



# Comandante: Hugo Chávez's Venezuela

By *Rory Carroll*

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**The inside story of Hugo Chavez's rule and complex legacy**

Few leaders in our time have been as divisive and enigmatic as the late Hugo Chavez. In *Comandante*, acclaimed journalist *Rory Carroll* tells the inside story of Chavez's life, his time as Venezuela's president, and his legacy. Based on interviews with ministers, aides, courtiers, and citizens, this intimate piece of reportage chronicles a unique experiment in power that veers among enlightenment, tyranny, comedy, and farce. Carroll also investigates the almost religious devotion of millions of Venezuelans who regarded Chavez as a savior and the loathing of those who branded him as a dictator. In beautiful prose that blends the lyricism and strangeness of magical realism with the brutal, ugly truth of authoritarianism, *Comandante* offers a cautionary tale for our times.

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**Comandante: Hugo Chávez's Venezuela** By *Rory Carroll* **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

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In 13 tumultuous years as president of Venezuela, Chávez continues to evoke either love or hatred, hardly ever neutral feelings. Carroll, the *Guardian's* Latin American correspondent, spent six months penetrating Miraflores Palace, interviewing political friends and foes, aides, ministers, and bodyguards for an absorbing portrait of the charismatic Chávez. The former revolutionary and coup leader gained the president's office in 1999, promising democracy and transparency. His impromptu television show, *Hello, President*, transmitted his actions and his media savvy as he seized control of the nation's oil industry, appropriated private property, and consolidated government authority, all the while exploiting tensions between the rich and the poor. Chávez has skillfully managed his image as a champion of the downtrodden, feared by the West for his close ties to Cuba's Castro, at times defying easy definition as either autocrat or democrat. His longevity and Venezuela's oil wealth have lent Chávez weight in tangled relationships with the U.S., China, and the Middle East. Carroll details Chávez's determination and alluring personality, offering a portrait that is at times frightening and at others amusing. --Vanessa Bush

#### Review

**"Comandante provides an impressively well-researched and readable portrait...** Carroll's book should serve as a useful reminder of what el Comandante did and didn't achieve, how he got away with it and the danger of statesmen-as-showmen whose promises are too good to be true."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Carroll shows how Chavez's shoddy understanding and willful manipulation of the economy ended by raining misery on the very people he meant to save. We see, in this vivid narrative, a government that is Shakespearean in its failings. By 2000, one year after Chavez was installed, a campaign everyone could believe in — rout the corrupt! elevate the poor! invigorate the nation! — had produced a clone of Cuba's faltering communist state... [a] deeply informative, sprightly chronicle of Venezuela's dizzying journey under its Comandante. ... Here is a lively portrait of a new Latin American genus: the democratically elected caudillo. As Garcia Marquez so presciently said a few years ago: 'The dictator is the only mythological figure Latin America has ever produced; and his legacy is far from over.'"

—*Washington Post*

"Deftly retells the familiar narrative and then adds something new: Hugo Chávez was a terrible boss, radiating administrative chaos from his desk at the presidential palace. The toll of this mismanagement will define post-Chávez Venezuela."

—*The New Republic*

"Rory Carroll's engaging, highly readable *Comandante* ... convey[s] the small, tectonic shifts beneath Chávez's revolution... Carroll's access, garnered over seven years reporting in Caracas for *The Guardian*, is showcased through the characters readers meet. From a fashion designer who works with newly elite "Boligarchs" (Bolivarian revolutionaries plus oligarchs) and sees the same issues of corruption and elitism as in administrations past, to the president's personal librarian who could rattle off quotes from Chávez's revolutionary hero Simón Bolívar, to the drug trafficker whose fate illustrates the speed with which one could rise and fall in grace in today's Venezuela, readers are helped to see just how challenging it is to bundle Chávez and his revolution into a nutshell."

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

"The best things in Rory Carroll's fine, timely book are the small details: that dripping lift, the law passed to make the horse on the nation's coat-of-arms face left, the panic among flunkies when Mr. Chávez briefly decided that there was too much red around and started wearing yellow. These snippets, collected by Mr. Carroll while he was reporting for the *Guardian*, are woven into a compelling story that comes close to answering the riddle of Mr Chávez; an autocrat, a self-proclaimed champion of his country's poor and a clown."

—*The Economist*

"The global media have never been sure what to make of this '21st-century socialist' and his Bolivarian Revolution... Rory Carroll is well positioned to provide a verdict... What emerges is a more intimate image of Chavez than his own propaganda allows... **The book also excels in showing what happens when a self-believing ideologue grasps the reins of government and determines not to let go...** Chavez, the master narrator, knows that true drama lies not in a story's ending but in the twists and turns it takes to get there. On those terms, *Comandante delivers.*"

—*The Independent* (UK)

"In this incisive portrait of a histrionic ruler who brooks little criticism, Carroll, the *Guardian*'s Latin American bureau chief, captures the tragic absurdity of life in a country flush with petrodollars but where many go without adequate health care, and where 'Out of Order' signs are switched out for ones promising 'Socialist Modernization' as broken-down elevators languish. Readers who know Chavez mainly for his anti-U.S. bluster will find some surprises in the true-life black comedy surrounding this mercurial leader."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Rory Carroll is an excellent journalist and gifted storyteller, and in this book, he tells the tale of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez with admirable style and insight. **A pleasurable read; highly recommended.**"

—Jon Lee Anderson, author of *The Fall of Baghdad*

**"Rory Carroll's brilliant portrait of Chavez reads like a fast-paced novel of ego run amok,** an ego that happens to be attached to a masterful politician, a dynamo of energy and charisma, and a colossus of managerial ineptitude. Comandante is by turns heartbreaking, maddening, absurd, and surreal, a truly epic story of promise squandered and opportunities lost. It's one thing for the general to be lost in his labyrinth, quite another when he drags the entire country with him into the maze."

—Ben Fountain, author of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*

"With new information and sharp-eyed reporting, Comandante is a riveting account of how Hugo Chávez has held his country in his thrall for 15 years. Rory Carroll has stripped away the propaganda surrounding Chávez's 'Bolivarian Revolution' to reveal its core of serial incompetence, corruption and cynicism."

—Michael Reid, author of *Forgotten Continent*

"This is a terrific read; funny, constantly informative about Hugo Chávez and the Venezuela he has created, and sure to annoy a great many people."

—Alma Guillermoprieto, author of *Dancing with Cuba*

"In cool, lucid prose, Rory Carroll unpicks the threads that weave together to form a modern-day dictatorship, no less sinister for its relative absence of bloodshed. The portrait of Venezuela that emerges is as nuanced as it is ultimately chilling. Hugo Chávez's story perfectly illustrates the fact that all that is necessary for the triumph of demagoguery is for good men to do nothing."

—Michela Wrong, author of *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*

"A close, well informed and concerned look at the most controversial yet fascinating figure in Latin American politics today. Rory Carroll intelligently lays out the puzzle of Chavez's idiosyncratic populism for us to judge."

—Gioconda Belli, author of *The Country Under My Skin*

"Rory Carroll was once harangued by Hugo Chávez on his weekly television show, Alo Presidente. These sharp-eyed sketches of 'El Commandante's' acolytes, former supporters and courtiers form Carroll's occasionally mischievous reply. Informed and often funny, it is also a chilling portrait of the cynicism and corruption that has come to characterize Mr. Chávez's once-charismatic Venezuelan revolution."

—John Paul Rathbone, author of *The Sugar King of Havana*

"Comandante is a trenchant, remarkably colorful book about Hugo Chávez. In sparkling prose, Rory Carroll goes beyond Chávez's seductive rhetoric, Manichean mindset, and huge appetite for power to highlight the tragic consequences of virtual one-man rule in Venezuela. More Chávez profiles are sure to come, but I doubt they will measure up to such a witty, cogent and exquisite account. An immensely gifted journalist, Carroll has broken new ground with this splendid political biography."

—Michael Shifter, President, Inter-American Dialogue

#### About the Author

**Rory Carroll** is a veteran journalist and former chief of the *Guardian*'s Latin American bureau. He lives in California.

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