

Trump and Miller’s “iron law” of imperialist barbarism

Andre Damon
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In the aftermath of Saturday’s US attack on Venezuela and the kidnapping of President Nicolás Maduro, the Trump administration has unleashed a torrent of threats against countries around the world, targeting Cuba, Colombia, Iran, China, Russia and even the European Union.

Following Maduro’s abduction on Saturday, the Trump administration presented a series of demands to Venezuela’s interim president, Delcy Rodríguez, aimed at subordinating the country’s foreign and economic policy to US geopolitical and corporate interests. US officials told Rodríguez that Caracas must first “kick out China, Russia, Iran and Cuba and sever economic ties,” according to ABC News, and then “agree to partner exclusively with the US on oil production and favor America when selling heavy crude.”

This is, in essence, the transformation of Venezuela into a colonial protectorate of the US. American imperialism intends to steal Venezuela’s oil and reverse the nationalization of the oil companies, which is directed not only against Venezuela itself but also Russia and China. Trump issued a direct threat to Rodríguez, stating that if she “doesn’t do what’s right, she is going to pay a very big price, probably bigger than Maduro.”

Over the weekend, Trump also renewed his declared intent to annex Greenland, an overseas territory of EU and NATO member Denmark, through military force.

In a CNN interview Monday, White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller laid out the criminal character of the assault on Venezuela and American imperialism as a whole. When asked what Trump meant when he said the US would “run” Venezuela, Miller declared, “We live in a world that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time.”

Miller dismissed international law as “international niceties” and declared flatly: “The United States of America is running Venezuela ... we are in charge, because we have the United States military stationed outside the country. We set the terms and conditions. We have a complete embargo

on all of their oil and their ability to do commerce.”

Miller made clear that this “iron law” applies not just to the former colonies but the territories of the European powers themselves. When asked about Greenland, Miller declared that “Greenland should be part of the United States” and refused to rule out the use of military force. “Nobody’s going to fight the United States militarily over the future of Greenland,” he sneered.

This is the language of the Nazis, drawn from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and its talk of “iron laws of Nature” in relation to races and racial-state conflict.

Beyond the specific ideological influences of Miller’s statements, however, he is expressing what is in fact the essential character of imperialist policy. Lenin, in his 1916 work *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in analyzing the competition between different banks and corporate conglomerates, explained that influence and power are divided “‘in proportion to capital,’ ‘in proportion to strength,’ because there cannot be any other method of division under commodity production and capitalism.”

Polemicalizing against those, including Karl Kautsky, who claimed that capitalism was capable of peaceful development, he wrote:

Monopolies, oligarchy, the striving for domination and not for freedom, the exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by a handful of the richest or most powerful nations—all these have given birth to those distinctive characteristics of imperialism which compel us to define it as parasitic or decaying capitalism.

In the aftermath of World War II, under conditions of immense social upheaval and enormous popular outrage over the crimes of the Nazi regime, the capitalist powers outlined and expanded certain principles of international law that were supposed to regulate the relations among states. A

limited number of the surviving leaders of the Nazi regime were tried for crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity. In its ruling, the International Tribunal declared a “war of aggression” to be the “supreme international crime.”

As a matter of fact, the United States never considered itself seriously bound by these principles. Within five years of the Nuremberg verdicts, it launched the Korean War. Then came the Vietnam War, the various operations in Iran, Indonesia, the Congo, Guatemala and Chile and the backing of death squads across Latin America.

But US imperialism traditionally cloaked its aggression in the language of freedom and democracy. As Trotsky remarked ironically in the 1920s, “America is always liberating somebody, that’s her profession.” Wilson’s “Fourteen Points,” Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms,” Carter’s “human rights” reflected an effort to uphold the pretense that American policy was not governed by predatory interests.

In asserting the “iron law” that might makes right, Trump is not inventing a new doctrine but stripping away the tattered remains of the democratic pretexts that once accompanied American aggression. He is not inventing something new, and Trump is building on decades of escalating criminality that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But there is now a qualitative development.

This transformation is rooted in the deepening crisis of American capitalism. The post-World War II framework of international institutions and legal norms served for a time to regulate inter-imperialist tensions and stabilize global capitalism under US leadership. Now, that framework has collapsed. The global dominance of the dollar is under growing threat. US debt has soared to unprecedented levels. Any pretense that American policy is determined by anything but naked imperialist interests is being cast aside.

The frankness with which the Trump administration now declares its criminal aims expresses the predatory aims of the ruling class itself. The *Washington Post*, owned by the world’s second-richest man, Jeff Bezos, published an editorial Monday under the headline, “Maduro’s arrest exposes legal fictions,” with the subtitle: “The administration concocts a legal rationale for a foreign policy objective. That’s OK.”

The *Post* concludes with the statement that “international law is always a flimsy constraint on state behavior, and the United States needs other tools to defend itself and its friends.”

The *Wall Street Journal* dismissed objections to the kidnapping of Maduro as “The ‘International Law’ Illusion,” declaring that “the demonstration of US nerve and military prowess will do more than a thousand UN

resolutions to protect the free world.” These editorials constitute open admissions that what the United States carried out was a crime—coupled with the declaration that American military power places it above the law.

Trump is the representative of a criminal oligarchy that has amassed its wealth through fraud, speculation and plunder. As the WSWS wrote in its first statement on the invasion of Venezuela, “He is the chosen instrument of the American ruling class, a gangster vomited up by the oligarchy to enforce policies that can no longer be pursued through democratic or legal means.”

What this demonstrates is the delusional character of all reformist nostrums. This is a ruling class carrying out a project of global war and dictatorship.

The same illegality, the same ruthlessness, the same criminality that is expressed in the kidnapping of Maduro is expressed in the assault on democratic rights at home—the mass deportations, the attacks on the press, the purging of the civil service, the deployment of the military against the population. These are two sides of the same war—a war waged by the oligarchy against the working class.

But the “iron law” of imperialist barbarism will be confronted with the “iron law” of the class struggle. Trump and Miller operate as if they can do anything, as if there are no consequences for their actions. This may be true in relation to their factional opponents within the ruling class, who have capitulated to every outrage. But it is not true in relation to the working class. The war on Venezuela is deeply unpopular. Polls show overwhelming opposition among the American population.

The working class in the United States and internationally must draw the necessary conclusions. The oligarchy has declared war on the world and on the working class. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party call on workers, students and youth to take up the fight against imperialism, against the capitalist system that produces it and for the socialist reorganization of society.



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