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Military Intervention in Venezuela Would Be a Reckless, Dangerous Option

The push for intervention is no surprise, and it should be given no quarter.



Johnny Louis/JL/Sipa USA/NewscomPublic anger over appalling deprivation led to continued protests in Venezuela this past weekend, demonstrations that were brutally suppressed by the government of embattled President Nicolás Maduro. On Twitter, Sen. Marco Rubio seasoned his commentary on Venezuela's chaos with a triptych of wordless posts showing [paired photos](#) of dictators—Panama's Manuel Antonio Noriega, Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu, and Libya's Moammar Gaddafi—before and after they were deposed. The Gaddafi tweet, which showed the former strongman shortly before his brutal execution by rebels who had been aided by U.S. military force, made Rubio's meaning especially clear: Maduro needs to go, and the United States should make it happen.

This push for U.S.-orchestrated regime change is no surprise coming from Rubio. Regardless of its source, the proposal should be given no quarter. This is a humanitarian crisis, not a security threat. American military might is [not the solution](#) to Venezuela's woes, and even calling for this sort of intervention may exacerbate an already horrifying situation.

Recognizing this reality does not require denying or downplaying the desperate misery Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chavez, have caused their people. Though Maduro's

present [border closure](#) to keep humanitarian aid out of the country is an escalation, severe shortages of food and other necessities have locked Venezuela in crisis for years. Infant mortality rates have [spiked](#) as children literally die of hunger. Inflation has reached [catastrophic levels](#), and at every turn the Maduro government has responded with further [corruption](#), [irrationality](#), and [abuse](#). It is no wonder that opposition leader and U.S.-recognized interim president Juan Guaidó has rallied so many to his cause, and it is only right to want Venezuela to look very different than it does now.

But recent history should make the hubris, futility, and risk of an American military intervention just as obvious.

Rubio's own example makes this point well. Is post-Gaddafi Libya a good future for Venezuela? Is that really a model to be emulated? Gaddafi, like Maduro, deserved not an ounce of power. But the 2011 NATO intervention [cost much and accomplished little](#)—or, at least, little we should want to repeat. U.S.-facilitated regime change in Libya was not a transformation from dictatorship to democracy but from regime to civil war. Libya [remains plagued](#) by violence today, split between competing forces including a branch of the Islamic State.

Venezuela will not fall prey to ISIS, of course, but the constancy of human nature when power is on the line makes a similar turmoil all too possible.

Of crucial concern to the situation in Venezuela, where many advocates of intervention have made their case on humanitarian grounds, there is good evidence that U.S. action in Libya made the humanitarian situation worse. "NATO's action magnified the conflict's duration about sixfold and its death toll at least sevenfold," [estimates](#) Alan Kuperman in a policy brief for Harvard's Belfer Center; it "also exacerbating human rights abuses, humanitarian suffering, Islamic radicalism, and weapons proliferation in Libya and its neighbors." Military intervention in Venezuela could likewise prolong and expand Venezuelans' troubles. It also makes the United States much more responsible for the long-term investments that Venezuela will surely need if it ever hopes to rebuild. The empathetic impulse that gives the humanitarian intervention argument its power should, informed by recent history, steer us to a more prudent path.

The mere discussion of U.S. military intervention in Venezuela is arguably risky, too, and Rubio's Gaddafi post is particularly reckless in this regard. Threatening him with a gory death is unlikely to coax Maduro from power. [If anything](#), it will encourage him to fortify whatever grasp on power he has left.

The prospect of U.S. invasion could also be a boon to Maduro's cause, allowing him to rally support by pointing to past U.S. meddling in Latin America and painting himself as Venezuela's champion against American imperialists, as he [has done before](#). Already Maduro has been able to turn U.S. humanitarian aid (the food he won't let across the border) into a political issue, precisely because American help has been paired with talk of regime change: On Monday, he [accused](#) Washington of "trying to fabricate a crisis to justify political escalation and a military intervention in Venezuela to bring a war to South America."

Unfortunately, Rubio [has been](#) an influential voice on Venezuela for the Trump administration. Despite Trump's campaign-trail invective against avoidable wars, his policy here may yet be swayed by Rubio's bluster. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [declined to reject](#) the use of military force when asked by Fox host Chris Wallace, affirming [instead](#) that "every option is on the table" and that Washington will "do the things that need to be done" to guarantee Venezuelan democracy and "put force behind the voice of the Venezuelan people." The next day, Vice President Mike Pence traveled to Colombia to meet with Guaidó, and senior administration officials [told](#) *The Washington Post* that military intervention was not immediately likely—which is not at all the same as saying a military intervention will not happen.

But that is exactly what Pence should say. As in Libya (to say nothing of other recent U.S. regime-change projects, such as Afghanistan and Iraq), there is no question the United States can toss out the dictator. Bringing peace and democracy to the country is another thing entirely, as our Mideast misadventures make all too clear. Rubio is right that Maduro is bad for Venezuela, but it would be folly and cruelty to wage war to force him out.

Photo Credit: Johnny Louis/JL/Sipa USA/Newscom

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