

when huge numbers of people came down to the streets, to surround Miraflores and several garrisons, demanding my return—vigorously reaffirmed in my mind the idea that this is possible. Of course, the battle is hard, and it will continue to be so. This is the art of making possible what has seemed and continues to seem impossible to so many.”

Marta Harnecker

Chronology

NOVEMBER 24, 1948—Overthrow of Rómulo Gallego from the *Acción Democrática* party (AD), leading to dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez.

JANUARY 23, 1958—Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship falls as a result of a military uprising supported by the *Junta Patriótica Nacional* led by Fabricio Ojeda and whose members include representatives of the then clandestine Venezuelan political parties AD, *Comite de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI), and the Venezuelan Communist party (PCV). The PCV was the most active in the popular uprising that overthrew the dictatorship.

OCTOBER 31, 1958—The Punto Fijo Pact is signed by Rómulo Gallegos, Rómulo Betancourt, Rafael Caldera, and Jovito Villalba. This pact controlled the Venezuelan political system and provides for the AD and COPEI parties to share power. The URD also participated in the meeting but without any significant results for the party. As a result of their participation a group led by Luis Miquelena and José Vicente Rangel split off.

DECEMBER 1958—Democratic elections result in Rómulo Betancourt becoming president.

MAY 4, 1959—The Carúpano and Puerto Cabello rebellion includes civilian and military members of the opposition. Admiral Pedro Medina Silva, the first public leader of the Armed Force for National Liberation–National Liberation Force (FALN–FLN), leads the uprising.

1959-62—The rise of the guerrilla movement FALN-FLN and its adoption of armed struggle influenced by the PCV. Weaknesses under the leadership of Douglas Bravo lead to splits. Guerrilla leaders under Teodoro Petkoff form the Movement toward Socialism (MAS), as a rejection of the traditional parties, the Communist party, and armed struggle.

DECEMBER 17, 1982—The Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200 (MBR 200) is born. Underneath the *Samán de Güere* four captains (Felipe Acosta Carlos, Jesús Urdaneta Hernández, Rafael Baduel, and Hugo Chávez Frías) swear an oath.

FEBRUARY 2, 1989—Carlos Andrés Pérez takes office as president.

FEBRUARY 16, 1989—IMF structural adjustment program implemented.

1989—Neoliberal economic reforms: floating interest rates; increased taxes on public services; public salaries increase 5 percent; the progressive elimination of import tariffs; 4 percent reduction in the budget deficit; labor weakened to make work force more flexible. Executive decree allows foreign companies to remit 100 percent of their profits to their base country. Inflation reaches 80.7 percent, real salaries decrease by 40 percent, unemployment reaches 14.0 percent and 80.42 percent of the country is living in poverty.

FEBRUARY 27-28, 1989—*El caracazo*, the popular explosion in response to an increase in gas prices, is put down by the army. An estimated 5,000 people are killed according to human rights organizations. Militarization of life across the country. Curfews imposed on several cities.

DECEMBER 4, 1989—Direct elections of governors, mayors, and representatives with a 60 percent abstention rate. The richest states elect leftist or independent candidates. Militants from the Causa R party were elected to key posts: Andrés Velásquez as governor of the state of Bolívar and Clemente Scotto as mayor of Caroní.

JANUARY 1992—National teachers' strike.

FEBRUARY 4, 1992—Military rebellion led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez. Chávez took the San Carlos military barracks in Caracas but failed to take the Miraflores Palace and President Carlos Andrés Pérez gets away. Meanwhile rebels take Maracaibo (where Francisco Arias Cárdenas was), Valencia and Maracay, key Venezuelan cities. Chávez negotiates a surrender and addresses his companions in arms and the entire country on live TV from the Ministry of Defense. He utters the famous words "I take responsibility" and "for now" which catapult him forward as a national leader.

—The MBR 200 is reborn nine years after its creation.

NOVEMBER 27, 1992—Second uprising led by high-ranking officials from all three branches of the Armed Force. The rebels bomb the Miraflores Palace and the Ministry of the Exterior. Rear Admiral Hernán Grüber Odreman takes responsibility for the act. Generals Francisco Visconti, of the army, and Higinio Castro, of the air force, among others, participate. Freddy Bernal, then chief of the special police force and now mayor of Caracas, joins the movement.

MAY 20, 1993—President Carlos Andrés Pérez is impeached by the Supreme Court after being accused of misuse of public funds.

JUNE 5, 1993—Ramón J. Velásquez leads the transition government. The electoral cycle begins and Chávez and the other military prisoners call for abstention; 52 percent of the electorate abstains and Caldera wins.

NOVEMBER 4, 1993—The candidates for the presidency of the Republic include: Rafael Caldera of the Convergencia party and supported by MAS; Andrés Velásquez of the Causa R party; Eduardo Fernandez of the COPEI party; and Claudio Fermin of the AD party. Chávez calls for abstention.

MARCH 26, 1994—Caldera's government grants clemency to Chávez and the other military rebels who were still in prison.



DECEMBER 1994—Chávez travels to Cuba.

DECEMBER 14, 1994—The government intervenes to save fourteen banks. The Central Bank of Venezuela offers extraordinary auxiliary credits to support the banking system. Many banking institutions fail.

1995—Chávez travels the country with the slogan “Constitutional assembly now!”

1996—MBR 200 carries out a survey to see how people feel about electoral participation and whether Chávez should be a candidate.

FEBRUARY 1997—Causa R is divided—one group supports Andrés Velásquez and the other supports the *Patria para Todos* party under Pablo Medina.

APRIL 19, 1997—MBR 200’s national assembly decides to participate in the elections and to create a formal political party.

OCTOBER 21, 1997—The Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) is formed.

DECEMBER 6, 1998—Chávez wins the presidential election with 56 percent of the votes in the first round.

DECEMBER 1998—Price of oil on the world market drops to \$7.60 per barrel. The external debt reaches US\$23.440 billion.

FEBRUARY 17, 1999—National Electoral Council calls a referendum on whether to hold a constitutional assembly.

APRIL 25, 1999—The vote calls for a constitutional assembly and a transitional period begins. The *Polo Patriótico* alliance is formed as a unified front in the elections of representatives for the constitutional assembly. It is composed of MVR, PCV, PPT, and MAS.

JULY 25, 1999—In elections for the constitutional assembly, the *Polo Patriótico* wins 120 out of 131 seats. After the constitutional assembly is sworn in, Congress is dissolved.

DECEMBER 15, 1999—The new constitution is approved in a national referendum.

JULY 3, 2000—Hugo Chávez decrees an increase in the minimum wage to 144,000 Bolívares.

JULY 30, 2000—In the election of 2000, Chávez is reelected president under the new constitution. In addition, 165 legislators are elected to the National Assembly; 23 governors, mayors, and other public officials are elected.

OCTOBER 30, 2000—The Cuban-Venezuelan convention on oil is signed.

JANUARY 2001—Alí Rodríguez, the minister of energy, becomes secretary general of OPEC.

APRIL 2001—Chávez travels through Russia, Iran, Bangladesh, China, and Malaysia.

—Hugo Chávez participates in the third FTAA summit in Québec, Canada. Brazil and Venezuela oppose formalizing the FTAA in 2003.

JUNE 2001—A coup attempt is detected and prevented.

DECEMBER 17, 2001—Bolivarian Circles are sworn in. Chávez re-launches the MBR 200.

APRIL 11, 2002—Coup led by right-wing political parties, business associations, and some high ranking military and labor officials. Pedro Carmona, president of Fedecámaras, names himself president of Venezuela and dissolves all of the branches of government. The coup plotters attack leaders of pro-Chávez groups. Pro-coup gangs attack the Cuban embassy in Caracas.

APRIL 12, 2002—Isaías Rodríguez, the attorney general of the Republic, announces on live TV that Chávez did not resign. Popular sectors and troops loyal to Chávez begin to mobilize against the coup.

APRIL 13, 2002—The popular mobilization against the coup continues to grow. Various groups within the military declare their allegiance to Chávez. In Maracay General Baduel, in charge of the parachute battalion, decries the coup. The people in the streets



surround his barracks. In Caracas, the people surround Fort Tiuna and General García Carneiro joins them and puts his battalion in the service of the Chávez loyalists.

APRIL 14, 2002—In the early morning hours Hugo Chávez returns to his post as president of Venezuela. Six officials of the Armed Force and Pedro Carmona are arrested in connection with the coup. Carmona is released to house arrest and a few weeks later he flees to Colombia where he is granted asylum.

AUGUST 16, 2002—In the Caracas district of El Valle there is a massive protest against the Supreme Court's decision that found there had been no coup.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2002—Major protests against Chávez shut down several parts of Caracas.

OCTOBER 22, 2002—Protest in the Plaza Altamira begun by fourteen military officers who come out against the government and are joined by more than eighty other officers. Hundreds of people form a solidarity network to support these officers.

NOVEMBER 11, 2002—PDVSA workers in opposition to the government protest the politicization of the national oil company. Fedecámaras, the CTV and the dissident officers form the "National Reconstruction Pact" to "recover the liberty of the country" and to force Chávez to agree to a recall referendum.

DECEMBER 5, 2002—Campaign to sabotage the oil industry begins. PDVSA's production decreases by one million barrels per day. The Paraguaná refinery, which accounts for 72 percent of the national production, supports the strike. The El Palito and the Puerto La Cruz refineries continue operating but at 50 percent capacity.

DECEMBER 6, 2002—Massacre in the Plaza Francia in the Altamira sector of Caracas: three killed twenty-eight wounded. Not clear who was responsible. Gas, becomes scarce all over the country. Domestic sales of gas are stopped. Forty wells close for twenty-

four hours in the north of the Orinoco valley and in Punta de Mata in the southwest part of Maturin.

DECEMBER 7, 2002—*Chávistas* organize a massive march for peace democracy and in support of the constitution.

DECEMBER 9, 2002—Chávez decrees the militarization of the petroleum industry and orders members of the Armed Force to not only provide security but also to operate the industry.

DECEMBER 19, 2002—The Supreme Court declares the PDVSA workers' strike illegal.

DECEMBER 20, 2002—Massive opposition march in Caracas demanding Chávez's resignation.

DECEMBER 2002—Government supporters organize a rally at the PDVSA headquarters. The government retakes the *Pilin Leon* ship with 44 million liters of gas from strikers. Gas production is suspended. The opposition rejects the government's proposal to end the strike. The navy takes control of the *Moruy* oil tanker. The president of PDVSA, Alí Rodríguez Araque, recognizes the collapse of the national petroleum industry. Hundreds of thousands of members of the opposition organize a protest to demand Chávez's resignation.

JANUARY 23, 2003—Hundreds of thousands of people gather on Bolívar Avenue in Caracas to support the government.

FEBRUARY 9, 2003—Chávez announces that the oil coup has been defeated and the country is on the way back to normal production.

MARCH 6, 2003—Chávez appoints a new board of directors to PDVSA with Alí Rodríguez Araque as president.

APRIL 21, 2003—Mission Barrio Adentro health program begins.

JUNE 20, 2003—Mission Robinson, the national literacy plan, begins.

AUGUST 23, 2003—Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans gather on Bolívar Avenue in Caracas to celebrate the third anniversary of the Bolivarian government.



FEBRUARY 27, 2004—G-15 summit is held in Caracas in the midst of protests with tear gas. The opposition protest results in two deaths and twenty-one wounded. Opposition protestors attack the headquarters of the MVR and the Comando Ayacucho.

FEBRUARY 29, 2004—Massive march in support of Chávez.

JUNE 3, 2004—The CNE announces that the opposition has enough signatures to initiate a recall referendum. Militant *Chávistas* who are convinced there was fraud involved in activating the referendum begin a series of spontaneous, violent protests in Caracas. Chávez accepts the CNE's decision and calls on his supporters to begin mobilizing for the referendum.

AUGUST 15, 2004—The *no* vote (not to recall Chávez) wins the recall referendum by a margin of roughly two million votes.

OCTOBER 31, 2004—Mayoral and gubernatorial elections across the country. Chávez supporters win the vast majority of offices.

JANUARY 19, 2005—The government expropriates the Venepal paper factory and hands it over to the workers for co-management.

JANUARY 30, 2005—President Chávez gives a speech at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in front of a standing room only crowd both inside and outside of the Gigantinho stadium.

MARCH 2, 2005—Presidents of Venezuela and Paraguay sign the Caracas Accords.

MAY 1, 2005—Chávez receives a massive workers march in support of the revolution at Miraflores Palace. The opposition workers in the CTV organize a small countermarch.

CHAPTER ONE

Roots

To start the conversation, it would be good to know what factors in your life inspired you politically and what is your vision for the Venezuelan Left?

I entered the military academy in 1970, when I was barely seventeen years old, almost a child. I didn't have any political aspirations: at that time my dream was to be a baseball player. We were a generation of kids from the towns, the neighborhoods, the countryside, who came of age at a time when the guerrilla wars were ending and the country seemed to be beginning a relatively stable democratic period.

I entered the military academy in fairly unique circumstances. I am a member of the first class of what is known as the Andrés Bello Plan. At that time the old military school changed to a sort of military university. Previously, students in the academy earned military bachelor's degrees. My class, however, entered with bachelor's degrees and graduated with degrees in military sciences, which was a university level degree. The curriculum was improved to meet university level requirements. We studied political science and I began to take an interest in military theory. I liked Mao's writings a lot and so I began to read more of his work.

Didn't your brother have an influence as well?¹

No, because as a young adult I saw very little of my brother except indirectly. He was studying in Mérida and I didn't know that he