

J. D. VANCE'S NOTABLE ABSENCE ON VENEZUELA

Was the Vice-President's exclusion from the operation in Venezuela an expression of his anti-interventionist ideology—or a political calculation?

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

January 6, 2026



Photograph by Tom Brenner / Getty

 Save this story

On Friday night, when Donald Trump met with a small group of senior Administration officials and decided to authorize a raid in Caracas by Delta Force commandos to capture Nicolás Maduro, those present included Secretary of State Marco Rubio; Secretary of War Pete Hegseth; the C.I.A.

director, John Ratcliffe; Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Stephen Miller, the President's most essential policy adviser, omni-portfolio'd and grimly saturnine. Notably absent was the Vice-President, J. D. Vance. On Saturday, when the same group announced at Mar-a-Lago that the attack had been a success, Vance wasn't there, either. A detailed report from the *Wall Street Journal* on the months of planning leading up to the attack did not mention the Vice-President's name once.

Vance's exclusion may have owed something to ideology. The Vice-President, who served in Iraq, has been one of the loudest critics of American interventionism in the second Trump Administration, both before entering the White House and since. (Last spring, when *The Atlantic* published Signal chats of the planning for a bombing attack in Yemen, the messages showed Vance striking a few cautionary notes.) That may have explained why he was missing—he'd lost out to the hawks. But Vance is also the ablest communicator in the President's orbit, and so his absence has been especially notable in the confusing and various answers the Administration has given to the most basic questions about the act of war: What was the attack really about, and what does the President intend to happen next in Venezuela?

This past weekend, when Vance did eventually make his case for the attack, in a long post on X, he sounded faintly lawyerly and quietly anguished. Maduro's Venezuela, he argued, was a source of drugs—if not fentanyl, which has been the scourge of Vance's beloved Midwest for the past decade, then certainly cocaine—and “a profit center for all of the Latin American cartels.” Vance acknowledged that there was “a lot of criticism about oil,” alluding to concerns that the U.S. was effectively using its might to steal Venezuela's significant reserves, without even the pretense of principle. Twenty years ago, Vance went on, under a prior regime, “Venezuela expropriated American oil property and until recently used that stolen property to get rich and fund their narcoterroristic activities.” (Note the legalistic “until recently.”) Vance continued, “I understand the anxiety over

the use of military force, but are we just supposed to allow a communist to steal our stuff in our hemisphere and do nothing?” The Vice-President seemed pained, like someone was twisting his arm. His statement also didn’t add up to a case for war, or anything like it.

The attack on Venezuela and the capture of its President, the most consequential foreign-policy act of this Administration, has been impeccably planned and woefully undertheorized. “The lack of framing of the message on a potential occupation has the base bewildered, if not angry,” Trump’s longtime ally Steve Bannon told the Times. In the days since the raid, the White House has offered a mess of contradictory plans and rationales. On Saturday, Trump said that the United States would now “run” Venezuela. But Trump officials had not kept any troops in the country and left Maduro’s Vice-President, Delcy Rodríguez, in charge; she was soon trying to rally her countrymen against Washington. Then, on Sunday morning, Rubio offered a clarification—the American role would be limited to continuing to enforce an oil “quarantine,” effectively a naval blockade, as a lever to encourage friendlier policies from Caracas. But that blockade had been in place before Maduro’s capture, and it didn’t resemble anything like a plan to “run” the country.

In this vacuum of meaning, the key Administration personalities have taken to network television and social media, offering their own post-facto theories of the case. They have been like the sweepers in curling, trying to coax a runaway stone onto an advantageous track. The runaway stone, in this case, being Trump’s decision to attack, and everything that will come after.

Among Trump’s advisers, Rubio’s vision is the clearest. His intent is anti-Communist. Cuban officials, Rubio told NBC, “are the ones that were propping up Maduro. His entire, like, internal security force, his internal security apparatus is entirely controlled by Cubans.” The previous day, at Mar-a-Lago, Rubio had said, “if I lived in Havana and I was in the government, I’d be concerned.” Was that a war plan for Havana? If so, the

President didn't exactly sound persuaded. On Sunday night, Trump told reporters on Air Force One that, when it came to Cuba, "I don't think we need any action," because the country was already "ready to fall." Trump also made some critical comments about the Presidents of Colombia ("a sick man who likes making cocaine and selling it to the United States") and Mexico ("has to get their act together"), which suggested that his gaze might be less methodically trained on the region's Communist regimes.

Stephen Miller, meanwhile, indulged a grander historical view, of a renewed imperial program. "Not long after World War II the West dissolved its empires and colonies and began sending colossal sums of taxpayer-funded aid to these former territories," he wrote on social media. "The West opened its borders, a kind of reverse colonization, providing welfare and thus remittances, while extending to those newcomers and their families not only the full franchise but preferential legal and financial treatment over the native citizenry. The neoliberal experiment, at its core, has been a long self-punishment of the places and peoples that built the modern world." Speaking with Jake Tapper on CNN on Monday, he declared that the U.S. could seize Greenland if it wanted. "We live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

Are the President's intentions actually colonial, or more simply a hostage-taking kind of gunboat diplomacy? According to the *Financial Times*, the brother of Rodríguez, Venezuela's interim leader, had held talks last year with officials in Washington, a detail which offered a whiff of Cold War client-statism and raised the question of what Rodríguez might have promised them. Trump himself kept talking not about anti-Communism or narco-trafficking but about oil. On Air Force One, he said that "oil companies are going to go in and rebuild this system." (The companies themselves said that they hadn't been consulted; flooding the market with new supply would not be in the interests of corporate profits.) The President told the public that the rebuilding of Venezuela's oil industry would take "billions" in

infrastructure investment—in Venezuela, not the U.S. Curt Mills, editor of *The American Conservative*, observed, “Democratic talking points writing themselves right now.”

Vance’s general absence from the Venezuela initiative has been taken as an expression of his ideological identity. He is a dove, at least in the relative terms of Trumpworld, and this has been an operation for the hawks. But his more salient position may be as Trump’s political heir, and the Venezuela adventure is beginning to look like a very hard political sell. A CBS/YouGov poll taken before the attack found that seventy per cent of Americans opposed military action in Venezuela; a snap poll taken by YouGov just after Maduro’s capture showed that only thirty-six per cent of respondents “strongly or somewhat” supported the operation. If Trump means to persuade the American people of the wisdom of the attack by trying to bring them cheaper Venezuelan oil, then that will mean a far deeper entanglement in a conflict that he might prefer to treat as a hit-and-run. And then there’s the tricky international question of why, exactly, the U.S. is entitled to just take oil reserves off of Caracas in the first place. Rubio may have achieved a long-standing anti-Communist goal. Miller can celebrate a blow struck against the liberal order. But the likeliest person to inherit the Trump mantle was the one staying out of the frame. Vance had noted that there is a national anxiety “over the use of military force.” Grant that there is a moral dimension to that anxiety. There is also a political one. ♦



Benjamin Wallace-Wells began contributing to The New Yorker in 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2015. He writes about American politics and society.