

Venezuela Keeps Hope Alive

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When Latin American leaders declare their intention to redistribute wealth downward in their countries, a Pavlovian bell rings in Washington. Like the dog in Russian scientist's experiments, the U.S. national security gang respond with aggressive intervention to the very mention of taking some of the ill-gotten gains from the filthy rich and distributing them to the miserably poor.

Look at a partial list in Latin America alone.

1954, the CIA overthrew Guatemala's elected government under President Jacobo Arbenz because he intended to expropriate - with payment - some of the United Fruit Company's vast, and unused, acreage in his country.

1959, Fidel Castro became an object for destabilization and terror because he redistributed wealth.

1964, the United States backed a military coup in Brazil to prevent nationalist President Joao Goulart from reforming Brazil's economic structure.

1965, U.S. troops stopped Juan Bosch from becoming president of the Dominican Republic.

1970-73, CIA destabilized Chile under Allende and backed a bloody, military coup.

1980, the CIA tried to derail the reforms of Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley. The Agency waged covert war against Nicaragua's Sandinistas from 1979-90 and cooperated in ousting President Jean Bertrand Aristide in Haiti - twice.

The CIA knew about the planned April coup against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. An April 6, 2002 Agency document reports that "dissident military factions, including some disgruntled senior officers and a group of radical junior officers, are stepping up efforts to organize a coup against President Chavez, possibly as early as this month." The report placed the coup within the context of a strike by oil workers. "To provoke military action, the plotters may try to exploit unrest stemming from opposition demonstrations slated for later this month or ongoing strikes at the state-owned oil company PSVSA." Washington did not inform Venezuelan authorities of this information. Accessories to a crime? That the CIA "knew" of the coup surprised me as much as George Bush dropping a malapropos.

As I arrived on December 2, I scanned Caracas' Simon Bolivar International Airport for likely looking CIAniks. Apparent serenity prevailed, but exciting social change was taking place throughout the country.

On December 3, I traveled to Guarenas, a city of about 140,000 people, about 15 miles east of Caracas. I had joined hundreds of Artists and Intellectuals in Defense of Humanity, among them actor Danny Glover, former Algerian Prime Minister Ben Bella and Nobel Prize laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel. We spent eight hours applauding grandmas showing off their newly acquired reading skills and pointing proudly to the North Pole on the map after taking a geography course. The education program ("Mision Robinson," named after Samuel Robinson, one of Simon Bolivar's teachers) now extends into the most remote rural areas. Cuban teachers help Venezuelan educators bring literacy and more advanced learning to areas that were previously deprived.

We also met scores of Cuban doctors, nurses, X-ray and lab technicians. They appeared to have routine and friendly interaction with poor patients at primary health care clinics in Oropeza Castillo, a slum neighborhood of eroding high rise apartments.

The Cubans, indistinguishable from the Venezuelans by skin color - slightly different accents and wearing white lab coats - proudly described how their primary health care programs and diagnostic centers treat thousands daily in facilities that the residents previously lacked. A group of women bystanders agreed that the Cubans treated them with dignity and professionalism, from physical exams through x-ray and lab work.

Before I had left for Venezuela, one wealthy Venezuelan student told me that "Castro's doctors deprive Venezuelan physicians. They treat patients for nothing. How will our own doctors survive?"

Before the Cuban doctors came, I asked one middle-aged woman, "What kind of medical attention did you receive?"

She laughed. "When students graduated from medical school, they would come and treat us, but without any support system. They did their best, but the public hospitals were filthy and often had inadequate staff, even when we came in with emergencies," another said. "Look how many babies died in childbirth!" She named neighbors who lost their babies.

The next day President Hugo Chavez provided exact figures. "Before we began the new primary care programs," Chavez said, "our infant mortality rate was 24 to every 1000 births. We've reduced it in the last year to 17, a major drop, but still too high." Imagine an oil rich country with such mortality figures! The Cuban doctors are helping to bring the rate down further.

Chavez' *barrio adentro* (inside the neighborhood) program also includes public dining rooms and markets where the government offers free or subsidized food to the poorest residents.

At the "Casa de Alimentacion Auricela Diaz," the residents served us rice, beans, shredded pork and fried bananas. Residents said they received meals like this on a regular basis, thanks to Hugo Chavez. In a school yard, Cuban physical education teachers had organized a potato sack race and other games involving parents and kids. Several neighbors commented on how the quality of life had improved since the arrival of the Cubans. "They're very much like us," a woman told me after her daughter had won a prize in a coordination contest. "You know, Caribbean people."

A Cuban doctor from Santi Espiritu told me that his "grandparents were illiterate *guajiros* (peasants) and every time they see me my grandmother bursts out crying. She still can't

believe I'm a doctor. I'm repaying my debt to my country by helping people here in Guarenas. I feel good about it."

Enough barefoot kids ran around to assure me that I was not seeing Caribbean versions of the Potemkin village, an ideal community set up to please Catherine the Great.

"This is my revolution," Asia, a young dark-skinned woman proudly tells me. "And it belongs to us because we voted for it several times." She referred to both the 1998 election when Venezuelans overwhelmingly chose Hugo Chavez president and to the August 2004 referendum when almost 60% opted for him. He vowed to end the Kleptocracy that had governed the country for decades and to spread the wealth to the poor. "I feel proud to be Venezuelan," she said. "I really feel as if Bolivar's spirit is alive with Hugo Chavez."

The wealthy behaved in Venezuela as they did in Cuba after the 1959 revolution, in Chile after the 1970 election of Allende and in Nicaragua after the 1979 Sandinista triumph. They responded to the loss of some power and privilege by mounting a vicious campaign against the new government.

After four years of incessant propaganda on how Chavez was a dictator, stupid, gay, a Castro tool, a terrorist and incompetent, the old privileged class convinced their corrupt union leader buddies in the oil industry to stage a crippling strike. In April 2002, with the Bush Administration blessing, they staged an unsuccessful coup. Following that, they sought to recall Chavez through a referendum. When almost 95% of the electorate turned out, the old ruling elite understood they could not use a democratic ritual against the first Venezuelan President that had given the word democracy real meaning.

Chavez won despite unrelenting opposition from the two main daily newspapers (Universal and Nacional) and the leading television stations. Chavez is a "black monkey," his white opponents smirked. Even Colin Powell took offense as he endorsed policies to overthrow Chavez.

He spoke to the delegates at the Defense of Humanity Meeting about why he rejected the IMF model. "It brought us the 'Carracazo' [1989 anti-IMF riots]." The rich imposed austerity policies on the poor and then the repressive forces shot down as many as 2,000 people. These neo-liberal policies have led to a million kids living in Venezuelan slums. Indeed, Egypt, Indonesia, Argentina and scores of third world countries have also been IMF'd. Neo-liberal economic policies, Chavez told the assembled delegates, produced an oil-rich nation with 1 million plus illiterate adults. For decades, alternating Social Democratic and Christian Democratic governments looted the treasury.

Chavez sang the praises of the 10,000 Cuban doctors, plus nurses and technicians, in the more than 11,000 urban and rural clinics. Chavez has also invested in housing and agrarian reform for poor farmers - 117,000 farm families will have received almost 5 million acres by January. "We've done very little," Chavez said. "The big job is ahead." He expected to win a larger majority in 2006, based on the performance of his government. He said that Venezuela can't do it alone, that a block of Latin American nations must form to insure proper development. Chavez has taken steps, along with Cuba's Castro and Brazil's Lula to start such a process. "The world needs development and peace and the only road to peace," he concluded, "is justice."

Chavez quoted Bolivar, Marti, O'Higgins and contemporary authors in his discourse, hardly

the picture of the military hick that his enemies paint. He showed intellect, a sense of humor, iron will and determination to push ahead with his ambitious and just programs. He laid out a reasonable social democracy model as his goal.

On the road back to the airport, I passed elegant high rises and wealthy neighborhoods. The class struggle will undoubtedly intensify. The unanswered question: how to stop Bush from further intervention and defend humanity in Venezuela?

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