

# Introduction

Flying toward Angel Falls in Venezuela, one flies over and among the *tepuyes*—tall rock formations with deep abysses between them, making it impossible to traverse by land. These tepuyes serve as a metaphor for the growing divide among Venezuelans in the late twentieth century. The Bolivarian Revolution under Hugo Chávez Frías exposed these divisions and fueled deeper polarization, affecting families, neighborhoods, and even the capital city such that its eastern half was the zone of the “*sifrin*os,”<sup>1</sup> those who opposed the government, and its western half the zone of the “*chusma*,”<sup>2</sup> those who supported the government. Chávez opponents claimed that he was turning the country into a new Cuba, and his supporters responded that he was finally addressing the severe poverty and inequality ignored for too long in this oil-rich nation of 27 million people. Many believed they were engaged in an “existential struggle” over core values and basic ways of life.<sup>3</sup> Each side wanted to eliminate the other, believing they could no longer coexist.

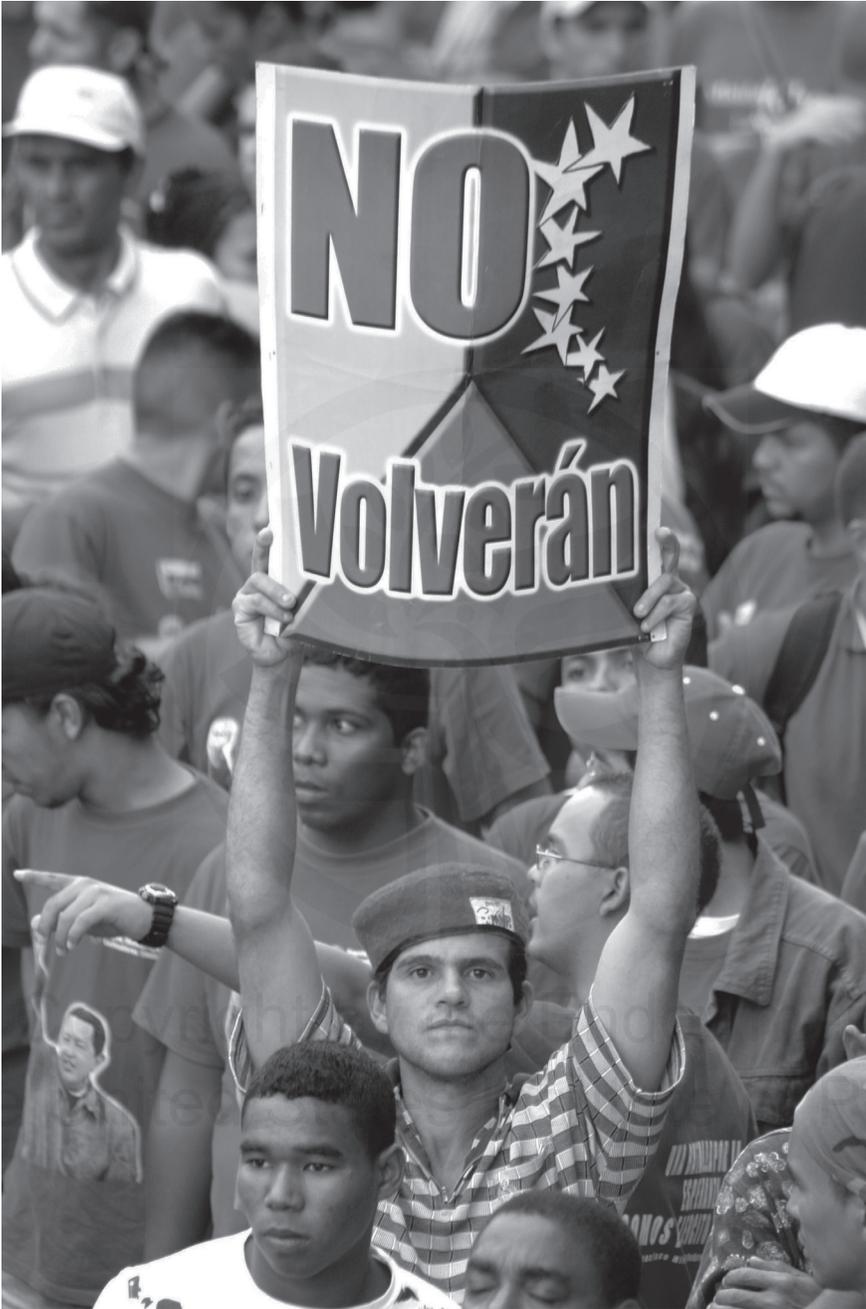
When the authors began their work with the conflict in June 2002 under the auspices of the Carter Center, the country appeared to be on the brink of domestic violence and possibly civil war. The authors hoped to build bridges across the divides of the tepuyes. On April 11, 2002, a massive demonstration

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1. This is a favorite term used by Chavistas to refer to their opponents from the upper and middle classes. It is derived from a song in the late 1970s that referred to the *sifrina* of Caurimare (a Caracas housing development) and described a rich, superficial, brainless woman who cared only about consumption, luxury, and so on.

2. Slang for “gang” often used by anti-Chavistas to refer to Chávez’s followers.

3. The term “existential struggle” was used by María Pilar García, Ana Mallén, and Maryluz Guillén to describe the Venezuelan conflict in “The Multiples Faces Of Venezuelan Civil Society: Politization and Its Impact on Democratization” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Las Vegas, Nevada, October 7–9, 2004). These authors cite Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).



Chavista's demonstration with a sign saying, "They will not return!"  
*Courtesy of SURpress*

against the Chávez government ended with nineteen people killed in unclear circumstances, leading the military to remove President Chávez from power. Within forty-eight hours, an outpouring of support for President Chávez in the streets, international condemnation, more deaths, and splits within the armed forces led military officers to reverse course and reinstall the president to his post.

Shocked by the coup and feeling vulnerable, Chávez invited Jimmy Carter, and later the Organization of American States (OAS) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP), to facilitate a dialogue to help reconcile the country. That invitation led to two years of intensive involvement by the three organizations to help resolve the conflict and prevent violence in Venezuela. The international efforts, which included a six-country Group of Friends formed in 2003, spawned a “dialogue table” personally led by the secretary general of the OAS for seven months, a number of peacebuilding activities sponsored by the Carter Center and UNDP for two years, and the monitoring of a ten-month electoral process representing the world’s first presidential recall referendum. The international involvement persisted through various manifestations of the conflict in Venezuela, from massive marches and countermarches, at times erupting in violence, to a two-month petroleum strike that paralyzed the country, an open military rebellion in a four-month “sit-in” by active military officers, and social mobilization at different levels across the country seeking both to exacerbate and to defuse the conflict.

The international involvement in Venezuela was unusual in many ways.

- First, it was a conscious attempt by the international community to try to defuse a social and political conflict before it erupted into full-scale violence.
- Second, it represented an unusual alliance between two intergovernmental organizations (OAS and UNDP) and a nongovernmental organization (Carter Center).
- Third, it was a multilevel and multisector conflict within a country lacking clear dominant cleavages based on ethnicity, race, religion, or class (although many of those elements were also present as part of the conflict).
- Fourth, it involved significant personal effort by many world leaders (e.g., Jimmy Carter, “Lula” da Silva, Álvaro Uribe, Fidel Castro, and other Latin American leaders), especially by OAS secretary general

César Gaviria, to mediate the conflict and to navigate complex relationships within the international arena.

## Approach of the Book

The book analyzes the two-year effort of the Carter Center and the broader international community to prevent violent conflict, try to reconcile a deeply divided society, and preserve democratic processes in Venezuela between 2002 and 2004. It tells the inside story of negotiations at the national and international level from the perspective of the authors, facilitators who represented the Carter Center during the entire process.<sup>4</sup> As participant-observers who are both scholars and practitioners, the authors describe their participation and the sometimes unexpected events that shaped the Carter Center's efforts. The volume explains their thinking, analysis, and strategies in real time, as they were developed, citing their internal notes and memoranda. The volume also examines missed opportunities and unintended consequences of the many interventions and identifies lessons learned. It is hoped that this case study will serve not only as a source of experience for practitioners in similar situations but also as a source of information to inform scholarly evaluation of conflict prevention efforts in this particular case and theory building in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and international relations.

In order to analyze what happened in Venezuela from June 2002 to late 2004 and account for the Carter Center's intervention as a third party, this volume presents a narrative that progresses along two basic tracks, a chronological track and a multilevel track. This approach reflects the way in which the authors worked. The chronological track provides a sequential account of the conflict cycles and the Center's interventions and offers "real-time" analysis that reflects the authors' thinking and decisions at the time. The multilevel track, meanwhile, provides analysis of the different political spaces and activities that constituted various levels of the conflict and the Center's interventions, which often developed along parallel paths.

This volume identifies as the central axis in the conflict dynamic the confrontation between the Chávez government and its opponents in an open

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4. Jennifer McCoy has been the director of the Americas Program at the Carter Center in Atlanta since 1998, and Francisco Diez has worked as a consultant for the Carter Center since 1991. He was the Carter Center's representative based in Venezuela from 2002 to 2004 and its representative in Latin America from 2007 to 2009. Ben Hoffman and Matthew Hodes, as directors of the Conflict Resolution Program in 2002 and 2003–06, respectively, worked closely with the authors in the Venezuelan case. The authors led a team in Atlanta and Caracas that ranged from seven to forty members. The exact size of the team varied depending on the needs of the mission (for example, a larger number of individuals were involved during the various periods of electoral observation).

struggle for power. It describes the conflict cycles emanating from this struggle for power through time and analyzes the Carter Center's interventions at the elite level as facilitators of multiple negotiations; the peacebuilding initiatives that the Center promoted together with many Venezuelans; and the influence of the international context in Venezuela. It thus analyzes the cumulative layers of interventions that the Carter Center and other international actors engaged in—layers that became increasingly complex.

Chapter 1 describes the historical roots of the crisis beginning with the emergence, consolidation, and unraveling of Venezuelan democracy under the Pact of Punto Fijo from 1958 to 1998, followed by the emergence of Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution. It describes in greater detail the events leading up to the coup and countercoup of April 2002 and the invitation to the international third parties.

Chapter 2 characterizes the nature of the conflict, describes the nature of the main domestic actors, and gives a schematic overview of the five cycles of the conflict. Analyzing the internal dynamics of the two main protagonists as “archipelagos,” it assesses the implications for the dynamics of the conflict interaction itself. It then turns to the theoretical approaches of the authors' analysis and the assumptions that underlay the Carter Center's efforts in Venezuela; finally, the chapter discusses the influence of the international arena on the domestic conflict and in turn the dilemmas faced by international actors.

Chapters 3 through 8 tell the story of the conflict and trace the international participation, beginning with the invitation to the Carter Center and the establishment of the Tripartite Working Group (OAS, UNDP, and Carter Center), moving through the seven-month “dialogue table” facilitated by the OAS secretary general and the launch of the program “Strengthening Peace in Venezuela,” and concluding with the observation of the ten-month recall referendum effort. Each chapter analyzes the central conflict for power, discussing the motives and actions of the government and opposition as actors. The chapters describe the continually evolving strategies of the international facilitators and explain the bases of the Carter Center's approach, decisions, actions, and inactions, referring to its memoranda and e-mail communications at the time. They also examine the international context as various other countries and actors became involved at different points. They include discussions aimed at practitioners that analyze specific episodes and methods. Finally, each chapter concludes with an analysis of lessons learned with the benefit of hindsight.

Chapter 9 analyzes the aftermath of the international intervention—the evolution of the internal dynamics in Venezuela from the disengagement of the international actors following the recall referendum of August 2004 to the end of 2010. It describes the consolidation of power of the Chávez government in late 2004 and 2005, Chávez’s reelection in 2006 and his unsuccessful attempt to introduce new constitutional reforms in 2007, and the continued development of “twenty-first century socialism” in 2008–10.

Chapter 10 concludes the volume with our theoretical insights and lessons learned for scholars and practitioners of conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, democratization, and international relations.



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