

# How GMO Seeds and Monsanto /Bayer's "RoundUp" Are Driving US Policy in Venezuela

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Global Research, May 07, 2019

[MintPress News](#) 6 May 2019

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean, USA](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO, Intelligence](#)

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As the political crisis in Venezuela has unfolded, much has been said about the Trump administration's clear interest in the privatization and exploitation of Venezuela's oil reserves, the largest in the world, by American oil giants like Chevron and ExxonMobil.

Yet the influence of another notorious American company, Monsanto — now a subsidiary of Bayer — has gone largely unmentioned.

While numerous other Latin American nations have become a "free for all" for the biotech company and its affiliates, **Venezuela has been one of the few countries to fight Monsanto and other international agrochemical giants and win.** However, since that victory — which was won under Chavista rule — the U.S.-backed Venezuelan opposition has been working to undo it.

Now, with Juan Guaidó's parallel government attempting to take power with the backing of the U.S., it is telling that the top political donors of those in the U.S. most fervently pushing regime change in Venezuela have close ties to Monsanto and major financial stakes in Bayer.

In recent months, Monsanto's most controversial and notorious product — **the pesticide glyphosate, branded as Roundup, and linked to cancer in recent U.S. court rulings — has threatened Bayer's financial future as never before,** with a litany of new court cases barking at Bayer's door. It appears that many of the forces in the U.S. now seeking to overthrow the Venezuelan government are hoping that a new Guaidó-led government will provide Bayer with a fresh, much-needed market for its agrochemicals and transgenic seeds, particularly those products that now face bans in countries all over the world, including once-defoliated and still-poisoned [Vietnam](#).

## **U.S.-Backed Venezuelan opposition seeks to reverse Chavista seed law and GMO ban**

In 2004, then-president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, surprised many when he [announced](#) the cancellation of Monsanto's plans to plant 500,000 acres of Venezuelan agricultural land

in genetically modified (GM) soybeans. The cancellation of Monsanto's Venezuela contract led to what became an ad hoc ban on all GM seeds in the entire country, a move that was praised by local farmer groups and environmental activists. In contrast to anti-GM movements that have sprung up in other countries, Venezuela's resistance to GM crops was based more on concerns about the country's food sovereignty and protecting the livelihoods of farmers.

Although the ban has failed to keep GM products out of Venezuela — as Venezuela has long imported a majority of its food, much of it originating in countries that are among the world's largest producers of genetically modified foods — one clear effect has been preventing companies like Monsanto and other major agrochemical and seed companies from gaining any significant foothold in the Venezuelan market.

In 2013, [a new seed law](#) was nearly passed that would have allowed GM seeds to be sold in Venezuela through a legal loophole. That law, which was authored by a member of the Chavista United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), was [widely protested](#) by farmers, indigenous activists, environmentalists, and eco-socialist groups, which led to the law's transformation into what has been nicknamed the "People's Seed Law." That law, passed in 2015, [went even farther](#) than the original 2004 ban by banning not just GM seeds but several toxic agrochemicals, while also strengthening heirloom seed varieties through the creation of the National Seed Institute.

Soon after the new seed law was passed in 2015, the U.S.-backed Venezuelan opposition led by the Roundtable of Democratic Unity (MUD) — a group comprised of numerous U.S.-funded political parties, including Guaidó's Popular Will — took control of the country's National Assembly. Until Venezuela's Supreme Court [dissolved](#) the assembly in 2017, the MUD-legislature [attempted to repeal](#) the seed law on several occasions. Those in favor of the repeal called the seed bill "anti-scientific" and damaging to the economy.

Despite the 2017 Supreme Court decision, the National Assembly has continued to meet, but the body holds no real power in the current Venezuelan government. However, if the current government is overthrown and Guaidó — the "interim president" who is also president of the dissolved National Assembly — comes to power, it seems almost certain that the "People's Seed Law" will be one of the first pieces of legislation on the chopping block.

### **The AEI axis**

Some of the key figures and loudest voices supporting the efforts of the Trump administration to overthrow the Venezuelan government in the United States are well-connected to one particular think-tank, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). For instance, John Bolton — now Trump's national security advisor and a major player in the administration's aggressive Venezuela policy — was a [senior fellow](#) at AEI until he became Trump's top national security official. As national security adviser, Bolton advises the president on foreign policy and issues of national security while also advising both the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense. As of late, he has been pushing for military action in Venezuela, according to media reports.

Another key figure in Trump's Venezuela policy — Elliott Abrams, the State Department's Special Representative for Venezuela — has been regularly featured at [AEI summits](#) and as [a guest](#) on its panels and podcasts. According to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Abrams'

current role gives him the “responsibility for all things related to our efforts to restore democracy” in Venezuela. Other top figures in the administration, including Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, were [featured guests](#) at the AEI’s “secretive” gathering in early March. As *MintPress* and other outlets have reported, Guaidó declared himself “interim president” of Venezuela at Pence’s behest. Pompeo is also intimately involved in directing Trump’s Venezuela policy as the president’s main adviser on foreign affairs.

Other connections to the Trump administration include Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos who was previously on AEI’s [board of trustees](#).

AEI has long been a key part of the “neoconservative” establishment and employs well-known neoconservatives such as Fred Kagan — the architect of the Iraq “troop surge” — and Paul Wolfowitz, the architect of the Iraq War. Its connections to the George W. Bush administration were particularly notable and controversial, as more than 20 AEI employees were given top positions under Bush. Several of them, such as Bolton, have enjoyed new prominence in Trump’s administration.

Other key Bush officials joined the AEI soon after leaving their posts in the administration. One such was Roger Noriega, who was the U.S. representative to the Organization of American States (OAS) during the failed, U.S.-backed 2002 coup and went on to be assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs from 2003 to 2005, where he was extremely influential in the administration’s policies towards Venezuela and Cuba.

Since leaving the Bush administration and promptly joining the AEI, Noriega has been instrumental in pushing claims that lack evidence but aim to paint Venezuela’s current President Nicolas Maduro-led government as a national security threat, such as claiming that Venezuela is helping Iran acquire nuclear weapons and hosts soldiers from Lebanon’s Hezbollah. He also lobbied Congress to support Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López, Guaidó’s political mentor and leader of his political party, Popular Will.

Not only that, but Noreiga teamed up with [Martin Rodil](#), a Venezuelan exile formerly employed by the IMF, and José Cardenas, who served in the Bush administration, to found [Visión Américas](#), a private risk-assessment and lobbying firm that [was hired](#) to “support the efforts of the Honduran private sector to help consolidate the democratic transition in their country” after the U.S.-backed Honduran coup in 2009. In recent months, Noriega and his associates have been very focused on Venezuela, with Cardenas offering Trump [public advice](#) about how “to hasten Maduro’s exit,” while Rodil has [publicly offered](#) “to get you a deal” if you have dirt on Venezuela’s government.

While the AEI is best known for its hawkishness, it is also a promoter of big agricultural interests. Since 2000, It has hosted [several conferences](#) on the promise of “biotechnology” and genetically modified seeds and has heavily [promoted the work](#) of former Monsanto lobbyist Jon Entine, who was [an AEI visiting fellow](#) for several years. The AEI also has [long-time connections](#) to Dow Chemical.

The most likely reason for the AEI’s interest in promoting biotech, however, can be found in its links to Monsanto. In 2013, [The Nation acquired](#) a 2009 [AEI document](#), obtained through a filing error and not intended for public disclosure, that revealed the think tank’s top donors. The form, known as the “schedule of contributors,” revealed that the AEI’s top two

donors at the time were the Donors Capital Fund and billionaire Paul Singer.

The Donors Capital Fund, which [remains](#) a major contributor to the AEI, is linked to Monsanto interests through the [vice chairman](#) of its board, Kimberly O. Dennis, who is also currently [a member](#) of the AEI's National Council. According to AEI, the National Council is composed of "business and community leaders from across the country who are committed to AEI's success and serve as ambassadors for AEI, providing us with advice, insight, and guidance."

Dennis is the [long-time executive chairwoman](#) of the Searle Freedom Trust, which was founded in 1988 by Daniel Searle after he oversaw [the sale](#) of his family pharmaceutical company — G.D. Searle and Company — to Monsanto in 1985 for \$2.7 billion. The money Searle had made from that merger was used to fund the trust that now funds the AEI and other right-wing think tanks. Searle was also close to Donald Rumsfeld, who [led](#) G.D. Searle and Co. for years and was Secretary of Defense under Gerald Ford and George W. Bush. Searle was also a trustee of the Hudson Institute, which once employed [Elliott Abrams](#).

After the family company — which gained notoriety for [faking research](#) about the safety of its sweetener, aspartame or NutraSweet — was sold to Monsanto, G.D. Searle executives close to Daniel Searle rose to prominence within the company. Robert Shapiro, who was G.D. Searle's long-time attorney and head of its NutraSweet division, would go on to become Monsanto's vice president, president and later CEO. Notably, Daniel Searle's grandson, D. Gideon Searle, was [an AEI trustee](#) until relatively recently.

### **Why is a top to Marco Rubio increasing his stake in Bayer while others flee?**



Yet, it is AEI's top individual donor noted in the accidental "schedule of contributors" disclosure who is most telling about the private biotech interests guiding the Trump administration's Venezuela policy. Paul Singer (image on the right), the controversial billionaire hedge fund manager, has long been a major donor to neoconservative and Zionist causes — helping fund the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), the successor to the Project for a New American Century (PNAC); and the neoconservative and islamophobic Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD), in addition to the AEI.

Singer is notably [one of the top political donors](#) to Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and has been intimately involved in the recent chaos in Venezuela. He has been called one of the architects of the administration's current regime-change policy, and was the top donor to Rubio's presidential campaign, as well as a key figure behind the controversial "dossier" on Donald Trump that was compiled by Fusion GPS. Indeed, Singer [had been the first person](#) to hire Fusion GPS to do "opposition research" on Trump. However, Singer has largely since

evaded much scrutiny for his role in the dossier's creation, likely because he became a key donor to Trump following his election win in 2016, giving \$1 million to Trump's inauguration fund.

Singer has a storied history in South America, though he has been relatively quiet about Venezuela. However, a long-time manager of Singer's hedge fund, Jay Newman, [recently told Bloomberg](#) that a Guaidó-led government would recognize that foreign creditors "aren't the enemy," and hinted that Newman himself was weighing whether to join a growing "list of bond veterans [that have] already begun staking out positions, anticipating a \$60 billion debt restructuring once the U.S.-backed Guaidó manages to oust President Nicolas Maduro and take control." In addition, the *Washington Free Beacon*, which is [largely funded](#) by Singer, has been [a vocal advocate](#) for the Trump administration's regime-change policy in Venezuela.

Beyond that, Singer's Elliott Management Corporation gave Roger Noriega, the former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs under Bush, [\\$60,000](#) in 2007 [to lobby](#) on the issue of sovereign debt and for "federal advocacy on behalf of U.S. investors in Latin America." During the time Noriega was on Singer's payroll, he wrote articles linking Argentina and Venezuela to Iran's nonexistent nuclear program. At the time, Singer was aggressively pursuing the government of Argentina in an effort to obtain more money from the country's prior default on its sovereign debt.

While Singer has been mum himself on Venezuela, he has been making business decisions that have raised eyebrows, such as [significantly increasing](#) his stake in Bayer. This move seems at odds with Bayer's financial troubles, a direct result of the slew of court cases regarding the link between Monsanto's glyphosate and cancer. The first ruling that signaled trouble for Monsanto and its new parent company Bayer took place last August, but Singer *increased* his stake in the company [starting last December](#), even though it was already clear by then that Bayer's financial troubles in relation to the glyphosate court cases were only beginning.

Since the year began, Bayer's problems with the Monsanto merger have only worsened, with Bayer's CEO [recently stating](#) that the lawsuits had "massively affected" the company's stock prices and financial performance.

### **Forcing open a new market for RoundUp**

Part of Singer's interest in Bayer may relate to Venezuela, given that Juan Guaidó's "Plan País" to "rescue" the Venezuelan economy includes [a focus](#) on the country's agricultural sector. Notably, prior to and under Chavismo, agricultural productivity and investment in the agricultural sector took a backseat to oil production, resulting in [under 25 percent](#) of Venezuelan land being used for agricultural purposes despite the fact that the nation has a wealth of arable land. The result has been that Venezuela needs to [import](#) much of its food from abroad, most of which originate in Colombia or the United States.

Under Chávez and his successor, Maduro, there has been [a renewed focus](#) on small-scale farming, food sovereignty and organic agriculture. However, if Maduro is ousted and Guaidó moves to implement his "Plan País," the opposition's coziness with foreign corporations, the interests of U.S. coup architects in Bayer/Monsanto, and the opposition's past efforts to overturn the GM seed ban all suggest that a new market for Bayer/Monsanto products — particularly glyphosate — will open up.

South America has long been [a key market](#) for Monsanto and — as the company’s problems began to mount prior to the merger with Bayer — it became a lifeline for the company due to less stringent environmental and consumer regulations than many Western countries. In recent years, when South American governments have opened their countries to more “market-friendly” policies in their agricultural sectors, Monsanto has made millions.

For instance, when Brazil sought to expand biotechnology (i.e. GM seed) investment in 2012, Monsanto saw [a 21% increase](#) in its sales of GM corn seed alone, generating an additional \$1 billion in profits for the company. A similar comeback scenario is needed more than ever by Bayer/Monsanto, as Monsanto’s legal troubles saw the company’s [profits plunge](#) late last year.

With countries around the world now weighing glyphosate bans as a result of increased litigation over the chemical’s links to cancer, Bayer needs a new market for the chemical to avoid financial ruin. As Singer now has a significant stake in the company, he — along with the politicians and think tanks he funds — may see promise in the end of the anti-GM seed ban that a Guaidó-led government would bring.

Furthermore, given that Guaidó’s top adviser wants the Trump administration to have a direct role in governing Venezuela if Maduro is ousted, it seems likely that Singer would leverage his connections to keep Bayer/Monsanto afloat amid the growing controversy surrounding glyphosate. Such behavior on the part of Singer would hardly be surprising in light of the fact that international financial media [have characterized him](#) as a “ruthless opportunist” and “overly aggressive.”

Such an outcome would be in keeping with the increased profit margins for Monsanto and related companies that have followed its expansion into countries following U.S.-backed coups. For instance, after the U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014, the loans given to Ukraine by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank [forced](#) the country to open up and expand the use of “biotechnology” and GM crops in its agricultural sector, and Monsanto, in particular, made millions as the prior government’s ban on GM seeds and their associated agrochemicals was reversed. If Maduro is ousted, a similar scenario is likely to play out in Venezuela, given that the Guaidó-led government made known its intention to [borrow heavily](#) from these institutions [just days after](#) Guaidó declared himself “interim president.”

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