

Hugo Chavez Frías and the Sense of History

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez Frías delivered a major summary of his government's current international initiatives today at an event which combined a moment of intense Venezuelan-Cuban diplomatic and commercial interactions with the meetings of the *Fourth Hemispheric Conference Against the FTAA*.

For readers accustomed to the thin gruel of platitudes, Orwellian inversions and vacuous cheerleading into which North American political rhetoric seems to have declined, a Chavez Frías speech can be a heady experience. The Venezuelan president shares with his friend and ally Fidel Castro Ruz an oratorical style that moves effortlessly through a wide gamut of effects, from self-deprecating banter to sustained historical analysis, from clever invective to geopolitical strategizing and impassioned declarations of the political ethics of what he calls "the Bolivarian Revolution."

Like President Castro, Chavez Frías possesses a stamina that might well make classical rhetoricians from Demosthenes to Cicero green with envy. He spoke, without notes (but with the assistance of occasional cups of coffee supplied by aides) for more than three hours in Havana's Karl Marx Theatre to an audience of conference participants and students from the medical and other faculties of Havana's institutes of higher education.

His subject was the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), which Venezuela and Cuba first announced on December 14, 2004 as a principled alternative to the project of a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA, or in Spanish, ALCA) that the United States has been pushing since 2001, first as an all-encompassing agreement modeled on NAFTA which was to have been approved by January 1, 2005, and subsequently in the form of bilateral and regional agreements into which single nations like Chile or groups of small countries like the Central American states might more easily be bullied.

According to Chavez Frías, one defining moment in his movement from protest to alternative proposal was his first meeting with President Castro in Havana in December 1994. This coincided with the Miami Summit of the Americas, at which U.S. President Bill Clinton famously (and fatuously) declared: "Now we can say that the dream of Simon Bolivar has come true in all the Americas." That declaration, Chavez Frías said today, "was a slap in the face of history, and a slap in the face for all of us who know our history and the ideals to which Bolivar devoted his life."

A second defining moment for him was the Québec City FTAA Summit of April 2001. Those among the more than 70,000 demonstrators who endured what Chavez Frías today called "gas warfare" (guerra de gaz) at the wall of shame that surrounded the Québec citadel on that memorable occasion will be gratified to learn that the protests of that weekend made an indelible impression on one at least of the thirty-one government leaders sheltered

within the fortress.

Chavez Frías recalled from that weekend the bullying behaviour of U.S. diplomats, and of their president—to whom he referred, in a mocking allusion to Venezuelan writer Rómulo Gallegos' classic novel *Donna Barbara*, as “Mr. Danger.” He recalled as well the suave hospitality of Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien—and his boast that the infamous wall was “anti-globalizationist-proof” (a boast that was refuted when the protesters marching from Laval University arrived at the wall and promptly pulled down a fifty-metre section of it).

In a discourse liberally salted with literary and historical references, Chavez Frías paid homage to two recently deceased writers: to André Gunder Frank, whose books include the classic study *Underdevelopment or Revolution*; and to the Uruguayan Ide Augustas, from whom he quoted the acerbic remark that “Globalization is a mask, a high-sounding term behind which crouches an evil intention, the old vice of colonialism.” Turning to address the international media, Chavez Frías cited the no less acid remark of Eduardo Galeano that “Never in history have so many been deceived by so few.”

He then remembered, for the benefit of the U.S. media especially, an earlier moment of Cuban-Venezuelan cooperation for which the United States has every reason to feel enduring gratitude. During the American Revolution, sympathetic Cuban women raised more than one thousand pounds for the cause. This substantial contribution was delivered to the insurgent Thirteen Colonies, Chavez Frías noted, by the Venezuelan captain Francisco de Miranda, who deserted from the Spanish imperial army in Havana and became a valued colleague of Thomas Jefferson and even of George Washington. Chavez Frías went on to remember the manner in which the emergent “colossus of the north” repaid this act of generosity by contributing in the 1820s to the defeat of Simon Bolivar’s dream of a united Latin America.

But now, he declared, ten years and five months after Bill Clinton’s empty appropriation of the name of Bolivar, “Now truly the dream of Bolivar is beginning to move toward fulfillment.” Chavez Frías quoted the proposal of Brazil’s President Lula da Silva, during what he called “an historic visit” to Caracas, that “if the nineteenth century was the century of Europe and the twentieth century the century of the United States, the possibility is now emerging of making the twenty-first century the century of Latin America.”

It is in this context that Chavez’s and Castro’s ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, is to be understood. The aim is a process of comprehensive integration aimed at developing “the social state, in the interests not of elites but of the people.” The trade regimes proposed, and imposed, by the United States have empowered corporate elites, and have resulted in a neoliberal and neocolonialist looting of countries like Argentina and Mexico (to name only two of the most prominent victims). They have also resulted, as Chavez Frías remarked, in the devastation of agricultural economies and the further immiseration of working people and of indigenous nations. The ALBA, in contrast, seeks to empower the people at large, and holds out the utopian, revolutionary-democratic hope of eliminating poverty. The goal, Chavez Frías said, is “integration for life—not colonialism, but the happiness of our peoples.”

Forty-nine distinct documents of the ALBA have been signed between Cuba and Venezuela, or are in advanced stages of discussion. Initiatives involving other countries are also being

developed.

An exemplary feature of the ALBA is the fluidity of exchanges of good and services in a manner that sidesteps international banking systems and corporatist trading interests. Thus Venezuela, in exchange for exports of oil and building materials to Cuba, is currently benefiting from the work of nearly 20,000 Cuban doctors, who have opened medical clinics in barrios and rural communities that had never previously enjoyed medical services, while Cuban-staffed literacy programs “have taught 1.4 million previously illiterate Venezuelans to read and write during the past year alone.” An ALBA-type agreement is currently being negotiated with Argentina, which already pays for the eight million barrels of Venezuelan oil it imports, not with the hard cash or currency reserves that it does not have, but with cattle, which it does.

Other initiatives include the signing of twenty-six cooperation agreements between Venezuela and Brazil, the development of Telesur, a shared media network that has the potential of becoming a Latin American Al Jazeera, the creation of a Banco Venezolano Soci  l, whose mission will be “to finance development in the interests of solidarity and cooperation,” and the founding of Petrosur, an “oil alliance” whose benefits to non-producing countries will include the avoidance of the 30% to 50% of the price to consumer countries that under the existing system goes to oil trading companies—or in Chavez Fr  s’ words, to “speculative capitalist intermediaries.”

The Bolivarian dream of Hugo Chavez Fr  s is a large and inclusive one. “Bolivarianismo,” he declared today, is also both “socialismo” and “cristianismo.” Chavez Fr  s’ Bolivarian-socialist Christianity consciously echoes the liberation theologians’ slogan of “a preferential option for the poor.” He quoted the saying of Jesus that “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven”—a saying that has particular resonance in Havana, where since the beginning of the “special period” of acute economic crisis brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union, “camel” has been the name given to the huge tractor-trailer trucks converted into sway-backed buses for urban transportation.

This Bolivarian doctrine involves clear political choices: “According to the Bible,” Chavez Fr  s reminded his audience, “you can be on good terms either with God or with the devil—but not with both.” And its orientation is, very clearly, humanist: “El dios para m  —es el pueblo” (“God, for me, is the people”).

The Venezuelan president harbours no illusions as to the kinds of tactics the U.S. empire is likely to deploy in response to a potentially continental reorganization of social and economic life in the service of human rather than corporatist interests. But neither is he content with the old definition of politics as “the art of the possible.” For this slogan, which Chavez Fr  s says has at times been “no more than an excuse for cowards, or a by-word of traitors and conservatives,” he substitutes what we might term a Bolivarian Alternative: “Politics is the art of making possible tomorrow what seems impossible today.”

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