

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP AGEE

# The Nature of CIA Intervention in Venezuela

Former CIA operative and editor of the *Covert Action Quarterly*, Philip Agee analyzes, for the Alia2 agency, the methods being used today by US services to destabilize Venezuela. Those methods are the same ones used in Latin America during the cold war, although they use new intervention techniques adapted to the current situation. Can knowledge of history prevent it from being repeated?

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**P**hilip Agee is a former CIA operative who left the agency in 1967 after becoming disillusioned by the CIA's support for the status quo in the region. Says Agee, "I began to realize that what I and my colleagues had been doing in Latin America in the CIA was no more than a continuation of nearly five-hundred years of this, exploitation and genocide and so forth. And I began to think about what, until then would have been unthinkable, which was to write a book on how it all works." The book, *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*, was an instant best-

seller and was eventually published in over thirty languages. In 1978, three years after the publication of *CIA Diary*, Agee and a group of like-minded journalists began publishing the *Covert Operations Information Bulletin* (now *Covert Action Quarterly*), as part of a strategy of “guerilla journalism” aimed at destabilizing the CIA and exposing their operations.

Not surprisingly, the response of the US government and the CIA in particular to Agee’s work has been somewhat aggressive, and he has been forced to divide his time since the 1970s between Germany and Cuba. He currently represents a Canadian petroleum technology firm in Latin America.

Despite the recent rash of anti-Chávez editorials in the US media, and threatening statements made by a whole slew of senior US government officials at both the Departments of State and Defense, Agee sees a more cynical US strategy in Venezuela. Building on the work of scholar William I. Robinson on US intervention in Nicaragua throughout the 1980s, and recently published documents detailing CIA and US government activity in Venezuela, Agee suggests that the CIA’s strategy of “democracy promotion” is in full-force in Venezuela.

As with Nicaragua in the 1980s, a series of foundations are providing millions of dollars of funding to opposition forces in Venezuela, meted out by a private consulting firm contracted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega recently reaffirmed the State Departments commitment to this strategy, telling the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 2nd, 2005, “we will support democratic elements in Venezuela so that they can continue to maintain the political space to which they are entitled.” The funding of these “democratic elements” has as its ultimate goal the unification of Venezuela’s splintered opposition (formerly loosely grouped into the *Coordinadora Democrática*) for the upcoming Presidential elections in 2006. But failing a victory in 2006, cautions Agee, the CIA et al. will

remain, their eyes set on the 2012 elections, and the 2018 elections, ad infinitum, “because what’s at stake is the stability of the political system in the United States, and the security of the political class in the United States.”

*How do you view recent developments in Venezuela?*

When Chávez was first elected and I began following events here, I could see the writing on the wall, as I could see it in Chile in 1970, as I could see it in Nicaragua in 1979–80. There was no doubt in my mind that the United States would try to change the course of events in Venezuela as they had in Chile and in Nicaragua, and before that in various other countries. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the time to really follow events day to day, but I did try to follow them from a distance, and eventually when Eva Golinger started her website it came to my attention and I began reading some of the documents on the website and I could see the application here of the same mechanisms that were used in Nicaragua in the 1980s in the penetration of civil society and the efforts to influence the political process and the electoral process here in Venezuela. In Nicaragua I had in 1979 I think, just after the Sandinistas took over, written an analysis of what I believed would be the US program there and practically everything I wrote about happened, because these techniques, through the CIA, through AID, through the State Department, and since 1984 through the National Endowment for Democracy, all follow a certain pattern. In Nicaragua the program for influencing the outcome of the 1990 elections began about a year and a half before the elections, for uniting the opposition, for creating a civic movement, all these things seem to be happening again in Venezuela. So this is my interest politically in Venezuela, is to see these things happening and to write from time to time about them.

*What was the most prominent strategy of US intelligence when you were at the CIA, for protecting US ‘strategic interests’ in Latin America?*

When I was in the agency from the late 1950s on through to the late

1960s, the agency had operations going internationally, regionally, and nationally, attempting to penetrate and manipulate the institutions of power in countries around the world, and these were things that I did in the CIA—the penetration and manipulation of political parties, trade unions, youth and student movements, intellectual, professional and cultural societies, religious groups and women’s groups and especially of the public information media. We, for example, paid journalists to publish our information as if it were the journalists’ own information. The propaganda operations were continuous. We also spent large amounts of money intervening in elections to favor our candidates over others. The CIA took a Manichean view of the world, that is to say there were the people on our side, and there were people who were against us. And the agency’s job was to penetrate, weaken, divide, and destroy those political forces that were seen to be the enemy, which are those to the left of social democrats, normally, and to support and strengthen the political forces that were seen to be friendly to US interests in all these institutions I just mentioned a few minutes ago.

One of the constant problems that the CIA had from the beginning of these types of operations, that is 1947, was the difficulty that the people and organizations that received their money had in covering it up, because when you get large amounts of money coming in it can be difficult to conceal. So the agency, early on, established a series of foundations, or worked out arrangements with established foundations. Sometimes the foundations of the agency were simply ‘paper foundations’ run by a lawyer in Washington on contract to the CIA. From the early 1950s the international program of the National Students Association of the United States—this is the University association that is on practically every campus—was run in fact by the CIA, the whole international program of the National Students Association was a CIA operation. And as each President of the NSA would come into office over the years they were briefed on how this international program worked under CIA direction. But the man who came into the Presidency of NSA in 1966—and this is the time of the

Vietnam war and the protest movement—he refused to go along, and he told the whole story to Ramparts Magazine in California, a magazine that had connections with the Catholic church. And Ramparts published the story creating an enormous scandal. Well, it didn't stop there, because every news media picked up on the Ramparts story and in February 1967 the *Washington Post* published a lengthy exposé of the CIA's international funding network. In other words they named foundations, and quite a few of the foreign recipient organizations of CIA money in these different institutions that I mentioned earlier—political parties, trade unions, student movements, and so forth—and it was a disaster for the agency. I happened to be at headquarters in between assignments in Ecuador and Uruguay when this happened, and it was a huge disaster for the CIA.

Within less than two months, after the collapse of this international funding mechanism, Dante Fascell—a member of the House of Representatives for Miami, with close ties to the CIA and to the right-wing Cuban-Americans in Miami—proposed in Congress the establishment of a non-governmental foundation that would receive funding from Congress and would in turn pass the money out openly to the different organizations that until that time would have been funded by the CIA secretly, under the table. But this was 1967 and bi-partisan consensus on foreign policy had, to a point, broken down and so Fascell's proposal went nowhere.

For that reason the CIA continued, even after the collapse of its international funding mechanism, to be the action agency for the US government in these activities known as 'covert operations.' For example, the CIA was responsible for undermining the Salvador Allende government in Chile from 1970 on. It happens that Allende was nearly elected in 1958. Elections came every 6 years in Chile and in 1964, the next election year, the CIA began early on, more than a year ahead of time, working to prevent his election in 1964. The money was spent in part to discredit Allende and the Socialist party

and his coalition known as *Unidad Popular* and to finance Eduardo Frei's campaign—the Christian Democratic campaign. Frei won that election, but when the next elections came around in 1970 Allende was finally elected. It's documented that the CIA tried to prevent his ratification by Congress following the election by provoking a military coup, which failed. Allende took power and the CIA was then the action agency for fomenting popular discontent, for continuous propaganda against Allende and his government, for fomenting the very damaging strikes that occurred, the most important of which was the truckers, which stopped the delivery of goods and services over a period of months, and which eventually provoked the Pinochet coup against Allende in September 1973.

*Have there been significant changes in CIA strategy since you left the agency in 1968?*

Yes, absolutely. In the 1970s there were brutal military dictatorships in all of the *Cono Sur* [Southern Cone]—Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, and of course, in Chile with Pinochet. And these were all supported by the CIA, by the way. It was during this period that a process of new thinking began in the upper echelons of the makers of US foreign policy, the new thinking being that these military dictatorships, with all the repression and the disappearances and death squads and so forth, might not be the best way to preserve US interests in Latin America, or other areas for that matter. The new thinking was that the preservation of US interests could better be achieved through the election of democratic governments formed by political elites who identify with the political class in the United States. Here I mean not the popular forces, but the traditional political classes in Latin America, to speak of one area, known as the 'Oligarchies.' And so the new American program, which became known as "Project Democracy," was adopted and United States policy would seek to promote free, fair, transparent democratic elections but in such a way that it would assure that power went to the elites and not to the

people.

A foundation was established called the “American Political Foundation” in 1979 with major participation from the main labor center in the United States the AFL–CIO, with the United States Chamber of Commerce and with the Democratic and Republican parties, four main organizations, and the financing for this foundation came both from the government and from private sources. Their job was to study how the United States could best apply this new thinking in promoting democracy. The solution was the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its four associated foundations: the International Republican Institute (IRI) of the Republican Party, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) of the Democratic Party, the American Center of International Labor Solidarity (ACILS) of the AFL–CIO, and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) of the United States Chamber of Commerce. Where the AFL–CIO foundation is concerned, they took an existing organization which had worked hand–in–glove with the CIA for many years called the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), they simply changed the name. [1]

*How exactly does the NED work with the CIA?*

The mechanism would be that the Congress would give millions of dollars to the National Endowment for Democracy and the National Endowment would then pass the money to what they call the “core foundations” which were these four associated foundations, who in turn would then hand out the money to foreign recipients. This all began in 1984, and one of the first recipients of money from the NED was the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), which was then the focal point of the most extremist of the anti–Castro individuals and organizations in the United States. But the real test for this new system came in Nicaragua. In Nicaragua since 1979–1980 the CIA had this program of organizing counter–revolutionary military forces or paramilitary forces that became known as the Contras, with the logistics and the organization and backup all coming from places in

Honduras. They infiltrated eventually something like 15,000 guerillas, whom the Sandinista army defeated. By 1987 they had terrorized the countryside, they had caused around 3,000 deaths, and many others were maimed for life. It was a strictly terrorist operation in the countryside, they were not able during all those years to take a single hamlet and hold it. So they were defeated militarily.

By 1987, Central America was war weary: El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua. And there was a meeting of the Presidents of these countries in a Guatemalan town called Esquipulas and they worked out a series of agreements by themselves—the United States was not a party to this—which included the disarming of the Contras and ceasefires in the various countries. So in Nicaragua there was a ceasefire, but the CIA did not disarm the Contras because they knew that elections were coming up in 1990 and they wanted to maintain the Contras as a threat. Although the Contras had been defeated militarily by 1987 they had caused enormous economic problems and Nicaraguans were suffering very badly from the destruction.

Following these accords of Esquipulas, US policy changed. More emphasis was placed on the penetration of civil society and the strengthening of the opposition forces to the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN), and one of the mechanisms was to strengthen what was known as the Coordinadora Democratica Nicaraguense, which was comprised of the private sector business-leaders, of certain trade unions that were anti-Sandinista, anti-Sandinista political parties, and anti-Sandinista civil associations. A private consulting firm known as the Delphi International Group was contracted to run operations to influence the elections coming up in 1990. And they turned out to receive the most money of all, and they played the key role in the run-up to the elections in 1990. NED had been active also in Nicaragua from 1984 on, and NED and its associated foundations—all four of them—were also quite active in penetrating and trying to influence the political electoral process in Nicaragua which begins in about 1988,

but really gets going in 1989. In order to get the anti-Sandinista vote out and to monitor the elections to create an anti-Sandinista political front the CIA and NED established a civic front called Via Civica and their ostensible job was political education and activism, civic action, non-partisan civic action. When in actual fact all their activities were designed to strengthen the anti-Sandinista side. So first there was the Coordinadora, then Via Civica, and finally the unification of the opposition, and they didn't achieve this until about August of 1989, about 6 months before the elections, quite late, but they'd been working on it for a long time, and of the twenty opposition political parties, they unified—many simply through bribes—fourteen of these parties and they called it the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO). And UNO ran a single candidate for all the different positions, and the United States selected Violetta Chamoro to run as President.

In September of 1989 there was a very strange agreement between the US government and the Sandinistas, wherein the Sandinistas would allow the United States to bring in US\$9 million to support the opposition, if the United States promised that the CIA would not bring in any other money to invest against the Sandinistas. And strangely enough the Sandinistas agreed to it, and the first thing that happened was that the CIA brought in millions of dollars more, of course. The man who wrote the book on Nicaragua in the 1980s and about this election in 1990 is Bill Robinson, an academic, who lived for quite a bit of the 1980s in Nicaragua, and his book is called *A Faustian Bargain*. It's an excellent book, very well documented, very well written. He estimated that the United States spent something in excess of US\$20 million for the 1990 elections. And as everyone knows, the Sandinistas lost; the UNO coalition won something like 56% of the vote, and the Sandinistas 40% or something like that. And these operations that were started in order to ensure the defeat of the Sandinistas in the 1990 elections, they continued in order to assure that the Sandinistas would not come into power in the next elections, and that has been the case.

## *How has this model been applied to Venezuela?*

In Venezuela, there is something rather similar: you have the Coordinadora Democrática here, comprised of the same sectors of the same organizations as in Nicaragua, although from what I've read it has more or less collapsed at this point. But they'll revive it I'm sure. You have an organization here that is supposedly non-partisan and dedicated to getting out the vote and making sure the elections are clean which is Súmate. You have the private US consulting group here which is called **Development Alternatives Incorporated**, that is fulfilling the same role that the Delphi International Group fulfilled in Nicaragua, and both the **International Republican Institute** and the **National Democratic Institute** also have offices in Caracas, so you have three offices here that are handing out tens of millions of dollars, private offices that in actual fact are under the control of the US embassy and of the Department of State in Washington and of the **Agency for International Development (AID)**. [2]. The first contract that was given to Development Alternatives was by AID, while the NED programs continued at a rate of about US\$1 million per year [3]. In the wake of the failed coup in April, 2002, the decision was taken in Washington to do the same thing they'd done in Nicaragua, which was to hire a consulting firm to act as a front for AID money which would be much larger than the NED money, and the first contract was signed on August 30th, 2002, which granted a little more than US\$10 million over the next two years for political activities in Venezuela. And they opened in August, 2002 and sent five people down from Washington—five people that were named by AID. Get that: they hire this consulting firm, but they name the people. And for any Venezuelan that is hired by Development Alternatives, the contract requires that they be approved by AID in Washington. So there's no other way to look upon these three offices here, than as mechanisms of the US embassy, and consider that behind the scenes of these three organizations is the CIA. And what is useful in having these foundations and the consulting firm giving out money is that it provides a way for the CIA to give a lot

more money to organizations that are already receiving money somewhat openly, so it makes it easier for these recipient organizations in Venezuela to cover it up. So if the AID money to Development Alternatives is about US\$5 million, of which US\$3.5 million was for grants to Venezuelan organizations, with another US\$1 million + from NED, you have about US\$6 or 7 million of open money. All of this comes, by the way, from **documentation that Eva Golinger has obtained**. She's done a marvelous job. In any case the CIA can add quite a lot of additional money to the US\$6 or 7 million, and the evidence is there in the documentation of support for the oil strike, the national strike, from December of 2002 to February 2003, and then for the recall referendum campaign. All of these things they lost, so now they have to be focusing on the 2006 elections.

Venezuela is certainly not the only country in which these operations to strengthen civil society, promote democracy, to educate people in election processes, but which is only a cover, the real purpose is to favor certain political forces over others, Venezuela is by no means the only place this is happening. There is a need a real need for research in this area because **DAI if you look at their website**, they're all over the world. It's not that all their programs are financed by the US government—they're financed by the World Bank and I can't remember how many other sources—one can look at their programs and see which ones are similar to what's happening in Venezuela. The same thing with the National Democratic Institute and the three other foundations associated with NED, and one can see where they're focusing this political penetration with the CIA, of course, in tandem. I think that there is a great need to expose this and to denounce it for what it is, which is fundamentally a lie, to promote democracy but in fact to overthrow governments, to achieve regime change, or to strengthen favorable governments that are already in power.

*Former-CIA agent Felix Rodríguez recently told Miami television that the US was looking for a change in Venezuela, possibly one brought*

*about by violence. He gave the Reagan administration's assassination attempt against Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi as an example. Is this a likely scenario for US intervention in Venezuela?*

Well, remember that where Qaddafi is concerned, the United States believed that Qaddafi had organized the bombing of this discothèque in Berlin, and the raid on Tripoli was in retaliation. Now Chávez has made no provocation like that, so there is no justification for a military strike and I cannot believe that the United States has come to the point where they would so blatantly seek to assassinate the President of another country. I mean, things are bad enough in the United States—worse than they've ever been—but I don't think we've quite come to that. One thing that is very important for the Chávez movement, the Bolivarian movement here, to keep in mind always, is that the United States will never stop trying to turn the clock back. US interests are defined as the unfettered access to natural resources, to labor, and to the markets of foreign countries. It is countries like the Latin American countries that assure prosperity in the United States. The more governments with their own agendas, with an element of nationalism, and that oppose US policies such as the neoliberal agenda come to power, the more of a threat these movement are seen to be in Washington, because what's at stake is the stability of the political system in the United States, and the security of the political class in the United States. So the Venezuelans are going to have to fight for their survival just like the Cubans have had to fight for forty-five years, forty-five years from now the United States will still be trying to subvert the political process in Venezuela if it is still on the road that it is on today, just like they are still continuing to try to destroy the Cuban revolution. A President will come and a President will go, there are nine Presidents now that Fidel has survived, so I think it's very important for Venezuelans to understand that this is going to be permanent, and that vigilance, organization, keeping unified, all that is key to avoiding these US programs, feeding these US programs which essentially are divide and conquer.

**Links:**

- ▶ *National Endowment for Democracy On The Offensive in Venezuela*
- ▶ *Refuting the Deceptive Claims of the National Endowment for Democracy Regarding their Activities in Venezuela*
- ▶ *U.S. Funds Aid Venezuelan Opposition*
- ▶ *Government Funds Color Press Group’s Objectivity on Venezuela and Others*

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[1] *In 1997, Then president of the AFL-CIO John Sweeney disbanded the AIFLD, replacing it with the ACILS, better known as the “Solidarity Center.”*

[2] *The Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) of the US Chamber of Commerce has also been **active in Venezuela**. Last August, CIPE-CEDICE (Center for the Dissemination of Economic Information) helped draft the Venezuelan anti-Chávez umbrella group **Coordinadora Democrática’s political program**, and **Venezuela Analysis***

[3] *For original documents received under the Freedom of Information Act detailing NED and AID funding to Venezuela’s opposition, see [www.venezuelafoia.info](http://www.venezuelafoia.info).*

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*Source : “The Nature of CIA Intervention in Venezuela”, Voltaire Network, 13 June 2005, [www.voltairenet.org/article30358.html](http://www.voltairenet.org/article30358.html)*