

Bullying Venezuela: Trump's Unvarnished Threat. Washington's "Dirty Politics" in Latin America

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Whether he holds good on it is beside the point. President Donald J. Trump's great value to US foreign policy is its lack of artifice and sophistication, a bullying force of nature that alters with the next burst of adolescent acne and the breaking of the voice. Even less than the traditional stereotype of the American behaving badly, he is ugliness without a veil, the brute promise without gloss. Truly ghastly, yet in a way, oddly refreshing.

His threats against President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela were impudent enough to garner resistance from Latin American leaders averse to Washington's heavily intrusive hand. The result of Trump's stance has been one of unifying, not dividing, the bloc.

Colombia's Juan Manuel Santos warned Vice President Mike Pence that,

"The possibility of military intervention shouldn't even be considered."

Santos went even further, making the almost daring, if delusionary point that "America is a continent of peace. It is the land of peace."

The vantage point from analysts in the US is that Maduro has got to go (the default position of Washington tends to be interference – the only issue amongst the scalpel holders is *how* the program might be implemented). This has been the position since he assumed power, enshrining a long held position that Venezuela is perfectly entitled to have any government as long as it sings the lullaby of American empire.

The reality since the 1990s is that the functionaries in Washington have been concerned about the unruly, independent trajectory of Venezuelan politics. The Bolivarian revolution spearheaded by Hugo Chávez between 1999 and 2013, a socialist experiment fuelled by rising oil receipts, sent a lingering titter amongst those in the US political establishment.

The Bush administration was sufficiently stirred by Chávez's achievements as to seek his ouster in 2002. While denying a direct hand, there was no shying away from the obvious point that "democracy promotion" was the administration's velvet gloved fist that would be repeatedly used, a pretext to advance business agendas and suitable alternatives to Chavismo.

As Christopher I. Clement, a long time student of US influences (read interference) in Latin American elections explained in 2005, the effort against Chávez was purely self-defeating.

“This targeting of a democratically elected government,” claimed Clement in Latin American Perspectives, “raises serious questions about the objectives and content of US policies toward Latin America.”[1]

Subsequently, WikiLeaks revealed some gold on US intentions in Venezuela with a 2006 State Department cable from then US Ambassador William Brownfield. For the eager Brownfield keen to make use of his position, US strategy towards altering the Venezuelan political landscape would entail five approaches: “strengthen democratic institutions” which had been “systematically dismantled” over the 8 years of Chávez’s rule; “penetrate” the base and “divide Chavismo”; “isolate Chavez” and, predictably enough, protect “vital US business” interests.[2]

The document is awash with calculations and not-so-hidden agendas, the dirty asides suggesting that democracy is only good if it is managed from the outside. The funding of 54 social projects through the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) gave the ambassador a cynical chance “to visit poor areas of Venezuela and demonstrate US concern for the Venezuelan people.” This tactic would supposedly divide the Bolivarian efforts, and sow “confusion”.

What the critics have against Trump is his near subnormal forthrightness. He is not interested in the subterfuge of US aid that chips away at a foreign government, the softly softy approach to discrediting an opponent. Rather than undermining the state using the more conventional techniques in the CIA armoury, the dissimulative practices of US Aid, or mere economic punishments through levelled sanctions, he has suggested calling in the marines.

“Threatening military action,” suggests Mark L. Schneider of the America’s program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “undermines the strongest Latin American consensus in support of democracy that I have seen since the end of the Pinochet regime.”[3]

But a view such as Schneider’s is merely more of the same recipe, the same formula with different utensils.

US intervention in Venezuela, whatever form it takes, resembles the abusive family member who regularly violates the sanctity and solemnity of others in the inner sanctum. Things were already looking less than peachy in 1841, with the commencement of the Venezuelan Boundary Dispute gave a foretaste of the US stance in the Americas.

While the Venezuelans were perfectly clear where their post-Spanish independence boundaries lay, the British were less than observant, preferring to see Britannia’s own acquisition of British Guiana from the Netherlands as borderless to the west. This contrived amorphousness brought the imperial interests of a global empire into play, a point that piqued Washington’s interest. To that end, the Monroe Doctrine was born, fashioned to prevent, if not repel, European efforts to influence the Americas.

Ironically enough, the resolution of the dispute was taken as the necessary validation of the Monroe Doctrine, which was duly used to sanctify periodic, often murderous acts of intervention by the United States in the affairs of Central and South America. Keeping the meddlesome Europeans out of the Western Hemisphere was simply a prelude to

entrenching the US within it: imperialism was bad, but only if practiced by foreigners. Trump has merely joined a large and not so distinguished club.

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Notes

[1] <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0094582X05275529>

[2] https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06CARACAS3356_a.html

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/14/world/americas/trump-venezuela-maduro-latin-america.html?mcubz=3>

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