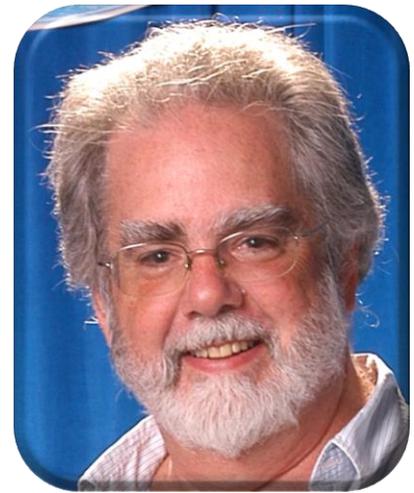


While Good Men Sleep Losing America



EXTRACT: BUILD-UP TO APRIL 11, 2002

Hugo Chavez' Communist Revolution took Venezuela by storm in 1998, exploiting the weaknesses of a strong 2-party system and leaving it and the country in shambles.

John Salas is a Venezuelan journalist educated in the United States, whose editorial columns and hard-hitting radio and television programs in central Venezuela finally brought the government down on him.

In **“While Good Men Sleep – Losing America”** Salas chronicles Venezuela's fall from prosperous Land of Opportunity to nation on the brink of chaos and ultimate destruction. In it, he details it all from the beginning, as a lesson to all who think their own Democracy is stable and strong:

- **The weaknesses in the system that opened the door to Chavez, and how this can happen anywhere that politicians have hidden agendas and allow institutions to wither and the people become disenchanted**
- **How and why the politicos took to the hills.**
- **The step-by-step process which threw off checks and balances and gave Hugo ultimate power.**
- **How the electoral system was undermined and why elections are not an option.**
- **The rampant corruption and violence.**
- **The incredible events of April 2002 when Chavez was out and then in again.**
- **The systematic confiscation of farms, ranches, industries and buildings, and their effect on the economy.**
- **The attack dogs that now keep the people off the streets, except when and where the government wants them.**
- **Chavez' ties with Iran, Cuba, Colombian guerrillas and drug trafficking.**
- **The “Chavez Franchise” international web of crime, corruption, and treason that spreads like a malignant virus throughout the Third World.**
- **The connection with key American Democrats and well-meaning celebs.**
- **How payback time came for him and his family.**

THE ATTACK DOGS BEGIN

“Look, we’ve got *permission* to protest in front of the Embassy. Tell them to get those people out of there and let *us* move forward!”

“The police say they can’t do anything about it. Those people are there, and they say they can’t force them out.”

Alejandro Peña-Esclusa had organized the manifestation in front of the Cuban Embassy in Caracas, trying to draw attention to the increasing influence of Fidel Castro in the Chavez government. It was an uphill battle to convince Venezuelans, even those opposed to Chavez, of the intricate web that was being set up to gain absolute power, modeled after Castro’s revolution and his system of control of the people.

Nobody really knew the horrors and misery inside Cuba, nor understood the extreme means Castro used to control his population, and so the signs that were so obvious to us were nothing but exaggerations to most. This is what had made Chavez’ visit to Cuba in 1994 a non-issue in the campaign: People don’t know or understand history or details, and didn’t seem comfortable with the idea that a group of people might exist that was conspiring to take absolute power. “Conspiracy theorists” were deemed mad in Venezuela, in Washington, and everywhere else. It isn’t easy to confront that evil intentions exist, and so people preferred to take things at face value.

We were 350 people, and blocking our way were some 75 Chavistas who had been bused in, and who were drinking cheap alcohol and having a ball, waving Cuban and Communist Party flags. The Caracas police were lined up between us, purportedly to keep the peace, but the fact that they were under the orders of Greater Caracas Mayor Alfredo Peña, a key Chavez ally, made us mistrust and fear them.

It was ten o’clock in the morning. My son, Christian, walked back and forth between the two groups, taking pictures. The Chavistas thought he was a journalist and let him do his job, happy to be in the limelight. Since the press had been so active in covering every Chavez move during the first two and a half years of government, they still *loved* the press.

Our signs warned of the “Cubanization” of Venezuela. I held one that said, “With Chavez, Fidel’s in charge”, a play on Chavez’ motto of “With Chavez, The People are in charge”.



ME HOLDING A PROTEST SIGN: “WITH CHAVEZ, FIDEL’S IN CHARGE. PABLO AURE, IN FRONT OF ME, WAS WITH US.”



BURNING THE AMERICAN FLAG AT THE CUBAN EMBASSY

Pablo Aure, a university professor from Carabobo who had become famous due to an article criticizing military complacency with Chavez, was busy giving statements to the different media present. Peña-Esclusa was trying to calm us all down so we wouldn't pick a fight with the Chavistas.

An hour later, these were now 200, and were boisterous. We yelled back from behind the

police line, disgusted that we hadn't been allowed to reach the

Embassy to protest. The yelling back and forth got louder, and three Chavistas climbed a wall and burned an American flag, taunting us.

Then a group of policemen from the office of opposition mayor Henrique Capriles, of Baruta, showed up. We were technically in his city, which was one of several municipalities within the Greater Caracas area. After a while, one of them recognized me and approached us. He told me that buses full of Chavistas were arriving, and that they had us surrounded on all sides but one. He recommended we leave immediately.

“Why should *we* leave if we have permission to reach the Embassy and *these* guys are the ones that are illegal?”

He answered simply that we were in danger of being attacked.

“Well, protect us, then! That's what you're *here* for, aren't you?” said Christian, furious.

“With all due respect, we're out-manned here, and these guys are liable to do anything. *Please* leave, right now, or we won't be able to guarantee your safety. We can escort you down the street until you're in the clear.”

I told Alejandro this, and he agreed that we should leave.

So, taunted by the Chavistas, we marched single-file between two lines of policemen who escorted us two blocks down the road to our cars.

A year and a half into his term, Chavez had marked his territory for the first time. Protesters could go only where *he* said, no further.

It was May 26th, 2000.



WITH ALEJANDRO PEÑA-ESCLUSA



CARLOS LANZ, FORMER GUERRILLA, BANK ROBBER AND KIDNAPPER, HEAD OF THE EDUCATIONAL REFORM

“DON’T MESS WITH MY KIDS!”

Napoleon says it is more important to educate the young than those who are already grown up, and he takes the nine puppies that are born right after the harvest away from their mothers for education, secluding them in a loft until the rest of the farm has pretty much forgotten that they exist.

George Orwell, “Animal Farm”

That was the rallying cry. Decree 1011 had hit too close to home, and for the first time people were willing to hit the streets and were organizing themselves. There were no leaders, just normal citizens: The politicians were still in hiding.

Chavez had won the presidency in part because of a growing idea in the people that Venezuela was a rich nation, but that corrupt politicians had stolen their part of the cake. Once it became clear he might win, many leaders of the main political parties that had ruled the country for forty years decided to get on his good side.

Some helped divide their own parties towards the end of the campaign, and instead of campaigning against Chavez they attacked Henrique Salas-Römer, his main opponent, thus sealing his defeat. Those who did so, despite being major factors in the corrupt governments preceding Chavez, were rewarded with no investigation into their finances and doings.

Once he was President, most of the rest of the past leaders had gone into hiding, afraid of being investigated. Governors and Mayors were very low-key in the first two years after the elections, some not wanting to destroy their political careers by being seen as contrary to the huge wave of hope that Chavez had unleashed. Many others had glass roofs and were simply avoiding his wrath and vengeance.

In the 2000 Congressional elections, Chavez won two thirds of the seats and set out to reform key laws. By the end of the year 2000, he had announced he was going to reform the whole educational system, starting with the Education Law.



A SIGN POSTED IN VENEZUELA AT THE TIME:

**TO FIDEL
COMMANDER FOREVER**

**BECAUSE YOUR INVINCIBLE EXAMPLE
WILL FOREVER GUIDE OUR PATH...**

**FIDEL WE LOVE YOU...
HOMELAND, SOCIALISM OR DEATH...
WE'RE WINNING!!!!**

The project that was made public for the educational system was a complex structure, of which a reformed Education Law would be only one of the pieces. Along with it were a series of Regulations which would convert schools into communal centers under the direction of elected officials charged with controlling not only education, but the surrounding neighborhoods as well, socially and economically. This network was so intricate that it was never fully understood by parents and teachers, and might easily have become law without major opposition.



**INTERVIEWING A CONSTITUTIONAL
LAWYER REGARDING THE ABUSES
BEING COMMITTED**

At the time, I interviewed the man in charge of the educational reform, Carlos Lanz. This figure had been a guerrilla, bank robber and kidnapper, infamous for his participation in the kidnapping of American industrialist William Niehous in February of 1976. Now he was in charge of the educational reform.

In our interview I outlined to him my understanding of the full implications of the reform, and how it would impact schools, communities, curricula and neighborhood politics by politicizing them under the government umbrella. He happily agreed with me, quite surprised, that I had it right. To my comment that I didn't want our kids saluting and fawning over Chavez like Cuban kids did with Fidel,

he said that that wouldn't be so bad.

To jump-start all these changes, Chavez issued Decree 1011, which gave government-appointed school supervisors the power to suspend or fire teachers and principals, even in private schools, if they contravened any vaguely-worded mandates in the law.

This Decree, unlike the complexity of the overall system proposed, was simple and was immediately interpreted as a direct threat to private schools, including those run by the Catholic Church. It was considered the first step of an imposition of government ideology –suspected by growing numbers to be Communism– into family affairs.

This caused terror and sparked emergency meetings of parents and teachers around the country to stop it. Finally, in January, 2001, for the first time during his mandate, ten thousand people gathered in the streets of Caracas, demanding the elimination of the Decree and that the Education Bill be submitted to discussion and approved only with a general consensus.

No one led, it was just people. I was among the speakers at a crowd of three thousand congregated at the same time in Valencia, and other major cities had similar turnouts.

“Not with my kids you don't!” was the battle cry. And we meant it. And it resonated throughout society.

Pressure mounted, forcing the Decree to be put on hold and, finally, two months later, Congress gave in to public opinion and started to discuss the law reform with parents and educators, finally presenting a Bill backed by everyone.

We breathed a sigh of relief: We'd saved the kids.

Those were happy times, and both opposing citizens and Chavista Congressmen I interviewed at the time were very satisfied with the new Law, which was fired off to Miraflores to be signed by the President and put into effect.

However, it was immediately sent back by Chavez, unsigned, remarking that he was swinging at the bill “with Sammy Sosa’s bat”, a reference to the recent visit to Venezuela by the Dominican baseball star. He wanted the original law and system that had been in the works.

So, Decree 1011, the Education Bill and the whole educational reform were parked on the side of the road: They hadn’t been approved, but they were not forgotten.

The President did what he had done so often: Emulating Lenin’s famous one step back to then take two forward, when Chavez was forced to take a step back, he planned and worked to take ten steps forward in the future.

He had to wait eight years to try again, but try and succeed he did.

But opposition had taken to the streets and would continue with a vengeance.



APRIL, 2002 - WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?

Snowball believes it is important to finish the windmill and save labor... and at the next Meeting the windmill is to be put to the vote: Snowball makes a speech in favor, Napoleon utters a sentence or two against it, and Snowball then launches into a brilliant, eloquent appeal for the windmill. Napoleon suddenly lets out a strange high-pitched sound and nine huge, vicious dogs bound into the barn, head straight for Snowball and chase him off the property. It turns out that these are the nine young puppies Napoleon took away from their mothers.

George Orwell, "Animal Farm"

THE BUILD-UP

"What if nobody comes?"

My son Christian was tired of being the eternal sheep facing the regime's attack dogs.

Nine weeks earlier, Peña-Eslusa had orchestrated a march protesting the growing Communist inclination of the government, drawing a gathering of some 15,000 people, and for the first time the opposition had been able to march without being attacked by the dogs. At the end of November, members of opposition party *Accion Democratica* marched –prepared for trouble– to the holy Chavista territory of downtown Caracas, and successfully repelled government backers as they made their way to the Capitol building for what was meant to be a peaceful protest but willing to put up a show of force.

Pedro Carmona had come into the center of the Venezuelan hurricane the previous December, 2001, when along with union leader Carlos Ortega they had promoted a one-day general strike which had paralyzed the country in protest against the government's totalitarian inclination and actions.

That strike had galvanized opposition factors and shown the strength of national discontent. The government had tried to break the strike, with a strategy of forcing public servants to show up for work and paying buses and taxis to drive around town all day long in an attempt to show that everything was normal, that the strike had failed. But the fact was that industry and commerce had come to a halt that December 10th, 2001.

Soon after, Alfredo Peña, the Mayor of Caracas, a journalist who had been one of the most prominent critics of previous governments and who had become a key Chavista, leveled severe criticism on the government and was immediately ostracized and branded a traitor and agent of the CIA.

Cornered by increasing unrest, the government stepped up attacks on the opposition, and announced the creation of the Bolivarian Circles with headquarters in Miraflores Palace, "to

promote social welfare among the poor”. Chavez started insisting that his was a peaceful revolution, but an *armed* one, and that no one should make any mistake about that.

On January 7th, 2002, the Circles made their street debut when dozens of Chavistas, on foot and on motorcycles, launched a rock attack on the *El Nacional* group of newspapers, accusing owners and reporters of being corrupt coup-mongers. The leader, a fire-breathing bleached-blond populist leader, Lina Ron, shouted un-publishable epithets not only against the newspaper and reporters, but also against Mayor Peña, who in the past had used that newspaper to gain fame as an irrepressible critic of previous governments.

On January 20th, Chavez had told his supporters not to attack or hound reporters, cameramen or other workers from the private media. That same day pro-Chavez demonstrators insulted and pushed a Globovision camera crew and beat and rocked its van as they called them liars, saying, “We’ll lynch you if you get out”. Other media reporters suffered similar aggressions.

In the days leading up to the January 23rd celebration of the fall of Dictator Marcos Perez-Jimenez in 1958, major newspapers ran stories on the popular uprising that had caused his downfall, showing explicit similarities to what was going on in the country.

Now, on January 23rd, things were extremely tense in the country, with things seeming to come to a head. This was no time to be out-manned.

“Don’t worry, there will be a *lot* of people” I said confidently. I felt I had the pulse of the country. My radio and television shows in central Venezuela showcased the national situation, and many critics of the regime were using it to open eyes regarding the increased “Cubanization” of the country, as well as the corruption, inefficiency and increased militarization that characterized the government.

At six o’clock that morning, the hour when most political talk shows began airing on both television and radio, the government started off the day with a media “chain” of a Catholic Mass. There, on a forced transmission to the whole country, the chosen priest denounced the United States’ *Plan Colombia*, demanded the media tell the truth, and led a prayer calling for the press “to begin to show respect for the President”.

The government had forbidden media helicopters flying over Caracas to film our march. When we arrived at the concentration point, almost a quarter of a million people were jubilantly flaunting their opposition. The turnout surprised both sides, electrifying all who opposed the President.

Then, a new chain aired, this time from the National Assembly, where a pro-Chavez journalist and Director of the *Ultimas Noticias* newspaper gave a speech praising the government’s stance on freedom of the press. He didn’t mention that the owners of his own newspaper had twice in the last year been forced to fire their independent directors because of financial and legal pressure placed on them by the government.

After the second chain, independent television and radio stations returned to their coverage of the massive opposition turnout, which marched downtown under the protection of the Caracas police and the stunned looks of Chavez’ followers.

That night, Chavez forced still another chain, this time from a government-backed concentration that drew some thirty thousand people. Armed with binoculars on the high stage set up for him, he made a show of belittling the “tiny” opposition march and telling people he couldn’t see people at the back of his own “immense” gathering, even with binoculars. He told independent newspaper owners “to roll up their newspapers and stick them in their...pockets”.

With tensions mounting, on February 7th an active Air Force Colonel, Pedro Soto, surprised the country by interrupting a forum on freedom of the press to denounce the Chavez government, the first of a series of active officers to do so.

The heat built up quickly from there. By the beginning of April, 2001, all talk was about calling for a general strike to paralyze the country.

To be continued...