

# Why we must watch Chavez

A discussion of Venezuela's political crisis should not begin or end with a cautionary parable about Herbert Mathews, but his image is hard to shake. A seasoned and respected reporter for The New York Times, Mr. Mathews secretly interviewed Fidel Castro at his guerrilla camp in the mountains of eastern Cuba not long before Mr. Castro's triumphant march into Havana in 1959. His conclusion? Fidel Castro was a democrat.

President Hugo Chavez survived last week's recall referendum with about 58 per cent of the vote. During the past six years, he has won several other mandates, including the adoption of a new constitution. The opposition adamantly believes that Mr. Chavez rigged the referendum results through manipulation of electronic voting machines and other pre-election machinations. Did the vote fairly represent the will of the people as endorsed by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter the following day? The answer is an annoying "yes and no."

"Yes," if the focus is on the election-day process. International observers have not uncovered evidence of significant manipulation or voter harassment during voting day or the postelection audits. "No," if the focus includes Mr. Chavez's pre-election manoeuvres that tilted the table in his favour through control of the electoral apparatus and indirect intimidation.

Thousands of citizens who had signed the petition that triggered the referendum lost jobs, pensions or suffered harassment. Many feared that their choice would be known to the government, and the ubiquitous presence of machine-gun-toting soldiers inside and outside the polling stations reinforced this concern.

Of mixed black, white and native heritage, Mr. Chavez looks and sounds like none of Venezuela's previous presidents. His speeches,

laced with humour, folksy anecdotes and baseball jargon, are entertaining, albeit often contradictory. Mr. Chavez has mobilized thousands of Venezuelans who had previously been marginalized from social, economic and electoral life. He has introduced literacy programs and medical care in places where they had not been before, and is a master of bestowing high-profile benefits in the tradition of a Boston ward politician.

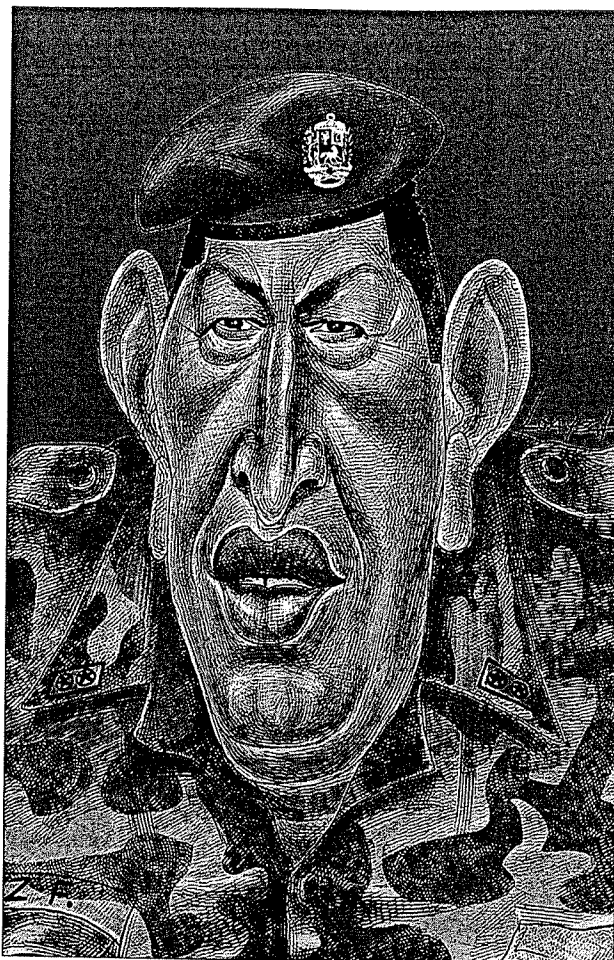
If Mr. Chavez is acknowledging political debts for his Aug. 15 victory, his first thank-you note should be to George W. Bush, without whose Iraq policy, which has driven up oil prices, Mr. Chavez could not have won the referendum.

What of the Herbert Mathews parable? So far, Mr. Chavez remains on the democratic side of the porous line that separates democracy from authoritarianism. His democracy is a populist brand, not a liberal one that suggests there is more to democracy than periodic elections.

For several months, Mr. Chavez resisted external pressures for international observation of the referendum process, setting out restrictive and unacceptable terms. Even after the government made some concessions, the European Community judged them insufficient for a free election and declined to participate. Mr. Chavez opened the door to observation for the Organization of American States and the U.S.-based Carter Center only after pre-election polls had indicated a shift from a majority for Mr. Chavez's recall to a significant Chavez lead.

The media are harassed (one broadcast mogul had his house raided in the lead-up to the election), but they remain free and vigorous in their anti-Chavez rhetoric. The jails contain few political prisoners. Private enterprise is bruised but still alive.

Mr. Chavez has eroded constitutional checks and balances, politi-



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## Venezuela's President is beginning to overtake Fidel Castro as the most charismatic leader in the Americas, say OAS election observers

**KEN FRANKEL and JOHN GRAHAM**

cized the military and militarized the government. His ideas are shaped by the Cuban model, and reinforced by his solid friendship with Fidel Castro. His patter and propaganda rail against *Yanqui* imperialism (replete with official posters of a swastika superimposed on Mr. Bush's forehead), oligarchic rule, and the international economic order.

Mr. Chavez has said he expects to be in the presidency until at least 2021. Unless the bottom falls out of the oil market, or the internal debt rises to a point where lav-

ish social spending is severely curtailed, he has a good chance of getting there. Many of his followers, who by and large were left out in the rain for 40 years, feel they have no alternative. They view the recent opposition pronouncements about helping the poor as insincere epiphanies. Hope, or even the illusion of hope, is better than no hope.

Apprehension is rising that Mr. Chavez's referendum victory will be a green light to pursue a more militant revolutionary agenda. It is tempting, but too simplistic to say

that Mr. Chavez is charting a full Cuban path. Unlike Cuba before the Castro revolution, Venezuela has one of the oldest democracies in Latin America. If the opposition forces don't overplay their hand (which they tend to do), then, given their size and tenacity and backing by the international community, they may yet be a check on Mr. Chavez's autocratic instincts.

Although the United States has squandered its leverage and is a hostage to Venezuelan oil production, Brazil (South America's strongest political player) remains a powerful and potentially moderating influence. Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva appears to have no interest in Mr. Chavez's ideas about recreating Simon Bolivar's dream of a united South America, militarizing the government, capping the international economic structure or destabilizing the continent through the spread of the Chavez model to neighbours such as Colombia and Bolivia.

Mr. Chavez is beginning to overtake Mr. Castro as the most charismatic leader in the Americas. Whether or not we approve of him, Canada and the U.S. must learn to deal with him and his bitterly polarized country. The region as a whole through the OAS should hold Mr. Chavez to the terms of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which sets out warnings and potential consequences related to creeping authoritarianism.

*Ken Frankel, a partner at Hodgson Russ LLP and a board member of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), and John Graham, former Canadian ambassador to Venezuela and chair of FOCAL, were international observers in Venezuela.*