

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Why Has the US Attacked Caracas and Captured Venezuela's President?

Trump's unprecedented capture of Nicolás Maduro follows months of military campaign and years of strained relationship

Source: William Christou, TheGuardian.com, January 3, 2026

Overnight on Friday, the US carried out airstrikes across Venezuela, with explosions rocking the capital, Caracas, before dawn. Shortly afterwards, Donald Trump announced that US forces had captured the Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro, and his wife, Cilia Flores, and flown them out of the country.

The stunning attack and unprecedented capture of a sitting president follow months of an intense US pressure campaign against Venezuela. Since September, the US navy has amassed a huge fleet off the Venezuelan coast and carried out airstrikes against alleged drug-trafficking boats in the Caribbean and the Pacific and seized Venezuelan oil tankers. At least 110 people have been killed in the strikes on boats, which human rights groups say could amount to war crimes.

Venezuelan officials have accused the US of trying to gain access to the country's oil reserves, the largest in the world.

The bombardment of Venezuela and the capture of Maduro is a serious and dramatic escalation of the US campaign. The future of Venezuela's ruling regime remains uncertain.

How did we get here?

Since Trump took office for his second term, he has put Maduro squarely in his sights, pursuing a maximum pressure campaign against the Venezuelan regime. He accused Maduro of being behind destabilizing activity in the Americas, including drug trafficking and illegal immigration to the US. In July, the US announced a \$50m (£37m) bounty on Maduro's head, accusing him of being one of the largest narco-traffickers in the world.

Trump's administration declared Venezuelan gangs such as Tren de Aragua as terrorist organizations and began carrying out airstrikes against alleged drug traffickers in the Caribbean Sea. Soon, the US began to seize Venezuelan tankers and build up its military presence in the waters surrounding the South American country.

Trump has openly flirted with the idea of regime change in Venezuela. In late November, Trump gave Maduro an ultimatum to relinquish power, offering him safe passage out of the country. Maduro refused the offer, telling supporters in Venezuela that he did not want "a slave's peace" and accusing the US of wanting control of his country's oil reserves.

As the Trump administration ratcheted up the pressure, the government in Caracas at times seemed bewildered. Maduro repeatedly said Venezuela did not want war with the US, at one point dancing in front of Venezuelan students to the lyrics, "no war, yes peace" and mimicking Trump's double-fist pumping dance move. On Thursday, two days before his capture, Maduro said in a televised interview he would welcome US investment in the country's oil sector.

Why are the US and Venezuela at odds?

Relations between the US and Venezuela have been strained since Hugo Chávez became the president in 1999. A self-professed socialist and anti-imperialist, Chávez angered the US in his opposition to its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as his alliances with countries such as Cuba and Iran. Relations further spiraled after Chávez accused the US of backing a 2002 coup attempt.

To many in the US, particularly in the more hawkish wing of the Republican party, the socialist ideological orientation of Venezuela's government has made it a natural adversary of the US, alongside its ally Cuba.

As Chávez consolidated power, punished political opponents and expropriated much of the country's private sector, the US condemned Venezuela for its poor human rights record. Despite occasional minor thaws in relations between the two countries over the years, the relationship has continued to deteriorate, especially after Maduro took power in 2013.

Under the Trump administration, the US has portrayed the Maduro government as illegitimate, recognizing Juan Guaidó, the speaker of the parliament, as Venezuela's president in 2019. In July 2024, Maduro appeared to suffer a landslide defeat in the presidential election, amid widespread anger at his increasingly authoritarian rule and Venezuela's economic collapse. The Biden administration recognized the opposition candidate Edmundo González as the victor. Detailed voting data released by the opposition and verified by independent experts indicated that González had won the vote, but Maduro clung to power after launching a ferocious crackdown.

In early December, the Trump administration published what it called the "Trump corollary," which said that the western hemisphere must be controlled by the US politically, economically, commercially and militarily. As part of the new Trump doctrine, the US military can be used to gain access to energy and mineral resources in the area.

Who is Nicolás Maduro and why did Trump capture him?

Maduro has been the president of Venezuela since 2013. The former bus driver rose to prominence under Chávez, working as his minister of foreign affairs before becoming the country's president after Chávez's death.

Maduro's rule is considered dictatorial, with the UN estimating in 2019 that more than 20,000 Venezuelans were killed in extrajudicial executions. Key institutions, such as the judiciary, have been eroded under Maduro and the rule of law has deteriorated. Relations with the US have also suffered under his rule.

Over recent months, Trump has repeatedly called for the ousting of Maduro, accusing him of sending drugs and criminals into the US – a claim experts have said lacks evidence.

Despite months of escalating rhetoric, Saturday's capture of the sitting president arrived without warning and Venezuelan authorities seemed to have been caught off guard by the brazen operation.

What happens next?

The future is uncertain. Venezuela's defense minister has vowed to fight on and has called on citizens to unite to resist the foreign "invasion," calling resistance to the US a "fight for freedom."

Though Maduro has been captured, Venezuela's institutions and military appear to be intact. It is unclear if Saturday's attack on Venezuela was the beginning of a wider conflict or a one-off operation. Venezuelan opposition leaders, chief among them the Nobel peace prize winner María Corina Machado, have called for Trump to help support an uprising in the country.

The US has in the past carried out war games to simulate a scenario where Venezuelan leadership was "decapitated." The simulations predicted prolonged chaos, with refugees pouring out of Venezuela and rival groups fighting one another for control of the country.

"You'd have prolonged chaos ... with no clear way out," Douglas Farah, a Latin America expert who helped run the war games, said.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about Trump's attack on Venezuela and the capture of President Maduro? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.