

STATE OF THE ART

The Civilizing Mission Persists

Racism and Justification for U.S. Intervention into Socialist Venezuela

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Abstract

U.S. government leaders have long considered Latin America their proverbial backyard and have recurrently intervened in the region. In earlier periods of U.S. imperialism, U.S. government leaders justified such intervention with reference to allegedly scientific racial hierarchies, which placed White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) at the top of this artificial hierarchy. In more recent episodes of U.S. imperialism leading into the twenty-first century, however, U.S. leaders have publicly used the language of democracy and human rights to justify intervention. In the instance of contemporary Venezuela, while U.S. leaders indeed use the language of human rights and democracy, they also draw on racist tropes of Latin Americans to justify their intervention. Through interviews with U.S. foreign policymakers and analysis of U.S. government documents, I find that U.S. leaders depict former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez as an irrational, uncivilized, and beastly leader, who manipulates ideas of racial inequality to maintain power. In addition, U.S. leaders understand him as manipulating an uncritical mass of Venezuelans who cannot think for themselves. U.S. leaders believe it thus their duty to intervene in order to promote democracy and show Venezuelans their true political-economic interests. I connect these dynamics with a history of U.S. intervention into the region and a history of racist and imperial thinking that continues to shape the logic of U.S. foreign policymaking into the present.

Keywords: Venezuela; Political Sociology; U.S. Foreign Policy; Racism; Imperialism

Introduction

Since the origins of racial capitalism, European and thereafter U.S. imperial efforts have recurrently involved justifications for their exploitative practices. This is not surprising given that cultural and racial justification for political-economic domination precedes capitalism (Robinson 1983). During the feudal period and into the capitalist period, the English, for instance, developed racist views towards the Irish, depicting them as uncivilized, lazy, and barbarous. European colonial powers enslaved Africans and forcibly relocated them to formerly colonized territories, including within the Caribbean and North America. Though the United States achieved independence from Britain in the late eighteenth century, a racist-imperial mindset persisted among its leadership just as it had among British political leaders. Much like the British, early U.S. government leaders embraced a vision of White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) supremacy and believed that they were destined by Providence to create a WASP-dominated society in the proverbial New World. This racist-imperial mindset provided the justification for slavery,

settler colonialism and “Westward expansion” towards to the Pacific, land annexation from Mexico, and land annexation from and genocide of Native Americans (Du Bois 1920; Fitz 2017; Horne 2020; Horsman 1981; Krenn 2006). For early U.S. political leaders, their alleged God-given destiny and their alleged chosen-ness outweighed any humanitarian concern for non-White, non-Anglo-Saxon individuals.

Early U.S. government leaders encouraged a break from continental European domination in the New World and, as a result, supported Latin America’s liberation from Spain, but they also viewed the region as their unique sphere of influence and codified these views under the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 (Fitz 2017; Grandin 2006). Under this policy, U.S. government leaders self-appointed their country as the manager of the Americas. U.S. leaders annexed land from Mexico and developed a racist-imperialist view of Latin America and its inhabitants, viewing Mexican citizens as uncivilized, corrupt, childlike, and irrational, and thus in need of continual U.S. tutelage (Fitz 2017; Horsman 1981; Krenn 2006). Though such views might appear outmoded and perhaps no longer prevalent among U.S. government leaders, analysis of U.S. foreign policy towards contemporary Venezuela reveals otherwise. U.S. government leaders continue to view Latin American leaders and citizens as uncivilized and irrational, and, once again, in need of U.S. tutelage in order to properly understand what is in their best interest.

In this article, I detail such views among U.S. government elites through an analysis of U.S. diplomatic cables emanating from the U.S. Embassy in Caracas, and through interviews with former U.S. government elites who devised policy towards Venezuela during the years that Hugo Chávez maintained the Venezuelan presidency (1999–2013) and recurrently challenged U.S. global leadership, embracing what he termed Twenty-first Century Socialism (Ellner 2008). In doing so, Chávez sought to chart an equal and independent path in his foreign policy approach. Chávez aligned with U.S. foes such as Belarus, Cuba, Iran, and Russia, and opposed major U.S. foreign policy objectives, such as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result, U.S. government leaders sought to undermine the Chávez government and assist the political opposition in coming to office. In the analysis below, I show how U.S. government elites deployed racist and Orientalist depictions of Chávez and his supporters in an effort to justify U.S. intervention into the country. Such intervention aimed to support a political opposition that has also embraced racist depictions of Chávez and his supporters (Cannon 2008; Duno Gottberg 2011; Gonzalez 2021; Herrera Salas 2005). In doing so, I show how U.S. government elites believed it was their duty to educate Venezuelans in the true ways of democracy, and, as a result of such U.S. intervention, they believed Venezuelan citizens might thereafter reject Chávez and his allies in favor of the U.S. government-supported opposition. Far from evaporating, a racist-imperialist mentality continues to characterize the thinking of U.S. government elites, as it has since the inception of settler colonialism in the Americas.

Defining U.S. Imperial Relations

The Origins of Racist and Imperial Mentalities in the U.S.

The existence of the U.S. Empire remains unacknowledged by some. Such terminology is more regularly used to describe former European colonial powers, including the British Empire, which early U.S. revolutionaries distanced themselves from and ultimately rebelled against (Bulmer-Thomas 2018; Go 2011; Immerman 2010). When the existence of the U.S. Empire is explicitly acknowledged, it is sometimes depicted as a benevolent force destined to usher in an era of peace and democracy instead of, for example, chaos and authoritarianism (Boot 2001; Ignatieff 2003 Kaplan 2020; McFaul 2004). Indeed, many U.S. government leaders have taken great pains to proclaim how the U.S. government is

not an imperial force, but rather seeks to promote sovereignty and self-determination for countries throughout the world (Amin 2001; Go 2011; Immerwahr 2019). The reality, however, is that many consistencies exist between, for example, the British Empire and the U.S. Empire. For one, as Julian Go (2011) has demonstrated, government elites and journalists within both empires were initially resistant to identifying their respective powers as empires. Instead of emphasizing power, control, and self-interest, individuals within both areas often emphasized goodwill, selflessness, and the supposed humanitarian nature of their global endeavors. Many British citizens and elites, much like those in the United States, believed in the beneficence of their respective countries and believed that their global might resulted in a more peaceful and “more civilized” world (Go 2011; Horsman 1981; Vucetic 2011).

Some social scientists, as well as formerly colonized subjects, have been much less celebratory of British and U.S. foreign relations and the alleged benevolence that has characterized such relations (see e.g., Amin 2001; Du Bois 1920, 1947, 1951; Jung 2011; Mills 1956; Nkrumah 1966). Many colonized individuals, for instance, became revolutionary agents and revolutionary intellectuals focused on abolishing colonialism from their territories, and, subsequently, influenced further anti-colonial and anti-imperial efforts into the present-day period. Revolutionaries, actors, and thinkers such as Simón Bolívar in Venezuela, James Connolly in Ireland, Amílcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, George Padmore in Trinidad, and Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon in Martinique wrote from the colonial world and provided broad expression for anti-colonial sentiments and anti-colonial rebellion against, in these instances, the Spanish, British, Portuguese, and French imperial powers. Bolívar himself was influenced by U.S. revolutionaries who had defeated the British and won independence for their settler colony turned newfound country in the late eighteenth century.¹ In their own work, such anti-colonial thinkers and revolutionaries drew attention to the dehumanizing aspects of colonial rule and how, under European control, colonial rulers drained native resources and established settler colonies with privileges awarded to European expatriates. They encouraged anti-colonial rebellion, and many—such as Connolly, Padmore, and Fanon—rejected capitalism and championed socialist and communist alternatives.

Though parallels remain between British and U.S. imperial power, there are clear divergences. The U.S. government has not pursued widespread colonial efforts in the same manner as European colonial powers did so, that is, since the U.S. rise to global power following World War II. Instead, the United States has largely operated, what scholars describe as, an informal form of empire (Appleman Williams 1959; Bulmer-Thomas 2018; Gill 2019; Jung 2011; Mann 2013). That is, rather than systematically pursuing formal colonies, the U.S. government has used alternative imperial strategies in an effort to maintain global domination. In contemporary Venezuela, these efforts have primarily included the use of democracy assistance in order to buttress the efforts of likeminded political parties and non-governmental organizations. Yet, as with the British Empire, imperial force requires justification regardless of its modalities. Since feudalism gave way to capitalism and, thereafter, to capitalist imperialism, such domination has recurrently involved a rationale for its existence (Cox 1959; Doty 1996; Horsman 1981; Robinson 1983). What is more, such justifications for political-economic domination have historically involved racist components designed in order to naturalize hierarchies between groups of individuals (Cox 1959; Doty 1996; Horsman 1981; Robinson 1983; Rodney 1972). As a result, many social scientists describe the formation of capitalism as, more accurately, the formation of racial capitalism.

As Cedric Robinson (1983) describes, while taking influence from sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox, among others, racist thinking involving human hierarchy developed in Europe during the feudal period, and, as capitalism developed, it shaped its creation and

came to justify slavery, colonialism, and imperialism in areas of the world beyond continental Europe. The English, for instance, racialized the Irish and portrayed them as lazy, uncivilized, and savage (Horsman 1981; Mac an Ghaill 2000; O'Callaghan 2013; Robinson 1983). In doing so, the English colonized Ireland, confiscated land, conscripted individuals to join their army, and forced the Irish to learn the English language. European powers enslaved Africans and introduced chattel slavery wherein the children of enslaved Africans were born into slavery with very little possibility for liberation (Cox 1959; Horne 2020; Rodney 1972). Much like the English, additional European colonial powers justified such relations with reference to an alleged scientific racial hierarchy situating White Europeans at the top, evidently deserving of the political-economic domination that they possessed in territories throughout the world (Christian 2019; Du Bois 1920, 1947; Horsman 1981; Rodney 1972). For their own part, the English embraced their own particular vision of White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) superiority, which placed the English above all other groups as the world's chosen people. Under this vision, the English believed that they reserved the right to rule over the world and to establish colonial rule wherever they decided (Horsman 1981; Hunt 2009; Vucetic 2011).

Though U.S. independence emerged out of resistance to British colonial power, U.S. political-economic elites had long developed an imperial, colonial, and oppressive relationship with indigenous Native Americans, Africans, African Americans, and Latin Americans (Du Bois 1915, 1947; Horne 2020; Horsman 1981). Indeed, the philosophical ideas and beliefs among early U.S. government elites and settlers remained rooted in the same WASP vision that prevailed among the English—a view rooted in WASP chosenness to rule the world as God's elite representatives and which placed WASPs above all other groups (Horsman 1981; Vucetic 2011). Michael H. Hunt (2009) identifies how

Americans of light skin, and especially of English descent, shared a loyalty to race as an essential category for understanding other peoples and as a fundamental basis for judging them ... As Americans came into closer contact with an ever-widening circle of foreign peoples in the last decade of the nineteenth century, racial assumptions continued to guide their response. Those crying for a strenuous foreign policy invoked the need to enhance the racial vitality of the Anglo-Saxon stock and to honor the tutelary obligations superior races owed lesser ones (p. 91).

Going further, U.S. Americans developed an enhanced vision of their supremacy over and above the English, particularly after the success of the American Revolution. Reginald Horsman (1981) describes that though “many of America's leaders believed that, with the exception of the United States, England was the happiest and most democratic country under the sun. The belief that the Americans were the most distinguished descendants of the Anglo-Saxons grew rather than diminished in the decades after the Revolution” (p. 81).

Yet, while U.S. Americans pledged to create a new society based on freedom and democracy in contrast to the British Empire, a racist-imperialist, WASP mentality persisted within the newly independent settler colony. Richard Immerman (2010), for instance, as well as Hunt (2009), documents the existence of a racist-imperialist mentality among early U.S. government elites such as, for instance, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson—two individuals still widely venerated by many U.S. citizens. Both Immerman (2010) and Hunt (2009) show that Franklin and Jefferson held plainly racist-imperialist views, justifying the existence of, for example, the enslavement of Black Americans and war with Native Americans. Indeed, Jefferson himself enslaved individuals on his property. Many of these government leaders also intensely believed that U.S. Americans were a

chosen people, and that they were destined by God and by Providence to “move Westward” towards the Pacific Ocean and to begin a historically superior Anglo-Saxon society in the New World.²

Such thinking contained obvious racist views and remained buttressed by European pseudo-scientific thought. As Horsman (1981) writes, “The process by which the long-held beliefs in the superiority of early Anglo-Saxon political institutions became a belief in the innate superiority of the Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race was directly linked to the new scientific interest in racial classification ... Americans had long believed they were a chosen people, but by the mid-nineteenth century they also believed that they were a chosen people with an impeccable ancestry” (pp. 4-5). Early U.S. government elites thus tethered their Whiteness to an alleged superiority over all other peoples, even the British. Such a vision surely involved religion, but it also involved an emphasis on White racial ancestry that, in their view, naturally distinguished them from other peoples, particularly non-White, non-European peoples.

The United States Confronts Latin America

Racist-imperialist mentalities directly extended into U.S. government elite thinking on Latin America. Such ideas were not imported into Latin America from the United States, but rather had long suffused relations between European colonial powers and indigenous and Afro-descendants in the region (Galeano 1971; Herrera Salas 2005). Jesus Maria Herrera Salas (2005), for instance, traces contemporary racism in Venezuela to the period of European colonization, writing that the contemporary period “is nothing more than the historical continuation of the long process of conquest and slavery of the indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan populations that began in 1496” (p. 72). Indeed, such ideas of White racial domination permeated societies all throughout the Americas and persist into the present. Yet, U.S. government leaders exclusively believed it incumbent upon them to take a paternalistic approach to the region writ large and even to annex land when believed necessary. In addition, U.S. government leaders believed themselves racially superior to all Latin American peoples, regardless of European ancestry, and, in making these arguments, often emphasized the indigenous and African “blood” of Latin Americans (Horsman 1981).

Indeed, within several decades following U.S. independence, the U.S. government developed the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 (Booth 2020; Fitz 2017; McPherson 2016). While U.S. government leaders claimed a desire to protect Latin American nations from foreign invasion, they primarily wanted to prohibit European powers from encroaching upon the United States’ new sphere of influence (Fitz 2017). U.S. government elites had nearly always expressed geopolitical and economic interests in Latin America (Fitz 2017; Horsman 1981; Hunt 2009). These interests clearly manifested in the decades that followed. Instead of safeguarding the sovereignty of Latin American territory, U.S. military forces annexed land from Latin America, particularly large portions of Northern Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. In a similar vein, and following U.S. involvement in the Spanish American War of 1898, the McKinley administration formally colonized Cuba, Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, demonstrating that at one point there was, in fact, a desire among U.S. government elites to engage in colonialism in much the same manner as European imperialists.

All the while the U.S. government engaged in imperialist efforts, U.S. government leaders justified these efforts with reference to cultural inferiority, backwardness, childlike immaturity, and a need for U.S. tutelage (Baldoz 2008; Cottam 1994; Fitz 2017; Horsman 1981; Krenn 2006). In Northern Mexico, Horsman (1981) reveals how U.S. government elites deployed such racist-imperialist thinking:

Americans, it was argued, were not to be blamed for forcibly taking the northern provinces of Mexico, for Mexicans, like Indians, were unable to make proper use of the land. The Mexicans had failed because they were a mixed, inferior race with considerable Indian and some black blood. The world would benefit if a superior race shaped the future of the Southwest ... the Mexicans who stood in the way of southwestern expansion were depicted as a mongrel race, adulterated by extensive intermarriage with an inferior Indian race (p. 210).

Horsman (1981) demonstrates how U.S. government leaders believed in both the racial and cultural superiority of WASP, U.S. Americans. Though U.S. government leaders recognized that Europeans, namely the Spanish, had colonized much of Latin America, they presented Mexicans and other Latin American nations as “a mongrel race” with impure blood. Indeed, W. E. B. Du Bois (1920) references this line of thinking in his essay “The Souls of White Folk,” relaying how the U.S. government had “whetted [its] sword for mongrel Mexico and mulatto South America” in its march towards becoming an imperial power. Tomás Almaguer (1994) has similarly detailed how U.S. racist-imperialist schemas shaped policy in California in the decades following the Mexican-American War. Although land annexation and attempts to colonize new territories in Latin America ended in the aftermath of the Spanish American War of 1898, U.S. imperialism has visibly persisted beyond this moment. What is more, the racist contours of such imperial projects have also persisted.

Into the twentieth century, Du Bois became one of the first social scientists to recognize how racism continued to shape U.S. foreign policy towards the formerly colonized world, including Latin America. In his most renowned phrase, Du Bois (1903) famously described how the most prominent issue confronting the twentieth century world remained “the problem of the color-line,” which resulted in extreme disparities in access to resources between White citizens and persons of color at a domestic level, but, also, resulted in disparities between White-dominated countries and the formerly colonized world, largely composed of Black and Brown individuals. While many surely remain familiar with the first half of Du Bois’s famous passage, the full phrasing of it reads as follows: the “problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (Du Bois 1903, p. 12). Du Bois clearly saw continuities between European and U.S. Empire. He identified how European imperial leaders promoted ideas of racial inferiority with assistance from European pseudo-scientists and journalists, who depicted White Europeans as “the heaven-sent rulers of yellow, brown, and black people” (Du Bois 1947, p. 12). Thereafter, he saw how U.S. government leaders continued to champion WASP superiority (Horsman 1981; Hunt 2009; Vucetic 2011). Du Bois made the connection between the transfer of global power between Europe and the U.S., and how a similar imperial vision and set of mentalities continued to characterize newfound U.S. global domination. Though he made these connections, he never fully fleshed out the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America, and how U.S. imperial efforts remained in some ways continuous, but also divergent from earlier imperial policies. He surely, though, recognized the existence of U.S. global machinations, writing that colonialism had “not disappeared, even though its back is broken in India and China ... American business is desperately trying to restore the essentials of colonialism under the name of free enterprise and western democracy; and are plunging the world into destruction for false ideals and misleading fears” about communism (Du Bois 1951, p. 3). Du Bois thus began to glimpse the disjuncture between U.S. government leaders’ public praise for democracy and freedom, and the ugly realities of their policies abroad. What is more, he saw how the U.S. government cloaked its racist-imperialist vision with discussions of free-market economics and democracy promotion, all

the while it stifled any movements that sought to move beyond capitalism and liberal forms of democracy.

Just as Du Bois (1951) noted how colonial policies had not entirely disappeared, scholars more focused on the particularities of U.S. imperialism in Latin America describe the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America as a neo-colonial relationship. Indeed, this is the sort of relationship that Du Bois had begun to describe in his prescient work in the early twentieth century. Thereafter, in the mid-twentieth century, scholars influenced by Du Bois, as well as the work of Marxist thinkers such as V. I. Lenin, Nikolai Bukharin, Karl Kautsky, and Rosa Luxemburg, drew attention to the ways the U.S. government continued to economically dominate Latin America, particularly scholars focused on what became known as dependency theory (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979; Frank 1966; Galeano 1971; Nkrumah 1966; Rodney 1972). Dependency theorists, in brief summation, illustrated how the U.S. set prices for primary products such as foodstuffs and minerals, but resold manufactured goods at elevated prices, cultivating economic dependency and, what some termed, underdevelopment within the formerly colonized world. In addition, corporations headquartered in what was then understood as the First World utilized labor and resources in the Third World, engaging in a form super-exploitation wherein local workers were poorly remunerated—a process that further encouraged deindustrialization and off-shoring from what was, again, understood as the First World to the Third World at the end of the twentieth century. In the end, dependency theorists claimed that as long as Latin American countries remained dependent on the U.S. for trade relations and employment, their respective economies would fail to diversify and develop, and most of its people would remain impoverished. Though some scholars have taken issue with some of the finer points of the dependency school of thought, many contemporary social scientists are in agreement that U.S.-based corporations and U.S. financial capital continue to dominate the economies of many Latin American countries (Robinson 2003; Tuman and Emmert, 2004).

As with earlier instances of European and U.S. imperial projects, the exertion of global power does not solely include control at the point of production, but it also includes attempts at geopolitical control, as well as ideological justifications for such political-economic domination in the first place. Unlike colonial rule, countries now nominally possess independence and territorial sovereignty. As a result, the U.S. government must either rely upon some form of consent from abroad or make use of interventionist strategies to achieve its objectives. To characterize these dynamics, scholars make use of the concept of neo-colonialism to thread the theoretical needle between earlier colonial projects and post-colonial U.S. imperial projects leading into the present-day period.

Kwame Nkrumah (1966) initially developed the concept of neo-colonialism and used it to make sense of imperial projects following the formal collapse of colonialism. Nkrumah (1966) argued that neo-colonialism remained “the main instrument of imperialism ... The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” (p. ix). Further, Nkrumah (1966) pointed out that the “ideal neo-colonialist State would be one which was wholly subservient to neo-colonialist interests” (p. xiv). According to Nkrumah, neo-colonial interests involved both geopolitical and economic domination. While economic domination involved continued corporate profiteering and exploitation of labor and resources, geopolitical domination required subordination to broader U.S. foreign policy interests. Throughout his manuscript, Nkrumah spotlights various modes through which the U.S. government has sought to perpetuate its global domination during the mid-twentieth century, including the periodic use of military warfare, the provision of foreign aid, the application of interest rates on multilateral banks loans, the encouragement of government overthrows, and the use of the Peace Corps to surveil foreign societies. Nkrumah (1966)

updates existing theories of imperialism and moves beyond a reductive focus on economic intervention alone. Though some scholars solely focused on the economics of U.S. Empire, Nkrumah (1966) drew much needed attention to some of the geopolitical modalities of U.S. imperialism, such as coups and the use of seemingly benign U.S. agencies such as the Peace Corps.

Similar to colonial policies, neo-colonial policies require justification for their existence. However, while early U.S. government elites openly broadcast their embrace of a WASP ideology, such overt forms of racism have become socially recognized as, in the least, impolite. Indeed, while many U.S. government elites in decades past appealed to phrenology and racist scientific classification, such crude, biological appeals no longer remain prevalent. Still, a racist-imperialist mentality persists and takes the form of cultural racism, often regardless of the racialized background of U.S. government leaders. In Venezuela, as I illustrate below, such mentalities continue to pervade discussions and depictions of citizens and leaders in the country. This is not entirely surprising. Depictions of Latin American individuals as uncultured, lawless, and criminal persist within mainstream U.S. media and continue to characterize the thinking of many non-Hispanic, White U.S. Americans (Berg 2002; Lacayo 2017; Ramirez and Peterson, 2020). Celia Olivia Lacayo (2017), for instance, has shown how White U.S. Americans believe in what she terms the “perpetual inferiority” of Latinos. In her interviews with White U.S. Americans, she finds that they “subscribe to the racial ideology of perpetual inferiority because they believe that Latinos are unable to change and progress (i.e., ‘become white’) because they pass down a ‘deficient’ culture to the next generation” (Lacayo 2017, p. 569). Indeed, over ninety percent of her participants reported “overwhelmingly negative” characterizations of Latinos (Lacayo 2017, p. 571). But, while such research has examined how citizens writ large view Latin Americans, an analysis of recent U.S. foreign policy towards Venezuela shows how these views remain tethered to contemporary U.S. foreign policymaking, a sphere heavily populated by White individuals.

In the sections below, I show how the justification for U.S. democracy promotion efforts in contemporary Venezuela remains linked with a racist legacy of U.S. foreign policymaking in the region. Since this time, U.S. government leaders have exercised a form of paternalism that envisions Latin American leaders and citizens as uncivilized, lawless, and unfit to govern, should they veer from the political-economic vision that the U.S. government has encouraged within the hemisphere. Such paternalism continues, and it continues to involve a racist-imperial understanding of Latin American leaders who, in this instance, challenge the U.S. government, as well as the Venezuelan citizens who support those leaders. For U.S. foreign policymakers, it remains unacceptable that Latin American citizens would elect a leader such as Chávez, who criticizes U.S. foreign policy, adopts divergent political-economic policies (e.g. anti-neoliberal and socialist policies), deeply aligns with U.S. foes such as Iran and Russia, and seeks to diminish U.S. global power. Given that Venezuelans voted former President Chávez into office on multiple occasions, U.S. foreign policymakers believed it was their duty to intervene into the country in order to change the minds of Venezuelans. Their justifications involve racist-imperial schemas, and this article examines them.

Methods

In the following sections, I detail the racist-imperial perspective that U.S. government functionaries have embraced with regards to former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and his supporters. Throughout the course of my research, I interviewed U.S. government elites involved in formulating and/or carrying out U.S. foreign policy towards Venezuela. This included top-ranking individuals who formerly worked within the Clinton, Bush II,

and/or Obama administrations, and it included individuals who worked for agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State, the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and the National Security Council, among other policymaking agencies. This involved individuals who both devised broad policy initiatives in Washington and individuals who carried out daily operations on the ground in Venezuela, including meeting with, working with, and funding organizations and political parties in the country.

In these interviews, I asked individuals about topics such as their view of President Chávez and his supporters, what the U.S. government sought to accomplish in Venezuela, and how they sought to accomplish their goals. Interviews were tailored to many of the specific individuals and the agencies they worked with, and our conversations often focused on particular periods wherein such individuals directly worked on issues related to Venezuela. In such specific instances, I asked questions about their particular vision for democracy in Venezuela, what actors they worked with in the country, and why they worked with particular political actors. In total, I interviewed eighteen individuals working within U.S. foreign policy circles. While this might not appear a very large number, there is a very finite number of individuals involved in the crafting and carrying out of U.S. foreign policy in Venezuela. This includes individuals in the Department of State and the National Endowment for Democracy operating out of Washington, in addition to their representatives on the ground, including, most notably, the U.S. ambassador and additional embassy staff. Additionally, we should consider that many U.S. government employees are often unwilling and/or legally unable to discuss their activities. As a result, much social scientific work often does not include any direct interviews with actors so closely involved in sensitive matters.

Lastly, in order to examine the logic that governs U.S. foreign policymaking in the country, I analyzed thousands of pages of U.S. diplomatic cables, which were initially gathered by Private Chelsea Manning and delivered to Julian Assange. Assange thereafter published these documents on his WikiLeaks website. This site includes a search function that allows one to sift through all diplomatic cables published from the years 2004 through 2010 relating to Venezuela. High-ranking diplomats working out of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas composed these cables, and, in doing so, they detail their daily activities in the country and provide regular updates on their logic and strategies. In addition, I analyzed various U.S. government policy documents describing their efforts in the country, particularly from USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy and its associated groups, wherein these organizations further delineate their strategies and projects within the country. Some of these documents were previously released in FOIA requests made by several journalists, including Eva Golinger, and some of them were released as a result of FOIA requests made by myself.

Depicting Chávez the Man

U.S. diplomats rarely portrayed former President Chávez in a positive light—either in conversation or within their diplomatic cables. Instead, their depictions of him were nearly always disparaging and negative. More specifically, U.S. government functionaries often exhibited patronizing and racist views of Chávez, derived from racial schemas that have historically portrayed Latin Americans as uncivilized, emotionally-driven, and irrational (Feagin 2009; Horsman 1981; Krenn 2006). Indeed, many of these depictions dovetail with the same racist depictions that were often deployed by Chávez’s domestic opponents. Salas Herrera (2005), for one, has documented how the political opposition often referred to him as a “mixed-breed” and a “monkey” (see also Cannon 2008; Duno Gottberg 2011;

Gonzalez 2021).³ Despite Chávez claiming that he wanted to enfranchise poor and working-class Venezuelans, and, despite many poor Venezuelans voting for Chávez, there was never any consideration that such concerns might have driven Chávez. Instead, they often portrayed Chávez in negative and racist terms, and they portrayed his motivations in nefarious and disreputable ways.

Within embassy cables, diplomats described Chávez as “bizarre,” “hot-headed,” “a megalomaniac,” and “rambling.” In addition, many diplomats expressed a dismissive view of Chávez and his actions, nearly always presenting him as foolish and irrational. Following U.S. government criticism of Venezuelan legislation, for instance, former Ambassador William Brownfield described Chávez as “lash[ing] out” against the U.S. government for its criticism, asserting that Chávez engaged in a “thin-skinned and hot-headed response to any criticism, no matter from whom it emanates” (Cablegate 2007c). Another former U.S. government functionary who worked on the White House’s National Security Council told me that “I remember joking with people. No one could figure out Hugo Chávez, whether he was dangerous or a clown. Then they realized he was a dangerous clown.” In both instances, individuals portrayed Chávez as an irrational individual who responds in inappropriate ways to criticism and remains a fool—or “a clown.” In both instances, these functionaries caricatured Chávez and never took him and his ideas seriously.

U.S. diplomats depicted Chávez not only as a fool, but also as a mentally unstable individual. In 2006, former Ambassador William Brownfield, for example, wrote a lengthy cable titled “Is Chávez Losing It?” In the cable, Brownfield claimed that Chávez “has flown off the handle in front of international microphones” when criticizing former U.S. President Bush, neoliberal policies, and alleged U.S. government support for the 2002 coup that temporarily deposed him (Cablegate 2006a). Brownfield remarked that he was unsure about “whether Chávez’s job is getting to him, but his public antics are making him appear increasingly on edge. Whatever the cause, we can take advantage of his volatile behavior” (Cablegate 2006a). Brownfield concluded that “Chávez’ narcissism cannot be overestimated. Part of his self-worth derives from the amount of international attention he receives ... With this in mind, we should not respond to every one of his nutty remarks” (Cablegate 2006a). In this cable, Brownfield wanted to show that Chávez was mentally unstable, erratic, and deployed “nutty remarks” unworthy of a U.S. response. Regardless, the ambassador wrote that they wanted to take advantage of Chávez’s allegedly “volatile behavior,” perhaps by highlighting dynamics that they believe would further contribute to an image of him as unhinged.

Other diplomats also routinely described Chávez as unstable and unpredictable. Deputy Chief of Mission Kevin Whitaker wrote that Chávez had “gained a well-deserved reputation for being a predictably unpredictable megalomaniac ... [who] appears increasingly thin-skinned and confrontational” (Cablegate 2007a). Indeed, diplomats continually drew attention to Chávez’s sensitivity to criticism. In 2006, former Ambassador Brownfield cabled that the Venezuelan government reacted to a U.S. government report that criticized the Venezuelan government’s lack of support for anti-terrorist policies with a “communiqué ... the hysterical contents [of which] have become commonplace” (Cablegate 2006b). What is more, he wrote that Chávez “lashed out at [the report] ... and began accusing the [U.S. government] of harboring terrorists for not extraditing accused Cuban airline bomber Luis Posada Carriles” (Cablegate 2006b). Similarly, former DCM Whitaker wrote that Chávez “lashed out at two actors who urged reconsideration of the [the decision not to renew an opposition-oriented television station’s public broadcasting license, RCTV], OAS Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza and the Church, churlishly insulting Insulza and calling for his resignation, and telling the Church to mind its own business” (Cablegate 2007b).

All of these cables remain emblematic of the racist and imperial mentalities U.S. diplomats possess. Such individuals presented Chávez as an “irrational” individual who could not control his “hot-headed” emotions, and instead hysterically “lashed out” against any criticism from the U.S. government. By contrast, there is no attempt to understand why Chávez might have become sensitive to U.S. government criticism of his strategies and actions, that is, after a coup that the U.S. government applauded in 2002 and, of course, a lengthy history of U.S. intervention in the region. From these diplomats’ perspectives, sensitivity to U.S. criticism remained pathological and should not receive strong rebuke.

U.S. government diplomats were also quick to describe the policies of the Chávez administration as “outlandish,” “bizarre,” and “stupid.” In 2007, former Ambassador Patrick Duddy composed a cable titled “We aren’t Making this Up: The BRV’s Bizarre Policy Highlights.” In this cable, Duddy reported on a series of changes that included, for example, moving the country’s time zone thirty minutes backwards so that individuals could travel to work and school in the daylight, in addition to limiting alcohol sales over a holiday weekend. Duddy wrote that these “outlandish policies ... clearly illustrate the arbitrary and capricious nature of Chávez’s regime” (Cablegate 2007d). In an earlier cable, DCM Whitaker also described Chávez as “untethered by voices of restraint or even reason ... [and that an] untethered Chávez presents a rather brittle situation” (Cablegate 2007c). In another example, a former U.S. ambassador to the country described to me how Chávez embraced “neo-stupid economics” and how the ambassador had tried to push Chávez in a different economic direction. As the former ambassador told me, though, this was an unsuccessful endeavor. Once again, in these instances, U.S. government diplomats present Chávez in unflattering and negative terms.

All throughout, he is depicted as a clown, a fool, irrational, and “untethered by voices of restraint or even reason.” U.S. diplomats also depicted Chávez as immature, “juvenile,” and “unstatesmanlike.” Indeed, DCM Whitaker described Chávez as “untethered” in the passage above, because he believed that Chávez was “without a mature advisor” that could provide him with some reason. This suggests that he believed that Chávez possessed a rather immature mind on his own. In another apparent indication of Chávez’s immaturity, U.S. government diplomats recurrently noted that they believed that former President Chávez behaved in a manner unfitting for a world leader. Following Chávez’s criticism of the OAS and the Catholic Church for their commentary of the Venezuelan government’s refusal to renew a TV network’s license, for instance, DCM Whitaker reminded his audience about Chávez’s speech before the United Nations General Assembly just a few months earlier. During this time, Chávez referred to former President Bush as the devil. Following this criticism, DCM Whitaker wrote that “Chávez once again has engaged in outrageous, vulgar personal attacks, and unstatesmanlike rhetoric” (Cablegate 2007b). In addition, DCM Whitaker described Chávez’s speeches as “long and rambling,” “semi-coherent,” and “at times laughable,” describing former President Chávez himself as possessing “mastery of bovine scatology” (Cablegate 2006c).

Throughout their cables and our conversations, such depictions of Chávez became commonplace. Individuals expressed incredulity at his behavior and his success. They portrayed their own selves, instead, as calm, collected, and rational. They displayed Chávez, though, as irrational, unpredictable, unintelligent, and juvenile. Despite lengthy educations, U.S. diplomats offered little attempt to understand Chávez outside of such crude caricatures. Instead, they quickly dismissed him and “laughed at” at his behavior from the sidelines. Nonetheless, they believed he was motivated by nefarious and self-serving purposes, and they believed he cared very little for the citizens he purported to represent.

Depicting Chávez's Ultimate Motivations

Throughout cables and within conversations, diplomats and functionaries never presented Chávez as driven by any sort of honorable intentions. Rather, they generally ascribed nefarious and self-serving motivations to his behavior. U.S. government functionaries generally possessed a rather simplistic and reductive understanding of Chávez and his motivations. They viewed him as primarily interested in maintaining power for its own sake. The reasons behind this desire varied, however, among different individuals. Some attributed Chávez's alleged power-hunger, for instance, to the historical lack of democracy in the country or to machismo. They also depicted Chávez as manipulating ideas about racial inequality in order to achieve and maintain power in the country. In the end, they all searched for an understanding of Chávez, but never on the terms that he presented himself. Rather, they always sought to uncover perverse motives behind his allegedly irrational and bizarre behavior.

Indeed, diplomats continually depicted former President Chávez as a dangerous authoritarian that desired power alone. In June 2006, for instance, DCM Whitaker cabled that like "many autocrats intent on maintaining power, [Chávez] uses rhetoric as a blunt political weapon that seeks to vivisection society along class, political, social, and race lines" (Cablegate 2006c). DCM Whitaker claimed that Chávez did not truly care about such social divisions, but that he only attempted to underscore such divisions in order to stir up resentment and politically benefit from it. Three years later, in June 2009, former Chargé Caulfield similarly wrote that Chávez's preference for "loyalty over competence, creation of parallel Bolivarian institutions, efforts to forge a one-party state, and chest-thumping nationalism also smack of creeping totalitarianism" (Cablegate 2009b). Here and elsewhere, U.S. government functionaries recurrently portrayed him as an opponent of democracy gravitating towards totalitarianism all in an effort to solidify his time in office. This, of course, does not mesh with the reality that former President Chávez continually participated in elections that included numerous opposition political parties as well as domestic and international electoral monitors.

All the while U.S. government diplomats described Chávez in racist ways, some claimed that he specifically manipulated race in order to win support. One former USAID employee suggested to me that perhaps Chávez had played "the race card" in order to gather support. When asked about his understanding of Chávez's rise to office, he told me

You know how Latin America works... he comes from a less elite, Indian family. He excels in the military, becomes a paratrooper. For whatever reason [he] becomes outraged about the state of politics in Venezuela, which is not bad and corrupt. [He believes] the darker you are, the less you matter to the state. Is this an MLK or Benito Juárez? A guy who loves liberty? Or is this a guy that says this would be a great vehicle to ride? This is a guy like others that wanted power.

For this individual, who devised policy in Washington towards Venezuela, Chávez manipulated weak minds by suggesting that racial/ethnic minorities were oppressed by a corrupt, White elite minority. Despite much evidence to the contrary and even a prosecution of a former president for corruption, this individual entirely denied the corrupt nature of pre-Chávez politics. According to this official, Chávez only deployed such a narrative of rampant corruption and racial/ethnic inequality to achieve power, and he suggested that Chávez might not have even believed that racial/ethnic oppression existed, but only wanted to push a particular perspective in order to use it as "a vehicle" to reach the presidency. In doing so, he contrasted Chávez with Martin Luther King, Jr., and King's apparently honest concern with racism.

Subsequently, U.S. government officials, including Chargé d’Affaires John Caulfield, depicted former President Chávez as an individual who “craves attention and influence abroad” (Cablegate 2009b). Despite Chávez’s ambitions, however, Chargé Caulfield labeled former President Chávez a “world leader wannabe” (Cablegate 2009a). In his attempts to become a world leader, Chargé Caulfield wrote that “Chávez travels extensively and doles out substantial foreign assistance in an effort to achieve international status as Latin America’s foremost leader. He jealously guards his exaggerated self-perception, and reacts negatively to other Latin American countries’ receptivity to [U.S.] initiatives and [U.S.] attention focused on other Latin American heads-of-state” (Cablegate 2009a). Caulfield thus presented Chávez as a highly jealous leader, and he hypothesized that Chávez would be jealous of all the attention paid to U.S. President Barack Obama at an upcoming Summit of the Americas conference (Cablegate 2009a). In this high-ranking diplomat’s opinion, Chávez wanted power at home and, thereafter, he wanted to project power around the world. In his perspective, it might have been the case that Chávez provided foreign aid to countries abroad. However, in his opinion, these endeavors were more akin to vanity projects designed only to serve Chávez’s ego.

Despite his attempts to capture international attention and to become a prominent global actor, diplomats disparaged Chávez in their cables. Such cables show how U.S. government diplomats aimed to annoy him on this particular issue, that is, by illustrating apathy and indifference to his comments on the United States. Indeed, while Chargé Caulfield, an Obama appointee, referred to Chávez as a “world leader wannabe,” the Deputy Chief of Mission to Venezuela under the George W. Bush Administration, Stephen McFarland, dismissed former President Chávez’s international ambitions. Under a section of an embassy cable ironically titled “The World Revolves around Caracas,” former DCM McFarland wrote that Chávez’s speeches on his weekly television program “demonstrated a typical, exaggerated view of Venezuela’s geostrategic importance and of U.S. media coverage of Venezuela” (Cablegate 2005). In a nonchalant response to Chávez, McFarland claimed that the U.S. Chargé d’Affaires under the Bush Administration told local radio “that ‘[the US Embassy] didn’t know if President Bush was aware of Chávez’s comments,’ a statement calculated to annoy President Chávez” (Cablegate 2005). U.S. officials thus attempted to convey that Venezuela remained rather unimportant to the United States, and that Chávez acted in a delusional manner regarding Venezuelan significance. Bush, of course, knew very well that Chávez disagreed with his foreign policy. U.S. officials, however, tried to signal to Chávez that President Bush cared little about what Chávez thought. These signals, however, were at odds with how much energy successive U.S. administrations devoted to the country.

U.S. government diplomats and functionaries indeed often pointed out how they believed Chávez was only interested in power, and sometimes they even connected such a disposition to cultural elements in Chavez’s background. In doing so, they denigrated Venezuelan culture and plainly evidenced culturally racist views. One individual who worked for the National Security Council told me, for instance, that “Chávez was the failure of the two-party system [in Venezuela], and he knew how to use symbols, [to] take advantage of symbols [and] demagoguery.” In doing so, this U.S. government functionary expresses a sort of sympathy for Chávez and told me that due to Chávez’s upbringing in Venezuela he could not truly understand the ways of democracy: “People used to say how undemocratic Chávez was. His idea of democracy was kind of warped by living under Venezuela under the previous regime. It was clear that it was a democracy in name before Chávez. He almost couldn’t be blamed for not understanding democracy, because he grew up in this undemocratic society.” While this individual claimed that Chávez could not understand democracy because he grew up in a deficient location, another U.S. government functionary who worked with USAID in Venezuela personally opined

to me that perhaps “machismo” lay behind Chávez’s support for, what the functionary saw as, the failed ideology of socialism. Machismo refers to the hyper-masculine, arrogant behavior that is allegedly characteristic of Latin American men. In both instances, such U.S. government functionaries refer to Chávez’s apparently deficient cultural heritage in order to make sense of his presently deficient views, that is, from their perspective.

Yet, though many U.S. government functionaries viewed Chávez as “a clown,” they also saw him as capable of successful manipulation. Indeed, this is how they largely understood his capacity to win support and succeed at the ballot box. Similar to how they often depicted Chávez, U.S. diplomats and functionaries also depicted Chávez’s supporters as irrational and generally unintelligent, and thus susceptible to Chávez’s “demagoguery.” In embassy cables, diplomats described Venezuelans as a “frenzied” mass of supporters who eschew free thinking and instead offer unwavering support for their leader. In June 2006, DCM Whitaker wrote that while to “outsiders Chávez’ long and rambling speeches are semi-coherent and at times laughable. To the average Venezuela, however, Chávez’ words have meaning, offering hope or fear, depending on the message” (Cablegate 2006c). In this passage, Whitaker presents Venezuelans as unlike U.S. Americans, for instance, who have the apparent capacity for discernment. In his understanding, individuals like Whitaker and seemingly other U.S. Americans can easily see the allegedly ridiculous nature of Chávez’ incoherent “rambling.” Yet, according to him, Venezuelans, for some reason, could not see Chávez’s incoherence, and they cannot see him for the apparently “laughable” fool that he is.

As a result of Chávez’s manipulation, DCM Whitaker claimed that such rhetoric resulted in “a frenzied and fearful, or at best intimidated, population incapable of resolving basic conflicts ... [and this] frenzied populace [is] afraid to express anything other than support, genuine or not” (Cablegate 2006c). From this vantage point, Whitaker depicts Venezuelan citizens as automatons who followed Chávez’s lead. In addition, he presents Chávez’s supporters as under the emotional control of their leader’s oratorical skills and incapable of independent thought. In other words, he paints his supporters as irrational individuals, incapable of utilizing any type of reason to understand that *chavista* policies are not truly beneficial to them or their society. From the outside, U.S. government officials argued that Chávez’s speeches were “laughable,” but to the rather simple minds of the Venezuelan masses, they insinuated, these speeches potentially offered hope. Indeed, this understanding of Chávez and Venezuelans offered the basis from which U.S. government diplomats and functionaries justified their intervention into the country.

The U.S. Duty to Intervene in Venezuela

Such depictions of Chávez as a tyrant who manipulated his supporters and sought power alone provided justification for U.S. government intervention into the country. U.S. diplomats and functionaries indeed believed it was their responsibility and their duty to intervene into the country in order to show Venezuelans their true interests and bring real democracy to the country, which, not unsurprisingly, involved supporting political parties and groups opposed to Chávez and his allies. During the years that Chávez maintained the presidency (1999–2013), the U.S. government operated a multiplicity of democracy assistance programs within the country, primarily through USAID and the NED and its associated groups, including the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Through these programs, the U.S. government assisted the Venezuelan opposition in their efforts to unseat Chávez and his allies. In doing so, the U.S. sought to transgress the judgments of Venezuelan citizens, who supported Chávez, and attempted to cultivate opposition to him.

Indeed, this represents the sort of neo-colonialist and paternalistic pattern in the realm of politics that remains evident elsewhere today, wherein the U.S. government privileges some political actors over others, regardless of whether they actually retain public support (Burron 2013; Gill 2019; Robinson 1996). Unlike former European colonial powers, U.S. leaders usually do not select a U.S. citizen to rule over a foreign country in a dictatorial manner. Instead, the U.S. government often aims to shape the electoral playing field by supporting only those actors who the U.S. government deems to be the political players who should operate governments abroad. In Venezuela, this has included center-right politicians who challenged Chávez during presidential elections and who displayed visible affection for the U.S. government. For instance, during the 2006 presidential campaign, the IRI provided opposition presidential candidate Governor Manuel Rosales with several technical specialists to assist with his campaign (Cablegate 2006e). The U.S. government also continually urged opposition members to unite behind one opposition candidate, that is, so that they would not splinter their vote. One former ambassador told me, for example, that they continually met with political party leaders and urged them to do this. They said that they had “met with the opposition—I can’t tell you how many times. I told them they need to come up with a plan and needed to unite. There were 50 opposition parties registered!” In doing so, high-ranking diplomats strategized with opposition leaders so they could possibly defeat Chávez and his allies when elections arose. While Rosales was unsuccessful in the election, this did not deter the U.S. from supporting the opposition in later years.

Throughout the mid-2000s, for instance, USAID had the explicit aim of tearing supporters away from Chávez, particularly within poor urban neighborhoods, where darker-skinned Venezuelans primarily live. Into the present, Venezuela, a former European colony marked by African and indigenous slavery, remains an intensively segregated society (Cannon 2008; Duno Gottberg 2011; Herrera Salas 2005). Before Chávez, the country contained a light-skinned political-economic elite whose members could often directly trace their roots back to Europe (Herrera Salas 2005). In poor, urban neighborhoods, USAID established community programs that seemingly sought to promote community ideals like participatory democracy. However, they established these programs with opposition political parties, who helped them locate opposition activists in the area. Thereafter, they helped opposition activists create seemingly neutral organizations, so that they did not appear to be linked with the opposition and thus could attract Chávez supporters to their meetings. The ultimate purpose of these community groups was to slowly introduce Chávez’s supporters to opposition viewpoints and to put them into direct contact with opposition activists, who would attempt to steer them into the opposition camp. One of the individuals who directly worked on these programs in Venezuela told me that USAID and its local contractors:

developed new NGOs that were looking very neutral in the eyes of the government ... They looked neutral because they had no affiliation with no political party. They were people from the neighborhood, even though they were opposition. They create the organizations with no past relation to political parties. So when they work in the [poor neighborhoods], they looked very neutral. So we gave them money ... They were pulling people away from Chávez in a subtle manner. We were telling them what democracy is and showing them what democracy means. We developed very nice materials and took care of every word to give them, so it didn’t look like we were sympathizing with the opposition ... We wanted to spread liberal democratic values. Not what the government said.

Throughout all of these programs, the U.S. government message was rather clear: “the politician who you have supported, you really shouldn’t support.” Instead, the

U.S. government through USAID sought to convert Venezuelans into anti-Chávez voters. U.S. government functionaries believed that Chávez was manipulating the populace, buying them off with social development projects, and offering them false promises of participatory democracy and socialism. They believed it was the United States' responsibility to show Venezuelans their true interests, and that they should support center-right politicians, who represented a different sort of politics than what Chávez offered.

U.S. government functionaries who designed these programs depicted Venezuelan citizens as requiring U.S. tutelage amid such circumstances. In 2006, for instance, DCM Whitaker described the U.S. government's vision of foreign assistance for the country and its people:

Chavez also cannot control the fact that his revolution is resulting in a slow process of political maturation (in which people are deeply confused as to what they should be doing). He has unleashed forces that will eventually escape his control. Millions have internalized the message that everyone must participate in their own governance. A new generation of social activists wants to get involved but doesn't know how. Venezuelan civil society needs partners like OTI [an office within USAID] to help build and strengthen the democratic institutions necessary to move the country beyond its deeply flawed past" (Cablegate 2006d).

In this instance, Whitaker presents Chávez's apparent manipulation of Venezuelan citizens as possessing unintended consequences that the U.S. government might harness to build, in this diplomat's vision, a truly democratic society. Whitaker presents Venezuelans as "deeply confused" and stuck in a developmental process of "maturation." Indeed, this is the same sort of language that U.S. foreign policymakers used in earlier instances of imperialism abroad—that they could help, for instance, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, and Nicaraguans move forward in a developmental process towards true democracy albeit only with U.S. tutelage (Fitz 2017; Horsman 1981). In much the same way, Whitaker presents the United States as capable of alleviating Venezuelans' "deep confusion" and of showing Venezuelans how to do politics correctly.

Whitaker, however, moves beyond simply involving Venezuelans in politics, but also involving them in a clearly partisan manner against Chávez. He cabled that while "Venezuela's institutions have always been deeply flawed ... Chavez continues to loudly define and distort what democracy is all about" (Cablegate 2006d). As a result, and

[t]o provide some balance—primarily in low-income neighborhoods—OTI has developed five highly inter-active training modules that focus on: rule of law, separation of powers, political tolerance, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and the role of civil society. In the two months since this project launched, over 40 NGOs around the country are using the materials to push back on the Bolivarian brain-washing effort (Cablegate 2006d).

In these passages, Whitaker clearly depicts Chávez as distorting democracy and "brain-washing" Venezuelans, who apparently could not think for themselves. As a result of such manipulation, U.S. diplomats like Whitaker believed it was now the duty of the U.S. to counter Chávez's ideas and develop training modules and materials designed to properly educate Venezuelans, particularly those in "low-income neighborhoods," where support for Chávez historically remained high.

This sort of interventionist and neo-colonial thinking turned up in many conversations with additional diplomats and functionaries. An individual who contracted with USAID to

operate programs in Venezuela, for instance, told me that he believed it was the duty of the United States to show Venezuelans how to do democracy properly and to spread “Jeffersonian democracy” throughout the world. This vision of politics is derived from U.S. politician Thomas Jefferson, who owned slaves, embraced “westward expansion,” and advanced a liberal vision of democratic politics primarily rooted in the rights of the individual, albeit only applying to White male property-owners. This vision deeply contrasts with the more collective form of economic and participatory democracy encouraged by the Chávez government. Similarly, a former U.S. ambassador to Venezuela during the years of Chávez’s rule asserted that Chávez routinely attacked what the U.S. government sought to cultivate abroad: “a conventional Western-style democracy.” In this phrasing, this individual contrasts Chávez with “the West,” and, in doing so, presents him as somehow anti-Western. Such a distinction is similar to the sort of Orientalism described by Edward Said (1978) and Aníbal Quijano (2000), among others, in their work examining how Europeans often depicted non-European individuals and societies.

Taken together, U.S. government functionaries in Venezuela sought to establish U.S. supremacy in the realm of politics. That is, although there are many variants of democracy (e.g. direct, participatory, representative, Jeffersonian), the U.S. government wanted to impart its own vision and promote those actors who embraced it. In doing so, U.S. government leaders embraced a form of cultural racism, viewing Venezuelans and Venezuelan society as undeveloped and “immature.” Indeed, some government functionaries spoke and wrote quite plainly in cultural-developmental terms, presenting Venezuelans as culturally lagging behind U.S. Americans. In the end, these depictions of Venezuelans, as well as their president, provided the justification for U.S. intervention and the U.S. government’s accompanying democracy assistance programs.

Conclusion

Since the inception of settler colonialism, a WASP elite has dominated U.S. political institutions. Individuals such as Benjamin Franklin and John Quincy Adams believed that WASP Americans were a chosen people destined to usher in a new era of global prosperity. They believed it was their duty and God-given responsibility to cultivate a New World. In doing so, U.S. leaders displaced and murdered indigenous populations from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, enslaved African and African American peoples, and engaged in colonial efforts by annexing land on both the American continent and beyond. Throughout all, U.S. government leaders deployed racist understandings of non-WASP, non-White populations to justify these endeavors. Yet, although formal land annexation and efforts towards direct colonialism have ended, the U.S. government has continued to pursue imperial endeavors all the while using the same racist justifications as earlier U.S. political elites.

In contemporary Venezuela, U.S. foreign policymakers became disturbed by the challenge former Venezuelan President Chávez posed to U.S. global hegemony. As a result, they sought to unseat him and his allies, and, unsurprisingly, embraced racist and neo-colonialist ideas designed to justify intervention into the country. U.S. policymakers depicted Chávez as an irrational and uncivilized leader who sought to manipulate the Venezuelan populace. They portrayed Chávez as ultimately interested in power, rather than the welfare of the Venezuelan population. Some policymakers even attributed Chávez’s alleged motivations to machismo and ostensibly deficient cultural traits. U.S. policymakers thus claimed that it was their duty to intervene into the country in order to save the Venezuelan population from Chávez and his manipulation. Indeed, U.S. diplomats and government functionaries portrayed themselves as easily able to see

the “laughable” and absurd nature of Chávez’s policies, but they depicted Venezuelans, particularly poor Venezuelans, as unable to see through the manipulation. In their perspectives, such dynamics necessitated U.S. intervention and accompanying tutelage.

Such thinking and such ideas remain consistent with a history of racist and imperial U.S. foreign policymaking. Since the mid-nineteenth century, U.S. foreign policymakers have portrayed Latin Americans as corrupt, backwards, and uncivilized, and in need of U.S. tutelage. Such thinking guided land annexation and continual intervention in places such as the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua in the early twentieth century. Parallels run deep with regards to contemporary U.S. foreign policymaking in Venezuela. As we have seen, U.S. foreign policymakers continue to believe in a “civilizing mission” throughout the world, wherein they might instruct and show citizens what their true interests are. There is no doubt that many such policymakers believe in the supremacy of U.S. American thinking and U.S. American culture. Regardless of what is in their heart of hearts, they use a racist and imperial logic to justify their geopolitical aims. In the case of Venezuela, this has included the cultivation of domestic leaders who embrace or at least do not threaten U.S. global leadership, both during and beyond the Chávez period.

Notes

- ¹ Bolívar himself became consecrated within the United States, with statues erected in his honor and several towns named after him (e.g. Bolivar, Ohio; Bolivar, Tennessee; Bolivar, Texas). Caitlin Fitz (2017) has also found that hundreds of families named their sons Simon Bolívar throughout the 1830s in a show of honor and respect for him.
- ² In later years and amid conflict with Mexico in the 1840s, John L. O’Sullivan famously termed this vision Manifest Destiny.
- ³ More specifically, as Chávez’s supporters referred to him, with reference to his military service, as Mi Comandante (My Commander), the opposition distorted the phonetics of the phrasing and referred to him as Mico Mandante (Monkey-in-Charge) (Herrera Salas 2005, p. 84).

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