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Why Did Washington Hate Hugo Chavez?

An Interview with Author and Revolutionary Eva Golinger

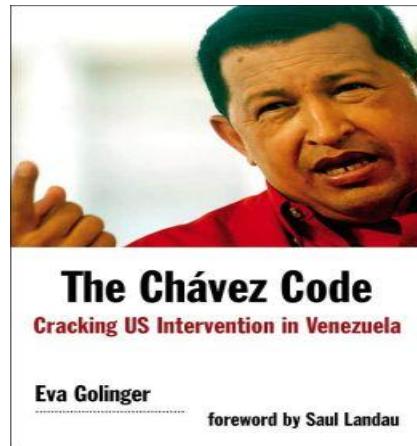
MIKE WHITNEY

July 30, 2013

Eva Golinger, winner of the International Award for Journalism in Mexico (2009), named “La Novia de Venezuela” by President Hugo Chávez, is an Attorney and Writer from New York, living in Caracas, Venezuela since 2005 and author of the best-selling books, “The Chávez Code: Cracking US Intervention in Venezuela” (2006 Olive Branch Press), “Bush vs. Chávez: Washington’s War on Venezuela” (2007, Monthly Review Press), “The Empire’s Web: Encyclopedia of Interventionism and Subversion”, “La Mirada del Imperio sobre el 4F: Los Documentos Desclasificados de Washington sobre la rebelión militar del 4 de febrero de 1992” and “La Agresión Permanente: USAID, NED y CIA”. Since 2003, Eva, a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and CUNY Law School in New York, has been investigating, analyzing and writing about US intervention in Venezuela using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to obtain information about US Government efforts to undermine progressive movements in Latin America. Her first book, The Chávez Code, has been translated and published in 8 languages (English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Farsi & Turkish) and is presently being made into a feature film.

Mike Whitney: There was very limited coverage of Hugo Chavez’s death in the United States. Can you briefly describe the reaction of the Venezuelan people?

Eva Golinger: Chavez's death was devastating for Venezuelans. Despite knowing about his illness, most Venezuelans thought he would win the battle against cancer like so many other battles he won before. The reaction was a collective cry of deep despair and sadness, but also of love, profound love for this person, this man who gave every last breath he had to making his country a better place for all. Ten days of mourning were officially declared in the country and Chavez's casket was placed for millions to pay respects to before the final funeral occurred. People spent up to 36 hours waiting in line to say goodbye to Chavez at the Military Academy where his political consciousness came to life, and where his casket was placed temporarily after his shocking death. Then, on the tenth day, a mass parade of people accompanied Chavez's funeral procession to the hilltop "Cuartel de la Montaña" (Barracks of the Mountain) across from the presidential palace Miraflores in Caracas, where he was laid to rest in a strikingly beautiful tomb called "The Four Elements". The Cuartel de la Montaña is where Chavez launched his political career in February 1992 during an attempted military rebellion against a corrupt and murderous neo-liberal president. He failed at that attempt and went to prison, but his message and charisma reached millions, who joined his movement that later led to his election as president in 1998. Chavez's tomb site, "The Four Elements", includes his casket resting on top of a beautifully sculpted lily pad on fresh water and clean earth. It sits in the open air with a burning eternal flame. Still to this day hundreds of Venezuelans visit the site, hoping for a chance to be



close to their beloved president.

MW: Chavez was an inspirational and charismatic leader who was able to push through progressive policies that benefited the majority of people. Will the Bolivarian Revolution continue under current Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro or has there been a shift in direction?

EG: The Bolivarian Revolution is continuing with President Maduro, there has been no shift in direction. Despite winning the presidential election in April with a narrow margin, Maduro has not altered Chavez's policies in any significant way, in fact, he is trying to consolidate them

further. He did change many cabinet members, but this was viewed as a positive move, especially because he brought in a lot of younger, unorthodox people instead of sticking with those who had been shuffled around Chavez's administration for years. He did keep many of Chavez's people, because of course Maduro is one of them, but he brought in fresh blood to show he was willing to make some necessary changes. For example, he named a frequent critic of Chavez's community-based policies, Reinaldo Iturriza, as Minister of Communes, which is a ministry dedicated to helping organized communities with resource management and project development. Iturriza himself was a grassroots organizer and he replaced a bureaucrat. Maduro has so far kept the economic policies of Chavez's government, though he changed the cabinet members in charge of them. He has cracked down harder on government corruption and crime. Dozens of public officials have already been arrested for corruption and he militarized high crime areas in order to get violence and insecurity under control. So I would say he picked up where Chavez left off and accelerated.

MW: Could you sum up some of Chavez's most important achievements as President?

EG: Chavez's achievements as President are vast and numerous. He transformed Venezuela from a dependent, cowardly nation with no national identity, mass poverty and stark apathy to a sovereign, independent and dignified country, full of national pride, cherishing its rich cultural diversity. He also reduced poverty by well over 50%, implemented successful, quality free universal healthcare and education programs and diversified the economy with the creation of new industries in the nation and thousands of new small business owners and cooperatives. One of his greatest achievements has been the collective awakening of consciousness in the country. Venezuela was so apathetic before Chavez became President, worse than the United States. Today it is a place where elections draw over 80% voluntary participation. Everyone talks about politics and issues of importance to the nation. Youth want to participate in the construction of their country, their future. Over the past few years the youngest members of Congress (National Assembly) have been elected in history, with legislators as young as 25 years old. Half of the members of Maduro's new executive cabinet are under 45. There are new youth movements, student movements – both opposition and chavista – that are active and participating in political life. And there is no question that Chavez's social policies and over 60% investment of the national budget annually in social programs made a massive difference in everyday Venezuelans' lives. Today there is more consumer power, Venezuelans enjoy better nutrition, have more dignified homes and Chavez also propelled worker-friendly laws that guarantee a living wage (the highest minimum wage in Latin America) and strong workers' benefits. There are many things he was unable to complete, but what he did achieve is extraordinary for a bit more than a decade in power, considering he also had to transform corrupt, inefficient and broken state institutions and face a US-backed opposition with immense economic power.

MW: You have written extensively about US intelligence agencies and NGO covert activities in Venezuela. Do you see any sign that the meddling has decreased since Chavez died?

EG: No. US intervention in Venezuela has progressively increased each year since Chavez was first elected in 1998. During the April 2002 coup d'etat against him, which was defeated by the people and loyal armed forces, the US was backing the opposition, but with moderate aid considering what they are doing today. Each year, funding for anti-Chavez groups has increased

by millions, coming through USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the State Department, and other US-funded agencies, such as Freedom House, International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI). In fact, Obama not only increased the funding to anti-Chavez groups, he made it even more official by openly including such funding in the annual Foreign Operations Budget. There is a special paragraph dedicated to funding for Venezuelan opposition groups, or as they call it, “democracy promotion”. I have extensively proven in my investigations that this funding has gone to finance destabilization and very undemocratic organizations and activities in Venezuela. We know from documents released by WikiLeaks and more recently by Edward Snowden, that US espionage in Venezuela increased exponentially this year, as Chavez’s health worsened. The US threw a massive amount of economic and political power behind losing presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, and has been the only nation to refuse to officially recognize President Nicolas Maduro’s electoral victory in April. Washington will continue to back the opposition in hopes that Maduro’s term can be recalled in a referendum in three years, when he’s reached the halfway point of his six-year term and constitutionally can be held accountable in a recall referendum. The US is banking on achieving his ouster then, if not before through other undemocratic means. Several leading opposition members have been caught recently in plots to attempt a coup against Maduro, as well as plan his assassination. All of them frequently travel to Washington for “meetings”. The Venezuelan government also recently ended a dialogue established with Washington that began in January after offensive statements made by incoming US Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power. Maduro’s administration, like Chavez’s, longs to have a respectful relationship with the US government. But they will not stand for aggression, meddling, or otherwise interventionist behavior. The US seems unable to engage in a mature, respectful relationship with Venezuela.

MW: Here's something that Barack Obama said in an interview with Univision when Chavez was on his deathbed. He said, "The most important thing is to remember that the future of Venezuela should be in the hands of the Venezuelan people. We've seen from Chávez in the past authoritarian policies, suppression of dissent."

Was there a reaction to Obama's comment in Venezuela?

EG: Definitely there was a very strong reaction. First of all, the comments were viewed as completely disrespectful to the nation and government at a time when Chavez’s health was deteriorating. They clearly indicated that the Obama administration is ignorant about Venezuela and has no concern for the massive, collective emotional difficulties millions in the country were experiencing due to Chavez’s failing health. President Chavez’s number one objective – which he achieved to a great extent – was transferring power to the people. Obama’s hypocrisy in such a statement overshadows his own failure to comprehend Venezuela’s reality. More people in Venezuela participate in political life than ever before, and many more than in the US (percentage-wise). In an era of mass espionage, selective assassinations, drones, secret prisons, grave human rights violations and other repressive policies led by the US, Obama should think twice about characterizing another nation’s government that he only knows about from talking points uninformed analysts provide him with. In sum, Venezuelans were outraged as Obama’s insensitive and disrespectful remarks, but they were not surprised. Those comments are typical of Washington’s hostile position towards Venezuela throughout the Chavez administration.

MW: Why did Washington hate Chavez?

EG: I suppose Washington hated Chavez for many reasons. Of course the oil is a primary source of Washington's aggressive attitude towards Chavez. Venezuela has the largest oil reserves on the planet and before Hugo Chavez was elected, governments were subservient to US interests. In fact, Venezuela was on the verge of privatizing its oil industry, along with everything else in the country, right when Chavez was elected. So the fact that a head of state sitting on the world's largest oil reserves – which the US needs to maintain its excessive consumer model in the long term – would not be subordinate to US agenda was maddening for Washington. Chavez not only reclaimed and transformed the oil industry to redistribute the wealth and ensure foreign corporations abided by the laws (paying taxes and royalties, for example), but he also nationalized other strategic resources in the country that the US had its hands in, such as gold, electricity and telecommunications. Clearly Chavez was a major thorn in Washington's economic interests in the region. Once Chavez spearheaded the creation of Latin American integration and cooperation, that converged into organizations such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), as well as PetroCaribe, Telesur (the region's first television network) and many more initiatives, Washington quickly began to lose influence in the region. This also led to more hostility towards Chavez, since he was the major leader and driving force behind Latin American independence and sovereignty in the XXI century. Washington, and the Venezuelan elite, also couldn't stand Chavez's mannerisms and direct way of telling things like they are. He was afraid of nothing and no one and never stood down, he always remained firm and said what he believed, even if it wasn't the diplomatically correct thing to say. And Washington hated him for bringing back the evil concept of socialism to today's world. They tried to hard to rid the planet of anything remotely like communism in the XX century, so Chavez's "Socialism of the XXI Century" was a slap in the face for old school Washington, which still holds the reigns in the US.

MW: Would you like to add your personal thoughts about Chavez's passing?

EG: Chavez's death is impossible to accept. He was such a vibrant, motivating force, full of love and genuine affection for people and life. He had an extraordinary capacity of communication and could connect with anyone in a sincere embrace of humanity. He was a brilliant visionary and a maker of dreams. He helped people see the potential within themselves and realize our capabilities. He adored his country, its rich culture, music, diversity, and he truly gave every piece of himself to building a dignified, strong and beautiful Venezuela. I was one of the fortunate ones to be his close friend and share many exceptional moments with him. He had weaknesses and imperfections, like we all do, but his capacity to love and care about all people led him to overcome many difficult – almost impossible – obstacles. He really believed he would defeat cancer, and of course we all hoped he would. His passing leaves a deep emptiness and profound sadness for millions. His energy was so infinite, it's hard to not feel it everywhere still, around us, leading and guiding the revolution he helped build. That's why it's so difficult to accept his leaving, because he is still so present in our lives, and of course in every inch of Venezuela. Chavez became Venezuela, la patria querida, and his legacy will continue to grow and flourish as Venezuela blossoms into its full potential.

