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# In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

May 27, 2002

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## Editorial

# Dictatorship or Democracy?

**W**hen on April 12, a cabal of business  
leaders and military officers deposed  
Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez  
and dissolved the country's National  
Assembly and Supreme Court, the Bush  
administration blamed the victim. White  
House spokesman Ari Fleisher said, "The  
actions encouraged by the Chávez govern-  
ment provoked a crisis."

Major dailies adopted the language of Big  
Brother. A *New York Times* editorial heralded  
the coup: "Venezuelan democracy is no longer  
threatened by a would-be dictator ... [Chávez]  
stepped down after the military intervened and  
handed power to a respected business leader."

The *Chicago Tribune* commented with a  
straight face: "It is not every day that a democ-  
racy benefits from the military's intervention  
to force out an elected president." (Stephen  
Chapman, the conservative columnist who  
authored that editorial also noted that  
Chávez had been "praising Osama bin  
Laden," a statement with no basis in fact.)

Forty-eight hours later, however, Chávez  
was back in power, thanks to a popular upris-  
ing that was bolstered by diplomatic pressure  
from the Organization of American States.

As many had suspected, evidence soon  
emerged that the United States appeared to be  
behind the overthrow of yet another democra-  
tically elected government in  
Latin America. Prior to the  
putsch, military and civilian  
coup leaders had visited the  
White House, State Department  
and Pentagon. Venezuelan Gen.

Lucas Romero Rincon, for exam-  
ple, met with Rogelio Pardo-Maurer, a former  
high-ranking Contra official who is now the  
Pentagon official responsible for Latin America.

Undersecretary of State for Latin America  
Otto Reich denies that the administration  
had any knowledge of or involvement in the  
coup. Lies are Reich's stock in trade. As head  
of the Office of Public Diplomacy in the mid-  
'80s, Reich, an anti-Castro Cuban, conducted  
an illegal propaganda campaign to garner  
public support for the CIA-Contra war  
against the Nicaraguan government. This  
covert operation, staffed by psychological  
operations specialists from the U.S. Army,  
intimidated journalists and news executives  
and dispersed spurious news items.

Is it a coincidence that in Venezuela a  
coordinated propaganda operation appears to  
have stoked rebellion using anti-Chávez pri-  
vate media outlets? Two days before the coup,  
the Venezuelan Program for Education

Action and Human Rights, a group that pre-  
viously had been critical of Chávez's authori-  
tarian impulses, issued this warning:

The media have played a fundamental role  
in encouraging the climate of instability by  
circulating rumors of the suspension of  
guaranteed rights and announcing an  
alleged program of government repression.

... In a clearly provocative and illegal  
action, television channels have decided to  
exercise control over Chávez's national  
presidential broadcasts, the only communi-  
cation tool that the government possesses  
to respond to the open media conspiracy  
against it. Calls for a *golpe de estado*, the  
criminalization of left movements and  
proclamations against the supposed  
"Cubanization" of the country have all  
been redoubled in these day of permanent  
coverage in favor of the strike and the  
departure of Chávez.

Indeed, on the day of the coup, private  
media stations promoted the demonstrations  
continuously, characterizing the anti-Chávez  
demonstrators as "civil society" and labeling  
Chávez's supporters "mobs" and "hordes."

Many Venezuelans, particularly wealthier  
citizens, are unhappy with Chávez. In  
November, he decreed, and the National

## Prior to the putsch, the coup leaders visited the White House, State Department and Pentagon.

Assembly passed, 49 economic reforms. One  
of these laws requires banks to provide 15 per-  
cent of their loan portfolio to farmers, up from  
8 percent. Another distributes idle land to  
landless peasants. The end result of these mea-  
sures will result in a redistribution of wealth  
from the oligarchy to the more than 80 per-  
cent of Venezuelans who live in dire poverty.

In essence, a charismatic Chávez, carrying  
on where he says Simon Bolivar left off, has  
mobilized the disposed majority to demand  
compensation for centuries of blood, sweat  
and tears. His supporters have described this  
"Bolivarian" revolution as "an antibody" to  
the "disease of globalization." The Bush  
administration, the *New York Times* and the  
*Chicago Tribune*, perceiving a threat to the  
established order, worry that this popular  
movement might be contagious. After all,  
once it gets started, where will it stop?

—Joel Bleifuss