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Beyond the caricature, the poor people?s president

Bart Jones | May. 23, 2013
Essay

Hugo Chávez and I were sitting across from each other in a small cabin in his presidential jet, flying over Venezuela. It was the start of interviews that spread over two days for a biography I was writing about the controversial leader. I had lived in Venezuela for eight years and was a front-row witness to Chávez?s rise to power.

I began the interview by asking him what were the events and experiences that had played the greatest role in his formation. The first thing he talked about -- a bit to my surprise -- was the Bible and Jesus Christ.

When he was an altar boy in his small rural village of Sabaneta, he recalled, the parish priest often read him the Bible. One thing Chávez said he could never understand was ?why Jesus was born among animals in a manger, with so many other places and him being the son of God.?

His grandmother, Rosa Ines, tried to explain, saying, ?When the poor die, we are going to heaven.? Chávez told me, ?But I couldn?t understand that, why you had to die to go to heaven. Why couldn?t we live better here??

Later in life, he began to understand why Jesus was born in such dire circumstances, he said. ?Christ came to be born among the poorest of the poor, to look for the road of liberation.?

Chávez himself came from similarly poor roots. And he saw his mission in life as leading that liberation.

Six years after those interviews, Chávez is dead, succumbing to a battle against cancer March 5. The battle to define his legacy has begun. In life, he was demonized by elites in Venezuela and the United States, and by much of the mainstream media. Now, according to the media watchdog group FAIR, he is being demonized in death.

Conventional wisdom tells us Chávez was a despot who destroyed a once vibrant democracy in a country with the world?s largest oil reserves. For millions around the world, he turned into some kind of evil monster, a crazed, bloodthirsty dictator. For them, he was a South American Pol Pot.

Among the detractors was the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church in Venezuela. Their dislike ran so deep they participated in a coup against Chávez in 2002.

How did Chávez become such a hated figure? And why were both sides of the story about him rarely told?

Chávez, after all, was not massacring people; he was not lining opponents up against walls before firing squads. This was not Pinochet killing or ?disappearing? at least 3,000 people after he was installed as an actual dictator through a CIA-orchestrated coup in Chile in 1973. Nor was it the death squad government of El Salvador in the 1980s. That regime killed peasants, teachers, priests and nuns, including the four American churchwomen,

Archbishop Oscar Romero, and the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter.

Despite his flaws, Chávez hardly had blood on his hands. And he generally remained within the bounds of democracy. He won a string of elections that even the U.S. government at times recognized as legitimate. But he offended people in high places and was a threat to the established order.

And for that he paid a price.

The image of Chávez as crazed dictator is more cartoon caricature than realistic portrait. His government, like any, had its flaws. It didn?t do enough to combat crime, corruption and bureaucracy. It was too centered on ?El Comandante? as a one-man show. And Chávez didn?t just debate or defeat opponents. He insulted them and sought to verbally annihilate them.

The surprisingly poor showing of his less charismatic anointed successor, Nicholas Maduro, who won the April 14 election to replace him by less than 2 percentage points, underscored the weaknesses of the Bolivarian Revolution, and where it needs to improve.

But Chávez also did some positive things rarely noted. For the first time in Venezuela?s history, he redirected its vast oil wealth to the poor majority. He sent thousands of Cuban doctors into slums, where they lived and provided free, 24-hour basic medical care. He launched a massive literacy and free education program, giving maids a shot at a high school diploma and others a college degree. Poverty was cut in half.

Above all, he gave the poor hope.

His supporters would argue that these and other initiatives amounted to fulfilling the social justice teachings of the Roman Catholic church.

In pre-Chávez Venezuela, a tiny elite controlled the oil wealth. They lived in gated mansions and flew off to Europe while the majority lived in tin shacks and struggled to eat.

It was an unsustainable social structure, not to mention -- Chávez and his supporters would say -- un-Christian. It was bound to collapse someday and easily led to the rise of a firebrand like Chávez who turned the established order upside down.

Chávez was the poor people?s president, the first in Venezuela?s history.

Charles Hardy, a former Maryknoll associate priest from Wyoming who has lived in Venezuela for 25 years, called Chávez ?a holy man.? Chávez, he said, ?had a great love for Jesus, but he would talk about Jesus being a subversive? who wanted to overturn unjust structures, very much in line with liberation theology.

Chávez was raised by a grandmother who was an upright Catholic and prayed in her mud hut home, where Chávez was born. She taught him to have solidarity with the less fortunate.

As president, Chávez would often brandish a cross during speeches and television appearances, and refer to Jesus Christ. He was surely one of the few world leaders who would talk about Jesus at international political summits.

Chávez?s relationship with the Catholic church, like his relationship with the country in general, was polarized. Many poor Catholics at the grassroots level worshiped him as a messiah. They now see him as a martyred saint,

cut down in his prime by cancer.

Some Catholic clergy were sympathetic to him, including Jesuit Fr. Jesus Gazo, his unofficial spiritual advisor. Bishop Mario Moronta of San Cristóbal de Venezuela said a prayer at Chávez?s funeral.

But most of the church hierarchy was unremittingly hostile to Chávez. It was the bishops? perception of him that got transmitted to the worldwide church authorities and audience, just as the oligarchy?s view of Chávez was mostly the one that got transmitted through the Venezuelan and international media. The other side of the story rarely got told.

In December 1999, mudslides killed an estimated 15,000 people in Caracas and its environs. The archbishop of Caracas at the time, Antonio Ignacio Velasco, suggested from the altar it was a punishment from God against the people. That day they had approved the new constitution that Chávez had promoted.

In April 2002, when Chávez was overthrown in a coup and disappeared for two days after military rebels essentially kidnapped him, church leaders supported the putsch. Velasco showed up at a ceremony at the presidential palace. He was smiling as businessman Pedro Carmona swore himself in as president and shut down the Congress, Supreme Court and constitution. Also arriving and sharing bear hugs with the celebrants was Archbishop Baltazar Porras of Mérida.

Ironically, one of the bishops? chief complaints against Chávez was that he wanted to install a dictatorship.

Chávez, of course, was not always diplomatic in his dealings with them. He had called the bishops ?devils in vestments,? and Porras in particular a ?pathetic ignoramus.?

Another of the complaints about Chávez from the bishops and others was that he was trampling on human rights, including free speech. Chávez, they said, ?shut down? broad sectors of the ?independent? media that were critical of him.

The truth, of course, was more complex. In Venezuela, the private media, including the major television stations, were largely controlled by the oligarchy, and mostly transmitted its views. The day of Carmona?s swearing in, many of the media moguls showed up at the palace.

In fact, they had helped engineer the coup. In the hours leading up to the putsch, the TV stations ran constant ads urging people to attend a massive anti-Chávez demonstration ?for liberty and democracy? and to get rid of him. On the day of the march, they provided blanket nonstop coverage for hours, pre-empting regular programming.

When shooting broke out as the marchers clashed with Chávez supporters near the presidential palace, one station manipulated footage to make it appear the *Chávistas* had shot the marchers in cold blood.

Then, after Chávez was kidnapped and thousands of his supporters flooded the streets for two days to demand the return of their democratically elected president, the stations imposed a news blackout. Amid one of the most dramatic events in modern Latin American history, with the president missing, the stations instead showed Hollywood movies.

One of those stations, RCTV, instructed its workers ?*cero Chávez*? -- no Chávez.

If CBS, NBC, ABC or CNN had done the same thing in the United States, they probably would have been

yanked off the air in five minutes. In Venezuela, RCTV remained on the air for five years more. When its license to use the limited public airways came up for renewal, the government declined. But RCTV continued on cable.

Still, in the narrative presented to the world of Chávez, he was a repressive dictator shutting down the free press. The reality is that there was and still is a vigorous opposition media that freely criticizes the government.

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I first met Chávez in 1994. He had just gotten out of jail. We were sitting in a Chinese restaurant in Caracas. I was able to land the first interview by a foreign journalist with the man who had led a coup against the government two years earlier.

He was already a sensation among the poor masses. They hailed him as a hero for standing up to a hated government that had mowed down hundreds if not several thousand people in the wake of riots a few years prior.

The wealthy elites, meanwhile, were eyeing him warily. They weren?t entirely sure what to make of him. But they didn?t think it was anything good.

Nearly five years later, I was standing near him the night he first won the presidency in December 1998. He made his way up a winding, packed staircase to an outdoor balcony to greet a throng on the street. We were all nearly crushed. The scene on the street was electric. Floodlights lit up a crowd that was in a frenzy over his victory.

It was the start of a new chapter in a life story straight out of Hollywood.

Chávez grew up dreaming of playing major league baseball. He gained admittance to the West Point of Venezuela because he thought scouts might discover him in the capital.

Instead, he discovered Simón Bolívar, the South American independence hero. He became radicalized. He went on to form a clandestine organization involving hundreds of soldiers and civilians livid over Venezuela?s social injustice. By day he was a soldier, by night a conspirator. After 10 years, he and his cohorts rose up against a government they considered had blood on its hands.

The coup failed and he went to prison for two years. After his release, he eventually ran for president. One of his main opponents was a former Miss Universe. The contest was dubbed ?the beauty and the beast.?

And that was just his life before he assumed the presidency, which was another series of life-and-death roller coaster rides.

Love him or hate him, there is no denying Chávez was a remarkable figure. Some believe he will go down as the most important leftist leader in Latin America since Fidel Castro. His face, like that of Che Guevara, is already seen on T-shirts around the world.

He was vilified in life and still is in death. Chávez was not perfect, but there are other sides of him that should be remembered. Perhaps someday the world will receive a more balanced, honest portrait of the man, of what he accomplished and what he failed to do.

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years in Venezuela, mainly as a foreign correspondent for The Associated Press.]

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