

Who Was Hugo Chavez?

By [John Pilger](#)

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

The Venezuelan elite's opposition to Chavez arose primarily out of his seizure of the nation's oil industry. It previously controlled the country's petroleum output, providing the United States with a cheap supply in return for a majority of the profits. Upon nationalizing oil, Chavez brought the nation's indigenous population to nearly full literacy, paid poor housewives as workers, and provided free health care and education to the public. For this, he was bitterly accused of socialism, and his efforts to work with American presidents, beginning with Bill Clinton, were spurned.

This was because rich Venezuelans living in the United States were working with the American government to end Chavez's rule. The wealthy wanted their silver spoons, and the American government wanted to control Venezuela's economy. In April 2002, plans for a coup were realized. A street march against Chavez was directed to the presidential home and a firefight in which a number of people died was orchestrated by business and military leaders. Chavez himself was kidnapped and an unelected dictator was sworn in.

Within hours of the revolt however, word got out that the events leading up to it had been staged. Venezuela's poor came down from their barrios on the hills and demanded the return of their president. Miraculously, the plotters surrendered, and Chavez was returned to his palace within 48 hours of the coup's start.

Some time later, it came out that the Bush administration had for months been funding groups that were involved in the coup, just as the U.S. has done in democratic countries throughout Latin America since the middle of the 20th century. But this time, the effort to overthrow an elected leader failed. Nonetheless, Chavez lived as all such leaders do—with the knowledge that one of the world's most powerful governments was working with some of his fellow citizens to bring an end to his rule and his life.

Of the impoverished Venezuelans' decisive response to the coup, Chavez says in the film: "I have nothing left to do, especially after that, but dedicate all the life I have left to those people, and above all the most deprived, the poorest."

Of Venezuela's difficulties with the United States, one woman in the film said: "This isn't just Chavez's struggle, it's our struggle. What Chavez has released is a recognition of this struggle, and we are in it together, and we'll carry on fighting. So the empire's struggle isn't with Chavez, it's with us."

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