

From Roosevelt to Trump: The Monroe Doctrine and US imperialism's predatory record in Venezuela

Part 1

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This is the first part in a two-part series on the record of American imperialism in Venezuela.

With the largest US armada ever assembled off the coasts of South America and an unrelenting murder spree carried out through missile strikes on small boats—killing well over 100 unarmed civilians so far—the Trump administration has escalated its campaign of imperialist violence in the region. It has accompanied this escalation with a new National Security Strategy document that proudly proclaims a new “Trump corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine.

Venezuela and its oil reserves, the largest on the planet, are the immediate target of US imperialism's predatory operations. Trump has made this explicit in statements to the media and ranting social media posts. He has vowed that US military attacks would only escalate “Until such time as they return to the United States of America all of the Oil, Land, and other Assets that they previously stole from us.” Making good on these threats, Washington has carried out the pirate-like seizure of oil tankers on the high seas and imposed a blockade, a direct act of war, aimed at starving Venezuela into submission.

But the so-called “Trump corollary,” as well as the fascistic and mafia-style pronouncements of its namesake in the White House, make clear that Washington's aims encompass far more than Venezuela. They amount to a drive for the recolonization of Latin America as a whole and the abject subordination of the entire region to US profit interests and the Pentagon's preparation for world war.

This campaign has taken concrete form in threats to bomb Mexico, attacks on Colombian President Gustavo Petro, and the imposition of 50 percent tariffs against Brazil in support of the convicted coup conspirator and fascistic former president Jair Bolsonaro. These measures have been accompanied by Washington's naked intervention in recent elections, including threats of punitive economic reprisals against the populations of Argentina and Honduras should they fail to vote for Trump-aligned candidates.

The origin and evolution of US intervention in Venezuela

Historically, Venezuela has played an outsized role in the evolution of US imperialist doctrine in the Western Hemisphere. This is due in part to its vast petroleum wealth, which, at the height of Standard Oil's dominance, accounted for fully half of the profits that US capitalists extracted from Latin America.

US interventionism in Venezuela, however, predates even the onset of large-scale oil drilling by just over a decade, beginning with the so-called Venezuela Crisis of 1902–1903.

Then too, a fleet of warships was deployed off Venezuela's coasts. Battleships bombarded ports, killing dozens, and foreign troops seized control of customs houses.

One hundred and twenty three years ago, the armada was sent by Germany, Britain and Italy. The pretext was the refusal of Venezuela's government, headed at the time by President Cipriano Castro, to meet debt payments.

Castro rose to power in 1899, only to face a “Liberating Revolution” led by Venezuela's richest man, Antonio Matos, and backed by foreign capital, particularly the US-owned New York and Bermudez Company, the German-run Great Venezuelan Railway, and the French Inter-oceanic Cable Company.

After a bitter civil war that devastated Venezuela's economy and emptied its state coffers, Castro refused to comply with the demands of British imperialists, who held large outstanding loans; German creditors, who had invested heavily in the country; and their junior partners in Italy, whose citizens dominated much of Venezuela's business and trade.

The European powers demanded immediate payment of outstanding debts and compensation for property destroyed in the civil war that they themselves had promoted. They were determined to impose their will by means of a naval blockade. Castro ignored the ultimatums, while appealing to popular nationalist sentiments that erupted into rioting and looting of foreign-owned businesses.

US President Theodore Roosevelt, an unabashed imperialist, was not opposed in principle to the major capitalist powers using armed aggression to extract wealth from oppressed countries. He is quoted as telling a German diplomat, “If any South American country misbehaves toward any European country, let the European country spank it.” He added, however, that “the punishment should not take the form of acquisition of territory by any non-American power.”

This warning was a reaffirmation of the Monroe Doctrine, a cornerstone of US foreign policy first enunciated by President James Monroe, who in 1823 declared: “The American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.”

By the end of the century, this anti-colonial and democratically inspired warning to the crowned heads of Europe had already undergone a steady transformation. It was invoked by the US government to justify the annexation of Texas as a slave state and the theft by means of war of more than half the territory of Mexico in 1848. This process rapidly accelerated

with the Spanish-American War of 1898, the US seizure of Spanish colonial possessions and the emergence of the United States on the world stage as a major imperialist power, intent on seizing control of markets and sources of raw materials and cheap labor by means of military aggression.

In the crisis of 1902, the Castro government in Venezuela appealed to Washington to mediate the conflict over outstanding debts. Roosevelt accepted and called upon the British and German governments to stand down. While the British were amenable, Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had overseen Germany's rise as a military power with the largest army in the world and a naval fleet second only to that of Britain, was determined to secure German capitalism's "place in the sun."

Roosevelt feared that Germany would use the Venezuela crisis to seize key naval bases controlling Caribbean shipping lanes and, in particular, access to a planned strategic canal across the Central American isthmus linking the Atlantic and Pacific. He issued an ultimatum to Germany to accept US mediation and withdraw its warships.

The US president let the German ambassador know that Washington was assembling its own armada off Puerto Rico under the command of Adm. George Dewey, who had gained international fame for dealing a decisive defeat to the Spanish fleet in the 1898 battle of Manila Bay, Philippines. Faced with the prospect of a war with the US under conditions in which it would be hard-pressed to supply or reinforce its fleet, Germany withdrew.

The conflict over Venezuela proved critical in the elaboration of what became known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, announced by the US president in his annual address to Congress in 1904. This was due in no small measure to the fact that the European powers that carried out the blockade, having taken their case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, received preferential treatment over the US in the payment of claims.

Saturated with imperialist arrogance, Roosevelt's address allowed that Latin American nations that behaved themselves "with reasonable efficiency and decency" had nothing to fear from the United States. However, he added, "Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation."

Roosevelt made it clear that US imperialism arrogated to itself the exclusive right to exercise "international police power" in the Western Hemisphere. If Latin American countries were to be "spanked," their ports bombarded, citizens massacred and customs houses seized, the US would do the job, not its European rivals.

Roosevelt's proclamation of this expansive corollary to the Monroe Doctrine was swiftly implemented through a wave of interventions, invasions and occupations. This imperialist onslaught was summed up succinctly by Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler in 1935. Reviewing his 33-year career as a Marine, Butler declared:

I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer; a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested. Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a

few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.

Venezuela was by no means spared. Washington helped to engineer what would today be classified as a regime change operation in 1908, installing Castro's vice president and former comrade-in-arms, Juan Vicente Gómez, in the presidential palace while Castro was seeking medical treatment in Europe.

Gómez, who immediately invited Washington to send gunboats to "stabilize" the situation, would rule the country as a dictator until his death in 1935. He likewise invited Matos, the wealthy banker who led the so-called "Liberating Revolution" backed by foreign capital, back to Venezuela to take charge of its foreign relations.

The Gómez dictatorship was known for its brutal repression, which included shutting down Venezuela's universities for a decade in retaliation against student protests, and the systematic use of murder, disappearances and torture methods borrowed from the Spanish Inquisition to quell all political opposition.

Political opponents were imprisoned without trial and, in many cases, slowly starved to death in the infamous La Rotunda prison of Caracas. Thousands of them were worked to death on chain gangs used to construct highways and lay railway tracks. Tens of thousands more fled into exile.

Nicknamed "The Catfish," Gómez became infamous internationally. *Time* magazine compared his repression to that of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin: "The secret police of Germany, Russia and Italy are notable organizations. They fade into insignificance before those of Dictator Gómez."

In his 1941 work "Inside Latin America," American author and journalist John Gunther provided a chilling portrait of the Venezuelan dictator: "The Catfish was—let us not gloss over the fact—a murderous blackguard. He made use of tortures of inconceivable brutality; political prisoners, of which there were thousands, dragged out their lives bearing leg irons (*grillos*) that made them permanent cripples, if they were not hung upside down—by the testicles—until they died. Others became human slime, literally. Gómez was quite capable of choosing one out of every ten by lot, and hanging them—*by meathooks through their throats!*" (Emphasis in the original.)

Gómez's savage repression, along with his vehement anti-communism and hatred of trade unions, went down well with Washington and the US oil companies, which were to emerge as the dominant force in Venezuela following the drilling of the first well in 1912 in the Maracaibo Basin. Within little more than a decade, Venezuela would emerge as the world's largest oil exporter and second largest producer, trailing only the US.

Gómez arrogated to himself unilateral power to hand out concessions to foreign companies, including most prominently the Rockefellers' Standard Oil, ceding them control over vast swaths of territory. He rapidly became Venezuela's richest man, while leaving the lion's share of the country's wealth for Wall Street and the oil corporations to pillage and using a portion of his kickbacks to buy the loyalty of his supporters and the military.

To be continued.



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