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As Socialism Destroys Venezuela, Only Its People, Not U.S. Military, Can Restore Democracy

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President Donald Trump has turned into the warmonger he criticized when running against Hillary Clinton. He just announced a major escalation in America's combat role in Afghanistan. Previously he or his administration threatened North Korea, continued military involvement in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, warned of a potential naval confrontation with Beijing in the South China Sea, and launched a major army build-up in Europe.

Perhaps most bizarrely, he threatened to attack Venezuela: "We have many options for Venezuela, including a possible military option if necessary." Ironically, invading the South American nation may be one of the few contingencies which the Pentagon never has considered. It's not clear what America's objective would be. Conquer Caracas, install a friendly politician as the new president, and rebuild the devastated nation? Would the next stop be Cuba? Then onto Brazil or Ecuador, perhaps?

It's impossible to know what President Trump was thinking. Actually, the problem almost certainly is that he was not thinking. Maybe he imagined that Venezuelans were spending sleepless nights hoping Washington would act. But given Latin America's tortured history with the U.S., probably not.

In fact, the president's bizarre comment undermined those battling the Maduro dictatorship. The regime unleashed a cascade of abuse in response. Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez, for one, blamed the "extremist elite governing the United States." In contrast, the opposition said nothing, fearful that Washington's outburst will aid President Nicolas Maduro and those around him. They can present themselves as defenders of the Venezuelan nation against the dreaded Yanqui imperialists and tar opponents as an American-backed Fifth Column.

In fact, two years ago, when economic sanctions were first imposed, the Atlantic Council's Jason Marczak warned: "Maduro is trying to shift the conversation from his laundry list of failures by using the concocted imperialist threat as a last ditch effort to unify the country around him." A unilateral oil embargo, now being considered by the administration, would have a similar political effect, even though it would have only limited practical impact in an international marketplace and would hurt common people far more than Maduro's apparatchiks.

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, observed David Smilde of the Washington Office on Latin America, "Maduro's theory of war will be much more concrete and believable." At the same time, "This will undoubtedly galvanize his coalition."

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. Similarly, the trade organization Mercosur, made up of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, which last year suspended Venezuela for undermining democracy, rejected the suggestion of a "military option" and called for "dialogue and diplomacy" instead.

In short, the president ignored the famous dictum that one should never interfere when one's enemy is destroying himself. Venezuela's socialist authoritarians are wrecking their government and nation. Washington should stay out.

The country has been sliding into crisis for decades. It long was ruled by a bipartisan political elite most interested in its own enrichment. The economy never was particularly free. Unfortunately, governments on both the right and left were responsible for, in the words of my Cato Institute colleague Marian Tupy, "the gradual, but constant, erosion of economic freedom in Venezuela that has been going on at least since the 1970s. The rule of law has been undermined, private property confiscated and prices fixed by the state."

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 proved to be a lackluster, incompetent thug, without Chavez's charisma. Maduro'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.

Officials could only fulminate, blaming hostile businessmen, political opponents, and foreign critics for the country's inability to feed or care for its citizens. Maduro charged that his government's problems are "made in the U.S.A." In contrast, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek pointed to the Venezuelan left—for its failure "to provide an authentic radical alternative to Chavez and Maduro," whatever that would have been.

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: indeed, reported Bloomberg, Venezuela "is now so broke

that it may not have enough money to pay for its money,” which is printed abroad. 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. Electricity is off, equipment doesn't work, medicine isn't available, and personnel are absent. Reported the *New York Times* last year: “Gloves and soap have vanished from some hospitals. Often, cancer medicines are found only on the black market. There is so little electricity that the government works only two days a week to save what energy is left. At the University of the Andes hospital in the mountain city of Merida, there was not enough water to wash blood from the operating table.” Infant mortality *is higher in Venezuela than in Syria*.

An astounding four of five families live in poverty. Tens of thousands of citizens have fled abroad, especially to neighboring Brazil and Columbia.

The economic news keeps getting worse. The country with the world's largest oil reserves appears likely to default on its sovereign debt. Credit Suisse barred its traders from even dealing in Venezuelan bonds, lest the company's reputation when the expected default occurs.

Unfortunately, as in the book *Animal Farm*, new oppressors simply replaced the old ones. Venezuelans have been seeking to rid themselves of Maduro and his criminal elite. However, the regime arrested thousands and jailed hundreds of critics, and employed military tribunals and vigilante mobs against opponents. Nevertheless, the last legislative elections delivered a two-thirds parliamentary majority to the divided opposition. Only by manipulating the system was Maduro able to thwart a recall effort. The latest poll shows him with an 86 percent disapproval rating.

In response 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 Chavistas, to create an entirely new, government controlled assembly to rewrite the constitution to further hobble any opposition. The body also announced plans to establish a “truth commission” to prosecute critics and protestors. About all Maduro did not do is follow the advice of former London Mayor Ken Livingstone, who complained that “Hugo Chavez did not execute the establishment elite, he allowed them to continue so they're still there.”

By seeking to hold on at all costs Maduro has triggered talk of widespread social conflict and ultimately civil war. The regime reportedly relies on Cuban security personnel in many positions, but cracks have started to appear in the Venezuelan forces. Discontent is evident among the military's lower ranks. A group of soldiers recently attacked a barracks and stole weapons and people increasingly are calling on troops to disobey their officers. Moreover, “rogue” police officers apparently used a helicopter to drop grenades on the building of the Supreme Court, which has been subverted by Maduro & Co. 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 Obama administration unconvincingly declared Maduro's government to be “an unusual and extraordinary threat,” but appropriately stayed out of the imbroglio, other than impose sanctions

on top Venezuelan officials. Nonintervention was the right decision. U.S. support for a botched coup in 2002 only enhanced nationalist support for Chavez. And now Maduro is attempting to burnish his nationalist credentials with President Trump's foolish threat.

Vice President Mike Pence visited South America after his boss's outburst and learned first-hand of the near-unanimous opposition to U.S. military opposition. The administration should make clear to all that military action is off of Washington's policy table and emphasize that it is up to Venezuelans to get rid of Maduro and his thugs. Doing so won't be easy. Recovering from the Chavista catastrophe and 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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