

Watch Venezuela

TWO years ago this week the Venezuelan army removed that nation's elected president, Hugo Chavez, in a violent coup resulting in about 100 deaths. The new dictator installed by the military, Pedro Carmona, immediately nullified Venezuela's constitution and dissolved its Supreme Court and elected National Assembly. Although the popular Chavez was initially elected by more than 80% of Venezuela's voters, Bush administration officials shed no tears over the apparent collapse of that nation's democracy. To the contrary, Bush's Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemispheric Affairs, Otto Reich, summoned ambassadors from Caribbean and Latin American nations and told them that the US would be supporting Venezuela's new "government."

The administration also sent ambassador Charles Shapiro to symbolically embrace the new dictator by dining with him in the presidential palace on his first day in power. To the embarrassment of the Bush administration, it was also the dictator's last day in power.

Venezuelans from across the political spectrum quickly rose up in outrage and deposed Carmona within a day, earning him the nickname "Dictator for a Day." It proved to be a long day, however. Before it was over, The New York Times ran an editorial celebrating Chavez's fall, which they termed a "resignation," laying out the template for their subsequent reporting of the 2004 Haitian coup, where they also reported that the deposed president "resigned."

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The Times' editors, on their editorial page (4/13/02), celebrated the new Venezuelan dictatorship in true Orwellian fashion, writing that Venezuela, under the new dictatorship, would "no longer be threatened by a would-be dictator," with the "would-be dictator" being that nation's deposed elected president, Hugo Chavez. Get it? The Chicago Tribune, like hundreds of other American newspapers, quickly followed The Times' lead, writing on April 14th, that Chavez was just an "elected strongman," arguing that sometimes countries "benefit from the military's intervention to force out an elected president." Long Island's Newsday, goose-stepping right along the merry path to fascism, oxymoronically wrote that the coup was "an affirmation of the democratic process."

To put this propaganda into an historical perspective, this was April of 2002 – around the same time the Bush administration was launching a disinformation campaign falsely alleging an imminent Iraqi threat to the US. The same media outlets parroted that story without question much as they echoed the administration's disinformation about Venezuela. Their acquiescence on the Iraq story allowed the administration to lead the nation into war. Their subservience on the Venezuela story, however, proved harmless. The Venezuelan people, to the embarrassment of the US media, put their president back into office.

All indications point to the Bushistas in Washington as being the instigators and planners behind the 2002 Venezuelan coup. According to The Observer, one of Britain's leading papers, the coup was engineered by Eliot Abrams, who currently serves in the Bush regime as "Senior Director of the National Security Council for Democracy, Human Rights and International Operations." Abrams, like Otto Reich, is a veteran of the Reagan White House, where he served as an assistant to Oliver North. He was ultimately convicted of a felony — illegally channeling funds to the Contra terrorists. President Papa Bush pardoned Abrams during his dynasty's first run in the White House – but Abrams seems recidivist, returning both to government employment, and to his criminal ways.

Of course the US media, having embarrassingly celebrated the failed coup, were later remiss in reporting its All-American roots.

Hence, it should come as no surprise that the American mass media is once again missing the story as the Bush administration readies for round two in its fight to unseat President Chavez. Rather than repeating its failed strategy of ousting Chavez through military means, the Bush administration this time around is trying to engineer a sort of electoral coup, employing the services of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

According to an expose published in The National Catholic Reporter (4/2/04), the NED is funneling money into Venezuelan opposition groups including one that is launching a recall campaign against Chavez. The Reporter's story is based on over 2,000 pages of

documents released through Freedom of Information Act requests. These documents show that the NED is also funding political opposition groups run by figures appointed to "cabinet posts" during the one day dictatorship. In all, the NED gave \$922,000 to Venezuelan opposition groups so far this year, on top of over \$1 million doled out to the same groups last year.

I hate to use the term "Orwellian" over and over again, but the Bush administration leaves writers little choice. Take the aforementioned Eliot Abrams, for example. During the Reagan administration's now well documented terror war against the democratically elected Sandinista government of Nicaragua, Abrams coordinated actions of the Contra terrorists against Nicaragua's civilian infrastructure and population. Now, in his incarnation in the new Bush administration, this pardoned felon is reborn as a Director in charge of "Democracy" and "Human Rights."

Likewise, the Reagan-era National Endowment for Democracy, reinvigorated under the Bush II White House, is another Orwellian incarnation – ultimately existing to undermine democratically elected governments not subservient to the Bush mob. Their current efforts to depose Venezuela's elected president would be illegal if a foreign agency attempted pulling the same antics here in the United States. Put simply, in the US it is illegal for foreign organizations to try to cook the electoral process through the infusion of capital from abroad.

This is best illustrated by looking at the NED's activities in Nicaragua in the 1980s. While the Reagan administration was arming and training the Contras with the aim of wreaking havoc in Nicaragua, the NED was bankrolling a US-backed democratic opposition party. The electoral choice for Nicaraguans was simple. Reelect their Sandinista government and continue to suffer under a US imposed trade embargo and a deadly unending series of terrorist attacks, or "Cry uncle" and elect a US-leaning government. In order to make the point, the NED, under the first Bush administration, infused \$10.5 million into Nicaragua's 1989 election. Adjusting for population difference and inflation, that would be equivalent to injecting \$1.16 billion into the current US presidential election campaign, dwarfing even George Bush's record breaking \$175 million war chest. What would The New York Times write if, say, China gave a billion dollars to the Kerry camp (assuming it was legal)? And how would that impact our election?

Chavez is on the Bush administration's hit list for many of the same reasons Aristide was: both came from the slums and still speak for the poor. In essence, they embody a principle the Bushistas hold in disdain – democracy. Chavez caught the administration's ire and the anger of his country's own wealthy class by creating massive government-funded literacy programs and enacting land reform programs while resisting the austerity

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measures foisted upon his country by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. More recently, Chavez joined forces with other regional governments requesting a UN investigation into the coup that deposed Haitian president Jean Bertrand Aristide. And he joined Jamaica's government by offering to host the Haitian president-in-exile.

The Bush forces have made a mockery of our own democracy while presiding over destruction of Haiti's democracy and at least one attempt to destroy Venezuela's democracy – all while the American mass media has slept. With Venezuela's democracy once again in peril, and with Jamaica and Brazil's democracy also caught in the Bush administration's crosshairs, Americans can't allow this silence to continue.

Michael I. Niman's 5/9/02 column on the Venezuela coup, is archived at www.mediastudy.com. US Government documents outlining NED activity in Venezuela are available at www.venezuelafoia.info. The National Catholic Reporter is available online at www.natcath.com.