

THE CHILE PRECEDENT

Emerging information indicates that the United States has had more influence than previously known on the current political divisions in Venezuela. A campaign of disinformation and financial support for Venezuelan coup leaders is eerily reminiscent of US involvement in the coup in Chile 30 years ago, which ushered in 17 years of brutal dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet.

A Democratic Mandate

For years, democracy in Venezuela was much like that in the US: representative democracy with political power alternating between two parties. The country's economy is dominated by oil, a situation leading to a massive wealth disparity. While some Venezuelans enjoyed privileges associated with rich countries, the majority of Venezuelans remained mired in poverty. Lack of access to health care, education and decent jobs plagued the majority while the nation's oil wealth was squandered by an elite few. In 1998, Venezuelans decided to vote for a change. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was elected in 1998 with 56% of the popular vote, upsetting the two political parties who had dominated Venezuelan politics for decades.

Chávez immediately set to work fulfilling his campaign promise to make the government responsive to the needs of its poor majority. Thousands of new public schools and health clinics were built, and the newly educated rural poor were encouraged to participate in the democratic process. In the years since, the ousted parties, largely representing the country's elite class, have joined forces to stop the Chavez reforms at any cost.

Wealthy and well-connected internationally, the opposition parties have called in favors from their allies at home and in the US government, maintaining a near monopoly in the media, securing financing, and gaining political backing for their efforts. So far opposition efforts have included a short-lived coup d'état and an economic shutdown that cost the economy billions.

Parallels to Chile

Thirty years earlier in Chile, another democratically elected leader championed the needs of the poor majority. After less than three years in office, President Salvador Allende was assassinated and a brutal military dictatorship took power. The 17-year reign of General Augusto Pinochet is one of the darkest chapters of modern Latin American history, during which thousands of Chilean citizens were jailed, assassinated or otherwise "disappeared."

A 1975 Congressional investigation led by Senator Frank Church looked into the Nixon Administration's

involvement in Chile throughout the period. The Church Report documents the participation of American officials, journalists and covert operatives who laid the stage for and directly assisted the violent overthrow of the Chilean government. While the full details of US involvement in Venezuela will not be known for many years, the information available presents chilling parallels to the demise of Chilean democracy.

US Government Propaganda: Media Disinformation

The Church report states that, "the most extensive covert action activity in Chile was propaganda." Journalists for Chilean and American newspapers were fed false information about the Allende administration, alleging dictatorial and Communist activities. US State Department officials made unsubstantiated but ominous references to Allende as a force of repression, human rights abuses and violence. The press blamed any act of opposition violence on Allende and his supporters.

In modern Venezuela, the media are again a principal source of anti-government organizing. Opposition leaders own the overwhelming majority of radio, print, and television media outlets. During the coup in 2002, top media executives met with the dictatorship's president to offer their support. When the democratically-elected President was restored to office after two days, the networks ignored the turn of events and instead ran cartoons and old movies.

American journalists rely heavily on vague descriptions of Chávez from opposition parties or State Department officials as "quasi-authoritarian," even when no evidence is presented to warrant such a description. "Unnamed" State Department officials are used as official sources for serious allegations like complicity in terrorism, political prisoners, and media repression, for which no documentation is provided.

Media outlets often recycle these questionable 'facts' until they become accepted as truth. For example, one Venezuelan newspaper reported a bizarre rumor that the Chavez administration funded Colombian guerilla movements. The newspaper account was then cited in a

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Defense Department Intelligence Assessment, which in turn made the rumor fair game to be repeated as fact in various Venezuelan outlets and, eventually, the US press. US editorial boards then base opinions on this dubious information. Editorials in the *Washington Post* have repeatedly passed on dozens of such factual errors, which greatly influence public perceptions.

Overt US Support from the Coup

The Church Report noted that US actions in Chile “went beyond the mere collection of information” and included direct assistance to “Chileans who sought a military alternative to the Allende presidency.”

In Venezuela, White House officials frequently met with coup leaders in the months leading up to the overthrow, and almost certainly knew of the plans in advance. During the coup, White House spokesman Ari Fleisher told the American public that, “the action encouraged by the Chávez government provoked this crisis,” assigning blame for protest deaths to the government without any substantiation.

Economic Sabotage: “Make the Economy Scream”

CIA Director Richard Helms had clear orders in Chile. Notes from a 1970 meeting with President Nixon read simply “Make the economy scream.” In an effort to cripple the Allende government, the US began to cut off investment in Chilean industry—no small matter considering that US corporations owned 70% of all foreign investment. The US used its substantial leverage among international lending institutions to cut off credit. The Nixon Administration also made use of intermediaries from the US labor movement to create a “large scale, middle class movement” against the government, by splitting the existing union structures and encouraging destructive strikes.

Similarly the Venezuelan economy let out a scream of international proportions in 2003 after coup leaders regrouped to shut down the nation’s oil sector. A two-month lockout of workers, organized by oil executives and tacitly supported by the United States, cut the country’s GDP and forced thousands out of work. Today the Venezuelan economy is only beginning to recover from the shutdown.

Follow the Money: US Financing for Coup Leaders

US agencies spent millions of dollars in covert activities in Chile in the three years leading up to the coup. While some of this money was spent overtly, the bulk was filtered through third parties. For example, the Church Report explains that while no CIA money was sent directly

to fund an economically devastating truckers strike, “It is clear that anti-government strikers were actively supported by several of the private sector groups which received CIA funds.”

In the same way, modern-day quasi-governmental bodies like the National Endowment for Democracy have funneled millions of Congressionally-approved US taxpayer dollars to Chávez opponents. In the lead-up to the 2002 coup, the NED more than tripled its funding to core grantees in Venezuela, including organizations whose leaders would go on to participate in the coup.

The language of a 2002 report from US Office of Inspector General strikingly parallels the Church report. “[I]t is clear that NED, Department of Defense (DOD), and other U.S. assistance programs provided training, institution building, and other support to individuals and organizations understood to be actively involved in the brief ouster of the Chávez government.”

Opposition “Democracy”

So just what type of democracy were the NED grantees promoting? In the first hours of the Venezuelan coup, the new government suspended the Constitution, dissolved the National Assembly and the Supreme Court, and fired the head of the National Bank, the Human Rights Ombudsman and the Attorney General. Interim President Pedro Carmona was declared the only legitimate government authority in the country--a one-branch dictatorship. Similarly, General Pinochet was also declared interim president on September 11, 1973, a position he held for 17 years.

In contrast, when Chavez was swept back into office by massive popular support in just two days, he pledged that the Venezuelan Constitution would be the guiding force for re-establishing the Rule of Law, a promise he has kept throughout the crises of the ensuing years.

The Major Difference with Chile: We Can Stop US Intervention in Venezuela Before It’s Too Late!

The one major difference between US intervention in Chile and Venezuela is that the democratically-elected government in Venezuela is still in office. US citizens can get involved to ensure that the US government does not support undemocratic activities and illegal intervention. Venezuelans have a right to choose their own democratic government, free of interference from the US government.

To find out how you can help the people of Venezuela, contact the Venezuela Information Office at newsandaction@veninfo.org or (202) 347-8081.