

VENEZUELA - An Analysis of Hugo Chavez United Nations Address on September 20, 2006

Greg Grandin, Amy Goodman & Juan Gonzalez, Democracy Now!

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AMY GOODMAN: Greg Grandin joins us in the studio now, professor of Latin American history at New York University, author of *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. Welcome to Democracy Now!

GREG GRANDIN: Thanks for having me.

AMY GOODMAN: Your assessment of [President Chavez's speech at the UN](#) and the message he was putting out?

GREG GRANDIN: Well, I think he was speaking on a number of levels. The most immediate level, he was trying to change the script that was being set up by the press as a confrontation between Iran and the United States, as exemplified by the two speeches of the respective leaders the day before. And what I think Chavez did was he diversified the struggle, and this speaks to what he is, I think, trying to do on a larger global scale. It no longer became about Iran and the U.S., but all of a sudden there was a kind of — he provided a cover fire, I think, for Iran in some ways by breaking through the tedium of the General Assembly and giving us an image that I think will go down in the history of the UN, along with Khrushchev banging his shoe on the podium.

AMY GOODMAN: The response in the General Assembly?

GREG GRANDIN: From what I read in the New York Times is that applause — the UN organizers of the event had to quiet the crowd down, that the applause had gone on for so long that he received the longest ovation of any other speech at the event.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Of course, what became most of the focus in the news coverage last night and today were the references to Bush and the devil and the sulfur is burning. There was almost a — while clearly quite a few Americans, especially backers of President Bush, were outraged, there was almost a humorous or sarcastic note to the whole thing, wasn't there?

GREG GRANDIN: Yeah, I think so. I think if you actually look at the clip — and I think it was the most downloaded clip from CNN, so I think people, American viewers, are getting a sense of it — there was a smile on his face. He crossed himself. He did the — you know, he looked up to God. And so, I think much of what Chavez does, he does with a glint in his eye.

AMY GOODMAN: It looks like rumors of Noam Chomsky's demise have been greatly exaggerated.

GREG GRANDIN: Yes. Yes, apparently Chavez believed that Chomsky was dead.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, explain. He holds up the book —

GREG GRANDIN: Well, he held up — I think he opened his speech with *Hegemony or Survival* and urged everybody to read it, noted that it was translated into Arabic and German, and Russian, so there's no excuse for people not knowing the book. And he particularly urged Americans to read it. And he repeated the thesis that the world faces — and this has been a kind of recurrent theme in many of Chavez's speeches — that the fight between barbarity and civilization in the past had a kind of long future ahead of

it, but with nuclear arms and the potential of mass destruction, the choice that we face between those polls is much more immediate, that there is much more at stake in the attempt to kind of curb U.S. aggression.

AMY GOODMAN: And he said he wished he could have met Noam Chomsky while he was alive?

GREG GRANDIN: Yes, apparently afterwards, I believe. I know that he didn't say that in the speech, but to reporters he commented.

JUAN GONZALEZ: The other thing that struck me about the speech was the very sharp criticism of the United Nations as a failed organization, and clearly he was pointing to the reforms that many in the United Nations are asking about, the whole issue of opening up the membership of the Security Council and democratizing the Security Council as a force in the world.

GREG GRANDIN: Yeah, I mean, in many ways, what Chavez represents is a return of third world nonaligned movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and reform of the UN was on the agenda, not driven by the U.S. or Europe back then, but by third world countries who felt that it was an institution which granted an inordinate amount of power to the world superpowers and that there needed to be structural reform. And Chavez referenced that at the end of his speech yesterday. At the same time, he is trying for a UN Security seat, which the vote is in October.

AMY GOODMAN: Let's talk about how significant that is. Latin America is supposed to have that seat.

GREG GRANDIN: The way it works is that regional caucuses get an allotted number of seats. Latin America usually gets two seats. There's ten nonpermanent members. Five rotate on every year, five rotate off. Venezuela announced its candidacy for the seat about seven or eight months ago. The United States has been backing Guatemala. And most Latin American countries are supporting Venezuela's bid, but there are a number of countries, like Peru and Mexico and a few Caribbean countries, that are supporting Guatemala and Central American countries, as well.

So what happens when there's not a consensus — normally there's a consensus candidate by the regional caucuses, and then it's just a pro forma vote in the General Assembly — it will actually be a real vote in the General Assembly. Now it's a secret vote, and the candidate has to win by a two-thirds majority. So what probably will happen is that neither Guatemala or Venezuela will receive two-thirds majority in the October vote, and there will be a series of votes subsequently.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And how active has the United States been behind the scenes on this issue, in terms of trying to prevent Venezuela from being the Latin American candidate?

GREG GRANDIN: Oh, I think it's been very active. It's been very active both in promoting Guatemala — and it needs to be said that Guatemala just a few years ago was decertified by the U.S. for not cooperating in drugs. Otto Reich of all people had singled out Guatemala as being a kind of nest of corruption. Human rights violations are on the rise, but Guatemala has been rehabilitated, and the U.S. has been pressuring its allies to support Guatemala. Now it's a secret vote, so it could play out. Nobody knows how it's going to play out when it actually goes to the General Assembly.

JUAN GONZALEZ: One of the U.S. officials who did react to the Chavez speech was John Bolton, the U.S. ambassador, who, as I recall this, he said that Chavez was free in this country to say whatever he wanted, so he could go to Central Park and say the same thing and that he wished that Chavez would extend the same kind of freedom to the press and freedom of speech in Venezuela itself. Now, this has been a growing theme of critics of the Chavez administration, that it's increasingly authoritarian. What is the status of the press in Venezuela today?

GREG GRANDIN: Well, this is, I think, indicative of the ignorance of the United States's top diplomat to the world to talk with such ignorance and lack of knowledge of what's going on in Venezuela. Anybody who has any firsthand experience in Venezuela remarks on how free and open the press is. And the

corporate media, the print media and the TV media is just chronically obsessed with Chavez and critical in a way that would be completely alien for most U.S. observers.

There's no — Guatemala is a good contrast. Actually, just last week, a journalist, a journalist and human rights activist was gunned down on the streets of a major city in broad daylight, and people have linked it to paramilitary groups and to an uptick in repression. If that kind of event, if that kind of repression happened in Venezuela, the world would know it through the United States, and yet, because Guatemala is being backed by the U.S., it's —

JUAN GONZALEZ: But now, hasn't the Venezuelan government passed new laws that would indicate at least its ability to exercise a new restraint on the press?

GREG GRANDIN: Well, some of that legislation, social responsibility legislation, was passed after the 2002 coup, which was organized and encouraged and inflamed by the corporate media, by Gustavo Cisneros, the head of Venevision and other corporate media conglomerates.

AMY GOODMAN: What do you mean it was "encouraged" by?

GREG GRANDIN: Well, part of the kind of polarization and mounting campaign of destabilization was being played out on the private TV stations in the weeks leading up to the April coup. And then a number of them were linked directly to the coup plotters, both the journalists and the corporate backers of the corporate owners of the stations. This legislation has come — I mean, it's two things. One, it hasn't been enforced. Two, some of its defenders have said it's no different than any kind of social responsibility legislation you would see in Germany, for instance, or Scandinavian countries.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Greg Grandin, professor of Latin American history at New York University. On this issue of Venezuela getting the seat, which is increased, the chance, with the secret ballot that will take place at the General Assembly, you have on one side the United States, Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Colombia; on the other side, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Cuba, more than a dozen other Caribbean nations now backing Venezuela's bid. Winning the support, Venezuela is making oil deals with some of these countries. And I want to go to this issue of oil deals in this country, actually, for starters. Juan, you wrote a really good piece in the New York Daily News about the oil deals President Chavez is making in the United States.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, yes. Well, I reported yesterday that the Chavez government — we covered, when we interviewed President Chavez a year ago, the beginning of the program to provide fuel oil in poor communities in the United States. That is now being ramped up this winter considerably.

In New York City, for instance, the last year, a million gallons of heating fuel was distributed throughout the South Bronx. Now, Venezuela is committing 25 million gallons just in New York City to all the boroughs — well, four of the five, the four biggest boroughs of New York City. And they're offering it to homeowners, poor homeowners, as well as co-op owners, and the only groups that they're not offering it to are privately held condos or private landlords. But basically they're trying to ramp up — I think as many as 70,000 apartments could be heated if the full 25 million gallons were used this winter, at 40% off the wholesale market price.

And they have asked also the Citizens Energy Corporation, that's run by Joe Kennedy, to run the whole operation nationwide in New York City, as well as throughout the country.

AMY GOODMAN: Joe Kennedy, the former congressman, the son of Robert Kennedy.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Former congressman, right. Right, and so they apparently are going to be running and administering the entire program. So I think they're ramping up considerably this program throughout the country now. Judging by the emails I got yesterday, there's a mixed reaction among New Yorkers and Daily News readers. A significant number of people are calling this political ploy of Chavez, but at the same time I've got all of these emails from elderly low-income New Yorkers, all saying, "How can I apply

for the oil?”

GREG GRANDIN: And it's not just in the United States. Chavez, Venezuela has pioneered this innovative form of diplomacy, where it's going below the national governments. It's doing this in Central America and in countries that are governed by conservative governments that are not allies with Chavez. It's providing cheap oil, cheap petroleum to Nicaragua, to Guatemala. I think a deal is in the works certainly to El Salvador. And it just arranged something with Ken Livingstone in London. On some level, it's just classic leveraging, comparative vantage, in order to project influence and defend interest. It's nothing the United States doesn't do.

AMY GOODMAN: Venezuela owns Citgo.

GREG GRANDIN: In the U.S., yes, it owns Citgo.

AMY GOODMAN: And Chavez just went to China.

GREG GRANDIN: And Chavez just went to China. And this is part of — what Chavez was doing yesterday and what — in general his foreign policy is to globalize now a battle that he has basically won in Latin America. The United States has lost Latin America, not in the way that we lost China after World War II, but it can no longer count on Latin America as its strategic reserve, to watch its back as it deals with the rest of the world, as it did during the Cold War. It could count on Latin America to vote its way in the OAS and the UN. That's no longer the case. That's clearly — Latin America is not behind, has not signed up to join the war on terror as a kind of ideological framework. So that battle, Chavez has won, or it's emblematic of a larger struggle.

And now what he's trying to do, I think, is project it onto a global scale. And part of it is — I think it has to be looked at as the failure of Europe to constitute itself as a balancing block to the U.S. What Chavez is now trying to do with Russia, with China, in the Middle East — particularly in the Middle East — in Southeast Asia, is create what he openly calls — it's not a secret — a multi-polar world, a way of balancing the uni-polarity of the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Greg Grandin, I want to thank you very much for joining us. Greg Grandin, professor of Latin American history at the New York University here in New York, author of *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*.

GREG GRANDIN: Thanks for having me.

Greg Grandin is professor of Latin American history at New York University and author of *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*.

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