

Hugo Chavez's Social Democratic Agenda

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Hugo Chavez Frias was reelected by an overwhelming nearly two to one margin over his only serious rival on December 3, 2006 giving him a mandate to proceed with his agenda to build a socialist society in the 21st century on a Bolivarian model designed to meet the needs of the current era in Venezuela and Latin America overall. Chavez first announced his intentions on January 30, 2005 at the Fifth World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and his people affirmed they want him to proceed with it in his new term to run until December, 2012.

Chavez wants to build a humanistic democratic society based on solidarity and respect for political, economic, social and cultural human and civil rights, but not the top-down bureaucratic kind that doomed the Soviet Union and Eastern European states. He said he wants to build a "new socialism of the 21st century....based in solidarity, fraternity, love, justice, liberty and equality" as opposed to the neoliberal new world order model based on predatory capitalism exploiting ordinary people for power and profit that's incompatible with democracy. Newly appointed Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte expressed Washington's concern about the challenge to its hegemony in his Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing saying Chavez's "behavior is threatening to democracies in the region (because he exports a form of) radical populism." He didn't mention how glorious it is.

He also never explained Venezuelans voted for it and love it and so do people throughout the region wanting what Venezuelans now have. Since first taking office in February, 1999, Chavez radically transformed the country from one of power and privilege to a participatory democracy governed by principles of political, economic and social equity and justice. He now wants to advance his social democratic agenda well into the new century, and his landslide electoral victory empowers him more than ever to do it. Like a true democrat, he intends to serve his people and deliver what they asked for.

Chavez began his new term with the formation of a new unity party called the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) to "construct socialism from below," built "from the base" in communities, patrols, battalions, squadrons, neighborhoods "to carry out the battle of ideas for the socialist project (to) build Venezuelan socialism." He wants it to be an "original Venezuelan model" to become the most democratic in Venezuela's history and include a coalition of many smaller parties along with his former Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR) party that completed its work and "must now pass into history."

In December, 23 parties joined with the MVR to reelect Chavez, including three major ones that can add strength and credibility to the PSUV - For Social Democracy (PODEMOS), Homeland For All (PPT), and the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV). The inclusion of all or most allied parties in the new PSUV will be a step toward building a foundational unity to

address the agenda ahead – building 21st century socialism using state revenues to benefit people in new and innovative ways. Chavez wants to reform the constitution, eliminate a two-term presidential limit, and institute new progressive changes giving more power to people at the grass roots the way democracy should work.

He also wants to transform the country's economic model believing it's "fundamental (to do) if we wish to build a true socialism (therefore) we must socialize the economy (including the land and create) a new productive model." He wants all proposed changes submitted to popular referendum so Venezuelans decide on them, not politicians. That's how it should be in a participatory democracy from the bottom up Chavez says must "transcend the local framework (to achieve) "a sort of regional federation of Communal Councils." There are 16,000 of them already organized across the country dealing with local issues, each with 200 – 400 families, and that number is expected to grow to 21,000 by year end 2007. "They are the key to peoples' power," Chavez stressed, and he sees them as the embryo of a new state driven by the PSUV.

Communal Councils are central to Chavez's plan for people empowerment. They were created in April, 2006 with the passage of the Communal Council Law. Once fully in place and operational, they'll represent true participatory democracy unimaginable in the US now governed from the top down by authoritarian rule allowing no deviation from established policies people have no say on and often don't know exist.

Councils work the opposite way. They're to deal with all community issues in local umbrella groups addressing matters of health, education, agriculture, housing and all other functions handled up to now by Social Missions and Urban Land Committees. They represent grass roots democracy in action giving them muscle and meaning and are administered by the Intergovernmental Fund for Decentralization that will distribute \$5 billion to them in 2007 or more than triple the \$1.5 billion allocated in 2006. Additionally, Chavez hopes \$7 billion more will be put in the Venezuelan National Development Fund for industrial development use.

US Corporate Media Assaults Against Hugo Chavez

In an earlier article, this writer addressed how Venezuela's corporate media relentlessly beats up on Hugo Chavez to a degree unimaginable most anywhere else. The US corporate media never lets up either as evidenced on January 24 by New York Times correspondent Simon Romero's report from Caracas. He referred to the Councils as a plan to construct "socialist cities....to be settled in part by cramped city dwellers in Caracas and Maracaibo." He added: "Some of Mr. Chavez's critics compare the project to (1970s Cambodian Khmer Rouge leader) Pol Pot's emptying of Phnom Penh in his bloody effort to remake Cambodian society in the 1970s."

Romero's anti-Chavez polemic went further with inferences of authoritarianism, anti-semitism, equating him with (Libyan strongman) Muammar el-Qaddafi and accusing him of masking an opposition to liberal democracy beneath the facade of his "socialist ramblings" with a climactic final outrageous comment that most Venezuelans voted for Chavez "because (they) wanted a dictatorship."

This kind of slander actually gets printed in the so-called "newspaper of record" with "All The News That's Fit To Print" that has muscle and clout. Its reports get instant recognition and echoing throughout America's dominant media eager to pick up on and trumpet the

most outlandish misinformation and distortions from the most influential publication on the planet. The NYT and entire corporate media in both countries play fast and loose with facts they never report unless they conform to their ideological view supporting power and privilege with the public being damned.

What they ignore about Chavez stands what they do on its head. It's his vision of participatory democracy rooted throughout the country in communities that the NYT portrays as potentially bloody communist takeover and population purging with implications of Pol Pot's Cambodian nightmare regime three decades ago. This is typical Times yellow journalism in its quasi-official state ministry of information and propaganda role meaning all of its reports should be viewed with grave suspicion or just dismissed.

So should Time Magazine's with its strident attack articles using language like "The Venezuelan strongman lurches even closer to one-party....one-man rule roiling democratic waters" (and Chavez is) "Stifling Dissent in Venezuela" also asking "Is Chavez Becoming Castro?" The articles refer to Chavez's nationalization plans, his new "enabling law" authority, and his government plan to control the Central Bank replacing a private banking cartel doing it for profit the way it works detrimentally in the US and West. Time's writers skip over inconvenient facts including how Chavez serves his people in full conformity to Venezuelan law unlike how Washington pols are bought, paid for and in office for the privileged alone including for the directors of Time's parent company, media giant Time Warner.

Another corporate press mainstay, the Washington Post, took its best shots too in a January 27 editorial claiming "democracy is dead, dying or in danger" in Venezuela because "Hugo Chavez began his (new) term this month with a flurry of authoritarianism, (including wanting) to rule by decree." It continued saying Chavez "hopes to convert (Nicaragua and Ecuador) into satellite leaders in a Venezuelan-led 'socialist' bloc (along with) Bolivia's Evo Morales and....Fidel Castro....already in Mr. Chavez's orbit (and) thanks to Venezuela's petrodollars, Cuba's 'totalitarian' system may survive Mr. Castro's demise." With this kind of "journalism," the Post writer may be up for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the US's highest civilian award for exceptional meritorious service surely including black propaganda for the state.

The above examples and countless more pass for what's called journalism in a country claiming dedication to press freedom but failing where it counts - reporting the truth. There's precious little of it about Hugo Chavez because he represents the greatest of all threats to US dominance - a good example that's infectious and spreading to growing numbers in the region no longer wanting democracy, American-style that's a one-way kind for the privileged alone.

Expect lots more hostile rhetoric ahead as Chavez advances new socially democratic plans and programs sure to be denounced in a collective drum beat of distortion and misinformation. They won't report the National Assembly democratically voted Chavez limited enabling law power for a fixed period after weeks of debate. They won't explain a fading US democracy with George Bush on his own "executive order" authority giving himself permanent "Unitary Executive power" to suspend the Constitution and declare martial law any time he alone decides a "national emergency" warrants it. They won't say Congress and the courts allowed him to do it. They won't ever let on that Chavez governs as a social democrat while George Bush rules by virtual "strongman" decree with no check or balancing restraint on him. Why would they when they won't ever tell the truth.

Nationalizing Key Industries

On January 8, Hugo Chavez announced plans to renationalize the nation's "strategic sectors" starting with two large partly US-owned companies. They're telecom giant Compañia Nacional Telefonos de Venezuela (CANTV), 28.5% owned by Verizon Communications, and Electricidad de Caracas (EDC) that's part of Virginia-based AES Corporation. CANTV is Venezuela's largest privately-owned company, but it's not a telephone monopoly. Its land lines reach only 11% of the population, with three-fourths of it having none, while its cell phone unit, Movilnet, controls 35% of this larger, more profitable market. It does have internet monopoly power in the country controlling 83% of it that's enough to block competitors and make for an untenable situation now being rectified.

The situation is similar in the electric power industry with much of it already controlled by two state-owned companies. At a news conference on February 2, Chavez announced "The nationalization of the electrical sector is one of the first laws to be approved (because) it is a necessity....One of the priorities is the nationalization of the electricity. It was a monumental mistake to have it privatized (and now six electricity companies in all will revert to state ownership)."

Telecommunications Minister Jesse Chacon indicated CANTV will be the only telecommunications company returned to state control, but doing it disrupted Mexican billionaire and richest Latin American Carlos Slim's plans. Slim controls the Mexican telecommunications company Telmex as its chairman, along with other vast holdings in banking, insurance, technology and much more. Verizon planned to sell him its 28.5% of the company making him even richer, but that's now off the table with Chavez's plans to "enrich" the Venezuelan people, not a predatory billionaire tycoon wanting more billions at the expense of the public he got his other billions from.

Venezuelan National Assembly Finance Chairman Ricardo Sanguino said these and other previously-owned state companies will be nationalized with payments for them likely conforming to their fair market value with government input on what that is. Finance Minister Rodrigo Cabezas indicated the country's oil revenue reserves will be used to compensate shareholders who'll "receive the fair price for the value of their shares."

It wasn't good enough for US ambassador William Brownfield who's more politician than diplomat and often offensive and out of line. He challenged the transactions, and in so doing provoked Hugo Chavez to say he might ask the envoy to leave the country if he continues "meddling in Venezuelan affairs." He added doing it violates "the Geneva agreements and (its) getting yourself involved in a serious violation and could (get you) declared a persona non grata and would have to leave the country."

Brownfield didn't say it, but he's reinforcing false and misleading reports that privately-owned companies may be expropriated while ignoring Chavez saying that's illegal under Venezuelan law and won't happen. But in a move to boost state revenues in the face of lower oil prices, Chavez ordered his telecommunications minister to take control of CANTV ahead of paying compensation for it, and he may continue that practice with other nationalizations.

As announced on February 13, however, the CANTV matter is now resolved as the Venezuelan government and US owner Verizon Communications agreed on a deal to settle it. The government will buy out Verizon's 28.51% ownership for just over \$572 million to

raise its equity stake in the company from 6.5% to 35% in an important step to put the company back under state control, 15 years after it was privatized.

Another nationalization is also moving toward resolution as state-owned oil company PDVSA agreed to buy a majority share in the electric company EDC from US-based AES owning 82% of it. Remaining minority owner shares will remain in private hands. A memorandum of understanding was formalized with AES confirming the agreement, and both sides expressed satisfaction with it putting to rest unfounded fears the Chavez government might expropriate private property forbidden by Venezuela's nationalization laws requiring owners get fair compensation in any state takeover. Venezuelan Vice-President Jorge Rodriquez attended the public presentation expressing his satisfaction along with companies on both sides, and said this is the first of a series of further agreements to come involving nationalizations of strategic sectors.

Chavez plans other changes as well and will ask for a constitutional amendment to end Central Bank of Venezuela's (BCV) autonomy in a move responding to state strategies according to its director, Armando Leon. Leon said one of the bank's functions is to maintain medium and long term stability to guarantee economic growth, improve the population's wealth, and keep the international payment system. He added autonomy will let the bank continue developing more convenient policies for the country. It should also put the crucial power of money creation back in government hands where it belongs and out of the hands of private for-profit bankers.

Chavez also repeated what he's said before that he wants a bigger share of joint-venture profits and majority state control over Orinoco River basin lucrative oil projects (believed to hold the world's largest undeveloped oil reserves) where big US and other oil companies now operate including Chevron, BP Amoco, ConocoPhillips and Exxon Mobil. At his February 2 news conference, he announced state oil company PDVSA will become the majority shareholder on May 1 in four basin projects with minimum 60% ownership with foreign joint-venture partners.

Negotiations toward agreement were stalemated for months finally breaking off January 15 with the government giving oil giants the option to stay on as minority partners or sell out to a competitor that will. Given the basin's future profit potential, it's hard imagining they'll want to leave. Chavez believes it but added if agreement isn't reached "they are totally free to leave." Minister for Energy and Mines Rafael Ramirez went further saying the oil fields will be seized if no agreement is reached. Watch for one ahead that will be fair and equitable to both sides as are all others in foreign investor joint ventures. Chavez wants similar arrangements to ones Western nations have that won't be strong-armed into bad deals like developing countries get. In Venezuela, those exploitive days are over.

Chavez also indicated he'll reverse 1999 legislation allowing 100% private ownership of natural gas projects. This sector will henceforth revert to majority state control in joint-venture operations. Still, this move and others aren't attempts to end private investment that's still welcome and likely always will be. From now on, though, the deals will have to be fair including allowing majority state ownership in them. It's to assure Venezuelan people benefit most from the nation's resource revenues and other businesses providing essential services like public utilities.

It's the way it should be, and based on last year's operating results private investors have

little to complain about. In 2006, the private sector grew an impressive 10.3% or double the public sector rate. Financial firms did especially well under some of the most profitable conditions in the world including in its free market US epicenter. The Financial Times even admitted bankers were having a “party” in Venezuela because “rather than nationalise banks, the ‘revolutionary’ distribution of oil money has spawned wealthy individuals who are increasingly making Caracas a magnet for Swiss and other international bankers.” It showed in total bank assets that increased by a third last year and may surge again this year promising to be another good one for bankers and other private enterprises in oil-rich Venezuela.

Changes ahead under Chavez won’t make the country unattractive to foreign investors. They find it very profitable operating there and aren’t about to leave or disinvest nor is Chavez pushing them out. It’s just that from now on, private business will have to abide by new standards of fairness that will be a big adjustment for those used to having their own way. That was in the old days. Things are now different, the way they should be in a social democracy.

Chavez’s Enabling Law Authority

On January 8, Hugo Chavez announced “we are now entering a new era, the National Simon Bolivar Project of 2007-2021” to achieve “Bolivarian Socialism” in the 21st century that will be “radicalized (and) deepened.” He explained implementing the bold transformation will rely on five revolutionary “motors” including constitutional reform, “Bolivarian popular education,” redefining and changing the organs of state power, an explosion of communal power at the grass roots, and the “mother (enabling) law” to make all other “motors” possible.

On January 18, the Venezuelan National Assembly (AN) unanimously approved a resolution giving Hugo Chavez his requested “enabling law” authority. It then convened an open to the public session in Caracas’ central Bolivar Square January 31 enacting the legislation shouting “long live socialism.” The “mother law” will run for 18 months and then expire. It allows President Chavez authority to pass laws by decree in 11 key areas including the structure of state organs, election of local officials, the economy, finance and taxes, banking, transportation, the military and national defense, public safety, and importantly policies related to energy.

Chavez wants the power to accelerate democratic change ahead that’s part of his socialist project. Venezuelans voted for it in December, and he promised to deliver. He had it two other times, used it responsibly, never abused his authority, and is the fifth Venezuelan president to use it as permitted by the constitutions of 1961 and in Article 203 in the 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Chavez last used it in 2001 passing 49 new legal changes making them conform to the new Bolivarian Constitution in areas of land and banking reform and establishing more equitable revenue-sharing arrangements with foreign oil companies in joint-state ventures. Going forward, he wants to continue building strong participatory democracy at its grass roots in communities and end the country’s ugly past practices serving capital interests alone. The new law gives him authority to do it in the following areas, all related to the country’s internal functioning without infringing on foreign relationships. He’ll be allowed to:

- Transform sclerotic bureaucratic state institutions making them more efficient,

transparent and honest while allowing greater citizen participation in them.

- Reform the civil service and eliminate entrenched corruption that's a major uncorrected problem.
- Advance the "ideals of social justice and economic independence" by continuing to build a new social and economic model based on equitably distributing national wealth through investments in health care, education and social security.
- Modernize financial sectors including banking and insurance and reform tax policy assuring those paying too little are taxed fairly.
- Upgrade science and technology benefitting all sectors of society and the nation in areas of education, health, the environment, biodiversity, industry, quality of life, security and national defense including state and local community co-responsibilities for the nation's defense.
- Improve citizen and judicial security by modernizing and reforming public health, prisons, identification, migration regulations and the judiciary.
- Upgrade the nation's infrastructure, transport and all public services including home construction, telecommunications and information technology.
- Structurally improve and developmentally enhance the nation's military.
- Establish territorial organization norms in states and communities relating to voting and constituency size.
- Allow greater state control of the nation's vital energy sector including nationalizing oil production in the Orinoco Oil basin, arranging equitable joint ventures with private investors, taking state control of electricity and gas production, and restructuring tax rates making them fairer.

In these areas, Chavez's critics ignore the limits of his authority:

- He's bound to govern within the limits of the law under the provisions of the 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.
- He's restricted to areas authorized by the National Assembly.
- His authority will expire after 18 months.
- He has no power to harm civil or human rights nor would he wish to as a social democrat believing in them for everyone, even for his opponents.
- He'll address only internal areas unrelated to relations with other countries.
- He has no authority to expropriate private property nor can he. Venezuelan law forbids it, and Chavez obeys the law.
- The Venezuelan Constitution empowers the people to rescind all laws by popular referendum if 10% or more registered voters request a referendum vote be held, and for laws passed by decree if only 5% want it.

— The democratically elected National Assembly can change or rescind decree-passed laws by majority vote. Chavez's 18 month authority doesn't override or interfere with citizen, judiciary or National Assembly "check and balancing" of presidential powers.

In short, Hugo Chavez's wants to reform and modernize a bloated, entrenched, and corrupted bureaucracy needing major change. Enabling power will help him do it as well as be able to strengthen grass roots democracy and direct more state revenues to social welfare services. He'll have no authority to rule by "dictatorial decree" as his critics falsely contend. Quite the contrary. He's responding to the popular mandate given him in December, he intends using it responsibly, and he'll do it according to Venezuelan law he's observed in all respects throughout his eight years in office. For that he should be lauded, not denounced, but don't expect that from Venezuela's dominant media or their US counterparts voicing a steady drumbeat of one-way vitriol that's long on noise and empty of truth.

Two Hemispheric Neighbors Worlds Apart

The two, of course, are Venezuela under Hugo Chavez and the US under George Bush, and the difference between them is Grand Canyon wide. In eight years, Chavez impressively transformed a state beholden to capital to one now serving all Venezuelans. He created real participatory democracy at the grass roots advancing the nation toward greater social equity and justice while George Bush neocons went the other way. Venezuela doesn't wage wars or threaten other nations. It engages them in solidarity offering no-strings-attached aid and mutually beneficial trade and other alliances. Chavez respects human rights, has no secret prisons, doesn't practice torture or state-sponsored murder, respects the law and rights of everyone under it, and is a true social democrat freely elected by his people overwhelmingly in elections independently judged free, open and fairly run.

For that, he's demonized as "another Hitler" by the man whose record is polar opposite. He took office twice through fraud-laden elections and considerable kick-off help from five Supreme Court justices deciding their votes outweighed the country's majority feeling otherwise. It gave George Bush power to pursue an imperial permanent war agenda, ignore constitutional and international law, contemptuously disregard human rights and civil liberties, wreck the state's already pathetically weak social contract obligations, and accelerate a generational process of transferring well over \$1 trillion of national wealth yearly from 90 million US working class households to for-profit corporations and the richest 1% of the population creating what economist Paul Krugman calls an unprecedented wealth disparity getting worse that shames the nation.

Chalmers Johnson writes about it in his new book *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* which this writer will shortly review at length. It's important instructive reading showing democracy and imperialism can't coexist. The latter path ends badly in military or civilian dictatorship eventually causing bankruptcy from a combination of "isolation, overstretch, and the uniting of (opposition) local and global forces."

Two classic examples prove it - ancient Rome that lost its republic and then its empire centuries later and Nazi Germany after democratic Weimar that lost it all in just 12. Johnson foresees a similar fate here but hopes "our imperial venture will end not with a nuclear bang but a financial whimper," even though dangers mount it may combine both. He explains the Greek goddess of vengeance, Nemesis, "is already a visiter in our country, simply biding her time before she makes her presence known." She may be quiet or noisy when she does and

is like that “piper” (whose gender may be female) who’s also very patient but always gets paid.

The due date draws closer because the man at the helm is one noted historian Eric Foner characterized as “the worst president in US history (who) in his first six years in office....managed to combine the lapses of leadership, misguided policies and abuses of power of his failed predecessors.” Under him, authoritarian extremists are in charge dedicated to savage capitalism and imperial conquest by permanent war. They’ve put the nation on the tipping edge of fascism combining its classic elements of corporatism, patriotism, nationalism and the delusion of an Almighty-directed mission while pursuing an iron-fisted militarist agenda with thuggish “homeland security” enforcers illegally spying on everyone. They pathologically insist on secrecy and tolerate no dissent in an age where the law is what the chief executive says it is, and the separation of powers and checks and balances no longer exist because both dominant parties are in this together as allies, not adversaries. They put the republic on life-support that can’t be sustained and won’t be.

They harmed growing millions left on their own under market-based rules where everything’s for sale for those who can pay. Our founding principles no longer matter in a brave neoliberal new world order on the march for key resources, markets and cheap labor where might is right and no challenge tolerated. Hugo Chavez presents one as leader of an alternate world order challenging the mighty but placing himself in jeopardy as hemispheric enemy number one marked for elimination. The Bush administration tried and failed three times but always readies a new scheme to unveil by whatever means and at whatever time it’ll try again. Chavez knows the danger, won’t be deterred, and intends governing responsibly regardless of the danger that’s real and threatening.

Responsible Venezuelan government is what Paul Cummins wrote about in his January 17 Truthdig online article called We Reap What We Sow. It was from a recent Los Angeles Times story he called “A wildly successful Venezuelan program that makes free musical instruments and training available to all children who serve as a model for the US as we struggle to keep guns out of kids’ hands.” The music education program is called “El Sistema” (The System), and it’s government sponsored. It’s serving 500,000 children from all strata of society getting free training at more than 120 centers around the country, and from it more than 200 youth orchestras have been created.

The article explains Los Angeles street gangs are up against thuggish police strike forces and incarcerations only guaranteeing more violence while in Venezuela better societal crime control alternatives are far superior to failed more costly ones on US inner city streets. It proves again an ounce of prevention beats pounds of cures that don’t work. It also proves Venezuela’s social model works far better than state-sponsored iron-fisted militarism abroad, homeland security thuggery at home and multi-billions spent on both reaping what they sow – power and riches for the privileged and the public be damned. As Cummins puts it: “Sadly, we reap what we sow, and we don’t harvest what we don’t plant.”

This is one of many examples showing the chasm between two states getting wider. Venezuela’s resources go for essential social services and to build grass roots participatory democracy governed from the bottom up. In contrast, Bush administration policies prey on “The Wretched of the Earth” Franz Fanon wrote about in his best-known polemical work exposing colonialism’s devastating effects. Today its modern neocolonial version targets the world with even more harmful effects than its antecedent. It exploits people everywhere for power and profit the way things worked in Venezuela before Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution

new way. It's advancing because it works, and it's heading for a new level Chavez calls his "socialism in the 21st century" agenda.

It's name doesn't matter. It's achievements and goals do because they're what Lincoln at Gettysburg called "government of the people, by the people, for the people (he hoped would) not perish from the earth." In Venezuela today it's vibrant, flourishing, maturing and improving peoples' lives. They won't tolerate going back to the old way, and Hugo Chavez promised it won't happen. He's succeeding in spite of powerful enemies against him, mostly in Washington, determined to end his glorious experiment because it works so well.

It covers a broad array of vital and innovative social programs including free health and dental care and education to the highest level mandated by law. There's help with housing, subsidized food for the needy, land reform, job training, micro credit and more. Benefits like these are unimaginable in the US where most people can't afford their cost. The Bush administration exacerbates the problem by directing public resources for war and the military while millions sink economically, politically and socially in an uncaring society masquerading as a model democratic state. It shows in the above-highlighted wealth disparity and a government exploiting the many for those of privilege. It allowed its banking cartel-owned central bank power to erode middle and lower income households' purchasing power on top of a bipartisan commitment to end social safety net protection fast disappearing.

The damage shows in the following inflation data. A 1950 US dollar today is worth 12 cents or 88% less than 57 years ago, and it continues eroding annually. In 1952, a full years tuition at Harvard cost \$600. Today it's over \$30,000, a 50-fold increase in 55 years. With room, board, health insurance fees, books, supplies and miscellaneous expenses it costs \$50,050 making it affordable only to the rich or students getting considerable aid.

In 1959, the average urban new home cost \$14,900. Today it's \$282,300 - a 1795% increase. In 1950, a dental crown cost \$40. Today it's \$740 - a 1750% increase and in larger cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and others it can exceed \$1000. In 1970, the monthly Part B Medicare insurance premium for seniors was \$5.30. It's now on average \$88.50 - a \$1570% increase and for some higher income seniors will rise in 2007 up to \$163.70 with further exponential increases coming in succeeding years to shift the burden of providing senior health care from the state to private individuals with those unable to afford it out of luck. It's as bad getting prescription drug help after Congress legislated sham relief only benefitting the indigent paying nothing or seniors with very high drug expense getting some, but inadequate, relief because Big Pharma drug companies can charge whatever they wish and do.

Also endangered is the single most effective government-sponsored program for keeping millions of retirees out of poverty - bedrock Social Security protection. Republicans want to end it so far without success because of mass senior citizen opposition that won't stop powerful Washington interests from trying again. If they succeed they'll end the most vital of all social safety nets through "privatization" fraud meaning seniors are on their own in a heartless brave new world order for the rich alone.

Another example is homelessness that's addressed by one country and not the other. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez wants to end it by offering street people communal housing, drug treatment and a modest stipend. Last year he said: "This revolution cannot allow for there to be a single child in the street...not a single beggar in the street." He's acting through

Mission Negra Hipolita guiding the homeless to shelters and rehab centers providing medical and psychological care. Those joining get \$65 a week in return for community service work.

Mission Negra Hipolita began about a year ago and is headed by retired general and former Defense Minister Jorge Garcia Carneiro. He said thousands are being helped but believes hundreds remain on Caracas streets in numbers too hard to quantify. Still, the Venezuelan government committed to action and has a program in place that's working.

Added help may come following Participation and Social Development Minister David Velasquez's announcement saying: "We believe that everything related to social protection aimed at helping people in a situation of risk and social exclusion should be a policy which embraces the whole process not just responding to specific situations or assistance." Part of it is strengthening Mission Negra Hipolita giving more power to Communal Councils as well as enhancing an integral social protection system implemented through equality and social protection committees (or Copis).

Compare that to the US under George Bush. No homeless help program exists nor is any planned. It shows in a report released in mid-January by the National Alliance to End Homelessness showing how bad it is. The report, called Homelessness Counts, estimates the US homeless population at 744,313 as of January, 2005 but indicated the assessment was limited and the true number likely much higher. An earlier estimate in 1996 had it at 842,000, and it affects families, singles, children and even working adults studies estimate are 25 - 40% of the homeless not earning enough to house themselves.

This issue alone highlights the savage effects of capitalism US-style based on one-way wealth distribution upward, varying crumbs to the middle, and nothing to growing millions on the bottom most in need and ignored hoping they'll go away. They won't and neither will their needs becoming greater.

Venezuela is dedicated to social progress and addressing unmet needs. It's reducing its homeless problem while Bush officials handle a growing one by eliminating vital welfare and federal housing programs once in place for the needy. It's happening in the richest country in the world where its largest corporation alone, Exxon-Mobil, had gross 2006 sales of \$377.6 billion or about 2.8 times Venezuela's GDP. It also posted record profits of \$39.5 billion for 2006, the largest ever for a US corporation, but isn't willing to sacrifice a few billion for more responsible behavior that won't help its bottom line. It wants more billions, not less, and has government help in Washington to get them at public expense.

More Evidence of Two Nations On Opposite Courses

In nearly every respect, the US and Venezuela are mirror opposites. US GDP is about 90 times Venezuela's with a population 12 times greater. It's huge resources could end the nation's poverty and much of it elsewhere. Tiny Venezuela's doing it because the law mandates it, and it's enforced. In the US, poverty is growing. In Venezuela, it's declining. In the US, Department of Education figures gloss over a deplorable functional illiteracy rate officially at 20% with real numbers far higher based on reports from urban school systems around the country graduating students without computer skills and only able to read, write, and do math at the elementary school level. It's from planned public school neglect for private sector gain and an overall disinterest in educating poor inner city children discarded like debris by an uncaring state.

Economic conditions are deteriorating as well for most, and for millions they're dire despite false and misleading reports to the contrary. They hide the true state of things for most people losing ground, not gaining. It shows in phony Labor Department unemployment figures hiding how bad things are. Based on how rates were calculated in The Great Depression when unemployment rose to 25%, the true figure today is about 12%, not the fictitious most recent official 4.6% number. In addition, poverty is rising annually despite overall economic reports of a healthy economy hiding its dark side. Well over 12 million Americans struggle daily to feed themselves and many, including children, go to bed hungry at night. And that's just one of many signs of neglect getting worse but kept under wraps in the mainstream.

In Venezuela, the opposite is true. Poverty levels are falling from a high in 2003 of 62% following the crippling 2002-03 "oil strike" and destabilizing effects of the 2002 two-day aborted coup against Hugo Chavez. They're down impressively now to levels nearing one-third or almost half the figure four years ago. Unemployment is also declining from a high around 20% in early 2003 to 8.4% in December, 2006 and likely to keep falling. Inflation is still a problem, but government efforts are being made to reign it in responsibly.

Free expression is another fundamental issue in an open democratic society. One country pays it lip service, but the other practices and respects it. In Venezuela, it's championed, and it shows in government tolerance for the dominant media's strident anti-Chavez rhetoric broadcast to over 90% of the country's potential viewers. It's from the country's five electronic media majors' relentless denunciation of government policies and their leading role in instigating and supporting the April, 2002 aborted two-day coup and 2002-03 management-imposed oil industry lockout and "general strike" destabilizing the country for 64 grim days. In the US, these kinds of actions could be considered capital offenses subject to long prison terms or even the death penalty for offenders found guilty.

Not in Venezuela. After restoring stability, Chavez never punished media transgressors despite having every legal right to do it. Only with RCTV's VHF operating license expiring in May did he act against the worst of the lot announcing its renewal won't be granted and its channel will be put under new management for socially responsible programming as it should be in a democracy. Chavez is acting within the law and is moving to democratize public airwaves that should be used for the people and not for black propaganda against them.

But that's not how Reporters Without Borders ("for press freedom") sees it. It condemned the non-renewal disingenuously claiming it violates free speech and press freedom. It put its one-sided corporate media support in writing in its 2007 Annual Report falsely claiming Chavez passed a "spate of laws" in 2005 and 2006 "greatly curbing press freedom" while failing to acknowledge every government action fully complies with Venezuelan law. It also ignored Venezuela's highest standards of press freedom in the free world tolerating the most outrageous corporate media attacks against Hugo Chavez and finally only punishing one offender with a mere hand slap.

Contrast this with life under George Bush. A climate of fear is pervasive. No dissent is tolerated and opponents are denounced as traitors and terrorists. The dominant media are supportive acting as little more than thought-control police mocking the notion of free expression vital to a healthy republic now passing from democracy to tyranny. Nothing is off the table to "homeland security" enforcers using hardest of hard ball tactics with no regard for law and justice this administration disdains endangering the last remaining free and

open public space now under attack. It's online digital democracy supporters call internet neutrality heading for final debate and resolution in Congress in the coming weeks. The outcome will determine its fate affecting every computer user and web editor contributing material to the public domain. Saving this venue is vital for any hope to remain to revive a flagging democracy somewhere between life support and the crematorium.

But the struggle just got harder because of Section 220 of S. 1, the lobbying reform bill now before the Senate, that, if passed, will require bloggers and others communicating online to 500 or more people to register and report quarterly to Congress just as lobbyists must do. The legislation's on hold, but it follows from Senator John McCain's proposed "Stop the Online Exploitation of Our Children's Act" that will fine bloggers up to \$300,000 for posting offensive statements, photos and videos online. This is thinly veiled hardball to stifle anti-war voices, under the guise of protecting children. They oppose Bush administration plans threatening Hugo Chavez after it's done ousting the Iranian mullahs and country's president.

McCain's bill is a leading Republican's effort to regulate online speech and let the federal government decide what parts are acceptable and what are not with heavy fines imposed on violators. At the same time, it's quite acceptable for government, Pentagon and corporate media propagandists to promote wars and anti-populist programs through the internet or in any other way. If the McCain legislation or Section 220 of S. 1 passes, the only voices heard online will be those supporting government policy while critics Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff calls "dissaffected people living in the United States (developing) radical ideologies and potentially violent skills" will be banned. That includes the web site posting this article.

And if Republican-led bipartisan efforts fail, planned Democrat-led ones are poised to go through in the form of new federal "hate crimes" legislation called The Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act (aka The Thought Crime Act). Democrats are closely aligned with the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith that's been unsuccessful getting this type law through a Republican-controlled Congress for eight years. It now has a friendly Democrat-led one that never votes against bills outlawing hate crimes. This one supposedly criminalizes hate talk against gays, minorities and other often-persecuted groups, but it's really about banning speech government opposes (including online) making it punishable by heavy fines, imprisonment or both.

These are dramatic examples of two nations going opposite ways. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez supports free expression, social democracy, and using state revenues to insure and improve both. In the US, both parties support wealth and power, are jointly running a criminal enterprise masquerading as legitimately elected government, scorn the law and constitutional freedoms, are heading the country toward despotism in a national security police state conducting wars without end, and want to rule the world including its oil-rich parts inside Venezuela's borders.

In Venezuela, people live freely in peace and their lives are enhanced. In the US they're threatened by state-sponsored terrorism and harsh repression against anyone challenging state power. The majority finds its welfare eroding under a system of authoritarian rule keeping a restive population in line it fears one day no longer will tolerate being denied essential services so the country's resources can be used for imperial wars, tax cuts for the rich and outrageous corporate welfare subsidies for boardroom allies in turn supplying politicians with limitless cash amounts in a continuing cycle of each side feeding the other

so they benefit at our expense with growing numbers left out entirely now suffering terrible neglect and abuse. If able to choose, imagine what type government and leader they'd want. Venezuelans have it under Hugo Chavez and are blessed for it. It's about time Americans got treated as well.

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