

Fire, Aim, Ready

Dan Rather

For those who think Donald Trump is doing a bad job of running one country, imagine him trying to run two.

Pity the Venezuelans who have lived under dictators for nearly three decades. Now they have an *authoritarian-in-absentia*. Trump attempting to run the show from 2,000 miles away is a disaster in the making.

If the president believes for a second that he can bully Venezuela, get ready for a reality check. The country is twice the size of California, has a population of nearly 30 million, many of whom want nothing to do with the United States, and won't be intimidated into submission.

We've been here before, in South America and farther afield, with dictators arguably worse than Nicolás Maduro. But *never with an Oval Office occupant as unfit as Trump*. How long before American lives are lost?

Trump out-Trumped himself on Saturday when he used the United States military to capture President Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores. They were extradited to New York and charged with drug trafficking and weapons offenses, making their first court appearance today.

Trump did not notify Congress as is required by the War Powers Act, though, apparently, he did inform oil executives of his plan. Nor did Venezuela engage in any hostile acts toward the United States that would justify the use of military force.

The legal, moral, and political ramifications of such an abuse of power will become clearer as Maduro and Flores move through the justice system and Venezuela reorganizes after the sudden and deadly U.S. aggression.

This is what happens when an *unhinged, amoral man with a massive ego and enormous power has no guardrails*. During his first term, Trump surrounded himself with loyalists who did their best to save Trump from himself.

This time around the sycophants, posing as Cabinet members, are trying to save themselves from Trump by greenlighting any outlandish idea that flies into his head. If they don't, they will be shown the door, and they know it.

Because he rules by whim rather than conviction, his impulses have a starting point but not necessarily a thoroughly considered endgame,, and he certainly has no plans for what lies in-between. *Trump's governing north star is power and wealth accumulation.*

From everything Trump and his posse of enablers have said since the raid early Saturday morning, the only thing they planned for was to get Maduro. What comes next? Who knows?

Secretary of State Marco Rubio made the rounds of the Sunday talk shows, ostensibly to answer that question. But when repeatedly pressed about the administration's plan on NBC's "Meet the Press," Rubio offered no clear answers.

"We expect to see changes in Venezuela. Changes of all kinds, long-term, short-term, we'd love to see all kinds of changes. But the most immediate changes are the ones that are in the national interest to the United States," Rubio said.

On ABC's "This Week With George Stephanopoulos," he was similarly obtuse. "What we are 'running' is the direction that this is going to move, moving forward."

On the flight back to Washington from West Palm Beach on Sunday, Trump was more forthcoming if no less clear with the White House press corps. "We're in charge. We're going to run everything," he told reporters. "We're in the business of having countries around us that are viable and successful and where the oil is allowed to freely come out."

What was that? Who said anything about oil?

Trump has been telling us for months that the problems in Venezuela were about drug traffickers and "narco-terrorists" who were endangering American lives. At least that was the justification for blowing up boats off the coast of the South American country.

In case we didn't hear it the first time, Trump went on, "We need total access. We need access to the oil... Right now, what we want to do is fix up the oil, fix up the country, bring the country back — and then have elections."

So that's the plan? *Get the oil first, not help the Venezuelans* who face political instability, humanitarian crises, crippling poverty, and food insecurity? But Rubio said it was about the national interests of the U.S. How exactly does getting Venezuelan oil help the American people?

Gaining access to the world's largest oil reserves certainly helps *oil executives and the companies they run*. Or so Trump thinks. But this is where his lack of planning becomes an issue.

Decades of mismanagement and lack of investment in the Venezuelan oil industry have resulted in a 72% drop in output since 1997. The infrastructure is outdated and dilapidated. Leaky pipelines have been pillaged and sold for scraps. Explosions and fires have destroyed pumps and machinery.

Francisco Monaldi, director of the Latin America Energy Program at Rice University, believes it would take \$10 billion a year for ten years to fix and upgrade Venezuela's oil sector. Add political instability, security concerns, questions of legality and a global oil glut, and it is unlikely Venezuela can increase oil production in the near future.

If all of the issues can be resolved and the investment money be found, the runway to increased output is five to seven years according to Thomas O'Donnell, an energy and geopolitical strategist who spoke with Reuters.

So the oil is there, but it will take years and \$100 billion to get it out of the ground. In the meantime, maybe Trump has a plan to help rebuild Venezuela's authoritarian government. Spoiler: he doesn't.

"If they don't behave, we will do a second strike," he threatened. Maduro's vice president Delcy Rodríguez, a staunch ally of her imprisoned boss, was sworn in as acting president on Saturday.

Rodríguez released a somewhat conciliatory statement that was far short of handing over the reins of her country to Trump. "We invite the U.S. government to collaborate with us on an agenda of cooperation oriented towards shared

development within the framework of international law to strengthen lasting community coexistence.”

Meanwhile, the democratically elected Venezuelan opposition — Maduro refused to leave office when they overwhelmingly won the presidential election in 2024 — has so far been sidelined by Trump. He says he has not been in contact with opposition leader María Corina Machado.

“It’d be very tough for her to be the leader. She doesn’t have the support or the respect within the country,” he claimed at a press conference on Saturday. But of course that isn’t the real reason. He is jealous of last year’s Nobel Peace Prize winner.

A White House insider told the Washington Post, “If she had turned [the peace prize] down and said, ‘I can’t accept it because it’s Donald Trump’s,’ she’d be the president of Venezuela today.”

Trump, who ran as an isolationist and chastised former presidents for participating in “endless foreign wars,” wasn’t done dropping information bombs on Air Force One. *Drunk on what he perceives as a successful mission, Trump threatened five additional countries with military intervention: Colombia, Cuba, Iran, Mexico, and Greenland.*

We’re all asking the same question. ***What can be done to stop madness?*** The obvious answer is Congress, but only if we still had a functioning legislative branch rather than a rubber stamp, which we currently do not.

Trump allies have long said to take him and his outrageous ideas seriously but not literally. After Saturday’s military action, they will have to change their tune. With guardrails long gone, we have to be ready for literally anything.