

VENEZUELA

THE MILITARY LINKED TO THE PEOPLE

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APRIL 1ST, 2003

*To the Venezuelan military who headed
the April 2002 historical process*

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INTRODUCTION¹

Led by Hugo Chávez, a former military officer, a “Bolivarian revolutionary process” has been underway in Venezuela since Chavez’s election to the presidency in 1998. While genuine progressive changes have been made and Chavez has won the enmity of the country’s rich and powerful, this “Bolivarian revolution” has been rejected by some on the left because it is headed by a military man and because the military has played a significant and outstanding role in numerous state institutions and government plans. The reason for this rejection is the standard left wisdom that the military is an integral part of the bourgeois state’s repressive machinery, imbued with a bourgeois ideology, and therefore incapable of playing a revolutionary role in a capitalist society. But perhaps this is a mechanistic interpretation. It might be better to avoid generalizations and analyze each country’s military within its own specific reality. If we take this approach, we see that Venezuela’s military has not played that negative role. During more than four years in which the military has occupied a key space in the Venezuelan political scene, they have defended the decisions made democratically by the Venezuelan people and they were the main actors in supporting Chávez’s return to power when in April 2002 a group of senior officers most of whom found themselves with no soldiers to leadknel before the major interests in a coup attempt.²

Military personnel have also headed important social projects organized by the government. They have placed their work capacities, technical skills, and organizational knowledge at the service of the poorest sectors of society. The most important of these undertakings has been Plan Bolivar 2000, a broad program aimed at improving the living standard of the poor, by, among other things, cleaning up streets and schools, improving the environment to fight endemic diseases, and recovering the social infrastructure in both urban and rural areas. The goal of the Plan was to find solutions to social problems while generating employment in the neediest sectors and incorporating community organizations into these efforts.

It is important to note that the Plan was begun during Chávez’s first year in power, when he faced a very unfavorable balance of forces.³ Most of the country’s governors and mayors were members of the opposition, and the same was true for the national Congress and the Supreme court of Justice.⁴ In addition, most of Chávez’s political cadres were then working on the political challenge first of amending the constitution to make it possible to implement his popular mandate and then in a series of elections to renew the mandates.

Chávez’s victory had produced huge popular expectations, and it was necessary to begin immediately to satisfy the people’s aspirations. The only apparatus with a national structure capable of carrying out Chávez’s mission (besides the Catholic Church) was the military.

1. This introduction does not correspond entirely with the one on the original text in Spanish. It appeared in Montly Review Volume 55, Number 4, september 2003.

2. It is not very well known that the only putschist senior officers in real positions of command were Ramírez Pérez, head of the Armed Forces General Staff, and Vásquez Velasco, Army commander general. Several retired generals supported the coup, along with only 200 out of 8 000 officers (generals, admirals, colonels, lieutenant colonels, and lower grade officers). Eighty percent of commanding officers participated in the Plan to rescue Chávez, and the number could be higher because at the time of the coup communications were very difficult.

3. The Plan was announced to the country on February 27, 1999, ten years after the Caracazo.

4. Elections for governors and mayors had been held the year before the presidential election.

The Venezuelan armed forces, especially the junior officers, took on these tasks of social reconstruction with enthusiasm. And as they made direct contact with the problems suffered by the very poor, these officers became more socially aware and engaged. The junior officers now belong to the more radical sectors of the process.

This phenomenon, so unusual in Latin America, raises the question: Why has the Venezuelan military given overwhelming support to a process of profound social transformation, becoming deeply engaged in solving the problems of the poorest people? The analysis which follows is based upon recent interviews with nine officers of the Venezuelan armed forces. The interviews and the analysis have recently been published in a book, *Venezuela: Militares Junto al Pueblo*.⁵

A number of factors appear to distinguish Venezuela's military personnel from their Latin American counterparts. First, the country's military has been deeply influenced by the philosophy of Simón Bolívar, the most outstanding figure of Latin America's struggle for independence from Spain. While Bolívar never spoke of class struggle, he did insist on the need to abolish slavery and his work always shows concern for the common people. His major contribution was perhaps his understanding of importance of Latin American integration. He understood very early on that our countries had no future unless they joined in their struggle against European countries and the United States. Already in the second decade of the nineteenth century he foresaw that "in the name of freedom, the United States of North America seem to have been destined by providence to plague America with miseries." He also believed that democracy had to be conceived as a political system to give people supreme happiness. According to him, no military man should ever aim his weapon against the people.

Second, beginning with Hugo Chávez's generation, most of the military's officers were trained not in the infamous School of the Americas (in the United States) but in the Venezuelan Military Academy. In 1971 the Military Academy underwent a radical transformation, the Andrés Bello Plan, which brought it up to university standing. Army cadres began to study political science and to read what had been written about democracy and about Venezuelan reality. In their military strategy classes they studied Clausewitz, the Asian strategists, and Mao Zedong. Students often went to the universities to specialize themselves in specific university subjects and began exchanging their experiences with other college students. If some of them did go on to study at the School of the Americas, they went to the United States well-fortified with progressive ideas.

Third, this generation of military officers never had to face a growing guerilla force as did so many other Latin American military. On the contrary, it was trained in the 1970s, by which time the country had been for all practical purposes pacified and only a few guerilla nuclei remained active. When soldiers patrolled peasant zones in the frontier, what they found was not a guerilla force but poverty. They could see with their own eyes that the ideology so common among Latin American elites that the poor are poor because they drink, because they have no initiative or will to work, because they are not very intelligent was false. They came to understand that behind poverty stands a national oligarchy hoarding the nation's riches, along with the United States whose policies sow this poverty throughout the country.

Fourth, there is no discrimination in the Venezuelan armed forces; anyone can reach the highest ranks. There is no military caste as in other countries. Most of the senior officers are sons of poor urban and peasant families, and they know from experience the difficulties their people have to undergo to make a daily living. This does not mean, of course, that because of their humble origins, they are immune to the clever coopting maneuvers of the oligarchy with whom they inevitably

5 Marta Harnecker, *Militares Junto al Pueblo*, *Vadell hnos., Caracas, 2003*; *El Viejo Topo*, *España, 2003*

come in contact once they reach the higher ranks. Some officers forget their social origins and start kneeling before the interests of the dominant classes.

A fifth factor is the effect on the Chávez generation of the social upheaval commencing on February 27, 1989. This convulsion was aimed at rejecting the package of neoliberal economic measures imposed by the Carlos Andrés Pérez government, which, among other things, sought to reduce public expenditures, deregulate prices, liberalize trade, promote foreign investment, and privatize state companies. The immediate cause of the popular rebellion was the increase in public transportation fees provoked by higher gasoline prices. People from the poorest neighborhoods took to the streets and began setting buses on fire, looting trade centers, and destroying stores and supermarkets. The military came out to restore “order.” The revolt, known as the “Caracazo” because it was centered in the capital city (though similar outbreaks took place in several other parts of the country) ended with a huge massacre.⁶ These events were very important in shaping the new political awareness of many of the junior officers.

Sixth, even before the Caracazo, the enormous inequality in wealth in Venezuela, an inequality reinforced by endemic corruption and one which prevented the country from solving its social problems despite an oil boom which could have provided the revenues to do so, produced a current within the military which rejected the status quo. In December 1982 this current became an underground movement called the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 and started growing internally and reaching civil sectors.

This Movement took its inspiration from three main sources: Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez, and Ezequiel Zamora. We have already spoken about Bolívar. Simón Rodríguez was Bolívar’s teacher and friend, a fine pedagogue and social reformer who strongly defended the originality of our Latin America with its multiethnic composition and argued for the need to integrate indigenous peoples and black slaves into the continent’s future societies. He was a strong advocate for the creation of original institutions adapted to our own world, and he rejected the imitation of European solutions, convinced that, “We either invent or we err.” Ezequiel Zamora was a liberal general who fought against the conservatives during the federal war of 1850 and who encouraged a struggle to death against the oligarchy and in favor of the distribution of land to the peasants.

The Caracazo accelerated the plans of the young Movimiento, and three years later, on February 4, 1992, it organized a military rebellion against president Pérez that failed in its immediate goals but placed lieutenant colonel Hugo Chávez Frías, the main leader of the Movimiento, at the center of the nation’s theater of events. This charismatic leader needed only two minutes of television time to register his personality in the minds of his people. In that short space of time he publicly assumed responsibility for events, in a country where no other leader had ever before adopted this kind of attitude. He called upon the insurgents to surrender, but he issued his famous sentence: “For the time being!” This was a clear message to the people that he had not given up the struggle. Thanks to this attitude he was able to build positive public opinion around him and his project, in a country where skepticism for politics and politicians permeated much of society, including the middle classes.

This initial commitment by Chávez paved the way for his strong victory in the 1998 presidential elections. His election, accepted favorably by many of his fellow military men, provides a seventh reason for the Venezuelan military’s uniqueness they are now in a favorable position to carry out the tasks of the new government. By doing this, the military could recover its prestige and

⁶ The true number of casualties is not known. The official number recognized by the government is 372 dead, but human rights organizations have put it at 5,000.

overcome the negative image provoked by the Caracazo. And supporting Chávez and his program allowed the military to put into practice what officers had learned in their schooling and from their experiences, that is, to defend the democratic system. Had not respect for the Constitution and its laws been one of the main principles they had received during their training and one of the reasons why some of the officers who now defended Chávez and his project had adopted a rather critical attitude toward the coup of 1992 he had organized?

In most Latin American countries, any attempt to carry out a deep social transformation has faced the complex straightjacket of existing laws, whose only goal is to protect the system from any change affecting the interests of the ruling classes. To overcome this barrier to change in Venezuela, the first measure of the newly-elected government was to launch a democratic process to change the rules of the game inherited from the past and found in effect a new State, giving birth to a new set of institutions which would allow social change to occur. A Constituent Assembly was called in 1999 with 131 members. It sat for about six months and finally submitted a draft for a new constitution, approved by an overwhelming majority (129 votes). This draft was then submitted to the Venezuelan people, obtaining 70 percent approval.

This new constitution is centered on social justice, freedom, the political participation of the people, the protection of the nation's heritage (in effect, opposition to neoliberalism), and the staunch defense of Venezuela's national sovereignty. Equality before the law includes indigenous populations, who now have the right to keep and develop their ethnic and cultural identities, values, spiritual beliefs, and holy places, as well as those where they practice their cults. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the experience of making a new constitution is the fact that this "Magna Carta" introduces the concept of popular sovereignty. It states,

All male and female citizens have the right to freely participate in public affairs, either directly or through their elected representatives, be they male or female. People's participation in the implementation and control of public administration is what we need to guarantee full individual and collective development. The State is obliged, and society has the duty to contribute to open the way for the most favorable conditions to put this into practice.

Further on, the constitution states that "electors have the right to receive from their representatives public, transparent and periodic reports on their work, which must follow the program they made public." The constitution emphatically demands respect for the nation and its sovereignty, explicitly rejecting foreign military bases. It also declares the need for a truly neutral judiciary, to apply justice without having to submit to judicial leaders or bureaucrats, and a state respected by all. In the case of indigenous people, their legitimate authorities will implement justice locally on the basis of their ancestral traditions, following their own rules, provided they do not go against the constitution. Judges must be elected after a process of selection that will ensure the suitability of all participants. The law must therefore guarantee the participation of all citizens in this process to select and name judges. The national executive has the duty to give an annual report to the assembly on the political, economic, social, and administrative aspects of its work. Deputies must also report back to their voters and answer their questions, so the people will have a permanent control over those it has elected.

Besides the three traditional branches of government (the executive, legislative, and judicial), the constitution has created two more: citizen power and electoral power. The first is implemented through the Republican Ethics Council, consisting of a people's defender, the general prosecutor, and the general comptroller of the republic. The National Assembly must approve its members. The people's defender is responsible for the promotion, defense, and control of the rights and guarantees established by the constitution as well as of the citizens' legitimate collective or particular interests.

Electoral power is exercised through the National Electoral Council, which acts like an arbiter to control elections and guarantee their transparency.

The constitution became the great ally of the Chávez revolution. This is because, as we have seen, the Venezuelan military took seriously its duty to defend what the people democratically decide. Once the military was committed to defending the constitution, it simultaneously was committed to defending the changes being carried out by Chávez, since these changes and the new constitution are, in effect, equivalents. When old-line military leaders tried to engineer a coup against Chávez in 2002, General Baduel, a zealous advocate of military respect for the democratic rule of law, was able to use the authority of the new constitution to defy the orders given by his putschist superiors. This same constitution was used by junior officers and soldiers when they organized resistance against the coup and pressured their commanders from below to join them.

We can make two final points in our effort to explain the uniqueness of the Venezuelan military. Chávez's economic program is a nationalistic program. It is opposed to a neoliberal, foreign-oriented globalization; instead it promotes national investments and local development. It is opposed to the privatization of the oil sector, and it tries to give priority to solutions for the problems suffered by the poorest parts of the population. The overall thrust of the program therefore fits very nicely with the military's vocation to defend sovereignty and national wealth. This makes it easy to understand why the recent actions of those opposed to Chávez the strikes organized by employers and the sabotage of oil production have been massively repudiated by the Venezuelan armed forces, thus consolidating military support for Chávez's programs.

Finally, the importance of the charismatic personality of Chávez himself cannot be underestimated. Chávez has inspired great admiration and love among the majority of the soldiers of the army. He is both legally and emotionally their commander-in-chief. During the April 2002 coup, it is precisely to these rank-and-file soldiers whom he met during his pilgrimage from prison to prison, from the Tiuna fort to the island of Orchila, the last place in which he was imprisoned that he owes his life.

Together with their people, and often encouraged by them, the Venezuelan military men have done what few Latin militaries have ever done, and in the process, they have been equal to the enormous challenges the revolutionary Bolivarian process has faced.

Havana, Aprilst. 2003

GENERAL JORGE LUIS GARCÍA CARNEIRO:

WE DO NOT REPRESENT ANY CASTE, WE COME FROM THE PEOPLE

1. Family background and military vocation; Very humble family; Officers not a caste; Ideals and democratic principles; The Armed Forces and social work. **2. Ties with Chávez and the Movimiento Bolivariano 200;** February 4 coup; Chávez as a presidential candidate. **3. Plan Bolívar 2000;** Going to the base; Solving basic problems; People's participation in the Plan; System where the people build their own homes; Success when you put the people together with the Armed Forces; Source of employment. **4. April 11, 2002, coup;** The President asked him for support with tanks; They tried to separate him from his soldiers; He went back to Fort Tiuna; In the DISIP; Putschists in Fort Tiuna; He talked to the people around the Fort; Rincón talked about Chávez's resignation; Reasons why some generals committed treason.

1. FAMILY BACKGROUND AND MILITARY VOCATION

VERY HUMBLE FAMILY

—*I would like to know about your family, and your vocation. Perhaps there was no such vocation, because some of you have always been with the people, it has been a very natural thing for you. In Chile, the military and the people in general have been told that the people are poor because they don't work much, because they drink, lack initiatives, and also that people who have money deserve it because they have worked hard for it. So how come this ideology had no influence on you? Why do you see things differently?*

—Let's start with the family. I come from a very humble family. I was actually born in El Valle parish, in Caracas, where Fort Tiuna is now. I was born really close to it, so at home we could hear their drums and trumpets as if we were right inside the fort. That humble parish where I was born and took my first steps out in the world put me in close contact with the military.

OFFICERS ARE NOT A CASTE

—*Just because you were right next to the fort?*

—No, I think we must take many things into account; the first is the fact that the Venezuelan Armed Forces feel for the people in a way that has perhaps no precedent in other countries. We don't represent any caste, as in other countries, where the last names of the main leaders of the Armed Forces represent families of very fine lineage and traditions. But in our case, our Armed Forces are usually very well connected to their people, and whatever the people feel, we feel.

For the man in uniform it is easy to say what the people are feeling because that's where he comes from, together with his family, his brothers and sisters, his parents, so it is easy to identify with the people.

IDEALS AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

—*But why did you join the Armed Forces?*

—Well, see, from the time when you are a child you are taught specific principles and values, such as love for your country, patriotic values. We follow a role model, of course, Bolívar's ideals, where we stress freedom and democracy, and these ideals are reaffirmed when we come to the Military Academy. I believe we see more democratic principles in our Academy than in any other university.

THE ARMED FORCES AND SOCIAL WORK

—*Do you remember something that could have had some influence on you, something that might have impressed you, some images and recollections from the past?*

—Look, I was more or less 14 years old when the 1967 earthquake that hit Caracas; I saw the Armed Forces doing impressive social work I remember the people they rescued alive, and that is well registered in my mind: I admired that man who was in danger to save his people.

But I remember not only positive things; there are also negative things. When we went to the Academy, for example, antiguerrilla feelings were still going on strong; in 1971, and also in 1972, we were still cadets, but there were hundreds of guerrilla centers of action, particularly in Coro, Carúpano, and Guarico. We heard all kinds of stories. I remember a young man (his brother was a friend of mine), and he died in an *alcabala*⁷. I knew him, he was an outstanding cadet, but a short time later we heard that a gang had gunned him down. But happily, years later this negative attitude was eliminated, maybe thanks to those being educated in the Armed Forces. The fact that guerrilla forces put down their weapons was also a positive thing; it was an important political contribution.

—*Did you have to participate in some antiguerrilla units?*

—No. I was a commander in several frontier towns, so our mission, rather than fighting the guerrillas, was to protect the frontier.

2. TIES WITH CHÁVEZ AND THE MOVIMIENTO BOLIVARIANO 200

—*Were you a member of the Movimiento Bolivariano 200?*

—No. I found out about the '92 coup through the media.

—*When did you meet Chávez?*

—Chávez joined the Military Academy in 1971, so we spent four years together and we became friends and loved each other like two brothers. Since we made different professional choices and went on to different armed corps, we lost contact, because he went on to the Chasers' Unit, while I joined the Guajira Combat Group⁸.

FEBRUARY 4 COUP

—*Where were you during the 1992 coup?*

⁷ Military police check point.

⁸ Temporary group formed in the 70s to answer a specific situation on the Western frontier.

—I was Commander of the Battalion in the Guajira Combat Group, in Alto Apure⁹, carrying out missions on the frontier in Los Bancos, Las Charcas.

—*What was your reaction?*

—I was surprised. From the time I left the Military Academy I had heard nothing about Chávez, I don't really know if that was because of the physical distance between us. Sometimes I didn't go home for over 100 days, because our missions usually lasted 90 days, but sometimes we stayed away from home for 110, 114 days because of some special movement, some transfer or other. Our communications were strictly for military reasons: radios with military frequencies only. When I saw Chávez on television talking about the February 4 movement, I exclaimed: "That's my *compañero*! What has he done? He has rebelled against the government?"

—*But was your reaction positive, or was it critical?*

—Even though I was not unaware of what the country was going through at that time, as far as corruption, negligence, and hunger was concerned, my reaction was critical due to my training, I had been trained for a democracy. But sometimes I was right in the middle of this sea of confusion, I saw some *compañero* of mine organizing a movement against what I have just mentioned, and I knew he was right in what he was doing. The country was hurting, it was in the middle of the biggest poverty ever, and I often wondered if he didn't really hold more truth than me.

—*So that means that until that day you had no contact with the MBR 200?*

—No. I knew Hugo Chávez as a *compañero*, not as a leader whom I had shared my ideas with.

—*So you are one of those typical institutional military who didn't belong to the MBR 200?*

—Institutional? I would rather say constitutionalist...

CHÁVEZ AS A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

—*As I understand it, when Chávez came forward as a candidate for president, the Armed Forces participated to defend the honesty of the elections. What can you tell me about this experience?*

—As principal of Venezuela's Military Academy, I had to use Academy busses and take our troops to the center of the capital, where Chávez wanted to have reserve troops so the elections would really be transparent, as they turned out to be.

—*Were you indifferent toward Chávez's victory?*

—No, of course not. We had been together since we were 17 years old, we had shared a world full of dreams, and we had had beautiful experiences. I feel something special for him; I always have I can't deny this.

3. PLAN BOLÍVAR 2000

—*When Chávez won the elections, what were you doing?*

—Chávez won in December, when I was Academy Principal; then in February, I was made Commander of the 21st Brigade at Merida Garrison. This post fell within the general military organization of the Brigade. I was happy with this appointment: from a military point of view

⁹ Part of the territory of the state of Apure that lies at the foot of the Andes.

Mérida was more important than Caracas, because there I commanded a garrison and I had to create good relations with the population, with the people in general. Let me tell you that there are 35 000 students in Mérida.

So when Plan Bolívar 2000 was launched, it was easy for me to establish close communication with these students. I had an unbelievable friendship with them, and in the end they named me vice-president of the Los Andes University group. I was the first military man to receive this bicentennial decoration¹⁰, and I was of course very proud, because I came to believe I was playing an important role for all citizens of Mérida in general—the students, the workers, the professionals.

GOING TO THE BASE

—I would like you to tell me what it means for the Armed Forces to have been made responsible for Plan Bolívar 2000, because the Latin American left is concerned about the fact that this government has a military president, who organized a military coup; who is surrounded by military men; who puts his social program in the hands of the military, and we know that in general, military people are used to giving orders and commands.

—Look, since we came from the people we knew how to be trusted by them. I knew that the students in Mérida came from humble families, mostly with very few resources, and since I came from the same origin I knew how to win them over, because I wanted to fulfil their basic needs. I used to visit their student homes and see all the needs they had, because these homes had never been taken into account by the State, who had never done anything for them, the lights were a disaster, they were in total darkness, they had little water, problems in their sanitary system... So of course I went into their world, where I was familiar with their problems and I tried to eliminate them.

Can you imagine? There in Mérida there were more than 120 useless highway light poles. But if you give those people bright streets, you stimulate their will to live in a new and clean community. And it is very rewarding to go in at 10 or 11 p.m. and see people jogging where they never dared to, because they thought they would be attacked, or that something could happen to them.

It is so nice to see a father with his kid riding a bicycle; the kindergarten working as it should; sports becoming popular now that we have given them the necessary resources, in a clean atmosphere.

SOLVING BASIC PROBLEMS

—I think Plan Bolívar 2000 was very important, not only for the students but also for poor people in general, people with few resources, because we went directly to the basic problems of the population.

I have an anecdote: just one day before June, a whole month before Army Day, a group of children closed the main street down. When I went to see what was happening, I found out that the professors, who demanded a suitable school, because they were studying in an inadequate place, had sent the children. So I went to look at the place where they were studying, and I found that they were working in what used to belong to an old police quarters; where first, second, third, and fourth grades were studying in what used to be the dungeons, with only one bathroom for both boys and girls; fifth and sixth grades were held in homes close to the school. What I found was the result of negligence, bad administration, and this makes you become involved in finding a solution.

¹⁰ Decoration given by the University.

Just think: while all this was going on with the school, in the same territory there was a roofed arena for bullfighting, and an air-conditioned *gallera*¹¹, that had been presented by the governor and the mayor as a marvellous project. They thought this was more important than the school.

We were able to enlarge the school and put in all the necessary services. So when we go to places like that we feel very happy, and we can tell that the professors, the *bedel*¹², the parents, the representative, the students--everyone feels respect for us and admires us because we represent something to them.

PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PLAN

—*So far you have mentioned the work carried out by the military for the population. I would like to know if the population participated in what you did in Mérida.*

—Plan Bolívar started out as a true military project, because what we really wanted was to just start. Later, time and life would have the final say.

We first saw the presence of soldiers while they did repair and rebuilding jobs; later, as we made some progress, we discovered that there was a whole unemployed and unattended population. We knew the man who had been a contractor, a mason he had never gone to a real school, but through life he ended up doing this kind of work. So we realized that we had to change methods and use this energy to benefit the community itself. This is how we have been able to create such an important unity between the Armed forces and the people, to satisfy their major needs.

—*Is there any difference between houses built by the military and handed over to the population, and houses built with popular participation?*

—Let me explain: when we came to Mérida and I speak of Mérida just because it was my reference point we gave journalists the possibility of having their own house, and we called it Residence for Journalists. And the cost of that house, without taking into account the details, the windows, the doors, sometimes even the sanitary fixtures and the bathroom itself, cost us 7 million Bolívares. Yet now, two years later, we build homes for only 4 ½ million, and they are bigger, with more space and comfort, with all sanitary services, all the finishing details... So there is a huge difference when the people participate in building and solving their own problems.

SYSTEM BY WHICH THE PEOPLE BUILD THEIR OWN HOMES

—*How did this idea come up?*

—It came from everyone, from how many professionals¹³ concerned with this problem thought it could be solved. I must point out that architect Diamney Ocando, who had a lot of experience in housing, is the ideological force behind the project. Later we also assigned a group of professionals with feelings, because actually she is now in charge of the social aspect.

They went on Internet to study everything possible on how to do your own building: Cuba, Uruguay, Spain, etc.

11 Place for cock fighting.

12 School assistants.

13 He is referring to other ranks in the Armed Forces.

We studied and analyzed all this experience from other countries, we separated what was good from what was bad, and we studied how to improve those projects on the basis of our own traditions this is how our very own system for home building was born.

Roberto¹⁴ thought of the name, he called me on the phone, and he said: “Look, General, I’ve found the name for your system, why don’t you call it *Wasp*?” So I told him: “But what’s that name have to do with our plan?” And he said: “Wasps, they make their own homes on isolated lots.” And that’s true: you give me the land and I check to see that it is on even ground, that it has water, electricity and sewer systems, that it has the elementary conditions to build a house. So that makes me build one here, one there, another over there, and that’s why we say they are isolated lots. And the name represented an insect that besides all this also symbolizes the wit of the Venezuelan people: Wasp, *ponte mosca*¹⁵. The word *Wasp* was good, it fit, because that small insect has good batteries and it’s quick.

SUCCESS WHEN YOU PUT THE PEOPLE TOGETHER WITH THE ARMED FORCES

—*Where do you think the Plan was more successful?*

—In San Cristóbal, where we first implemented it. It was a nice experience, because we were able to put together the people, the Armed Forces, and the municipal governments. In one of those municipalities I built 20 Wasp homes with the support of the people. We chose the workers, the contractors, from the local people themselves; the Armed Forces helped in the general supervision of the project, and we also had the support of the mayors. This is how we made one mayor compete with another.

—*Tell me about it.*

—They tried to make their own Wasp houses prettier than those of the other municipality; they had to add a personal touch to make them prettier. Some of them said: “I’m going to get some stones and make special patterns with them”; another said: “My support is going to be the finishing touches for the tiles and the kitchen.”

So there was a very clean contest between the mayors, and even between the unit commanders themselves, because I had assigned them the responsibilities I had in each municipality, and that’s how we were able to build such pretty yet cheap houses. This all went down as an experience that should go on a national scale, and we have already started implementing this project.

—*How many homes have been built with this project?*

—Well, we built 280 in Tachira and another 56 in Barinas. We already have a project set up on a national scale, and according to our estimates it could help 23 000 families. It was submitted to the National Council for Housing and they thought it could be a flag project within the revolutionary project for housing taken on by the government.

—*What has been the most touching thing you have lived through in this project?*

—Giving a home to such needy people. I felt happy and proud the day I did this. I saw tears of happiness on their faces, and I felt terribly happy, my heart was full, thanks to the work I was doing. I remember the specific case of a very humble family, a lady with two mentally retarded children and two normal ones; that’s why we had decided to make her house. But what happened? We had

14 Roberto González, cameraman and photographer.

15 To be always on the alert.

set our own conditions: the lady had to leave her little ranch and go live in her neighbor's house while we built her new home, which takes 8 weeks. And what happened? Unfortunately, because of the retarded children, the people in her neighborhood were not as solidary with the lady as we had expected, or maybe she didn't insist enough, but the thing is that she told us she had not been supported by her neighbors. So we decided to put her up in a military tent while we finished her home. And since we built a really pretty house, we felt bad putting all her old *peroles*¹⁶ in there, because it was a very poor family, the mother did laundry for other people to feed her children, and just doing laundry it was impossible for her to have any nice things, much less pay for them. So we thought about it and the mayor said: "I'm going to give that lady two bunk beds for her four children, for the boys and for the girls, and I'm going to give the lady a bed, a refrigerator, the stove, and a small living room set."

You can imagine that lady's happiness when she opened the door and she saw that not only did she have her own house now, but it also had all she would ever need. The kids were extremely happy: "No, no, that's my room; no, it's that one." And Roberto went to such details that at the end he even put each child's name on his bed.

That was a very beautiful day, very impressive. Seeing a happy child is one of the nicest things anyone can feel; see him smile, and sleep where he never thought he could, in one of those nice and decent beds. I think that without a doubt we did reach our goals.

SOURCE OF EMPLOYMENT

—*One of the criticisms I have heard here was that the military took on all these social projects, instead of giving work to the people, and that what you needed here was work for the people.*

—As I told you, in the beginning we did use soldiers, but very soon we realized we didn't have enough men for what we wanted to do; on top of it all, our cadres had no professional training, we didn't have good electricians, contractors, or masons. In the very beginning we used what we had, but then we saw that for what we wanted to do, we just couldn't use everybody, otherwise things would have come up crooked because we were not using the right professionals. So we had to use civilian workers from the communities; they would then be giving their own answer, they would be getting a salary that would allow them to feed their family and we, we would be putting the Armed Forces in close unity with the people.

The Wasp Plan has been an exceptional thing: it is not only a solution to the housing problem, it also creates employment. Twenty homes generated 83 direct employments: each engineer was assigned four contractors; the contractors were assigned five houses; each one of those five houses was assigned two masons and two workers, for a grand total of 83 people. We also discovered the need to create cooperatives for the metal structures, door and window frames, part of the general carpentry work, etc. So we were giving two simultaneous answers: first, creating cooperatives and generating employment, uniting the Armed Forces with the people; and second, solving the people's needs and helping the State with its problems.

—*What do those cooperatives do once the work is finished?*

—I have an important answer for you. When we began building these houses and creating the cooperatives that were going to produce the elements for them, we realized that as soon as the home was built those workers would be unemployed again. So we are studying how to get those workers

16 Belongings.

to stay on longer, or on a permanent basis. We are now trying to train these people who are participating in the housing project; maybe we can discover their abilities and improve them, so maybe in three months' time they can get the basic training to survive a little longer.

There is some important work being done in the Malvinas neighborhood. We began finding out how many unemployed workers there were, what skills they had, and what work we could offer them in city cooperatives, besides helping others go back to the countryside: perhaps there are many of them up in the *cerros* who had always been farmers, but came to the capital in search of work when agriculture declined due to lack of concern; so they came to the capital looking for survival. We are trying to recover those families and send them back to the country. They have studied this problem in six states, and they are looking for projects to offer them.

—*Why is the cooperative better than individual production or capitalist concerns?*

—In Venezuela, individual production is not usually an organized process, it grows in an unruly way without an adequate orientation. When you work in a capitalist place under the figurehead of huge capital, you are under the exploitation of man by man: very few people become very rich while many people grow needy. The cooperative system, on the other hand, gives leeway for at least some equality, more stability. For example: in a ten-man cooperative there is the feeling of responsibility, and the man who fails to comply with his duties must leave; but if all ten do it well, they will be able to save and go forward.

If a government wants to be effective, it must give answers to the people. So the State must be present everywhere, in the most remote corner of Venezuela. You must have not only the most elementary organ, which is the local government, but also the teacher, the policeman, the authority, basic services, and the presence of the State to make men happy.

4. APRIL 11, 2002, COUP

—*Can you tell me something about the coup? I was told that you had become an agitator (he laughs), such a constitutionalist military man agitating the people. Now how did that come about?*

—Maybe I was really calming them down... (he laughs). OK, let's talk about the 11th... many things happened then. I will tell you very quickly about it. I could tell something was cooking, it wasn't well defined but I had the feeling that something was going on because of some meetings we held in the Higher Command with the Commander General and the Assistant Commander. There was something strange about them. You could tell these professionals were already starting to become referees, following information they were getting on television, defending their own personal interests. So I was getting worried about what was going on. Because a military man is not trained to be the referee of any law, much less the government. This is a Bolivarian idea that is always imbued in a military man: you are a military, you are not fit to say if the government is doing things well or not; you are there to defend the sovereignty of the people, and if this sovereign people have said: "This is what we want," they you must respect their opinion. It is the people who can remove or put in power.

I received orders in March to go to another garrison in Caracas and head an exercise in a commanding post: this is a tactical exercise we call Staff Exercise. It is conceived to train the Staff. The exercise didn't need any soldiers present, so I came to the conclusion that what they really wanted was for me to leave my soldiers behind under another leader; but what if there were things going on in Caracas that really needed my presence as leader of those soldiers? So I started thinking and I recommended the upper echelon that it would be better and prudent to suspend the exercise. So he tells me I'm right, that it is not a good idea for me to leave because the situation in Caracas

isn't good. And then, just two days later, I get another order, the situation has been analyzed and I must leave. Once more, I consult the upper echelon and he tells me: "Don't move, stay."

—*Who was that upper echelon?*

—The inspector general of the National Armed Forces, General-in chief Lucas Rincón Romero.

Then, the morning of April 11, I visited the higher command of my garrison, I saw some movement, they were worried, because the march on Palacio de Miraflores was already launched, and when I came back to headquarters I called General Wilfredo Silva, who was at that meeting; I told him to leave the meeting, and from then on there was a series of related facts: the arbitrary capture of the UNEFA *alcabala*¹⁷, and *alcabalas* 3 and 1, taken by the Logistics Commando troops.

THE PRESIDENT ASKED YOU FOR SUPPORT WITH TANKS

—*Chávez told me what happened that day, you were here with your regiment, whereas the high command was higher up and they tried to have you join them, but you refused to abandon your regiment; they finally convinced you and they took you to Miraflores. Can you explain how all this took place?*

—That day I was in the Battalion Bolívar patio; I was then commander of the Joint Task Force, which is formed on a temporary basis together with other task groups in this specific case, the Bolívar Task Group, which was already with me at the Fort and was under the command of General Wilfredo Silva. I made them line up in the Bolívar Battalion honor patio, and once there they discovered that I was ready with the tanks and the soldiers to leave any time: I was just waiting for instructions from my superiors: "Apply the Avila Plan."¹⁸ On applying this plan I had to comply with that order.

I could tell that the General in command of CUFAN¹⁹ was undecided. When the President called him insistently, he didn't even answer, but I could hear the insistence over the radio, and since he didn't show up, I told the President: "I'm listening, I know you want to talk to the CUFAN commander, but since he isn't listening, if you have an order, give it to me and I will carry it out." Then we crossed our information and he told me to support him with a tank unit to preserve security at Palacio de Miraflores.

THEY TRIED TO SEPARATE HIM FROM HIS SOLDIERS

—Right then the Admiral acting as head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff came up and really insisted that I get into his vehicle, because we had to make a statement at Miraflores, we had to speak with the President, and the military high command as a whole must be present at Miraflores.

So I told him: "Look, I'm not a member of the military high command, so my presence at that meeting won't be important, I can't abandon my soldiers." And he told me: "No, this is an order by General Lucas and you have to go to that meeting." So I insisted but so did he, and only because I am a disciplined military even though he had the same military rank as I did, he held an important post because he was second in the military command I decided to get into the vehicle and went on

17 Armed Forces National Experimental University.

18 Plan for the defense of the government.

19 Unified Command of the National Armed Forces.

to the National Armed Forces Inspector Office. From there we went to Miraflores by helicopter, while I kept insisting that I had nothing to do there.

When we got to Miraflores, they made the high command go in together with the Minister of Defense, in a room where they were all looking at each other, because during their conversation in the helicopter they had been talking about the possibility of making the President resign.

HE WENT BACK TO FORT TIUNA

—I had an aside with General Lucas Rincón and I told him I needed to go back to Fort Tiuna, because the soldiers were there all alone. He told me: “You’re right, go ahead.” Then I asked a minister to lend me his car and I left from behind Palacio, coming right here to Fort Tiuna. I went directly to the Trinidad Morán Battalion headquarters²⁰, where we were holding prisoner the officers who had rebelled and taken the *alcabalas*; I talked to them, explained our concern, and talked about how confused they might be.

Then I went on to the north patio in the Bolívar Battalion, and while I was talking again with the small number of officers left, I had the feeling that I was being arrested, and I say “feeling” because they never told me openly that I was arrested. Then a general came up with a colonel and some soldiers, and his way of moving around made me understand that they were looking for something. I asked the colonel if he was the owner of the car parked right there; he told me he was, so when I began to feel a little under pressure, I got into the car and drove off for Miraflores.

IN THE DISIP

—On my way to Miraflores I went through the two tunnels, but when I was almost at Regional 5, the one at Paraíso when you’re almost getting out of the tunnel, I saw there was a considerable bottleneck. This made me go back with huge difficulties and I went to the DIM²¹, to the DISIP²², which had already been taken by the putschists. They thought I was one of them. Then the head of the DISIP looked for me and we were both allowed to leave easily. The putschists had detained him, but he used his intelligence and told them I had gone to get him. We got in the car and they let us leave. I came here to Fort Tiuna because right then I got a phone call insisting that the general commander wanted to talk to me. A colonel told me: “Come and talk to them, they are going to propose something, the idea of arresting you has never crossed their mind. I’ve already talked to them, come on, you’ll be very safe.” I consulted the DISIP guy: “What do you think, should I go over there?” And he told me: “Let’s go and see what’s going on.” So we went to the Army.

PUTSCHISTS IN FORT TIUNA

—When I got there I saw Mr. Carmona sitting where the general commander usually does, and I saw the generals celebrating, feasting together. They lead me to the room of the general commander and started talking, explaining they had been planning this for a long time, they thought it was the best way for Chávez to leave power and avoid blood shedding, because they considered he was not doing things properly, etc. They told me they had been planning this for years. I didn’t consider myself arrested, so I told them: “Ok, fine, that’s your opinion, that’s your opinion and I respect it.”

20 Battalion that accepted the coup d’Etat.

21 Military Intelligence Division.

22 Police Intelligence Services Division.

I left the room again, aware of the sea of misunderstandings and confusion, because they were fighting for the positions available, and they were congratulating each other, embracing, drinking, and celebrating in general. So I left and went home around 3 or 4 in the morning, and once there I started thinking what I was going to do the following day. And dawn came, at 6 a.m. I came to the Fort once again.

HE TALKED TO THE PEOPLE AROUND THE FORT

—*Did they let you in?*

—Yes, there were no restrictions. But when I got there they gave orders to remove me from office and they told me they didn't want to see me ever again inside the Fort. They had a room all ready to arrest me. But taking into account the events we were going through and the situation I had seen, I left and took refuge in *alcabala* 3, where the population was demanding to see the President.

—*Had they already announced that Chávez had not resigned?*

—Yes, they had already been commenting that he had not resigned, while others were talking about the fact that no one knew where he had been kidnapped, no one knew where he was, no one knew exactly where he was. But the people there wanted to see him, they were anxious to see Chávez and wanted to go into the Fort. While I was there with that huge mass of people, I grabbed a megaphone and started talking to the population. I told them that the Armed Forces didn't agree with the coup, that we didn't agree with having Carmona violating the Constitution and eliminating by a stroke of the pen the powers belonging to the State; that we didn't agree with the persecution of the governors, the mayors, and the public servants, and that we demanded the restoration of the Constitution and Carmona's resignation.

When I said this, the people started clapping very loudly and became more peaceful because they felt our support. We then started trying to explain what was going on. We explained that even the garrisons didn't agree with what had happened and were joining us once again.

—*Were you already able to communicate with Baduel?*

—Yes, we had already communicated with him, telling him there were several garrisons that didn't agree with what was going on and wanted to recover the constitutional path.

We also used Ali Primera's music to entertain the people and calm them down a bit. We were becoming happy because things were coming back to normal. It was a very nice experience; we were able to confirm that the people did love their Armed Forces. After talking so much about all our hopes, it was already 3:30 a.m., and then they announced Chávez was coming back to Miraflores by helicopter. The people from *alcabala* 3 here started walking over the whole highway until they got to Miraflores.

—*What has this coup, this whole four-day process taught you for the future?*

—The most important teaching for the officers is that they must forget the people, always take them into account. These people speak for themselves, they know what they want, and they are not going to accept anything imposed on them, because of anyone's whim. I think the military must respect the constitutional principles and precepts of respect for the people's sovereignty; it is the people who name, unname, and command. I think that's the best lesson for young people: never to obey personal whims or listen to biased information that could confuse them.

RINCÓN TALKED ABOUT CHÁVEZ'S RESIGNATION

—*Were you here when Rincón announced Chávez's resignation?*

—Yes.

—*How did you interpret it?*

—I never accepted it. I thought there was a mistake, because one of the things I understand perfectly well is that any action taken under pressure or coercion is illegal. And I couldn't accept the President's resignation when they were menacing with bombing Miraflores, they were menacing with seizing it militarily; they were menacing with murdering us. I never accepted it, and I told the deputies: "If you are a deputy, and someone gets into your house and kidnaps your daughter, puts a gun to your head and tells you to resign, you resign to avoid more problems a get your daughter back. But this is illegal, illegitimate, and unconstitutional." This is how I understood that the resignation imposed on the President couldn't be accepted by the Armed Forces.

WHY SOME OF THE GENERALS COMMITTED TREASON

—*Do you think there was some fracture within the Venezuelan Armed Forces?*

—I never thought the Armed Forces had broken into pieces; I have always said there was a crack, because you can say there is a fracture when something splits in two, whereas a crack means that just one point has gone bad. I think that in this case what went bad was the highest echelon within the Armed Forces if we really look carefully, we can see that there are very few middle-echelon putschists, like lieutenant colonels, majors, and captains.

—*What does that crack mean? Because we have seen how people trained with you committed treason, or at least was deceived.*

—Right now, if a general says he was deceived I would be very sad, because we have been very well trained to know the difference between right and wrong. I think it was man's ambition that prevailed over and above all else. If I am not promoted I get annoyed; if I don't get an important job I'm vexed. They give the impression that they didn't understand very clearly the basic concepts and principles of our institution, because they should have known that our career is pyramid-shaped; as the years go by we have increasingly fewer possibilities of promoting, because there just can't be four or five commands in the Army there is only one, and if you don't get there you have to help consolidate your institution.

On top of this ambition you also have biased information, and influence of other people's interests. If you have a man who is already unhappy due to specific circumstances and you add on his personal ambition, and top it all with outside influences taking advantage of the fact that the man is already irritated... I think that is what makes someone rebel against his own institution, his own *compañeros*.

What makes me sad about all this is that I thought my *compañeros* were well identified with the project, but I was wrong: their personal ambitions prevailed instead.

I was there and I saw how they fought for some post or other... I think what really mattered for them was to become important, not to be useful. And that's what I regret, because we all came to the Armed Forces to serve, and not to be served. That's the spirit we try to imbue our soldiers with, these are principles and values that must be preserved above all else.

—*Did you ever believe everything was lost?*

—Yes, on the morning of April 12th I thought we had lost everything. I was really plunged in confusion, even though I still had a little hope, because the day before there had been a rebellion by the people. When I saw all those people, that huge mass of people demanding that Chávez come forward, I was really stimulated by all their strength. And the outcome was even quicker than we had ever imagined. It took Chávez only 47 hours to recover power. I think it is the first time in world history that a defeated president comes back to power so quickly.

GENERAL WILFREDO RAMÓN SILVA

SOWING PROGRESSIVE IDEAS

1. Family background and military vocation; Poor family; Early military vocation. **2. The Military Academy and its changes;** Studying political doctrines; analyzing a new way of governing the country. **3. To fight against the guerrilla or to fight against poverty.** **4. School of the Americas;** Talking with Salvadorian military; Sowing progressive ideas. **5. Caracazo.** **6. Chávez, the MBR 200, and the 1992 coup.** **7. Chávez's electoral victory;** Attempted coup d'Etat in Carabobo; Discovering social injustice in the country. **8. April 2002 coup;** Control over oil; He received orders not to move his soldiers; General Rosendo did not answer the President's call; An immense majority of battalions opposed the coup; They took refuge in the population; Impressive popular support for Chávez. **9. The Armed Forces and the Plan Bolívar 2000;** Popular origin of the Venezuelan military; He united the military with the people; Trying to forge a popular organization. **10. Company strike;** Trying to take control over oil; The Armed Forces repudiated the strike; Venezuelan military intellectually very well prepared.

1. FAMILY BACKGROUND AND MILITARY VOCATION

POOR FAMILY

—*Tell me, where were you born?*

—I was born in a small town in the state of Lara called La Miel and I am the very proud son of a truck driver and an assistant nurse who came to this small town and thanks to her efforts she created a rural medical post around 1953. At that time no paved roads came to my town, just a county road. At home we were eleven siblings: 10 girls and me, the only boy.

—*Ten girls and one boy, oh, come on (he laughs)!*

—My great grandmother saved me from that household made up of girls only, because she thought I couldn't be brought up among so many women. She was in charge of my upbringing, stressing the need to help your neighbor.

I come from a poor family that has made its way through hard work, fighting; at times we ate only once a day. So this is how we were brought up, seeing how each government in power committed abuses against the people. I wore *alpargatas*²³ until I finished sixth grade. Then I emigrated to Barquisimeto, the capital of my state, where I studied five years in the Lisandro Alvarado high school, one of the best in the region, with a very good group of professors, an excellent group! I have to admit that at that time, public education in Venezuela was pretty complete. After high

23 Footwear, usually with rope sole and fabric top

school I went to university in Barquisimeto for a whole year, and then I decided to go to the Military Academy.

In elementary school my teachers had a real vocation. I remember that my town had no television at that time, but every day they brought us a newspaper from the capital. We had lessons in the morning and in the afternoon, and in the afternoon they would comment international news with us, what had happened in America, in Venezuela, and then they went on to the region. They stimulated us all the time, telling us that we had to leave our town, study other professions, and search for new horizons. That's why in that town, most people from my generation are university professionals, they are in all professions, we even have a Monsignor, a bishop, and we have to thank those professors for that, because they imbued us with the desire to be better.

EARLY MILITARY VOCATION

—How did your military vocation come about?

—I liked the military since I was a child. I was born in 1954, and in the 60s there was a guerrilla movement in my town. When Rómulo Betancourt banished the Venezuelan Communist Party, many of its members went to the mountains, and from the small town where I lived perched right in the mountains--we could see how military forces moved constantly around the area.

My first vocation was to be a military pilot. The first time I went to a military institution, I went to take the admission exams to become a pilot. But even though I passed the intellectual, physical, and psycho-technical part, it turned out I had problems with my eyesight that prevented me from becoming a pilot. So I went to the Army, I passed all the exams, and entered Venezuela's Military Academy, the Alma Mater of the Army.

2. THE MILITARY ACADEMY AND ITS CHANGES

STUDYING POLITICAL DOCTRINES

—So you benefited from the change in program when the Academy was brought up to university standing?

—Yes. I belong to the third graduating unit in the Andrés Bello Plan, which started in 1971 with today's President of the Republic.

I started the Military Academy in 1973. Our teachers were third-year students for the first three months' training. That's the group brigadier Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías was in, together with another group of young students who later became officers: Felipe Acosta Carlez, Urdaneta Hernández, Acosta Chirinos, and Ortiz Contreras.

Our principal was General Osorio García, who held the post for four years, from the very beginning of this new study system drafted by the National Council of Universities until the first group graduated (President Chávez's group). General Osorio sacrificed his career for the benefit of the Academy, because he could have reached the highest military ranks, but he chose to be principal. He said: "No, leave me here, it doesn't matter if I'm not promoted, I want to see the consolidation of this new study program."

I remember that four years later, when we went on to military units, they looked down on us with mistrust, they pointed their finger at us: "Here come the college bachelors" and this, in spite of the fact that taboos should have disappeared. There was still this feeling of rejection toward this new system, the new ideas these officers might have.

—*Do you remember what you thought were the most important subjects?*

—While we were at the Military Academy we analyzed all political doctrines, we studied Communism, we studied Marx and Lenin, the basic theories of all parties: the Social Christian Party (Copei), Christian Democracy, and Social Democracy. During 1959 and 60, Rómulo Betancourt had desecrated the Venezuelan left and many of its members had left, as I told you, and gone to the guerrilla. There were two political parties who controlled the political theater: Acción Democrática and Copei, Social Democracy and Christian Democracy.

In 1971, when President Chávez joined the Military Academy, a new party was born: Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), with a different theory, more humanism. Those of us who came from the country had seen how landholders abused the peasants, took their land from them, mistreated them. I suffered all that and so did my family.

ANALYZING A NEW WAY OF GOVERNING THE COUNTRY

—In Venezuela people started to analyze new possibilities openly, new ways of governing the country. We talked in the halls. There was a boy in my year called José Vicente Rangel; he is the son of the Vice-president of the Republic, and I remember that when his father--a militant on the left--came to see his son, the old generation of generals *se ponían las espinas*²⁴ when they saw him coming. So after that we were not allowed to read any literature related to Karl Marx, Lenin, Socialist history, or Christian Democracy history, even though they were all optional subjects in the study programs drawn up by the National Council of Universities.

Our professors were very well trained, most of them came from the Central University of Venezuela, and together with them we openly analyzed the situation in the country.

—*I believe José Vicente was a candidate for MAS?*

—Yes, at that time he was.

—*I have been told that you are being trained in methods for leadership.*

—There is a subject called Leadership. It describes how leaders are formed, how to act. Remember that we are military and therefore we work with men, in peace and in conflict; this is practically what we have been doing for organization and leadership during the Plan Bolívar 2000.

—*Did you belong to the Movimiento Bolivariano 200?*

—No.

—*What was your opinion of Chávez at the time?*

—He was an outstanding cadet, in the top rank of his graduating class. He was always singing, making jokes, talking. He was very extrovert.

—*Did you like him?*

—Oh yes, yes. He was nice. Then he graduated and left the Military Academy. Two years later I graduated too and I went to the eastern part of the country; I stayed around seven months in those jungles, and then they sent me to a chasers' battalion to fight the last guerrilla centers.

24 Worried.

3. TO FIGHT AGAINST THE GUERRILLA OR TO FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

—I remember that I had been there for some 20 days and there was a clash where I was shot three times. I recovered and went back to the chasers' battalion to fight again. That's when with my friends from my graduation year we start talking during our free time and asking what we were fighting against. We were supposed to be on the lookout for guerrillas, but what we really saw was misery, the extreme poverty of the population. Many times we exchanged the food we had in our knapsacks for one of their hens, and other times we just gave it to them because we saw how poor they were.

We were very versatile. One day we were in the fields, with the peasants and their poverty, and all of a sudden we had to go to the cities, or to a meeting with the governor, or even with the President of the Republic and there, there we saw opulence, waste, how much whisky they drank, squandering everything. And with this contrast in mind we would ask: "So, what are we fighting against? Can we accept that in the middle of this poverty, the misery of our peasants, this group of people up here can go on showing off, earning money?"

I was an under-lieutenant for three years, and in 1980 I was promoted lieutenant and sent as *oficial de planta*²⁵ to the Military Academy. The President was there at the time; we formed a group, and worked together for three years. We talked about the situation in the country and everything that was going on at the time. I remember once, we were both doing guard duty, and we had to lower a flag. We had to go on the roof of the Military Academy to do it, and while we were there he said: "Can you imagine if one day those people up there on those *cerros* got angry and came down?" We're talking around 1980-81. I remember telling him that they had all the right to come down, because they had no way of improving their lot, no way of having an education, good sanitary conditions in their neighborhoods like other people had, and we went on talking about many things like this.

4. IN THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS

—After those three years they sent me to the United States, where I passed several courses between 1983 and 1987.

That's because I was first in my class in the Basic and Middle Infantry courses. In the US I studied English, an advanced infantry course, and psychological operations.

TALKING WITH SALVADORIAN MILITARY

—After graduating from the School of the Americas, I stayed there as an instructor. There I learned the Theory of Low Intensity Conflicts. I remember that I talked a lot with Salvadorian officers about the revolutionary movement in their country and what was happening to them, how their army was deteriorating because their military leaders were now related to the oligarchy, to businessmen, had married the daughters of important businessmen, and they no longer defended the interests of the country, but rather their own personal interests.

I talked with them but also with other Central American and South-American officers (including some from Chile), and from other parts of the world. Thanks to this I got a global vision of what was going on. Some armies followed the United States and others didn't.

²⁵ Member of the Military Academy faculty.

SOWING PROGRESSIVE IDEAS

—*I would never have imagined that in the United States you would find people who shared your ideas. I have always thought of the School of the Americas as a center for indoctrination against the people.*

—No, on the contrary. I studied something called Development, where we analyzed subversion and internal development. I was very transparent and clear in what I said; I always defended my opinions, though they tried to put pressure on me to say something.

—*And just what did you say?*

—I remember that I talked to them about the situation in El Salvador, that until justice prevailed there, until they found solutions to the problems suffered by so many poor people, there would never be peace there. They were never going to overcome that situation while there were still so many exploited people, with nothing to eat; yet the major resources of the country were controlled by a handful of people only. And time has proved me right.

Most of the junior officers did understand, because they came from the lower classes. The real cause was the terrible inequality in El Salvador. The problem is that at that time they were getting huge economic and military support from the United States and many of these young officers were in a huge conflict, they were really confused, they knew what was going on but didn't know how to control it or what road to follow.

—*You mean to say that those in responsible positions at the School of the Americas knew what you were teaching in your classes?*

—I don't know if they were aware of it. I talked very openly to my students.

—*OK, to your students, fine. But what about the professors, those responsible for the School's ideology?*

—They never said anything to me. I was known as a good professor. I won several prizes as a good instructor and even taught senior officers, and I never had any problem at all. I was there for two and a half years.

I came back to my country in 1987 as instructing officer at the Caracas Military Academy. I was an instructor for many of the young men who participated in the February 4, 1992, coup. Most of them had been students of mine, and of the President too.

5. CARACAZO

—*What do you remember of the Caracazo?*

—I remember that on the first day I had to go to El Valle; it was not a comfortable mission because I had to pick up some bodies and some wounded people, take them to the hospitals. But fortunately the local people did that. On the second day I came to Fort Tiuna to send supplies on to the capital: as a result of pillaging and nervous people hoarding, the capital was left without food supplies. In the Fort itself we created a huge supply commando, where every means of transportation, every truck, everything went there, and we had to control it all to guarantee supplies for the capital.

When that happened I wasn't in a tactical unit, it was an administrative unit within the Infantry School.

—*How did you interpret the Caracazo?*

—I was very sad because the Armed Forces had been used to repress the Venezuelan people that way. There were combats, shots here, shots there, and many many casualties. We still don't really know how many--officially they say there were around 266, but there are other people who say there were many more. That really impressed the officers.

6. CHÁVEZ, THE MBR 200, AND THE 1992 COUP

—In 1989 I went to Maturin, and major Chávez came too. He had been transferred urgently from Caracas, because word had got out that a group of majors and captains had been organizing a conspiracy. So we were together for a whole year: I was an officer in the Administration and he was an officer for Civilian Matters in the 73rd Chasers' Brigade. So we were able to continue talking about the situation in the country.

—*Didn't he talk about the Movement?*

—We spoke very openly about what was happening; he spoke a lot about the El Valle landowners, about the families who controlled Venezuela, but if you really want to know, he never even mentioned the Movement to me. My wife used to sing local songs--she gets along very well with him. When we went out together, those two used to sing. Once, they were supposed to tell me about the Movement but the President said not to, because I was newly married and he wanted me to get on with my life. Of course I found this out later. They never got to tell me anything, but we did talk about what was going on in the country.

—*When did you find out about the coup, about Chávez's rebellion?*

—I was passing a General Staff course, and that day the subject was social security, the class was given by the Chairman of Horizontes Insurance; we left the conference around 7 p.m. I used to live at La Rosaleda, a military complex in San Antonio de Los Altos. The morning after, when I come down around 5:30 in the morning, I went by several *alcabalas*; they checked my car and asked me on which side I was. "What do you mean what side I'm on?" And they answered: "You don't know about today's coup?" "No", I answered, "I don't know anything about it."

So I went to change a Fort Tiuna, where the students stayed. They detained us there, we couldn't leave the rooms. Around 9 a.m. they called us to the schoolrooms. Major Alastre López²⁶ was the only one missing. We later found out that he was one of those driving the tank that had tried to get in Miraflores. Around 10 a.m. we saw lieutenant colonel Chávez's speech on television, explaining the failure of the plan and asking the rest of the soldiers who were still fighting in the Valencia and Maracaibo garrisons to surrender, and that we would have to wait for new and better opportunities to seize power.

—*What was your impression at the time?*

—I would say 98 % of the students agreed with what those junior officers had done. Later on there was a denigrating campaign against the group, psychological operations. We were well aware that they had gone against the Constitution of the Republic, but we also discovered that this time the Movement had accepted responsibility for their acts. Not only did they accept this responsibility, they also explained why they had rebelled. Not at all like what happened now in April 2002, when none of the cowardly putschist generals took any responsibility.

26 Now mayor of El Tocuyo, in the state of Lara.

Venezuelan audiences liked the fact that the President accepted his responsibility then. It was the first time anyone came out and accepted outright that he had done something and felt responsible for it, because in both professional and political spheres, when they did something no one accepted the responsibility.

7. CHÁVEZ'S ELECTORAL VICTORY

ATTEMPTED COUP D'ETAT IN CARABOBO

—*Did you expect Chávez's electoral victory in 1998?*

—I was in Guasdalito during the President's campaign. Logically, we had information that he was going to have a smashing victory, because we saw how opposing parties joined forces against him, while there was a sea of people out in the towns saying they were going to vote for him. I was later transferred to Ciudad Bolívar, practically at the other end of Venezuela; as soon as I got there I saw the campaign, I talked to the people, and everyone was talking of Chávez. I had to watch over the elections, and on my rounds of voting centers I could see that when they asked the people, six or seven out of ten said they had voted for President Chávez.

As soon as his victory was made public we were informed of several military movements to prevent Chávez's coming to power, so we went immediately on the alert, at least in the Division where I was, in case we had to counteract. There was an attempted coup d'État from Carabobo state.

—*What was your position when Chávez won the elections?*

—When he won in 1998, I was in the Fifth Jungle Infantry Division, after having held several other positions. Later on I came to the Army Logistics Command, where I was working when that terrible disaster happened in Vargas²⁷; I was operations officer in charge of food and gas supply. Everything the population needed as far as supplies was concerned came from the Logistics Command. Then I went to another logistics command in Barquisimeto, and then to Barinas, as head of the 23rd Security and Development Brigade, for seven months.

DISCOVERING SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN THE COUNTRY

—When I was still in Barinas the President called me: he wanted me to take over the National Agrarian Institute. So he named me president of the Institute because he wanted me to reform it as the National Institute of the Land, born after the Bill of the Land came out. I had to travel throughout the whole country, and speak face to face with the peasants of all Venezuela because I was convinced that would be the only way to get to know what was really happening in our countryside.

I saw that 75 % of rural land was held by 5 % of the people, and that 25 % was held by 75 % of the people living in the country. I discovered that when we analyzed the land titles held by eminent families of Venezuela, famous last names at that, many of them were false. They had forged them using a special oxygen technique to make them look old; with documents drafted in one place they had seized lands in another place all this, with the approval of local judges and the participation of State officers.

27 Torrential rains that caused the total destruction of Cerro Avila, with around 15 000 casualties and where thousands of families lost their homes.

As far as fences was concerned, I used to say they moved at night, because when we went to measure land held by people who had 1000 hectares according to the original documents, they would end up having 5000 or 6000 hectares. So how on earth did that land grow so much? Because they would reset their fences, throw the peasants out there were often bodies left on the ground, peasants who had fought for their land. But at that time Venezuela was under the law of the most powerful.

All this swelled my heart and I felt I really had to fight harder for these people who had been abused for such a long time.

Then, in December 2001, the President told me I had to go back to the Army, and that's when I went back to the 31st Infantry Brigade, one of the most influential units in the struggle against the April 11, 2002, coup.

8. APRIL 2002 COUP

CONTROL OVER OIL

—*Tell me about the April 2002 coup.*

—Well, thanks to Intelligence, we knew they were preparing a conspiracy.

—*You had Intelligence reports, but did you know how many generals would be in the coup?*

—We had most of their names. Some people had infiltrated into their ranks and let us know what was going on, but we didn't know exactly how they were going to operate. We knew that so and so had met with someone, and we followed that tip. Very often their attitudes and what they said during the meetings made us suspect that they were in the middle of a conspiracy.

HE RECEIVED ORDERS NOT TO MOVE HIS SOLDIERS

—We arrived the morning of April 11, when the PDVSA concentration began. That's when I ordered by soldiers to be prepared in case we had to take over specific places to guarantee the security of the capital: subway stations, electric plants just take over certain spots. All this was part of the Avila Plan²⁸.

At 10 a.m. Commander General Vázquez Velasco sent an emissary to ask me why I had moved my vehicles and alerted my soldiers. He got on the phone and I told him it was a normal thing for a commander to do, because of the gravity of what was happening in the capital, and if it became necessary to apply the Avila Plan, my soldiers were all ready.

He then told me to put the vehicles away and that we were not supposed to have the soldiers out on the streets. This seemed quite strange to me but I obeyed him and put the vehicles back, but I kept the soldiers on alert in their dorms, just waiting for orders.

Vázquez Velasco summoned me to a meeting at 2 p.m., so I went there and saw a group of generals. They made me sit in a chair before a TV set, and two generals pointed to the march that was just then getting to Miraflores. At that time I still didn't know that with no authorization to do it, they had detoured the march toward Miraflores. One of them, the second Army commander, General Ruiz Guzmán, told me: "Silva, the President has lost control of the country, he doesn't control it any longer, so he must leave." And other generals started talking in the same tone. All this seemed

28 Plan for the defense of the government.

very strange to me. But luckily, right then General García Carneiro called me and told me to leave the meeting. When I was about to leave, the second Army commander asked me who had called me, and I told him it was our Commander in Chief in other words, President Chávez, because if I had told him it was García Carneiro, general Ruiz Guzmán wouldn't have authorized me to leave because he was a higher-ranking general.

So I went to see García Carneiro at his command. He had just come from the Ministry of Defense. I described the strange situation I had seen and told him we should concentrate all the Third Division units. So we brought out a tank battalion, all Third Division units, and concentrated them in one single place that's when they started their plan to block our *alcabalas*. They turned around the traffic coming from Valencia, from the center of the country, and made it go toward Fort Tiuna, creating a bottleneck so we couldn't move our units, but we moved very fast and with our tanks we controlled the *alcabalas*.

GENERAL ROSENDO DID NOT ANSWER THE PRESIDENT'S CALL

—It was around 3:30 in the afternoon on April 11, and when we began to see something was wrong we started giving out instructions. Several generals and senior officers then began to concentrate in the schools' command, and we heard the President call General Rosendo who was commander of the Unified Command of the National Armed Forces over the radio, and he sounded very worried. He asked Rosendo to activate the Avila Plan; General García Carneiro answered him and told him we didn't know where Rosendo was, so the President asked for two tank squads to protect Miraflores. Seeing the battalion commander's lack of decision, I was instructed by General García Carneiro to get the tanks to Miraflores. When I got there I had no idea the President had talked to the country, or that there were snipers who had shot 17 people around Palacio de Miraflores.

It was 7 p.m. when I arrived; an enormous amount of people were there supporting the President, so I left the tanks there and went to his office, where I explained what had happened at Fort Tiuna. He pointed out the people he knew were participating in the coup and ordered me to go back to Fort Tiuna and seize control.

I was arrested as soon as I got there, and with a general escorting me I was sent to my command and from there to the fifth floor of the General Army Command, where they were holding a huge party and happily giving posts away some were even drinking. Division generals were all together and coordinating with the rest of the members of the Armed Forces: the National Guard, Aviation, and the Army, because they had to draft the President's resignation. They finally even got García Carneiro, the last one to give himself up. But we were both able to leave the fifth floor when the guards were not looking, and we went to organize the counter coup. It was dawn.

On the 12th we made contact with people by phone and in person. We started calling those commanders we knew for sure were supported a constitutional position. And we spoke personally with several units. Around 5 p.m. that day, Carmona Stanga's swearing ceremony came on the air.

AN IMMENSE MAJORITY OF BATTALIONS OPPOSED THE COUP

—We immediately requested an urgent meeting from the Army commander general. Of the 19 battalion commanders at Fort Tiuna, only one had joined the conspiracy-- the rest were very confused and ended up with García Carneiro and me. We held a meeting at the Ayala Battalion and drafted a document to oppose the coup and ask the Army commander to take a stand in favor of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Logically, if the Constitution had been reinstated, it would have meant the President had to come back to power. They didn't accept this.

On the 12th in the afternoon, people started coming spontaneously, and when they found out the President had not resigned, that he had been kidnapped, their numbers increased.

That night, at the Fort Tiuna *alcabala* 3, where the people had come to support the President and the Constitution, the Metropolitan Police unleashed a very brutal repression.

That's when we began our talks with civilian leaders, such as Minister Nelson Merentes and deputy Iris Valera so they would get in contact with the mass movement in Caracas and get the people to go to Fort Tiuna and Palacio de Miraflores.

THEY TOOK REFUGE IN THE POPULATION

—The putschists were under great pressure from the people out in the streets, they got nervous and desperate. Faithful to the President, the regiment in charge of the Honor Guard recovered Miraflores. Carmona, the head of the Military House, and a group of other personalities, journalists, deputies, and ex deputies left running all that political crap left running.

Meanwhile, at Fort Tiuna they started hunting for General García Carneiro, for me and for General Lameda, who was then colonel they were hunting for those of us who had been organizing the coup at Fort Tiuna; General Baduel was in Maracay; General Gutiérrez Alberto in Barinas, and other garrisons were held by generals who had not accepted the coup. So, since they wanted to arrest us, we went to *alcabala* 3 and took refuge in the population. That's when General García Carneiro got on a tank and explained to the people that the President wasn't at Fort Tiuna, that we were facing a coup d'Etat, and that we were not going to accept it.

So with the units we found in *alcabala* 3 we created a command center and started giving out orders to take over the Army command, recover the Ministry of Defense, and arrest Carmona and the group of putschist generals. We also sent people to recover control over Venezolana de Televisión it went on the air once again, and the group of officers in Maracay organized a commando operation to save the President from La Orchila Island and put him back in power, where the sovereign people had originally put him by a huge majority. The same sovereign people who had to decide if the President stayed or went.

—*What did you feel throughout this whole process? Did you see Rincón when he announced the President had resigned?*

—Well, I never even found out General Lucas Rincón had spoken. But when I was on the fifth floor that night of April 11, I was really sick and angry seeing so many of the President's own *compañeros* from his graduating year, those he had helped so much, betraying him, being so disloyal to the people. These were people who had come from the most humble sectors and were now going against the great majority of their people, who had placed their hopes in this new Constitution, this new project for the country.

Many of them had said they would be unconditional, and now they were betraying the President and saying bad things about him: that he was crazy, a schizophrenic, that he had lost control. Terrible things! I'm ashamed to say these things in this interview.

IMPRESSIVE POPULAR SUPPORT FOR CHÁVEZ

—I wasn't surprised when the people from the *cerros* came down. It was nothing new for me since in 1989 I had already seen it. I knew the President had a lot of popular support: when I was in the National Agrarian Institute and General García Carneiro was head of the Military House, we often had to fly with the President throughout Venezuela, and we were able to see how many people

supported and loved him, gave him *La bendición*, and wished him great success. There were thousands and thousands and thousands of them on each trip throughout the country.

While working on social aspects of Plan Bolívar we were always in the *cerros* rebuilding homes, building sidewalks, and the social plans the government is carrying out with the Caracas Garrison. And that's when we could see how these people simply adored and loved the President. If we visited ten homes, in at least nine we could see his picture, or a poster, or a piece of cloth with his face on it in the living room; sometimes a sign saying: "Viva Chávez!" or "Chávez, I love you!" They also had the Constitution, and records, music by Ali Primera.

We knew the President had all this backing. That night on April 11, when those generals were all celebrating, both me and General García Carneiro told them they were making a mistake, that the President had a lot of support, that things just weren't going to stay as they were, that they shouldn't count on controlling the population so easily, and that the people from the *cerros* would no doubt come down and they did come down, and the people from the countryside also came down, and together they put their elected President back into power.

—According to you, you called several political personalities because you wanted them to ask the people from the *cerros* to come down to Fort Tiuna and Miraflores; but there are other people who say it was a very spontaneous thing.

—Yes, there were many people who came down spontaneously, but others were asked to. I would say around 70 % came down spontaneously and 30 % were alerted by social leaders and base organizations, who asked them to come down in specific places.

9. THE ARMED FORCES AND PLAN BOLIVAR 2000

POPULAR ORIGIN OF THE VENEZUELAN MILITARY

—So how do you explain that these people went to the barracks... because in Chile, for example, and in many other Latin American countries, the people would never go there, because barracks represent a repressive military authority, whereas here, the people trust their military. How has the Army won over the people to their side?

—Because our Armed Forces come from the people, 99.5 % of the soldiers come from the middle and lowest classes of society. In Venezuela, military service is obligatory, but the middle or higher middle classes don't serve. It is only the low or lower middle classes who serve, and these are the people supporting the President. The immense majority of the officers also have popular origins; they belong to the middle and lower middle classes. Our Armed Forces are popular. The only thing an officer must do to get into the Military Academy is to pass the admission test. He doesn't have to belong to a specific caste or social class. Most of the officers are admitted this way, though there may be someone who has been admitted through influences. And I can tell you that usually, those who get in thanks to some recommendation don't have good results. Of ten recommended people, maybe one gets to graduate.

HE UNITED THE MILITARY WITH THE PEOPLE

—When Chávez became President, we worked to get the Armed Forces closer to the population, because in the past what they had tried to do was to divide us: the military in their own world, and the civilians in theirs.

One of the constant requests the President used to make was the union between civilians and military. Thanks to this those who were unaware of what people up in the *cerros* or the poor sectors

of the population were going through, or who didn't understand it properly, started seeing the problems under a different light thanks to Plan Bolívar 2000. As soon as the emergency plan took off we put the often-untapped immense human and material resources available in the barracks to help the people. So we contributed in civil works, building roads, repairing deteriorated schools and medical posts; military doctors have operated throughout the whole country, and the itinerant hospitals we had for emergencies, for the war, are now serving the population.

This huge group of officers and soldiers felt very well in this work, we were happy, very happy to see we were helping our fellowmen, our *compañeros*, and our compatriots.

But our political opponents immediately realized that this plan was really helping poor people, cutting down the distance between the Armed Forces and the population, and that's how this movement came about, both on a political level and within the Armed Forces themselves, against this kind of work.

Precisely today, February 5, 2003, we can see how all those now attempting to affect Plan Bolívar were there in Altamira Square²⁹, all those who had rebelled in April 2002.

—*What about your personal experience in Plan Bolívar 2000?*

—It was really nice. I was in Ciudad Bolívar when it took off. I began with a lot of sacrifices because the then governor of the state was completely against the President and he certainly didn't give us much help, we had to wrench it from him with the support of the social organizations there.

For the first time we were able to coordinate different ministries, sit them around the same table and coordinate at what time social work was going to be done. I was greatly enriched by this experience, I got to know the work carried out by the Ministries of Transportation and Communications, Education, and Health; the plans organized by the Ministry for the Environment--and so they too discovered what we were doing, the humane characteristics of Venezuelan military. We began a team, and though some were trying to sabotage it, others understood how necessary it was.

At least in the state of Bolívar things went very well. While I was in Plan Bolívar 2000, over a period of seven months there more than 8000 surgical operations. If the Plan hadn't existed this would have never happened, because it's sad to say, but though Venezuela's hospitals have all the resources and the facilities, the doctors have lost sight of their mission, and operating rooms worked only in the morning, and the rest of the day they were shut down, none of the equipment was working for the population as it should have.

I then went on to Barinas, where we worked on road networks, health facilities, reconstructed basic schools, all of which meant health and education for the people.

This is important, because a healthy and educated people can go very far. And I think that in all those years in the past that's exactly what they didn't do: they did nothing for the Venezuelan people to be educated, and taken care of from a medical point of view, because medicine was privatized, and doctors don't like small towns, all they want is their own private practice, private clinics. And teachers were going down the same path, like professors who retire and open private schools. All this was in detriment of public health and public. So for me, and the group that was with me the whole time, it was very gratifying to recover those schools and medical posts, as I know it was for the immense majority of the National Armed Forces.

29 Square in the Este neighborhood of Caracas where they set up a stage: putschist military and other people who supported them would get up and talk to the people who had gathered there.

TRYING TO FORGE A POPULAR ORGANIZATION

—*When you were working on these social plans in the communities, did you solve the people's problems by yourselves or did you incorporate them?*

—We did both things: we solved their problems but we also tried to get them organized, because the people were very dispersed. We taught them in different ways. We taught their natural leaders how to organize several things, and they started learning. We began organizing Humanitarian Days, and showed them how to do it, how to coordinate things. And now, three and a half years after Proyecto Bolívar was launched, we can see that what we started has been well learned by numerous neighborhood organizations, whole towns, and now they do things by themselves.

When you come to a neighborhood nowadays, social leaders are now able to tell you: “Look there, General Silva, we are going to organize a Humanitarian Day here, there are four people who must be sterilized because they already have ten kids and they don't want any more babies; a similar number of people must go to birth control meetings.” These leaders already know how many schools they have in their area, how many schoolrooms and desks, what those desks need, and which bathroom in which school needs repairs.

That's the degree of organization we are now getting among the people, and we were able to teach this with the support of civil organizations we did this as we carried out our operations and required their participation. And that's how they got used to this system, they began to learn, and this is going on in every little corner of our Republic.

—*When the President gave the Armed Forces this task, were you told to promote people's organization, or was this the idea of some specific cadres?*

—Well, see, when the President talked to us he used to say: “Venezuela has a structural problem, people aren't organized, so go help them organize themselves,” but he didn't tell us how to do it. He was thinking of some kind organization so the people would learn to take care of their own problems, but he never told us to organize them politically.

My experience and that of many of my *compañeros* was that we organized a meeting in the barracks and we distributed the tasks: “You are in charge of the sanitary aspects; you, the environmental ones; you take care of the water, and you are going to be responsible for the educational part, of the desks, how many desks?” We did all this organizational work with the people, with community leaders. And with all this information we created our own database. And some of our military units already have databases and exact information of the situation of their people.

10. COMPANY STRIKE

TRYING TO TAKE CONTROL OVER OIL

—*What do you think of the recent strike?*

—As I told you in the beginning, when I was in the United States, I studied psychological operations, and was an instructor of that subject for two years and a half. There I studied the Chilean case, the strategy followed to overthrow President Salvador Allende. So here I'm able to understand that everything that's going on against President Chávez is a true copy of what happened in Chile, with some small variations. The military coup failed, so fine: they launched the economic coup. In the Armed Forces we were aware that the coup was meant to take control over oil. Because what is the core of the matter? They just don't want Venezuela to become a nationalist country defending its own resources. Many foreign countries don't see us as 22 million people

living in around 912 050 square kilometres, in a land in the northern part of Latin America. No, they don't see us like that. They just see us as an oil well they need for their own development, their economic aspirations, and the well being of their population. As Venezuelan military we have no doubts about that at all, but before the strike, an important part of our population didn't understand this. But we, we did know their attack would come more or less in that direction.

After we controlled the April military coup, we had to yield some power in PDVSA and wait for better times--which came in December, when they hit the very economic heart of Venezuela.

THE ARMED FORCES REPUDIATED THE STRIKE

—How did the Armed Forces interpret that strike? Because the Armed Forces has been trained to defend the sovereignty, the wealth of the country...

—Well, our younger soldiers and the majority of the Armed Forces are very angry with all this, they consider it treachery it's an attempt to destroy our country for personal reasons. We can understand the fact that there are political differences, but when we see the country's patrimony being destroyed, and we know that this wealth could have been good for you or for your children in the future, we just can't accept it. This is very difficult to understand, to swallow. And that's when the rank-and-file soldiers put pressure, and when the Armed Forces decided to control the oil strike we had to send our military engineers, our managing experts, all sorts of engineers... let me explain something interesting: in our Armed Forces, the majority of our officers have two or even three professions.

VENEZUELAN MILITARY INTELLECTUALLY VERY WELL PREPARED

—When they graduate from the Military Academy as Bachelors in Military Arts and Sciences, most of our officers go to university during their spare time; there they come in contact with civilians, with what people are thinking out there, the people of our own generations. We have captains graduating from the Military Academy but they are also mechanical or civil engineers; professors in physical education, in mathematics, business administration, public accountants, and some are high-level technicians with university degrees. In my personal case, I am a graduate in business administration and have passed the eighth semester in mechanical engineering; I did a postgraduate course in personnel management, and another postgraduate course in administration. Many organizations, including the political ones, lost ground while the Armed Forces kept forging ahead intellectually.

WE WANT THE PEOPLE TO BE THE ROLE PLAYERS

1. Family background and military vocation; Son of an oil worker; Early military vocation. **2. Characteristics of the Venezuelan Armed Forces;** Most officers come from the popular classes; Bolívar's legacy in military training; New military training; Leadership: study subject; Personal example of vital importance; Civic actions program against counterinsurgency; Victory over the guerrilla strengthened the military. **3. Chavez, the MBR 200, and the 1992 coup;** He did not belong to the MBR 200; The 1992 coup surprised him and gave him enthusiasm; First contact with Chávez. **4. Plan Bolívar 2000;** Why the Armed Forces play such an outstanding role; The military approach the people; Building housing; Our commitment is with the people; Steps in the Plan; Community housing organizations; Corruption in Plan Bolívar 2000?; The military must be both effective and efficient. **5. Desertion of the high commands and the constitutionalist military line;** Institutional or constitutionalist; How can you explain why so many generals have deserted; Ambition for power. **6. Phases after April;** Consolidation within the Armed Forces; Sabotage against our oil; Legal offensive; Opposition: a minority, but a very active one.

1. FAMILY BACKGROUND AND MILITARY VOCATION

SON OF AN OIL WORKER

—*Where were you born?*

—I was born in Cabimas, a town that came up in 1922 when people emigrated to the oil fields in the state of Zulia, in what is known as the eastern coast of El Lago, just in front of Maracaibo. It was the year the well exploded and Venezuela came to be known throughout the world as an oil country. It is called well Barroso, in Nueva Rosa. It simply exploded, and gave off oil for a whole week it was a very light oil, practically right under the surface. Research had been going on from the beginning of the 20th century, and the first inkling that there was any oil appeared in Táchira, but production was very small. After well Barroso came well Zumakethey both put Venezuela at the top of the oil world.

Mi father Valentín was an oil worker; he worked on Maracaibo's lake. I was born on an oil field well, rather, in a town quite close to the oil wells. My mother Carmen was born in the state of Falcón; she came from a very humble family and never got beyond sixth grade. I am the youngest son, and together with my two older sisters we make up the family. I didn't have a difficult childhood, because oil workers' basic needs were satisfied. We lived in a very simple house but we had everything we needed. That's why I can't say I went hungry.

Around the oil fields there were towns for the workers, their club, their school; other towns for the managers and middle cadres; and towns for the top managers. When I was small, I thought only

Americans lived there, because we didn't see any Venezuelans there. The urban structure in those towns was completely American.

I did my basic education in an excellent school belonging to the oil industry; I was quite diligent as a child, I joked a bit but I was a good student that I can't deny.

EARLY MILITARY VOCATION

—From my earliest childhood I didn't miss any military activity, parade, or national anniversary. I watched them on our black and white TV set. Once, when I was on vacation, I came to Caracas and when we were getting on the Valle-Coche highway (in the past the trees weren't as tall as now) I saw the Paseo de los Próceres {Avenue of the Heroes}, and that time it was not black and white but full of colors did that impress me deeply! And I exclaimed: "The heroes? That's not possible!" Then I went on vacation to my godmother's home in the state of Táchira, where the Jáuregui Moreno Military High School works as a prep school for military schools. It's about 50 years old and it has always been rated A-1. So I said: "That's where I'm going to study." I was about ten then. And I want you to know that I did everything by myself. I ended up second. My father didn't want me to go there because he had a feeling that I was going to like military life and look how long it's been now!

At that time, when we graduated from the Military High School we were automatically accepted in the Military Academy. We had to pass an interview and some easy tests, because the military high schools had already sent in our records. I went to the interview and of course I was accepted. Militarily speaking, my life has been happy.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VENEZUELAN ARMED FORCES

MOST OFFICERS COME FROM THE POPULAR CLASSES

—To try to understand the attitude of the military today, you must first study the genesis of the Venezuelan Army, the most numerous component of the Armed Forces. At least 80-90 % of the generals and officers come from the popular classes and are accepted in the Armed Forces training centers without any kind of recommendation they get in through their own efforts.

—*Is there a selection?*

—It is a rigorous selection, at least for the Military Academy. There are 4500 candidates and only 200, 400 are accepted, so you can imagine how rigorous they are. The applicants have to go through all the tests. The first few months are really hard, and if you don't have a true vocation you can't take it.

BOLIVAR'S LEGACY IN MILITARY TRAINING

—When I got to the Academy I became even more convinced that Venezuela has a military history, and that military history is Venezuela's own history. Bolívar's ideas have a general influence on Venezuelan people as a whole, but they are very strongly embedded in the military. We consider ourselves to be the true heirs of those glorious ideals. When they told me about Simón Bolívar in the Military Academy, about the Valle de Aragua militias where Simón Bolívar studied, I went there and confirmed that history is true to life. But it's not just that, see: Bolívar is recognized not only by Venezuelan authors but also by foreign ones, and this gives even more strength to his doctrine. It's like the case of a Christian who goes to Israel to see where Jesus was born, but it's not just that he's also told this by other groups, other Christians, a Jew, and pretty soon even a Muslim. In our opinion Simón Bolívar and his work are our true idols.

Those who come from my generation are also taught utmost respect for the Constitution too, even though it was another Constitution. Because within the military we are taught that we must have an instrument for State policy not political chicanery--, we must have an order above all things.

NEW MILITARY TRAINING

—Simón Bolívar's graduation year--which included President Chávez, General García Carneiro, and López Hídalgo was the first university level year. The whole curriculum had changed by then, and you came out with studies in Engineering, Administration, and Education. Academic levels went way up, to university level. You had to be a high school graduate to be admitted, it was a hard change. I belong to the third graduating year, while General García Carneiro belongs to the first one.

—*What did they teach you?*

—On top of normal military training they added Engineering, Management, and Education, because a true officer must have the ability for calculus and design, the knack for managing resources under his control, but above all, he must be a teacher. I have passed the third semester in engineering, and I could have gone on to university and my previous studies would have been accepted, but I didn't go on; I think my general came from Management, and if he had gone on to university, in a year and a half/two years he could have graduated as manager. These were the bases for the Andrés Bello Plan; later it was modified, but now they are trying to go back to its original version.

From the 70s on professionals were trained academically, including, of course, in politics, both as a science and as leadership.

LEADERSHIP: STUDY SUBJECT

—*You were saying that they taught you leadership?*

—Yes, this was one of the subjects at the Academy, and when I was there it was called "Command and Behavior." And how did they teach it? Through the values that came down to us from the heroes of our independence: military history, the battle that's what we studied: ideology, how to plan a battle, the art of war. The Battle of Carabobo, for example, has been considered a perfect battle as far as the planning of its military strategy. So... well, this is the land of Bolívar, and every military man must have a statue of Bolívar around somewhere. Of course the important thing is not to admire Bolívar just for the sake of admiring him, but how can you separate the two things? If you criticize a Venezuelan person, you are criticizing Bolívar, and viceversa. I can go even further: when you land in Venezuela, I think that the first day here the word you see or hear the most is precisely his name: Bolívar. And those foreigners who don't know us ask: "Is Bolívar everything you have around here?" "Well, yes; around here he is everything."

So when the curriculum was changed, they introduced the concept of military leadership and they started teaching it as a subject. General Osorio García, who was principal of the Academy for three years, was the first one to give it some personality. The Academy had a principle that ran: "Don't do unto others what you don't want to be done unto you." Which meant that if you wanted to be a leader, you must serve, you must give support, you must give the example, and you must teach and speak a lot.

PERSONAL EXAMPLE OF VITAL IMPORTANCE

—Personal example is vital if you want to be a leader. You can't just say something and not give the example. The members of that graduating class received this principle and passed it on to us,

they were like fathers or teachers to us. When we got to the Academy, for example, they helped us avoid all sorts of terrible things they do to undergraduates when they first go there. Some of them started calling them Fathers just so you understand the kind of fraternal relationship we had with them.

The President's graduating class was very close. One of their characteristics was that everything they did was excellent, and they were able to imbue most of us too with that same feeling of being a solid group, that feeling of military solidarity.

The Academy is like an abbey. At that time we were more militarily centered than now, we had no Internet, no cell phones--we just had the training we received from our teachers. We also had that romanticism, that utopia of things not of revolution, just the utopia of things, as they should be, the Constitution, the concept of homeland, of the pride we felt for being Bolívar's heirs. That Military Academy has graduated a huge number of men who have played an outstanding role in the country. When we graduated they told us: "You are going to be the generals of the year 2000, you are going to be the leaders of the year 2000." And we came out convinced that was our role in the country. Only 20 students out of 100 listen to you, 80 don't; but later there are 50 more who believe in those ideas. That's what military sociology means.

—*You were saying that you were taught politics, what was it all about?*

—It was about the Cuban revolution, the left in South America and the rest of the world, Venezuela's guerrilla, and the left in this country. Of course at that time we graduated from the Academy with an aversion toward the guerrilla--a logical thing: we were in the 70s. Here in Venezuela, between 1970 and 1975 anti-guerrilla operations were newly activated, and many of our *compañeros* participated in them. So what happened afterwards? Well, they sent the military back to their barracks.

CIVIC ACTIONS PROGRAM AGAINST COUNTERINSURGENCY

—During the 1960s they created Chasers' Units trained in anti-guerrilla tactics; they were special forces trained to fight rural guerrillas. The Armed Forces used civic actions to win over the population and carry out intelligence activities among them.

When you organize military operations close to towns with a civilian population, you usually also carry out these operations with a series of activities called civic actions, to mitigate the effect, the negative influence of those military operations, such as lack of food, oil shortages, health problems, etc.

But after the 1970s, when the guerrilla had calmed down, there were some military units that wanted to approach the population, as a result of their regional or local commanders' initiative, to carry out intelligence operations, even though they were very isolated cases. At one given time, for example, I was assigned for three whole months to the town of Acarigua-Araure in the state of Portuguesa, where I participated in a project for school reconstruction. Together with my soldiers I worked with an engineer and a technician. We had a shed full of material, we chose the schools, and we took the first steps and started the repair jobs, mainly schoolrooms and bathrooms.

—*Was that before Chávez?*

—Yes, but at that time these actions were conceived to mitigate the deficiencies of the regional and local governments. They were very specific actions. There were some cases where the commanders accepted doing favors for some governor or mayor at that time, these governors and mayors were not elected; they were named by political parties. The commanders helped them upkeep squares,

public roads, etc. Many officers didn't like this; they didn't understand why they had to do this, because the governors and the mayors had the necessary infrastructure and budget. Personally I thought it was a pretty good thing to go and repair schools, or support some electoral activity, because it was a good way to guarantee that they were clean and thus deserve national and international credibility. There were very small towns where the only people who could really get there were the military, on their mules, their helicopters, whatever means they had. I was once in El Tocuyo, in the state of Lara, for some election or other, and I had to take the ballot boxes to places that were practically a whole day away from the city.

VICTORY OVER THE GUERRILLA STRENGTHENED THE MILITARY

—It also influenced the fact that we were proud to have militarily destroyed the guerrilla in Venezuela, because we did overcome the guerrilla militarily

DEMOCRATIC VOCATION

—We graduated in the 70s, when the guerrilla was coming to an end in Venezuela. When we were born we already had our ideals of democracy, respect for the Constitution and Bolívar's ideas. I never lived under a military dictatorship; I just know about it from what I have read in books and from the experiences lived by some of my relatives.

3. CHÁVEZ, THE MBR 200, AND THE 1992 COUP

HE DID NOT BELONG TO THE MBR 200

—*Did you know about the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200?*

—No, but as I told you, I belong to the same generation as our President; he is only two years older than I am. The students in his graduating class were like fathers to us while we were at Venezuela's Military Academy. When I began my studies there, they trained us, they belonged to the Simón Bolívar 2 graduating class. That's where our solidarity was forged. I already knew that there were some aggressive and concerned officers there.

—*Aggressive? how?*

—They went against some rules, they were quite unruly. Of course my reaction was to be a bit suspicious, because I thought those officers were too rebel. I saw myself as a very disciplined student, and it was only later that I understood why they were like that.

The President's solid group was made up initially by his *compañeros*: Felipe Acosta Carlez, now deceased; Contreras, who died in an accident in Europe; Urdaneta Hernández, and only later Arias Cárdenas. The really strong group is their graduating class, and the cadets trained by them when he was school officer. The rest started joining later on.

THE 1992 COUP SURPRISED HIM AND GAVE HIM ENTHUSIASM

—Already by February 4th I no longer participated in the preparatory meetings I was never called. But between the 3rd and the 4th the atmosphere at the School was strange. I was then passing a higher course with Baduel at the General Staff, so I only thought about my thesis and my studies. When they started talking about a coup and that some military and some commanders were involved, I had no doubt whatsoever: "That must be Chávez, Urdaneta Hernández, Joel Acosta Chirinos, and Contreras." And when I saw the President on television and he said the things he said,

I fully agreed with him and felt: “It’s incredible, what courage!” There was something like a military solidarity with him.

When I saw that challenge I was very surprised, and the interesting thing is that I didn’t talk to Chávez until about three years later. Once I met him when he was a candidate and he said me: “Hi there, you Indio, how are you?” And I called him “*Mi comandante*,” out of respect. It was the first occasion he saw me after a long time, yet he remembered three or four things that had happened then: “Do you remember this, do you remember that?” “Do you remember the *maracas*?” I could have thought: “It’s only a detail... but, *caramba!* how can he remember these things? Come on! About 15 years have gone by without talking to each other, and yet he remembers everything.” Chávez can see through your eyes; when he talks to people he can see inside them, he unarms people.

I had been working then in a very discreet way and I think he knew about my work, he knew where I was at that time. He calls me Indio, or Negro Lameda.

So then I began following his career, and I became increasingly convinced of his role when I worked in the Plan Bolívar 2000, in the Sucre Municipality of the state of Miranda. I witnessed how people went crazy over him, he created hope in them, and I said: “Wow, Chávez has something I’ve never seen before!” I had seen him during my four years at the Academy; we were together even during military exercises, and during some maneuver or other I was under his command. So *caramba!* now he is President and he transmits an energy that is going around the world. Because of our military sociology we identify with him. That happens to many of us.

Just imagine what the older graduating classes must have felt: Medina Gómez, Rosendo, Ruiz Guzmán...

FIRST CONTACT WITH CHÁVEZ

—*When was your first contact with Chávez after he was elected President?*

—When he came to Petare and I was in charge of the area. Later there were some more contacts when I was working in the tragedy that took place in the state of Vargas. I was in charge of part of the communications with Rescue Operation, so we held meetings, we spoke together, and he assigned me a task; I gave him some opinions and he accepted them. Then I started working in FONDUR (National Fund for Urban Development), and while there I had more contacts with him.

—*And when did you personally identify yourself with his project?*

—Before becoming identified with the project I become identified with Chávez himself because I believe in what he says; I believe in him because I’m sure he is honest, he’s not cheating. I’m convinced he is giving his life for the well being of the country. I also became identified with the project for the country because in times like these, when there is so much dishonesty, particularly in relation to the well being of the majority, there is no other possible road to follow but to see how the abandoned sectors of society can eat and satisfy their basic needs and then go forward and start thinking about the country that appears in the new Constitution.

4. PLAN BOLIVAR 2000

WHY THE ARMED FORCES PLAY SUCH AN OUTSTANDING ROLE

—*What do you think of Plan Bolívar 2000? How is it different from past military civic actions?*

—I've already told you about the military civic actions we carried out before Chávez came to power, their sporadic and unplanned characteristics. The difference now is that Plan Bolívar is a governmental plan. When the President won the elections and began his mandate, what he received³⁰ was a very weak State structure, where part of the central administration and of the ministries was very weak and rigid. There was no structure allowing him to implement some kind of program to assist the neediest sectors of the population. So what organization could he then use, and which was really under-exploited? None other than the Armed Forces.

Plan Bolívar was born on February 27, 1999, and the date was chosen as a symbolic gesture to show the contrast between the Army that ten years before had gone all out in the so-called Caracazo, and today's Army, that goes out into the streets to help the people solve their problems. The Plan corresponds to a specific moment and it must be implemented while the State is being adapted to these new times. While the constituent process was being consolidated we had to start giving answers to the people. So what happened? Venezuela's biggest natural tragedy took place in Vargas, and this affected the Plan because the State had to concentrate on almost 75 000 people who were affected: take them to another place, settle them somewhere, give them medical attention, etc.

Due to his military training, the President decided to use the Armed Forces, because he considered they were not being used correctly--so why not use them for the development of the nation? Are the military by any chance beings from another planet? They are Venezuelans, just like everybody else; they are part of the people. The old Constitution already talked about the military as participants in the development of the nation, but the difference is that in our present Constitution this is called "active participation."

No doubt, during the first six months Plan Bolívar filled in the spaces left vacant by the political cadres who now had to devote themselves to the Constituent Assembly, and then legalize their mandates again. They left this space vacant and we went and filled it in--that was all. Many officers became heads of sectors, and the only case I'm aware of in which this later became a political post was that of Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Rangel, now governor in the state of Cojedes. I was never a politician; I always wanted to be a military. And I don't even consider myself a politician, even though I might have some characteristics necessary for this. My experience in Plan Bolívar and the time I spent in FONDUR made me realize that you have a role to play, so why not use trained military men for the development of the nation, for public affairs? Why not?

In a word: in the past, civic actions were very specific and didn't come about as the result of any State policy rather, they answered the need to improve the image of the institution. Now they have a much broader reach, for Plan Bolívar has a structural goal and will use intellectuals, personnel, materials, and equipment belonging to the Armed Forces to solve State problems, such as food, health, and housing for the poorest sectors, etc. Meanwhile, the State, the political and administrative organization adapt themselves to the new Constitution and start adopting economic measures.

Plan Bolívar is today more than justified: it has allowed the Armed Forces to be really accepted by the people instead of staying cooped up in their barracks though they must also fulfil their defense routine and part of their time is taken up by operations benefiting the people.

30 General Lameda uses the Spanish word for "gets" to mean "finds."

THE MILITARY APPROACH THE PEOPLE

—After the tragedy in Vargas we realized that Plan Bolívar was a great and powerful instrument. When that happened we had to use our barracks to shelter many of those who had lost their homes. At the beginning it was traumatic, but in the long run it was a good thing.

There was an interrelationship with those people. Right here in Fort Tiuna we sheltered more than 3000 people, so the everyday routine of our barracks became helping those poor people, and after a time, instead of calling them “*damnified* people” we called them “*dignified* people,” because thanks to what they were receiving they were also recovering their dignity. We gave them food, shelter, and when the State began building new homes, they were assigned to these new neighborhoods.

Far from me making a political analysis of these events, but I am amazed that some sectors of the opposition dare say the government has done nothing, because in two years this government has built more homes than any other government. Where do you think we put those poor people? In houses some of them had been repaired, but others had been built by the government through FONDUR. And Marta, we’re talking here of around 60 000 homes. No other government has ever built here in Venezuela more than 25 000 houses in only one year.

BUILDING HOUSING

—*Did you have any responsibility in Plan Bolívar 2000?*

—I was in public office, something that had to do with housing construction. And I feel very satisfied because during my mandate more homes were built in this country than ever before.

—*What was your job?*

—I was marketing manager and general manager at FONDUR. I think I benefited more than 40 000 families, including those affected in Vargas. And if we multiply each family by four, we’re talking about a considerable number of Venezuelans.

OUR COMMITMENT IS WITH THE PEOPLE

—Together with other officers, we later realized that with our training, our specialties and our abilities, we could also hold public office without being politically committed, because I am committed to the well being of the Venezuelan people, whatever social class they belong to. From the very beginning I was convinced of the importance of what was happening in the country, and there was no doubt in my mind that we had to change the way things were done traditionally. That’s why so many military many, many, and when I say “many” I mean a lot feel identified with what the President preaches, which is what put him in Miraflores in the first place.

STEPS IN THE PLAN

—Plan Bolívar has three steps: the step for the country, the step for the homeland, and the step for the nation. The first step was precisely the participation of the Armed Forces to create favorable conditions, so its members could go back to their usual tasks once new elections for governors and mayors were held. But the Plan was so successful that it became a continuous structure.

In many of the mayors’ jurisdictions nothing had ever been done in health infrastructure, so that’s the door we went through to get to the communities and start solving their basic problems. People began to look to the military not as a repressive figure, they discovered that was a lie besides the fact that Venezuelan military have never been very repressive.

—*What about 1989, during the Caracazo?*

—Well... what really happened during the Caracazo was that no one ever thought the people would react so fiercely to the measures of that neo-liberal package adopted by Carlos Andrés Pérez and which had a terrible impact on the people. From a military point of view, decisions were too slow and too late. That's when they sent the army out on the streets, when public order became uncontrolled, there were sharpshooters shooting against civilians so we had to put a stop to that, we had to control the situation one way or other, or the whole country would be on fire once the natural dams of public control came down. Even the Metropolitan Police was looting.

And you must also remember that besides those graduating classes that upheld the principles and values I was telling you about, there were classes with older people, graduated in older times, and their problem was the guerrilla. Everything that even had a slight smell of "left" was against the democratic system--their enemy was the left.

COMMUNITY HOUSING ORGANIZATIONS

—*Coming back to your work in the housing sector, did the organization you were working with stimulate people to build their own homes?*

—We worked in two directions: first, build many houses to generate employment, and in this we were successful. That year the economy grew. I think that the kind of construction had a lot to do with this because we had something like a blank check and broke down a few barriers.

In the other direction, we promoted what we called Community Housing Organizations, so they could be given credit and financing. With that system we built 11 000 houses, and with the other one, 30 000 something. They were nice homes, 70 square meters, with three rooms and two bathrooms, nice tiles they had the conditions necessary for people to live in, as the President himself had promised.

That way we did away with the system used by private companies, who made 30-square-meter homes, without the necessary conditions and excessive building.

We were well aware that perhaps, large sectors of the population wouldn't be able to pay, so we tried to keep our prices down, so they could pay later on with State subsidies.

And then, Vargas! the tragedy no one could ever have foreseen. In my opinion that really changed the center of gravity of the President's economic policy. We had to earmark many resources to overcome that tragedy, affecting economic plans in general.

—*Do you have a Ministry for Construction here?*

—No, there are several companies that build homes, it all depends what kind: rural homes, neighborhood coops, etc.

—*What Ministry do they answer to?*

—Infrastructure; there are some ideas going around to create a separate Ministry for Housing. General García Carneiro wants to promote a cooperative building system in line with the Constitution. We want the people to be the main role players, to participate more in solving many of their own problems. The State promotes, and they join their own self-administrative cooperative.

The truth is that you can't just get a bus, a plane, and move all those people living in the *cerros* above Caracas. What you have to do for those people is adequate housing, so they will feel they belong where they are.

On top of his military condition, García Carneiro has two other virtues: he is a command officer, a warrior, a man with military determination and leadership; and he also has the moral background of the social work he has promoted.

While I was in FONDUR in the National Housing Program, he was in Mérida's Military Garrison, where there have always been conflicts with the students.

General García Carneiro is not a conventional military. He is extremely responsible in accomplishing his missions, and if they tell him he has to move a *cerro*, he does anything under the sun, and the *cerro* moves. He is a man of great experience: he has worked with many front-line professionals, and for a long time he worked on the frontier, where he had to have initiatives.

When the government first started Plan Bolívar, García Carneiro was still a military, but when he saw how needy people were, his inner popular spark woke up: you can't prevent your heart from breaking when you see the problems the people go through. And he had the possibility of exerting influence on the communities through the social work done by Plan Bolívar and the infrastructure, so he began to take over ground from governor William Dávila³¹. And while the governor was in Caracas fighting against Chávez, trying to stop elections for the Constituent Assembly, the General was right in the middle of poor neighborhoods doing things for them, like fixing schools, medical posts, and solving problems for those who had lost their belonging in Mérida, giving them medical assistance. There were operations to implant new hips, eyes, and hands. That was a real way to help those people. There are some neighborhoods in Mérida that had never seen a general. Carneiro assumed Plan Bolívar at heart; he spent his whole day in the neighborhoods and in the end came out successful. We consider him a command officer, an excellent warrior. It was a very crucial moment for the country, and he was able to have some influence on the population. Remember that we are talking about the first six months after Plan Bolívar was created. He was able to help many people; he took over activities where regional and municipal authorities were absent. And I think that was what really set off the spark that he had there in him, waiting...

He was later sent to the San Cristóbal Garrison, in the state of Táchira. He was lucky to find several civilian professionals there who were on the same wavelength as he, as a result of the social work he had carried out in Mérida--excellent professionals that are still with him.

You might say that's where the famous Wasp Plan was born, the plan that gives a house to people living in *ranchos*, and creates employment.

He fell in love with the work. That's when they sent him to Caracas as head of the Military House, but that little spark stayed alive and he just couldn't stand still.

He was given the great responsibility of recovering El Silencio, in the historical sector of Caracas. Today Fundapatrimonio, in the mayor's office, is in charge of it, but he's the one who started the idea.

Later he came here to Petare, in El Valle, with several projects he's working on. There came a time when we called him mayor and he used to say: "No, look, please, I'm a military man, I have absolutely no political ambitions." But we always replied: "No, no, you're the mayor."

Before going to FONDUR, as I told you, I was in Petare with Plan Bolívar. And I had to change my telephone number because they called me even at night about problems that would come up. So the following day we had to go and see the justices of the peace to solve these neighborhood disputes. They also called me "the mayor of Sucre," but I wasn't interested in any political post; politics

31 Member of Acción Democrática (AD).

interests me for the well being of society, as a military element, as a factor of State politics but not for politicking or party matters.

It's a difficult task, but in general you feel identified with the people, you feel useful. I think human beings die when they no longer feel useful. So if you hold a post and you help many people, why not do it?

In García Carneiro's case, his possibilities were much broader, because he worked in three garrisons. That's the heritage he brings with him and he's not going to stay put. Right now he's the head of a national coordination to extend the Wasp Plan to the whole country. The General has won his leadership; the President hasn't given it to him, the only thing he's done is recognize his good work.

CORRUPTION IN PLAN BOLIVAR 2000?

—*What about rumours about corruption, stolen resources in Plan Bolívar 2000?*

—I already explained that Plan Bolívar was born specifically to face the state of emergency the mayors and governors found their infrastructures in. Since Plan Bolívar was in charge of social programs, matters related to infrastructure, and had six months to be very effective, they had to create a foundation with judicial capacity to receive and manage resources, because money can't just be assigned that easily. It's possible that with the best intentions of carrying out this mission--some administrative mistakes were made in the middle of this entire bureaucratic world. But what are we talking about in most of these cases? If you were in the middle of a neighborhood, a rural sector, and you bought food or other things; you hardly ever got a receipt for your purchases.

So why talk about corruption? Because once the storm is over, it's so easy for analysts to come out of their offices and say: "Look, you shouldn't have put your sail up, you shouldn't have gone starboard, you should have turned the motor off." That's very easy to say, but while you're in the middle of the storm nobody tells you anything, it's you and your intuition and your leadership that tell you what you have to do to accomplish your mission.

They wanted to use conventional standards to measure work done in the middle of an emergency. Social emergency hadn't yet been declared, true but we were going through very dynamic times. You just take hold of some controls, some parameters, and you go check, but some things don't come out right. That's what happened. It's true that in the first Comptroller's report there are some observations, but there is no mention of fraud, just some administrative doubts. And that's very different from stolen resources.

—*What kind of administrative doubts?*

—Mistakes in the documents submitted for the general report for the Comptroller's office.

—*What about some military people making money out of this?*

—As far as I know, there are one or two cases in Anzoátegui, and the Comptroller's Office is investigating them. I want you to know that the only public institution that has exercised its own self-control is the military institution. Some of our enemies have leaked information or even documents; perhaps there have been some administrative doubts in relation to how certain things were carried out, but no one has ever been able to prove that the money went to individual pockets that money all went for some good deed in some far-away neighborhood, in a rural sector. How are you going to ask for a formal receipt from a salesman for an eye prosthesis destined to a person who lives in the middle of the Venezuelan Andes?

From the conventional point of view of the Comptroller's Office, it is very difficult to justify something that was done in an emergency. But in the end, their specialists were able to see that there was no fraud. There were some doubts, and in the majority of cases we solved them. They are very few, I don't believe there are more than three where there was fraud, and those cases are now in the Comptroller's Office.

That's what happened. But if you give this information to those sectors that want to hurt the President's image, of course there is going to be criticism and slander.

We thought that Plan Bolívar could end by December 2000 at least I thought so. We worked very hard for eleven months, from February 1999 to December 1999, but when the year came to an end we realized there were still many things to be done.

Around six garrisons had an outstanding position in this Plan: Mérida, where García Carneiro was; López Hidalgo in San Juan; in Caracas, too, they did a very good job, they were all efficient in this work. Other garrisons were much slower because if we are to tell the truth some leaders were not very convinced due to the money problem. Work in the community takes up a lot of your time and these professionals started saying that money was being misused. Perhaps some of them simply didn't want any part of this.

—*So why is it called Plan Bolívar 2000 if it was carried out in the year 1999?*

—Because the year 2000 was the millennium, and because President Chávez started his mandate practically in the year 2000. But look here, in the original plan the Armed Forces were to participate directly only in the first phase of the plan, the Pro-Country phase I mentioned. In the phase Pro-Homeland there was going to be a more structural participation by the ministries, governors and mayors' offices, autonomous institutes, etc.

So what really happened is that the first phase was extended the results were so good, it answered so many problems that it was difficult to stop it. And that's when the problems with the Comptroller's Office first came up.

—*Why do you say that?*

—Because in the beginning they implemented the same controls, with fewer requirements. But when we went from a specific situation to a structural plan, they should have organized a whole new set of theaters of operations, give each of them a legal personality, and that's when they began putting this activity through conventional comptrolling parameters.

We have been accused of participating in political campaigns, but that's a huge lie because it was the population itself that at times worked hand in hand with the soldiers. I think that the criticism voiced by some sectors of the opposition stems from the fact that we did things they had never done before, so their credibility deteriorated. This is the result of information being manipulated by the building sector. We did very specific work in the infrastructure: repairs in ravines, gorges, some roads, but our priority were in hospitals, health centers, schools, and sports fields.

The problem is that we were the competition for the building sector: we lowered costs, so the private sector began feeling left out.

—*Were you their rivals?*

—There were more than 400 private building companies, many of them members of the Chamber of Construction. The problem is that FONDUR paid within 15 days, we paid well. We checked plans very quickly, and the guys got their advance payments immediately; so they started working,

there was an inspection, and 15 days later they got paid, so who's not going to build houses that way?

THE MILITARY MUST BE BOTH EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT

—And something else: the military at least the Venezuelan military, because of their training, tend to be more effective than efficient. Am I making myself clear? They should be both, but we tend to be more effective because our training leads us to fulfilling our mission. Of course, if I'm given a mission I will work for its success, not for its failure.

—*What's the difference between being effective and being efficient?*

—To be effective is to be able to carry out any task, no matter how many resources you must use, no matter how much money you must spend what matters is the task itself. You can use any kind of resources to accomplish your mission. To be efficient, on the other hand, is how to use your resources rationally to accomplish your mission and respect the different steps, as stipulated. Efficiency is doing things as they should be done, whereas efficacy is doing what must be done. I hope you understand me.

—*What's the reason behind your being more effective than efficient?*

—When he is responsible for a specific task related to the civilian sector, the military man makes a special effort to do it as best as possible, sacrificing other aspects so his institution will be seen in a good light.

5. DESERTION OF THE HIGH COMMANDS AND THE CONSTITUTIONALIST MILITARY LINE

—*I've been told that the sector that has become more radical than the rest, that is demanding a quicker progress, is a sector within the Army that isn't precisely President Chávez's, but a sector that believes the Armed Forces must respect the Constitution, must respect the laws, yet in its contact with the poor sectors it has discovered a whole new world and a social vocation, and now wants this process to run and solve all these problems. Would you by any chance be one of the members of this last sector?*

—I think so, and I can explain this when I tell you what I think of people who call themselves institutionalists. Look at the Church, for example: if that institution had not adapted to our times, if it had not evolved, perhaps it wouldn't be the Church it is today.

INSTITUTIONALIST OR CONSTITUTIONALIST

—When someone tells me he is an institutionalist, I ask him: "What does that mean?" Does that mean that you just cross your arms when the problem is social or political, when it is not strictly a military problem? That you just stay put in your barracks waiting for the problem to be solved, or that your country is destroyed and then you come out, head high, chest out, and say: "Ah, I was an institutionalist, because I just never got mixed up in this problem." Is that what being institutionalist means?

An institutionalist is someone able to interpret who your main client is, what your business is. The Army's business is land defense, sovereignty; but sovereignty is the people; so your main client is the State, and since the State structure is changing, the Army must also change, it must adapt. So for me, being an institutionalist means that I must participate, I must help my institution adapt to this new State that is now in the Constitution.

Some leaders have said we must be institutionalists, but I always ask myself what this really means: must I stay in my barracks and wait until the country's problems are all solved, or must I participate and adapt the Army to the new requirements of the country?

To be an institutionalist is to observe what is going on, understand the structure is changing, that there is a new national and legitimate project for the country that appears in the Constitution, and realize you must adapt the Army to that new Constitution. That is what being an institutionalist means.

I think that theoretically, a military man must be more political than the politician himself. I mean "political" because politics is a science, and the political military must feel for the State and for the well being of the inhabitants of the nation. The military man is an instrument for State policy. So I must know about politics, but I can't be member of any party, I can't militate in any political party.

—I think one of the things that greatly contribute to this fact is your new Constitution, because you can be institutionalists due to your respect for the Constitution, while the whole process goes forward. Whereas in Chile, for example, they used the Constitution against Allende. You have the advantage of a Constitution that supports the process.

—That's true. The process is the Constitution itself.

And I tell the people: "Look, *compañero*, if and when we feel unsure and doubtful, like on April 11 and I sure hope this will never happen again you have to go wherever the people go, where the people are pushing to go, that's where you have to go, that's the best banner to follow."

—Where were you when the April coup took place?

—I was head of the General Staff of the Third Division, led by General García Carneiro. I took over his command accidentally. The putschists tried to recruit me but I refused. I told them that in my opinion, everything they were doing was completely crazy, against the Constitution, and that they were serving a conspiracy against the President.

HOW CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHY SO MANY SENIOR OFFICERS HAVE DESERTED?

—How can you explain why so many senior officers have deserted, including those who belonged to Chávez's graduating class?

—I think there must be personal reasons for this, because the generals belonging to some graduating class before Chávez's were never able to see him as President, they kept considering him a junior officer, and they made a mistake. Many of the generals who went to Altamira Square belonged to those graduating classes.

—But there were some from his own class who betrayed him, right?

—Yes; I was telling you that his graduating class was very united, but this all lasted until he began his formal political activity when he left prison. Many of them slowly started marking their distance, and the worst expression of that distance was April 11, when the principal of Venezuela's Military Academy, the Chairman of IPSA (Institute for Social Prevention of the Armed Forces), the commander of Army Schools, the commander of Army Logistics, among others, conspired against him.

—How can you explain this distance?

—Well, in my opinion the problem has to do with what those commanders expected. It is normal for senior officers, from colonel up, to start getting important posts as managers or command posts,

and that creates expectations. And since the President of the Republic was one of them, I think they felt they had the right to be promoted. So when they weren't, they felt resentment. "What's the matter with Chávez, has he forgotten me?" I think that's what happened. And that's when they started daydreaming; they started listening to other military men who didn't agree with Chávez from the very beginning because they saw him as a simple military exercising power.

I think there are still many people who have not been able to understand Chávez, his personality, his attitude. They don't understand that in spite of having become President, he has not forgotten his military training or his love for the people.

They just don't understand this, they want to see a President like the ones we had before, who only talks about the economy, who doesn't go see the people in their neighborhoods because in old times, presidents only went there when elections were coming up. But this President goes there at least once a month, and he puts his arms around the people. He might be participating in a very official activity, but he doesn't consider himself above greeting an old lady, a normal Venezuelan.

AMBITION FOR POWER

—So, to answer your question as to why so many of his *compañeros* turned their back on the President, I think that the answer is their ambition for power. They thought that being his *compañeros* they would get to hold power, but our Constitution doesn't allow this: the people now have power, the community has it. And that's what so many military men out there haven't been able to understand.

—*Power and money?*

—And money, of course. They are affected by the ambition-and-money virus. And that's when you see these economic groups with some retired military, who lived through their time but never solved what they had to solve in the country, and now they offer money, financing galore. And they have tempted more than one.

6. PHASES AFTER APRIL

CONSOLIDATION WITHIN THE ARMED FORCES

—*Could you describe in a few words what happened after the April coup?*

—After April 11 the problem was how to consolidate things to prevent the Constitution from being betrayed once again, and the Army was the quickest in doing this. We began making changes, putting people who truly understood what was happening in the country in posts where they really had troops to command. We did this in the Armed Forces, but it was not done in PDVSA, for example.

—*How was that possible?*

—By April 11 our Army General Commander was in a conspiracy; the second in command was in a conspiracy; general Rosendo was in a conspiracy in CUFAN they were all in a conspiracy in Altamira Square.

—*The coup allowed you to purge...*

—Of course! Many constitutionalist officers, who knew the Constitution had to be defended at any price, were against the coup because they knew that if the President had to leave, it had to be done constitutionally, not as a result of a coup. What we did in the Armed Forces wasn't done in

PDVSA. Remember that in a generous gesture, the President forgave all those people, and yet those very people keep on conspiring against him.

—*Did you have any legal or military instrument to do this?*

—Of course. When the putschist officers went to Altamira Square and began marching in a political meeting--that helped things. We were able to organize a Research Council, because you just can't participate in a political activity and speak publicly against the President, who is your commander in chief... That's what gave us the possibility of getting rid of all those people.

SABOTAGE AGAINST OUR OIL

—December, when the sabotage against our oil, is the beginning of a new stage, with the civilian-military integration that allows us to get hold of PDVSA. There is a trilogy with PDVSA, the people, and the Armed Forces.

—*You talk of sabotage, not of strike; why is that?*

—Because in a democracy, strikes have to be legal, they must be labor strikes with specific vindications. But here the strike was joined by the managing sector, the workers' sector, which is not a representative one, let us make that clear... and a military sector. They decided to go on strike to force the President to resign. But that had no legal base, neither here nor anywhere else in the world. So, when the strike failed they began to force things through sabotage, and what happened was the sabotage against oil.

Now, if you come and tell me: "No, we have too many unemployed people," I'll tell you: "Wait, wait, just a minute; what about those *ranchos* up in the *cerros*, tell me, did they spring up as recently as in the last two years? How are we not going to have alterations in our economy, my word! if the managing sector, the media, and the financial sector start sabotaging?"

—*The true situation in PDVSA was a real revelation to me, because I thought it was similar to Chile's copper company, the State company nationalized by Allende with the support of all the parties of the time: we had a national State company led by the Allende government. And I thought in Venezuela, the oil company you nationalized³² was also led by the government, but later on I realized that wasn't the case, that the State, the nation owned it but the actual appropriation of the productive process belonged to the technicians, who were against the process. That was true from the very beginning of this government, but I don't think it has been fully known and reported to the population. So I would like to know if it was the sabotage that made you discover things you hadn't fully valued before.*

—Of course! The first thing you must understand is that PDVSA had three times more resources than the State itself, it was like a super state. There have been other previous governments that have wanted to take PDVSA and audit it, and it has been impossible. But the sabotage and their deficient planning allowed us to intervene and that's when we realized what was really going on in the company. It wasn't badly managed, on the contrary, it had good management, but for the benefit of international interests, not the interests of our own country.

PDVSA's accounts were in foreign countries. The Venezuelan State didn't receive from PDVSA and we hope it will in the future any taxes for the fact that this natural resource is a property of the Venezuelan State and not of any sector or transnational company. That simple. Physically,

32 When oil was nationalized during the Carlos Andrés Pérez Administration.

PDVSA was in Venezuela, but it had dispersed all its accounts in the different countries where it had agencies.

—*What were the strike's effects, in particular the sabotage on oil, within the Armed Forces?*

—It was a crime of high treason against our homeland and there's no more to be said about that. But I believe that in general, from what we hear from our junior officers, they didn't really understand why there was so much impunity for the PDVSA executives, why more effective actions haven't been taken against them.

Some people died here in our Oncology Hospital as a result of that sabotage. We had to run and get gas for emergency operations, because people were dying there.

And didn't you think it strange that nothing happened to electricity? I'll explain why: if there is no electricity there is no television, and that's the only weapon they had left. Hadn't you realized that? Think about it...

This trilogy between PDVSA, the people, and the Armed forces is something new, and it is very important. Why? Because we really got into their private affairs and began to understand what was going on in the oil company and in society too. The trilogy's members felt direct consequences from this sabotage on their daily lives: they had to stand on line, they had no gas, so they asked themselves how was it possible for this country, one of the main oil-producing countries in the world, to find itself in this situation.

This new trilogy allowed the State to act, because people who were already retired and many other people went back to the company, and this is how we turned the technical process over at PDVSA; a group of volunteers plus the Armed Forces all together they were able to get control over the gas and oil supplies.

LEGAL OFFENSIVE

—That stage came to an end when the Supreme Court of Justice decided that the consulting referendum accepted by the authorities of the National Electoral Council was illegal, because the authorities had violated internal rules. So there is a new stage, characterized by the consolidation of PDVSA, and later what we have called the legal offensive making competent bodies feel the pressure of what the people are feeling. These bodies must declare if it is constitutional or not to organize a revocatory referendum before the date established in the Constitution, or if they must wait until August.

Meanwhile, what's happening? Remember there is an ongoing dialogue, where they are studying a constitutional amendment and electoral solutions. All this is very bureaucratic and will take one month, three months, a whole year.

So here's the trick: insist that the President must leave through elections but that he won't accept this solution--on the contrary, that he is fiercely holding on to his post. When has the President ever said he won't accept his post being questioned? He has always said that any kind of consultation is valid, provided it's carried out as stipulated by the Constitution, and not like they say. And what did he tell those friendly countries who came as intermediaries: "Gentlemen, if you are a friend of Venezuela, defend democracy. You can't just come here and support these people who have promoted all this... this is fascism in its purest state."

And that's the phase we're in right now.

Now, as far as we are concerned, how are we going to solve this mess? First, PDVSA structures must be consolidated; we have to act legally against the old leaders, there can be no impunity here. And the rest is to guarantee food but *compañero* Silva can tell you more about that.

OPPOSITION: A MINORITY, BUT A VERY ACTIVE ONE

—To put an end to this, then, don't you think the opposition is a minority, but an active, a very active one?

—Very active, no doubt! And they have that special weapon which is television. If that were closed down... In my opinion, that's the only weapon they have.

—Don't you have any law here that would allow you to act?

—Yes, of course we have laws, but remember that the process must be carried out in a democracy, and it's first launched by the District Attorney's Office and the judges. And that's precisely where we are still very weak.

COLONEL JESÚS DEL VALLE MORAO CARDONA

WHILE PATROLLING HE SAW HOW POOR THE PEOPLE WERE

1. Family background; His father was a bank manager; Aware of poverty. **2. The Caracazo, the 1992 coup, and their consequences;** The country needed a change; He participated at the last minute in the 1992 coup; Prison and persecution; Rejected and transferred; Some asked to drop out, others stay on. **3. What brought him to the Movement;** He made contact with the MBR 200; Documents from prison; Concern for people's well being; Institutions related to national awareness; Literature he read; The road toward elections; Why not the armed solution. **4. Responsible for the President's security;** Collecting messages from the people; Like a fish in the water. **5. April 2002 coup;** What happened with the Military House; He had not resigned; General Baduel's role; The people came down from the cerros; Rescuing Channel 8; Civilians inside Miraflores; He negotiated Chávez's return. **6. National dialogue;** Chávez wanted dialogue, the opposition didn't; Strengthening the institutional sector; What would happen if they did away with him. **7. From the defensive to the offensive.**

1. FAMILY BACKGROUND

HIS FATHER WAS A BANK MANAGER

—*Where were you born?*

—I was born in Caripito, a town in the state of Monagas. The gringos had taken it over because right next to it there is a port from where PDVSA exports its oil. There are very beautiful neighborhoods there, like the one in Campo La Floresta.

—*And what did your parents do?*

—My father worked for a bank; he had started out in that town and later became manager of the Banco de Venezuela, the Banco Metropolitano, the Banco de Desarrollo Agropecuario, and the Banco de los Trabajadores de Venezuela. He worked all of 25 years in the banking world. My mother worked at home, we were seven children. We had a normal economic position, so we were all able to study: one of us is an electric engineer, three are senior technicians, one sister is a kindergarten assistant, and I have a brother who graduated from high school; me, I graduated from the Venezuela Military Academy in 1981 and I belong to Lieutenant Pedro Camejo's graduating class.

AWARE OF POVERTY

—*Where does your awareness for poverty come from?*

—It began when I was sub-lieutenant in the Vicente Campo Elías No. 63 Chasers' Battalion. While patrolling I saw how the people lived, their poverty, how they were abandoned to their own lot:

there were no schools, no roads, no *ambulatorios*³³, and where there was one, it was in a terrible condition.

I graduated in 1981 and was a member of a Chasers' battalion for three years; our job was to fight against the guerrilla. But luckily, instead of clashing with the guerrillas I contacted with the people, who needed us to see to their needs. You could see children with swollen bellies, full of parasites, hungry. Marta, sometimes we shared our combat rations with them, or we bought them some chicken or something to help them. Sometimes we gave our whole ration away to someone who was going really hungry. I lived for three years in this situation, and I never saw a guerrilla what I did see were people who were living in pretty bad conditions. That's what I saw!

I was promoted from sub-lieutenant to lieutenant, to captain, and then to major, and as major I was sent to La Charca, where I had to give part of my soldiers' medicine to the people that lived around our command. That medicine was for the most common diseases: headache, diarrhea, and snakebites with anti-ophidian serum.

We tried to be civic, to help the people, and that's how we won them over, and even got valuable information.

—*That kind of civic action is part of the anti-subversive plan taught at the School of the Americas: they train the armies to win the trust of the population...*

—Maybe the Yankees use this method, but knowing how to do it is not a bad thing because we really helped a needy population.

2. THE CARACAZO, THE 1992 COUP, AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

THE COUNTRY NEEDED A CHANGE

—*What do you remember about the Caracazo?*

—The people would go out, there was looting, all sorts of things...I had to act in the southern part of the state of Carabobo, where people are quite humble. There were many casualties, and practically everyone held the Armed Forces responsible for them. There was a lot of violence, even by the people themselves, but that situation made us understand that the country really needed a change.

—*Were there many casualties at Carabobo?*

—Too many. We had to control the masses, thousands of people who wanted to destroy stores we had to get those people under control without wounding or killing anyone. Thank God at that time I was in command of the greatest number of professionals, because I was in the Maintenance Company of the Support Battalion belonging to the Armored Brigade. I had around 20 to 30 professionals and about 200 soldiers with me; I had no need to kill anyone that was neither my intention nor the Command's. When we implemented Plan Sovereignty, our aim was to contain the masses and restore order.

I became aware precisely in 1989 that the country was really in a dangerous situation and the people were suffering badly.

33 Polyclinics

Honestly, Marta, sometimes it was so hard: I went to a hospital with a wounded soldier because we had no military hospitals in Valencia and right there I saw people waiting on line, women with small children, waiting for hours on end. It was truly heartbreaking!

The governments were never concerned with their social duties; what they did, instead, was take that money, sit down somewhere with it, and the more money they had the more they wanted. But meanwhile there was no solution to the people's problems. It was very sad to see.

HE PARTICIPATED AT THE LAST MINUTE IN THE 1992 COUP

—*How did you take in the 1992 coup?*

—It had a great impact on me.

—*Did you participate in it at all?*

—I was not aware of what was being organized at the time. On the evening of February the 3rd, I was getting ready for an exercise in the Pao, where there is a fort called Los Caribes, a training center we have there for maneuvers, military exercises, etc. Just then we were carrying out a small maneuver for the Support Battalion, and I observed some movement in the units: in the Pedro León Torres one, in the Group for Field Artillery, and I wondered what was going on...

Around 10 p.m. I went home, but when I came back about 1 a.m. because I was supposed to leave very early in the morning for the Pao at the door I found captains Martínez Alfonso and Jiménez Yústiz, together with Lieutenant Novo Costoya. They stop me and say: "Captain, we want to inform that the fort has been taken and we are under a coup d'Etat." So I answer: "What?" and they say: "Yes, this is a coup d'Etat against the situation our country is going through, against Carlos Andrés Pérez and everything that has been going on, we are in the front line against this situation. We want to take Venezuela out of this nightmare. Since you are the senior officer here, we want you to decide the actions required by this situation." So I tell them: "Let me go to my unit and see what's going on there, and I'll come right back."

As I was telling you, I didn't know that they had planned this action, I was taken by surprise. But when they gave me the "invitation card," I was able to confirm that what they proposed coincided with my own ideas and everything I had always thought, so I told them: "Fine, perfect, let's do it!"

It's true that there was a critical social situation, but in the Armed Forces we were also going through abuses that we could no longer allow.

—*Like what?*

—Orders such as this, for example: "You are to go to Guasualito on a mission with 30 soldiers," but they didn't give me any travel allowance to pay for gas, and food for the soldiers there was absolutely no support whatsoever. They didn't give me any money for my expenses and I wondered how far these things were going to go, because I knew there was money for all this. I even had to buy books for my unit, and the ream of paper for our agenda. I thought this was much too much abuse, that this just couldn't go on, that too many people in the army lived totally unaware of the fact that resources weren't being used where they should have been.

During the course of events, we became aware that we had failed in our goal here in Caracas. The President then asked people to put down their weapons and pronounced his famous sentence: "For the time being!" Valencia had not given itself up yet; it did so only when it was attacked by the Armed Forces, who bombed and machine-gunned some sectors to scare us.

So we organized a meeting and the captains told me: “Look, captain, we are going to give ourselves up, we are not going to involve you in this, so you can stay out of all this.” We hugged each other, and each went his way. It was a very sad moment. I stayed on but about four days later they arrested me and took me to the San Carlos Barracks, where they took my weapon, they took everything I had, and put me in jail together with other professionals.

PRISON AND PERSECUTION

—I shared my prison cell with captains Alcalá Cordones, Clivera, Guyán Celis, Flores, Hernández Pérez; Ronald Blanco la Cruz³⁴ was also there, and many other officers. There were a lot of professionals together in that cell.

—*How long were you there?*

—First we were together for 15 days, and later I just lost count. Every time they felt like it, they sent me incommunicado to the basement³⁵ for three or four days, then they took me out and I renewed my activities and then, they would get hold of me again. That’s what they used to do to me, but I said to myself: “Oh no, they’re not going to bend me.”

—*What was their pretext for doing this?*

—They always looked for a good argument. Let me give you one, just an example: they ordered me to be present at a unit, and on the document they would put a specific date, but on that very day they would arrest me, and later, they would accuse me of having deserted because I had not gone to the unit.

—*While Chávez was in prison all those years, they would free you and yet play with you that way?*

—They used to do this every time they felt like it...

—*To you and other people too?*

—I suppose they did it to other *compañeros* too, because sometimes I coincided in the basement with some of them: with Pedro Carreño the deputy, for example; he was in prison with me in one of those basements. Major Christopher was with me too, and on one occasion Major Pernia too. Together with other professionals, they would lock us up in a one-square-meter room where they would keep us for hours we would lose the notion of time. And we would say: “They’re holding us here like Guinea pigs.” They would keep us there hours on end, they would bring us our food whenever they felt like it, often it was cold, and other times there was simply no food at all. Then they would send us down to the basement, one of us to the right, the other to the left, never together. This agony would go on for three, even four days in a row.

REJECTED AND TRANSFERRED

—After the coup I was sent all over the country, and finally I went to the Higher School of the Army for a specific course. I was there for a whole year, they never bothered me there, I was never arrested it must have been around 1996.

Then I went off to the 31st Infantry Brigade, where no one wanted to have any contact with me because I had participated in the coup, I had been marked in red by the February 4th events, even my

34 Now governor of the state of Táchira.

35 Basement at the Military Intelligence Department.

card there in the Army said: “Officer who participated in the February 4th events.” They promenaded me all over Venezuela, because they wanted to bend me.

In 1998 I went to Maracay with General Nelson Benito Verde Graterol General of Brigade at the time but later Commander of the 42nd Infantry Parachutist Brigade stationed in Maracay. They called him and said: “Look here, we have Commander Morao from the 31st Brigade, right now he has no post, but he participated in the coup, and we have nowhere to send him, would you take him?” And General Verde said: “OK, send him over, I think I can work with him.” So they sent me to Maracay as logistics officer under this general’s orders; he talked to me, said we were friends, that we already knew each other, that he had no problem in working with officers who had participated in the coup. And that’s how I started working with him.

We worked very well together, today we are great friends, not just because I had worked with him when I was a lieutenant in San Cristóbal and we already knew each other maybe that’s precisely what allowed me to stay put in Maracay. He was Commander of the Third Infantry Company with headquarters in San Juan de Colón, and I was lieutenant there. That’s where our friendship began, and we worked well together.

When he found out I was going there he felt motivated because he knew me, so I said to him: “OK, let’s get down to work.” And we worked well in some of the Brigade’s projects: between the two of us we were in charge of remodelling the packing room of the Parachutist Brigade it was a very nice and interesting project that allowed us to connect as good friends.

Sánchez Segura, now a Mayor, was there together with other professionals, and we analyzed and talked about the situation of the country: we could tell the Movement was still alive so we couldn’t lose our goals, we had to be very close to each other. As soon as the others realized that the five of us were getting together, they just separated us: Sánchez was sent to the 5th Infantry Brigade; another guy was sent to Guasualito; another one to San Juan de los Morros, the fourth one somewhere else, and I was left there. That’s what always happened.

So here we were once again apart, but our soul was with the Movement, we were always up to date on everything and following each other’s movements, because we were convinced that the Movement must stay alive and we had continue our struggle.

—*And all this took place in spite of the fact that your friend was there?*

—Of course, because he received instructions he had to obey.

SOME ASKED TO DROP OUT, OTHERS STAYED ON

—So what happened, Marta? As a result of this situation, many professionals asked to drop out and left what a mistake! We stayed on, because inside the organization we could still be strong, but not if we left it...

—*When you decided to stay, was this your own decision or did the Movement believe you were more important inside?*

—It was my own decision. We were all very far apart from each other; they had dispersed us all over the country so we couldn’t consult the others. I came back to the Chasers’ Unit as a Major, and we had practically no news at all about the President.

3. WHAT BROUGHT HIM TO THE MOVEMENT

HE MADE CONTACT WITH THE MBR 200

—*When did your contacts with the MBR 200 begin?*

—I started talking with the *compañeros* I found each time they moved me around. And we would say: “Look, let’s stay in contact, just in case we have to take some military action.” There was contact with those of us who were in the Movement but not with those who were outside. But as I told you, things were not so easy. If you established contact with someone in a specific place, the following month you would be sent somewhere else, and if you visited another unit and talked with someone, the following month you would also be changed. All those people were separated.

Not only did they disperse us they also postponed our promotion; we became increasingly strong, however, and some of us even planned to get the President out of prison, but also unfortunately this didn’t happen. This is how the Movement multiplied all this love and appreciation between all of us.

DOCUMENTS FROM PRISON

—*So what did they tell you about the Movement? Because I suppose they must have told you what it was like, its ideals...*

—I was able to get several documents oh yes, I even have some photocopies of everything we did in prison for the Movement, its ideology. I kept all those things. The person I talked to about this situation and shared these ideals with was Martínez Alfonso, now Captain at PDVSA. By the way, many of the things the President wrote about and many of these people signed them, they have their signature have been implemented little by little, though of course others have been adapted to offset what was really happening.

CONCERN FOR PEOPLE’S WELL BEING

—*Of all the ideas the project had, what attracted you most?*

—I was really mostly impressed by the people’s well being, the need for them to learn and change, keeping their own sovereignty always in mind; that they must be the main actors of their future life, leaving oppression behind; that they must come out of the stagnation in which they are now, and be totally aware of what Venezuela really is; the people must learn to love their country, always respecting the laws, aiming at their total fulfilment. They must prevent Venezuela’s falling into anarchy, because constitutional order must reign and laws be upheld; where people will no longer be able to do what they feel like, but will work for the well being of the whole country. That young man, for example, who would like to be a doorman, he must put in his grain of sand as a citizen of Venezuela; and those public servants, they must also put in their grain of sand to help this Venezuela.

—*I’m surprised when you use the word “public servant” I have always heard them described as public officers...*

—Well, the truth is that here we talk about public officers, but in my opinion they are public servants, because, Marta, it would be so nice to go to the Foreign Department to get your ID card, pay your taxes (3000 Bolívares), hand in your photo, get your receipt and after a few days get your card not like now, when you have to bribe an officer to get his attention. So where are the public servants?

A public servant must understand his mission: he must help the people, make them feel at home, feel for the people, because if someone comes to get his card, and he's say... 70, 80 years old, for the love of God! are you going to leave him standing there, aren't you going to take care of him? aren't you going to give him a seat?

INSTITUTIONS RELATED TO NATIONAL AWARENESS

—In our country, our institutions should have started acting a long time ago with national awareness, but this isn't happening yet.

Marta: it's so important for a doctor to really understand his mission and to know that every drug he gets is for the people, and not for his own private clinic.

Every institution should carry out a deep self-analysis, but this isn't going to happen overnight, it's a slow process, but it must stem from inside each Venezuelan citizen.

Here you are, driving on the highway in your car, and you see how someone throws a piece of paper or a bottle of soda water out the window. You have to teach the people, educate them.

The mass media can play an important role in this. Just imagine how important it could be if these media could tell a young boy, or the population as a whole: "Look now, don't go beyond the line, because that's where streetwalkers cross the street" and that's something that happens every day, morning, noon and night. Or if over the media they could read and explain just an article of the Constitution daily, as Venezolana de Televisión does sometimes. We should use all mass media possible to teach people that Venezuela is their homeland, that they must love it and defend it, and explain it in easy terms, very single day of the week. That's how we could be teaching people to take that piece of paper that was wrapping their chocolate bar and not throw it on the ground, as so many people do and many other things. Every single person must understand³⁶ this: they must put that piece of paper in their pocket, and then when they see the garbage can, they can throw it in there but not on the ground.

LITERATURE HE READ

—*What did you read at the time, that you consider important for your intellectual development?*

—I always used to look for social literature. There is a little book by Guillermo Mitchell that is always on my mind: *Aprender a aprender (Learn to Learn)*. It's a guide for self-education, it helps you analyze situations you've gone through, it even mentions the September 11, 1973, coup against Allende. A very interesting little book.

I used to read literature that might have an influence on man's behavior; I even read one on Communism, a red book, I took it and read it, but well at that time I was a high school student and I really didn't get very much out of it; later on, as a sub-lieutenant I read it again and again and again, many times, and found many interesting things in it.

—*Chávez told me you used to be trained in leadership methods and theories, but I haven't heard you mention any of this.*

—There's a book on leadership, or what we call leadership and command in our schools. I remember a course in leadership I took with General Rosendo. This was a very frequent subject at the Academy. Training was based on leadership and organizational culture. Right now, by the way,

³⁶ Understand it.

I'm preparing a thesis for my Masters in Human Resources Management, related to "leadership and its implications in Venezuelan organizations."

THE ROAD TOWARD ELECTIONS

—So what happened with elections? Because at first, the MBR 200 was not in favor of participating in them, when La Causa R³⁷ had been unleashed and had convinced Arias Cárdenas to participate in the project. What was your opinion then?

—Let me tell you something about the Arias Cárdenas' case. When we saw Commander Arias Cárdenas go into politics with the support of COPEI, those of us who were participating in this felt pretty bad about it, because COPEI had been involved in the squandering of Venezuela's riches, creating situations that really impoverished the country. Me, Morao Cardona in person, I considered this a very bad attitude. While the President was working so hard, here he comes, fresh just out of jail and begins crisscrossing the country with the Constituent Assembly flag, informing the country about all he planned to do and then he explained he was running for president.

So when Arias decided to run for president, we understood him because he did it in a very intelligent way, he worked the masses so they would react the way he wanted, which was to be elected President to implement his project because without power, he would have no project.

In the Army we thought everything he was doing was very positive, because he would give some dignity to those professionals who had participated in the February 4th and November 27th events, and because it was a way to implement and consolidate his project.

—Could you give me an idea of the project?

—How can I explain it? Let me see: as a Venezuelan, as a military, I can see that he is trying to indoctrinate people, develop their national awareness through the work each individual Venezuelan citizen carries out in his organization, so Venezuela can start off and contribute to its new social, cultural, and political development; so the country and all of Latin America will be consolidated. Because Venezuela will be an example for the rest of the Latin American countries and then she won't be alone it'll be all of South America together. And maybe we can even make El Libertador form Great Colombia's dream come true: connect all the countries of South America so in the future they will represent a single united block, a unity against the Yankees, and the Yankees will understand that in South America we are all human beings, but not fourth or fifth category citizens like they think, we are human beings just like they are and we are as able as they are to lead the country toward freedom, equality, fraternity, and sovereignty.

WHY NOT THE ARMED SOLUTION

—You come from a military group with a project like the one you have just explained, so why didn't you choose the armed solution instead of organizing a Constituent Assembly?

—Marta, I think the President has always had in mind all the projects El Libertador tried to implement at the time, like the Angostura Congress, where they analyzed so many ideas, so many solutions, so the people could go out and express themselves, organize themselves to consolidate their laws. Something like that... it's just an idea.

February 4th was carried out militarily, but the goal wasn't a military consolidation, we wanted a government that would be able to organize the country.

37 La Causa Radical, branch that left the Communist Party of Venezuela in 1972.

Had we used weapons at that time, there would have been many casualties. If we want to eliminate an evil, we have to cut out its roots. And the President never thought we had to destroy ourselves massively. I think that when he proposed his idea for a Constituent National Assembly, he wanted to create a space for a group of Venezuelan citizens who would be able to make laws, give their opinions, express their ideas and their knowledge on how we should draft the new Constitution.

But probably the President never thought that after the Constituent Assembly and the approval of the new Constitution, this kind of opposition would come to light. And yet, opposition is always there, dissidents are always there, and there will always be resistance to change that's why there will always be some kind of opposition.

4. RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PRESIDENT'S SECURITY

—Where were you when Chávez became President?

—I was in Maracay, state of Aragua, at the 41st Parachutist Infantry Brigade. General Martínez called me there and offered me to command the Support Battalion of the Regiment for the Honor Guard. He told me: “Think about it, I’ll give you 24 hours to think about it and then you call me.” I had other projects in mind, like commanding a tactical unit in Maracay, but then I thought: “He gave me 24 hours, I’m already working on this, so with all the love in the world I’ll work with the President of the Republic, I’ll be right at his side, and I’ll still be putting in my little contribution for this country I can’t lose this opportunity.” So the following day I called him: “General, I’m going with you.”

I was head of the Support Battalion for a short time, because I was senior enough to be promoted colonel, so they named second in command of the Regiment, and when Colonel Félix Antonio Velásquez finished his two-year term as commander, I was automatically promoted first commander. That’s how the President himself decided to do things.

—Exactly what is your responsibility and that of your regiment?

—I have to guarantee the security of the President and his relatives.

—So you always have to be ahead of him, each time there is a trip you have to guarantee conditions...

COLLECTING MESSAGES FROM THE PEOPLE

—Right. We make up the third security ring, and sometimes we act together with the first one. But our mission is much more than this. At the beginning, when the President visited the whole country, we would collect letters from the people asking him for jobs, they would describe their health problems, problems in their communities, and we would try to solve them all. We created a small section of Plan Bolívar 2000 within our own Regiment, and we put a group of people to work, repairing and building squares, schools my professionals were the supervisors, but the people did the work themselves.

Sometimes, when the President asked us to take care of such and such a case, we would be in charge until we found a solution. For example: a child had to have a foot operation, we would accept the case and wouldn’t leave it until the whole thing was solved. But thank God this kind of thing is not very frequent now, because the Department for Citizen Problems is in charge of all that. There is also an agreement with Cuba for the humanitarian, medical aspect of all this, and we have been able to solve numerous cases this way. That has really been excellent, Marta! It’s a very nice

activity, a very interesting and humanitarian thing, for a people that had not been attended like that for a long time.

LIKE A FISH IN THE WATER

—That’s why when I visit a place as a military, I feel like a fish in the water, right in the middle of the people. Before, the military were on this side and the people on the other. Not now: now we’re integrated with the people and we participate, the people are together with the military. You couldn’t see anything like this before, but now you do, and we’ve had great results, even for the President’s own activities.

We go to different places and the people help us in our mission, because they protect the President of the Republic. Of course they are now organized in *Círculos Bolivarianos* and give part of the support: “He’s coming this way, let’s organize the people...” You know, people really want to touch him. Once, when we were in Plaza Bolívar, this lady, I don’t really know how she managed, but she jumped and fell right beside the President, and she put her arms around him, stroked his head, touched him, and blessed him. That was some extraordinary thing! Then the lady turned around and she was just crying: “I did it! That’s the only thing I really wanted to do! Finally I did it, I did it, I touched him, I embraced him!” It’s really incredible how they love him! How the people love him! We were able to see this personally here with the soldiers themselves after the 13th, when he came to visit us to stimulate the soldiers and congratulate them and thank them for what they had done.

5. APRIL 2002 COUP

—*Since you already touched on the subject of the coup, what can you say about those who accuse the President of having promoted violence and murder?*

—That’s totally false! On the contrary, on the 11th, before leaving Palacio, he expressly asked that no blood be shed. If he had been on the rampage, that’s when we would have taken up our guns, we would have imposed our force, and no one would have been able to get us out of there. We were all convinced, Marta, that if he gave the order, we would all die with our boots on, but he never gave that order on the contrary, he said: “I don’t want any bloodshed, I don’t want any destruction, I don’t want people killed, I’m a President taken prisoner.” And they took him away.

I’m talking about the 11th, but when I woke up on the 12th, I saw some metropolitan policemen shooting pellets at the people right here in front of Palacio.

—*What did you do when they announced the President had resigned?*

—He didn’t resign, he was taken away prisoner. When he left I met with my professionals and gave the order to strengthen all the security positions, both at the regiment and right here in Palacio; and then we just kept on talking and planning what we were going to do.

WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE MILITARY HOUSE

—*But what happened then? What were you going to do? And when Carmona came the following day and you had to greet him, what was your attitude?*

—That day, the 12th, in the morning, we met with General Vietry Vietry, head of the Military House. And he told us: “We’re going to try to understand this situation, we’re going to give our support to these people, here comes Carmona, we must give him full honors.” So I told him: “OK, fine.” Right then I thought many many things and told my professionals: I’m going to accept this

because if I get mad they can throw me out of the Regiment.” I had to keep calm and stable, because if I wanted to do something positive I couldn’t just launch a military operation to get Carmona and break his neck right then and there it could have been suicidal at the time.

Somebody came up with the idea of launching a commando operation and take everyone prisoner there at Palacio; we would then consolidate our positions and we would negotiate with the people we had to negotiate. But that was really crazy, because we were not in a strong position at the time, who was in our favor? No one. The idea of that operation, no matter who was going to die, wasn’t the best option for the moment, so I told them: “Just a minute, it’s not convenient to do that right now, because they’ll make mince meat of all of us, they’re going to kill us off like rats. Stay put. We’ll look for a better time to do what we have to.” So they calmed down, but we were all angry at what was going on here.

As far as Carmona is concerned: my soldiers who played in the military band cried when they had to play honors for that gentleman. I was a little further up, at the guardhouse of my regiment watching and listening to all that. It was sad, Marta, but we had a lot of courage, enough to guarantee the calm necessary to avoid mistakes and depression.

HE HAD NOT RESIGNED

—On April 12th we met once again and began analyzing the things we would do with unit commanders, but I hadn’t slept for two days because I had been thinking: “Damn, my God, I can’t just sit here like this! We must do something!”

So the morning after, Major Chaurio called me and told me: “Colonel, it’s the 13th, and it’s today or never.” Those were his very words. I told him: “Come on, I can’t take this situation any longer.”

—*Where was he calling you from?*

—He was at Fort Tiuna and I was at the Regiment. So we started planning how to rescue the President.

—*Did the fact that you knew Chávez had not resigned have any influence on this? You knew he had not resigned?*

—We did know he had not resigned, because Chaurio had told us the President had been made prisoner and had not resigned. Until then we had had no information whatsoever about the President’s resignation. It’s true that the putschists had talked about it in the media, but I had said that until all of us saw the President’s signature on the resignation, we would not put our weapons down. So we finally decided to rebel right here in the Regiment and seize Palacio. And we prepared ourselves here.

That was on the 13th. El Negro told me: “Listen here, let’s plan things, how are we going to get him? what means do we have for this? where are we going to take him? who can help us in this?” All the things you must take into account when you are organizing an operation: when, how, who, where, why... And I told him: “Let’s do something, but right now, we just can’t take this any longer.” The media were not talking, they weren’t giving any information to the people, according to them nothing was happening, and yet the truth was that the President had been taken from Fort Tiuna to Turiamo and from Turiamo to Orchila Island.

—*Was your upheaval a secret? Did the putschists believe you were one of them?*

—They always thought that I was letting things go, a laissez-faire attitude, accepting everything they told me. Neither my unit commanders nor I supported them, but we had to win time, to be able

to carry out what we were planning. Our plan required a commando operation to consolidate our position here, until the President was brought back right here. We had to take this place, consolidate our position here but we were alone.

GENERAL BADUEL'S ROLE

—Finally, the solution came from General Baduel, who was in Maracay. They told me he didn't recognize Carmona as president. So I told him: "General, what is your position in relation to this whole situation?" "Morao, our mission is not to recognize this Carmona as President of the Republic; the Constitution has been violated, and we just can't accept this situation." So I answered: "General, I support you in full together with my soldiers and my professionals. Let's take Palacio."

At 10 a.m. on the 13th we were already in control there.

—*So what did you do with the putschists?*

—We arrested 21 people, all those who were in the Council of Ministers. It was a full-scale operation.

—*How many were able to escape?*

—Carmona, the people who were with him, Lameda then PDVSA chairman. They were not in the Council; they were in Counter Admiral Molina's office together with other professionals. Apparently, they were alerted and when they saw people moving around they began to run, even Admiral Molina, who was then head of the Military House. With that exception, it would have been a totally successful operation.

THE PEOPLE CAME DOWN FROM THE CERROS

—That's the day the people started coming down from the *cerros* and gathering around Palacio. In my opinion, Marta, there were no less than a million people there. Everything, absolutely everything, even back there, about four or five blocks beyond Urdaneta Avenue, was full of people, and here, on the side, the people were demanding the return of the President of the Republic. I kept the people informed about everything we were doing: "Listen, we're negotiating, Maracay is already ours, General Baduel is there."

The people even thought we were traitors. When they came convinced otherwise, they even made me a sign out there: "Thank you, Colonel Jesús Morao, for having restored the constitutional line; the people love you and the Regiment of the Honor Guard."

—*So how did you feel?*

—Proud. The people were grateful for what we had done what my professionals, my soldiers, my people had done. And the people were grateful.

Going back to the original idea, I started calling generals and colonels to rally behind our cause. Some said yes and others: "Look, you know, I...yes, but no..."

And that's how we started winning people over. Around 4 p.m. we were already quite strong, and at 8 p.m. many military units had finally understood what was really going on, and that the situation was nothing like what the general commander of the Army was saying. By the way, I tried to talk to him about three times: I called him on his cell phone to ask him to think things out, but he never answered.

—*They say General Velasco declared he had played his military role, because there was no one in power at that time.*

—That's not true there was a coup d'Etat because many generals of the four corps of the Armed Forces accepted to participate. The opposition said a whole series of lies: according to them, they were attempting to save the situation, and that's completely false. They violated everything represented by the Constitution and the laws. I think the whole world witnessed when Carmona took the oath, dissolved the National Assembly and all the other powers. It's not true there was no one in power; they know perfectly well what happened, yet they keep denying it was a coup. What a difference with the President's attitude on February 4, 1992, when he said: "Before the country I assume the responsibility for what happened." Marta, none of those gentlemen had the guts to take on responsibility for what they did.

We had the courage to take Palacio and come out before the world to say: "We are not going away, we are not surrendering our weapons, and we're going to be here until they show us our President, and we ask the Armed Forces to join us."

There was an instance during the April coup when the soldiers wanted to take their weapons and come here to Palacio I'm talking about the evening of the 12th, they wanted to do away with everyone here... they have a deep love for the President, it's a very nice kind of love. So I had to calm them down, during the afternoon my young soldiers, and in the evening the other ones.

They said: "If the Colonel leaves the Regiment we're all leaving too, because they will arrest us, but we're all leaving, one by one, in a one-man little column, and this shit will be abandoned, there won't be a single soldier here, because we're not going to allow this."

Marta, I was able to see this: they took everything, what they had in their closets, and put it in their bags. They had everything ready in case I left. But thank God, things went the way they did and we had to take everything out again and put it back in the closets."

RESCUING CHANNEL 8

—*Were you the ones who planned the rescue of Channel 8?*

—Sweetheart, just listen to this: On the 13th, when we were practically consolidated in the Regiment and had already taken Palacio and we controlled everything, I told General García Carneiro: "General, we control Palacio, the center of power, we have everything, but I have to go public because the mass media aren't transmitting anything yet, and I don't want to have to speak before General Baduel, because I would be putting myself above all of you. You must first authorize me, give me the authorization because I must speak, the people must know that a colonel has rescued Palacio de Miraflores, that we are consolidated we have to tell them." And he says: "Just do it!"

I had all the mass media waiting for me at the command. We also called Spanish TV; I got mentally ready to take advantage of this situation and prepare a short video to put on the social mass media. "We do not recognize the Carmona government, it's a totally unconstitutional government; we recognize Hugo Chávez Frías as the only President of the Republic. Only if you show us the document of his resignation will we accept putting down our weapons. We must all fight for this beautiful Venezuela that we all love so much." That was more or less the idea in the message.

What happened in Venezolana de Televisión? I called the commander of the Custody Battalion³⁸, who was there at the TV station, and I told him: "Look here, *compañero*, we have to take

38 Frigate Captain César Salazar Coll.

Venezolana de Televisión to put a video we just prepared here.” So the commander sent his soldiers and his professionals to take the place. They had already disconnected practically all the equipment, damaged it, taken all the plugs out, cut the cables a true mess. I was informed that some technicians and engineers supported us. To re-establish service, we took material from the communications department of the Battalion: the plugs, the connectors, the cables, tapes, buttons... We dismantled part of our equipment and started reconnecting what little there was, and that’s how we were able to repair part of the equipment. And we were finally able to come on the air.

Then Major Ballesteros told me: “Colonel, we have to take Radio Caracas.” I knew this perfectly well: we have to take it, so I said: “We can’t run the risk of having you go there and have you attacked, and having to reject the attack, so take some soldiers for your own protection, and another professional will head the platoon.” Then he said: “There at Venezolana de Televisión and Radio Caracas we have the *círculos*³⁹. This is what I’m going to do: when I get there I’ll tell the *círculos* to protect me so I can get into the TV station, and if they’re going to shoot at me, let them shoot.”

That’s how it was done. He went there, the *círculos* protected him immediately, and he was able to get in. When he went in he found Pablo Mendoza, Radio Caracas Televisión Vice Chairman, and he told him: “We’re here so you can connect with the signal Venezolana de Televisión is going to transmit, we’re not going to hurt anyone but we want you to support us. In any event, if you say no, we leave, but out there you have a zillion people. And I don’t know what those people are going to do.” He said that just to scare him, so the man could feel the floor tremble under him. And the man said: “No problem, no problem, Major! But I’d like to speak to your boss.” The Major called me and put him on the phone.

“Sir, this is Colonel Jesús del Valle Morao Cardona, who’s speaking?” “It’s Pablo Mendoza.” “Fine, Mr. Pablo Mendoza. The country is going through a specific situation and please, I need Venezolana de Televisión’s signal to be shared with you so I can inform the people what’s going on. Can you cooperate with us?” “But of course, Colonel! no problem, I’m supporting you as of right now.” “Please, then, put the Major on.” “Ballesteros, no problem, get going, and until you come on the air don’t leave the place.”

And that’s how we did it. I came on the air, Marta, but there was no sound, because some of the details couldn’t be solved... until we finally solved that too. We were connected to Radio Caracas Televisión and I began sending my message every once in a while, a bit here, a bit there, so the people began realizing what was going on. That was practically the little push we needed, because Maracay was already consolidated as a garrison and the people of whole the city were there.

—*And Baduel?*

—I was informed he had talked regionally, but I spoke on national and international TV, I got in contact with Colombia’s Radio Caracol, and I think that in Argentina and Chile we came out through CNN, DW, Telemundo. That’s how we talked to the whole world.

—*Did you talk to the world before the local radio and TV did?*

—Exactly, that’s exactly what happened.

CIVILIANS INSIDE MIRAFLORES

—*And how did the civilians inside Palacio behave?*

³⁹ He is referring to the Círculos Bolivarianos, organizations with seven to ten people created in neighborhoods and work centers for different tasks.

—That’s an interesting question. In Palacio I was with José Vicente Rangel, then Minister of Defense; his son, the mayor of Avalos; professor Aristóbulo Istúriz; old man García Ponce; Counter Admiral Yuber Odreman; William Lara; María Cristina Iglesias. They came to the Regiment, went through the tunnel, and joined us. Listen here, there were so many citizens who were members of the ministerial team of the President of the Republic; citizens who were friendly to our Movement and the cause, and they were all there with me! Many of them were in my office, in my command; others came here, and right here we went on the air with a program where Maduro informed the people about what was really going on. There were several other programs like that one.

I got in touch with Diosdado several times over the phone; I wanted him to come over to the Regiment so he could take over as Vice-president. He was in hiding, because they were chasing him to put him in prison.

Many citizens put in their own little grain of sand to be with us, they met at the Regiment and here in Palacio. I didn’t move from my Regiment, I was always in my command, because it was practically the control and coordination center of everything we were doing.

HE NEGOTIATED CHÁVEZ’S RETURN

—Thanks to the information we had about the whereabouts of the President, I negotiated right from here with Corvette Captain Vacari how they should hand the President over. I had found out they were holding him in Orchila, so I coordinated with him, we negotiated, and I told him: “Now look, you must also understand that neither of us wants any bloodshed here.”

He had 40 commandos there in Orchila, so I told him as a persuasive measure: “I’m going to send a plane over with 150 men, and if you really want to avoid bloodshed, avoid it. You must hand us the President of the Republic.” And he answered: “I’ll hand him over to you, but then what’s going to happen to me?” “Well, whatever has to be said to your group, we’ll say it, but there must be no confrontations.” So then he said: “Give me the list of the professionals who are coming over. But I warn you, don’t put too many soldiers on that plane, because there might be some confrontation.” So I told him: “Don’t worry, I know who’s going over there.”

I called Maracay and talked to General García Montoya, and I told him: “General, I already negotiated with the Corvette Captain who’s over at Orchila, so I need you to support me with the plane that’s going over to get the President of the Republic. Please give me the names and the number of professionals who are going, I’ll give the information to the Captain who’s negotiating everything.”

He told me: “OK, call me back in ten minutes.” Ten minutes later he called me and said: “OK, General Uzcátegui Duque, vice head of the Military House, is going; Captain Aquino Lamón, from the presidential security unit; Sub-lieutenant Martínez, who was also a member of the President’s team his closest collaborators.”

We prepared three helicopters, two as decoys and a main one, just in case.

Then I called the Corvette Captain who was in the custody Battalion and told him: “OK, you must get in contact with the head of the frigates down there in La Guaira, just in case they plan to shoot the helicopters.”

And the funny part about all this is that while we were coordinating the President’s rescue, we didn’t know how he was or where he was, but I told Captain Aguino Lamon: “The first thing you must do is call me and tell me how the President is.”

And we coordinated two planes for the return trip, so no one would attempt to down one of them.

When my people got there Aquino Lamon called and said: “Look, I have the President right here.” He put the President on and I heard a voice saying: “Morao, son, how are you?” Wow, what a tremendous happiness! I immediately let the people know. And I told him: “President, I’m so happy to hear your voice, is everything all right? How are you?” “No problem, son, I feel fine, everything’s under control.” And I said: “Now I can feel well, knowing you are all right. I’m really happy to listen to you and... well...no news here. We’re just waiting for you.” “OK, fine, Morao, everything’s just fine.”

Once again I let the people know all this. “Friends, he’s ours once again, we’ve got him, he’s fine, he has nothing to worry about, he’s coming over to Miraflores by helicopter, let’s wait for him.”

When he arrived, what joy. I gave him a real strong hug. And then he put his hands on my cheeks and said: “Morao, I’m eternally grateful for what you did. I don’t even know how to begin thanking you. I’ll always remember this in my heart, my soul, and my mind.” I almost started crying. I hugged him again and didn’t want to let go of him. Everyone wanted to touch him, grab him, hug him...until he went into his office.

—*We were following all these events on television in Cuba. There was so much emotion!*

6. NATIONAL DIALOGUE

CHÁVEZ WANTED DIALOGUE, THE OPPOSITION DIDN'T

—*What did you feel when the President called for a national dialogue?*

—I understand perfectly well that the President wanted to talk because he wanted to discover our weaknesses and our strong points, and the opposition’s, in order to try to solve the problem. But what we’ve seen here, Marta, is that the President is all for finding solutions to the problems, for a conciliatory dialogue, and to find a just solution to the problems we’re going through, but he’s also very much aware that the opposition does not want this, and the President himself has said so: today he might have an interview with a social mass media, maybe it’s even a nice meeting after all, they touch interesting subjects, but as soon as the director leaves, they take the cassette and the war starts again. But if they don’t really want him, how are we going to solve the problems of this country? With marches, with strikes, with conspiracies promoted by them? No, that’s not how we’re going to solve our problems!

STRENGTHENING THE INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR

—As a result of all this, the President is now much stronger as far as the Armed Forces’ middle cadres is concerned, because we are aware that he wants to do something and the opposition won’t let him. And we also see that those very generals who had the courage to participate, but later didn’t have the same courage to take the responsibility, are now supporting the opposition and creating chaos in the country.

The President has been extremely flexible with each and every one of them, because he has prevented their rights from being trampled. He should have been a bit harder on them. It’s a very different attitude from that used against those of us who participated in the February 4th events: they didn’t respect our rights. I don’t even remember how many days I was down there in that basement. Where were my rights? Who was even aware they were offending a man and going against his very dignity?

—*But could he have taken a harder stand?*

—Of course! He doesn't have to do it personally, he can give instructions, after all: that's what he's President of the Republic for!

The military aren't the only ones who see this. Once, I went to get gas in my uniform, I was putting gas in the car when the gas attendant an ex member of the reserve told me: "How are you, Colonel? Look here, tell the President we like him, we love him, but to clamp down some more." Then he used a word we use among ourselves: "*Está muy ponchera*... Tell the President to clamp down a bit more."

—*What do you mean by ponchera?*

—Flexible. The President can use his ministers to give instructions, to tighten the *cureña*⁴⁰.

As I see it, the President's policy is to put the injection in a little bit at a time, just little by little, step by step, because he might just kill the man with the injection. So you have to give small doses at a time: a bit today, some more tomorrow.

—*Have you let the President know this?*

—No, I haven't told him. I haven't had the time. The President has a very heavy agenda, the days go by, and we can't get to speak to him to let him know some of these things.

—*This is all quite concerning, isn't it? Do you see a solution?*

—He should organize things so this information could get through to him. I'm convinced this kind of information, together with his extraordinary capacity for political analysis, could solve some of the problems.

—*What do you think of Chávez?*

—As my commander because he has always been our commander I feel love, faith in the project. I think he's going to save the country at any price, and not just the country all of Latin America. We need this man, who has a very interesting project. So we should all unite behind his project. That would really be wonderful!

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THEY DID AWAY WITH HIM

—*I suppose your work is full of tension, because it's evident that one of the enemy's goals is to do away with Chávez. So what would happen if they did something to the President, would they be able to do away with him?*

—It would be the most horrible disaster, there would be huge anarchy, where part of the people whose President had disappeared would go against the other part. There would practically be a war. I have heard people say: "If they do away with the President of the Republic, we will eat up Este, California or Macaraguay." (44) And I can guarantee that if something happens to the President, I will do anything whatever I have to, Marta, because I'm not going to just stay here, waiting.

7. FROM THE DEFENSIVE TO THE OFFENSIVE

—*From the time of the first interview in July 2002 and today, March 2003, there have been many events in your country, so how do you see the situation now?*

40 Cannon bases.

—These last few months, the President and his executive cabinet have been implementing long-awaited actions, like dismissing the top managers at PDVSA, whose sabotages contributed to that decision, because there's no one left to defend those top executives who caused so much damage to the country.

On the other hand, those military who had gone to Altamira Square⁴¹ were really hoping their attitude would unleash an upheaval among the four corps of the Armed Forces but in the end, they were left practically alone and increasingly weaker, so there was no need to force them out of there as they would have liked, to accuse the President of stimulating acts of violence. With his patience, the President played the game of attrition, and he won.

The productive strike also failed; there was only a partial paralysis of the trade sectors, mainly in the Este neighborhood of Caracas, which led the opposition to go on an oil strike.

The opposition also called for a tax strike, but the government's attitude, through the SENIAT⁴², prevented them from scoring another point.

So, thanks to all this, the opposition is becoming increasingly weaker, they have destroyed themselves from the inside, they haven't attained any of their goals, and I'm convinced they never will. Perhaps they thought the President would fall in one of their provocations, but he never lost his aplomb, he always adopted very balanced measures, and knew when the time was ripe to go on the offensive.

41 He is referring to several neighborhoods for well-off people where the opposition is concentrated.

42 National Integrated Service for Tax Administration.

LIEUTENANT COLONELS

JESÚS MANUEL ZAMBRANO MATA (*CHEMA*) AND FRANCISCO ESPINOZA GUYÓN
(*CHICHO*)

RESCUING CHANNEL 8 WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE PEOPLE

1. How they joined the Movement; The Caracazo: Organizing pillaging; During the 1992 coup; He participated in the November 27th coup; Sent to the Guasdalito Disciplinary Unit; How the MBR 200 was organized; Influence on the junior officers; Integrating the other forces. **2. Banner of the Constituent Assembly.** **3. Attempt to ignore the results of the 1998 elections.** **4. Plan Bolívar 2000: an excellent idea;** Integrated with the community; Different reactions within the Armed Forces. **5. April coup;** The two marches; Quartered in Fort Tiuna; Internal reaction to the attitude of putschist generals; Group of officers prepared actions; Rescuing Channel 8; Delivering a harangue to the people; Talking to the commanders; Baduel's firm stand; Chávez's attitude on his return.

1. HOW THEY JOINED THE MOVEMENT

—*When did you both join the MBR 200 Movement?*

—**Espinoza:** Well, it started in 1990, at least for me it did. Captain William Oseli, one of my cousins who is now retired, told me about some military or other who were trying to find a solution to the institutional crisis Venezuela was going through. The State wasn't interested in the well being of the whole country, just that of a few people. I was lieutenant at the time, so he invited me to join the Movement and said: "Listen, just think about it. Don't answer me now, you can do that later."

I already had my own convictions, because you get those with your upbringing. I could see that Venezuela was a very rich country, yet how unfair that we should be so bad off as we are still now, as a matter of fact, such terrible underdevelopment. All the money the country had earned from oil, gone down the drain, and we had done nothing to come out of the slump. We had galloping corruption, and the whole country was in a critical situation.

And then, the Caracazo that's what really affected me, so I decided to join the Movement, and as soon as I saw my cousin (his wife had been in an accident so I saw him at the Maracay Military Hospital) I told him: "OK, fine, I want to join the Movement."

—*Did it take a lot of thinking?*

—**Espinoza:** No, not really, because I already had my own convictions. This was on a Saturday, and already the following Monday I was approached by the second in command of my unit⁴³, who

43 Major Alastre López, now mayor in el Topuyo, state of Lara.

told me: “Look here, I spoke to Carlitos” {my cousin’s pseudonym}. He surprised me, really, because I didn’t know my cousin knew him. So that’s how I started participating in some meetings with people in Valencia... and from then on, that’s how it’s been.

THE CARACAZO: ORGANIZING PILLAGING

—*You were saying the Caracazo had affected you greatly. Where were you at the time?*

—**Espinoza:** I was in Valencia, where I saw how the people ran out into the streets, and I thought: perhaps they had rebelled because they felt oppressed, seeing that they weren’t getting any of the riches earned by the country. This really affected me very much. I was in charge of a group of soldiers, and each time we had to go out on patrol I would tell them: “Look now, those people out there could be your brother, your friend, a relative, someone very close to you, because you belong to the people too. I don’t want any soldier of mine shooting or doing something I haven’t authorized first. Because no one is a criminal out there, far from it.”

Zambrano: I was here in Caracas when the Caracazo took place, and I remember that it affected me too. The movement came from the people themselves.

—*You must have been very young.*

—**Zambrano:** Quite young, I was a sub-lieutenant; I was maybe 24 or 25. I was in charge of security of the city’s electric supply, and right next to its facilities there are some pretty strong neighborhoods, like Sarría and Pinto Salinas.

—*Did you have a military responsibility then?*

—**Zambrano:** Yes, I was in charge of some soldiers. Later they gave me the mission to go and clean out the mall there in San Bernardino, because there was some looting going on. The order was: “Go and stop the looting; how you do it is your problem, not mine just stop it.” It was really like a subliminal message: do what you have to do.

I went with a lieutenant, and I remember he shot in the air, like a warning, but I told him: “No, not this way.”

So we went there with the soldiers and organized those who were doing the looting: “single file here for those going for meat,” “single file there for those going for clothes.” We put some order there because they were leaving with cash registers and other things they didn’t really need. “If you’ve created all this trouble because there are real problems and you want food, well take it, but single file if you need meat, and a soldier to control things.” People would come in, get their stuff, and then leave.

Espinoza: They never gave me direct orders to shoot to kill, but they had explained that all guarantees had been suspended and that if we had to, we were authorized to use our guns to stop the looting, and nothing would happen to us. So maybe they didn’t give us an outright order to kill, but they did insinuate that if we had to, we could use our guns.

DURING THE 1992 COUP

—*Did you participate in the February 1992 armed upheaval?*

—**Espinoza:** In 1992 I was with *compañero* Avila, who was also in the Movement. We had different missions on that occasion: I was waiting for some people from Valencia, some tanks from my old unit. We tiptoed into the room where Chema was sleeping, Avila went to get his gun and some other things, and then we left.

—*You were in the same regiment?*

—**Espinoza:** We were both studying, but in different places: I was working in Valencia, and Avila was in Carabobo.

—*Were you able to fulfil your mission then?*

—**Espinoza:** No, because they stopped the tanks before they could get to Caracas.

—*You were waiting for them out on the street?*

—**Espinoza:** I was at the Tazón toll station, at midnight, and saw the parachutist units go by. Commander Chávez came through Los Teques, another road. I waited a bit, until around 2 a.m., and when I realized they wouldn't come, I asked for a ride and went on to Encrucijada. There was a whole column of military vehicles there, I thought they were my tanks but not was dark, they weren't. I stayed in Encrucijada and then came back to Caracas, and I got there around 3 or 4 in the morning. The column I had mistaken for mine was the Ezequiel Zamora Battalion, led by Captain Hernández Berehms.

—*He supported Chávez?*

—**Espinoza:** Yes, of course. He was arrested at *alcabala* 3. That's where I left my vehicle and said: "So where do I go now?" And I decided to go to La Carlota, a place we were going to take over. I got on a *libre*⁴⁴ and left for La Carlota, and as soon as I got there I started talking to the taxi driver, and he told me what was going on. I couldn't get into the town because all the accesses had been cut, so I waited until around 5 a.m. and told myself: "I'm going to Fort Tiuna no matter what."

—*Were you in uniform?*

—**Espinoza:** Yes, with my red beret and the tricolor badge.

—*The red beret?*

—**Espinoza:** Those were the distinctive symbols we had decided to use that day, a red beret and a tricolor badge.

You couldn't get in Fort Tiuna, so around 5 or 6 a.m. a sergeant friend of mine saw me and said: "Come on in, come in, come on." So when they saw me there they said: "Where were you?" So I told them a lie, I told them I was with my family.

And then it happened, what you all know. The following day there were still some actions going on in Valencia, and Commander Arias Cárdenas in Maracaibo hadn't given himself up yet. Chema used his vehicle to take us out to the Fort Tiuna gas station. Lieutenant Goitia and I went out, we fled and went to Valencia.

—*Chávez hadn't given himself up yet?*

—**Espinoza:** I left around noon and about an hour earlier he had already spoken. We arrived in Valencia around 3 p.m. and a friend said: "Look, everyone here has surrendered, a helicopter came and took them all away, so you'd better leave and I'll just make believe I never saw you." We left, and I told the *compañero* who was with me: "So now we know, we're lost, we'll be arrested anywhere we go; the only thing we can do is say goodbye to our families, tell them what happened, and accept responsibility for it."

44 A taxi.

Mi wife did know what I was doing, so I just said goodbye to her; then I spoke to my mother, mi brother, my family, and in the evening I came back to the Fort in Caracas. There was a colonel in the *cabala*, and he told me: “Where were you?” “I had to leave because my mother fell sick, her blood pressure just dropped.”

So we stayed around three or four days in the Army Intelligence Department. They interviewed us, but what they really did was to help us, and they didn’t arrest us. I suppose they already had so many prisoners that... well, they just helped us.

—*You didn’t see Chávez when he said you had to put down your weapons? Did you agree with him that those who were still up in arms had to surrender? What did you think right then and there?*

—**Espinoza:** Yes, I saw him when he spoke; and what did I see during those three minutes they allowed Chávez to speak? I saw that for the first time in Venezuela, someone had stood in front of the people and taken responsibility for the facts that had never happened in Venezuela before. I think that must have had quite a lot of influence on Chávez’s popularity among the population. He went from being a nobody, to being well known and accepted, in spite of all the war they organized against his reputation. But Maracaibo was still taken by Commander Arias Cárdenas; Valencia was also under captains Pedro Jiménez and Valderrama, and we decided that we had to give our all; we just couldn’t lose our cause like that. And with my *compañero* we decided to leave for Valencia.

When we got there they told us: “Look, they’ve surrendered here,” and they told us that Commander Arias Cárdenas had also surrendered, and the best thing we could do was to go back to our command, because everything had been lost.

—*Was there some kind of contact with the population, or was it just a military conspiracy...?*

—**Zambrano:** Some civilians did participate. As I already told you, while in Valencia I was with Commander Chávez and several times with Commander Arias Cárdenas too, he was working in Maracay leading a battalion of the Maracay Division General Barracks, so Arias was going to Valencia to meet with several personalities. Major Alastre López had been working for a long time in Valencia and knew many people in the Movement; he even had several groups of people working in the university.

But most of the people I had contact with were military.

—*And what happened to you, Chema, on February 4th?*

—**Zambrano:** I remember that on February 4th, Avila, who was a good friend of mine, practically like a brother, and other people came to change in my room, and Avila said: “No, not Chema, let’s leave Chema alone,” giving the impression that they didn’t want to involve any more people.

I think things turned out worse for me because later, when they were all in jail, I was like a liaison person, going to the jail, and that was very hard on me.

—*That means you supported their ideas?*

—**Zambrano:** Very much so! I admired the courage those officers had shown when they dared go against a government that might have been legally constituted all you wanted, but that really lacked leadership. There were many of us behind those officers, but even that was a risky thing to do because we had no way of knowing if there were some people infiltrated among us.

I had good relations with the boys in jail and I was liaison for some of the things we had to do. I was there in jail longer than any of them, and they always made jokes on me because they used to

go get me in jail go over here, go over there, make a statement, answer questions, because they thought I had to be a member of the MBR 200 any way you saw it, but I really wasn't.

HE PARTICIPATED IN THE NOVEMBER 27TH COUP

—**Zambrano:** Afterwards I participated in planning the November 27th coup, but that night all that came out. Some say the Armed Forces acted too hastily and that very night I was arrested in the Commander's office. I was in the Ayala tank battalion, with the armored vehicles, and that's where I was arrested that night, so I saw everything that happened on November 27th from the Commander's office, with a soldier as my jailer. But later, when everything was over, they had to ask me to take some anti-aircraft batteries here to Miraflores, because there was no one else who could. We put them on some tanks; I brought them here, and went back.

SENT TO THE GUASDUALITO DISCIPLINARY UNIT

—*And then, what did they do to you?*

—**Zambrano:** We were dispersed, I was sent to the Guasqualito Disciplinary Unit, and that's where I was for a year and half. It was mi spiritual retreat {he laughs}.

—*That's where you started working with the Movement?*

—**Zambrano:** Of course, because they used to send to Guasqualito all those officers who were leaving jail, and from there they sent them to any frontier, because they wanted to get us all out of Caracas. But it turned out that on that specific frontier there were two units, two battalions, so what they really did was unite us, and that's how the Movement stayed alive.

HOW THE MBR 200 WAS ORGANIZED

—*How did you get organized within the Movement?*

—**Zambrano:** We had networks; I was member of a team and I was also the leader of another team...

—*With how many people...?*

—**Espinoza:** That depended on the situation...

Zambrano: We worked with underground discipline, we often didn't know who was a member of the Movement. That's why I was surprised when I found out about Major Lastre; I never thought he would be a member.

I recruited quite a few professionals in Valencia who were working there, but I was the only one who knew it. About 12 of them were working with me in Valencia, Maracay. Sometimes we found out in meetings where we all coincided, but usually we didn't know the rest of the members.

It was here in Caracas where I got to know more people, because we were passing some courses together; it was called the Common Phase, and there were officers from different armed corps: infantry, artillery, armored vehicles...

So we had a pretty large group there but I never knew Commander Chávez, Arias Cárdenas, Urdaneta, Chirinos were in the Movement. When they sent me to Guasqualito, where there was a large group of officers, most of who are now in the Military House, that's when we began having more contact with the population and telling them about the political situation of the country. Many people joined us, come what might.

INFLUENCE ON THE JUNIOR OFFICERS

—**Zambrano**: From Apure I came over to Caracas, where I was instructor in armored vehicles, and used this position to exert influence on the junior officers: second lieutenants, lieutenants, sub-lieutenants, captains... I instructed them but I also put my little speech in, and that's how we were able to exert influence on many of these officers, and they would come see us that's how I started weaving my social structure, a very important social network.

INTEGRATING THE OTHER FORCES

—**Zambrano**: Later I was named manager of the Minister of Defense's printing facility, and things improved because I found there officers from other corps of the Armed Forces. Francisco and I have always wanted a larger integration from other corps we have always been very devoted to the Army, but we really have to open up more and integrate officers from the four corps. That's the process we're in now.

2. BANNER OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

—*How did you interpret the change in the Movement's position, now in favor of participating in the elections, where in the past it had been against it? And perhaps even before, what did the banner of the Constituent Assembly mean to you? Because that banner had already been hoisted in 1992, I've been told. Is that so?*

—**Espinoza**: What the MBR was really looking for was a structural transformation of the Venezuelan State, because the traditional parties AD and COPEI in general, all parties had misapplied democracy, they had greatly misinterpreted their own *raison d'être* and had finally become part of the power structure, and shared the slices of the State among them. The State was like a cake, each party had its own slice in State power they had it all very well allotted.

I was lieutenant at the time and had no idea whatsoever what politics was all about, but I did understand that the Movement didn't just want to eliminate the regime it wanted to transform Venezuela and guarantee the well being of all Venezuelan citizens. And that if it came out winning in 1992, the first thing it would do would be to create a governing junta, and the second thing would be to call a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution, along lines that had already been studied. This is really an old project; it is not the result of an improvisation. The problem wasn't just eliminating a regime, like they did in southern Latin America, where they placed dictatorships called gorilla governments. What we wanted here was a Constituent Assembly to implement the changes our State needed.

This project has gone through different phases: in the first one we had to use force, we had to use the military power we had at the time, but even though that failed, the goal was always there.

3. ATTEMPT TO IGNORE THE RESULTS OF THE 1998 ELECTIONS

—*Is it true that there was an attempt to ignore the results of the 1998 elections?*

—**Zambrano**: Yes, there was. General Rojas Pérez, Army Commander at the time, had several maneuvers all ready for this. He had soldiers prepared in Valencia and right here in Caracas to ignore Chávez's victory, but according to recent information we have, we know they told the guy: "You can't ignore it, his victory has been overwhelming, it has been too significant." People were really impressed; they never imagined the strength of the Movement.

Those of us who were on the alert to prevent it, rejected what General Rojas Pérez attempted to do. I was then second in command of a tank battalion in Zulia, and when the elections came up I spoke with the commander and told him: “Look here, they’re saying this and this and this, but here we’re playing a game and there are rules, so we have to respect whoever wins with those rules.” I just wanted him to know how we were going to react, not just me but also the people who were there.

4. PLAN BOLIVAR 2000: AN EXCELLENT IDEA

—*Are you participating in Plan Bolívar 2000?*

—**Zambrano:** As soon as the President won, Plan Bolívar 2000 started in Maracaibo and my battalion participated in saving educational facilities. Many schools had been abandoned, their structure was so bad they just couldn’t work as such, and we went about saving many of them.

I think that was one of the best things this government did in the beginning that and popular markets. I was on the frontier, in Zulia, and we used to help the local population a lot. We prepared popular markets, medical help, and that’s what started uniting the people with the Armed Forces. We were no longer the bad guys for the people, and began acting like their brother that was very very important.

Not only did we become brothers with the people; we ourselves within the Armed Forces began to get to know each other better through these things, through Plan Bolívar 2000, because one corps was in charge of an aspect and another corps in charge of another one we complemented each other. That was a very interesting and nice project; it integrated us both with the people and within the Armed Forces itself.

INTEGRATED WITH THE COMMUNITY

—*Did you promote people’s participation in the communities, or did you work the military way, with efficient operations, but not concerned with popular participation?*

—**Espinoza:** One of the things we wanted, particularly in my own case though that was one of the rules we were taught was the participation of the community. We were taught that we must take their opinions into account, we had to detect their needs and that really helped, because they were the ones who worked with us, they did things, it wasn’t just us working, we tried to get the community involved in whatever we had to do.

—*Did you pay them for this work?*

—**Espinoza:** When we needed skilled workers we made a contract with that person. But there were groups of people who would cooperate spontaneously in whatever we had to do.

DIFFERENT REACTIONS WITHIN THE ARMED FORCES

—*How was this work interpreted within the Armed Forces?*

—**Zambrano:** Many many officers were very glad to be part of the process and they were convinced that the population needed our support, but there were some old-liners who believed you just couldn’t use the Armed Forces for that kind of work.

I’ll never forget that the commander I had at the time would talk to us about the difference between El Libertador’s army and our own army. He used to say that El Libertador’s army was made up of the people themselves, and that now we too had to be the people. Why should there be two different parts; if we were really just one people, we had to help each other.

He did a great deal to get the people to participate in the Plan Bolívar 2000 activities because they were convinced that we were doing something for society, something good for the people, for the community, for the neediest, the poorest people. And we did it gladly; we did that work with a great amount of love.

—*What were the arguments used by those who were against this?*

—**Espinoza:** They said the social work carried out by the Armed Forces was vilifying us. They never understood why the military should be selling potatoes, cleaning hospitals, or fixing this or that. There was a huge campaign to attack our moral fibre within the Army, but they weren't at all successful because we knew how useful we were for the great majority of the people of Venezuela.

—*What did you get from the population in exchange for these activities?*

—**Espinoza:** Quite a lot of recognition and gratitude, because they were able to see that we were giving them a hand to help in all their needs, something they would never have been able to do alone. As the saying goes: "They finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel." They saw there was someone ready to help them, with the heart to give them a hand.

5. APRIL COUP

—*I'd like you to tell me what happened on April 11th. First of all, where were you?*

THE TWO MARCHES

—**Zambrano:** At the time we were a group of officers studying at the Higher School. I came early with Figueroa, one of my *compañeros*; we came to Miraflores because we had news about the two marches that were coming over here. We started controlling people here, helping the *compañeros* who were in charge of the Military House.

—*Was it an organized thing?*

—**Zambrano:** No, it was done spontaneously. We came to help. No one authorized us. When we realized things were getting out of hand, we came over here to support them. We thought: "This process has been so hard that we just can't lose it overnight." We were here until about 4 p.m., I was out there with the people. Altogether we were about three or four officers down there, out of uniform: we were there as civilians, as part of the people.

Around 4 p.m. apparently nothing had happened, I was down there on Paguita Bridge, and all of a sudden we began to see dead people. We thought they had passed out, but later we were informed they were killing our countrymen.

QUARTERED IN FORT TIUNA

—**Zambrano:** Around that time I went to the School, because they sent for all of us and we were all quartered. I went to Fort Tiuna with Figueroa and there we began to hear what the general officers of the Four Armies declared. We were very surprised. When the General Commander of the Army spoke, it was as if everything around us had tumbled down...

—*What time was that?*

—**Espinoza:** About 10 p.m.

—*What did he really say?*

—**Espinoza**: That in relation to what the President had ordered to send the soldiers to stop the peaceful march that was approaching Miraflores and the casualties that had been produced, he couldn't share this attitude and would not acknowledge the authority of the President of the Republic, so he ordered those commanders in charge of soldiers not to move them from their barracks.

Zambrano: All the generals were meeting in the Schools' commands: General Medina Gómez, one of the authors of the coup; General González González (the Bald One), former principal of our Higher School, who used to swear by the President's word yet overnight, we heard him saying something completely different, ignoring his authority.

INTERNAL REACTION TO THE ATTITUDE OF THE PUTSCHIST GENERALS

—**Zambrano**: Since we had a small group of loyal students, we gave ourselves our own orders: "No matter what they're going to say tonight, none of us must participate, because we might be found out, identified." Some of us wanted to speak, but we decided it wasn't worthwhile, it was better to let the generals do the speaking, and we would just observe closely what they were saying and what they were doing.

So we went to our room; I was with my roommate studying how things had gone off during the night. It was very impressive; we practically didn't sleep at all. That Friday they ignored the authorities, detained the President, and that same night they put on the show with the Carmona Decree: all those generals were having their picture taken, they just went crazy, fighting for positions and here we were observing all this.

Saturday morning we went for our psycho-technical test and an English test before being promoted lieutenant colonels. But we were really shocked: "Right in the middle of a coup d'Etat, and here we are taking tests!" We just signed and handed them in right away.

GROUP OF OFFICERS PREPARE ACTIONS

—**Zambrano**: With a group of officers we went to my room and analyzed the situation; then we decided we had to act. We just came to the conclusion that either we acted immediately or everything was lost. Among the officers were Hugo Salas, César Figueroa, Carlos Kancev, Gil Barrios, Leopoldo Amundaraín, Rodríguez Raban, and Francisco Espinoza.

And we felt much stronger when we found out that General Baduel was in Maracay in a consolidated position.

—*How did you find out, through the TV?*

—**Zambrano**: No, the TV had only cartoons and things like that, and Channel 8 the State channel was off, there was no information at all.

—*Did you use cell phones?*

—**Zambrano**: Yes, but they went off, the people at TELCEL cut them off: they were also part of the coup, so they had received instructions to cut the signal.

—*For specific people only?*

—**Espinoza**: Yes, but also for the whole city, so we had no phone connection.

Zambrano: I was very touched by what I saw on Friday: I got on my pickup truck and left Fort Tiuna, but there were people protesting out there, in *alcabala* 3. That impressed me. So I called

Francisco, Figueroa, I called some of them and said: “There are people protesting, this isn’t over yet!” So I came by Miraflores and I also saw people protesting, demanding they bring the President back. And we said: “We have to stay with the people.”

As I was saying, that Saturday we met in my room and we assigned missions to each one of us: you do this, you do that, let’s rescue this. Each one of us left to do something: some came to Miraflores, others stayed at Fort Tiuna, others at the *alcabala*, some others went to Maracay to support General Baduel. Our main concern was to find a general in Fort Tiuna still loyal to the process, someone with enough authority before the media, before the people.

And was that difficult! We got in touch with many generals and many of them would say no. Finally Francisco found General Martínez Mendoza and García Carneiro, and from there, each one of us went off to his destination.

RESCUING CHANNEL 8

—*And what was your destination?*

—**Zambrano:** I was putting a camera on my pickup truck (another of my *compañeros*, César, had given it to me) and had called people from Catia TV and some other friends I had in Channel 8 and given them the order to go and film everything television wasn’t taping, to tape everything they could, get all the cameras out on the street and just start filming, because we had to start sending images out to the rest of the world. That was my mission. We had given out the tasks according to each one’s capacities or experience.

—*You knew something about TV?*

—**Zambrano:** Once, I had worked for about four or five months in the office of a Channel 8 vice-president, restructuring Channel 8 before going back to the Army. I met many people there but I also became familiar with that world and became part of it. So when I realized there was no information, one of my concerns was that the world should be made aware of what was happening.

Espinoza: Not only the world, here in Venezuela too.

Zambrano: I had contacts with General García Montoya, with Baduel, so I called them. I also called the Cuban Ambassador and told him we had to send some material. Francisco was in Fort Tiuna, so around 1 p.m. I went to Channel 8, where there were 12-14 policemen, and I called Francisco: “I’m going to take Channel 8 once and for all.” And he said: “Of course, of course, *compadre*, let’s do it!”

But I had no soldiers, so I told him: “Get us some soldiers.” He called Colonel Morao and said: “Look here, there’s a *compañero* who’s going into Channel 8 and he needs soldiers,” because we couldn’t get those in Fort Tiuna, so I got in contact with a major called Marcos Torres who worked in the First Lady’s Battalion and he told me: “I’ll put the soldiers there right away.”

Around 3 p.m. Marcos called me: “Come on in, the soldiers are here.” But when I got there, there were around 3000 people out on the street, but not one single soldier.

The first thing I had to do was organize things. The police commander wouldn’t let me in, so taking advantage of the fact that Carmona President of the transitional government had dismissed the new bosses and given orders that everyone should recover his old job, I told him that I was there to take up my old place in Channel Seven though I no longer had one there and my people were coming to work with me.

They put the chief of police on and he told me: “Look here, Zambrano, you can’t go in there because I was told to guard the channel.” So I answered: “Fine, perfect, I go in and you guard the channel, so you’ll be giving me protection.” And the guy said: “No, no, you can’t go in.” “Look, *compadre*, there are 5000 people out here and more coming; I’m going in, I’m unarmed and the people out there too; they only want the channel to go on the air so the world may know what’s going on in the country, I’m going in, you’re responsible for the casualties. I’m going in.”

I had called the president of the Channel repeatedly and had been telling him: “Come over here, *compadre*, aren’t you the president of this thing? Come on over...” And the man did come over, so I told him: “Now, look, this is a coup d’Etat, we’re going in so the people won’t put too much pressure, you’re just a figure president because right now we’re going to do what we have to do in there, militarily speaking.” So he said: “OK, fine.”

And we went in. I had four kids with me who didn’t work there but who knew about television, some were from Catia TV and other places, but they had never really seen a channel, so they just had to start experimenting with the plugs, the equipment, which cameras to use: “Put the sound on, this one, not that one, put the tape on, sound, come on.” I called María Cristina {Iglesias} and she told me: “Look, we’re going to some channel to make a statement.” And I told her: “Don’t go anywhere because around 5 or 6 p.m. we’re going on the air.” Morao called me once and asked me when we were going on the air, so I told him: “Take it easy, we’re about to go on the air, but this is a bit more complicated than just putting the key in and turning it on; you know something about these things yourself.”

Around 5 or 6 p.m. we did go on the air. I got the president of Channel 8 to open up the plant correctly, and I put a TV set out there where the people were. When we came on the air I called María Cristina: “Come on over”; then I called other deputies too: “Come over here, this is going to be our rostrum now.”

All the deputies and ministers came over, even a moderator. And we started calling the employees, because we had no paper, no way of doing anything on camera, no assistant producer nothing! There was a lady with a lipstick, and she would write the messages for the moderator.

I think this was decisive, because people out in the provinces, in all Venezuela, finally learned what was happening, that it was a coup d’Etat.

And I said I would not give Channel 8 over to anyone until our President came up. So when he did appear around 3 or 4 a.m. the following day, that’s when I said: “OK, I’ll give you your channel, it’s now yours, the President is back and now that my mission is over, I’m leaving.”

—*Were there any civilians who planned this action with you?*

—**Zambrano:** There were really very few people when I decided to seize the channel, but out there, there were several organized community leaders, together with the people from Catia, from 23 de Enero⁴⁵, and from several parishes in Caracas. I told them many things: “I have no soldiers with me, you’re my soldiers. I guarantee the channel is going on the air very soon, but you must guarantee that you’re not leaving, because you have to help me defend this thing.” And the people would answer: “We’re not leaving.”

And we went on the air around 6:30 p.m.

—*What was Morao’s role in all this?*

45 Neighborhood in Caracas.

—**Zambrano:** Morao sent a Major over from the Military House, with some soldiers. When they got there, we already had the channel under control and we were working hard to get it on the air.

Espinoza: When we gathered in Chema's room we understood perfectly well there were several things we had to do; one of the main ones was to get information to the people about what was going on, because the April 11 coup came as a complete shock, it was so unexpected that we were all shocked, we just couldn't believe it. We had to get information out about what was happening, and I even spoke with deputy Pedro Carreño and told him: "Look here, Pedro, we have to go on the radio and explain what's happening, because here we are fighting, but the radio, the media aren't saying anything about it." So he said: "I've already gone to see several people and they just don't want to say anything, we're being censured, they have vetoed the information." I also called deputy Francisco Ameliach, but he was singing the same song...

So we said: "There's nothing left but to take the channel." Chema called me and told me there were several policemen there who wouldn't let him in. I called Morao and said: "Colonel, we're going to do this, we need to take the channel but we have no soldiers; I've asked several battalion commanders in the Fort for some soldiers." And Morao answered: "I just can't give you any soldiers, they're not going to let them through the *alcabalas*." We had even come to an agreement: Morao would give us five or six soldiers and we would get them out in a car.

—*Communications were very important right then...*

—**Espinoza:** They were essential, and obviously we had to let the people know what was going on and make them aware, so they would come out and cooperate and recover the constitutional line.

DELIVERING A HARANGUE TO THE PEOPLE

—*That was on the 13th. Had Rincón already informed that Chávez had not resigned and had spoken on the phone with his daughter?*

—**Espinoza:** We had heard some rumors about this. I was at Fort Tiuna coordinating where we could get some soldiers, and since I was right next to *alcabala* 3 and there were many people there, I decided to go out with one of my *compañeros* and deliver a speech to the people, explaining what we were doing. CNN was there, they taped me. I explained what was happening, that there had been a coup d'Etat that we had to go to Miraflores because we already knew we were going to recover it.

I spoke with a commissar from the Metropolitan Police who was there and told him: "Look here, *compañero*, the Armed Forces are in there, we're not going to shoot the people nor are we going to repress it; the people want to go back to the original constitutional line and they want to see the President of the Republic."

And he said: "I'm not going to do anything, but commissar Henry Vivas gave me this order. " So I told him: "Give me his phone number and I'll call him." Which I did: "Commissar, this is what's happening: we are a group of officers from the Armed Forces and we're trying to recover the constitutional line and we want the President of the Republic back. There are people here who want the same thing, but the Metropolitan Police is fighting them." And I added: "Look, if there are any casualties it will be your fault, because neither the Army nor the Armed Forces nor the National Guard are going to shoot." So he said: "We're not shooting." And I explained: "I don't know, but if there are any casualties, they will be yours." This was on the 13th.

TALKING TO THE COMMANDERS

—**Espinoza:** There were several battalion commanders there and I had talked personally with them, and we had agreed they weren't going to repress anyone; they were going to be neutral.

—*About what time was that?*

—**Espinoza:** Around 4:30 or 5 p.m. on April 13th. They wanted to arrest me in the Fort itself, they had already disconnected my phone, I was off the air, but I had already had several contacts with General Baduel. Around 4:30 or 5 p.m. I saw a group of officers at the Third Division, so I decided to go over there and tell General Wilfredo Silva: “Look, General, have you spoken already with General Baduel?” “No, I haven’t.” “OK, give me your phone, because mine isn’t working” how innocent of me! And he said: “No, it isn’t working because they cut your line, mine too.” He was using his assistant’s girlfriend’s phone, and that’s how I called General Baduel and put General Silva on, and later on I did the same thing with General García Carneiro. So I told him: “Let’s go to *cabala 3*, there are lots of people there.” That’s where I had spoken passionately to the people.

As far as military power was concerned, we didn’t really have any, because even if some battalion commanders were with us, they were not authorized to move their soldiers.

—*I don’t understand how come if you were there leading your soldiers you couldn’t give them orders, even if other officers told you not to.*

—**Espinoza:** Because there was a very precise order from the Army general commander to all unit commanders: even to the point that in each *alcabala* there was a senior officer and they were closed, they weren’t going to let anyone out.

So I suggested going to *alcabala 3*, where there were many people; General García got on a tank and started talking to the people. There were some deputies there and other *compañeros*. I told them we were going to get all those people inside the Fort, where the Army general command was, and that we would make them sit there until General Vásquez Velasco handed our President over.

Another *compañero* and I spoke with those commanders who had soldiers with them and told them: “See here now, this is the situation, if they don’t want to hand the President over, I’ll speak to the people and we’re going to make them go into Fort Tiuna. I’m just asking you not to do anything.” And they answered: “OK, we’re not going to do anything.” And they really got their soldiers together and took them back to their barracks. And they even removed the tanks that were still in front of the Fort.

I also spoke with General López Hidalgo and General Martínez Mendoza: “Generals, go there and talk with General Vásquez Velasco and tell him that if he doesn’t bring the President back, all these people are going to go where he is and he’s going to have to decide what to do with all those people inside the Fort. He’s going to be responsible for that!”

They did go and talked to him, they negotiated something, and then our own *compañeros* went and took over the Ministry where mister Carmona was sitting, and arrested him.

Zambrano: Francisco was in charge of making passionate speeches to the masses at Fort Tiuna, including the commanders, the generals, the colonels (he laughs).

—*Was that when you discovered you were a good speaker...?*

—**Espinoza:** Yes, I had no idea I had that knack...

Zambrano: When you’re convinced of something you really get inspired and do what you have to do, things come out spontaneously, you don’t have to think about it too much.

BADUEL FIRM IN HIS STAND

—*Did you find out about other initiatives like the one you had?*

—**Espinoza:** General Baduel's, who was always firm in his stand. He never recognized Carmona, and said that the only legal and constitutional authority he recognized was Hugo Chávez, the President of the Republic. And that's the stand he defended together with his soldiers... Of course he had his soldiers all concentrated where he was, and they were under his command. Later on we found out that there were other generals with a firm stand I even called some of them, and just like some of them never answered the phone, others said they agreed with what I was saying.

CHÁVEZ'S ATTITUDE ON HIS RETURN

—*And, what happened when Chávez came back? How did you interpret his return? Did you ever imagine it would be so quick? Who was the main person responsible for his return?*

—**Espinoza:** In my opinion, if ever there was a main player there, that main player were the people, because as I had told them: "Look, it's either today or never." What I meant was that if things didn't happen that Saturday, Monday would have been too late because they were going to substitute the commanders and put their own people there.

—*You participated actively in these events and were able to observe the strength of the people at times like these. When Chávez came back and took over again and I guess it must have been a deeply emotional situation for all and he made that speech, a very calm speech I heard it in Cuba and spoke about the attempt at negotiation, and made an appeal for national harmony, how did you interpret all that?*

—**Espinoza:** That's true, and that's what politics is all about: you have to talk, come to an agreement, and the strongest side must be convinced enough to state things the best way possible. He must put an idea into practice and get the rest of the people to follow him.

—*But I think there's a sector here in Venezuela that won't accept any arguments.*

—**Zambrano:** I think that when we came back we should have made a 180-degree change in many things, adopt some measures with the written press, the radio and all those things, but we didn't realize this at that time, and we let it slip out of our hands. What's incredible is that we have gone through a coup d'Etat and there are no culprits. Practically the only culprits of the coup are the President and Executive Power. In my opinion, the measures we adopted were much too lax.

Espinoza: Very few people really know Chávez, even those who are on his team don't know him very well. And I'm not even on his team.

Zambrano: None of us are.

Espinoza: The President is an excellent politician; I really admire him for that. I always like to go to the bottom of things, because I usually say: "Fine, OK; if this general did this, he made a statement, well, then he must be punished or something like that." But what is best for the State or the institution? Is it better that I grab this general and execrate him, or name him somewhere else, in another job? Because that would be a message for the whole collective group.

Zambrano: A message, but not in a strategic job or a key job.

Espinoza: No, but if I take more drastic measures, maybe I'm really going to cause division and provoke resentment and more resentment.

MAJOR MANUEL GREGORIO BERNAL MARTÍNEZ

BOLÍVAR, THE INSPIRATION

1. Family background; His father was a junior high school teacher; Early military vocation; He participated in the 1992 coup without belonging to the MBR 200. **2. Bolívar and anti-imperialist awareness.** **3. Electoral victory.** **4. Plan Bolívar 2000;** Organizing the community; Making the people participate; Loyalty for our homeland, and not toward your superior; It was a great experience; Go back to the barracks?; Rationalizing work. **5. The April coup;** He declared himself a defaulter; Some military were deceived?

1. FAMILY BACKGROUND

HIS FATHER WAS A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

—*I'd like you to tell me something about you...*

—I'm the son of foreigners because both my mother and my father are Spanish, from Madrid. My father came to Venezuela because my grandmother had cancer and her doctors recommended the Tropics. When my grandmother died, my grandfather decided to go back to Spain, but my father, who was very young, decided to stay, so he married my mother in Spain by proxy and founded the family my four brothers and I come from. My father, now deceased, was a junior high school teacher; he really was an engineer in agronomy and a civil engineer, but he never practiced his profession he always preferred participating in youth movements, school movements, the Scouts of Venezuela, where he founded a group. He liked child psychology very much and really understood why young people rebel.

As a foreigner, he taught me very early in life that my homeland came first, and then my loved ones.

—*Was he a Spanish republican?*

—No, he was in the *Falange* of Antonio Primo de Rivera.

We grew up in a high-middle class neighborhood; I really grew up in La Castellana, so I know that atmosphere very well, all their defects and complexes, but my father taught us to love our neighbor and he made us play with kids from poor neighborhoods. He built camps with kids from Catia and other poor neighborhoods. I went everywhere. He loved the semantics of the simple Venezuelan; he loved to go to town squares, for example, to Plaza Bolívar in Caracas, and just listen to them. He loved that atmosphere, where he could be with simple and spontaneous men and women, true people.

Then he got enthused with painting, he painted Bolívar, the Liberation Army, and the present Army too; I have those paintings.

EARLY MILITARY VOCATION

—*Did you go the Army because of your vocation?*

—Yes, and my father understood that's what I liked. My first impression came when I was 5 or 6 years old, when my father took me to Campo de Carabobo, and I was very impressed by the two soldiers who were guarding the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I was so impressed that I told him: "Look, the dolls, the dolls!" But when I saw the relief of the guard I was even more impressed, and I told him: "Look, they're not fake, they are real-life." So he answered: "Those are soldiers, soldiers of your homeland." And that's when I started becoming really interested. After that visit, each time I went on vacation I would insist he take me again to Campo de Carabobo.

I'm not a born historian, but being a military I am educated and I know so many things we can be proud of. Just think of our struggle for freedom, Bolívar, his naked and hungry soldiers, and how he was able to make them go forward only through his personal example and leadership. How that hungry, shoeless, poor, and sick army, with the highest possible morale, fought against the world power of the time and defeated an imperialist army.

HE PARTICIPATED IN THE 1992 COUP WITHOUT BELONGING TO THE MBR 200

—*Did you participate in the 1992 coup?*

—I participated in the February 4 rebellion, though I wasn't a member of the MBR 200.

—*What rank did you have then?*

—I was a newly promoted lieutenant in the Parachutist Brigade. There were three battalions in Operation Dignity in Maracay, and the President of the Republic headed one of them.

I was in Battalion Chirinos, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Joel Acosta Chirinos. I found out a month before. But then I was told they had been organizing it ideologically for years. So why did I decide all of a sudden to participate and join in? Well, even when I wasn't yet directly involved in the MBR 200, I was informed of their plans because I was company commander and many of my officers knew about it. I found out a month before but others only found out the week before, and the commander allowed each one of us to decide if we were going to join. Only one captain refused to participate, the rest of the battalion participated fully in the operation.

—*Were you arrested?*

—Yes. My mission was to take over the DIM {Department for Military Intelligence} and when they surrendered I was there, and Commander Chávez was also sent there, together with Commander Acosta Chirinos, Captain Ronald Blanco⁴⁶, and other officers. The rest was taken directly to the San Carlos Barracks. About two or three days later we were also taken there. But I still didn't know what had happened: if the soldiers had retreated, if they were in prison and that gave me a lot of food for thought. But once we got to San Carlos we realized the rest of the officers of the rebel operation were also there.

We lieutenants stayed together with the captains and the sergeants, but the situation became unbearable, so the lieutenants and sub-lieutenants were put aside and we were taken to Fort Tiuna,

46 Now governor in the state of Táchira.

where the CECAO⁴⁷ worked, in parallel with the Military Academy of Venezuela. They prepared it so we would be separated from the captains and the sergeants.

—*How long were you arrested?*

—I was there for around three months.

—*And what did you do when you got out?*

—Many of my friends decided to drop out when they left jail, but some of us decided to stay. Those of us who stayed on in the Army were constantly harassed, but we kept up our morale for struggle, a struggle that started way before 1992, perhaps in 1989 or long before that. This process keeps growing, in spite of its errors, and its goal isn't yet consolidated. I think that we are going through a process similar to that waged for our independence as a colony.

2. BOLÍVAR AND ANTI-IMPERIALIST AWARENESS

—*How is that?*

—Because 200 years ago, Bolívar and that worthy generation were able to expel an empire that had occupied our territory physically. But I believe and of course I come to my own historical conclusions that once Great Colombia was dissolved, another empire penetrated our country, with other methods: that invisible hand of economic domination that we are still suffering, and the empire that is still present here.

—*The empire from the North?*

—Yes sir, from the North. In my opinion, our divisions and our differences explain why we have remained so long in this poverty, this misery, and this lack of culture because they can dominate us and drain us only if we are not united.

—*Usually, the ideology coming from the North tries to convince people with a bit more culture, that our countries are poor because people won't work, lack initiative, are drunkards, whatever...How were you able to understand that the original problem came directly from the North, and that you couldn't blame the poor?*

—The American dream, in my opinion, was built on the South American nightmare. For this American dream to materialize they had to drain someone's blood. Not like the Soviet block, which was self-sustained they had no one's blood to drain.

—*Did you learn this at the Academy?*

—No, I learned this through life.

—*And what helped you understand this?*

—Little by little, reading, reading Bolívar and his history.

—*So, Bolívar is important?*

—He was and is important to me. He even said something like: "The United States of North America are destined by providence to plague the peoples of South America with hunger and misery, in the name of freedom."

47 Training Center for Candidates to the Rank of Officer.

I get a lot of inspiration from Bolívar's beliefs and from Jesus. I consider them equal, two revolutionaries. I study the philosophy in everything they say I try to meditate on all they say, their verb and their action.

If the Latin American people had understood where truth lay, we would have consolidated El Libertador's vision of a Great Colombia. If the Latin American countries had become articulated, we wouldn't be where we are today.

Bolívar used to complain when he said: "Aren't 300 years {under the yoke} enough?" But we've been under now for 500 years; how many more will we need before we understand that our continent must come united? We have so many resources, yet they simply go down the drain, become the property of a small group of people related to the interests of the foreign power that dominates us.

Bolívar worked hard for unity, and those of us who understand this know that it is precisely in unity that our force resides. We can apply this in our own family the smallest cell of society, a united family that understands its members, with moral values, and all the factors that make that family invincible before all problems.

Loot at the European Union there's Bolívar's ideology at work; those European countries united, and look how strong they're becoming!

Mutual help among the people, open frontiers why can't we do the same?

—*Were you a member of the MBR 200?*

—No, no. I'm not very versed in the political information of those movements and those political matters. But I am convinced that we must give up some of our personal aspirations, and offer what we have to our neighbor. If we all had that attitude we would be much better off.

Those with power use the media to prolong the ignorance of the people, so they can keep draining our riches for their own benefit. You can't explain how in a country as rich as Venezuela, 80 % of the population is poor, and some children have no school. This is social awareness at its best. When a human being loses this social awareness, he loses everything; he is no longer a human being.

3. ELECTORAL VICTORY

—*What about the 1998 elections, did you see the electoral victory coming?*

—Yes, the population felt it. Chávez is a very humble and good man; he really loves the people. And that's why I follow him. He has no base passions or selfish interests. But there are some things or decisions that we often don't understand.

—*Like what?*

—I am referring specifically to the fact that there are government officers who are not working well, who hinder the process, and yet they're not sanctioned or removed from office; often they're against the Bolivarian process. And an example of this is April 11. They are not true revolutionaries, because up front they are acting as though they supported the process, and behind its back they are hindering it.

But I always say that we must never underestimate the President. We shouldn't underestimate him because he always has the best intentions and knows why he does something, because he is a very capable person. He is motivated by collective interests, by the interests of his country; he loves our traditions, our culture, and above all things our people.

In my opinion, his revolutionary project doesn't want to change things but put them back in their correct place, because things became disorderly. So it doesn't matter whether this is a revolution, a change in the model, or a change in the project what we have to do is put things back in their place.

—*What is a revolution, in your opinion?*

—I'm telling you: it's precisely that putting things in their place; rescuing our culture once again, our traditions, our dignity as a people. Like everyone else, I studied in a school where they taught our history in a very superficial way, and of Bolívar they only told us his date of birth, they never went into his philosophy or his work.

—*Did you relate Chávez with the left?*

—No.

—*What was your vision of the left?*

—I never studied politics, nor has it ever interested me; I've never been interested in reading books about doctrines, be they democratic, dictatorial, socialist, or leftist. I do have some knowledge because I read history, so I know something about these political ideologies human beings use in the social world.

But I can tell you that to feel love; to take what's yours and give it to your neighbor if that's socialism, then we'll be socialist; if that's being on the left, we'll be on the left; if that's being democrats, we'll be democrats.

Because in my particular case, my ideology comes from Jesus and his words and his actions; and from Bolívar and his words and his actions, together with my father's teachings, which followed that same course.

—*In your Christian beliefs, is there any influence from Theology for Liberation?*

—I don't know anything about that theology; I'm not a church-going man. I went to church only to be baptized and be married, and maybe some other time. I don't feel inclined to go and talk to a priest; he's in my own position. More than in priests, I believe in missionaries, a man who converts his frock in a true mission and really throws in his lot with the poorest people. That's God's doctrine: to go where the poorest, the weakest, the neediest live, like Sister Teresa from Calcutta. That's what I believe in, in those missionaries who give their lives to God on earth. I don't believe in the ever-powerful strength of the Church, I don't believe in this. And I can't explain all the riches in the Vatican, when there is so much misery in the world.

4. PLAN BOLÍVAR 2000

—*Tell me about Plan Bolívar 2000. When the government said the military had to accept this plan, what was your opinion, and what is your experience with your soldiers?*

—It was just great, a very beautiful thing. I think it was precisely this action that quickly eliminated the separation between the barrack walls and the citizens. It allowed us to come in contact with the communities.

ORGANIZING THE COMMUNITY

—*Where?*

—There in Campo de Carabobo, a very poor place. We started repairing schools, but I tried to concentrate our efforts more in increasing people's awareness. One of these examples used to up when the population asked for a squad of my soldiers to clean the streets, the brooks, etc., and we used to tell them: "Let's organize this, because I'm not getting anything done if I come in and clean, and do what you really should do yourself in the community, because tomorrow things will be dirty again and you're not going to take care of them. If you try hard, if you do your work, you're going to care for them." That's how I started to organize work teams within the communities themselves.

Some commanders used all their soldiers and all their professionals to solve these problems, and the next day there were very disappointed: "How terrible, the school we painted is all broken down again!" I used the smallest number of soldiers possible for this, and I concentrated my efforts in organizing and teaching the communities so they would do their own work.

MAKING THE PEOPLE PARTICIPATE

—*How did you get the idea to make the people themselves participate? Because one of the criticisms is precisely that the military have been sent to do social work, to take over what the population should do; they don't organize them, but solve their problems instead, in a populist way. You say that some sectors did it this way, but others didn't...*

—I think if you go in and do their work you are a populist, you give them fish but you don't teach them how to fish.

I was very impressed when I read about the people who found themselves in very difficult situations, even worse than ours, and were able to overcome them through their own efforts, their unified awareness, like the Europeans did after the war.

—*Exactly, but where did you get the idea that it is important for the people to do their own thing?*

—When people participate, their self-esteem grows. The problem is how to make them discover that if they unite and work all together, they will be able to solve many of their problems.

Thanks to the populist and irresponsible attitude of former governments and I don't know if that's the case in other Latin American countries some people here think that everything is the President's fault; if I don't have a job, I have the President to blame; if I don't have electricity in my neighborhood, I have the President to blame. So the blame falls on the President, or the governor, or the mayor.

Almost intentionally they planted a culture with indolent attitudes, which affects even our prosperity and development as a nation. The problem of our people was caused; it didn't just happen, as some would like you to believe.

—*Caused, by that you mean that there is a cause?*

—Yes, because increasing a man's poverty until you leave him in total misery, then making electoral promises as a way of giving him charity, is just one example of all those premeditated methods used by these "starvers" of human beings to feed their greed for power. These practices debase people, because they stimulate their knee-bent attitude, which is exactly what they want: to keep them under the yoke. So it is logical to think that this man will be grateful when you give him something, and will blame you for all his troubles when you don't. I talk a lot with my soldiers, and with the community teachers too, and I tell them: "Look here, I think we are all responsible for this country, from the President down to the simplest worker, because the leader who doesn't work for the happiness of his people; the soldier who goes to sleep instead of doing guard duty; the teacher who doesn't give classes; the lawyer who lives well thanks to what he charges; the worker who

registers in a trade union interested only in the rights, but never the duties they are the main cause behind our country's destruction. World history has given us many examples of how immorality has destroyed huge empires, and lust and illegality erased them. How many more mistakes are human beings going to make against the work of God? Who gave man the right to submit his brother? He who humbles his brother is not worthy of being called a human being.

In a word: a Plan Bolívar 2000 that stops short and only does a little painting, will find broken desks, written walls, broken down bathrooms and all this because instead of asking for man's participation, it did all his work for him.

That's the kind of leadership we have to apply in Plan Bolívar 2000.

LOYALTY FOR YOUR HOMELAND, AND NOT TOWARD YOUR SUPERIOR

—*Since you're talking of leadership, did you analyze this method in the Academy?*

—No.

—*So where did you get all these ideas?*

—They often want to convince you that military leadership is a strict thing, and that there is a model to follow when you have to solve some problem but I don't agree with this, because in everyday life there are similar situations, but there will always be some variation on the general pattern. That's why I make no effort at all to follow guidelines in my leadership I want to be natural, and it has become a habit with me.

I've tried to break some of my superiors' patterns that I consider wrong. I could give you several examples with specific terminology from our own institutions: loyalty is supposed to be some kind of duty, an automatic submission to authority, no matter what its merits. I once had to prove this to one of my superiors, who requested that kind of loyalty from me, so I had to explain what I'm loyal to: God's principles, my country, my institution, my people; I'm loyal to the weak man rather than to the strong one, so I told him: "I'll be loyal to you only if you're loyal to the things I'm loyal to."

These are the principles and values I don't doubt, and this is what I try to hand down to my subordinates, and to my children in the future.

IT WAS A GREAT EXPERIENCE

—*What did Plan Bolívar 2000 mean to you?*

—A very nice experience.

We took care of 400 affected people in the state of Vargas, and this wasn't inside our barracks but outside, where I had to work double. The June 24 Company in Campo de Carabobo has become part of the community. We participate in everything: medical activities, solutions to all kinds of social and security problems. I still keep having meetings to solve problems that come up between the municipality and the associations, and there is a very nice on-going relationship we are now part of the community.

—*How did your soldiers feel?*

—The lower you go in this kind of work, the more sincerity you will find and discover that the soldier is the true essence of his people. Right now I think it's hard to cheat a soldier in relation to the people. What happened in 1989, when they ordered those soldiers to gun down their own people, is not going to happen again. What happened when we came back to our barracks that time?

The soldiers became aware they had killed relatives of other soldiers, and I think that what happened this year on April 13 began down there with the people and started climbing up. I thought I would have to convince my soldiers that the problem was a violation of constitutional order, but I didn't have to explain anything at all. The attitude of the officers, the sergeants, and the soldiers was a show of impotence: they were crying, they couldn't understand what was going on.

GO BACK TO THE BARRACKS?

—I've been told that when Plan Bolívar 2000 comes to an end, part of the military will have to back to the barracks, where they have their own task: the defense of the people.

—It's true, some say: "We have to go back to our barracks, we have our own things to do." But why insist so much on separating the soldier from the common citizen, if in the end we are citizens too? Here in our institution we used to use the term "civilian" in an insulting way. But what are your father, your mother, and your wife? And what about your children? So, what are you? I'm a plain citizen; my first title is that of citizen. That's what Bolívar used to say. There can be no injustice, no corruption around me, because that's treason. And treason against whom? Against my country. My country is not just a little old parcel; my country is a territory, a population, and interests. That's what my country is! And all those who want to come and join us, fine; all those who want to come and take away, they're going to have to fight against my vote and all my strength, because I'm going for them one way or the other.

I'm going to ask you to visit my unit and see if my soldiers aren't well trained. I train my soldiers well; they're the ones I've implemented Plan Bolívar 2000 with. I comply with my military duty and with the whole military program that comes with our mission. And anyone can ask: "How is their morale?" because someone out there could come to the conclusion that with so much work to do, they have no time for their families but that's not the case. All the soldiers and the officers have accepted this new approach to society very well.

RATIONALIZING WORK

—When I was given my mission I went to visit people's markets, and found all the professionals from the Digoles Company there. "What are you all doing here?" And they told me: "Wherever you go, we have to be there too." So I said: "No, let's organize this better, with one of you supervising it's enough, because in the end we have to get the same results with just one of you supervising. We're not going to get anything done if you're all there doing nothing, when you could be spending that time with your families. Next week it'll be your turn, and the one after that, someone else's turn."

As a company, we have complied with everything I've explained to you. Usually a battalion is made up of three to five companies, according to their mission so now you can understand all this a little better... In a single company I have more or less 100 soldiers, three officers, four junior officers, three groups of professionals. To make a battalion you just multiply this by five. And besides our normal tasks, we are responsible for the poorest municipality in the state of Carabobo, and we have to guard Campo de Carabobo, one of Venezuela's centers of historical heritage.

Four letters move the world: LOVE. If you put love in, everything will turn our all right, everyone will be happy, enthused with his activity. So our task is to teach our officers and junior officers that they have to mix with the population, they are part of us, that's where our fathers, our mothers, our brothers are.

—With this conduct you preach, your soldiers must love very much.

—I feel well with my soldiers, with the community, I do feel they love me...

—*Hasn't the idea that you could be mayor ever crossed your mind? Have you thought about it?*

—I feel that it's in the Army where I can do much more than I could ever do out there. I don't like the political game, because I've been very disappointed with what I've seen there.

—*Does Chávez know about the work you're doing out here?*

—I don't really know. I'm not crazy about going and telling him; "Look here, President, this is what I'm doing." No, no, no; because I'm just doing my duty, and what I'm doing is part of what we're all doing with the same goal in mind, under one single leadership: our country.

5. THE APRIL COUP

—*So what happened during the April coup?*

—The first thing I did was to make contact with my superior, Colonel Morao. I was in the June 24 Company at Campo de Carabobo. Morao was in a different place; he was practically in the very middle of the disturbances that took place at Palacio de Miraflores, because he was regiment commander. So I called him and told him: "Colonel, I consider this a *de facto* coup, and neither my officers nor my soldiers nor I recognize this."

—*When was this?*

—On the 12th, at dawn, when I saw the President on TV going into the General Command of the Army, already under the control of his infamous captors. And Morao answered: "Look here now, take it easy, stay there, prepare your statement to hand in your command." So I left, gave my officers instructions to get the documents ready, went back to my office and thought: "This is impossible!" But then, more in control of myself, cooled off as you might say, I began to think: my colonel is in a very different situation from mine. So as soon as I realized this, I decided on another mode of action, and went immediately back to gather my officers and gave them the order to suspend everything related to handing over power, and to activate the armed preparation of the personnel for an immediate exercise of instruction. And I began communicating with several generals, without getting any answer.

HE DECLARED HIMSELF A DEFAULTER

—Then I called Baduel and told him: "General, I inform you that the June 24 Company, its officers, soldiers, and myself are now on the side of resistance, because this is a *de facto* coup, this is murder." And Baduel said: "Look, Bernal, I feel the same. If they want to get us out of this Parachutist Unit, they'll have to take me and my men out of here dead. We're not going to accept tricks of any kind." That was on the 11th, rather the 12th at dawn. That's when we started weaving a network with the other units. Together with my captains and lieutenants we began calling their colleagues and getting information on the situation from the Zulia to the center, and we also called some units in Caracas...

—*And what happened with Morao's instructions?*

—I just plainly forgot about my regular rank, because I found support in Baduel. Meanwhile, my own colonel Morao was doing the right thing, but he was in completely different circumstances from Baduel's, from mine, and from the rest of the units, because this was really a coup d'Etat from east Caracas against Miraflores, headquarters of Colonel Morao Cardona's commando.

SOME MILITARY WERE DECEIVED?

—We then started testing out the other units, and discovered they were on our same line of thought. And thanks to this, many military leaders were forced to go against their commitment with those in favor of the coup.

—*Do you believe some military were deceived?*

—Yes, if you are not convinced of what you are; if you are not convinced of your rank, of the responsibility that comes with your rank, then it is easy to deceive you.

—*Do you think some military thought Chávez was going against the Constitution, that he had shot his own people, so they had to organize a coup because the military didn't agree with that?*

—Look, in my opinion, economic power as a whole, together with the Church, supported by the United States and the nefarious role played by the media, shook the floor beneath those with weak convictions. And if you're not convinced of your historic commitment, your commitment with your country, anything can happen.

—*But that's pure opportunism...*

—It can also be opportunism, but this is the result of the ideas they have implanted in us: "I am a person that must respect the institution, I do what my boss tells me to do." If that's how you feel, then you're nothing but a slave, and you don't have a boss but an owner.

These are my own ideas. I don't want to become a general, but if that's in my future, I'll be glad to become one. I have other goals: I don't want my children to consider me a coward, I want my children and my grandchildren to say: "My father did something so this country could be different, worthy of dignity."

And it is really a great pity that in this kind of institution you can deceive even a general...

When I was arrested on February 4, 1992, a group of colonels from the Army's General Inspectors' Office told me: "Look here, lieutenant, you were deceived." And I told them: "Just a minute, colonel, the day someone can deceive the lieutenants of the Army, you should really start worrying, because that will mean we have no Army at all. How can you deceive a lieutenant?" "So you're convinced of what you did?" "Yes, I'm convinced of what I did, and I'll pay whatever I have to pay, but don't say I'm stupid, don't point at me as a stupid man."

But if a general told me: "I was deceived," then I would tell him: "Brother, give yourself up, you can't wear *los soles de la República*⁴⁸, aren't you ashamed to say you were deceived? Accept your responsibility in this!"

I'm not worried if someone's position is the opposite of mine; what really worries me are those dangerous "jackets," those who put on opportunistic jackets, those are the dangerous ones, they are traitors.

48 The suns of the Republic: they define your military rank; a general, for example, wears one sun.

GENERAL LUIS FELIPE ACOSTA CARLEZ

RECOVERING CONTROL OVER OIL

1. Family background; His father was an ambulance driver; Only one pair of shoes a year; Older brothers financed studies; His brother was a founder of the MBR 200; Studies. **2. Caracazo.** **3. Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200;** Sowing the seed; Against corruption. **4. The 1992 coup;** Mission in El Salvador; The electoral road. **5. Plan Bolívar 2000: an extraordinary idea.** **6. April coup;** The school principal supported the coup; National Guard officers did not support the coup. **7. Recovering control over oil;** Obeying the law and a presidential decree; Struggle to get the El Palito plan working; Agreement and then treason by the opposition. **8. The Coca Cola and beer cases.** **9. Bolívar's ideas move this process;** National Guard and National Police; Demanding collective rights be respected.

1. FAMILY BACKGROUND

HIS FATHER WAS AN AMBULANCE DRIVER

—*Tell me something about your life and your family's.*

—I was born in Los Llanos, in San Juan de los Morros, state of Guárico, one of the central states. I come from a humble family; we were 14 children.

—*And your parents?*

—My mother was a housewife and my father worked in different business activities: he was a cattle farmer, worked in the purchase and sale of cattle; he was also owner of some trucks, and he sold stones he got from the river. Later on, during the Rómulo Betancourt administration, he was responsible for the General Police Department (DIGEPOL), now known as the DISIP, for police investigations. He stayed there for around five years, and then he was thrown out because he had only empiric knowledge, he had never studied his experience came from having been a detective and his success was due to the investigative logic he applied. Later on he worked as an ambulance driver for the San Juan de los Morros Central Hospital, and that's how he provided for his family. My older brothers studied technical careers because they had to work and help out financially.

ONLY ONE PAIR OF SHOES A YEAR

—I remember that on December 24, Baby Jesus, really my father, would bring us a new pair of shoes, shoes with a real sole, and during the first few months of the new year I was very elegant when I went to school, because my mother made our own uniforms. But already by May the sole of the shoes was all worn out, and since there was no more money to buy new ones I used to put in a piece of cardboard so I wouldn't soil my socks, but when it rained it was a real problem because the

cardboard would get all wet. I remember when I went to church, I was very ashamed to kneel because the children sitting behind me would laugh at the holes in my shoes. Sometimes my father would give me 25 cents to buy *chucherías*⁴⁹ in the store, but I used to save them until I had 3 Bolívares to repair my shoes with a shoemaker that came by the house every week. Sometimes I had to go in *alpargatas*, but the teacher wouldn't let me in the classroom with them.

We were a humble family, but a very honorable one. Our parents had brought us up with ethical principles. My father left us no riches, but he did give us an education, and now we are passing all this down to our own children, it's something that comes down through the generations and it is the most important fortune our father could have left us.

OLDER BROTHERS FINANCED STUDIES

—My older brothers asked my father to stop working. The civil engineer helped pay the expenses of our family; my older brothers studied technical careers like topography, schoolteachers, airplane stewardesses, and they helped pay for the education of the younger ones. As soon as one of them became professional, he started paying for part of the studies of the younger brothers, and this is how we were all able to graduate. The older ones helped us graduate, and we in turn helped the younger ones. There was a wonderful unity at home and we were always together, helping each other. In our family we have civil engineers, agronomists, lawyers, doctors, militaries, topographers, and teachers.

We are still helping each other, we meet, talk, have parties, listen to our parents' opinions, and this is how we all share in our family. We have a specific custom in Venezuela: our families are made up of parents, grandparents, brothers, uncles, nephews, and we all live in the same house with lots of unity, and even if I'm a general of the Republic, I still ask my older brother for *la bendición* (his blessing), because we have never lost our humility or our roots.

I remember we had a small plot of land, and my father used to take me there to help him, he would stick a long pole in the soil and when he took it out I would pour in five grains of corn and filled the hole; then I waited until they grew into a small plant. And when I saw it I would shout: "Look, dad, this one came out." And my father would laugh. Until finally I saw the plant really grow. I was proud when I planted the soil and even prouder when my brothers, my whole family would eat *cachapa* made with the corn I had planted...

—*Cachapa?*

—It's a special bread we make here in Venezuela with young corn, it's very very good, very local, it comes from the plains. And I would say: "Look, I planted this corn here with my father and you're eating what I planted." So we shared in this happiness. I was just a kid and my older brother would tell me: "Yes, little brother, you're going to be a big man and you have to keep planting so we can all eat." He would be very satisfied when he said this to me; I liked his message.

HIS BROTHER WAS A FOUNDER OF THE MBR 200

—In 1982, one of my brothers⁵⁰ founded the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200, together with the President of the Republic. He was killed on March 1st, 1989, when the rebellion in Caracas {he is referring to the Caracazo}. It was a very strange death. According to the investigation, my brother was killed by a sharpshooter in the el Valle Parish. But we have information that Carlos

49 Cheap things.

50 Felipe Antonio Acosta Carlez.

Andrés Pérez had him killed by an officer in the DISIP. They wanted to get rid of one of the founders of the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200.

STUDIES

—*What about your studies?*

—I studied in the San Juan de los Morros elementary school; then I left to study in the Inter-diocesan Seminar in Calabozo, and from there I went to Caracas. I was studying to be a priest, but I didn't like that profession. So I decided to leave and went to the Officers Training School of the Armed Forces and Cooperation (EFOFAC). I graduated as an officer and have devoted all my professional life to operational aspects. I have a Masters' Science Degree in Public Security, Security, and Defense Management; I specialized in Human Resources Management, and in Brazil I specialized in Politics and Strategy.

Throughout my professional career and my studies in general I have learned that my power resides in my soldiers, and the power of my soldiers comes from me, it comes from their officer. There must be a perfect relationship between the officer and his soldiers, and that is precisely what didn't exist in the group of putschist generals who called their soldiers for the coup d'Etat, but those soldiers reacted: "Come on, you never listened to me, you never met with me, you were never with me, so why are you calling me now?"

We have had moral power over the soldiers, and the soldiers are not for any political party the soldiers support the Constitution, and that beautiful principle of the collective right of society. Why? Because our soldiers come from the people, and I also come from the people, I also come from a humble family. I have yet to see the son of a businessman doing his obligatory military service, or serving his country as a national guard, or as a professional soldier, or enlisted in other corps.

2. CARACAZO

—*And how did you interpret what happened during the Caracazo?*

—I was working on Margarita Island, in the state of Nueva Esparta; what we did was talk to the people to avoid looting, and that's one of the places where there was none. We shared our feelings with the population. I was then captain and all the National Guard went into the community and explained that we didn't want any violence, but that we understood their social problems, because the people were hungry. There was looting only because they were hungry. There was a lot of speculation, the government did absolutely nothing, so the only thing the people could do was walk into the markets and get food. There was no economic policy to answer the population's needs.

It was an unfortunate social explosion you saw what happened. First of all because my brother Felipe Antonio Acosta Carlez was murdered this was a terrible blow to my family, and to the process as a whole. Felipe's death was just the last straw, it accelerated the February 4, 1992, coup d'Etat. I'd like you to know that our President Hugo Chávez Frías wrote some words about the coup d'Etat on the occasion of my brother's death, and right now they're playing it a lot over the radio because they put music to the lyrics, harp, *cuatro*, and maraca music, and someone with a deep voice sings it over the radio the people like it very much. In the second place, because the Armed Forces and state police started killing people outright. Anyone peeping out of a building was just shot and killed; more than 4000 people died in these circumstances. Their exact numbers aren't really known; they were never made public, just the number the government of the time wanted to give. Things are very different now, because the government's public policy is satisfying the needs

of the people through a participative democracy where the people can submit to their government different alternatives to solve their problems, and then the government will be in charge of implementing the actions to satisfy their needs.

A journalist once asked me: “General, please give me an example of a socio-political work carried out by Chávez’s government.” “Well: Bolivarian schools.” And he started laughing and said: “Oh, come on, General, how can you talk about schools when they don’t even have desks.” And I told him: “Well, yes, that’s true, but before we didn’t even have schools. Bolivarian schools might not have desks, as you say, and the kids receive their classes sitting on the floor, but they now have schools. The children are being educated, the peasants are being educated, and they are taught to read. Everyone is responsible for the situation in education, not just the government. So let’s donate the desks, let’s hand out clothing to the poor children; those shoes you don’t need any more give them to me, I’ll thank you very much and give them to that poor child, or a ball anything will do.” And then he goes and tells me: “General, you are really convincing when you talk.”

3. MOVIMIENTO BOLIVARIANO REVOLUCIONARIO 200

SOWING THE SEED

—I would like you to tell me about your relationship with the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200.

—OK. The Movimiento was born as a result of the oath taken by four officers in El Samán de Güere on December 17, 1982: Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, Raúl Baduel, Urdaneta Hernández, and Felipe Antonio Acosta Carlez.

My brother was one of the four officers who participated in that oath. I’ll never forget that my brother came home that weekend and told my father: “Dad, we’ve just taken an oath in El Samán de Güere where we ask for a change in Venezuela: a philosophical change, a democratic change, with people’s participation, where the people can give their opinion, where the government’s public policy will satisfy their needs.” So my father said: “Look here, how many took the oath?”... “There were four of us, dad.” And my father told him: “Are you crazy? Do you think four ragamuffins are going to be able to offset Acción Democrática and COPEI? Where did you get such a crazy idea? You’re all crazy.” The three of us hugged each other and told my brother: “We support you.” And that’s how it went. Now that so many people support this change, I become more convinced that Felipe Antonio was right.

Right after that oath we started sowing the seed. I participated from the very beginning, because in the National Guard I was elected by my brother to implement this doctrine and convince officers from the four Army corps to embrace this change. The change consisted in treating the soldiers correctly, applying the principles of leadership of your soldiers, knowing your soldiers and solving their problems, always giving the example this being the most beautiful aspect of that principle of leadership toward your soldiers. That’s how we started convincing people about the new philosophy, and later it left the barracks and where did it go? It went to the people! That’s how this understanding between the people and the Army was born, and it began convincing the people, who became identified with us, with the officers, with the Armed Forces in general.

—Did that relationship with the people begin when you left prison?

No, way before that, it began in 1982, when they took the oath. That’s when this new philosophy, this new doctrine I’ve already mentioned began to materialize.

—*What were the Movimiento's main ideas? What did your brother tell you? Did he recruit you immediately?*

Yes, immediately. He actually recruited the whole family well, he didn't really recruit us, because those ideas were already in our family, the ideas of equality, peace, calm, equity, justice, respect for the human being...

AGAINST CORRUPTION

—*Did you reject the regime?*

—No, we didn't; what we wanted was equality, true social justice to avoid corruption. I'll give you an example of this: once my brother was participating in an anniversary of the Army and Mrs. Blanca Ibáñez President Lusinchi's⁵¹ secretary arrived with her son; a general came at the same time in a small plane, and her son told her: "Look, mother, I like that general's small plane." Well, three days later the general no longer had his little plane. So what do you think of this? They just took it away from him it wasn't even his, it was the Air Force's, and they gave the plane to that lady's son. Is that correct? President Carlos Andrés Pérez sent army boots to soldiers in other countries, while our own soldiers had no boots is that correct? First you solve your own people's needs and then you help others.

Then there was the economic aspect: you could clearly see that the credits we received were not equitable: the more people had the more they received, while poor people got nothing, or practically nothing. Thanks to their economic power, many people bought land parcels and little by little they would add more and more land, evicting the farmers, but nobody ever sold them this land, they just took it. And on top of this power of the stronger over the weaker, whenever someone was affected and claimed for justice, what he got was injustice, because the judges would order evictions, destroying fences and **ranchos**.

4. THE 1992 COUP

—*Where were you when the 1992 rebellion took place?*

—I was in San Juan de los Morros; I was second in command of Detachment 28. I didn't participate because I was being protected: Commander Chirinos Cárdenas would say, for example: "We don't want another Acosta Carlez to die."

My brother José Francisco, who is now a colonel in the army, was given a mission in his unit but couldn't carry it out because the battalion commander had taken the necessary measures and my brother had been discovered. The only thing the commander could do was put his gun to my brother's temple and say: "If you had taken over the unit, you would be dead by now," but my brother hit the gun hard and demanded respect. I was afraid for his life. When I was about to go to the Ministry of Defense in my vehicle, the people in charge of security didn't open the doors of the command and told me the commander had the keys and had given the order that no officer or national guard could leave they really had me well guarded.

—*Did you see Chávez on TV? What did you feel then?*

51 President of Venezuela from 1984 to 1989.

—I felt the time was ripe to come out in the open, we had to show ourselves, stop running, accept responsibility for anything that might happen: disciplinary sanctions, insults, vexations both from the population and from our colleagues.

MISSION IN EL SALVADOR

—What really affected me was when they sent me to the Republic of El Salvador, on February 13 that same year. I was to be the UN Military Observer. I remember getting the passport and leaving the office of the military attaches at the Ministry of Defense on my way to the airport, where an Air Force plane was waiting to take me there; my brother and I saw each other from afar, we started walking toward each other and without a single word we just embraced, kissed each other on the cheek, and when I looked up I realized we were right under the central dome of the building of the Ministry of Defense, under a mural where the most outstanding figure is our Libertador. That was my last day in Venezuela that year, because my mission was supposed to last until October 1992, but I only returned in August 1993.

While I was in El Salvador my father died on the very same day my brother Felipe Antonio had died: March 1st, but in 1993, exactly four years later. I couldn't go to the funeral, and that really affected me sentimentally.

I came back from El Salvador much stronger, ready to fight and never accept defeat, because I went through and felt a real revolution, where I was able to see how weak people the majority in that country overpowered the strong people, who were but a minority. I got to know both sides, their strong points and their weak ones. From the weak people we received amends and a lot of tenderness, love, and kindness, whereas from the Salvadorian oligarchy we got nothing but insults, contempt, reproaches, and insults. Once I was driving the UN car and when I stopped at a red light, and several members of this oligarchy threw eggs at my window shield and tried to turn the car over those people didn't want peace in their own country, they wanted war.

So as you can tell I'm more than ready now to face the insults of the Venezuelan oligarchy, when they bang their pots and pans right in front of my house, when they film my house with their TV cameras.

THE ELECTORAL ROAD

—*So what was your opinion when Chávez and the Movimiento decided to follow the electoral road in 1996? Did you understand them at that time?*

—Yes I did, because even when they founded the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 their goal was not to keep power even the attempted coup d'Etat wasn't meant to get hold of power, it was simply meant to apply social justice, which is at the base of the Movimiento's philosophy. So if you keep this in mind, when Chávez decided to be a candidate, we were all very very happy, because even if it didn't turn out as planned, we were convinced that it would be possible when the people elected him President of the Republics it turned out in the last elections. I remember that on one occasion, Chávez was walking on Sabana Grande in Caracas, and a group of people were following him; suddenly a businessman saw him and said in a low voice: "Look at that crazy guy over there," and I immediately answered him: "That crazy guy you're pointing at will be the next President of the Republic." Businessmen from the US were scared of Chávez from the day he became a candidate, because according to their polls here in Venezuela he was going to win the elections I'm telling you this because in September 1998 I was sent to Quito, Ecuador, to a conference on drugs, and an officer from the CIA told me this, and he even told me that even if

there were only one other candidate from all the other political parties together, Chávez would win the elections, as he actually did.

5. PLAN BOLIVAR 2000: AN EXTRAORDINARY IDEA

—*What role did you play in Plan Bolívar 2000? What did that task mean to you?*

—President Chávez's idea was to give the Armed Forces a social role I think this was extraordinary. We're repairing public buildings, schools, we're building homes for the neediest people, and we're taking care of health problems, giving the population inexpensive food.

Together with the Armored Brigade we have organized medical activities in the most difficult regions of the central states of the country. On one occasion we saw a woman patient with a very pronounced abscess in her left eye, and she was so ashamed she thought she was ugly and being ignored by a young man she had fallen in love with. The woman surgeon told her that if she wanted to be operated on she would come out perfect. The young girl accepted and she was successfully operated on. No one recognized her afterward, and the only thing she could say was: "Now **I am** going to get married." So thanks to Plan Bolívar her wish came true.

6. APRIL COUP

THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL SUPPORTED THE COUP

—*What did you do during the April 2002 coup?*

—I was vice principal of Venezuela's National Guard Training School for Officers, and I was informed that the putschist generals wanted to convince our cadets and send them out on the street to force the President to surrender and accept his resignation. I had to control that situation because the principal of our school, Division General Alfonso Martínez, had openly made known his support for these putschist generals. All the General Staff officers and the group of cadets, as well as the national guards told me they supported the Constitution of the Republic and were loyal to the Commander in Chief of the National Armed Forces.

On April 12th I said goodbye to my family, my wife and children, and on the 13th I was back at the EFOFAC, so I went to Venezuela's Military School and spoke to Colonel Mata, vice principal there, and told him we shouldn't allow anyone to break the constitutional line, and that with both military schools' officers we could take the Ministry of Defense. He agreed with me and said he would speak with his own officers. That's when my brother José Francisco Acosta Carlez came in he was working at the Military Academy and he saluted me military style: "Excuse me, Colonel, I need some colonels with four testicles," and went to talk to Colonel Mata: "Colonel, the Military School is under my control, the officers are waiting for the principal to come back to arrest him. Will you support us?" "Of course" said Mata "we had already coordinated that with your brother."

So I went to EFOFAC and from there I got into my vehicle and left for *alcabala* 3 at Fort Tiuna, where I got off and told all the people there that the President wasn't in Fort Tiuna, that they should go to Miraflores and arrest all the putschists there, that the National Guard wasn't going to do anything to them, that we wanted to re-establish the constitutional line. Many of them left on their motorcycles shouting and playing their horns, while others stayed where they were.

NATIONAL GUARD OFFICERS DID NOT SUPPORT THE COUP

—Back once again at the EFOFAC, I called General Alfonso Martínez on his cell phone, and when he answered I told him: "General, it's General Acosta Carlez, I would like to report that the senior

and junior officers, professionals, and national guard do not recognize citizen Pedro Carmona Estanga as the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.” He answered back: “Acosta Carlez, times have changed, assume the consequences.” So I told him: “General, I’ll accept the consequences,” and hung up. Ten minutes later the principal of the school called me into his office and told me: “You and your brother are arrested, they’re coming to get you.” So I said: “Fine, General, those smart alecks: let them come, we’re waiting for them.”

I left the office and immediately called General Baduel on the phone and told him that both EFOFAC and Venezuela’s Military Academy were controlled by officers who supported the President and the Constitution of the Republic. Right then I got a phone call from my brother telling me General García Carneiro had taken the Ministry of Defense and he had shut all the putschist generals in a room, and there was going to be a series of consecutive apologies by Pedro Carmona Etanga and some generals through the media.

So I started calling some friendly governors and mayors to inform them the latest events; I also called several *compañeros* who were second in command at the regional commands of the National Guard as well as some state police commanders. That was the day our President recovered his place of honor.

7. RECOVERING CONTROL OVER OIL

—*How did you interpret this strike called by the opposition?*

—They made a wrong interpretation of article 350 as far as civilian disobedience is concerned, and they called a national strike without analyzing or measuring the consequences it could have for all our society. So what consequences did it have? The economic strike affected the economy of the country and provoked more poverty. When they went on the oil strike, there was no gas and according to our information, some people died in the hospital for lack of gas; ambulances had no gas so they couldn’t go out on emergencies and transport sick people; hospitals couldn’t put on their electrical equipment when the power went off, because they work with petrol.

The opposition, or those who are against the Constitution, know that if they organize a revocatory referendum, President Chávez will win once again, so they have been forced to go on strike, civic strikes, pots and pans banging in public, to put pressure on our leader and force him to resign, but they’re not going to succeed because our President’s heart is with the people. On the other hand, the Armed Forces are guaranteeing the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, that will give us peace, equity and equality in the communities; we will be able to build a new Venezuela, a country of law and justice, which is the great philosophy behind this change we are bringing about.

—*You were mentioning the oil strike...*

—Oil production wasn’t paralyzed. What they completely paralyzed was its distribution, because the strike was also respected by transportation by land and by sea, as well as by service stations. Their strategy was to make storehouses overflow and then say: “Look here, we can’t produce any more oil because we can’t get it out, the population is not consuming oil because there is no transportation available to distribute it.” People from the transport sector would say: “I can’t get the oil out because service stations are closed.” Ships would say: “I can’t get raw materials out to the refineries because there’s no one there to receive them.” They would all blame each other, so our strategy was to go directly to the neuralgic centers.

The case of towboats, for example: I had to get on one and apply the Law of Mines and Hydrocarbons, and I told the crew members: “OK, now, you either carry out the maneuvers so the boat docks or you are arrested. Why? Because the law gives me the right to do this.” The crew then

said: “General, we want to help you but we don’t own the boat.” So then I applied transitory custody to the boat, as foreseen by that Law. We prepared a statement and that’s how we were able to carry out the necessary maneuvers. Then we got two more towboats, also protected by that legal provision.

—*What about the captains in the opposition, could they be easily replaced?*

—We recruited people who had already been on those boats; they were trained and had their certificates. They went to the ports as soon as they heard our call. We sent a plane to Paraguaná with about 20 to 30 authorized people between captains and sailors; when they got there, a selection was made and they were able to move all the ships of the Venezuelan Navy whose crew had gone on civic strike.

Everyone in the Armed Forces did something to fight sabotage. Because according to Article 358 of the Penal Code, what the enemy was doing was piracy, which is a crime, because the captains could not have taken over the ships as they did: these ships are a public service and they’re not their own private property, they are the property of the State of Venezuela. So the thing to do was to get them off the ship and put another crew on, draft a police statement and hand it over to the district attorney over at the Public Ministry for the corresponding criminal investigation.

—*So what happened to the previous crew...?*

—It’s being judged from a legal point of view.

OBEYING THE LAW AND A PRESIDENTIAL DECREE

—*Did you participate in these actions because there was a law, or because there was a very specific order?*

—Well, really both things. First, because I am a police authority and the Law allows me to; and second, because the President of the Republic decreed a series of actions we’re carrying out. There was also a sentence by Dr. José La Cruz Useche, Supreme Agrarian Judge from the state of Cojedes, which he sent to the states of Aragua, Carabobo, and Cojedes, whereby he ordered the National Guard to do everything necessary, as far as oil and food was concerned, because without oil and food there is no industrial activity, no trade activity.

—*So in this towboat you took over, what was the crew’s attitude?*

—As soon as they discovered our presence, the crew immediately renewed operations on the basis of their own convictions. They supported the process, though I still was momentarily in charge of the towboat. Jordán Blanco, one of the captains, told me citizen Enrique Fernando Salas Feo, governor of the state of Carabobo, had informed him about a house in the city of Puerto Cabello for those who would not obey the order to restore towboat operations.

The owners of land and sea transportation requested a protective measure from the judge in the state of Carabobo, considering their rights had been trampled. They based this request on Article 350 of the Constitution related to civilian disobedience. The lady judge accepted their request in other words, she forbade the National Guard’s intervention.

—*And what did you do then? Did you suspend the custody of the boat?*

—No, because the judge had adopted an arbitrary measure. I was not acting through an administrative measure; I was acting legally according to a Presidential decree. The judge’s order created a legal conflict and the Constitutional Court of the High Court of Justice transferred the cases and suspended these protective measures.

That's what happened with the means of transportation that distribute gas. When we went to see them for the same protective measure, there was practically a sabotage by the prosecutors of the Public Ministry; alleging respect for human rights, they forbade the National Guard to carry this out, when what we were really doing was guaranteeing respect for the collective right because these are public services and with no gas there is no food, no education, no health services. The Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela includes a very beautiful principle, whereby collective right precedes the individual or private right of its citizens.

We were finally able to dismantle this enemy plan, distributed gas, and right now we are in the process of getting the El Palito plant working.

STRUGGLE TO GET THE EL PALITO PLANT WORKING

—*So, this plant stopped working?*

—Not right away, it stopped later. The managers let the tanks fill to the top so they could then justify shutting down the plant because it was impossible to fill any more tanks. When I understood their strategy, on December 2nd I took over the Yagua distribution plant, emptied its tanks and sent all the gas out in several trips. All this thanks to the measures adopted when we repaired twenty *góndolas*⁵² owned by PDVSA, which had been put up for sale to the highest bidder, with the cooperation of several private companies who didn't accept the strike. We were then able to recover stability in gas distribution. Our drivers were working on a voluntary basis and they came directly to the Yagua plant to offer their services free of charge, they were certified by the Ministry of Energy and Mines to drive these *góndolas* and were well informed of the procedures for gas distribution they had already driven those same *gondolas* three years before. I had no money to pay them any *per diem* though it was very necessary if we remember that they had far to go, to the states of Apure, Guárico, Portuguesa, and this meant they would be on the road for six-eight hours, but when they realized how concerned I was with this problem, the National Guard gave me 100 000 Bolívares, then 50 000 more, and that's how we received several thousand. That day we sent *góndolas* out to the states of Apure, Aragua, Guárico, Carabobo, and Cojedes.

When the El Palito refinery administration realized we had discovered their trick and had managed to empty their tanks, the man in charge of Human Resources forbade the workers and employees from going into the plant, so we had to arrest him because he was preventing his personnel from doing their work, and he was handed over to the prosecutor of the Public Ministry. The other managers left the plant, which was then in the hands of the technicians, the workers, and the National Guard.

—*When was this?*

—The company was in charge of the workers for four days, from the 3rd to the 6th of December 2002, but as soon as the workers realized they needed a boss, they asked for a manager, and that's when Dr. Alí Rodríguez, chairman of PDVSA, decided to call a meeting of all those managers who had abandoned the plant.

AGREEMENT AND THEN TREASON BY THE OPPOSITION

—During that meeting we agreed that they would distribute the oil themselves, and that the plant would not stop working. We signed this agreement, giving them their plant back, but what they did was receive it and then immediately start sabotage, they blocked their computers, broke their lab

52 Special trucks to transport oil by land.

equipment, and then left. They stopped the plant and destroyed it. So they're traitors. That's the correct word: They are traitors!

—*So why did you give the plant back to them?*

—Because we had to anyway, even if we had the workers and technicians on our side, we didn't have the main personnel to run it and we couldn't run the risk of putting the plant in the workers' hands. So, the situation was so critical that we had to take the plant militarily once again, and we started calling people who had retired from PDVSA but who had all the necessary knowledge. These people were mechanical engineers, chemists; they went back to work voluntarily to their old jobs. And thanks to them, to their past knowledge and education, we were able to restore production little by little, and distribute the gas that was stored in their tanks.

Something similar happened in Yagua. I got Mr. Jesús Belloso, distribution manager of the plant, to work until Friday; on Saturday he signed an agreement with the vice-minister of Mines and he stopped going. They also blocked their computers, broke down pipeline valves. When we seized the Yagua plant militarily, on the basis of a presidential decree, we looked for expert personnel, personnel from the Ministry of Mines with the necessary knowledge because they had also worked there in the past while others had worked in another similar plant. Then we unblocked the computers: one of the key words was "strike," and the other was "coup." We did unblock them, but they came in again and again into the system and would sabotage the process through Internet.

The last thing we were finally able to do thanks to the engineers, was make the plant work directly, and so far that's how it's worked: manually, and we have kept up gas distribution in five states. But we are limited by the fact that the El Palito refinery is still not producing according to our needs. The government has had to import gas at international prices and sell it at national prices. Imagine how much money we're losing with this operation alone! But we're going to recover production 100 %.

8. THE COCA COLA AND BEER CASES

—*Now tell me all about what happened with the Coca Cola case?*

—The strategy of the Coca Cola managers and of other companies was to monopolize their products so the people would loot their facilities, and this would create a domino effect throughout the country and force the President to decree a state of emergency. But since soft drinks are considered a necessary product by a decree published by President Caldera years ago, the Institute for Consumer and User Defense and Education (INDECU) decided to visit the factory and as soon as they realized they were monopolizing the products, they spoke to the managers and gave them 48 hours to sell the products to the people, but 48 hours went by and nothing happened.

—*The workers were willing to go to work?*

—No, the workers had agreed to stop working. From December 19th they never went back to the company, because the manager had given them a collective vacation. So they neither produced nor put their accumulated product on sale. When I realized they were not complying with the decision, I went personally there as INDECU security and ordered the manager, Mr. José Caro, from Colombia, to put their soft drinks on sale. But he told me he received orders only from his boss, and his boss had told him not to do it. So then I applied the authority given me by the law: "If you don't distribute it you're going to be arrested for monopolizing the product, and as a member of the police I have the duty to arrest you, apply the law, and put you in the hands of the Prosecutor of the Public

Ministry.” That’s when he got a call from Miami, USA, from Mr. Osvaldo Cisneros, who asked me if he could consult the board of directors about the possibility of selling their own products.

Manager José Caro informed me he had received the order to sell, but not with their own Coca Cola trucks, so I told him: “Sell them on small carts, mules, horses, call the buyers to come over with their own trucks, because what I’m really interested in is that you sell the soft drinks to the people.” So through the Prosecutor of the Public Ministry I authorized them to sell, and they started getting their products out of the factory.

And what happened? A group of people, including women, started hindering this operation and attacked some of the Venezuelan National Guard officers, to prevent the product from reaching the people. We had to use force, tear gas, because of the aggressive attitude of these women citizens against our National Guard. These women were karate experts, one of them was black ribbon and karate instructor, so the only alternative we had left was to use tear gas. One of these ladies was even strangling a captain by the trachea and to free him we had to pull her off, she fell to the ground, and there is a false report going around saying she fractured her skull. I have the true report, and it says that absolutely nothing happened to her; of course she didn’t fracture her skull, she just had a black and blue on her skull because she did hit it when she fell on the ground. These are the things we have to solve now from a legal point of view. The Prosecutor of the Public Ministry wants to accuse directly before the court the National Guard who saved the officer from the lady karate expert, but that Prosecutor didn’t take into account the crimes committed by these women: aggression against the authority, create conditions to monopolize products, personal injuries so I requested the Garrison Command to order the Military Prosecutor to open a legal and military investigation and submit this conflict to the competent authorities.

At the Polar beer plant they were 100 % against distributing the product, so we had to apply the court’s decision. Through a written sentence, the court ordered the National Guard to sell the population the beer, liquor, and malt they were monopolizing there. We sold 392 million Bolívares worth of beer and malt. All this money was put in a bank account. We had to forcefully expel a lawyer who made believe he represented the company, and even had to use cutting sheers to open the locks and break the chains.

Polar asked the First Court for Administrative Differences for a protective constitutional measure, but my lawyers (Luis Rincones, Ricardo Delgado, Omar Carrillo, and Zulima de Carrillo) asked to transfer the case to the Constitutional Court of the Supreme Court of Justice, and this was accepted. That court suspended the protective measures and requested all the documents so it could analyze the case in that court. I now have four trials going on against me in court: the Cerveza Regional one, the Cerveza Polar one; the FERRARI land transportation of gas and oil, and VESCA, the sea transport company in charge of towboats.

—*And in all these cases the workers had decided to stop working?*

—At the Polar plant they were willing to distribute beer and malt, but the pressure of their managers prevented them from doing so. So they decided to buy the beer themselves and sell it in their own private vehicles. At PANAMCO the workers went back to work that same day; the towboat crew cooperated willingly, but Ferrari didn’t allow their workers to get the *góndolas* out: they let the air out the tires, grabbed the starting motors out and yet, to date, we haven’t needed them at all.

9. BOLIVAR’S IDEAS MOVE THIS PROCESS

—*What have Bolívar’s ideas meant to you?*

—His ideology moves this process. When they ask about the philosophy behind this revolution, if it is Marxist-Leninist, I answer that this philosophy is based on Simón Bolívar's ideas. Bolívar wanted justice, peace, equality, respect for the law, honesty, common well being, and human rights: the right to life, education, and health. And that's what we can find in our Constitution, which is very different from our old Constitution. At EPOPAC we studied a lot of law, because we have a political mission, and as policemen we must know our laws to make people obey them. Though we are part of the Armed Forces, we are responsible for internal order based on what these laws tell us, and that's why I relate the ideas of El Libertador with the principles of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

NATIONAL GUARD AND NATIONAL POLICE

—*What's the difference between the National Guard and the National Police?*

—The difference is that the National Guard is a military corps and it depends on the Ministry of Defense, whereas the police aren't military and they depend on the governors and mayors. The National Guard of Venezuela is responsible for activities attributed it by law related to Guardian of Environmental and Renewable Natural Resources, Anti Drugs, Physical Security of all Facilities, Prison Security, Public Order, National Security, and according to the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, it is responsible for the Internal Order of the country. Together with military operations, its own operations make up the defense system of the nation. The police have specific tasks, which are to defend public order.

Our new Constitution has determined that to maintain and restore public order and protect the population, the national executive will organize a uniformed National Police corps, and that means that today's police corps will become a unified corps and the National Guard will command and organize this Uniformed Corps of the National Police the National Police will depend on the National Guard. We're working on it, because here in Venezuela the different police corps are acting from a party point of view, they represent the interests of only one person, and aren't acting as a public service to guarantee security to all Venezuelan citizens. All that will end when, as a result of a constitutional principle and the political will of the National Assembly and the government itself, the National Guard will begin controlling the National Police. We're working on it and I think that will be the only way to avoid the atrocities that take place in Venezuela, where each mayor, each governor wants to have his own private police corps.

—*But there are people from humble origins who forget their past when they climb to important jobs, and some of them even deny these origins; apparently this didn't happen to most of you, because you have an extraordinary social awareness. So how do you explain this?*

—Even if we come from the countryside, from humble origins, and then went to college in the city, our roots stayed back there, and we have never become separated from our people, we have always been at its side through civic actions, and we have worked for its well being. The link between us, who are now professionals, and the population, the humblest people, never broke. Even more so in the National Guard, which is always in the community, guaranteeing their security, lending our vehicles, solving their immediate needs their social, political, economic, and educational needs, because we also teach old people and children to read and write...

DEMANDING COLLECTIVE RIGHTS BE RESPECTED

—*In this government?*

—Always, it's always been like that. But in this government it is even more so. The Guard has always been like that. And we also take care of health problems; we send our doctors to attend the community, where we have such good relations because we've never abandoned them. Now, when we see unjust institutions that don't answer the people's call; companies that don't do any social work, and we now have power of authority given us by law, we're demanding these institutions and these companies really comply with their duty, which is a collective right. Many of the institutions and companies still respect the old Constitution, and they say: "No, no, I have my private property and you have to respect that." "Well, fine, but even if you have private property you can't monopolize food." If the government authorized you to have your own industry, it financed you and gave you credits, it gave you land, you must comply with your social role. If you have, say, 10 000 hectares, you must use them also to benefit the people, otherwise I will expropriate you, I will take your land away from you and give it to the peasants, so the land will really have a social use.

That's the conflict we now have in Venezuela. The new Constitution makes Venezuela a democratic and social State of right and justice, whose higher values in its legal and active order are: life, liberty, justice, equality, solidarity, democracy, social responsibility, and in general, the superior importance of human rights, ethics, and political pluralism. Some people won't understand that principle of our Constitution that reads: the right to justice, to equality, to peace, to equity. They won't understand that collective right must be stronger than the individual right of any one single person.

STRATEGIST OF THE COMEBACK

1. Family background; His father was an oil worker. **2. First steps in the MBR 200;** The seed was born in the Parachutists Unit; One of the founders of the MBR; First contacts among officers; Persecution against those involved in the Movement. **3. The 1992 coup;** Why Baduel didn't become involved; Previous consolidation within the institution; Discriminated in spite of not having participated; Banner of the Constituent Assembly; In favor of political struggle. **4. Characteristics of the Venezuelan Armed Forces;** The officers are not a caste; Counterinsurgent tactics relate the Armed Forces to the people; Changes in the Military Academy; The importance of leadership. **5. Corruption and impunity.** **6. April 11 coup;** Putschists don't want to recognize their responsibility; Attempts to remove Baduel from office before the coup; Chávez ordered there be no bloodshed; Causes for the coup; Plan for the Recovery of National Dignity; Military strategy inspired in oriental cultures; A strange plane accident. **7. National dialogue;** Need for a modest agenda; The biggest challenge: changing the economic situation. **8. The opposition is stubborn;** Repercussions of the oil sabotage within the Armed Forces; Plan for food supplies. **9. Confessions of a secretary to the President.**

1. FAMILY BACKGROUND

HIS FATHER WAS AN OIL WORKER

—*I understand you come from humble origins. What did your parents do?*

—My parents have been separated since I was a child. I use my mother's last name only; she was in charge of my upbringing, but I have very good relations with both of them. My childhood was under the influence of the women of the family, particularly on my mother's side. My mother is a strong woman but she didn't become a professional, she was self-taught and always imbued us with the passion for books, for education, for study. Though she never finished high school, she was admitted into public administration in an electric company, where she was promoted to several positions: she started out as an office worker, then became executive secretary, and finally she filled several managerial posts. My father was an oil worker, though in my childhood and adolescence we were not together. Then he turned up again and there were more contacts.

Dr. Ernesto Mayz Vallenilla, founding rector of the Simón Bolívar University an excellent philosopher and a Venezuelan of our times: a man I greatly admire and a good friend of mine coincided with me one day in that much of what we have been able to do in life is due to the good luck of having had a nurse, because we both had a nurse, one of those *nanas* who tell you stories, teach you principles, values and good habits, and who sweeten the road of religious faith...that kind of thing. I remember my *nana* with a lot of tenderness: we went to mass, prayed, she gave my religious faith more strength. Ernesto jokes with me about my *nana*, he says she had foresight

because I was her favorite. I think that in my particular case, these women were a determining factor in my life: my mother, my maternal grandmother, and my *nana*.

—*Did these women have an influence on your concern to solve the problems affecting the people?*

—Definitely, because they gave me the example: they served others and taught me it's better to be useful than to be important.

2. FIRST STEPS IN THE MBR 200

THE SEED WAS BORN IN THE PARACHUTIST UNIT

—At present I am Commander of the Fourth Armored division. From August 1999 to the end of May of the year 2002, I was Commander of the 42nd Parachutist Infantry Brigade the unit where the President and I served together, he as a lieutenant and I as a captain.

Chávez and I weren't members of the same graduating class; he was a whole year ahead of me in the Military Academy, where he graduated in 1975 and I graduated in 1976. We both coincide in many things, perhaps because we both come from the plain region of the country: he comes from Guarina and I come Guárico; or perhaps because of our positions, coming from humble origins yet able to study at the Academy.

We had been talking, discussing, expressing our discontent for the way they were leading our country and not just from a political point of view, but also because of the values and principles we had been taught at home and were later reaffirmed at the Military Academy through our code of honor, which I have upheld all my life. Those who were leading our country did not uphold those principles in public activities, and we used to say: "Well, if we don't do something we'll be accomplices, maybe not by commission but by omission."

ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE MBR 200

—*How did you relate to the Movement?*

—I have the honor of being able to say that it was precisely in the Parachutist Unit, in the Placera, San Jacinto, Barracks, that the genesis of what was to become the MBR took place on December 17, 1982. That day we were commemorating the anniversary of Bolívar's death that that time, these were very simple activities, with a very sober act in the barracks and other units. The act would start around 1 p.m., the official time of El Libertador's death.

That day just by chance because it wasn't usual they named someone to speak in the activity: they named Captain Hugo Chávez, officer in charge of the Adjutancy of the Regiment's Command, and intelligence officer also. Chávez improvised his speech, he did it practically *a cappella*, and expressed some ideas we were all identified with: all the junior officers and the professionals. He really put fire in our souls.

—*What were those ideas?*

—They revolved around the life of our Libertador. He declared that we shouldn't just talk formally and make it a cold commemoration; we should rather try to imagine what Bolívar would have thought about the way the country was being conducted if he had still been alive. Would he ask us why we hadn't yet achieved so many of the things he had already given shape to in his ideology, his Bolivarian dream?

At the end of the meeting, Colonel Manrique Maneiro, Regiment Commandera very jovial man at that time gathered all of us, because he realized that the senior officers in particular had been a bit vexed by what Chávez had said. They considered his speech too political and they thought that being only a captain, a junior officer, he had broken the traditional pattern of the usual speech in that kind of ceremony. But the Colonel said he was satisfied with what Captain Chávez had said and he supported him. It was a great backing. And very wisely he added: “Now, in memory of El Libertador, we’re going to suspend all activities for the day.”

Then someone had the idea that we should run to honor El Libertador. I don’t really know whose idea it was, it could have been Felipe Acosta Carlez’s who died during the Caracazo in February 1989, or Jesús Urdaneta Hernández’s, great lovers of physical training, or Captain Hugo Chávez Frías’s himself.

We went running by the facilities in the *cerro*, it’s like a crest of the Costa Mountain Range, about 10 kilometers long. While we were running, we started talking about the situation, about where the country was being led. We were saying that we had a democracy, but it didn’t allow citizen participation something that would guarantee a better living standard for the majority of Venezuelans though the country was endowed with so many resources and benefits. On our return, we were already conspiring that’s the honest truth.

Then another idea came up, I guess it was the President’s: we should continue running we had already run about 20 kilometers, 10 one way and 10 back until we got to El Samán de Güere, a very emblematic place where there is a monument to a tree: Simón Bolívar used to rest there 200 years ago in Güere, a small town in the state of Aragua between Maracay and Tumeró. So we kept running and we came to El Samán, some of its branches were still alive. We took some leaves, a very symbolic action, as ritualistic as we soldiers are. Stimulated by the President, we paraphrased El Libertador’s oath at Monte Sacro and declared we would not be accomplices by omission or by commission of what was happening to our country.

FIRST CONTACTS AMONG OFFICERS

—That’s when we first started our contacts, trying to identify those officers who would accept these things, because to top it all, there was a lot of censure on political matters.

I never felt that what motivated us was thirst for power, nor classic totalitarianism, of the kind known as gorillas in Latin America. No, not at all; we wanted a true democracy for our country, that would benefit the great majority of our population, allow the full exercise of freedom, and that would do away with corruption and the deterioration of public morals. We always thought there would be a military *pronunciamiento* that would put a transitional government in power to implement a series of changes and improve our democracy.

So we made contact with officers, and also with some political sectors. They were really promoted by the President and then by Arias Cárdenas, who joined us later on, because in the original oath at El Samán de Güere, on December 17, 1982, we were only four officers present: Captains Hugo Chávez, Felipe Acosta Carlez, Jesús Urdaneta Hernández, and me I was still a lieutenant.

One of the major premises we used to study the officers and professionals we wanted to incorporate to the Movement and that we later demanded of them was an excellent professional work. When each new officer accepted our requirements, it was really like a ceremony. Part of the ritual was going to El Samán and taking the new officer’s oath.

These were the beginnings of the Movement, which at first we called Bolivarian Revolutionary Army 2000 we were thinking of its projection to the year 2000. The initial idea was not for immediate action, and I shared that thesis.

There were several moments of great tension within the Movement due to the stand adopted by some of our comrades-in-arms. Under the influence of their relatives in particular, they worried over our contacts with people on the left, and they even attempted to divide us.

There were many ups and downs: our superiors discovered our ideas but somehow, both the leading classes of our institution and of the country in general underestimated our position. According to them: "This is just child smallpox, typical of adolescents, they'll get over it soon."

PERSECUTION AGAINST THOSE INVOLVED IN THE MOVEMENT

—There were even critical times where we were persecuted, they would arrest us and question us, like they did with Chávez. God has always allowed me to come out intact from those situations. I have been able to avoid them.

One of the things the opposition has done in its attempt to discredit the President is to circulate the rumor that he was a bad student during the higher course at the General Staff. There was constant pressure on his professors, and this made them lower his qualifications not a very ethical thing to do. Chávez had shown that as far as the military academic aspect was concerned, he was good in his specialty, which was armored vehicles; he had been one of the best students in the training course postgraduate military courses that include a basic course in our specialty, with a middle course, an advanced course, and a higher course at the General Staff practically an extension of the first two. So who can believe that having been an excellent student in the basic courses, the President wasn't also an excellent student in the General Staff course?

3. THE 1992 COUP

WHY BADUEL DIDN'T BECOME INVOLVED

—*I've heard you didn't participate in the 1992 coup, is that so?*

—Well, when the 1992 coup d'Etat was proposed, I didn't think the timing was right. I was very concerned with the political project, contacts with the political world, the outside world, and how we were going to explain to the world that we weren't typical power-thirsty putschists.

I was operations officer in a General Staff, the person in charge of plans and of making an evaluation of the situation, and I was extremely concerned that we hadn't yet drawn up a political project, or made contact with outstanding personalities of the country to explain our goals and intentions. I would think jokingly: "Fine, great! We pull off a coup and then at dawn I come to Dr. Uslar Pietri's⁵³ home and tell him: I'm so and so, we've just pulled off a coup d'Etat, and we're here to call on you." The least this gentleman could tell me was: "Look here, commander, or lieutenant colonel, or whatever you are, you must be off your bat, come on in and have some coffee."

On top of everything, in the beginning we were planning the coup for December 31, 1991. Now I am under the impression that it was the junior officers who were forcing the matter, and at first I didn't share that thesis.

53 A famous Venezuelan writer and intellectual.

I would also say: “We are the senior officers, the oldest ones here, it would be irresponsible to send these young boys on this adventure without knowing what we are going to do afterwards.” I had expressed this openly.

Since I wasn’t convinced the idea had been structured, I didn’t agree with the military *pronunciamiento*. And even though I had discussed this at least with the President and Arias Cárdenas, many of my *compañeros* have pointed out that I had an ambivalent attitude, that I never really took sides, that I didn’t take the step forward. Many of them were fed the notion that I had betrayed them.

PREVIOUS CONSOLIDATION WITHIN THE INSTITUTION

—I thought we should better wait, try not to be too obvious, and consolidate our positions in relation to the year 2000 projection. That year many officers with excellent professional characteristics were ready to become generals. We thought we should also have a leadership structure, and I thought: “We’re lieutenant colonels, we pull off a coup d’Etat, and what’s going to happen with the military structure? What are we going to do with officers with higher rank than our own? We couldn’t subordinate them to us.”

That practical problem really worried me a lot: what were we going to do with the colonels and generals who wouldn’t accept our situation because one of the main principles in military life is verticality. We didn’t want to provoke violence, but we were going to fall right in its arms with the *compañeros* who wouldn’t accept our position, and this would disqualify us.

These problems could become quite complex, and I would say: “Let’s wait until one of us becomes a general, or at least a senior officer, so he can be a leader not only because of his rank but also because of the authority he will have earned.”

—But the fact that you participated in the conspiracy yet decided to step aside, wasn’t that very complicated? Because you were in the know of all their secrets.

—The situation wasn’t certainly an easy one at all, but the President told me: “Papathat’s how my intimate friends call me, you stay in the reserve, you won’t act, so you’ll survive within the Armed Forces.”

Some sectors kept thinking of a military solution, and that’s why they organized the coup in November 1992. They called me for this, but I went to just one meeting and decided not to participate. That’s why they say I’m a slippery guy, but I realized on time it was a trap.

—What do you mean by a trap?

—Well, it was like announcing a coup d’Etat beforehand. There was a summit meeting to prepare the coup, with many generals, senior and junior officers, I saw many people there and thought: “Well, just a short time ago these people were against us.” And that’s what happened, one of the officers who participated in that meeting fought against the coup. Even the way the meeting was held was very strange: we met very early on a Sunday morning, and later there was a caravan driving around Los Altos Mirandinos⁵⁴, and at noon we ended up visiting people we would normally relate to conspiracies, opportunistic people. And I felt: “This is definitely a trap.”

54 Region in the state of Miranda with populations settled right at the foot of the mountain chain.

I was in a very difficult situation from 1992 to 1998. And I used to say jokingly that I was like commander Cero Edén Pastora⁵⁵, because all of a sudden neither of the two sides wanted him: one side called him a traitor, the other considered him an infiltrated agent.

DISCRIMINATED IN SPITE OF NOT HAVING PARTICIPATED

—I accepted this situation with a sense of humor. Some of my superiors would tell me openly: “The matter with you is that you are with the Bolivarians.” But I answered that every single Venezuelan soldier was a Bolivarian follower. Others openly incriminated me, and after the coup they just left me as professor in the Army Higher School.

It’s true that I was never arrested, but my life was certainly not a bed of roses, and I’m not complaining, I accepted this. I was in the General Staff course and everything pointed to the possibility that I would be one of the first three students, but due to this situation, they changed the votes and put me in fifth place, which meant I couldn’t be a candidate for the first place, which I had a right to because of my notes and my attitude during the course.

After that they relegated me, never gave me a unit to lead, in spite of having announced that at the end of the course, as lieutenant colonel I could be candidate to command a tactical unit, a battalion something every officer wants. And I thought: “I’m a lieutenant colonel, graduated from the General Staff, I finished among the first students, and now they relegate me, they leave me here as a professor.”

While we were leaving the academic act given in one of the classrooms on the day I became incorporated, in his toast the principal said my problem was that I was a Bolivarian follower. I reacted softly and said: “Are you asking me or are you accusing me, General?” And later he said: “Well, I certainly hope they won’t be coming tomorrow to tell me Baduel is in a conspiracy over there in the library.” And I used to answer him like this: “General, you can be absolutely sure that they’re never going to say such a thing, because I would never be so awkward that day I’ll go somewhere else.” That’s how I used to react, jokingly.

Once, even the Minister of Defense in person called me and told me they were going to send me to trial.

I used to take all this tongue in cheek and thought: “Well, I’m not going to become nasty because then they will really investigate me.”

After parading me through several positions, they sent me abroad: having ended my studies in the first places, I could choose to go abroad. First they said I would be going to Spain, then to France, then to Italy, then to Chile. I was all ready to leave for Chile when they told me: “No, no, we can’t send you to Chile because you would learn from Pinochet. Careful!” They gave pretty stupid excuses that I accepted with plenty of patience.

Finally, they said I would be going to the United States, and at the end they sent me to Fort Benning, to the School of the Americas, where I graduated from the General Staff. I was studying with officers from 43 different countries and there too, I had the possibility of graduating among the first students, but I suspect there was some pressure from my country to prevent me from winning first place. It makes you wonder that after the visit of one of our generals the course ended in December and he came in October I was given only a mention as distinguished graduate!

55 One of the Nicaraguan *comandantes* who left the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) after their victory.

To make a long story short, I just mention this because I want you to know that there are some *compañeros* out there who have said and keep saying that I have always walked on both sides of the road, that once having assumed I avoid, that I lack the courage to take a stand. They have questioned me in public, but I have decided as a rule not to discuss this in public and keep these *compañeros* in my realm of affection, love and respect, in spite of all they might say in public. I don't want to fall into the temptation of recalling here in public all they have done to me; I prefer to just leave things as they are. And this is due to my philosophic convictions.

—*And what are they?*

—Taoism's teachings.

—*From the 80s to the 1992 coup, were you among those military who had contacts with civilians, with the people from La Causa R?*

—Yes, though the political aspects were more the responsibility of Francisco Arias Cárdenas we call him Pancho, the president of the party. My role was more operational, because I was operations officer in charge on the military plan. And though it's not elegant to speak in the first person, I was very good at establishing relations with my *compañeros* and junior officers, so I was also given the task of reconciling people.

BANNER OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

—*One of the things that call my attention is that the MBR 200 hoisted the banner of the Constituent Assembly. What is your interpretation of the facts?*

—We began having a broader political vision, and one of our main concerns was to define the political project we would propose. The upper class was all out for the existing Constitution, applying it according to their own interests, because the constitutional text itself and several other laws contributed to perpetuate their activity. The Constitution, for example, didn't stipulate any participation of the people, where sovereignty really resides.

We studied the Constitution and its defects, and how those in power were able to manipulate it to do what they wanted. And we looked to other countries as reference points.

So we did participate with and came in contact mainly with those people on the left who were always faithful to their beliefs. Because there were many people on the Venezuelan left who made a 180-degree change in their position.

We believed that one of the ways in which we could change the situation was to go to the very roots of the Constitution. Dr. Ernesto Mayz Vallenilla had long promoted the need for the country to begin a constituent process and found a new Republic, with completely new bases and mechanisms so our democracy would be more efficient. He was a member of the President's Constituent Commission, formed to promote this process that finally gave us our new Constitution.

IN FAVOR OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE

—*After the 1992 rebellion, and the abstention called for in the 1993 elections, how did you interpret the change toward participation in the elections, and the fact that Chávez's candidacy as President of the Republic in the 1998 elections was a real possibility?*

—I always tried to keep in contact with them when they were in jail, to support them, make an evaluation of the situation for them, and I often wrote them that as things stood then, the struggle was now a political one. And that we would have to begin structuring a political movement.

—*Is there any document on these matters?*

—No, no documents at all because more often than not they were oral messages, through emissaries. And if they ever existed, they were destroyed for security reasons.

As I was saying, we always recommended those in jail to start thinking about the need to structure a political movement. So when they left jail, and the President was still in favor of abstention because he considered the solution wouldn't come through elections, I didn't agree with him, even though we always analyzed these matters. Many people, however, avoided these discussions.

—*What were the main guidelines of the Movement and what made it different from others?*

—Well, as you know, ideologically it took its inspiration as the President says from the tree with three roots: Simón Rodríguez's beliefs; those of El Libertador, and those of Ezequiel Zamora, though we can't deny that in its political aspects there was also a great influence from people on the left.

—*What kind of society did you want to build?*

—We always proposed a democratic system. We never thought of a totalitarian government or even a non-democratic one. We thought of a democratic government, stressing citizen participation; a government where the people would never be denied space to participate because sovereignty resides in the people.

—*When the change took place in favor of elections, were you in the Army?*

—Yes, I never left the Army.

—*Did you feel part of the MBR 200?*

—I had never broken my ties with them in spite of all the things I mentioned earlier about the junior officers' distrusting me. I think I was one of the few people who didn't avoid contact with them when they came out of jail.

They left jail just when I was coming back from the United States. Perhaps because I had behaved correctly, I ended up with a unit to command, yet in spite of commanding a unit I never avoided contact with people from the Movement though they were underground contacts, of course. I often found Hugo and we would meet to analyze the situation. We spent time with people from the political world, thinking...

I was later promoted colonel and sent to Mérida, a city with a university, where many people on the left were staying. So we made contact with people from the university world whose political ideas were on the left and we analyzed the situation together, but even what those people wanted for the country was a democratic system.

—*Did you expect what later happened in 1998? Because I have been reading the long book written by Agustín Blanco Muñoz interviewing Chávez, and I've been discovering he was pretty sceptical about some things, he found Chávez pretty much in the clouds...*

—Well, the problem was that the media were giving biased reports, trying to deny the fact that people had accepted this movement represented by Hugo Chávez. The first thing was that Agustín Blanco never understood that people no longer thought we military were not going to do anything to change the situation because we were quite satisfied with our privileges. And in the second place, they didn't understand the meaning of those famous words Chávez pronounced during his speech on TV after the 1992 rebellion failed, when he said: "I assume responsibility for what has

happened,” and “For the time being.” The people, who had lost their faith and credibility in their leaders, were very impressed when they saw that a military man publicly accepted responsibility for the fact.

We had contacts with the university world, with the population in general, and this caused an enormous reaction. After that, in some of the carnivals here in Venezuela, the most popular disguise was that of a parachutist: small children dressed as parachutists, with camouflage clothing, or dressed outright as Hugo Chávez.

—*Did you foresee what really happened?*

—Yes, I always thought there were good possibilities for an electoral victory. Thanks to my direct contacts with the people, I never thought it improbable, and as the elections approached, they had to accept the evidence and stop the biased information they were giving out, particularly in polls and all that.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VENEZUELAN ARMED FORCES

THE OFFICERS ARE NOT A CASTE

—There is an aspect difficult to understand in Venezuela’s military institution with all the due respect we owe other countries of the area that are very similar to us even in the way we behave because here in our country we don’t breed that feeling of caste within the officers of the military institution. Anyone with talent and merit can be admitted to a training institute for officers. He doesn’t need to be the son of a military, the grandson of a military to have these genes in his blood. The military institution is practically like a channel for upward mobility, where the vocation to serve is being increasingly consolidated.

COUNTERINSURGENT TACTICS RELATE THE ARMED FORCES TO THE PEOPLE

—During the 1960s and until the end of the 70s there was a very strong subversive process here in Venezuela, and it was understood that the only way to destroy the possibility for those elements to create a leftist guerrilla was to really relate the Armed Forces to the people.

—*So these relations had already started when counterinsurgency activities began?*

—We might say that’s when they began. They became convinced that many rural areas of the country were unattended by the government. So here we had a small group of houses with no public services at all, with undernourished and parasitic children, and a whole unit and its commander would come along to give assistance. We were never tough-skinned to this situation, and this is how the Armed Forces came in closer contact with the forgotten sectors of the Venezuelan population.

It was precisely where the people felt abandoned, that leftist guerrilla forces put down some roots in the country. But sometimes even the importance of relating to the people is misunderstood. They have even attempted to enclose the barracks, create a clear separation between the Armed Forces and the people. And we have even come to the point of using the word “civilian” with contempt. It used to be an offence if you ever told a military: “Hey you, you’re a civilian.” But we didn’t agree with this and we would say: ”So... we come from the civilian world, that’s where we have our loves, our affection, our dearest things.”

CHANGES IN THE MILITARY ACADEMY

—In the early 70s, there was a change in Venezuela’s Military Academy promoted by the principal of the time, General Jorge Ernesto Osorio García, of Andean origin. A man greatly concerned with the intellectual and ethical aspects of life. He wanted to stimulate the professionalization of the Armed Forces, and used the Military Academy as the center to multiply these ideas to the other schools.

That’s when the change took place and new curricula were prepared. The President’s graduating class was the first to study under this new plan; they all graduated as bachelors. You had to be a high school graduate to be admitted it was a new requirement, unnecessary in the past. This was called the Andrés Bello Plan, which also came with a small document: the code of honor I always have it with me, which stresses the need for the military institution to follow the Constitution, a law to serve the nation, the citizens, who in turn give us the role of managing the State’s legitimate and legal violence. This is how little by little we were able to destroy whatever residues were left of the difference between civilians and military. This pattern was slowly modified.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

—*Does the importance given to leadership stem from that time too?*

—Yes, that’s right; that’s when we started stressing leadership. Though our doctrine was under a strong influence from the North American Armed Forces, it began adapting to our own situation. The leadership wasn’t just limited to the military sphere a man educated in service to others could be sent to a far away place and still be aware of the living conditions of many of our fellow citizens. He would say: “All right, we’re going to ask the state governor to install public services in this town.” The military man became very involved because of his relations with the population.

That has its high point with Plan Bolívar 2000, but that’s not when it really began, it had precedents.

5. CORRUPTION AND IMPUNITY

—*As far as the subject of corruption is concerned one of the two banners of the Movement how do you explain such a limited progress? Why haven’t you had more success?*

—I think that for one, the political agenda has filled the whole set up and, for the other, this new Constitution allows a very wide framework, sometimes wrongly used, and has let many people go on with their impunity. You must also take into consideration the fact that many public administration workers say they are supporting this work, but what they’re really doing is supporting their own personal interests and they are well aware, down deep inside, that the political cost of whatever embezzling they do with public funds will not affect their pockets but those of the government, and of the President himself.

You can’t deny there is still corruption around. It would be dishonest to do so. One of the Venezuelan people’s hopes is to wage an out and out struggle against corruption.

I think the solution to this problem must also include education, because no matter how many coercive plans you design, there is also a medium- and a long-term element in all this. I feel that many of the problems accumulated in our country are due to errors in the educational system, particularly basic education.

We must now make an important investment in basic education. This is related to the home, where values, ethic and moral principles are taught. I was telling an anecdote, recently, on this subject: I

remember when we were children, we were coming out of a movie matinee in our town with a cousin of ours and we found a 500 Bolívar note the highest one in Venezuela at that time and we wouldn't even dare pick it up until we could send word to our family that we had found it, because just the idea of coming home with one of those notes without being able to clearly explain where it came from meant a sure beating! A real one, because evidently, that note belonged to somebody.

There used to be a saying in Venezuela: "We may be poor but we're honest." People would make a show of their honesty, like a family crown, the pride of the family.

That's why the struggle against corruption must take place in education too. You can design all the plans you want and put many people in jail, but those will only be reactive measures, perhaps a more active position would be to do it through education, go back to the times in which honesty was a basic value.

6. THE APRIL 11 COUP

—As far as the April 11, 2002, coup is concerned, were you taken by surprise? Did you have any information about what was going to happen?

—It wasn't a total surprise because many of those actions had already been announced: the general strike, manifestations against the regime here in the capital and in other regions. I was Commander of the Parachutist Unit and said: "These people are looking for a dead body to create chaos and justify their coup." Together with some of the sectors in Maracay we made an evaluation. I have a calendar where I marked April 5 and I wrote there: "The coup is now imminent." I marked it and tried to speak to the President, but I couldn't.

—Were you surprised by some of the people who participated in the coup, or had you already detected more or less who they would be?

—I never imagined General Rosendo in this. But it was possible to suspect, for example, Admiral Molina Tamayo and people like him, who have always been strongly related to the powerful.

PUTSCHISTS DON'T WANT TO RECOGNIZE THEIR RESPONSIBILITY

—I now make a joke of saying that we'll have to write a new theory and a new terminology, because both those civilians and the military who participated in the coup now feel offended because we call what they did a coup. In their opinion it wasn't a coup, or a rebellion, or an insurrectionist should be called an absence of power, or *pronunciamiento*, as though they hadn't created this absence.

What authority can be wielded by an Army commander to dictate an order of arrest against the constitutional citizen President of the Republic? And we have proof that it's what they did.

ATTEMPTS TO REMOVE BADUEL FROM OFFICE BEFORE THE COUP

—So how do they explain this? Or at least, in my own specific case, how can they explain that on Monday, April 8, General Vázquez Velasco I have to say his first and last names tried to remove me from office from the Brigade, because they alleged the Parachutist Brigade was organizing a coup against President Hugo Chávez? That was part of their dirty trick.

I had previous information of the plan and shook it all up, preventing them from creating the conditions they needed. I was to have come to Caracas that day to see about the promotion of some of the members of the Brigade. I had planned an interview with the Evaluation Commission to find out how the personnel of the Brigade stood in relation to the rest of their group, which is the

elementary duty of any commander to look after the well being of his men; but when I found out about this I didn't come to Caracas and stayed with my brigade. If I had come to Caracas, they would have arrested me here in the general command and would have sent some other general over there.

But they still sent there an Intelligence investigation team, because an officer very close to the Brigade had denounced the "coup d'Etat" against President Chávez in my brigade. It was certainly difficult not to believe an officer general...they invented all this: a formal denunciation from someone very close to the Parachutist Brigade. That was part of the plan: remove Baduel from office. During that whole week, the national and international media were full of news about how I had rebelled, while I was really carrying out instructions for what we called Plan Soberanía (Sovereignty Plan), which implied staying in my barracks and ready to participate in any possible serious disorder. And since they thought I was going to come out and make some kind of statement against the President, around the Brigade there was a group of journalists waiting for my statement.

Now, thinking back, I'm analyzing all this and I don't understand this insistence of the media in making Raúl Baduel appear as an enemy of the Constitution and its laws. And using my imagination I have come to the conclusion that perhaps they would even have gone to see the President: "Oh, don't you worry, Mr. President, we're going to take care of this with the utmost discretion, after all, it's Baduel, and he has such a strong relation with you..." And then, out of a clear blue sky, they would propose the President put me on a plane and send me on a vacation somewhere, or name me in some foreign country.

They even attempted to neutralize me, reminding me I was up for promotion soon. A general came to see me: "Don't worry, just stay put, because in July you'll be named Division General." He thought that with this announcement I would kneel and accept their coup. How wrong he was!

How can some officers, generals, and admirals I can't give any names because the courts are in charge of this as well as the competent legal bodies explain that already in the year 2000 they were giving out to civilians some weapons, last generation assault guns? We have collected evidence of all this and handed it to the competent legal bodies. How cynic can you get and now say that no one was exercising power, and that what they did was save the country? Noooooo!

CHÁVEZ ORDERED THERE BE NO BLOODSHED

—And the most Machiavellian and untruthful thing they could do was blame the Llaguno Bridge deaths on Chávez when you know that one of Chávez's weak points is that he can't take having provoked someone's death. Just last night I was telling him that a woman who knew I was coming to interview him had told me: "Please, tell the President that the women, the mothers of this country, ask him not to resign ever again, even if there have to be casualties, because there will be many more if he does resign."

—On this same topic: At midnight between Thursday 11 and Friday 12 I talked to the President over the phone, and he used more or less the following words: "Papa, my brother, thank you for your position and that of your soldiers, because you have been a wall of contention to prevent their attacking us here in Palacio and killing us." He must have some reason to tell me that. And at the end of his conversation he told me: "Brother, I order you... no, better, I plead you not to become together with your unit a motive for bloodshed." That's why I say: "How can these gentlemen now declare the President gave orders to shoot the people?" That's a total lie.

I don't blame or unblame anyone, that is for the competent court to do, but we all know those of us who have some information, anyway the techniques they were using: sharpshooters that would come out on television and would incriminate some people.

CAUSES FOR THE COUP

—There wasn't so much resistance here for the constituent assembly process, or for the Constitutional Referendum, or for re-legitimizing jobs; the real reaction came when we started affecting economic aspects a clear demonstration that there are people unwilling to lose their privileges, unwilling to stop meddling in public funds and make their fortunes with public money.

And if you take a second and look at what these people did when they usurped power because I will never be able to accept that was a government; they had simply usurped power it becomes evident. They discovered their personal appetites, their thirst for power; they wanted to cut up the country and distribute it among themselves, like a dead cow like Balthazar's feast⁵⁶.

In my opinion, the problem started when they began affecting very strong economic interests, and people used to doing business with public funds no longer had that possibility that explains the violence in their manifestations.

The media themselves reveal that there are more than 80 billion dollars of Venezuelan citizens outside the country. If they brought even a third back to invest here in Venezuela, our economic situation would be quite different actually you could come to the conclusion that there are people interested in intensifying the economic crisis and accelerating the fall of the country.

They should think about that carefully, because if they unleash an economic chaos and it turns into generalized violence, it will be very hard to stop the situation.

That's why I think it's crazy for those people to keep intensifying the conditions for our country to end up in generalized violence, because no one would be safe from the danger of a similar situation. And no magic wand would be able to fix it.

PLAN FOR THE RECOVERY OF NATIONAL DIGNITY

—I've been told you were the first to manifest your defiance and reject the attempted coup, and that you started gathering around your some commanders of the operational units, a plan to put Chávez back in power...

—It is important to stress that I hadn't talked about the situation of the country with the officers, generals, and admirals who accepted my position to reject the *de facto* junta that had usurped power. As soon as they learned of my negative position, they just went over to the Brigade. Since the rank of some of those who came was higher than mine, when we structured the command and the general staff, it was General García Montoya the highest-ranking officer who led the operations, whereas I became once again operations officer and spokesman for what was going on. That's when we began structuring our Plan for the Recovery of National Dignity.

—Did you have any contact with Commander Morao?

—Of course, we talked over the phone; he's the one who called. I asked his opinion about the situation and whether he needed reinforcements to recover control over Palacio, but he told me that with the soldiers and the personnel he already had, they were going to be able to do it.

In my opinion, what we did was unleash the reaction of many other military. We registered the names of all those who called telling us they knew the position we had taken and that they were with us that they wouldn't take any order that hadn't been previously approved or led by us. We calculated that around 80 % of all units of the Armed Forces had backed our position, in spite of

56 A very copious banquet.

communications problems. That's why I insist on saying that the Armed Forces are not fractured. What happened, in my opinion, is that a group of the highest-ranking officers just forgot their duty and assumed that position, but the direct operational commands, those in middle and junior positions, never doubted their duty was to defend the Constitution and the laws.

With each new arrival of these officers, the plan became increasingly structured. The only officer I called that morning to explain what I planned to do was General Pedro Torres Finol, Aviation Brigade General, who died when his helicopter fell on April 19, 2002.

The whole strategy was aimed, in the first place, against enemy plans, in particular against the spirit of the putschist commander in chief. The greatest ability lies in winning without shedding a single drop of blood, and you can do this by destroying the enemy's plans, guessing them or deducing them.

I am an admirer of Oriental cultures; I once made the mistake of saying I believed in reincarnation, and I've been seriously criticized about this.

MILITARY STRATEGY INSPIRED IN ORIENTAL CULTURES

—*What do you mean by "Oriental cultures"?*

—Philosophers like Lao Tse and military strategists like Sun Tzu. Look, just by chance I have here this book by Lao Tse called *Tao Tze Ching*, I'll read you verses 68 and 69 they're short. Verse 68 says: "The best military is not martial; the best fighter is not aggressive; the best conqueror enters no combat; the good leader puts himself below his assistants; that is called the virtue of not fighting and it is the energy men obey best, it is the wisdom of old people: to become one with the sky." Verse 69 has a specific military message: "According to a military proverb: I don't dare be the host, I prefer being the guest; I don't dare go an inch forward, I prefer to go back a foot: this is called advancing without moving, rolling up your sleeves without showing your arms, surrounding the enemy without deployment, defending yourself as if you had no weapons." And here it was the population that helped us; because they started coming to our unit, and with no classic weapons at all they defended us with their support and their encouragement, with their firm resolution to fight at our side.

Later on, verse 69 says: "There is no bigger mistake than to underestimate your enemy; if I underestimate the enemy I run the risk of losing by biggest treasure, which is love." And I think that's exactly what happened to our enemies: all those officers who accepted that power be usurped, they underestimated the Venezuelan people because they because its enemies, and they underestimated us military too. And I am totally convinced that their motivation was not love, but ambition. That same verse goes on saying: "That's why, when two similar armies clash, the one with an aching heart comes out winning." And the Venezuelan people, together with its Armed Forces, had an aching heart as a result of all the abuse, and seeing how their Constitution and their laws were being trampled. That's the philosophical aspect of all this.

The more operative aspect can be found in Chinese military literature, its treaty called *The Art of War* by SunTzu, where he says, for example: "Supreme ability resides in winning without shedding a drop of blood, and this can be done by destroying enemy plans, guessing them or reducing them." In another part of the treaty he says: "An expert in the art of war knows how to submit the enemy without fighting." And further on: "The golden rule of war is precisely the absence of all rule." And there is another war adage that says: "The supreme refinement of war is artifice, conquering the enemy without staining your sword with his blood." That's the art of offensive strategy.

—*Offensive or defensive?*

—An offensive that seems defensive. The Tao greatly insists on the importance of water, taken from nature: “There is nothing weaker than water, yet there is nothing that can resist it,” so you must try to imitate water’s behavior: water is ductile, malleable, apparently soft, yet nothing can stop it when it gets angry. In Taoism this is known as “doing without doing.”

I came in contact with *The Art of War* when we went to the Military Academy, where you study different ideologists of military art. We studied Sun Tzu and several others, but I was captivated by his book and decided to study it further from my younger years I have always liked martial arts, and even began studying Aikido, and though I’m no expert, I would very much like to improve my knowledge. *The Art of War* was my starting point to learn more about Lao Tse, because this treaty is inspired in Taoism.

—*So what do your compañeros think of all this?*

—Look, Marta: I know that some of the comrades I truly appreciate have said in private: “Oh no, Baduel isn’t bold enough to do anything, he breathes incense and smoke there in his office, singing strange songs too.” But that’s exactly what Taoism is all about: “The best warrior is not a martial one,” because you don’t need to show off your courage, you might find yourself in reckless positions that might prevent you from really evaluating the situation.”

—*Where can you see those principles in the strategy you followed in April?*

—Well, for example, we gave strict orders for the units to establish defensive positions in their bases, their facilities, and their barracks. They were told not to leave their facilities to start combat. They were to react only when attacked. We wanted to avoid combat as much as possible, thus respecting what the President had requested personally from me. We did train a unit to send it to Caracas, but in view of the confusion reigning there, we took all precautions possible to avoid a confrontation with innocent victims.

—*When you decided it wasn’t convenient to participate in the 1992 armed rebellion, were you already imbued with these ideas?*

—That’s correct, my position was precisely that: the best combat is won without soiling your sword with blood. The problem was how to exert pressure without using violence.

—*Did you use these arguments during your group discussions?*

—Of course, my *compañeros* would make jokes about my Taoism and all those things: here comes Sun Tzu, or the Tao.

A STRANGE PLANE ACCIDENT

—*Since you mentioned General Pedro Torres’ accident, do you really think that was just an accident?*

—There are many doubts about all this; some of the normal procedures were not followed. Worse still: General Alí Uzcáteghi and I had been invited to go on that helicopter but I had something like a foreboding and dropped the idea of going to the Armada’s commemoration, because from there we had to come to Caracas. Meteorological conditions were pretty difficult that day and we got to Caracas flying very very low.

I really doubt the accident was caused only by a human error. We know that now there are technical means to create false disturbances and introduce strange elements in flying instruments. Who knows, maybe that’s what they did, and when the pilot flies by instruments alone, he has to believe what the instruments say. What the pilot did was very strange: why did he turn left when it was so

much more logical to think that he had all the space he needed to the right? Because even if the sky is cloudy, usually our pilots fly through what we call El Callejón del Bacagua, that goes from here to La Guaira, and he was practically coming out of the tunnel, where the skies allow for better visibility to the right, because to the left he would have been closer to the *cerro*. The other pilot turned right and found a good place to put the helicopter down. And to top it all, General Rincón's helicopter had to do an emergency landing. That's just a bit too many strange elements all together.

7. NATIONAL DIALOGUE

—*In relation to its efforts for national dialogue, it's difficult to understand that having this government come back as strongly as it has, this action hasn't had more drastic results and that the right, at least in its public statements, hasn't come out as defeated. What's your opinion on all this?*

—The worst thing about all this is that there are still some elements creating conditions to unleash general violence in our country, create chaos, anguish, uncertainty, and disregard for constitutional mechanisms. What you're saying is quite true, and some of my military *compañeros* have told me about the arrogance of those awaiting competent trials, who now menace them: "You, we're going to get you for acting this way." They are the ones awaiting trial, yet they have the nerve to feel they can menace other *compañeros*. It's really incredible!

We have witnessed how some of these generals have menaced members of Congress, saying that had they planned the coup, something very different would have happened in Venezuela. And we wonder: "These people must be sure of their impunity, because they did something irrespective of all legal precepts, openly breaking what is constitutionally legal, and yet they act like bullies."

It's true that sometimes people demand that we act more strictly; a frustrated people are a dangerous thing, because in our country we don't know what hate is: Venezuelan culture is very tolerant; there is a wide-open space for tolerance, for openness. But some sectors are trying to stimulate hate, and I always say: "God forbid, God preserve us from a fratricidal struggle. We just cannot accept it!" We'll welcome everything and anything to avoid this, and I believe we have to have at least some trust and good faith the government certainly has.

NEED FOR A MODEST AGENDA

—We should do everything possible to stimulate dialogue, understanding all this is important. We could aim at a modest agenda, that would concentrate on poverty, and immediate short- and medium-range economic actions to overcome it.

That agenda could also include a stronger Constitution, a stronger democracy vs. *de facto* dictatorships or governments. It could be an arbitrated dialogue, where the government would name some representatives, the opposition some of its own, but for the time being they could just choose impartial representatives⁵⁷.

They accuse the government of being violent, but Chávez had asked for understanding, moderation, calm and the people who had concentrated around the barracks went away without any feeling of retaliation, without vengeance. They could have identified the richest sectors and applied measures of retaliation, but nothing like that happened here. Maybe there were some isolated cases, but nothing like what happened in other countries and other situations, where a sector of the population has applied vengeance against the other. In my opinion, that's the most evident proof that our country is really and truly mature, and that people have learned to participate.

57 This interview took place in July 2003, way before the Dialogue around a Table came up.

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE: CHANGING THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

—*What is, in your opinion, the biggest challenge the government has today?*

—It has to change the difficult economic situation of the country. Many people could interfere, intensify the economic crisis, use their international contacts to hinder investments in Venezuela, or at least put them in doubt.

The true challenge is to stop the process toward increasing poverty; which is nonsensical because our country is full of resources. There would also have to be immediate actions to generate employment, but a productive one not just the result of emergency measures to mitigate the situation. That might also be necessary but it shouldn't be the rule.

In my opinion, one of the sectors where there could be important investments because it generates employment is housing, and this would also solve one of the most serious problems of the country, the need for homes.

We could promote projects for some sectors of the population who could build their own homes; and for those with some purchasing power, facilities to buy their own home we might even motivate people to put some order in urban neighborhood concentrations.

Another of our possibilities is tourism. True, that needs a huge infrastructure, but we could start promoting it modestly. Venezuela has things many other countries don't, and there has often been an inadequate vision of tourism: we think we have to make a Las Vegas out of Margarita Island, so people will go there to gamble; or make it into a Florida, or a Miami, where people can shop. Well, no, I think there are many people from other parts of the world who would be happy to visit such original and beautiful places.

8. THE OPPOSITION IS STUBBORN

—*Everything you just said, you had already told me in our previous interview in July 2002, but after that you had the December offensive, the company strike, and the oil sabotage. So how do you see the situation now?*

—Well, everything that has happened after April 2002 is evident proof that these elements wanted to use military force to usurp legislative power here in Venezuela, and though they failed they are stubborn in their goal.

After analyzing the situation of the country with experts in economic questions, and particularly in oil matters, early in October 2002 we came to the conclusion that this offensive would continue, but this time around with an economic facet: they would attempt to create chaos in our national economy, using technology to provoke obstacles and a generalized sabotage in the oil sector.

We foresaw what happened, and they weren't able to achieve their goals. We controlled the situation, and both the strike and the oil sabotage failed but it isn't yet time to boast: we must be very careful because there are too many interests at play, particularly economic interests, sectors who want a piece of power.

Recently we have been studying the national electric sector, the interconnected system in particular, which controls the generation, the distribution, and the marketing of electric power throughout the whole country. I think both the State and all Venezuelan citizens who love their country must be very alert.

—General Lameda asked me if I hadn't wondered why they hadn't cut off electric power. He believed it was due to the fact that television was a major instrument for them: if they cut off electricity, they had no way conduct the process.

—General Lameda's is a very valid opinion; as an officer of communications he has a very clear view of their importance; but we must not deny the possibility of a blackout to create chaos and open the door for foreign intervention in our country... because unfortunately, there are some sectors out there that long for it.

In line with the precepts I have already quoted from Lao Tse's *Tao Tze Ching*, I think we must not underestimate the enemy.

REPERCUSSIONS OF THE OIL SABOTAGE WITHIN THE ARMED FORCES

—Going back to the oil sabotage, what were its repercussions among Venezuelan military? This is perhaps the first time Venezuela has known such a major attempt against its national wealth, and I know military people are always concerned with anything related to sovereignty and the defense of the wealth of the nation. Did you have any specific task to rescue PDVSA?

—The Fourth Armored Division in particular has had to act directly in the facilities that include the whole system of El Palito, Yagua, the refinery and the distribution of oil by-products at Maproal in Barquisimeto, and more particularly at Yagua, in the state of Carabobo, a distribution center.

The contingency plans we had prepared for the oil industry foresaw the paralysis of the workers, but that's not what happened; on the contrary, it was the managers in the administration and the sector working with state-of-the-art systems that control the oil industry who went on strike. At Yagua they broke all links with the computer systems and created new links through telephone headquarters to enter and sabotage operations that are totally automated.

We also had evidence of a possible physical aggression, when a helicopter flew over the facilities of the Yagua distribution center.

—A Venezuelan helicopter?

—Yes, a Venezuelan helicopter, we have all the information and this has already been denounced before the Public Ministry. Many people saw how the helicopter launched some kind of balloon with an incandescent tip, but fortunately the winds pushed the balloon over to the nearby hills and generated a fire there, so we suspect they had the deliberate intention to create an explosion of all the tanks in the Yagua system.

—They've told me opposition-controlled media announced much too soon that they feared explosions in several places, because you had incorporated inexperienced workers to overcome the absence of those on strike.

—That's right, and even representatives of regional governments thought the lack of experience of the people who had come to work the systems could provoke a catastrophe of incalculable consequences.

But as a soldier I am very proud, and I believe this has become a factor of cohesion and awareness at all levels of the National Armed Forces not only of the commanding ranks but also of senior and junior officers, sergeants, and soldiers. They were all able to observe *in situ* the criminal actions unleashed by a group of people on our national industry, provoking huge losses for the Venezuelan nation, and creating risky conditions that could have led to a catastrophe. That's why I consider this a factor of cohesion.

I only use Yagua as an example, because I know it first hand, but in my opinion you could extend this to the whole nation. Civilians and military with technical training joined forces there, and though it's true that most of those who took over the jobs of the deserters had no previous experience in managing oil systems, they were scientifically and technically highly qualified. There were doctors in mechatronics, robotics, telematics, together with qualified military personnel: system engineers, communications engineers, and we were able to restore services in the plant and reject their attempted sabotage against our plants and the work processes of oil facilities.

A positive result of all this is that throughout the military world they became aware of a group of people in our country who believe they have the right to endanger the nation's wealth with political aims in mind.

—You are saying that even if the technical personnel weren't specialized in the oil industry, it was so qualified it wouldn't make mistakes.

—Look, Marta, in Yagua they have in fact corrected mistakes: there was that fire there in the bush that I already mentioned, and we discovered those facilities had no fire wall, so we immediately got the necessary equipment and built it; right now their protection is guaranteed this also undermines the myth they spread that only their qualified personnel could run the facilities. These people want to convince you that they have almighty power; that they are the only ones anointed by God to operate there, and that's certainly not true, because we discovered errors there too, not due to sabotage but to negligence, carelessness, or just plain indolence. So we confirmed that their myth about their “meritocracy”⁵⁸ isn't really true; we discovered, for example, that the fire extinguishers were not working properly, again not because of sabotage but due to negligence in their maintenance.

And there are many other problems we have discovered that we can't blame on sabotage, but negligence. What more proof do you want than the fact that the plant has been working since December 8, with no “meritocracy” and with no problems either, service has been renewed, and those systems are operating full time.

—I've heard criticism because you have decided not to allow those 16 000 people who went on strike back to work. Some say they're not all to blame for the sabotage, and that they represent an important “human capital” that should be preserved.

—I'm not sure that's the way it is, but it's also true that many people in that sector have damaged the industry with their strike. Previous information also indicated that there were too many people working in our oil industry, and that's turned out to be true because the systems are working without those 16 000 people, and more they have recovered our country's real capacity to produce and refine oil.

I think that decision is valid and perfectly thought out; I even think that some of the leaders should go before the competent legal bodies and assume responsibility for the criminal actions and the damage done unto the Venezuelan nation's wealth.

It's better to just plainly do without them; because we must take into account not only their academic and technical training not to be underestimated, and which they owe the Venezuelan State, by the way, because thanks to oil industry resources most or all of them were able to get that academic scientific and technical training. We must also take into account their love for our

58 In Venezuela they call “meritocracy” those technicians who earn high salaries and who should have been chosen because of their meritstheir high technical qualifications.

country, their sense of nationality and social responsibility for their actions. Before the strike, these people had assumed an active political stand, even though they now deny it. We would have to be really stupid to give them back the management and operation of those systems.

—*Shouldn't they come back...?*

—Definitely not, they should not come back, and if they ever come back it will be to take responsibility for the damages they caused and the actions they committed.

I believe there are enough people in the country with the necessary training, and now we must also insist that they be not only technically, scientifically, and academically trained, but also committed to serve the country and the nation you can't be just politically defined, you must serve the supreme interests of the Venezuelan State.

—*Now, in relation to these technical and qualified personnel that cooperated with you, don't you think the opposition's attitude of sabotage and destruction increased the awareness of some hesitating sectors of the middle class, who have begun understanding the Bolivarian project?*

—Yes, I agree with you, and the best proof of that is Yagua once again. There is a group of engineers and technicians who started working there in December with no salary, and much less coveting a specific job. As an act of pure justice I think we should take them into account for the new personnel structure we are preparing for the oil industry. They have often had to use their own personal resources to eat, to get to work, and they have never asked for anything, working all the time: Saturdays, Sundays, all the holidays we have in December they were trying to put the systems back to work and to put that part of the oil industry back on its feet.

—*If I understand correctly, in the oil industry you have had the technical personnel necessary to put oil production back together, but you haven't yet solved the problem of computer services, and this is having some negative consequences for the company.*

—One of those criminal actions was precisely through this company specialized in computer services for the oil industry: INTESA is one of PDVSA's associates that work together with a transnational company for these computer services. In some cases it has been indexed for its connections with the intelligence services of some oil-consumer countries. So, as the saying goes, we put our own head on the stocks. One of these criminal actions was to export all the information, so we've been forced to recreate it. There are specific people responsible for this deed and they must answer for their crime, even if they don't harm specific people or interests but affect the interests of the Venezuelan nation that's what's at play here.

I have always said and this is what I insist on with my colleagues that we must analyze this oil strike and the damage to national wealth as deeds against State security. I can feel that in the Venezuelan Armed Forces, it is increasingly important to defend the spirit and the letter of the Constitution, in particular anything related to Article 328, which states that the military institution is essentially a professional institution that must serve the nation.

PLAN FOR FOOD SUPPLIES

—*They say that after the strike failed, the opposition has been trying to create food shortages, an unhappy population, so in August they will be better qualified for the revocatory referendum, or whatever you'll have. What is your opinion of this situation and what can you do about it? Because I've been told that major monopolies have incredible control, they have a mafia just like the one they had in PDVSA, and it could do great harm. I take it that you're preparing a whole plan for food security.*

—That’s correct, it’s what we’re doing and our goal is very clear: we have to guarantee through our own means 20 % of the national food demand, particularly for the poorest sectors of the population that must be able to buy at least the basic food required for the household.

We have been doing this in the past, but now were really doing something about it with people’s markets, itinerant little stores, solidary stores to operate the marketing network and the distribution of solidary grocery bags. But in this specific state we have stressed everything related to planting, and with the help of the educational sector we are pushing a project called “Every hand must plant something.” The problem here is that food distribution was practically controlled by traditional sectors: the major food monopolies and food distribution chains. They weren’t interested in the small or medium producers, who often didn’t even exist.

In our state we have small peasant communities, and with a very limited investment in resources and support, we can answer the need for many of the products that make up the Venezuelan diet. We have discovered astounding things, not only in Araguawe have been in contact with some producers in Arismendi, state of Barinas, and interestingly they can get more easily by land to Maracay than to the capital of their state. We’ve also discovered that they have a long tradition: on Mondays, they have some kind of popular fair where they sell different products, and they have surplus food like meat, fish, cheese, beans, and corn that could answer different demands.

We’re also attempting to recover our eating traditions. Through our educational system we could teach how to cook corn meal, go back to our own foods instead of drinking soft drinks, processed soda drinks, that sometimes even affect our health just go back to our own drinks, like *papelón* with lemon, juices, *chichas*, *carato*⁵⁹ all these things that now seem pure folklore. You might think I’m crazy, but we’ve seen a certain comeback of these traditions, and if we were able to give them some support, it would contribute to solve this problem.

And just like in the Chinese ideogram “crisis” means “opportunity,” we can see opportunity right here and now. This crisis has forced us to satisfy our own internal food demand, because among all the privileges God and nature gave her, Venezuela has been blessed with the best conditions to produce different foods: we have good soil, great seasons for sun and rain, a thick organic layer, good communication by road, and people willing to work. We should take advantage of this and turn our eyes to the countryside, break our dependence on imported goods, and base our economy and food security on our own national production.

—I think the opposition is giving you a present: the possibility of completing your program, because if we take things as they are, this national production to substitute imports was certainly not favored by those not interested in it, and right now they’ve created the perfect conditions for you to go for it.

—You’re right. Now we must organize production under the cooperative system, organize the communities in productive cooperatives, consumer coops, service coops, so they can manage them together with their own resources.

I mentioned the people over at Arismendi: they have around 50 000 weekly kilos of excess cheese alone, and 50 000 kilos of cheese cover a huge demand if we support them in transportation, placement and direct sale to the consumer, with no intermediaries, we can solve many problems.

I’ve discovered many details thanks to all this. Just think: those who are in control of fish marketing chains buy directly from our fishermen in east Venezuela; they buy fresh sardines, high in proteins

⁵⁹ *Papelón con limón*: sugar candy with lemon; *chicha*: cereal brandy; *carato*: rice brandy.

and a very healthy food, at 60 bolívares per kilo in the east; they sell it very cheap in the center of the country, just 1500 bolívares per kilo! Transportation, conservation, and marketing expenses just can't amount to all that, so we must come to the conclusion that they have huge and inconsiderate earnings. Of course if you are in business you want to make money, but by God! You must also have a social attitude; your benefits can't be totally disproportionate.

9. CONFESSIONS OF A SECRETARY TO THE PRESIDENT

—*Were you really the President's first secretary?*

—Yes, from December 10, 1998, to August 30, 1999. In July 1999, when the President named me General I know he appreciates me and was aware of my passion for the parachutists he decided to put me in command of that emblematic unit in Venezuela. There was a lot of speculation with this decision and they said many things, but that was the real cause behind it.

My presence as Secretary spurred on those who were attacking Chávez because he was “militarizing” the government. And it was also quite complicated for the military institution itself: having an active officer acting as a private secretary, with so many political connotations.

They say there were a lot of tension and misunderstandings between the two of us, but that's not true. There might have been things I didn't agree with, but with a lot of respect and tenderness for the *compañero*, and a lot of honesty and frankness, I would tell him but that certainly didn't mean we were in opposite positions, as some people have said, or that he didn't treat me well, because there has been a lot of speculation about his despotic and inconsiderate attitude toward me. No, that's most certainly not true.

—*Even if Chávez himself confesses that he loses his patience all of a sudden, and all of a sudden he can be very harsh...*

—But he recognizes this and apologizes, and you get to understand him. It's true that sometimes he is harsh and strong-minded, but you can understand that he wants things done well, because his main concern is to make the country go forward. He can create chaos all of a sudden, but then he comes looking for reconciliation: “Brother, you know I love you very much.” I never interpreted those reactions as a despotic attitude I knew it was because he wanted things to be well done. And he confesses I don't know if he let you in on this that he is harsh and demanding with those he loves, and also with those who love him too.

I hardly ever went with him on his national or international trips, but once, on one of those trips, when he had just been elected president and was coming back from Cuba, he confessed to Gabo García Márquez, who was on the same plane, that I too had participated in the El Samán de Güere oath they had always said there had been only three people, and later, Gabo wrote an article and told this; even my mother recriminated me because I had never told her. So I explained to her: “Look, mother, I just couldn't tell you...”

—*That was Chávez's way of acknowledging you against all the doubts people were having about you.*

—Yes, yes, of course, even though many people already knew it, I think the President was moved by the wish to neutralize all that. Many *compañeros* who were in the Movement didn't understand why Chávez had named me his private secretary. They would say: “Well look now: Baduel who threw in the towel, who didn't support him all the way, who never went to jail...”

—*And finally, what is your opinion of those who accuse Chávez of being antidemocratic?*

—This might not be a perfect process and undoubtedly there are many things that should be improved, but if ever a process of change, social and political transition here in Venezuela has been consulted, this is it. ◀

STRUCTURE OF THE VENEZUELAN ARMED FORCES

The high military command in Venezuela has a Minister of Defense, an inspector general of the Armed Forces, a head of the Armed Forces General Staff, and general commanders of the four corps: the Army, the Armada, the Air Force, and the National Guard. Only two of them participated in the coup.

Each corps has its own high command, which included the force commander, the inspector general of the force, and the head of the General Staff. Some corps also have an operations commander who is member of the high command.

Each corps has what is known as the enlarged high command that is made up of the high command plus the commanders of major combat units and major commandos (for example, in the case of the Army: the commanders of the five divisions, the commander of the Army air force, the commander of the logistics commando, and the commander of the Schools commando.)

In the case of the Armada, they have the commander of naval operations and the squadron commanders, as well as the commander of the logistics commando.

The only putschist senior officers in real positions of command were Ramírez Pérez, head of the Armed Forces General Staff, and Vásquez Velasco, Army Commander General.