



## **Max Blumenthal on two decades of US war on Venezuela**

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**Max Blumenthal (MB):** We've been covering at The Grayzone for years; I interviewed Nicolas Maduro in Caracas at a particular phase of the war on Venezuela, and it's moved through various phases, and that's kind of what I'm going to focus my remarks on. This war could be catastrophic; a Libya style assault and destabilisation attempt in the Western hemisphere could be absolutely catastrophic for Venezuela, for the continent of South America, for the US-Mexico border. And we've seen how pressure on the border caused by migration waves, which are the result of successive US coups, regime change attempts, sanctions wars, has pushed our politics to the hard right and propelled Donald Trump's election. You mentioned my book *The Management of Savagery*. I mean in that book I think I demonstrated how the so-called war on terror also helped propel Donald Trump to power in 2016. His return to power I think was fueled heavily by the immigration crisis. And whatever you think about immigration policy I think we all agree, it's a crisis. And no one's talking about the reasons behind it. Venezuela, we all know, has the largest oil reserves in the Western Hemisphere. It has coltan, it has rare earth minerals, minerals that are needed, like lithium, for Elon Musk's batteries, his electric batteries. Most batteries will be electric and most devices and vehicles will be powered by those batteries by 2030, 2040 at the latest. So, the rush is on. And global capitalism is in crisis itself. There's a need for assets within the West. There is a competition with China, in which we just saw Trump and Xi meet, and one of Trump's key objectives in that meeting was to get China to end export controls on rare earth minerals, because the US can't get the minerals it needs to wage this AI war that it's initiating with China and to advance its own economies. So they're in a real crisis, and attention is turned towards Venezuela, which has been a target ever since Hugo Chavez acquired power first in 1998, then a coup attempt was staged by the same figures of the Venezuelan opposition that are now poised to ride US tanks to power in Caracas. We're talking about Leopoldo Lopez, who's been based in Spain.

The Spanish government is heavily involved in these coup attempts. The former colonial master of Venezuela. His father's a right-wing legislator in Madrid. He is the mentor of the radical Venezuelan opposition that supports attacking Venezuela with the U.S. Military and sanctions and destroying the country just so they can obtain power. He was the mentor of Juan Guaido. He was in Miraflores Palace with a group of coup plotters after Chavez was first removed in 2002, taken by holdovers of the old regime, the old Puntofijo regime, to a military base. And the Venezuelan people marched on Miraflores Palace a day after a corporate CEO, front man for multinational corporations, Pedro Carmona, was installed in power. And the New York Times celebrated: Pedro Carmona is the new president of Venezuela and tried to normalise the coup on the front page; meet our new president. The Venezuelan people were not having it. They marched on Miraflores. They demanded Chavez's return. And he returned to power. What did he do? He nationalised PDVSA, which was the national oil company, removed the old management, which saw PDVSA as a vehicle for essentially exporting Venezuela's wealth to the North. And Chavez enacted a series of social programmes, established workers cooperatives, rural cooperatives, literacy programmes, housing programmes, reduced poverty by over 70% during those years when the US was pinned down and the Bush administration focused on trying to steal Iraq's oil. And the Venezuelan opposition, meanwhile, was training. They were raking in millions of dollars under the watch of figures like Leopoldo Lopez and someone you're probably now familiar with, María Corina Machado, through USAID and the regime change arm of the US government, the National Endowment for Democracy. Various European Union NGOs, the Open Societies Institute of George Soros, training from figures like Gene Sharp, they were basically training for colour revolutions, modelled after those that were sweeping Eastern Europe. Chavez dies in 2012, and Venezuela faces the Bolivarian Revolution, which inaugurated a new constitution and brought millions of people out of the shadows and Venezuelan life faces a crisis of legitimacy following Chavez's death from cancer.

First of all, the National Election Council has to hold a national election within, I think, one month. Can you imagine with all of the crises we've faced in US elections if the US was forced to do such a thing?! Under international pressure?! But they did so. A successful election, Nicolas Maduro, Chavez's chosen successor, surprised many people that he was the chosen successor. He was the foreign minister under Chavez. He was the former head of the bus drivers union, a former bus driver who is from Caracas, not from the military like Chavez, which could have presented problems, defeated Henrique Capriles, who is a fairly popular opposition figure representing the upper class and upper middle class of Venezuela, the East Caracas elite. And it was judged a free and fair election by the Carter Centre. But as soon as Maduro came into power without the same kind of name recognition, popularity, or credibility within the military as Chavez, the Venezuelan right backed by the US went to work to try to unravel his presidency and they ushered in a series of what they call guarimbas – it basically means like roadblocks – and they blocked off parts of Caracas that they controlled and initiated riots. This eroded Venezuela's economy And the US media painted it as a popular rebellion that was being brutally crushed by Maduro's vicious security forces. What the guarimbas were doing was in some cases they would like erect wires across streets that had beheaded motorists and they would home in on and attack Afro-Venezuelan people,

people with dark skin who they thought were Chavistas, if they caught them in their neighbourhoods in East Caracas. There was one man who was actually burned alive, Orlando Figuera, for simply being black in East Caracas. These guarimbas were violent, they were racist, they were driven by US intelligence, and they were destroying Venezuela's economy in 2016. And they were given by the National Assembly. The National Assembly of Venezuela at that point was controlled by the opposition. And so imagine if the US had this situation where a president had been elected and Congress is calling for riots in the street and bringing in support from Russia and China to support those riots; like January 6 on steroids, burning down cities. What would the president do?

And what Maduro did was he invoked the Bolivarian Constitution to call for a constitutional assembly to break the crisis and called for elections which were actually more democratic and included more members of the Venezuelan public, bringing them into public life. And the National Assembly walked out. The riots immediately ended. Venezuela was now at least at peace. However, the National Assembly had simultaneously called for the US to sanction the entire economy in the oil sector of Venezuela. Imagine that, imagine the US Congress calling for foreign countries to carry out economic warfare on the United States. That's what happened in Venezuela with the traitorous Venezuelan opposition seeking to burn down their country in order to take power. And those first sanctions arrived at the end of the Obama era in 2015. And from 2015 on, Venezuela began to experience hyperinflation shortages, as The Grayzone revealed; Anya Parampil reported. In 2019, the State Department under Trump actually published a document boasting about how much economic destruction the US had caused to Venezuela through sanctions and how many economic assets they had destroyed. And then they swiftly removed that document because it was a little bit too on the nose, but Anya caught it in time.

So that's the situation Venezuela was facing in 2017. The National Assembly, which had been invalidated, declares that Venezuela is facing a humanitarian emergency. There are shortages because of the sanctions that they had supported, and now they're calling for an emergency and demand foreign intervention to break the humanitarian emergency. So flash forward to February 2019, the border of Colombia and Venezuela, Colombia under the control of a right-wing pro-US president, Ivan Duque, who today is a DJ in Miami – we'll talk about Colombia in a second – he authorises the USAID and the radical US-backed Venezuelan opposition to carry out a fake humanitarian aid stunt in order to shatter Venezuela's sovereignty and discredit Maduro in front of the eyes of the world. Pallets of aid are loaded up on trucks on the Colombian side of the Venezuelan border in a town called Cucuta, and simultaneously the neoliberal British billionaire Richard Branson carries out a star-studded live aid concert to save the people of Venezuela in Cucuta. The aid stunt was a complete disaster. The caravans filled with aid, which people in Venezuela did not actually need, what they needed was an economy that could be allowed to function in the international financial world, which they didn't need, the aid was blocked at the border by Venezuelan police. The Venezuelan military stood by Maduro, and the aid was then burned at the last minute by opposition hooligans on the Colombian side, and they attempted to blame the burning of the aid on Maduro and his security forces. I was one of the first journalists in English to expose

how they burned the aid themselves. I was called a conspiracy theorist until a few months later, when the New York Times did an open source investigation showing that I was actually right. The conspiracy theorists were right again. The aid stunt fails. Venezuela's borders are secure. The military is standing with Maduro. Juan Guaido has been announced by the US as interim president. He was snuck back into Venezuela from Colombia through actually a narco cartel called Los Rastrojos. And he, in April 2019, attempts to lead a military coup inside Caracas. This also was a complete disaster. He managed to secure about two dozen men from the Venezuelan military to carry out a rebellion in the streets. They were all easily gunned down or captured. Guaido is left exposed with his mentor, Leopoldo Lopez, who had broken out of the Spanish embassy. And there's a famous photo of them looking for war on the streets of Caracas, Guaido making a call maybe to his masters in the US.

And after that, it was all downhill for Guaido to the point where he conducted a series of humiliating stunts, attempting to break into the Parliament by jumping over a fence. He was humiliated in restaurants by average Venezuelans who were basically sick of having their country come under attack from within and without. And he eventually absconded to Florida. I mean this is so telling about who the Venezuelan opposition is. Guaido is now a supposed professor with no academic background at something at Florida International University called the Adam Smith Centre for Economic Freedom, which is basically just like a right-wing libertarian propaganda institute where failed and washed up Latin American vassals of Washington go to get put out to pasture. So Guaido's gone. Guaido accomplished one thing, which is sort of the thesis for Anya Parampil's book, *Corporate Coup*. He managed to, by delegitimizing Nicolas Maduro as president on the international stage, he enabled the theft of Venezuela's gold from the Bank of England, and it was transferred to the rightful president, who was himself controlled by the US government and Western forces and he enabled the theft of Venezuela's most valuable foreign asset, which is Citgo. You know, you've all seen Citgo gas stations. That's the international arm of PDVSA, the engine of the Venezuelan economy and the engine of Venezuela social programmes. So they've robbed Venezuela of billions of dollars a year through Juan Guaido, an economically crippling blow; straight up theft, international piracy. At the same time, we can see the war on Venezuela progressing to a new phase after the failed aid stunt, the failed military coup, the failure of the internal Venezuelan opposition forces to carry out an internal rebellion. The war starts to move towards more exclusively external forces. The Trump Justice Department under William Barr, former CIA official who wrote the pardons for the Iran Contra figures, and whose father was principal of Dalton High when Jeffrey Epstein was given a teaching job there, William Barr issues a bounty for the head of Nicolas Maduro, accusing him of being, him and Diosdado Cabello, who is one of the most powerful Chavista figures other than Maduro, accusing them both of being the director of a narco-cartel called *Cártel de los Soles*, cartel of the suns.

Cartel of the suns doesn't exist. It's not real. Well, it never existed, actually. What it is, is a reference to the patches that were worn by leading figures, generals of the Venezuelan National Guard, who were recruited by the CIA to be the origination point of a DEA operation to quote-unquote "let the dope walk inside the United States". During the early 90s,

I think it's starting in like 92, this is before Chavez was elected, the CIA and DEA plotted to ship 20 tonnes – that's a lot – 20 tonnes of cocaine into the United States. And many of you who lived through the 90s I lived through it in Washington, D.C. I saw the crack epidemic just unfold right under my eyes, right in front of my face. The neighbourhood I lived in just immediately turned more violent. And I mean, it was just like an immediate shift. The CIA and DEA, this is just confirmed, shipped all this cocaine into US cities in order to supposedly be able to surveil who the drug honchos in each city were, how it was being shipped, and then to be able crack down. And the source of this was the Venezuelan National Guard, the key CIA point men like General Guillen, who wore these patches on their shoulders, were recruited. Then it all ended. And you can go and watch Mike Wallace's report for 60 Minutes at the time about this operation back when 60 Minutes reported on the CIA instead of reporting on behalf of the CIA if you don't believe what I'm saying. Then the Cartel of the suns disappeared. It was no more and it was only resurrected by William Barr in order to put a \$15 million bounty over the head of Nicolas Maduro. So with this bounty came sort of violent, avaricious figures who were looking to get rich quick, collect the bounty by riding into Caracas with mercenary armies, and that was the point, to incentivize private coup attempts from the outside or kidnapping schemes to get Maduro and to put a target on his back. And that's what we saw with, later on in 2019, Operation Gideon. Everyone if you're watching this right now, go to The Grayzone YouTube channel, watch my interview with Jordan Goudreau, who led the Operation Gideon failed invasion, mercenary invasion of Venezuela. His men were captured, many of them were killed, several of them were fellow Green Berets like him. And Jordan Goudreau is now speaking out. And he explained to me how he was first recruited to do this operation by close Donald Trump associates, including Donald Trump's bodyguard and longtime security director who also had an arms export licence named Keith Schiller who started a firm called Global Governments and the purpose of this firm, which included top beltway lawyers, the lawyer for Mike Pompeo, then the Secretary of State, as well as Venezuelan opposition figures close to Leopoldo Lopez and Juan Guaido. The purpose of this was to topple Maduro and then seize Venezuelans wealth. And they were promised lucrative contracts by the Venezuelan opposition in order to get Maduro out.

So the whole purpose of this entire war on Venezuela, it's always been for the 1% of the United States and particularly cronies of those in government to seize Venezuela's oil wealth, to get so-called rebuilding contracts, and to use humanitarian aid as a cover for their get-rich-quick scams. So, Goudreau has exposed the entire thing. And he's also spoken out about CIA operations to destabilise Venezuela; he's called them out. Attacks on Venezuelan infrastructure that US media said were just the result of mismanagement, Goudreau has clearly said these were conducted by the CIA in coordination with the Venezuelan opposition. I mean, the mask is completely lifted.

But through the Biden era, there was an attempt to cut a deal with Venezuela in exchange for elections in 2024. Some of the sanctions were lifted. Obviously, Biden was facing an inflation crisis. Biden had cut off, he'd tried to reduce the Russian ruble to rubble. So the oil that was coming in from Russia to displace the oil that was no longer coming in from Venezuela and

Iran was now cut off as well. So we had the NATO price spike under Biden. So Biden starts to try to relax some of the sanctions, allowing some Chevron to conduct business again inside Venezuela to bring Venezuela's thick crude oil into refineries in Texas. He had to. And in exchange, Maduro agreed to hold elections. They're holding elections with a gun to their head during a state of war. The US declares immediately that Maduro has stolen the election in 2024 and a new phase of the war begins. The new phase of the war began during the campaign, which pitted first Biden and then Kamala Harris against Donald Trump in which the immigration crisis took centre stage. Alright, there have been several waves of Venezuelan migration to the North. The first was a sort of ideological wave, you know, the exiles who hated Chavismo. But it became an economic wave following the US sanctions attack on the Venezuelan economy in 2015. And that wave began to culminate under Biden when Biden declared TPS, Temporary Protective Status for Venezuelans. And the Venezuelan opposition went along with this because they wanted to fill their ranks with people who hated Chavismo and Maduro. Marco Rubio was a key sponsor of TPS. And so the pressure at the border became so extreme, TPS just allowed masses of Venezuelans into the US. And some people didn't like that very much; Donald Trump's base. So Donald Trump begins to highlight Venezuelan Migrants as a national security threat. How does he do it? Through a Psyop or a propaganda stunt. I mean we should mention though that many of figures that were – not many but some of those coming in, most of those coming in were just decent people who were desperate – but some of those coming did have criminal backgrounds, crime did go down in Caracas following this wave and there was crime in some communities across the US caused by some minority of Venezuelan migrants.

One of those was Aurora, Colorado, where there was an exchange, a violent exchange inside an apartment complex with some gunmen that was filmed. I don't think any guns were discharged. This is at the height of the election campaign. That apartment building was being maintained by a corrupt landlord who was receiving government assistance, and basically he was flipping Section 8 apartments, and trying to just basically get government assistance to justify tearing down Section 8 apartments, and then he would profit. And so to justify government assistance and then, I think it was like to get authorisation to continue to hand over this apartment building or like to tear it down. This corrupt landlord declared that it had been invaded by a Venezuelan gang called Tren de Aragua. Fox News and right-wing media fill up with this image of these Venezuelan men with guns inside this apartment building. The residents of the apartment building actually held a protest at this time, declaring that the landlord wasn't providing them any repairs, that it was infested with rats, and that that was the real problem, not Venezuelans gangs. There was no evidence that a Venezuelan gang had taken over these apartment buildings. But that was the narrative assisted by a pro-Trump local sheriff. And Donald Trump declares that Tren de Aragua is taking over parts of American cities. Then Trump claims that Tren de Aragua is controlled by Nicolas Maduro. And this is where the issue becomes international and tied to the war on Venezuela. It's no longer just an election season issue about immigration and nativism. This was false. Tren de Aragua was not being controlled by Nicolas Maduro. It had been largely neutralised within Venezuelan prisons by Maduro's security forces. In April, 2025, a US intelligence declassified report confirms this. So the US intelligence world, which had been trying to destroy the government

of Nicolas Maduro, contradicts Trump. And Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, someone who was a longtime opponent of the war on Venezuela when she was a Democrat in Congress Who switched sides, after sort of being rejected by the Democrats, comes out and fires the intelligence analysts who revealed that Maduro had nothing to do with Tren de Aragua and so the Donald Trump administration is pushing this gigantic hoax, this is the WMD hoax of the war on Venezuela, combined with the notion that Maduro controls the Cartel of the suns, Cartel de los Soles, which was created by the CIA.

Behind the scenes, there were meetings to find a new strategy to fold the phoney war on drugs and the phoney war on terror into a new designation that would allow the removal of Nicolas Maduro once and for all. And this strategy was being spearheaded by the people around the new face and voice of the Venezuelan opposition. Her name is Maria Corina Machado. She was the candidate who ran on behalf of the Venezuelan opposition, who was beloved by US media, who was painted as this iron lady, like a new Margaret Thatcher, as though Thatcher were some sort of hero in the New York Times. And the rightful winner of the Venezuela presidency, Machado and her inner circle held a meeting with then National Security Council Chief Mike Waltz in January and declared that the way forward was to declare that Maduro was a narco-terrorist. He was a terrorist because he was carrying out these attacks inside the US through an invasion, a gang invasion through TDA, and he was a Narco Lord because the Department Justice had already declared that he controls a cartel. Which doesn't actually exist. And Waltz is taking notes and putting together this justification, which was then passed on to his successor after the Signal Gate scandal, Marco Rubio, who is the de facto leader of the South Florida Gusano Industrial Complex, who wants to invade and topple Venezuela for ideological reasons.

And so the Trump administration officially declares that Nicolas Maduro and those around him are narco-terrorists. This also helps bring Stephen Miller on board with the operation because it links TDA internally inside the United States, the supposed Venezuelan gang invasion, to a regime change war that will likely cause massive migration to the North. It turns out Stephen Miller, principled on immigration, he just likes torturing Brown people. So he goes along with Marco Rubio with this narco terrorist designation. What does it mean? Well, it means the bounty on Nicolas Maduro's head increases from 15 million to 50 million. Who else had a \$50 million bounty on their head? Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden, what happened to him? He was assassinated by US special forces teams when it was politically expedient for Barack Obama as he was beginning his campaign for reelection. They always knew where Bin Laden was in Abbottabad. They decided to kill him for political reasons.

So now, the US can authorise decapitation attacks on the Venezuelan leadership, and they're fighting drugs and terrorism at the same time. It's like all of the neocon fantasies have come back. But first, they have to get US military forces into Venezuelan waters, into the Caribbean, they have to aggressively militarise the Caribbean and now the USS Gerald Ford is steaming towards the Caribbean with 80 attack jets on its deck. This is all the doing of Marco Rubio. And in order to get this Naval deployment in the water, they first need to authorise attacks on supposed boats bringing drugs into the US. And everybody knows this is

a joke so far and a massive crime. Over 60 people have been killed in these US military massacres of small fishing boats in the Caribbean. Which are proudly promoted through Pentagon DUI hire Pete Hegseth's Twitter account, these snuff films. And I guess we're so desensitised to this killing by the Gaza genocide that it's not a major issue in US media. We don't know who these people are. There is no due process. No interdictions taking place. But here's what we do know about these boats. They cannot possibly reach the United States. At most, they can go 200 kilometres. The US is far more than 200 kilometres away. 200 kilometres they can't even go that far. Most of them can probably be at sea for just a few hours. None of them are even heading towards Miami. Most of them are going from Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago. And if they're carrying drugs, it's cocaine. Cocaine is not the problem in the United States. This is not what's poisoning America, it's fentanyl. Fentanyl is coming across the US-Mexico border and less than 5% of cocaine, according to United Nations statistics, is even coming through the Caribbean from Venezuela. Most is coming from Colombia through Ecuador, where the president of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa, has been the shipping director of his billionaire family company, Bonita Fruit, which is packing parcels of bananas with cocaine and sending them through the Albanian mafia to Europe, as well as the United States. It's Ecuador, a key US ally, a key Rubio ally, that's shipping most of the cocaine to the US through Colombia.

So it's all a gigantic lie, but the lie allows this massive show of force and deployment of forces in the Caribbean. And as Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State under Clinton, said to Colin Powell about Iraq: "When you have the largest military in the world, you can't do nothing with it, you have to use it." So that's what Rubio has done; placed so many US military assets around Venezuela that something has to be done. And what do we think will be done? Decapitation strikes. The objective? Cause destabilisation inside Venezuela, igniting a supposed rebellion, which is delusional, and then destroy the, what I call the Troika of Resistance, which John Bolton recently indicted, coup-crazed former Trump Chief of Staff [inaudible]... in Venezuela through the ALBA Economic Alliance has helped sustain the besieged economy of Cuba and has helped support the socialist-oriented, very popular government of Sandinista leader and president Daniel Ortega. First you take down Venezuela, then [inaudible] and then you spread the so-called free market across Latin America. And destroy the ideology of Chavismo, make an example of it. Destroy the Latin American left.

Will that happen? Do we think that Venezuela is going to go down so easily under the weight of the largest aircraft carrier in the US military? I don't think so. Not necessarily. Look at what just happened in Iran, where when Iran came under an unprovoked attack by Israel, which effectively was an arm of the US at that point or was using the US weapons, with the knowledge that the Trump administration would come in and rescue Israel from the consequences of a war that it started but which it couldn't finish, the Iranian people rallied around the flag and became more nationalistic than we have seen in a generation. Sectors of Iranian society which did not support the Islamic Republic, which did support the Iranian revolution of 1979, which did not support Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who may have had great problems with them, were outraged by the civilian casualties that Israel was causing, by the destabilisation of Mossad assets inside their society, by car bombs going off



in their neighbourhoods, that they stood with their government. And if the US is going to do the same thing in Venezuela there is going to be a large segment of Venezuelan society that will stand with their government over the United States military that is carrying out brutal attacks. The kind we've seen in Latin America in the invasion of Panama in 1989, 1990, which has sort of been put forward as a model for taking out Maduro. A lot of Americans don't remember this, but mass graves were found across Panama of Panamanian people who were killed by the US military, some with zip ties on their wrists, many of them children, many killed in airstrikes, hundreds and hundreds of civilians were killed there. And so the idea that Venezuela's own democratic revolution can be destroyed by the US military and that an ideology, an idea can be wiped out is going to be tested. And it's the same idea that we've seen tested in Gaza where enormous unprecedented, like historically unprecedented pressure has been put on an entire population that has resisted their dispossession and destruction and occupation. They've had a genocide imposed on them and they're refusing to leave and they have refused to part from the model of resistance. So this entire neoconservative idea, it hinges on people in Latin America, in the Arab world, all across the world, basically accepting vassalhood and accepting neocolonialism. And it's going to be tested in Venezuela in the coming days. I had prepared to talk about Gaza, and to talk about the post-October 7th shift, but I feel like the situation with Venezuela is so urgent and so immediate that I wanted to focus on that today. That was sort of what was on my mind. But we can cover those issues in Q&A. I'm interested to hear what your questions and comments are, so let's wrap up my comments and move to Q&A. Thanks a lot.

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