

# Threats to Hugo Chavez As Venezuela's December Presidential Election Approaches

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

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On December 3, 2006 voters in Venezuela will again get to choose who'll lead them as President for the next six years. There's no doubt who that will be as the people's choice is the same man they first elected their leader in December, 1998 with 56% of the vote and reelected him in July, 2000 after the adoption of the Bolivarian Republic's new Constitution with a 60% total. They then saw him survive three failed US-directed and funded attempts to unseat him beginning with the aborted two-day coup in April, 2002, followed by the 2002-03 crippling oil strike, and then the failed August, 2004 recall referendum. Chavistas must believe the man they revere has at least more six lives and will use one of them in a few weeks to continue in the job the Venezuelan people won't entrust to anyone else as long as he wants the job.

They may also hope he has as much good fortune and as many lives as his friend and ally Fidel Castro who in nearly 48 years as Cuba's leader survived over 5,700 US-directed terror attacks against his country and about 600 US attempts to kill him - an astonishing survival record against a powerful and determined foe still trying to remove him to reinstate oligarchic rule over the island state. The Bush administration has the same fate in mind for Hugo Chavez Frias and won't sit by quietly allowing Bolivarianism to flourish and spread which it's doing as more people in the region and beyond are fed up with the old order and want the same benefits Venezuelans have. It's playing out now in Bolivia, on the streets of Mexico and in the run-up to the December 3 Venezuelan presidential election where the people show up in massive numbers most every time Chavez makes a public campaign appearance.

Since beginning his presidency in February, 1999, Hugo Chavez and his Movement for the Fifth Republic Party (MVR) have transformed Venezuela from an oligarchy serving the rich and powerful to a model democratic state serving all the people. From the start, Chavez kept his campaign promise and began implementing his vision for political and social change. He held a national referendum through which the people decided to convene a National Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution that was overwhelmingly approved in a nationwide vote in December, 1999. It became effective a year later, changed the country's name to the Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela, and mandated Hugo Chavez's broad revolutionary vision for a system of participatory democracy based on the principles of political, economic and social justice. Ever since, the people of Venezuela haven't looked back and won't now tolerate a return to the ugly past they'll never again accept willingly.

The Chavez Campaign

Hugo Chavez began his reelection campaign by registering his candidacy at the National Electoral Council (CNE) on August 12, affirming his confidence in the country's electoral process and saying that his campaign "must be above all a debate about ideas, an opportunity to elevate the level of debate and the political culture." Afterwards he addressed many thousands of his red-shirted supporters in Caracas Square and told them the "Bolivarian hurricane" was beginning with a goal of achieving 10 million votes that would assure a convincing electoral victory in a nation of 27 million people and just over 16 million registered voters according to the CNE as of September 4. If he achieves it, he'll have gotten the highest ever vote total in the country's history. He sounded an optimistic note adding "The Bolivarian hurricane will become a million hurricanes in all corners of the country, carrying forward the Bolivarian project and defending the revolution."

Two polls out in September indicate he may be on track toward his goal although their results show a wide variance. Datanalisis reported Chavez had a voter preference of 58.2% (41% ahead of his closest rival) while IVAD's percentage was 76.9%. And the most recent October University of Miami School of Communication/Zogby International poll shows Chavez with a 59% voter support compared to 24% for his only serious rival, Manuel Rosales (discussed more fully below). The Zogby poll also gave Chavez an overwhelmingly popular approval rating among Venezuelan voters based on his job performance. If the median between these poll results is closest to the right number on December 3 and the voter turnout is high enough, that would translate to a stunning victory for Hugo Chavez whether or not it's with the 10 million vote total he hopes to get.

Chavez's current overwhelming popularity is consistent with the results of the Chilean firm Latinobarometro interviews conducted with 20,000 Latin Americans in 18 countries in 2005. It found a higher percentage of Venezuelans calling their government "totally democratic" than any other nationality surveyed as well as Venezuelans expressing the highest degree of optimism about their country's future in the region. These results contrast to the pre-Chavez era when the country was ruled by oligarchs, ordinary people had no political rights and the level of poverty was extreme enough to cause street riots the government chose to violently suppress. Hugo Chavez changed all that, and he's campaigning now on his Bolivarian record of accomplishment that made him a national hero to most Venezuelans who only want him as their President as long as he wants the job.

Chavez's plan to continue in office is part of his "Miranda Campaign" to go beyond the traditional party structure by forming local "platoons" of the "Miranda Campaign Command" across the country. It began with the swearing in of 11,358 battalions and 44,698 squads nationwide to mobilize all Venezuelans to vote on election day and to supervise and handle security, logistics, vote tabulation and other aspects of the voting process. Overall the aim is to bring together 200,000 grassroots leaders of the Revolution who then will be assigned the task of convincing 10 others to vote for Chavez that would mean 2 million votes if successful. In addition, other organizations representing social sectors, workers, peasants, women, small business owners and indigenous groups will be mobilized to support the campaign to build the "new socialism of the 21st century." Chavez also wants to hold a nationwide recall referendum half way through his next term in 2010, if he's reelected, to let the Venezuelan people decide if the Constitution should be amended to eliminate the current two-term presidential time in office limit. He also announced his Simon Bolivar National Project which includes the following:

— a new socialist ethic especially against corruption

- a new socialist productive model expanding the social economy
- a revolutionary protagonist democracy under which the highest priority would be power to the people including through communal councils
- the Bolivarian ideal of supreme social happiness
- a new internal geopolitics (focused on internal development)
- a new international geopolitics based on a multipolar world focused against US hegemony, and
- assuring Venezuela is a global energy power by developing its Orinoco Belt extra-heavy reserves and raising its daily oil production to six million barrels daily

Hugo Chavez was greeted on September 1 by tens of thousands of supporters after returning from his international diplomatic tour. He went seeking to establish and solidify alliances and gain support for Venezuela's campaign for the Latin American seat on the Security Council for which voting began on October 16 in the General Assembly but that has been deadlocked since because of US coercive tactics. Chavez told his supporters "This is an election (for president) on whether we want to continue to be an independent republic or return to being a North American colony." He added: "For the first time in history, Venezuela is occupying a privileged position in the world, a position of respect....because we defend with a clear voice the interests of the countries of the Third World and the sovereignty of the peoples." Chavez has a lot of support to do it from most Venezuelans and the 25 political organizations that nominated him including the MVR's coalition partner Patria Para Todas, Podemos and several smaller parties. But Chavez also knows what he's up against, and said he is "the candidate of the revolution....and the national majority (and that other candidates are) tools of the US government. In this electoral process there are two candidates only, namely Hugo Chavez and George W. Bush."

On September 9, Chavez's electoral campaign battalions and platoons were sworn in as part of his "Miranda campaign" to confront "North American imperialism." It was done at a huge rally and march of hundreds of thousands of supporters in Caracas. Chavez used the occasion to propose the formation of a single united political party of the Bolivarian Revolution to be formed in 2007 after the upcoming election. In a speech he called for unity to further "consolidate and strengthen" the spirit of Bolivarianism. He said he wanted it to be the "great party of the Bolivarian Revolution (and that) it should represent the republic and the revolution to the world and establish the strongest connections with the greatest revolutionary parties throughout the world."

### The Opposition

A final unknown number of the currently 18 or so announced candidates will be on the ballot on December 3 opposing Hugo Chavez, but only one is of consequence because the US picked and backs him - Zulia state governor (who by law should have relinquished his office to run for president but for whom the CNE made an exception and allowed him to remain in office) and regional Un Nuevo Tiempo party member Manuel Rosales. The other more prominent ones, including Primero Justicia candidate Julio Borges, dropped out to unite behind him as the main standard-bearer of the opposition thus ruling out a primary the US-funded right wing NGO Sumate planned to hold but then cancelled.

It still remains to be seen what strategy the opposition will decide on or even which, if any, of them will show up on election day. Already Accion Democratica, Venezuela's largest opposition party in size of membership, at first refused to back any candidate. The AD's General Secretary, Henry Ramos Allup, said the only option is to abstain from the election and that Rosales, Borges (before he dropped out of the race) and other candidates are "like drunks fighting over an empty bottle." Others in his party disagree though calling for an exercise of "democratic resistance." Still it's clear to all in the opposition, Chavez is so far ahead in the polls there's no chance anyone can defeat him in a free, fair and open election so it's likely Rosales was chosen to run with something else in mind, and his strategy will show it as the campaign unfolds and especially as election day approaches.

Clearly the US had the final say in picking him for whatever strategy is planned that may have a lot to do with the fact that he's the governor of the state of Zulia that has 40% of Venezuela's oil and where in the past energy elites there supported the state's independence to free it from the government in Caracas. Rosales also favors this idea (likely with a little coaxing from his US allies) and has called for a referendum to let the people of Zulia decide. He's also very close to the Bush administration and was the only governor to sign the infamous "(Pedro) Carmona Estanga Decree" after the 2002 coup that dissolved the elected National Assembly and Supreme Court and effectively ended the Bolivarian Revolution and all the benefits it gave the Venezuelan people (for two days).

Rosales' electoral plan, with considerable US National Endowment for Democracy (NED)-funded through Sumate support, should become clear close to or right after the December 3 election if he's able to win a majority of the votes in his own state. He may then try to go ahead with an independence referendum, claim fraud in the rest of the country, and make plans to declare himself president of the independent state of Zulia if he, in fact, moves to break away and form it. The Chavez government, of course, will never accept this, and the Sumate/Rosales/Bush administration opposition may use this as justification to confront it violently when any attempt is made to stop them. This could provide the US a pretext it may be seeking to intervene militarily for whatever reasons it gives such as protecting the lives of US citizens and defending democracy and human rights. If it happens, it would be the same kind of stunt Ronald Reagan used to invade Grenada in 1983 and GHW Bush used to do the same thing against Panama in 1989. On both those occasions, the US acted against leaders who never threatened the US or its citizens. They were forcibly deposed solely because they were unwilling to obey "the lord and master of the universe" from el norte. The same scenario may be planned for Venezuela after the upcoming election. It won't be long before we find out.

Another possible strategy planned may be similar to what happened in the 2005 National Assembly elections. When it was clear then the major opposition candidates couldn't win, they dropped out claiming fraud that didn't exist. It was a cheap transparent stunt decided on a few days before the vote as a way to avoid a humiliating defeat, but it gave the corporate-run media a chance to trumpet their black propaganda and characterize a free and fair election as tainted. The tone out of Washington is always antagonistic and grabbed on to this and at other times with oxymoronic language like Venezuela under Chavez is an "authoritarian democracy, an elected authoritarianism, a threat to democracy, (and) an elected dictatorship," all of it said without a touch of irony. It also gave the opposition a chance to chime in and say voter turnout was low (mostly because opposition supporters had no one to vote for and stayed home) and the results thus had no legitimacy. So it organized street demonstrations in upscale neighborhoods and suburbs to create a false

sense of turmoil and disorder.

There was also evidence uncovered at the time that violence was planned for around the time of the election to create unrest and further delegitimize the results. This is how an oligarchy puppet regime in the wings allied with the power structure in Washington operates. They have no respect for the law or norms of conduct and will use any means including murder to try to regain the power they lost to Hugo Chavez democratically. There's no doubt schemes have already been cooked up quietly that will be sprung between now and the election period. Already on September 2, Caracas Diario Vea reported it learned about a plot involving the right wing opposition. It's called Plan Alcatraz and is aimed at making unacceptable demands on the National Electoral Council (CNE) sure to be rejected so as to allege fraud and then organize street actions in protest including occupying CNE offices. Manuel Rosales is part of the scheme to lead the protests but he'd have to withdraw from the race to do it, which so far he's unwilling to do. He has been willing to consult with representatives of the Bush administration and met with them recently on a trip he made to south Florida where he reportedly met with the president's brother, Governor Jeb Bush.

Colombian right wing paramilitaries are also known to be involved and would be brought in to commit terrorist attacks along the border and in other parts of the country. If that happens, it won't be the first time as this tactic has been used before and foiled by Venezuelan police when a plot was uncovered and arrests were made. This kind of state-directed terrorism should come as no surprise to those familiar with the government and ideological position of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe that's hard right and in line with neocon Bush administration policy. Uribe comes from a wealthy land-owning family, has a history of links to the country's paramilitary death squads and drug cartels, and engaged in state terrorism in the various government positions he held for over 20 years that included kidnappings and assassinations of trade unionists, peasants in opposition groups, social and human rights activists, journalists and others. He's also committed gross violations of Venezuelan sovereignty and apparently still is doing it egged on by his US ally. In spite of it, or maybe in praise for it, the Wall Street Journal calls Uribe "(maybe) the most clear-thinking, courageous ally in the war on terror that the US has in Latin America." The Journal writer would have been right if she changed the preposition "on" to "of," and the adjectives "courageous" to "outrageous," and "clear-thinking" to "obedient."

In spite of his dubious background, Uribe was elected and then reelected the country's president (in elections heavily tainted with fraud) and was the only South American leader to support the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. He even invited the US to "invade" Colombia to help it double the size of its military and supply it with weapons and intelligence. He already benefits hugely from the billions of dollars his government gets in "Plan Colombia" military aid that's used to fight the FARC and ELN resistance and has little to do with its supposed aim to eradicate coca cultivation except in areas controlled by those two groups. He's now the Bush administration's strongest and most subservient ally in the region, and thus it backs the right Uribe claims he has to intervene militarily in violation of another country's sovereignty - with bordering Venezuela as the main target.

Reports are increasing that Uribe is directing his policy of state terrorism against Venezuela by continuing to send Colombian paramilitary hired assassins illegally across the border. They're apparently responsible for a large number of deaths in the countryside, and some have even infiltrated into metropolitan Caracas. High profile figures are also becoming

targets as was state prosecutor Danilo Anderson who was killed in a December, 2004 car bombing likely because he headed an investigation of the hundreds of individuals (all from the opposition) suspected of being involved in the 2002 aborted coup attempt. More recently National Assembly (AN) for the Movement for the Fifth Republic, campesino leader, and Chavez supporter Braulio Alvarez escaped a second assassination attempt when his car was attacked and riddled with bullets. Alvarez is working with the government to implement its land reform law that redistributes large, underused land from the latifundistas (large land owners) to landless campesinos that surely is angering the rich landowners who now with Uribe's help are striking back.

One of Hugo Chavez's top priorities when first taking office in 1999 was land reform in a country run by oligarchs including rich land owners. He's been determined to rectify the inequality of land distribution the 1997 agricultural census revealed - that 5% of the largest landowners control 75% of the land and 75% of the smallest ones only 6% of it. His plan led to the current confrontation, but Hugo Chavez is now responding more forcefully and on August 18 announced the creation of civilian/military security units in the large farms that have been taken over in Barinas, Apure and Tachina states. He's doing it to combat the wave of kidnappings and assassinations especially in areas bordering Colombia that are linked to paramilitary death squads infiltrating into the country. They likely are dispatched by Alvaro Uribe and are employed by the latifundistas. Tachina has been particularly hard hit by this invasion as the number of killings there rose from 81 in 1999 to 93 in 2001, 212 in 2002 and exploded to 566 in 2005 for a total of 2037 deaths in the last seven years. In addition, the Caracas Daily Ultimas Noticias reported in July that 70% of businesses in Tachina bordering Colombia have to pay the paramilitaries a vacuna (vaccine) as protection money to keep from being attacked.

All this is mounting evidence that Hugo Chavez has every reason to fear the Colombian president and sees his close ties to the Bush administration as part of a greater strategy to provoke a confrontation giving the US a pretext to intervene to try to oust and assassinate him. This also seems to be Uribe's aim as Colombia and Venezuela share a common border, and he fears for his own survival in a country plagued by poverty and violence. Uribe has an ugly record supporting the concentration of wealth and power while cutting vitally needed social services. He's also allowed his military and paramilitary assassins to displace three million peasants, has one of the worst records of state-directed terrorism in the world, and has a long-term disregard for democracy and human rights. Just across the border his people can see how the Bolivarian Revolution has benefitted Venezuelans and many of them have emigrated there to take advantage of it. It's hard to imagine those staying behind don't want the same things and may one day act in their own self-interest to demand them.

Hugo Chavez also needs to be wary of the major new base the US is building in Mariscal Estigarribia, Paraguay, 200 kilometers from the Bolivian border even though it's far south of Venezuela. Reportedly the base will be able to handle large aircraft and house up to 16,000 troops. Since July, 2005 small numbers of fully-equipped US forces have been in Paraguay and have been conducting secretive operations there. It's led some military analysts and human rights groups to suspect an interventionist operation is planned, likely directed at Bolivia and its president Evo Morales some of whose policies mirror those of his friend and ally Hugo Chavez. But with enough troops and long-range large aircraft in the region, the base could also be used as a staging area for an operation anywhere within its range that easily could include Venezuela. The human rights group Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ) in Paraguay believes the US wants the country to be what Panama once was, and to be able to

operate there to control the southern cone region of the continent.

It's also been reported that George Bush recently bought a 98,842 acre farm in Paraguay to go along with the 173,000 acres his father already owns there. Both properties border Bolivia and Brazil and comprise 2.7% of the whole country that comprises an area the size of the state of California. It's not known what the Bush family has in mind there or whether it may have any connection to a planned US military intervention in the region. It is known Paraguay has no laws criminalizing money-laundering, anti-terrorism or terrorist financing even though it does have an extradition treaty with the US. It's also important to be mindful of the fact that a dominant US family of two US presidents now owns a sizable piece of real estate in a country able to domicile a large number of US forces. It may only be for whatever personal use they have in mind, but it may not be and we can only speculate on what that may be.

We don't have to speculate that the US also has another major military base in Manta, Ecuador that's much closer to Venezuela on Colombia's southern border and is part of the US's increasing militarization of the southern continent. The Pentagon says it's tasked to carry out a variety of security-related missions, but that's just code language for interventionist ones. Ecuadorian presidential hopeful, Rafael Correa, who'll now face a runoff vote on November 26 after a tainted first round spoiled his victory, responded to a question recently that he'd allow the base to remain in his country provided the Bush administration gave Ecuador the same basing rights in Miami. But even if this base is closed, the US is currently building another new one in the Dutch colony of Curacao (a popular vacation destination that will be tainted by it) that's located near the Venezuelan coast and near the oil-rich state of Zulia.

It remains to be seen if he'll follow through if he wins the presidency, but one positive development to watch is Paraguay's decision not to renew a defense cooperation agreement with the US for 2007 because it's unwilling to grant US troops immunity from prosecution by the International Criminal Court in the Hague (ICC). The Court was established to assure perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide are brought to justice. Foreign Minister Ruben Ramirez announced his country's decision on October 2 saying his government concluded under international treaty law, exceptions to immunity are only permissible for foreign diplomats and administrative personnel. Paraguay is a member of the South American Mercosur trade block that also includes Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Venezuela. These countries have also refused to grant US troops such immunity in another sign the US is losing influence in the region as more leaders in it are standing firm against unreasonable demands from Washington as well as its failed policies. Hopefully the spirit and influence of Hugo Chavez is spreading.

#### US Intervention in Venezuela's Political Process - Again

It's no secret the Bush administration wants to oust Hugo Chavez, has already tried and failed three times to do it, and is now planning another attempt at whatever time and by whatever means it has in mind. It may be staged in connection with the upcoming December election and likely will be a reworked version of what was tried earlier and failed but this time with some new twists and going further than before.

Hugo Chavez knows it's coming, has taken steps to counter it when it does, and has a hard-to-trump ace in his deck - the many millions of Venezuelans who've already shown they'll come out in force to support him, especially if the stakes are to keep him as their president.

Chavez witnessed some of that support when he spoke at an October mass rally in Valencia in the state of Carabobo and sounded the alarm about the Bush administration's plot to destabilize the election and assassinate him. He indicated to the crowd that "friendly nations" have warned him about this and said: "With God's favour this will not happen, but if it (did) you know what you would have to do; the Bolivarian Revolution at this stage does not depend on one man." Chavez also said he's preparing for what he expects will happen and "we are going to hit back so hard that they will not stop running until they reach Miami. Chavez may not have long to wait to find out if his plan can best the one Washington has cooked up.

In the lead-up to whatever is planned, the Bush administration is relying on the usual kind of covert mischief from the CIA that specializes in it. It's been at it all over the world for nearly 50 years and in Venezuela since Hugo Chavez was first elected. Author and international human rights attorney Eva Golinger obtained top-secret CIA documents through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests showing the Agency had prior knowledge and was complicit in the two-day 2002 aborted coup attempt to unseat President Chavez and that the Bush administration provided over \$30 million in funding aid to opposition groups to help do it.

It began in 2001 involving the same quasi-governmental agencies that are always part of these kinds of schemes - the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), International Republican Institute (IRI), National Democratic Institute (NDI), and US Agency for International Development (USAID) which did its work through its Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). These agencies funded and worked with the opposition staging mass violent street protests leading up to the day of the coup. The documents also showed NED and USAID funded and were otherwise involved in staging the 2002-03 crippling oil strike and the failed August, 2004 recall referendum. The US State Department, National Security Agency (NSA) and White House had full knowledge of and had to have approved each coup attempt.

Most people have some idea how the CIA operates covertly but few know much about the National Endowment for Democracy that was (in language Orwell would have loved) established to "support democratic institutions throughout the world through private, nongovernmental efforts." In fact, it's very much a part of government and its purpose is to be the somewhat overt counterpart to the CIA, and in that capacity its hands are almost as dirty as the spy agency short of having actual blood on them. The one objective it pursues above all others is the subversion of democracy including supporting the removal of democratically elected leaders unwilling to allow their countries to become submissive US client states.

It's already been learned from information made public, including NED Quarterly Reports, that this agency actively supports anti-Chavez organizations in Venezuela and that removal of Hugo Chavez is one of its top priorities. It will also be reported soon in a new book by Eva Golinger called *Bush v. Chavez: Washington's War on Venezuela* that the Bush administration since 2005 has increased its (anti-Chavez) "interference by providing funding, training, guidance, and other contacts, and other strategically important ways to support the opposition's presidential campaign here." Golinger also reports the US anti-Chavez campaign includes the use of "psychological warfare within Venezuela, but also in the international arena, and in the United States." It's trying "to make people think that Venezuela is a failed or failing state with a dictator, which is how the US government refers to him."



NED is an old hand at this kind of dirty business since it was established in November, 1982 by statute as a supposedly private non-profit organization. It's hardly that as Congress approves its funding as part of the Department of State budget going to its sister USAID agency. NED also gets some private aid from several well-known right wing organizations including supportive think tanks that provide considerable funding for ultraconservative and business-friendly enterprises.

USAID has considerably greater resources than NED to pursue its activities which supposedly are to function as an independent federal agency providing non-military foreign aid. In fact, however, it's a thinly disguised instrument of US foreign policy able to do its dirty work while avoiding congressional scrutiny. It, like NED, has in the past been an instrument of US efforts to oust Hugo Chavez, and in the run-up to the December election is likely to be working with the opposition again as it was learned it did in the other three attempts to oust the Venezuelan leader. We'll have to wait to learn more about what schemes CIA, NED, USAID and other US-related agencies are planning until they begin unfolding or are exposed in advance and are headed off before any harm is done.

### The Role of Sumate

Sumate is a nominal non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 2002 by a group of Venezuelans led by Maria Corina Machado and Alejandro Plaz and now headed by Ms. Machado. It's true purpose and activities belie the claims it makes to be an organization of independent citizens supporting the democratic process and promoting the political rights of Venezuelans under the country's Constitution. In fact, it's a US-supported and funded anti-governmental organization dedicated to the overthrow of the Chavez government and the return of the country to its ugly past ruled by the former oligarchs and the interests of capital.

In the US this kind of activity or any foreign interference in elections would never be tolerated. US election law specifically prohibits foreign nationals or corporations from contributing to any federal, state or local political campaign, and it would be unthinkable to imagine there being any tolerance if it was learned a foreign government attempted to influence the electoral process here. None of this, however, applies to what the US does all over the world routinely. At least post WW II, this country has a tainted history of meddling in the affairs of other countries almost like we had a birthright to do it. Put another way, according to "Washington-think," what's good for the US "goose" isn't allowed for any other country's "gander."

It's thus no surprise Sumate went on the Bush administration payroll when it first gained prominence in late 2003 becoming involved in organizing and providing support for the 2004 failed recall referendum signature collection process. Ever since it's been at the center of anti-Chavez activities and is liberally funded to do it by US agencies like NED and USAID. As mentioned above, it cancelled a primary it planned to hold after the main opposition candidates dropped out so Manuel Rosales could run unopposed against Hugo Chavez in the December election. It's now moving ahead with the help of millions of dollars of Washington-supplied opposition candidate bankrolling. This was recently revealed in 132 USAID contracts made public that claimed the funding to be politically neutral but which Hugo Chavez believes is being used overtly and covertly to undermine his government. USAID and NED now admit they're spending (at least) \$26 million on the December election, and those organizations never support democratically elected leaders running for office who don't obey US neoliberal diktats.

Chavez has lots of past experience to back up his claim of US interference and an added new one now after the Bush administration named career CIA agent Patrick Maher as the “mission manager” to oversee US intelligence on Venezuela and Cuba. His previous job was as deputy director of the CIA’s Office of Policy Support and his background includes having been an architect of the counter-insurgency strategy in Colombia as well as managing the agency’s operations in the Caribbean region. William Izarra, a former MVR Party leader and the national coordinator of the Centres for Ideological Formation that organizes grassroots discussions about the Bolivarian Revolution, believes this move elevates Venezuela and Cuba into the “axis of evil” category along with Iran and North Korea, and that heightens the risk of trouble ahead.

The Chavez government knows something is afoot and is taking preventive action by having Venezuelan prosecutors bring conspiracy charges against Sumate leaders. If convicted, Maria Corina Machado could face up to 16 years in prison, and three other Sumate members also face charges. The National Assembly also intends to require “non-profit” groups like Sumate to reveal their funding sources. In addition, it’s recommending Sumate be investigated for currency and tax law violations, and Chavez has threatened to expel US Ambassador William Brownfield whom he accuses of causing trouble as he’s done in the past. All this is playing out in a highly-charged atmosphere of mistrust that’s well-founded according to Eva Golinger who wrote “The Chavez Code: Cracking US Intervention in Venezuela.” The book cited clear evidence of the Bush administration’s intent to overthrow the Chavez government, and Golinger recently said Washington is “trying to implement regime change. There’s no doubt about it (even though it) tries to mask it saying it’s a noble mission.”

#### The Prospect for Fall Fireworks in Venezuela

The Bush administration must believe while it’s often wrong it’s never in doubt. It’s already dealing with two out of control conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and has blood-stained hands from its complicity with Israel on their co-sponsored conflicts against Lebanon and the one still raging in Palestine. Undeterred, it seems determined to become even more embroiled in the Middle East by planning a possible attack against Iran according to some reliable reports (or at least putting up a good bluff to do it), even though the US public has grown disenchanted with George Bush’s wars and it shows in his low public approval rating. He’s even now drawing flack within his own party, and many Republican candidates for Congress on November 7 see him as radioactive and don’t want him around. So why would this administration be willing to risk making things even worse by trying to forcibly remove a democratically elected leader revered by his people who will never stand by and allow their Bolivarian Revolution to be taken away from them.

Here’s why. Soon after the Bush administration came to power, Vice President (and de facto head of state) Dick Cheney said the US must “make energy security a (top) priority of our trade and foreign policy.” The Iraq and Afghanistan wars followed what, in fact, was “boss” Cheney’s diktat with control of energy and its security one of several key reasons why we’re now embroiled in the greater Middle East.

Now fast forward to June, 2006 and it gets more chilling. The US Southern (military) Command in Latin America (that has no business meddling in affairs of state) concluded that efforts by Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador to extend state control over their oil and gas reserves threatens US oil security. A study it conducted states: “A re-emergence of state control of the energy sector (in those countries) will likely increase inefficiencies and....will

hamper efforts to increase long-term supplies and production.” Even though the region produces only 8.4% of the world’s oil output, it accounts for 30% of US consumption, and most of that comes from Venezuela and Mexico with each of these countries supplying about an equal percentage of our needs.

A secure supply and firm control of oil from the region is crucial to the US, but most of all from Venezuela because of its vast reserves (including its immense untapped amount of Orinco Basin super-heavy tar oil) that potentially are even greater than what’s now available from Saudi Arabia – although that’s debatable and merely suggesting it will open up a torrent of disagreement that may be right. Still, Venezuela, by any measure, has the greatest hydrocarbon reserves in the hemisphere, and that makes the country and Hugo Chavez target number one in this part of the world for US energy security importance and second only after the greater Middle East that includes the Caspian Basin in Central Asia. Couple that with the fact that the US sees Hugo Chavez as the greatest of all threats it faces anywhere – a good example that may and is spreading throughout the region threatening US dominance over it and you have a recipe for a determined effort to oust him by any means including assassination and armed intervention.

Chavez, of course, knows the risk and so do the Venezuelan people who proved in 2002 they will rally en masse as they did then to restore their president to office after the US-staged two-day April coup that year briefly removed him. It’s certain any attempt to oust him again will be met with the same resistance, and it’s hard to imagine how intense it may be if the US succeeds in killing him. There’s no question Washington wants to avoid six more years of Chavez rule and officials there have said it in so many words. They call Hugo Chavez “a clear and present danger to peace and democracy in the hemisphere (and) US strategy must be to help Venezuela accomplish peaceful change (before 2007).” Heinz Dieterich, a Chavez consultant, believes, as does Hugo Chavez, the Bush administration is plotting to assassinate him to prevent his serving another term in office.

So far there’s been nothing more dramatic than the usual US Chavez-bashing especially after his September 20 tour de force at the UN General Assembly when the Venezuelan President had the courage to say what most other world leaders think but only speak about privately. The Bush administration responds claiming the Chavez government is a dictatorship that supports terrorism. It also unjustifiably accuses him suppressing the media and repressing his opposition, and it’s guaranteed a Chavez victory will be challenged with outrageous accusations of electoral fraud arranged by a state-controlled CNE.

The truth on all counts is the opposite of the rhetoric, yet the vitriol continues unabated from Washington and is heard over the corporate-controlled media in both countries. What should be reported (but never is) is that the fairness of the Venezuelan electoral system shames the corrupted one in the US that’s now run by corporate-owned and controlled electronic voting machines manipulated to assure enough business-friendly candidates win even when they’re not the choice of the majority of US voters. Venezuela has real democracy while what’s called that in the US is just a shameless mirage of one – an illusion the public hasn’t caught onto yet. The Venezuelan people know the difference between that and the real thing and will fight to keep it. Sadly, most people in the US are kept uninformed, don’t know what they’ve lost, and can’t even imagine the kind of country they’d have if they had an enlightened leader like Hugo Chavez instead of the appalling one they’re stuck with for two more years.

Things are certain to heat up in Venezuela between now and December 3 as the Bush

administration tries to impose on the Venezuelan people what's it's already done here at home, and it will be relentless and ruthless about the way it does it. And if covert efforts are afoot, as almost for sure they are, we'll likely see them unveiled during the election period and they may be ugly. Hugo Chavez expects them, is surely ready to confront them when they're sprung, and it now remains to be seen how the latest chapter in the Bush administration vs. Hugo Chavez will play out. Stay closely tuned. It won't be long before the fireworks begin.

*Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago and can be reached at [lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net). Also visit his blog site at [www.sjlendman.blogspot.com](http://www.sjlendman.blogspot.com).*

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### **About the author:**

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago. He can be reached at [lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net). His new book as editor and contributor is titled "Flashpoint in Ukraine: US Drive for Hegemony Risks WW III." <http://www.claritypress.com/LendmanIII.html> Visit his blog site at [sjlendman.blogspot.com](http://www.sjlendman.blogspot.com). Listen to cutting-edge discussions with distinguished guests on the Progressive Radio News Hour on the Progressive Radio Network. It airs three times weekly: live on Sundays at 1PM Central time plus two prerecorded archived programs.

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