

Coup Against Chavez in Venezuela

**The Best International Reports of
What Really Happened in April 2002**

Edited by Gregory Wilpert



Fundación Venezolana
para la Justicia Global



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Coup Against Chavez in Venezuela The Best International Reports of What Really Happened in April 2002

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Introduction

Gregory Wilpert

One year after the April 2002 coup against Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez, there still is much disinformation and ignorance as to what really happened. This volume of essays, articles, analyses, and news reports is meant to clarify and contextualize the events in Venezuela of April 2002, particularly as they were made sense of by non-Venezuelan observers of these events. Also, since almost all of the authors are non-Venezuelan, it presents perspectives on the April coup that are perhaps a bit more detached than they might otherwise be, had the articles been written by Venezuelans. This is not to say that the articles are non-involved and impartial. As a matter of fact, each and every one of these shows sympathies of one kind or another. It is practically impossible for a reporter or analyst not to have sympathies or to leave them out in their writing. Still, given the depth with which most Venezuelans feel for their country and for or against the current government, the non-Venezuelan writers of this collection of articles are perhaps slightly more dispassionate.

When the articles collected here first appeared, either in mainstream newspapers, on the Internet, or in small alternative publications, they were among the very few articles that presented an interpretation of the coup, at the time of the coup, which has withstood the test of time. The vast majority of articles that appeared in most mainstream media during the coup, especially within Venezuela, but also internationally, provided extremely misleading or outright false information as to what took place between April 11 and 13. For example, most early reports had falsely claimed that Chavez had resigned, that Chavez supporters shot at unarmed demonstrators, and that Chavez had issued orders for his supporters and the military to shoot. (For more on the disinformation spread by the mainstream media, see the media section in this volume.)

It is because there was so much disinformation surrounding the coup attempt that this coup has been dubbed, in Venezuela, as the world's first "mediatic coup." It makes perfect sense that in a time when the international community frowns upon coups, that if one were to organize a coup, the first order of business would be to make the coup look like it was something else. Also, given that today we live in an information (and dis-information) age, the imperative to disguise a coup and to do so successfully go hand in hand. Since most of the mainstream media have a stake in ousting a president like Hugo Chavez, the coup plotters have a powerful ally in creating the conditions for a coup that is not supposed to look like a coup. Hard as it might be to believe, to this day, there are many within Venezuela's opposition who claim that what happened on April 11 and 12 was not a coup, but a "vacuum of power" that resulted from Chavez' voluntary resignation and which "civil society" (a code word for the opposition) gracefully helped fill until a new election could be held.

The articles in this collection have been reprinted as they originally appeared, along with some factual errors or inconsistencies between the articles. I would like to highlight just two of the more glaring inconsistencies. First, there is the question of how many demonstrators participated in the different demonstrations between April 11 and 14. These figures tend to vary quite wildly, for example, between 1.5 million and 200,000 for the opposition demonstration that headed for the presidential palace on April 11. Rather than debate the exact number, which would be extremely difficult to determine reliably, one should simply take all these figures with a grain of salt and use the numbers as rough guidelines, with inconsistencies representing a possible maximum and a possible minimum.

Second, and much more important, is the question of who were the casualties from the shooting on April 11. In this collection Phil Gunson and David Adams, for example, report that most of the casualties were opposition demonstrators, just as most of the media

reported in the days immediately following the coup. Most other articles presented in this collection, however, state that most of the victims were pro-government demonstrators. While in the first few weeks following the coup there still was some confusion as to the victims' identity, the location of their being shot, and their political affiliation, now, all of this information is, for the most part, fairly clear.

The human rights organization COFAVIC, which has been associated with the opposition, has adopted nine cases of individuals who were killed during the events of April 11. Of these nine, seven were killed in the area of the opposition demonstration and two in the area of the pro-government demonstration. Now, it is well known that many more than nine were killed on April 11th. At first, reports were that eighteen people were shot that day. So, this would imply that, at the very least, seven were with the opposition protest and the remaining eleven were with the pro-government protest. However, according to some accounts, many more died later, as a result of their fatal wounds. The pro-government association, Mujeres por la Verdad y la Justicia (MUVERJUST) lists a total of 34 dead on April 11. It claims that of these, 23 were located in the pro-government demonstration, six in the opposition demonstration, and five who were in neither demonstration. This number of dead in the opposition demonstration corresponds more or less with the number that COFAVIC and the Ombudsman's (Defensor del Pueblo) office state. The main uncertainty that remains is the number of dead within the pro-government demonstration, which could be anywhere between 10 and 23. This uncertainty about the number is primarily the result of contradictory witness testimony.

I go into more depth on this issue because the number of dead on each side was one of the main controversies surrounding the events of April 11th and was used by the opposition to justify the coup. If, as it appears to be the case, a majority or half of the dead were Chavistas, this explodes one of the opposition's most cherished myths, that practically all of the April 11 dead are "martyrs" or "heroes" of the opposition. However, even more important than the number of dead on each side is the question of who killed them.

This, unfortunately, is still largely unresolved.

That is, the Chavistas who are currently under arrest for firing shots from the Puente Llaguno might very well be freed soon because so far there has been no proof that their shots killed or injured anyone. On the other hand, several metropolitan police officers now stand accused for having fired their weapons at the pro-government demonstration. According to many eyewitness reports, however, it was the shooters from the buildings who started the killing and many of these are still unidentified. Those seven who were arrested in the Hotel Ausonia, who presumably fired shots from the Hotel (all tested positive for gunpowder) were released during the brief Carmona regime and have disappeared ever since. The individuals who fired shots from two other buildings, closer to the opposition demonstration, are still unknown.

While an authoritative report on the April coup remains to be written, in English or in Spanish, this compilation will hopefully fill the gaps for interested English-language readers.

I would like to thank my wife, Carol Delgado, for pushing me to pursue the publication of this book. It would not have happened or been possible without her prodding and help. Also, many thanks to Alex Main and Eduardo Daza, for their logistical help, and to my sister-in-law Isabel Delgado, who has always been an invaluable informant to me.

Gregory Wilpert
Caracas, March, 2003

THE WARNING SIGNS

The Scent of Another Coup

*Conn Hallinan**

There is the smell of a coup in the air these days. It was like this in Iran just before the 1953 U.S.-backed coup overthrew the Mossedeah government and installed the Shah. It has the feel of 1963 in South Vietnam, before the military takeover switched on the light at the end of the long and terrible Southeast Asian tunnel. It is hauntingly similar to early September 1973, before the coup in Chile ushered in 20 years of blood and darkness.

Early last month, the National Security Agency, the Pentagon and the U.S. State Department held a two-day meeting on U.S. policy toward Venezuela. Similar such meetings took place in 1953, 1963, and 1973, as well as before coups in Guatemala, Brazil and Argentina. It should send a deep chill down the backs of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and the populist coalition that took power in 1998.

The catalyst for the Nov. 5-7 interagency get together was a comment by Chavez in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. While Chavez sharply condemned the attack, he questioned the value of bombing Afghanistan, calling it “fighting terrorism with terrorism.” In response, the Bush Administration temporarily withdrew its Ambassador and convened the meeting.

The outcome was a requirement that Venezuela “unequivocally” condemn terrorism, including repudiating anything and anyone the Bush Administration defines as “terrorist.” Since this includes both

* *San Francisco Examiner*, December 29, 2001

Cuba (which Venezuela has extensive trade relations with) and rebel groups in neighboring Colombia (which Chavez is sympathetic to), the demand was the equivalent of throwing down the gauntlet.

The spark for the statement might have been Sept. 11, but the dark clouds gathering over Venezuela have much more to do with enduring matters—like oil, land and power—than current issues like terrorism. The Chavez government is presently trying to change the 60-year old agreement with foreign oil companies that charges them as little as 1 percent in royalties, plus hands out huge tax breaks. There is a lot at stake here. Venezuela has 77 billion barrels of proven reserves, and is U.S.' third biggest source of oil. It is also a major cash cow for the likes of Phillips Petroleum and ExxonMobil. If the new law goes through, U.S. and French oil companies will have to pony up a bigger slice of their take.

A larger slice is desperately needed in Venezuela. In spite of the fact that oil generates some \$30 billion each year, 80 percent of Venezuelans are, according to government figures, “poor,” and half of those are malnourished. Most rural Venezuelans have no access to land except to work it for someone else, because 2 percent of the population controls 60 percent of the land.

The staggering gap between a tiny slice of “haves” and the sea of “have nots” is little talked about in the American media, which tends to focus on President Chavez's long-winded speeches and unrest among the urban wealthy and middle class. U.S. newspapers covered the Dec. 10 “strike” by business leaders and a section of the union movement protesting a series of economic laws and land reform proposals, but not the fact that the Chavez government has reduced inflation from 40 percent to 12 percent, generated economic growth of 4 percent, and increased primary school enrollment by one million students.

Rumblings from Washington, strikes by business leaders, and pot-banging demonstrations by middle-class housewives are the fare most Americans get about Venezuela these days. For any balance one has to go to the reporting of local journalists John Marshall and

Christian Parenti. In a Dec. 10 article in the Chicago-based bi-weekly, *In These Times*, the two reporters give “the other side” that the US media always goes on about but rarely practices: The attempts by the Venezuelan government to diversify its economy, turn over idle land to landless peasants, encourage the growth of coops based on the highly successful Hungarian model, increase health spending fourfold, and provide drugs for 30 to 40 percent below cost.

But the alleviation of poverty is not on Washington's radar screen these days. Instead, U.S. development loans have been frozen, and the State Department's specialist on Latin America, Peter Romero, has accused the Chavez government of supporting terrorism in Colombia, Bolivia and Ecuador. These days that is almost a declaration of war and certainly a green light to any anti-Chavez forces considering a military coup.

U.S. hostility to Venezuela's efforts to overcome its lack of development has helped add that country to the South American “arc of instability” that runs from Caracas in the north to Buenos Aires in the south, and includes Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru. Failed neoliberal economic policies, coupled with corruption and authoritarianism have made the region a power keg, as recent events in Argentina demonstrate.

And the Bush Administration's antidote?: Matches, incendiary statements, and dark armies moving in the night.

Venezuela: The Next Chile?

*John Pilger**

He has won two elections, and he has made a start on relieving poverty. So now the US wants to get rid of Venezuela's president

Almost 30 years after the violent destruction of the reformist government of Salvador Allende in Chile, a repeat performance is being planned in Venezuela. Little of this has been reported in Britain. Indeed, little is known of the achievements of the government of Hugo Chavez, who won presidential elections in 1998 and again in 2000 by the largest majority in 40 years.

Following the principles of a movement called Bolívarism, named after the South American independence hero Simon Bolívar, Chavez has implemented reforms that have begun to shift the great wealth of Venezuela, principally from its oil, towards the 80 per cent of his people who live in poverty. In 49 laws adopted by the Venezuelan Congress last November, Chavez began serious land reform, and guaranteed indigenous and women's rights and free healthcare and education up to university level.

Chavez faces enemies that Allende would recognize. The “oligarchies”, which held power since the 1950s during the corrupt bipartisan reign of the Social Christians and Democratic Action, have declared war on the reforming president, backed by the Catholic Church and a trade union hierarchy and the media, both controlled by the right. What has enraged them is a modest agrarian reform that allows the state to expropriate and redistribute idle land; and a law that limits the exploitation of oil reserves, reinforcing a constitutional ban on the privatization of the state oil company.

* *The New Statesman*, March 11, 2002

Allied with Chavez's domestic enemies is the Bush administration. Defying Washington, Chavez has sold oil to Cuba and refused over-flying rights to American military aircraft supplying "Plan Colombia", the US campaign in support of the murderous regime in neighboring Colombia. Worse, although he condemned the attacks of 11 September, he questioned the right of the United States to "fight terrorism with terrorism".

For this, he is unforgiven. On 5-7 November, the State Department, Pentagon and National Security Agency held a two-day meeting to discuss "the problem of Venezuela". The State Department has since accused the Chavez government of "supporting terrorism" in Colombia, Bolivia and Ecuador. In fact, Venezuela opposes American-funded terrorism in those three countries.

The US says it will "put Venezuela in diplomatic isolation"; Colin Powell has warned Chavez to correct "his understanding of what a democracy is all about". Familiar events are unfolding. The International Monetary Fund has indicated it supports a "transitional government" for Venezuela. The Caracas daily *El Nacional* says the IMF is willing to bankroll those who remove Chavez from office. James Petras, a professor at New York State University, who was in Chile in the early 1970s and has studied the subversion of the Allende government, says that "the IMF and financial institutions are fabricating a familiar crisis. The tactics used are very similar to those used in Chile. Civilians are used to create a feeling of chaos, and a false picture of Chavez as a dictator is established, then the military is incited to make a coup for the sake of the country."

A former paratrooper, Chavez apparently still has the army behind him (as Allende did, until the CIA murdered his loyal military chief, opening the way to Pinochet). However, several senior officers have denounced Chavez as a "tyrant" and have called for his resignation. It is difficult to assess this; in its rumor-mongering, the hostile Caracas press plays a role reminiscent of Chile's right-wing press, with poisonous stories questioning Chavez's sanity.

The most worrying threat comes from a reactionary trade union hierarchy, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), led by Carlos Ortega, a hack of the anti-Chavez Democratic Action Party. The CTV maintains a black list of "disloyal" and "disruptive" members, which it supplies to employers. According to Dick Nichols, writing from Caracas, Chavez's most serious mistake has been his failure to move against the union old guard, following a national referendum in which a majority gave him a mandate to reform the CTV.

The crime of Hugo Chavez is that he has set out to keep his electoral promises, redistributing the wealth of his country and subordinating the principle of private property to that of the common good. Having underestimated the power of his enemies, his current counter-offensive is imaginative but also hints of desperation.

He has set up what are called "Bolivarian circles", of which 8,000 are being established in communities and workplaces across the country. Based on the revolutionary heritage of Simon Bolívar's triumph in the war against Spain, their job is to "raise the consciousness of citizens and develop all forms of participatory organizations in the community, releasing projects in health, education, culture, sport, public services, housing and the preservation of the environment, natural resources and our historical heritage". Allied to this is a popular command "unifying and strengthening the forces in support of President Chavez".

These are fighting words that echo through the continent's history of epic struggles. They say that yet another South American country, in offering its people an alternative to poverty and foreign domination, the "threat of a good example", is entering a period of great uncertainty and fear. The achievements in Venezuela are a clear response to those who say that radical dreams and change are no longer possible. Chavez should be supported by all democrats. Chile must not happen again.

An Imminent Coup in Venezuela?

*Gregory Wilpert**

It appears that the strategy of President Chavez' opposition is to create as much chaos and disorder in Venezuela as possible, so that Chavez is left with no other choice than to call a state of emergency. This, in turn could either lead to a military coup or U.S. military intervention.

Given that Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the western hemisphere; it is distinctly possible that the U.S. government is going to intervene overtly, if it is not already doing so covertly. This means that the current crisis in Venezuela is probably a planned conspiracy to topple the Chavez government with the support of the U.S.

As I write this, on April 9, Venezuela's largest union federation, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV) has called for a two-day general strike. Venezuela's chamber of commerce, FEDECAMERAS, has joined the strike and called on all of its affiliated businesses to close for 48 hours.

This was the second time in four months that the two federations, of labor unions and of business owners, decided to join forces and strike against the leftist government of President Hugo Chavez. What is happening in Venezuela? Why are these and many other forces uniting against Chavez?

Chavez took power in late 1998 in a landslide electoral victory, calling for a "Bolivarian Revolution," in reference to Latin America's

* *ZNet Commentary*, April 9, 2002

hero of independence and Venezuela's favorite son, Simon Bolivar. Since then, Chavez has tried to root out the entrenched powers of Venezuelan society, represented by a political and economic elite, which had governed Venezuela for over 40 years in a pseudo-democratic form by alternating power between two entrenched political parties.

Chavez first reformed Venezuela's constitution, through a constitutional assembly and a referendum, making it one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. The old elite were nearly completely driven from political power in the course of seven elections, which took place between 1998 and 2000. However, the old elite of the labor unions, the business sector, the church, and the media are still in power and have recently begun making life as difficult as possible for Chavez.

Although Chavez originally had popularity a rating of around 80%, his popularity has steadily declined in the past year, supposedly reaching the low 30's now. Whether the reason for this decline was the slow pace of his promised reforms, the lack of significant progress in reducing corruption and poverty, or if it was because of the incessant media assault on his government, is not clear - most likely it is because of a combination of these factors.

The conflict between Chavez and the old elite has recently come to a head. First, when Chavez passed a slew of 49 laws, which, among many other measures, were supposed to increase the government's oil income and redistribute land. The chamber of commerce vehemently opposed these laws and decided to call for a general business strike on December 10.

Venezuela's labor union federation, the CTV, decided to join the strike, supposedly out of concern for the harm the laws did to the business sector and thus to employment in Venezuela.

More likely, though, the CTV's support of a general strike was in retaliation for Chavez having forced the unions to carry out new elections of the CTV's leadership and for not recognizing its leader-

ship, due to charges of fraud, when the old guard union leadership declared itself the winner of the election and refused to submit the official results and ballots to the government.

The second major issue, which has resulted in a serious challenge to Chavez, occurred when Chavez appointed five new members loyal to him to the board of directors of the state-owned oil company, PDVSA, the largest oil company in the world and the third largest supplier of oil to the U.S.

Also, he appointed a prominent leftist economist and long-time critic of PDVSA as its president. The management of PDVSA cried out in protest, arguing that the appointments were purely political and not based on merit and thus threatened to undermine the company's independence and its meritocracy.

Chavez has since countered that board members and president have always been political appointments and that the state needed to regain control over PDVSA because it has become increasingly inefficient, a state within a state, whose top management is living a life of extreme luxury.

Furthermore, and less explicitly, Chavez wants to assure that PDVSA adheres to OPEC's production quotas, so that the oil price remains at a stable and profitable level. PDVSA, however, has a history of undermining OPEC quotas because its management places a higher premium on market share than on a good oil price.

Following a two weeks of protest and of labor slowdowns within PDVSA, mostly on the part of management, the labor federation leadership of the CTV, who all belong to the discredited old elite, decided to join the conflict in support of PDVSA's management, arguing that it was acting in solidarity with PDVSA workers in its call for a day-long general strike.

The chamber of commerce rapidly followed suit, seeing this as another opportunity to humiliate and perhaps topple Chavez, and supported the strike as well. Considering the first day a complete

success, the CTV and the chamber of commerce have decided to extend the general strike another 24 hours. However, as PROVEA, Venezuela's human rights agency has noted, even though Venezuela's constitution guarantees the right to strike, the strike is completely illegal because it bypassed the legal requirements for democratic legitimation of such a strike.

Given that a large majority of private businesses are members of the chamber of commerce and oppose Chavez, the strike has appeared to be quite successful. Whether workers actually believe in the strike and intentionally stay away from work in protest to the government, is almost impossible to tell, since most businesses were closed by management.

Many businesses were open and most of the informal sector was actively selling its wares on the streets as usual. Of course, all government offices and all banks, whose hours are regulated by the government, were open. Together, these sectors account for about 40% of Venezuela's workforce.

The conflict in Venezuela has come to take on epic proportions, if one listens to the rhetoric of the two sides of the conflict. Both sides make extensive use of hyperbole, alternately calling the strike either a complete and total failure or a complete and total success.

Other examples of how passionate and heated the debates have become are reflected in the opposition's repeated references to Chavez as a "totalitarian fascist dictator" who wants to "cubanize" Venezuela. Chavez and his supporters, for their part, refer to the opposition as a squalid ("escualido") corrupt oligarchy.

Both sets of labels are caricatures of the truth. Certainly, Venezuela's oligarchical elite opposes Chavez, but the opposition to Chavez has become quite strong and has grown far beyond the oligarchy, to include many of his former friends and supporters. On the other hand, even though Chavez uses a lot of inflammatory rhetoric, the opposition has yet to find a single instance in which he has violated Venezuela's very democratic constitution in any way.

Chavez' greatest failure, from a progressive point of view, probably lies in his relatively autocratic style, which is why many of his former supporters have become alienated from his government. Whenever someone opposed his policies he has tended to reject them and cast them out of his government circle.

The result has been a consistent loss of a relatively broad political spectrum of government leadership and a significant turn-over in his cabinet, making stable and consistent policy implementation quite difficult.

This loss of broad-based support has made itself felt particularly strongly during the recent crises, making Chavez look more isolated than he might otherwise be. Other than his party supporters, who are quite significant in number and come mostly from the poor "barrios," the progressive sectors of civil society have been neglected by Chavez and have thus not been active. Instead, the conservative sectors of civil society, such as the chamber of commerce and the old guard union leadership are among the main mobilizers of civil society.

Still, Chavez' policies have been almost without exception progressive in that they have supported land redistribution for poor farmers, title to the self-built homes of the barrios, steady increases in the minimum wage and of public sector salaries, and the enrollment of over 1 million students in school who were previously excluded, to name just a few accomplishments.

In terms of international issues, Chavez has been on the forefront in working for greater intra-Third World solidarity, in opposing neo-liberalism, and in supporting Cuba.

Figuring out what this epic conflict is about has been somewhat difficult for an outsider. Passions are so inflamed that it is practically impossible to find calm and reasoned analyses about what is going on. Are the chamber of commerce, the labor federation leadership, the upper class, and significant sectors of the middle class really pri-

marily concerned about the “politicization” of PDVSA and the appointment of a pro-government board of directors?

Perhaps. But does opposition to these appointments justify a general strike? Definitely not. More likely these sectors are concerned that politicization of PDVSA means a loss of access to Venezuela's cash-cow: oil. Not only that, the most common complaints one hears about Chavez have more to do with his style than with any concrete policies he has implemented. There often is a racist undertone to such complaints, implying that Chavez, because of his folksy and populist style and his Indio appearance, is sub-human, a “negro.”

It does not help that almost all of the media, except the one government-run TV network, out of about five major TV networks, and one out of approximately ten major newspapers is completely opposed to Chavez.

The media regularly cover nearly every single opposition pronouncement and rarely cover government declarations. Chavez, out of frustration with the media has relentlessly attacked the media for belonging to the old guard oligarchy and for printing nothing but lies, occasionally threatening them with legal action for slander.

The media has, of course, responded in kind, by accusing Chavez of intimidating journalists with his pronouncements and of sending gangs to threaten journalists with physical violence. The media has tried to embarrass Chavez internationally by taking its case to the Organization of American States and to the U.S., which have responded favorably to their complaints and have criticized Chavez for his supposed lack of respect for human rights.

The other thing Chavez has done to combat the media is to exploit a law which permits the government to take over all of the airwaves for important government announcements. All TV and radio stations are required to broadcast these announcements.

During the general strike Chavez decided to go all-out and interrupted all TV and radio broadcasts numerous times during the strike.

The government's use of the airwaves has now provided additional ammunition to the opposition and constituted an important factor in their deciding to extend the strike from one day to two.

Chavez' greatest error has been his truly fundamental neglect for cultivating a culture which would support his “Bolivarian Revolution,” one which progressive sectors of civil society would support and promote amongst the population and internationally, even against a strongly oppositional media.

Despite this grave fault of his presidency, Chavez continues to deserve the support of progressives because the only alternative that has presented itself until now is a return to the status quo ante, where the upper class, together with selected sectors of the labor movement and the government bureaucracy share Venezuela's oil pie amongst themselves, leaving the poor, who constitute three quarters of Venezuela's population, to fend for themselves.

Currently, however, the most immediate and most likely alternative to Chavez is either a military coup or U.S. intervention, since Chavez definitely won't resign and since he is legally in office at least until the 2004, when a recall vote can be called. This means that progressives around the world should act in solidarity with Chavez' government and support him, if another Chile-style coup is to be avoided.

US Pushing for a Coup D'État

*Maximilien Arvelaiz & Temir Porras Ponceleon**

President Bush's statement in the wake of 911 that "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" is clear: From now on, those who are not "100% with the USA" may be branded as terrorists. Until recently, only the so-called rogue states had been threatened by the Bush administration, but now, a traditional ally, with a democratically elected government, has also become a target.

On February 5, Secretary of State Colin Powell, questioned by Senator Jesse Helms, expressed unhappiness with Hugo Chavez. He was distressed by the fact that the Venezuelan president was being less than fully supportive of the anti-terrorism campaign. Powell also questioned, without elaborating, Chavez's "understanding of what the democratic system is all about."

The following day, George Tenet, director of the CIA, followed up on Powell's statement, commenting on "the growing internal opposition to President Chavez," and predicted that, due to the fall of oil prices, oil being Venezuela's main source of income, the "crisis atmosphere is likely to worsen." Needless to say, this sort of comment could hardly ease the "crisis atmosphere." At no other time since the beginning of the Bolivarian Revolution in 1998, had US officials intervened so abruptly in Venezuelan affairs. Yet they did so at a time when the political situation in Venezuela was particularly tense. Washington's warnings took on the appearance of self-fulfilling prophecies: During the following week, the massive flight of capital (US \$100 million per day) forced the Venezuelan government to take emergency economic measures.

Following a period of steady deterioration, US-Venezuelan bilateral

* *Covert Action Quarterly*, Spring 2002

relations seem to have reached a point of no return. Back in the Clinton days, the US government had adopted a “wait and see” policy toward President Chavez, and tolerated some uncolonial behavior from the former paratrooper (e.g, visiting Iraq, establishing close links with Cuba). They didn't really have much choice. When Chavez took office, he found a country exhausted by ten years of social unrest and permanent political crisis. After several decades of ruthless corruption and the political class's inability to respond to basic social needs, the Venezuelan population unanimously rejected a regime that was once considered a model of democracy. Given that Venezuela is one of the U.S.' main oil providers, and that it contains among the world's largest proven oil reserves outside of the Middle East, the Chavez solution, as long as it could bring stability to the country, was not considered by Washington to be the worst possible scenario.

Additionally, from the beginning of the 1990s, Latin America had ceased to be a priority for the USA. The historical hegemonic influence of the US in Latin America took on a new form: the promotion of Bill Clinton's “market democracy,” i.e., elected governments as long as they guarantee that markets remain open to free trade, and that US interests remain untouched. Thanks to the retreat of traditional opponents, this policy was not difficult to implement. After the fall of the Berlin wall, most of the left-wing parties in Latin America were easily co-opted to neoliberal ideas. Meanwhile, the guerrilla movements, with the notable exception of the FARC and the ELN in Colombia, seemed to have run into a dead end.

But three years after Chavez's electoral victory, the context determining US-Venezuela relations has changed considerably. Within Venezuela, the vast consensus that rejected the ancien regime has fallen apart, and the political scene has become extremely polarized. For several months, storm clouds have been gathering over Venezuela. These days, a typical week in Caracas features bomb scares, dramatic headlines, rumors of a coup, the distribution of threatening manifestoes signed by underground political factions within the army, or the reports of an imminent US intervention by some obscure retired general. Not to mention strikes and demon-

strations financed and promoted by Fedecamaras, the main business lobby.

On the external front, the Republicans' return to office and the 911 events have resulted in a much more aggressive US foreign policy which has resulted, among other things, in a significant change in attitude toward Latin America. The recent appointment of hawks such as John Negroponte, Otto Reich, John Maisto and Roger Noriega, has brought forth a new “realistic” agenda involving the protection and promotion of US interests no matter what it takes. Negroponte, appointed ambassador to the United Nations, attracted much criticism after having served as US ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985 where he implemented the Reagan administration's anti-Communist policy in the most fanatical manner. The current National Security Council Special Adviser on Latin America, John Maisto, is remembered for his role in the 1989 invasion of Panama. Ironically, during the Venezuelan presidential campaign of 1998, this former ambassador to Caracas refused to grant a visa to candidate Hugo Chavez citing Chavez's involvement in the 1992 coup D'État against President Carlos Andres Perez. A few weeks before the election, he told the press that he didn't “know anyone in Venezuela who thinks that Chavez is a democrat.” Is he to blame, given that the 56% of voters who endorsed the Chavez option, mostly members of the lower classes, don't regularly attend diplomatic receptions?

The Bolivarian Model

Once elected, Chavez didn't fall into the expected mold-that of a neo-populist of the same cloth as Alberto Fujimori or Carlos Saul Menem, popular enough to implement the neo-liberal reforms advocated by the global financial institutions. On the contrary, President Chavez has proved to be an heir to two important traditions of rebellion in Latin America: a civilian revolutionary tradition and a national military tradition. The first, that of the left-wing guerrillas of the 1960s inspired by Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, is represented by some of the most prominent government members and advisers, often former guerrilla fighters or supporters. This tra-

dition has also materialized in the creation, parallel to the Chavez administration, of a *Commando Politico de la Revolucion*, a “revolutionary brain trust” in charge of setting the political agenda in the mid and long term. In the present context, “making the revolution” has been interpreted as the search, through governmental action, for an alternative path toward social equality and sustainable development. Meanwhile, the Chavistas have also given new impetus to the national military tradition, that of Generals Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru or Omar Torrijos in Panama, by accepting and encouraging democratic rules. For instance, over a three-year time span, Venezuelan voters went to the ballot box seven times. And the elections were in each case fair and competitive.

The Chavez administration has been implementing a series of pragmatic measures, which combine economic rationalism and nationalism. With the aim of responding to the needs of the poor (80% of the population), his government has boosted social spending, particularly in the education sector, and launched an ambitious public works program. In the meantime, it has slowed inflation and increased growth rates. Nevertheless, amateurism has handicapped the government's action, mainly because of the lack of experienced cadres among Chavez's supporters. It has resulted in a considerable turnover in key executive positions and in numerous hesitations over such matters as paramount as monetary policy. Furthermore, constant quarreling between “moderate” and “radical” factions within Chavez's political party, the MVR (Fifth Republic Movement), has led to several defections among members of the parliament, and thus lessened the government's margin of maneuver.

On the international scene, President Chavez, in a move that is likely to arouse concern in Washington, is urging Latin Americans to reconsider their position on issues such as nationalism, regional integration and democracy. His conception of nationalism finds its inspiration in the early nineteenth century wars of liberation and is symbolized by the figures of the Founding Fathers, San Martin and Bolivar. In this tradition the armed forces are looked upon as the defenders of state sovereignty as well as the interests of the general

population. As a direct corollary, the Bolivarian paradigm influences Chavez's conception of regional integration: a political integration, prior to economic integration, that takes into account the particularities of each nation and its people. Bolivar imagined a Latin American *anfictionia* (assembly) that would form a vast political front, powerful enough to act as a counterweight to the “Colossus of the North.” Chavez has reinterpreted this vision and adapted it to existing national realities, imagining a “federation of sovereign nations.” Finally, the Venezuelan government has advocated a “participative democracy” in which every sector of the population could contribute to the decision-making process. Thus, Venezuelan officials opposed the US final resolution proposal at the Summit of the Americas (Quebec, March-April 2001), arguing that a vague commitment to democracy was insufficient if its participative character was not specified. Chavez's comments on the risk of confiscation of representative democratic systems by national “oligarchies,” and his condemnation of Cuba's exclusion from continental meetings, were less than appreciated by most of his colleagues, particularly George W. Bush who refused to meet him in private.

Washington and Caracas' plans for Latin America could hardly be more divergent, as their respective views on Plan Colombia and the Free Trade Area of the Americas clearly demonstrate. From an economic point of view, Chavez's program is nationally oriented. Its main objective is the reduction of the country's excessive dependence on oil exports, as well as on foreign—mainly US—agricultural products and manufactured goods. Thus, Chavez is skeptical about the implementation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas as soon as 2005. Arguing that the Venezuelan economy wouldn't yet be ready to compete with “northern” economies on equal terms, he also asserts that a matter of such grave importance should first be submitted to a national referendum. As for “Plan Colombia,” Chavez didn't allow US surveillance airplanes to enter Venezuelan airspace during their “War on drugs” missions in the neighboring country. Another clear sign of Caracas' animosity towards US military policy in Colombia was the removal of the US Military Group delegation from its rent-free presence in the Venezuelan army's main headquarters at Fuerte Tuna. This decision put an end to a “cooperation”

that began in the mid-1950s, during Colonel Marcos Perez Jimenez' dictatorship, and that was continued after 1958 under democratic rule.

Same Old Fears

More generally, Washington fears, in a new version of the “domino theory,” that the growing influence of leftist nationalistic political forces in countries like Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador, could lead to the emergence of a “Bolivarian triangle.” For instance, President Chavez seems to have been an inspiration for some leaders of the January 2001 coup D'État in Ecuador. This short-lived revolution, which Venezuela was the only country to not firmly condemn, was the product of an alliance between sectors of the army and indigenous movements. Its aim was to put an end to the neo-liberal policies of President Yamil Mahuad, who intended to “dollarize” the Ecuadorian economy. Without the pressure of the OAS and US authorities, Colonel Lucio Gutierrez and his allies might well have succeeded. In Colombia, Chavez's electoral victory led the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) to modify their Marxist rhetoric and to adopt some aspects of his “Bolivarian” language and style. On several occasions, the FARC, an organization labeled “terrorist” by the US, and therefore by the Colombian Government as well, has shown sympathy for Venezuela's political evolution since 1998.

US-Venezuela Relations Post-911

Pro-Chavez sentiment on the part of rebel movements that are on the wrong side of the fence, can prove to be particularly cumbersome in the post-911 world. For this and other reasons, Fall 2001 was a significant turning point for Venezuela-US relations.

In conformity with its general approach to the Third World, the Venezuelan government has upheld an unorthodox view of the September 11 attacks and the American intervention in Afghanistan. For Chavez, a formal condemnation of the attacks on New York and Washington didn't preclude the examination of their root causes. As unjustifiable as they might be, these events were the product of

American unilateralism in the world as well as the acute social imbalances that neo-liberal capitalism has engendered. In view of this attitude, Venezuela's poor show of support for the US military intervention in Afghanistan isn't too surprising. While the majority of Latin America's leaders were pushing and shoving to be the first to visit the White House and pledge their support to Bush, Chavez received attention for publicly declaring that it was impossible to “fight barbarity with barbarity.” The evil deeds of a fanatical minority, he added, could in no way justify “the bombing of the Afghan people,” since it would inevitably result in the “slaughter of innocents.” During the weeks that followed, the US ambassador in Caracas, Donna Hrinak, was recalled to Washington for consultation, thus underlining the US administration's irritation.

Also, while the Western forces were beginning their war against the Taliban regime, Chavez visited Libya, Venezuela's strategic partner within OPEC, but also one of Washington's biggest headaches. Thus, no one was too surprised when, in December 2001, the US government decided to give a sterner tone to bilateral relations with the nomination of Charles S. Shapiro as new ambassador to Caracas. It was thought that Mr. Shapiro had picked up skills as ambassador to El Salvador (1985 to 1988) and as director of the Bureau of Cuban Affairs (since 1999) that could be particularly useful in Chavez's Venezuela.

Fall 2001 was also a turning point for Venezuela domestically. Up to this date, the Chavistas had mainly carried out political reforms. The most significant of these was the complete remodeling of the country's institutions, and the drafting of a new Constitution. On the economic front, most of the government's energy had been focused on reviewing oil policy and reactivating OPEC. Under the leadership of the Venezuelan Ali Rodriguez Araque, an ex guerrilla leader of Syrian descent, OPEC had carried out a concerted policy of decreased production that, during the year 2000, pushed barrel prices up from nine to thirty dollars. The ensuing flow of petrodollars was a godsend for a government that was preparing to launch a far reaching policy aimed at revitalizing and restructuring the economy. Its margin of maneuver was further extended by the

Venezuelan Parliament's decision to authorize the executive to legislate by decree. This authorization was due to expire at the end of October 2001 and so, when Chavez returned from his international tour of that same month, he presented Venezuela with a set of 49 new decrees. In no time, the opposition to Chavez and much of the Venezuelan business community were in an uproar.

The Anti-Chavez Offensive

One of the most controversial measures was the “land law” that was to serve as the framework for the agrarian reform that the government had long promised to carry out. This law allows the National Land Institute to expropriate all non-productive land of properties surpassing 5,000 hectares (12,350 acres) includes provisions that limit individual property ownership to 12,350 acres and that allow the National Land Institute to expropriate nonproductive land. This land is then to be redistributed to peasant cooperatives. Furthermore, the law requires that landowners produce title-deeds for all the land they claim to own. Many are in fact incapable of doing so as, very often, they appropriated land illegally, sometimes displacing small farmers in the process.

The opposition to the Chavez government now felt that the context was ripe enough to begin awakening the fears, both old and new, of the US administration. From the domestic point of view, and despite the fact that they were entirely legal, the economic measures were deemed “tyrannical” and “communist.” And from the international point of view, President Chavez was accused of alienating the “Western democracies” and favoring ties with governments and subversive groups that used “terrorism” as a political weapon. Then, on December 10, the day the “land law” was to come into effect, the opposition launched a full offensive by calling for a “general strike” against the government. This strike, that paralyzed the country for one day, was the baby of a couple of strange bedfellows: the Fedecamaras business lobby and the CTV, a central trade union confederation (a National Endowment for Democracy grantee) in which the old former ruling party, Accion Democratica, plays a dominant role. It was a peculiar strike indeed: The bosses themselves shut

down their companies for a day, and thus provided their employees with an unexpected holiday.

Following this “awakening” of the country's conservative opposition, the declarations made by members of the American administration added fuel to the fire. Since Powell and Tenet's comments, the number of anti-government demonstrations has multiplied and senior army officers have defected. The fact that these defections have been given lavish media coverage is unsurprising in view of the fact that most of Venezuela's media are controlled by the interests that have the most to lose from Chavez's new measures. Nevertheless, the hero's welcome that the opposition has given the rebel officers serves to highlight the contradictory nature of their attitude. For though they are prompt to denounce the “country's militarization” operated by Chavez, they are just as quick to praise the democratic values of any general who chooses to distance himself from the president. On a daily basis, they use their mouthpieces in the press to denounce the government's alleged disrespect for freedom of speech. The Venezuela correspondent for the Paris daily *Le Monde* has noted otherwise: “...even the most hostile newspaper editors admit that under the Chavez regime the media encounters much fewer pressures than before.” All the while, rebel officers in uniform march in protest against the “dictatorship” without any sort of interference on the part of the government. Each time they occur, these acts constitute the very proof of the absurdity of the accusations that are thrown at the Chavez government. Furthermore, the fact that the demonstrations' participants are socially homogeneous, belonging to the same elite group, is strangely reminiscent of the mobilization of the upper classes prior to the coup D'État against Allende in 1973. It is in Altamira, one of the ritziest neighborhoods of the capital, that the demonstrations and the “cacerolazos” are organized. It is SUVs with tinted windows that make up the “caravans” that parade around Caracas using their horns to call for Chavez's departure. But these demonstrators are not alone. At the end of February 2002, a spokesman for the State Department predicted that “if Chavez doesn't fix things soon, he's not going to finish his term.” To some ears, this little piece of advice sounds a bit like a threat.

THE COUP

An Eyewitness Account

*Gregory Wilpert**

The orchestration of the coup was impeccable and, in all likelihood, planned a long time ago. Hugo Chavez, the fascist communist dictator of Venezuela could not stand the truth and thus censored the media relentlessly. For his own personal gain and that of his henchmen (and henchwomen, since his cabinet had more women than any previous Venezuelan government's), he drove the country to the brink of economic ruin. In the end he proceeded to murder those who opposed him. So as to reestablish democracy, liberty, justice, and prosperity in Venezuela and so as to avoid more bloodshed, the chamber of commerce, the union federation, the church, the media, and the management of Venezuela's oil company, in short: civil society and the military decided that enough is enough—that Chavez had his chance and that his experiment of a “peaceful democratic Bolivarian revolution” had to come to an immediate end.

This is, of course, the version of events that the officials now in charge and thus also of the media, would like everyone to believe. So what really happened? Of course I don't know, but I'll try to represent the facts as I witnessed them.

First of all, the military is saying that the main reason for the coup is what happened today, April 11. “Civil society,” as the opposition here refers to itself, organized a massive demonstration of perhaps 100,000 to 200,000 people to march to the headquarters of Venezuela's oil company, PDVSA, in defense of its fired management. The day leading up to the march all private television stations broadcast advertisements for the demonstration, approximately once

* *ZNet Commentary*, April 12, 2002

every ten minutes. It was a successful march, peaceful, and without government interference of any kind, even though the march illegally blocked the entire freeway, which is Caracas' main artery of transportation, for several hours.

Supposedly at the spur of the moment, the organizers decided to re-route the march to Miraflores, the president's office building, so as to confront the pro-government demonstration, which was called in the last minute. About 5,000 Chavez-supporters had gathered there by the time the anti-government demonstrators got there. In-between the two demonstrations were the city police, under the control of the oppositional mayor of Caracas, and the National Guard, under control of the president. All sides claim that they were there peacefully and did not want to provoke anyone. I got there just when the opposition demonstration and the National Guard began fighting each other. Who started the fight, which involved mostly stones and tear gas, is, as is so often the case in such situations, nearly impossible to tell. A little later, shots were fired into the crowds and I clearly saw that there were three parties involved in the shooting, the city police, Chavez supporters, and snipers from buildings above. Again, who shot first has become a moot and probably impossible to resolve question. At least ten people were killed and nearly 100 wounded in this gun battle-almost all of them demonstrators.

One of the Television stations managed to film one of the three sides in this battle and broadcast the footage over and over again, making it look like the only ones shooting were Chavez supporters from within the demonstration at people beyond the view of the camera. The media over and over again showed the footage of the Chavez supporters and implied that they were shooting at an unarmed crowd. As it turns out, and as will probably never be reported by the media, most of the dead are Chavez supporters.

This fact, crucial as it is, will not be known because it does not fit with the new mythology, which is that Chavez armed and then ordered his supporters to shoot at the opposition demonstration. The local media here will probably never bother to investigate this information. And the international media will probably simply ape

what the local media reports (which they are already doing).

Chavez' biggest and perhaps only mistake of the day, which provided the last remaining proof his opposition needed for his anti-democratic credentials, was to order the black-out of the private television stations. They had been broadcasting the confrontations all afternoon and Chavez argued that these broadcasts were exacerbating the situation and should, in the name of public safety, be temporarily shut-down.

Now, all of "civil society," the media, and the military are saying that Chavez has to go because he turned against his own people. Aside from the lie this is, what is conveniently forgotten are all of the achievements of the Chavez administration: a new democratic constitution which broke the power monopoly of the two hopelessly corrupt and discredited main parties and put Venezuela at the forefront in terms of progressive constitutions; introduced fundamental land reform; financed numerous progressive ecological community development projects; cracked-down on corruption; promoted educational reform which schooled over 1 million children for the first time and doubled investment in education; regulated the informal economy so as to reduce the insecurity of the poor; achieved a fairer price for oil through OPEC and which significantly increased government income; internationally campaigned tirelessly against neo-liberalism; reduced official unemployment from 18% to 13%; introduced a large-scale micro-credit program for the poor and for women; reformed the tax system which dramatically reduced tax evasion and increased government revenue; lowered infant mortality from 21% to 17%; tripled literacy courses; modernized the legal system, etc., etc.

Chavez' opposition, which primarily consisted of Venezuela's old guard in the media, the union federation, the business sector, the church, and the traditionally conservative military, never cared about any of these achievements. Instead, they took advantage of their media monopoly to turn public opinion against him and managed to turn his biggest liability, his autocratic and inflammatory style, against him. Progressive civil society had either been silenced

or demonized as violent Chavez fanatics.

At this point, it is impossible to know what will happen to Chavez' "Bolivarian Revolution"-whether it will be completely abandoned and whether things will return to Venezuela's 40-year tradition of patronage, corruption, and rentierism for the rich. What one can say without a doubt, is that by abandoning constitutional democracy, no matter how unpopular and supposedly inept the elected president, Venezuela's ruling class and its military show just how politically immature they are and deal a tremendous blow to political culture throughout Latin America, just as the coup against Salvador Allende did in 1973. This coup shows once again that democracy in Latin America is a matter of ruling class preference, not a matter of law.

If the United States and the democratic international community have the courage to practice what they preach, then they should not recognize this new government. Democrats around the world should pressure their governments to deny recognition to Venezuela's new military junta or any president they happen to choose. According to the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS), this would mean expelling Venezuela from the OAS, as a U.S. state department official recently threatened to do before the coup even took place.

The Coup Will Be Televised

*Jon Beasley-Murray**

So this is how one lives a modern coup d'état: watching television. Venezuela's coup (and coup it is, make no mistake) took place in the media, fomented by the media, and with the media themselves the apparent object of both sides' contention. But while South America's longest-standing democracy was brought down in the confused glare of media spectacle, any attempt to turn this spectacle into narrative or analysis must also take into account, first, oil and, second, the general breakdown of Latin American political legitimacy, of which this coup has been just one (particularly bloody) symptom.

In Caracas, Venezuela's capital, everyone has been watching television over the past few days: every restaurant, shop, and business has had a television on, showing almost constant news coverage, and diners and shoppers have been dividing their attention between what they are consuming and what they are seeing of developments in the ongoing crisis that came to a head last night with the overthrow of president Hugo Chavez.

For several months now, support for (now former) president Chavez's once overwhelmingly popular regime has been in steady decline, in part as a result of a relentless assault by both the press and the television networks. In response, Chavez took to decreeing so-called "chains," in which he obliged all the networks to broadcast his own--often long and rambling--addresses to the nation. The media only redoubled its opposition, subverting the broadcasts by superposing text protesting against this "abuse" of press freedom, or for instance by splitting the screen between Chavez's speech on the

* Previously unpublished report.

one side and images of anti-government demonstrations on the other. Moreover, through the media came more and more calls for the president's resignation or, failing that, for the intervention of the military.

The military has now answered these calls. The trigger for the most recent convulsions has been (predictably enough) a battle for control of Venezuela's oil. The country is the world's fourth largest producer, and the third largest exporter of oil to the United States; the state oil company, PDVSA (the world's largest oil company and Latin America's largest company of any kind), is crucial to the economy as a whole, and among Chavez's policies had been the attempt to rejuvenate OPEC and to run PDVSA according to national and political priorities rather than simply acceding to market demands. Two weeks ago, the president sacked several members of the company's board of directors, replacing them with his own allies. The management immediately cried foul, initiating a production slow-down, and taking up a position at the vocal centre of anti-government protest. At the weekend, Chavez replaced more board members, and on Monday the union federation Confederacion de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV) and the national chamber of commerce, FEDECAMERAS, allied with the oil industry's management and joined to call a general strike for Tuesday 10th. While the opposition gathered to demonstrate around the headquarters of PDVSA, in Caracas' opulent East Side, those loyal to the government congregated around the presidential palace in the more working class and dilapidated city centre. Tuesday night Chavez decreed another chain, declaring to the nation that the strike had been a failure; in response, the coalition of union, business, and oil management declared that the strike had been 100% successful (of course, the truth was somewhere in between) and announced, first, another day's general strike and, then, the following day, that the strike would be indefinite.

The atmosphere in the city became palpably tenser. Opposition supporters, mainly from the middle and upper classes, drove through the city, the national flag and the black flag of opposition waving from the electric windows of their four-wheel drive vehicles, while a broader spectrum of opponents added to the cacophony by bang-

ing pots and pans from their windows (exchanging shouted insults with government supporters) either when Chavez appeared on television or, on those days when he was off the screen, at pre-arranged times in the evening. Encouraged by this show of support, anti-Chavez forces called for a march within the East Side for Thursday morning. On the day of the march, the two hundred thousand demonstrators then continued on beyond their stated destination, heading for the city centre and the core of the president's power base.

Undoubtedly this was a provocation (and almost certainly planned in advance), but at this point the two sides had become so polarized that confrontation was inevitable. The final moments of Chavez's regime began that afternoon as the president tried to take over the television networks literally as well as symbolically. At around 1:30pm he appeared on the airwaves, broadcasting from his office in the palace, declaring calm and that his government continued in control, well able to deal with the vociferous minority demanding his resignation. As the broadcast started, I was finishing lunch with friends at a restaurant; at all the tables there was a sudden silence, all present recognizing that Venezuela's crisis had entered its end-game. Over the next hour or so, as the president continued talking (sometimes chiding, sometimes patronizing), one by one the terrestrial channels were taken off the air, leaving only the government station available to those who did not have cable. For some time, a surreal dialogue ensued, as the private channels (now visible only to cable subscribers) split their screens once more, showing mute and confused images of rioting taking place outside the palace, commenting upon these events with superimposed text, while Chavez spoke calmly from behind his desk while from off-screen aides periodically passed him notes updating him about and allowing him to respond to the images and text added by the television stations to the official discourse.

Then the chain broke and, for all intents and purposes, the game was up. The networks abandoned Chavez and dedicated themselves to the pictures (often repeated, often out of sync) of what had been happening in the city centre as the president's discourse had domi-

nated the airwaves. Confused and disorganized images of stone-throwing youths, the injured carried away on stretchers, Chavez loyalists apparently returning fire, the first dead bodies, troops and tanks mobilizing, and various military officials making statements all marked a coup in progress. I was driven back to another friend's house as darkness fell, and we as well as the few other road-users ran every red light in our way. As the night wore on, the government television screened old nature documentaries, and then went off the air completely as private channels regained their full broadcasting capabilities. Eventually the entire military high command declared themselves against the president. Grainy images of government jets leaving the darkened city centre airfield with all lights off strengthened rumors that the president might have fled, but then the different forces seemed to have hunkered down until, at 1:30 in the morning, the sound of pots and pans and fireworks greeted the news that Hugo Chavez was now in custody. But nobody went out into the street. We turned the television off.

It is only today that the coup's fall-out is becoming clear, just as the choppy, confused television images are being re-written as linear, coherent newspaper narrative. Adherents of the former government are (in their entirety) being accused of perpetrating the massacre of at least thirteen unarmed protesters yesterday--when it is far from clear (and indeed, most unlikely) either that all the dead are protesters or that the protesters were all unarmed. With this justification, however, (and with the false notion that Chavez's regime was characterized by repression) all traces of the past three years are rapidly being erased. It seems probable that Chavez's democratizing constitution will be revoked (it has already been utterly breached), and that the country will return to the constitution of 1961, and perhaps to the entrenched social inequalities of the 1960s and 1970s, too. Much of the opposition, united only in its rejection of Chavez, may find cause to regret the manner of the old regime's passing, and the shape of the regime now in formation. At present, the "transitional" government (which has promised new elections "within a year") is the product of a pact between the military and business: the new president, Pedro Carmona, is the former head of the chamber of commerce, and in the televised announcement in which his new

position was announced, he was flanked by the collected heads of the various armed services. Meanwhile, the police are conducting raids in the city centre, (democratically elected) provincial governors are being detained and stripped of power, and all those who sympathized with or worked for the former government face an uncertain future; some have already gone into hiding.

The previous regime had many faults: after an auspicious beginning (and 80% support in the polls), it failed to mobilize the mass of the people towards its stated aim of transforming what, for all its oil resources, is still a country with considerable poverty. The regime's prospects (and the prospects for any social change) came to depend all too much on the figure of the president himself, at best a maverick, at worst authoritarian in style (and probably in fact quite incompetent), whose personal charisma would inevitably wane. As Chavez's personalism allowed for no competition, when Chavez's popularity declined, there were no alternatives left to those who believed in the generally progressive causes advanced (if intermittently) by his government. "Chavismo" itself came to create the political vacuum that has allowed the far right pact of arms and commerce now to take control.

At the same time, under Chavez, Venezuela constituted a dissident exception to the contemporary prevalence of a neoliberalism that has only accentuated the divide between rich and poor throughout Latin America. If Chavez was not the way forward, he was rather a throwback, a (somewhat hokey) mix both of the nineteenth-century liberators he revered—he went so far as to rename the country the "Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," in honor of Simon Bolivar, the leader of the Latin American independence movement—and of early twentieth-century populists such as Argentina's Juan Peron. Briefly, at least, Chavez seemed to demonstrate that other models were possible—and, in his attempts to make OPEC a force of third world producers allied against a global system heavily weighted in favor of first world consumers, that another form of globalization might be imagined.

Imperial Coup in Venezuela

*Heinz Dietrich Steffan**

Champaign in Caracas and Washington. The recipe never fails. It worked with Salvador Allende in 1973, the Sandinistas in 1989 and in 2002 with Hugo Chávez. It took three years to destroy the Unidad Popular in Chile, eight for the Sandinista Front of National Liberation in Nicaragua and three for the Bolivarian forces. Failure to give away natural resources and national sovereignty continues to be the death sentence for any Latin American government.

The master plan for the fall of Venezuela's president Hugo Chávez—made in USA and commanded in situ by Carlos Ortega—leader of the mainstream union of Venezuelan Workers (Central de Trabajadores de Venezuela – CTV), and Pedro Carmona—president of the business confederation, Fedecamaras—was published five weeks ago in one of the epicenters of anti-government conspiracies: the daily El Nacional.

The ideologue and Cabbala confidant Julio García Mora revealed the internal (Venezuelan) part of the coup mechanics. The external part—that of the White House participation, of Miami, of Colombian paramilitaries, of the U.S. AFL-CIO, of the Spanish government, of right-wing international foundations and the international media was left in the dark.

With regards to the Venezuelan civil gears that were aimed to remove the president, García postulated that the unity of CTV, Fedecamaras and the Church was “the only way out” from Chávez's mandate.

* www.Rebellion.org, April 13, 2002

“This front will act [...] with great force. With the 12-hour general strike of March 18 and the chain of actions that start on the 4th [...]. The demonstrations signal the episodes of a foreseeable government end [...] Those are the dynamics that end with an institutional exit. With a provisional President who designates the vice-president and from there on, everything is set, the executive cabinet and the powers [...] Nine months of transitory effort and once you remake the Executive Power you go to a general election [...] A striking technical K.O. and with no rupture of the institutional thread.”

The definitive operation in this strategy was undertaken by Ortega and Carmona. Under the false label of general strike they laid a double ambush. Unable to paralyze the country as they promised, and through an intensive media campaign, they called for a solidarity demonstration with the strike of executives from the government-owned *Petróleos de Venezuela S. A. (PdVSA)* [state oil company]. This demonstration was authorized to reach the Caracas neighborhood of Chuao, but from there it was diverted towards the presidential palace, Miraflores. The obvious intention was to produce clashes and deaths that in the face of their failed “general strike” could generate a military coup, advocated many times over by the other key external conspirator: the social-democrat Carlos Andrés Pérez.

In the eighties, the CIA lectured its Nicaraguan mercenaries (the *contras*) that every political movement needed martyrs, and the ambush by Ortega and Carmona met that prescription. Alfredo Peña, Caracas mayor and chief of the notoriously repressive and corrupt Metropolitan Police (PM), provided the snipers who, dressed as civilians, shot from the rooftops, near the Presidential Palace, at civilians, particularly at government supporters, who suffered the greatest casualties.

The media, among them the TV station *Globovisión* and the dailies *El Nacional* and *El Universal*, contributed to the propagandistic multipliers for the coup, while the transnational media networks guaranteed the worldwide dissemination of lies.

The civilians killed by the conspirators will now be used to fabricate a trial of the president, who is under arrest at Fort Tiuna, in order to remove him definitively from the country’s political scene.

The lie that Hugo Chávez gave orders to shoot at demonstrators is being propagated by the military plotters and the media, just as is the falsehood that he resigned his post when, in fact, he was detained by a group of disloyal generals.

The anatomy of the coup reveals that it was a carbon copy of the coup d’état against Nicolae Ceaucescu in Rumania. A lie over a supposed government’s violation of human rights is turned, through an intensive TV and newspaper campaign, into a cause for people’s fury and into a justification for a coup by a section of the military, which had previously been prepared to take power.

The provisional defeat of the Bolivarian project in Venezuela is a significant set-back for the democratic and patriotic forces of Latin America, as it changes the balance of forces in the sub-continent to its detriment: for the mass movement in Argentina; for the electoral chances of the popular forces in Ecuador and Brazil; for the resistance to the FTAA and the defense of MERCOSUR; for a negotiated solution in Colombia and, of course, for Cuba.

In a conversation between the Cuban president Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, the first said to Chávez: “You have a historic opportunity, don’t waste it.”

Excruciatingly, it was wasted for multiple reasons; amongst them, the complicity of many intellectuals and international media with the destabilizing agents. Some of them are now even trying to pass as “Bolivarianos,” to maintain their image as progressives.

The coup was foreseeable ever since the moment Hugo Chávez won the election and it was revealed, as we showed, five weeks ago.

The Bolivarian State did not take the necessary steps to defend its project and lost power. It lacked the political-software to make the

most of the “historic opportunity,” just as happened two years earlier, during another “historic opportunity” in the Andean countries: the indigenous-popular-military uprising in Ecuador.

Translated from Spanish by José Luna

Hugo Chavez: A Servant Not Knowing His Place

*William Blum**

How do we know that the CIA was behind the coup that overthrew Hugo Chavez?

Same way we know that the sun will rise tomorrow morning. That's what it's always done and there's no reason to think that tomorrow morning will be any different.

Consider Chavez's crimes:

- Branding the US attacks on Afghanistan as “fighting terrorism with terrorism,” he demanded an end to “the slaughter of innocents”; holding up photographs of children killed in the American bombing attacks, he said their deaths had “no justification, just as the attacks in New York did not, either.” In response, the Bush administration temporarily withdrew its ambassador.
- Being very friendly with Fidel Castro and selling oil to Cuba at discount rates.
- His defense minister asking the permanent US military mission in Venezuela to vacate its offices in the military headquarters in Caracas, saying its presence was an anachronism from the cold war.
- Not cooperating to Washington's satisfaction with the US war

* *Counterpunch*, April 14, 2002

against the Colombian guerrillas.

- Denying Venezuelan airspace to US counter-drug flights.
- Refusing to provide US intelligence agencies with information on Venezuela's large Arab community.
- Questioning the sanctity of globalization.
- Promoting a regional free-trade bloc and united Latin American petroleum operations as a way to break free from US economic dominance.
- Visiting Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Moammar Gaddafi in Libya.
- And more in the same vein which the Washington aristocracy is unaccustomed to encountering from the servant class.

The United States has endeavored to topple numerous governments for a whole lot less.

The Washington Post reported from Venezuela on April 13: "Members of the country's diverse opposition had been visiting the U.S. Embassy here in recent weeks, hoping to enlist U.S. help in toppling Chavez. The visitors included active and retired members of the military, media leaders and opposition politicians.

"The opposition has been coming in with an assortment of 'what ifs,'" said a U.S. official familiar with the effort. "What if this happened? What if that happened? What if you held it up and looked at it sideways? To every scenario we say no. We know what a coup looks like, and we won't support it."

Right. They won't support a coup. So what happens when a coup occurs which they want to support? Simple. They don't call it a coup. They call it a "change of government" and say that Chavez was ousted "as a result of the message of the Venezuelan people."

Veritable grass-roots democracy it was.

Opposition legislators were also brought to Washington in recent months, including at least one delegation sponsored by the International Republican Institute, an integral part of the National Endowment for Democracy, long used by the CIA for covert operations abroad.

Overthrowing a man such as Hugo Chavez, guilty of such transgressions, was a duty so "natural" for the CIA that the only reason it might not have been intimately involved in the operation would be that the Agency had been secretly disbanded.

A Coup by Any Other Name

*Tim Weiner**

When is a coup not a coup? When the United States says so, it seems - especially if the fallen leader is no friend to American interests.

What else to call the fall on Friday of Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez? An armed transition of power? By any other name, though its European and Latin American allies deplored it, it was a consummation devoutly wished for by the White House.

“The actions encouraged by the Chávez government provoked a crisis,” the White House spokesman, Ari Fleischer, said on Friday. That sentence was spring-loaded, given the history of Latin American coups tacitly encouraged or covertly supported by the United States.

For Washington, the real crisis in Caracas was Mr. Chávez. It ended with his leaving office at gunpoint. Now 1.5 million barrels of Venezuelan oil a day will keep flowing to the United States. And none will go to Fidel Castro's Cuba - Venezuela's new leader, an oil man, immediately declared that tap shut.

In Latin America, the United States has long preferred friendly faces in presidential palaces, playing reliable roles, whether or not they are wearing uniforms. It supported authoritarian regimes throughout Central and South America during and after the cold war in defense of its economic and political interests.

In tiny Guatemala, the Central Intelligence Agency mounted a coup overthrowing the democratically elected government in 1954, and it backed subsequent right-wing governments against small leftist

* *New York Times*, April 14, 2002

rebel groups for four decades. Roughly 200,000 civilians died.

In Chile, a C.I.A.-supported coup helped put Gen. Augusto Pinochet in power from 1973 to 1990. In Peru, a fragile democratic government is still unraveling the agency's role in a decade of support for the now-deposed and disgraced president, Alberto K. Fujimori, and his disreputable spy chief, Vladimiro L. Montesinos.

The United States had to invade Panama in 1989 to topple its narcodictator, Manuel A. Noriega, who, for almost 20 years, was a valued informant for American intelligence. And the struggle to mount an armed opposition against Nicaragua's leftists in the 1980's by any means necessary, including selling arms to Iran for cold cash, led to indictments against senior Reagan administration officials.

Among those investigated back then was Otto J. Reich, a veteran of Latin American struggles. No charges were ever filed against Mr. Reich. He later became United States ambassador to Venezuela and now serves as assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs by presidential appointment. The fall of Mr. Chávez is a feather in his cap.

THERE is so far no evidence that the United States covertly undermined Mr. Chávez. He did a decent job destabilizing himself. But the open White House embrace of his overthrow will not be lost on Latin American leaders who dare thumb their noses at the United States, as did Mr. Chávez.

Yes, he was freely and democratically elected, and his starry-eyed visions of a united South America unshackled from the dominance of Washington's power did not bother the administration much. But his selling oil to Mr. Castro? His alliances with his brothers in petroleum production, Saddam Hussein and Muammar el-Qaddafi? His not-so-tacit support for the Colombian rebels? And the potential threat he posed to thousands of American gas stations?

Above all, the United States wants stability in its backyard. Mr. Chávez did not fit in with President Bush's vision of "the century of

the Americas" in "a hemisphere of liberty."

The Organization of American States, the most venerable alliance in the Americas, has a new Democracy Charter, signed by every one of its members, including the United States, on Sept. 11. It requires strong action against military coups. Yet, in all likelihood, it will be ignored in Venezuela's case, because Washington wanted Mr. Chávez gone.

Today, armed dictatorships cannot flourish as easily as they did in the cold war. Ideologies have little power left in Latin America. But civil institutions have less. Laws, legislatures and legal mechanisms have been starved by strong armies and weak democracies. The promised land of political empowerment pledged by free traders still seems far away. And in Venezuela, despite its oil, more than 85 percent of the people are still dirt poor.

"Venezuela has been in and out of crises like this for 50 years, with arrogant elites overthrown by popular uprisings whose leaders become arrogant elites," said David J. Rothkopf, chairman of Intellibridge, a Washington consulting firm run by former senior intelligence and foreign policy officials. "The only cure would be to extract all the oil from Venezuela at once."

The cure for Washington was the army's extracting Mr. Chávez.

THE COUNTER COUP

Virtual Reality, Real Coup

*Alexander Main, Maximilien Arvelaiz, Temir Porras
Ponceleon**

We knew that the heat was on the Chavez regime but we were still caught by surprise when, on April 11th, a cunningly orchestrated coup d'état unfolded before our eyes.

As suddenly as the coup, came a reversal of the situation: the people of Caracas rose up and the forces behind the coup suddenly collapsed. The large majority of the Venezuelan military decided not to back the self-proclaimed "provisional government." Within 48 hours, Chavez was released and he and his ministers were back in power.

As we write we hear people outside cheering and yelling "Chavez is back!", but, though we're relieved we're also acutely aware that the danger has not passed, for the forces that organized the coup d'état are still in place and certainly haven't bowed to the will of the Venezuelan people. To be reminded of the threat, all we have to do is turn on the TV.

The unfolding of events, or rather the manner in which the national media reported them, clearly indicates that this coup was orchestrated by an alliance of the business sector, members of the political old guard, the media and the US government. The business sectors with Fedecamaras (the Venezuelan big business lobby), the old guard with the CTV (the main federation of trade unions that is linked to Accion Democratica, the old ruling party), the media with Venezuela's four national television channels, the most widely-read

* *Covert Action Quarterly*, Spring 2002

newspapers, and all of the country's commercial radio (all of which are in the hands of the old business elite), and, finally, the US, with its major interests in Venezuela, particularly those linked to the country's oil production. These forces all joined in a well thought-out plan to destabilize Venezuela and create a context of confusion in which a coup could be carried out.

Stage I: Managerial “Strike”

To prepare the atmosphere of crisis, CTV and Fedecamaras called for a general strike on Tuesday, the 9th of April. The unnatural alliance of old-line trade union leadership with business owners clearly indicates that this was a political move. This is confirmed by the fact that, although the strike was not widely followed, its organizers decided to prolong it, and then on Wednesday night they decided to continue it indefinitely.

Stage II: Virtual Reality

The second move was made by the media who constructed a sort of virtual reality, first by representing the strike as an enormous success indicating widespread discontent with the Chavez regime, then by constant coverage of anti-Chavez demonstrations in the upper-class neighborhoods of Caracas. As with similar demonstrations in preceding months, the media referred to the demonstrators as “civil society”, representative of Venezuela as a whole. But the media's biggest contribution to the big plan was its constant drum roll of support for a march, called for by all the opposition forces, on the headquarters of PDVSA, the state-owned oil company. Recent management changes implemented by Chavez to bring the company into line with his economic policy were used by the opposition as examples of Chavez's “authoritarian character”. On Thursday morning, after a night of rallying on the country's TV and radio stations, most of Caracas's middle-class, at least 200,000 people, was in the streets of the city's wealthy Eastern neighborhoods and marching towards the PDVSA main office. By midmorning, the media began falsely reporting that President Chavez had fled from Miraflores, the presidential palace, and in no time the march had

shifted its course towards this new destination.

But the pro Chavez shantytowns of Caracas were alerted and many “Chavistas” began running toward Miraflores to defend the President and their Revolution. The decisive phase of the plan was in action. As the opposition forces understood, given the enormous class tension between these two segments of Caracas's population, this could only result in a very ugly confrontation.

Stage III: Fire at Will

Chaos best describes what followed. Before more than a few thousand Chavez supporters had reached the presidential palace, the mob of middle-class demonstrators had encircled the Miraflores neighborhood and were moving in on the palace. Only a few dozen National Guard troops were interposed between the two fronts. There was a lot of yelling and stick waving, but clashes had not occurred when, suddenly, the Chavistas began receiving sniper fire from unidentified sharp shooters deployed on tall buildings nearby. To add to the confusion, the snipers shot at both pro-Chavez and anti-Chavez demonstrators, killing several people on each side, including a journalist.

Who were the snipers? The media, without providing an ounce of proof, claimed that they belonged to the Chavista camp. To support this allegation they broadcast videotaped images of the pistol-shooting Chavistas. As this was the only record produced of acts of violence it served to put forward the idea that the violence was a Chavista monopoly. This rather hasty generalization was probably accepted unquestioningly by the TV-watching middle-classes, both inside and outside Venezuela, as for many months the anti Chavez media campaign had depicted the Bolivarian Circles as bloodthirsty mobs armed to the teeth and “civil society” as civilized pacifists.

We don't know yet who the snipers were and perhaps we'll never know, but let's ask another question: who really stood to benefit from the snipers' executions? Let's just say that, thanks to the media's manipulation of the hordes of middle-class demonstrators,

confrontation had occurred, and now the snipers had added oil to the fire. Chavez and his team, meanwhile, were trying desperately to calm things down, and, frequently, government officials used the Miraflores sound system to ask the Chavez supporters to avoid all violence. For the most part, these instructions were being followed.

Unfortunately, none of this was being reported by Venezuelan media which was already asserting, without advancing any proof, that Chavez had ordered the shootings, that he was an “asesino.” And, henceforth, “asesino!” became the battle cry of the opposition.

Stage IV: Military Defections

As dusk approached, the situation around Miraflores seemed to be cooling down. But the media onslaught continued relentlessly, with the private television stations showing over and over footage of two Chavistas firing for five seconds over a bridge railing, providing no image of what they were firing at, accompanied by wild assertions about the number of demonstrators killed. Then, at around 6 pm, an announcement was broadcast on television and radio: the commander of the National Guard declared that, because slayings had occurred and because Chavez had sworn that he would never give the order to shoot at civilians, his corps no longer recognized President Chavez. This declaration triggered defections of other factions of the army in a domino effect, while the media continued to attack by broadcasting false reports the disintegration of the Chavez government, e.g., the flight of Chavez to Cuba, the defense minister's request for asylum at the Chilean embassy, etc. The job was finished off with the sabotage of the public television's transmission. From this point on, until Chavez's return, reality would be defined exclusively by the opposition's media.

In the middle of the night, Chavez asked to be handed over to the army. Previously, the media had announced that Chavez had resigned, though no real proof was ever advanced.

Stage IV: Interim Government

The next morning, a civil-military junta was constituted with, at its head, Pedro Carmona Estanga, president of Fedecamaras. In the early afternoon, a formal ceremony was organized, and Carmona declared himself invested with powers to lead the country during a transitional government. He announced that the term “Bolivarian” would no longer be officially used, then announced the dissolution of all the Bolivarian Republic's institutions.

Stage V: US Stamp of Approval

On the afternoon of the same day, George W. Bush's spokesman, Ari Fleischer, held a press conference on the Middle East problem in which he commented on the Venezuelan situation almost in passing. “We know that the action encouraged by the Chávez government provoked this crisis... now the situation will be one of tranquility and democracy.” The illegal junta had been implicitly recognized and given the go-ahead. Although the US attempted to lead the way, Vicente Fox's Mexico and Alejandro Toledo's Peru decided to hold back for the time being.

Members of the junta had done everything to attract the sympathy of the Bush government. Contrary to Chavez, they had shown themselves favorable to neo-liberal policies and the Free Trade Area of the Americas. In addition, in the midst of the crisis in the Middle East that was driving oil prices up, they pledged a quick return to a pro US rather than a pro OPEC oil policy. As a symbol of their good will, the very first measure taken by the fired PDVSA managers who had illegally returned to their former positions, was to cut off all oil exports to Cuba.

According to the national press and media, no coup had occurred. Officially, President Chavez had resigned; therefore Venezuela had entered a democratic transitional process. At no moment had the media expressed any concern for the fact that tangible evidence had not surfaced, and that no individual was available to confirm that the resignation had indeed been signed. But, since Venezuela had

entered the media's virtual reality zone, it didn't really seem to matter.

In the 24 hours that followed, the junta behaved as one might expect, carrying out political arrests and illegal searches of anywhere where Chavista-related material might be found, and some of this purging process actually appeared on TV. It might strike the reader as strange that such blatantly criminal activity should be covered by media favorable to the junta, but, in reality, this coverage, observed through the filter of the virtual reality that the media had constructed, could actually be seen in a positive light. For Chavez and his followers had been demonized and criminalized long before the coup, and their persecution demanded little, if any, justification for the regular consumers of Venezuela's media. In the same way, when the media "revealed" that searches made in the lower class Pastora neighborhood had "uncovered" T-shirts and posters bearing the image of Chavez and Che Guevara, they were quite certain that the Venezuelan middle class would react with anxiety. They would not sense the hypocrisy of the Venezuelan media when, after three years of constant denunciations of Chavez's authoritarianism, they covered, but didn't denounce, violations of fundamental rights that had never been perpetrated in the three years of Chavez's presidency.

The next day (April 13th), the morning papers carried full-page ads like this one in the Nacional: "Telcel (BellSouth) celebrates Freedom with all of Venezuela / Freedom to call wherever you want / Free national long distance calls [on Sunday the 14th of April]"

But not everyone was celebrating this new-found "freedom." In the early afternoon spontaneous demonstrations were taking place all over Venezuela demanding the return of Chavez. But this news was not being broadcast on Venezuelan television. Since the junta's inauguration the preceding day, and after days of constant coverage of the general strike and "civil society's" street demonstrations, television viewers were being treated to the "normal" fare of telenovelas and game shows. Thus, censorship of critical events was being accomplished by the same media that, since Chavez's election, had accused Chavez of threatening freedom of expression.

To discover the fast-spreading movement to bring back Chavez, the television viewer had to tune in to CNN en español. But concrete reality overwhelmed virtual reality and, seeing the extent of the popular upheaval, and possibly displeased themselves with the anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies that the junta had already demonstrated, an inverse domino effect occurred and factions of the army began to reject the junta and call for Chavez's return. Late in the afternoon CNN en español informed Venezuelans that Miraflores had been taken over by Caraqueños and a group of paratroopers. In a matter of hours, the coup had been reversed and Chavez was back in office.

Democracy had returned to Venezuela. But the forces that nearly brought an end to a dream of real social progress are still in place and many Venezuelans and democrats around the world can't help asking: what will they do next?

Venezuela: Not a Banana Republic After All

*Gregory Wilpert**

It looks like Venezuela is not just another banana-oil republic after all. Many here feared that with the April 11 coup attempt against President Hugo Chavez, Venezuela was being degraded to being just another country that is forced to bend to the powerful will of the United States. The successful counter-coup of April 14, though, which reinstated Chavez, proved that Venezuela is a tougher cookie than the coup planners thought.

The coup leaders against President Chavez made two fundamental miscalculations. First, they started having delusions of grandeur, believing that the support for their coup was so complete that they could simply ignore the other members of their coup coalition and place only their own in the new government. The labor union federation CTV, which saw itself as one of the main actors of the opposition movement to President Chavez, and nearly all moderate opposition parties were excluded from the new “democratic unity” cabinet. The new transition cabinet ended up including only the most right-wing elements of Venezuelan society. They then proceeded to dissolve the legislature, the Supreme Court, the attorney general's office, the national electoral commission, and the state governorships, among others. Next, they decreed that the 1999 constitution, which had been written by a constitutional assembly and ratified by vote, following the procedures outlined in the previous constitution, was to be suspended. Also, an intensive witch-hunt began, looking to arrest any members of the Chavez government. The new transition president would thus rule by decree until next year, when new

* *ZNet Commentary*, April 15, 2002

elections would be called. Generally, this type of regime fits the textbook definition of dictatorship.

This first miscalculation led to several generals' protest against the new regime, perhaps under pressure from the excluded sectors of the opposition, or perhaps out of a genuine sense of remorse, and resulted in their call for changes to the sweeping "democratic transition" decree, lest they withdraw their support from the new government. Transition President Pedro Carmona, the chair of Venezuela's largest chamber of commerce, immediately agreed to reinstate the Assembly and to the rest of the generals' demands.

The second miscalculation was the belief that Chavez was hopelessly unpopular in the population and among the military and that no one except Cuba and Colombia's guerrilla, the FARC, would regret Chavez' departure. Following the initial shock and demoralization which the coup caused among Chavez-supporters, this second miscalculation led to major upheavals and riots in Caracas' sprawling slums, which make up nearly half of the city. In practically all of the "barrios" of Caracas spontaneous demonstrations and "cacerolazos" (pot-banging) broke out on April 13 and 14. The police immediately rushed-in to suppress these expressions of discontent and somewhere between 10 and 40 people were killed in these clashes with the police. Then, in the early afternoon, purely by word-of-mouth and the use of cell phones (Venezuela has one of the highest per capita rates of cell phone use in the world), a demonstration in support of Chavez was called at the Miraflores presidential palace. By 6 PM about 100,000 people had gathered in the streets surrounding the presidential palace. At approximately the same time, the honor guard, which guards the presidential palace and is a regiment of soldiers hand-picked by the president, decided to act and took control over the presidential palace. Next, as the awareness of the extent of Chavez' support spread, major battalions in the interior of Venezuela began siding with Chavez.

Eventually the support for the transition regime evaporated among the military, so that transition president Carmona resigned in the name of preventing bloodshed. As the boldness of Chavez-support-

ers grew, they began taking over several television stations, which had not reported a single word about the uprisings and the demonstrations. Finally, late at night, around midnight of April 14, it was announced that Chavez was set free and that he would take over as president again. The crowds outside of Miraflores were ecstatic. No one believed that the coup could or would be reversed so rapidly. When Chavez appeared on national TV around 4 AM, he too joked that he knew he would be back, but he never imagined it would happen so fast. He did not even have time to rest and write some poetry, as he had hoped to do.

So how could this be? How could such an impeccably planned and smoothly executed coup fall apart in almost exactly 48 hours? Aside from the two miscalculations mentioned above, it appears that the military's hearts were not fully into the coup project. Once it became obvious that the coup was being hijacked by the extreme right and that Chavez enjoyed much more support than was imagined, large parts of the military decided to reject the coup, which then had a snowball-effect of changing military allegiances. Also, by announcing that one of the main reasons for the coup was to avoid bloodshed and by stating that the Venezuelan military would never turn its weapons against its own people, Chavez supporters became more courageous to go out and to protest against the coup without fear of reprisals.

Very important, though, was that the coup planners seem to have believed their own propaganda: that Chavez was an extremely unpopular leader. What they seem to have forgotten is that Chavez was not a fluke, a phenomenon that appeared in Venezuela as a result of political chaos, as some analysts seem to believe. Rather, Chavez' movement has its roots in a long history of Venezuelan community and leftist organizing. Also, it seems quite likely that although many people were unhappy with Chavez' lack of rapid progress in implementing the reforms he promised, he was still the most popular politician in the country.

The media and the opposition movement tried to create the impression that Chavez was completely isolated and that no one supported

him any longer. They did this by organizing massive demonstrations, with the extensive help of the television stations, which regularly broadcast reports of the anti-Chavez protests, but consistently ignored the pro-Chavez protests, which, by all fair accounts, tended to be just as large. The television channels claimed that they did not cover pro-Chavez demonstrations because protesters threatened their lives. While this is possible, they could have gotten protection, if they had cared to.

The Role of the Media

Nearly the entire private mass media is owned and operated by Venezuela's oligarchy. There is only one neutral newspaper, which is not an explicitly anti-Chavez newspaper and one state-run television station. During the coup, the state-run station was taken off the air and all of the other media kept repeating the coup organizer's lies without question. These lies included the claim that Chavez had resigned and had dismissed his cabinet, that all of the demonstration's dead were "martyrs of civil society" (i.e., of the opposition, since the media does not consider Chavez supporters as part of civil society), and that Chavez had ordered his supporters to shoot into the unarmed crowd of anti-Chavez demonstrators.

The media never addressed the repeated doubts that members of Chavez' cabinet raised about his resignation. Also, the media did not release the names of those who were shot, probably because this would have shown that most of the dead were pro-Chavez demonstrators. Finally, the media edited the video footage of the shootings in such a way as to avoid showing where the Chavez supporters were shooting—namely, as eyewitnesses reported, at police and individuals who were shooting back at them, while hidden in doorways. Also, they did not show the pro-Chavez crowd repeatedly pointing at the snipers who were firing at them from the rooftop of a nearby building.

These media distortions in the aftermath of the coup drove home the point just how powerful the media is at creating an alternate reality.

Those Chavez supporters who were at the demonstration and witnessed the events realized more than ever that power needs a mass medium and that those who control the mass media have much more power than they let on. This is why the television stations became a key target in the hours leading up to Chavez' reinstatement. The take-over of four of the eight stations was essential to Chavez' comeback because it showed the rest of the military and the rest of Venezuela that Chavez still had strong support among the population and that if the people really wanted to, they could fight for what was right and win.

Quo Vadis Chavez?

An aspect of the rise of Chavez to power, which is often forgotten in Venezuela is that as far as Venezuelan presidents are concerned, Chavez has actually been among the least dictatorial. True, Chavez is a flawed president. However, earlier presidencies, such as that of Carlos Andres Perez (1989-1993), the killing of demonstrators were nearly a monthly occurrence. Also, the outright censorship of newspapers was quite common during the Perez presidency. None of this has happened during the Chavez presidency.

President Hugo Chavez is an individual who raises the passions of people, pro or con, unlike anyone else. It almost seems that Venezuelans either love him or hate him. A more balanced picture of the president, however, would show, first, that he is someone who deeply believes in working for social justice, for improving democracy, and believes in international solidarity. Also, he is a gifted and charismatic speaker, which makes him a natural choice as a leader.

However, one has to recognize that he has some serious shortcomings. Among the most important is that while he truly believes in participatory democracy, as is evidenced in his efforts to democratize the Venezuelan constitution, his instincts are that of an autocrat. This has led to a serious neglect of his natural base, which is the progressive and grassroots civil society. Instead, he has tried to jump-start this civil society by organizing "Bolivarian Circles," which are

neighborhood groups that are supposed to help organize communities and at the same time to defend the revolution. The opposition easily stigmatized these circles, however, as being nothing other than a kind of shock troops for Chavez' political party. Another crucial flaw has been his relatively poor personnel choices. Many of the ministries and agencies suffer from mismanagement.

Finally, and perhaps the most often mentioned flaw, is his tendency for inflammatory rhetoric. Accusations that Chavez divided Venezuelan society with his constant talk about the rich and the poor are absurd, since Venezuelan society was divided along these lines long before Chavez came to power. However, by trying to belittle his opponents, by calling them names, such as "escualidos" (squalids), he made it virtually impossible for real dialogue to take place between himself and his opponents.

The crucial question that Chavez-supporters and opponents alike are now asking is whether Chavez has grown through the experience of this coup. In his initial statement, after being freed from his military captors, was, "I too have to reflect on many things. And I have done that in these hours. ... I am here and I am prepared to rectify, wherever I have to rectify." Right now, however, it is too early to see if he really is going to change his ways, so that he becomes more productive in achieving the goals he has set for Venezuela.

While Chavez' many progressive achievements should not be forgotten, neither should his failures be overlooked, most of which have important lessons for progressives everywhere. The first lesson is to keep the eyes on the prize. Chavez has become so bogged-down with his day-to-day conflicts with the opposition that many people are no longer sure if he remembers his original platform, which was to abolish corruption and poverty. While greater social equality is extremely difficult to achieve in a capitalist society, it is fair to say that Chavez' plans have not had enough time to bear fruit. He has a six-year social and economic development plan for 2001-2007, of which only a small fraction has so far been implemented. However, on the corruption front, not much has happened.

The second lesson is that the neglect of one's social base, which provides the cultural underpinnings for desired changes, will provide an opening for opponents to redefine the situation and to make policy implementation nearly impossible. By not involving his natural base, the poor and the progressive and grassroots civil society, Chavez allowed the conservative civil society, the conservative unions, the business sector, the church, and the media to determine the discourse as to what the "Bolivarian revolution" was really all about.

The third lesson is that a good program alone is not good enough if one does not have the skillful means for implementing it. Chavez has some very good plans, but through his incendiary rhetoric he manages to draw all attention away from his actual proposals and focuses attention on how he presents them or how he cuts his critics down to size.

Finally, while it is tempting to streamline policy-implementation by working only with individuals who will not criticize the program, this creates a dangerous ideological monoculture, which will not be able to resist the diverse challenges even the best plans eventually have to face. Chavez has often dismissed or alienated from his inner circle those who criticized him, making his leadership base, which used to be quite broad, smaller and smaller. Such a narrow leadership base made it much easier for the opposition to challenge Chavez and to mount the coup.

Whether Chavez has learned these lessons remains to be seen. Venezuelan society is still deeply divided. One has to recognize that, at heart, this conflict is also a class conflict. While there certainly are many Chavez opponents who come from the lower classes and numerous supporters who come from the middle classes, the division between Chavez supporters who come from the lower dark-skinned classes and the opponents who come from the higher light-skinned classes cannot be denied. What Venezuela needs, if social peace is to be preserved, is a class compromise, where social peace is maintained at the expense of a more just distribution of Venezuela's immense wealth. However, today's globalized world

makes such a compromise increasingly difficult to achieve because free market competition militates against local solutions to this increasingly global problem. But perhaps Venezuela is a special case because of its oil wealth, which might allow it to be an exception. Such an exception, though, will only be possible if power plays, such as the recent coup attempt, come to an end.

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

*Jon Beasley-Murray**

So this is how a modern coup D'État is overthrown: almost invisibly, at the margins of the media. Venezuela's return to democracy (and democracy it is, make no mistake) took place despite a self-imposed media blackout of astonishing proportions. A huge popular revolt against an illegitimate regime took place while the country's middle class was watching soap operas and game shows; television networks took notice only in the very final moments, and, even then, only once they were absolutely forced to do so. Thereafter television could do no more than bear mute witness to a series of events almost without precedent in Latin America-and perhaps elsewhere-as a repressive regime, result of a pact between the military and business, was brought down less than forty-eight hours after its initial triumph. These events resist representation and have yet to be turned into narrative or analysis (the day after, the newspapers have simply failed to appear), but they inspire thoughts of new forms of Latin American political legitimacy, of which this revolt may be just one (particularly startling) harbinger.

By Friday night, Caracas, Venezuela's capital, seemed to be returning to normal the day after the coup that had brought down the increasingly unpopular regime of president Hugo Chavez. In the middle classes' traditional nightspots, such as the nearby village of El Hatillo, with its picturesque colonial architecture and shops selling traditional handicrafts, the many restaurants were full and lively. Those who had banged on pots and pans over the past few months and marched the previous day to protest against the government seemed to be breathing a sigh of relief that the whole process had eventually been resolved so quickly and apparently so easily. "A Step in the Right Direction" was the banner headline on the front page of one major newspaper on the Saturday, and the new president, Pedro Carmona (former head of the Venezuelan chamber of

* *NACLA*, July/August 2002

commerce), was beginning to name the members of his “transitional” government, while the first new policies were being announced. Control over the state oil company, PDVSA (the world's largest oil company and Latin America's largest company of any kind), had been central to the ongoing crisis that had led to the coup, and its head of production announced, to much applause, that “not one barrel of oil” would now be sent to Cuba. Not all was celebration, it is true: the television showed scenes of mourning for the thirteen who had died in the violent end to Thursday's protest march, but the stations also eagerly covered live the police raids (breathless reporters in tow) hunting down the Chavez supporters who were allegedly responsible for these deaths.

Elsewhere, however, another story was afoot, the news circulating partially, by word of mouth or mobile phone. Early Saturday afternoon, I received three phone calls in quick succession: one from somebody due to come round to the place I was staying, who called on his mobile to say he was turning back as he had heard there were barricades in the streets and an uprising in a military base; another from a journalist who also cancelled an appointment, and who said that a parachute regiment and a section of the air force had rebelled; a third from a friend who warned there were fire-fights in the city centre, and that a state of siege might soon be imposed. My friend added that none of this would appear on the television. I turned it on: indeed, not a sign. Other friends came by, full of similar rumors, and with word that people were gathering outside the national palace. Given the continued lack of news coverage, we decided to go out and take a look for ourselves.

Approaching the city centre, we saw that indeed crowds were converging. But as we drove around, we saw almost no sign of any police or army on the streets. In the centre itself, and at the site of Thursday's disturbances, some improvised barricades had been put up, constructed with piles of rubbish or with burning tires, marking out the territory around the national palace itself. The demonstration was not large, but it was growing. We then headed towards the city's opulent East Side, and came across a procession of people advancing along the road towards us, people clearly poorer and more

racially mixed than the East Side's usual inhabitants. They were chanting slogans in favor of Chavez, and carrying portraits of the deposed president. This march was clearly headed towards the city centre, as were a stream of buses apparently commandeered by other chavistas. Neighborhood police were eyeing them carefully, but letting them pass. If this number of demonstrators were arriving from the eastern suburbs, then many more must be converging on the palace from the working class West. We doubled back and tracked the march from parallel streets, watching as the numbers grew, as passers-by were called to join in this unexpected protest.

Meanwhile, we were listening to the radio. Some reports were arriving of the crowds on the streets, but mainly we heard official pronouncements. First the army chief spoke, and we heard the signs of incipient splits among the forces behind the ruling junta: the army would continue to support interim president Carmona only if he reinstated Congress as well as the other democratically elected regional governors favorable to the previous regime who had been (unconstitutionally) deposed the previous day. But if Congress were reinstated then, according to the constitution, and in the absence of the previous president and vice-president, the head of Congress should rightfully be next in line as head of state. Then Carmona himself was interviewed, by CNN. He declared that the situation in the city was absolutely calm and under his control, denied that he had been forced to take refuge in any army base (clearly CNN knew something we did not), downplayed any insubordination among other sectors of the armed forces, and announced that his next step might be to fire some of the military high command. Finally, the head of the national guard then pronounced that respect and recognition needed to be shown to those who had supported--and continued to support--the deposed president, Chavez. The pact between military and commerce was beginning to unravel. We decided to head home.

We turned on the television. Every Venezuelan commercial station was continuing with normal programming (and the state-owned channel had been off the air since Thursday's coup). However, as we had access to cable, from BBC World and CNN en español we start-

ed to receive reports of disturbances in various parts of Caracas that morning, and some details about the parachute regiment's refusal to surrender arms to the new regime. More mobile phone calls assured us that the crowd outside the palace was still growing, and still peaceful. The BBC had a reporter in the crowd, and spoke of thousands of people gathered. Darkness fell, and still no word from any of the national networks. At one point the CNN anchor pointedly asked its Caracas correspondent whether or not local television was covering this tense situation: no, he replied, despite these same channels' protests over alleged censorship under the previous regime. Now the self-censorship of soap operas and light entertainment stood in the way of any representation of what was slowly emerging as a pro-Chavez multitude.

Indeed, the private networks had previously protested loudly and bitterly about the former president's policy of decreeing so-called "chains," in which he obliged all the networks to broadcast his own--often long and rambling--addresses to the nation. Now the networks had instituted their own chain, the apparent diversity of variety shows masquerading a uniform silence about what was happening on the streets.

Then a development: suddenly one channel broke its regular programming to show scenes of the street outside its own headquarters. A group of thirty to forty young and mobile demonstrators, on motorcycles and scooters, were agitating outside the plate glass windows. Some rocks were thrown, some windows smashed and graffiti sprayed, and suddenly a new chain was formed as all the networks switched to the same image of demonstrators apparently "attacking" the building. But the group moved on and the soap operas resumed. Until a similar group turned up at another channel's headquarters, then another, then another. No more stones were thrown, but the demonstrations could now at least be glimpsed, in fragments (the channels splitting their screens into three, and, as one of the images turned out to be an image of the television screen itself, further still, into an endless regress of fuzzy images snatched through cracked windows and over balconies). A local pro-Chavez mayor who had been in hiding from the repression was briefly visi-

ble, apparently calling for people to remain calm. But no camera teams ventured outside, and we still had little idea as to what was happening at the presidential palace.

We were switching rapidly between channels: to CNN and the BBC at the top of the hour, and then through the various commercial channels to try to see at least a partial view of the multitude that must now be on the streets. The international channels were showing footage shot during the day, of police repression of protests in the poorer neighborhoods--the footage was out there, but had not been screened or discussed on any private channels. At around 10:30pm, on one of these searches through the cable stations, we saw a channel that had been dark had now come back to life. A friend phoned almost immediately: "Are you watching channel eight?" Yes, we were. State television had, amazingly, come back onto the airwaves.

The people who had taken over the state television station were clearly improvising, desperately. The colour balance and contrast of these studio images was all wrong, the cameras held by amateur hands, and only one microphone seemed to be working. Those behind the presenters' desk were nervous, one fiddling compulsively with something on the desk, another shaking while holding the microphone, but there they were: a couple of journalists, a "liberation theology" priest, and a minister and a congressman from the previous regime. The minister spoke first, and very fast. She gave a version of the violent end to Thursday's march that differed absolutely from the narrative the media had put forward to justify the coup that had followed: the majority of the dead had been supporters of Chavez (not opposition protesters), and the snipers firing upon the crowds were members of police forces not under the regime's control. Moreover, the former president had not resigned; he was being held against his will at a naval base on an island to the north. The current president, Carmona, was illegitimate head of a de facto regime that was product of a military coup. Thousands of people were on the streets outside the presidential palace demanding Chavez's return. A counter-narrative was emerging.

The congressman appealed directly to the owners and managers of other television stations to portray what was happening in Caracas. No change on those other channels, however, most of which had returned to their regular programming. And then the state channel went off the air.

Over the next few hours, channel eight would go on and off the air several times. Each time the immediate fear was that it had been forcibly closed down again; each time, it turned out that technical problems were to blame as the channel was making do with a team unaccustomed to the equipment. Several times the channel attempted to show images from inside the presidential palace, but these were eventually successfully screened first on CNN: the “guard of honor” defending the palace was declaring its loyalty to Chavez. Later, around 1am, amid the confusion, we saw pictures of the vice-president, Diosdado Cabello, inside the palace, being sworn in as president. Venezuela now had three presidents simultaneously: Hugo Chavez, Pedro Carmona, and Cabello. The situation was extremely confused, the majority of the channels were still transmitting none of this, and rumors reported on the BBC suggested that two of the three—Carmona as well as Chavez—were currently being detained by different sectors of the armed forces. But the balance of power seemed to have shifted to supporters of the previous regime. The only question remaining, the question posed by the thousands at the gates of the presidential palace and still besieging the private television stations (by now some had been forced to interview spokespeople from the crowd, while at least one had simply switched to the feed provided by channel eight), was: would we see Chavez?

And so the apparently unthinkable happened. As all the armed forces as well as the seat of power effectively passed back to the control of those loyal to the deposed regime, shortly before 3am, Hugo Chavez, president of Venezuela, returned to the presidential palace, mobbed as soon as he left his helicopter by the thousands of supporters who were now in a state of near delirium. All the television stations were now running the images provided by channel eight—a new chain had formed, as commercial television lapsed into

a new form of stunned silence. The president returned to the office from which he had been broadcasting on Thursday afternoon, when he attempted to close down the private stations and as the coup was unfolding. This time, however, he was no longer alone behind his desk, but flanked by most of his ministers and in a room crowded with people, buzzing with excitement and emotion. We turned the television off.

Today the fall-out from this revolt is far from clear, just as the partial, confused television images have yet to be re-written as linear, coherent newspaper narrative. What is becoming clearer are the lineaments of the coup that the revolt overthrew—though even here rumors abound, such as the notion that it had been planned for three months, or about the extent of possible US involvement. If it had been planned for three months, then it was badly planned over that time: above all, those who led the coup were always uncertain as to whether or not they wished to present the coup for what it was. Had they decided to go through unashamedly with a coup D’État (in, for instance, the Pinochet style), they would have been more thoroughgoing and widespread in their repression (though as it was, more people were killed during the illegitimate regime’s brief existence than were killed in Thursday’s demonstration, let alone by Chavez’s security forces over the past three years); they would have detained more chavistas, rather than leaving key (former) ministers to pay a part in the revolt (though as it was, they used extreme force in raiding several ministers’ homes, and detained, for instance, up to sixty people at the country’s largest university); and they would have decisively secured the state television and no doubt imposed a state of siege. Yet had they decided to preserve at least a facade of legitimacy, they would have made some effort to extract some kind of (written or televised) resignation from Chavez, would have not dissolved the Congress, would have not detained and stripped of power (democratically elected) provincial governors, and hence would not have so utterly breached the constitution.

As it was, the pact between military and business that engineered the coup was weak, and could survive only through repression or apathy. But the military was split, and (especially) the front-line forces

unwilling to go through with repression—even while the business component refused to negotiate with the other anti-Chavez sectors of society, nominating a cabinet almost exclusively composed of figures from the extreme right. More importantly still, the coup plotters were surprised to discover that they were received not with apathy, but with an extraordinary and near-spontaneous multitudinous insurrection.

The fate of Chavez's government, and indeed also of Chavez himself, remains uncertain. Support for what was once an overwhelmingly popular regime had been in steady decline, in part as a result of a relentless assault by both the press and the television networks, but also because it had so far failed to achieve its stated aim of transforming what, for all its oil resources, is still a country with considerable poverty. Now (despite an initial concession of reversing the interventions in PDVSA that had triggered the most recent convulsion), Chavez still has a large proportion of the middle classes firmly set against him, people who supported the coup; he must negotiate with them without at the same time betraying—and indeed while starting to fulfill—the desires of the multitude that overthrew it. The government has a golden opportunity—it is now more clearly legitimate than at any time since its auspicious beginnings (when it had 80% support in the polls), whereas the commercial media that so fomented his downfall are patently in disgrace. Yet the government could so easily blow that opportunity, especially if it continues (as before the coup) to depend all too much on the figure of the president himself, at best a maverick, at worst authoritarian in style (and probably in fact quite incompetent), whose personal charisma is already lost on the middle classes. As Chavez's personalism allows for no competition, it leaves few alternatives to those who believe in the generally progressive causes advanced (if intermittently) by his government. “Chavismo” itself came to create a political vacuum that briefly allowed the far right pact of arms and commerce to take control. In the event, however, the multitude came to fill that political vacuum—silently at first, almost invisibly, at the margins of the media.

Though Chavez (and chavismo) claims to represent that multitude,

yesterday's insurrection should be the signal that the regime is in the end dependent upon (constituted by) that multitude. Chavez should not repeat the mistake—made both by the nineteenth-century liberators he reveres and the early twentieth-century populists he resembles—that he can serve as a substitute for that multitude, or that he can masquerade their agency as his own. For in the tumultuous forty-eight hours in which the president was detained, it became clear that “chavismo without Chavez” has a power all of its own, apt to surprise any confused attempt at representation.

Thanks to that multitude, Venezuela continues to constitute a dissident exception to the contemporary prevalence of a neoliberalism that has only accentuated the divide between rich and poor throughout Latin America. It is not so much, perhaps, that Chavez demonstrates that other models are possible—though his unpredictable foreign policy (embracing figures as diverse as Saddam Hussein and Fidel Castro), as well as his more coherent attempts to make OPEC a force of third world producers allied against a global system heavily weighted in favor of first world consumers, do help to suggest that another form of globalization might be imagined. Rather, it is that the multitude suggests another possible, liberatory, side to the almost complete breakdown of any semblance of a social pact that characterizes the Latin American “mainstream.”

One sign of this breakdown is the perceived dramatic rise in delinquency or common crime—Caracas is a city that abounds with a surplus of security devices (people are weighed down by the number of keys required to operate lifts and open doors, gates, and pass through other protective cordons) that regulate the middle class's comings and goings in line with this fear of latent social disorder. But yesterday's events suggest another side to this apparent disorder, both on the one hand that it is a criminological demonization of a sector of society that (it is presumed) has to be systematically cleansed from social spaces; and on the other that it is a glimpse of a desire to go beyond such enclosures. The criminalization of mobility is a reaction to a force that no longer “knows its place.” Another sign of this breakdown is the withdrawal of any popular legitimation for political systems—the clamor in Peru, Argentina, and now

Venezuela (among other countries) has been against politicians of any kind, all of whom are regarded as equally corrupt, equally inefficient, and equally inadequate to the needs and demands of the multitude. But the breakdown of any representation of yesterday's insurrection might also point towards a politics that is itself beyond representation, beyond a set of systematic substitutions of people for politicians.

Venezuela's coup, and the revolt that overturned it, constitute simply another sign of the disappearance of the former contract (however illusory that contract may have been) between people and nation. Hugo Chavez tried to reconstruct that contract by televisual means, but the medium itself (unsuited to such simple narratives) rebelled against him, and it will continue to do so. The current regime has legitimacy, but this legitimacy does not come from paraded invented rituals for the cameras; it comes from the multitude's constituent power. And the multitude is also waiting for other alternatives, and other possibilities.

Venezuelan Democracy Survives, in Spite of Washington

*Mark Weisbro**

A joke that was once popular in Latin America has become relevant again: Why has there never been a military coup in the United States? Answer: because there's no U.S. embassy here.

Latin Americans would not be surprised to read that the military coup which ousted President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela for nearly two days was well-orchestrated and planned for at least six months, according to the Washington Post. And that the plotters visited the US embassy in Caracas, seeking support.

Washington denies having anything to do with the coup, and we probably won't know for some time what role, if any, was played by the US government. It took a couple of years and a Congressional investigation to declassify the details of the United States' massive involvement in the overthrow of Chile's elected government in 1973.

But the Bush Administration's support for the Venezuelan coup was unqualified—in fact it tried to deny that this was a military coup at all. This was a ridiculous position: the country's elected President was arrested and replaced by the military, and his replacement dissolved the elected National Assembly and Supreme Court. If that is not a military coup, then there is no such thing.

So the Bush Administration must bear some responsibility for supporting the failed coup, regardless of its level of involvement in the events leading up to it. The Administration has sent a clear and ugly message to the world: you can play by the rules, but for us, there are no rules. Theirs is the ethic of the terrorist, driven not by the des-

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peration of the poor and powerless, but by the desire of the richest and most powerful state on Earth to rule over others.

Fortunately for the hemisphere, there were other governments—Mexico, Argentina, Peru, to name a few—that showed more respect for democracy than our own. They refused to recognize the new government. The Organization of American States condemned “the alteration of constitutional order in Venezuela.” And then there were Venezuela’s poor, who after nearly two decades of Washington-sponsored “economic reform,” now comprise the vast majority of the population. They took to the streets to demand the return of their democratically elected government.

This international and domestic resistance, combined with Chavez’s residual support within the military, was enough to reverse the coup by Sunday. But the Bush Administration’s hostility to Chavez will probably continue. Venezuela is OPEC’s third largest oil producer, and Chavez, unlike his predecessor, has adhered strictly to OPEC quotas (oil prices jumped 3.9 percent upon his return to the presidential palace, after falling 6.1 percent during the coup). He has refused to support Washington’s escalation of the war in Colombia, where civilians are indiscriminately murdered by death squads allied with the Colombian armed forces. And then there is his close relationship with Fidel Castro.

One of the most shameful occurrences during last few days was the support of America’s leading newspapers for the Venezuelan coup. The New York Times and the Washington Post both resoundingly endorsed the military coup in their Saturday editorials. The editorial boards of these newspapers ought to engage in some serious soul-searching as to how they could so easily abandon the most fundamental principles of democracy.

Cynics would say that the United States has a long and sordid history of supporting military coups and dictatorships over democracy, whenever our government feared or did not like the outcome of democratic elections. This is certainly true, but in most cases they have had what the CIA calls “plausible denial.”

In El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1970s and 80s, when the United States supported governments and militaries that slaughtered civilians by the tens of thousands, our leaders maintained the fiction that the governments were not responsible for the killings. When Washington tried to overthrow the government of Nicaragua in the 1980s, it pretended that this government was not legitimate. When military officers who were paid by the CIA overthrew Haiti’s first democratically elected government in 1991, the Bush (senior) Administration said that it was against the coup.

But today no one denies that Hugo Chavez is the democratically elected president of Venezuela, yet our government and foreign policy establishment—including the press—considers it legitimate to overthrow his government by force.

Chavez has been conciliatory upon his return, offering concessions to the state oil company employees who led the protests that culminated in the attempted coup. The Bush Administration has been unrepentant, with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice warning Chavez to “respect constitutional processes.” If only Washington would learn to do the same.

The Unmaking of a Coup

*Phil Gunson and David Adams**

The shooting hadn't started yet and there was still a feeling of fiesta in the air. A sea of people flowed through the capital. It was Thursday, April 11, and hundreds of thousands of men, women and children were marching in opposition to the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Amid the throng, union leader and Chavez opponent Carlos Ortega was marvelling at the massive turnout when his cellphone rang. On the line was Gen. Lucas Rincon, chief of Venezuela's armed forces. They spoke briefly, a witness says. Then Ortega turned to those around him and said, using a profane epithet to refer to Rincon, "He says we've won! It's all over."

But it was only beginning.

Over the next 48 hours the political pendulum would swing one way, then the other. The two days would be punctuated by gunfire, frantic phone calls, political double-cross and military maneuvering.

Rival conspiracies, with vastly different agendas, would collide and dissolve. And Chavez, a firebrand former paratroop commander who was elected as a national savior barely three years earlier, would be unceremoniously deposed, only to rise from the ashes.

The catalyst of the April 11 demonstration was Chavez's recent move to take control of the autonomous state oil company. But activists seeking to oust Chavez had been meeting in secret for months. A simple strategy had emerged from the meetings, which

* *St. Petersburg Times*, April 22, 2002

involved people close to Ortega and representatives of a broad spectrum of Venezuelan society.

“Our job was to heat things up,” said one of the conspirators who, fearing reprisals, asked that his name not be published. “We believed we had to put pressure on Chavez by bringing people out onto the street. That was the only way to fracture the government and create a constitutional way out of the crisis.”

Now the plan was unfolding, and the anti-Chavez crowd was in a buoyant mood. After three years of being dismissed by the president as a “squalid” minority, they owned the streets of Caracas. And, despite an announced plan to march on the oil company, some in the crowd wanted more. “Miraflores, Miraflores,” they yelled, referring to the capital's 19th century presidential palace.

Standing near Ortega was independent political consultant Jose Ricardo Thomas. For the rest of the afternoon Thomas stuck by Ortega's side, scribbling notes on a newspaper. “I didn't want to miss any of this,” he said later, as he pieced together his notes. “Anyone could tell it was going to be a historic day.”

Ortega would later confirm much of Thomas' account, though he disputed the salty language that Thomas wrote.

Needing a place to consider their options, Ortega and the others - Thomas included - leapt on motorbikes and sped off to the nearby offices of the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), of which Ortega is secretary-general.

Soon after they arrived, the phone rang again. This time, Gen. Rincon wanted Ortega to come to his military headquarters at Fort Tiuna, on the outskirts of Caracas. Suspecting a trap, Ortega asked for time to contact his people. The general wanted to know where he was. Ortega hung up. Turning to the others in the room, he said, “Do you think I'm going to tell him where I am? F--- that. They'll arrest us all.”

Ortega's people decided they weren't safe in their offices and decamped to the nearby Coliseo Hotel. Ortega put in a call to Pedro Carmona, head of the private sector business group, Fedecamaras.

Since late last year, Carmona and Ortega had led the opposition's united front. Their contrasting backgrounds complemented each other. A diminutive and unassuming businessman, Carmona was highly regarded among the country's elite. Ortega, a burly former oil worker, had defeated Chavez's hand-picked candidate as chief of the CTV in October.

Ortega told Carmona they had to meet. Before that could happen, news of the shooting came. As the march had neared the palace, bullets began to fly. Witnesses reported seeing snipers with rifles on the roofs of several government buildings. By the end of it, 17 people, mostly anti-Chavez marchers, were dead. As many as 140 were injured.

At the hotel, Ortega's phone rang again. This time he reacted angrily. “You have the historic opportunity of being a hero for the nation,” he told Gen. Rincon. “I haven't got guns or a uniform to stop this bloody barbarity. You're the general. It's up to you.”

After the call, Ortega sat back in his chair and took a long drag on a Belmont cigarette. “I was pretty tough on him, eh?” he told the others. “S---, I'm giving the orders.” Everyone laughed.

The mood changed when TV coverage of the march was interrupted by Chavez making a national address from the palace. He didn't look as though he was about to give up power. Everything was under control, Chavez insisted.

By now more uncertain than ever about the way things were going, Ortega and the group decided to keep moving. Thomas, the political consultant, offered to take them to the house of a friend in la Floresta, a leafy middle-class neighborhood in the capital.

In a fourth and apparently final conversation with Rincon, the union

boss was livid. "Grab (him) and end this butchery," he said, referring to the president.

Half an hour after they got to la Floresta, Carmona arrived in a taxi from the march. The two leaders sat down by themselves. Exactly what was said, only they know. Thomas recalls overhearing talk of creating a junta. Ortega and his advisers deny using that word.

But the idea of a junta had been discussed for months, said a participant in the secret meetings. It would consist of nine people: four military officers - army, navy, air force and National Guard - and five civilians. Neither Carmona nor Ortega were to be members. It was felt they could do more good in their current positions.

Around 5:30 p.m., Carmona, Ortega and three others piled into a tiny Chevrolet Corsa. They headed for the studios of Venevision, one of the country's leading television stations. There they would find many of their opposition colleagues, lining up to be interviewed. The mood was upbeat.

Things didn't appear to be going Chavez's way after all. A string of military officers, including a National Guard commander and the deputy interior minister, had come out against the president. It wouldn't be long before army chief of staff Gen. Efraim Vasquez would follow.

The news of Chavez's resignation came from the presidential palace after 3 a.m. Friday. Rincon made the announcement, though Chavez would later deny having resigned.

Ortega and Carmona were at the TV station, where they'd been off and on throughout the night. Ortega said he was going to get some rest.

"Everyone was tired," recalled CTV political consultant Miguel Manrique. "That's when the problems started." Ortega left for a friend's house. Carmona said he would be at the Four Seasons hotel.

When Ortega checked the TV about two hours later he was shocked to see Carmona, surrounded by military officers, announcing he was taking charge. "When he saw that, he was upset," Manrique said.

Later Friday morning, Ortega and the CTV heads met Carmona at the palace to express their concerns. They insisted on broad-based civilian participation in the new government. Shortly after, Ortega left the city. Saying he felt unwell, he flew to his hometown of Coro, 200 miles west of the capital.

For several hours, Ortega shut himself away with his family, taking calls only from his closest friends and allies. "This all died for me," he told Manrique when the two next spoke. "The fat cats hijacked it. But that gentleman (Carmona) will fall."

Exactly what happened in the early hours of Friday morning remains something of a mystery. Instead of turning in at the Four Seasons, Carmona had gone to the military headquarters, Fort Tiuna, where he was accompanied by a group of heavily armed civilians, Venezuelan press reported.

Some of their faces, and weapons, could be seen behind Carmona when he made his TV appearance. They have since been identified as bodyguards belonging to Isaac Perez Recao, a wealthy businessman and reputed arms dealer.

Detailed reports in the Venezuelan press say Perez Recao had been plotting a coup for more than four months. No denials have been issued since the story appeared Tuesday. The Perez Recao family is a majority shareholder in a petro-chemical firm, Venoco. For many years, Carmona was Venoco's chief executive.

"We believe Carmona was kidnapped by a highly conservative sector of the business community," said Lt. Col. Wilmer Castro, a former air force officer who helped restore Chavez to power. "They put a Praetorian Guard around him. It was a gorilla coup."

Carmona, under house arrest by the restored Chavez government,

has denied he was involved in a conspiracy. Interviewed by local media, he asked forgiveness for his errors. "I did it in good faith," he said, downplaying the alleged role of Perez Recao. "It's totally false that I served as a vehicle or instrument of anyone."

Only 32 years old, Perez Recao is regarded in Venezuelan business circles as a man to be feared. Lt. Col. Castro, who runs the government airline, Avensa, described him as a "Rambo businessman, a yuppie with guns."

Castro and others say the Perez Recao group comprised a strange mix of conservative businessmen, lawyers and military officers with otherwise distinguished records. That was evident on Friday afternoon when officials began arriving for Carmona's swearing-in as interim president.

For the first time in the past three years, the faces in the basement media room of the Miraflores palace were almost exclusively white, the suits Armani, the accents those of the Country Club district of Caracas. Gone was the multicolored, multiclass alliance of hundreds of thousands of marchers that had marched peacefully on the palace, to be met with rocks, tear gas and bullets. After a minute's silence for the 17 dead, the would-be government got on with business.

That was no less than the dismantling of Chavez's controversial "revolution." Out went the 48 laws, proclaimed in November, that lay at the heart of the ousted president's populist political and economic project. Out went the 165-seat national assembly, democratically elected less than two years earlier.

As the decrees were read aloud, the social elite of Caracas could not contain the glee. "Democracia! Democracia," they shouted, as the de facto government closed down the country's congress.

"It was the arrogance of the bourgeoisie," opposition congressman Pastor Heydra said. "These people feel they own the country, and were scared they were going to lose it all."

Meanwhile, the labor leaders and civil rights activists - stunned at a turn of events that none of them had foreseen - faded quietly away. Their dream of a constitutional transition to a post-Chavez era had died.

Of church leaders, only the country's Roman Catholic cardinal, Ignacio Velasco, sat beaming as Carmona swore himself in, flanked by a double row of generals and admirals. In Heydra's view, "He turned himself into a dictator."

As to who was pulling the strings, no one outside the inner circle could tell. "Carmona is a fiction. He doesn't exist," political columnist Manuel Felipe Sierra said. But if the president wasn't the boss, who was?

There was little time to find out. The interim government's life was brief and marred by key errors. As Heydra put it, "When you leave in the hands of amateurs things that should be left to professionals, these are the kind of mistakes that get made."

Mistakes, for example, like ordering illegal raids on the leaders of the newly ousted Chavez movement and their families. Or abandoning the project for a nine-member junta with representatives not just from the military but the media, church, unions, "civil society" and political parties.

Other errors included failure to replace the palace guard - hand-picked Chavez loyalists - or secure the streets around Miraflores. "The first thing you do in the ABC of coups," Heydra said, "is order a curfew."

The new regime began to come apart almost before the ink was dry on its first set of proclamations. The trouble began an hour down the freeway west of Caracas, in the country's fourth-largest city, Maracay.

A military complex in Maracay controls the country's strategic heart. It was from here that Hugo Chavez launched his unsuccessful

coup in 1992. The complex includes the Libertador air base, home to the country's aging fleet of F-16 fighter-bombers. The Parachute Brigade was under the command of Gen. Raul Baduel. "Baduel is a super-Chavez," journalist Sierra said. Baduel had been part of the 1992 coup. Now he was to play a crucial part in foiling Chavez's downfall.

On Saturday morning, Baduel proclaimed himself in rebellion against the interim government. He gathered a cluster of like-minded active and retired officers who had come to Maracay. As the day wore on, and the situation in the capital deteriorated, pro-Chavez demonstrators swarmed around the base - 10,000 to 15,000 by mid-afternoon. The regional TV channel was also loyal to the ousted president. Said Sierra, "Maracay was a chavista fiesta."

Baduel is reported to have had his personal differences with Chavez. According to a friend, architect Nedo Paniz, Baduel rebelled against Carmona, "not on behalf of Chavez, but against all that had gone on" since the provisional government was sworn in.

A devotee of the Taoist way of life, Baduel is described by Paniz as, "a strange guy. He's very thoughtful, philosophical. He reacted against what he saw was happening - how this was all being manipulated by a tight-knit mafia."

Anti-Chavez plotters say they had always had the general marked down as a "neutral" in their coup plans. But his role was to be crucial in the restoration. Those who flocked to support him included several former military men who had fallen out of favor with the government, but who would now win back their place in the comandante's good graces.

Among their first moves was to organize the sabotage of the country's fleet of 12 Super-Puma helicopter gunships. Batteries were removed from the engines and placed in a safe. A team was dispatched to disable the undercarriage of the presidential plane - a Boeing 737 - on the runway at a Caracas airport.

"We weren't going to let them fly Chavez out of the country" Castro said. In the end, he never left. After being removed from the presidential palace, Chavez was placed under armed guard at Fort Tiuna. He was later transported to a small military base on the coast at Turiamo and then flown to the island of Orchila in the Caribbean.

It was there that he was rescued by commandos from Maracay in the early hours of Sunday morning. By then, Carmona had fled the palace.

The precise whereabouts of Perez Recao are not known. He reportedly left the palace by private helicopter. It is widely rumored in Venezuela that he later flew to Miami.

David Adams is the Times' Latin America Correspondent. Phil Gunson is a Times correspondent based in Caracas.

A Coup Countered

*Maurice Lemoine**

The television cameras focused on the presenter, in his improvised studio on the slopes of El Avila. In the background was Caracas, at the foot of the mountain. The presenter made the audience laugh by reminding them he once persuaded Fidel Castro to sing on air - "but he can hardly hold a note!" He passionately described Guatemala, and libertador Simón Bolívar. He crooned, questioned his guests, among them a few ministers. He blew a kiss at the end of a conversation with an ordinary viewer. He had a television presenter's easy manner, but he wasn't a TV professional, but Hugo Chávez, president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

The date was 17 March. For the 100th edition of his Sunday broadcast Hello President, Chávez had gone overboard: satellite communications with the presidents of Guatemala, Dominica and Cuba. "OK Fidel, let's talk speak on the phone ... Hasta la victoria, siempre!" Chávez threw twigs towards the journalists, then said "to those who would like to see the back of me: I know how many of you there are!" His audience applauded: "Long live our comandante!" The comandante was overdoing it: six hours and 35 minutes on air, without a break - but he believed the ritual was an essential way of keeping direct contact with the people who make up his majority: the excluded, the poor and the left.

The escuálidos¹ of La Castellana, Altamira, Palos Grandes and Las Mercedes - the fashionable districts of Caracas - were furious. "He's a demagogue, a populist, and mad." They grudgingly conceded his predecessors were no better, but Chávez was still leading the country to ruin. And then they dismissed him - "his place is not the pres-

* *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2002

idency. A soldier can do only two things: obey orders or give them.” The bankers, financiers and middle classes are the social élite, and they detest him. He looks like a taxi-driver or a hotel porter, a have-not from the ranchos, a buhonero.² But it is precisely because he looks ordinary that he occupies the presidential palace - Miraflores. Chávez is a lieutenant-colonel from the parachute regiment who mounted a coup in February 1992 to end 30 years of power by the Democratic Action (AD - Social Democrat) and Copei (Christian Democrat) parties. Venezuela is an oil revenue state, but those parties had dragged 80% of Venezuelans below the poverty threshold. Chávez was imprisoned and then released, and came to power democratically in December 1998. He was endorsed in a referendum in 1999, and instituted constitutional reforms before re-election on 30 July 2000.³ Chávez won and Venezuela changed hands peacefully.

Since then the government has been pursuing an unusual revolution. “It is neither socialist nor communist, because it falls within the parameters of capitalism, but it is radical and, we are introducing far-reaching economic structural changes,” says the minister of the presidency, Rafael Vargas. Washington has reacted badly. Caracas wants to promote an oil policy that keeps the price of crude over \$22 a barrel, by revitalizing the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). It also opposed neo-liberal globalization and promotes a world at odds with the claims of the United States.

No work, no progress

But it is one thing to announce the birth of a new country, and another to effect change. “There is no work, no progress,” complains a Valencia worker on the scrap heap, who points out that unemployment levels have not fallen. In a shantytown called Marisabel de Chávez (after the president's wife), a melancholy resident said “the only thing I know how to do is steal. But there is nothing worth stealing around here.”

In Barrio Alicia Pietri de Caldera (named after the wife of the preceding president), the better-off earn 84,000 bolivars a fortnight

(\$76) as private security guards, the only economic growth area. Minimum wages are stagnant at \$142, though it costs \$216 to feed a family of five.⁴ Even the government's more generous initiatives make little headway. A woman explained that “the Bolivarian school is open, and there are three free school meals a day. But they have just had to close the canteen because there was no more money to pay the suppliers.”

Emperor Chávez is often without his clothes. His Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) was put together in a hurry to win the elections but lacks solidity. With victory in prospect, it was embraced by Chávez supporters and revolutionaries, and also members of the existing political groups and opportunists. The same is true of the parties with which the MVR is allied - the Movement towards Socialism (MAS), the Causa R, Movimiento 10 de Mayo, the Bandera Roja or the leader of the Homeland for All (PPT), Pablo Medina.⁵ Sooner or later, they will want the president to pay for their cooperation. It is unsurprising that many have changed their minds, resigned, been sacked or gone over to the enemy. There is a feeling that the government is constantly reinventing itself.

Eroded by 40 years of vote-catching policy, the state machinery and administration are an obstacle course. The ministers or 14 pro-Chávez governors can count on only a few senior officials in their departments to carry out reforms. “We have not witch hunted, we have tried to make the changes using existing staff, most of them AD or Copei militants.” This army of middle-rank officials and employees holds back programs, sabotages projects and thwarts the transfer of resources to local authorities. Faced with the problems, local government secretary-general Diogenes Palau of Puerto Ayacucho (Amazonas province) says: “It takes time to change structures of that kind, you can't sack everyone. You have to move forward in stages.”

Chávez has two groups he can rely on to circumvent structures still opposed to him: the army, backbone of the state, and the disorganized groups who brought him to power. In April 2001 he called for the creation of a million “Bolivarian Circles” to support him. Tens

of thousands of Venezuelans responded enthusiastically in their streets, districts or barrios.⁶ In groups of seven to 15, they discussed the future, their lives, their essential needs. The results were immediately passed to the authorities. According to the coordinators of the Bolivarian Circles for Sucre district, in eastern Caracas, that was the way to reach authority - before, a minority of politicians ran the community as they liked.

Refuge of militants?

The Bolivarian Circles can submit projects for funding. And the state has begun to accord them substantial resources, through the Peoples' Bank, Women's Bank, fund for the development of micro-businesses, intergovernmental fund for decentralization (Fides). The opposition accuses the Circles of being shock troops backing a totalitarian program, and the refuge of "Taliban-like elements". Rumors are rife that the government is arming them. Those concerned shrug and say "All you see here are peaceful individuals working for the benefit of the community." Some militants are less amiable: "The men and women in this process are determined to defend it. Peacefully. But in other ways if need be."

The escuálidos were taken by surprise when, on 13 November 2001, Chávez introduced a more radical element into his revolution by signing the land act, the fisheries act and the law on hydrocarbons. On 10 December the employers organization, Fedecámaras, headed by Pedro Carmona, launched a general strike to protest against these "attacks on the free market", supported by the media and the Venezuelan Confederation of Workers (CTV). CTV, a corrupt organization and the driving force behind Democratic Action had for years negotiated collective bargaining agreements with employers, selling its soul and membership for substantial backhanders for its leaders. The government refused to accept that its leader, social democrat Carlos Ortega, had any claim to be representative. On 25 October 2000 Ortega had declared himself the victor in trade union leadership elections marred by violence and irregularities.

On 5 March 2002 Ortega shook hands with Carmona and, with the Church as his witness, signed a pact aimed at democratically and constitutionally ousting the president.

Fedecámaras, CTV, the Church and the middle classes, with the media that had constituted itself a political party, tried to make the country ungovernable. They had no program, no plans, but declared themselves representative of "civil society", sidelining the majority that continued to back the president. That intolerance made the majority, backing the Petroleos de Venezuela SA revolution, angry: "They claim to represent "civil society". Fine ... But we are the people! If this campaign of destabilization results in the constitutional law being questioned, we shall defend it with our lives."

The authorities were barely rattled by a few statements and protest marches (followed by larger counter-marches by government supporters) and the appearance of four dissident members of the military publicly rejecting the head of state.⁷ But when the card of economic destabilization was played, tensions increased. Oil accounts for 70% of Venezuelan exports and 40% of state revenue. Oil prices collapsed as a result of the September 11 attacks. Chávez visited Europe, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and Iraq. Those visits combined with the action of Ali Rodríguez, the Venezuelan secretary-general of OPEC, made it possible to stabilize prices by lowering production.⁸

A public limited company, with the state its sole shareholder, Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA) is controlled by 40 senior officials. These "oil generals" dictate the law, apply their policy, promote foreign interests, breach the rules of OPEC by increasing production, sell at a loss, undermine the company and are preparing for its privatization. The Venezuelan government wants PDVSA to work for the benefit of the whole community and retake control of this strategic sector, where tax arrangements are out of control. Twenty years ago, 75% of total profits went to the state (and 25% to the company). Now, the company gets 70% and the tax authorities 30%. The head of state is appointing a new company chairman, Gastón Parra, and a management board. The technocrats promise a proper career for the best performers, effective management, pro-

ductivity, viability and independence in the face of the politicization the government is seeking to impose; they advocate a meritocracy. A meritocracy they have just invented to reject the government appointees.

Elsewhere in the world where the state holds the shares, it appoints the managing boards of national companies and tells them what line to take - and that is what previous Venezuelan governments have done. The new protesters in Venezuela, senior officials in positions of trust, could not call for strike action because of the posts they held. "Civil society" acted for them, and activated by the press, radio and television, almost stilled the economic heart of Venezuela. The action was only partially effective, as many workers refused to stop work.

All the time there was shuttling between Caracas and Washington. The Bush administration deplored the Bolivarian president. His reluctance to espouse the "anti-terrorist fight", in particular against Colombian guerrillas; his military agreements with China and Russia; his anti-globalization statements and his revolution angered Bush. On 6 February the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, told the Senate he had doubts whether Chávez really believed in democracy and criticized his visits to governments hostile to the US and suspected of supporting terrorism, like those of Saddam Hussein or Colonel Gadafy.⁹

Worry about oil imports

Concerned at the turmoil in their third largest oil supplier, the US feared the suspension of its imports should Venezuela become ungovernable. There was no official attempt to fan the flames. But secretly, on 25 March, Alfredo Peña, the mayor of greater Caracas and a fanatical Chávez opponent, met the US authorities and Otto Reich, assistant secretary of state for interamerican affairs.¹⁰ A few days later, in Reich's office, he might have bumped into Pedro Carmona, president of Fedecámaras, or Manuel Cova, deputy secretary-general of CTV, who also met representatives of the

International Republican Institute.

The shadow of Chile might loom over Venezuela were it not for a significant difference: the army. Chávez claims to know it well and controls it through classmates from his graduation Simón Bolívar year (1975). But rumors contradict his claims. The general in charge of US Southern Command (Southcom) has declared Venezuela the country with the most officers studying in US academies, so he had no doubts about Venezuela.

Francisco Ameliach, chairman of the Venezuelan parliament's defense committee, asked about four officers who had recently opposed the president, replied: "If an officer declares himself publicly, it means he doesn't have the army's support. We plotted (Ameliach took part in Chávez's coup) and we know that a colonel involved in an operation of that kind is not going to shout it out on the streets."

The national strike of 9 and 10 April, called by the CTV and Fedecámaras in "defense" of the PDVSA, seven senior officials of which had been fired and 12 others pensioned, was only relatively successful at national level. Having embarked on a desperate venture (or a plan that could not be aborted), the opposition upped the stakes. On the pretext that the government might declare a state of emergency (which it had no intention of doing), it called for a general strike from 11 April. Worryingly, dissident members of the military reappeared: General Nestor González (relieved of his command in 2001) accused President Chávez on television of treason and called on the high command to act.

On 11 April 300,000 opponents marched peacefully towards the headquarters of the PDVSA-Chuao, in eastern Caracas. The idea seems to have been to prove that "civil society" was confronting a dictatorship by creating a few "martyrs". At 1pm, in western Caracas, at the presidential palace, Rafael Vargas burst into his colleagues' office, and said: "The rest of the country is calm, but Carlos Ortega has just made a television broadcast calling for a march on the presidential palace. It's a plot." At 1.40pm, middle-rank officials

anticipated what was to happen - the demonstrators were marching on the motorway; they had to be allowed to demonstrate, but stopped before they reached the palace, otherwise the Bolivarian Circles would mobilize and it would end in disaster.

The high command of the National Guard failed to order any sizeable deployment to prevent the inevitable. The opposition got to within 100 metres of the presidential palace, and tens of thousands of pro-Chávez supporters, some armed with sticks and stones, rushed to protect their president. Just 15 members of the National Guard were positioned between the two sides to prevent the clash. The scene was surreal. The most senior guard desperately asked a photographer to lend him a mobile phone to call for reinforcements. His men used tear gas to stabilize the situation.

The Bolivarian Circles were blamed for the 15 dead and 350 wounded (157 shot) that day. It was alleged that members of the Circles had shot at a peaceful demonstration. That is not true. Mysterious snipers on the roofs of buildings shot the first victims actually among the Bolivarian Circles. There was total confusion. Near the El Silencio metro station, a squad of the National Guard responded to the stone throwing of “civil society” with tear gas grenades, and shot directly into the crowd. Small groups of the city police of opposition mayor Alfredo Peña shot arbitrarily at anything that moved. Other police behaved well.

The president's guard of honor is said to have arrested three snipers, two of them policemen from Chacao (in the east of the capital) and one from the city police.¹¹ In the heat of the clashes, a dazed young man said that they had found two, in uniform. Next day on the screens of Venevisión, rebel Vice-Admiral Vicente Ramírez Pérez claimed: “We are in control of all the president's phone calls to the unit commanders. We met at 10am to plan the operation.” What operation? At that time, officially, the opposition was still en route to the presidential palace.

The opposition had achieved its aim. At 6 pm, “shocked at the number of victims”, General Efraín Vásquez Velasco announced that the army would no longer obey President Chávez. A few hours earlier,

almost the whole command of the National Guard had done the same. At 3.15am, General Lucas Rincón read a communiqué: “The president of the republic has been asked to resign and has agreed to do so.” That message was broadcast on television every 20 minutes over the next 36 hours.

Appointed president on 12 April, employers' leader Carmona dissolved the national assembly and all the constituent bodies, and dismissed the governors and democratically elected mayors. He was now in complete control and heard White House spokesman Ari Fleischer congratulate the Venezuelan army and police for refusing to shoot at peaceful demonstrators. Fleischer further concluded that Chávez supporters had shot people. While the Organization of American States (OAS) was preparing to condemn the coup, the US and Spanish ambassadors in Caracas were on their way to congratulate the de facto president.

In a country that had not seen assassinations, disappearances or political prisoners for three years, the crackdown targeted ministers, members of the national assembly and militants. Premises and homes were searched; 120 Chávez supporters were thrown into prison. At the end of his interview on Venevisión, Colonel Julio Rodríguez Salas smiled and said: “We have a major weapon ... the media. Let me congratulate you.” In the name of democracy, “civil society” had set up a dictatorship. It would be up to the people to restore democracy.

We know what happened next. To avoid a bloodbath, Chávez surrendered without putting up any resistance, but he had not resigned. On 13 April hundreds of thousands of his supporters occupied roads and squares throughout the country. That afternoon, the guard of honor retook the presidential palace and helped ministers reoccupy the president's office. Following the example of General Raúl Baduel, head of the 43rd Parachute Regiment of Maracay, commanders loyal to the constitution retook control of the garrisons. The high command was divided, had no clear plan and feared an uncontrollable response from the people and clashes between militants. It lost its grip. During the night the legitimate president was restored

to his people.

The opposition had apparently learnt no lessons, and, a few days later, was already increasing its pressure. But, as a militant remarks, pointing to the groundswell in the country for three years, the opposition should have no illusions, as, with or without Chávez, Venezuela will never again be what it once was.

Endnotes

- (1) Pejorative term used by the president to describe his opponents (who use it as a mark of honor) meaning bony, skeletal, colorless.
- (2) Unofficial market trader.
- (3) See Ignacio Ramonet “Chávez” and Pablo Aiquel “Venezuela waits for superstar's magic to work”, *Le Monde Diplomatique* English edition, October 1999 and November 2000.
- (4) *Datanálisis*, in *El Universal*, Caracas, 14 March 2002.
- (5) After breaking its links but never entering into an alliance with the opposition, the PPT rejoined Chávez.
- (6) Shantytown.
- (7) Colonel Pedro Soto, Rear Admiral Carlos Molina, Captain Pedro Flores and Commander Hugo Sánchez.
- (8) The Middle East crisis also contributed to that rise.
- (9) *Miami Herald*, 7 February 2002.
- (10) Involved in Iran-Contra in the 1980s and with close links to the Cuban-American lobby, Reich's appointment was for a long time blocked by Congress.
- (11) *El Nacional*, Caracas, 13 April.

Translated from French by Julie Stoker

THE CONSPIRACY

The Conspiracy Against Chavez

*Ignacio Ramonet**

For the first time in Latin America in more than 10 years, on April 11 a military coup d'état attempted to overthrow a democratically elected president who had tried to launch a moderate program of social transformation. The United States and the International Monetary Fund couldn't hide their joy during the brief period it seemed Hugo Chávez had lost power in Venezuela.

Chávez had not ordered the firing at the demonstrators as some TV channels deceitfully claimed (I refer to the utter sham broadcast worldwide by the TV network Venevisión). There are proofs to the contrary which say that the first shots came from sharpshooters hidden in the pro-coup demonstrators. They were aimed toward the pro-Chávez forces, from which group came the first four deaths.

In 48 hours, this grave blow to democracy, with its aspect of caricature (a military junta presided over by the boss of an employer's association!) set the entire Latin American continent back to a political era we thought we had overcome, the years of Pinochet and of repression. It has been a terrible warning to all Latin American leaders who intend to criticize globalization and oppose the ultraliberal model. Above all this warning is directed at Luiz Inacio (Lula) da Silva of the Worker's Party of Brazil, who polls say will be the top vote getter in the October presidential election.

This plot was seen coming. I was in Caracas scarcely a week ago and immediately perceived an atmosphere of extreme tension. The coup was on its way.

* *El País*, April 17, 2002

Venezuela has a scandalously unequal distribution of wealth. Seventy percent of the population lives in poverty. For the 40 years in which the two parties-Democratic Action (social democrats) and Copei (Christian democrats)-shared power and the national wealth, the levels of corruption grew outrageously large.

While we roamed the nighttime Caracas streets, Hugo Chávez told me that from 1960 through 1998, Venezuela had received foreign income from petroleum sales equivalent to about 15 Marshall Plans. "With only one Marshall Plan," Chávez said, "I could reconstruct all of Europe destroyed by the Second World War. And with 15 Marshall Plans in Venezuela, the only result has been some corrupt individuals have amassed some of the largest fortunes in the world, while the majority of the population remains in misery."

That system of corruption fought by Chávez ended up collapsing in 1998. The two parties, Democratic Action and Copei, were swept out and disappeared. Chávez was elected president with a platform of social transformation and with the task of making Venezuela a more just and less unequal country. Some thought that once in office, Chávez, like so many others, would forget his promises and everything would continue as always. But this commander, from a very humble background, an admirer of the great Latin American liberators like Bolívar, was resolved not to cheat the people who voted for him, the people of the ranchitos who saw in him their last hope of leaving poverty, the lack of education and basic dignity. "The fight for justice, the fight for equality and the fight for liberty," Chávez told me, "some call socialism, others, Christianity; we call it Bolivarianism."

His government launched a series of social reforms: schools in forgotten neighborhoods, projects to aid indigenous people, micro credits for small business, land law to help landless peasants, improvements to the country's infrastructure outside of Caracas, etc.

"We've lowered unemployment," Chávez pointed out. "We've created more than 450,000 new jobs. In the last two years, Venezuela gained four places on the United Nations' Human Development

Index. The number of children in school has increased 25 percent. More than 1.5 million children who didn't go to school are now in school, and they get clothing, breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack. We've launched massive vaccination campaigns for the marginalized sectors of the population. Infant mortality declined. We're building more than 135,000 housing units for poor families. We are giving land to peasants without land. We have created a Women's Bank to provide micro credits. In 2001, Venezuela was one of the countries with the highest growth rates on the continent, about three percent.... The country was flat on its back. We're taking it out of underdevelopment."

As these reforms are put in practice, many of those who had supported Chávez have deserted him. They label him an "autocrat" or "boss" when there's never been more liberty. The country has no political prisoners. But the miniscule upper crust and the upper middle class, essentially white, as are many of the intellectuals and journalists, are terrified people of color, people with copper or black skin, rising on the social scale. Here, as everywhere in Latin America, they occupy the lowest rungs of society. They would have to share their privilege, and that seemed unacceptable. "There's an incredible racism in this society," Chávez told me. "They call me the Monkey or the Black, they can't stand that someone like me was elected president."

Thus came April 11. It was a class confrontation. On one side, President Chávez, supported by a majority of the common folk; on the other, a neoconservative alliance: the bourgeois who live on the streets of the rich neighborhoods with their saucepans [to bang in demonstrations], helped by the employer's association; the communications media (press, radio and TV), fiercely hostile, telling enormous lies, making up calumnies and rumors, falsifying the facts; and the working aristocracy of the oil industry, mobilized by CTV, considered Latin America's most corrupt union.

This reactionary alliance declared war without mercy on President Chávez. They had the help of some of the international news media (for example, CNN en Español) and the ill-concealed support of the

United States. Washington, in its will to dominate the world after September 11, could not stand for-Colin Powell said so a few weeks ago-Venezuela's getting back an independent foreign policy, or its role in OPEC, its lack of support for Plan Colombia, its good relations with Cuba, its militant attitude against neoliberal globalization.

A few months ago, the Bush administration named as Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs-that is, United States proconsul in Latin America-Otto Reich, the old Reagan collaborator, conspirator in the Iran-Contra affair, expert in sabotage and attacks, specialist in the counterrevolutionary arts. Otto Reich has been the occult architect of the plot against Chávez.

On the eve of the coup, Hugo Chávez perceived with unusual clarity the evil intentions of the United States: "The April 9 general strike was only a stage in the great North American offensive against me and against the Bolivarian revolution. And they will keep concocting any number of things. Don't be surprised that tomorrow they invent the story that I have Bin Laden in Venezuela. Don't be surprised if they produce some document showing with dates and other proofs that Bin Laden and a group of Al-Qaeda terrorists are in the mountains of Venezuela. They prepare a coup, and if they fail, they will prepare an attack."

Translated from Spanish by Mark McHarry

Venezuela Coup Linked to Bush Team

*Ed Vullaimy**

The failed coup in Venezuela was closely tied to senior officials in the US government, The Observer has established. They have long histories in the "dirty wars" of the 1980s, and links to death squads working in Central America at that time.

Washington's involvement in the turbulent events that briefly removed left-wing leader Hugo Chavez from power last weekend resurrects fears about US ambitions in the hemisphere.

It also deepens doubts about policy in the region being made by appointees to the Bush administration, all of whom owe their careers to serving in the dirty wars under President Reagan.

One of them, Elliot Abrams, who gave a nod to the attempted Venezuelan coup, has a conviction for misleading Congress over the infamous Iran-Contra affair.

The Bush administration has tried to distance itself from the coup. It immediately endorsed the new government under businessman Pedro Carmona. But the coup was sent dramatically into reverse after 48 hours.

Now officials at the Organization of American States and other diplomatic sources, talking to The Observer, assert that the US administration was not only aware the coup was about to take place, but had sanctioned it, presuming it to be destined for success.

The visits by Venezuelans plotting a coup, including Carmona him-

* *The Guardian*, April 22, 2002

self, began, say sources, “several months ago”, and continued until weeks before the putsch last weekend. The visitors were received at the White House by the man President George Bush tasked to be his key policy-maker for Latin America, Otto Reich.

Reich is a right-wing Cuban-American who, under Reagan, ran the Office for Public Diplomacy. It reported in theory to the State Department, but Reich was shown by congressional investigations to report directly to Reagan's National Security Aide, Colonel Oliver North, in the White House.

North was convicted and shamed for his role in Iran-Contra, whereby arms bought by busting US sanctions on Iran were sold to the Contra guerrillas and death squads, in revolt against the Marxist government in Nicaragua.

Reich also has close ties to Venezuela, having been made ambassador to Caracas in 1986. His appointment was contested both by Democrats in Washington and political leaders in the Latin American country. The objections were overridden as Venezuela sought access to the US oil market.

Reich is said by OAS sources to have had “a number of meetings with Carmona and other leaders of the coup” over several months. The coup was discussed in some detail, right down to its timing and chances of success, which were deemed to be excellent.

On the day Carmona claimed power, Reich summoned ambassadors from Latin America and the Caribbean to his office. He said the removal of Chavez was not a rupture of democratic rule, as he had resigned and was “responsible for his fate”. He said the US would support the Carmona government.

But the crucial figure around the coup was Abrams, who operates in the White House as senior director of the National Security Council for “democracy, human rights and international operations”. He was a leading theoretician of the school known as “Hemispherism”, which put a priority on combating Marxism in the Americas.

It led to the coup in Chile in 1973, and the sponsorship of regimes and death squads that followed it in Argentina, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and elsewhere. During the Contras’ rampage in Nicaragua, he worked directly to North.

Congressional investigations found Abrams had harvested illegal funding for the rebellion. Convicted for withholding information from the inquiry, he was pardoned by George Bush senior.

A third member of the Latin American triangle in US policy-making is John Negroponte, now ambassador to the United Nations. He was Reagan's ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985 when a US-trained death squad, Battalion 3-16, tortured and murdered scores of activists. A diplomatic source said Negroponte had been “informed that there might be some movement in Venezuela on Chavez” at the beginning of the year.

More than 100 people died in events before and after the coup. In Caracas on Friday a military judge confined five high-ranking officers to indefinite house arrest pending formal charges of rebellion.

Chavez's chief ideologue - Guillermo Garcia Ponce, director of the Revolutionary Political Command - said dissident generals, local media and anti-Chavez groups in the US had plotted the president's removal.

“The most reactionary sectors in the United States were also implicated in the conspiracy,” he said.

Venezuela: A Coup With The Smell Of Hamburger, Ham And Oil

*Aram Aharonian**

After the frustrated coup d'état against the constitutional government of Hugo Chávez, last week a Spanish journalist exclaimed, "What a smell of hamburger, jabugo [an Andalusian ham] and oil!" Obviously, the man knew what he was talking about: the participation of officials from the United States, Spain and El Salvador among the rabble headed by business leader Pedro Carmona.

These assertions don't seem out of place today. After all, the ambassadors of Spain, Manuel Viturro, and the United States, Charles Shapiro (who previously directed the State Department's Cuban Affairs office), met with de facto president Pedro Carmona, after which he dissolved the National Assembly and the principal government institutions.

According to private investigations, one of the results of the coup was to be the denationalization of oil: the privatization of the state oil company Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA), leaving it in the hands of a U.S. firm linked to President George Bush and to the Spanish company Repsol; to sell PDVSA's U.S. subsidiary, Citgo, to Gustavo Cisneros and his U.S. partners; and the end of the nation's underground reserves.

To do this, the 1999 Constitution had to be abolished and the PDVSA's internal conflict had to be leveraged, where the higher ups had been acting in accordance with directives sent by PDVSA's former president, Luis Giusti, from the U.S. They also

* *Venezuela Analítica*, April 28, 2002

counted on businessman Isaac Pérez Recao's financing and active participation. Carmona had worked for him at the petroleum company Venoco.

A high military source amplified to Agence France-Presse on accounts which had already been published locally: Pérez Recao ordered a small group of "right-wing extremists, heavily armed, including mortars ... under the operational control of Rear Admiral Carlos Molina Tamayo," one of the officials who had publicly rebelled against Chávez last February, and who was now in charge of Carmona's defense forces. According to the source, this group "belonged to a private security firm owned by ex-Mossad agents" (Israel's security, terrorist and spy agency), which does not mean Israel was implicated in the conspiracy.

Neither was this assertion made mention of locally: the person with the face and weaponry of Rambo who personally guarded Carmona was Marcelo Sarabia, linked to security firms and organizations, some of them Mossad franchises. He was in the habit of boasting of spending the night in the U.S. embassy's bunker. He went with Pérez Recao the same Saturday the 13th. Two days later, his girlfriend abandoned the TV studios of Televén to be with him.

The U.S. intelligence company STRATFOR said the CIA "had knowledge of (the coup leaders') plans, and could have helped extreme right civilians and military who tried, without success, to take possession of the interim government," after meeting with militants from Opus Dei and officials linked to retired general Rubén Pérez Pérez-the son-in-law of former president Rafael Caldera.

What is confirmed is that the plane in which they wanted to take Chávez out of the country from the island of La Orchila belonged to the Paraguayan banker Víctor Gil (TotalBank). Its destination? According to crew of the U.S. registered aircraft, the flight plan was to Puerto Rico, U.S. territory. The intervention of the United States came not only in the "advice" of high Washington functionaries, such as Rogelio Pardo Maurer-in charge of the Pentagon's Latin American special operations and low intensity conflicts-Otto Reich

and/or John Maisto, but also in the person of Lieutenant Colonel James Rodger, military attaché to the U.S. embassy in Caracas. His presence supported the uprising, set up on the fifth floor of the Army Command building, from where he advised the rebellious generals.

Reich, in charge of Latin American affairs in the State Department, confirmed he talked "two or three times" during the coup with Gustavo Cisneros, deep-sea fishing buddy of former president George Bush and chief of a business empire extending from the U.S. to Patagonia [southern Argentina and Chile], including: DirecTV, Venevisión, Coca-Cola, and the Mexican TV network Televisa. To Newsweek he said he was only looking for information, not encouraging or directing the organizers. "We had absolutely nothing to do with that," he added.

Perhaps I may call attention to the case of the two El Salvadorians detained after the April 11 events. According to local intelligence sources, they formed part of a death squad trained to carry out attacks in Latin American countries (earlier in Cuba and Panama, now in Venezuela). These sources link them to the former ambassador in San Salvador, Christian Democrat Leopoldo Castillo, today a radio commentator and advisor to Carmona's business association.

On the afternoon of the coup, the plotters, Carmona among them, met in the TV studios of Venevisión. "That government was armed in the offices of Gustavo Cisneros," said opposition deputy Pedro Pablo Alcántara (Democratic Action). He gained fame by being one of the censors dispatched to the press in 1992 by then-president Carlos Andrés Pérez. The person who read Carmona's decree, Daniel Romero, was named Attorney General. He had been a high-level member of the Pérez government and a functionary in Cisneros' organization.

The repercussions of the frustrated coup began in Washington and threatened to become the Bush administration's first public foreign affairs scandal. Don't discount the fact that the U.S. Senate's Foreign Relations Committee sealed documents detailing contacts of Venezuelan citizens with the highest-level U.S. civil and military

officials. Among them: Luis Giusti, the ex-president of the state oil company, PDVSA.

After Carmona's plutocratic government dissolved the National Assembly and trampled on the Constitution, and after it learned of the unrest among the Latin American heads of state at the Rio Group meeting in Costa Rica, and in a good part of generals and the civil opposition to Chávez, they began to speak of a pluralistic junta, one which would respect the terms of office of Congress and the governors and mayors.

There were numerous calls between Caracas and Washington from Friday night to mid-day Saturday. To General Efraín Vásquez, principal commander during Carmona's brief tenure, the Pentagon conveyed a series of points to comply with. These were sent by State Department officials in the U.S. capital to the head of negotiations with Venezuela, Luis Herrera Marcano, and to Carmona by Ambassador Shapiro, and to the army chiefs by Colonel Harkins, also a member of the U.S. delegation in Caracas.

In their flight from the Miraflores Palace, the coup leaders left behind a sumptuous lunch and various documents in the presidential office. One of these, sent by Luis Herrera Marcano to Rear Admiral Molina Tamayo, who without doubt was the link between the coup plotters and the U.S. government, reads as follows:

“This morning Mr. Phillip Chicola of the State Department telephoned to ask me to communicate urgently to the Venezuelan Government the following viewpoints of the United States Government:

1. Given that the United States subscribed to and supports the complete validity of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which condemns any rupture of constitutional legality, it is necessary that the transition which is going on in Venezuela, with which they understand and sympathize, preserves constitutional norms. To that end, they consider it indispensable we get the National Assembly to approve the resignation of President

Chávez, and that, if he seeks recourse to the Supreme Court, they affirm it. Mr. Chicola made it very clear he was not talking about an imposition but on the contrary an exhortation to make it easier for them to formally support the new authorities. He indicated not only were they obligated by the provisions of the Democratic Charter, but were also subject to legal norms which require them to inform Congress of any interruption of the constitutional authority of a country on the continent, and eventually to suspend all cooperative activities.

2. In keeping with this, Mr. Chicola suggested the new Government send a communiqué as soon as possible to the United States Government in which it formally expresses its commitment to call elections in a reasonable time frame, and indicating observers from the OAS would be welcome in the elections.

3. He indicated it was of equally great importance that we produce a copy of the resignation signed by President Chávez.

4. Finally he indicated his hope that current permanent representative from Venezuela to the OAS would be replaced soon. He insisted this was a friendly suggestion for the sake of Venezuela and not a declaration he was ‘persona non grata’.

Mr. Chicola asked this message be sent by the U.S. Ambassador in Venezuela.”

(Communication 913, oddly enough on letterhead of the Embassy of Venezuela and not of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.)

Interference? Suggestion?

This libretto had already been learned by the representatives to the OAS' Permanent Council.

Colombian César Gaviria, Secretary General, suggested that since

the government of Chávez has been deposed, Ambassador Valero should not join the meeting. Chilean representative Esteban Tomic and the Council's Chair, Salvadorian Margarita Escoba, sent the news. The United States, Ecuador, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Colombia made efforts to recognize the de facto government. Mexico, Argentina and Brazil-with the unanimous support of the Caribbean countries-insisted in the primacy of the Democratic Charter. Gaviria annoyed these countries a second time when he announced the Carmona government had removed Valero from office. The representative from Barbados rebuked Gaviria for serving as a connection between the coup plotters and the OAS and for ordering an ambassador be suspended without complying with the necessary procedure.

One of those pressured to support the Carmona government was Santiago Cantón, Rapporteur of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights who that Saturday the 13th sent a communication directed to "His Excellency the Minister of Foreign Relations, José Rodríguez Iturbe."

On the Spanish side, the hullabaloo could not fool Foreign Affairs Minister Josep Piqué or the officials in the embassy in Caracas. Some Spanish business people who got on better with Chávez than the embassy affirmed there was a fund of 500 million bolivars (a little more than a half a million dollars) to help finance the general strike and the coup, with money from the large conglomerates such as Repsol and the banks, but it has not been possible to confirm this.

In any event, Ambassador Viturro met with all the high-ranking Spanish personnel last Sunday to lay out the strategy they will follow from here on: via the news media, insist on the necessity of a referendum or that Chávez call new elections in the short term. Exactly the same strategy launched by U.S. Ambassador Shapiro from the bunker of Valle Arriba, in the southeast of Caracas, to the country's English speaking accredited journalists.

Translated from Spanish by Mark McHarry

Our Gang in Venezuela?

*David Corn**

In the weeks before the April 12-13 coup in Venezuela, Asociacion Civil Consorcio Justicia, a legal rights outfit, was planning an April 10 conference to promote democracy in that country. At the time, Venezuela was undergoing severe political strife. Business groups and labor unions were bitterly squaring off against President Hugo Chavez, a democratically elected strongman/populist. Using an \$84,000 grant from the Washington-based National Endowment for Democracy, a quasi-governmental foundation funded by Congress, Consorcio Justicia was supposed to bring together political parties, unions, business associations, religious groups and academicians to discuss "protecting fundamental political rights," as an NED document put it. In a proposed agenda Consorcio Justicia listed as one of the main speakers Pedro Carmona, president of Fedecamaras, a leading Venezuelan business group. But when the coup came, Carmona was handpicked by the plotters to head a government established in violation of the Constitution. Then he signed a decree suspending the National Assembly and the Supreme Court. Carmona, it turns out, was hardly interested in safeguarding "fundamental political rights."

Fortunately for NED, the conference was part of a series that never happened. The program was canceled as Venezuela was hit by national strikes that would lead to the massive business-and-labor demonstration against Chavez on April 11, in which at least eighteen people were killed by unidentified gunmen. The murders provided Chavez's military foes cause, or cover, to move against him early the next morning. (A recent Human Rights Watch report concluded, "Both sides bear responsibility for the shootings.") But

* *The Nation*, August 5, 2002

imagine if the NED-backed conference had occurred and Carmona had appeared there—days before becoming a front man for the coup-makers. That was a close call for NED. Instead, the episode may be no more than a mild what-if embarrassment for NED, which is supposed to finance pro-democracy activism around the world. It shows, though, how democracy-promotion can slip, perhaps unintentionally, toward supporting the opposite—especially in a highly polarized political environment like the one in Venezuela.

Created by President Ronald Reagan and Congress in 1983, NED was designed to run a parallel foreign policy for the United States, backing and assisting entities that Washington might not be able to officially endorse—say, an opposition party challenging a government with which the United States maintained diplomatic relations. In a way, NED took public some of the covert political activity the CIA had previously mounted. The endowment—which devotes much of its budget to funding the foreign policy arms of the Democratic and Republican parties, the Chamber of Commerce and the AFL-CIO (its core grantees)—has been involved in both questionable and praiseworthy projects. It awarded a large grant to a student group linked to an outlawed extreme-right paramilitary outfit in France, helped finance the development of conservative parties in countries where democracy was doing just fine and played a heavy-handed role in Nicaragua's 1990 elections. In the late 1980s it aided the pro-democracy opposition in Chile and antiapartheid organizations in South Africa. But even if its programs have indeed enhanced democracy on occasion, NED overall has long been problematic, as it has handed taxpayer dollars to private groups (such as the two major parties) to finance their overseas initiatives and has conducted controversial programs that could be viewed abroad as actions of the US government. What might the reaction be here, if the British government funded an effort to improve the Democratic Party's get-out-the-vote operation in Florida?

Which brings us back to Venezuela—where the US Embassy was compelled after the coup to declare as a “myth” the notion that “the US government, through organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, financed coup efforts.” For months

before the coup, Americans—including US government officials and officials of NED and its core grantees—were in contact with Venezuelans and political parties that became involved or possibly involved with the coup. This has provided Latin Americans cause to wonder if the United States is continuing its tradition of underhandedly meddling in the affairs of its neighbors to the south. And these contacts have prompted some, though not much, official probing in Washington. The issue is not only whether the United States in advance OK'd this particular coup (of which there is little evidence) or tried to help it once it occurred (of which there is more evidence). But did discussions between Americans and Chavez foes—such as those involving NED—encourage or embolden the coup-makers and their supporters? Give them reason to believe the United States would not protest should they move against Chavez in an unconstitutional manner? Much of the two-day coup remains shrouded in confusion. (It came and went so quickly: Carmona fled office the day after he seized power, once several military units announced they opposed the military coup, whereupon Chavez was returned to his office.) But enough questions linger about US actions in Venezuela to warrant a good look.

Consider some NED activities there. When Consorcio Justicia began to assemble the pro-democracy conferences, it approached the two main opponents of Chavez—Carmona and his Fedecamaras, as well as the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), the leading anti-Chavez labor union—according to documents obtained from NED under a Freedom of Information Act request. Christopher Sabatini, NED's senior program officer for Latin America, says, “The idea was that the conferences (which were to include Chavistas) would be able to define a consensus-based policy agenda” for the entire country. But certainly NED's core grantees were trying to beef up Venezuelan organizations challenging Chavez. The AFL-CIO, for example, was working (seemingly laudably) to bolster and democratize the CTV, which Chavez had been trying to intimidate and infiltrate. The International Republican Institute was training several parties that opposed Chavez. At one session, Mike Collins, a former GOP press secretary, taught party leaders how to mount photo-ops; at another he suggested to Caracas Mayor Alfredo

Peña, a prominent Chavez foe, how he “could soften his aggressive image in order to appeal to a wider range of voters,” according to an IRI report. (Human Rights Watch found that at least two members of the police force controlled by Peña—now Chavez’s primary rival—fired weapons during the April 11 melee.) The question, then, is, since it was not explicit US policy to call for Chavez’s ouster—though his departure from office was desired by the Bush Administration, which detested his oil sales to Cuba and close ties to Iraq, Iran and Libya—should US taxpayer dollars have gone to groups working to unseat Chavez, even through legitimate means?

Moreover, NED and its grantees helped organizations that may have been represented in the coup government. When Carmona unveiled his Cabinet on the morning of April 12—hours after he was placed in power by the military at 5 am—his junta included a leading official from COPEI, the Christian Democrat party, and one from Primero Justicia, a new party. IRI had provided assistance to both. Carmona also named a member of the CTV board as minister of planning, even though he was not a recognized leader of the union. And when Carmona assumed power in the presidential palace, a leading CTV figure was supposedly nearby—though his whereabouts and his role have been subjects of debate. The CTV did denounce Carmona—but not until Carmona, on the afternoon of April 12, announced his decree to shutter the National Assembly and the Supreme Court. It’s not easy to determine whether Carmona’s Cabinet appointees were acting on behalf of their parties or freelancing. And as one current Venezuelan official says, “The appointees were never sworn in as ministers, so they can claim they did not approve of Carmona’s decree.”

On April 12 Carmona also said he was establishing an advisory council for his government. But he did not name the several dozen members of this group. After the coup, the Chavez government maintained that it found a list of council members. The roster supposedly included leading officials of COPEI, Primero Justicia and the CTV, including CTV head Carlos Ortega—all of whom had been in touch with and/or received assistance from NED or its core grantees. This document, if accurate, raises the prospect that recipi-

ents of NED assistance, when the crunch arrived, were more interested in overthrowing Chavez than adhering to the democratic process.

Asked whether it might be troubling if political figures who worked with NED and its grantees had agreed to assist the coup, NED’s Sabatini said, “It’s important to remember that these are independent groups, reacting—on their own—to their very difficult political environment. The NED’s programs with the groups...were very specific programs of technical assistance and training.... It’s also important to remember that these groups (when they were named to the Cabinet or to the advisory council) were acting under the belief that Chavez had resigned—as had been announced on TV.” But according to postcoup news reports, Chavez actually refused to submit his resignation. And, as Venezuelan human rights outfits argued while the coup was in progress, Carmona’s military-installed government was unconstitutional, whether or not Chavez had resigned.

At least two key NED partners did cheer the coup (as did the Bush Administration initially). On April 12 George Folsom, the IRI president, issued a statement supporting the action: “Last night, led by every sector of civil society, the Venezuelan people rose up to defend democracy in their country.” Three days later, after the coup was reversed, NED president Carl Gershman sent Folsom a letter of rebuke, noting that by welcoming Chavez’s “removal through unconstitutional means,” Folsom had “unnecessarily interjected IRI into the sensitive politics of Venezuela.” Folsom’s statement, Gershman added, “will only make it more difficult for the IRI to work in Venezuela and the region as a whole.” Gershman, though, didn’t threaten to withdraw support from IRI. And on the night of April 12—after Carmona suspended the assembly—Mercedes de Freitas, a director of the Fundacion Momento de la Gente, a legislative monitoring project subsidized by NED, e-mailed the endowment defending the military and Carmona, claiming the takeover was not a military coup.

Not all NED allies were rooting for Carmona. On April 13 Carlos Ponce, executive director of Consorcio Justicia, e-mailed NED that

the coup was illegal and that the decision to eliminate the legislature was “terrible.” Yet several weeks earlier Ponce had almost jumped into bed with coup supporters. While developing NED’s pro-democracy conferences, he solicited the participation of the Frente Institucional Militar de Venezuela, an organization of former military officials. That prompted a swift reply from Washington. “This is a group that has proposed a military coup!” Sabatini exclaimed in an e-mail. He noted that NED “will NOT—I repeat—will NOT support anything that involves the FIM.” Ponce subsequently said that he was unaware of FIM’s position (noting that its participation had been suggested by Carmona), and he quickly booted the organization from the conference. Another potential embarrassment was averted.

But NED was only a part of the picture. For months before the coup, according to several US media reports, US officials in Venezuela had assorted conversations with Chavez foes, and these interactions, purposefully or not, may have led the plotters to believe the Bush Administration would look favorably on anyone who made Chavez go away. *Newsday* noted that long before the coup, business, union and civic leaders were meeting to plan opposition to Chavez, and at one such meeting—attended by Carmona and held at the US Embassy—a coup was proposed. US officials, according to the newspaper, say they immediately killed the idea. But the officials continued to interact with these Chavez opponents. The newspaper quoted one Venezuelan source familiar with these discussions as saying, “All the United States really cared about was that it was done neatly, with a resignation letter or something to show for it.” And the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a “Venezuelan leader who visited Washington for an official meeting said he concluded after talks with US officials that the Americans would not necessarily punish the leaders of a government that overthrew Chavez.” A Western diplomat told the *Washington Post*, “I don’t think the US provided any active or material support for [the coup]. But the people involved may have seen all of these meetings and visits, added them all up, and come up with an idea that they were on the same team.” Last November then-US ambassador Donna Hrinak instructed the US military attaché in Venezuela to cut off contacts with dis-

sident military officers. But Vice Adm. Carlos Molina, one of the leading military opponents of Chavez, said he had met with a US official several weeks before the coup.

After the coup failed, Chavez officials found inside the presidential palace documents left behind by the coup-makers. One was a note apparently written by Luis Herrera Marcano, chargé d’affaires in the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington. He was reporting on a conversation he had had with State Department official Phillip Chicola while the coup was under way. According to a copy published by *Proceso*, a Mexican newsmagazine, Chicola said, “Given that the United States signed and fully supports the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which condemns any violation of constitutional rule, it is necessary that the transition currently under way in Venezuela, which [the United States] understands and sympathizes with, conserve constitutional structures.”

On the morning of April 12, according to the *New York Times*, Otto Reich, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, told a gathering of Latin American and Caribbean ambassadors that they had to support the new government. The next day Reich spoke twice to Venezuelan media magnate Gustavo Cisneros, according to a Cisneros spokeswoman. Cisneros’s role in the coup—if he had one—has been a topic of speculation in Venezuela, for on the night of April 11 Carmona met with other opposition leaders at a TV station owned by Cisneros. (Cisneros denies he was a force behind the coup.) Cisneros’s spokeswoman maintains that Reich called on April 13 “as a friend” because Chavez supporters were protesting at media outlets in Caracas. And on the morning of April 13, US ambassador to Venezuela Charles Shapiro met with Carmona. According to Carmona, Shapiro expressed concern regarding Carmona’s dissolution of the legislature and urged Carmona to be less antidemocratic. If Carmona is to be believed, Shapiro did not oppose the unconstitutional means by which Carmona seized power.

The Bush Administration claims that all the contacts before and during the coup were kosher. The US Embassy in Venezuela released a

statement maintaining that “of course” US officials met with opposition figures, for “that is an Embassy’s job.” But it insisted that “officials in Washington and in Caracas consistently and repeatedly emphasized the United States’ opposition to any extra-constitutional alteration of power.” The embassy denied that US military officials were involved in coup activities. It noted that Secretary of State Colin Powell declared, “We condemn the blows to constitutional order.” But Powell said that on April 19—six days after the coup collapsed.

There has been no thorough public exploration in Washington of the precoup contacts or the efforts of Bush officials to nudge the coup in a direction that would permit the Administration to openly support the takeover. At the request of Senator Christopher Dodd, who chairs the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Latin America, the Inspector General of the State Department has been examining Bush Administration actions before and during the coup. Dodd asked the IG to review cables, e-mails and other records to determine what US officials told Chavez’s foes and to examine NED programs. The report is due at the end of July, and Dodd expects to hold hearings afterward. On April 23 the New York Times reported that the Pentagon was reviewing its actions during the coup to insure that no military officials had encouraged the plotters. But Lieut. Comdr. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, says no formal review was initiated: “It was just a matter of getting the facts together. There were questions why people from the US defense attaché were on a Venezuelan military base while this thing was going on. It was nothing out of the ordinary.”

One matter that warrants scrutiny is a Washington Post report that two military officials who publicly challenged Chavez in the weeks before the coup—Vice Admiral Molina and Col. Pedro Soto—each received \$100,000 from a Miami bank. The newspaper cited an unnamed diplomat in Venezuela as its source for this curious allegation. Who in the United States might have been secretly subsidizing Chavez’s foes? Any official body that wants to investigate could start by subpoenaing Soto. In April he fled Venezuela for the United States, and in June he asked the Immigration and Naturalization

Service in Miami for political asylum, claiming that he feared for his life.

Postcoup Venezuela is a jittery place of deepening division, marked by rising gun sales, political violence, constant rumors of another coup and talk of assassination. Former President Jimmy Carter failed to broker talks between Chavez and his foes; on July 11 an estimated 600,000 people demonstrated against Chavez. For the time being, Consorcio Justicia has given up on holding a large pro-democracy conference. “It’s a nasty environment,” executive director Ponce says. “We have a radical opposition and a radical government. We are unable to find ways to negotiate.” So his group is now using NED money for smaller projects. The failed coup has changed his perspective. Has it affected the policies and plans of the Bush Administration, NED or NED’s grantees? If a Congressional hearing regarding Venezuela’s cloudy coup ever convenes, that is one of many questions that ought to be asked.

THE MEDIA

U.S. Papers Hail Venezuelan Coup as Pro-Democracy Move

*FAIR**

When elements of the Venezuelan military forced president Hugo Chavez from office last week, the editorial boards of several major U.S. newspapers followed the U.S. government's lead and greeted the news with enthusiasm.

In an April 13 editorial, the New York Times triumphantly declared that Chavez's "resignation" meant that "Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator." Conspicuously avoiding the word "coup," the Times explained that Chavez "stepped down after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader."

Calling Chavez "a ruinous demagogue," the Times offered numerous criticisms of his policies and urged speedy new elections, saying "Venezuela urgently needs a leader with a strong democratic mandate." A casual reader might easily have missed the Times' brief acknowledgement that Chavez did actually have a democratic mandate, having been "elected president in 1998."

The paper's one nod to the fact that military takeovers are not generally regarded as democratic was to note hopefully that with "continued civic participation," perhaps "further military involvement" in Venezuelan politics could be kept "to a minimum."

Three days later, Chavez had returned to power and the Times ran a second editorial (4/16/02) half-apologizing for having gotten carried away:

**Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, Media Advisory, April 18, 2002*

“In his three years in office, Mr. Chavez has been such a divisive and demagogic leader that his forced departure last week drew applause at home and in Washington. That reaction, which we shared, overlooked the undemocratic manner in which he was removed. Forcibly unseating a democratically elected leader, no matter how badly he has performed, is never something to cheer.”

The Times stood its ground, however, on the value of a timely military coup for teaching a president a lesson, saying, “We hope Mr. Chavez will act as a more responsible and moderate leader now that he seems to realize the anger he stirred.”

The Chicago Tribune's editorial board seemed even more excited by the coup than the New York Times'. An April 14 Tribune editorial called Chavez an “elected strongman” and declared: “It's not every day that a democracy benefits from the military's intervention to force out an elected president.”

Hoping that Venezuela could now “move on to better things,” the Tribune expressed relief that Venezuela's president was “safely out of power and under arrest.” No longer would he be free to pursue his habits of “toasting Fidel Castro, flying to Baghdad to visit Saddam Hussein, or praising Osama bin Laden.”

(FAIR called the Tribune to ask when Chavez had “praised” bin Laden. Columnist and editorial board member Steve Chapman, who wrote the editorial, said that in attempting to locate the reference for FAIR, he discovered that he had “misread” his source, a Freedom House report. Chapman said that if the Tribune could find no record of Chavez praising bin Laden, the paper would run a correction.)

The Tribune stuck unapologetically to its pro-coup line even after Chavez had been restored to power. Chavez's return may have come as “good news to Latin American governments that had condemned his removal as just another military coup,” wrote the Tribune in an April 16 editorial, “but that doesn't mean it's good news for democ-

racy.” The paper seemed to suggest that the coup would have been no bad thing if not for “the heavy-handed bungling of [Chavez's] successors.”

Long Island's Newsday, another top-circulation paper, greeted the coup with an April 13 editorial headlined “Chavez's Ouster Is No Great Loss.” Newsday offered a number of reasons why the coup wasn't so bad, including Chavez's “confrontational leadership style and left-wing populist rhetoric” and the fact that he “openly flaunted his ideological differences with Washington.” The most important reason, however, was Chavez's “incompetence as an executive,” specifically, that he was “mismanaging the nation's vast oil wealth.”

After the coup failed, Newsday ran a follow-up editorial (4/16/02) which came to the remarkable conclusion that “if there is a winner in all this, it's Latin American democracy, in principle and practice.” The incident, according to Newsday, was “an affirmation of the democratic process” because the coup gave “a sobering wake-up call” to Chavez, “who was on a path to subverting the democratic mandate that had put him in power three years ago.”

The Los Angeles Times waited until the dust had settled (4/17/02) to run its editorial on “Venezuela's Strange Days.” The paper was dismissive of Chavez's status as an elected leader— saying “it goes against the grain to put the name Hugo Chavez and the word 'democracy' in the same sentence”— but pointed out that “it's one thing to oppose policies and another to back a coup.” The paper stated that by not adequately opposing the coup, “the White House failed to stay on the side of democracy,” yet still suggested that in the long run, “Venezuela will benefit” if the coup teaches Chavez to reach out to the opposition “rather than continuing to divide the nation along class lines.”

The Washington Post was one of the few major U.S. papers whose initial reaction was to condemn the coup outright. Though heavily critical of Chavez, the paper's April 14 editorial led with an affirmation that “any interruption of democracy in Latin America is wrong, the more so when it involves the military.”

Curiously, however, the Washington Post took pains to insist that “there's been no suggestion that the United States had anything to do with this Latin American coup,” even though details from Venezuela were still sketchy at that time. The New York Times, too, made a point of saying in its April 13 editorial that Washington's hands were clean, affirming that “rightly, his removal was a purely Venezuelan affair.”

Ironically, news articles in both the Washington Post and the New York Times have since raised serious questions about whether the U.S. may in fact have been involved. Neither paper, however, has returned to the question on its editorial page.

Venezuela and Censorship: The response of Britain's media to the conspiracy in Venezuela

*John Pilger**

Last month, I wrote about Venezuela, pointing out that little had been reported in this country about the achievements of Hugo Chavez and the threat to his reforming government from the usual alliance of a corrupt local elite and the United States. When the conspirators made their move on 12 April, the response of the British media provided an object lesson in how censorship works in free societies.

The BBC described Chavez as “not so much a democrat as an autocrat”, echoing the Foreign Office minister Denis MacShane, who abused him as “a ranting demagogue”. Alex Bellos, the Guardian's South America correspondent, reported, as fact, that “pro-Chavez snipers had killed at least 13 people” and that Chavez had requested exile in Cuba. “Thousands of people celebrated overnight, waving flags, blowing whistles . . .” he wrote, leaving the reader with the clear impression that almost everybody in Venezuela was glad to see the back of this “playground bully”, as the Independent called him.

Within 48 hours, Chavez was back in office, put there by the mass of the people, who came out of the shanty towns in their tens of thousands. Defying the army, their heroism was in support of a leader whose democratic credentials are extraordinary in the Americas, south and north. Having won two presidential elections, the latest in 2000, by the largest majority in 40 years, as well as a referendum and local elections, Chavez was borne back to power by

* *New Statesman*, April 29, 2002

the impoverished majority whose “lot”, wrote Bellos, he had “failed to improve” and among whom “his popularity had plummeted”.

The episode was a journalistic disgrace. Most of what Bellos and others wrote, using similar words and phrases, turned out to be wrong. In Bellos's case, this was not surprising, as he was reporting from the wrong country, Brazil. Chavez said he never requested asylum in Cuba; the snipers almost certainly included agents provocateurs; “almost every sector of society [Chavez] antagonised” were principally members of various oligarchies he made pay tax for the first time, including the media, and the oil companies, whose taxes he doubled in order to raise 80 per cent of the population to a decent standard of living. His opponents also included army officers trained at the notorious School of the Americas in the United States.

In a few years, Chavez had begun major reforms in favor of the indigenous poor, Venezuela's unpeople. In 49 laws adopted by the Venezuelan Congress, he began real land reform, and guaranteed women's rights and free healthcare and education up to university level.

He opposed the human rights abuses of the regime in neighboring Colombia, encouraged and armed by Washington. He extended a hand to the victim of an illegal 40-year American blockade, Cuba, and sold the Cubans oil. These were his crimes, as well as saying that bombing children in Afghanistan was terrorism. Like Chile under Allende and Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, precious little of this was explained to the western public. Like the equally heroic uprising in Argentina last year, it was misrepresented as merely more Latin American chaos.

Last week, the admirable Glasgow University Media Group, under Greg Philo, released the results of a study which found that, in spite of the saturation coverage of the Middle East, most television viewers were left uninformed that the basic issue was Israel's illegal military occupation. “The more you watch, the less you know” - to quote Danny Schechter's description of American television news - was the study's conclusion.

Take US secretary of state Colin Powell's “peace mission”. Regardless of America's persistent veto of United Nations resolutions calling for Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories, and regardless of Powell calling Ariel Sharon “my personal friend”, an American “peace mission” was the absurd news, repeated incessantly. Similarly, when the United Nations Commission on Human Rights last week voted 40-5 to condemn Israel for its “mass killing”, the news was not this near-unanimous expression of world opinion, but the British government's rejection of the resolution as “unbalanced”.

Journalists are often defensive when asked why they faithfully follow the deceptions of great power. It is not good enough for ITN to say dismissively, in response to the Glasgow Media Group findings, that “we are not in the business of giving a daily history lesson”, or for the BBC to waffle about its impartiality when some recent editions of Newsnight might have been produced by the Foreign Office. In these dangerous times, one of the most destructive weapons of all is pseudo-information.

Coups D'États Without Borders

*Maurice Lemoine**

On March 18, 2002, at its semi-annual meeting held in Romana (Dominican Republic), the Interamerican Press Association (IAPA) was pleased with its efforts “of maintaining the little that remains of freedom of expression.” The special guest at this large conference (to undoubtedly guarantee its objectivity) was former U.S. president Bill Clinton, who had declared shortly beforehand, “Mr. Hugo Chávez placed himself in a dead end.” This statement authorized the IAPA to qualify the Venezuelan president as a “fascist.”

In this matter, the IAPA knows of what it speaks. The vice-president of the executive committee of this association of media owners is none other than Mr. Danilo Arbilla. An Uruguayan, he was known in his country as a censor with the Center of Diffusion and Information, during his country's the military dictatorship (1973-1985). In this period the newspapers *Ultima Hora*, *Mañana*, *Ahora*, *El Popular*, and *Marcha* were closed. As for the representative of IAPA in Venezuela, his name is Andrés Mata, the owner of the conservative daily newspaper *El Universal*.

The local press version of the facts diffused during the April 11 coup d'état is often found, in identical form, in many international media outlets: *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, CNN, *El Tiempo*, Radio and TV Caracol, RCN (the latter two practice the same kind of disinformation within their own country, Colombia), etc. Among these, the Spanish newspaper *El País* is particularly distinguished. At the heart of economic and financial interests, one can, at times, make sense of the reasons for such “synergies” between national and international media.

* *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 2002

The owner of *El País*, the Prisa group, owns 19% of the shares of Radio Caracol, whose majority shareholder, the powerful Colombian group ValBavaria, has as principal partner Mr. Julio Santo Domingo (the richest man in Colombia) and the Cisneros group, which dominates the media industry in Venezuela. At the head of Prisa, Mr. Jesus Polanco also chairs Sogecable, a company related to the U.S. company DirecTV, of which one of the principal shareholders is this same Cisneros group. Rendering even closer relations, an agreement is about to be signed between Prisa (Mr. Polanco) and ViaDigital (Mr. Cisneros).

Pretending “to defend the right to inform and to be informed,” the corporatist organization Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontiers - RSF) deliberately ignores the hardly hidden role of the owners of the media. Still, it did not have any scruples to make the government of Mr. Chávez—who never undermined any freedoms—one of its privileged targets. Legitimately, thus, it judges restrictive and likely to lead to censorship article 58 of the Venezuelan Constitution (so far never enforced), which relates to the civil right “to veracious, timely, and impartial information.”

RSF's attitude, however, is questionable when it requires of the president “to put an end to his virulent attacks against the press, which make it a target of popular revenge,”¹ without at all wondering about the mendacious attitude and the absence of moral obligation in the media in question. “It is legitimate that the government periodically makes its voice heard in exceptional circumstances,” writes RSF, denouncing without investigating nor critical detachment the “abusive resort” of the government’s requisitioning of air time on April 10 and 11, that “in no instance could justify the interruption of television programming and broadcasts with about thirty requisitions in two days.” Even when those media take active part in a coup d'état?

On April 12, RSF required of the “authorities” (which authorities? There is the issue of an illegitimate power!) “to carry out a profound investigation into the shootings of four journalists who were victims” (one is deceased), “to guarantee the safety of journalists con-

sidered close to the former (sic) president” and, commenting on the facts with a great lightness, speaks about “the repression which was the target of the opposition's demonstration.” Taking once again word for word the version of the Venezuelan press, the official statement concludes, “Sequestered in the presidential palace, Hugo Chávez signed his resignation during the night, under the pressure of the army.” One knows that Mr. Chávez never resigned and that he was imprisoned in a military fort. Not a word, on the other hand, on the repression exerted by the putschists against the many journalists who work for the alternative and community media.

Forgetting, in spite of some principled statements, the defense of the right “to be informed,”² RSF guarantees in Venezuela a media plan worthy of that of *El Mercurio*, the Chilean newspaper that was largely implicated in the coup that led to the overturn and death of Salvador Allende in 1973.

In this sense, one can only be pleased with the appearance of an organization, Global Media Watch, which was born at the time of the last World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. Unrelated to any corporatism, the latter understands, in Venezuela just as elsewhere, to look after pluralism and balance of information, and to constitute a platform for citizens in face of the excesses of the media and their manipulations.

Endnotes:

(1) RSF, Paris, January 8, 2002

(2) While committing itself to inquiring into the repression (of the putschists) and the threats currently uttered by the opposition against the alternative media, RSF specified, on June 18, in a message sent to Teletambores: “the role of our organization is to defend the freedom of the press, not to judge the usage that is made of it.”

Translated from French by Gregory Wilpert

How Hate Media Incited the Coup Against the President

*Maurice Lemoine**

Never even in Latin American history has the media been so directly involved in a political coup. Venezuela's 'hate media' controls 95% of the airwaves and has a near-monopoly over newsprint, and it played a major part in the failed attempt to overthrow the president, Hugo Chávez, in April. Although tensions in the country could easily spill into civil war, the media is still directly encouraging dissident elements to overthrow the democratically elected president - if necessary by force.

“We had a deadly weapon: the media. And now that I have the opportunity, let me congratulate you.” In Caracas, on 11 April 2002, just a few hours before the temporary overthrow of Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, Vice-Admiral Victor Ramírez Pérez congratulated journalist Ibéyiste Pacheco live on Venevision television. Twenty minutes earlier, when Pacheco had begun to interview a group of rebel officers, she could not resist admitting, conspiratorially, that she had long had a special relationship with them.

At the same time, in a live interview from Madrid, another journalist, Patricia Poleo, also seemed well informed about the likely future development of “spontaneous events”. She announced on the Spanish channel TVE: “I believe the next president is going to be Pedro Carmona.” Chávez, holed up in the presidential palace, was still refusing to step down.

After Chávez came to power in 1998, the five main privately owned channels – Venevisión, Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV),

* *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 2002

Globovisión and CMT - and nine of the 10 major national newspapers, including El Universal, El Nacional, Tal Cual, El Impulso, El Nuevo País, and El Mundo, have taken over the role of the traditional political parties, which were damaged by the president's electoral victories. Their monopoly on information has put them in a strong position. They give the opposition support, only rarely reporting government statements and never mentioning its large majority, despite that majority's confirmation at the ballot box. They have always described the working class districts as a red zone inhabited by dangerous classes of ignorant people and delinquents. No doubt considering them unphotogenic, they ignore working class leaders and organizations.

Their investigations, interviews and commentaries all pursue the same objective: to undermine the legitimacy of the government and to destroy the president's popular support. "In aesthetic terms, this revolutionary government is a cesspit," was the delicate phrase used by the evening paper Tal Cual. Its editor, Teodoro Petkoff, is a keen opponent of Chávez. Petkoff is a former Marxist guerrilla who became a neo-liberal and a pro-privatization minister in the government of rightwing president Rafael Caldera. The Chávez government is not, of course, above criticism. It makes mistakes, and the civilian and military personnel who surround it are tainted by corruption. But the government was democratically elected and still has the backing of the majority. It can also be credited with successes, nationally and internationally.

When it comes to discrediting Chávez, anything goes. There was a scandal in Caracas in March when a faked interview with Ignacio Ramonet, the director of Le Monde diplomatique, was circulated. In a statement alleged to have been made to Emiliano Payares Gúzman, a Mexican researcher at Princeton University, Ramonet was supposed to have said: "Chávez lacks a respectable intellectual corpus, and that is why his ship is always off course. When he won the elections, it seemed to me that he had something about him. But populism won out, as so often happens in such cases. I have seen videos in which he sings boleros while setting out his economic program, if indeed he has one. I think those true and verifiable facts

speak for themselves, I don't need to voice my opinion of somebody like that."

*Venezuela Analítica*¹ immediately posted the "statement" on the web, without checking on its authenticity, and it then became headline news in El Nacional. The paper was delighted to give credence to the idea of Chávez being isolated internationally, and made no attempt to check with the supposed interviewee. When Ramonet denied having made the statement, El Nacional rounded on the hoaxer² and, less overtly, without even apologising, on Ramonet.

The "information" that has been published has verged on the surreal. For example, "sources from the intelligence services have uncovered agreements entered into with elements linked to Hezbollah on the Venezuelan island of Margarita, who are controlled by the Iranian embassy. You will remember that when Chávez was campaigning, a certain Moukhdad was extremely generous. That debt had to be repaid, and now Iran is to make Venezuela an operational base, in exchange for training Venezuelans in Iranian organizations for the defense of the Islamic Revolution. Terrorism is in our midst".³

On 21 March El Nacional ran the headline: "Hugo Chávez admits to being the head of a criminal network." Next day Tal Cual referred to "the feeling of nausea provoked by the aggressive words he uses to try to frighten Venezuelans". The president was insulted, compared with Idi Amin, Mussolini or Hitler, called a fascist, dictator or tyrant, and subjected to a spate of attacks. In any other country actions would have been brought for libel. "An ongoing and disrespectful attack," was how the minister of trade, Adina Bastidas, put it. "They accuse me of funding the planting of bombs in the streets. And I cannot defend myself. If you attack them, they complain to the United States!"

Chávez responded to this media bombardment, sometimes using strong language, especially during his weekly broadcast *Aló Presidente!* on the only state-controlled television channel. But his regime in no way resembles a dictatorship, and his diatribes have

not been followed by measures to control the flow of information. Since Chávez took office, not a single journalist has been imprisoned, and the government has not shut down any media. Yet it is accused of “flouting freedom of information” and of “attacking social communicators”.

‘Tell the truth’

On 7 January a group of the president's supporters besieged the offices of El Nacional chanting hostile slogans. Shouting “tell the truth!”, they hurled objects at the building. The number of attacks on journalists is increasing, according to Carlos Correa, general coordinator of Provea,⁴ an organization for the defense of human rights, and they are being criminalised. “Although there have been no deaths, the situation is serious. Since the media bosses decided to oppose Chávez politically, it is no longer possible to have a reasonable discussion about the country's problems. But to claim there is no freedom of expression is outrageous.”

“You read the newspapers, you watch the TV news and you have the impression that the country is gripped by conflict,” says Jesuit Father Francisco José Virtuoso sadly. “Naturally that all adds to the tension.” The popular majority is striking back in this war in which it is the target, no longer prepared to tolerate journalists who consider themselves above the law or the anti-democratic control of information.

Incidents are on the increase. The official agency Venpres described three media personalities as “narcojournalists”; the journalists in question - Ibéyise Pacheco (editor of *Así es la noticia*, a member of the El Nacional group), Patricia Poleo and television presenter José Domingo Blanco (Globovisión) - decided to make capital out of the accusations. After condemning their “persecution” in front of the cameras at the US embassy, they left for Washington, where they got a heroic welcome. The Venpres article, signed by a J Valeverde,⁵ was repudiated by President Chávez and condemned by the defense minister, José Vicente Rangel; it led to the censure and resignation of the director of Venpres, Oscar Navas. But that did not halt a campaign,

in Venezuela and abroad, against a government accused of “muzzling the media”.

The media has proved adept at using the self-fulfilling prophecy - both in relation to government supporters and the government. By protesting about infringements of liberty, when under no threat, and using lies and manipulation, the media provoked a reaction, sometimes inciting its victims to do wrong. Those misdeeds were then portrayed as the cause (and not the consequence) of the media's unhappy relationship with the government and much of the population.

We must condemn the attacks by the president's supporters on television units or journalists. But how could those supporters tolerate always being described as “Taliban” or as “villains”? We should protest when journalists, even if they are aggressive and completely identified with the oligarchy, are described as “narcojournalists”. But those journalists had themselves bombarded the president with false accusations and portrayed him as the accomplice of Colombian “narcoguerrillas”.

Led by men of influence and top journalists, the media is taking over from other players in the process of destabilization: Pedro Carmona's employers' association (Fedecámaras), Carlos Ortega's Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, dissident members of the military, the technocrats of the national oil company (PDVSA) and a few discreet US officials.⁶ United in the Venezuelan Press Bloc (BPV), the media finally showed its hand when it joined in the first general strike on 10 December 2001.

Scaremongers

“Free” opinions published in print - “Time for a change of government” or “Time to overthrow this government”⁷ - were reinforced by dubious manipulation of the broadcast media. On 5 April two TV presenters gave their own commentary on a strike of petrol stations that was linked to the PDVSA conflict: “Have you remembered to fill up? Hurry, because tomorrow there won't be a drop left in the

country.” By encouraging motorists to rush out to buy petrol, they provoked unnecessary chaos, though the strike was only partial and the stations were still receiving supplies.

On 7 April Ortega and Carmona announced that there was to be a general strike. The editor of *El Nacional*, Miguel Enrique Otero, stood shoulder to shoulder with them and spoke on behalf of the press: “We are all involved in this struggle in defense of the right to information.” Two days later the BPV, which had just been visited by the new US ambassador, Charles Shapiro, decided to back the strike. From then on the television companies broadcast live from the headquarters of the PDVSA-Chuao, the designated assembly point for opposition demonstrations.

“Take to the streets” thundered *El Nacional* on 10 April (in an unattributed editorial). “Ni un paso atrás! (not one step backwards)” responded the hoardings on Globovisión. Another TV company broadcast: “Venezuelans, take to the streets on Thursday 11 April at 10am. Bring your flags. For freedom and democracy. Venezuela will not surrender. No one will defeat us.” The call to overthrow the head of state became so obvious that the government applied Article 192 of the telecommunications law. More than 30 times -for all television and radio channels - it requisitioned 15-20 minutes' air time to broadcast its views. But the broadcasters divided the screen in two and continued to urge rebellion.

On 11 April military and civilian press conferences calling for the president's resignation marked the next phase. On RCTV, Ortega called on the opposition to march on Miraflores (the presidential palace). At about 4pm, when the scale of the conspiracy was apparent, the authorities gave the order to block the frequencies used by the private channels. Globovisión, CMT and Televen went off air for a few moments before resuming their broadcasts using satellite or cable. All screens broadcast an image that had been edited to show armed counter-demonstrators firing on “the crowd of peaceful demonstrators”. As a result the Bolivarian Circles, the social organization of Chávez supporters, were blamed for deaths and injuries.⁸

The conspirators, including Carmona, met at the offices of Venevisión. They stayed until 2am to prepare “the next stage”, along with Rafael Poleo (owner of *El Nuevo País*) and Gustavo Cisneros, a key figure in the coup. Cisneros, a multimillionaire of Cuban origin and the owner of Venevisión, runs a media empire - Organización Diego Cisneros. It has 70 outlets in 39 countries.⁹ Cisneros is a friend of George Bush senior: they play golf together and in 2001 the former US president holidayed in Cisneros's Venezuelan property. Both are keen on the privatization of the PDVSA.¹⁰ Otto Reich, US assistant secretary of state for Interamerican affairs, admits to having spoken with Cisneros that night.¹¹

At 4am on 12 April, to avoid bloodshed, Chávez allowed himself to be arrested and taken to the distant island of Orchila. Without presenting any document signed by Chávez to confirm the news, the media chorused his “resignation”. The boss of the bosses, Carmona, proclaimed himself president and dissolved all of the constituent, legitimate and democratic bodies. *Venezolana de Televisión*, the only means of communication available to the government, was the first broadcaster forced to shut down when Carmona took power.¹²

Ready for the coup

The press greeted the coup (though they censored any use of that word) with undisguised enthusiasm. And for good reason. Interviewing Admiral Carlos Molina Tamayo and Victor Manuel García, director of statistical institute Ceca, at 6.45am, presenter Napoleón Bravo boasted that he had allowed his own house to be used to record a call to rebellion by General González González. García described his role at the dissident military centre of operations at Fort Tiuna: “We were short of communications facilities, and I have to thank the press for their solidarity and cooperation in helping us to establish communications with the outside world and pass on the instructions that General González González gave me.” “One step forward” was the triumphant headline in *El Universal*. Journalist Rafael Poleo, who had filed the account of the first meeting of the rebel leaders, took responsibility (with others) for the doc-

ument setting up the new government. During the afternoon “President” Carmona offered Poleo's daughter, Patricia, the post of head of the central information bureau. The decree establishing a dictatorship was countersigned by the employers, the church and the representatives of a pseudo “civil society”, and also by Miguel Angel Martínez, on behalf of the media. Daniel Romero, private secretary of the former social-democrat president Carlos Andrés Pérez, and an employee of the Cisneros group, read it out.

The desire for revenge provoked repression. The interior minister, Ramón Rodríguez Chacín, and a member of parliament, Tarek William Saab, were arrested, and heckled and manhandled by a crowd. RCTV triggered a manhunt by publishing a list of the most wanted individuals and broadcast violent searches live, aping the hectic pace of US news broadcasts. The live broadcast on all channels of attorney general Isias Rodríguez's press conference was suddenly taken off air after only five minutes when he talked about the excesses of the “provisional government” and condemned the “coup”.

On 13 April the Chávez supporters were unleashed, and officers loyal to him retook control. But the only way Venezuelans could get information was through CNN broadcasts in Spanish - available only on cable, or on the internet sites of the Madrid daily *El País* and the BBC in London. Announcing the rebellion by the 42nd parachute division in Maracay, CNN expressed amazement that the press were saying nothing. The freedom of information that had been clamoured for had been replaced by silence. Screens were filled with action films, cookery programs, cartoons and baseball games from the major US leagues, interspersed only with repeats of General Lucas Rincón's announcement of the “resignation” of Chávez.

Thousands logged on to the internet and got on their mobile phones, but only the alternative press was able to beat the blackout. Popular newspapers, television and radio began life in the poor districts, and were an important source of communication and information. Short on experience, they were the first targets of the “democratic transition”. According to Thierry Deronne, the presenter of *Teletambores*,

Chávez had never asked them to broadcast his speeches.

But the anti-Chávez powers did not hesitate long after their coup before arresting editorial staff and seizing equipment, ensuring that the only way the people could find out what was really happening was via the opposition press. In Caracas, Radio Perola, TV Caricuao, Radio Catia Libre and Catia TV were searched and personnel subjected to violence and detention.

In the late afternoon of 13 April, crowds gathered in front of RCTV (then Venevisión, Globovisión, Televen and CMT, as well as the offices of *El Universal* and *El Nacional*), throwing stones and compelling journalists to broadcast a message calling for “their” president to be restored. It was an intolerable attack on the press; terrified journalists broadcast an appeal for help on air - conveniently forgetting that they were supposed to be on the rebel side. “We too are part of the people; we too are Venezuelans and we are doing our duty. It is not possible that the supporters of Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez [no mention that he was head of state] should consider us their enemies.”

It was 20 hours before the state channel *Venezolana de Televisión* came back on the air with the help of militants from the community media and from soldiers from the presidential guard. The silence was broken and Venezuelans then found out that the situation was changing. Except for *Ultimas Noticias*, no newspaper was published next day to announce the president's return. The private television channels broadcast no bulletins. Globovisión alone rebroadcast the information that had been transmitted by the international agencies.¹³

Although the restoration of democratic normality did not result in media repression, the media continues play victim. It gives priority to the “coup heroes”, speaks of a “power vacuum” and calls for the resignation of Chávez - described as a “murderer”. Openly called the “hate media”, it claims to be the “coup media”.

Endnotes:

- (1) See on www.analitica.com.
- (2) Gúzman claimed to have done it to show just how unreliable the Venezuelan press was.
- (3) “Entrelíneas”, El Nacional, 15 March 2002.
- (4) Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en derechos humanos.
- (5) It was later discovered that this was the pseudonym of an unsavoury character called Rafael Kries.
- (6) See “Venezuela: a coup countered”, Le Monde diplomatique English edition, May 2002.
- (7) “Overthrow the government”, El Universal, 20 March 2002.
- (8) See Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, May 2002, and the photographs posted on our website.
- (9) Including: Univisión (80% of broadcasts in Spanish in the United States), Canal 13, Chilevisión, DirectTV Latin America, Galavisión, Playboy TV Latin America, Playboy TV International, Uniseries, Vale TV, Via Digital, AOL Latin America.
- (10) The former would like to see it in the hands of a US company close to his interests, and the latter has his eye on Citgo, the American subsidiary of PDVSA.
- (11) Newsweek, Paris, 22 April 2002.
- (12) The same applies to Radio Nacional de Venezuela and the official news agency Venpres.
- (13) Some journalists have resigned in disgust, like André Izarra, of RCTV where the management has imposed a ban on pro-Chávez reporting.

Translated by Julie Stoker

THE AFTERMATH

Will Chavez' Project Survive?

*Gregory Wilpert**

More and more details about the attempted coup against President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela are beginning to emerge, although much of it still remains shrouded in mystery. The perhaps biggest unsolved mystery is who were the snipers who started the shooting at the April 11 demonstrations, which resulted in 17 dead, and provided the justification for the coup? It appears that there were as many as five or six snipers, firing from various buildings, some of whom might have been arrested, but who were subsequently freed during the brief coup regime, before they could be identified. Chavez supporters here have little doubt that the only ones who could have stood to gain from shooting at demonstrators were those who planned the coup. Anti-Chavez forces, though, seem to argue that Chavez is so mentally instable that he would place snipers, even to shoot his own supporters and even if it is against all logic and self-interest.

Of course, another big mystery that is on everyone's mind here in Venezuela is the extent to which the U.S. government was involved. There is little doubt now that the U.S. government has been supporting the Venezuelan opposition financially and through advice, as recent New York Times and Washington Post articles have reported. The National Endowment for Democracy, a US government funded institution known for its support of anti-progressive forces throughout the world, has provided nearly \$1 million to Chavez' opposition in 2001, with another \$1 million in the pipeline for 2002. Also, Wayne Madsen, a former National Security Agency intelligence officer, claims that the U.S. Navy had stationed ships off of the coast of Venezuela to monitor troop movements and reported these to the

* *ZNet Commentaries*, May 7, 2002

officers involved in the coup attempt. Assuming that the coup was carefully planned down into the last detail and not merely a coincidence of events, as the coup supporters here claim, one has to also assume that there was a central coordinating force behind this normally uncoordinated and fragmented opposition movement. Whether the U.S. government played that coordinating role or exactly how involved the U.S. really was we will probably not find out for certain until the relevant documents are declassified decades from now.

Chavez since the coup attempt

Perhaps more important than the details of how the coup was organized, is what the coup means for the future of Chavez' policies and his hold on power. The coup has done at least five things to change the political situation in Venezuela. First, it has helped Chavez separate the secret opponents and opportunists from his true loyalists. The coup lasted just barely long enough for the opportunists in his government to reveal themselves when they celebrated the coup.

Second, because the coup failed, and because it provided some clarity as to who is with Chavez and who is not, it has emboldened many hardline Chavez supporters to push for fuller implementation of Chavez' political program.

Third, the coup showed just how strong the opposition is and how far it is willing to go to oust Chavez. In other words, that the opposition can mobilize over a quarter million demonstrators and that it is quite willing to trample on Venezuela's democratically approved constitution.

Fourth, and as a mirror-image of the third point, the coup has shown just how strong Chavez' support is and how far his supporters are willing to go to defend the "Bolivarian revolution." Chavez' supporters mobilized an equal number of demonstrators as the opposition, during a complete media black-out, solely by word-of-mouth, in less than a few hours time. Also, it is clear now that many Chavez'

supporters are willing to defend the "Bolivarian revolution" with their lives, if necessary.

Finally, the coup and subsequent counter-coup have created a degree of political uncertainty previously unseen. Everyone is wondering whether there will be another coup attempt, whether someone will now try to assassinate Chavez, whether Chavez is now just a puppet of the military, or whether the country is headed for an interminable dead-lock between government and opposition.

It would seem that Chavez has decided that the only way to move forward in this post-coup situation is through reconciliation and dialogue. In numerous statements to the public, Chavez has promised to "sheathe his sword" and to initiate a dialogue with the opposition. Although much of the opposition is extremely skeptical about this, some sectors, such as the Church, some business leaders, and some union leaders have decided to take Chavez up on this offer. As part of this more conciliatory approach, Chavez' party has promised to implement a truth commission, which will make an independent investigation of the events of April 11 to 14, modeled upon the truth commissions of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Argentina.

The problem Chavez faces now, perhaps more than ever, is that his supporters are divided between what have come to be called the "Talibanes," the radicals who are saying that Chavez should implement his program now more than ever, and the "Miquilenistas," named after Luis Miquilena, the more moderate former Interior and Justice Minister and elder statesman of Venezuelan politics. Miquilena left Chavez' cabinet last fall, in the wake of the controversies surrounding the set of 49 "enabling laws" (leyes habilitante), which outraged the business sector and had led to the business strike of December 10.

What makes this division particularly dangerous for Chavez' political program is that members of his coalition in the legislature have gradually been leaving the coalition. Chavez' formerly solid majority in the legislature has now shrunk from 99-66 to 85-80. Five of the most recent defectors are members of his of own party, belong-

ing to the Miquilenista faction. It is estimated that there are about 15 more in this faction and if only three of them leave, Chavez will have lost his majority in the National Assembly, which would make it extremely difficult for Chavez to implement the rest of his program. In other words, it is not just because of the economically and mediatically powerful opposition that Chavez has to tread lightly, but his own base in the assembly threatens to break away if he does not moderate his approach.

The Opposition to Chavez

As mentioned earlier, one thing that the coup attempt and the events leading up to it did was to remind Chavez and his supporters just how powerful his opposition is. Chavez, his Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR) party, and the other parties in his coalition (a portion of Movement Towards Socialism - MAS, Fatherland for All - PPT, and the indigenous parties) have a solid dominance in all branches of the political system, as a result of their tremendous electoral victories during the election years of 1998-2000. However, the opposition to Chavez holds tremendous economic and media power.

This opposition, just as Chavez' camp, is also divided between confrontationalists and reconciliationists. The good news for Chavez is that he can for now practically dismiss the confrontationalists because they are for the most part in the legislature, where they are fragmented into about ten political parties. The real opposition to Chavez is the main union federation, the business sector, most of the mass media, and the church. This extra-parliamentary opposition has, since the coup attempt, shown signs of its willingness to engage Chavez in dialogue and reconciliation.

Chavez' parliamentary opposition is showing no signs of having learnt anything from the failed coup and is going full steam ahead with calls for his resignation, impeachment proceedings, and with efforts to convoke a referendum to cut short Chavez' term in office. On the last point, according to the constitution, Chavez' term in office is six years and would last until 2006. However, a recall election may be called four years into the president's term. Also, the con-

stitution allows for popular referenda, which is what the opposition is planning on organizing, but such a referendum could only be consultative on Chavez' term of office, unless it changes the constitution.

In an attempt to appease the extra-parliamentary opposition, particularly the business sector, Chavez recently named a more market-oriented economic team to his cabinet, one of whom even earned his doctorate in economics from the University of Chicago. But what seriously bothers the business sector are the recently passed laws which deal with land reform, banking, oil revenue, and microfinance, among many other things. Perhaps the most important of these, for Chavez' political project and for his supporters, is the land reform law, which is supposed to redistribute idle plots of land to the landless. Legislators in Chavez' coalition have said that they are willing to revise these laws, so as to allow more input from the opposition.

It seems doubtful, though, that it really was these rather technical issues, including the recent dispute over the management of the state-owned oil company, which mobilized over 250,000 citizens of Caracas to march in opposition to Chavez on April 11th. Rather, the growing unpopularity of Chavez among the middle classes probably has much more to do with the worsening economic situation, one-sided media coverage of the government, and class resentment towards a president who takes pride in his indigenous background, who speaks like a member of the lower classes, and who shows contempt for the upper classes.

Four weeks after the failed coup, the divisions within Venezuelan society are as great as ever. The coup has radicalized many of Chavez' supporters in the barrios—the poor neighborhoods of Venezuela. Many in the lower classes had their doubts about Chavez before the coup, mostly because they believed the mass media campaign against Chavez. Now, after the coup, Chavez skeptics have become followers and Chavez supporters have become diehards.

On the other side, the diehard opposition to Chavez, which is no

doubt still trying to come up with ways of organizing another coup, does not seem to realize that any non-constitutional defeat of Chavez will mean civil war. The lootings which took place April 12 and 13, immediately after the coup, were an indicator of the pent-up anger the lower classes in Venezuela feel towards those who oppose “their” president.

The Economy

It would seem, though, that the opposition is being much too impatient. Where the coup failed, domestic and international economic pressure might still succeed, in a much subtler and more profound way. That is, massive capital flight, which has been going on more or less continuously since Chavez came to power, but has intensified in the past few months and especially in the wake of the coup, is causing serious economic havoc. Among other things, capital flight has led to a constant devaluation of local currency and since Venezuela imports about 80% of its goods, this means that the imported goods become more and more expensive. In other words, inflation has become a serious problem. Up until January 2002 the government has tried to ward off this type of inflation by using its dollar reserves to buy the Bolivar, the national currency. However, as capital flight intensified after the first business-led general strike, last December 10th, the government had to abandon this strategy because the reserves were being depleted too quickly. Inflation immediately shot up the following month, to over 9% for the period between January and April 2002. For all of 2001 it had been 12%.

Capital flight, inflation, and general economic uncertainty have of course also contributed to a lack of investment and a slight increase in unemployment (from 14.2% in February 2001 to 15% in February 2002). Another consequence of capital flight and inflation is the relatively sudden appearance of a large fiscal deficit for the government, amounting to as much as \$8 billion for 2002. The drop in the price of oil in late 2001 also significantly contributed to the government shortfall. Given that the government already owes massive public sector debts from the pre-Chavez years, the government appears to be nearly broke at the moment.

The opposition is arguing that the dire economic situation means that the government must apply to the International Monetary Fund to finance the deficit. However, as most IMF-observers and the Chavez government know, going to the IMF will mean complying with neo-liberal IMF loan conditions, such as liberalizing trade (more specifically: bust OPEC quotas); cutting back on social spending for education, health care, and services for the poor (no more microcredits); privatization (of the oil sector); guarantees for the sanctity of private property (no land redistribution and no titles for the homes in the barrios).

Chavez will be loathe to go to the IMF for help. He has continuously railed against “savage neo-liberalism” and it is doubtful that he will give in on this. So far he can avoid going to the IMF because Venezuela has about \$15 billion worth of reserves, which it could use to finance the deficit instead of looking for outside funding. The problem with using up the reserves is that doing so leaves Venezuela even more at the mercy of international currency speculators and capital flight, since it would no longer have the currency reserves to combat these. Chavez' main hope at this point is that the price of oil maintains its current relatively high value, so that the deficit and the decline in currency reserves can be reversed relatively quickly.

Implications for Venezuela's Future

Based on what is happening in Venezuela now and on what has happened in Nicaragua, Chile, and Cuba, it would seem that any political movement that seeks to use the state as a means for redistributing a country's wealth will be challenged on at least three fronts: the international political (mainly the U.S.), the domestic economic, and international economic front (the domestic political front having been conquered by electoral means, in the case of Venezuela and Chile, by insurrectional means in the case of Cuba and Nicaragua).

While it is possible for progressive forces to win significant national political power (the next sign of hope being Brazil), progressives have yet to figure out how to deal with the other three fronts. Chavez

has primarily dealt with them through confrontation. This approach, in light of the business strikes, the subsequent coup attempt, and the declining economic condition, is no longer viable. Sheer national political force, which Chavez has in spades, is not enough to combat the international political (U.S.) and the domestic and international economic opposition.

Clearly, Chavez needs to maintain his focus and should not give up on his principles and his program, the way his predecessor Rafael Caldera did. A better strategy might be learnt from the local governments of Porto Alegre in Brazil and of FMLN controlled municipalities in El Salvador, to name just two positive examples among many others that are cropping up all over the world. In these places, a true culture of grassroots participation and democracy is being cultivated.

Chavez has often stated his support for participatory democracy and has even opened the avenues for such participation through the new Venezuelan constitution. However, his government has not cultivated a participatory culture which would flourish in the new institutional structures he has created. Part of the problem is that most of Venezuela's grassroots leaders are now in political power, leaving a vacuum of progressive leadership at the grassroots. Chavez tried to breathe life into this grassroots through the "Bolivarian Circles", but that approach failed due to their stigmatization as violent and their lack of leadership.

What the examples of places where a true culture of grassroots democracy exists have shown, is that they manage to create development and decent lives for the poor, precisely because they have become more self-reliant and thus are less dependent on outside investment and finance. This is not to say that if Chavez imitates this grassroots approach all his problems will be solved. Rather, what it means is that such an approach might be more compatible with the forces arrayed against his movement than outright confrontation is, while putting his movement into a better position for actually achieving its stated goals of empowering the poor.

Why Oppose Chavez?

*Gregory Wilpert**

With an oil industry strike that has largely paralyzed the country's primary industry entering its third month, Venezuela is heading for economic and perhaps even social disaster. While most businesses operated more or less normally during the strike, the partial paralysis of Venezuela's oil industry has meant a loss of around \$ 4 billion to the country and has caused shortages and bottlenecks throughout the economy. President Chavez has managed to regain control over most of the industry's installations, but it is not clear to what extent he will be able to avoid permanent damage to them. Venezuela's opposition is still intent on ousting president Chavez not only before the end of his term in 2006, but also before a constitutionally guaranteed recall referendum in August 2003. It has declared that it is willing to sacrifice the country's well-being for this goal, arguing that Venezuela will be worse off if the president does not give in to the opposition's demands of holding elections in early 2003 or resigning.

Why is the opposition so intent on getting rid of Chavez and why now, if it can organize a perfectly legal recall referendum in August 2003? When asked why not wait until the recall referendum, Carlos Ortega, the leader of the oppositional union federation, simply responded, "The country cannot wait that long." To people like Ortega and most of the media it has become absolutely self-evident why the country cannot wait. If one digs a bit deeper, the reasons one can find for ousting the president fall into roughly three categories: spurious, serious, and unarticulated.

* Previously unpublished, parts of which will appear in *The New Left Review*, March/April 2003

Spurious Reasons

Oddly, the spurious reasons are the ones one hears most often, perhaps because these are the most damning accusations, if they were true. Into the category of spurious or easily dismissible reasons for ousting Chavez belong the accusations of human rights violations, the lack of separation of powers, economic decline, and the fomenting of class division.

The opposition's accusation that the Chavez government violates human rights is probably the most spurious of charges. This charge is primarily based on one incident: the deaths that led to the April 11 coup attempt, whose exact circumstances are still shrouded in fog. The opposition claims that Chavez ordered his supporters to shoot at an unarmed opposition demonstration. While some government supporters did shoot that day, they were exchanging fire with the police. It is not certain who started the shooting, but most eyewitness accounts clearly indicate that individuals positioned in buildings near both pro-and anti-government demonstrations shot at both crowds, which then led the police and the Chavez supporters to shoot at each other. The only ones who stood to gain anything from this incident were the coup plotters, since they used this shooting incident as the reason for ousting Chavez. Recently a former CNN correspondent, Otto Neustaltdt, said that the morning of the coup, military officers involved in the coup asked him to make a CNN video recording, denouncing deaths in the demonstrations, well before any deaths had even occurred. This piece of evidence, the benefit the coup leaders were able to gain from the deaths, and the fact that most of the dead were Chavez supporters (still a controversial claim), make it highly unlikely that the Chavez government had anything to do with the shooting.

Other accusations of human rights violations are equally far-fetched, since there are no political prisoners, there is no censorship, and citizens enjoy nearly total freedom of assembly. The occasional break-up of demonstrations is related to demonstrations without a permit and that block the freeways or certain strategic buildings, whereby the government is generally much more permissive than most U.S.

city governments tend to be.

Many observers of Venezuela probably find the accusation that Chavez has armed paramilitary gangs to intimidate the opposition more troubling than the government's supposed human rights abuses during the coup attempt or the supposed lack of freedom of assembly. The media and opposition spokespersons regularly refer to any gathering of Chavez-supporters as "circles of terror" or "circles of violence," implying that the "Bolivarian Circles" that Chavez created in early 2002 are nothing more than shock troops meant to terrorize and intimidate the opposition, similar to the shock troops of Hitler or Mussolini. According to the government and to spokespersons of the "Circulos Bolivarianos," these groups are merely neighborhood groups of between five and fifteen persons that support the government and engage in improving their communities. While it is no doubt true that members of some of these "circulos" are armed, one has to keep in mind that Venezuela has a heavily armed population, with a firearm estimated to exist in every other household. Also, as most foreign journalists have found out through their own investigations, the overwhelming majority of these "circulos," ranging in the tens of thousands, are unarmed and are indeed merely working on community projects and on supporting the government by organizing demonstrations.

As for political violence, there have been several incidents, but these can be to a large extent traced to the Caracas Metropolitan police (who have shot at demonstrators with live ammunition), some violence can be traced to opposition groups, and some to pro-government groups. But the bottom line is; anyone who is at all familiar with the workings of the government knows very well that it has no control over the activities of the Bolivarian Circles, which tend to be quite disorganized. Thus, to describe them as part of a larger government strategy to weaken or intimidate the opposition is attributing to the government a much greater organizational capacity than it has. Despite these weak arguments on human rights violations, the opposition insists on calling the Chavez government "totalitarian" and "castro-communist"—terms that are nothing more than traditional red-baiting.

Another common spurious opposition argument is that there is a lack of separation of powers in Venezuela. The opposition argues that Chavez controls the legislature, the Supreme Court, and the Attorney General's office, by virtue of controlling a majority in the legislature and by having made all the necessary appointments to the judiciary. First of all, this kind of dominance is a fairly common phenomenon in most democracies, especially when a party wins elections by a landslide, as was the case with Chavez' series of electoral victories between 1998 and 2001. The U.S., for example, has a President, a Congress, a Supreme Court, and an attorney general, which are all either controlled or appointed by the same party.

However, Chavez does not have a solid control of the legislature because his party (Movimiento Quinta Republica, MVR), does not have a majority of the seats, which means that the pro-government faction is a coalition, consisting of at least five parties. Also, the legislature occasionally acts on its own against the president's preferences, such as occurred recently when the legislature passed a new electoral law that the Chavez administration did not like.

As for the Supreme Court, it has demonstrated its independence from Chavez many times since it was appointed, especially in a number of recent decisions, such as when it rejected indicting the military officers involved in the April coup or when it ordered the central government to return control of the Caracas Metropolitan Police back to the city mayor's office. Finally, the Attorney General was appointed with a solid vote from both the opposition and the pro-government coalition and is as independent as any U.S. Attorney General can be expected to be. Also, many, perhaps even most, of the deputy attorney generals were appointed before Chavez became president and clearly stated their opposition to Chavez when they supported the brief coup regime.

A third spurious opposition argument is that Chavez has brought nothing but economic decline to Venezuela. Specifically, they point to the increase in unemployment and inflation in the past year. However, if one takes a longer-term look at Venezuela's macro-economic performance, one can quickly see that under Chavez the

country has done reasonably well. When Chavez first came to power the price of oil was at an all time low and the economy nose-dived during his first year. However, during his second and third years, the economy did fairly well, expanding by 3.2% and 2.8% during those years. Inflation was at its lowest point in nearly 20 years, dropping to 12% for 2001. The following year, 2002, was when the economic trouble began, partly as a result of falling oil prices and thus falling government revenues, and largely as a result of capital flight and two business-led strikes that lead up to and followed the opposition's April 2002 coup attempt. The blame for the declining economy can thus be found in at least three factors: the continuation of Venezuela's 20-year economic decline, a temporary drop in world oil prices, and the opposition's insistence on deposing the president via business strikes (and capital flight) before the end of his term. This is not to say that the Chavez government has not made economic management mistakes. The most important mistake in this regard probably was underestimating the strength and persistence of the opposition.

The fourth spurious opposition argument is that Chavez has fomented division and violence and that Venezuela is more divided now than it has ever been. It is no doubt true that Venezuela is politically more divided and polarized than it has been since the demobilization of Venezuela's guerrilla movement in the 1960's. However, one has to seriously examine to what extent Chavez is the cause or the consequence of Venezuela's division. Chavez emerged following an ever-increasing class division in Venezuela, which has caused Venezuela's poverty rate to increase more in the past 20 years than in any other country in Latin America. Chavez has no doubt served as a focus for Venezuela's division, uncovering it and thereby making it more visible and more acute, but he could not possibly be the underlying cause of Venezuela's division, which is poverty. In essence, the conflict in Venezuela is an all-out class war, where most of Chavez' support comes from the poor and the opposition's support comes from the middle and upper class. The opposition appears to be gradually recognizing this and has thus placed the fight against poverty on the top of its political program, something it rarely concerned itself with before Chavez came to power.

Serious Reasons

While the spurious arguments against Chavez can be dismissed relatively easily, the serious and semi-serious reasons cannot. The first of these, Chavez' abrasive and autocratic style, is closely related to the previous argument that Chavez has fomented divisions in Venezuela. However, Chavez' style merely creates the illusion that he is the cause of the division. Still, this is an argument that one should take seriously because his style is probably at least partly responsible for Chavez' support having diminished since he first came to power in 1999 (though, ironically, it is probably also the reason why he still has a solid base of support in a large part of the population). At the very least, his style has provided his opposition and former friends powerful ammunition for dismissing him. His tendency to call his political enemies names, such as "squalid," makes constructive dialogue between the government and the opposition extremely difficult. On the other hand, one should keep in mind that the opposition's discourse is equally as harsh as the president's, something which makes opposition criticism of this aspect of the Chavez presidency somewhat hypocritical.

The second serious opposition argument against Chavez is that there is a large amount of corruption in his government. While it is very difficult to measure corruption, it is no doubt true, and Chavez admits this, that corruption is still present in the government. Even though Chavez came to power on an anti-corruption platform, several corruption cases have been uncovered during his administration and some cases have been swept under the rug. However, the claim that corruption in Venezuela is greater than before is doubtful, especially since the government has abolished 80% of the secret budgets, which used to constitute the largest source of corruption in Venezuela. The issues that the opposition regularly points to as its most serious examples, such as the allocation of \$2.3 billion dollars to government expenses instead of a special macroeconomic savings fund, or the purchase of a new presidential airplane to replace an aging one, do not constitute corruption, but at the most poor judgment, something that occurs in governments all of the time.

The third serious accusation, which is closely related to the previous one, is that the opposition says that the Chavez government is filled with incompetence and the trappings of patronage and clientelism. Of all of the serious arguments against the Chavez government, this is perhaps the most serious.

Regarding the patronage argument, here Chavez is following Venezuelan and Latin American custom, placing loyalists in key positions. Given that many government positions of the past were filled with members of the old parties, the practice of replacing these with government loyalists was to some extent a protective measure against the sabotage that these old functionaries often engage in. The extremely damaging political strike of the oil industry that managers and administrators engaged in is a perfect example of what happens when opposition loyalists are in control of a key institution. Also, there are numerous examples of government functionaries sabotaging government policy at all levels and in all branches of government.

Unfortunately, sabotage is all too often combined with the government placing inexperienced or incompetent functionaries in key posts. It is well known, for example, that some ministers are essentially mismanaging their ministries. This also explains why Chavez has had an extremely high turn-over in ministers since he has come to power, exchanging them on a regular basis. Of course, such a high turn-over in ministries causes massive upheaval and while it might replace an incompetent minister with a slightly more competent one, it puts the whole institution into disarray until the new leadership has settled in. This also explains why Chavez appointed many officers to his government. According to him, it's not part of a strategy to militarize the government, but an effort to find the best managers who are loyal to Chavez' political project.

Another reason for the persistence of poor management in the Chavez government is that most of Chavez' leaders come from relatively modest backgrounds. While these individuals might have had good leadership skills in organizing unions or communities,

they do not have the necessary experience or training for managing large sprawling government institutions.

The combination of spurious and serious arguments for opposing Chavez makes for a very potent mixture, which, especially with the help of a private media that amplifies and repeats the above mentioned arguments over and over again, thereby making it relatively easy to convince the middle classes and others to join the opposition. The media have created a powerful discourse in Venezuela, such that anyone who questions it is automatically declared to be living in a fantasy world. The script is identical in all four major private television networks and nary all major newspapers. As a result, the vast majority of the opposition has swallowed these arguments hook, line, and sinker, such that many have come to hate Chavez, his government, and his supporters—a feeling that is often reciprocated. This opposition discourse acquires even more force and power to convince when it is combined with political and economic interests that are left unarticulated because they would be too embarrassing or discrediting if discussed in public.

Unarticulated Reasons

So what are the unarticulated motivations behind the opposition's efforts to get rid of Chavez? It is possible to identify at least four types of reasons that clearly are present but rarely enter into the public discourse: economic interests, political interests, prejudice, and strategic considerations.

In terms of economic interests, the opposition, particularly the chamber of commerce, Fedecameras and the management of PDVSA, are concerned about the oil reform law and a land reform law, both of which were passed last year, when the current conflict first began. The oil reform law sets the stage for reforming Venezuela's oil industry, which is notorious for being a “state within a state” and has become increasingly inefficient over the past twenty years, passing on an ever-declining share of its profits to the government. PDVSA is Latin America's largest corporation, but also one of its most inefficient, according to a recent ranking by the busi-

ness magazine *America Economía*. The new oil law limits foreign companies to 50% joint ventures and it doubles the fixed royalties that companies have to pay per barrel of extracted oil to the state. Also, there are many interests within the opposition that are intent on privatizing PDVSA, such as its former president Luis Giusti. Giusti happens to own several of the tankers that blocked the ports during the December strike and also has a stake in the main data processing company that PDVSA subcontracts, INTESA, which caused some of the severest damage to Venezuela's oil industry. As long as Chavez is in power, privatization is out of the question, since Chavez had the national character of the oil industry anchored both in the constitution and in the new oil law.

Finally, the law would enable the government to restructure the oil industry, so as to make it more efficient and provide greater revenues to the government. This last issue is one that has a direct impact on the oil industry's white-collar employees, who fear losing their jobs as a result of the restructuring. This is probably one of the main reasons PDVSA managers and administrative workers went on strike, even though the issue was never mentioned in public.

Another major interest that the country's oppositional elite wishes to protect are their large landed estates. The land reform law is designed to put an end to “latifundios,” the estates that are not used for agricultural purposes, but which take up large areas of agriculturally useful land. Idle agricultural land of over 5,000 hectares (12,355 acres), would be required to be put into production or, if the owner refuses, would be made available for redistribution to landless peasants who commit themselves to cultivate the land. The opposition has argued that this law violates the right to private property, even though the redistributed land would be compensated for at market rates. None the less, Fedecameras was so opposed to the law that it cited this law as the most important reason for the first employer-led “general strike” of December 10, 2001. The union federation CTV joined the strike with the uncommon union reasoning that the land law and other laws passed at that time would impinge on the business sector's ability to do business.

While the first two largely unarticulated issues mentioned above primarily apply to the upper class, Venezuela's middle class also has some important unarticulated reasons for opposing Chavez. Among these are that the Chavez government has not shared the recent increase in oil income with the middle class, but has spent it mostly on projects that benefit the poor, such as doubling the education budget, building extensive public housing for the poor, and assuring free health care for any one who needs it. The middle class tends not to benefit from these policies because for the most part it relies on private health care and education. Another important unarticulated middle class reason for opposing Chavez is that the recent economic crisis has affected the middle class much more than the poor. For example, devaluation and inflation hit the middle class much harder than the poor are because the middle class tends to consume more products and services that are imported or denominated in dollars (such as cars or vacations in the U.S.). Also, the poor, who live off of the informal economy, are more able to quickly adjust their income to inflation than middle class salaried white collar workers, who generally can expect a raise only at the end of the calendar year.

In addition to the above mentioned unarticulated economic reasons, there also are unarticulated political reasons (which, of course, have economic ramifications). That is, while almost all political parties in Venezuela claim to be "left of center," many of them subscribe to the neo-liberal agenda of privatization, reduced government role in social spending, and "free" trade. Clearly, all of these parties are vehemently opposed to Chavez also on ideological grounds, since Chavez considers neo-liberalism to be "savage." (In response, the opposition has begun referring to Chavez' political program as "savage neo-communism.") Also, there are some political groups, such as Bandera Roja, which feel that Chavez has not gone far enough in his reforms and are opposed to him on this basis. Differences in political ideology are very legitimate reasons for opposing the government, if only the opposition would actually spell out its political program.

In some cases, such as with the Movement Towards Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS), Solidaridad, and individual

political leaders such as Pablo Medina and Luis Miquilena, these split from the government coalition ostensibly because Chavez was being too confrontational and ought to be seeking more dialogue with the opposition. As such, one can consider the opposition of these parties and individuals to be based on the different degrees of radicality. That is, the parties and individuals that left the Chavez coalition were more willing to compromise on his political program than Chavez was. Chavez' rather uncompromising stance on his political project could still cause him to lose more supporters in the future.

Another unarticulated reason for opposing Chavez is racism. Venezuelans generally say that there is little or no racism in Venezuela and that all, regardless of skin color have an equal opportunities at social mobility in Venezuela. However, if one takes even a cursory look at the participants in the opposition and pro-government demonstrations, one can immediately notice a clear difference in skin color. The population that supports Chavez is by and large of much darker skin color and much poorer than the part of the population that supports the opposition. Certainly, there is a mix in both groups, but this characterization applies to the overwhelming majority of participants in both types of demonstrations. This type of difference in support by itself does not necessarily mean that it is the result of racism. However, when one listens to the opposition discourse about Chavez supporters, one can clearly hear the disparaging characterizations of "chavistas." They are regularly described as "lumpen" (dregs), "negros" (blacks), ignorant, and simpletons - all terms that are also used for Chavez. Part of the intense dislike the middle class has of Chavez comes precisely from the fact that he uses metaphors and expressions that Venezuela's poor can relate to, but to the middle and upper classes this speech seems undignified for a head of state.

Finally, an unarticulated reason not for opposing Chavez, but for opposing the constitutionally set electoral timetable is of a strategic nature. The opposition is now unanimously demanding that Chavez either resign or call for new elections within the first three months of 2003. Chavez, however, argues that he will not resign, even if he

loses a consultative referendum, since such a referendum would be unconstitutional. The reason it would be unconstitutional is that the constitution already provides for a recall referendum, but which requires more signatures and has a tougher turn-out and vote requirement than the consultative referendum. Also, allowing a consultative referendum on an elected official's term in office would set a dangerous precedent, which would make future governments much less stable if one can call such a referendum whenever the president's popularity drops below 50%. As for new elections, Chavez argues that this is also not an option, since the constitution does not permit the president to call for early elections. He has, however, indicated that a constitutional amendment might be possible, which could then allow for early elections.

So why does the opposition not wait until August 2003, when a recall referendum is possible? Aside from their own arguments that the country cannot wait that long, another possible reason is that they fear that the opposition would not win such a referendum. While the opposition consistently argues that Chavez has practically no popular support, many opposition figures are well aware that Chavez still enjoys considerable popular support and that they might lose in an all-out campaign against a fragmented and discredited opposition (a recent poll showed that 56% of Venezuelans do not trust the opposition, a slightly lower percentage than the proportion that does not trust the president). Their favorite option is that Chavez resigns because this way he would not be able to run again in new presidential elections.

Conclusion

If one combines the above-named reasons for opposing Chavez with a private mass media that continuously reiterates the spurious and the serious reasons for opposing Chavez, one has a powerful combination that few skilled politicians or political movements could survive. It should thus come as no surprise that the opposition has managed to lower Chavez' popularity even among the poor, but especially among the middle class. Despite the opposition's and the media's efforts, many in Venezuela, perhaps even a majority, still

support Chavez. As a result, the country has become bitterly divided between those who believe the government and those who believe the media's and the opposition's interpretation of what is happening in Venezuela. The only way these two parts of the country will come together and avoid bloodshed is if some kind of agreement can be found as to the nature of the opposition and of the Chavez government. Unfortunately, an openly biased mass media will make it practically impossible for the country to reach this kind of agreement, since the mass media are the primary means by which a country comes to an agreement as to what is true and right in today's information societies. The media's unabashed bias disqualifies it from playing this role in Venezuela.

Lessons of the April Coup

*Marta Harnecker Interviews Chavez**

MH: Regarding the peaceful aspect of the Revolution, when you've been asked if you fear that a new Chile might happen in your country, keeping in mind the coup d'état against Allende, you've answered that the difference between that and this process is that the first one was a Revolution without arms while the Bolivarian Revolution has arms and people ready to use them if it's necessary to defend it. On the other hand, you expressed before the coup in April 2002 that any intent of a coup d'état could generate radicalization of the Revolution, therefore the oligarchy had to think seriously about taking that step. You've also affirmed that having a military force doesn't necessarily mean "using the arms" but counting on them as "a supporting and dissuading force"⁷⁸. In fact, as per your account, the Armed Forces blocked a military-coup attempt in preparation during the electoral process of 1998 and they stopped the electoral fraud at the beginning of the process. On the other hand, one cannot negate that they've played an important role during the current process: in first place, as guarantors of six electoral processes in less than two years, avoiding fraud and military coups; in second place, as the main executors of Plan Bolívar 2000 and of the emergency plans to confront the consequences of the natural disasters that affected many Venezuelan villages.

*I understand that until before the coup of April 11, 2002, you estimated that the majority of those in high command supported you, despite that in the last few months some officials of high rank appeared publicly asking you to resign as president of the republic, and General Guaicaipuro Lameda had recently resigned as president of the state-owned *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*. He*

* Excerpted from *Hugo Chávez Frías: Un Hombre, Un Pueblo* Entrevista de Marta Harnecker, 2002

expressed to have disagreements with some policies of his government. Is that the case?

However, the coup on April 11, 2002, was only possible due to the fact that an important sector of the high ranks supported the opposition, although it's also true that your return to power was due to, among other things, that many in those ranks rethought things and finally you ended up with a majority support within the military.

1. Erroneous Perception of the level of support

What is the reason for your erroneous perception of the level of support within the Armed Forces?

HC: And here a large topic is unveiled: how does a leader of the country obtain objective information of what is going on in his country? On one side, it often happens that the people around him, in order to please him, to save him worries or because of opportunism avoid informing him of the problems by giving him rosy information. On the other side, the attitude of the leader subtracts himself from paying attention to critical information. Is there any mechanism to avoid what Eduardo Galeano in a conversation named as the echo problem: the leader and his echo?

Or as Matus says: "The leader and his bell jar."

Look, in regard to the first question, without any doubt I overestimated the strength of a group of people whom I believed I knew well enough, maybe it was the heart.... When feelings play an important role it is sometimes fatal, tragic. Since 1999, I kept respecting seniorities-respecting the military roll with minor variations. There was no beheading of the military leadership. And regarding the perception of their disposition to respect the constitution, the government, the commander-in-chief, I was wrong. In reality, it wasn't a total mistake; if that had been the case, you and I wouldn't be sitting here. Because in reality the answer that we experienced on the Saturday and that allowed the government to return to power shows in a very objective manner that the great majority of

the generals were not involved. It was a minority that was able to mislead the rest. I mistrusted some of them. There was no surprise regarding those who engineered the coup. We had delicate information about, for instance, the military attaché in Washington and some expressions from some other generals. But I admit that I was wrong regarding some persons in key positions, like the commander-in-chief of the army, General Vázquez Velasco, and that I never even thought that a group of officers was able to reach such extremes as to get involved with the movement for the coup. There, one has to assume self-criticism: one needs to be much more cautious.

With regard to the resignation, it was something that had a really negative effect. Many soldiers were surprised by the way the situation was managed, but they reacted later on.

Well, in any case it's been a learning experience. From now on we're going to pay much more attention to some signals, we're going to try to be more precise in our individual evaluation: the interests of each human being and the internal conflicts of the institution, often injected from the outside.

2. How a leader obtains objective information

Now, with regard to the second question on how a leader can obtain exact information about what is going on in the country. I don't doubt that a leader needs a team that constantly follows current events and informs him without impairing the reality, without covering up information. Now, it's true what you said, that for different reasons the information given to the head of state is not sufficiently clear, and I think this is unavoidable. What do I do in order to correct that situation? I read the papers, which is one way of staying informed. I particularly like to rummage through the inside pages where denunciations, letters from the public and the readers' page are printed. I read this and I start calling people. "Look, what happened with this?" "What kind of problem is that?"

On the other hand, in palace I have a group of people, some are soldiers, others are civilians, whom I call the Inspectoría. I send them

to do unannounced inspections on some particular sites; I ask them to bring me information about what they find along with photographs and reports from the people. That way I learn of many things that work, things that work badly and things that don't work at all. I insist that they tell me the truth. I insist of the Chief of Intelligence that he tell me the facts, the tendencies, at the moment they occur. Obviously, my informants have to have judgment because the president doesn't need to be overwhelmed by rumors, by information circulating on the streets, but he needs to be informed of those facts that in their judgment may impact the decision-making. It's a constant predicament of mine. And in this I think we are improving.

And, on the hand, Marta, I tend to run away from the confinement of the bell jar that Matus refers to in order to have direct contact with the people. I receive a huge amount of papers and letters. Naturally, I don't have time to read them all, but I do read a fair amount of them, and the kids who work with me read, process, and give me abstracts. That way many complaints from different areas-social, economic and popular-reach me. Or contact with small groups such as the one in Las Malvinas, with 60 leaders from the neighborhood who inform, criticize, make suggestions, present preliminary projects and ideas. Other times, walking on the streets, I ask questions. All of these are mechanisms, some institutional, others personal; some respond to the political situation when they ought to be rather structural.

I'm aware that this cannot be limited to personal, spasmodic actions. It must be a continuous process with a methodology that allows us to diagnose, evaluate and inspect. We need to organize an office capable of detecting problems and tracking instructions. I believe this is the best way of staying informed at the highest level possible of the surrounding reality, because it would be terrible that one were kept deceived, thinking that everything is well while the country is sinking.

MH: And in relation to your consulting team, do you aim to surround yourself with critical persons? Do you readily accept criticism?

HC: Yes, of course, and I actually ask for it. I don't like complacent people. If there are decisions to be made that a minister or official does not agree with, it seems to me absolutely correct that the issue be discussed, deliberated to reach the best option.

3. The dimension of the treason

MH: Don't you believe that the first thing to keep in mind is that the soldiers are not one homogenous group? I believe that the coup of April 11 reveals exactly that you can count on the support from the majority of the troops, the non-commissioned officers and the young officers. Those who betrayed you were essentially members of the high ranks, the sector most susceptible to the ideology of the dominant classes. Is that right?

HC: Yes, but it's not all the generals....

MH: How many generals took part in the coup?

HC: Those who really participated in the coup d'état, those who had been planning it for quite some time and those who subscribed to the operation of manipulation and support of the coup are no more than 20 per cent, and perhaps I'm exaggerating. And if you analyze almost all of them, one by one, you may understand their reasons. Some are political, some are economic. Some, because they don't quite understand the political process, others because they're influenced by that persistent campaign that if communism, if the Colombian guerrilla, if Bolivarian popular militias, if the plan to weaken the Armed Forces, etcetera. Some were confused, others were engaged in the coup.

Of almost 100 generals, that little group is no bigger than 20, despite the fact that many of them were in the video⁷⁹. The one who read the communiqué was among the conspirators but the majority of them were there because they had been called; they were manipulated. They were told: "The president ordered the killing of people-watch the images-and now he wants us to go to the street to contin-

ue the killing. He himself has said that the soldier who directs arms against his own people be damned (a sentence by Bolívar). Therefore we're not going to obey that; we're going to pronounce ourselves within the institution." And many of them fell in that game, that trap, that manipulation.

4. Who are the soldiers engaged in the coup d'état

MH: *How do you characterize the group involved with the coup?*

HC: Almost all of the conspirators are men of privilege, with political contacts with the previous government, with AD and COPEI, or officers who had become wealthy, sometimes through dubious businesses in association with "dogs of war." There were "dogs of war" involved in the coup: Mr. Pérez Recao, dealer of weapons and military equipment.

Finally, I continue thinking despite what happened that the majority, even among the generals-people of my generation-, was not participating in the coup.

MH: *What is your analysis of what happened within the Armed Forces? How was it possible that the military you trusted were won over for that intent of a coup?*

HC: Venezuela is living a historic conflict-that's how we categorize it-, a terminal conflict, a war that ends and a war that begins; it's a rupture with the past. And one cannot ignore a sector with many interactions-historical, social, economic, psychological, etc-with society as a whole and the other sectors that constitute it. So the Armed Forces have been feeling the impact of the national shake-up for quite some time already. It's not a sector isolated from the national events.

And within this context a group of soldiers, obviously shaped by certain criteria of democracy, were co-opted, convinced by groups of civilians, politicians and businessmen in favor of the coup. They are persons who spent one, two or more decades immersed in a

process with external influences that generated individual or group interests very similar to the interests of the civilian, political and business sectors. Some of those soldiers were engaged; they were the promoters of the coup and for many years they belonged to groups that took shape and shelter within established power. They accumulated privileges or took over privileged positions. When our Revolution arrived and our government took power, they started to lose their privileges such as, for example, the control of the armed institutions and the contracts of military purchasing. Therefore, it's not strange that Isaac Pérez Recao, one of the persons involved in the coup and who is now in the United States-and it's almost certain that he was behind Mr. Carmona-is a man who for many years did business selling weapons: rifles, grenades and armored vehicles to the Armed Forces. This man befriended, for instance, one of our generals in Washington. The day of the coup, that general came back from Washington on Pérez Recao's plane and joined the conspirators. He even smuggled weapons-but not weapons that belonged to the Venezuelan Armed Forces-into Fort Tiuna in order to take control of some spaces.

Others had aspirations of becoming possible military chiefs, because they were associated with the parties that governed the country for a long time. They aspired to become division generals, military chiefs, Army chiefs, chiefs of the Armed Forces and, well, their plans did not pan out. And it was then that their resentment started: "Chávez promoted another one, but not me." "Chávez is giving positions to his friends, but not to us who had the potential." All those tales.

They were basically-with some exceptions-the soldiers who became the engines of the conspiracy and, moreover, those who manipulated a group of officers.

5. Work done by conspirators within the general staff

Last night I spoke to four generals of the Air Force whom we decided not to bring to court-I've been speaking to many generals one by one; almost every week I speak to a group-and one of them

explained to me that one of the generals involved in the coup told him to report to the command at the Carlota base. He did as he was told, and there he was told: "Look, do you know what's going on? Watch these images. There's a peaceful demonstration and look at the president's people, the armed Bolivarian Circles, and pay close attention, they're shooting, killing people." They showed that footage, the video that everybody saw. "The president went crazy, and now he's asking us to go out to massacre people but we're not going to do that. Do you agree?" "Well, yes, I agree. I don't want to kill people. What's going on is horrible." Moreover, he was told: "Look, the president has resigned and there is a vacuum of power. We're writing a document; we're going to declare our intentions to the country." Then a television camera captures one of the generals reading the document. He was manipulated with lies and fell into the error. He told me: "I was stupid, but they're never going to fool me again!" And I believe him, because we have identified those who really were the instigators and we know that there's another group that was fooled, manipulated as well. That group belongs to my generation.

Moreover, it's a favorable piece of information that the following day some of them started reacting, thinking more calmly, seeing the reality and assuming positions. That was before my return. I want to clarify this to you because people might think that it was because of my return that they jumped back to my side. No, no, although some did. It was the following day that the majority reacted; it occurred to them that I had not resigned. They started to declare their positions in a very strong way. Some of them did it in a more reserved manner, but in the end there were these declarations along with popular reaction, which permitted the reversal of the situation.

One of the generals involved in the coup, for instance, was the chief of Caldera's Casa Militar and a very good friend of Caldera's son-in-law. Another one of them is a retired general who was active when I won the elections and attempted to prepare a coup d'état against me but failed. He didn't have the power to launch it that December in 1998. I mean, there are a variety of reasons-some individual, others political-that brought together those soldiers and brought them close

to political parties, such as Acción Democrática and COPEI, business sectors, weapons dealers, etc., and the media with some amount of power. They managed to control a conflicting moment that was fed from the outside, prepared in part by a conflict like the one affecting PDVSA, an internal conflict between sectors, a struggle between internal powers. It was on this stage that they had been preparing, for quite some time already, the events of April 11.

6. Why such a benevolent attitude? Weakness or strength?

MH: You say that you decided not to take them to court. What is the reason for such a benevolent attitude? You should know that there is a concern inside as well as outside Venezuela that here no one is punished, that despite the fact that this is a government that has strongly opposed corruption no corrupt person has been tried in spite of the existence of obvious evidence of corruption. The same goes for the coup d'état. I understand that within sectors of troops and non-commissioned officers that are completely engaged in the process, the attitude of the government is not understood. Neither do they understand your appointment of General Rincón, who announced your resignation, to the post of minister of defense. All of this gives the impression of weakness-not strength. There are those who think that the correlation of forces within the Armed Forces are so against you that you have no choice but to be conciliatory. What can you say with regard to this?

HC: You can read a reality like this one in many ways. Whether you call it weakness or strength depends on your concept of weakness and strength. After our return to power, following the coup d'état of April 11, we had many options. One was to show strength from a traditional point of view, understanding this as the execution of harsh actions, like a battalion of tanks attacking, moving forward and destroying positions, flattening one wall after another, occupying space. Some people conceive strength that way. It's a respectable concept. I'm not diminishing its merit, but that doesn't mean this concept is valid for every situation. I imagine that when the Nazis were marching toward Leningrad they had this concept in mind: we're going to move forward to the heart of the enemy to blow it up.

There is another concept of strength. Look at those bamboos. It's an image used by the Chinese: the bamboo bends over without breaking, as opposed to other trees that seem so strong but that nevertheless break. I believe I've had this concept of strength forever—the strength of flexibility, maneuvering and intelligence, and not brute force, meaning the expression of strength as an immediate response without persistence over time.

Going back to what I was telling you, when I came back I had a few options. One of them was to show strength in the sense I was just talking about—if we had sent a few people to jail that would have been interpreted as strength, but we didn't do that. Some of them have left the country; others are in their homes, a few under house arrest and others without restrictions other than weekly appearances at court since they are under a process of investigation

I remember, Marta, that at the time of our uprising we were all jailed, as they say here, “a Raimundo y todo el mundo”—everybody. We were 300 people and there wasn't enough space for us in the jails. They had to invent prisons. The area immediately surrounding the jail where I was detained was mined because they were afraid that people would come to rescue me. We were not allowed to talk to the country for fear that we would expose the truth. In order for our wives, children and relatives to visit us we had to write a list and send it to the Ministry of Defense a week earlier so they could authorize their visit. Pablo Medina, indeed, proposed at the time that we be questioned in Congress. The answer was: “That is not possible! Those conspirators shouldn't be allowed to talk!” So we had to do an interview with José Vicente Rangel in Yare. The hidden tape got out secretly but the government found out and stopped the show. They searched my house; they even took my children's clothing and some money that belonged to my first wife. I would ask, was that a demonstration of strength? In reality, it was a demonstration of great weakness. I'm not afraid, and I couldn't care less that Carmona Estanga was in the National Assembly for, I think, 15 or 17 hours, being questioned, and that it was transmitted live on television and radio across the country. And that General So-and-So and Admiral So-and-So tell their version of the truth. I believe some of them

ended up in a very bad position when they said, for example, “There was no coup here.” People were laughing. No coup? And Carmona Estanga was saying, “There was a vacuum of power and the soldiers called me and I was sworn.” Nobody, not even he himself, believes that. He made a fool of himself. People are aware of that. I believe it's been a lesson, a learning experience. Now, I don't deny that there are people, especially young and impulsive people, that may think that this is a sign of weakness and that that man shouldn't be talking, that he should be jailed in Yare, where I was detained. Perhaps you yourself share that opinion.

Now, I want to clarify that it's not that the conspirators are acquitted. No, Marta, we are applying the constitution.

We decided to become a political party, to get involved in elections, to win the government, to create a new constitution, to recognize five powers and elaborate that constitution, which contains elements according to which a general, an admiral—the constitution doesn't allow for exceptions—must first be brought to a trial of merit and then to a court of justice. We decided to accept the rules of the game that we've established and that's what we're doing now.

The attorney-general of the republic already elaborated the pre-trial of merit. This can't be done from one day to the next, because if one is not well backed the trial can fail. One has to create documents, interview people. Three attorneys interviewed me for five hours; they interviewed a lot of people. Then, the attorney-general, according to the timing established by the constitution, handed over a large document to the Supreme Court of Justice, which is currently reviewing it to see if there are grounds for a trial against those men. If we don't fulfill these steps, we would be in violation of the constitution. Of course, the auditor-general's office has also adopted some measures. It has established some restrictions—they can't leave the country, they have to report themselves, they can't emit public opinions, they can't participate in demonstrations.

If following the constitution is considered a sign of weakness, imagine what that would mean!

If the constitution is too permissive in some articles-and we've already detected some vulnerabilities-then it should be revised to see if amendments are necessary. That is as valid as when one builds a house and discovers that some of its columns are weak and a decision is made to strengthen them. There are people who already think about proposing amendments to strengthen parts of the constitution. That is a valid constitutional process. For their part, the opposition is also demanding amendments and it's valid that they do so, that they collect signatures, that they go there; after this process we have to call a referendum.

7. Different levels of responsibility

Therefore there are different levels of responsibilities. First there is group of soldiers, those truly engaged in the coup d'état. They are facing the pre-trial of merit. There's another group that we've decided not to put on trial based on a very thorough investigation, but to instead bring them to the "Council of Investigation," which is another instance of the Constitutional Law of the Armed Forces.

MH: *When you say, "We have decided," what do you mean?*

HC: I speak in plural because it's not only me. I receive recommendations from the military ranks and from other sources that provide me with intelligence information. I'm in charge of gathering other information. Thus, we consolidate information in order to come closer to the truth regarding the role played by such and such soldier. This Council of Investigation is also a very serious body that can't be created from one day to the next-you can't discharge a soldier who has already reached a rank, and who has some rights, without reasons. The constitution establishes due process and the right to defense. You have to grant him the right to defend himself; otherwise we fall into the same tendency as Carlos Andrés Pérez. He discharged a few soldiers like that, without trial or investigation. They were even taken barefoot; their weapons and everything were taken away—a humiliation. And the innocent and the guilty alike paid. Many were innocent and a few were guilty in this case of ours.

The men brought to the Council of Investigation are already in the final stage. About five days ago I signed a recommendation to discharge two admirals, one was the commander of the Marines in Carúpano in the East, and the other was here in Caracas. We consider that their fault was grave but not a crime, because if the Council of Investigation determines that it was a crime or presumption of crime, the investigation follows the route of the pre-trial of merit, which is longer. The Council of Investigation is faster because it depends on the commander-in-chief. There are currently about 15 generals and admirals from the Army, the Navy, the Air force and the National Guard appearing before the Council of Investigation. And after that we'll decide if we should put them on trial, arrest them for a few days, admonish them verbally or discharge them from the institution.

What I'm doing with some of them is to bring them here to talk to them for two or three hours and tell them, "You made a mistake." I also tell them, "Well, look, you can keep your position, but you have to realize that you made a mistake and that if there is ever another similar situation, I hope you don't do it again." In other words, it's a moral sanction. That is within our laws and military regulations-it's what we call a "verbal admonition." I've seen a general crying here, saying, "Damn, Hugo, they fooled me, I was naïve." And I know he meant it and he told me, "Look how my children have suffered, because I was in the newspapers and my children love you very much." I've even taken on the task of publicly vindicating some of them in order to redress the moral damage done to a man with more than 20 years in the Armed Forces, a man who has grandchildren, who feels like a soldier and who hurts because he was fooled when he was told that Chávez has resigned and that Chávez killed some people. So, he said, "How could I believe that, why the hell didn't I wake up and think that this was a lie! I didn't believe my superior when he told me, but I believed the one who phoned me, and I believed the television and the whole campaign, like many others around the world."

I think it would be very unfair if those manipulated and deceived

officers were sent to jail. Because the only thing many of them did when they were called was to report to their commands, where they made them stand up in front of a journalist with a camera. And then one of them, the conspirator, started reading while they were standing there.

After the coup d'état we have transferred soldiers, and the just thing is that the decisions have direct relation with the level of gravity of the implicated person. In that regard we've acted extremely carefully. It would be terrible to start a witch-hunt within the Armed Forces. One officer told me, "Look, see this photograph. We have analyzed it. The day you didn't arrive, Colonel Moreno wasn't wearing his red beret; he had a green beret. Why did he remove the red beret and put on a green beret? This may indicate that he didn't want to look like red beret." I want to clarify that Colonel Moreno is the chief of Casa Militar and he was with me to the last minute of the coup d'état. I said to the officer: "Look, be careful with what you're thinking; if we're going to start doubting everybody, we're going to end up mad. That colonel risked his life that day. You're not aware of that because you were not there. Do you know why that colonel was wearing that beret? He and Colonel Morao and the soldiers under their command were all wearing green berets because they, as part of the tactical plan to retake the palace, decided to change their red berets since they made them targets easy to detect. Instead, with the green berets, people who saw them didn't know on which side they were. They removed the sign that identified them as people of the Chávez regiment and the Presidential Guard of Chávez." The guy, in good faith, doubted Colonel Moreno. But imagine that because of a misinterpreted photo, because of gossip or a comment, some soldiers start being questioned without any real reason!

Another told me, "Look, Colonel So-and-So went home, nobody saw him around here the day we were planning the taking back of the palace." In fact, that colonel was in another place coordinating something else. It means that one can't let oneself be guided by impulses, by preliminary observations, and unleash in such a complicated and sensitive environment as the Armed Forces-a witch-hunt.

8. Why general Rincón was appointed minister of defense

MH: *Can you explain to me why you appointed the general who announced your resignation to the country-General Rincón-as minister of defense? Nobody can understand that.*

HC: Nobody?

MH: *Nobody. How is it possible that someone who said that you'd resigned when you had not can count on your trust?*

HC: There are many versions, but I do know the truth. Maybe I'm the only one who knows it exactly. I know what drove him to say that. He is not guilty, but a victim of a situation in which I am involved; maybe this is why I'm the one who understands him, perhaps more than anybody else. I would feel badly if I had discharged Rincón.

MH: *Why? Did you have an ambiguous position at some point?*

HC: I wouldn't say ambiguous, but there was a moment when we in fact started to discuss the topic of the possibility of the resignation. That was when I realized that we had lost almost all our military force on hand in order to resist or move to another place. So I called José Vicente and William Lara, the president of the assembly, who were there at the palace, and other people, other ministers, and I asked them to come to my office. We then studied the constitution and we began to think about the possibility of my resignation. I said to the group: "I'm able to resign, but only if four conditions are met. The first one was to respect the physical safety of all men, women, the people, and the government-physical safety and human rights. The second one: respect of the constitution, meaning, if I resigned it would have to be before the National Assembly and the vice-president would have to assume the presidency of the republic until new elections were called. The third condition was to address the country live. The fourth one was that all the officials of my government should accompany me along with those kids who were my body-

guards for years. I knew that they wouldn't accept, because that would be a shock group that I would have within my reach.

Then the emissaries-General Arturo Sucre, minister of infrastructure, and General Rosendo-went to Fort Tiuna. They talked to the conspirators and came back saying that, yes, they accepted the conditions.

I had authorized General Rincón, who had been with me the whole evening and night, to go to Fort Tiuna to find out what those people really wanted, and at that moment he was already there. In the middle of these events he called me and said: "President, they're demanding your resignation and they're putting pressure on me to resign as well. But I've said that I'll assume whatever decision you make." Then I told him: "Look, Lucas, Rosendo and Hurtado have arrived and they've told me that they accept the conditions that I am demanding for my resignation. Tell them that, yes, I will resign." I gave him the green light. He leaves saying what I told him. What he said was: "The president has accepted the resignation and so have I. My position is at the disposition of high command." Therefore, I'm completely sure that he said what I had told him by phone.

What happened 10, 20 minutes later? He gives that declaration and leaves, but a few minutes later we receive the information that they no longer accept the conditions. I was almost certain that they were not going to accept; it was a way to gain time. Now they were demanding that I go there as a prisoner. I if decided not to do so, they would come to attack the palace. In a few minutes, the situation changed.

And that was the end-I accepted to leave as a prisoner.

Lucas left. He took his family to some place and on Saturday he returned to Fort Tiuna. He joined García Carneiro and the group of generals who were there reorganizing things. What can we accuse him of, then?

MH: *Has this information been released? Because as far as I know*

it hasn't reached outside Venezuela.

HC: I explained that, I believe, to the special political commission of the National Assembly that investigated the events that took place during the April coup, when it interviewed me at the palace. I've said this before, when I appointed him as minister of defense to endorse him, to strengthen him. On the other hand, he's a man who has been with me from the beginning of the government. He was the chief of Casa Militar, he was a member of my ministry, he was commander of the Army and then inspector of the Armed Forces. And I appointed him minister of defense. Facing the new situation around us, which demands political dialogue, the most experienced man in my cabinet is José Vicente Rangel and this is why I appointed him vice-president from being minister of defense.

9. The military coup d'état: Lessons

MH: *Can you summarize the lessons that you learned from the recent military coup d'état? When we talked, you explained to me that in Fort Tiuna the commanders of the coup were in one building, and in another building farther away were the regiments. General García Carneiro-a man loyal to you-and his troops were in this last one. You told me that the commanders had called him but he didn't want to report to them because he did not want to abandon his troops. Although, in the end, when he was told that they would go and talk to you in Miraflores he was convinced and left his troops without command. Some military chiefs involved in the coup took advantage of the situation to control the troops by means of hierarchy and lies.*

HC: I've told you that I've always tried to respect the line of command. The instructions from the commander-in-chief were always given through the high ranks. Now, you could see the situation that happened, which I painted of García Carneiro and the difficulties I had communicating with him and other generals from the loyal military garrisons. And I was barely able to talk once to General Baduel and after that I lost contact. I couldn't establish it-they had sabotaged the phone lines of the palace.

Well, we should take this as a lesson in order to establish more flexible communication mechanisms and direct contact from the commander-in-chief to the commanders of the operative units-those who have weapons in their hands and who command the men of the Armed Forces.

It's not about disowning the high ranks, it's just that in an internal or external conflict the high military commands may disappear for many reasons; they could be captured or physically eliminated. The top commander must have the capacity, the communication channels in order never to lose something that is fundamental: the direct military command of the units of the Army. That was harmed on April 11. The conspirators used this to manipulate unit commanders, to neutralize other units, to deceive military chiefs who only received information from the conspirators, to disorient them, misinform them, confound them, lie to them, manipulate them.

So this is a lesson: a much more direct contact with middle officers, the chiefs, the officers and also the troops is needed.

MH: *Do you believe you can count on absolute majority support from those sectors?*

HC: Yes, absolutely. And I could prove it to you.

MH: *And how do the high ranks see this?*

HC: Since it's not about mistrust, but to prepare oneself for any eventuality, they shouldn't see it in a negative light. Although, some jealousies could exist. Nonetheless, the predicament, the discussion, the search for the elimination of any kind of jealousy has been my concern.

10. Radicalization of the process and the armed forces

MH: *Don't you think that as the revolutionary process is radicalized it is more and more difficult to count on majority support from a*

group whose formation is very influenced by the values of the dominant classes and that, therefore, is very susceptible to the campaign that the reactionary sectors launch against your government, as they have showed during the last events?

HC: Yes, I think that's normal. I believe that this happens in any example anywhere in the world. Even if we apply the law of physics to swimmers crossing the Orinoco River, there will be those who say "I can't go on" for physical reasons. The same thing happens in a group of mountain climbers; some will fall behind because of weakness or accidents. If this is what happens at a physical level, it's even more common in a complex process that is influenced not only by physical laws-which isn't even the most important-but by culture, ideology, material, economics. There are people who go along with you through one phase-and we've lived it throughout this process, which for me, Marta, has lasted for almost 25 years, since I started in a firm and serious manner to organize small groups-but who later fall behind for several reasons. I have always tried to be thankful for that. I even thank those who are no longer with us because they helped at one stage. Their incapacity of moving forward is no reason to condemn them. No, they just broke down, fell behind or walked away for different reasons.

Many officers who were of great help before the insurrection didn't participate in the insurrection. But one can't forget their work. Of course, I'm not referring to the traitors but to those who fell behind for different reasons.

In prison, for example, there were people who had broken down or rather didn't want to continue. How many officers? Many-they were my comrades. They left prison and told me: "Look, comandante," or "Look, Hugo, I'm going home. I have my wife and children, I have to work to sustain them." I could never condemn them; on the contrary.

Look, Marta, I remember four kids who were with me once when we bought bananas to feed ourselves; we ate bread, banana and drank Pepsi cola or coffee. We didn't have one cent. Everything we had

was for the family far away, for our small children, our wives. One morning when I was sleeping in a chinchorro and they on mattress, which couldn't contain them all—we were in a walkway of a house belonging to a brave man who had let us stay; almost nobody dared to let Chávez sleep in his house—I heard one of them crying. I came closer, thinking that he was dreaming, and when I asked him what was the matter, he answered: “My wife called me today. She's eating crackers and sardines.” I then told him: “Well, you know that I'm the leader.” “Yes.” “I'm going to give you an order: tomorrow I don't want to see you here. Go to your wife, look for a job with someone who can pay you; I can't pay you anything.” The guy didn't want to leave, by I ordered him to go.

He came back one day when I was already the president and worked with us for awhile. Later, he started working on other things, but let's say he followed his way. The majority went to look for something to do, somewhere to work; of course, they were young kids with wives and children. And then some of the radicals said, “They're traitors, they're weak.” I think they're human—not everybody is like us, who left wife and children; we don't care where we sleep; we have a great dream. Perhaps we have a superior strength that pulls us more than them.

What I want to tell you is that I agree with you. I consider it normal that as the process demands more, it requires people with a higher conscience, capacity, strength, force. There are people who have their limits, and that's how far they go. At this point one may have negative surprises, but also positive ones—sometimes one has the impression that some people can't surpass certain limits but they do indeed cross that line and even the next one, and they keep moving ahead, leaving many behind.

I believe that, in our case, this observation of people who keep moving forward is greater in quantity and significance than the other part. After February 4, the people has advanced much further than previously anticipated. I remember how I felt in 1992 when we surrendered. What an embarrassment! “If we had only fought to the death,” I thought, alone in a prison cell. Of course, I was isolated

from reality. I didn't know the explosion of affection and emotion that the gesture of a group of soldiers had generated in the people. We had never imagined that. And what we saw at Las Malvinas the day before yesterday was a passion, a passion that had awakened in the majority of those people. Therefore, I can tell you that there are people who show that they can go much further than you may think. Those who fall behind do so drop by drop, in small groups.

MH: You'd have to be conscious of that. I mean, in the same way you were sensitive to the one you sent home, you should be able to detect when a person has reached his limit and make a decision about him before he breaks down, right?

HC: Sometimes it's not easy. One needs to be a lot more attentive to better develop the perception, the instinct. I do have a good instinct and many times I regret not to have followed it. I often pay attention to my strategic instinct, but sometimes I don't consider the small instinct regarding an individual. That happened to me before April 11; I will try to not let it happen again.

11. Attitude towards radicalized military sectors

On the other hand, I've found out that an important group of young officers that has been leading the social task of the Revolution has become more radical and demands the adoption of more drastic measures against corruption. It asks for the acceleration of the rhythm of transformation. It doesn't understand your conciliatory attitude toward the generals involved in the coup. Am I right? How do you evaluate its attitude? How can one channel it? What can you expect from this group?

I believe that this sector or this phenomenon of radicalization of the military sectors has grown in favor of the revolutionary process; it has grown not only in number but also in intensity. You ask me how to confront this situation. What I try to do is exercise leadership. I have met with some of those who pressure and who are upset because there are no prisoners, military or civilian, and because the

media continue doing what they're doing-disrespecting, inventing, twisting the reality.

I try to make them understand that we're making an effort, as much as we can, to maintain the strategic option that we chose and that these people are supported by a large majority.

I am very aware that a process of deterioration of this situation may bring as a consequence the growing or increasing weight of this tendency. This is what some sectors of the opposition do not consider. In the sense that they can remove Chávez, but they can't stop the process?

Yes, Chávez may go, but Chávez is not only Chávez. They sometimes tend to simplify the problem. The situation we are in has awakened very radical tendencies, feelings. I'm sure that in the impossible case that I bend to the reaction, these sectors would pass over me and new leaderships would emerge. That, Marta, reassures me. Beyond my structural and political concerns and errors, I'm certain that this process has no way back. This movement of change, of restructuring, of Revolution, will not be stopped. Now, the chance that it may take another course, that is possible.

I have said it publicly; it is not only a comment for you or your publication. No, I have said it, and many times it has been misrepresented as if I were launching a threat. No. I say it as a conclusion. Now, after what happened, I say it with even more conviction.

Here I can quote John Kennedy's thought in this regard. He said that if the revolutions in these countries were not peaceful, they'd be violent revolutions. That's when the Alliance for Progress (Alianza para el Progreso) was born. I read it in your book and in its context, which I imagined but didn't know.

Now, I'm convinced that if we were to fail in this effort of making profound political, economic and social changes in this way, other ways will come, Marta, other ways will come. Perhaps violent ways, perhaps military ways or perhaps civic-military ways. But this

process has assumed its own strength. I give as an example a river, a river you can dam but not detain. If you don't give it the possibility to flow it will tear down the dam or find its own course, but it will always flow toward the sea.

Translated from Spanish by Alejandro Palavecino and Susan Nerberg

Appendix

Chronology of the April Coup

Adapted from, among other sources, PDVSA y el golpe and Indymedia Argentina

1998

December 6 - Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias is elected president of Venezuela by one of the largest margins in Venezuelan history (56%). He takes office on February 2, 1999.

1999

April - A referendum on whether or not to convoke a constitutional assembly is held. 92% vote “yes” (abstention is 63%).

July - Members of the constitutional assembly are elected. Chavez' coalition (Polo Patriotico) wins 94% of the seats, since each member is elected on a district basis and Chavez' coalition wins a majority in nearly all districts. (53% abstention)

December 15 - New constitution is approved by 72% (55% abstention).

2000

July 30 - Election of President, National Assembly, and state Governorships, based on the new constitution. Chavez wins 57% of the vote (abstention: 43.5%), 99 out of 165 seats in the National Assembly, and 14 out of 23 governorships.

2001

June - James Roger, a U.S. military attaché arrives in Venezuela. Chavez and others later implicate him in the planning of the coup.

September 11 - Saudi Arabian terrorists attack the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington.

October - Chavez criticizes U.S. attack on Afghanistan, saying that "you don't fight terrorism with more terrorism."

November 5-7 - Interagency meeting of National Security Agency, State Department, and Pentagon is held in the U.S. to discuss the "problem" of Venezuela. Venezuela is subsequently accused of supporting terrorism in Colombia, Bolivia, and Ecuador.

November 13 - The Chavez government passes 49 laws, which are supposed to deepen the "Bolivarian Revolution." Among these, are the land reform law, a new banking law, and a new law governing the oil industry.

December 10 - The largest Venezuelan chamber of commerce, Fedecamaras, calls for a "general strike" against the government because of the 49 laws. The union federation CTV decides to join the strike.

2002

January - The Venezuelan government's General Accounting Office reviews PDVSA's books and discovers numerous irregularities. As a result, Chavez later fires PDVSA's president, Guaicaipuro Lameda, who subsequently becomes one of the government's most vocal critics and a leader in the coup against Chavez.

February - Various U.S. government officials, such as Colin Powell and George Tenet (CIA director) express their concerns about the democratic credentials of President Chavez.

February 7 - Colonel Pedro Soto, of the air force, denounces the government as being a dictatorship. He is celebrated by members of the opposition and several other officers follow his example in the months leading up to April.

February 25 - Chavez names a new president and board of directors to PDVSA.

March - PDVSA managers declare their opposition to the new board of directors, saying that they are unqualified, and demand that they be removed. Managers and administrative workers begin a work slow-down to pressure the government.

April 5 - managers of the El Palito refinery shut it down, causing a production loss of 120,000 barrels per day.

April 6 - the CTV announces that it will move up its second scheduled 24-hour general strike from April 11 to April 9, in solidarity with the conflict in PDVSA

April 7 - Iraq announces a 30 day oil embargo because of the deepening Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Chavez dismisses 13 PDVSA managers during his weekly television program *Aló Presidente*.

April 8 - Fedecamaras announces that it will support the general strike.

April 9 - CTV-Fedecamaras-PDVSA "General strike." While the private media all broadcast messages of support of the strike, the government interrupts private programming numerous times during the day with reports of opposition to the strike.

CTV and Fedecamaras declare the strike a success and extend it for an additional 24 hours.

Two more refineries (Cordon and Amuay) shut down operations.

April 10 - The second day of the strike is much less noticeable than the first, especially in the western part of Caracas, with most people who are not locked out by employers returning to work. Nonetheless, CTV and Fedecamaras declare the strike a success and announce that it will be an indefinite strike until Chavez resigns. They announce a major demonstration that is to go from Parque del Este to one of PDVSA's headquarters, in Chuao

General Rafael Damiani Bustillos and General Nestor Gonzalez make declarations against the government and call for the military to disobey any order to break up the demonstration scheduled for the next day.

April 11

9:00 am to 12:30 pm - the opposition demonstration is fills up a large part of the freeway and rallies in front of PDVSA-Chuao.

12:30 pm - Pedro Carmona, president of Fedecamaras and Carlos Ortega, president of the CTV, announce that the demonstration will head towards the presidential palace, Miraflores.

2:30 pm - 6:00 pm - As the opposition demonstration nears Miraflores and the pro-government demonstration that is already there, shots are fired from surrounding buildings into both demonstrations. Shoot-outs begin between demonstrators, police, and shooters hidden in buildings. Around 18 demonstrators on both sides are killed that day and between 100 and

200 are wounded.

3:45 pm - 5:15 pm - President Chavez requires all television and radio stations to simulcast his speech to the nation, in which he addresses the strike and criticizes his opponents. After a few minutes, the television stations divide their screen between Chavez' speech and the violence that is taking place near the presidential palace.

4:25 pm - Chávez orders the commercial TV and radio networks taken off the air, due to their non-compliance with broadcast regulations.

6:30 pm - Fedecamaras and CTV blame the government for the dead at Miraflores and denounce the supposed use of sharpshooters firing from the presidential headquarters.

7:00 pm - About 10 National Guard generals headed by General Héctor Ramírez announce that they no longer recognize Chávez as the commander in chief and ask for his resignation.

9:20 pm - A convoy of tanks and trucks with 200 men heads for Miraflores from Fort Tiuna to support Chávez.

9:37 pm - The generalship of the Army denounces the "abuse" committed by Chávez against civilians.

9:50 pm - Pro-government legislators attribute the Miraflores massacre to members of Bandera Roja, a party that is opposed to Chávez' government.

10:00 pm - The studios of the state network, Venezuelan Television, are occupied by the opposition governor Enrique Mendoza and his police force. It halts broadcasting. All of commercial networks resume broadcasting.

10:10 pm - General Rafael Damiani calls on troops loyal to

the government not to use their weapons.

10:30 pm - Chávez' wife, Marisabel Rodríguez, and children depart on a flight to the city of Barquisimeto.

11:50 pm - The political police, DISIP, announce that they no longer recognize Chávez' authority.

April 12

1:10 am - Communications media say Chávez has turned himself over to the military rebels.

1:29 am - Army Commander Efraín Vásquez, principal spokesperson for the rebels, confirms two military officials in the Miraflores Palace are negotiating with Chávez to vacate the presidency.

3:20 am - Head of the military high command, General Lucas Rincon, announces that Chávez was asked to resign and that has done so. At the same time, the top military brass joins the coup.

4:00 am - Under threats that the presidential palace will be bombed, Chávez agrees to be placed under arrest in Fort Tiuna military base. He is later transferred to another base on an island off the Venezuelan coast.

4:51 am - Pedro Carmona, the president of Fedecamaras, announces he will assume the presidency, heading up a transition civilian-military government. The new government will begin issuing executive orders immediately.

2:04 pm - The Attorney General, Isaias Rodriguez tells the media that he wants to announce his resignation, but once on the air he declares that Chávez did not resign and that even if he did, there is a legal chain of succession that must be followed. The TV stations cut him off before he can finish his

statement.

5:39 pm - Carmona assumes the presidency, swearing himself into office to the cheers of Venezuela's old ruling elite. He announces a decree repealing the 49 laws, says there will be elections within a year, and dissolves the legislature, the supreme court, the national electoral council, and state governorships.

6:10 pm - The sacked president of the National Assembly, William Lara, denounces the persecutions of Chávez loyalists and the "illegality" of the new regime.

April 13

12:30 pm - Chávez supporters demonstrate in the poor neighborhoods throughout Caracas and the country, demanding Chavez' return to the presidency. Wide scale looting also takes place. The metropolitan police try to prevent the demonstrations and the looting, killing between 40 and 60 people.

1:34 pm - General Raul Baduel and his paratroop brigade in Maracay announce their support for Chávez. Other brigades throughout the country follow in the course of the day.

4:09 pm - Jess Briceo, a new minister, acknowledges that Chávez did not resign.

4:37 pm - Army Commander Efraín Vásquez says the provisional government has made mistakes. He conditions military support on the reinstatement of the legislature and the reversal of other elements of Carmona's decree.

4:42 pm - On CNN Marisabel Rodríguez de Chavez says she spoke to her husband and that he told her that he did not resign. She says he was kidnapped and is being held prisoner.

5:11 pm - Carmona restores the legislature and announces

other changes to his Friday decree.

5:53 pm - The head of the National Assembly, William Lara, says the Assembly does not recognize the transition government.

6:00 pm - Tens of thousands of Chavez supporters demonstrate outside of the presidential palace, Miraflores, demanding Chavez' return.

8:12 pm - Leaders of Chávez' movement retake the Venezuelan state television station and announce that with the help of the palace's honor guard they have also retaken Miraflores.

9:52 pm - Ministers from Chavez' cabinet broadcast on state television from Miraflores.

10:11 pm - Chávez' vice president, Diosdado Cabello, temporarily assumes the presidency, sworn in by Lara.

10:12 pm - Carmona announces his resignation and recognizes Cabello.

April 14

2:50 am - Chávez returns to Miraflores Palace to reassume his post. He apologizes for errors he made and, in a more conciliatory tone, rejects revenge and calls for unity.

