

## The Smart Way to Beat Tyrants Like Chávez

By Donald Rumsfeld  
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Today the people of [Venezuela](#) face a constitutional referendum, which, if passed, could obliterate the few remaining vestiges of Venezuelan democracy. The world is saying little and doing less as President [Hugo Chávez](#) dismantles Venezuela's constitution, silences its independent media and confiscates private property. Chávez's ambitions do not stop at Venezuela's borders, either. He has repeatedly threatened its neighbors. In late November, [Colombia](#)'s president, [Alvaro Uribe](#), declared that Chávez's efforts to mediate hostage talks with Marxist terrorists from the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC, were not welcome. Chávez responded by freezing trade with Colombia.

With diplomatic, economic and communications institutions designed for a different era, the free world has too few tools to help prevent Venezuela's once vibrant democracy from receding into dictatorship. But such a tragedy is not preordained. In fact, we face a moment when swift decisions by the United States and like-thinking nations could dramatically help, supporting friends and allies with the courage to oppose an aspiring dictator with regional ambitions.

The best place to start is with the prompt passage and signing of the Colombian free trade agreement, which has been languishing in Congress for months. Swift U.S. ratification of the pact would send an unequivocal message to the people of Colombia, the opposition in Venezuela and the wider region that they do not stand alone against Chávez. It would also provide concrete economic opportunities to the people of Colombia, helping to offset the restrictions being imposed by Venezuela -- and it would strengthen the U.S. economy in the bargain.

The importance of the Venezuela-Colombia clash goes beyond turmoil in the U.S. backyard. The episode can help us understand what's at stake in a new age of globalization and information, an age in which trade networks can be as powerful as military alliances. Extending freedom from the political sphere to the economic one and building the global architecture, such as free trade agreements, to support those relationships can -- and should -- be a top priority for the United States in the 21st century.

Since the first years of the Cold War, 10 presidential administrations have operated within an institutional framework fashioned during the [Truman](#) administration: [NATO](#), the [United Nations](#), the [World Bank](#), the [International Monetary Fund](#), the [CIA](#), the [Defense Department](#), Voice of America and the [National Security Council](#). Over six decades, the United States and the rest of the free world have benefited from those institutions, which led to victory in the Cold War and helped maintain international order thereafter.

But with the passage of more than half a century, the end of the Cold War, the attacks of 9/11 and the rise of an Islamic extremist movement that hopes to use terrorism and

weapons of mass destruction to alter the course of humankind, it has become obvious that the national security institutions of the industrial age urgently need to be adapted to meet the challenges of this century and the information age.

At home, the entrenched bureaucracies and diffuse legislative processes of the U.S. government make it hard to creatively, swiftly and proactively handle security threats. Turf-conscious subcommittees in Congress inhibit the country's ability to mobilize government agencies to tackle new challenges. For example, U.S. efforts to build up the police and military capacity of partner nations such as [Afghanistan](#), [Iraq](#) and [Pakistan](#) to fight [al-Qaeda](#) and other extremists have been thwarted over the past six-plus years by compartmentalized budgets, outdated restrictions and budget cycles that force a nation at war to spend three years to develop, approve and execute a program.

The United States has also lost several tools that were central to winning the Cold War. Notably, U.S. institutions of public diplomacy and strategic communications -- both critical to the current struggle of ideas against Islamic radicalism -- no longer exist. Some believed that after the fall of the [Soviet Union](#) such mechanisms were no longer needed and could even threaten the free flow of information. But when the U.S. Information Agency became part of the [State Department](#) in 1999, the country lost what had been a valuable institution capable of communicating America's message to international audiences powerfully and repeatedly.

Meanwhile, a new generation of foes has mastered the tools of the information age -- chat rooms, blogs, cellphones, social-networking Web sites -- and exploits them to spread propaganda, even while the U.S. government remains poorly organized and equipped to counter with the truth in a timely manner. The nation needs a 21st-century "U.S. Agency for Global Communications" to inform, to educate and to compete in the struggle of ideas -- and to keep its enemies from capitalizing on the pervasive myths that stoke anti-Americanism.

Many existing international institutions are also falling short. The United Nations -- which elected [Syria](#) and [Iran](#) to a commission on disarmament, [Sudan](#) to one on human rights and [Zimbabwe](#) to one on sustainable development -- can hardly be considered a credible arbiter of international issues and dialogue. Endemic inertia and corruption threaten to render the United Nations even less effective in the 21st century.

NATO, the great bulwark against communist expansion, could be usefully reoriented toward today's threats to the nation-state system -- global problems that can be successfully dealt with only by broad coalitions of nations capable of efficiently executing collective decisions. By building bilateral and regional partnerships with other like-thinking countries -- such as [India](#), [Singapore](#), [Australia](#), [Japan](#), [South Korea](#) and [Israel](#) -- NATO could evolve into a diplomatic and military instrument of the world's democratic and capitalist societies.

We also must reinvigorate the structures that support global prosperity. Free trade seems to be slipping out of fashion in Congress and the presidential campaign, with some candidates calling for a "timeout" for free trade and the abolition of current agreements, such as [NAFTA](#) and [CAFTA](#). But the world will need a network of trading nations to provide a way to change the circumstances of people in poor nations. Strong U.S. economic relations with the countries of [Latin America](#), [Asia](#), [Africa](#) and the [Middle](#)

[East](#) would encourage international development and investment even as they build closer ties among the United States and its allies. The prosperity that trade pacts foster has proved to be one of the most effective weapons against internal instability and international aggression.

Today's global order is threatened not only by violent extremists, rogue regimes, failing states and aspiring despots such as Chávez. It is also threatened by the complacent assumption that our domestic and global institutions, in their present form, can meet these growing menaces.

In the first years of the Cold War, the free world's leaders created the new institutions necessary to prevail against communism. Sixty years later, six years into a new ideological struggle, in the face of new challenges from asymmetric warfare, in an age in which information mixes with weapons of unprecedented lethality, these old institutions by and large remain arrayed to deal with the enemies of the last struggle, not the enemies of today.

Pundits tend to focus on individuals, not institutions. Personalities, after all, garner more headlines than do bureaucracies and agreements. But when institutions no longer serve our interests well -- or, worse, hamper important efforts -- we need to hear more about reform through public commentary, in Congress and on the campaign trail. The next president will face the issue of reforming domestic and international institutions -- and will need to accelerate the efforts begun by [President Bush](#). We can prevail by mustering the same resolve that President Harry S. Truman and others demonstrated 60 years ago.

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