

The War on Venezuela Is Built on Lies

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Travelling with Hugo Chavez, I soon understood the threat of Venezuela. At a farming co-operative in Lara state, people waited patiently and with good humour in the heat. Jugs of water and melon juice were passed around. A guitar was played; a woman, Katarina, stood and sang with a husky contralto.

"What did her words say?" I asked.

"That we are proud," was the reply.

The applause for her merged with the arrival of Chavez. Under one arm he carried a satchel bursting with books. He wore his big red shirt and greeted people by name, stopping to listen. What struck me was his capacity to listen.

But now he read. For almost two hours he read into the microphone from the stack of books beside him: Orwell, Dickens, Tolstoy, Zola, Hemingway, Chomsky, Neruda: a page here, a line or two there. People clapped and whistled as he moved from author to author. By way of contrast, said Carter, the US election system, with its emphasis on campaign money, "is one of the worst".

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In Barrio La Linea, seated in her tiny kitchen, Beatrice Balazo told me her children were the first generation of the poor to attend a full day's school and be given a hot meal and to learn music, art and dance. "I have seen their confidence blossom like flowers," she said.

In Barrio La Vega, I listened to a nurse, Mariella Machado, a black woman of 45 with a wicked laugh, address an urban land council on subjects ranging from homelessness to illegal war. That day, they were launching Mision Madres de Barrio, a programme aimed at poverty among single mothers. Under the constitution, women have the right to be paid as carers, and can borrow from a special women's bank. Now the poorest housewives get the equivalent of \$200 a month.

In a room lit by a single fluorescent tube, I met Ana Lucia Fernandez, aged 86, and Mavis Mendez, aged 95. A mere 33-year-old, Sonia Alvarez, had come with her two children. Once, none of them could read and write; now they were studying mathematics. For the first time in its history, Venezuela has almost 100 per cent literacy.

Then farmers took the microphone and told him what they knew, and what they needed; one ancient face, carved it seemed from a nearby banyan, made a long, critical speech on the subject of irrigation; Chavez took notes.

Wine is grown here, a dark Syrah type grape. "John, John, come up here," said El Presidente, having watched me fall asleep in the heat and the depths of Oliver Twist.

"He likes red wine," Chavez told the cheering, whistling audience, and presented me with a bottle of "vino de la gente". My few words in bad Spanish brought whistles and laughter.

Watching Chavez with la gente made sense of a man who promised, on coming to power, that his every move would be subject to the will of the people. In eight years, Chavez won eight elections and referendums: a world record. He was electorally the most popular head of state in the Western Hemisphere, probably in the world.

Every major chavista reform was voted on, notably a new constitution of which 71 per cent of the people approved each of the 396 articles that enshrined unheard of freedoms, such as Article 123, which for the first time recognised the human rights of mixed-race and black people, of whom Chavez was one.

One of his tutorials on the road quoted a feminist writer: "Love and solidarity are the same." His audiences understood this well and expressed themselves with dignity, seldom with deference. Ordinary people regarded Chavez and his government as their first champions: as theirs.

This was especially true of the indigenous, mestizos and Afro-Venezuelans, who had been held in historic contempt by Chavez's immediate predecessors and by those who today live far from the barrios, in the mansions and penthouses of East Caracas, who commute to Miami where their banks are and who regard themselves as "white". They are the powerful core of what the media calls "the opposition".

When I met this class, in suburbs called Country Club, in homes appointed with low chandeliers and bad portraits, I recognised them. They could be white South Africans, the petite bourgeoisie of Constantia and Sandton, pillars of the cruelties of apartheid.

Cartoonists in the Venezuelan press, most of which are owned by an oligarchy and oppose the government, portrayed Chavez as an ape. A radio host referred to "the monkey". In the private universities, the verbal currency of the children of the well-off is often racist abuse of those whose shacks are just visible through the pollution.

Although identity politics are all the rage in the pages of liberal newspapers in the West, race and class are two words almost never uttered in the mendacious "coverage" of Washington's latest, most naked attempt to grab the world's greatest source of oil and reclaim its "backyard".

For all the chavistas' faults — such as allowing the Venezuelan economy to become hostage to the fortunes of oil and never seriously challenging big capital and corruption — they brought social justice and pride to millions of people and they did it with unprecedented democracy.

"Of the 92 elections that we've monitored," said former President Jimmy Carter, whose Carter Centre is a respected monitor of elections around the world, "I would say the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world."

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This is the work of Mision Robinson, which was designed for adults and teenagers previously denied an education because of poverty. Mision Ribas gives everyone the opportunity of a secondary education, called a bachillerato. (The names Robinson and Ribas refer to Venezuelan independence leaders from the 19th century).

In her 95 years, Mavis Mendez had seen a parade of governments, mostly vassals of Washington, preside over the theft of billions of dollars in oil spoils, much of it flown to Miami. "We didn't matter in a human sense," she told me. "We lived and died without real education and running water, and food we couldn't afford. When we fell ill, the weakest died. Now I can read and write my name and so much more; and whatever the rich and the media say, we have planted the seeds of true democracy and I have the joy of seeing it happen."

In 2002, during a Washington-backed coup, Mavis's sons and daughters and grandchildren and great-grandchildren joined hundreds of thousands who swept down from the barrios on the hillsides and demanded the army remained loyal to Chavez.

"The people rescued me," Chavez told me. "They did it with the media against me, preventing even the basic facts of what happened. For popular democracy in heroic action, I suggest you look no further."

Since Chavez's death in 2013, his successor Nicolas Maduro has shed his derisory label in the Western press as a "former bus driver" and become Saddam Hussein incarnate. His media abuse is ridiculous. On his watch, the slide in the price of oil has caused hyper inflation and played havoc with prices in a society that imports almost all its food; yet, as the journalist and film-maker Pablo Navarrete reported this week, Venezuela is not the catastrophe it has been painted. "There is food everywhere," he wrote. "I have filmed lots of videos of food in markets [all over Caracas] ... it's Friday night and the restaurants are full."

In 2018, Maduro was re-elected President. A section of the opposition boycotted the

election, a tactic tried against Chavez. The boycott failed: 9,389,056 people voted; sixteen parties participated and six candidates stood for the presidency. Maduro won 6,248,864 votes, or 67.84 per cent.

On election day, I spoke to one of the 150 foreign election observers. "It was entirely fair," he said. "There was no fraud; none of the lurid media claims stood up. Zero. Amazing really."

Like a page from Alice's tea party, the Trump administration has presented Juan Guaido, a pop-up creation of the CIA-front National Endowment for Democracy, as the "legitimate President of Venezuela". Unheard of by 81 per cent of the Venezuelan people, according to The Nation, Guaido has been elected by no one.

Maduro is "illegitimate", says Trump (who won the US presidency with three million fewer votes than his opponent), a "dictator", says demonstrably unhinged vice president Mike Pence and an oil trophy-in-waiting, says "national security" adviser John Bolton (who when I interviewed him in 2003 said, "Hey, are you a communist, maybe even Labour?").

As his "special envoy to Venezuela" (coup master), Trump has appointed a convicted felon, Elliot Abrams, whose intrigues in the service of Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush helped produce the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s and plunge central America into years of blood-soaked misery.

Putting Lewis Carroll aside, these "crazies" belong in newsreels from the 1930s. And yet their lies about Venezuela have been taken up with enthusiasm by those paid to keep the record straight.



On Channel 4 News, Jon Snow bellowed at the Labour MP Chris Williamson, "Look, you and Mr. Corbyn are in a very nasty corner [on Venezuela]!" When Williamson tried to explain why threatening a sovereign country was wrong, Snow cut him off. "You've had a good go!"

In 2006, Channel 4 News effectively accused Chavez of plotting to make nuclear weapons with Iran: a fantasy. The then Washington correspondent, Jonathan Rugman, allowed a war criminal, Donald Rumsfeld, to liken Chavez to Hitler, unchallenged.

Researchers at the University of the West of England studied the BBC's reporting of Venezuela over a ten-year period. They looked at 304 reports and found that only three of these referred to any of the positive policies of the government. For the BBC, Venezuela's democratic record, human rights legislation, food programmes, healthcare initiatives and poverty reduction did not happen. The greatest literacy programme in human history did not happen, just as the millions who march in support of Maduro and in memory of Chavez, do not exist.

When asked why she filmed only an opposition march, the BBC reporter Orla Guerin tweeted that it was "too difficult" to be on two marches in one day.

A war has been declared on Venezuela, of which the truth is "too difficult" to report.

It is too difficult to report the collapse of oil prices since 2014 as largely the result of criminal machinations by Wall Street. It is too difficult to report the blocking of Venezuela's access to

the US-dominated international financial system as sabotage. It is too difficult to report Washington's "sanctions" against Venezuela, which have caused the loss of at least \$6billion in Venezuela's revenue since 2017, including \$2billion worth of imported medicines, as illegal, or the Bank of England's refusal to return Venezuela's gold reserves as an act of piracy.

The former United Nations Rapporteur, Alfred de Zayas, has likened this to a "medieval siege" designed "to bring countries to their knees". It is a criminal assault, he says. It is similar to that faced by Salvador Allende in 1970 when President Richard Nixon and his equivalent of John Bolton, Henry Kissinger, set out to "make the economy [of Chile] scream". The long dark night of Pinochet followed.

The Guardian correspondent, Tom Phillips, has tweeted a picture of himself in a cap on which the words in Spanish mean in local slang: "Make Venezuela fucking cool again." The reporter as clown may be the final stage of much of mainstream journalism's degeneration.

Should the CIA stooge Guaido and his white supremacists grab power, it will be the 68th overthrow of a sovereign government by the United States, most of them democracies. A fire sale of Venezuela's utilities and mineral wealth will surely follow, along with the theft of the country's oil, as outlined by John Bolton.

Under the last Washington-controlled government in Caracas, poverty reached historic proportions. There was no healthcare for those could not pay. There was no universal education; Mavis Mendez, and millions like her, could not read or write. How cool is that, Tom?

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