

# New York Times describes 2002 US-backed coup against Hugo Chavez as “unwise”

Bill Van Auken  
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In an editorial published Thursday, the *New York Times* provided a somewhat measured assessment of the career of Venezuela’s recently deceased president, Hugo Chavez, while rooting its attitude firmly in US imperialist interests.

“Venezuela’s future matters to Americans because its oil wealth makes it a major political and economic force in Latin America, and it supplies around 10 percent of the oil imported by the United States,” the *Times* declared. The primary concern of the *Times*, like that within US ruling circles as a whole, is whether Chavez’s death will facilitate more lucrative exploitation of Venezuela’s petroleum reserves, the largest in the Western Hemisphere.

The editorial continued by charging the Bush administration with having “badly damaged Washington’s reputation throughout Latin America when it unwisely blessed a failed 2002 military coup attempt against Mr. Chavez.” It urged Washington to signal its support for “a democratic and civilian transition in a post-Chavez Venezuela.”

The *Times*, the voice of what was once known as America’s liberal establishment, neglected to recall for its readers the paper’s own response to the coup. It enthusiastically endorsed it. On April 13, 2002, as Hugo Chavez—Venezuela’s then twice-elected president—was being held in a military fortress, apparently facing execution or exile, the *Times* published an exultant editorial, declaring: “Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator.” It praised the country’s military for having “intervened and handed power to a respected business leader.”

Only after the coup had failed—in the face of popular protests and the intervention of decisive sections of the military—did the “newspaper of record” apologize for having “overlooked the undemocratic manner” of Chavez’s overthrow. Had the coup and its CIA backers

succeeded, it is safe to say that no such contrition would have been forthcoming.

What follows is the article posted by the *World Socialist Web Site* in response to the failure of the coup attempt.

## What the New York Times “overlooked” in the Venezuelan events

By Bill Van Auken  
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The disarray within US ruling circles over the failed coup in Venezuela has found its most distilled expression on the editorial page of the *New York Times*.

When Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was in the custody of military coup leaders and apparently bound either for execution or exile, the *Times* hailed his overthrow in the lead editorial of its April 13 edition. “Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator,” the paper exulted, noting that “the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader.”

The collapse of the coup in the face of mass protests and dissension within the military required a shifting of gears. “In his three years in office, Mr. Chavez has been such a divisive and demagogic leader that his forced departure last week drew applause at home and in Washington,” the newspaper declared in an April 16 editorial. “That reaction, which we shared, overlooked the undemocratic manner in which he was removed. Forcibly unseating a democratically elected leader, no matter how badly he has performed, is never something to cheer.”

How the *Times*’ editors “overlooked” the small detail that Chavez had been removed by flagrantly undemocratic means is not explained. Did they fail to note the military

uniforms of the coup leaders portrayed in the photograph on the newspaper's front page? Were they not informed about the tanks in the streets of Caracas? Were they so unfamiliar with Venezuela's recent history that they did not know Chavez had been elected, not once but twice, and that his policies had received overwhelming backing in a popular referendum?

Obviously, the "correction" in the second editorial is a cynical evasion. This apologia was seen as necessary only because the US-backed plot failed.

When the editorial writers initially proclaimed that a military coup had ended the "threat" to democracy, it was no slip of the pen. Their conception of "democracy" is firmly rooted in the social interests of the ruling elite, and therefore easily dispenses with such traditional democratic forms as elections and the subordination of the military to civilian rule.

The first editorial clearly spelled these interests out. "Washington has a strong stake in Venezuela's recovery," it stated. "Caracas now provides 15 percent of American oil imports, and with sounder policies could provide more."

In addition to lauding the civilian chief of the short-lived junta, big business federation chief Pedro Carmona, the *Times* also noted approvingly the "strong participation of middle-class citizens in organizing opposition groups and street protests."

Indeed, those participating in the demonstration in Caracas that proved to be the opening shot of the April 11 coup were considerably wealthier, better dressed and whiter than those who later battled security forces in the city's working class and poor neighborhoods to protest the military's seizure of power.

The key elements of the "democracy" that the *Times* upholds in Venezuela begin to emerge. Its principles are the assurance of uninterrupted cheap oil to the US petroleum corporations and the maintenance of a firm grip on both the government and the economy by the country's thin layer of wealthy businessmen, backed by the military. To the extent that Chavez's policies threatened the US grip on Venezuelan oil and his minimal reforms infringed on the privileges of the economic elite, his overthrow, as far as the *Times* is concerned, was justified.

That he was elected twice by the largest majorities recorded in the country's history was of little consequence. "He was democratically elected," a Bush administration official interviewed by the *Times* conceded, and quickly added: "Legitimacy is something

that is conferred not just by a majority of the voters, however."

No doubt this official was voicing a belief firmly held throughout the Bush administration, which came into office by suppressing the popular vote in the 2000 US election. That election proved that decisive sections of the American ruling class were prepared to break with democracy to further their profit interests. And the response from what passes for American liberalism, including the editors of the *Times*, demonstrated that those within the establishment who had opposed Bush were easily reconciled to the theft of an election and a massive conspiracy against democratic rights.

The *Times*' attitude to the Venezuelan coup only demonstrates once again that liberalism no longer exists in the United States as a significant political trend. Serious opposition to the crimes of the US military and the CIA abroad, as well as to the attacks on democratic rights at home, will emerge only from a movement led by the working class, mobilized independently of the Democrats and Republicans in a struggle directed against the profit system.

Despite its two-faced contrition over having praised the military coup, the *Times*' April 16 editorial contains an unmistakable threat that the CIA and other US agencies are by no means through with Chavez. "The only hope for Mr. Chavez and Venezuela is for him to step back from his confrontational agenda," it states.

But the *Times* promises to exercise more decorum next time around. Should a second coup attempt prove successful, instead of joining the cheers of the Bush administration, it will more quietly blame Chavez, while once again exonerating the CIA and the Pentagon for any role in what would unquestionably be a bloody settling of accounts with the Venezuelan people.



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