

# The CIA's Attempts to Destabilize Venezuela

How RCTV President's CIA Connection Links Venezuela and Nicaragua

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The president of Venezuela's RCTV, Eladio Larez,[\[1\]](#) is no stranger to the CIA. In fact, Eladio's contact with the agency goes back nearly twenty years. Back in 1989, Larez helped the CIA funnel money through Venezuela to the Nicaraguan opposition as they worked to topple the Sandinista government through massive violence and destabilization. Larez was actually so kind as to set up a fraudulent foundation in Venezuela, called the National Foundation for Democracy, as a front organization to receive money from the CIA and pass it on to fund the operations of a major opposition newspaper in Nicaragua.[\[2\]](#)

"As a journalist," Larez said to his Nicaraguan counterparts, "I understand the problems with freedom of expression in these countries and the necessities and difficulties with written and spoken media."[\[3\]](#) A few weeks later, Larez's friend and political ally Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez would order the national army to fire on innocent protesters, killing hundreds, possibly thousands, of activists in the streets of Caracas. Larez's RCTV helped mask the reality by not televising images of the massacre.[\[4\]](#)

Likewise, on April 13th, 2002, after RCTV and other Venezuelan media supported and participated in a coup d'état against President Hugo Chavez, as many as 60 pro-Chavez protesters were shot down by the temporary government of Pedro Carmona.[\[5\]](#) RCTV refused to broadcast the violence, instead playing cartoons and soap operas as people were killed in the streets of the capital.[\[6\]](#)

Apparently, Larez's fictitious concerns about "freedom of expression" haven't changed much over the years. One has to wonder, though, if his relationship with the CIA has also not have changed? A look at Larez's role in the CIA's destabilization of Nicaragua sheds some light on how Eladio Larez and his RCTV are using the same methods in Venezuela.

## Nicaragua's La Prensa: A model for Venezuela's RCTV

In the same year that the Sandinista rebels overthrew the brutal, decades-long dictatorship of the Somoza family in 1979, the U.S. State Department was already searching for a way to avoid any significant changes in the country and create what they referred to as "Somocismo without Somoza".[\[7\]](#) In the years of Sandinista rule that followed, the United States and the CIA tried nearly every strategy at their disposal, including all out violence and warfare through U.S.-funded "counter-revolutionary" forces called the "contras," in order to undermine, destabilize, and eventually topple the revolutionary Sandinista regime. The use of the media would be a critical element in the campaign.

In its attempts to create a hostile media atmosphere, the United States aided, created, and financed media outlets both inside and outside Nicaragua in order to shape public opinion

and destabilize the Sandinista government. In the early years, the CIA broadcast into Nicaragua from radio stations in neighboring countries like Honduras, and gave financial assistance to existing opposition radio stations inside Nicaragua. But later, the United States eventually set up its own station inside the country called Radio Democracia with money from the CIA's National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The mission, according to the director of the station, would be to "offset the [Sandinistas'] instruments for consciousness formation."[\[8\]](#) This was logical, after all, since a conscious population might not agree with Washington's plans for "Somocismo without Somoza."

The most important media for the U.S., however, would be the well-known opposition newspaper *La Prensa*. From the very beginning of the Sandinista government, the Managua daily received millions of dollars in payments from the CIA and NED, much of it funneled covertly through third-party connections like Eladio Larez and the Venezuelan government of President Carlos Andres Perez.

Larez met with *La Prensa's* owner, and Washington's preferred candidate for the 1990 elections, Violeta Chamorro, the year before the elections to set up a fraudulent foundation to receive money from the CIA and pass it on to the opposition newspaper.[\[9\]](#) According to one document, Larez's front organization, the National Foundation for Democracy, "would probably not actually have to serve as a pass-through other than on paper."[\[10\]](#)

Larez collaborated in, and witnessed first hand, the U.S. efforts to orchestrate the Nicaraguan opposition media campaign and to promote the opposition candidate. Their efforts would allow the United States to "buy" the 1990 Nicaraguan elections for the opposition as explained by California Congressman George Miller: "We have taken Mrs. Chamorro and we pay for her newspaper to run, we funded her entire operation, and now we are going to provide her the very best election that America can buy."[\[11\]](#)

CIA assistance enabled the paper to play a key role in the campaign against the government; the same role, in fact, that the CIA had cultivated in other countries that were victims of destabilization programs. The *El Mercurio* newspaper in Chile, for example, had played the same role in the CIA operation against the Allende government in 1973, as had the *Daily Gleaner* in Jamaica against the Manley government in 1980.[\[12\]](#) The media could be a very useful tool in getting rid of popular, yet "undesirable," governments. In Venezuela, Eladio Larez's RCTV appears to be playing that very same role.

## **Destabilizing Venezuela**

In the few years I have been observing the media in Venezuela, there has been one aspect of RCTV news coverage that has really stuck out: everything centers on the president. On a daily basis, from morning to night, RCTV news coverage and political talk shows seem to tie every single problem in the country back to the Chavez government.

Interestingly, this strategy appears to be straight out of the CIA handbook, and was implemented in the same fashion against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. One CIA manual used by anti-Sandinista groups instructed them to determine "the needs and frustration of the target groups" and to channel them into "generalized anti-government hostility." The goal was to make the population identify the current government as "the cause of their frustration," according to the manual, and believe that these frustrations could only be gotten rid of with the elimination of that government.[\[13\]](#) Linking all the problems in the country back to the central government, or even the president himself, is the strategy used

to create general anti-government hostility and frustration.

In Venezuela, crime, corruption, kidnappings, strikes, unemployment, poverty, problems with infrastructure, and general inefficiencies are always blamed directly on the central government or even the president himself, almost as if none of these problems ever existed before Hugo Chavez, and as if his government was the only possible cause. The kidnapping and murder of three children in 2006, for example, was used for months on end to criticize the Chavez government, as was the collapse of a major bridge near Caracas the same year. Even an increase in the nation's homicide rate has literally been attributed to "the president's fiery rhetoric."[\[14\]](#)

And nearly every person interviewed by RCTV almost always has some message or other for the president of the country, even if the issue at hand is simply a hole in the road, or a flooded street. The complaints of the common citizen seem to be frequently directed to President Chavez himself. It seems likely that RCTV does this on purpose, presumably by asking their interviewees if they have anything to say to the president, then airing their response in order to create a direct connection between local problems in communities and the central government. By channeling all problems back to Chavez himself, the media creates the impression that Hugo Chavez is the root "cause of their frustration."

The United States also used a whole variety of other covert psychological operations in destabilizing Nicaragua and waging an informational war against the government. These involved manipulating and paying off journalists, planting disinformation and propaganda, and influencing international coverage of the country. As one U.S. official admitted, the media war in Nicaragua sought to "demonize the Sandinista government" in order to "turn it into a real enemy and threat."[\[15\]](#)

This appears to be the identical strategy used in Venezuela. Recent revelations have also shown that some of the principal journalists from the Venezuelan opposition have received payments from the U.S. government in recent years,[\[16\]](#) and U.S.-funded organizations frequently make press releases and call for press conferences to make public criticisms of nearly every policy decision of the Chavez government.

On a constant basis, the U.S. State Department releases propagandistic reports to the international press criticizing the Venezuelan government on everything from drug enforcement, to human rights, to corruption. These reports pretend that Venezuela has a worse record than previous Venezuelan governments or even Venezuela's neighbors including, for example, U.S.-allies such as Colombia with much worse human rights situations.[\[17\]](#)

Opposition media such as RCTV work in unison with the U.S. propaganda effort and give unwavering coverage to U.S. reports and denunciations from U.S.-funded organizations like Sumate or Primero Justicia. Government opponents are given almost daily coverage to make accusations of political persecution, threats to democracy, curbed freedoms, and economic problems, over and over again week after week, year after year. As William Robinson says in his book about the Nicaraguan destabilization, *A Faustian Bargain*:

"Like worn-out records, the themes of a lack of democracy in Nicaragua, political repression, persecution of the church, economic disaster, militarization, the export of revolution, and so forth, were repeated on a daily basis during the course of a decade."[\[18\]](#)

All of this, with opposition media like RCTV consistently putting all the blame on the government, comes together into a very effective “demonizing” of Hugo Chavez. For many Venezuelans as well as U.S. citizens, the media campaign has managed to repeat the strategy in Nicaragua and “turn [Hugo Chavez] into a real enemy and threat.”

### **“Crackdown” on freedom of expression**

If the principal function of the *La Prensa* newspaper in Nicaragua was to destabilize the Sandinista government, one of the ways it did this was by creating the image that freedom of expression had suffered repression under the Sandinista government. Although there were other newspapers and opposition media in the country, *La Prensa* attempted to create the impression that it was “Nicaragua’s only independent newspaper,” and tried to appear as a victim of an authoritarian government. As William Robinson explains:

“*La Prensa*’s activities are a textbook study in how a psychological warfare organ operates. In this role, *La Prensa* worked closely with U.S. Embassy personnel in Managua and coordinated its editorial policy in unison with overall U.S. strategy and the contra war. When the Sandinistas tried to curb the excesses in *La Prensa*’s openly destabilizing activities through limited censorship, the issue was pounced on as evidence of their ‘anti-democratic tendencies’.”[\[19\]](#)

Since the beginning of the Chavez government, private media such as RCTV have continuously accused the government of “repressing” the private media and have even claimed they are paying “armed groups” to attack journalists. None of these accusations were ever accompanied by evidence or supported by the facts, but the media did not cease their claims.

The more recent strategy of RCTV, however, seems amazingly similar to the strategy used in Nicaragua. After Hugo Chavez announced last year that he would not renew RCTV’s broadcast license when it expired on May 27th of this year, RCTV made every effort possible to appear as a victim of an “authoritarian” regime. And exactly as Nicaragua’s *La Prensa* had done, RCTV claimed the government was repressing the “only independent media” in the country.

For months leading up to the May 27th deadline, the RCTV news programming centered on what they referred to as the “closing” of the channel, and the “silencing of opposition.” Never did they mention, however, that the station would not be closed, but would simply go off the nation’s VHF spectrum and could continue to broadcast by cable.

The private channel, along with the opposition political parties (many of whom are indirectly funded by the U.S. State Dept.), organized public events, political marches, and street protests building up to May 27th, which was to be the climax of several months of protest and “resistance” to the “closure.” The street protests on and around the final days leading up to the deadline were used by RCTV and the international media to claim the Chavez government was “cracking down” on “independent” media and “repressing freedom of expression.” Isolated protests among certain sectors of the population were made to appear like a massive protest movement against a repressive regime.

Surprisingly, this “protest movement” was not unique to Venezuela. A very similar event in Nicaragua, organized with the help of the U.S. Embassy, had been used to create the image of a “burgeoning protest movement” against the Sandinistas. When a joint embassy-

opposition activity ended in violence between police and protesters, the Sandinista government arrested many people and accused the CIA of organizing the incident to provoke violence. The incident was described as “repression” of civil liberties and a “Sandinista crackdown” in the U.S. and international press.[\[20\]](#)

Months later, the Sandinista accusations were confirmed when Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Jim Wright affirmed that Congress “had received clear testimony from CIA people that they had deliberately done things to provoke an overreaction on the part of the Government of Nicaragua.” The goal had been “to provoke a riot or antagonize [Sandinista] officials.”[\[21\]](#)

Video of the protesters in Nicaragua show that they had initiated the violence by attacking the police just as RCTV protesters seemed to have intended the same when they attacked a police line in front of the National Telecommunications Commission two months ago.[\[22\]](#) And RCTV protesters tended to dress alike, using T-shirts and apparel distributed by RCTV and opposition political parties. The protesters in Nicaragua did the same, according to video footage, dressing in light colored guayabera shirts and dark pants.[\[23\]](#)

All of this is eerily similar to the section on “urban insurrection” in the CIA’s *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare* manual used by anti-Sandinista forces. In the section dedicated to how to organize urban disturbances, the manual advises insurrectionary forces to dress alike so that they can easily identify each other and situate themselves strategically before they are incited to “violently confront the government” by a political ‘cadre’ in the crowd. When this political “cadre” has created “great hostility against the regime,” the conditions are ripe for the overthrow of the government, says the manual.[\[24\]](#) Not only is this very similar to the strategy of RCTV protesters during the May 2007 protests, but also of the opposition marchers who were urged on by RCTV during the April 2002 coup attempt that temporarily overthrew the Chavez government.

A little more than a month after RCTV finally went off the air on May 27th, the channel began to broadcast in Venezuela again, this time over cable and satellite. But, again, the channel immediately caused problems when it refused to follow the national media regulations that require all national media to broadcast government public-service messages as well as the national anthem on a daily basis. A new conflict was created with the government when RCTV asserted that it did not have to follow national law claiming that it was now an “international” channel with its headquarters relocated to Miami. The Venezuelan government responded warning RCTV that if it did not follow national law, it would force cable operators to remove the channel from their listings.[\[25\]](#)

Repeating the strategy used by *La Prensa* to create conflict with the government and then claim repression when the government responds, RCTV used the situation to initiate another campaign claiming “repression” of “independent media” and an “attack on freedom of expression.” Other private and international media joined in, but none ever mentioned the fact that the private media’s freedom to make these accusations was evidence enough of the complete freedom of expression in the country.

If the actions and strategy of the opposition in Nicaragua, and the CIA-financed newspaper *La Prensa* are any indication, it is apparent that RCTV is following the very same strategy of destabilization used by the CIA in other countries. As the CIA manuals and documents demonstrate, along with the evidence documented in William Robinson’s book *A Faustian Bargain*, *La Prensa* was an important instrument in the CIA destabilization of Nicaragua, and,

with the help of Eladio Larez, the campaign eventually succeeded in overthrowing the Sandinista government.

In Venezuela, the CIA's goal is the same and RCTV appears to be playing the same role. Although to date there is no documented evidence that RCTV is receiving any significant CIA funding, Eladio Larez's previous connections to the agency seem to make it a good possibility.

[1] Not to be confused the TV station's the more public representative, Marcel Granier, who is RCTV's executive director and president of RCTV's parent company, 1BC.

[2] CovertAction Information Bulletin, #34, Summer 1990

[3] William Robinson (1992) *A Faustian Bargain: U.S. Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections and American Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era*, Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1992, p. 246

[4] According to testimony from witnesses of the media coverage of the "Caracazo" massacre in February 1989, RCTV and other private media did not show the reality of events during and after the massacre. Footage taken from those days shows that the channels continued with normal commercial broadcasting. In editorials by Eladio Larez on live television in the days surrounding the massacre he praises the efforts of the government for bringing a "rapid end to the crisis."

[5] Human Rights Watch, Informe Annual 2003 Venezuela, New York, 2003, [http://www.hrw.org/spanish/inf\\_anual/2003/venezuela.html](http://www.hrw.org/spanish/inf_anual/2003/venezuela.html)

[6] During the popular uprising of Chavez supporters following the coup of April 11th 2002, RCTV and other private media declared that they would not show images that could "cause harm to the stability of the country." Instead, RCTV and other private media broadcast entertainment programs despite demands from people in the streets to cover the popular rebellion taking place in the country.

[7] U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States spoke in favor of installing "Somocismo without Somoza." That is, keeping the same basic political and economic system, but without the Somoza dictator. From Noam Chomsky (1993) *What Uncle Sam Really Wants*, Odonian Press

[8] CovertAction Information Bulletin, #34, Summer 1990

[9] In the Appendix to his book, Robinson shows an internal La Prensa fax from Cristina Chamorro, Violeta's daughter, in which she describes their meeting with Eladio Larez and the plan to set up the foundation in Venezuela, pg. 247

[10] Robinson, pg. 93

[11] George Miller, (D- CA): "We are going into this election process [spending] \$1 billion dollars. We funded the Contras, we have destroyed [Nicaragua's] economy, we have taken Mrs. Chamorro and we pay for her newspaper to run, we funded her entire operation, and now we are going to provide her the very best election that America can buy." Congressional Record (House), October 4, 1989, p. H6642.

[12] Robinson, p. 79

[13] *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare, The CIA's Nicaragua Manual*, a manual prepared by the CIA for the contras. New York: Vintage Books, 1985, p. 70

[14] Opposition media and political groups have frequently made the claim that Venezuela's increased homicide rate is a result of the president's "hateful language" (lenguaje de odio) and that he is "planting hate" (sembrando odio) in the society.

[15] Robinson, pg. 77

[16] "[Documents Reveal U.S. Effort to Influence Venezuelan Journalists](#)," Venezuela Analysis, May 26th, 2007

[17] See the 2006 U.S. human trafficking report or the 2006 U.S. human rights report in which Colombia and Mexico are praised for their "progress on human rights" while Venezuela is condemned as "outside the democratic norm." Or recent U.S. drug reports that again praise U.S. allies like Colombia and Mexico while condemning Venezuela for "not cooperating" with U.S. officials. See the 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/>, and U.S. State Department report: Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2006, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/shrd/2006/80591.htm>

[18] Robinson, p. 71

[19] Robinson, p. 80

[20] Robinson, p. 43

[21] U.S. House of Representatives Jim Wright, New York Times, September 20, 1988

[22] "[Protests For and Against RCTV Continue in Caracas](#)," Venezuela Analysis, May 28, 2007

[23] Robinson, p. 43

[24] *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare*, pg. 80-90

[25] El Universal, "[Chacón: Registro de RCTV Internacional ante CONATEL es un requisito exigido por la ley](#)," Sunday, July 29th, 2007.

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