

“Operation Southern Spear” When State Terrorism Marches Under a U.S. Flag

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The seizure of a Venezuelan oil tanker off that country's coast by U.S. military personnel on Wednesday, 11 December 2025, opens a new chapter in the standoff between Trump and Maduro. For months, U.S. armed forces have been bombing small vessels in international Caribbean waters under the pretext of disrupting drug-trafficking routes. These latest actions, however, escalate the level of aggression and further erode the United States' standing on the global stage.

After a crescendo of rhetorical attacks against Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, Trump finally applied the most infamous diplomatic label in the U.S. arsenal: leader of a “narco-terrorist” cartel. Maduro — a vocal critic of the United States and, paradoxically, head of one of North America's main oil suppliers — has been pressured by Trump to resign in favor of a more compliant and subservient opposition. This discursive intimidation strategy, punctuated by calculated threats and statements, was echoed by cabinet members such as Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco Rubio. As an outgrowth of this coercive campaign, the Trump administration launched a dangerous military maneuver that rapidly intensified tensions between the two countries.

Since mid-2025, U.S. armed forces have been moving troops and high-powered military equipment into the Caribbean, effectively encircling Venezuela. According to specialized estimates, at least twelve warships, two aircraft carriers, a nuclear submarine, an unknown number of reconnaissance and bomber aircraft, and more than 15,000 troops are now stationed in international waters or in bases scattered across neighboring states.

This initiative — dubbed “Operation Southern Spear” — is officially framed as an anti-narcotics effort, but its disproportionate scale speaks for itself.

There is no precedent for deploying such a colossal military apparatus merely to confront criminal syndicates. The operation, both massive and costly, bears the unmistakable marks of an invasion, or, at the very least, aims to resemble one. In the Caribbean, the United States resurrects an old and unsettling tactic of coercion — the “big stick”: displaying overwhelming military power to subdue an adversary's will. The threat of war is meant, on one hand, to pressure Maduro into stepping down and, on the other, to erode domestic support for his government through fear of an unequal conflict.

In either case, the primary targets do not appear to be military assets, but Venezuelan civilians themselves. The strategy deliberately cultivates insecurity and collective fear to achieve political and economic ends. Violent acts and threats designed to terrorize civilian populations have a name: terrorism.

This ostentatious display of force descended into outright farce once U.S. forces began attacking small civilian boats. Under the unsubstantiated claim that these vessels were engaged in contraband, U.S. troops bombed them without prior warning, without any opportunity for defense, due process, seizure, or arrest. More than twenty boats were destroyed from a distance; in some instances, survivors were fired upon again to ensure their deaths.

Military action against civilians — even presumed criminals — constitutes a war crime under international law. Armed conflicts are waged between combatants. To deliberately strike civilian populations, disproportionately and without formal investigation, is to commit murder. Moreover, even if the alleged crimes were proven, targeting wounded or surrendered foes remains a war crime — and reveals unmistakable traces of sadism.

The escalation reached a new threshold on 11 December 2025, when U.S.

forces boarded and seized a fully loaded Venezuelan oil tanker engaged in commercial operation. Based on the facts released thus far — and on Trump's own statements — the United States is claiming ownership of the cargo and control of the vessel, in a diplomatically ludicrous turn of events. The monetary value of the oil is negligible compared to the colossal cost of the military operation, underscoring the political nature of the act.

In practice, violently seizing, on the high seas, property belonging to another state or to private actors is an act of piracy.

None of this, however, is foreign to the West. European powers have long employed hired criminals to plunder maritime wealth. England, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal — all relied on privateers to traffic enslaved people, trade narcotics, intimidate rivals, or steal valuables. It is hardly surprising that a state inheriting this legacy, and commanding a military force with global reach, would use such power for plunder. What is surprising is the open admission, uttered without shame, bolstered by the certainty of impunity.

In today's world, no official narrative is spontaneous. Every word, image, gesture, or silence is crafted to reinforce the leader's image, galvanize supporters, and send signals to other political actors. In this logic, when the U.S. government releases footage of the seizure and Trump declares he will keep the “booty,” the rhetorical intent is unmistakable. The explicit goal is to solidify the “strong leader” persona Trump seeks to project; the strategic goal is to signal to Maduro that the regime's economic lifelines will be strangled. The subtext, however, is even more revealing: the United States openly adopts a delinquent posture on the international stage — disdainful of diplomacy, acting as an aggressor state, a terrorist actor, and now a

perpetrator of ordinary televised crimes.

From a self-proclaimed “leader of the free world” (a title it never deserved, but that is another discussion), the United States debases itself — or perhaps reveals its true nature — as an authoritarian, interventionist regime engaged in terrorism, war crimes, and piracy. From an oligarchic political structure, a society grounded in racism and consumerism, an economic system devoted to extreme concentration of wealth, and a compliant media ecosystem — what else could emerge?

The Caribbean offers the answer in stark relief.

Who will restrain an increasingly reckless United States?

This situation recalls the fears of the country’s founders, who designed a system of checks and balances to prevent the rise of authoritarian rule. When Woodrow Wilson weakened that arrangement in the name of a “modern,” ostensibly more agile state in the early twentieth century, he paved the way for a Trump — even as he enabled the construction of a state

apparatus of extraordinary scope and power.

Everything suggests that what Wilson set in motion was a historical irresponsibility without precedent. And now our generation must confront the consequences: the wealthiest and most militarily powerful state in human history is in the hands of arrogant, authoritarian, and insidious leaders — figures marked by megalomaniac and narcissistic tendencies, and by an evident deficit of empathy.

Beware.

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