



# A Force for Democracy? Representations of the US Government in American Coverage of Venezuela

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Since the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998 the United States has played a highly questionable role interfering in Venezuelan politics, funding, training, and supporting attempts at coups to remove democratically elected presidents. Yet the American media (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Miami Herald*) have presented the US overwhelmingly positively, portraying it as a force for democracy and stability in the region, contrary to the wealth of official evidence. This content and discourse analysis focuses on the coverage of four key events in recent Venezuelan history and concludes that the concept of “democracy” in the media is automatically applied to official US policy, whatever it happens to be. Thus, the official American ideology of its fundamental benevolence and exceptionalism is not disputed, even when reality clearly challenges this concept.

**Keywords:** American exceptionalism, Hugo Chavez, media criticism, *Miami Herald*, *New York Times*, US foreign policy, Venezuela, *Washington Post*

*“Freedom is not the possession of one race. We know with equal certainty that freedom is not the possession of one nation. This belief in the natural rights of man, this conviction that justice should reach wherever the sun passes, leads America into the world. With the power and resources given to us, the United States seeks to bring peace where there is conflict, hope where there’s suffering, and liberty where there’s tyranny”*  
—George W. Bush.

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea that the United States is different to all other nations in that it is fundamentally benevolent, that it is uninterested in empire or glory, and that it seeks only freedom and democracy for all people can be traced back to before its inception. In 1630, the puritan pilgrim John Winthrop preached while still aboard the *Arabella* that the country they would found would be a “city upon a hill”; a light unto the world, an exceptional country that would provide hope for humanity. Alexis de Tocqueville popularized this American exceptionalism in academia in his two-volume *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), that argued,

“The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. . . Let us cease, then, to view all democratic nations under the example of the American people” (De Tocqueville, 2017: book 2, p. 42).

It has remained a central concept in social and political sciences, with scholars continuing to endorse the notion. For example, Huntington (1993, p. 83) writes that a world without US dominance would be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth.

*The sustained international primacy of the United States is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world.*

Therefore, it is the duty of the benevolent superpower to regulate and lead the world. This notion has been espoused by successive Presidents since World War Two, through Kennedy, Reagan (most notably) to Trump. As such, it represents a cornerstone of American ideology and of how the United States views itself and a central tenet of American political life. Indeed, those who do not espouse the belief sufficiently forcefully are often attacked. In his book on American exceptionalism, former Vice-President Dick Cheney excoriated President Obama for “abandoning” Iraq, reducing America’s nuclear arsenal, for “apologizing” for the country and for his insufficiently strong belief in American exceptionalism. Cheney holds unshakeable confidence in the “empirical fact and undeniable history” that the US is “the most powerful, good, and honorable nation in the history of mankind, the exceptional nation” (Cheney and Cheney, 2016, p. 1–5).

Yet critics of the US and its foreign policy do not share this view, least of all the Venezuelan government. At the United Nations in 2006, President Hugo Chavez called President Bush “the Devil” and “the spokesman of imperialism” and accused the US of trying to continue its “current scheme of domination, exploitation, and pillage of the peoples of the world.” Chavez modeled his ideology on Venezuelan revolutionary hero Simon Bolivar, who, in 1829, predicted that the US would come to plague Latin America with misery under the guise of liberty (Gott, 2011, p. 91–101). President Chavez and his successor, Nicolas Maduro (2013–present) have spearheaded a movement aimed at independence from the United States through collective Latin American solidarity and unity (De La Barra and Dello Buono, 2012).

There is considerable evidence to support these accusations. For example, in 1953 the CIA organized a coup that overthrew the democratically elected Arbenz administration in Guatemala, leading to 40 years of war, military dictatorship and genocide (Blum, 2004, p. 71–81). After the success of the Cuban Revolution, the Kennedy administration changed its objective in Latin America from “hemispheric defense” to “internal security,” and tens of thousands of Latin American military and secret police were trained by the Office of Public Safety and the School of the Americas, including many of the hemisphere’s worst human rights abusers (Schoultz, 2014, p. 219). The US oversaw a wave of military dictatorships in Latin America; it approved of the overthrow of the liberal Goulart administration in Brazil and its replacement with a far-right military dictatorship (Blum, 2004, p. 163–171). President Nixon successfully destabilized the Allende administration in Chile, Henry Kissinger instructing the CIA to “make the economy

scream,” leading to a military coup and its replacement with the far-right military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (Blum, 2004, p. 207–214).

In 1986 the World Court found the US guilty of “unlawful use of force” by waging a large-scale war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The US responded by blocking the enforcement of the decision and escalating the war (Chomsky, 2011, p. 325–326). Schoultz (1981) found a strong correlation between Latin American countries receiving US aid and human rights abuses; that the more atrocities a government carried out, the more funding it received from the US government. A 2013 poll from Gallup worldwide surveys found that the US was overwhelmingly considered the greatest threat to peace (BBC, 2013); even in US ally states like Germany the US was considered the most dangerous country in the world. In terms of Venezuela, the government accuses the US of continually trying to overthrow it, in particular in 2002 and 2014.

*The United States does not start fights. We will never be an aggressor. We maintain our strength in order to deter and defend against aggression—to preserve freedom and peace. Ronald Reagan*

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

### The Role of the Media

(Robinson et al. (2010), p. 34–35) identify three models of news media performance: the oppositional model, the independent model, and the elite driven model, similar to (Hallin’s (1986), p. 117) spheres of deviance, legitimate controversy, and of consensus. The oppositional model understands the press as openly adversarial to power, as “cantankerous, obstinate, and ubiquitous in their search for truth and their independence of authority,” as Judge Gurfein said while presiding over the Pentagon Papers case (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, p. 297–298). The independent model sees the media as objective and independent of power, always striving to report in a neutral and fair manner. However, the elite-driven model argues that media consistently mirror the positions of their governments and elites more generally, helping impose elite hegemony (see Gramsci, 1971) over the population. Bennett (1990) and Althaus et al. (1996) argued that official debate between establishment Democrats and Republicans sets the parameters of US media debate, meaning that the range of views expressed in the media are indexed to those expressed within the beltway between the two parties. Thus, if there is agreement among officials, there will be uniform coverage in mass media like *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, even on issues that the US is off the spectrum of world public opinion on, such as Israel/Palestine. In this context, (Herman and Chomsky’s (2002), p. 298) propaganda model suggests that the true societal purpose of the media is to “inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state.” Therefore, we would expect criticism of the government to be rare. Evidence from this study adds weight to the elite-driven, hegemonic model.

It is often said that the negative and adversarial press coverage of the Vietnam War lost the US the war, its media depicting it as an aggressive and belligerent force. However, content analyses of the American media coverage of the war (Hallin, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 2002, p. 169–253) found that, while many in the United States felt their country was the aggressor, this position was not reflected in the media. As the war progressed, elite opinion shifted toward viewing it as a costly miscalculation and the media tone and content changed to reflect this position. However, the righteousness of the cause and nobility of intent were not subject to question, as editorials continued to explain the idealistic and democratic motives of the United States. Thus, even in extreme cases like Vietnam, the media did not question the United States' noble intentions, instead accepting the Johnson administrations' assertions as facts and ignoring the legality of US actions (Friel and Falk, 2007, p. 228–235).

Chernomas and Hudson (2012) studied *The New York Times'* coverage of the US/UK overthrow of the Mossadegh government in Iran, finding *The Times* overwhelmingly presented the two superpowers as fundamentally benign, noting that not a single editorial in the period differed from the view they were “the long-suffering, patient, aggrieved parties” while Iran was presented as having “gone berserk with fanatical nationalism” Any counters to this position were usually presented as accusations from the “berserk” Mossadegh or Armenian Communists (2012, p. 75–77).

The arrival of the Internet and new communication technologies was greeted with great optimism by many media scholars and “cyber-utopians” (see: Robinson et al., 2010, p. 27; Castells, 2012), who saw their potential to challenge existing hierarchies and produce more adversarial news. New technology brought with it the ability to instantaneously contact a wide range of adversarial sources around the world, leading some to declare Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model antiquated (Rampton, 2007). However, the Internet has also been responsible for a massive drop in revenues for media, leading to cutbacks and an increased reliance on official sources to set the news agenda. Wahl-Jorgensen et al.'s (2016) study found an increasing prominence of official sources setting the parameters of debate and a decreasing quantity of alternative sources, such as activists and unionists in UK media. Therefore, the hierarchies and patterns of coverage continue to the present day. Bachman (2016) studied *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post's* coverage of Obama's drone wars in Pakistan and Yemen, finding an overwhelming trend to minimize and underreport the numbers of civilian deaths from the campaign and to follow the US military's lead in labeling those dead as “militants” or “insurgents,” some of whom were later proved to be civilians. The “vast dichotomy” between the administration's declared benign intentions and the opinion of respected international bodies was not reported upon.

In terms of Latin America, Young (2013) studied how a number of Western media outlets portrayed the US-supported 2009 coup in Honduras. He found that the media presented the US very positively, arguing for intervention on the grounds that it was a force for democracy. Five months after the 2009 coup the US was virtually the only country that accepted the election of Porfirio Lobo. US support for the election, held amidst

widespread repression, was presented as “lending the support for the democratic option” (2013, p. 215) leading Young to conclude that “democracy” in the media means whatever the US government supports, regardless of the empirical reality. Thus, American benevolence was maintained in the face of strong evidence to the contrary. Recent work on Western coverage of Venezuela found that American and even British coverage of the country tended to closely follow the official US line, using the same talking points and even same phrases as high US officials (MacLeod, 2018). Sierra Cabellero's study (2018, p. 449–451) described the coverage as “hugely negative and massively distorted” with mainstream media “only citing sources reflecting the stance of the USA,” while (Friel and Falk (2007), p. 183) excoriated *The New York Times'* “inaccurate reporting” of Venezuela, accusing it of “evading due diligence.”

This leads to the question how does the American press portray the US government in coverage of Venezuela, a country where it is accused of having a longstanding policy of support for regime change? US national interest is certainly at stake in Venezuela, part of a region called America's “backyard.” The country has the largest proven oil reserves in the world and is a key energy supplier to the US. The Trump administration is public about its intentions for regime change, the President stating bluntly,

“We have many options for Venezuela and, by the way, I am not going to rule out a military option... We have troops all over the world in places that are very, very far away. Venezuela is not very far away” (Benen, 2017).

In such a context, how would the media portray the United States?

## Methodology

In order to answer the question of how the press portrays the United States, a sample of 302 articles was taken from three leading titles, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Miami Herald*. These articles were subject to a content and discourse analysis. On the questions of American exceptionalism and Latin America these three are particularly noteworthy and influential. *The New York Times* is referred to as “the paper of record” (Friel and Falk, 2007): the most authoritative source in the US, while *The Washington Post's* geographic location at the heart of the American political system coupled with both outlets' high circulation figures mean they are two of the most influential American media organizations. *The Miami Herald* was chosen as it is of particular influence on Latin American matters, devoting more pages to the continent than any other major US newspaper and has a very high Latino readership. Indeed, Miami is commonly referred to as the “capital of Latin America.”

Four periods were chosen for this study, corresponding to peak interest in Venezuela due to important political events. They were the 1998/9 election and inauguration of Chavez, the 2002 coup against him, his 2013 death and the subsequent election of Maduro and the 2014 anti-government demonstrations, called “*La Salida*.” The dates sampled for *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* were 1 September 1998 to 1 March 1999, 1

**TABLE 1** | Newspaper articles sampled, 1998–2014.

	New York times	Washington post	Miami herald
1998/9	9	12	11
2002	49	27	36
2013	30	22	34
2014	28	15	29
Total articles	116	76	110

January to 1 June 2002, 1 March to 1 May 2013, and 1 February to 1 May 2014. *The Herald* produces much more Venezuela content than other newspapers and as to stop the newspaper swamping the sample the dates 1 December to 8 December 1998, 1 April to 1 June 2002, 1 March to 8 March and 1 April to 18 April 2013 and 1 February to 1 March 2014 were chosen for it. All relevant articles from these newspapers containing the word “Venezuela” anywhere in the title or body were subject to both content and discourse analysis. Articles not referencing these events, for example those about the Venezuelan baseball team, were not examined. This led to 116 *New York Times*, 76 *Washington Post*, and 110 *Miami Herald* articles (see **Table 1**). The databases used to gather materials were Nexis and NewsBank. Two of these periods correspond to times when the US was openly supporting insurrectionist movements attempting to forcefully remove democratically elected presidents from power (MacLeod, 2018). As such, they represent periods where the assumption of American exceptionalism should be most strongly questioned, and therefore, are most worthy of examination. The author undertook all coding work alone.

Instances of articles stating, implying or claiming the US was a force for democracy and peace were counted toward the force for democracy framing, whether it came from the writer or from a source, while passages stating, implying, or claiming the US was a force against democracy (for example, that it was involved in a coup), including allegations from official enemies, counted toward the opposite framing. A typical example of the “force for democracy framing” is “Secretary of State Colin Powell made a strong statement to the OAS reaffirming our preference for democracy” (McGrory, 2002). An example of the opposite would be,

“Such actions would place the United States at odds with its fellow members of the Organization of American States, whose charter condemns the overthrow of democratically elected governments” (Marquis, 2002).

“When I came into office, I was determined that our country would go into the 21st century still the world’s greatest force for peace and freedom, for democracy and security and prosperity. We have to promote these values just as vigorously as we did in the Cold War”—Bill Clinton.

## Findings

Hugo Chavez had come to prominence in 1992 leading a failed military coup against President Carlos Andres Perez. Perez was elected in 1989 campaigning on an explicitly anti-neoliberal platform, calling the World Bank “genocide workers in the pay

of economic totalitarianism” (Gott, 2011, p. 54). He had secretly negotiated with the World Bank, however, to impose widespread austerity measures. In response to nationwide protests, Perez ordered a military crackdown, killing thousands. It was then that Chavez decided to overthrow Perez. The coup attempt made Chavez an overnight national celebrity and he was legally elected president in 1998. For the newspapers, this posed a dilemma for the American government. Could the US government, committed to freedom and democracy, support a democratically-elected coup plotter? *The Washington Post* wrote that,

“The Clinton administration, in the awkward position of supporting an elected head of state in Venezuela who has shown little commitment to democracy and free markets, is warning President-elect Hugo Chavez that relations will sour if he implements promised radical political or economic measures, U.S. officials said” (Farah, 1998).

Thus, coded in the reporting is the clear assumption that the US supports only democratic forces in Latin America and that democracy and free markets are synonymous. *The Miami Herald* followed a similar path, claiming a foreign government enacting authoritarian measures would immediately engender a hostile response from the US.

“More likely, the former coup plotter will be a ruler whose authoritarian temptations—such as his plan to close down Congress—will periodically put him at odds with the international community, but who will ultimately avoid taking measures that would result in a rupture with the United States and Latin America’s democracies” (Oppenheimer, 1998).

Relations between the two countries did sour, not because of authoritarian measures but primarily because of the Chavez administration’s revival of OPEC, tripling oil prices in 6 months, and due to Chavez’s vocal opposition to the US invasion of Afghanistan (Jones, 2008; Gott, 2011). Plans to remove the president were swiftly organized and on 11 April 2002, large anti-government demonstrations hit Caracas. As those demonstrations met counter-protests, shots were fired and many were killed or wounded. Opposition leaders claimed Chavez’s forces were responsible and, in conjunction with some army units, broke into the presidential palace and deposed Chavez, replacing him with the head of the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce, Pedro Carmona. Carmona immediately abolished the Constitution, liquidated Congress and fired all other elected officials in Venezuela, suspended the Supreme Court and even changed the name of the country (Jones, 2008, p. 351–352). Media outlets not loyal to the opposition were raided and closed down, including state TV. The new administration also began rounding up hundreds of politicians, activists and journalists, some of whom claim to have been tortured (McCaughan, 2004, p. 93). In contrast to international condemnation, the US immediately came out in full support of the action, with White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer (2002) insisting no coup had taken place, and that Chavez had ordered the suppression of peaceful protest and then resigned. The US also unsuccessfully tried to pressure Latin American governments into accepting the



coup (Campbell, 2002). However, it was beaten back as huge protests from Venezuela's lower classes engulfed the country, spurring the military to retake the presidential palace and rescue Chavez.

The precise nature of American involvement in the coup has been much debated. However, documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act unequivocally show that the US paid for many of the coup leaders, such as Carmona and Leopoldo Lopez, to fly many times to Washington to meet Bush administration officials (Golinger, 2007, p. 44–49). The NED and USAID had also been funding, training and supporting a wide range of groups involved in the coup. In late 2001 NED and USAID funding for opposition groups quadrupled. A US embassy document dated 5 March noted that a speech by Carlos Ortega “dispelled any remaining doubts” that the opposition was planning a coup while a 6 April cable noted, “Dissident military factions, including some disgruntled senior officers and a group of radical junior officers, are stepping up efforts to organize a coup against President Chavez, possibly as early as this month” (Golinger, 2007, p. 61–64). It went on to explain how opposition figures were going to provoke violence between demonstrations and use it as a justification in order to remove Chavez and commented on the level of detail of the plans, confirming they had seen them. Thus, the US knew a coup involving a clash between pro- and anti-government demonstrations was planned for early April led by figures it had been flying back and forth to Washington for training and meetings with top US officials. After the coup, the US opened an “Office of Transitions” in Venezuela, and grants to opposition groups, many of whom had been involved in the coup, increased from \$232,000 in 2000 to almost \$10,000,000 in 2003— an increase of over 4,200 percent (Golinger, 2007, p. 56).

However, the media did not know this at the time. What was known and widely reported on was that the US ambassador was present at the coup's headquarters while US army and navy units were involved in the actions (Jones, 2008, p. 335). The coup's imminence and US involvement in it was an open enough secret that by February Democratic Massachusetts Senator William Delahunt was publicly attempting to gain assurances from his government that they were not going to support it (Slevin, 2002). After the April coup, the US continued to support the individuals and groups responsible and backed another attempt to oust Chavez later that year (Ciccariello-Maher, 2016, p. 85–105).

Therefore, the United States had publicly been caught supporting a failed violent coup to overthrow a democratically elected president and publicly continued to support the culprits afterwards. How would the media respond? Would the media challenge the idea of American benevolence?

In the 2002 sample the newspapers identified the United States 109 times as a force for democracy and 28 times as the opposite. Thus, even in a scenario such as the 2002 Venezuelan coup, there was still a strong tendency (a 4:1 ratio) to identify the US as a democratic force (see **Figure 1**). However, the quantitative data alone presents a somewhat misleading picture of the coverage, as it does not take into account the *quality* of the identifications. Identifications of the US as a benevolent force were stated factually, while identifications of

the opposite were usually very weak, presented as accusations, and immediately argued against, as can be seen in the following examples.

In the wake of what appeared a successful change of government, *The Washington Post* (2002, April 13) published an editorial presenting the US as a misguidedly maligned paragon of virtue and a force for democracy, echoing how *The New York Times* presented the US and UK during the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran. It stated,

“Both the Clinton and Bush administrations chose to ignore most of Mr. Chavez's frequent provocations; there's been no suggestion that the United States had anything to do with this Latin American coup. Now, however, the administration's reengagement with Venezuela is essential—together with the Organization of American States, it must push hard to bring back democratic rule as quickly as possible...”

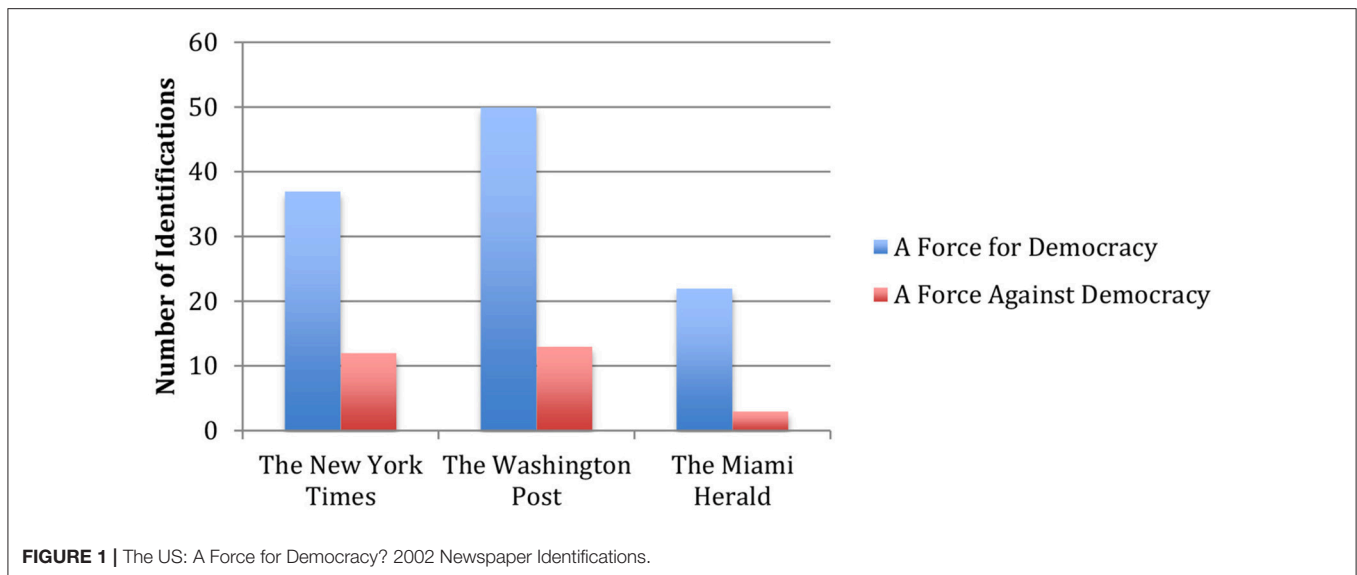
Thus, *The Washington Post* presented the US as an important force to bring democracy to Venezuela. Indeed, even after the President had been restored and US involvement in the coup's execution and its pressuring of other countries to accept the coup had been widely reported around the world (Campbell, 2002), the press continued to argue that the US was crucial to the continuance of democracy, as this *New York Times* op-ed illustrates: “But given Washington's enormous influence in hemispheric affairs, America's support could be vital for the success of any dialogue among Venezuelans and, more broadly, for safeguarding democracy in the region” (Hakim, 2002).

Furthermore, much of the criticism of United States benevolence was markedly tepid. On the subject of US involvement in the coup, *The Washington Post* wrote (emphasis added):

“U.S. officials said they unequivocally discouraged a coup in these meetings, and instead suggested a constitutional course to remove Chavez, such as a national referendum. When Chavez was pushed from office, however, the Bush administration *appeared to send a different message*” (Wilson, 2002).

Thus, the criticism of the US was not that it organized a coup, nor that it was even involved, nor that it made several statements clearly endorsing the events, nor even that it sent a pro-coup message, merely that it *appeared* to send one, meaning that it only *appeared* that the fundamental benevolence of the US was in question. Sometimes US involvement was framed only as an allegation, as displayed by the following quote,

“A senior administration official yesterday repeated denials of allegations by Chavez supporters that the United States had encouraged the coup, although he acknowledged that U.S. officials had met with a number of Chavez opponents. “They came here...to complain and to inform us and to tell us about the situation,” he said. “We said we can't tell you to remove a president or not to remove a president... We did not wink, not even wink at anyone.” Few Latin American officials appeared to believe the United States was involved” (DeYoung, 2002).



The idea of US involvement was referenced only as an allegation by nameless supporters of a man *The Washington Post* described as a “demagogue” and an “instinctive authoritarian” that day (Valenzuela, 2002). It was then immediately countered by a credible official source—“a senior administration official”—and followed by a statement presented as fact that “few Latin American officials” believed the US was involved. As such, the identification as the US as nefarious is of a very low value. Yet this also counted as an example of the “force against democracy” frame. There was sometimes harsher critique of the US’ role, leading to soul-searching on the part of American commentators. Yet often even this stronger criticism was couched in a way that made clear the US was fundamentally exceptional and benevolent and that this was a deviation from its shining track record, as can be seen in Paul Krugman’s *New York Times* column.

“Surely the worst thing about this episode is the betrayal of our democratic principles; “of the people, by the people, for the people” isn’t supposed to be followed by the words “as long as it suits U.S. interests.” But even viewed as realpolitik, our benign attitude toward Venezuela’s coup was remarkably foolish” (Krugman, 2002).

Therefore, the coup was presented as an aberration, a temporary deviation from a long and exemplary history of supporting democracy and human rights around the world. One may wonder if Venezuela had organized and supported a deadly coup in the US whether the reaction from commentators would be that surely the worst thing about the affair was the betrayal of Venezuela’s democratic tradition.

The United States continued to train, fund, and support forces that attempted to remove Chavez multiple times throughout his terms in office (Golinger, 2007; Jones, 2008, p. 372). For example, George Bush formally hosted Maria Corina Machado in the Oval Office, despite Machado’s signing of the “Carmona

Decree,” which liquidated every democratic institution in the country and gave Carmona power to rule on his own (Ciccariello-Maher, 2016, p. 86). However, when Chavez died in 2013, the press saw it as a new opportunity for the US to help Venezuelan democracy flourish. *The New York Times* arguing in Chavez’s obituary that, “The United States should now make clear its support for democratic and civilian transition in a post-Chávez Venezuela” (2013, *The Miami Herald*, March 5). This theme was echoed in *The Miami Herald’s* obituary, which stated, “The United States and democracies throughout the hemisphere should insist on a fair and transparent electoral process to select the new president” (2013, *The New York Times*, March 7).

These statements made clear Venezuela was not a democracy and that it was the US’ role to bring freedom back to the country. In April 2013, Chavez’s handpicked successor Nicolas Maduro won the election to become the new president. However, Maduro was soon embattled as violent demonstrations against his presidency flared up in 2014. A movement of students from wealthy elite universities, led by Leopoldo Lopez and Maria Corina Machado, took to the streets and built barricades in an attempt to force Maduro from office. The movement, known on social media as “*La Salida*” or “the exit” of Maduro, was exceptionally violent, with 43 people dying during the campaign, as demonstrators attacked kindergartens, social housing, the Caracas Metro, and health clinics, including some 160 Cuban doctors (Ellner, 2014). There were also cases where the demonstrators beheaded passersby (Ciccariello-Maher, 2016, p. 90).

Lopez and Machado had been notable figures in the 2002 coup, when Lopez arrested the Minister of the Interior. They were relatively frank about their intentions. During a speech in the US in 2013, Lopez said,

“We have to hurry the exit of the government... Nicolas Maduro must go out sooner than later from the Venezuelan government.

Nicolas Maduro and all his supporters... from my point of view, the method is secondary, what is important is the determination to reach our goals at any cost.”

He also said the protests would only end “when we manage to remove those who govern us” (Fuchs and Vivanco, Fuchs and Vivanco).

However, unlike in 1998–9, the media had no problem supporting coup plotters. Indeed, the fact they led coups was not even brought up. The protests themselves were deeply unpopular in Venezuela, with polls showing disapproval ratings of up to 87 percent (Noticias24, 2014) and even opposition-aligned polls showing around two-thirds disapproval (Nagel, 2014).

The United States supported the attempt to remove Maduro from power and had been funding the student groups for many years. Leaked cables show that the US was funding the movement’s leaders and that funding for anti-Venezuelan government groups increased by 80 percent from 2012 to 2014. Their plan was to “divide” and “penetrate” the *chavistas* by funding, training and supporting oppositional movements (Beeton et al., 2015, p. 518). The cables also show the State Department was well aware that many of the leaders came from questionable backgrounds. For example, it continued to support Nixon Moreno despite the fact he had led a crowd to the state capital of Merida to lynch the governor during the 2002 coup and was accused of murder and the rape of a police officer (2015, p. 525–526). By 2014, the US government had spent hundreds of millions of dollars funding the opposition (Weisbrot, 2014). The Cato Institute awarded its \$500,000 Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty to Lopez’s associate Yon Goicoechea for his role in organizing previous anti-government activities.

The Union of South American Nations rejected the attempt to “destabilize” Venezuela (Rosas, 2014). “This coup attempt is being financed from abroad, by the United States,” the President of Bolivia announced (Cadena Agramonte, 2014). In contrast, the US government supported the attempt to oust Maduro, with Vice-President Joe Biden framing it as a legitimate and democratic protest being trampled by an authoritarian government (Bajak, 2014). Thus, the US was again accused of sponsoring an extralegal attempt to oust a democratically elected government.

Nevertheless, the newspapers overwhelmingly presented the situation as a legitimate protest against an authoritarian government and rarely mentioned the opposing point of view and even more rarely took it seriously. A typical example of how they portrayed the events can be found in this *New York Times* article: “Faced with a government that systematically equates protest with treason, people have been protesting in defense of the very right to protest” (Toro, 2014).

In 2014 there was a total of 27 identifications of the US as a force for democracy in the three newspapers and 24 identifications as the opposite (see **Figure 2**). Although the quantitative data suggests that the newspapers were even handed, analyzing the data qualitatively a different picture emerges. The identifications challenging the notion of a benevolent US were never stated as matters of fact but rather as accusations only—accusations made by Venezuelan officials who the media had

spent years demonizing. Furthermore, they were often countered immediately by calm and credible opposing voices, as in this *New York Times* example,

“It was the third time in less than a year that the government had expelled American diplomats, as Mr. Maduro has repeatedly accused the United States of supporting opponents who he says are plotting a coup. But critics say that he regularly seeks to provoke crises with the United States to distract from problems at home” (Neuman, 2014).

Indeed, many identifications of the US as not benign were presented as less credible still. For example, *The Washington Post* noted,

“The president portrays moderate opponents as “fascists,” claims that he is the target of incessant plotting by the CIA and increasingly depends on force—delivered by riot police or organized groups of thugs—to answer popular protests” (2014, *The Washington Post*, March 30).

“The CIA is trying to kill me” is a common trope in Western media indicating a paranoid or otherwise mentally ill person and the newspapers regularly questioned Maduro’s sanity, as they had done with Chavez before him. Thus, the inclusion of the idea that the US was not a benign force, counted as one quantitative identification, served only to develop a “paranoid” (Shapiro, 2014) tin pot dictator framing of the president, and not as a serious discussion of the US’ intentions. *The New York Times* also used this frame, presenting the Venezuelan government’s claims as outlandish:

“It is typical of the government here to sometimes make wild claims about conspiracies without providing evidence. During the campaign, Mr. Maduro repeatedly warned of plots to kill him, and he said that foreign agents were entering the country to undermine the government. In all of this, Mr. Maduro is sticking to the playbook of Mr. Chávez, who regularly warned of threats from the United States or suspected homegrown traitors” (Díaz and Neuman, 2014).

Thus, the *fact* that the US was funding groups that were trying to overthrow the government (and *had* done so in 2002) was treated as a ludicrous conspiracy theory pedaled by a paranoid dictator even when visiting the USAID or NED websites would have confirmed its validity. Instead the media soberly presented the US as an unfairly maligned, innocent bystander, though one still trying to help democracy by considering sanctions against an authoritarian government. An example of this can be found in *The Washington Post*:

“The Obama administration, too, has been a non-factor in the Venezuelan crisis, other than as a foil—even though the United States, as a major buyer of Venezuelan oil, has plenty of potential leverage. So it was encouraging to hear the senior State Department official for the Western Hemisphere, Roberta Jacobson, say Thursday that sanctions against the Maduro government could be “a tool” if “there isn’t a possibility of dialogue, if there is no space for the opposition” (Midgett, 2014).

Every identification of the US as non-democratic was an accusation from the mouth of Venezuelan government officials, usually Maduro, whose government the American press was

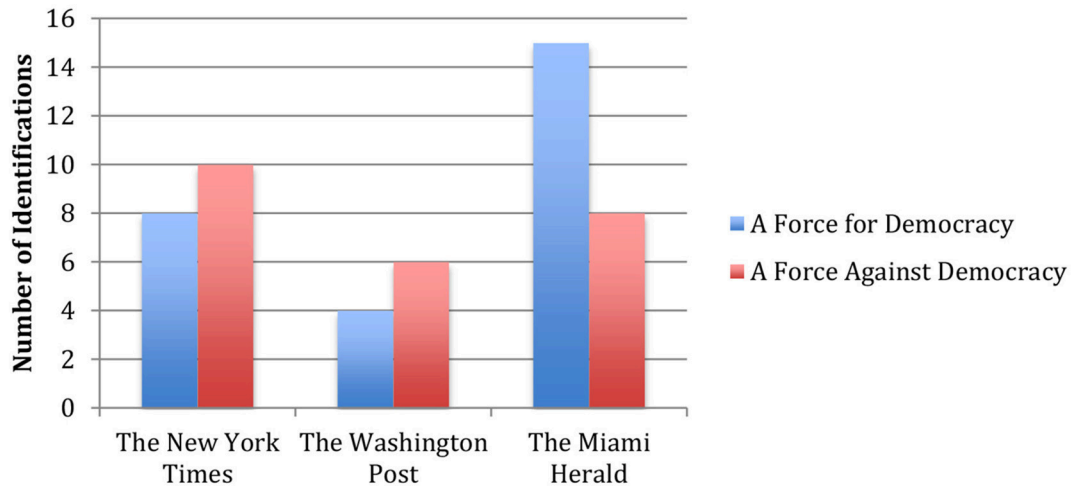


FIGURE 2 | The US: A Force for Democracy? 2014 Newspaper Identifications.

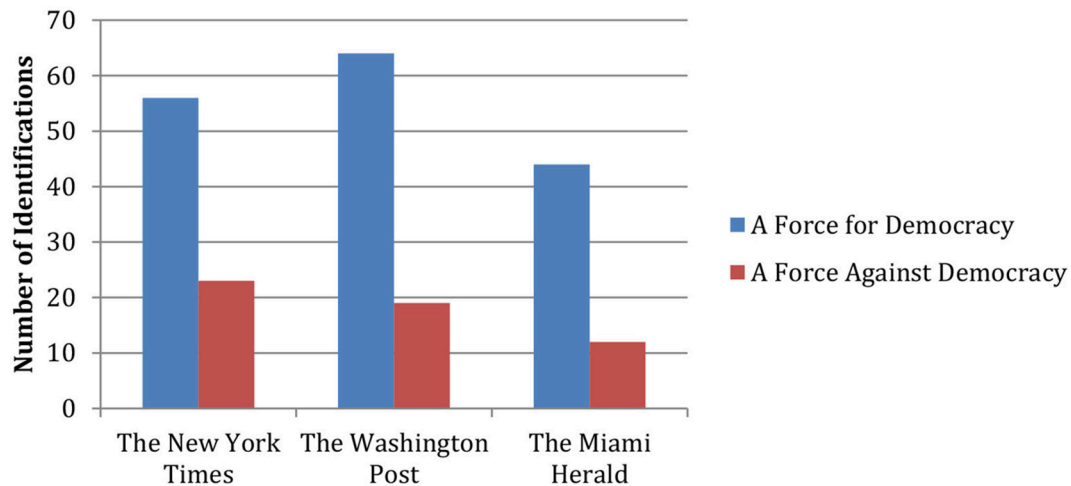


FIGURE 3 | A Force for Democracy? Identifications of the US, 1998-2014.

consistently portraying as a “dictatorship” (Diaz-Struck and Miroff, 2014; Midgette, 2014; Osío Cabrices, 2014; Tommasini, 2014) engaged in a full-scale “massacre” of “peaceful protestors” (Oppenheimer, 2014). The sole exception was *The New York Times* noting the president of Bolivia’s aforementioned remarks. However, it was reported in a way that immediately undermined his credibility and subtly suggested his words were not to be taken seriously,

“President Evo Morales of Bolivia, a close ally who is allowed to buy Venezuelan oil on favorable terms, has spoken publicly several times to support Mr. Maduro and to accuse the United States of trying to destabilize Venezuela” (Cave, 2014).

Thus, the article implies Morales only said such a thing because he was bought off by cheap oil from his ally.

In contrast, the identifications of the US as a benevolent, exceptional nation were all presented credibly, either as statements of fact or as quotes from US officials in the context of stories claiming Venezuela was violating human rights and the US must do something about it. For example, in an op-ed, *The Miami Herald* claimed, “Many Latin American experts in Washington agree that the Obama Administration cannot look the other way as peaceful protestors are massacred by government-supported armed thugs” (Oppenheimer, 2014), implying that the US always acts to stop any violation of human rights in the world. Therefore, in contrast to the opposite identifications, all identifications of the US as benevolent power were of a high value. This should serve as a caution against purely quantitative analysis.



“America has never fought a war against a democracy, and our closest friends are governments that protect the rights of their citizens”—Barack Obama.

## CONCLUSION

Across the sample period there was a very strong tendency for the official ideology of the United States to be regurgitated in the publications studied, with 164 identifications as the US as a force for democracy and 54 identifications as it being a force against it (see **Figure 3**). However, a qualitative analysis of the data showed that the semi-official doctrine of the country was rarely truly questioned at all. Mirroring Chernomas and Hudson’s (2012) and Bachman’s (2016) findings, ideas challenging the official doctrine of the US (in this case its fundamental, exceptional benevolence) were overwhelmingly presented as accusations coming from sources the newspapers had been demonizing for years, and were therefore not taken seriously. Similar to Hallin’s (1986) and (Herman and Chomsky’s (2002), p. 169–252) studies of Vietnam, there was little true questioning of American righteousness. This was particularly notable as the sample included two periods where the United States was involved in coups or regime change abroad, meaning the empirical reality clearly challenged this concept. As such, the sample is likely to be among the most critical it is possible to construct. Yet the doctrine is sufficiently strong as to negate serious discussion of the US as capable of acting in an anti-democratic way.

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This study provides weight to Young’s (2013) argument that “democracy” in the media was whatever the US supported. As Young (2013, p. 215) concluded, “facts are again irrelevant when they conflict with doctrinal precepts.” Consequently, it could be stated that journalists are not as independently minded and as quick to question authority as is commonly claimed. Thus, the use of content and discourse analysis in this study adds weight to the hegemonic, elite-driven model of media performance Gramsci (1971) and Herman and Chomsky (2002) described.

Even when faced with strong counterevidence, the doctrine of the US as a shining city on a hill was qualitatively overwhelming, indicating a continuing ideological rigidity inside the US media and elite US society more generally, with an absence of serious criticism of this cornerstone of political thought.

“I believe the United States of America is the greatest country on earth and therefore will not apologize for policies or actions which have served to free more and feed more people around the world than any other nation on the planet. You know what, when everybody else apologizes for all the crap they’ve done then we can apologize for our crap too. Boohoo, cry me a river”—Glenn Beck.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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