popular, a banking entity.

In retrospective analysis of Chavez's political and social agenda, the portrait of Fidel Castro is eclipsed by the Venezuelan leader's *Bolavarian* revolution, which unquestionably walks a fine line between Western capitalism and Soviet socialism (or communism). And, therein lies the clash between the affluent opposition and the poor, the United States and the Latin American *pueblos*. The revolution strays away enough from neoliberalism to anger critics though it embraces few aspects of communism for the poor. Venezuela's societal division parallels the age-old struggle between American capitalism and Latin America's nationalist integrity. Yet, Chavez successfully maintains the direction of the third way, 21st century socialism, as he truly grasps the magnitude of his role within an oil-driven state and a continent on the verge of change.

Bolivar's Dream

The unfortunate reality of Central and South America has been its failure to attain political stability; of course, the majority of the fault lies in Western powers' interventionist foreign policies, such as those implemented during the Cold War. Nevertheless, social and political factors have never fallen in a sort of equilibrium throughout the region to allow for a united revolutionary change. Consider the efforts of Che Guevara; after the Cuban revolution, his efforts in the heart of South America, Bolivia, to rally a communist or nationalist movement faltered. Although U.S. intelligence thwarted his plans, the fact was that most Latin Americans were not prepared or aware of their individual power, nor were some countries in good terms. In other words, internal and external effects have always sabotaged any chance for a unified front that could attempt to ascertain true

sovereignty, self-sufficiency, and development. Some may see a futility or needlessness of a Latin American union; however, before the region defended nationalism or [Latino] Marxism, it was glorifying the ideology of Simon Bolivar, *El Libertador* or The Liberator of South America from Spanish forces. He envisioned expanding Gran Columbia, which at the time was a federation of present-day Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador: "I aspire to no other glory than the consolidation of Colombia. You must all work for the supreme good of a united nation.... My last wishes are for the happiness of our native land. If my death will help to... promote national unity, I shall go to my grave in peace."⁴³ As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, this sentiment has reemerged. Sharing Bolivar's passion is Chavez who upholds the concept throughout his rhetoric and regional alliances. His efforts have indeed brought more countries together despite few disagreements. For the first time since Bolivar, Latin America has actually moved towards a viable possibility of regional integration.

The opportunity has sprung mainly due to the flourishing of left-leaning leaders, such as Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Argentina's Nestor Kirchner, who Chavez has continuously maintained positive relations. In attempt to construct the Latin American bloc, the Venezuelan president has pursued various agreements with many nations of the region, especially with South American neighbors. The latest developments are remarkable improvements and signs of strengthening collective agenda. On 11 May 2005, energy ministers of Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina completed the draft designing Petrosul, an energy coalition Chavez has been pushing for sometime. What started in February as a strategic alliance, focused on implementing nineteen projects for infrastructure, the energy and mining sectors, and fostering import substitution goods, between Lula and Chavez, later evolved into a trilateral alliance. By March, the tripartite pact expanded on their earlier political, energy, and cultural agreements, while promising further talks over the creation of Petrosul and Telesur. The energy coalition will permit the creation of an

institution responsible for overseeing the coordination of the all three countries' energy bases: "... Pretrosul will *englobe* the petroleum exploration companies of the three countries—the Brazilian Petrobras, the Argentine Enarsa and the Venezuelan PDVSA."⁴⁴ Chavez has hopes that this will be an establishment of equal influence as OPEC.

Telesur, on the other hand, is a proposed television channel with information about and for South American countries, an alternative from CNN. Chavez has been attempting to convince other countries to join the initiative, and has so far succeeded; Uruguay's President Tabare Vasquez has pledged his support, accompanied by Cuba, Brazil, and Argentina.⁴⁵ Clearly, these measures are symbolic of a region's urgency and confidence in building bridges of unification along the line of the European Union. In fact, on the table since December 2004 is an agreement between all twelve South American countries to establish the South American Community of Nations. Chavez, of course, has backed the agreement entirely, suggesting "to set up a fund that could help countries facing financial difficulties."⁴⁶ The Venezuelan president obviously has his mind set on resurrecting Bolivar's dream, fully acknowledging this is a much needed dosage for a region attempting to stay afloat globalization.

But unlike other Latin American leaders, Chavez is remaining on a course ignorant of U.S. influence. One cannot deny that the developed nation's track record with Latin America is mostly bathed in blood, intimidation, and discord. Thus the reason behind Chavez's ongoing trail to cement as many trade agreements within the region and Far East nations as possible. He has signed over ten agreements with Latin American countries, known as the *Acuerdos de Cooperacion Energetica*, agreements over energy (oil) trade. In April 2005, Chile's President Ricardo Lagos and the Venezuelan leader signed a series of energy, scientific, and trade cooperation agreement; the accordance will also allow the oil state to provide Chile with crude to "lighten the workload of [Chile's] refineries while expanding overseas markets."⁴⁷ What's more,

Chavez's recent cooperation agreements (March 2005) with Brazil, Columbia, and Spain to boost integration and strengthen security within the region not only demonstrates his commitment to solidifying diplomatic/ economic relations, but also proves that he is no enemy to Columbia. There were American suspicions that Chavez was funding the Columbia's major underground guerillas, FARC. The president has always denied the accusations, proving so were his talks with Columbian President Alvaro Uribe. Currently, they maintain peaceful relations despite Uribe's strong alliance with the United States.

One of Chavez's more substantial accomplishments is gaining membership into MERCOSUR (Common Market of the South). Established in 1991, the MERCOSUR is a four-partner association between Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil that created a free-trade zone, welcoming the opening of economies while seeking to contain them. The customs union already signed a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union. Now, Kirchner and Lula have welcomed Venezuela though the country must first follow certain steps, includes the issue of tariffs, in order to achieve full member status. Adding to the list of regional concords, Chavez has sustained strong alliance with Cuba. In fact, Chavez and Castro share a close friendship that has rendered several trade agreements. Dating back to 2000, the island has received 53,000 barrels a day of Venezuelan oil at reduced prices.⁴⁸ In exchange, the oil state has received over 20,000 professionals (i.e. teachers, doctors, etc.), intelligence agents, and military advisers to aid Chavez's *misiones* and the overall development of the nation. Among other notable agreements between the leaders, ALBA (Alternativa Bolivariana para las América) is designed as an alternative to the FTAA. Essentially, ALBA pushes for solidarity with the economically weakest countries, with the aim of achieving a free trade area in which all of its members benefit. Aside from the fact that the overall relationship between Castro and Chavez is highly criticized by the U.S. and company, the alliance has shared successes and contributed to regional integration.

Important to recognize is the president's evident dedication to establishing constructive lines of communication and exchanges with his neighbors, which simultaneously enriching the social welfare of Venezuelans. Take for instance, the intellectual services gained from Cuba, or consider Chavez's recent agreement with Kirchner to export fuels worth \$200 million per year to be paid back in agriculture machinery and livestock.⁴⁹ Such efforts undermine the validity behind criticism against the Venezuelan leader since he has managed to truly shatter the image of a Communist authoritarian, and rather exemplify a profound loyalty to Bolivar's dream.

Mapping Latin America 2020

Yet, to some skeptics of Chavez, these strategic alliances are interpreted as influential means of spreading anti-American sentiment throughout the Southern belt. In fact, the old language of the Cold War is often resurrected. In an article written by Otto J Reich, Chavez along with Castro is signalized as one of major players that constitute the Western axis of evil. Putting many of the unfounded and exaggerated charges against Chavez aside, the former assistant secretary of state for the National Security Council does make one valid point and question:

“Not only is Castro still in power, but he is being kept afloat financially by Venezuela's oil-fueled charity; the Sandinistas are making a comeback in Nicaragua; and violent radical groups menace democracy from Bolivia to Haiti. In recent years, left-of-center leaders have come to power in Chile, Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay. Should we worry about these leftists?”⁵⁰

Not surprisingly, Reich says yes, believing that leftists would be the cause for regional instability ranging from an increase in crime to uninhibited radicalism. His argument is unreasonably unsubstantiated (and deserves no further analysis), however he brings to the table a likely portrait of most Latin American leaders in the near future. What Reich fails to acknowledge, though, are the legitimate efforts of Latin American leaders today (as has been made clear) to form a united, functional front, a necessary and long awaited vision of the Latin American populace. And, to believe that future leftist leaders, like the possible candidate Daniel Ortega of the Sandinistas, will

threaten the peace, is equivalent to still believing in the domino effect of the Cold War. The underlying fact is that although the Latin American psyche bears a disgruntled memory of the American past wrongs, the region does not live in the past. For, the root of anti-American sentiment today is founded in the unfair system of trade and “free” market between the Global South and North, the developing and developed countries. This is an issue that finds its solution in strengthening both the nation itself and the regional integration, not violence.

Needless to say, the reality appears to be that many Latin American states will strengthen their soil by electing left-leaning leaders, like Chavez, who will attempt to counter the U.S. imposed neo-liberal economic model. But, integration between Central and South America is far more difficult. According to the NIC report, *Mapping the Global Future*, experts predict that by the year 2020, past global changes could “deepen divisions and serve to split Latin America apart in economic investment, and trade policy terms,”⁵¹ thus weakening the influence of the overall continent in world affairs. To an extent, this is possible because many of the South American countries are developing partnerships with Asia and Europe, while Central America (especially Mexico) have become increasingly dependent on the U.S. and Canada. Yet, this may not be entirely conceivable if Reich’s prediction is true, or what the NIC report details is also credible: “Regional experts foresee an increasing risk of the rise of charismatic, self-styled populist leaders, historically common in the region, who play on popular concerns over inequities between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in the weakest states in Central America and Andean countries, along with parts of Mexico.”⁵²

Other than sharing similarities with Reich’s argument, the statement is also a clear allusion to Chavez. If true, however, certain Central American states will follow the steps of many South American leaders, especially those of Venezuela’s leader; and thus, they will look to the East for alliances, as they should considering China and India’s emerging status. In fact, the NIC report

even acknowledges that the two Eastern nations will become major economic powers that will challenge U.S. influence in global affairs. And, Chavez is not ignorant to these developments. He has signed seven agreements with India, including selling oil to the country, and twenty agreements with China, also involving oil sale. The president contends, "These agreements aim to promote Venezuela's new, productive economy... and they want to transfer technology with us."⁵³ Indeed, the strategic alliances are profitable and, more importantly, conducive to Venezuela's future status in the globe.

Accompanied by leaders like Kirchner, Lula, and Lagos, Chavez is setting the example for the practical manner of channeling anti-American sentiment through diplomacy with the rest of the major players, while at the same time strengthening regional ties. Ultimately, the only threat standing before the U.S. is its own image of the old Cold War, world-policing force.

Chavez in the future

Of course, one cannot completely dismiss Chavez's faults. The man, by any other name, is still a politician, and like any politician, he is guilty of slight nepotism. Many of the PDVSA board members he replaced in 2002 were close friends or family members of the president. However, what remains to be seen are the charges of censorship and "undemocratic" behavior. Along with the opposition, the Human Rights Watch has expressed concern over allegations that Chavez's administration is intent on censoring the news media and unlawfully arresting anti-Chavez activists who played a major role in the coup and the oil strike. The nongovernmental organization and company should carefully investigate the validity behind these accusations considering that Chavez has never stopped the Venezuelan people from demonstrating, or the news media from attacking him on live television. As of late, nevertheless, Chavez did pass a law with language similar to one of the many FCC (Federal Communications Commission) regulations in the United States. The law simply allows a federal agency to oversee that broadcasted information will not

incite violence [against the government]. Considering the distorted information provided by most private news agencies in Venezuela, which initiated the 2002 coup, the law comes in good timing and nowhere near reflects the ingredients of a “gag law,” as the opposition nicknamed the legislation.

What’s more, the United States has been more vocal than usual in the past two years, accusing the president of undemocratic behavior. Not only has this analysis shown the lack of truth behind such a charge, but there is also a hypocrisy that cannot be ignored. Many of the American allegations and consternations against Chavez can be easily attributed to the Bush administration. For instance, Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condleezza Rice have both admonished Chavez for buying weapons from Russia and Spain, as well as enlarging his military. They believe these are means of destabilizing the region and causing an arms race. This is, by far, an audacity (especially since the U.S. sell arms to both India and Pakistan, two warring nations) to point fingers at a leader who has done more for his country than any other Venezuelan president, and has proven to want nothing more than peaceful regional integration. Furthermore, whether wrong or not, Chavez has the legal right to equip his militia in order to strengthen national security and development, a justification that U.S. officials have themselves sustained for their own country.

In due course, perhaps the United States will reevaluate its stance against Chavez; they should attempt to since polls show that Chavez is likely to win the 2006 presidential elections in Venezuela, thus extending the Bolavarian Revolution. Even if he is not victorious, his political rhetoric and social reforms will not be easily forgotten.

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