

THE LEDE

REGIME CHANGE IN AMERICA'S BACK YARD

What comes after Nicolás Maduro's ouster in Venezuela?

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Photograph from AFP / Getty

Early Saturday morning, when President Donald Trump launched a bombing raid on Venezuela and captured its strongman President, Nicolás Maduro, few observers were entirely surprised. Trump has long said that he wanted Maduro out of power, branding him a narco-terrorist and placing a fifty-million-dollar bounty on his head. In recent months, Trump and his “Secretary of War,” Pete Hegseth, have deployed a huge military force to the region, launching attacks on at least thirty so-called narco-boats and killing more than a hundred alleged drug runners.

Maduro and his wife were taken into custody aboard the U.S.S. Iwo Jima, an assault ship; unverified photos circulated of Maduro in handcuffs. Attorney General Pam Bondi swiftly congratulated Trump, saying that Maduro had been indicted in the Southern District of New York on drug-trafficking and other charges and would “soon face the full wrath of American justice on American soil in American courts.” Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who by all accounts was key to the campaign, re-shared a post on X that he made in July: “Maduro is NOT the president of Venezuela and his regime is NOT the legitimate government. Maduro is the head of the Cartel de los Soles, a narco-terror organization which has taken possession of a country.” Rubio’s assertions, like Trump’s claims that the attacks on boatmen have stopped fentanyl smuggling into the U.S., were unaccompanied by any publicly available evidence.

I interviewed Maduro in 2017, as Trump began agitating for his removal. Maduro spoke of his mentor, Hugo Chávez, the founder of the Bolivarian revolution. Chávez was a fierce ideologue, but, Maduro said, even he had avoided pushing the U.S. too far. “He understood that he needed to have a good relationship with *el poder*”—the power. Maduro’s own relationship with Trump was tendentious. He mocked Trump in rallies, calling him the “king

of wigs.” But he was also willing to meet with his envoy Richard Grenell last year, reportedly to discuss a deal under which Venezuela provided access to its oil reserves, the largest in the world. That deal was evidently set aside as various members of the Administration debated how to proceed.

Back in 2017, the prospect of an outright attack on Venezuela seemed remote. “No one involved in real military planning has ever thought of this as a place we’d put blood and treasure into—because, quite apart from anything else, there’s no national-security threat,” a U.S. official told me at the time. In Trump’s second term, though, he has sought to reassert the Monroe Doctrine, by which the U.S. had dominion in its sphere of influence. In a celebratory press conference Saturday morning, he proclaimed, “American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again.” He also spoke forthrightly about taking over the Venezuelan oil industry, which he has repeatedly argued should belong to the United States. Right-wing leaders in Latin America seem happy to enable him: Javier Milei of Argentina and Daniel Noboa of Ecuador, jubilantly welcomed the attack on Venezuela. On the left, Presidents Gabriel Boric of Chile, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, and Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico expressed deep concerns. The Communist leaders of Cuba called for the international community to resist “state terrorism”—no doubt fearful that the Trump Administration intends to go after them next. Trump suggested as much in his press conference. Rubio, a longtime critic of Cuba, came to the lectern to add, “If I lived in Havana and I was in the government I’d be concerned, at least.”

The operation to remove Maduro came precisely thirty-six years after President George H. W. Bush sent the U.S. military to invade Panama and depose General Manuel Noriega. A former American proxy, Noriega had begun criticizing the United States in rallies and machete-waving speeches; he was taken into custody and, like Maduro, accused of drug trafficking. When I met Noriega in prison, in 2015, two years before his death, he largely insisted on his innocence but expressed regret at having taken on the

Americans. If he had the chance to do things over, he said, he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Trump insisted in Saturday's press conference that, by deposing Maduro, he had removed the "kingpin of a vast criminal network" that trafficked huge amounts of cocaine into the U.S. Ironically, just weeks before, he had extended a full pardon to the former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who in 2024 was convicted in the Southern District of New York of cocaine trafficking and sentenced to forty-five years in prison. Trump's reasoning was that, like him, Hernández had been "treated very harshly and unfairly" by political opponents.

When I met with Maduro in 2017, he spoke bluffly about the limits of the effort to remove him from office. "They want me out, but, if I leave this chair, whom shall we put in it?" he said. "Who can be the President?" Many Venezuelans support Edmundo González and María Corina Machado, the apparent winners of the Presidential election that Maduro stole in 2024. González was the Presidential candidate, but the real power is Machado, a conservative Catholic from a wealthy family who built a following as an ardent critic of the Maduro regime. Both have been in hiding, though Machado appeared in Oslo last month to collect the Nobel Peace Prize. Cannily, she dedicated the award "to the suffering people of Venezuela and to President Trump."

In the press conference, Trump called Machado "a very nice woman" but said that she doesn't have the "respect within the country" to lead. Instead, he said, the U.S. would "run" Venezuela in the immediate term, as part of a "group" that also apparently included U.S. oil companies. They will have to contend with Maduro's senior officials, who remain largely in place. They include the hard-line military chief General Vladimir Padrino López; Diosdado Cabello, the equally hard-line interior minister; and Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez, a tough-minded operator. All have denounced Maduro's abduction. Padrino, in a press conference of his own, condemned

“the most criminal military aggression” and declared the activation of a national-defense plan, including widespread mobilization of Venezuelan forces on land, sea, and air. Reportedly, in response, Trump said that the U.S. was prepared to mount a second military intervention. Yet many questions remain unanswered. Why take out Maduro and leave his supporters in place? Can his loyalists still carry the timeworn Bolivarian revolution forward? Will Trump offer Maduro refuge in another country—perhaps Turkey—in exchange for his asking his comrades in Caracas to stand down? Or will the remaining officials find a way to hold on to power? (In the press conference, Trump praised Delcy Rodríguez, saying that she had been exceptionally cooperative.)

It remains to be seen how Venezuelans, both in government and in the street, will respond to the increased presence of U.S. power in their country. Twenty-four years ago, I spoke with Hugo Chávez in Fuerte Tiuna, a military headquarters in Caracas that was bombed in last night’s raid. He told me that he would never let the Americans take him alive, to parade him around like a trophy. Chávez, who died of cancer in 2013, avoided such a humiliation. Maduro did not have the insight, or the instincts, to forge a different destiny for himself. ♦