

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Hugo Chavez broke his promises to Venezuela

By: Robert Ernst – March 27, 2013

I lived in Venezuela from October 1997 through the end of November 1998. It was the year of Hugo Chavez's first election campaign for president. As hard as it is to admit now, I was very enthusiastic about his candidacy and election. You might wonder how an American who loves democracy and hates repression in all forms could be in such a position.

It would help if Americans knew more about Venezuela, but, in short, prior to Chavez, the country was a poorly run kleptocracy where billions disappeared annually from the national treasury and found their way into the pockets of the ruling elite. From 1984 to 1994, about \$36 billion was stolen via currency manipulation by very highly placed government officials.

According to the Cato Institute, the Caracas-based non-government organization, Pro Calidad de Vida, estimated in 1997 that about \$100 billion in oil income had been wasted or stolen since the early 1970s. Huge sums of money were regularly diverted from government contracts earmarked for building schools, hospitals, roads, dams and sanitary sewage facilities. The larger the project, the quicker officials would figure out a way to loot the funds.

Poorly constructed and partially built and abandoned public works facilities were everywhere. Zoning regulations and building construction codes were ignored to allow projects by developers who had greased the most palms. Public officials were on the take at every level. It was corruption on a massive scale.

Chavez promised to put an end to that national-scale banditry, and to address the country's incredible poverty, which amounted to nearly 70 percent of the population. Yes, that number is hard to believe, but numbing poverty is the reality of life for the average Venezuelan.

Chavez was a man of the common folk. He didn't look or talk or act like an upper-class member of the power elite. He was a committed socialist, a man who knew their struggle personally and promised to change their lives for the better by ending corruption and spending the nation's huge oil income on projects that benefited the poor. Of course, he won the election and won big. Why wouldn't he?

It didn't take long for the tiger to show his stripes and begin a long and successful campaign against the country's democratic institutions. And that's when he lost me and the far greater majority of my Venezuelan friends. The sad truth is under Chavez more public funds have either been misused or are unaccounted for than is the case for presidential administrations over the previous 35 years.

Today, little evidence can be seen in Venezuela of expenditures of public funds on projects that benefit the common people. Corruption is still the sport of choice in many if not most state and local governments. The oil business is in the toilet because Chavez fired most of the competent managers and nearly all the scientists. Things look grim.

I hope that situation will change over the next few years, but don't have much confidence in that happening. The ghost of Chavez hangs over Venezuela like smog over Los Angeles with little prospect of a strong democratic wind blowing it away.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author was in Caracas as the lead land use planner for an American consulting firm, working on a billion dollar project for PDVSA, the Venezuelan oil firm.

Robert Ernst is a retired urban planner who has worked on projects in this country and overseas. He collects interesting rocks from the places he has visited and incorporates them into landscaping at his home. He also is a self-taught painter.