

Chavez views presidency as epic struggle

The Miami Herald
Sep. 24, 2007

MANTECAL, Venezuela --

Hugo Chavez is driving across the plains of Venezuela, raving about a Hollywood film in which the enslaved hero rises up to challenge the emperor of Rome.

"'Gladiator' - What a movie! I saw it three times," the president tells an Associated Press reporter traveling with him in a Toyota 4Runner, along with his daughter and a state governor. "It's confronting the empire, and confronting evil. ... And you end up relating to that gladiator."

The parallel is unstated but clear. To Chavez, the United States is the empire, and he is the protagonist waging an epic struggle to bring justice to the oppressed of Venezuela and the world.

In the eight years since he took office, Chavez has emerged as Latin America's most visible and controversial leader, electrifying leftist movements internationally while controlling a vast source of oil. Labeled a threat by the U.S. government, he captured the world's attention a year ago at the U.N. General Assembly by comparing President Bush to Satan - and he is likely to be just as defiant if he returns as scheduled to the U.N. this week.

Underneath the fiery persona is a man who both firmly believes in his vision and is shrewd enough to know how to sell it. Chavez sees the world in black and white and casts himself as crusader, a role that is at once genuine and expedient. He truly empathizes with the common people of Venezuela, but it is also vital for him to hear their cheers, be their hero and feel the power.

"Vamonos," Chavez bellows to his entourage in the hotel lobby. "It's a beautiful day."

Chavez gets behind the wheel, seatbelt off, and the motorcade sets out on a road trip through Apure state. He is visibly relaxed to be back in these southern plains, where he was once stationed as a soldier.

"Listen to this song," he says suddenly, turning up the volume on the stereo. It's a pasaje folk tune by Eneas Perdomo, a favorite from his childhood. He repeats the lyrics - "I remember the harp with tenderness like a watercolor painting..." - then raises his voice an octave and sings: "Apure is always Apu-u-u-re."

Entering a traffic circle, he abruptly veers away from the motorcade for a view of the Apure River, despite protests from his 27-year-old daughter Maria in the back seat.

"I'm going this way just a second," Chavez assures her. "It's a magical river," he muses out loud.

To understand Chavez, it helps to see these plains, spreading lush and green in the rainy season, all the way from the Venezuelan Andes in the west to the Orinoco River in the east. This is the land where Chavez grew up poor in the town of Sabaneta and later spent three formative years in Apure. It's a personal history he draws on often in his speeches.

"A man from the plains, from these great open spaces... tends to be a nomad, tends not to see barriers. You don't see barriers from childhood on. What you see is the horizon," says Chavez, whose first question to a foreigner is often, "Where are you from?"

The stereotype in Venezuela is that people from the plains, or "llaneros," tend to be talkative, boisterous cowboy types with a rich tradition of folklore. Chavez fits the bill.

"I have deep roots here," he says. "When I die I want them to bury me here in this savanna, anywhere, because you feel like a part of it."

He says it was the injustice he saw here - of "impoverished people living atop a sea of oil" - that drove him in the 1980s to lead a secret dissident group. As he drives past stands where poor people still sell pineapples and cantaloupes today, he reflects, "We're in the process of freeing the slaves. It's still slavery, disguised." He has expressed the idea so often that it sounds almost rehearsed, yet still seems heartfelt.

The extent to which Chavez is actually leading a liberation struggle - or just using Venezuela's oil wealth to buy popularity - is one of the country's great debates. His government is carrying out agrarian reform and pouring billions of dollars into anti-poverty programs. But to some old friends like Douglas Bravo - a former Marxist guerrilla leader of the 1960s and 70s - a new Chavista elite today is in a power struggle with competing bourgeois factions.

"Chavez is an intelligent man, a man who dominates that game of the real elements of power and has the capacity to be constantly learning," says Bravo, who respects Chavez but disagrees strongly with his policy of forming joint ventures with multinational oil companies.

Much has changed since the charismatic lieutenant colonel led a failed coup in 1992. Chavez is now at the apex of power in one of the world's top oil-producing nations, accustomed to the finest tailored suits and the leather seats of the presidential jet.

Yet he seems to believe he is still that poor soldier from the plains, leading a revolution.

"I'm still a subversive," he says. "I think the entire world has to be subverted."

The tinted window rolls down at a military checkpoint, and startled troops snap to attention when they see their president at the wheel.

"Fatherland, socialism - or death! Good afternoon, my commander-in-chief," a National Guardsman blurts out, saluting with an expression of shock.

"Why haven't you received the AK rifles yet?" Chavez asks, examining the soldier's outmoded weapon. Chavez says he will find out what's wrong because some of the 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles newly bought from Russia should be in their hands.

Chavez lives with a certain siege mentality, warning that Venezuela is under threat of a U.S. invasion. It is both a genuine fear and an us-against-them dynamic that he plays up to maximum effect. He recalls Venezuela's 2002 coup, when he was ousted for 47 hours, and how the U.S. swiftly recognized the government that briefly replaced him.

In classic Chavez form, he describes his standoff with the U.S. through the parable of a scorpion that hitches a ride across a river on a frog's back. Once across, the scorpion stings the frog and tells him: "I'm sorry, that's my nature." In the same way, Chavez says darkly, "the empire has its nature."

"There are groups working, hunting me. They're investigating, trying to infiltrate my security teams, trying to buy someone," he says.

His security measures are tight. His agenda is often unannounced, and when in public bodyguards surround him. Colombian designer Miguel Caballero, who specializes in protective clothing, says he has sold Chavez items such as a bullet-proof red shirt.

"I'm condemned to death, like Fidel (Castro) has been for a very long time, and as such forced to take security measures that are so extreme one ends up not having a personal life," Chavez said. "One ends up being a prisoner on a personal level." He adds, "Can someone who is threatened with death have plans to be in power forever?"

Pausing, he notes that for security reasons his driving route was not publicly announced.

Chavez draws the line between those with him and those against him with the zeal of a preacher in a prayer meeting, and he speaks for hours every Sunday on his radio and TV program "Hello, President." He said he broke his record Sunday when the program lasted more than eight hours.

On another recent episode, he condemned several politicians as turncoats, saying: "You're either with God or you're with the devil - one or the other. That's in the Bible."

It is a streak critics see as absolutist, and therefore dangerous. He won re-election in December with 63 percent, his biggest margin ever, and wants to reach 80 percent eventually, effectively marginalizing the opposition. He has also proposed to rewrite the constitution and do away with presidential term limits.

"From every conflict we should emerge stronger and they should become weaker," he says.

He sees himself as the heir of a historic struggle going back two centuries, in which his hero is Simon Bolivar, the 19th century Latin American liberator. He has painted oil portraits of historical figures such as land revolt leader Ezequiel Zamora.

The mission is an all-consuming responsibility that apparently leaves Chavez few spaces to retreat. He is said to summon his ministers at any hour. He sleeps little, often

reading late into the night, and sometimes gathers together ministers, aides and bodyguards for pickup baseball games on a palace patio.

"I really like to pitch," gushes Chavez, bringing to mind the little boy who once dreamed of making the Major Leagues while growing up with his grandmother in a palm-thatched house.

The life of the commander-hero is sometimes a solitary one. A twice-divorced 53-year-old with four children and three grandchildren, Chavez laughs when asked about his love life. He says he has no life to share anymore.

"It's as if you pawned your own life, you gambled it and turned it over completely," Chavez says thoughtfully. "In reality, you're a prisoner in a way."

"And that doesn't weigh on me, you know?" he adds, in an attempt to reassure those around him, and perhaps himself. "But it's the truth. It's the essence of a life."

As Chavez slowly pulls away from a military checkpoint, passers-by notice him at the wheel and come running through the rain, shouting "Presidente!" Leaning out of the window, Chavez clasps hands and plants kisses on cheeks, heads and hands.

"Hola mi amor," he tells an elderly woman.

"Epa compadre, how's your family?" he exclaims to a man he recognizes from years ago.

People crowd around. They snap photos with cell phones. They ask the president for help to replace shacks with homes or treat sick relatives. Chavez promises to help them all, barking out orders to aides who hurriedly jot down notes.

A woman runs to the window in the rain with tears in her eyes, crying out "I love you!"

Pulling away, Chavez honks, grins and shouts: "I'm off! On we go!"

The interruptions come throughout the road trip, and clearly revitalize Chavez just like the cup upon cup of sweetened black coffee that his daughter pours him from a Thermos.

Without contact with his supporters, "I'd be dead," he says. "Nothing would have any meaning." He warms up to the drama. "I ask myself quite regularly, 'Do you really love those people?' ... 'Is it true? Does their poverty hurt you? Do the children who are barefoot and homeless hurt you?' Yes, it hurts me. It can even make me cry."

He recalls that when held prisoner during the 2002 coup, he broke down weeping in a bathroom because he thought his cause was finished. Eventually, he came out. "I said, 'No, I'm going to keep fighting.'"

The fight is not always pleasant. Chavez scolds journalists whose questions he finds improper. He berates Cabinet ministers on live television for failing to meet goals. He chews out cameramen who err in their camera angles.

He acknowledges sharp emotional highs and lows.

"I get excited, and the frustration also really hits me hard. ... I'm very sensitive," he says. "Things hit me hard when they turn out badly. But even so, one needs to move quickly to look for a solution."

This acute sensitivity to criticism is linked to an underlying insecurity and a yearning for applause, says Angela Zago, a Venezuelan writer who once was a friend and aide to Chavez but became disillusioned in the early years of his presidency.

She thinks he would have made a perfect TV variety show host. "He knows how to sell himself very well," she says. "I've come to believe that he disguises himself and ends up believing the disguise."

His sensitivity is especially evident when he's called a caudillo, or strongman.

"They accuse me all over the world, saying there's a tyranny in Venezuela," Chavez says. "They say I'm a caudillo. I'm no caudillo in reality. I'm a man of these people. I grew up in this countryside, in this savanna. I grew up like those boys you saw there, selling fruit, selling sweets."

"I was lucky, you know?"

It is both the truth and the story Chavez tells, as he drives on through the rain.