

The Accidental Coup

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In 2002, political events took place in Venezuela that have in many respects remained mysterious ever since. Between April 11 and 13 of that year, President Hugo Chávez was forced out of office and then, nearly as quickly as he was removed, he was reinstated. But by whom precisely, and why? These questions have been hard to answer. In *The Silence and the Scorpion*, Brian A. Nelson—a journalist and writer with long-time experience in Venezuela—delves deep into those three days to provide the best effort in English so far to clear up the puzzles surrounding this early attempt to derail Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution.

In addition to why and by whom, an even more fundamental question has persisted: Exactly what happened? Was the event truly a coup—one engineered by a military that was fed up with Chávez, that acted in collusion with an old-guard political class and its fellow travelers in the business world, and that carried out its plot with a wink and a nod from Washington? According to Nelson, the simple answer is no.

Nelson suggests that Chávez's removal from office happened accidentally. It was the unintentional result of an interacting series of events. The opposition, when it staged a march on Miraflores (the presidential palace in Caracas) on April 11, 2002, did not intend to topple Venezuela's leader. The protesters' desire was to show the president and his supporters, known as *chavistas*, that his recent actions—most notably, sacking the board of directors of the state oil company, PDVSA, and installing his own appointees—were abuses of power.

Chavistas, meanwhile, gathered at Miraflores to protect their president and to present a united front to his opponents. Some came armed, believing the opposition march was a phalanx aimed

ultimately at bringing Chávez down. Wearing red scarves and the red berets that Chávez had made popular, they waited at the palace.

RELUCTANT COMMANDERS

The military leadership had already made it known to Chávez that it would take no role in countering the demonstration. According to Nelson, the principal commanders were committed to not firing on Venezuelan citizens. Foremost in their minds were the lessons of 1989, when the so-called *caracazo*—an eruption of protests and riots sparked by government-imposed austerity measures—had rocked the capital city and neighboring towns. In response to the *caracazo*, the military had killed at least 800 people.

Also at play among the commanders was a deep dislike and distrust of Chávez himself. The president was a former military officer, but army leaders were troubled by what they saw as the “anticonstitutional” nature of actions he had taken since gaining power in 1998.

One military contingent, however, was willing to fire on protesters if need be. That was the National Guard, which assembled near the *chavistas* at Miraflores. (In Nelson's account, the only other armed official actor at the scene was the Caracas metropolitan police department—and the mayor of the city was no fan of Chávez.)

Chávez is of course the standout character in the story. He, according to Nelson, believed that the revolution he had initiated needed refreshing, that the citizenry needed to be shocked into believing in his vision of a new Venezuela and a new Latin America. Hence the arming of some *chavistas* who were members of “Bolivarian Circles,” informal community groups that supported the president and his revolution.

Chávez's revolutionary zeal was evident in his reverence of “Jesus, my commander” and

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of Simón Bolívar, the man who liberated South America from Spain and “whom Chávez simply referred to as ‘the father.’” The president would even would set a place at the table for him.

A SERIES OF EVENTS

As narrated in Nelson’s masterful reconstruction of what transpired at Miraflores, the marchers moved through the *El Silencio* (The Silence) district toward the palace, which was occupied by the man now known as “the scorpion.” As the mass of opposition marchers approached the presidential residence, metropolitan police fired on them with tear gas. Soon gunfire rang out—from the government side, as Nelson makes clear, including from the National Guard—and marchers fell dead and wounded.

After the protesters dispersed, a swift sequence of events took place. The military turned on Chávez for having ordered the shooting, and for launching Plan Ávila, a national emergency program that called for military intervention to quell disorder.

The military leaders told the president that they would not follow his orders, that he had acted unconstitutionally, and that, ultimately, he must resign. However, the military commanders did not, at least initially, compel his resignation. They hoped to force it through his recognition that he had lost their trust.

A stunned Chávez decided he had no alternative but to leave office. But on the advice of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, whom Chávez called for guidance, he did not resign. In the power vacuum that resulted—the president was physically removed from his office and held incommunicado by the military—the opposition, with the military commanders’ acquiescence, took over the presidency. Power was assumed by Pedro Carmona, leader of the old-guard political class and the business sector.

But Carmona was to serve as president only briefly. In an attempt to dismantle the political

edifice that Chávez had put in place, Carmona issued a series of decrees to scrap the constitution and to dissolve the National Assembly and Supreme Court, which Chávez had packed with supporters.

The opposition, however, was fragmented and its leadership divided. So too the military: It turned out Chávez had supporters among the commanders. After Carmona overreached, they forced the head of the military to reinstate Chávez.

THE ABSENT YANKEE

Another long-unanswered question is this: What was the role of the United States? The administration of President George W. Bush vilified Chávez, and informally it welcomed his removal from office. But did it back his ouster?

Nelson believes it did not (though he acknowledges that his findings can be based only on what is publicly known now). To buttress his assertion, the author offers evidence that the Bush administration was as surprised as it was pleased by Chávez’s removal. Nelson’s judgment appears to be a fair one, based on what the participants told him.

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The Silence and the Scorpion in fact depends considerably on interviews, memoirs, and other first-person recollections of the events of April 2002 to construct a blow-by-blow account of the “coup.” Nelson also, in an effort to draw persons and events vividly, uses narrative devices common to fiction, like interior monologue; and reconstructed dialogue à la Bob Woodward.

These devices likely will provoke disapproval among some Latin America experts. That would be a shame, since Nelson has given us a case study that brings politics alive. His is an audacious and successful attempt to sort out important political events in their immediacy rather than from a safe distance. While Nelson may attract scholars’ disapprobation, readers will appreciate his accomplishment. ■