

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

Part 2

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This is the second part in a two-part series on the record of American imperialism in Venezuela. The first part was posted here.

Venezuela assumed even greater strategic importance for US imperialism and its profit interests following the nationalization of Mexico's oil industry by President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938. With its oil reserves monopolized by US and Anglo-Dutch multinationals, Venezuela became crucial in fueling the American military during World War II, as well as in powering the postwar economic boom and the escalating militarism of the Cold War.

Following the death of "Catfish" Gómez, a succession of generals held the presidency. They gradually loosened the dictatorship's grip, ultimately legalizing the Communist Party and the unions, and passing the country's first petroleum reform law in 1943. However, an attempt to impose another president without popular elections provoked the so-called "October Revolution" of 1945, led by Acción Democrática (AD)—the bourgeois democratic party of Rómulo Betancourt—and a group of younger military officers organized as the Patriotic Military Union, whose most prominent member was Marcos Pérez Jiménez.

The new government led by Betancourt initiated a series of reforms, though it rejected calls for the nationalization of the foreign-owned oil operations. In 1947, Venezuela held its first direct and universal election, won overwhelmingly by the AD candidate, the Venezuelan novelist Rómulo Gallegos. Among his most notable actions was the raising of the tax on the profits of the foreign oil companies from 43 to 50 percent (an arrangement known as "fifty/fifty" which would subsequently be adopted by other major oil-producing countries, including Saudi Arabia). Gallego's actions were not popular with the oil companies, and he was overthrown by the military barely nine months into his term.

Venezuela would be subjected to yet another decade of brutal dictatorship, headed by Col. Marcos Pérez Jiménez. The military dictatorship's hated Directorate of National Security imposed a reign of terror, which employed assassinations, disappearances, torture and the detention of thousands of political prisoners in concentration camps and jails. The regime enjoyed the best of relations with the oil companies and foreign capital, which were invited to exploit the country and its resources. For services rendered in suppressing the masses and facilitating profit-taking, US President Dwight Eisenhower bestowed upon Pérez Jiménez the Legion of Merit Award.

Pérez Jiménez would fall victim to another "civil-military" coup that began on January 1, 1958. He fled the country with hundreds of millions of dollars stolen from the public treasury, finding a comfortable refuge first in Miami Beach and subsequently under the protection of the Franco dictatorship in Spain.

Visiting Venezuela at the end of a Latin American tour, barely five months after the fall of Pérez Jiménez, US Vice President Richard Nixon became the target of the intense popular anger towards US imperialism for its backing of the dictatorship and decades of exploitation. Pelted with garbage and spat upon as soon as he got off his plane, Nixon barely escaped in a motorcade that was again attacked by crowds that surrounded his car, smashing its windows with stones, pipes and clubs. The US vice president only barely managed to restrain one of his Secret Service agents who had pulled out his gun and shouted, "Let's get some of these sons-of-bitches."

When news of Nixon's reception reached Washington, Eisenhower ordered the deployment of Marines and paratroopers to the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and dispatched warplanes to Curaçao to rescue the vice president. Ultimately called off, "Operation Poor Richard," as it was known, proved an embarrassment for Nixon and provoked outrage across Latin America.

In subsequent years, the Acción Democrática government of Betancourt became a model for Washington as an anti-communist but civilian regime committed to upholding private property and the interests of foreign capital, while repressing political movements to its left. Betancourt embraced Kennedy's "Alliance for Progress," declaring that it was necessary to "help the poor in order to save the rich." During frequent visits to Washington, Betancourt cultivated relations with the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which assisted him in the development of an anti-communist union apparatus loyal to the government and the oil companies.

Venezuela was held up as a "model democracy" during a period in which CIA-backed military coups brought brutal dictatorships to power throughout most of South America. The Monroe Doctrine had undergone yet another revision, this time in the Kennan corollary, named after the US diplomat George F. Kennan who authored the policy of containment toward the Soviet Union. Applied to Latin America, this became the doctrine of "national security" in which any revolutionary threat from below was to be regarded as a manifestation of Soviet expansionism and ruthlessly repressed.

In reality, Venezuela's "democracy" was no less ruthless than the torture regimes imposed by Washington elsewhere in the hemisphere. The government and its reviled secret police agency, DISIP, savagely repressed fledgling guerrilla movements along with left-wing and union activists. According to the government's own estimates, nearly 900 Venezuelan civilians were murdered or disappeared by the repressive forces under so-called "democratic" regimes.

Under the presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez, a close ally of Betancourt and co-founder of AD, the Venezuelan government nationalized the oil

industry in 1976 in the midst of the sharp price hikes that accompanied the energy crises of that period. Contrary to Trump's claims about Venezuela "stealing" oil and land from the US, the oil companies were compensated with roughly \$1 billion. Moreover, neither the oil nor the land were ever US property, with Standard Oil and the others plundering the resources under generous concessions granted by successive Venezuelan regimes.

Nationalization under a capitalist government failed to alter the fundamental class relations in Venezuela. The country remained entirely dependent for income upon a single commodity, oil, which it sold overwhelmingly to the US, leaving it at the mercy of market fluctuations.

The same structures and even the same Venezuelan managers employed by the foreign companies remained in place. The foreign oil companies continued operations and reaped profits under new names as subsidiaries of PDVSA, the state petroleum company. Attempts at employing import substitution to diversify the economy foundered, leaving Venezuela dependent upon imports for 80 percent of its foodstuffs as well as the bulk of its manufactured goods.

Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso, a prominent Venezuelan politician who served as Betancourt's minister for energy presciently warned, "Ten years from now, 20 years from now, you will see; oil will bring us ruin. Oil is the Devil's excrement." The country contracted a classic case of the "Dutch disease," in which domination of the economy by a single export sector (oil) leads to a stunting of other sectors, like manufacturing and agriculture, leaving the country vulnerable to severe crises when export prices fall.

Alternating presidencies of the AD and its friendly rival, the Christian Democratic COPEI, presided over escalating social inequality and rampant corruption, while the country's debts steadily rose. Returning for a second term in power, Carlos Andrés Pérez responded to a sharp decline in oil prices by further opening up the country's oil fields to exploitation by the foreign corporations and imposing a drastic International Monetary Fund-dictated "shock therapy" program that included a 100 percent increase in fuel prices.

Masses of impoverished Venezuelans reacted to the assault on living standards with a popular uprising that became known as the *Caracazo*. The government retaliated with martial law and bloody repression, turning automatic weapons on unarmed crowds and dragging people from their homes in poor neighborhoods for summary executions. The events signaled the breakdown of the supposedly liberal anti-communist consensus that had dominated after the fall of Pérez Jiménez.

Continuing unrest followed, marked by an abortive 1992 coup attempt led by a young officer, Hugo Chávez. Chávez assumed the presidency six years later in an election that saw the obliteration at the polls of AD and COPEI, both of which were widely hated for their corruption and defense of capitalist interests at the expense of the masses.

Initiating what became known as Latin America's "Pink Tide," the Chávez government utilized high oil prices to fund social programs that improved education and health care while ameliorating poverty. These fairly modest reforms were followed by the new government cementing economic and political ties with Cuba, while condemning the US invasion of Afghanistan, leading to mounting animosity from Washington.

This friction culminated in an April 2002 US-backed coup that saw Chávez briefly deposed and imprisoned before mass protests forced his reinstatement. Joining the collection of military officers, big business representatives and AFL-CIO-linked bureaucrats who backed the coup was Maria Corina Machado, the US-financed right-winger recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for supporting a US war for regime change.

In 2007, the Chávez government carried out another round of nationalizations, reversing the growing privatization and hand-over of operations to the US-based corporations that had taken place over the previous decade. This measure was taken only after ExxonMobil and

ConocoPhillips refused to allow the government to assume majority stakes under new concession deals.

After the death of Chávez and his succession by Nicolás Maduro in 2013, a fall in oil prices, compounded by the imposition of punishing economic sanctions initiated under the Democratic administration of Barack Obama and intensified ever since, led to a dramatic shrinking of Venezuela's economy, mass outward migration and a plummeting of living standards.

US intervention escalated, including through coup plots, attempted assassinations and even the landing of mercenaries on Venezuela's shores. The Trump administration sought to impose its own president, the unelected and largely unknown right-wing legislator Juan Guaidó, whose "interim government" failed to gain popular support, proving adept only at pilfering millions of dollars in US aid funding.

"History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." The deployment of foreign fleets off Venezuela's coasts leading to the proclamation of two corollaries to the Monroe Doctrine, 123 years apart, seems a confirmation of this saying, attributed to the celebrated writer, humorist and anti-imperialist Mark Twain.

Theodore Roosevelt, however, used the 1902 crisis to amend the Monroe Doctrine in line with the rapacious interests of US imperialism as a rising global power. Trump's "corollary," while tipping its hat to TR, is the expression of that same power's increasingly intractable crisis and loss of global hegemony, which it desperately seeks to overcome by means of militarism and aggression.

China has already outstripped the US as South America's leading trade partner and is expected to overtake it throughout Latin America and the Caribbean by 2035. It is carrying out large scale infrastructure investments, from the new deep-water port at Chancay, Peru to the creation of 5-G networks, that the US is unable to match. Meanwhile, the European Union is also seeking its own access to the region's strategically vital sources of raw materials.

Under these conditions, the National Security Strategy document issued by the White House on December 4 states:

After years of neglect, the United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, and to protect our homeland and our access to key geographies throughout the region. We will deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in our Hemisphere. This "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine is a common-sense and potent restoration of American power and priorities, consistent with American security interests.

The path set out by this new assertion of the Monroe Doctrine seems, at first glance, more delusional than "common-sense." It represents, more than at any other historical juncture, the sure road to war. The aims spelled out by the Trump administration cannot be achieved outside of military conquest and direct military confrontation with nuclear-armed China and Russia.

At the same time, the drive to impose neo-colonial shackles upon Latin America will inevitably provoke a gigantic eruption of the class struggle throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The alternatives have never been more stark. The working class must unite its struggles across national boundaries, in the Americas and beyond, to put an end to capitalism, or this moribund system will drag humanity into the abyss of a nuclear third world war.



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