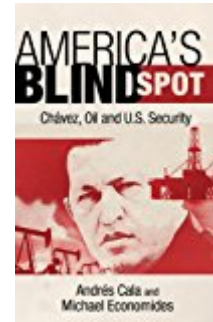


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrés Cala, Michael Economides. *America's Blind Spot: Chávez, Oil, and U.S. Security*. New York: Continuum, 2012. 224 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4411-8669-0.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Among the many concerns that governments must combat in the modern world, energy security is by far one of the most pressing. A topic that is often overlooked by the media and disregarded by the public, energy security affects almost every human being on the planet, as our way of life in the twenty-first century depends on copious amounts of energy for survival. For a country like the United States, which is the number one oil consumer on the planet, energy security is paramount to maintaining the way of life that Americans have come to know. However, with all of the international conflicts and rivalries that exist today, simply relaxing and imagining a world in which the United States can always continue to import energy with no issue is not an easy task. From burgeoning regional superpowers (such as Brazil and India) that will require more energy in the coming years to unstable situations in major oil exporting countries (such as Libya and Iraq), the world is rife with issues that can possibly harm the United States and its energy security. Issues like these and what the established leadership can do to ensure that American energy is secure for the upcoming decades are what Andrés Cala and Michael Economides focus on in their work *America's Blind Spot: Chávez, Oil, and U.S. Security*. Cala and Economides attempt to bring more stability to American energy secu-

rity by breaking down the issues surrounding Venezuela and its anti-American president Hugo Chávez and replacing them with a new path for American leadership to follow that will bridge the gap between the two countries which will allow for a more prosperous; mutually beneficial; and, in the authors' minds, quite necessary trade agreement.

In three parts, Cala and Economides give a brief history of U.S. foreign relations in Latin America, maintaining that these relations have been primarily subpar; a strong explanation of how the upcoming decades will be driven by oil and other forms of nonrenewable energy sources; and a finale that demonstrates what can be gained by improved relations with Latin American countries, especially Venezuela. The authors' thesis—that U.S. national security is directly tied into energy security—is a strong one that they support throughout the book. Cala and Economides point out that the ever-shifting alliances and relations between oil importers and major oil producers produces a tension that all global powers must recognize. By arguing that U.S. leadership is lagging behind and is still treating Latin America as “a raggedy group of apprentices,” the authors make the point that poor foreign relations are harming the national security of the entire country by putting the energy security of

the nation in unnecessary jeopardy (p. 14).

By urging the current Obama administration to forgo the idealist version of diplomacy that has been utilized by his predecessors, Cala and Economides argue that by taking a more realist approach to Latin America, and in particular Venezuela, a mutually beneficial relationship can be achieved. The authors point out that despite Venezuela's hard-line President Chávez and his economic program of Bolivarianism (a model that is contrary to programs championed by the United States), American energy security can be strengthened by pushing for more cooperation between the two countries. Cala and Economides ask the direct question "is Chávez a threat?" and answer with a resounding no. By pointing out that it is unwise and even dangerous for America to not fund Venezuela's oil production through foreign investments, the authors claim that any further delays can and will "have a big impact on oil prices and indirectly hurt America's economy" (p. 47).

Moving away from the topic of Venezuela and its complex situation in regard to America's energy security, the authors take three middle chapters of the book (approximately fifty pages) to discuss the coming century and the United States' continuing reliance on fossil fuels. Cala and Economides argue that despite increased funding to various renewable energy sources, such as nuclear and wind, fossil fuels will continue supplying "around 80 percent of total energy over the next two decades" (p. 69). This overall pessimistic attitude toward renewable energy sources certainly emphasizes the authors' insistence that the Obama administration must act to shore up relations with oil producing countries like Venezuela. Despite being an interesting and thought-provoking part of the book, the aforementioned chapters focus little on the authors' thesis of energy security and its relation to Venezuela. More of an economic lesson on oil prices and its supply and demand principles, this middle section does little to push the authors' argument concerning improved relations with Venezuela and how such a positive relationship would benefit American energy security.

The final and most critical section of the book focuses on how the United States can improve its relationship with Venezuela and the numerous benefits that each country could reap if such an agreement was completed. The authors give relevant ideas that could feasibly improve ties between the two countries, which would greatly benefit the Venezuelan economy, American energy security, and the American image throughout the rest of Latin America. The authors contend that American leadership should take a more realist approach to

ward Venezuela, leaving behind the ideological differences that the two countries share and instead focusing more on improving the Venezuelan oil output primarily through more private investment. Cala and Economides make a valid point when they mention that the United States must cease bringing oil into the political fight between the two countries as the United States "cannot long survive the combination of slow growth and high oil prices" (p. 187). This statement more than others demonstrates just how much the United States has to gain by improving relations with Venezuela as it would guarantee that more oil would hit the market, which would only help improve the still struggling economy.

One major aspect of the book that must be discussed is its relevance after the death of former Venezuelan President Chávez, a major player in the Venezuelan oil industry and in international relations. Published before his death in March 2013, the authors mention his illness and its potential to affect the impending presidential election in Venezuela in late 2012. However, despite Venezuela having a new president with slightly different ideas toward relations with the United States and the oil industry, the book is still relevant to readers. The authors make note that U.S. dependence on oil and its tenuous energy security will not change even with a new leader at the helm of Venezuela. Cala and Economides point out that the American necessity for nonrenewable energy sources to drive its economic recovery will place the United States in a situation in which it needs more Venezuelan oil no matter if the president is Chávez or someone else. These arguments are quite valid and do much to ensure that the book is still a worthwhile read even after Chávez's death.

Overall, *America's Blind Spot* is a meaningful book for anyone who is interested in American energy security and its fragile state in relation to foreign countries. Throughout the piece, the authors demonstrate the American penchant for requiring copious amounts of nonrenewable energy, a trait that is dangerous to the country since America must import more than it can produce. The authors' combined knowledge of the oil industry and its relationship to the economy in general gives the book an extra value in that it is informative about not only the relationship between the United States and Latin America (specifically Venezuela) but relations between the United States and other major oil producing countries as well. Although slightly dated due to Chávez's death, this book is still a valuable piece that contains many solutions that could strengthen the United States' energy security issues at a time in which such answers have never been more necessary.

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