

HUGO CHAVEZ: A NEW CASTRO?

THE VENEZUELAN PRESIDENT'S AUTHORITARIAN TENDENCIES
REPRESENT A GROWING CONCERN TO THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION,
WHICH IS SPEAKING OUT MORE ABOUT THE THREAT HE POSES TO THE HEMISPHERE.

BY GEORGE GEDDA

Nobody paid much attention when Hugo Chavez bounded off a plane in Cuba in December 1994 and received a hearty welcome from President Fidel Castro. Chavez had just been released from a Venezuelan prison where he spent more than two years for leading a bloody but unsuccessful military revolt in February 1992 against the elected pro-U.S. government. The cordial reception for Chavez in Havana suggested that Castro saw the Venezuelan army veteran, 28 years his junior, as a man of conviction and daring, the same qualities that had catapulted Castro to power in 1959.

Late 1994 was a grim period for Cuba. The country had been experiencing a catastrophic economic decline following the collapse of its main benefactor, the Soviet Union, three years earlier. At age 35, Cuba's revolution looked spent. But Chavez was still a believer, calling the country "a bastion of dignity in Latin America." He later said, "It's the first time we have come to Cuba physically, but in our dreams we have come an infinity of times." Castro and Chavez seemed to see the world through the same anti-American lens. Castro has always been an extremely acute political analyst. He predicted the demise of Soviet communism well before it happened. In 1994, he perceptively hailed Chavez as a comer.

Fast-forward a decade to Jan. 31, 2005. Chavez, completing six years as Venezuela's elected president, is standing at a podium in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where tens of

thousands of leftists are gathered for a conference. "The imperialist forces are starting to strike against the people of Latin America and the world," Chavez declares. Opposition to America and support for Cuba are staples of Chavez's presidency. Awash in ambition and petrodollars, he has become America's biggest headache in the hemisphere.

Not long ago, a sharp shift to the left in Venezuela would have been unimaginable. The country seemed immune to the kind of political upheavals so common elsewhere in the region. Besides Cuba, there were leftist triumphs in Nicaragua and Chile. At the same time, military rule in the area was common well into the 1980s. Venezuela was one of the few models of democratic stability. It was seen as a privileged Third World country, blessed with abundant oil reserves, greater social mobility than its neighbors and a centrist political tradition that resisted extremism. As Venezuelan experts Miguel Tinker-Salas and Steve Ellner point out in an essay, Venezuela long seemed an exceptionalist country to many observers, not "a likely candidate in Latin America for a sharp shift to the left."

That assessment turned out to be wrong. It soon became clear that Venezuela's pre-Chavez experience mirrored that of a number of other Latin American countries during that period: The democratic form was there, but not the substance.

As Tinker-Salas notes in a separate essay, Venezuela may have been rich in oil but was still a poor country two decades ago. "During the 1980s, the suggestion that the oil economy could uplift broad sectors of the population, or provide an entryway into the middle class, ceased to hold sway among the disenfranchised sectors of society," he writes.

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“Instead, the widespread perception was that oil only fueled the success of a small privileged sector of society directly associated with the enterprise or its affiliates.”

Former President Jimmy Carter warned in a speech this past January that Latin America’s impoverished millions could turn to “radical and destructive” behavior unless governments do a better job of meeting their needs. He said more than 225 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean are consigned to extreme poverty. And in 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell said that if democracy does not deliver a better life for Latin Americans, then “it is possible for us to go backward” — meaning a retreat to authoritarian rule. Chavez himself said former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, as he was leaving office, expressed frustration over Brazil’s widespread destitution. Cardoso said, according to Chavez, “I governed Brazil, one of the biggest nations in the world, for eight years, and in all those eight years, Brazil’s economy didn’t stop growing.’ Then he said an amazing thing: ‘Neither did poverty stop growing.’”

In Venezuela, simmering resentment turned into rebellion in February 1989. When President Carlos Andres Perez imposed austerity measures to deal with a declining economy, the response was mass protests that shook his government. Venezuelans were losing their faith in traditional political parties, a point underscored when the Chavez-led coup attempt in 1992 nearly succeeded. People were tired of corruption, human rights violations, exclusionary politics and electoral fraud.

Consider a World Bank assessment of where Venezuela stood in the late 1990s, at roughly the time when Chavez would take office: “(T)he percentage of Venezuelans living in poverty (household income of less than \$2 a day) has increased from 32.2 percent in 1991 to 48.5 percent in 2000. Likewise, the proportion of those living in extreme poverty, below \$1 a day, rose from 11.8 percent to 23.5 percent. This increased poverty is accompanied by a widening inequality gap. Currently, the richest 20 percent of Venezuelans receives 53 percent of all income, while the poorest 20 percent accounts for only a 3-percent share...” A leading Venezuelan intellectual and social critic, the late Arturo Uslar Pietri, once lamented how little ordinary people benefited from what he described as the “15 Marshall Plans” worth of oil revenue the country had received over the years.

Chavez Consolidates Power

Against that backdrop, Chavez won the 1998 presidential elections by a wide margin. He took office in February 1999, a 44-year old black-Indian nationalist who promised clean government and a better deal for the poor. Privately, Chavez assured U.S. diplomats that he was a committed democrat, but the Clinton administration remained wary of this dynamic new figure.

While alienating the middle and upper classes with confrontational policies, Chavez has tackled poverty with a vengeance. He mobilized the armed forces in programs to help the poor, initiated literacy campaigns and provided free education for school dropouts. The government has delivered low-cost food and medical services to poor areas. It has established a new university for the poor. Cuba has provided a huge assist, dispatching upwards of 10,000 health experts, teachers and sports trainers to underserved areas of Venezuela. All of this has brought enormous political benefits for Chavez. Last August, an opposition attempt to oust him through a recall referendum ended with a lopsided victory for the president.

But at the same time, the country has strayed far afield from traditional democratic norms. The Venezuelan Congress, dominated by Chavez loyalists, has approved legislation enabling the government to shut down private media outlets for vaguely defined offenses. The president has authorized the seizure of privately owned farms, part of what he calls “the war against the estates.” He arranged for an enlargement of the Supreme Court from 20 to 32, permitting him to appoint new justices known for loyalty to him. Indeed, the court has named an electoral council that is top-heavy with Chavez supporters. This should bode well for Chavez’s expected re-election run in 2006.

The once powerful opposition to Chavez has turned quiescent, seemingly cowed by legal action planned against some of its leaders. Among them is Maria Corina Machado, of a civic group known as Sumate, which helped organize last year’s referendum to unseat Chavez. She and some allies could face treason charges for having received \$31,000 in U.S. funding for Sumate through a private prodemocracy endowment. Machado says the money was used for nonpartisan voter education projects. The government accuses her of seeking “to destroy the republican nature of the country.”

Robert Zoellick, the new deputy secretary of State, testified at his Senate confirmation hearing in February that

***Bush administration officials
are well aware of the many parallels
between Chavez’s
and Castro’s respective
rises to power.***



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Chavez's anti-democratic activities are reminiscent of former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori. He described the common strategy of the two: "You win the election, but you do away with your opponents, you do away with the press, you do away with the rule of law, you pack the courts."

For her part, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has called Chavez a "negative force" in the region. She says she is "very deeply troubled" by his policies. However, several senators challenged her on this during her confirmation hearings. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Minn., said the message to Rice was, "Look, maybe there's a chance here to have a real relationship [with Venezuela]." He complained that Rice was "absolutely rigid" in her unwillingness to reach out.

There is little doubt that Chavez has been on America's case ever since taking office. He ran afoul of the Clinton administration in 2000 by becoming the first foreign leader to call on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein since U.N. Security Council sanctions were imposed on Iraq in 1991. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Chavez joined Castro in vigorously condemning the crime. But his sympathy morphed quickly into anti-U.S. hostility once the American military began taking aim at the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Then-U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela Donna Hrinak delivered a personal rebuke to Chavez after he went on national television and showed photographs of the bloodied remains of children killed by the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan.

Chavez later said his message had simply been that one could not fight terrorism with terrorism. But as he would later explain, "The [American] ambassador came to me and demanded, 'You must rectify your position.' I replied: 'You are talking to the president of the Bolivarian

Republic of Venezuela. You are dismissed. When you learn what the job of an ambassador is, you may come back.'"

Parallels with Cuba?

Chavez's close ties to Castro have been a particular concern to the Bush administration, which is well aware that the two men's ascents are remarkably similar in some ways. Both achieved national and international renown through dramatic acts of defiance against the state. Castro led an assault on the Moncada barracks in eastern Cuba in 1953, while Chavez's 1992 bid for power featured attacks on the presidential palace and residence. Both attempts failed. Castro was convicted of rebellion and served two years before being granted early release. Chavez's fate was similar — two years' imprisonment followed by early release.

It took Castro five-and-a-half years after the Moncada assault to shoot his way into power. The time gap for Chavez, using the electoral route, was just under seven years. Both men assured a suspicious Washington of their democratic bona fides but failed to live up to those promises. And each faced a crisis early on in his rule: Castro at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 and Chavez during a mass protest backed by military dissidents in April 2002. Both leaders survived (Chavez just barely), and were strengthened as a result.

Obviously, there are important differences between the two leaders, as well, quite apart from the contrasting means by which they achieved power. While Castro runs a totalitarian state in which the government dominates the economy and harasses the private entrepreneurs, Venezuela retains many of the trappings of a democratic society and a market-based economy. Newspapers are relatively unrestrained. But Chavez is steadily chipping away at the separation of pow-

ers, democracy's cornerstone. In that sense, he is creating a state that looks more and more like Cuba. Washington obviously is anxious about this trend, but the more than 30 other democracies in the hemisphere have remained silent. None seems eager to take Chavez on.

Castro's ambitions have always extended far beyond Cuba's borders and, likewise, Chavez sees Venezuela as too small a stage. He is attempting to revive the Bolivarian dream of the "true unification" of South America, presumably under Venezuelan leadership. He has also been sending mixed signals about the long-running leftist rebel campaign to topple the government in neighboring Colombia. Chavez insists he is neutral, but his military was discovered in December to have been harboring Rodrigo Granda, a top official of Colombia's FARC rebel group. An outraged Colombian President Alvaro Uribe arranged for Granda to be kidnapped and taken back to Colombia. For his part, Chavez considered the Colombian-sponsored abduction of Granda on Venezuelan turf to be an unwarranted intrusion. Early tensions over the issue have abated but Colombian suspicions about its eastern neighbor run high, fed by, among other things, Venezuela's plan to buy 100,000 rifles from Russia. Colombian officials worry that the weaponry is intended for the FARC.

Chavez seems most comfortable not with fellow Latin American democrats but with leaders, often half a world away, who rule with a heavy hand. Besides Cuba, a partial list of his overseas stops in recent months includes Iran, Russia, Libya and China. A trade deal with Beijing will permit Chinese access to oil fields in Venezuela and investment in new refineries. To sweeten the deal, Venezuela, the world's fifth-largest oil exporter, has also offered to supply

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At present, Caracas sells about 60 percent of its output to the United States. In effect, American petrodollars are financing Chavez's revolution. On occasion, there is talk of Venezuela suspending oil exports to the United States for perceived U.S. misdeeds but analysts say that is unlikely because the American market is the only one that makes sense for Venezuela because of its size and easy geographic access.

The 2002 Coup Attempt

The events of April 2002 in Caracas were among the most dramatic in Latin America during the past half-century. Widespread anti-Chavez protests erupted on Thursday, April 11. Gunfire left at least 18 dead and many more wounded, although it was not clear how many casualties each side was responsible for. Dissident military leaders seized Chavez and took him to a military base near the coast. It was officially announced that Chavez had resigned and that Pedro Carmona, a businessman, had been named interim president.

In a statement issued on April 12, the morning after Chavez was detained, the State Department said the president had resigned and, before doing so, fired his vice president and Cabinet. It asserted that his ouster was the result of his provocations, a reference to the violence that occurred during the demonstrations, and added that the new government was planning to hold elections in six months. The statement conspicuously failed to indicate any concern about the unconstitutional outcome. It was not until the evening of April 13, just hours before Chavez returned to power, that the United States condemned the coup, joining other members of the Organization of American States in a strongly-worded resolution.

Arturo Valenzuela, a top State

Department aide during the Clinton administration, said he was appalled by the seeming U.S. acceptance of the coup. In an opinion piece written after Chavez was reinstated, Valenzuela warned: "The United States now risks losing much of the considerable moral and political leadership it had rightly won over the last decade as the nations of the Americas sought to establish the fundamental principle that the problems of democracy are solved in democracy, not through resorting to unconstitutional means."

Privately, State Department officials had been doubting Chavez's commitment to democracy starting well before the events of April 2002. To these and other officials, his actions resurrected the old question of how to deal with an undemocratic leader who is elected democratically. Some would argue that removing him would be a subversion of democracy; others say that leaving him in power would lead to the same result. Based partly on the hemispheric Democratic Charter, which took effect in September 2001, the official U.S. policy was to support institutional status quo in Venezuela. But on that climactic day in April 2002, there was a clear impression in Washington and in Latin American capitals that Chavez's enemies had forced him out, the first unconstitutional change of government in a major hemispheric country in 26 years. This conclusion was reflected in the State Department statement of April 12.

That impression was reinforced on that same day in a statement by George Folsom, the president of the pro-democracy International Republican Institute. (The IRI is a government-funded GOP affiliate, with a Democratic counterpart, that seeks to promote democracy overseas through nonpartisan programs promoting voter education and other democratic building blocks.) Folsom hailed the efforts of the Venezuelan people to

restore democracy to the country. He referred to Chavez not as "president" but as "lieutenant colonel," his last rank before he was captured after leading the 1992 rebellion. Folsom further declared that the Venezuelan people "rose up to defend their democracy as a result of systematic repression by Chavez."

Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy, which oversees the IRI, sent a letter to Folsom after Chavez's reinstatement saying he was "greatly disturbed" by his comments. He said Chavez's attempted removal through unconstitutional means "was understandably seen by many democrats in the hemisphere as a blow to democracy in Venezuela."

The Carmona government, of course, was short-lived. Chavez's supporters took to the streets to demand his return to office. Intimidated, the coup-makers backed off and, somewhat miraculously, a chastened Chavez was back in power less than three days after his disappearance.

Made in Washington?

The U.S. role — or lack of it — in the coup attempt has been debated ever since. Washington denied any involvement and a State Department Inspector General's report, completed in July 2002, found "no evidence to suggest that the department or Embassy Caracas planned, participated in or encouraged the overthrow of President Chavez."

Given the long history of American intervention in its hemispheric "backyard" (e.g., Panama, the Dominican Republic, Grenada and Guatemala), Washington's denials have been greeted with widespread skepticism. In recent years, though, the United States has acted decisively to defend elected governments faced with possible ouster due to an internal uprising. It has helped preserve constitutional order in Guatemala and Ecuador, and

also used force to restore an elected Haitian government that had been deposed in a military coup. But in the Venezuelan case, the United States was slow to condemn Chavez's ouster. This reflected either confusion about what was happening in Caracas or contentment over the prospect of a Chavez-free future for Venezuela, or both.

The confusion was understandable. Hours after Chavez's resignation, the highest-ranking military officer in the country went on television to confirm that the president had resigned, only to be contradicted by Chavez's attorney general.

The 2002 report of the State Department's Office of the Inspector General found that U.S. Ambassador Charles Shapiro and embassy officials "repeatedly stressed U.S. opposition to undemocratic and unconstitutional moves against President Chavez." Shapiro served notice that, if invited, he would not attend Carmona's inauguration and, when asked by a Venezuelan military opposition leader to facilitate Chavez's departure from the country, Shapiro declined. The ambassador also warned Carmona against dissolving the Supreme Court and the National Assembly, advice that was ignored. By the time Carmona reconsidered, it was too late. The pro-Chavez forces, the OIG report noted, were already setting in motion the chain of events that would lead to restoration of his presidency.

Still, the report leaves room for doubt about whether Chavez's opponents in Venezuela really believed Washington's stated policy of opposing Chavez's ouster. It allows for the possibility that Chavez's enemies would have sought his ouster no matter what the U.S. said or did. Given the long list of U.S. grievances against Chavez, "it is certainly possible that some of those who sought to remove Chavez did so reckoning that Wash-

ington would shed no tears over his ouster," the report notes.

Furthermore, it continues, "the weight of embassy contacts fell heavily on the side of the opposition. Aside from meetings with the president himself, and key ministers, there appears to have been limited outreach to others inside and outside government who supported President Chavez." The report also points out that embassy officials only occasionally spelled out to the president's opponents "the consequences of failure to take the United States at its word that we were opposed to the use of undemocratic and unconstitutional means to oust Chavez."

At a minimum, it is clear that Chavez does not believe Washington's assertions of non-involvement, repeatedly blaming the U.S. for the attempt to oust him. He says the United States was responsible not only for the April coup attempt, but

also for a strike by oil workers eight months later that was designed to force Chavez out. Citing those actions, he has called 2002 "the year of imperialism."

Lately, after keeping a low public profile, the United States has begun stepping up criticism of Chavez, provoked by his moves in recent months to neutralize or eliminate potential threats to his rule.

Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick foreshadowed a possible U.S. strategy for dealing with Chavez when, in February, he called on Latin Americans to join with the United States to combat "creeping authoritarianism" in the region. He suggested that the hemisphere, through institutional changes, has done a good job of protecting elected governments against military takeovers. He said it now needs measures to curb elected authoritarians — pointing to Chavez as Exhibit A. ■

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