

Trump takes Machado's Nobel medal as CIA chief meets with Venezuela's "interim president"

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Last Thursday, two events unfolded simultaneously, though roughly 2,000 miles apart. The first was in Washington D.C., the second in Caracas. Together they provide a damning indictment of the Venezuelan national bourgeoisie and the subservience to US imperialism of all of its political representatives in the wake of the criminal January 3 invasion of the country and abduction of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Celia Flores.

The first event was a grotesque spectacle staged at the White House, where Maria Corina Machado, the CIA-backed leader of Venezuela's far-right opposition, came to pay homage to the man who ordered the bloody invasion of her country. In a groveling display of servility, she bestowed upon the would-be US Führer the Nobel Peace Prize medal she was awarded, supposedly for "her struggle to achieve a just and peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy."

Trump appeared happy enough to accept the 18-carat gold trinket, which was framed with a statement praising him for "promoting peace through strength," an apparent reference to the US special forces raid that claimed the lives of over 100 Venezuelans and the missile attacks on small boats that have killed at least 100 more.

Trump has repeatedly groused that he deserved the prize, claiming to have stopped eight wars, some of which never existed and others of which have never stopped. In the case of Machado's award, he can no doubt lay some claim given the unceasing flow of money from the National Endowment for Democracy and other US agencies that have financed her operations.

Norway's Nobel Institute issued a statement noting that the prize itself cannot be transferred, though the medal may change hands. One relevant precedent is Norwegian Nobel literature prize winner Knut Hamsun's gifting of his medal to Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels in 1943. The equation of Trump with "peace" is roughly analogous to equating Goebbels' pig grunts with literature.

For all of her bootlicking—including her vow to privatize Venezuela's oil sector and make US corporations \$1.7 trillion richer—Machado left the White House empty-handed. She exited through a side entrance with no escort, and Trump made a short comment on social media describing the handing over of the medal as "a wonderful gesture of mutual respect."

He did not, however, amend his earlier assessment describing

Machado as "a very nice woman" who could not be installed as Venezuela's president because "she doesn't have the respect within the country." He was undoubtedly parroting a CIA assessment that any attempt to place such a widely detested figure in office would have triggered a civil war.

An even more revealing and politically significant meeting was unfolding in Venezuela as Machado made her pilgrimage to the White House. Delcy Rodríguez, installed as Venezuela's "interim president" after Maduro's abduction, cordially welcomed John Ratcliffe, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, to an airport terminal outside Caracas for a lightning visit that appeared to consist of the CIA chief delivering Rodríguez her marching orders.

According to one US official, Ratcliffe was dispatched to Caracas to tell Rodríguez that "the United States looks forward to an improved working relationship" with her government, which it expected would no longer provide a "safe haven for America's adversaries," first and foremost China, which has provided the main non-US market for Venezuelan oil along with loans and infrastructure investments, and Russia, which has made investments in Venezuela's oil sector and provided military hardware.

On the same day that she hosted the head of the CIA, a man who played a central role in organizing the bloody invasion of Venezuela and the abduction of Maduro and his wife, Rodríguez delivered an annual address to the country's National Assembly. To say that she spoke out of both sides of her mouth would hardly do the speech justice.

On the one hand, Rodríguez mouthed the same increasingly hollow "anti-imperialist" and left nationalist phrases that have long characterized the *chavista* government (founded by the late President Hugo Chávez more than a quarter-century ago). She denounced Washington as "the invading aggressor," adding: "They attacked, assaulted, killed, invaded and kidnapped President Maduro and the first lady. There is a stain on relations between the United States and Venezuela."

Nonetheless, this "stain" would be resolved, she declared, adding, "Let us not be afraid of diplomacy." Her government has announced plans to reopen its embassy in Washington, which was closed after the first Trump administration launched its abortive regime change operation centered on its recognition of the political

non-entity Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's "legitimate" president in 2019. The State Department, meanwhile, sent a delegation to initiate plans to reoccupy the sprawling 27-acre US embassy compound in Caracas.

Washington's view of "diplomacy" with Venezuela was summed up by Trump, who threatened that Rodríguez would get "worse than Maduro" if she failed to comply fully with US orders. Given that Maduro is in a New York jail cell facing a trial that could put him away for life, the comment can only be interpreted as a death threat. The "interim president" has seemingly gotten the message.

The most substantive announcement in Rodríguez's speech unveiled legislation to "reform" the hydrocarbon law, which has constituted a principal bone of contention between Venezuela, which possesses the largest proven oil reserves on the planet, and Washington and US energy conglomerates. As amended under Chávez in 2001, the law reasserted state sovereignty over the country's oil resources and required that foreign oil corporations enter joint ventures with the state-owned oil corporation, PDVSA, in which PDVSA would hold majority stakes. The law was the immediate catalyst for a failed 2002 CIA-backed coup attempt.

The proposed "reform"—drafted at the point of a US gun—would open the door to US investments and effective control of Venezuela's oil under the guise of developing fields that have yet to be tapped or that lack sufficient infrastructure.

At a meeting of oil executives convened at the White House on January 8, Trump was positively salivating over the prospect of plundering Venezuela's oil. The oil CEOs, however, were not so sanguine. Darren Woods, the chief executive of Exxon Mobil, the largest US oil company, earned Trump's displeasure by describing Venezuela as "uninvestable." The US oil companies are far from convinced that they can simply waltz back into the country and reverse 50 years of nationalization without provoking popular upheavals that could end in new expropriations.

Whatever the prospects for the US energy giants returning to Venezuela, for the time being Trump has placed the country's limited oil production in a vice-like grip, enforced by a continuing naval blockade. He has struck a deal for the sale of \$500 million worth of Venezuelan crude, with half of it flowing through the commodity trading firm Vitol, whose chief executive donated \$6 million to Trump's re-election campaign.

While there have been no immediate indications of serious divisions within the *chavista* government and its repressive apparatus over the planned oil "reform," among the left-nationalist base of the *chavista* movement and within the Venezuelan working class there have been expressions of disquiet and outright opposition over the course pursued by Rodríguez and her allies.

Some have gone so far as to suggest that those now in charge in Caracas conspired with Washington to allow the kidnapping of Maduro, ordering a stand down of the Venezuelan military. Such allegations have been strenuously countered by the government, which insists that advanced US military technology paralyzed air defense systems and overwhelmed Maduro's guard.

Rodríguez had played a leading role in attempts to reach a negotiated settlement with Washington and had apparently impressed US officials as someone with whom they could do

business. Nonetheless, Maduro himself had, by both his and Trump's accounts, offered the kind of subservient relationship now being pursued by his successor.

Both of them, along with the rest of the top echelons in Caracas, began not with "anti-imperialist" convictions but rather with a determination to defend the power and privileges of the *chavista* officialdom along with its principal constituents, the so-called *boliburguesía*, the bourgeois layers close to the regime that have enriched themselves off of government contracts, speculation and oil revenues, and the military, which plays an outsized role in governing the country.

The debacle in Venezuela is the product not only of criminal US aggression but also of a turn to the right by the *chavista* government and the bourgeois layers it represents under the unrelenting pressure of imperialism.

For all the talk of "21st century socialism" and "Bolivarian revolution," from its outset, the *chavista* movement was bourgeois nationalist in character. Its program sought not the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism but rather a limited redistribution of wealth that was dependent upon a single export commodity, oil. So long as the price and demand for oil remained high and its export continued unimpeded, limited social reforms remained possible. Once demand and prices fell and exports were blocked by a tightening unilateral US sanctions regime, the burden of the ensuing economic crisis was placed on the backs of the working class and the masses of oppressed, even as bourgeois layers continued to extract profits.

The turn by a crisis-ridden US imperialism toward military aggression in pursuit of renewed US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere has laid bare the class character of the *chavista* movement and of the broader Latin American "Pink Tide" with which it is associated.

While the shift by the *chavista* government is of a piece with a broader turn by the Latin American bourgeoisie to the right, the broad masses of working people are being driven into struggle to the left by the deepening global capitalist crisis.

US imperialism's attempt to reverse the course of the 20th century and reimpose colonial shackles upon Latin America cannot be waged without igniting a social powder keg. The way forward lies through the independent political mobilization of the working class in Venezuela and throughout the continent on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

Realizing this program requires the closest bonds between the workers of Latin America and the United States, who confront the destruction of democratic and social rights by an administration and a ruling oligarchy bent on imposing dictatorship, in a common struggle to put an end to capitalism.



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