

Targeting Hugo Chavez

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

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Since taking office in February 1999, America's dominant media have relentlessly attacked Chavez because of the good example he represents and threat it might spread in spite of scant chance it will in today's climate.

Yet some of his fiercest critics maintain pressure and show up often on the Wall Street Journal's op-ed page. Most recently on November 10 by its America's columnist, Mary O'Grady. Her style is agitprop. Her space a truth-free zone. Her latest in an article headlined "Hugo Chavez Spreads the Loot" referring to what The New York Times calls "Suitcasegate."

It played out in a Miami show trial that concluded on November 3 with Franklin Duran found guilty of acting as an unregistered agent of the Venezuelan government in the US. He's co-owner of the private Venezuelan motor oil company, Venoco. It's unconnected to the government, but that's not what prosecutors charged, what jurors were pressured to conclude after initially being deadlocked, and what O'Grady picked up on and claims.

She calls Hugo Chavez "the intellectual author of his crime," whatever that means, but O'Grady doesn't explain. "The problem for Mr. Chavez is that, for almost a decade, Latin American 'democrats' (i.e. Colombia's fascist and US vassal leader Alvaro Uribe) have been accusing Venezuela of violating the sovereignty of its neighbors by supporting the radical left with money and weapons."

With no proof whatever, she means the FARC-EP (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and wrote about it in her March 10 column titled "The FARC Files." In it, she accused Chavez, Ecuador's Correa, Bolivia's Morales, and Nicaragua's Ortega of being "four best friends of terrorists." Citing bogus laptop documents "show(ing) that Mr. Chavez (& Co.) and (the FARC-EP are) not only ideological comrades, but also business partners and political allies in the effort to wrest power from Mr. Uribe." She listed a menu of charges that were bogus on their face, then later exposed and dropped for lack of evidence.

Of course, they were preposterous in the first place, but were resurrected in September by the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Control (OFAC) in designating one former and two current high-ranking Venezuelan officials as FARC-EP collaborators. Accused are Hugo Carvajal, head of the Military Intelligence Directorate and Henry de Jesus Rangel Silva in charge of the Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services (DISIP).

These charges came after Chavez expelled the US ambassador in solidarity with Bolivia's Evo Morales. A day earlier, he dispatched the US envoy for instigating violent anti-government protests.

What's happening relates to Colombia's early 2008 Ecuadorean incursion. An illegal cross-border raid with the help of US Special Forces. They attacked and slaughtered 20 or more people while they slept, including 16 FARC-EP members. One being its second in command, Raul Reyes. Its public voice, key peace negotiator since the 1990s, and lead figure in the Chavez-arranged releases of hostages they held. A humanitarian effort he was vilified for with the usual kinds of political charges often made against him.

Noted Latin American expert James Petras calls the FARC-EP the "longest standing, largest peasant-based guerrilla movement in the world (that was) founded in 1964 by two dozen peasant activists (to defend) autonomous rural communities from" Colombian military and paramilitary violence. It's a "highly organized 20,000 member guerrilla army with several hundred thousand local militia and supporters...." It now numbers about 10,000 – 15,000 "distributed throughout the country" and still a force to be reckoned with.

When its leader, Manuel Marulanda, died in March, Petras paid homage to him in a powerfully moving article. He explained that for over "60 years he organized peasant movements, rural communities and, when all legal democratic channels were effectively (and brutally) closed, he built the most powerful sustained guerrilla army and supporting underground militias in Latin America." Besides its fighters, it included (and still largely does) "several hundred thousand peasant-activists, (and) hundreds of village and urban militia units" united against the most brutally repressive Latin American government (regardless of who leads it) and his vast supportive entourage.

Marulanda "defied them all – those in their mansions, presidential palaces, military bases, torture chambers, and bourgeois editorial offices." These brave fighters nonetheless persist. The same ones O'Grady attacks and the Venezuelan leader as equally committed to justice and freedom as they are.

She takes full advantage of Duran's conviction for supposedly conspiring to conceal the "origin and destination" of a suitcase filled with \$800,000 and for acting as an "unregistered agent" for his country on US soil. Prosecutors claimed it was for Argentina President, Christina Kirchner. For her successful campaign last year. A charge both presidents deny. Venezuela's foreign minister, Nicolas Maduro, as well (earlier in the year) calling the case "absolutely rigged (and that) the person who said he is an agent of our government lied."

As a Miami trial approached, Maduro questioned the impartiality of the venue, saying: "Those who appoint the public prosecutors and judges in Florida are those who run the mafia, linked to people of Cuban origin who are totally opposed to the sovereign process in our country" and, of course, are committed to removing Castro and his brother.

Today, "Suitcasegate" is front-page news in Venezuela and Argentina. In America as well at times and in O'Grady's November 10 commentary.

In December 2007, Duran and three businessmen came to Miami. Their purpose – to advise their business partner, Guido Antonini, a Venezuelan-American businessman who was caught with the money months earlier in a Buenos Aires airport. At the time, Argentine judge Marta Novatti ordered his arrest, but he evaded authorities and returned to Miami where he lives in its wealthy Key Biscayne suburb. Argentina twice requested his extradition on charges of money laundering, but US authorities refused and instead used him to advantage.

Antonini wasn't charged. In return, he allowed the FBI to wire him to record conversations with Duran and the others. At trial, he was the star witness after proceedings were at first delayed. All four defendants originally pleaded not guilty. Then, after threats and bribes, three agreed to plea bargains, including Venoco's co-owner, Carlos Kauffman, who testified against Duran at trial.

Edward Shohat represented him. He denounced it as a "political circus" and said he plans to appeal because the FBI entrapped Duran, the charges are false, and the whole scheme is an attack against America's ideological Latin American enemies, especially Chavez.

Early in the trial, Shohat filed a motion to dismiss and was rejected. He argued that the law Duran supposedly broke is unconstitutional because it's vague as to what type behavior is illegal so its use is solely for political purposes.

He referred to 18 USC, 951 - "Agents of foreign governments." It states:

"the term 'agent of a foreign government' means an individual who agrees to operate within the United States subject to the direction or control of a foreign government or official, except that such term does not include -

(1) a duly accredited diplomatic or consular officer....;

(2) any officially and publicly acknowledged and sponsored official or representative of a foreign government;

(3) any officially and publicly acknowledged and sponsored member of the staff (thereof - from paragraphs 1 and 2); or

(4) any person engaged in a legal commercial transaction" - except if "such person agrees to operate within the United States subject to the direction or control of a foreign government or official."

Most often, this law only applies to enemy spies in wartime or against agents committing espionage. In other words, individuals engaged in activities violating the nation's security. Against Duran, it involved a mysterious cash-filled suitcase having nothing to do with security or any connection to Chavez and his government. Antonini and Kauffman testified otherwise. That Venezuela's state oil company, PDVSA, supplied it, and Chavez directed the operation and cover-up from his office. Of course, it's their word with no proof.

On tape, Duran and his co-defendants said Chavez and Kirchner promised Antonini protection if he was charged in an Argentine court. At trial, Duran said that he lied to convince Antonini to be tried in Argentina if it came to that. For its part, Argentina accused Antonini of working for the CIA. It's quite possible given his known links to Chavez opposition groups. He worked for Venoco from 2000 - 2002 when its then owner, Isaac Perez Recao, was involved in the April 2002 (two-day aborted) coup. Venezuela's 48-hour president, Pedro Carmona, also headed Venoco at the time. The connection between him, Recao, and Antonini seems more than coincidental.

Duran's defense learned more about Antonini as well. That the FBI paid him \$30,000 and, through a letter, that he asked Chavez for \$2 million to stay silent about the affair. It also came out that the FBI tried to bribe an Argentine customs officer to testify falsely for the prosecution. The usual type FBI shenanigans seen often in other show trials. Against

innocent targets of political persecution. Most often Muslim victims of the “war on terrorism.” A topic this writer frequently revisits and discusses on-air.

In her commentary, O’Grady continued her attack and accused Chavez of directing his “intelligence chief to find a way to shut up (his) bagman (Antonini).” She claims Duran and Kauffman “were sent to Florida to warn Mr. Antonini to remain silent....The exposure of this thuggish behavior of the Venezuelan government is embarrassing enough.” What’s worse, she claims, is that there was another \$4.2 million with Antonini on the same plane “and that there had been other operations to smuggle cash into Argentina for political purposes. Another “\$100 million to spend on Bolivia” as well.

Not a shred of evidence for proof, and she forgets about the open-ended millions Washington directs to CIA, the National Endowment for Democracy, International Republican Institute, USAID and other US agencies for political mischief, including coups against democratically elected leaders. Funds also to opposition groups and candidates in Venezuela, Bolivia, and wherever else less than fully US-supportive governments exist, either democratic or despotic.

In contrast, Chavez supplies low-cost oil to his neighbors and to US cities that accept it. He also engages other nations cooperatively as opposed to Washington’s global predation. He seeks unity, promotes world solidarity, and practices the kind of democracy Americans can’t even imagine.

He champions human rights. Has no secret prisons. Doesn’t invade his neighbors or practice torture. He’s a true social democrat and the reason Venezuelans overwhelmingly support him in elections independent monitors judge free, open and fair.

But O’Grady keeps hammering with accusations that “the Venezuelan ambassador (to Bolivia) travels the country handing out checks to mayors who support President Evo Morales.” In Colombia also for “pro-Chavez Senator Piedad Cordoba recently (with) a PDVSA subsidiary (donation of) \$135,000.” Nicaragua as well “where the old Sandinista Daniel Ortega is now president (and Chavez) is supplying 60 - 70% (of his crude) through a program that allows Mr. Ortega to pay only half the bill....Nicaragua’s state oil company Petro-Nic sells the oil to private companies and collects the full value.”

O’Grady’s says one-fourth of this revenue goes for “giving away goodies like kitchens and houses ahead of yesterday’s municipal elections (to buy votes she implies),” and much of the rest is for an Ortega “slush fund government critics say.” Something similar is going on in El Salvador, she claims and continues:

“The Duran case has blown the lid off Mr. Chavez’s covert Argentine activities. But his imperialist ambitions go far beyond that country (and) he may get away with it.” If she means spreading Bolivarianism, let’s hope so and that its spirit takes root in America. What country is more in need at a time its leaders plan even greater world domination with hardened repression for enforcement.

Through a secret new scheme now revealed. To unleash IMF orthodoxy globally - “austerity, sacrifice, deregulation, privatization, union busting, wage reductions, free trade, the race to the bottom, prohibitions on advanced technologies,” and to crush the human spirit along with it.

To make Venezuela and all countries banana republics. Its workers serfs. Its industry destroyed to empower corporate giants. Mostly American ones. To suck global wealth to the top. To render freedom, democracy and Bolivarianism dead letters. To use agents like O'Grady to support this "best of all possible worlds."

Those in the know must expose her. Back leaders like Chavez for the type world all humanity wants. It's there for the taking but won't ever come down from the top. A message all readers should consider. At a perilous time in our history staring down the likelihood of the greatest ever world economic crisis with imperialists in Washington planning to milk it to maximum advantage. It's for freedom loving people everywhere to stop them.

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