

Oil and Ideology.

Roughly a quarter of the U.S. Navy's fleet now floats in the Caribbean off the coast of Venezuela, including the *Gerald R. Ford*, the largest aircraft carrier in American history. Alongside the *Ford*, numerous destroyers, amphibious vessels, and submarines are also patrolling just outside Venezuela's territorial waters. In the air, the Pentagon has deployed F-35 jets, heavy bombers, MQ-9 Reaper drones (large, long-range, lethal), and some 15,000 uniformed personnel. This is America's largest deployment in the Caribbean since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. In mid-October Trump acknowledged that he has authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to conduct covert operations in Venezuela and that he may order ground troops to invade the country.

What is the plan? Does the president intend to attack the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to bring down the socialist government of Nicolás Maduro at some point in the not-distant future? This is our first question, on which there is a variety of opinions. It is inevitable, it is almost certain, possibly, possibly but probably not, it is simply too reckless but the Trump regime will go ahead anyway, or no, not possible. Uncertainty reigns at this fraught moment.

A second question derives from the first. Why, in the autumn of the first year of Trump's second term, are he and those around him aggressing so singlemindedly toward a nation that has been brought nearly to its knees in the course of a sanctions regime that extends back to 2005, when Maduro's predecessor, the charismatic Hugo Chávez, was still in power? One theory making its way about Washington now is that the military might deployed off Venezuela's coast, while extravagantly expensive, is all bluff—display and nothing more, the threat of an attack but not an attack. But were this to be so the intent would remain “regime

change”—that term Americans prefer to “coup” so they do not have to face the lawlessness of their purported leaders. The question holds, then: Why all this and why now?

The official explanation for the immense buildup of American military assets in the Caribbean is that the Trump regime is intent on waging what it officially calls a war against what it officially calls “narco-terrorists,” and President Maduro, as a major drug-trafficker himself, stands among them. This makes absolutely no sense. Venezuela is not a major part of the Latin American drug trade, and the charge that Maduro is some kind of drug kingpin is preposterous. Late last month, I should remind *Global Bridge*’s readers, Trump extended a full pardon to Juan Orlando Hernández, who was convicted in a U.S. court last year of running a sprawling cocaine operation in league with various drug cartels during his time as president of Honduras. Hernández had begun serving a 45-year sentence.

I must note something quite important at this point.

Everyone other than the most dedicated admirers of the Trump regime’s various self-portraits knows the stated purpose of the lethal flotilla off Venezuela’s shores makes, but precisely, absolutely no sense. There is no such thing as a narco-terrorist. Drug-runners cannot be counted combatants in anyone’s war, U.S. intelligence has determined that the drug gang Maduro is said to lead does not exist, etc. But none of this is of any account. It no longer matters if official explanations of official conduct are patently ridiculous. This is what America has come to in its late-imperial phase. You do not find a sound relationship with reality among the policy cliques and the hawks and political hacks such as Pete Hegseth, Trump’s defense secretary, who is hawk and hack alike.

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William Appleman Williams, who famously professed in foreign relations and diplomatic history at the University of Wisconsin during the Cold War decades, ranks among the great “revisionist” scholars of the last century. Stripping away the common rhetoric of freedom and democracy and America’s providential duty to spread both, Williams argued that foreign policy is fundamentally driven by economic imperatives. The policy cliques are at bottom in the service of corporations seeking ever-expanding markets, ever-more resources, and, of course, ever-higher profits. Williams made this case exquisitely in such books as *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (World Publishing, 1959) and—his last book and a favorite of mine, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament, Along With a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (Oxford, 1980).

Williams had his critics, but there is no refuting his thesis that corporate interests figure prominently and often in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, to make the point as simply as I can, came out five years after the C.I.A. deposed Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala to protect the interests of the United Fruit Company against Árbenz’s social-democratic land reforms. More broadly, what has long dictated U.S. policy in West Asia if not, first among a variety of factors, the Arab states’ petroleum reserves?

Venezuela, of course, possesses the largest oil reserves in the world. And there is little question these have long been the object of American avarice. Indeed, the United States is now in the process of stealing Citgo, the retailing operation owned by Petróleos de Venezuela, the state-owned oil monopoly, which nationalized Venezuela’s reserves in 1990. The United States seized Citgo’s assets during Trump’s first term. Last week a U.S. judge ordered the formal sale of the company to a group of American investors for \$5.9 billion, an indefensibly low price.

Caracas has denounced this as a forced takeover—legalized theft by any other name.

O.K., but oil resources alone do not account for the United States' long and many aggressions against Venezuela. We must turn to ideology to explain U.S. policy going back to at least 2002, when the C.I.A. sponsored a right-wing coup against Hugo Chávez. To remind readers, Chávez was actually forced from office for 48 hours, after which a massive popular mobilization reversed the attempt. Ap Williams, as he is affectionately known in my household, elaborated his thesis with the argument that free-market capitalism had become an ideology all its own. Perfectly true. But we are confronted now with a very different ideology, the ideology of total global dominance as advanced by American neoconservatives, and, their nearly inseparable cousins, neoliberals.

Neoconservative cliques, whose roots date to early Cold War anticommunism, rose to prominence during the first post-Cold War years, that decade of obnoxious American triumphalism, when they made the argument for global dominance—"full-spectrum dominance" in military terms. One administration to the next, this has been U.S. policy ever since. Trump may not be a true neoconservative—it is difficult to say what Trump is one day to the next—but he was surrounded by neocons during his first term. John Bolton, a truly dangerous man who briefly served as Trump's national security adviser, made the case that a "triangle of evil" in the Western Hemisphere, comprised of Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, must be invaded and smashed.

Marco Rubio, Trump's incompetent secretary of state, is a neoconservative head to toe. He is also a *gusano*, a "worm," the Cubans' term for those who fled to South Florida after Castro's revolution in 1959. Rubio brings a quality of obsession to the neoconservative project: He is singleminded in his desire to overthrow the Cuban

regime. And as Cuba and Venezuela have been *très sympathique* since the Chávez days, the former highly dependent on the latter for its petroleum supplies, destroying Cuba must begin with destroying the *Chávistas* in Caracas.

There is another motivation here that must not be missed. During the Cold War decades and ever since, there is one thing Washington's ideologues have feared as much as communism, and I sometimes wonder if it has not been the greater consideration. Under no circumstances can these people abide a working social democracy in the Western Hemisphere—or anywhere in the non-West for that matter. It would stand as too compelling an inspiration to other nations otherwise under American dominance. In the Venezuelan case this has been a motivating force since Chávez launched his Bolivarian revolution on coming to power in 1999.

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Donald Trump came to office this second time self-advertising as the president of peace. He has attempted to speak directly with Maduro in recent days, reportedly with the intention of negotiating the Venezuelan leader's peaceful exit. Maduro, in turn, is said to have offered exceedingly generous concessions to American oil companies seeking access to Venezuela's crude reserves. This has made little difference. He, Trump, now thinks nothing of threatening Venezuela with a military invasion.

Last week the Trump White House issued a new National Security Strategy. This is a white paper wherein a presidential administration sets out the framework within which it will plan and execute its foreign and security policies. In this N.S.S., Trump effectively revives the Monroe Doctrine, named for America's fifth president, who declared, in the early 19th century, the United States' right to extend

its power throughout the Hemisphere. Americans now speak of “the Donroe Doctrine.” This is not a design for peace: It is a design for domination by way of force or the threat of it.

What are we to make of this man?

This is never an easy question to answer, but I see the same pattern one discerned during Trump’s first term on office, when he was surrounded by neoconservatives intent on subverting his efforts to end America’s “forever wars.” His second time around, Trump has filled his cabinet with misfits whose sole virtue is that they do not represent “the Deep State,” if you do not mind the term. But the ideology of global dominance nonetheless prevails. Trump, in short, does not make policy, just as he did not during his first four years in the White House. Preoccupied with display, he is left to put his name on policies determined by others with different agendas. Marco Rubio and Pete Hegseth are prominent among these others.

My conclusion: We do not know by what means or when, but the project in the Caribbean Basin remains as it has long been: It is to overthrow the Bolivarian Republic as part of the larger endeavor to subvert the other two social democracies in the region, Cuba and Nicaragua. Neither of these others possesses any resources to speak of. Their sin, along with Venezuela’s, is to continue resisting the aggressions of neoconservative-neoliberal ideologues who shape policy in Washington. It is ideology, not oil, that drives policy in the Venezuelan case. Caracas may negotiate new contractual arrangements to govern its petroleum reserves. But there is no negotiating contending national ideologies. Bitter as it is to say, this can end only when Caracas either capitulates or surrenders.

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