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The ‘Donroe Doctrine’: When sanctions fail, U.S. imperialism wages war on Venezuela

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EXPANSION!
The western patrol's long stretch.

Trump's 'Donroe Doctrine' graphic makes explicit what the ruling class can no longer accomplish through economic means: military domination of Latin America. This isn't Theodore Roosevelt's confident imperialism – it's the violence of an empire that has run out of other options.

The world has looked on with horror as the United States launched its largest and most aggressive military operation in the Western Hemisphere in decades. After months of attacks on migrant boats and seafood industry workers, the U.S.

imperialist class escalated its assault on Venezuela.

More than 80 people are dead. Dozens of military and industrial facilities have been reduced to rubble. Venezuela's democratically elected president, Nicolás Maduro, was kidnapped and paraded before the world — a deliberate display of imperialist arrogance and political theater.

Maduro is a real human being and the elected leader of a sovereign country. Yet the United States seized him in the middle of the night, chained him, and displayed him in full view of the global media. This was not a covert operation or a misunderstanding. It was a public act meant to intimidate, humiliate, and assert domination.

The 'Donroe Doctrine' and the return to open colonialism

While the United States is no stranger to military conquest, the overthrow of governments, or the public degradation of anti-colonial leaders, this brazen attack marks a dangerous escalation. The methods may echo 19th-century colonialism — direct military seizure, public humiliation, and rule by force — but this is not a return to that era. This is something far more desperate: imperialism in terminal decline, with military violence as its last remaining tool.

This turn to open aggression is driven by economics, not principle or geopolitics. The decision to raise the stakes against Venezuela reflects a U.S. imperialist class strategy to curb its loss of global economic power. Trump, acting as its political executor, has even branded this revival of 19th-century expansionism as the “Donroe Doctrine.”

By explicitly referencing the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, the administration signals that it no longer feels the need to hide behind the “humanitarian” masks of the past. The “Donroe Doctrine” is a blunt admission: The Western Hemisphere is once again

viewed as a colonial backyard to be policed by the “Big Stick” of U.S. military might.

Economic contraction and the turn to force

After World War II, U.S. capitalism stood at the center of global production. Its factories, markets, and financial power shaped the postwar order. That position did not last. Capital was exported to lower-wage labor markets across the oppressed world, and U.S. control over production weakened.

With less control over global labor, the monopoly capitalists lose leverage. When sanctions, trade pressure, and financial coercion no longer secure obedience, U.S. imperialism turns to military force. The war carried out under Trump against Venezuela follows this pattern. It echoes earlier moments when an economically strained imperialist class escalated its assault on national self-determination and the working class worldwide.

This pattern has appeared before under similar conditions. In the late 1890s, the United States faced a deep domestic economic crisis, surplus capital searching for new outlets, and growing pressure to expand beyond informal influence. Political leaders and the press supplied humanitarian and defensive justifications, but the underlying drive was economic expansion. When commercial penetration and indirect control proved insufficient, the ruling class escalated toward open war and formal domination. These conditions converged in what became known as the U.S. war against Spain in 1898.

1898: The ‘splendid little war’ of the robber barons

In April of 1898, William McKinley requested that Congress [declare war](#) on Spain. McKinley proclaimed that the United States had an obligation to intervene to defend the independence of Cuba from Spanish imperialism. Funny, that the country that exterminated its indigenous population, enslaved millions of Black Africans, and

spent the entire 19th century expanding its territory, suddenly was concerned with the well-being and self-determination of oppressed people. McKinley also proclaimed that a U.S. intervention would be an act of self-defense, citing the explosion of the battleship [USS Maine](#). Politicians and newspapers owned by right-wing capitalists such as William Randolph Hearst claimed Spain was responsible for the warship's destruction.

All of this — absolutely all of it — was a bald-faced lie. Presidential documents signed by McKinley in August 1898 instructed the U.S. military, “Where it can be done prudently, confer with the leading citizens of Cuba ... in an unofficial manner and endeavor to ascertain their sentiments toward the United States, and their views as to such measures as they may deem necessary or important for the future welfare and good government of the island.”

On the eve of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the [Washington Post](#) already had its eyes set beyond Cuba: “We are face to face with a strange destiny. The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people even as the taste of blood in the jungle.”

In his “People’s History of the United States,” historian Howard Zinn accurately [analyzed](#) the war as a ruling class project. These robber barons, as they were called, knew the war would create a boon for the massive U.S. [iron industry](#) and create new markets for manufacturers to sell their goods.

The parallels to 1898 are instructive, but the crucial difference must be understood. In 1898, U.S. imperialism was ascending — expanding its productive base, opening new markets, establishing economic dominance. The war with Spain was an expression of capitalist strength and confidence.

In 2025, U.S. imperialism faces [the opposite condition](#): declining [productive](#) capacity, eroding dollar hegemony, and the loss of economic leverage that once made direct military conquest unnecessary. When sanctions fail, when financial

coercion loses its grip, when trade pressure no longer secures compliance — military force becomes the only card left to play. This is not expansion from strength. This is violence from weakness.

Lenin's analysis: the scramble for the world

The late 1890s, which saw the imperialist war with Spain, was the exact period that led scholars and Marxists at the time to begin using the term “imperialism.” Eventually, Vladimir Lenin crystallized the Marxist analysis of imperialism in “[Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism](#),” defining the relationships between the principal economic features of imperialism.

In “Imperialism,” Lenin described the mad rush of Western imperialist powers to divide the world to export capital and exploit cheap labor markets and natural resources. Between 1884 and 1900, Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Portugal carved up over 10 million square miles of territory, home to nearly 150 million people. As Lenin wrote: “The scramble for colonies by all the capitalist states at the end of the nineteenth century and particularly since the 1880s is a commonly known fact in the history of diplomacy and of foreign policy.”

The U.S. imperialist war with Spain was a crucial part of this “scramble” that Lenin analyzes. As seen in the events at the end of the war, the U.S.’s motive was to catch up with Britain, France, Germany, and others in the scramble to divide the world. It is this period that the ruling class seeks to recreate through escalating provocations against China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and other targets, with Trump acting as its political standard-bearer.

When the Spanish departed Cuba in 1898, it was U.S. troops, not the Cuban people, who took control of the island. The U.S. military occupation lasted until 1902. Even when the [U.S. troops left](#), their withdrawal was contingent on Cuba accepting treaties from the U.S. government that restricted Cuba’s right to act independently

and kept the door open for future U.S. intervention. The United States maintained its informal but iron grip over Cuba until the 1959 socialist revolution.

The 20th century further demonstrated without a doubt that the United States wanted Cuba to be completely subservient to the U.S. capitalist agenda. In 1961, the CIA backed an attempted fascist takeover of the island known as the Bay of Pigs. In 1962, the U.S. military brought the world to the brink of nuclear war through an illegal blockade of Cuba that has lasted until this day. Between 1960 and 1965, the CIA attempted to [assassinate](#) Fidel Castro hundreds of times.

2025: Manufactured outrage and systemic aggression

The United States has held, informally or formally, all of the territory it captured from Spain in the 1898 imperialist war – including Puerto Rico and the Philippines. The war against Spain wasn't about democracy or independence for colonized nations – the same way war against Venezuela isn't about drugs or human rights. Both of these wars were about reshaping and dividing the world economically to benefit the U.S. ruling class better.

In 1898, the United States faced a massive economic crisis dating back to the Panic of 1893. During the panic, over 15,000 businesses went bankrupt. The country experienced widespread bank failure and a 19% national unemployment rate. The U.S. financial oligarchy was in a panic and in need of new markets to exploit for profit. Waging war against Spain provided the perfect opportunity to create colonial relationships with [Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam](#).

Fast forward to 2025. The U.S. imperialist class confronts not the opportunity for expansion, but the reality of irreversible decline. Capital has fled to cheaper labor markets. Productive dominance has evaporated. Dollar hegemony weakens as rival powers build alternative systems. The economic tools that once made overt military conquest unnecessary — sanctions, IMF structural adjustment, trade pressure — are

losing their effectiveness. What remains is naked military force: the last, desperate instrument of an empire that can no longer dominate through economic means alone.

Allegations of “narco terrorism” ring as hollow as William McKinley’s proclamation of Cuban independence on behalf of ultra-wealthy industrialists. Both the current war on Venezuela and the imperialist war with Spain in 1898 were escalations to overt colonial aggression in response to economic contraction.

Organizing to smash the state machine

Countries of the world and the U.S. working class must be prepared to struggle against this escalation and against imperialism as a system at its very core. There will be no inherent withering away of U.S. imperialism, as can be seen in its violent and desperate attempt to reassert control across the globe. Right now, Venezuela is the main target of that ire. However, there is always a new market to conquer or competition to eliminate. U.S. imperialism will not stop unless the working class of the world stops it.

This escalation shows that imperialist war is not a deviation but the regular operation of the capitalist state when its dominance is threatened. As Lenin told us in “State and Revolution,” the working class has no choice but to “crush, smash to atoms, wipe off the face of the earth the bourgeois, even the republican-bourgeois, state machine, the standing army, the police and the bureaucracy and to substitute for them a more democratic state machine.” This prescription for the bourgeois state and social order is more relevant than ever as the U.S. ruling class, using its state apparatus, seeks to reassert itself across the planet.

