

False Reporting on the Health of Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was diagnosed with cancer and a malignant tumor was removed from his pelvic region last June, all kinds of rumors, lies and speculations have circulated about his health. Most of the hype has come from known anti-Chavez media, such as the Miami Herald and several online blogs run by right-wing extremists like Bush's former Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega, who's been obsessed with Chavez for years. All cite unnamed sources who claim they have "insider information" about the Venezuelan head of state's health.

It's been unsurprising that those media outlets, known for their decade-long distortions of Venezuela's reality, would publish such falsities and morbid tales about President Chavez. But that a serious, veteran, investigative journalist, such as Dan Rather, would indulge in the necrophiliac story-telling about the Venezuelan President is truly disappointing.

Rather, who now runs his own show on HDNet, *Dan Rather Reports*, posted a report on Wednesday, May 30, claiming President Chavez's health is "dire" and has "entered the end stage". Rather also claims his unnamed "high-level" source, who he alleges is close to the Venezuelan President, told him Chavez won't live "more than a couple of months at most".

In his brief report, which he calls an "exclusive", Rather also bids in with his own biased language, calling the democratically-elected Venezuelan President a "dictator".

What prompted Dan Rather to write such diatribe? Why would he join the ranks of Roger Noriega, the wretched Miami Herald and a slew of pseudo-journalists drooling over their morbid wet dreams of President Chavez's failing health?

What is apparent is that Rather was quick to the gun to "break" his "exclusive" story. Just the day before, President Chavez hosted a cabinet meeting broadcast live on television that lasted more than four hours. The Venezuelan head of state appeared energized, optimistic and focused on his duties, and even sang a few heartfelt songs, as is custom for the eclectic and charismatic Chavez. He reaffirmed his candidacy for the October 7th presidential elections. (Yes, Venezuela is a democracy!) That's a far cry from being on his "death bed", as Rather implies.

President Chavez does have cancer. He's been the first to inform on his health, and has been open about his treatment and recovery since his first operation last June to remove the initial tumor. Chavez then underwent five sessions of chemotherapy - four of which were done in Cuba. He was recuperating well and even played host to a major historical summit in Caracas last December to inaugurate the newly-formed Community of Latin American and

Caribbean States (CELAC), in which all 33 nations in the region are represented.

But in early February, Chavez announced that a second, smaller tumor had been detected in the same area in his pelvic region, and had to be removed. He again returned to Cuba for surgery, and subsequently received several rounds of radiation therapy. According to Chavez, there was no metastasis, nor were any of his organs affected. On May 11, he returned to Venezuela after completing the treatment and expressed his optimism for recovery. "I'm on the plane... Heading for the Venezuelan fatherland. With more optimism than ever! We will live and we will conquer!" Chavez said that day in a message on Twitter.

Since then, the Venezuelan President has participated in several televised meetings and called in to different news programs to discuss his policies and provide updates on his health. He has admitted he can no longer be the "work horse" he was before, and now must limit himself to an 8-hour workday, ensuring he keeps his diet and sleep in check. But previous to his health scare, Chavez was a super-President, appearing on television in public events for hours – sometimes even eight hours – and participating in three to four activities daily, often in different parts of the country. He barely slept and drank excessive amounts of black, sugary coffee. He worked until the wee hours of the morning and listened to every voice, attended every request. His level of energy was extreme, as was his anxiety and commitment to continue rebuilding Venezuela and ensuring his policies reduced poverty and provided for the most needy.

Now, as Chavez runs for his third full term, his pace is no longer extreme, but it's certainly on par or above his counterparts. Even throughout his cancer treatments, President Chavez was on top of his duties, informing the public via television and Twitter about budgetary issues and new projects underway. He never dropped the ball, despite the severity of his situation.

Chavez has cancer, and he is fighting it hard, with the same strength he has used to propel his nation forward, often against the toughest obstacles. But President Chavez is not "out of the game", as Dan Rather morbidly implies. Polls show him with double-digit leads over the opposition presidential candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, a neoconservative known for his violent role in the April 2002 coup d'état against Chavez. A majority of Venezuelans know – and love – President Chavez for his immense humanity and his passionate commitment to improving their lives. And they will vote for him again.

Dan Rather has always emphasized the necessity of "courage" in reporting, yet he shows cowardice and sloppy ambition by racing to publish unconfirmed reports on President Chavez's health, and by touting slanderous epithets to describe the Venezuelan head of state. He also shows a complete lack of respect for President Chavez's humanity by perpetuating gruesome rumors about his mortality. Mr. Rather appears to have left his journalist ethics and principles behind, and has chosen – at least in this case – to be a pawn of yellow journalism.

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