

Is the US plotting to murder Venezuela's president?

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Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez cancelled a planned trip last month to the United Nations General Assembly's opening debate, explaining that he did so because of a potential threat on his life. His government's intelligence agencies had reportedly warned of a plot backed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to sabotage his plane in flight from Caracas to New York City. He and others had also raised concerns about Venezuelan anti-government terrorists conducting military training on US soil.

The US media has barely reported the Venezuelan president's security concerns; and when it has, it generally attempts to portray the charges as an indication that Chavez is unstable or suffering from paranoia.

Chavez's concerns, however, are hardly far-fetched. While he has won two consecutive popular elections by the largest popular margins in Venezuelan history, he remains in office today thanks only to the failure of an April 2002 coup attempt carried out with the barely concealed backing of the Bush administration. Those who carried out the coup were the recipients of US funding, including government money funneled through the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy and its international front, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity.

The military-businessmen's regime that briefly seized power held Chavez incommunicado on an island of the Venezuelan coast for two days while deciding his fate. Washington welcomed the coup and then backtracked after mass opposition in the streets of Caracas made the new ruling junta's position untenable.

After it emerged that the coup plotters had held repeated discussions with a group of right-wing Cuban émigrés and veterans of the CIA-backed "contra" war in Nicaragua who hold key positions of power in the State Department and the Pentagon, the Bush administration improbably claimed that these individuals were merely trying to talk the Venezuelan military and business establishment out of overthrowing the government. None of them, however, thought to warn Chavez of the impending coup.

Since the failure of the coup, Venezuela has been the target of an unrelenting economic and political destabilization campaign, including a 64-day oil strike backed by opposition leaders in December and January in an attempt to bring down the government.

US officials, meanwhile, have issued repeated statements denouncing Chavez. "I think that some of the things that he has done at home politically and his policies on the economic side have ruined what is a relatively wealthy country," Roger Noriega,

the State Department's top official on Latin America, declared recently. Noriega made no mention of the oil strike, which enjoyed Washington's tacit support, or of Washington's decision in July to cut off all credit to Venezuela from the US Export-Import Bank.

At the same time, the Bush administration has lent all but open support to the campaign by elements of the opposition to force a recall election aimed at ousting Chavez. In an act of gross interference in Venezuela's internal affairs, US ambassador Charles Shapiro went before the country's newly formed electoral commission last month and offered US assistance to the panel, including determining whether to accept the opposition's recall petition.

Shapiro is no stranger to CIA-sponsored subversion and killings. His diplomatic career in the 1980s was centered in El Salvador. He first served as the State Department's Salvadoran desk officer from 1983 to 1985, and then as the political consular at the US Embassy in San Salvador from 1985 to 1988. That position has commonly been used as a cover for the CIA's chief of station in a given country.

This period spanned the height of the Salvadoran civil war and the wholesale massacres and assassinations carried out by the military-backed death squads. It also was when the US used El Salvador as a base of operations for its illegal "contra" war against neighboring Nicaragua.

In the end, the Venezuelan panel ruled that the opposition had gathered most of its signatures illegally and then set a new timetable for holding a recall. Supporters of Chavez in the "Fifth Republic Movement" indicated that they too will petition for the recall of opposition governors, mayors and deputies seeking the president's ouster. The earliest any recall referendum could be staged is next February.

Recent weeks have seen a series of terrorist bombings in Caracas, including a bomb thrown at the military barracks near the Miraflores presidential palace and an attack on the Colombian consulate. Most recently, terrorists hurled an explosive device at the headquarters of CONATEL, the government's telecommunications regulatory agency, apparently in retaliation for the confiscation of illegal equipment from the opposition-controlled television network, Globovision.

Meanwhile, the Venezuelan government has protested the fact that anti-government forces, including direct participants in the April 2002 coup, are openly conducting training in terrorist tactics on US soil.

An article published in the *Wall Street Journal* detailed the activities in Florida of Capt. Luis Eduardo Garcia, one of the first Venezuelan officers to storm the presidential palace during the April 2002 coup. Heading up an outfit known as the Venezuelan Patriotic Junta, Garcia has forged a “civic-military” alliance with the F-4 Commandos, an anti-Castro exile group that has carried out terrorist attacks against Cuba.

According to the *Journal*: “Now Capt. Garcia says he is providing military training for some 50 members of the F-4 Commandos, 30 of them Cuban-Americans, the rest Venezuelans, in a shooting range close to the Everglades. ‘We are preparing for war,’ he says.”

Florida newspapers, including *El Nuevo Herald* carried similar reports on the terrorist training camp.

Chavez directly protested the existence of the camp in a meeting last month with Shapiro. In a speech also delivered in September, he denounced the hypocrisy of the Bush administration’s supposed war on terrorism. “There in the US they are conspiring against Venezuela,” he said. “Terrorists are training against Venezuela and it is a demand that must be made to the government of the US, because they are obligated by international law to act. If what they say is true, that they are fighting against terrorism, they should act against the terrorists on their own territory who are threatening Venezuela.”

Shapiro responded by claiming that the training of terrorists on US soil “is not necessarily a crime.” He asserted that the US government is in “the process of collecting information and we must follow all legal procedures.” The first reports of the military activities of Capt. Garcia appeared in the Miami press fully a year ago.

While sheltering Venezuelan terrorists in Florida, the administration has orchestrated a sinister campaign to brand Venezuela as a terrorist haven. A product of this propaganda drive appeared in the October 6 issue of *US News & World Report* under the scare headline, “Terror Close to Home.”

The article, consisting almost entirely of unsubstantiated allegations attributed to unnamed US intelligence and government sources, claims that “Chavez is flirting with terrorism, and Washington is watching with increasing alarm.”

The substance of these sensationalist claims consists largely of the fact that there is an Arab minority in Venezuela as well as hundreds of thousands of Colombian refugees. The fact that the Venezuelan government provides identity documents to these people—whom the article insinuates are somehow tied to terrorist groups by virtue of their nationality—is branded as support for terrorism.

“The suspicious links between Venezuela and Islamic radicalism are multiplying,” the article declares. As evidence, it cites the case of a single Venezuelan of Arab descent who was deported from the US in March 2002. When the US sought to locate this individual for further questioning, “they were told by Venezuelan officials that he was not in the country.” The article provides no explanation as to why Venezuela’s inability to locate this person is any more suspicious than the US authorities’ decision to release him before they were through with their interrogations.

The article concludes: “Given all that is happening in Chavez’s

Venezuela, some American officials regret that terrorism is seen chiefly as a Middle East problem and that the United States is not looking to protect its southern flank.” This amounts to a direct appeal for Washington to use the pretext of “terrorism” to launch another predatory war, this time in Latin America.

Chavez’s populist rhetoric and sharp criticism of the Bush administration’s unprovoked war on Iraq has earned Washington’s enmity, as has his friendly ties with Castro’s Cuba. In the end, however, the sustained US campaign against his government has the same essential roots as the war against Iraq. Venezuela is the world’s fifth-largest oil exporter, and the US ruling elite is determined to establish its undisputed hegemony over the strategic energy resources that exist both there and in neighboring Colombia.

It is not just the petroleum reserves existing in Venezuela that concern Washington, but also the Chavez government’s behavior on the international petroleum markets. Venezuela has pushed for raising oil prices and recently antagonized the US administration by strenuously objecting to the seating of a delegation from the US-controlled Iraqi Governing Council at a meeting of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). There are also indications of US opposition to Venezuela’s turn toward barter agreements with other Latin American countries for petroleum deals and the use of euros rather than dollars for other transactions.

In assessing the validity of Chavez’s concerns about assassination, Washington’s international behavior is certainly relevant. In the run-up to the war a year ago, Bush’s White House spokesman declared that the problem of Iraq could be solved with “one bullet.” The administration has publicly lifted previous restrictions on CIA assassinations and has carried out such political killings in both Yemen and Afghanistan, claiming that its targets were “terrorist suspects.”

In Iraq, after carrying out an illegal invasion and occupation of the country, the Bush administration has repeatedly advocated the assassination of the country’s ousted president, Saddam Hussein. Last July, it murdered his two sons and then organized the international broadcast of the grisly images of their corpses.

Meanwhile, the administration has backed Israel in its policy of “targeted assassinations” of Palestinian militants and leaders, and recently vetoed a resolution condemning the Sharon regime’s public threat to assassinate Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat.

There is no reason to doubt that elements within the Bush administration have ordered plans drawn up for the realization of “regime change” in Venezuela by means of assassination. In Iraq and elsewhere, this US government has amply proven its readiness to resort to the most criminal methods to realize its aims.



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