

Pax Brasiliana? A Study of Brazil's Role in Constitutional and Political Crises in Latin America (1990-2015)

Pax Brasiliana? Um Estudo da Atuação Brasileira em Crises Constitucionais e Políticas na América Latina (1990-2015)

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Roger F. Noriega

Interview, 2017

Roger F. Noriega served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs (Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean) between 2003 and 2005 and as U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) from 2001 to 2003.

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Roger F. Noriega

Roger Francisco Noriega was born in Wichita, Kansas, 1959, and served under the George W. Bush administration as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs between 2003 and 2005 and as U.S. Permanent Representative to the Organization of American States (OAS) from 2001 to 2003.

Noriega graduated from Washburn University in 1981, receiving a Bachelor in Arts degree. He served as Press Secretary and Legislative Assistant to congressman Robert Whittaker in the U.S. House of Representatives, between 1983 and 1986. From 1986 until 1990, he also worked at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) – where his involvement with policies for Latin America first started – and at the Bureau for Inter-American Affairs and Public Affairs. From August 1990 to January 1993, he worked at the U.S. Mission to the OAS, becoming the Senior Advisor to the Mission from July 1993, until July 1994. From 1994 to 1997, he was a senior staff member for the Committee on International Relations of the U.S. House of Representatives.

During his time as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Noriega managed the U.S. political and economic strategy in Canada, the Caribbean and Latin America. He was critical to Latin American governments opposed to the United States influence in the area, particularly Venezuela and Cuba.

Noriega is the founder and current managing director of Vision Americas LLC, as well as visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

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Interview: September 26, 2017

O.S. – Basically, it’s a project about the history of...

R.N. – You can take your coat off, by the way.

O.S. – Thanks, that’s fine.

R.N. – You know, Brazilian diplomats are famous for never taking their coats off. They are sitting, I’ve watched it personally, sit in a long slide in coat, with their coats on, and they won’t take their coats off. Do you know Valter Pecly Moreira?¹ He was Ambassador to the OAS, he was chief of the *Casa Presidencial*² under, I think, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Cardoso is in town by the way.

O.S. – Yes, he is having lunch on Thursday at the Brazilian Embassy.

R.N. – But anyway, I went to South Korea with Valter and he did not take his coat off the entire flight. I mean, Americans are kicking their sheets off!

O.S. – There is a very interesting tension between Brazil’s reputation of being a very informal culture and elements of formality, which are also quite important in Brazil.

R.N. – Yes.

O.S. – So, basically, this research project seeks to explain the regional reactions to political upheaval and to political crises, and obviously studying the case of Venezuela in 2002 is a key part of the project. We would like to gain a better understanding of the role Brazil – positive or negative – has played. I am also looking at the coup of 1992 by Chávez and then the situation in 2002 and, of course, at the current crisis. Considering your experience in the 2002 situation, the first thing I wanted to ask you is in what moment – considering that you have been following politics in Latin America for decades – you looked at Venezuela and said: “This is going to be a problem, there is something there that I sense is problematic.”

R.N. – 1998.

O.S. – When the election in Venezuela took place on September 6th 1998, did you immediately believe that Chávez’s victory could lead to instability?

R.N. – So, there is a very smart guy, an observer, Andrés Oppenheimer.³ And Oppenheimer was calling me during the campaign and saying: “Do you see what this guy is saying?” This is 1998 and I was on Capitol Hill at the time.⁴ “Do you see what this guy is saying?”, I mean,

¹ Brazilian career diplomat and permanent representative of Brazil to the Organization of American States between 2000 and 2004.

² Reference to the Brazilian presidential office known as *Palácio do Planalto*. During the Cardoso administration, Valter Pecly Moreira worked as the Ceremonial Chief of the Presidency.

³ Argentine columnist who writes about Latin American politics and U.S.-Latin America relations.

⁴ In 1998, Noriega was a senior staff member of Senator Jesse Helms for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

boiling the opposition in oil, and *escuálidos*,⁵ and all the nasty, nasty rhetoric. “The guy is not democratic and so.” I was there in 1998 and, you know, I just saw this *caudillismo*...

O.S. – Did you visit Venezuela at the time?

R.N. – I went there for just a short period of time for the electoral observation, and met some Venezuelans. By the way, Venezuela’s political class was really among the last to figure this [the election of Hugo Chávez] out and they brought this on themselves with a formal democracy where essentially the *adecos* and *copeianos*⁶ battered power back and forth one another. And then you had the democratic institutions. Even the courts were influenced, you know, for political game, and this corruption, which was petty compared to what is happening now. But it was significant. I remember when I was in Cumaná,⁷ a coastal town, and there was a school half built and the driver was saying: “Yeah, they ran out of money, somebody took the money.”

O.S. – So do you think the elites were too complacent, that they did not realize that there was anger building up, which permitted Chávez to rise?

R.N. – The wealthy folks had some sophisticated political machinery there. They thought that they could control Chávez. A guy like Gustavo Cisneros⁸ felt that they had Chávez right where they wanted him, to control him.

O.S. – Do you believe that the elites thought that Chávez could be a puppet, that he could be co-opted?

R.N. – Right, and, frankly, then you had the American policy “Watch what he does, not what he says.” Pretty early on he started doing some really radical things. When he took the oath of office, he was swearing loyalty to a Constitution that he said has got to be replaced and shredded. I mean, that is fairly indicative of where he was headed, and I think the United States was completely asleep at that moment.

O.S. – In Brazil there was a bit of a division between those who were warning from early on and saying “This is going to be our big problem for the next ten years,” and there were those who said “A lot of people say one thing and do another.” So how did that division look like here in Washington? After the election of George W. Bush, you were a policy maker. Within the government, how did that play out? Were there groups that said “This is not a priority, because we have 9/11...”?

⁵ Name given by Hugo Chávez’s supporters to define the opponents of the regime. Given the meaning of the word “escuálido” in Spanish – weak, sickly –, this definition is used to denigrate the ones opposed to Chávez.

⁶ *Adecos* is the name given to the members of the political party *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action), while *copeianos* is the one given to the members of the political party *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization). These two organizations were the main Venezuelan political parties from 1958 to 1998.

⁷ The capital of Venezuela’s State of Sucre, located 400 kilometers east of Caracas.

⁸ Venezuelan businessman of the telecommunications conglomerate *Organización Cisneros*, an organization that includes *Cisneros Media*, *Cisneros Interactive* and *Cisneros Real Estate*.

R.N. – So, I would say that the president had a feel for this, “It is not good.” He kind of read his briefings, he encountered Chávez on a couple of occasions and, you know, his radar was up, that “This guy is going to be a problem for us.” And President Bush’s body language expressed that he did not like Chávez very much. For example, I remember there was a [OAS] Summit Meeting in Monterrey, I think it was on the anti-poverty commitments, and while Chávez was speaking, Bush took his headphones off and said: “This is all gibberish, blaming the United States for everything.”⁹ So the president was very impatient early on, and I would also throw certainly [Condoleezza] Rice¹⁰ in that can. And, because she is right there [next to President Bush during the OAS Monterrey Summit], at his elbow, and sees what is going on.

O.S. – How did this play out at the State Department?

R.N. – At the State Department, we felt that we had to manage the relationship and we very much were committed to the idea of working with the other countries willing to do so and not let Chávez become a distraction. And not mud wrestle. And there was a decision when we were in Lima, to go forward with an Andean trade arrangement. We had a meeting and the Venezuelans were not invited. That kind of scored the line. But it was clear that we didn’t want to hold up the progress on an important part of our agenda because of Chávez. There was a flood in Venezuela, early on. When Chávez threw American forces out of the country that were there for doing flood relief, I made an absolute mental break with any idea that Chávez was anything but an enemy of the United States.¹¹ Not many [American forces] had arrived anyway at that point, others were on the way, but he preferred to have his people wallowing in mud than take support from the United States. Ok, it is not an illogical decision from his part, and I can understand, which is “We will take it out of ourselves, I am sending a message of self-reliance, etc.”, but I also took it, I frankly took it, as: “Ok, this guy is making these decisions.”

O.S. – What did this mean for your day-to-day operations? How did you engage with the different types of actors in Latin America?

R.N. – I remember that I worked for [U.S. Senator] Jesse Helms¹² at the time [in 1999]. And people used to say that it was easier to get a meeting with the Pope than with Jesse Helms – and, quite frankly, the Pope did not have that many meetings. Just a quick example: Helms would not meet with the Mexican ambassador, even though the Mexican Embassy asked all the time. After [Vicente] Fox¹³ won the [Mexican presidential] election, the Mexican ambassador called me and asked for a meeting. I said “When?”, and he said “Are you saying yes?”. I said “Yes,” and he asked: “You don’t have to ask the boss?”. “No, I’m sure he will say yes,” because there was an election. And Helms met with Vicente Fox’s Foreign Minister, Jorge

⁹ Reference to the OAS Monterrey Special Summit of the Americas that was held on January 12 and 13, 2004 in Monterrey, Mexico.

¹⁰ U.S. National Security Advisor from January 2001 to January 2005 and U.S. Secretary of State from January 2005 to January 2009.

¹¹ Reference to the Vargas tragedy, in which torrential rain killed tens of thousands of people and destroyed the infrastructure of the State of Vargas, Venezuela, in December 1999.

¹² American politician and one of the leadership members of the conservative movement. Helms was a U.S. senator for North Carolina between 1973 and 2003.

¹³ Mexican politician and entrepreneur who was the president of Mexico between December 2000 and November 2006.

Castañeda,¹⁴ the anti-American guy – but who cares? Because Fox was democratically elected. Ok, so, the other Secretary for Political Affairs of the Venezuelan government came and said to me: “The one meeting that my president [Chávez] wants is with Jesse Helms,” and I said: “Well, that is interesting. Look, I was there just to watch over the election, I have a complete, a total respect for your country and for your president, I was there, I saw him elected. However, that’s the one, I’m telling you now, that’s the one meeting in Washington he [Chávez] will not get.” And the Secretary was taken aback, I said: “I tell you why. Because your boss wants to be pictured with my boss and say ‘Look, I even have the *derechistas*, right-wingers...’”

O.S. – ...On my side.

R.N. – “‘Fooled, *engañado*.” And I said: “You’re not going to do that to my boss. And that is why you are not going get that picture. Because you have to decide whether you want be a Maoist or you want be a friend of Jesse Helms.” So, that is probably 1999, I don’t know when exactly it was, but I was not even in government. When Chávez was first elected, he showed up, for example, in Beijing, saying he wanted a strategic dialogue. The Chinese probably fell out of their chairs, you know: “What about this guy coming in saying he wants strategic dialogue?”. Well, eventually it evolved into that. With the Chinese basically buying up the country, this Lieutenant-Colonel [Chávez], this guy realized that objective, he realized the objective of decimating the regional consensus in favor of democracy, against drugs and even against terrorism. And from my point of view, he really achieved a lot of negative things. But that was his agenda. I remember sitting with John Maisto,¹⁵ a dear friend, talking to him about the fact that Chávez was going to move his oil ship to new oil sales, to China and away from the United States. Well, there were 45.000 gallons of oil going to People’s Republic of China, before Chávez was elected, and it’s at least half a million now. And the U.S. consumption went down dramatically.

O.S. – The United States buys 700,000 gallons per day today.

R.N. – Yeah, it was 1.7 million before. So, you know, he realigned things logically and economically, so he achieved a lot of his objectives, and frankly if he were alive today, he would probably be managing this situation better than [Nicolás] Maduro¹⁶ is handling it. Maduro is not really managing it at all. Chavez had this way of modulating what he let Cubans do in the country. Maduro can’t do that because he is Cuban.

O.S. – Commodity prices now are much lower today, this makes things very difficult for Maduro. But coming back to Chávez: inside the administration, because of 9/11, Latin America was no longer a priority. Bush did have a personal interest in the region, and on the campaign trail he spoke a lot about strengthening cooperation. So, once you are there in government, who is really the defining force when it comes to Latin America? Are there “soothers” in government who sort of say “Forget about Venezuela” or “Let’s not worry too much about this”?

¹⁴ Mexican politician and intellectual who was Mexico’s Secretary of Foreign Affairs from 2000 to 2003.

¹⁵ American diplomat and U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela between 1997 and 2000. Maisto succeeded Roger Noriega as U.S. Ambassador to the OAS in 2003.

¹⁶ Venezuelan trade union leader and politician who took office as Venezuelan President after the death of Chávez in 2013.

R.N. – The primary “soother” was John Maisto, the National Security Advisor, Senior Director at the time, and John had been ambassador to Venezuela. He was there in 1998 telling me not to get excited about Chávez. He was a clever guy, we maintain a relationship. The Counsellor [during that time at the Embassy in Caracas] was Thomas Shannon.¹⁷ The president was hard over, he got a little irritated with hearing this message from John about, you know, “Don’t overreact.” So the soothers were people saying: “We have to work with Chávez, we have to engage with him.”

O.S. – Engage Chávez. How did that work?

R.N. – So, I remember standing in [Colin] Powell’s¹⁸ office before our election year, in 2004, and saying to him “Would you be willing to meet with Chávez?”, because I was like “Let’s do this Hail Mary pass.” Say in Barbados, at the OAS General Assembly of 2002,¹⁹ when I was Ambassador to the OAS, and Powell asked me: “Which one of these guys is the Venezuelan?”. I pointed out the Venezuelan Foreign Minister [Roy Chaderton].²⁰ It is hard to miss him, he stands a foot taller than everybody else. And I said “There.” So Powell walked over to him – and, of course, every eye is on Powell, and every camera lens is on Powell whenever he does anything, he is very interesting, he is a rock star. I stayed right where I was and let him do his thing, and, because the Venezuelan Foreign Minister spoke English, chattered English, and Powell just went and shook his hand, but he didn’t smile, and it was kind of “I know you are a piece of shit, but I’m shaking your hand.” It was not a smile, he didn’t give him a picture with a smile, it was like, just shaking. He did that on purpose, you know, he did it to send a message: “Look, I know you are in the room.” And we were talking about Venezuela at that meeting, because we wanted to maintain some kind of OAS engagement. So, we got there, I told Powell we were going to get a resolution with Maisto and Lino Gutierrez.²¹ I’m not saying this to implicate these guys. These are great people. But I just remember Gutierrez was saying: “Look, I don’t know, the regions are not going to go on with this. I don’t think that’s the objective.” I said that I thought we were going to get a resolution. And my interlocutor was that same guy I said three years earlier that he was not going get a picture [of Chávez] with Helms. That was the guy who I was negotiating with. And we got a resolution.²² And Powell’s presence was

¹⁷ American career diplomat who served as Political Counsellor to the U.S. Embassy in Caracas between 1996 and 1999 and as Director of Inter-American Affairs at the National Security Council from 1999 to 2000. Shannon later served as Assistant Secretary of Western Hemisphere Affairs from 2005 to 2009 and as U.S. Ambassador to Brazil between 2010 and 2013.

¹⁸ U.S. Secretary of State from January 2001 to January 2005.

¹⁹ Reference to XXXII Regular Session of the OAS General Assembly that took place in Bridgetown, Barbados on June 2-4, 2002.

²⁰ Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2002 and 2004.

²¹ American diplomat who served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the Department of State from August 1999 to July 2002. From September 2003 to July 2006, Gutierrez was the U.S. Ambassador to Argentina.

²² On June 4, 2002, the OAS General Assembly, among other resolutions regarding several Hemispheric issues, adopted the Declaration of Democracy in Venezuela (AG/DEC., 28 XXXII-O/02). The Declaration stated the OAS’s willingness to assist the government of Venezuela in consolidating its democratic process and in the promotion of national dialogue. It also reiterated the OAS determination to continue applying the mechanisms provided in the Democratic Charter for the preservation and defense of representative democracy and stated its welcoming to the decision of the Venezuelan National Assembly to set up a Truth Commission to investigate the acts of violence that occurred from April 11

helpful in getting that resolution, but it was basically signaling U.S. awareness about what was going on. We engage, we are willing to engage with him, not necessarily in the most pleasant way, but on their terms. So, that was kind of an interesting moment, that is why I bring it up, because Chaderton, before the end of the meeting, came over to me as I was sitting in my chair and the U.S. delegation meeting was going on – and, of course, nobody is watching Chaderton at this point – and he sat behind me, tapped me and said: “So, it’s like this.” So that was sort of Chaderton’s way of saying: “Ok, I get it, you got the big guns.” So we did that kind of very low grade *tête-à-tête* for a while but we managed to keep the OAS engaged, we managed to keep the region engaged. This, of course, maddeningly passive in the view of the hard-liners. And because what Bush was hearing from the likes of [Luiz Inácio] Lula da Silva²³ was: “Don’t worry about Hugo, I have him in my hand.”

O.S. – Yes, that was the idea.

R.N. – And what Lula da Silva was saying to Chávez was: “Don’t worry about the Americans. I’m talking to Powell.”

O.S. – And [José] Dirceu, Lula’s Chief of Staff,²⁴ was talking to Condie.²⁵

R.N. – Yes, we had a good relationship. They played us. Lula played us.

O.S. – Do you think Brazil was not able to handle Venezuela?

R.N. – Lula was not interested in handling Chávez, he was interested in having Venezuelan war jets, business, political force, cash – eventually in his own personal pockets.

O.S. – Did you perceive a tension between Venezuela and Brazil, because at some point there was a worry in Brazil that Venezuela could actually claim or seek regional leadership and, in that sense, challenge Brazil?

R.N. – I understand, and I remember standing in [the Brazilian Ministry of External Relations’ headquarters] Itamaraty Palace, or maybe even in the Brazilian presidential palace, and before the dinner I asked the [Brazilian] Vice Minister of Defense: “Do you guys worry about Venezuela?”, and the guy just grabbed the question out of my mouth: “No, absolutely not, they represent no threat to us.” “Ok. So, are you concerned that Venezuela is pretending to be this big continental leader?” and he answered: “They’re not. Of course they’re not. No. The Venezuelans aren’t the continental leader.” It was not their concern or whatever.

O.S. – They were just rejecting the possibility of Venezuela taking the lead in the region.

to 14, 2002. On April 18, 2002, the OAS Special Session had already welcomed the restoration of the constitutional order and the democratically elected government of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (AG/RES. 1, XXIX-E/02).

²³ Brazilian President from January 2003 to January 2011. Lula da Silva was a founding member of *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers’ Party) in 1980 and ran unsuccessfully for the Presidency three times, in the 1989, 1994 and 1998 elections, before his victory in the 2002 elections.

²⁴ José Dirceu was Lula’s Chief of Staff from January 2003 to June 2005.

²⁵ Reference to Condoleezza Rice.

R.N. – Brazil rolled over for CELAC,²⁶ I mean, UNASUR²⁷ was more sort of in line with the Brazilian kind of strategic vision, and so they went along with it. But, I mean, they clearly rolled over for this, and part of it was for being Lula's administration. His vision was, you know, much more ideologically left internationally, very orthodox internally and all about the social spending, which basically was putting the Workers' Party on the payroll and bleeding the economy to feed these social programs. And then Dilma [Rousseff]²⁸ came along and she really was not interested in foreign policy engagement. All of this was being handled by Marco Aurélio Garcia.²⁹ So, more so than even the Foreign Ministry, Marco Aurélio Garcia was running these issues. I am only kind of reflecting on this now that you asked the question, but Brazil has a lot of responsibility for this mess in Venezuela.

O.S. – Would you call Garcia an enabler?

R.N. – Yeah, absolutely. They really did not put pressure on Venezuela and I think Lula felt that he had some leverage on Chávez. You remember when Lula's said to Chávez "Come on, you have your free trade agreement with the Americans, it is called oil. The rest of us are here talking about other things." But the Brazilians were not helpful on the free trade agreement with Americans, because they had reasons not to be. Sound economic reasons. They did not work that through, and it got used by Chávez to tube this economic division. They could have done more, if they wanted to align more. I remember being in the General Assembly hall and Bush calling for the elimination of agriculture tariffs and subsidies. That is a remarkable thing for an American president to say. No one ever took him up on that. But the Brazilians, instead of siding with him, and helping align the Third World with the Indians, who have their own, very sophisticated trade objectives, they could have taken, the Brazilians could send the lead to the Americans, and the Japanese and Europeans, "All right, let us do this for real."

O.S. – Coming back to 2002, as we approach the coup d'état, as tension rises. At what point do you, prior to April 11, 2002, sense that there could be a coup? To what extent do you think the opposition figures felt that getting the military involved would be the only way to sideline Chávez? Prior to the coup, both [Lucas] Rincón Romero³⁰ and Pedro [Vicente] Soto³¹ traveled to Washington.

R.N. – I don't even know who those guys are, to give you an idea of how important they were to me. The run-up was the petroleum strike, that was what kind of brought the regime to very

²⁶ Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, inaugurated by the Declaration of Caracas on December 3, 2011.

²⁷ Union of South American Nations, created on December 8, 2004 by the Cusco Declaration.

²⁸ Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff took office on January 2011 and suffered an impeachment process that removed her from the Presidency on August 2016.

²⁹ Brazilian politician and intellectual. Garcia coordinated President Lula's election platform for the 1994, 1998 and 2006 elections and President Dilma Rousseff's election platform for the 2010 election. Garcia was the Special International Advisor to the President of Brazil between Lula and Dilma's administrations from 2007 to 2016. Garcia was one of the founders of *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party) in 1980 and was the party's Vice-President between 2005 and 2010.

³⁰ Venezuelan Army General between August 1999 and June 2001 and Venezuelan Minister of Defense from April to July 2002. On April 12, 2002, it was Rincón Romero who announced in front of cameras to all Venezuelans that Hugo Chávez had resigned.

³¹ Venezuelan Air Force Colonel.

tough straits.³² Now, it was nothing in comparison to what is happening today. It has collapsed now. So, back in 2002, there was that unrest, people mobilizing, and we were very alarmed by this, and we wanted to talk about this at the OAS, but Venezuelans stiff-armed us, and only a handful of countries in Latin America were willing to work with us, to talk about those issues at the OAS in open way, because the Venezuelans were concerned about this being considered in the context of the Inter-American Democratic Charter as if their institutions were under stress for being denigrated. They were unwilling to accept that proposition and certainly were not going to have the OAS talking about these things, about their internal affairs. So they stiff-armed us. So we just saw this thing growing up.

O.S. – When did you sense the armed forces were going to make a move? Rincón is a military high command, he is supposed to have had a meeting with Rogelio Pardo-Maurer.³³ This would be, from a logical point of view, something they would do. They would sort of check in, in a more or less explicit manner. They also contacted the Brazilian government ahead of the crisis.

R.N. – Let me tell you, there was no winking and nodding from the United States. If Roger Pardo-Maurer said something, it is because he is a mental defective.

O.S. – There is no information about what happened during the meeting.

R.N. – But some people even told me “Winking and nodding” and things like that. And Roger was undisciplined, to say the least. Brilliant guy, but way over his head. And he certainly did not report anything like that. When we had coup threats and heard of plotting, we told Chávez about it, through our ambassador, so we did not have any coming of this, coming up. To give you an idea, Pedro Carmona³⁴ was sitting next to a U.S. official at a dinner in Lima, about three days before this thing happened, saying: “Chávez is in very tough shape, I’ll be surprised if he makes until the end of the year.” Five days later, he is in the palace announcing a new provisional government. This thing was not planned.

O.S. – Was not planned?

R.N. – Was not planned.

³² Since late 2001, the oil crisis attracted great attention. After Chávez’s Law of the Lands and Law of Hydrocarbons decrees of November 13, 2001, the *Federación de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción de Venezuela* (Fedecamaras) (Federation of Chambers and Associations of Commerce and Production of Venezuela) summoned a strike that paralyzed 90% of the country. On March 15, 2002, the state-owned Petroleum of Venezuela SA (PDVSA)’s management revolted against changes proposed by the government and declared a strike. After resignations and Chavez’s attitude against privatizing the Venezuelan petroleum sector, PDVSA workers go on strike on April 5, 2002, and, on April 6, Fedecamaras and the Workers Confederation of Venezuela (CTV) also summoned a general strike.

³³ U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs. According to the New York Times (24/04/2002), it was confirmed by the Pentagon that Rogelio Pardo-Maurer met with Venezuela’s Military High Command, General Lucas Romero Rincon. To the New York Times, Pardo-Maurer told that, during the meeting, he told Rincon that the U.S. would not support a coup against Chavez. “Nada de golpes,” he claimed to have told the General.

³⁴ Venezuelan former trade leader who was briefly installed as President of Venezuela after the coup attempt of April 2002.

O.S. – And also the timing was terrible, as the Rio group met at the same time.³⁵ It was also badly executed.

R.N. – You are right. So, we were in the State Department. I am sure it is much more sophisticated now, but they used to have... In my office there was a TV and they used to dial in hotspots. So, I had Venezuelan television on my TV and I was watching these resignations – essentially these individual members of the military coming and saying: “We won’t fire, we will not follow orders to use weapons.”

O.S. – So you spent the day watching this, in D.C., on the 11th.

R.N. – We watched this playing. And who knew where it was headed, but it did not look good for him. The next morning, at probably 5 in the morning, certainly before I was ready to get up, we got a call from this Ops Center – State Department Operations Center – and the guy on the phone is the acting Assistant Secretary, I don’t know where he was, maybe he just put the call up together saying, first word out of his mouth after the call started: “Chávez has resigned.” So, that is the way our day started. That day [April 12, 2002], I am standing in my office watching the TV, before going over to an OAS meeting, and Carmona is dismissing the National Assembly.

O.S. – Ambassador Reich actually asked him not to, right? Assuming Reich actually asked him not to dismiss the National Assembly, it is very hard to understand why Carmona would do such a thing. There is a need to demystify this period and the role the United States played. There was of course contact, Carmona got a call from Reich and Reich was saying: “Don’t do this.” Once he dissolved the Parliament there was another call, apparently.

R.N. – “What’s going on?”

O.S. – Did you know Carmona well? He clearly mismanaged this situation...

R.N. – I don’t know Carmona at all, but he has a huge responsibility for everything that has gone wrong in Venezuela.

O.S. – In the following decade, the failed coup serves as a big excuse for more repression.

R.N. – And it is a huge excuse, ok, but there is more to this, I think. So, we are up watching this thing in my office and my Executive Assistant – he has served in Venezuela and he was there in 1998 when they had the elections for these people – said: “They can’t do that,” you know, “What does the president resigning have to do with dismissing the National Assembly?”. So, we walk over to the OAS and everybody is wondering. We had an ambassadors-only meeting, or ambassadors plus one – which, to be fair, in America it means plus two –, and Gaviria is calling and telling me: “I am not going to let [Venezuelan Ambassador Jorge] Valero³⁶ be seated, and I was thinking: “This is interesting,” because the [Venezuelan] Foreign Minister

³⁵ The Rio Group was an international organization of Latin American and Caribbean states created in 1986. In 2010, it was succeeded by the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which was inaugurated in 2011. On April 11, 2002, the annual meeting of the Heads of State of the Rio Group began in San José, Costa Rica, which came to a close on April 15th.

³⁶ Permanent Representative of Venezuela to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS).

Luis Alfonso Dávila, military guy, who was in San José [for the Rio Group Meeting], called me, and he said: “I resigned, my president resigned, there is no government.” He said the Rio Group, in the declaration, is not claiming for Chávez’s restoration of power, but for new elections.³⁷ So Valero just was not representing anybody. So, that was all I knew, as in complete rookie in this role as Ambassador – at this point I’d been there for 5 months. Well, this is a very dramatic decision, right, and he [Gaviria] didn’t preconsult with me about it. So, when I walked in, people were all wondering: “What are the Americans going to say?”, “Are we going to back Gaviria?”, I didn’t, I don’t remember saying that Valero should be seated, I don’t think I said that, but I said: “Look, if this is a democratic transition, to restore institutions, democracy, they are off to a very inauspicious start.” I can remember saying that. And I looked at the Inter-American Democratic Charter and took a portion of it that referred to “Well Constituted Civilian Authority,” which was an anti-coup, a civilian control of the military section, and I quoted this. I said: “I don’t think that there is a ‘Well Constituted Civilian Authority’ in Venezuela right now.” As several South American ambassadors told me later, at that point, they kind of breathed a sigh of relief saying: “Ok, the Americans are not on board on this thing.”

O.S. – Did you ever ask yourself why Carmona did this?

R.N. – They pushed him into that role. I don’t think he was ready for it. He was not suited for it.

O.S. – You didn’t see that person and think: “Well, this guy has been dreaming about becoming President all along.”

R.N. – No, absolutely not. He was a manager at the Chamber of Commerce [*Federación de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción de Venezuela*] – he was not even a manager from a company.

O.S. – Exactly, he was not a CEO, who has had leadership experience.

R.N. – It was a joke. Here is what the worst thing about it was: Luis Miquilena,³⁸ who was Chávez’s political mentor, had engineered a vote in the National Assembly to dismiss Chávez.

O.S. – Do you think that without the coup, Chávez could have actually left office?

R.N. – He would have been dismissed.

O.S. – Another argument, of course, is that if the U.S. had been involved, it would have been better executed.

R.N. – Exactly. So we were laboring under the notion that the guy had resigned, well into the day. The second thing we were asking was: “Where is the letter of resignation?”. And we got this thing that was supposedly written that day. It looked like it was the 15th generation xerox

³⁷ In fact, the Declaration of the Rio Group on the Situation in Venezuela condemned the interruption of the constitutional order and called for new elections, assuming that Chávez’s resignation was a *fait accompli*.

³⁸ Venezuelan politician and businessman who was Chávez’s political adviser during his election and administration before 2002. Miquilena revoked his endorsement for the Chávez administration right before the coup of April 2002 and became critical of the government after Chávez resumed power.

of a fax, I don't even remember what these things were, carbon powder, whatever, with "I resign," you know, with his carnet number and his signature. And, I was like, "This is not very convincing." So, we don't know how it played out. The guy resigned under pressure, yes, but under pressure, "If you are going to kill me, yeah, here [is the letter of resignation]." Probably thinking at the back of his head that the people were out there doing what they were doing, which is mobilizing people to defend him. And when he reappears, let me finish... So I used to get in the old days, not too long ago, we actually got a news ticker. We had terrible reception in the Simón Bolívar Room,³⁹ and the only guy who had any contact was the damn Canadian Ambassador with the fucking Blackberry, who showed if off to me all the time: "Look at that, look what's going on here." I spent the day over there hearing these discussions, arguing for a gradual response to this thing, according to the Inter-American Democratic Charter. First thing we need to do is understand what is going on. I said: "You guys have averted your gaze from this Venezuela mess for weeks and now you want to rush to judgment, and we are not prepared to rush."

O.S. – What did [Charles] Shapiro⁴⁰ do? Did he call you or Ambassador Reich?

R.N. – I must have been on the same phone calls, but I was the Ambassador to the OAS, I was just, I was, would be on calls, but he would not call me directly.

O.S. – But you weren't the average U.S. Ambassador to the OAS, particularly on this matter...

R.N. – I was a political appointment, and I felt that I was representing the President's point of view on these things, he was very confident that I was. And the fact was, I was also in the Simón Bolívar Room in 1991, when they overthrew [Jean-Bertrand] Aristide. I was a junior officer, and James Baker⁴¹ said: "This will not stand." That committed the United States to restoring him to power.⁴² I had received instructions, from a career senior foreign sponsor officer that we were not to agree on anything that called for Chávez's restoration on power, because we were going to be on the hook to do that and we were not there yet, so what we needed to do first was to find out what was going on, because we didn't know.

O.S. – At this point, were there people calling? Leopoldo Lopez,⁴³ Corina Machado,⁴⁴ did these people use to call up and tell you what was going on?

³⁹ Room in which the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States meets in the OAS building in Washington, D.C.

⁴⁰ U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela from March 2002 to August 2004.

⁴¹ U.S. attorney and political figure. James Baker served as White House Chief of Staff and Secretary of Treasury under the Reagan administration. Under President George H. W. Bush, Baker was the U.S. Secretary of State from 1989 to 1992 and the Chief of Staff between 1992 and 1993.

⁴² Aristide was deposed on 29 September 1991 from the Presidency of Haiti by a military coup led by Army General Raoul Cédras, who had been promoted by Aristide in June to Commander in Chief of the Army. Aristide returned to power in 1994, when international pressure led by the U.S. – from Haitian expatriates, the United Nations (Resolution 940 of the Security Council), and U.S. military – persuaded the military regime to back down.

⁴³ Venezuelan politician and opposed to Chávez's administration. Lopez was the mayor of Chacao, one administrative subdivision of the city of Caracas, Venezuela, from 2000 to 2008.

⁴⁴ Venezuelan politician and civil society advocate opposed to Chávez's administration. Machado was, in 2002, the co-founder of *Súmate*, an organization whose stated aim was to promote the exercise of civil rights in Venezuela.

R.N. – No, no, absolutely not. I felt that Otto walking around talking to people on the phone, cell phone, to his folks, was incredibly irresponsible, stupid. You have to make decisions based on what's on the table, from U.S. government sources, not from your drinking buddies from Venezuela. None of these people would get to my cell phone when I was Assistant Secretary, I can assure you. Because I saw him walking around saying: "Hey, I just got a call from this guy, etc.", I'm thinking: "Can we look at this fucking letter of resignation again? Are we focusing on the fact that this thing is not coming off the way we have been told? It's unbelievable anything that suggests to you Chávez is going to go just resign." And so, by the end of the day, there were people who were in that room, who said: "Roger Noriega was with us." And there were other people saying: "Roger was trying to prevent OAS action in defense [of Chávez]." Frankly, they were both right, but my argument was: "Why do we have this rush to judge? The very people in this room refused to engage on Venezuela when I've been asking for weeks that we take a look at what's going on, when people are being abused. Now, when Chávez just gets himself into trouble, you're ready to act?"

O.S. – Right.

R.N. – The Rio Group had already spoken on this and it did not say Chávez would be restored to power. So I hopped out with this news ticker item, while Chávez was on a helicopter on his way back to Miraflores, and I took this and showed it to ambassadors from many countries, and I said: "Take a look at this." And they saw it and one of them said "Oh well," and the other wouldn't say anything. And this is proof that this coup was not planned by the United States, because this coup was not planned by anybody. Carmona, if he had taken fucking Miquilena's call, he would have gotten a National Assembly vote on this thing, where he would blast the whole thing. And when they fired all these electoral officials...⁴⁵ If you are in the military, you think you did the right thing. And I think a lot of people acted this way, thinking they did the right thing. These fucking politicians are making a hash of this. Now we are dismissing, we are shredding the Constitution, the one that I just said that I was defending two days earlier by not firing them. And so they made a hash of it, and that is the legacy, that is why the military won't act now. They are reluctant to act now, even though 75% would like to see Maduro out for the good of the country, it is because these politicians have made a hash of it.

O.S. – Do you think that those who pushed Carmona were not being strategic, there weren't briefed properly?

R.N. – I have to tell you, I don't know who talked to Carmona, who was handling this. And that would be an excellent thing to find out, great to find out, who was giving this advice. I have gotten to know very successful Venezuelans who were sitting in the Miraflores Palace to see the new President [Carmona], very successful well-known people. And they saw what was coming and going and they said: "Get in the car, let's go, we are leaving." Because they even saw this thing collapsing, because Carmona didn't take the phone call. It was from people within Chávez's camp who were saying: "We are ready to vote with you, the guy went too far." He didn't do that. So, that's neither here nor there, but what's fascinating is when Chávez

⁴⁵ While in power, Pedro Carmona announced, alongside the dissolution of the National Assembly, the dissolution of the Supreme Court and electoral authority, as well as the dismissal of all high-level officials.

shows up on the balcony of the Miraflores,⁴⁶ the guy looks like he just woke up from a nap. Not the least bit of stress on his face, I mean, talk about the guts of a cat burglar. The guy must have known these things were playing out. But his enemies exposed themselves, in the military and elsewhere, and he probably, at that point, is when he really gave *carte blanche* for the Cubans to do his internal security.

O.S. – We know that Fernando Henrique Cardoso tried to convince president Chávez, once he was back in power, to not stage a witch hunt. How did the United States engage with him after the coup?

R.N. – He made a commitment to the military he would not do that. He made a commitment that he would not appear in military uniform anymore. Remember that's when he started using the flag thing...

O.S. – Dressed the jacket with the colors of Venezuelan flag.

R.N. – Now, within weeks, at least one of these military guys goes down in a helicopter accident.⁴⁷ Sort of interesting to me. But, the fact, the dirty little secret of that is that the only people that performed, let's say, honorably, was the Venezuelan military, by saying they would not use weapons of war against the Venezuelan people. Some of these political characters made a complete hash of it. Then the code-on was Condoleezza Rice then going on television a week after, basically saying "Chávez had it coming."⁴⁸ There is one thing I didn't know until a year after, probably, maybe five years after, about Otto. They convened the ambassadors from the region to the State Department, OAS, so I attended. Since I was working with Powell's staff about getting him to the OAS, I was in and out of the [OAS] meeting, and Lino Gutierrez told me long time later that during that meeting Otto said "The people have spoken." One of the Brazilian ambassadors, either Valter Peçly Moreira or the bilateral guy [Rubens Barbosa]⁴⁹ said: "Excuse me, Ambassador, in our country, the people speak through elections." I'd heard about this thing, I never quite knew when this conversation took place, and it was when I was out of the room and it just looks really awful, and then Rice went on the television program, set Sunday, basically saying "Chávez had it coming." So, hopefully, in the future, it will be written down: "If you're going take blame for a coup, you should not do it after it's failed." I spent years digging our credibility out or the rubble after that mess.

O.S. – If you are Chávez, even if there is no clear evidence, of course you are going to blame the United States. I mean, the biggest dilemma of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America is that whatever happens, governments need someone to blame, and the U.S. is often a convenient scape goat. That's something very natural to do.

⁴⁶ On April 14, 2002, Chávez returns from the Orchila island prison and goes to Caracas to retake his position at the head of the Venezuelan government. He addressed the nation in a televised speech in the Miraflores Palace.

⁴⁷ Reference to the helicopter accident that killed four Venezuelan generals on April 20, 2002.

⁴⁸ On April 14, 2002, Rice told NBC's *Meet the Press*: "I hope Hugo Chavez takes the message that his people sent him that his own policies are not working for the Venezuelan people. [...] We do hope that Chavez recognizes that the whole world is watching and that he takes advantage of this opportunity to right his own ship, which has been moving, frankly, in the wrong direction for quite a long time."

⁴⁹ Brazilian Ambassador to the United States from 1999 to 2004.

R.N. – And Chávez did that. Do you remember Chávez was talking about evidence of the U.S. involvement in a coup and certain aircraft on the tarmac and things of that nature, and I remember going to the Ambassador, Bernardo Alvarez,⁵⁰ and I said: “I understand that your president is making accusations and do you have any proof to share with me now? Because that would be really illuminating if you could share with me.”

O.S. – It was more to the Venezuelan people he was basically saying that, right? I mean, this was an internal political game...

R.N. – But you can't just say that.

O.S. – Of course.

R.N. – And that was my point to him: “I know this is bullshit, and he should stop saying it if he wants to have a normal relationship with us.” You know, what is interesting is that, when I became Assistant Secretary, I told the guy: “Let's end this microphone diplomacy, that's why you and I have jobs.” You know, within a week, Chávez is basically saying that Condoleezza needed to get laid, you know, so the guy was foul, he was a foul human being. I even met with Diosdado Cabello⁵¹ these days. I heard that Cabello was in town, he was Interior Minister at the time and I saw Bernardo Alvarez outside the Rayburn building and he was getting in a taxi, I was getting out of a taxi, and I said: “Hey, I hear Cabello is in town,” and he said “Yes,” I said: “He hasn't asked to see me,” and he said “Would you see him?”. I said: “Yes, of course, send him by.” So I did, I met with Cabello. Don't get me wrong, I mean, I had no sympathy or I wasn't beguiled by this guy, I had some people telling me that Chávez was a charming guy, that he draws you in, I said: “Bullshit, I've been in the room with that guy. I see him as a piece of shit, to be honest.” You know, the democratically elected president of Venezuela, but still a piece of shit who is enemy of the United States and practically destroyed his own country. But I knew my role, so there I was, even in 2004, after the 2002 episode, after the 2004 referendum,⁵² sitting, standing in Powell's office asking him: “Would you be willing to meet with Chávez?”, and he said, “Yes.” I said “Really?”, and he said: “Roger, that's what I do, I meet with these guys, I meet with these bad guys.” That's the role of the State Department.

O.S. – A final a question. In 2003, the Lula government established a group called “Friends of Venezuela,” including the United States, Cuba, and Spain, to help Venezuela overcome its internal divisions. To what extent did you think that made sense? Do you think that it had a positive impact?

R.N. – I don't even remember Brazil doing it, to tell you the truth, which means I guess they did a fairly ineffective job communicating it and I will tell you why: The Cuba thing would have been a non-starter with us, we wouldn't have set off with the Cubans in that context.

⁵⁰ Venezuelan Ambassador to the United States from 2003 to 2010.

⁵¹ Venezuelan high-ranked politician who served as Venezuelan Vice-president between 2000 and 2001, as Minister of the Secretariat of the Presidency in 2002, and as Vice President from January 2002 to April 2002. It was Cabello who became the interim President of Venezuela after Carmona's fall on April 13, staying in office until the next day, when Chávez resumed the power. Later on, Cabello became the President of the Venezuelan National Assembly between 2012 and 2016.

⁵² Reference to the Venezuelan presidential recall referendum of August 15, 2004, in which Chávez was able to remain in office as 58% of the votes were against his dismissal.

O.S. – Did you sense that there were pragmatic policy makers that you could work with on specific issues, like solving little things that came up, or did you sense that, through the years, as Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, the space for real dialogue diminished? Were you moving towards the perception that engaging was no longer having a positive impact? At the same time the U.S. was still buying oil from Venezuela. How did you handle these tensions?

R.N. – The only thing that is very critical about this is Chávez doing a nose dive into the cocaine business. That did not happen until 2005. He was making common cause with the FARC, even before he was elected president, and there were guns going in and things like that. In terms of doing a nose dive into the cocaine business – that happened in 2005, when he met with FARC commanders and said: “Look, I’m going to give you half a billion dollars and I want you to continue what you are doing against Colombia’s President Álvaro Uribe, to torment him.” This is how we caught Raúl Reyes,⁵³ because Chávez was carrying a telephone and we found Raúl Reyes in the jungle. Chávez talked too much [on the phone] and he was petrified when computers showed up because they kind of exposed this network that predated it and revealed some of the money in the context. It didn’t show us everything, but when Leamsy Salazar,⁵⁴ who was Chávez’s bodyguard, arrived in Washington from Spain, his first stop was in my office. This is like ten years after I left government, 5 years, maybe 3 years ago. And he told me a story, and he has told the same to U.S. authorities and it has been shown up at some media that Chávez met with the FARC leaders, – that’s in 2005.⁵⁵ Soon after that, certainly before Bush left office, they put Venezuela on this narco list. So we started doing things...

O.S. – That’s something Bush supported, right?

R.N. – Certainly did. I mean, I didn’t know everything then that I know now, but I knew that for them to have done that, particularly Shannon, who was my successor [as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs]. Shannon was the biggest apologist for Chávez, still is.

O.S. – Still today, you think?

R.N. – He is the reason why we have not done effective sanctions, I mean, we were a year later, we are a year late because of Shannon, and Shannon’s off-meeting with Diosdado Cabello, I mean, the most telling thing about Shannon when he was Assistant Secretary was when he was in Ecuador, and he was talking about the Correa’s redrafting of Ecuador’s institutions. The process literally included beating opposition people so they couldn’t get into the room to vote

⁵³ Colombian of the FARC’s High Command who was killed on March 1, 2009, by the Colombian army within Ecuador’s territorial sovereignty. This mission provoked a diplomatic and political crisis between Ecuador and Colombia known as the Andean crisis.

⁵⁴ Venezuelan Navy Lieutenant Colonel who was Hugo Chávez’s head of security and personal assistant for more than ten years until Chávez’s death in 2013. Afterwards, Salazar was assigned to work under Diosdado Cabello, then the President of the National Assembly.

⁵⁵ Reference to the episode in which Salazar defected to the United States – through Spain – in January 2015 with the assistance of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Salazar accused Diosdado Cabello to be linked to the *Cartel de los Soles*, which dominates traffic routes that arrive to the U.S., passing through Venezuela and Cuba. Despite the accusations here made by Noriega regarding Chávez’s link to the narcotraffic, no report was found stating Salazar’s testimony also included the direct contact of Hugo Chávez with FARC leaders.

for the National Assembly, and the U.S. Assistant Secretary [Shannon] goes and says: “Look, I’ve seen constituent assembly processes were to renovate institutions and I’m not afraid of them.” Where did he see that in fucking Venezuela, where they dismantled democracy? I mean, that is his legacy, frankly, I mean, is that mess. So, the drug thing metastasized after I left, and it had all of the corruption that goes along with it on steroids. It went from low-level – but pretty widespread – corruption before Chávez, to significant levels of corruption, to now, where not only they are stealing government resources, but also engaging in narcotraffic. And the estimate is that they have stolen at least 300 billion dollars. You can’t have a normal relationship with a country like that.

O.S. – Right. What would your policy recommendations look like today?

R.N. – What I think we could have done without breaking a lot of china was draw lines early on the narcotraffic by naming names, by designating people as narco traffickers, in a much more robust way. Because what happened was that the FARC paid for the coup, you know, compensated for the donations after and paid off with cocaine. So, these military officers went from abetting coca trade to engaging in it, so we saw this explosion of illicit trafficking routes and things like that. So they were more interested in criminality than they were interested in governing the country and seeing that it is able to function, that its infrastructure is being restored or that if they are going to kill the private sector, are they going be able to sustain... “Is the State going to be able to sustain it through...?”

O.S. – “Illicit trade or...”

R.N. – “...our own production of goods?”. No, they were too busy in engaging with criminality to see whether people were going have food, whether they were going have the cash flow to fund exports and imports.

O.S. – So, looking back on the crisis of the botched coup, the repression that followed and the Trump administration now, do you think that the solution is to go for more sanctions, or do you think there still space for a dialogue?

R.N. – No.

O.S. – Did you ever have a good dialogue with somebody in this regime, as the Secretary of State, where you said “That was a fruitful conversation with the Venezuelan government”?

R.N. – This is a critical question. This is a criminal organization, it is not a government anymore, and we can’t deal with a criminal organization, where a government has got to honor its commitments, its political commitments, and I think we need to increase the targeted sanctions on the individuals. I am not for sectoral sanctions against the petroleum sector, because, as you were leading to, I just see the Russians waiting for this papaya to drop on their heads if we pull out, and you cannot blame the Venezuelans, since the Americans pulled out, they killed the industry. So yes, our Russian friends are going take it over.