



ROANOKE COLLEGE

An interview with Daniel Di Martino From Venezuela to America: A Journey of Freedom, Socialism, and Advocacy

By Bryana Archer '26

Daniel Di Martino is a Ph.D. candidate in economics at Columbia University, a graduate fellow at the Manhattan Institute, and a Center for Entrepreneurship & Free Enterprise Board of Advisors member at Young America's Foundation.

Born and raised in Venezuela, Di Martino experienced the terrible consequences of socialism firsthand. After leaving Venezuela for the United States in 2016, he dedicated himself to explaining how socialism destroyed his homeland, advocating for its freedom, and stopping this ideology from ever being implemented in America and elsewhere.

On March 10, he spoke at Roanoke College in a lecture sponsored by the David L. Guy '75 Lecture Series, the Center for Economic Freedom and the Young America's Foundation. Ahead of that event, I had an opportunity to interview him about his career and his advice for today's students.

Editor's Note: This interview took place on March 10. Edited excerpts of the conversation follow below.

Q: What was it like to leave Venezuela to come to America? What was the hardest and best part?

The hardest part is the hardest part of leaving any country or any place, which is being far from family and your loved ones. All of my family used to live in Caracas and were all very close. Even though I have a small family. I don't have siblings; I'm an only child. The best part was the freedom and the opportunities, the possibilities, the peace that comes with safety, the less anxiety that comes with not having to worry about electricity or water. That's a big source of anxiety.

Q: You have been quoted saying, "If socialism ever comes to America, it will be through votes, not bullets." What do you think socialism would look like in America?

It would look like an ever-growing government. It would look like ever higher taxation levels. It would look like the government regulating small aspects of our lives they shouldn't be involved in. Let me give you examples: maybe we would have a national sales tax, maybe we would see the quality of our public services decrease, maybe we would see a straight-up takeover from the government of companies in different sectors of the economy, health care, government hospitals, government insurance, more and more of a share of the population living off the government, fewer people working in the private sector, we become a parasitic economy because someone who lives off the government isn't producing something. They are taken away because they are literally living off the taxes of those who do produce in the private sector. I think that's what

socialism would look like. It would just translate into a lower quality of life. My concern is that it would be in a gradual way, and it would be widely supported, as maybe it is in southern Europe, where people make very little money, there is a high share of the population that is unemployed and living off the government, more than half the population and then ever faster inflation like in Argentina. That's the optimistic scenario; that's the scenario where we still have democracy.

Q: You founded the Dissident Project. What inspired you to start the Dissident Project?

I went to a high school, spoke, and really liked the experience. I think we have much more to teach at the high school level than at the college level from the stories of those who lived under socialist dictatorships. I also understood, wow, I would love to do this everywhere, but I am just one person, and we need money. That's where the Dissident Project came about. I also saw that Florida required that every high schooler learn from a person who escaped a socialist country. This is one of the reforms Ron DeSantis did in 2022. I thought there would be a lot more demand for this; my goal is that every high school student in America is exposed to at least one survivor of a socialist regime. I am contributing a little bit through this project. We have spoken at hundreds of high schools, but there are tens of thousands of high schools. We've only done one percent; we need to multiply it by one hundred, and then we'll be done.

Q: You were born the same year as Hugo Chavez was sworn in as president. What was your most memorable interaction with socialism in Venezuela, and how did you know it wasn't how the rest of the world operated?

The most memorable thing was that you saw Chavez everywhere. He appeared on your TV whenever he wanted. He was very well known for his daily ramblings. He would have his own TV show called, "Hello Mr. President," every morning. His face and signature would be on public property, everywhere. Red became a widespread color because that was the color of the revolution. The government workers wore red shirts; public housing was painted red, and government office walls were painted red. Everything was red. We got rid of all our red clothing because we didn't want to be associated with any of that. They politized a color. That is the most memorable thing you see.

Q: You have expressed on Twitter your excitement in Trump's movements in the first month or so in office. What do you think of America's current political climate and the presidency in the next four years? What do hope to see from this presidency?

I have some hopes and some concerns. I would say my greatest hope is in government spending reduction. I hope the whole Department of Government Efficiency effort is fruitful; I'm skeptical it will be because this is not about the executive, it's about Congress. I don't see the willingness to do the entitlement reforms required to reduce spending or even the discretionary spending reforms; I don't think the members of Congress are willing to.

I also like the sanctions against the authoritarian regimes and Venezuela. I love that the FBI is going to go after people who do business with Maduro. That's excellent; it's what we need to do. What happened in Venezuela is not just because of some actions of some Venezuelans in Venezuela; it's also because of the actions of Americans and other people from other countries around the world who are making money off the destruction of Venezuela. And you know what, America should not be in the business of profiting from the destruction of entire nations. Not

America, but Americans. I think it is immoral, it's wrong, it's human rights violation. Just like it's wrong to profit from drug trafficking. Imagine you are not selling arms. You are selling pens to El Chapo. I'm just his pen-and-paper provider, but you know what he does, right? You would actually go to jail as the pen-and-paper provider. We need to treat Maduro like we treat El Chapo, as an international criminal. That's what he is. That's what I am hopeful.

I am very concerned on the trade front. I am worried about the tariffs on Canada, Mexico, Europe, and other allies. I think we need to be united against China and the Chinese communist party. That's a good thing because they are evil. They could destroy America. That's their plan. So why are we fighting with the Canadians and the Mexicans and destroying our economy in the process? You're seeing what's happening in the stock market because of that. I am very concerned about that. I am just very worried about the political environment overall. I feel like the Democrats have moved to insane positions on social issues. They keep believing in growing government, and the Republicans are not willing to cut government. They are more reasonable on social issues, but they are also becoming more liberal. Trump is not pro-life even though he was able to overturn Roe V. Wade. He is not in favor of the right to life. He, by many measures, is the most socialist and liberal president in modern history.

I am concerned about the long run, even if I am optimistic about the short run.

Q: In your opinion what is your biggest accomplishment in your life?

I would say I am trying to be as good a Christian as I can be, trying to follow God's mission for me.