

Joe Biden Clings To A Bad Trump Policy

Sanctioning Venezuela and propping up Guaido has only punished the Venezuelan people and strengthened the socialist regime.

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The Chavista regimes of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro have been catastrophic for the Venezuelan people. Authoritarian populists both, they wrecked the economy. They squandered oil resources. They destroyed democracy. They brutalized critics. They drove millions of despairing Venezuelans abroad. And they held onto power irrespective of the cost to everyone else.

What is America's policy? Huffing and puffing, while punishing the Venezuelan people. The Trump administration sanctioned Venezuela, multiplying the hardship of an entire population already barely able to feed itself, claimed that an expired politician last elected in 2015 was the country's legitimate president, and then cited the two-century old Monroe Doctrine when Iran, China, and Russia appeared in the country.

President Donald Trump also talked of invading Venezuela, only to retreat when he found no enthusiasm elsewhere in Latin America. This would not surprise anyone familiar with the long, sordid history of Yanqui Imperialism. However, U.S. involvement was suspected in the comically-inept Operation Gideon, a supposedly private military mission launched in 2020 to overthrow the Venezuelan regime.

President Joe Biden was expected to shift U.S. policy toward engagement. Yet over the last year little has changed. As with Cuba, the long-gone Trump administration remains in charge. Maduro and his cronies feast, the Venezuelan people suffer, and Washington continues to preach meaningless platitudes.

The State Department's latest policy statement does not even mention sanctions, which have done much to impoverish the Venezuelan people. Although Maduro's dirigiste practices underlie the country's current economic collapse, U.S. restrictions have slashed oil revenues and otherwise amplified the people's pain.

Francisco R. Rodriguez, founder and director of Oil for Venezuela, published a detailed economic study for the Fourth Freedom Forum earlier this month which concluded: "The preponderance of evidence indicates that sanctions and other statecraft measures—including the formal recognition of a government with no de facto control over the territory—have had a

strong and significant negative effect on the Venezuelan economy. These actions have made a sizable contribution to declining oil production, exacerbating the country's fiscal crisis, and contributing to one of the largest documented peacetime economic contractions in modern history."

Per capita income is down by more than three-quarters. A couple of years ago, Nicholas Casey of the *New York Times* described what Venezuelans face: "It's almost unimaginable from the kind of life that you would have had 10, 15 years ago. This is an oil-producing country. This was one of the most wealthy countries in Latin America. And now this is a place where there are shortages of food, shortages of medicine. People's daily lives are spent trying to figure out how they're going to get basic things like eggs or coffee; coffee can be a luxury. And for people that need medicine or are sick, this is an even more urgent challenge." The Times later profiled a few of the estimated three million people, about 10 percent of the population, who have fled Venezuela.

The Biden administration lauded itself for providing humanitarian aid to help ease the hardship caused by U.S. sanctions: "We support efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Venezuelan people and bring the humanitarian crises in Venezuela to an end through international cooperation. Since 2017, the United States has provided more than \$1.9 billion in humanitarian, economic, development, and health assistance to help Venezuelans both inside Venezuela and those forced to flee throughout the region." However, that doesn't go nearly far enough as recompense for doing much to wreck an entire economy.

Economic warfare also has failed politically. Rodriguez explained that the theory "is that depriving the country of the funds needed to sustain its economy will bring about regime change. It hasn't, and it won't. It will simply contribute to worsening the country's humanitarian crisis, fuel animosity toward the United States, deepen opposition divisions, and weaken civil society."

In fact, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign proved to be a bust wherever it was tried: North Korea, Syria, and Iran, as well as Venezuela. In the latter, wrote Rodriguez, hostility to economy-killing sanctions divided the opposition. He pointed to polling data indicating that more than three-quarters of Venezuelans oppose U.S. sanctions on oil sales. The popularity of Juan Guaidó, Washington's chosen man in Venezuela, plummeted in just two years from 61 percent to 16 percent, about the same as that of Maduro. In recent regional elections, the parties opposed to Guaidó and sanctions each took one third of the vote, allowing Maduro's forces to win with less than a majority.

Thus, the starting point for U.S. policy should be to roll back broad economic and financial sanctions. Not because doing so would lead to the collapse of the Maduro regime, which has proved remarkably resilient, in part due to Cuban intelligence and military assistance. Rather, as Rodriguez insisted, "What the United States must do is dramatically reverse a failed sanctions policy that exacerbates the suffering of millions of people who should not be made to pay the cost for the atrocities of their ruler."

Alas, Washington's political strategy also is a bust. The administration promotes the Trump administration's fiction that Guaidó is Venezuela's legitimate president. Explained the State Department: "The United States continues to recognize the authority of the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly as the last remaining democratic institution and Juan Guaidó as

Venezuela's interim president. We welcome the agreement reached to extend the authority of the National Assembly elected in 2015 and of interim President Guaidó as its president.”

This was a dubious strategy three years ago—he first claimed the presidency on January 23, 2019—since expectations of mass military defections to Guaidó went unfulfilled. He remains a “president” who controls nothing in his country and is unlikely to ever do so, even though Washington transferred Venezuelan financial resources in America to him.

This approach is now well beyond its expiration date. Foreign support for Guaidó's pretensions dropped noticeably last year when both the European Union and Lima Group, made up of Latin American nations, declined to continued describing him as interim president. He also lost domestic support, as last fall three other opposition parties resisted extending his “mandate.” Ultimately, they preserved his title while rolling back his authority. According to Bloomberg: “Henceforth Guaidó will be accountable to a committee of opposition lawmakers, who he'll need to keep informed of how he has spent funds under his control. The committee will take over management of foreign policy, which used to be Guaidó's responsibility, and authorize the appointment of ambassadors in opposition allied countries.”

Even some of those around Guaidó have headed for the exits. Julio Borges, the shadow opposition foreign minister, quit last month. He explained: “The interim government is no longer a means to liberate us and has become an end in itself that looks to stay on indefinitely.”

Rodriguez provided a devastating critique of Guaidó's inadequate democratic bona fides:

Guaidó's claim is tenuous both legally and politically. He has never won a national election, his term as legislator expired more than a year ago, and his poll numbers are as low as Maduro's. His interpretation of the Constitution is highly disputed, especially after the National Assembly's five-year term expired in 2021. His administration of public funds has come under intense criticism—including by top members of his coalition—for its lack of transparency and associated corruption scandals. Monday's decision counted with the support of less than half of the principal legislators elected in 2015—though the official tally was inflated through the questionable practice of incorporating substitutes of principal legislators who do not recognize the validity of the sessions.

Venezuela is in crisis. With Washington's perverse “assistance,” the country has suffered the greatest economic decline in Latin American history. However, the U.S. has failed to achieve any corresponding political gains. Despite the power of sanctions to wreak economic harm, they have yet to cause authoritarians anywhere to yield power. Thus, the Chavista dictatorship lives on, about to enter its 23rd year. Maduro is now facing his third U.S. president and appears increasingly secure.

For this he can thank Washington. Explained Rodriguez: “Maduro has benefited from the actions of an unsuspecting accomplice: the United States. Maduro can rightly blame Washington for contributing to the country's economic crisis... The specter of a foreign aggressor has helped Maduro rally the military around his leadership. And the deepening economic crisis has only increased the power of the state over ordinary Venezuelans.”

Proposals for enhanced “democracy” funding are unlikely to change anything. Authoritarians increasingly ban foreign support or tar recipients of foreign monies as disloyal. Nor do Venezuelans lack the knowledge and infrastructure of democracy, despite the notable flaws in

the system which helped to initially deliver the presidency to Hugo Chavez. And the opposition's declining effectiveness is not a financial issue.

Biden should halt a policy which has manifestly failed. Washington needs a new course—one that is both more humane in dealing with the Venezuelan people and more effective in encouraging the government's respect for human rights and democratic processes.

Moreover, considering America's checkered history in occupying Latin American nations and overturning democratic governments, Washington should encourage Venezuela's neighbors to take the lead. Ultimately, only internal political dialogue and transformation will allow the Venezuelan people to achieve the free and prosperous future they deserve.

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