

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)

¿Pax Brasiliana? Un Estudio de la Actuación Brasileña en las Crisis Constitucionales y Políticas en América Latina (1990-2015)

John F. Maisto

Interview, 2018

John F. Maisto was the United States ambassador to Venezuela between 1997 and 2000 and later the US Permanent Representative to the Organization of American States from 2003 to 2007.

John F. Maisto foi embaixador dos Estados Unidos na Venezuela entre 1997 e 2000 e, posteriormente, representante permanente dos EUA na Organização dos Estados Americanos de 2003 a 2007.

John F. Maisto fue embajador de los Estados Unidos en Venezuela entre 1997 y 2000 y representante permanente de los Estados Unidos ante la Organización de los Estados Americanos de 2003 a 2007.

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John F. Maisto

John Francis Maisto was born on August 28, 1938 in Braddock, Pennsylvania, United States and was the US ambassador to Venezuela from 1997 to 2000. In subsequent years, Maisto served as the Foreign Affairs advisor in the US Southern Command from 2000 to 2001; special assistant to the president and senior director for Western Hemisphere Affairs from 2001 to 2003. Ambassador Maisto was also the United States permanent representative to the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington from 2003 to 2007.

Before becoming ambassador to Venezuela, he was the ambassador to Nicaragua from 1993 to 1996; served at the State Department as deputy assistant secretary for Central America from 1992 to 1993; deputy permanent representative at the US Mission to the OAS from 1989 to 1992; deputy chief of Mission in Panama from 1986 to 1989. In previous years, Maisto served at the State Department as deputy director and then director of Philippine Affairs from 1982 to 1986.

Maisto began his career as a Foreign Service officer in 1968. He attended Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and received a Master's Degree in Latin American History from San Carlos University, Guatemala.

Today, Ambassador Maisto is the head of the US-Philippine Society and also writes and speaks regularly on US foreign policy; democratic transitions; and international trade.

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O.S. – Ambassador Maisto, it is a great pleasure to meet you and to speak with you about your time at the US State Department. I would like to start out by talking about your experience in Venezuela: you came in 1997 and, of course, you’ve been looking at the region for longer than that so you were aware of the particularities of Venezuela.

J.M. – Yes, Venezuela is different.

O.S. – It’s different and very difficult to compare.

J.M. – It’s called oil [laughter].

O.S. – That’s right. Can you remember the first time when you realized that the political *status quo* in the country was eroding irreversibly and that this was something which created a lot of volatility and unpredictability? Was this before you came or you were already aware that you were sent into trouble?

J.M. – No, none of us (including the Latin Americans) really understood [what was happening]. The expression in Spanish is “*nosotros no nos interiorizamos*”¹ what was happening in Venezuela. What was happening in Venezuela (and I finally saw it during the campaign in 1998) was the collapse of the two traditional political parties², which represented the complete misunderstanding of Venezuela’s political class. Think about what Venezuela was during those years from *Puntofijo*³ in the late 1950’s, up through Carlos Andrés [Perez]⁴ and through all the administrations, the founding of OPEC⁵, the rich period of Venezuela then the downtime in terms of oil. Venezuela was the example! A two party-political system with the Christian-Democrats COPEI⁶ on the one hand, the Social Democrats [*Acción Democrática*]⁷, on the other hand. What I began to see was the continuation of the old generation in Venezuelan politics. I have now reached the conclusion (and I reached it while I was in Venezuela) that the notion of having the reelection of a president two terms after [the end of] an administration suffocates the new generation of political leaderships. That’s what happened in Venezuela with regard to both COPEI and *Acción Democrática*.

O.S. – So in 1992, there’s the coup attempt. Then in 1998 on February 4th there is the “Day of Dignity”⁸, which commemorates the 1992 coup attempt and it doesn’t really stir much public

¹ In English: we had not *internalized* it, as in “grasped the meaning of something”.

² From 1958 to 1993, the two historically dominant parties in Venezuela were COPEI (Independent Political Electoral Organization Committee) and *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action).

³ The *Puntofijo* Pact of 1958 was an agreement within the Venezuelan political elite aimed at the consolidation of a new democratic order and institutional stability within the country after the end of the Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship. The Pact is also recognized as bringing about a period of exclusionary politics in which the country’s leadership alternated between the COPEI and *Acción Democrática* parties.

⁴ Carlos Andrés Perez was President of Venezuela from 1974 to 1979 and again from 1989 to 1993, when he was forced out of office on embezzlement charges. During his second presidential term, Perez suffered two coup attempts in 1992 led first by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez and later by his followers.

⁵ OPEC is the acronym for the “Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.” Venezuela was one of the five founding members of the group created in 1960.

⁶ COPEI is the acronym for the Venezuelan political party “*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*.”

⁷ The *Acción Democrática* is a Venezuelan social democratic political party.

⁸ The Day of Dignity was a day-long event held across Caracas commemorating the 1992 coup attempts by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez. The ceremonies were held before the 1998 election and received little media attention beyond the chavista movement.

and media attention. So, when was the first moment when you looked at [Hugo] Chávez⁹ and said, “This could create a problem.”?

J.M. – It wasn’t that difficult. See, it was a combination – to my mind, because I was living there at the time – and I observed two things that were happening simultaneously. Number one was 1998 was the presidential election year. The year started with both traditional political parties, *Acción Democrática* and COPEI, having difficulty finding candidates. Who appeared on the scene? People who weren’t part of the *Puntofijo* reality. Who were they? Henrique Sales Römer¹⁰, who was governor of Carabobo state and had been a *Copeñano*¹¹, left the party about ten years earlier. He was a very successful governor, but remember, Carabobo is a very rich state too.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – And there was a bit of a Sales Römer dynasty there, kind of an old-fashioned Venezuelan successful politician at the regional level. He tried to create a national independent party¹², kind of a precursor of what you’re seeing all over the place. Then, Irene Sáez¹³. And it didn’t seem to be so crazy, because Irene had three things going for her. Number one, she was a pretty good mayor. Number two, she was an excellent people person. People trusted her. And number three, she was a beautiful woman¹⁴. She was attractive. And she was doing things right during those first several months. Look at her [poll] numbers: February, March, April... were in the high thirties, as I recall. What did her in? A blow to her credibility. What was the blow to her credibility? She decided she needed a national political party and she chose COPEI. The moment her photograph appeared in the newspapers with all the “dinosaurs” of the COPEI... here’s this beautiful woman right in the middle of those *copeñanos*... Just look at the numbers. In the meantime, Hugo Chávez was up and you had the anniversary of what Hugo Chávez did.¹⁵ But it didn’t have a big impact. *No tuvo resonancia*¹⁶. But Chávez had a reputation. The old reputation of Chávez comes from the coup attempt.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – I was just with a Venezuelan friend of mine, he just got out of the plane with me. He works for one of the development organizations here, who was very active in Venezuelan politics back then. He was a classmate of Leopoldo López¹⁷, a good friend of him. And he still talks about (as all of us who observed this) how Chávez in one minute on national television, in 1992, handled [the situation]. He captured the moment. What did he do? He accepted responsibility! What Venezuelan politician in Venezuelan history would do that? And number two, was the famous...

⁹ Hugo Rafael Chávez Frias was the president of Venezuela from 1999 until his death in 2013. During his first year in office, he established a new Constitution and started controversial reforms as part of a “Bolivarian Revolution.”

¹⁰ Henrique Sales Römer is a Venezuelan politician who founded the party *Proyecto Venezuela* to run in the 1998 national elections against Hugo Chávez of the MRV party. Römer received the support of both the COPEI and *Acción Democrática* parties, but in the end secured only 40% of the national vote.

¹¹ Römer was a member of the COPEI party from 1989 to 1998.

¹² Reference to *Proyecto Venezuela*.

¹³ Irene Lailin Sáez Conde founded the anti-establishment *Integración y Renovación Nueva Esperanza* (IRENE) party to compete in the 1998 elections. After accepting COPEI’s support, however, she lost credibility and finished the election with only 3% of the votes.

¹⁴ Irene Saez was a former beauty queen who won the Miss Universe title in 1981.

¹⁵ Reference to the 1992 coup attempt.

¹⁶ In English: “it did not have repercussion”; that is, it did not receive significant public attention in the media.

¹⁷ Leopoldo López is a Venezuelan oppositionist politician, currently under house arrest for allegedly inciting violence in the 2014 protests against the Maduro government.

O.S. – *Por ahora*¹⁸.

J.M. – Yes, “*por ahora*.” He had something. We began to see the message of Chávez being heard more. He had 3%, I believe, in early 1998. If you look at the numbers, I just saw it went up and up and up... meanwhile Irene went down. Salas Römer kind of bounced around 30% in the polls, because the people who believed in COPEI and *Acción Democrática* saw in Salas Römer somebody who would continue what they had before. However, the economic situation was very bad, the price of oil was very bad. So, to a certain extent, it was “the economy, stupid!”¹⁹ There was a great distress on the traditional politicians, there was a desire for change and people were kind of intrigued by Chávez.

O.S. – Yeah, I knew reasonable people who were open to him.

J.M. – [It was] a combination of being intrigued by him and being angry at the traditional politics. I had friends who said “*cualquier que no sea COPEI o Acción Democrática!*”²⁰

O.S. – How do you as the Ambassador deal with the tension? On the one hand, some people in the United States were saying Chávez could be a problem and could threaten US interests to some extent. Therefore, Chávez shouldn’t, for example, have a visa to the United States. At the same time, it was clear that he may win, so that makes the United States working against him prior to the election a risky decision.

J.M. – But we didn’t work against him. The policy of the Clinton administration was very simple and straightforward: the Venezuelans have to resolve their own political issues.

O.S. – Yeah.

J.M. – They have an electoral system that is credible. *And it was*. It was fair and our position was – there had been a debate in Venezuela where the question of whether Chávez should have been allowed to be a candidate was discussed.

O.S. – Yes, and as somebody who staged a coup in the past, it’s a genuine question to ask.

J.M. – Yes, they resolved it. The Venezuelans resolved it! What we did was to defer to Venezuelans. I saw my job as keeping the United States of America *out* of that campaign.

O.S. – Did you think that worked?

J.M. – Yeah. It did work, because we were not the issue, go back and look. Because our position was (and remember this is the Clinton administration), “We are talking about Venezuela. We are talking about a mature country.”

O.S. – It was actually one of the most consolidated democracies in Latin America.

J.M. – Yes, with institutions that worked. There were problems, no doubt. We had been doing a lot of work with their judicial institutions in the fight against corruption. But at the same time many Venezuelans were *disgusted* with the two-party-system, well not with the two-party-system, but with the two parties. The political personalities. Because there was poverty. What were the issues in the 1998 campaign? Chávez really had a focus [on poverty]. He reduced [the issues] to, “There is a lot of poverty in Venezuela”. He claimed there were about two thirds of Venezuela [in poverty]. It wasn’t so, but nonetheless about a third of Venezuelans were

¹⁸ After being captured in the 1992 military uprising, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez gave a famous speech after being permitted a couple of minutes on nation-wide television. Chávez promised that he had surrendered only temporarily. In other words, “*por ahora*” or, in English: “for the time being.”

¹⁹ Phrase coined by US political strategist James Carville of the 1992 Bill Clinton presidential campaign. The expression was meant to highlight the significance of addressing the 1990 economic recession during the presidential debates. The statement has been appropriated by others and used in various political contexts.

²⁰ In English: “anything but COPEI and Acción Democrática!”

considered to be in the poverty category again. His message was so simple and it had a resonance, not only with poor people, but with middle-class people as well. [Chávez said], “You have opportunities. This is supposed to be one of the richest countries in the world. And if that’s the case, why are you and your family in such a bad shape?”

O.S. – Actually, if you looked at the sixties at Dubai and Caracas, you would have said, “One of these two cities will be the major transportation and airline hub in the world by 2000. The other will be dirt poor.” Most people during the 1990’s would have said, “Caracas will be the major hub.”

J.M. – That’s right. I will go one step further. Speaking of the sixties, go back and look at the first James Bond movies. Now why would I say that? Because James Bond was asked how he wanted to receive his payment and he said, “American dollars, British Pounds or Venezuelan *Bolívars*.”²¹

O.S. – [laughter] I had no idea!

O.S. – In retrospect that would’ve been a bad investment [laughter]. When political systems unravel it’s quite interesting to hear people who were there during the process. Historians sometimes make the mistake of assuming that *everybody* was involved and had the benefit of hindsight, which of course people don’t. You, however, being an Ambassador can contribute – and certainly your career is quite interesting because you were actually working on one particular region, from 1997 to 2007 which is very unusual for American foreign policy. If you had believed that the region had any role to play, how could it have prevented Venezuela’s decline? If you look back, at which point were there forks in the road where you think international actors (be it the United States through the OAS²² or the United States and other countries) could have done things that may have affected Venezuela? Or would you say, “What happens in a country is something we can’t influence.”?

J.M. – You will find me to be almost simplistic about this subject, but I have some very strong beliefs. The Venezuelans had their election in 1998. Hugo Chávez won. The policy of all the countries of the hemisphere, including the policy of the United States to be sure was, “OK, Chávez was elected. Let’s deal with it!” We really attempted to engage with Chavez. The Clinton administration attempted to engage with Chávez. Chávez travelled to the United States two or three times during that period, I accompanied him. It was very interesting to watch Chávez in action in 1999 and 2000, here and in the United States²³. Very interesting. Why? Chávez is a very smart guy. He knew whom he was talking to. He told them what they wanted to hear. I mean, Chávez goes to New York and appears before the Council on Foreign Relations. He goes to the United Nations, the Council of the Americas gives him an event in New York, he comes to Washington...

O.S. – Were you there all the time?

²¹ Throughout Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels and the subsequent adapted movies, the Venezuelan Bolivar does indeed figure prominently as a preferred method of payment. In the 1964 film *Goldfinger*, Caracas – alongside Zurich, Amsterdam, and Hong Kong – is pointed out as being an important center for gold bullion deposits.

²² The Organization for American States, with its 35-member states, was founded in 1948 and is based in Washington D.C.

²³ During his first term, the Chávez administration’s stance toward the United States was much more amicable than in later years. He had a private meeting – before his inauguration – at the White House with President Bill Clinton on January 28, 1999, threw the first pitch at a game between the Blue Jays and Mets at Shea Stadium in New York on June 9, 1999 and rang the closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange on June 10, 1999.

J.M. – I was there for all of it! He went to Houston and met with the oil people. Former President George Bush²⁴ did a working a breakfast for him in Houston when he was there.²⁵

O.S. – That must have been so fascinating! He was able to sense what each one wanted to hear?

J.M. – Chavez’s message was simple and straightforward, he said, “We have to have an economic system in which poor people have a better opportunity.”

O.S. –Difficult to disagree with.

J.M. – Yes, that’s fine. [laughter] I used to have long conversations with Chávez... hours...

O.S. –You met him for the first time in 1998. So, how was it?

J.M. – Yes, he was a candidate. We had a very interesting situation, you mentioned the visa. His lack of a visa had nothing to do with the US policy about that Venezuelan election. It was a legal thing, anybody who participates in an armed coup attempt is in violation of US law.²⁶ Congress is very strong on that. I can give you an example, Joaquín Villalobos²⁷, of the FMLN²⁸.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – We began to engage with the FMLN for the peace process in Central America and Joaquín [Villalobos] was one of the leaders [of the FMLN], he saw the world had changed, etc. Even so – and I was Deputy Assistant Secretary – the only way we could grant him a visa, was that we had to jump through all these hoops with the immigration system. Everybody who participated with Chávez in that coup attempt was on the “no-visa” list.

O.S. – Of course.

J.M. – Once he became the elected President of Venezuela it completely changed. And once he brought people into his government. What happened in Venezuela was that the electoral council, which had the last word, declared on September 1st, that they had to pronounce as to who the candidates *could be* according to Venezuelan law. That was a big question, that was the debate. Was Chávez going to be allowed to be a candidate? They said Chávez could be a candidate. Once *they* decided that, we adjusted our policy and dealt with Chávez as a candidate – as opposed to a failed coupster who went to jail and was released. Now, if you go back and ask the people of the Caldera government – which I did, including Asdrúbal Aguiar²⁹ and President Caldera³⁰ – “Why did you release Chávez [from jail]? Why did you allow him and all the government coupsters to leave jail?”

O.S. – What did they say?

J.M. – It’s very Venezuelan. They said, “Our view was that he was a bigger problem in jail than he would have been outside.” He was a coupster, this is Venezuela. Let him try to participate in the political process, it will never work in Venezuela. Because when Chávez was in jail, they

²⁴ George Herbert Walker Bush served as the 41st President of the United States from 1992 to 1996 .

²⁵ At the end of his trip to the United States in 1999, Chávez met with George H.W. Bush in Houston, Texas on June 11, 1999.

²⁶ The US Code defines visa ineligibility in [Act 212 of the Immigration and Naturalization Act](#).

²⁷ Joaquín Villalobos was formerly a Salvadoran guerrilla leader and politician of the People's Revolutionary Army, one of the five organizations that comprised the FMLN movement. He is now a renowned international authority in security and conflict resolution, however Villalobos still experiences difficulties acquiring US visas due to his past guerrilla involvement.

²⁸ The Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) is a left-wing party in El Salvador that fought against the US-backed right-wing government during the Salvadoran Civil War.

²⁹ Asdrúbal Aguiar was the Venezuelan Minister of Interior Affairs from 1998 to 1999.

³⁰ Rafael Antonio Caldera Rodríguez was President of Venezuela from 1969 to 1974 and again from 1994 to 1999.

let him wear his uniform and he was giving interviews. The media loved him. Chávez was a new star, he was on television, he was in the newspapers. The leftists and the communist parties in Venezuela embraced him. When Chávez was released, what did he do? He did two things. He had been in jail for what? Two and a half years or so. The first thing he did was to accept Fidel Castro's invitation to go to Cuba.³¹ And how did Castro receive him? As a hero! Fidel was at the plane when Lieutenant-Coronel Hugo Chávez arrived and greeted him as a hero. He had a visit to Cuba where he was a hero. He spoke to thousands of students at the University of Havana. Back to Venezuela and my understanding from people who worked with Chavez – people like Luis Miquilena³², José Vicente Rangel³³ – was that they had to persuade Chávez that if he was interested in coming to power in Venezuela and reforming Venezuela he had to do in the Venezuelan political way through an electoral process. It was very difficult to convince Chávez of that earlier on.

O.S. – Of course, if you decide to stage a coup, clearly your view is that a coup is easier than through the electoral process, right? So, what was your message to Chávez? And what was his message to you?

J.M. – We used to talk to Chávez about what he was going to do when he achieved power. Chávez was very naïve about government. His view was, “There is corruption in Venezuela because these people have been in power for far too long and the way to change that is to appoint *good* people. People who *I* know are good people, people who *I* can trust”. He used to say, “You’re going to see.”

O.S. – In Brazil, we have corruption issues and many candidates say the exact same thing [laughter].

J.M. – Exactly the same thing! I don’t understand that: “*Good* people”!

O.S. – Nothing to do with incentives [laughter].

J.M. – No, nothing to do with institutions! And the functioning of institutions... and an independent judiciary... [irony].

O.S. – Did you not say that? Did you not say that maybe this view was too easy?

J.M. – Yeah! [laughter]

O.S. – So you had a dialogue?

J.M. – Oh, I had a dialogue!

O.S. – So, he was genuinely listening to you?

J.M. – Early on after he was elected, I said, “People are going to look at three things about your incoming government to try to figure out whether it’s credible. Number one, they’re going to look at whom you appoint. Are these good people? Are these smart people? Are these people that are recognized? That’s number one. Number two, they’re going to be interested to see what you do in regard with PDVSA³⁴. Are you going to turn PDVSA into a corrupt institution that shovels money to you so that you can do what you want? And number three, you’ve promised

³¹ Fidel Castro was a Cuban revolutionary leader who deposed the regime of dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959, later becoming Prime Minister, between 1959 and 1976, and President between 1976 and 2008, when he was succeeded by his brother Raúl Castro.

³² Luis Miquelina was a Venezuelan politician that served as the president of the Constituent Assembly from 1999 to 2000 and later as the Interior and Justice minister from 2001 to 2002.

³³ José Vicente Rangel is a politician, journalist and lawyer who served as Venezuela’s Foreign Affairs minister from 1999 to 2001, Defense minister from 2001 to 2002 and later as the country’s vice president from 2002 to 2007.

³⁴ *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PDVSA) is the state-run oil and natural gas company in Venezuela.

a constitutional reform. So, people are going to be following that very closely to see what kind of constitution that *you* are trying to engineer. Those are the three immediate things. His response was, “*Ah, por favor, usted va a ver. Mi estilito va a ser lo más... bien, muy inteligente.*”³⁵ Then he played to us and said, “*Mi Ministro de Defensa va a ser Raúl Salazar*³⁶, *el gordo.*”³⁷ We knew Raúl Salazar very well. Raúl Salazar was educated in the United States, he knew us, etc. The head of PDVSA was a technocrat³⁸, very respected. Except the economic cabinet was absolutely atrocious, the Finance Minister³⁹, the Development Minister⁴⁰, if you go back and look at those people. Giordani⁴¹ was one of them - who thought that Albania was a real success and apparently a really good model [laughter].

O.S. – To what extent do you think that Chávez was bound by factions that he needed to satisfy?

J.M. – I don’t think he was.

O.S. – For example, some people say that – and this is a hypothesis – that, because [Luiz Inácio] Lula [da Silva]⁴² needed to co-opt certain groups, he sometimes gave a lot of leeway to Chávez because this was his way of saying domestically to some [leftist] groups, “See? I’m all partnering up here”. Do you think he didn’t owe to a lot of people when he came to power? Did Chávez owe people?

J.M. – No, I don’t think so. Chavez felt – and this was very clear early on – he really didn’t trust civilians that much. He trusted the military, the people who were in with him. Particularly the younger military [officers]. It was very interesting! Diosdado Cabello⁴³. The first job that Diosdado got was not in the cabinet; he made Diosdado – it wasn’t a ministerial job – the head of the telecommunication system, which was notoriously corrupt. Diosdado engineered a reform of their telecommunications law, and it was so good! He worked with us early on... [he implemented] the best modern practices... That telecommunications law is still in effect. [laughter].

O.S. – You leave in 2000 and head back to Washington to be Foreign Affairs Advisor at the US Southern Command⁴⁴, where you gain a broader perspective and therefore, need to deal with other issues too. During that time, how much of those issues are Venezuela?

J.M. – Well, in the first two and half years in the Bush Administration, Venezuela was not the main issue. Little by little Venezuela was becoming an issue. The big issues [laughter] back then were related to Argentina⁴⁵.

³⁵ In English: “Oh, please, you are going to see. My [governing] style is going to be the most... well, very smart.”

³⁶ Major General Raúl Salazar was the Venezuelan Defense minister in 1999.

³⁷ In English: “My minister of Defense is going to be Raúl Salazar, the fat man.”

³⁸ Roberto Mandini, the former executive vice president and deputy chief executive of CITGO Petroleum Corporation, was named president of PDVSA by President-elect Hugo Chávez in 1999.

³⁹ José Alejandro Rojas was Venezuela’s Finance minister from 1999 to 2002.

⁴⁰ Denominated as the “*Ministro del Poder Popular para la Planificación*” in Venezuela.

⁴¹ Jorge Giordani was the head of the *Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Planificación* from 1999 to 2001, 2003 to 2008 and 2009 to 2014.

⁴² Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was President of Brazil between 2003 to 2011.

⁴³ Diosdado Cabello Rondón is a Venezuelan politician, former Speaker of the country's legislature, and an active member of the Venezuelan armed forces. He was the General Director of the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) in 1999 and later directly involved in Hugo Chávez’s return to power after the 2002 coup.

⁴⁴ The US Southern Command is a division of the Department of Defense’s Unified Combatant Commands and is responsible for the protection of the United States’ security interests in Central and South America.

⁴⁵ Argentina experienced a widespread economic crisis from 1998 to 2002 which led to riots and the destabilization of the central government.

O.S. – Of course, you were dealing with that too!

J.M. – Yes. I mean, I spent so much time with Argentina. Not that much with Mexico. The Mexico agenda was all positive and was moving in the right direction. Central America was moving in the right direction, back then. Brazil was a *big* question mark and I had the opportunity to watch the reaction of the Bush Administration when Lula was elected.

O.S. – Right, one of my colleagues, Matias Spektor ⁴⁶, has written a book about this and I would be very happy to send it to you.

J.M. – Yes, I talked to Matias! I had a long conversation with him.

O.S. – Wonderful! Great. Now he actually also recommended you, he said, “For this project, you must speak to John Maisto”. So, he describes how [Fernando Henrique] Cardoso⁴⁷ is fundamental in convincing the US government to provide support [to the Lula presidency] and to signal to the markets in Brazil that the United States – I wouldn’t say support – but that the United States would *bless* this candidate. This trust was crucial to avoid a capital flight with the arrival of Lula. If you at least look at the first six years, it was a success.

J.M. – Yes! Right.

O.S. – It was a very interesting example of how he shows that US engagement was crucial to assure institutional consolidation in Brazil.

J.M. – Think of the time, most of the hemisphere had democratic systems in place. The [Inter-American] Democratic Charter⁴⁸ came into effect on September 11, 2001. You have a Condoleezza Rice⁴⁹ and a George Bush believing in the democratic revolution in the hemisphere – and in the world! Wouldn’t they call it – after the Berlin Wall – it was the democracy dividend?!

O.S. – Yes, it was a time of profound optimism.

J.M. – That’s correct. Here in Washington there was a great belief that our role was to promote democracy. I remember that the first question that President Bush would ask me in my two and a half years as National Security Advisor when it came to elections in any country in the hemisphere was, “Did they have a good election? Was it free and fair? Does the population accept it? Credible elections?” The answer was yes.

O.S. – Yeah.

J.M. – And when that’s okay, we would have a normal relationship. When it came to Brazil, there were people in the establishment in Washington that were *really* concerned about Lula getting elected.

O.S. – Yeah, in Brazil too.

J.M. – Yeah, but President Bush, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell⁵⁰ in the State Department [said], “*Calma, calma*, everybody. This is something for the Brazilians to work out.” The very first question was, “Did they have a credible election that Brazilians accepted?” Yeah. President Bush’s custom was always to call the newly elected president in one or two days of the election.

⁴⁶ Matias Spektor is an Associate Professor of International Relations at FGV in Brazil and the author of *Kissinger e o Brasil* (Kissinger and Brazil). Zahar, 2008. 234 pages.

⁴⁷ Fernando Henrique Cardoso was President of Brazil between 1995 and 2003.

⁴⁸ The General Assembly of the Organization of American States adopted on September 11, 2001 the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

⁴⁹ Condoleezza Rice was the United States National Security Advisor from 2001 to 2005 and later served as the Secretary of State from 2005 to 2004.

⁵⁰ Colin Luther Powell was the US Secretary of State from 2001 to 2005.

O.S. – That’s right.

J.M. – He called Lula.

O.S. – That’s right. That appears in the book.

J.M. – Out of that telephone call he surprised everybody, because [what he said to Lula] was not in the briefing material. He suggested that President Lula come to Washington.

O.S. – He was on the plane and he was calling Lula, that’s right.

J.M. – Lula immediately said “yes” and in December Lula comes to Washington, he goes to the White House! [laughter].

O.S. – That’s right. Initially at least – until Iran, I would say – this was the best moment of Brazil and US relations in decades. We have never been back to that level. I mean, Condoleezza Rice and José Dirceu⁵¹ exchanged personal cell phone numbers...

J.M. – Oh yeah! It was very interesting, every once in a while [laughter] he would take a position and Condi⁵² would say, “Come on, Celso [Amorim]⁵³! You’re Brazil, you’re larger than that, you can do these things!” [laughter].

O.S. – Of course, right. That brings us to a really interesting question. There are two big strands of thinking in Brazil about the United States and Latin America. The first is espoused by a historian who has recently passed away and was quite influential – Moniz Bandeira⁵⁴. He believed that the key goal of the United States, the strategic interest of the United States, is to keep Brazil small.

J.M. – [laughter] Most Americans would probably, if you said that, laugh just like I did [laughter].

O.S. – Yes, exactly. But this is the dominant view, I would say. There is a profound belief that the United States is uncomfortable with Brazil assuming, not only rising, but also assuming greater responsibility in the region. Matias, on the other hand, argued that this is actually wrong. He wrote two books. One is called “Kissinger and Brazil”, which says that Kissinger tried to delegate certain issues to Brazil and say, “We would actually be quite happy for Brazil to assume a more dominant role in the region, because there are a lot of other things that we have to take on and deal with as the United States. We can’t prioritize Latin America all the time. In fact, the high point of Brazil-US relations was partly because Brazil was doing really well. There was a time when the US government before taking any big steps in Latin America, would – perhaps with the exception of Colombia – consult with Brazil. There was a perception in Washington that a strong Brazil could make the United States’ life easier in Latin America. There was always a tension between the vision of Brazil as a regional leader in regard to US military presence in Colombia. Supporting Plan Colombia⁵⁵ was impossible because it clashed

⁵¹ José Dirceu was the Lula presidency’s Chief of Staff from 2003 to 2005.

⁵² Reference to Condoleezza Rice.

⁵³ Celso Luiz Nunes Amorim was Brazil’s Minister of Foreign Affairs during the governments of Itamar Franco and Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, from 1993 to 1994 and 2003 to 2010, respectively.

⁵⁴ Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira was a Brazilian diplomat and academic that wrote prolifically about Brazil-US relations. His main view was that the United States’ interests in Latin America were, more often than not, detrimental to the interests of individual Latin American countries.

⁵⁵ Plan Colombia was an integral part of the United States’ strategy in combating drug cartels and left-wing insurgents in Latin America, specifically in Colombia and surrounding countries. The plan entailed high diplomatic initiative by the US government and also consisted of military and foreign aid to Colombia.

with Itamaraty's goal of excluding extra-regional powers in South America. Peter Romero⁵⁶ was in despair because he was so hopeful about this great relationship at the presidential level between [Fernando Henrique] Cardoso and Bill Clinton⁵⁷, but Cardoso was unable to give much support on Plan Colombia, ALCA⁵⁸...

J.M. – To deliver ALCA.

O.S. – Yeah, he couldn't deliver that; partly because the nationalist forces in Brazil would dramatically increase the political cost of any of that. It got to such an extent that Cardoso's second foreign minister, Celso Lafer⁵⁹, went to some US airport after 9/11 and some security guy asked him to take his shoes off. He didn't know he was a Foreign Affairs minister...

J.M. – Oh, I remember that one.

O.S. – And that was it. His political career was over after that. That gives you a sense of how sensitive these issues are. At the personal level, of course we should give support to Plan Colombia, but it's politically impossible. So, my question is, to what extent was Brazil seen as a potential partner when things were going south in Venezuela? Initially when the coup happened, it was still Cardoso; he sent a boat full of oil to Venezuela⁶⁰, one of his last acts when he was a president, after the coup failed and when Chávez was facing strikes in PDVSA in late 2002. Under Cardoso, how helpful was Brazil?

J.M. – Not [helpful].

O.S. – Right, and why is that?

J.M. – Look, it was confusing in Venezuela. We have to remember what happened in March of 2002. What was going on in the streets?⁶¹ Wave after wave of people going to the streets. And then things get very confusing. In the first few days, [the question] was "who shot whom?"⁶² We were here in Washington trying to understand this. Poor Charles Shapiro⁶³ was there [in Venezuela] trying to understand it.

O.S. – Do you think he was well connected? Do you think that he did what an Ambassador had to do? Because an ambassador's job is to make sure that *you* don't have to wake up in D.C. and say "Oh, my God!"

⁵⁶ Peter F. Romero served as US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs between 2000 and 2001 and as US Ambassador to Ecuador from 1993 to 1996. The oral history interview with Peter Romero is available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10438/20218>.

⁵⁷ William Jefferson Clinton was President of the United States between 1993 and 2001.

⁵⁸ ALCA (*Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas*) or FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) was proposed by the Clinton administration in 1994 as an agreement to reduce and/or eliminate trade tariffs within the Americas to help foster interregional commerce.

⁵⁹ Celso Lafer was Brazil's minister of Foreign Relations between 2001 and 2003.

⁶⁰ On the December 28, 2002, the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration accepted President-elect Lula's request to send an oil tanker to Venezuela as an effort to alleviate the effects of the *Para Petrolero*, that is, the Venezuelan general strike of 2002.

⁶¹ In the first few months of 2002, owing to the general strike which began in December of 2001, Venezuela underwent profound social and political unrest.

⁶² On April 11, 2002, violent clashes between protestors left 19 people dead and more than 80 wounded in Caracas. Venezuelan journalist Jorge Tortoza was among those shot in the head while covering the events in the capital. Following the tragedies, there was confusion as to who perpetrated the acts.

⁶³ Charles Shapiro is a United States diplomat with extensive experience in Latin American affairs. He was the former Ambassador to Venezuela from 2002 to 2004.

J.M. – There are times when even the US ambassador can't do that. We had the only foreign military presence in *Fuerte Tiuna*⁶⁴ with the American assistance mission. And our people knew everybody. The Venezuelan military was divided.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – Okay. Then you had what was going on in the streets, wave after wave after wave and then the event itself. Then Chávez was not to be seen, he was captured. I'd describe it as a confused and confusing situation. You had the Rio Group⁶⁵ meeting in San José, Costa Rica and [they] were angry about it. We have to remember; the Inter-American Democratic Charter was supposed to have been in full flower.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – So that's what should have been applied and that's what everybody tried to do. That's what Roger [Noriega]⁶⁶ engineered as our Ambassador to the OAS. You were talking about the Friends of Venezuela⁶⁷?

O.S. – Yes, that came later. Because things didn't really get that much better in 2003. That was Lula and Celso Amorim already putting a group of people together to assure that this wasn't going off the rails again.

J.M. – Yeah, because Chávez and company were very successful in depicting this – and to a certain extent they were right – as the widest attempt to grab power in Venezuela. The Venezuelan military was divided. [There are] those who accepted the view of the Venezuelan private sector. Analyze who was in *Miraflores*⁶⁸ with the idiot. What's his name? The President of the Chamber of Commerce... Pedro Carmona!⁶⁹ Who ever heard of a Latin American coup lead by a President of the Chamber of Commerce? I mean, come on! [laughter].

O.S. – Yeah, there are so many questions about that particular day. The timing of the coup was terrible and it was badly executed. So, starting on November 13th, 2001 you have the “*Decretos Presidenciales*”⁷⁰, the 49 executive orders. You have the “*Ley de las Tierras*”⁷¹ and...

⁶⁴ *Fuerte Tiuna* (formally Fort Tiuna Military Complex) is a Venezuelan military installation in Caracas, Venezuela. It is the headquarters of the Venezuelan Department of Defense.

⁶⁵ 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 (one day before the opposition led coup on Chávez's government), the annual meeting of the Heads of State of the Rio Group began in San José, Costa Rica and came to a close on April 15th.

⁶⁶ Roger Francisco Noriega served under the George W. Bush administration as US Permanent Representative to the Organization of American States from 2001 to 2003 and as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs between 2003 and 2005. His oral history interview is available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10438/19939>.

⁶⁷ The Group of Friends of Venezuela, composed of Brazil, Chile, Spain, the United States, Mexico and Portugal, was created in 2002 in Quito, Ecuador in order to aid the Organization of American States (OAS) in seeking a peaceful solution to the Venezuela crisis.

⁶⁸ The *Palacio de Miraflores* is the building that houses Venezuela's official presidential office.

⁶⁹ Pedro Carmona was the President of the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce (*Fedecámaras* - *Federación de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción de Venezuela*) and was installed for 48 hours as President of Venezuela after the coup attempt in April 2002.

⁷⁰ On November 13, 2001, Chávez enacted 49 laws by executive order, i.e. *los decretos presidenciales*, including the “*Ley de Tierras*” and “*Ley de Hidrocarburos*”. This angered the right wing and corporate classes.

⁷¹ The “*Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario*” was an ambitious land and agrarian reform program enacted by executive order during the Hugo Chávez administration. It entered into force on December 10, 2001.

J.M. – Yes, all of these things, piece by piece showed that Chávez was becoming more authoritarian.

O.S. – Did you speak again to him?

J.M. – No. By the time I left in August 2000, I was decorated by the Venezuelan government! And I could get in to see Chávez anytime I wanted. Chávez once told me – and this was early, this was during 1999, after one of his trips to the United States – he says to me, “I see myself politically as in the third wave with Bill Clinton and Tony Blair⁷²!”

O.S. – That’s fascinating, I have read a lot about Chávez and I have never heard about that.

J.M. – He played hard ball politically in Venezuela. Once, I remember saying to him, “Mr. President, your language is pretty tough with regard to the people you oppose and you know it sounds as if you are becoming more authoritarian”. He’d say, “*Tiene que entender como es la política venezolana. ¡Claro que sí! ¡Jugamos duro, claro que sí! Yo fui acercando la línea, sí, de acuerdo. Pero no voy a cruzar la línea. ¡Ellos van a saber que yo administro el poder!*”⁷³

O.S. – There is an interesting interview with Chávez when he talks about the necessity of the recall referendum and that if people vote him out, he’s out. Did you feel that other governments played that same moderating role? We spoke to [Luiz Felipe] Lampreia⁷⁴ and [Celso] Lafer and [Fernando Henrique] Cardoso, and all of them said that they spoke to him. After the coup, Cardoso said, “It’s good to give amnesty to these people, you have to be a moderating force.” Did you sense that Brazil actually did that?

J.M. – No, no, no. Cardoso *did*. There were Presidents who tried to do this. But Chavez wasn’t paying much attention. With regard to Brazil later on, the view in Washington was – as I saw it – that in the Lula presidency there wasn’t much concern about the direction that Chávez was going.

O.S. – There are several competing narratives. One is that Chávez was a threat to Brazil’s broader leadership project.

J.M. – Yeah.

O.S. – He may have been actually challenging it. There was a time when he was becoming quite known globally. He wasn’t necessarily more known than Lula, but he was certainly somebody who wouldn’t easily integrate into a “Brazil-centric” South America. So, a lot of people said, “Well, you have to do as much you can – and Chávez is difficult to manage – but if you start isolating Chávez, you’ll divide Latin America. He has got a lot of money, especially later on.” For example, Nicaragua still votes today with Venezuela because they are afraid that the opposition victory would cause a President [Henrique] Capriles⁷⁵ or [Leopoldo] López or whoever to ask the Nicaraguans to repay the money that Venezuela has lent to Nicaragua. So even broke, they still gather lots of international votes on all sorts of issues.

J.M. – Oh yeah, Venezuelan oil money, and in the Caribbean as well.

⁷² Tony Blair was the Prime-minister of the United Kingdom between 1997 and 2007.

⁷³ In English: “You have to understand what Venezuelan politics is like. Of course! We play hardball, of course! I have been approaching ‘the line’, yes, I’ll give you that. But I’m not going to cross ‘the line’. They will know that I have the power.”

⁷⁴ Luis Felipe Lampreia was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Brazil from 1995 to 2001. His oral history interview is available at: www.fgv.br/cpd/doc/acervo/historia-oral/entrevista-tematica/luiz-felipe-lampreia-ii.

⁷⁵ Henrique Capriles is a Venezuelan oppositionist politician, former governor of Miranda state from 2008 to 2017 and two-time presidential candidate. In April 2017, Capriles was barred from participating in the 2018 elections due to “administrative irregularities”.

O.S. – Why do you think the April 2002 coup was so badly executed? Did you think that the reason was incompetence? I know a lot of these people and they explain, “Well, yes... Pedro Carmona was badly advised.” The fact that they chose to stage the coup at a time when government representatives were gathered in the region shows how little they thought about this, right? The Russians know that timing matters, they invade Georgia when the Olympics are taking place [irony]⁷⁶. You want to make sure that the attention is elsewhere. So, they could have done it during the World Cup or something...

J.M. – They weren’t thinking of anything like that.

O.S. – Yes, exactly. But did you know Carmona from your time as ambassador?

J.M. – Yes, we knew him as President of the Chamber of Commerce. As a matter of fact, he had come to Washington and that’s one of the things that the Chávez people, the leftist elements of Latin America and the left here [in the United States] used as justification for the accusations that the US was responsible because Carmona came to Washington. I saw Carmona when he came to Washington, I was at the NSC. [He presented] the typical view of the business community, etc.

O.S. – A couple of generals, including General Rincón⁷⁷, also had a trip to Washington. That’s interesting, especially because one of the things that critics normally say is that the generals would never try to stage the coup without confirming they have some international support.

J.M. – There were some attempts, by those folks, by the Venezuelan opposition.

O.S. – To reach out and say...

J.M. – Yes, there were some attempts to reach out here in Washington.

O.S. – So to whom would they reach out to and gather support? The policy makers or think tanks?

J.M. – You have to ask Otto Reich⁷⁸ about that. There is a famous story you’ve probably heard of already about the stuff that was going down in April. The State Department called in the ambassadors to give the Assistant Secretary the opportunity to provide a briefing as to what was going on. I wasn’t there and neither the National Security Council nor I knew that the Assistant Secretary was going to do that. It wasn’t surprising that in the fast-moving situation the US policy was “The Venezuelans have to resolve this.” The meeting was going on in Costa Rica, there was an announcement in Caracas that Chávez was no longer the President by the time.⁷⁹ It was confused and confusing. The Assistant Secretary briefed the diplomatic corps and said, “There has been a political change in Venezuela. The Venezuelan people have spoken”.

O.S. – Right. Exactly, yes, this is known, yes.

J.M. – One member of the [Brazilian] diplomatic corps said, “Mr. Assistant Secretary, with all due respect, in my country when the people speak, they speak through elections.”⁸⁰ That was

⁷⁶ During the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the Russian military crossed the border into Georgia in order to support the separatist groups in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, therefore initiating the Russo-Georgian War.

⁷⁷ General Lucas Rincón was part of the high command of the Venezuelan military at the time of the 2002 coup attempt against Hugo Chávez.

⁷⁸ Otto Reich was US ambassador to Venezuela from 1986 to 1989 and assistant secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs from January to November 2002.

⁷⁹ On April 12, 2002, General Lucas Rincon, then Minister of Defense, announced that Chávez had resigned.

⁸⁰ Ambassador Roger Noriega also mentions this episode in his oral history interview, which is available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10438/19939>. According to the ambassador, it was either Valter Pecly Moreira “or the bilateral guy [Rubens Barbosa]” that voiced this opinion.

a good moment for Brazil. But what report went back to all the capitals? The Americans were saying, “It’s over!”

O.S. – Condoleezza Rice later on also said that Chávez had it coming. Do you think that saying something like that was a mistake, which played into the hands of the accusers?

J.M. – In retrospect, probably. What she was trying to do and what we were trying to do was to interpret and explain what was going on. The piece that people have tended to forget was what was going on in the two to three weeks before the coup. It looked like Argentina, like Bolivia, think about the changes when people go to the streets... That’s how [Fernando] de la Rúa⁸¹ lost power in Argentina.

O.S. – That’s right.

J.M. – That’s how poor Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada⁸² lost power in Bolivia. That’s what happened in Ecuador⁸³.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – At that particular time, these pressures, these popular pressures of governments that had really gone off the rails. Moisés Naím⁸⁴ wrote a column back then, a couple of weeks afterward, which to me was one of the best analysis.

O.S. – What did he say?

J.M. – That there was in process a popular demand for change that was either lost or stolen by the Venezuelan oligarchy [laughter] and the whole movement lost all credibility. Because it was viewed as the private sector led by the President of the Chamber of Commerce and some military guys who wanted to *grab* the power. Really at the same time, there was an effort going on in the Venezuelan legislature to channel all this into a constitutional process to...

O.S. – ... to remove Chávez! Yes, there is actually a lot of people who say that without Carmona he would have been...

J.M. – ... would have been removed. Yes! They would have done something! Venezuelans thought they could jump through hoops and actually cite the constitution, Chavez’s own constitution through Article 350⁸⁵! But that never had an opportunity.

O.S. – Right. And when that happens, of course, it’s quite interesting that afterwards this has been used by Chávez... During these days, beginning on April 11th, Friday, were you in DC?

J.M. – Yes, I was in DC.

⁸¹ Fernando de la Rúa was President of Argentina from 1999 to 2001, when he resigned amid the Argentine financial crisis.

⁸² Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada served as President of Bolivia for two non-consecutive terms, first from 1993 to 1997 and a second time from 2002 to 2003, when he was forced to resign following violent clashes with protesters during the 2003 *Guerra del Gas*.

⁸³ In 1997, in the midst of national protests and general strikes, the Ecuadorian Parliament removed President Abdalá Bucaram and his Vice-President, Rosalía Arteaga, from power for alleged “mental incapacity” and granted the presidency to the President of the Congress, Fabián Alarcón.

⁸⁴ Moisés Naím is an author, columnist and media commentator that has served as Venezuela’s Minister of Trade and Industry, director of Venezuela’s Central Bank, and as executive director of the World Bank. Currently, he has his own television program, “*Efecto Naím*”, which is dedicated to discussing current economic and politic affairs.

⁸⁵ Article 350 of Venezuela’s 1999 Constitution states that, “The people of Venezuela, true to their republican tradition and their struggle for independence, peace and freedom, shall disown any regime, legislation or authority that violates democratic values, principles and guarantees or encroaches upon human rights.”

O.S. – At that stage is the President being briefed on that?

J.M. – Yes.

O.S. – Who does that? Condoleezza Rice...?

J.M. – The National Security Advisor and the Senior Director: me. We were constantly providing updates.

O.S. – To the President?

J.M. – Yeah, with Condi and the President. I was preparing stuff for the entire National Security Council community. I was also briefing Ari Fleischer⁸⁶ because he had to brief the press as well. From where were we getting the information? Through the classic way. We got our information from the State Department, from the intelligence community, we had our military attachés and a group that was in contact with Venezuelan military. But we were getting confusing information! We were getting information from our friendly governments in the area, including the Spanish.

O.S. – Yes, the Spanish were there. When do you think Carmona took this decision?

J.M. – It was really confusing, because the information that was coming in was contradictory.

O.S. – Yes. Exactly and I think this is one of the key things that is important for us to understand is how do you operate with imperfect information?

J.M. – It was a confused situation within Venezuela and, as a result of that, it was confusing for all of us to try to understand. What was the concern of the United States? I'll tell you. One of the big concerns here in Washington was that we were afraid that if the opposition military had Chávez, they were going to kill him. We did not want that, which is one of the reasons why we and the Spanish tried to get to Carmona and...

O.S. – Did you reach Carmona during that time?

J.M. – You have to ask Charles Shapiro about that. We authorized [Charles Shapiro], along with the Spanish Ambassador, to go in and impress upon Carmona – because it looked as if Carmona was in charge, yes – the constitution had to be respected, the law had to be respected, and if there would be any change in Venezuela, it had to be democratic. He had no right to the presidency! So, they would have to have elections very soon.

O.S. – Right, so did he strike you as a naturally born leader?

J.M. – No, and that was a problem! That wasn't *the* problem, but...

O.S. – We've also interviewed Osmar Chohfi⁸⁷ who was the Brazilian ambassador at the OAS and he says the exact same thing! He actually had dinner with Carmona two days before [the coup] – if I'm not mistaken in Bogota – and they sit next to each other and he says to me "This didn't look to me like a man who was about to stage a military coup." Because you need some kind of charisma...

J.M. – Yeah, yes.

O.S. – So if you don't go through an election...

⁸⁶ Lawrence Ari Fleischer was the White House Press Secretary from 2001 to 2003 during the George W. Bush administration.

⁸⁷ Osmar Vladimir Chohfi was the Brazilian ambassador to Ecuador from 1994 to 1999 and to the OAS from 2005 to 2008. The oral history interview with Osmar Chohfi is available at: <http://www.fgv.br/cpdac/acervo/historia-oral/entrevista-tematica/osmar-vladimir-chohfi>.

J.M. – Then the idiotic part of the Venezuelan military was busy dividing up power.

O.S. – So to some extent this may be a sign that there is a lot of incompetence in play?

J.M. – They thought they were very smart politically, but they weren't.

O.S. – So then you have the response, there was a meeting in Costa Rica...

J.M. – And the Foreign Affairs minister of Venezuela was there.

O.S. – Exactly.

J.M. – Luis Alfonso Dávila⁸⁸.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – And he admitted that it looked like this government was over and he was going back and he wasn't going to be Foreign Minister anymore.

O.S. – That's right and it's interesting to look at this particular moment because this has been used quite a lot in the aftermath. There have been constant allegations by the Venezuelan government that this was a CIA led thing etc. How did you engage with the [Chávez] government then?

J.M. – After [the coup attempt]? We tried to engage. We tried to have a normal diplomatic relationship with them. It was... it started being difficult after that time, in spite of the fact – and you have to ask Charles Shapiro about this – that Chávez acknowledged that the United States had nothing to do with the coup attempt in Venezuela during a meeting with Charles Shapiro. When Chávez came back... and you should reread his speech!⁸⁹ When Chávez came back, it was kind of a contrived, "Yes, you have reason to be concerned with me but I'm going to do better."

O.S. – Which lead us to think that his response and then his radicalization is more due to particular internal reasons.

J.M. – Absolutely! And then he was being pulled by the left on the situation.

O.S. – At what point do you think that the region could have engaged more positively and where do you see, in broader terms, the US role?

J.M. – This is where the region failed. Where all of us failed. In taking the Inter-American Democratic Charter and saying, "Chávez, this is what we do nowadays and what you are up to are piece by piece violations of the Inter-American Democratic Charter." Now, what was difficult in doing that? There were other people who were doing stuff like that too, the Ecuadorian presidents were doing that.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – I remember when the President of Ecuador in about 2005 fired the Supreme Court!⁹⁰

O.S. – That's right.

J.M. – I mean he just dispatched them. I was ambassador at the OAS. Do you know what was the reaction of the OAS? The Ecuadorian Ambassador was there. Were *we* going to raise it?

⁸⁸ Luis Alfonso Dávila was the Venezuelan minister of Foreign Affairs from 2001 to 2002.

⁸⁹ The speech, given by President Chávez after his restitution to power on April 14, 2002, is published in the book, "2002 - Año De La Resistencia Antiimperialista - Selección De Discursos Del Presidente De La República Bolivariana De Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías".

⁹⁰ On April 15, 2005, President Lucio Gutiérrez of Ecuador dissolved the Supreme Court and declared a national state of emergency amid protests against his government in Quito.

My advice to the State Department was, “No, we shouldn’t take the lead on this.” If it were us taking the lead, the reaction would be, “Well here they go again... the gringos...”

O.S. – That’s right. So, you were aware of that dynamic?

J.M. – Yeah. Nothing happened because the Ecuadorian Ambassador said, “This is an internal thing, don’t mess around with our internal stuff!”

O.S. – Right.

J.M. – Evo [Morales]⁹¹ was doing things, the Sandinistas were doing things... You just had this erosion of pieces of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Nobody would step up! And Venezuela just kept moving in that direction.

O.S. – Yeah. Do you think that the Venezuelan opposition’s public calls on the US to do something about Chávez were counterproductive?

J.M. – Absolutely.

O.S. – Because in 2004 Carlos Andres Perez makes this plea to the United States. Were you not saying that this was the worst way to actually...

J.M. – We used to say that to them, but we couldn’t control their doing that and thinking that *to this day* [laughter].

O.S. – That’s actually quite interesting, there is notion of omnipresence, of a capacity to shape issues and then when something bad happens this can be easily attributed to US meddling.

J.M. – And by the way, this type of thinking is aided and abetted by the nationalist type of leadership throughout the hemisphere.

O.S. – But if you think in purely utilitarian terms it makes total sense for politicians to make to blame external actions.

J.M. – Sure.

O.S. – What are your thoughts on the Brazilian government’s relationship with Venezuela? In 2007, there are many in the Brazilian government who say, “Well, we kind of know where this is going, but we make a lot of money in Venezuela.” Considering that you were at the OAS until the end of 2006 – and there’s a meeting in 2004 where you openly say that, “If all we can do is revert back to our national sovereignty, then there is really no point in discussing these things” – how do you see the response in the OAS? Did you sense a Brazilian failure, as is one of the hypotheses? Was this failure only Brazil’s? What else could have been done other than reiterating the democratic charter?

J.M. – I consider it a South America thing and Brazil exercises its leadership in [South America]. People look to Brazil. What did we see in the OAS? I think we saw that Brazilian diplomacy was focused on advancing the interests *of Brazil* in the Venezuelan case. And what are the interests of Brazil? In my own interpretation, while I was still there and then afterwards, Brazil was getting everything it wanted and needed from Venezuela. What was it? Brazilian investment, a welcoming atmosphere for anything Brazil wanted to do commercially, a Brazilian government that is left of center and that is able to sell itself to that cohort in Brazil and is able to say, “Look, we support Venezuela.” With that comes the perception of criticizing the United States. For example, many in the intellectual class fall into that category. But anyways, why in the world would Brazil want to step up and say, “Venezuela, hey, you guys!

⁹¹ Juan Evo Morales Ayma was elected to the office of President of Bolivia three times during the election years of 2005, 2009 and 2014. In 2008, he presented a new constitution that established Bolivia as a plurinational state and allowed him to stand for reelection in 2009 and 2014.

This is not the right way.” At the same time that Brazil is carrying out its own democratic system that is working and has its own institutions that are working, etc.

O.S. – Do you think that the most influence came from business interests rather than an ideological push? Brazil was also divided, for example there was Marco Aurelio Garcia ⁹²who was more of an ideologue. Did you engage with Brazilians during that time? With different members of the foreign policy team?

J.M. – Yes, we did. But we had other fish to fry with Brazil. We had a whole set of other issues in our relationship with Brazil. We were continuing to think, “It was up to the Venezuelans to solve this and they can.” They can because the Venezuelan opposition was functioning back then, it functioned for years. Of course, they were divided and that’s their problem. But, again, we said, “You guys will have to work this out.” I remember talking to the Venezuelan opposition and I’d say, “Why don’t you go and talk to your Brazilian counterparts?” and they said “Ah the Brazilians [don’t respond]”

O.S. – Yes, we had that sense too. We spoke to Capriles two years ago and he was very dismissive. He was very clear, he said that the Brazilians had much at stake, Odebrecht contracts, for example...

J.M. – Sure. Absolutely.

O.S. – During the ten years you were directly involved in Venezuela, Chávez changes all the time his vice-presidents, many ministers. What do you make of that? Was that a sign of that he needed to rebalance his coalition?

J.M. – From my many conversations with Chávez, my view was he just quite didn’t know. He had a great faith in his gut instincts about Venezuelan politics. And again, he really didn’t trust civilians that much. I was always intrigued by why later on he put so much faith and trust in [Nicolás] Maduro⁹³...

O.S. – Yeah.

J.M. – I can’t figure that one out.

O.S. – Did you keep in touch at that time? So, in 2004, it really comes to blows at the OAS and you’re verbally attacked. At this stage, the Venezuelan Ambassador to the OAS says that the coup is the United States’ work and that this is an example of how Washington is actively working to weaken Chávez.

J.M. – I used to have debates with the Venezuelan Ambassador at the OAS.

O.S. – Yes, exactly, those are quite known and several other people we spoke to make references to those conversations. What does that mean in practice? Does that mean that presidents don’t talk to each other on the phone any longer? Did Chávez speak on the phone to President Bush? Did you speak to the Foreign minister?

J.M. – Chávez wanted to engage with Bush. Chávez had the opportunity to engage with Clinton. I was with him once in the White House, before Chávez was inaugurated. [I was with him] once at the UN. Those meetings were very interesting, if you can imagine, you would not be surprised. But those of us who know Bill Clinton... Clinton could not get a word in edgewise. Chávez did all the talk. And Chávez said to me once about Bush, “All I need is three hours to

⁹² Marco Aurelio Garcia, of the Brazilian Worker’s Party (PT), was the Foreign Policy Advisor to the President of Brazil during the governments of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff.

⁹³ Nicolás Maduro was the Venezuelan Foreign minister from 2006 to 2013 and later Vice-President from 2012 to 2013 in the Hugo Chávez administration. Maduro assumed the presidency after Chávez’s death on March 5, 2013.

sit down with George Bush and I will convince him about the Venezuelan revolution!” I knew George Bush and there was *no way* that could’ve happened. Bush met him once and I was there.

O.S. – Where was that?

J.M. – It was in Québec. At the Summit of the Americas.⁹⁴ And it was a very interesting conversation. Because the Andean Presidents were there: [Andrés] Pastrana⁹⁵, Hugo Banzer⁹⁶ and Chávez. That was April of 2002. It went like this: Chávez and Bush shake hands and the first thing Chavez says is in English – Chávez couldn’t speak English – he says, “Mr. President, I want to be your friend”. George Bush replied, “Mr. President, I want to be *your* friend as well.” Then Chávez says in Spanish, “*Yo quiero que usted sepa, Señor presidente, que Venezuela nunca va a hacer nada que va a ser contra los intereses de los Estados Unidos con nuestra revolución*”.⁹⁷ Bush says, “Mr. President, I appreciate that. Where I come from, Texas, we measure somebody by what they say and then compare it to what they do”. That was the conversation.

O.S. – That was the entire conversation?

J.M. – Well, no, then someone pulled... you know how it is in these things...

O.S. – That was in a larger room?

J.M. – No, it was in a small room. A room with just the presidents, Bush and me. Then they sat down, they had a regional Andean meeting.

O.S. – So there was translator for Chávez too or just the three of you?

J.M. – No, I did the interpretation, but Bush understands Spanish.

O.S. – But he responded in English?

J.M. – Bush responded to him, but Bush always responded in English.

O.S. – Yeah.

J.M. – He would not speak Spanish. Well, he speaks Spanish, but he has a very [strong] Texan accent.

O.S. – So after that there was no longer a high level [meeting]?

J.M. – No, they never had a bilateral.

O.S. – Did you ever think that having a bilateral would help? Because one of the things is quite interesting is the Venezuelan case affects bilateral relationships throughout South and Central America. For example, when [Manuel] Zelaya⁹⁸ falls this becomes clear. We spoke to Zelaya and one of his key advisors during the constitutional crisis, Armando Sarmiento⁹⁹, who came to Washington to try to build up a coalition, meeting with [Hillary] Clinton¹⁰⁰, etc. Many people in [the United States] Congress said, “If Zelaya keeps contacting Venezuela, using Chavez’s plane, etc., that makes it difficult for us to mobilize against the coup, we can’t put pressure on

⁹⁴ The Third Summit of the Americas was held in Quebec City, Canada from April 20 to April 22, 2001.

⁹⁵ Andrés Pastrana Arango was the President of Colombia from 1998 to 2002.

⁹⁶ Hugo Banzer Suárez was the President of Bolivia for two non-consecutive terms from 1971 to 1978 and later 1997 to 2001.

⁹⁷ In English: “I want you to know, Mr. President, that Venezuela will never do anything that would go against the interests of the United States with our revolution”

⁹⁸ José Manuel Zelaya Rosales was the Honduran president from 2006 to 2009. On June 28, 2009 he was deposed in a military backed coup. His oral history interview is available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10438/20725>

⁹⁹ Armando Sarmiento was Director of the *Dirección Ejecutiva de Ingresos* (DEI) of Honduras.

¹⁰⁰ Hillary Clinton was the US Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013.

the relevant institutions for Zelaya to return.” So, Sarmiento called Zelaya and said, “Zelaya, stay away from Chávez now because we need support in Washington for you to go back to power.” Zelaya was “*todo corazón*”, all heart, no strategy. So, he kept going back to Chávez.

J.M. – You compliment Zelaya, but that’s another assumption. You compliment [inaudible] Venezuela.

O.S. – Well, he was no strategist. Let’s put it that way.

J.M. – Not at all.

O.S. – So what I’m saying is that this had a real cost to the United States because Chávez was affecting the bilateral relations of the United States with other countries. At what stage, would you say things transform from a fairly cordial atmosphere to damage control? At what stage do you sit down and tell either Condoleezza Rice or the President, “This is a thing where there is nothing that the United States can do, this is unfixable.”

J.M. – No, we always... the way it worked in Bush’s White House was the President didn’t want to get pulled into something with Chávez. Let the people who deal with Venezuela deal with it. President Bush was not at all convinced that Hugo Chávez was a democratic. He was receiving piece-by-piece reports of what Chávez was doing. Well, going back to what Bush said to Chávez, “I’ll listen to what you say but I’ll compare it to what you do”, what Chávez was doing did not match what Chávez was wanting to convey. Then Chávez would insult [the Bush Administration].

O.S. – At the UN and other events.

J.M. – Yeah, but that was later on. Before that, there was the Summit of the Americas where they could have talked, Mar del Plata, in 2005.

O.S. – That’s right, I think Colin Powell met the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, but Bush did not meet with the Chávez.

J.M. – They were in the same room and I was there too, but they didn’t talk to each other. By that time, Chávez was insulting the United States and Chávez was really angry that his friends were not supporting what he was saying about the United States in Mar del Plata. People like the President of the Dominican Republic, Leonel [Fernández]¹⁰¹ and the Brazilians were playing it very cool, along with Argentina at the Summit, etc.

O.S. – To what extent do you think was there a regional engagement to reduce the damage that this was creating? We know that Brazil for example was worried that the situation could become unstable this could even get at some point the United States engaged...

J.M. – Yeah, but Brazil wasn’t doing anything about it! The most that Brazil would do was, “You guys have to talk to him. You have to talk to Chávez.”

O.S. – Did Brazil ask you to talk to Chávez or did you ask Brazil?

J.M. – No, Lula suggested, to George Bush, to speak to Chávez. And the Argentines and others used to do [the same thing]. Several of them wanted to be the intermediary. But it was obvious, there was no real desire on the part of Bush to getting sucked into sitting down and talking to Chávez. And that was the idea because Condoleezza Rice’s and Colin Powell’s recommendation – they were the two Secretaries of State – they both...

O.S. – They both said “don’t do it”?

¹⁰¹ Leonel Fernández was President of the Dominican Republic for three terms, first from 1996 to 2000, later from 2004 to 2008, and lastly from 2008 to 2012.

J.M. – No, no, no. Our policy messages to Chávez were, “Look, let’s work out some of the differences, let’s try to get pieces of it worked out.” For example, energy agreements, trade disputes, cooperation on fighting international terrorism, fighting narcotics trafficking, etc.

O.S. – When did the issue of narcotics and organized crime come up for the first time? Did they come up when you were an Ambassador?

J.M. – Oh yes, oh yes. Narcotics and organized crime all of those things, our message was constant. Before we talk about the overall relationship – which Chávez really wanted to get into – we said, “No, let’s do small pieces of it to show...” and very early on – and that was the Clinton administration – we were doing these small pieces.

O.S. – So that deteriorated at some point?

J.M. – I used to say this to their foreign ministers – and they had a series of foreign ministers and I knew all of them – I used to say, “Let’s sit down and hammer it out. Let’s get some high-level meetings and let’s hammer out these things to be able to show each side that we can work together.” Their responses were always, “*¡Sí! cómo no?! ¡Tú tienes razón, Embajador! ¡Tenemos que hacer; lo vamos a hacer!*”¹⁰² and we used to say, “Let’s start in Caracas and we’ll send people [to discuss] trade issues or energy issues...” We sent cabinet-level people and the Venezuelans stood them up. They would say “Yes, *sí, sí, etc.*” and then when it came down to [the real deal], when we thought we had the bases to at least start talking, there would be a [negative] announcement and they would say, “No, no, no...” Because, even if there were some in the Venezuelan government who thought that it was a good idea to do that, there were others who would say, “No, wait a minute.”

O.S. – When it came down to the technical stuff, you had your team and they had their team, but did you sense a politicization of bureaucracy? When discussing transitional scenarios, one of the things we realize is that there was a politicization of the bureaucracy. Was there a point in which the US government clearly said, “There is no point in talking to these people or was there a constant engagement...?”

J.M. – There were attempts. During my time I engaged and tried to move it. Charles [Shapiro] tried to do it when he was an ambassador, the successors tried to do it, Patrick [Duddy]¹⁰³ tried too. There was – for a little while – this happy talk and then nothing happened.

O.S. – Ok, this is a pattern that we’ve also heard from the Brazilians. Second to last issue I want to ask is about the bilateral relationship of the United States and Brazil. Despite you saying that there were other fish to fry, Venezuela continued to be a relevant issue. But would you say that Venezuela was becoming an issue that negatively affected other bilateral matters? Or were you able to circumvent this?

J.M. – Yeah, but not in a “weighty” way. This began to grow and grow and grow. One other thing, there was a desire to do an FTAA¹⁰⁴ and bring Brazil around to it and the hiatus came in Mar del Plata at the Summit of the Americas when the Argentines wouldn’t allow language in the declaration that kept the interest in the process moving. What was very interesting about that was Brazilian diplomacy was so good in Mar del Plata, in the Lula government that President Bush after the Mar del Plata Summit in 2005 visited Brazil. The joint declaration¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² In English: “Yes! How [can we] not?! You are right, Ambassador! We have to; we are going to!”

¹⁰³ Patrick Duddy was the US Ambassador to Venezuela from 2007 to 2008, when he was expelled by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Duddy was reinstated as ambassador in 2009 when both countries restored diplomatic relations. He finished his assignment in July 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Free Trade Area of the Americas, see footnote 58.

¹⁰⁵ During a barbecue at the Granja do Torto Presidential Residence in Brasília on November 6, 2005, President Bush and President Lula each gave speeches emphasizing the bilateral relationship between the United States and Brazil. The transcribed documents are available at the [George Bush White House Archives](#) and the [Biblioteca da Presidência da República](#).

of the United States and Brazil about trade issues was exactly what the United States was trying to push and that the Argentines would not permit. The Brazilian position in Mar del Plata was, “It’s the Argentines that take the lead.”

O.S. – Yeah.

J.M. – It was [Néstor] Kirchner¹⁰⁶. Kirchner had his own problem with the United States. Kirchner’s problem with the United States had to do with the Malvinas. He wanted a declaration in Mar del Plata in 2005, which had all the countries of the hemisphere supporting the Argentine view. We said, “No.” This really bothered him.

O.S. – Personally?

J.M. – I don’t think he thought through that other countries would say no...

O.S. – Brazil is not interested in prioritizing it...

J.M. – Yeah, think about Canada and the English-speaking Caribbean, come on! But he led with us and we just kept saying, “No!” If you go back to Mar del Plata declaration, there were five countries that did not go along [with the FTAA]: the four Mercosur countries led by Argentina plus Venezuela. There were 31 countries that had signed on and still kept the hope that there would be a free trade agreement of the Americas.¹⁰⁷ That was the high point, after that, forget about it...

O.S. – Yeah, I agree. Although I sometimes doubt that had [José] Serra¹⁰⁸ won whether that would have changed anything.

J.M. – Then you get back to the thinking in Brazil, that really doesn’t accept the notion of a free trade area of the Americas along with the United States. Brazilian interests are not well-served...

O.S. – It’s in the geopolitical context and you can see that it’s not personal against the United States, it’s actually against Mexico. Because with a FTAA, then Mexico’s could see eye to eye.

J.M. – But it’s interesting at the OAS to watch Mexicans and Brazilians try to outmaneuver each other [laughter].

O.S. – Right. I find it...

J.M. – That was one of the amusing moments.

O.S. – I can imagine.

J.M. – For example, [President Vicente] Fox¹⁰⁹ comes to the United States for a state visit in September of 2000. Jorge Castañeda¹¹⁰ is the Secretary [of Foreign Affairs]. Fox announces in his speech to a joint session of congress, that Mexico is going to leave the Rio Treaty¹¹¹ because it’s not needed anymore. [He says,] “The Cold War is over!” The notion that “an attack against

¹⁰⁶ Néstor Kirchner was the Argentine President from 2003 to 2007.

¹⁰⁷ During the IV Summit of Americas in Mar del Plata, Argentina, 29 countries demonstrated favorability in continuing discussions over the FTAA – five other countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela) were against the free trade agreement.

¹⁰⁸ José Serra was the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) candidate in the 2002 presidential elections.

¹⁰⁹ Vicente Fox Quesada was the President of Mexico from 2000 to 2006.

¹¹⁰ Jorge Castañeda Gutman was Mexico’s Secretary of Foreign Affairs from 2000 to 2003.

¹¹¹ The Rio Treaty, also known as the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, was proposed by the Truman Administration in the United States and signed in 1947 by 23 countries of the Americas. The document represented the hemispheric defense doctrine of the United States during the Cold War and codified the notion that an attack against one member would be considered an attack against all and would thus require mutual defense responses.

one is attack against us all” is old news! They make the announcement and give two years notice. Then September 11th happens and Brazil at the OAS invokes the Rio Treaty.

O.S. – Yeah, that’s right.

J.M. – We tipped our hats to Brazil! That was so smart [laughter].

O.S. – To what extent do you think that there was a broader attempt to contain Venezuela and to what extent was that affected by the notion that Venezuela was more than just a problematic bilateral relationship? In other words, the perception that this was in fact a dangerous situation because there was a lot of money flowing around, there was increasing cooperation between organized crime, the drug issue, etc. Roger [Noriega] mentions that there is a broader effort that involves Cuba, so to what extent do you think Cuba *really* played the role in all this? I must say, I was in Caracas two years ago and we asked a lot of questions – I mean of course, the kinds of conversations with the Chávez people and the Maduro people is an anthropological experience, I mean, they tell you about Bolívar and everything.

J.M. – [Laughter].

O.S. – But it’s really hard to pin point how Cuba was, or continues to be, involved. It’s very difficult for me to find out at what point Venezuela becomes a regional problem that the United States needs to deal with from a security perspective. When was this moment?

J.M. – Venezuela has been a problem from a security point of view in terms of international organized crime in the narcotics flow. Period.

O.S. – Since when?

J.M. – Since the nineties.

O.S. – So this wasn’t something that was invented by Chávez?

J.M. – No, it was going on, because it had been going on, but it is certainly increased during the Chávez period. It was exacerbated, it increased. I used to go in, when I was an Ambassador, in 1999 early Chávez, I used to say, “Our people are tracking the flights of the drug business. We are tracking these flights out of Colombia, going to Peru, Venezuela, over Venezuela, into the Caribbean, making drops in the Caribbean or landings in islands in the Caribbean.” They would cross Venezuela but they wouldn’t go to South America. This stuff is coming out of Colombia too. We would say [to Venezuela], “Here it is, you have a military. Are you interested in doing this?” and they said, “Yes, yes, yes”. So, we wanted to intercept [these flights] with them [using] some of our DEA¹¹² planes out of Colombia. But Venezuela would have none of that and they would say, “No, we will take care of this ourselves.”

O.S. – Which probably didn’t happen.

J.M. – It didn’t happen. And as time went on there was a lot of corruption in Venezuela with regard to the drug business and it just kept increasing. Roger [Noriega] will argue and his organization has catalogued the amount of information that’s out there about certain people in the Venezuelan government and certain people in the Venezuelan military cooperating [with the drug business].

O.S. – Why did you at that point not impose individual sanctions?

J.M. – No, because we were trying to win the Venezuelans over. We were trying to say, “Come on, this is the *one area* where we can cooperate.”

O.S. – Yeah.

¹¹² United States Drug Enforcement Administration.

J.M. – I was doing this until the time I left. I remember meeting with, a series of Venezuelan former ministers, who were old friends of mine, I used to say, “Let’s do it. Let’s cooperate. You guys can sit down.” We had intelligence that some of their people were participating in this and they said, “No”. José Vicente Rangel would jump up and [say], “Venezuela will never permit such a thing. This is the most insidious thing! Of course, we want to cooperate with you.” And I would say, “Ok, then let’s cooperate.” Then they would say, “Yes, yes, we’re going to do it” and then of course nothing would happen and it got worse and worse and worse.

O.S. – But did you have intelligence on him?

J.M. – On whom? No, not José Vicente. I’ve never seen anything, but there were members of Venezuelan military that were [implicated].

O.S. – But did you sit down with people and you had intelligence that they were engaged [in the drug business?]

J.M. – Yeah, we offered and we were willing to share with them, of course. But that’s what they do. By the way, Brazil has that intelligence too.

O.S. – Right. But then why did it take so long for the United States to impose individual sanctions? What was the hope of policy makers?

J.M. – Because the Venezuelan regime got so *damn* bad! Why do it in 2008? Or 2007? Or 2012? It just got worse and worse. The screws turning on the opposition. It measures up to the country really going off the rails.

O.S. – So that then led the US government to respond not particularly based on new evidence of engagement, but rather...

J.M. – Continuing evidence.

O.S. – I see... Well, here’s my final question: What should the stance, both the US government and also the region be? Because, looking back, do you blame yourself for lost opportunities? There is a humanitarian catastrophe now. Looking back, if something like that happened in the future, what kind of institutions could be established and what should the responses be today?

J.M. – We have a basis for dealing with Venezuela in the Inter-American System, it’s called the Inter-American Democratic Charter. I used to always have a copy in my pocket when I was an Ambassador, I used to pull it out and say, “This is what has to be followed!” If the countries of the hemisphere would take each issue and compare it with what the charter calls for, years ago we could have been dealing with Venezuela.

O.S. – Right.

J.M. – Now, why didn’t that happen? For a variety of reasons, most countries in the hemisphere did not want to confront Venezuela.

O.S. – Because it was too big?

J.M. – Too big, too important and they have their own bilateral interests.

O.S. – Right. Or because they were worried that it would affect them later on at some point?

J.M. – Okay, let’s look at the countries one by one. Does Colombia want to [confront Venezuela?] No, Colombia has a 2,200-mile border with Venezuela and it’s their number one commercial [partnership].

O.S. – And even Uribe needed Chávez to negotiate with the FARC.

J.M. – Colombians are always looking at their national interests first.

O.S. – And so does every country.

J.M. – Every country looks at its national interest. Going down the Andes, you have Evo Morales who sees a friend in [Chávez]. They support each other. You have Ecuador that goes through its different governments and they play those games. You have Chile, you have Chile-Venezuelan relations, the Chileans look in terms of, “Hey, what are the Brazilians doing?” *All* of them look in terms of what the Brazilian leadership is and Brazilian leadership has been at arm’s length.

O.S. – Interesting, so do you think that these governments said, “Let’s wait for Brazil to make a move” before they were willing to act?

J.M. – They were looking for Brazil to make a move! Take some leadership. Speak to the issue!

O.S. – Right.

J.M. – Speak to the issue! My view is, had Brazil early on said, “Wait a minute, this is a violation of the Inter-American Democratic charter. Do we believe it or don’t we believe it?” The alternative is that the United States should have done it.

O.S. – Right.

J.M. – And there are a lot of people in Washington who think that the Obama Administration didn’t do it because the Obama Administration was more interested in Cuba”.

O.S. – Right that may be true actually. Because it’s also a quagmire. So getting involved in Venezuela is difficult.

J.M. – Yeah. What exactly do you do? You say, “Ok, let’s try traditional diplomacy to resolve issues.” The Venezuelans would play this game, of “This is our revolution. We are doing it our own way. Who are you to say?”, but at the same time, they would say, “Yes, we want to get into resolving issues.” It’s the old “salami game”, constantly playing for time, kicking the can down the road etc. In the meantime, they are putting the screws to the opposition and on the media. Now, what should we do now? I think about this all the time.

O.S. – But there is no easy solution. That’s what appears to me right now.

J.M. – Let me tell you an old OAS story. In 1989, I had been *Charge d’Affairs* in Panama. I came back and I became Luigi Einaudi’s¹¹³ deputy at the OAS.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – December of 1989, the big issue is Panama and [Manuel] Noriega. People said “Oh, you came out of Panama”. I said “Yeah, what do you think [about the situation]?” They said, “The only way that’s going to be resolved is if you Americans take care of it militarily.”

O.S. – Latin Americans said that to you at the OAS?

J.M. – Yes, I know, they were saying this to me! As a Deputy...

O.S. – Do you remember who said that?

J.M. – Yes, I do! But I’m not going to tell you [laughter]... But anyways, I said, “Let me ask you something. Let’s suppose for one moment that we *did* do that. What would be the position of your government?” They said, “Oh, we’ll condemn you!”

¹¹³ Luigi Einaudi was the United States ambassador to the Organization of American States from 1989 to 1993. Einaudi was the US Special Envoy from 1995 to 1998 in the peace talks that led to a comprehensive settlement of the century-long border dispute between Ecuador and Peru. The oral history interview with Luigi Einaudi is available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10438/25750>.

O.S. – Sure.

J.M. – Now, something else. But that was back then. I think there are people who are thinking – and not only Venezuelans, who are absolutely terrified of what’s going on in their country – that we are going to do something. When our president, our current President¹¹⁴, says, “Oh, regarding Venezuela all the options are on the table, including, military.”

O.S. – Everybody is going to panic.

J.M. – So, what happened [in Panama]? We invaded, we invaded for our reasons. We had a canal there¹¹⁵, we had bases there, we had troops there. We decided we would take care of business for our reasons – not everybody else’s reasons, but for our reasons. By the way, a democratic government had been elected and Panama has flourished ever since.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – Okay, I remember my academic friends, probably some of the people you deal with and I can give you names of these American academics. I used to go out and speak and they would say, “This is the most terrible thing!” *American* academics.

O.S. – Of course.

J.M. – They said, “This has set back our relations! We can’t invade Latin America countries!” Six months passed, we have a General Assembly in Asunción.¹¹⁶

O.S. – Right.

J.M. – A normal general assembly. The subject... [laughter] Panama isn’t even on the agenda.

O.S. – Right.

J.M. – Nobody is talking about them. Then the Foreign Minister of Panama says, “I am here today to talk about Panama”, [laughter] he proceeds to excoriate the member country. He said, “My country was suffering under a military dictatorship, we attempted to resolve it democratically through elections. The election was stolen and you had *four* general assemblies and the most that the Organization could come up with was general statements like, “*Oh, es un asunto interno y no se puede entrometerse en los asuntos internos de un país soberano*”¹¹⁷ [irony]. That’s what happened in 1989. Four General Assemblies.

O.S. – And what was the reaction of the Latin Americans? You were there?

J.M. – I was there! I was sitting at the American chair. I heard this. The foreign minister of Panama, was a Julio Linares.¹¹⁸ The foreign minister had made a name for himself in Panama for being a real Panamanian nationalist against the American presence in the canal and the military etc. He was a genuine Panamanian nationalist and he was condemning all of these countries and they all sat there and didn’t say anything. The vote was to condemn – well, I don’t remember what verb was used – but the vote was something like in the 20’s to 6. One of

¹¹⁴ During the time of this interview, the President of the United States was Donald J. Trump, elected in 2016 to a four-year term.

¹¹⁵ In 1989, the United States invaded Panama through “Operation Just Cause” which justified US involvement as an attempt to protect US interests within the Panama Canal region.

¹¹⁶ In 1990, from June 4 to June 9, the OAS held its Twentieth Regular Session in Asunción, Paraguay. The [certified texts of the resolution](#) are available at the OAS website.

¹¹⁷ In English: “Oh, this is an internal matter and you can’t meddle in the internal affairs of a sovereign country”.

¹¹⁸ In 1989, during the US invasion of Panama, the Foreign minister of Panama was Julio Linares. Linares served in this position from 1989 to 1993.

the countries that did not support this resolution, by the way was Venezuela. I forget how Brazil voted¹¹⁹.

O.S. – So then do you think that they could invade Venezuela today? I mean of course invading Panama is one thing and invading Venezuela is quite another.

J.M. – That is *not* going to happen.

O.S. – No, no. There is no exit plan, there is no way.

J.M. – There's no way. It's craziness.

O.S. – They would be there for 30 years or something.

J.M. – So what should we do? What if – in response to these latest efforts at an election that is not going to be an election – every country in *South America* said, “Maduro you go through this, we're going to cut diplomatic relations, we're going to cut commercial relations with you. We will have nothing to do with you and we will ask our European friends to do that. We will take it to the OAS.”

O.S. – Right.

J.M. – I despair over Venezuela. I love Venezuela and I'm very sympathetic, but the notion among some of my Venezuelan friends who say, “You Americans have to resolve this”. No, the Venezuelan political class got themselves into this situation.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – I have been arguing. I still think it's a legitimate argument. Looks as if [Henri] Falcón¹²⁰ is really running.

O.S. – Yes.

J.M. – I was in a meeting and my Venezuelan friends didn't like it and I said, “What if the opposition unified behind one candidate, just one candidate?” What if the opposition went into this and said, “Ok, we are going to run. This is illegitimate, we know it is illegitimate. It's not really an election. It's a political exercise, but it's an opportunity for us to show that this regime is authoritarian, not democratic, etc.” One candidate. Could be [Henry] Ramos¹²¹. Anybody! Could be [Henri] Falcón. Anybody. Because if others don't see the Venezuelan opposition... I mean, this notion of, “*Ay pobre de nosotros, alguien va a tener que hacer algo porque ellos tienen todo el poder. Tienen el poder electoral, el poder judicial, el ejército, la policía y nosotros hemos tratado de hacer cosas, pero no se puede hacer nada*”.¹²² I'm sorry... but that does not convince me!

O.S. – Of course.

¹¹⁹ The OAS Permanent Council voted "to deeply regret the military intervention in Panama" through the resolution CP/Res. 534 (800/89). The result was a 20 to 1 vote for the adoption of the document. Brazil expressed support for the resolution, while the United States was the only country to vote against it and another six countries abstained (Antigua and Barbuda, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Venezuela).

¹²⁰ Henri Falcón is a Venezuelan politician who disputed the 2018 presidential election as an opposition candidate to Nicolás Maduro. Falcón came in second place with 20.93% of the votes.

¹²¹ Henry Lisandro Ramos Allup is a Venezuelan politician of the Social Democratic Action party and former President of the National Assembly.

¹²² In English: “Oh poor us! Someone [else] is going to have to do something because they have all the power. They have the electoral power, the judicial power, the army, the police and we have tried to do things, but nothing can be done.”

J.M. – If they said this and said to the delegation of each Latin American country, “We’re going to do this. We know this is not a legitimate election.”

O.S. – “But we need your support”.

J.M. – We need your support. To my mind it’s a political platform. In the meantime, what they are doing? They are sitting beside “*chiando*”¹²³.

O.S. – Of course. Thank you very much for your time Ambassador Maisto!

J.M. – Thank you.

¹²³ In English: Figuratively, “to complain.” Literally, *chiar* is the sound made by some birds, especially chickens.