



As Nicolas Maduro and Socialism Destroy Venezuela, Its People Must Restore Democracy

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President Donald Trump said he might attack Venezuela: “We have many options for Venezuela, including a possible military option if necessary.” Yet invading the South American nation may be one of the few contingencies which the Pentagon never has considered.

Unfortunately, the president’s comment undermined those battling the Maduro dictatorship. The regime unleashed a cascade of abuse in response.

The president’s threat of war is even worse. Last year Maduro held military maneuvers to be ready for “any scenario,” including a foreign invasion. Then he looked like a paranoid. Now he can wrap himself in his nation’s flag.

Moreover, even the chief critics of Caracas have had to denounce President Trump’s remarks. Both Peru, which criticized Maduro’s betrayal of the Venezuelan people and withdrew its ambassador from Caracas, and Columbia, America’s closest South American ally and a long-time recipient of U.S. aid against drug traffickers and communist insurgents, rebuffed the president’s threat.

Venezuela has been sliding into crisis for decades. It long was ruled by a bipartisan political elite most interested in its own enrichment.

Lt. Col. Hugo Chavez unsuccessfully attempted to seize power in 1992. But just six years later angry Venezuelans elected him president.

His “Bolivarian Revolution” completed the destruction of both the economy and democracy, nationalizing industries, imposing price controls, spending wildly, and treating the state oil company as national piggy bank and patronage machine. When these policies resulted in chaos and poverty, he ruled more autocratically, jailing opponents, legislating by decree, subverting the judiciary, intimidating the media, and making elections unfree in everything but name.

He died four years ago, and was succeeded by Vice President Nicolas Maduro. The latter’s policies accelerated the economy’s collapse. As oil production and prices declined there was less money to disguise socialism’s disastrous impact.

Goods disappeared from shelves in the midst of hyper-inflation, leading the state to seize private factories. Government spread and deepened poverty in the name of fighting poverty.

The economic disaster is almost complete. Venezuela has the world's top "misery index" of combined inflation, interest, and unemployment rates. The crime rate also comes in first, while corruption levels are highest in Latin America. Kidnapping is common, but captors accept only dollars. Food is rationed, lines are pervasive, looting is common, people scavenge garbage for scraps, and city residents hunt birds, cats, and dogs.

Government can't pay its debts, sustain the currency, keep its workers on the job, or maintain power and water. The inflation rate exceeds 700 percent and the regime has trouble introducing new money fast enough to keep up. The economy shrank by eight percent in 2016 and is on course for a more than ten percent reduction this year.

Basic goods, such as aspirin, auto parts, diapers, and toilet paper are scarce. There is little foreign exchange, long distance phone service has been cut, and foreign airlines no longer serve Venezuela.

The medical system essentially no longer functions. Infant mortality is higher in Venezuela than in Syria.

The economic news keeps getting worse. The country with the world's largest oil reserves appears likely to default on its sovereign debt.

Venezuelans have been seeking to rid themselves of the new criminal elite. However, the Maduro regime arrested thousands and jailed hundreds of critics, and employed military tribunals and vigilante mobs against opponents.

As Maduro's poll ratings fell, the regime has arrested opposition leaders, brutally suppressed demonstrations, detained local officials, and ousted the chief prosecutor, a member of the Socialist Party, for targeting Maduro's regime. The regime held a sham election, criticized even by some past supporters, to create an entirely new, government controlled assembly to rewrite the constitution to further hobble any opposition.

By seeking to hold on at all costs Maduro has triggered talk of widespread social conflict and ultimately civil war. Venezuelans' main hope may be that as the regime's end nears Maduro's colleagues may jettison him as they race for the regime's exits.

The U.S. should stay out. Support for a botched coup in 2002 only enhanced nationalist support for Chavez. Now Maduro is attempting to burnish his nationalist credentials with President Trump's mistaken threat.

The administration should emphasize that it is up to Venezuelans to get rid of Maduro and his thugs. Next creating a free and just society will be even more difficult. The American people should stand ready to lend their support.

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