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Le Journal International des Sachants (JDS) est une revue scientifique pluridisciplinaire dédiée à la valorisation et à la vulgarisation des résultats de recherches innovantes, de découvertes de pointe et de productions scientifiques originales et pertinentes dans divers domaines scientifiques. Disposant de comité scientifique et de lecture, la revue **JDS** offre ainsi aux chercheurs du monde entier, une plateforme de publication de haute qualité en favorisant le partage des connaissances et de la collaboration au sein de la communauté scientifique.

JDS est une revue évaluée par des pairs (*blind peer review*) et en libre accès "*Open access*" relevant des Editions Croco. Il publie les articles dans le domaine des Sciences Humaines et Sociales ; Langues et littérature ; Art, patrimoine et culture ; Sciences du Langage et de la Communication ; Sciences Economiques et de Gestion ; Sciences politiques et Juridiques. Dans sa vision d'ouverture, **JDS** encourage la collaboration interdisciplinaire entre les chercheurs de tous les pays africains et du monde.

Les articles proposés doivent respecter la ligne éditoriale de la revue. Ils doivent être originaux et n'avoir jamais fait l'objet d'une acceptation pour publication dans une autre revue à comité de lecture. Ils sont soumis à une sélection initiale par l'éditeur, puis à un processus rigoureux d'évaluation par les pairs en double aveugle avant publication.

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SOMMAIRE

SECTION 1 : LANGUES & LITTERATURE

Anglais

1. **Urban transformation and gentrification in America in Upton Sinclair's the jungle and Zadie Smith's White Teeth**
Didier KOMBIENI..... 1-17
2. **Power and Authority in Discourse: An analysis of pragmatic strategies in Dan Fullani's One Man, Two Votes**
Marius Eder BROU..... 18-33
3. **Investigating Contemporary History of US Interventions in Venezuela and Current Developments**
SY Mamadou Malal..... 33-53
4. **In-between two worlds: struggling for a new cultural identity in Buchi Emecheta's The New Tribe**
Koffi Gérard KOUADIO..... 54-67
5. **Resilience and Survival in Ernest J. Gaines' The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971)**
Mariame WANE LY & Abdoulaye NDIAYE..... 68-79

Etudes hispaniques

6. **Poética de la metamorfosis: el neobarroco como nuevo realismo en esa puta tan distinguida de Juan Marsé**
Oumar MANGANE..... 80-94
7. **La Iglesia y la emancipación ilustrada: una lectura crítica del proyecto colonial latinoamericano desde El papel quemado de Jaime Díaz Rozzotto**
Bonzallé Hervé SAKOUM..... 95-108

Lettres Modernes

8. **Émile Zola et Calixthe Beyala, une écriture inclusive : vers l'émergence féminine**
Elise ABENG ZE..... 109-128
9. **Didactique du français langue seconde : quel encadrement pédagogique pour un développement professionnel efficient des enseignants ?**
Arnaud OUÉDRAOGO..... 129-145
10. **L'occupation abusive des terres dans Raga et le rêve mexicain de Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, une violation du droit à la propriété**
Yaya KONÉ..... 146-159
11. **Travailler le sacré. Polar africain et capitalisme de l'occulte chez Konaté et Ndione**
Taoussi Taoukamla BICHARA..... 160-175

ISSN-P: 3079-3009

ISSN-L: 3079-3017

- 12. Imaginaire littéraire et développement durable : une analyse de
La danse du vilain de Fiston Mwanza Mujila**
Eulalie Patricia ESSOMBA..... 176-189
- 13. La transparence esthétique dans les romans d'Octave Mirbeau :
entre expressionnisme et subversion romanesque**
DZENE EDZEGUE Joseph Bénard..... 190-201
- 14. Culture matérielle et culture immatérielle dans l'organisation
des funérailles moose du village de Yaké**
SARE Honorine & SAOUADOGO Sidibéouéndin..... 202-214

SECTION 2 : COMMUNICATION, ARTS, CULTURE ET PATRIMOINE

Sciences du langage et de la communication

- 15. Communication des organisations féministes sénégalaises et
industries culturelles : la provocation comme stratégie de visibilité**
Alioune Badara GUEYE & Ngagne FALL..... 215-227
- 16. Supports de sensibilisation des maladies cardiovasculaires
en Côte d'Ivoire : un regard sociolinguistique**
Ahi Yao Guillaume, Kouadio Amah Victoire & Konan Kouacou Fabrice..... 228-242
- 17. Médias numériques et propagande contre le 4ème mandat
lors de l'élection présidentielle ivoirienne de 2025**
Koffi Nestor N'DRI..... 243-259
- 18. Communication et musique urbaine ivoirienne : influence,
recomposition des valeurs et dynamiques d'appropriation des jeunes**
Boni Hyacinthe KPANGBA..... 260-276

Patrimoine, art, culture et cinéma

- 19. La "Maison des artistes" de Grand-Bassam : sociographie d'un lieu de
création et de diffusion de la peinture contemporaine en Côte d'Ivoire**
Krou Eugène ASSOUMOU..... 277-291
- 20. Le langage indicible dans l'art des cordes tissées de Christian Lattier**
Yoro Emmanuel GUEYE..... 292-307
- 21. Modélisation du féminisme dans le cinéma documentaire :
la femme porte l'Afrique d'Idriss Diabaté**
Nangnintaha Estelle KONÉ & André Banhouman KAMATE..... 308-321

Informatique

- 22. Transition numérique et gestion des productions scientifiques :
état des lieux, contraintes et recommandations**
Aminata Nadège SAKO Epse BAYOKO & Abou Bakary BAYOKO..... 322-333

SECTION 3 : SCIENCES HUMAINES ET SOCIALES

Civilisations

- 23. La piraterie dans les provinces anatoliennes à l'époque hellénistique**
Ibrahima DIAMANKA..... 334-347

Archéologie

- 24. Savoir-faire ceramique du nord et du sud de la Côte d'Ivoire :
cas des zones de Tengrela et d'Anyama**
Tiantio SANOGO épse BAMBAMBA & Affoua Eugénie KOUAME..... 348-360

Histoire

- 25. Le Zhégié de Dassa : fonctionnement d'une juridiction traditionnelle
et enjeux de sa valorisation patrimoniale (Burkina Faso, Nando)**
Boukary DABAL & Désiré BATIENO..... 361-372
- 26. La politique étatique de la protection de l'environnement minier
en Côte d'Ivoire (2000-2024)**
SIDIBE Nohan & NDIA YE El Hadji Amadou Ba..... 373-389
- 27. Gouvernance coloniale et marginalisation socio-spatiale
dans la ville de Daloa : 1920 -1956**
Blé Angélin LAGO 390-401
- 28. La diplomatie publique sud-coréenne en Côte d'Ivoire (2011-2021)**
Yao Serge-Rodrigue AHI..... 402-418
- 29. Administration coloniale et transformations économiques
en Côte d'Ivoire de 1908 à 1960**
N'Goran Alphonse BROU..... 419-433
- 30. L'identité natchaba du XVI^e au début XX^e siècle**
Sougla YATOUTI & Ilaboti DIPO 434-450
- 31. Migration et installation des Noumou (Danlèssôgô)
chez les Koulango de Nassian (XVIII^e - XX^e siècle)**
Koffi Alain KOUASSI..... 451-463
- 32. Acteurs et organisation de la commercialisation du cacao
dans la région de l'Indénié (1920-1970)**
Alfred Brondon Esso AKESSÉ & Antoine Koffi GOLÉ 464-485
- 33. Les mutuelles dans le développement local : l'exemple de la mutuelle
de développement de la sous-préfecture de Napié (nord Côte-d'Ivoire)
de 1965 à 2014**
Valy YEO..... 486-503
- 34. Système de santé colonial et construction du chemin de fer
en Côte d'Ivoire (1904-1931)**
Chidjé Mireille Léontine AKRE, Blé Angélin LAGO &
Ange Barnabé ADOFFI..... 504-518

ISSN-P: 3079-3009

ISSN-L: 3079-3017

- 35. La commémoration tournante du 11 décembre au Burkina Faso 2008 -2020 : dynamique d'urbanisation et enjeux sanitaires dans les villes de Manga et de Tenkodogo**
Moussa ZABSONRE & Inoussa YELBI..... 419-534
- 36. La pénétration coloniale française dans le pays bhété de Soubré, 1897-1910**
Huberson Bahi POAMÉ & Mamadou BAMBA..... 435-546

Géographie

- 37. Infrastructure hydraulique, fragmentation des parcours pastoraux et vulnérabilités du pastoralisme à Diama dans le Delta du fleuve Sénégal**
Ramata Ndianor, Aliou Ndao, Tamsir Mbaye & Cheikh Samba Wade 547-564
- 38. Electrification et développement socio-économique dans le village de Dialakorobougou, commune de Mountougoula au Mali**
Idrissa Amadou TRAORE & Idrissa Issa CISSE..... 565-578
- 39. Perception des populations sur les impacts socio-économiques et écologiques des ouvrages antiérosifs dans la zone girafe de Kouré au Niger**
ISSAKA ATTININE Abdoul Nasser & ILBOUDO Dieudonné..... 579-595
- 40. Les intermédiaires fonciers dans la ville de Kolda (Sénégal) : entre opportunités et contraintes**
Yaya DIALLO & Oumar SY..... 596-609
- 41. De l'agrovillage à la ville secondaire en recomposition : dynamiques économiques, pressions foncières et transition urbaine à Bonoua (Sud-Est de la Côte d'Ivoire)**
Jean Baptiste ESSAN & ALOKO N'Guessan Jérôme..... 610-629
- 42. Santé reproductive en milieu rural et dispositifs du SWEDD : lecture territoriale à San-Pedro**
Oulai Munné-Prisca YOH Épouse TIA & Koua Ange Donatien BROU..... 630-645
- 43. Les territorialités dans l'espace périurbain dakarois : cas de Diass et Sindia**
Seybatou THIOM..... 646-662
- 44. Facteurs associés à l'augmentation du recours aux consultations prénatales au Burkina Faso**
Fahimatou Rayagne-Wendé OUEDRAOGO & Moussa BOUGMA 663-677
- 45. Valorisation des résidus de cacao et empowerment des femmes rurales : enseignements de la sous-préfecture de Soubré (Sud-ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire)**
Kopeh Jean-Louis ASSI..... 678-694
- 46. Influence socio-environnementale et sanitaire du niveau de dégradation des entre deux maisons dans la ville de Gagnoa : cas d'Afridougou, Dar-es-Salam et Odiennékourani**
Abdoul Karim TOURÉ..... 695-710

- 47. Échec scolaire des élèves en classe d'examen dans les établissements d'enseignement secondaire public de la ville de Bouaké : Évolution, facteurs explicatifs et stratégies de réduction**
Faustin GUEI, SEKA Ayenon Ferdinand,
Yah Edwige Bénédicte N'GUETTA épouse GBOKO & Émile Brou KOFFI..... 711-727

Philosophie

- 48. Théorie critique et progrès : Max Horkheimer et la signification de l'individu**
Bi Drigoné Gilles Martial TOUBOUI..... 728-739
- 49. Le Wittgenstein de Hintikka : une réinvention formelle ou une incompréhension des jeux de langage de Ludwig Wittgenstein ?**
Yao Jacques KOUAMÉ..... 740-762
- 50. La vérité chez Claude Bernard : du dualisme qualitatif à l'unité quantitative**
Kouacou Firmin Luc KOFFI..... 763-774
- 51. Meilleur des mondes possibles leibnizien et fléaux d'un monde émergent : cas de l'homosexualité**
Konan Adolphe Dumas N'GATTA..... 775-795
- 52. De l'extrémisme violent aux insécurités en Afrique : une réflexion à partir de Kant**
AVOCES David Pierre..... 796-812
- 53. La pensée face au déterminisme algorithmique : les fondements bernardiens d'une complémentarité par-delà les antagonismes**
Tiasvi Yao Raoul AGBAVON..... 813-825
- 54. Intelligence Artificielle (IA) et crise ontologique de l'humanité : objectivation de la pensée comme oubli de l'Être**
Yao Wilfried N'GUESSAN..... 826-844
- 55. Neurosciences et environnement : comment vaincre l'éco-anxiété ?**
COULIBALY Sionfongon Kassoum & GONDO Golou Roseline..... 845-857
- 56. Éthique transcendantale et création technique : l'impératif catégorique comme horizon**
Akpolé Koffi Daniel YAO..... 858-870
- 57. La morale sartrienne, un gage des droits des immigrants**
Kouassi Jean-Jacob KOFFI 871-884
- 58. Mariage pour tous : Entre dynamisme mondial et justice sociale**
Abraham Saint-Omer Koffi KOUAKOU..... 885-896

Anthropologie et sociologie

- 59. Contribution de la MUCREFCI Daloa dans la reconstruction socio-économique des fonctionnaires et agents de l'État de la région du Haut-Sassandra (Côte d'Ivoire)**
DJETTE Grah Cyrille, KONAN Koffi,
KOFFI Alexis & SANOGO Mamadou..... 897-915
- 60. Genre et développement par l'agriculture en Côte d'Ivoire : cas des femmes du village de Dihi dans le Département de Korhogo**
Navouon FANNY, Olivier GNAN & Nambalassigué Kolo KONE..... 916-932
- 61. Itinéraires thérapeutiques des usagers de drogues dans le contexte urbain abidjanais**
Félicien Yomi TIA 933-951
- 62. Grossesses non désirées et recours à l'avortement clandestin chez les jeunes femmes au Gabon**
Steeve-Thierry BALONDJI & Aimée Patricia NDEMBI NDEMBI..... 952-974
- 63. Foncier et gouvernance migratoire en milieu rural. Les relations intercommunautaires à l'épreuve de la marchandisation de la terre**
Mahamadou ZONGO..... 975-992
- 64. Confrérie des chasseurs en Haute Guinée : mutation entre chasse, environnement et politique**
Sidiki KOUROUMA, Lamine MANSARE & Soumahila BAYO 993-1011
- 65. Féminisation du maraîchage et vulnérabilités socio-institutionnelles dans la gestion de l'eau à Solomougou**
Namè Hassan YÉO & Guy Éric Anicet Quassy KOUAKOU..... 1012-1026
- 66. Le choléra dans le discours de Guy de Maupassant : entre imaginaire populaire et rationalité scientifique**
Martial BAMA..... 1027-1034
- 67. L'extorsion du surtravail de la femme en milieu rural de la Haute Guinée : la mobilité comme mode de recherche d'autonomie ?**
Mamoudou CONDE..... 1035-1058
- 68. Conflits autour de la culture attelée à Atchangbadè au Togo : enjeux, acteurs et mécanismes de résolution**
Konga PALASSI..... 1059-1076

Criminologie

- 69. L'abandon familial et pratiques sexuelles chez des detenu/e(s) au pôle pénitentiaire d'Abidjan**
Rebecca Paule Jacqueline DO & Diescieu Aubin Sylvère KAZON..... 1077-1090
- 70. Enjeu de pouvoir et gestion de risques miniers dans le Haut Katanga : cas du site de Ruashi-mining à Lubumbashi**
MULUNDA TSHIEYA Lucien..... 1091-1108

ISSN-P: 3079-3009

ISSN-L: 3079-3017

Psychologie

**71. Comportements à risques d'accidents de la circulation
des conducteurs de motos taxis à Bingerville**

YAO Koffi Constant, AKA Blainson Alain &
KOUADIO Lou Younan Yolande 1108-1122

SECTION 4 : SCIENCES ET TECHNOLOGIES

**72. Obstacles à l'accès à l'éducation pour les enfants handicapés
dans un contexte de forte croissance démographique
dans la ville de Parakou (Bénin)**

Boni Romulus BIAOU & Hervé A. KOMBIENI..... 1123-1139

Investigating Contemporary History of US Interventions in Venezuela and Current Developments

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive historical analysis of United States interventions in Venezuela from the late twentieth century through the critical events of January 2026. It explores the progression of US policy, beginning with diplomatic engagement during the Clinton administration and culminating in overt military intervention under the second Trump presidency. The capture of President Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026 – while unprecedented in its directness – is argued to represent the culmination of nearly thirty years of escalating pressure rather than a fundamental departure from past practices. The study examines three interrelated themes: the structural influence of oil on US-Venezuelan relations, the evolution of sanctions from targeted measures into comprehensive economic warfare, and the gradual erosion of traditional legal and diplomatic constraints on unilateral intervention. Utilizing declassified documents, sanctions databases, congressional records, and scholarly analyses, this paper asserts that the January 2026 operation reflects both a resurgence of historically rooted interventionist patterns and a significant shift toward normalizing extraterritorial military action as an instrument of foreign policy. The findings suggest major consequences for international law, regional stability, and the future of US-Latin American relations.

Keywords: intervention in Venezuela, Monroe Doctrine, oil politics, sanctions, US foreign policy

Étude de l'histoire contemporaine des interventions américaines au Venezuela et des développements actuels

Résumé

Cet article propose une analyse historique approfondie des interventions américaines au Venezuela, couvrant la période de la fin du XXe siècle jusqu'aux événements clés de janvier 2026. Il examine l'évolution de la politique américaine, depuis l'engagement diplomatique sous l'administration Clinton jusqu'à l'intervention militaire direct lors du second mandat de Donald Trump. L'étude soutient que la capture du président Nicolás Maduro le 3 janvier 2026 – bien que marquée par une brutalité sans précédent – représente l'aboutissement de près de trente ans de pressions croissantes plutôt qu'une rupture radicale. Trois axes interdépendants sont mis en lumière: le rôle structurel du pétrole dans les relations américano-vénézuéliennes, la transformation des sanctions passant d'actions ciblées à une guerre économique à grande échelle, ainsi que l'érosion progressive des contraintes juridiques et diplomatiques traditionnelles encadrant l'intervention unilatérale. S'appuyant sur des documents déclassifiés, des bases de données relatives aux sanctions, les archives du Congrès et des analyses académiques, cet article démontre que l'opération menée en janvier 2026 illustre à la fois la résurgence de schémas

interventionnistes historiquement enracinés et une évolution qualitative vers la normalisation de l'action militaire extraterritoriale comme instrument de politique étrangère. Ces conclusions revêtent une importance majeure pour le droit international, la stabilité régionale ainsi que pour l'avenir des relations entre les États-Unis et l'Amérique latine.

Mots-clés : Doctrine Monroe, intervention au Venezuela, politique étrangère américaine, politique pétrolière, sanctions

Introduction

On January 3, 2026, United States military forces executed an operation that stunned the international community. Codenamed "Absolute Resolve," Delta Force units supported by the FBI and CIA entered Venezuela's capital Caracas, seized President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores from the Fuerte Tiuna military complex, and transported them to New York to face federal drug trafficking charges. President Donald Trump announced the operation on social media with characteristic brevity: American justice has finally arrived for the people of Venezuela.

For many observers, the operation appeared as a dramatic rupture in hemispheric relations—an act of unilateral military intervention unprecedented since the 1989 invasion of Panama. Yet a closer examination reveals that January 3, 2026, was not a sudden rupture but rather the logical endpoint of a decades-long trajectory. The capture of Maduro represents the culmination of an evolving strategy that transformed Venezuela from a diplomatic challenge into a criminal enterprise systematically dismantled the legal and economic foundations of its government, and ultimately rendered military action not merely plausible but, in the eyes of its architects, inevitable.

This paper seeks to assess the true contemporary history of US interventions in Venezuela, tracing the complex relationship between ideology, oil interests, and executive power that shaped the path to January 2026. It argues that understanding this trajectory requires examining three interconnected dimensions: first, the structural centrality of oil in defining US strategic interests and shaping policy responses; second, the evolution of sanctions from targeted measures into comprehensive economic warfare; and third, the progressive reinterpretation of legal authorities that enabled the executive branch to circumvent traditional constraints on the use of force.

The analysis draws on primary sources including US Treasury Department sanctions data, congressional reports, executive orders, and legal documents, as well as scholarly literature on US-Latin American relations, democracy promotion, and international law. It situates

contemporary developments within the broader historical context of US intervention in the region, tracing patterns that extend from the Monroe Doctrine through the Cold War to the present.

1. Historical Context: Venezuela and the United States Before Chávez

The Monroe Doctrine (1823) declared the Western Hemisphere closed to European colonization, establishing a precedent for US intervention in Latin America. Venezuela has historically been a key focus, with the 1895 Anglo-Venezuelan crisis marking an early application. The U.S. invoked the doctrine to force Great Britain into arbitration over a territorial dispute, asserting its role as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere. Following Venezuela's inability to pay foreign debts, European powers blockaded its ports. President Theodore Roosevelt applied the Roosevelt Corollary—a direct extension of the Monroe Doctrine—asserting the US right to intervene as an "international police power" to prevent European interference.

1.1. The Monroe Doctrine and Early Interventions

The United States' relationship with Venezuela has been shaped from its inception by the principles articulated in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. President James Monroe's declaration that the American continents were "henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers" (H. S. Commager, 1976: 35) established a framework for hemispheric hegemony that would be invoked repeatedly over the following two centuries.

The first significant invocation of the doctrine in relation to Venezuela occurred in 1895, when a border dispute between Venezuela and British Guiana (now Guyana) threatened to escalate into conflict. President Grover Cleveland, invoking the Monroe Doctrine, demanded that Britain submit the dispute to arbitration (G. Fournial et al., 1966: 28). *The Nation* magazine, in a prescient critique, warned against the emerging pattern of US intervention: the country was going, in the name of the Monroe doctrine, to assert such ownership of the American hemisphere as will enable us to trace all the boundary lines on it to our own satisfaction in defiance of the rest of the world" (R. Kreitner, 2026: 3).

This warning proved prophetic as the United States proceeded to repeatedly meddle in Latin American affairs throughout the early twentieth century.

1.2. The Gómez Dictatorship and Early Oil Politics

The discovery of oil in Venezuela in 1914 fundamentally transformed the country's political economy and its relationship with foreign powers. By the 1920s, Venezuela had become the

world's largest oil exporter, attracting intensive investment from US and British companies. The benefits of this wealth, however, flowed almost entirely to foreign corporations and local elites rather than the Venezuelan population (D. Perkins, 1963: 7).

The dictator Juan Vicente Gómez, who ruled from 1908 to 1935, epitomized the pattern of authoritarian governance that flourished under US protection (D. Perkins, 1963: 5). Gómez governed "by terror and corruption," as the Puerto Rican journalist Luis Muñoz Marín documented in *The Nation* in 1925, employing martial law, torture, and imprisonment to suppress dissent (M. Munoz, 1925: 11). US oil companies provided crucial support to the regime, and the United States government maintained diplomatic recognition despite the regime's brutality. As Mauritz A. Hallgren noted in 1928, "Gomez has left nothing undone to make foreign capital at home in Venezuela," and US companies reciprocated with unqualified support (M. Hallgren, 1928: 23). The pattern established during the Gómez era—foreign oil interests aligning with authoritarian governance, US diplomatic support for stability over democracy, and the concentration of oil wealth in elite hands—would resonate throughout the twentieth century and shape the conditions that gave rise to Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution decades later.

1.3. The Democratic Interlude

Venezuela's transition to democracy following the overthrow of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958 was hailed as a model for Latin America. The Punto Fijo pact, signed by the country's major political parties, established a framework for democratic governance that endured for four decades. Venezuela became Latin America's most stable democracy, its oil wealth funding social programs and infrastructure development that lifted living standards (T. Gill, 2022: 3).

Yet beneath the surface of democratic stability, structural problems persisted. The country's dependence on oil revenue intensified, with petroleum constituting nearly 98 percent of exports by the 1990s. Political power became concentrated in the hands of two dominant parties—Acción Democrática and COPEI—that alternated in power while excluding alternative voices. Corruption flourished, and by the 1990s, public disillusionment had reached critical levels (U.S. Congress, December 3, 1999: 20). The neoliberal reforms implemented under President Carlos Andrés Pérez in the late 1980s, which included austerity measures and privatization, sparked violent protests in the 1989 Caracazo uprising that left hundreds dead (T. Gill, 2022: 3).

This combination of economic inequality, political exclusion, and popular anger created the conditions for the rise of Hugo Chávez, whose 1998 election marked a decisive rupture in Venezuelan politics and US-Venezuelan relations.

2. The Chávez Era: From Engagement to Confrontation

The election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 marked a seismic shift in Venezuela's political landscape—and nowhere was this transformation more pronounced than in the country's relationship with the United States. What began as a period of cautious engagement, with Washington initially acknowledging Chávez's democratic mandate and cooperating on oil and counter-narcotics, steadily deteriorated into open confrontation. As Chávez consolidated power, railed against neoliberal "savage capitalism," and forged alliances with U.S. adversaries like Cuba and Iran, the White House responded with suspicion and criticism. By the time of the 2002 coup attempt, which Chávez blamed on U.S. complicity, and his subsequent rise as a leading voice of 21st-century socialism, the once-functional bilateral relationship had devolved into a protracted diplomatic war, setting the stage for two decades of mutual antagonism.

2.1. The Bolivarian Revolution

Chávez's "Bolivarian Revolution"—named for the nineteenth-century independence leader Simón Bolívar (G. Fournial et al., 1966: 20-23)—promised to fundamentally restructure Venezuelan society. The new 1999 constitution expanded presidential powers, renamed the country the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and established a framework for participatory democracy (U.S. Congress, December 3, 1999: 20). Oil revenues, which had previously flowed largely to foreign companies and domestic elites, were redirected toward social welfare programs known as "misiones" that provided healthcare, education, and subsidized food to previously marginalized populations (R. Bacic, et al., 2026:18).

During his first years in office, Chávez's policies delivered measurable social gains. Extreme poverty rates fell by 15 percent, literacy campaigns reached millions, and access to healthcare expanded dramatically. These achievements cemented Chávez's popularity among Venezuela's poor majority while alienating the traditional elite and foreign investors (Seelke and Sullivan, 2026: 18).

2.2. The 2002 Coup Attempt

The turning point in US-Venezuelan relations came in April 2002, when a short-lived coup briefly removed Chávez from power. On April 11, massive protests against Chávez's government turned violent; military officers announced that Chávez had resigned (a claim he

denied) and installed businessman Pedro Carmona as interim president. The Carmona government lasted only 48 hours before loyalist military units restored Chávez to power (R. Bacic, et al., 2026: 18).

Substantial evidence suggests at least tacit support for the coup, despite the disputed role of the United States in the. The Bush administration quickly recognized the Carmona government, and subsequent investigations revealed that US officials had met with coup plotters in the months preceding the event. For Chávez and his supporters, the 2002 coup demonstrated conclusively that the United States was prepared to use covert means to overthrow his government—a perception that would define Venezuelan foreign policy for the next two decades.

2.3. Oil Nationalization and the "Axis of Resistance"

In the aftermath of the coup, Chávez moved decisively to consolidate control over Venezuela's oil industry. Following a devastating strike by PDVSA management in late 2002, Chávez dismissed thousands of executives and technical staff, replacing them with political loyalists. The state oil company was transformed from a technically proficient but politically independent entity into an instrument of state policy, its revenues directed toward social programs rather than reinvestment in production capacity (US Department of State, 2026: 8). Chávez also used Venezuela's oil wealth to forge a network of alliances designed to reduce US influence in the region. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), established in 2004, formalized relationships with Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and other left-leaning governments. Venezuela provided subsidized oil to Cuba in exchange for Cuban medical and intelligence personnel; it also developed increasingly close ties with Russia, China, and Iran (T. Gill, 2022: 3).

This "axis of resistance," as Chávez termed it, positioned Venezuela as a direct challenger to US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. The Bush administration responded by escalating diplomatic pressure, reducing engagement, and eventually imposing the first targeted sanctions on Venezuelan officials in 2006, citing Venezuela's lack of cooperation in counterterrorism efforts (T. Gill, 2022: 3).

2.4. The Obama Era: Continuity Beneath the Surface

President Barack Obama's approach to Venezuela was characterized by a rhetorical softening that masked underlying continuity. In 2009, Obama famously reached out to Chávez at the Summit of the Americas, declaring that the United States sought "a new beginning" in relations (T. Gill, 2022: 2). Yet the substance of policy changed little. In 2011, the United

States imposed new sanctions on PDVSA for its dealings with Iran. In 2014, following violent protests against the Maduro government Chávez had died of cancer in 2013, the Obama administration imposed sanctions on senior Venezuelan officials under the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act, freezing their assets and revoking their visas. Executive Order 13692, issued in March 2015, declared a "national emergency with respect to the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States posed by the situation in Venezuela" (United States, 2015: 2). This declaration, which remains in effect today, provided the legal foundation for the escalating sanctions that would follow.

3. Mechanisms of Intervention: Democracy Promotion, Sanctions, and Regime Change

The United States has long seen itself as a defender of democracy in the Western Hemisphere. Its approach to Venezuela under Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden shows a complicated mix of principle and pragmatism. Officially framed as a response to Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian consolidation, human rights abuses, and economic collapse, US intervention has unfolded through three overlapping mechanisms: democracy promotion through diplomatic recognition and aid to the opposition, escalating economic sanctions aimed at crippling the regime's revenue streams, and covert or overt efforts to foment regime change. While Washington denies pursuing a classic coup d'état, critics argue that the cumulative effect of these policies—from recognizing Juan Guaidó as interim president to pursuing criminal indictments against Maduro—constitutes a sustained strategy to unseat a hostile government, raising urgent questions about the legality, efficacy, and humanitarian consequences of a foreign-imposed transition.

3.1. Democracy Promotion Infrastructure

One of the less visible but most consequential dimensions of US intervention in Venezuela has been the extensive infrastructure of democracy promotion organizations funded by the US government. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have operated extensively in Venezuela, providing funding, training, and technical assistance to opposition parties, civil society organizations, and labor unions (R. Kreitner, 2026: 1).

Scholars such as Timothy M. Gill have documented how these organizations, often justified in terms of promoting democratic values, have functioned as instruments of US foreign policy designed to undermine governments that challenge US hegemony. Gill's analysis, based on

documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests and interviews with participants, reveals that US-funded democracy assistance in Venezuela "was often justified in neocolonial and racist terms" and operated as part of a broader imperial project (T. Gill, 2022: 8). The Chávez government reacted to these actions by cutting off foreign funding for political parties and NGOs, kicking USAID and NED out of the country, and limiting the work of international democracy promotion groups (Seelke and Sullivan, 2026: 1). These measures, while effective in limiting US influence, also reinforced the narrative of Venezuela as a closed, authoritarian state that would be used to justify further intervention.

3.2. The Sanctions Architecture

The evolution of US sanctions against Venezuela represents perhaps the clearest illustration of the progressive escalation that culminated in the January 2026 capture. The sanctions regime developed through three distinct phases, each expanding in scope and severity

3.2.1. Phase One: Targeted Sanctions (2014-2017)

The initial sanctions, imposed under Presidents Obama and Trump, targeted specific individuals rather than the Venezuelan economy as a whole. The Obama administration's 2014 sanctions froze the assets of approximately a dozen Venezuelan officials accused of human rights abuses during anti-government protests. Under Trump, these designations expanded to include Maduro himself in July 2017, following the election of the Constituent Assembly that effectively dissolved the opposition-controlled National Assembly

3.2.2. Phase Two: Sectoral Sanctions (2017-2019)

A series of executive orders issued between 2017 and 2019 transformed the sanctions regime from individual designations to comprehensive sectoral sanctions as Executive Order 13808 (August 2017) prohibited US individuals from engaging in transactions related to new Venezuelan debt or equity. Executive Order 13827 signed in March 2018 also prohibited transactions involving Venezuelan government-issued digital currency. Moreover, Executive Order 13835 (May 2018) extended prohibitions to existing Venezuelan debt.

The most consequential escalation came in August 2019, when Executive Order 13884 froze all property and interests in property of the Venezuelan government within US jurisdiction. The order effectively prohibited all US individuals from engaging in transactions with the Maduro government unless specifically authorized by the Treasury Department (M. Alexianu, 2026: 2).

3.2.3. Phase Three: Comprehensive Economic Warfare (2019-2026)

The January 2019 designation of PDVSA under Executive Order 13850 marked the transition to comprehensive economic warfare. By freezing PDVSA's assets and prohibiting US persons from transacting with the company, the United States effectively cut Venezuela off from its primary market and from the global financial system as Washington purchased approximately 40 percent of Venezuelan oil exports (R. Bacic, *et al.*, 2026: 18).

Subsequent administrations built on this framework. The Biden administration offered temporary sanctions relief in 2023-2024 to incentivize electoral reforms, but reimposed sanctions when Maduro's government was judged to have failed to meet its commitments. The second Trump administration, beginning in 2025, escalated further, designating the Tren de Aragua gang and the "Cartel de los Soles" as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, imposing a "total and complete blockade" on sanctioned oil tankers, and authorizing lethal military strikes on alleged drug vessels (Pedraza, Lisdey Espinoza, 2026: 4). By the end of 2025, the United States had imposed sanctions on more than 500 Venezuela-connected individuals and entities, including 160 individuals under Executive Order 13692 alone, 95 entities under Executive Order 13850, and numerous vessels, aircraft, and companies operating in support of the Venezuelan government.

3.3. The Recognition Strategy

A distinctive feature of US policy during the 2019-2023 period was the strategy of recognizing opposition leader Juan Guaidó as interim president. In January 2019, the Trump administration announced that it recognized Guaidó—then president of the National Assembly—as Venezuela's legitimate leader, citing the constitution's provision for succession when the presidency is vacant (Seelke and Sullivan, 2026: 19).

More than fifty countries followed the US lead, creating an unprecedented diplomatic standoff in which two competing governments claimed legitimacy. The Guaidó government was ultimately dissolved in 2023, its failure to gain control of the Venezuelan state illustrating the limits of diplomatic recognition as a tool of regime change (R. Bacic, *et al.*, 2026: 18). Yet the strategy established important precedents: by refusing to recognize Maduro as legitimate, the US government laid the groundwork for arguing that he lacked sovereign immunity and could be subjected to US criminal jurisdiction.

4. The Road to January 3, 2026

On January 3, 2026, a quiet but consequential shift in the Western Hemisphere's geopolitical landscape marked the culmination of over a decade of escalating U.S. pressure, covert tactics, and diplomatic maneuvering in Venezuela. What began as swift condemnation of Nicolás Maduro's 2018 reelection soon evolved into sanctions, shadowy attempts at regime change, and a prolonged humanitarian gambit—each phase methodically chipping away at Caracas's sovereignty. By the time the calendar turned to 2026, the road paved by American intervention had not only redrawn Venezuela's political map but also set a stark precedent for 21st-century interference, leaving a fractured nation and a wary world.

4.1. The 2024 Election and Its Aftermath

The 2024 presidential election marked a critical turning point in the crisis. Despite international pressure and the US offering sanctions relief in exchange for democratic reforms, widespread irregularities marred the election. Independent monitors and the opposition's own vote tally indicated that opposition candidate Edmundo González had won a significant majority, but the government-controlled National Electoral Council declared Maduro the victor (Pedraza, Lisdey Espinoza, 2026: 4).

The US response was swift. The Biden administration reimposed sanctions, revoked oil licenses, and joined with the European Union and other international actors in condemning the election as neither free nor fair. By January 2025, when Maduro was inaugurated for a third term, the political standoff had hardened, and the possibility of a negotiated transition had effectively ended (Pedraza, Lisdey Espinoza, 2026: 4).

4.2. The "Maximum Pressure" Campaign

The second Trump administration, which took office in January 2025, moved immediately to escalate pressure on Venezuela. In February, Secretary of State Marco Rubio designated the Tren de Aragua gang—which originated in Venezuelan prisons and had spread throughout the hemisphere—as a foreign terrorist organization. In July, the Treasury Department designated the "Cartel de los Soles"—described as a criminal network led by Maduro and senior regime officials—as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (Seelke and Sullivan, 2026: 19).

The legal significance of these designations was profound. By labeling Venezuelan government officials as leaders of terrorist organizations, the administration created a legal framework for treating the Maduro government not as a sovereign state but as a criminal enterprise. This reframing, critics charged, was designed to circumvent the legal protections normally afforded to foreign leaders and to justify more aggressive action.

August 2025 marked the beginning of direct military action. On September 2, President Trump announced that US forces had struck a boat carrying alleged drug traffickers in the Caribbean Sea, killing eleven people. The operation, conducted by the Navy without Coast Guard involvement, was a break from precedent; law enforcement vessels typically conduct maritime interdictions, and lethal force is authorized only against individuals posing imminent threats. Trump's statement following the strike—"Please let this serve as notice to anybody even thinking about bringing drugs into the United States of America"—suggested a broader deterrent purpose (Pedraza, Lisdey Espinoza, 2026: 4).

Further strikes followed throughout the fall. By December, the United States had conducted more than a dozen "kinetic strikes" on vessels alleged to be transporting drugs, killing over a hundred individuals. In December, US forces seized the Skipper, a tanker carrying Venezuelan oil to China, and escorted it to Galveston, Texas. The administration characterized these actions as law enforcement; critics called them piracy.

4.3. The Capture

In the early hours of January 3, 2026, Delta Force operators supported by FBI and CIA personnel executed a "snatch-and-grab" operation at Maduro's residence within the Fuerte Tiuna military complex. The operation was over in less than thirty minutes; Maduro, his wife Cilia Flores, and several aides were seized and transported to New York, where they were arraigned on charges of narco-terrorism, cocaine importation conspiracy, and possession of machine guns (*The Friday Times*, January 5, 2026).

President Trump announced the operation on social media, declaring that "American justice has finally arrived for the people of Venezuela" (*The Friday Times*, January 5, 2026). In subsequent statements, he indicated that the United States would "run" Venezuela at least temporarily to "fix" its badly broken oil infrastructure, with US companies investing billions to modernize facilities and ramping up production to sell to global markets.

The administration also announced a sweeping energy deal under which the United States would market and sell Venezuelan oil, depositing proceeds into US-controlled accounts to be used for the benefit of the American and Venezuelan peoples. Energy Secretary Chris Wright stated that the United States intended to sell Venezuelan oil on the international market, with funds from those sales directed to US-controlled accounts.

5. Legal and Constitutional Dimensions

The debate over US intervention in Venezuela raises critical questions under both domestic and international law. While the Trump and Biden administrations have justified their actions—ranging from economic sanctions to diplomatic pressure and threats of military force—as necessary to counter Nicolás Maduro’s authoritarian rule and restore democracy, these measures face significant legal and constitutional scrutiny. Domestically, the US Constitution grants Congress alone the power to declare war, yet executive-led interventions often circumvent this authority. Internationally, unilateral actions against a sovereign state may violate the UN Charter’s prohibition on the use of force and the principle of non-intervention. This analysis explores the legal boundaries shaping US policy toward Venezuela, examining the tension between stated foreign policy goals and the constraints of law.

5.1. The War Powers Question

The capture of Maduro raised profound questions about the constitutional allocation of war powers. The 1973 War Powers Resolution requires the president to consult Congress before introducing US forces into hostilities and to report to Congress within forty-eight hours of such introduction. It also limits the deployment of forces without congressional authorization to sixty days.

The Trump administration made no pretense of compliance with these requirements. According to reports, Congress was not notified of the operation in advance; the "Gang of Eight"—the bipartisan group of congressional leaders normally briefed on sensitive intelligence matters—was informed only after the fact. The administration defended its silence by asserting that lawmakers cannot be trusted because they might leak (Seelke and Sullivan, 2026: 16).

Legal scholars and members of Congress expressed alarm at the administration's expansive interpretation of executive authority. By treating the War Powers Resolution as an outright work of fiction, the White House had effectively rendered the "imperial presidency" a reality. Bipartisan efforts led by Representatives Jim McGovern and Thomas Massie sought to force a vote on a new War Powers Resolution, though the prospects for enactment remained uncertain (Seelke and Sullivan, 2026: 16).

5.2. The Noriega Precedent and Its Limits

The administration invoked a series of legal precedents to justify the operation, most notably the 1989 capture of Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega. Noriega, who had been indicted in

the United States on drug trafficking charges, was captured during the US invasion of Panama and transported to Miami for trial.

The Noriega precedent provided a rough template for the Maduro operation, but significant differences complicated the comparison. Noriega was a military strongman who had been indicted for drug trafficking and whose relationship with the United States had deteriorated following his refusal to cooperate with US policy in Central America. Crucially, the United States did not recognize Noriega as Panama's legitimate leader at the time of his capture; US forces were ostensibly protecting the democratically elected government of Guillermo Endara.

In Maduro's case, the legal situation was more complex. While the United States had not recognized Maduro as legitimate since 2019, he remained in effective control of the Venezuelan state and had been inaugurated for a third term in January 2025 (*The Friday Times*, January 5, 2026). By capturing him directly, rather than operating through an alternative government, the administration had set a new precedent for the extraterritorial arrest of a sitting head of state, which raises questions about international law and the potential consequences for diplomatic relations.

5.3. International Law Violations

The capture of Maduro also raised profound questions under international law. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter states that "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations" (B. Simma *et al*, 2024: 45). The Charter's prohibition is subject to two exceptions: self-defense against armed attack and action authorized by the Security Council.

Neither exception clearly applied in the Venezuela case. The administration did not claim that Venezuela had attacked the United States; instead, it argued that Maduro's alleged leadership of the Cartel of the Suns constituted a "national security threat" comparable to an armed attack, justifying preemptive action under Article II of the Constitution. Critics charged that this expansive interpretation of self-defense, if accepted, would eviscerate the prohibition on the use of force.

Thus, the operation violated the Article and the principle of sovereign immunity as Matei Alexianu puts it "the U.S.'s lack of legal justification and vocal opposition by most States means that the *content* of the rule remains intact for now" (M. Alexianu, 2026: 2). He added that "this episode of aggression raises serious concerns about the normative *force* of the

rule—concerns further exacerbated by recent developments in the Middle East” (M. Alexianu, 2026: 2). The administration argued that because the United States had not recognized Maduro as legitimate since 2019, he lacked sovereign immunity. This reasoning, if accepted, would allow any country that refuses to recognize a foreign leader to subject that leader to its criminal jurisdiction—a precedent with potentially destabilizing consequences.

6. Oil, Empire, and the Question of Motivation

Beyond the legal justifications and constitutional debates surrounding US intervention in Venezuela lies a more elusive yet crucial question, that of real motivation. While official discourse often frames American policy as a defense of democracy, human rights, and regional stability, critics argue that beneath this rhetoric lies a more pragmatic agenda—one shaped by geopolitical leverage, access to oil reserves, and the reassertion of imperial influence in Latin America. This “œil” (eye), or the persistent, watchful scrutiny of US actions, invites a deeper examination of how power, economic interest, and historical patterns of intervention intersect. Analyzing the question of motive does not merely supplement legal analysis; it challenges the very framing of intervention as benevolent or lawful, urging a closer look at the empire’s strategic calculations beneath the surface of stated intentions.

6.1. Venezuela's Oil Reserves

Any assessment of US policy toward Venezuela must grapple with the central role of oil. Venezuela possesses the world's largest proven crude oil reserves—approximately 300 billion barrels, surpassing even Saudi Arabia. The country's oil wealth has defined its political economy since the first wells were drilled in 1914, and it has been a constant factor in US-Venezuelan relations (R. Kreitner, 2026: 2).

The economic significance of Venezuelan oil to the United States has fluctuated over time. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Venezuela was one of the top four suppliers of oil to the US market. Even after the deterioration of political relations, the United States continued to import Venezuelan oil until sanctions were imposed in 2019 (L. Palacios, et al., 2026: 4).

6.2. The "Resource Imperialism" Critique

Critics of US policy argue that the focus on oil reveals the true motives behind the intervention. President Trump's statements following the capture—that the United States would “run” Venezuela and that US companies would invest billions to modernize oil facilities—seemed to confirm these suspicions (L. Pedraza, 2026: 4).

The administration framed the energy deal as a way for the United States to be "reimbursed" for the costs of the operation, with oil proceeds deposited into US-controlled accounts. But international observers argued that this represented a new era of "resource imperialism"—the direct seizure of a sovereign nation's natural resources under the guise of law enforcement (L. Pedraza, 2026: 4).

The pattern was not without precedent. Throughout the twentieth century, the United States had intervened repeatedly in Latin American countries to protect the interests of US oil companies and other corporate actors. What distinguished the Venezuelan case was the directness of the intervention and the explicit articulation of resource access as a policy objective, which was more pronounced than in previous interventions, where such objectives were often implied rather than clearly stated.

6.3. The Petro-Shield and Regional Implications

The capture of Maduro also had significant implications for Venezuela's regional allies, particularly Cuba. The two countries had maintained a symbiotic relationship for decades: Venezuela provided subsidized oil that powered the Cuban economy, while Cuba provided intelligence, security, and medical personnel that helped sustain the Chavista government. With Maduro's capture and the US seizure of Venezuelan oil shipments, the Cuban government faced an existential crisis. Without Venezuelan crude, the island's power grid was predicted to fail within weeks. The United States had effectively removed the "battery" from the Cuban Revolution, leaving the regime isolated and facing collapse (*The Friday Times*, January 5, 2026).

The administration also signaled broader ambitions for the region. Under what some analysts termed the "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, the United States would no longer tolerate "hostile foreign incursions" or regimes that facilitate drug cartels. Intelligence reports suggested that Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba were already on high alert, fearing similar actions (L. Pedraza, 2026: 4).

7. Critical Perspectives and Scholarly Debates

While official narratives often frame US policy toward Venezuela as a defense of democracy and humanitarian relief, a deeper examination reveals a far more contested reality. Beneath the surface of sanctions and diplomatic pressure lies a turbulent field of critical perspectives and scholarly debates, where scholars question the legality, morality, and strategic logic of Washington's interventionist posture. From analyses of economic coercion as a tool of regime change to disputes over Venezuela's sovereign rights and regional stability, this section

unpacks the intellectual battleground that has come to define the study of US-Venezuela relations—challenging conventional assumptions and exposing the ideological fractures that shape academic and policy discourse alike.

7.1. The Continuity Thesis

A significant strand of scholarship emphasizes continuity rather than rupture in US policy toward Venezuela. Proponents of the continuity thesis argue that the January 2026 operation, while unprecedented in its directness, represents the logical culmination of patterns established decades earlier, including previous interventions and diplomatic strategies that have consistently aimed to influence Venezuela's political landscape.

Timothy M. Gill's study of US democracy promotion in Venezuela, for example, traces the interventionist impulse to the early years of the Chávez government, when US-funded organizations began systematically working to undermine his administration (T. Gill, 2022: 3). Gill argues that these efforts were not an aberration but rather a continuation of the imperial project that has characterized US-Latin American relations since the nineteenth century.

Similarly, *The Nation's* retrospective analysis of its coverage of Venezuela over 130 years reveals striking consistencies: struggles between autocracy and democracy, debates over foreign intervention and national self-determination, and the corrupting role of oil in enriching ruling classes and attracting predatory foreign powers. From the 1895 border dispute to the 2026 capture, the magazine's coverage reveals a recurrent pattern of US intervention justified in terms of democracy but driven by strategic and economic interests (Seelke and Sullivan, 2026: 16).

7.2. The Exceptionalism Thesis

Other analysts like Ryan Bacic, James Disalvatore, and Hunter Sosby argue that the January 2026 operation represents a qualitative shift in US foreign policy (R. Bacic, et al., 2026: 18). The capture of a sitting head of state in a country with which the United States is not at war, the explicit articulation of resource control as a policy objective, and the disregard for traditional constitutional and international legal constraints all distinguish this operation from previous interventions.

Supporters of the exceptionalism thesis point to the legal innovations that enabled the operation. The designation of senior Venezuelan officials as leaders of a Foreign Terrorist Organization, the reliance on Article II authority to justify military action without

congressional approval, and the invocation of the "Barr Memo" framework from the Noriega case all represented novel legal arguments that, if accepted, would fundamentally alter the rules governing international relations.

7.3. The Imperial Overreach Thesis

A third perspective, advanced by critics of the operation, warns of the dangers of imperial overreach. By acting unilaterally and in disregard of international law, the United States risks provoking a backlash that could destabilize the region and weaken its long-term strategic position. The experience of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya provides cautionary examples. In every instance, the ousting of a regime lacking a viable transition plan resulted in enduring instability, humanitarian disaster, and the strengthening of armed factions (M. Alexianu, 2026: 2). The capture of Maduro could produce similar outcomes in Venezuela: institutional decay, fragmented opposition movements, an uncertain military posture, and the potential for prolonged insurgency.

Moreover, by setting a precedent for the extraterritorial arrest of sitting heads of state, the United States may have weakened the legal protections that shield its officials from foreign prosecution. If the principle of sovereign immunity can be set aside for Maduro, it can be set aside for any leader—including US presidents—whose policies antagonize powerful states, potentially leading to a situation where US officials could face legal actions abroad for their decisions and actions in office.

Conclusion

The capture of Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026, represents a watershed moment in US-Latin American relations and in the history of international law. This paper has argued that understanding this event requires examining the long trajectory of US intervention in Venezuela, the complex mechanisms of sanctions and democracy promotion that shaped the crisis, and the legal innovations that enabled military action.

Three conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, the January 2026 operation, while dramatic, represents the culmination of patterns established over decades rather than a radical departure. The United States has consistently sought to shape Venezuelan politics to serve its strategic and economic interests, employing tools ranging from diplomacy and democracy promotion to sanctions and, ultimately, military force.

Second, the evolution of US policy toward Venezuela reflects broader transformations in the international system. The erosion of constraints on the use of force, the expansion of

executive authority, and the normalization of extraterritorial sanctions all contributed to creating conditions in which the capture of a foreign head of state could be presented not as an act of war but as a law enforcement operation.

Third, the long-term consequences of the intervention remain uncertain. The immediate aftermath—the installation of an interim government, the seizure of oil revenues, and the potential for prolonged instability—suggests that the capture of Maduro may be the beginning rather than the end of Venezuela's crisis. The regional fallout, especially in Cuba, and the precedent set for international relations will reverberate for years to come. The challenge for scholars and policymakers is to assess these developments with clear eyes, recognizing both the specific dynamics of the Venezuelan case and the broader patterns of US intervention they reflect. As *The Nation* observed in 1895, and as events have repeatedly confirmed, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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