

LATIN AMERICAN  
**Gerald Tribune**

Caracas,  
Monday  
September 19, 2011

Gustavo Coronel: Venezuela in Dubuque, Iowa

"In spite of some wonderful accomplishments, Venezuela badly lags behind the U.S. in social and economic progress. And this is not because we are a young country," says Venezuelan commentator Gustavo Coronel, called upon to speak to an Iowa audience about what is going wrong in Venezuela. "When Chicago was founded Caracas was already 250 years old. Yet, today, metropolitan Chicago has more universities than all of Venezuela and its GDP is almost twice as large as ours."

By Gustavo Coronel

As the plane lifted from Washington's National Airport I was glad to leave all the rain behind. Chicago was windy but dry. After a brief wait at O'Hare I boarded a sleek Brazilian Embraer for the 27-minute flight to Dubuque, Iowa. I was going to talk about Venezuela to the American Committee of Foreign Relations there.

In clear weather, flying at relatively low altitude, the scenery was magnificent. The flat country near Chicago gave way to gently rolling, wooded hills and to green farms as neat as golf courses. As the plane came in for a landing it crossed the great Mississippi, bordered by high bluffs. The city of Dubuque has an ideal size, some 70,000 inhabitants. It is very clean and the atmosphere is clear and bright. The downtown area, next to the river, still keeps much of its early buildings, while the more modern residential areas are perched on the bluffs.

In Dubuque the prevailing sights are the cornfields. As my host gave me a tour of the city he also told me about its history. Founded by Jules Dubuque, a French trapper from Canada, it was later settled by German and Irish immigrants. Dubuque is a largely Democratic city in a Republican state. The area has universities and colleges and is the site of several important industries. I was very impressed by the deep involvement of its citizens in Dubuque's community affairs. Significant amounts of money are continuously raised to finance educational and other social projects.

As I started my talk I mentioned that, although founded by a Frenchman and settled by German and Irish immigrants, Dubuque had become a typical American city, with civic attitudes that promote the well being of the community, shared values and a strong sense of national identity. We Venezuelans, I added, were a mixture of Spanish, African and Indian and had not been able to develop as strong a sense of national identity. The explanation for this had much to do with Spaniards coming to Venezuela to conquer, not to settle.

Although rather small in size Venezuela has had a disproportionately strong influence in Latin American history, since the days when Bolivar liberated several countries from Spanish dominance and Andres Bello became the founder of the University of Chile. Probably inspired by these examples some of our modern presidents such as Carlos Andres Perez and Hugo Chavez inherited an urge -- not always based on the noblest of intentions -- to become regional or, even, global leaders.

In spite of some wonderful accomplishments such as the "System", the classical music program for poor Venezuelan youth started by Jose Antonio Abreu 40 years ago, Venezuela badly lags behind the U.S. in social and economic progress. And this is not because we are a young country. When Chicago was founded Caracas was already 250 years old. Yet, today, metropolitan Chicago has more universities than all of Venezuela and its GDP is almost twice as large as ours.

Our main problem, I said, is that we manage to generate a dictator every 40 years or so. The latest one has been Hugo Chavez, one of the very worst. To attain his objectives he developed three main strategies, helped by about one trillion dollars of oil income during his 12 years in power: (1) to handout enormous amounts of money to the Venezuelan poor, in order to buy their loyalty; (2) to try to export his "socialist revolution" to the rest of Latin America, and, (3) to form a global anti-U.S. alliance by joining a group of rogue states such as Iran, Libya, Cuba, Belarus, Zimbabwe and Syria.

During the first 8-9 years of his presidency he was able to make significant progress in these three areas but the collapse of oil prices in 2009 produced a dramatic reversal of his political fortunes. Surrounded by a mediocre and corrupt team of collaborators he has committed many errors, both at home and abroad, losing much power and many followers during the last three years.

I predicted that he will lose the October 2012 elections or could even be ousted before the elections take place. Today Venezuela is a country in great social and political turmoil, where anything can happen. To add to Chavez's problems, he is now seriously ill and, as a result, he might not be able to engage in the long and hard electoral campaign that lies ahead. I suggested that Chavez badly wants to go down in history and since he can no longer attain his original objectives, he would probably resort to martyrdom. Due to this possibility, I added, the most important threat posed by Chavez to U.S. national security would probably be a repetition of the 1960 missile crisis staged in Cuba by Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro. This time around the crisis would be generated by Iranian missiles, in Venezuelan soil, threatening the U.S.

The audience in Dubuque was wonderful and very knowledgeable. After I ended my short remarks, they made many pertinent questions. They wanted to know, among other things: How strong is the opposition? Who are they? Who could be the leader replacing Chavez and would he, she have a different attitude towards the U.S.? What is the position of the armed forces? What is the reason for Chavez's hatred of the United States? Why is Chavez so dependent on Fidel Castro? Why is Joe Kennedy helping Chavez in the U.S.? How long would it take for Venezuela to recover from this period of dictatorship? What

is China doing in Venezuela?

The following day I returned to Washington. The rain had mercifully stopped. I kept thinking about wonderful Dubuque. Only a few days ago the place meant little to me. Now, I know what it looks like and about the high civic quality of its citizens. I hope I was able to transmit to them some of the drama Venezuela has experienced under Hugo Chavez's harsh dictatorship and our hope that this nightmare finally seems to be coming to an end.

Gustavo Coronel was on the Board of Directors of PDVSA from 1976 to 1979. He was Chief Operations Officer (COO) and acting CEO of the Corporacion Venezolana de Guayana (CVG), the \$35 billion Venezuelan government conglomerate designed to exploit and run all of Venezuela's mineral, metal and mining operations, from 1994-1995. He was President of Puerto Cabello -- Venezuela's main port -- from 2001 to 2002.

Coronel was author of the Cato Institute study "[Corruption, Mismanagement and Abuse of Power in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela](#)" and was the Venezuelan representative to Transparency International from 1996 to 2000. In 1994, he founded Pro Calidad de Vida, an NGO promoting anti-corruption techniques in government and civic education for children in Venezuela, Panama, Paraguay, Mexico and Nicaragua.