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Confronting Hugo Chávez

United States “Democracy Promotion” in Latin America

by
Christopher I. Clement

After the April 2002 coup in Venezuela, news reports and political commentary highlighted the United States’s long-standing displeasure with Hugo Chávez’s leadership. Although the Bush administration denies involvement in the coup, it continues to provide advice and financial support to many of Chávez’s opponents as what it considers “democracy promotion.” It has interpreted Chávez’s leadership and the ongoing events as a sign of deteriorating democracy in Venezuela. Few accounts have explained why the Bush administration believes that its criticism of Chávez, its initial support for the coup, and its continuing funding of Chávez’s opponents advance rather than undermine democracy. This targeting of a democratically elected government raises serious questions about the objectives and content of U.S. policies toward Latin America.

Some writers on U.S. foreign policy have suggested that recurrent images of Latin American peoples as temperamental, immature, and incapable of self-government have frequently served as pretext and justification for U.S. intervention in the region (Johnson, 1980; Hunt, 1987). Similarly, Martha Cottam has suggested that the U.S. public and its officials often ascribe negative moral traits to Latin American leaders when they come into conflict with U.S.-defined regional policies (Cottam, 1994). A wide assortment of cultural sources (e.g., literature, newspapers, and films) can serve as the materials for constructing U.S. foreign policy as having a noble and higher moral purpose. Recently, Roxanne Lynne Doty and Michael Shapiro have both emphasized the importance of the written and spoken narratives of U.S. leaders, bureaucrats, statesmen, and academicians in making U.S. foreign policy (Doty, 1996; Shapiro, 1988). These narratives provide a glimpse into the way U.S.

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officials and intellectuals construct the “realities” of politics and society in the Third World and advance the United States as ultimately progressive and democratic in its foreign-policy objectives.

Here I shed light on the argument of a prevalent intellectual discourse on democratic transitions that suggests a lack of confidence in party politics is responsible for turbulence and instability in “third-wave democracies” (i.e., countries undergoing democratic transitions). This discourse resonates well with the views of U.S. foreign-policy leaders and bureaucrats, who frequently employ rhetoric that justifies U.S. interventions as “pro-democratic.” I also suggest that this parallel between intellectual discourse and foreign-policy rhetoric becomes especially visible when rifts occur between foreign leaders and U.S.-defined global security interests. The implications of these practices are critical for understanding how the Chávez government came to be branded “semi-authoritarian” and for examining the content of U.S. democracy promotion in Venezuela. In the conclusion I address some of the assumptions behind U.S. democracy promotion and suggest that the ongoing intervention in Venezuela should make us cautious about U.S. toleration of democratic governments in the region.

WRITING DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN LATIN AMERICA

Much of what Washington calls democracy promotion developed throughout the 1980s as a response to rapidly changing events in Latin America. A rising tide of protests and armed rebellions against U.S.-backed dictatorships led prominent figures in the Reagan administration to believe that political change in Latin America was unavoidable. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was one instrument created to manage these changes so that the outcomes were compatible with U.S. interests. With the backing of the Reagan administration, Congress established the NED in 1983 as an agency run by private individuals but funded by the government. In Chile, Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams and other government officials worked through the NED to devise an electoral transfer of power from the Pinochet dictatorship to centrists in the opposition movement. The strategy was conceived by its proponents as a means for permitting the return to democracy and heading off a possible leftist overthrow of Pinochet. NED and other U.S. governmental funding of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) in Nicaragua’s 1990 election also led to a victory that dislodged that of the U.S.-maligned Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front—FSLN) (see Robinson, 1996). Elsewhere in Latin America, the relaxation of tensions with the Soviet Union and electoral

victories by moderates led the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations to view the return to democracy as compatible with U.S. interests (Carothers, 1993).

U.S. democracy promotion was and continues to be grounded in a new ideological zeal for democratic governance as an essential and indispensable element of free markets and regional security in a post-cold-war order. Democratic governance was conceived as a moderate political model that would be an alternative to the authoritarian extremes of left and right (see, e.g., O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 12–14). But as political liberalization expanded and included previously marginalized social actors throughout the 1990s, market liberalization faced greater contestation (Teichman, 2001). The rapid and deleterious effects of global economic integration contributed to the growth of militant labor and peasant groups and radicalized indigenous movements, which challenged traditional parties for political space (Veltmeyer, Petras, and Vieux, 1997: esp. chap. 11). By the end of the decade, protests against political corruption and economic decline had fueled several attempted coups and pockmarked the region's transition to market democracy.

At the same time, leading intellectuals of democratic studies told tales of fragile and helpless democracies throughout the Third World and postcommunist societies in which weak or ineffective parties had failed to manage popular resentment. At a conference sponsored by the NED, political parties, declared “key institutions in all democracies,” were reported to be “widely regarded as being in decline” (International Forum for Democratic Studies, 2004). The political scientist Juan Linz asserted, “Today, in all countries of the world, there is no alternative to political parties in the establishment of democracy. No form of nonparty representation that has been advocated has ever produced democratic government.” Peter Mair added, “However fragmented, weak, or undisciplined, however poorly rooted in society, however unstable and vociferous, parties are a very real and necessary part of the politics of new democracies.”

In several academic publications underwritten by the NED, strong parties and deeper commitments to market reforms are sanctioned as the solution to turbulence and instability while resistance to either is censured as antidemocratic. In their study of political parties and democracy, Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther (2001: x) proceed by first objectifying societies they regard as lacking in deeply rooted democratic values. While noting that disaffection with political parties is widespread, they still insist that

[the] implications of disaffection are much more serious in countries where democracy is not consolidated—most of the third-wave democracies of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the post-communist world. Where the legitimacy

of democracy is not deeply rooted at all levels of society, dissatisfaction and disaffection with democracy are much more likely over the long term to give rise to preferences for, or diminished resistance to, the return of some form of authoritarian rule.

In another publication underwritten by the NED, Laurence Whitehead cautions: "The resilience of communist rule in mainland China, as well as the weakening of democracy in Colombia and Venezuela, indicated that such convergence [of political and economic liberalization] was likely to encounter opposition and resistance" (Whitehead, 2002: 182). Dismissing Hugo Chávez's electoral victory in 1998 as seemingly an "untypical throwback," Whitehead concludes, "Three years later the political and economic benefits of an unquestioning endorsement of a liberalized world system seem more doubtful" (2002: 183). But resistance to globalization will reportedly lead to abandoning and reversing political and economic opening and reducing the scope for dissent (2002: 188). Whitehead therefore stresses the importance of regimes' pushing ahead with market reforms despite political pressures and urges the United States to maintain its commitment to economic and political liberalization.

The Inter-American Dialog (IAD), a think tank that has received numerous NED grants for its research on Latin America, issues similar directives in its policy recommendations. The foreword of an IAD 2003 policy report entitled *The Troubled Americas* states (2003: iii),

We see little evidence so far of a regional backlash against market economics and democratic politics, but we are concerned that Latin America's citizens and government are losing confidence in the economic and political reforms that, in the past dozen years, have taken hold in most of the region. The challenge, we argue, is to recast and amplify, not jettison, the reform agenda.

The IAD thus describes the design and efficacy of economic and political reforms as unproblematic and objectifies Latin America's "citizens and government" for lacking faith in the market and democracy. The report concludes, "Washington has considerable power to shape events and determine outcomes in Latin America. Stronger leadership from Washington could help address other regional economic challenges" (2003: 26).

PRACTICING DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN LATIN AMERICA

Some commentaries have charged the United States with focusing too heavily on trade and illicit narcotics trafficking in Latin America while

neglecting regional political problems (IAD, 2003; Robinson, 1991). Over the past two decades, however, the United States has provided substantial political aid for democracy promotion through the NED. Between the Reagan and Clinton administrations, NED funding and programs in Latin America remained at similar levels despite widespread transitions to democracy. From 1985 to 2000 the NED spent over US\$93 million in Latin America. Although funding declined slightly during the Clinton administration, Latin America remained a major region for NED funding and programs. Only Central Europe and the former Soviet Republics intermittently surpassed Latin America in such funding. Under George W. Bush, NED annual funding levels in Latin America have also been similar to those of previous presidential administrations.¹

When some members of Congress argued that the NED no longer served any purpose after the cold war and moved toward ending public funding, NED Chair John Brandemas stated (NED, 1996: 2),

Because the Endowment is a small, nongovernmental organization, it does not operate under the constraints of federal institutions that must (and should) serve U.S. diplomatic interests. The Endowment is thus able to act in certain countries where the involvement of an official U.S. government agency may complicate our diplomacy and conflict with our desire to help democratic activists.

The NED's *1997 Strategy Document* (NED, 1997) further noted that the organization needed to remain at the "cutting edge" of democratic change to sustain its funding from Congress. In the organization's *2002 Strategy Document*, the NED (2002a) explained that most of its resources were directed not only at authoritarian system but also at "semi-authoritarian" ones that fell "somewhere between dictatorship and genuine political openness and competition of electoral democracy" (NED, 2002a: 3).

The NED believed that it had a special role to play in "crafting a comprehensive response" in "semi-authoritarian" systems. The key objectives in these cases were strengthening the independent media, civil society, and political parties and building "effective governing coalitions and business associations, trade unions, and policy institutes that can mediate between the state and the market and effect real economic reform" (NED, 2002a: 4). Venezuela's government was explicitly identified as a semi-authoritarian system targeted by NED programs. As relations between the United States and Chávez worsened, this characterization would be repeated to justify NED funding of his opponents.

TEPID RELATIONS WITH THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION

During the Clinton administration, Chávez's visits to Iraq and his praise for Fidel Castro met with some criticism. Just prior to one of these trips, the State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher said, "We do think it's a rather dubious distinction to be the first democratically elected head of state to go meet with the dictator of Iraq" (*Agence France Presse*, August 7, 2000). Chávez also diverged from Washington over regional counternarcotics operations and economic integration. In 1999 he refused to permit U.S. military aircraft involved in antinarcotics operations to fly over Venezuelan airspace. But in public the administration still maintained a cordial relationship with the Chávez government. U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela Donna Hrinak stated, "Venezuela is an active partner in building an integrated hemisphere through the economy, through a consolidated democracy and through sustainable development" (*Agence France Presse*, November 5, 2000).

The official statements, at least, acknowledged the Chávez government as a democracy. In contrast, the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Republican party's international organization and a core NED grant agent, scrutinized Chávez's presidential bid and expressed anxiety over Venezuela's democratic future. An IRI report acknowledged that while opinion polls showed Chávez in the lead, the IRI believed that Chávez's armed revolt against the Pérez government made his credentials "questionable." Without citing any irregularities in voter registration, political violence, or restrictions on civil liberties during the election campaign, the IRI still concluded with a warning (1998):

Accustomed to a stable and democratic Venezuela, many U.S. policymakers have yet to confront the possibility that the country may veer away from the democratic path being followed by most Latin American countries. The consequences of such a development would be profound: the United States imports more oil from Venezuela than from any other country and bilateral trade has been expanding rapidly in the 1990s. For these reasons, the travails of Venezuelan democracy bear watching.

To the IRI and other NED grantees, the potential of a Chávez presidency signaled a serious erosion of party politics in Venezuela. Indeed, Chávez's political project appears to be clearly out of step with the NED's mission of promoting democracy through "party-building." He has built his political profile by relying on an "antiparty" discourse in which the traditional party domination of Acción Democrática (Democratic Action—AD) and the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (Independent

Electoral Political Organizing Committee—COPEI) are considered a source of political corruption and an impediment to democracy. Following his victory at the polls, he decreed a referendum for a constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution. As Steve Ellner explains, Chávismo and the political reforms under way in Venezuela resemble the populism employed by parties throughout Latin America during the 1930s and 1940s, but the constitutional changes also create the potential for direct popular participation in Venezuela's politics (Ellner, 2001).

NED spending in Venezuela during the period illustrates that the organization responded to Chávismo almost from the start. In 1999 Venezuela ranked the highest of 11 countries in the region for NED-funded programs. The IRI received the most funding out of all NED grantees in Venezuela during the period, and it responded to Chávez's push for a new constitution by using a US\$194,521 grant to develop a network for offering input into the drafting process (NED, 1999: 56). Its country-project overview (IRI, 2004) explains that "the perception that the country's traditional political parties are out of touch with the concerns of the citizenry and are largely responsible for its misery is the chief reason for this disdain. An opportunity exists to work with Venezuelan political parties to help them play their essential role more effectively." A US\$292,297 grant from the NED helped the IRI "train national and local branches of existing and/or newly formed political parties on party structure, management, organization, communications, and other topics" (NED, 1999: 56).

The American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), another core grantee of the NED representing organized labor in the United States, was also active in Venezuela. In 1998, ACILS provided the Confederación de Trabajadores Venezolanos (Confederation of Venezuelan Workers—CTV), which is dominated by the AD, with US\$54,289 so that it could play a greater role in Venezuela's economic and political debates (NED, 1998: 57). In 1999 pro-Chávez labor leaders introduced a resolution into the constituent assembly that would require all federated and confederated labor leaders to step down until elections were held. The CTV leadership responded by carrying out substantial internal reforms, which relieved some of the tension (Ellner, 2001: 22–23). During this period, a US\$246,926 grant to the CTV was described as helping to conduct internal elections by providing training and promoting widespread support and participation (NED, 1999: 56). Although total funding of NED programs in Venezuela declined sharply the following year, ACILS, the IRI, and a number of other grantees were still active. ACILS provided another US\$60,084 to the CTV "to effect reforms intended to increase rank and file control over decision making" (NED, 2000: 54).

HEIGHTENED TENSIONS UNDER THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION

Some predicted that the incoming Bush administration would toughen U.S. policy toward Chávez (Marquis, 2000). In fact, relations between Washington and Caracas continued to sour through 2001. When traveling to Iran, Chávez urged members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to refrain from increasing oil production. He insisted that OPEC members would not give in to pressure even if it came from the United States (*Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, May 21, 2001). On the eve of a visit by Fidel Castro, the Venezuelan government ordered the U.S. military mission in Caracas to vacate its office space. The final straw may have come in late October, when Chávez described the United States's military actions in Afghanistan as "fighting terrorism with terrorism." Days later, U.S. Ambassador Donna Hrinak was called back to Washington to brief the administration on its current relationship with Venezuela.

Chávez was facing political turmoil at home as well. Throughout the year, his opponents carried out a number of protests, alleging that his political reforms were really a means of consolidating dictatorial power. Shortly after Hrinak's return to Venezuela, the AD called another demonstration. AD member Henry Ramos stated, "Our principal weapon is our right to demonstrate against this pitiful situation which is dragging Venezuela through dirt, humiliated and discredited not only at home but abroad as well" (*New York Times*, November 23, 2001). Several members of Chávez's Fifth Republic Movement were wounded by rubber bullets when the Caracas police (controlled by Mayor Alfredo Pena, a Chávez opponent) opened fire because they were attempting to block the protest march.

In early January the *Washington Post* reported that the Bush administration expressed its solidarity with Venezuelan newspapers after Chávez had allegedly infringed on freedom of speech. Peter Hakim, the director of the Inter-American Dialog, used the resignation of Venezuela's ambassador to the United States to chide Chávez: "Deteriorating ties with the U.S. are being blamed on [Ambassador] Arcaya. It demonstrates the irrationality of Chávez, when the problem is in Caracas, not in Washington" (*Washington Post*, January 16, 2002). About this same time, allegations of Chávez's support for Colombia's rebels began surfacing in the U.S. press. From January until the coup in April, the White House explicitly questioned Chávez's commitment to democracy, human rights, and hemispheric security.

On February 5 Chávez was mentioned when Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. When Senator Jesse Helms asked Powell to comment on Chávez's support for

“narco-terrorists” in Colombia, Powell responded (U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2002),

Briefly, we have been concerned with some of the actions of Venezuelan President Chávez and his understanding of what a democratic system is all about. And we have not been happy with some of the comments he has made with respect to the campaign against terrorism. He hasn't been as supportive as he might have been. And he drops in some of the strangest countries to visit. We've expressed our disagreement on some of his policies directly to him. And he understands that it is a serious irritant in our relationship.

Powell also disclosed that the U.S. embassy in Venezuela had attempted to express its displeasure directly to Chávez but found him “quite defensive.” In fact, after Ambassador Hrinak returned from Washington she reportedly had a “very difficult meeting” in which Chávez was told to “keep his mouth shut on these important issues” (Slevin, 2002).

The verbal attack on Chávez became harsher the next day when CIA Director George Tenet spoke before the Senate Intelligence Committee. Republican Senator Pat Roberts asked Tenet to underscore how “a fellow named Hugo Chávez, who I think would be another Castro,” might be “a threat to the U.S. within our own hemisphere.” Tenet described Chávez as “a tough actor for us” who “probably doesn't have the interest of the United States at heart.” He then deferred to Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research Carl Ford, who engaged Roberts in deriding Chávez (U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2002):

Ford: Well, it seems to me—and I'm not an expert on Chávez or South America—but when you can't solve your basic, fundamental economic problems that Venezuela with the natural resources that it has available, you got to blame somebody. And I think that he's found that it's easier and more politically correct for him in Venezuela to blame us.

Roberts: Well, that's what Castro does.

Ford: That's right. That's why he joins with Castro in several occasions in voicing concerns about the U.S. That doesn't bother me so much, as long as it's just words. But there are also indications that he is sympathetic and helpful to the FARC [Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces] in Colombia and various other groups. So that I'm sure that all of us are going to be watching very closely to see what goes on in Venezuela and with President Chávez in particular.

In March 2002 NED President Carl Gershman spoke before the Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and repeated the NED's classification of Venezuela's government as semi-authoritarian. The IRI and NDI's efforts in Venezuela before and after the coup show that two of Gershman's recom-

mendations are especially relevant: “work to expand the constitutional, legal, and political space for civil society, NGOs, and opposition political party development” and “focus on building up subcultures of democratic activism that try to achieve incremental gains, but that can also provide leadership if and when opportunities arise for more substantial breakthroughs” (U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, 2002).

INTENSIFICATION OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

In 2000 Venezuela had fallen to sixth place out of ten Latin American and Caribbean countries in a number of NED-funded programs. Just one year later, NED funding in Venezuela went from a total of US\$257,831 to US\$877,435. Venezuela was the highest-ranked out of all the countries in the region (NED, 2000; 2001). The National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Democratic party’s international organization and NED core grantee, received a US\$210,500 grant and opened an office in Venezuela. The rationale and objective of NDI’s program described the state of Venezuela’s democracy in alarming tones (NDI, 2004): “Once considered South America’s most stable democracy, Venezuela is experiencing a period of dramatic political change. The rise of former coup leader Hugo Chávez and the demise of the traditional political parties reflect the fact that many Venezuelans are losing faith in the democratic process.”

The NDI’s January to March 2002 quarterly report on Venezuela asserted that “to help salvage democracy in Venezuela, an effective political party system must be rebuilt” (NDI, 2002: 1). Shortly after opening its office, it worked closely with several groups opposed to Chávez, including Proyecto Venezuela (a group associated with 1998 presidential contender Henrique Romer Salas) and Primero Justicia (Justice First—PJ).

The ACILS also provided another grant totaling US\$154,377 to the CTV. According to the NED’s *2001 Annual Report*, ACILS funding “played a critical role in mediating the controversial results [of the CTV’s elections] after pro-government unions attempted to disrupt the process” (NED, 2001: 49). The NED also provided the Education Assembly Civic Association with a US\$55,000 grant for reforming educational policy. Leonardo Carvajal, the group’s head, said that the funds were used for the stated purpose but claimed that it was one of the first organizations to carry out antigovernment marches. Carvajal was also considered for the position of minister of education in the two-day coup government (Caesar, 2002: 2).

With a Republican in the White House, IRI programs (which had shrunk to a mere US\$50,000 in 2000) dramatically increased to almost US\$340,000

in 2001. During this year, the IRI office in Venezuela established a firm working relationship with opposition figures, among them Francisco Arias Cárdenas, an erstwhile Chávez cohort who had competed against him in the 2000 election, and Caracas Mayor Alfredo Pena. The IRI's quarterly report on its activities in Venezuela discloses that Cárdenas visited its headquarters in Washington on October 18 and "spoke of the shortcomings of President Chávez's administration and the desperate need for change in Venezuela" (IRI, 2001: 8). The report also reveals that in December 2001 the former Republican party press secretary Mike Collins conducted an IRI training session on communication strategies for Cárdenas's Unión para el Progreso and encouraged the group to move its weekly press conferences out of its headquarters and into the streets. The IRI also had discussions with Pena about possibly forming his own party. During a December 5 meeting with Pena, Collins suggested that he "soften his aggressive image in order to appeal to a wider range of voters" and discussed "ways in which Pena could differentiate himself from the president and put forth a positive message" (2001: 7). Similar contacts were also made with the AD and COPEI. The IRI conducted workshops for these two parties and for PJ.

From February 17 to 23 Elizabeth Winger Echeverri, the IRI's senior program officer for Latin America, visited Venezuela and met with leaders of PJ, AD, COPEI, and other IRI affiliates. Meetings also included U.S. embassy officials and the Federación Venezolana de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción (Venezuelan Federation of Chambers and Associations of Commerce and Production—FEDECAMARAS), led by Pedro Carmona. After the meetings, IRI reported that it had "received firm commitment of party leaders to place a new, more urgent emphasis on the importance of party strengthening in the context of the present political turbulence" (IRI, 2002a: 4). Another meeting sponsored by the IRI brought these parties to Washington, DC, in March 2001, just a month before the coup.

THE COUP AND THE AFTERMATH

After the coup on April 11, Carmona assumed power and selected individuals from COPEI, PJ, and the CTV for the new government (Corn, 2002). The White House and the IRI praised the coup and justified it on the grounds that Chávez had allegedly instigated his supporters to attack demonstrators and later resigned. IRI President George Folsom applauded "the bravery of civil society leaders—members of the media, the Church, the nation's educators and school administrators, political party leaders, labor unions, and the

business sector—who have put their lives on the line in their struggle to restore genuine democracy to their country” (IRI, 2002b). State Department spokesperson Philip Reeker stated that the United States looked “forward to working with all democratic forces in Venezuela to ensure full exercise of democratic rights. The essential elements of democracy, which have been weakened in recent months, must be restored fully” (Ross, 2002). During a State Department meeting on April 12, Assistant Secretary of Western Hemisphere Affairs Otto Reich told attendees that the United States did not approve of coups or encourage the one in Venezuela but that Chávez had had it coming. The next day, U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) Roger Noriega chastised member states for being more concerned with events in Venezuela over the past 24 hours than with Chávez’s “antidemocratic” behavior (DeYoung, 2002a).

Carmona’s attempt at shutting down the National Assembly and Supreme Court and Chávez’s return to office on April 14 prompted a dramatic modification of these sentiments. Christopher Sabatini, the NED’s senior program director for Latin America, maintained that the NED recipients who had come out in support of the Carmona government had been under the impression that Chávez had resigned (Corn, 2002). Folsom’s praise had also drawn sharp criticism from NED President Carl Gershman. Without actually retracting his earlier statement, Folsom followed up by stating that “IRI’s statement was not an endorsement of extra-constitutional measures to forcibly remove an elected President, and IRI never contemplated the notion that the will of the Venezuelan people would be circumvented by extra-constitutional measures, such as the closure of the National Assembly and the Supreme Court” (IRI, 2002c). On April 16 White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer stated that the Bush administration did not encourage a coup and still believed that Chávez had resigned, regardless of his denial (DeYoung, 2002b). During the weekend of the coup, Reich had cautioned Carmona against dissolving the National Assembly and stressed the need to maintain the appearance of democratic continuity (Marquis, 2002a). Washington condemned the coup only after Carmona went against its advice.

Nevertheless, the White House continued to place the blame for Venezuela’s political crisis squarely on Chávez. On the day of his return, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice issued a stern warning that “the whole world is watching” and that Chávez should “right his own ship that has been moving in the wrong direction for quite a long time” (Witworth, 2002). The depiction of the United States as rescuing an imperiled Venezuelan democracy also continued. Lino Gutierrez, deputy assistant secretary for hemispheric affairs, declared (2002),

In the past, Venezuela has been a leader in the hemisphere—a champion of democracy, a supporter of regional integration efforts, and a close friend of the United States. It is time for Venezuelans to return to that leadership role in the hemisphere. And the way to do that is to create the conditions at home to preserve and encourage democratic activity.

But the White House had also become more public in its insistence that all parties and individuals involved in Venezuela's political disputes abide by democratic principles and seek a change in government through constitutional means. When Chávez's opponents called for his ouster again in late 2002, the U.S. embassy in Caracas stated that the United States would oppose any illegal or violent actions aimed at the "constitutional and democratically-elected government of Venezuela" (Forero, 2002). Some speculated that this cautious handling of events in Venezuela stemmed from the United States's need to depend on Venezuelan oil in the likely event of war with Iraq (Kaste, 2002).

It appears that the White House preferred to handle Chávez by electoral means rather than by supporting another coup. In December 2002 White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer stated that the "the only peaceful and politically viable path to moving out of the crisis is through the holding of early elections." He added that Venezuelans could seek resolution of the conflict through the ballot box, including the use of referendum to recall the president (Dao, 2002). Both the IRI and the NDI continued to maintain their contacts with Chávez's opponents. After the coup, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) designated a US\$1 million grant to the NED for its programs in Venezuela. In 2002 Venezuela remained the most heavily funded of all NED programs in the region, with a total of US\$1,099,352. The IRI received almost US\$300,000 for its party-building efforts (NED, 2002b). Three large grants were also provided to the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), a core affiliate of the NED.

When the NED's funding of Chávez's opponents surfaced in the U.S. press, Sabatini admitted that the goal was to create political space for the opposition but also insisted that the NED "had no opinion of Chávez" (Marquis, 2002b). But several of the grant proposals to the DRL and the NED reveal clear contempt for Chávez. CIPE's proposal was perhaps the most acerbic (NED, 2002–2003):

The current political crisis in Venezuela has been brought about by the deplorable performance of the Hugo Chávez government, which has demonstrated both militaristic and Marxist tendencies while consistently undermining democratic institutions in the country. It is therefore imperative to seek consensus

among civil society groups that will help build an alternative vision for Venezuela that will be characterized by greater democratic participation and input.

Grant proposals submitted by five separate groups all contained the same opening paragraph:

Once known for its consensus-based politics and respect for democratic liberties, Venezuela now teeters on the verge of widespread social and political conflict. Elected in 1998 and again in 2000 under a new constitution, President Hugo Chávez tapped into a growing popular sense of frustration and anger against Venezuela's political class, promising a revolution that would sweep out the "squalid" oligarchy. Once in office, Chávez's revolutionary rhetoric, public disregard for democratic processes and institutions, and vitriolic attacks on his opponents escalated political and social tensions and hardened the opposition.

The NED also provided a US\$53,400 grant to Sumate, the principal organizing vehicle for the presidential recall referendum. Sumate's grant proposal began with the same opening paragraph and further explained, "With Endowment support, the Venezuelan group Sumate will conduct a nationwide elections education campaign related to the referendum. With the assistance of other election-related groups in the region, Sumate will train voters throughout Venezuela on the voting process and encourage participation in the referendum voting process" (NED, 2003–2004).

CONCLUSION

Some have argued that U.S. democracy promotion has the potential of blindly placing idealistic values such as human rights and elected governments ahead of concrete security interests. From this perspective a foreign policy overly concerned with the domestic political virtue of other nation-states might restrict the ability of the United States to make alliances that are strategically necessary (see Schweller, 2000). It has also been suggested that the United States has not sufficiently heeded the potential of despotic leaders' remaining or coming to power through elections (Zakaria, 2003); "illiberal democracies" are partly the consequence of a foreign policy that focuses excessively on supporting elections abroad without fully acknowledging the possibility of undemocratic outcomes.

I offer a markedly different critique of U.S. democracy promotion. Indeed, the policy is premised on the ideological assumption that democratic governance optimizes global capitalism and international stability, but the

above argument pays little attention to the narrow and orthodox intellectual forces that underpin the practice of democracy promotion. The preoccupation with party building and the “semi-authoritarian” tag used in Venezuela and elsewhere demonstrates a growing awareness that political liberalization does not necessarily result in populations or regimes that readily fall in line with free-market principles or U.S.-defined global security priorities. Experimentation and departures from the authorized model of political liberalization are frequently identified as threats to democratic consolidation. Hugo Chávez’s trenchant critique of party politics in Venezuela and his sweeping political reforms run counter to the conventional written narratives of democratization.

Moreover, idealism has not been the sole (or even the principal) impulse behind the practice of democracy promotion. Contrary to the assertions of Zakaria and other critics, U.S. foreign policy has not promoted democracy simply because it is moral. The practice is deployed primarily when U.S. interests can be secured by using a targeted country’s electoral system (or other constitutional mechanisms) to accomplish regime change. Furthermore, while these interventions may not be driven by morality, they are associated with moral rhetoric that casts the intransigent leaders (even elected ones) as dubious political actors with undemocratic intentions. The statements of several members of the Bush administration make clear that Washington considers tensions with Venezuela the result of a government in Caracas that lacks an “understanding of what a democratic system is all about.” Other official statements and the NED’s grant descriptions also suggest that a victory by Chávez’s U.S.-backed opponents will not only “return” the country to democracy but also repair Venezuela’s “close friendship” with the United States.

It has been argued that since democracies rarely wage war against one another and seek pacific settlement of disputes, the spread of democratic governments can significantly reduce interstate warfare and encourage greater cooperation (Russett and Oneal, 2001). A modification of this proposition is that weak states with fragile democratic systems may be vulnerable to violent hostilities from advanced democracies (Doyle, 1983). David Forsythe has highlighted how U.S. covert operations during the cold war targeted elected governments (e.g., Guatemala in 1954, Brazil in 1964, and Chile in 1973) because they were suspected of aiding Soviet communism (Forsythe, 1992). I suggest that the United States employs a subjective and contingent conception of democracy that occasionally leads it to behave aggressively toward other democracies. Chávez’s obstruction of U.S. regional policy and his fiery indictment of U.S. military actions in Afghanistan led officials in Washing-

ton to see him as a despot. Their attempt at removing him and their initial support for the coup then became justified as a means of protecting Venezuela's democracy rather than subverting it.

"Democracy promotion" obviously falls short of a resort to violence. Nevertheless, we have seen that the United States does not necessarily rely on pacific settlements with other democracies, especially when the adversary is construed as a threat to democracy. One could also argue that the shift from violent covert operations to democracy promotion marks progress, since U.S.-backed regime change in the region now culminates with elected governments rather than repressive military juntas. But the last wave of covert operations directed at Latin American democracies occurred when U.S. public officials and intellectuals believed that political liberalization might actually bring radicals to power. Given this history and the possibility that more figures like Chávez will win elections in Latin America, it is likely that the United States will become more hostile to the region's leadership and its public officials will justify its behavior as a defense of democracy.

NOTE

1. These observations are gleaned from the funding numbers disclosed in the National Endowment for Democracy's annual reports from 1985 to 2001. The Agency for International Development has been another important source of aid to Latin America. Most of this aid, however, is provided ad hoc and has multiple objectives (e.g., conflict resolution, economic development, cultural).

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