

The Word Is Kidnapping

We bombed a country, took its president, and the media calls it 'capture.' This morning I woke up to the New York Times telling me the United States had “captured” the president of Venezuela.



Current time in Caracas, Venezuela: 11:45 a.m. Jan. 3

LIVE Updated 8m ago

Live Updates: U.S. Captures Venezuelan Leader, Trump Says

President Trump announced that U.S. forces had carried out “a large scale strike against Venezuela” and were taking President Nicolás Maduro and his wife to New York. The Trump administration had been building pressure on Mr. Maduro for months.

Let me say that again. The United States military conducted airstrikes on a sovereign nation’s capital, killed an unknown number of its citizens, and dragged its head of state out of his bedroom in the middle of the night. And the word the paper of record chose was “capture.”

Capture is what happens when you execute an arrest warrant. Capture is what happens when there’s an ICC indictment. Capture is what happens when the UN Security Council authorizes military action. Capture is what happens when Congress declares war.

None of those things happened here.

The word is kidnapping.

I’ve been writing about executive power. About how Congress abdicated its war-making authority decades ago. About how presidents from both parties have consolidated power while everyone looked the other way because the bombs were falling on someone else.

Last week I wrote about how the tools Trump is using to reshape the executive branch aren’t inherently authoritarian—they’re just tools. The problem is who’s wielding them and what they’re being used for. I stand by that.

But here’s the thing about tools: they can be used to build a house or burn one down. And what happened in Caracas this morning isn’t building anything. It’s the United States government deciding, unilaterally, that it has the authority to bomb a country, kill its citizens, and abduct its leader because we say he’s a drug dealer.

We say. Not the International Criminal Court. Not the UN. Not even Congress. Marco Rubio looked senators in the eye weeks ago and said this wasn’t about regime change. He lied. They knew he was

lying. And the media is busy debating whether this was “constitutional” under some tortured reading of Article II instead of stating the obvious:

This is an act of war conducted without declaration. This is a kidnapping dressed up as law enforcement. And if any other country on earth did this to us, we would call it what it is.

I pray we see protests. I pray the “No Kings” folks see this as the move of a monarch.

In October, millions marched under the No Kings banner. Veterans. Nurses. Teachers. Regular people who understood that unchecked executive power is a threat to everything we claim to believe in.

We need that again. This is insanity. If we allow this to happen unchecked it sets yet another unnerving precedent.

Trump watched the operation from Mar-a-Lago. He told Fox News it was like watching a television show. He said the military action was “genius.” And then he admitted he has no plan for what comes next. “We’re making that decision now,” he said.

We just decapitated a government—a government with the largest proven oil reserves on the planet, let’s not pretend that’s incidental—and the President of the United States is figuring out the day-after plan in real time.

The Democrats issued some statements. Andy Kim said it “sends a horrible signal.” Jim McGovern called it “unjustified and illegal.” Chris Murphy has been screaming about this for months.

But where are the marches? Where are the mass mobilizations? Where is the machinery of opposition that showed up in June and October? Are we powerless against this regime? Can our leaders not grind the gears of government to a halt?

At what point do we need Sen. Chris Murphy to lay on the tracks to stop this Crazy Train?

Let’s talk about what we’re actually seeing here.

The administration has been building toward this for months. They designated drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. They claimed Maduro ran something called Cartel de los Soles. Our own intelligence agencies have assessed that this cartel doesn’t exist as an actual organization—it’s a term used to describe various Venezuelan military officers involved in drug trafficking. There’s no evidence Maduro directs it.

Spy Agencies Do Not Think Venezuela Directs Gang, Declassified Memo Shows

The release of the memo further undercuts the Trump administration's rationale for using the Alien Enemies Act to deport scores of Venezuelans to a prison in El Salvador.

And even if it did—this is the same government that [ran cocaine through Central America to fund the Contras](#), that looked the other way while our Afghan allies controlled the opium trade, that kept Noriega on the CIA payroll until he stopped being useful. We don't have a problem with drug traffickers. We have a problem with drug traffickers who won't cut us in.

EXPLAINER

News | Corruption

Meet the US's drug running friends: A history of narcotics involvement

US President Donald Trump claims to be cracking down on drug gangs in Venezuela but has pardoned a Honduran drug lord serving 45 years in the US.

But the indictment exists. It was unsealed this morning, conveniently timed. And that indictment—a piece of paper generated by US prosecutors, not recognized by any international body—is being used to justify bombing a capital city and kidnapping a head of state.

Think about what this means. The United States has now established that it can unilaterally declare any foreign leader a terrorist, indict them in a US court, and then use military force to extract them. No international warrant required. No Security Council authorization. No declaration of war.

Benjamin Netanyahu has an actual ICC warrant for crimes against humanity. If China conducted an airstrike on Tel Aviv and dragged him onto a warship, we would call it an act of war. We would probably consider it an act of madness.

But when we do it? It's a "capture." It's "law enforcement." It's protecting American personnel executing an arrest warrant—never mind that the arrest warrant exists only because we created it.

The fourth estate is failing us again.

I've read the coverage from the Times, the Post, NPR, NBC, CNN. Every single outlet uses the word "capture." Every single one frames this as Trump says versus Venezuela says, as if there's some legitimate debate about whether bombing a country and taking its president constitutes an act of war.

There isn't a debate. There's international law, which we are violating. There's the UN Charter, which we are violating. There's our own Constitution, which requires Congress to declare war, which they did not do.

The same media that has spent years documenting Trump's lies, his manipulation of the system, his contempt for legal constraints—that media is now treating his claim of legal authority as a serious proposition to be evaluated rather than an obvious pretext to be exposed.

Al Jazeera, at least, quotes the UN special rapporteur calling this an "illegal aggression" and an "illegal abduction." That's not both-sides journalism. That's stating facts.

We know why this is happening.

[Venezuela has 304 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. The largest in the world. Eighteen percent of global reserves.](#)

Trump said this morning that the United States will be "very strongly involved" in Venezuela's oil industry going forward.



That's the whole game. Everything else—the drug trafficking accusations, the terrorism designation, the indictments—is infrastructure. It's the narrative architecture required to make armed robbery look like law enforcement.

This didn't start with Trump. It didn't start with Maduro. It didn't even start with Chavez.

On January 1, 1976—fifty years ago this month—Venezuela nationalized its oil industry. President Carlos Andrés Pérez stood at the Mene Grande oilfield and announced that the world's largest petroleum reserves now belonged to the Venezuelan people. Exxon, Gulf, Mobil—they all got bought out. They were compensated. There was no theft, no matter what Stephen Miller says. The oil companies themselves acknowledged the legality of the process. It was orderly. It was sovereign. And American capital has never forgiven it.

What followed was fifty years of pressure. Not from one party. From the monopoly.

Bush put Venezuela on notice after Chavez won in 1998. Obama imposed the first round of targeted sanctions in 2015. Trump 1.0 went full maximum pressure—financial sanctions, oil sanctions, the recognition of Juan Guaidó as the "legitimate president" in a failed coup attempt. Biden kept most of

the sanctions in place, lifted some temporarily when it suited us, then reimposed them. And now Trump 2.0 has finished the job with bombs and helicopters.

Red or blue. It doesn't matter. When it comes to empire, when it comes to oil, when it comes to keeping the Western Hemisphere safe for American extraction, there is no opposition party. There is only the party of American business interests wrapped in whatever justification polls best this decade.

And here's the part that should make your blood boil.

María Corina Machado—the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize winner, the opposition leader—she's already made the sale. In an interview with Donald Trump Jr.: “We're going to kick out the government from the oil sector. We're going to privatize all our industry.”

She told a room full of American executives that Venezuela represents “a \$1.7 trillion opportunity.” She said American companies “are going to make a lot of money.” She thanked Marco Rubio by name.

Forget Saudi Arabia, she said. Venezuela has more oil.

Usually there's some theater about democracy, about human rights, about weapons of mass destruction. Some effort to dress the corpse before they wheel it out. This time? Trump announces on television that the United States will be “very strongly involved” in Venezuela's oil industry. Machado tells Trump's son that American investors are going to get rich. Stephen Miller claims Venezuelan oil belongs to us because “American sweat, ingenuity and toil created the oil industry in Venezuela.”

We want it. We're taking it. And we'll call it law enforcement.

Here's what I keep coming back to.

I wrote about how we need a presidency capable of directing economic policy. A presidency that can break up corporate power, build public capacity, point the machinery of government toward the people it's supposed to serve.

But that requires a presidency constrained by law. Constrained by Congress. Constrained by international norms. Not because constraints are inherently good, but because power without constraint becomes corrupted. It becomes exactly what we're watching right now: a government that takes what it wants from whoever it wants because no one can stop it.

The liberals who want to strip away executive power entirely are wrong. An impotent presidency serves no one but the people who already run everything. But a presidency that bombs countries without authorization, kidnaps leaders without warrants, and announces it will take over their oil industry on live television—that's not power in service of the people. It's empire wrapped in our flag, and in my opinion it's worse than burning the damn thing.

Venezuelans are fleeing across the border into Colombia. The government is in chaos. There's no succession plan. The inner circle survived but nobody knows who's in charge. The defense minister is calling for armed resistance.

This is what we built. Not stability. Not democracy. Not freedom. Chaos. Violence. Uncertainty.

And somewhere in the Caribbean, on the USS Iwo Jima, a man and his wife are being transported to New York to face charges in a court that has no jurisdiction over them, for crimes that may not exist, based on designations our own intelligence agencies question.

The word for this isn't justice.

The word for this isn't capture.

The words are "illegal kidnapping" and "declaration of war." And if we can't say it, if we can't see it, we've lost something way more important than oil.

Corbin