

THE CIA'S VIEW OF VENEZUELA: What We Learn from Archives

CIA public archives show the objective of U.S. policymakers, regardless of the political party, is to monitor the activities of foreign nations, particularly resource-rich ones.

In 2017, then-U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Mike Pompeo said: *"we are very hopeful that there can be a [political] transition in Venezuela and we the CIA is doing its best to understand the dynamic there [sic], so that we can communicate to our State Department and to others."* CIA monitoring of the political situation and interference in Venezuela is, of course, nothing new. Back in April 2002, just days before the coup that temporarily ousted President Hugo Chávez, a Senior Executive Intelligence Brief anticipated the removal of Chávez by the Venezuelan military.

With the current crisis in Venezuela intensifying, thanks in no small part to the U.S. intelligence apparatus, it is worth examining the CIA's declassified and partly-declassified Venezuela archives. The archives include memos, briefing notes, and reports from the Agency itself, as well as from the National Intelligence Estimate. The records on Venezuela date back to the founding of the CIA in the late-1940s. With the exception of more recent records obtained under Freedom of Information Act requests, many of them filed by Eva Golinger, the records dry up in the 1980s. Those released so far reveal much about the deeply entrenched attitudes of Cold War planners.

The CIA records reveal that: 1) The main U.S. interest in Venezuela from the 1940s until at least the '80s is not just oil but the Venezuela's role in the region as a symbol of the success of **"constitutional democracy,"** i.e., U.S. power; 2) The kind of "constitutional democracy" supported by the U.S. was a façade because the records also acknowledge that the military, not the Congress, retained the real political power; 3) The CIA and the wealthy business elites of Venezuela shared the conflation of mild state-socialism with "communism"; and 4) Intelligence analysts held two, contradictory beliefs, that Venezuelans were prosperous under U.S. patronage, but they also acknowledged that half the population lived in poverty.

The historical records reinforce the evidence that, like the policymakers of all empires, U.S. elites think of sovereign nation-states in terms of their exploitability.

After the Second World War, victorious U.S. planners drew up maps of areas of the world most beneficial to U.S. corporations. During this period, Venezuela (in the Western Hemisphere) exported two-thirds of its oil to the West Indies for refining. A declassified intelligence report from mid-1948 notes that "Political conditions are generally favorable" to U.S. interests in the West Indies and in the Western Hemisphere, but concludes that oil pipelines are vulnerable to sabotage by "trained agents." Giving the U.S. Department of Defense's reliance on petroleum for its vehicles, "such agents could seriously affect U.S. capacity either to prepare for or to wage war." The report notes that the ruling regime of Rómulo Betancourt (1945-48) moved away from the Soviet sphere of influence. However, labor "strikes for wages" in the oil sector "could get out of hand and result in considerable reduction of output, even if there were no deliberate intention to sabotage."

It is significant that the CIA considered labor strikes an act of industrial sabotage. *"Strikes of other unions in allied industries furthermore (transportation for example) from which Communist control may not yet have been eliminated could have similar adverse effects."*

It should be noted that "Communist" with a big C was a catch-all term employed by the CIA to describe a largely non-existent demographic. In the literal sense, there was the Communist Party of Venezuela, but the word was used by the CIA to describe the population more generally. The report concludes that so-called Slavic migration to Venezuela continued into the post-War years and that "it is quite possible that well trained agents may have been included among the almost 3,000 migrants," such was the level of paranoia of the time.

We can draw ominous parallels to the present. Just as the U.S. supported Betancourt, who became increasingly right-wing, U.S. President Trump supports leaders like Brazil's Bolsonaro, the bane of trade unions. We can also find similarities between the planners post-War who assumed that Russian immigrants in Venezuela were Soviet sleeper cells and those who, today, believe that Russia is significantly influencing U.S. politics.

Given U.S. corporations' interests in undermining labor unions, it is important to note that a December 1948 CIA report acknowledges that *"a serious split existed in*

the Venezuelan labor movement as a result of intrigues instigated by foreign oil companies." It concludes that, *"as a result of the workers not being united, the recent military coup was made much easier."* In May 1950, the Venezuelan government issued a decree outlawing the Communist Party. The election of Betancourt (1959-64) followed the overthrow of dictator Pérez Jiménez. *"Venezuela has a record of close ties the U.S., based in large part on the mutual interest of the two countries in the development of Venezuela's oil industry."* So says a National Intelligence Estimate report from 1961. Evidence that Cuba supplied anti-Betancourt communists with weapons was *"largely circumstantial"* says another report.

The documents reiterate the interests of U.S. corporations in Venezuela, not only oil but the banks that profit from the oil revenues. The Catholic-majority population could be manipulated to believe that the secular communists and broader left were a threat to their religion and thus ways of life.

A report on U.S. President Kennedy's visit to Venezuela in late-1961, including its *"propaganda impact,"* lauds the visit as a *"decisive victory over Communist extremists and other leftist groups."* The propaganda effort included Kennedy's support for the Catholic Church against the godless commies. Hinting at where the real power could be found, the report notes: *"Special credit is due civilian authorities and even more so to military."* Hinting also at U.S. opposition to political diversity in Venezuela, the report further notes that *"Venezuelan visit showed importance of keeping down size Presidential parties thereby making it easier for his government and our diplomatic missions to take care of them most efficiently."*

By 1963, the CIA was describing Venezuela as *"a prime example of a country attempting rapid social and economic progress through constitutional democracy."* This was assisted by the U.S. AID Mission, which involved police training. Later, we shall see how other documents confirm that the poorest Venezuelans considered the U.S.-trained police forces to be worse than the communist terrorists that attacked U.S. interests. The constitutional democracy of which the analysts were so proud also involved the imprisonment by Betancourt of half a dozen left-wing congressmen during the elections. The report notes that Betancourt *"used a broad interpretation of his executive powers."*

Referring to the Christian, mildly socialistic Partido Social Cristiano, it concludes that *"Betancourt will also probably enjoy the support of the COPEI leadership and the business community while his crackdown against the terrorists continues."* In July 1963, CIA director John McCone advised the U.S. Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, that in the past there had been *"serious deficiencies in the internal security services of the Venezuelan government"* led by the U.S. ally, Pérez Jiménez. If the extradited Jiménez returned, *"it would certainly be difficult ... to give him adequate protection in any normal prison situation,"* hence it was best for the U.S. to continue to support Betancourt.

A CIA report describes Betancourt as *"a former Communist who turned strongly anti-Communist."* Many communists were "eliminated" from the military after the revolts of 1962. The Communist Party of Venezuela, says the CIA, had "infiltrat[ed]" education, labor movements, the media and youth groups. In other words, the CIA believed that "communists" meant the entire civil society. The Jiménez dictatorship *"tended to tolerate a limited amount of Communist activity."* By the 1960s, communist involvement in the parliamentary politics of Venezuela "was more the responsibility of [Jiménez]" than Betancourt.

A secret, partly-redacted CIA memo on terrorism in Venezuela in 1963 states that terrorists, *"primarily the Communist-dominated Armed Force of National Liberation" (FALN), wanted to tempt the military into overthrowing government in the hope that they could ride the wave of the coup. The FALN attacked energy pipelines, police, military and, mainly, "American targets."* It also notes that *"The major subversive threat is from the extreme left, from Communist and Castroist forces hoping to reshape Venezuela along the lines of Castro's Cuba."* But the so-called extremists, says the report, *"are limited in numbers."*

A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report cites the desire for *"orderly social and economic reform"* in Venezuela under the government of Betancourt or a successor. The report notes that Venezuela is *"an extraordinarily wealthy country in terms of its natural and financial resources."* The economic strains, says the NIE report, can be traced to the tension between the military infrastructure of the country's political system and the transition towards *"a democratic welfare state."* Betancourt, says the NIE, was opposed by *"extreme leftists"* (i.e., political Communists with a big C) and *"extreme rightist elements."* It describes U.S. relations with Betancourt as *"cordial."*

Aiding our understanding of whom the elites on all sides considered to be communists, the report goes on to say that *"The wealthy ... do exert substantial political influence ... In the view of many of them, the democratic socialism of [Betancourt's Acción Democrática (AD) party] is equivalent to communism."* Again, we can draw ominous parallels, with Trump's Republicans today being so far to the right that they see the center-right neoliberals of the Democratic Party as raving socialists. Returning to Venezuela, as the so-called extreme left oppose the AD government for its slow reforms, *"some rightists will continue to conspire with reactionary military elements to overthrow the regime,"* leaving Betancourt at risk from both the left and right. However, *"[i]n world affairs, Venezuela will continue to support the West against the Communist Bloc on most issues in the UN and elsewhere."*

The reports also confirm that so-called constitutional democracy in Venezuela was a façade. *"The military will continue to be the ultimate arbiter of political power in Venezuela,"* says a NIE report from early-1964. President-elect Raul Leoni's (1964-69) *"success or failure in office will be of great importance to the US."* Hinting at U.S. acquiescence in potential state-violence against the broad public ("communists"), it notes that Leoni *"probably will have to resort at times to extraordinary measures such as suspension of constitutional guarantees to contain the insurgency threat within tolerable limits (by Venezuelan standards)."*

The same report notes that by the mid-1960s, U.S. capital investments in Venezuela totalled \$3bn, *"exceeded only by our investments in Canada and in the UK."* In addition to the *"strategic importance"* of Venezuela *"as the world's largest exporter of oil,"* Venezuela *"holds great symbolic value for our policy in Latin America."* But the problem was that Venezuela remained *"the only Latin American country in which leftist extremists ... have been able to sustain an impressive level of insurgency."* Half the population lived in poverty, says the report, adding that the 300,000 slum-dwellers of the capital, Caracas, *"regarded the government and the police--not the terrorists--as its main antagonists [sic]."* It's an interesting comment on exactly who the population considered the main terrorists.

By the mid-1970s, Venezuela had nationalized its oil and iron ore industries. By 1977, the CIA was concerned about *"the rise in influence and assertiveness among developing countries ... whose ambitions and activities seem likely increasingly to complicate the efforts of the United States to cope with global and, especially, regional issues."* With windfall oil revenues but a predicted economic downturn or even crash, Venezuela wanted to **"replace a heavy dependence on the United States with a growing regionalism and Third World interdependence."** The CIA noted President Carlos Andrés Pérez's (1974-79) efforts to *"reintegrate Cuba into the American system,"* efforts which they predicted would be slow and largely unsuccessful.

In the 1980s, with collapsing oil revenues and International Monetary Fund-imposed **"structural adjustment programs"** Venezuela unleashed austerity on its people; or *"bring[ing] public sector spending and borrowing under control, and ... improving the country's sagging reputation,"* as an intelligence report describes it. In 1982, the CIA noted that Venezuela was supplying "aid" to neighboring El Salvador, whose U.S.-backed forces were engaged in a brutal counterinsurgency war (1979-92). With regards to Cuba, *"We believe [Venezuela's Herrera government (1979-84)] ... sees Cuba as a threat to its long-term interests in the Caribbean Basin."* As with its Cuba relations, Venezuela's integration into the Non-Aligned Movement didn't seem to alarm the CIA: *"we expect this to cause little change in Venezuela's basically pro-Western foreign policy."* They were right, until a certain Hugo Chávez came along...

We shall have to wait for more records to be declassified under the often-violated 30-year rule. But the ones already available demonstrate that whichever political party controls both the White House and the Congress, the objective of U.S. policymakers is to monitor the activities of foreign nations, particularly resource-rich ones in which U.S. corporations have a great deal of investment. Hugo Chávez's presidential victory in 1999 was a shock for the U.S. policymaking establishment. A nation with such long-term and predictable pro-U.S. policies was suddenly transformed into an economy that served the interests of its people.

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