

“Murió Chávez”: Architect of a New Latin America: Chávez Has Died

By [Arnold August](#)

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On March 5, 2013, I was accompanying the President of the Unión de Periodistas de Cuba – UPEC (Cuban Association of Journalists), Tubal Páez. The occasion was a ceremony to honour an outstanding Cuban journalist. It took place in the small town of Juan Gualberto Gómez in Matanzas province. The town eponymously honours the son of mulatto slaves born there in 1854 on a sugar plantation.

After the First War of Independence (1868–78), Juan Gualberto Gómez founded *La Fraternidad*, a newspaper dedicated to racial harmony, liberty and social progress for people of colour. In March 1880, he was arrested for supporting the Cuban independence fighters and deported to Spain. However, he continued contributing articles and letters to *La Fraternidad* and to *El Abolicionista* (“The Abolitionist,” in favour of the abolition of slavery). He returned to Cuba in 1890. During the Third War of Independence (1895–98), he rose to the rank of general and was a close collaborator of José Martí. After the war, when Cuba’s victory against Spain was recuperated by the U.S., who imposed its domination, he continued his work as a journalist. Juan Gualberto Gómez did this in various forms, opposing U.S. neo-colonial control. He combined journalism with political activism. He is famous for his outspoken opposition to the U.S.-sponsored Platt Amendment, which, he declared, had reduced the independence and sovereignty of the Cuban Republic to a myth. He thus was strongly opposed to the annexation of Cuba to the U.S. He died 80 years ago, in 1933, after which the sugar plantation town adopted his name.

During the solemn ceremony conducted by villagers in Juan Gualberto Gómez, which was taking place in front of his portrait bust, I heard a cellphone ring at 5 p.m. Tubal turned toward me and said softly, “Murió Chávez” (“Chávez has died”).

It was a shock. Even though the daily *Granma*’s headline that day had clearly indicated the extremely precarious medical situation brought about by the aggravated health condition of the Venezuelan leader, it was impossible to believe. Is it true? How can it be that this dynamic, relatively young and smiling Chávez is no longer physically alive? After coming to grips with the reality, I told Tubal there are some moments in life that one never forgets. These two softly spoken words, “Murió Chávez,” uttered with a combination of sadness and firmness on March 5, just minutes after the Bolivarian Revolution’s leader passed away, was one of these instances.

There are several moments since the 1960s when transcendental news of this type has been ingrained in the memory of individuals and peoples. Which “headlines” hold importance for a person or a people really depends on where one stands on history. During

every anniversary of the assassination of J.F. Kennedy and, of course, the U.S. September 11, 2001 terrorist tragedy, we are called upon by the mainstream media to think back to the specific moment where we were when these events took place and how we reacted to them. In the case of September 11, 2001, this abominable act has no words to describe it.

However, my gut reaction to September 11 every year is to also remember the U.S.-orchestrated coup d'état in Chile on September 11, 1973 that resulted in the assassination of Chile's elected leader, Salvador Allende, and a fascist dictatorship. I remember exactly where I was on that day and my revulsion the moment I heard the news. Before that, on October 9, 1967, I remember the exact spot on McGill University's campus in Montreal where I heard from a fellow student that Ernesto Che Guevara was assassinated in Bolivia. These are precise, vivid moments that I, and many others around the world, remember.

Now there is another one for me: March 5, 2013 in Juan Gualberto Gómez, Matanzas, Cuba. This island and its people and leaders opened the path in 1959 to the new Latin America that is now developing, spurred on by Hugo Chávez.

In the days following his passing away, we were able to experience in Cuba and through the Cuban television broadcast from Venezuela that, in life and as in death, Comandante Chávez was an architect of a new Latin America and Caribbean that is no longer the backyard of the U.S., as they conceive it. This accomplishment was demonstrated so clearly by the presence of heads of state and high-level representatives from the entire region south of the Río Grande at the official funeral ceremony for Hugo Chávez; in addition, representatives from all continents were present to recognize and pay homage to this great achievement and others.

This regional integration is still in motion, a dream in the making. It contributes to establishing a new world where no super power dominates and where each country and its people are free to develop the democracy and socio-economic system that it chooses to follow and build on its own.

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Articles by: **Arnold August**
<http://Guillaume>

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