

## **The Madness of Military Intervention in Venezuela**

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War is the ultimate human calamity. Despite the fevered hopes and utopian promises of its advocates, loosing the dogs of war almost always results in abundant death and destruction, and sometimes unimaginable slaughter, devastation, and horror. America's last four wars, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, should serve as sufficient proof of this fact.

At least would-be humanitarian warriors make serious moral claims, even if they usually end up killing many of those whom they promise to help. Worse are the war advocates seeking geopolitical advantage, upset that this or that government churlishly refuses to follow Washington's dictates.

The very worst, however, are the arguments based on cash. In the bad old days, warmongers spoke of plunder. Over time they grew more genteel, instead citing trade and commercial opportunities. Now they point to increases in GDP. Bomb, invade, occupy a country, and watch it flourish!

Venezuelan expatriate Daniel Di Martino has made just such a case.

Last year, President Donald Trump famously asked his aides whether the U.S. should intervene militarily in Venezuela. They argued against the idea. He then asked top Latin American leaders for their opinion. They were strongly opposed.

However, wrote Di Martino, "While calls for the use of military force were dismissed among diplomats, American intervention could have economic benefits for both Venezuela and the United States." Waging war would lower Venezuela's "Misery Index," unemployment rate, and poverty rate. Indeed, "the economic miracle that would follow" the country's liberation "would be unprecedented," Di Martino claimed. Price and currency controls would end and "oil production would surge."

In contrast, he predicted that allowing the regime to stay in power "will surely result in millions of deaths" while the death toll from a U.S. assault would be low. He extrapolated from America's operation in Panama to estimate just 3,500 civilian casualties. By this calculus,

“intervention would bring enormous rewards for Americans and Venezuelans alike.” The president, he said, should be strong and declare: damn the advisors, full speed ahead.

It is a terrible argument.

There is no question that socialism has been a catastrophe for Venezuelans, at least those who aren't close to power. Venezuela was once among Latin America's wealthiest countries. Today its people starve and flee.

Because of hyper-inflation, reported *The Washington Post's* Matt O'Brien, some \$333,000 worth of bolivars six-and-a-half years ago would be worth just \$1 today. Three weeks ago a cup of coffee cost two million bolivars. The regime can barely afford the hard currency necessary to pay foreigners to print more banknotes. By the end of the year, warns the International Monetary Fund, inflation could hit *a million percent*. The government's original solution: knock three zeroes off the bills. But then officials decided that wasn't enough, so off came another two zeroes. The new lower “sovereign bolivar” was just issued.

Alas, without economic reform this is merely playacting. Inflation will continue its inexorable rise. It doesn't matter what numbers the regime puts on its currency: prices will continue to soar. New, bigger bills will have to be issued. And another three, four, or five zeroes will have to be dropped.

Virtually nothing about Venezuela's economy works. Grocery stores shelves are empty. Hospitals lack medicine, blood, supplies, even water. The murder rate is among the world's highest. With oil production falling to its lowest level since 1949, the Chavez-Maduro regime even “turned natural resource wealth into a curse,” notes my Cato Institute colleague Juan Carlos Hidalgo. The poor suffer the most, and today almost everyone is poor. Nearly nine in ten Venezuelans have fallen below the official poverty line.

Naturally, Venezuela's venal, corrupt, and incompetent rulers blame “economic war” from abroad. Yet isn't the purpose of true socialism to allow a country, especially one so rich in resources, to upstage the capitalist world and prosper without outside help?

The Chavistas, as they are known—even though current president Nicolas Maduro is a lackluster substitute for Hugo Chavez—leavened their gross economic mismanagement with ostentatious corruption and violent repression. As even many of the poor turned against the regime that claims to represent them, Maduro and his cronies rigged the electoral process to ensure their continued control.

In short, the regime deserves to go.

But does that make it unique? There are plenty of brutal dictatorships that have destroyed their economies—and killed more of their people than Venezuela has thus far. North Korea hosts a system of deadly labor camps. Eritrea is known as the African North Korea. Iran is politically repressive, religiously intolerant, geopolitically aggressive, and economically incompetent. Saudi Arabia is all of those things, too, though its oil wealth, much better managed than Venezuela's, helps cushion its economic failure. Burma is engaged in the ethnic cleansing of its Muslim

Rohingya—after spending decades terrorizing a host of other minority ethnic and religious groups seeking autonomy.

The Central Asian nations are nasty and repressive. The People's Republic of China and Russia are geopolitically dangerous. The Middle East is full of bad regimes: Bahrain, Egypt, and Syria belong on any list. Zimbabwe is a terribly repressive economic calamity. There is a potpourri of states that regularly harm their own people and threaten others. Why shouldn't Washington bomb, invade, and occupy them as well?

War is not just another policy tool. Its foundation is death and destruction. Military action, no matter how well-intentioned, is often indiscriminate in effect. The course of conflict is always unpredictable and often inconceivable. Seldom does a government go to war expecting to lose. The number of conflicts that turned out vastly more horrible than their architects expected is great, including the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Iraq II, and Yemen. The number of conflicts that turned out easier than expected? Iraq I. No doubt there are other examples, but they don't exactly jump to mind.

Di Martino's rosy predictions about the results of an American expeditionary force landing in Venezuela are highly suspect. Such an intervention could result in a mix of civil war and insurgency that no doubt the "good guys" would win, but the costs would be severe. Most important would be the impact on America. The primary responsibility of the U.S. government is to protect its own people, including those in uniform. They are not to be treated as gambit pawns in some global chess game. Their lives should only be imperiled when their own nation has something substantial at risk.

There also is something grotesque in attempting to justify war on the basis that fewer might—might!—be killed via military action than in its absence. That's a matter of speculation at best and a terrible gamble at worst. Are lives to be treated as abstract numbers in an account balance? Whatever the net casualty figure, a war would mean thousands of people who would otherwise be alive would instead die. Why do U.S. policymakers get to make that decision? Who anointed America to play god with the futures of other peoples?

Moreover, an American invasion would undermine the legitimacy of any new government. It would offer Chavistas a permanent excuse, someone to blame for any and all future problems and challenges. If the process did not go well, the impact could be long-lasting. Especially in Latin America, the specter of U.S. domination, if not imperialism, casts a long shadow. Military action seen as benefiting Washington would undercut its legitimacy not just in Venezuela, but across the region.

If the security and humanitarian arguments fall short, the economic rationale is risible. How much profit per life, American or Venezuelan, justifies war? Imagine a president writing the families of dead military personnel explaining that their sacrifice was justified because it helped bump up Venezuela's annual GDP rate. Only a well-founded concern over the survival of an economy adequate to meet America's essential needs would be important enough to consider military action.

Finally, sending in the military for frivolous reasons creates yet another precedent for promiscuous warmongering. Washington can say little today when Russia intervenes using previous American justifications. Handing Moscow—or Beijing, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, or other aggressive states—another excuse further empowers already dangerously militaristic regimes.

War is the most horrid of human practices. It is a tragedy that it is ever necessary. There is much that is awful in the world, but as John Quincy Adams urged a couple centuries ago, America “goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.” Otherwise, he warned, “she might become the dictatress of the world” and “be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.”

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