

# Venezuela's Future

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

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The [New York Times](#) debated it. Nine views were presented. Mark Weisbrot co-directs the Center for Economic and Policy Research. He's fair-minded and forthright.

He was outnumbered eight to one. Times style debates avoid evenhanded exchanges.

Debates are an ancient tradition. Genuine ones air views freely. Beliefs are challenged. Truths are sought.

Critical thinking is stimulated. Opinions are formed. Conclusions are reached through free and open dialogue and discussion.

Debates should involve opposing sides given full opportunity to air views and challenge others. New York Times editors changed the rules.

News and views are filtered. One-sided ones are prioritized. Government and corporate ones matter most. Truth is largely suppressed. Dissent is marginalized.

Consent is manufactured short of full and accurate disclosure. Readers aren't told what they most need to know.

On January 3, [The Times](#) headlined "The Future of Venezuela," saying:

Chavez's health raises questions. His January 10 inauguration approaches. He'll not likely be well enough to attend. Postponement can delay swearing in for later.

Key is whether he's well enough to serve or for how long. If "he steps down or dies, what will become of Venezuela," asked The Times? "Will Chavismo survive?"

"What sorts of social, economic and political issues must the next president confront? Would the nation's contentious relationship with the United States improve?"

## Fact check

Chavez is struggling to recover from his fourth cancer surgery in 18 months. Earlier post-operative problems were resolved.

New reports say severe respiratory infection ones arose. Venezuelan Information Minister Ernesto Villegas said he "faced complications as a result of a severe lung infection."

He's fully conscious. He's getting superb care. On January 3, [Granma International](#) said he remains in "stable condition within the context of his delicate condition."

Venezuelan Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Jorge Arreaza, said he's

“battling hard and sends his love to our people.”

On December 11, Chavez underwent complex surgery in Havana. He hasn't spoken publicly since. A climate of uncertainty remains. Most Venezuelan pray he'll recover fully.

The Times suggests possible change. Asking what social, economic and political issues a new leader “must” confront wrongly implies possible Bolivarian transformation.

Calling Venezuela's relationship with America contentious points fingers the wrong way. Chavez sought normalized relations. He still does. So do likeminded officials. Washington spurns them.

Chavez is vilified for doing things right. Times editors turn truth on its head. They've done it throughout his tenure. They support wealth, power, and privilege.

They ignore Chavez's responsible progressive policies. They're polar opposite destructive US ones. Explanations aren't forthcoming.

The Times matched Weisbrot against eight establishment figures. Actually nine. One article had two contributors. It's hardly a fair exchange. It's typical Times.

[Moises Naim](#) is Carnegie Endowment for International Peace senior associate. He's featured in mainstream publications. In 2009, he participated in the corporate-run World Economic Forum. He didn't come to discuss progressive politics.

His article was titled “An Economic Crisis of Historic Proportions.” He called Chavez irresponsible. He blames him for “mismanagement.”

He ignored remarkable achievements. Popular needs are prioritized. Child mortality fell from 20 per 1,000 to 13. Unemployment dropped from 14.5% to 6.4%.

Income inequality is Latin America's lowest. Poverty was cut in half. Extreme poverty fell over 70%. Economic growth in 2011 was 4.8%. In 2012, it was 5.5%. Forecasts estimate 6% in 2013.

Hundreds of thousands of new homes were built. Commerce grew 9.2%. Communications advanced 7.2%. Manufacturing increased 2.1%. Oil sector production was 1.4% better.

Moises and others claim Venezuelan debt tops 20%. Accurate calculations indicate 8.8%. America's gross federal debt exceeds 100% of GDP. Annually it grows exponentially. Moises didn't explain.

[Francisco Toro](#) is a notorious anti-Chavista propagandist. His credibility is sorely lacking. His commentaries don't approach bad fiction. The Times featured him before. It did again now.

His article is titled “Austerity Will Cement the Chavez Myth.”

Like Moises and others, he grossly exaggerated Venezuelan debt. He claims his “spending-led socialism can't last.” Since 1999, he's done it responsibly. Good government can continue in perpetuity. Destructive policies have bad endings.

Who'll “be left holding the checkbook when the spending must screech to a halt,” asked Toro? “Chavez's possible exit is exquisitely timed: apres moi, le deluge.”

“His colorless vice president (Maduro) strikes no one” as able to replace him.

Venezuelans didn't know Chavismo until it arrived. Chavez was untested. Maduro and others may respond like he did. Bolivarianism has strong popular support.

Toro and likeminded scoundrels want neoliberalism replacing it. Venezuelans won't tolerate returning to their ugly past. Chavez heads Venezuela's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

Maduro and other likeminded officials are committed to preserve and continue Bolivarian progressive initiatives.

[Anita Issacs](#) teaches social science at Haverford College. Formerly she was a Ford Foundation program officer. She focuses on Latin American and Caribbean issues.

She headlined “A Peaceful Transition Is Key.” She suggests Chavez's era is passing. Saying so way oversteps. The fullness of time will decide what no one can predict with certainty near or intermediate-term.

She believes post-Chavez Latin American relations and domestic politics will be “unsettled.” She says Venezuela “should remain committed to assisting the Colombian peace process.”

She claims it's the region's most constructive. US military bases infest the country. They menace Venezuela and other regional countries. America is committed to war, not peace. Colombia is a close ally.

She wants relations with Cuba treated “delicately.” She believes future ones are on “shakier ground.” Nothing suggests it.

Venezuela has one of the region's strongest economies. Its economic growth way surpasses America and other Western countries. She calls Venezuelan economic conditions “tanking.”

Imagine what she teaches students. They're best advised to avoid her.

[Michael Shifter](#) heads the Inter-American Dialogue. He teaches politics at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Earlier he worked for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). It's mandated to destroy it where it emerges. Shifter was also a former Ford Foundation staffer.

He's notoriously hostile to Chavez. He titled his article “Change Must Come Gradually.” He deplores Bolivarianism and wants it replaced.

He turns Venezuelan reality on its head. He calls “reform” and “improved governance” “essential.”

“Difficult choices” have to be made, he claims. Jettisoning popular programs should happen slowly. He's for “piecemeal” change.

“Moderation” should replace Chavismo and “grandiosity.”

Venezuelans alone will decide their future. Outside meddling won't be tolerated. Bolivarian achievements are cherished. Shifter and other neoliberal hardliners want it replaced.

[Joy Olson](#) is Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) executive director. She's a frequent mainstream media commentator. She avoids discussing what most needs explaining.

[David Smilde](#) is a senior WOLA fellow. He specializes in Venezuela. He and Olson headlined "Fight Crime, Respect the Poor." They claim government "oil-financed social policies are of questionable sustainability."

"Lack of transparency and accountability threaten them." Venezuela's "enormous fiscal deficit will need to be addressed."

Instead of accurately discussing Venezuelan conditions, both contributors distorted reality. They greatly exaggerated crime problems. They ignore high US levels. A previous article said the following:

On November 18, 2012, the [Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence](#) said "epidemic levels of gun violence (claim) over 30,000 lives annually."

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data document it.

Every gun-related death leaves two others wounded. Every year, about 100,000 Americans are gun violence victims. Countless others are irreparably harmed. Nothing whatever is done to curb or prevent what's shocking and intolerable.

Olson and Smilde also accused Chavez of compromising press freedom. Chavez's social democratic agenda prioritizes it. America pays it lip service. In Venezuela, it's real.

It shows in government tolerance for strident anti-Chavez print and broadcast rhetoric. Corporate owners dominate Venezuela's media.

They operate freely. They feature outrageous propaganda. What they print and broadcast wouldn't be tolerated in America's media. Olson and Smilde didn't explain.

[Patrick Duddy](#) formerly was Washington's Venezuelan ambassador. In September 2008, he was declared persona non grata and ordered out. He's currently a Duke University Center for International Studies diplomat in residence.

His article is entitled "Chavismo Is Entrenched." He accused Chavez of "virulent anti-Americanism." He "actively worked to move Venezuela - and the region - away from its historically deep relationship with the United States."

For decades, Washington dismissively considered Latin America its back yard. Repressive subservient client states were established.

Ruthlessly exploitive policies were prioritized. Regional inequality and poverty intensified. Duddy and likeminded hardliners yearn for the good old days.

He deplores Chavismo. Relations with America "would likely improve with the election of an opposition candidate," he says. Go slow and make it happen, he urges.

[Miguel Tinker Salas](#) is Pomona College Professor of Latin American History. He's a frequent mainstream media commentator.

"Follow the Oil," he headlined. Last year, OPEC said Venezuelan reserves topped Saudi

Arabia's. They're the world's largest supply. The country's natural gas reserves are the region's largest.

Washington covets control. It wants Chavez ousted to assure it. It wants neoliberal hardliners replacing him.

Salas admits how Chavez "s(hook) things up." He reduced poverty dramatically. Privileged Venezuelans resent him. Most Venezuelans support him.

Whatever Venezuela's future holds, its "fractured society" will continue "battl(ing) over who will benefit from the riches that" began flowing a century earlier.

Salas was mostly even-handed. He stopped well short of telling all. Bolivarianism involves more than oil. Its spirit pervades society. It champions progressive politics. It prioritizes helping Venezuela's most disadvantaged. Salas didn't explain.

[Ray Walser](#) is a veteran US Foreign Service officer. He was a State Department official for 27 years. He's a right wing ideologue.

He's a Heritage Foundation senior policy analyst. He specializes in Latin America. He prioritizes US security and related interests.

He headlined "Big Shoes to Fill Globally." Chavismo without Chavez will be "daunting," he said. "Many predict it cannot be done."

Saying appears wishful thinking. Hardball US meddling prioritizes it. Venezuelans have plenty to say on their own. They're not about to roll over for Washington. They'll fight to preserve Bolivarian gains.

Walser repeated the usual canards. Venezuela's PDVSA oil company is "in trouble." The nation "suffers from high public debt." It's experiencing "slowing growth."

Its infrastructure is "failing." Its overall "domestic challenges" are daunting.

"Chavez is known for strutting on the international stage, playing bad boy to the United States. The Ahmadinejads, Castros and Ortegas of our world could count on a hero's welcome in Caracas."

"Chavez's heir will probably be hard-pressed to cast the same giant Bolivarian shadow over the international landscape."

Whoever's eventually chosen will inherit strong popular support. It extends way beyond Venezuela. It's invaluable political capital. Chavez won't lead Venezuela forever.

His successor must use it wisely. Doing so can sustain Bolivarianism longterm. Venezuelans want it no other way.

[Mark Weisbrot](#) headlined "Continuity Likely Even Without Chavez."

Last October, he was overwhelmingly reelected. PSUV candidates dominated regional and local elections. Nothing suggests near or intermediate-term change.

Weisbrot explained what other Times contributors omitted. He discussed vital social

progress. Poverty was dramatically cut. Extreme poverty dropped over 70%.

Elevating Venezuelans “came from increased employment, not ‘government handouts.’ ”

Millions got free healthcare and education for the first time. “Eligibility for public pensions tripled.” In the last two years alone, “hundreds of thousands of (vitaly needed) houses” were built.

Throughout Chavez’s tenure, “the private sector (grew) faster than the public sector.”

“If you follow Venezuela and haven’t heard this, it’s because (media scoundrels provide) the equivalent of a ‘tea party’ view of the country.”

Pre-Chavez years were “economic(ally) disast(rous).” From 1980 - 1998, per capita income fell. Chavez turned disaster into success.

Press reports highlight 18% inflation. It’s perhaps the region’s highest. It’s falling. It dropped from 28.2 in 2010. Responsible policies will drop it further.

If new elections are called because Chavez is too ill to serve, Chavismo support “indicates that his successor will likely win.”

It shouldn’t surprise. All regional centrist and left of center governments were reelected. They fall well short of Bolivarian change.

They shifted away from what James Petras calls “the golden age of pillage.” Living standards improved enough to matter. They’ve got a long way to go.

Times editors and neoliberal hardliners deplore progressive social change. The fullness of time will decide whether Bolivarianism is sustained longterm.

It’ll determine if it takes hold regionally. It’ll have final say. Hopefully populism will emerge triumphant. Majorities want it no other way.

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*His new book is titled “Banker Occupation: Waging Financial War on Humanity.”*

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