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by GARRY LEECH

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## *Business as Usual: Washington's Regime Change Strategy in Venezuela*



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For those who have been following Venezuela closely in recent years there is a distinct sense of déjà vu regarding US foreign policy towards that South American nation. This is because Washington's strategy of regime change in Venezuela is almost identical to the approach it has taken in Latin America on numerous occasions since World War Two. This strategy involves applying economic sanctions, extensive support for the opposition,

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[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

and destabilization measures that create a sufficient degree of human suffering and chaos to justify a military coup or direct US military intervention. Because this strategy has worked so well for the United States for more than half a century, our elected leaders see no reason not to use it regarding Venezuela. In other words, from Washington's perspective, its regime change policies towards Venezuela constitute business as usual in Latin America.

Despite US rhetoric, this regime change strategy does not take into account whether or not a government is democratically elected or the human rights consequences of such interventions. In fact, virtually all of the Latin American governments that the United States has successfully overthrown over the past 65 years were democratically elected. Among the democratically-elected leaders that have been ousted were Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (1954), Salvador Allende in Chile (1973), Jean Bertrand Aristide in Haiti (2004) and Manuel Zelaya in Honduras (2009). Washington targeted all these leaders with economic sanctions and destabilization campaigns that created the economic chaos and humanitarian crises required to justify a military solution.

The common denominator in all those cases had nothing to do with democracy or human rights, it was the fact that those elected governments had the audacity to challenge US interests in the region. The fact that a Latin American government might prioritize the interests of its own people over US needs is unacceptable in Washington. This attitude was exhibited by CIA director George Tenet during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing in February 2002 when he arrogantly declared that Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez "probably doesn't have the interests of the United States at heart." Two months later, Washington supported a military coup that attempted to overthrow the Venezuelan leader. The failed military coup was the first major US-backed attempt to oust President Chavez following his election victory in 1998. Following the coup, Washington continued its efforts to install a government in Venezuela that would have the "interests of the United States at heart." It ramped up its support for opposition groups through increased funding for USAID programs in the country with the objective of turning people against the government. Wikileaks published a classified cable sent from the US embassy in Venezuela to Washington in 2006 that stated USAID funding for local programs seeks to influence community leaders by "moving them slowly away from Chavismo." The cable also declared that the embassy's broader objectives include "Isolating Chavez internationally."

In 2015, President Obama signed a presidential order ludicrously stating that Venezuela posed an “extraordinary threat to the national security” of the United States. The order was required under US law for the Obama administration to impose sanctions. Two years later, President Donald Trump stated that he would not rule out a “military option” for Venezuela. He also intensified the sanctions in order to make it more difficult for the government to address the country’s economic crisis. According to economist Mark Weisbrot:

The sanctions do their damage primarily by prohibiting Venezuela from borrowing or selling assets in the US financial system. They also prohibit CITGO, the US-based fuel industry company that is owned by the Venezuelan government, from sending dividends or profits back to Venezuela. In addition, if Venezuela wanted to do a debt restructuring, so as to reduce debt service during the current crisis, it would be unable to do this because it wouldn’t be able to issue new bonds.

Because the sanctions prohibit Venezuela’s state-owned company CITGO from sending its profits home, the Venezuelan government is losing \$1 billion a year in revenues. Ultimately, the sanctions are imposing greater hardship on the Venezuelan people because, as Weisbrot notes, they “exacerbate shortages of food, medicine, and other essential goods while severely limiting the policy options available to pull the country out of a deep depression.”

Earlier this month, President Trump turned the screws even more by signing an executive order imposing sanctions on gold exports from Venezuela. The South American nation contains one of the world’s largest gold reserves and has turned to selling some of its gold as a means of addressing the economic crisis. One week after Trump issued his decree, Britain complied with the new sanctions by refusing to handover 14 tons of gold bars worth \$550 million to Venezuela. This gold belongs to Venezuela and is simply being stored in the vaults of the Bank of England. As is the case with CITGO’s profits, Venezuela simply wants what is rightfully its own.

The fact that the United States and Britain feel they have the right to decide what Venezuela can and cannot do with its own assets and reserves illustrates the imperialist arrogance of these two nations. These latest US sanctions and Britain’s refusal to hand over Venezuela’s gold further restricts the Venezuelan government’s capacity to address the country’s economic crisis.

And then, earlier this week, it was revealed that the Trump administration is considering adding Venezuela to the US list of state sponsors of terrorism, which would automatically

trigger even harsher sanctions. Labeling Venezuela as a state sponsor of terrorism is as ludicrous as Obama declaring the country to be an “extraordinary threat” to US national security. One US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, admitted that it would be very difficult to provide any proof that Venezuela sponsors terrorism. That is because it doesn’t! But the US has never needed proof to intervene in another country, with Iraq and its supposed weapons of mass destruction being the obvious example. Such a move also illustrates the lengths to which Washington is willing to go to demonize and bully weaker countries that refuse to play by its rules.

US regime change policies are being coordinated with the opposition in Venezuela, which mostly consists of the country’s wealthy elites who ran the country prior to the election of Hugo Chavez. The socialist policies of former President Chavez and current President Nicolas Maduro have infringed on the privileges enjoyed by these domestic elites and by foreign oil companies. In response, the country’s wealthy opposition, who still dominate economic activity, have sought to sabotage the economy by scaling back production and by exporting much-needed basic necessities to neighboring Colombia.

Despite its wealth and economic power, the Venezuelan opposition needs the support of the most powerful nation in the world because it cannot win at the ballot box. Since 1998, in election after election, Venezuelans have overwhelmingly supported presidents Chavez and Maduro at the polls. These elections have been monitored by international observers and have repeatedly been deemed free and fair. One famous election observer, former US President Jimmy Carter, stated: “As a matter of fact, of the 92 elections that we’ve monitored, I would say that the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world.”

The US mainstream media is playing its customary and crucial propaganda role with regard to Venezuela by ensuring that the public only hears the official Washington narrative. This narrative seeks to demonize the Venezuelan government and has repeatedly labeled Chavez and Maduro as “undemocratic,” “authoritarian” and, ludicrously, as “dictators.” The media has also focused attention on food shortages and a “humanitarian crisis” that is resulting in Venezuelans leaving the country rather than the incredible social achievements in poverty reduction, education, housing for the poor and participatory democracy.

Meanwhile, the fact that more than five million people in neighboring Colombia were forcibly displaced from their homes by violence over the past couple of decades barely registered a blip on the mainstream media radar. Nor has the fact that more than 4,000 indigenous Wayuu children have died from malnutrition in Northern Colombia over the

past decade. We don't hear about these humanitarian crises because the Colombian government is a friendly regime that serves US interests—as are many other authoritarian allies whose human rights violations are conveniently ignored by the mainstream media.

As mentioned earlier, Washington's regime change strategy in Venezuela is nothing new. In fact, it is virtually a carbon copy of previous regime change efforts in Latin America. One classic example occurred in Chile after socialist candidate Salvador Allende was elected president in 1970. The Nixon administration's National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger foreshadowed the arrogance that CIA director Tenet would exhibit decades later when he made his thoughts on the election clear: "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves." And so, the Nixon administration set about destabilizing the country with policies that sought to, as one cabinet member stated, "make the Chilean economy scream."

For 18 months, the CIA clandestinely funded businesses, shop owners and truck drivers to shut down and go on strike, successfully making the "economy scream" by causing hardships for the Chilean people who had to endure mass shortages of basic necessities. Declassified documents reveal that the United States also provided funding and weapons to opposition groups in Chile while CIA operatives worked with Chilean military officers who were planning a coup to overthrow President Allende. By 1973, Chile had been destabilized sufficiently to justify a military coup. Once in power, the coup leader, General Augusto Pinochet, reversed many of Allende's policies that had hurt the interests of the country's elites and US corporations. He also ruled Chile as a dictator for the next 18 years with Washington's backing as he turned the country into a human rights catastrophe.

A similar process unfolded in Haiti following the election of Catholic priest Jean Bertrand Aristide to the presidency in 2000. His political party Fanmi Lavalas was by far the most popular in Haiti and gained a significant majority in the country's parliament. As the elected leader of the hemisphere's most impoverished country, Aristide implemented policies that benefitted the poor in the areas of healthcare, education and low-cost housing. He also doubled the minimum wage, which infringed on the profits garnered by US, Canadian and French companies operating in the country. Washington and its imperialist allies responded by imposing economic sanctions on Haiti while simultaneously funding opposition groups in the country. USAID managed much of the opposition funding and actively campaigned against the raising of the minimum wage. Aristide also faced a campaign of violence waged by paramilitary groups that were funded by France and

Haiti's economic elites. Declassified documents revealed that these armed groups also maintained a relationship with the United States.

In 2004, with the country reduced to chaos following three years of economic sanctions and paramilitary violence, the United States, Canada and France deployed troops to Haiti to overthrow the government. US Marines seized President Aristide and his wife in the presidential palace and transported them to the international airport, which had been secured by Canadian troops. The Haitian president was forced to resign from office and flown with his wife to Africa. The United States then installed a Haitian businessman who lived in Miami as the new unelected president. With the country existing under foreign military occupation, the new president reversed most of the policies implemented by Aristide, imprisoned thousands of opponents and banned Fanmi Lavalas, the most popular political party in the country.

The current US foreign policy towards Venezuela clearly replicates policies implemented in past decades that successfully ousted governments in Latin America. From Washington's perspective, it makes perfect sense to implement policies that undermine a democratically-elected government in order to achieve regime change when that government prioritizes the needs of its own people over those of the US economy and multinational corporations. The strategy worked in Chile. It worked in Haiti. And it also worked in the other aforementioned Latin American countries. The United States has no qualms about undermining democracy and imposing economic hardships on Latin Americans yet again, this time with the Venezuelan people the target in order to achieve regime change in that country. After all, a country isn't democratic unless its government has "the interests of the United States at heart."

Garry Leech is an independent journalist and author of numerous books including *Ghosts Within: Journeying Through PTSD* (Roseway Publishing, Forthcoming, Spring 2019); *Capitalism: A Structural Genocide* (Zed Books, 2012); *The FARC: The Longest Insurgency* (Zed Books, 2011); and *Beyond Bogotá: Diary of a Drug War Journalist in Colombia* (Beacon Press, 2009). He also teaches international politics at Cape Breton University in Nova Scotia, Canada.