

Paul Gardner Brook

08 January 2026

The Return of the Sheriff: Why President Trump's Arrest of Nicolás Maduro Was Exactly What the World Needed

By Paul Gardner Brook

On January 3, 2026, the world witnessed a watershed moment in the reassertion of American leadership and the enforcement of international accountability: the arrest and extraction of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro by United States special forces. This

bold action, executed with precision during Operation Absolute Resolve, represents far more than the apprehension of a single corrupt leader, it signals the end of an era in which authoritarian thugs have operated with impunity, confident that their positions would shield them from the consequences of their crimes.

The arrest was not merely justified; it was overdue by decades. For too long, particularly since the end of the Cold War, the Western world has watched passively as corrupt politicians, especially those on the Left who espouse anti-capitalist ideologies while enriching themselves through state power, have crippled their nations and threatened global stability. President Trump's decisive action in Venezuela marks a critical turning point: the United States has reasserted itself as the global sheriff, a role that Western civilization desperately needs if it is to survive the manifold threats it faces in the 21st century.

The Legal Foundation: Narco-Terrorism and American Jurisdiction

Critics have rushed to condemn the operation as illegal, a violation of Venezuelan sovereignty, or an act of "kidnapping". These objections crumble upon examination of the robust legal framework supporting Maduro's arrest. The legal grounds are not merely sufficient - they are compelling.

Maduro was originally indicted in March 2020 by a federal grand jury in the Southern District of New York on charges of narco-terrorism conspiracy, cocaine importation conspiracy, and weapons violations. The superseding indictment, unsealed on January 3, 2026, paints a damning picture: Maduro and his associates allegedly conspired with Colombian guerrilla groups,



Paul Gardner Brook

including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), designated by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization to traffic cocaine into the United States.

The centerpiece charge, narco-terrorism under 21 U.S.C. § 960a, is particularly significant. This statute, enacted as part of the PATRIOT Reauthorization Act, specifically targets drug trafficking conducted to provide "anything of pecuniary value" to designated terrorist organizations. The indictment alleges that Maduro exploited his official position to protect cocaine shipments from Colombia through Panama to the United States, provided haven to cartel members, arranged for the transshipment of chemicals used in cocaine production, and orchestrated kidnappings and murders to protect his drug trafficking operations.

Importantly, U.S. jurisdiction extends to these offenses because they produced effects within the United States - specifically, 2,141 pounds of cocaine illegally imported into Miami from Panama under Maduro's protection. The statute explicitly provides for jurisdiction when "after the conduct required for the offense occurs an offender is brought into or found in the United States, even if the conduct required for the offense occurs outside the United States". This extraterritorial reach is not novel; it reflects longstanding principles of U.S. criminal law that permit prosecution of foreign nationals whose crimes harm American citizens or interests.

Moreover, under the well-established Ker-Frisbie doctrine, U.S. courts have jurisdiction over Maduro regardless of the way he was brought to American soil. This principle, reaffirmed repeatedly by the Supreme Court since 1886, holds that once a defendant is physically present before the court, the means of apprehension - even if irregular or involving extraterritorial arrest - does not divest the court of jurisdiction. As one legal analysis notes, "Interestingly, under longstanding U.S. Supreme Court precedent known as the Ker-Frisbie Doctrine, U.S. courts have jurisdiction over Maduro and Flores, notwithstanding the highly irregular manner in which they were brought to this country".

The Noriega precedent is directly applicable. In 1989, the United States invaded Panama and extracted General Manuel Noriega, who was subsequently convicted in federal court on drug trafficking charges and sentenced to 40 years in prison. Like Noriega, Maduro was indicted on federal drug-trafficking charges; like Noriega, he was not recognized by the United States as a legitimate head of state; and like Noriega, his alleged criminal conduct bore no connection to any legitimate governmental function. As legal scholars have noted, "Maduro is not the first de facto ruler to be abducted and brought to the United States for trial".

The Necessity of American Action: Self-Defense Against Narco-Terrorism

The Trump administration's legal justification rests on several pillars beyond the specific narco-terrorism charges. First, the operation was framed as an act of self-defense against a concrete threat to American national security. Secretary of State Marco Rubio articulated this position clearly: Maduro's drug trafficking operations, which flooded American streets with deadly narcotics, constituted "a direct threat to the United States".

Paul Gardner Brook

This is not hyperbole. The designation of illicit fentanyl as a weapon of mass destruction by President Trump in December 2025 underscores the severity of the threat posed by international drug cartels. Fentanyl—often manufactured using precursor chemicals supplied by Chinese companies to Mexican cartels—is the leading cause of death for Americans aged 18-45. Just two milligrams constitutes a lethal dose. The cartels and their state sponsors, including Maduro's regime, have weaponized narcotics as instruments of chemical warfare against the American people.

Second, the operation was conducted under authorities derived from the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) passed by Congress in 2001 and 2002. While originally enacted to combat al-Qaeda and associated terrorist organizations, successive administrations have interpreted these authorizations to extend to drug trafficking organizations that engage in narco-terrorism. In October 2025, President Trump issued a memorandum explicitly declaring an armed conflict against narco-terrorist cartels, branding them unlawful combatants and enemy belligerents. This designation brought the full weight of American war-making authority to bear against these transnational criminal organizations that threaten U.S. national security.

As one legal analysis observed, the Trump administration acted within "the well-trod tradition of justifying limited military action under Article II, emphasizing self-defense and narrow objectives". Operation Absolute Resolve parallels Operation Just Cause, which deposed Noriega in 1989, but it was executed with greater precision, shorter duration, and no American casualties.

The Maduro Arrest Versus the Iran Strikes: Why One Matters More Than the Other

While President Trump's Operation Midnight Hammer in June 2025—striking Iranian nuclear facilities with precision B-2 stealth bombers and bunker-buster munitions—was a dramatic display of American military capability, the arrest of Nicolás Maduro represents a far more significant assertion of American authority and the enforcement of individual accountability. The Iran strikes, while operationally impressive and strategically significant in the context of the Iran-Israel conflict, were directed against physical infrastructure and state military capabilities. They set back Iran's nuclear program by approximately two years and sent a message about American willingness to act decisively. Yet they ultimately targeted facilities, not people, and were executed within the context of a larger regional conflict between Israel and Iran.

The Maduro arrest is categorically different and considerably more consequential for the future of global order. It establishes the principle that no individual, regardless of his position, title, or the traditional respect given to heads of state can hide behind sovereignty to escape accountability for crimes against humanity, drug trafficking, and narco-terrorism. The Iran strikes demonstrated American military supremacy; the Maduro arrest demonstrates American legal authority and the principle that the rule of law transcends borders. One was a tactical military operation in a regional conflict; the other is a precedent-setting arrest that fundamentally redefines what it means to enjoy immunity from international criminal prosecution.

Paul Gardner Brook

Moreover, the Maduro operation achieved a political objective without conventional military force, without killing, and without inflaming regional tensions. It extracted a dangerous criminal from power through precise, surgical use of special operations forces, bringing him to face trial in an American federal court where he will enjoy constitutional protections and due process. By contrast, the Iran strikes, while careful in their targeting and designed to minimize civilian casualties, occurred in the context of an active military conflict and carried the risk of escalation. The Maduro arrest represents the future of American power projection: precise, law-based, and designed to hold individuals accountable rather than to wage war against nations.

The End of Impunity: Politicians Must Be Held Accountable

The deeper significance of Maduro's arrest transcends the legal technicalities of narco-terrorism prosecution. It represents a fundamental assertion of a principle that has been dangerously eroded in recent decades: political leaders must be held accountable for their crimes. They cannot be allowed to act with impunity, hiding behind claims of sovereignty or diplomatic immunity while they plunder their nations, brutalize their people, and threaten international peace and security.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned in September 2024 that "the level of impunity in the world is politically indefensible and morally intolerable". He noted that "a growing number of Governments and others feel entitled to a 'get out of jail free' card. They can trample international law, violate the Charter of the United Nations, turn a blind eye to international human rights conventions or the decisions of international courts, invade another country, lay waste to whole societies or utterly disregard the welfare of their own people".

Maduro exemplifies precisely this culture of impunity. Under his rule a continuation of the destructive policies initiated by Hugo Chávez - Venezuela experienced the largest peacetime economic collapse in modern Western Hemisphere history, losing roughly 70% of its GDP since 2013. Hyperinflation peaked at over 130,000% in 2018. Food shortages became endemic as price controls and nationalizations destroyed productive capacity. Nearly 90% of Venezuelans lived in poverty. More than seven million Venezuelans fled the country as refugees.

This catastrophe was not the result of external sanctions or capitalist exploitation, as Maduro repeatedly claimed. It was the inevitable consequence of socialist economic policies: price controls that destroyed incentives for production, nationalization of industries that eliminated private enterprise, currency controls that choked off imports, and corruption that siphoned billions of dollars from state coffers into the pockets of the ruling elite. Maduro blamed "economic war" waged by capitalists and imperialists, but the real war was waged by his regime against the Venezuelan people and against the principles of free-market capitalism that have lifted billions out of poverty worldwide.

Paul Gardner Brook

The charges against Maduro detail how he transformed Venezuela's state apparatus into a criminal enterprise. He allegedly sold diplomatic passports to drug traffickers, provided military protection for cocaine shipments, arranged for seized drugs to be returned to cartels for trafficking, and ordered kidnappings and murders of those who threatened his operations. This was not governance; it was racketeering masquerading as a socialist revolution.

The Post-Cold War Failure: How Corruption and Anti-Capitalism Have Crippled the World

Maduro's regime is emblematic of a broader malaise that has infected global politics since the end of the Cold War: the proliferation of corrupt, authoritarian governments, particularly those espousing leftist ideologies that have enriched themselves while impoverishing their peoples and destabilizing the international order.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 should have inaugurated a period of democratic consolidation and economic liberalization. Instead, we have witnessed the rise of what scholars' term "authoritarian international law" - a system in which autocratic regimes use international legal frameworks not to promote justice and accountability, but to shield themselves from criticism and extend their illiberal influence. Russia and China have led this effort, wielding their veto power in the UN Security Council to protect authoritarian allies like Bashar al-Assad in Syria. They have promoted a vision of international law centered on absolute sovereignty and non-interference that effectively grants dictators license to brutalize their own populations with impunity.

Meanwhile, transnational kleptocracy has become a defining feature of the post-Cold War order. Authoritarian leaders divert public resources to their own pockets, hide the proceeds offshore in Western financial centers, and use that wealth to corrupt both foreign and domestic institutions. The Biden administration belatedly recognized this threat, making anti-corruption a stated priority, but failed to take the decisive action necessary to confront it. Words without enforcement mechanisms are meaningless.

The ideological dimension cannot be ignored. Many of the most corrupt and destabilizing regimes of the past three decades have been explicitly anti-capitalist in their rhetoric, even as their leaders have enriched themselves through state control of resources and industries. From Venezuela to Zimbabwe, from Nicaragua to North Korea, we have seen variations on a theme: socialist or communist governments that promise equality and social justice but deliver poverty, repression, and corruption.

These regimes pose a particular danger because they reject the fundamental principles that underpin Western civilization: individual liberty, property rights, the rule of law, and market economics. As David Murrin has argued in his geopolitical analyses, we are witnessing the decline phase of Western hegemony, characterized by rigid, linear thinking and an inability to adapt to new threats. The post-Cold War era has seen Western powers, particularly under Democratic and

Paul Gardner Brook

left-leaning administrations engage in what amounts to systematic appeasement of authoritarian adversaries.

The Obama administration's weakness was particularly pronounced. Its intervention in Libya lacked congressional authorization and left behind a failed state. Its "red line" in Syria proved empty, emboldening Assad and Putin. Its nuclear deal with Iran enriched a terrorist-sponsoring regime without meaningfully constraining its nuclear ambitions. Throughout these failures ran a common thread: a refusal to use American power decisively to defend Western interests and values, combined with a naive belief that authoritarian regimes could be reasoned with or integrated into a rules-based international order they had no intention of respecting.

Western Civilization Under Siege: Why Heavy-Handed Measures Are Essential

The stakes extend beyond Venezuela. The core Western pillars of liberty, democracy, law, and markets are being attacked at once by authoritarian regimes abroad and corrupt elites at home.

Externally, authoritarian powers like China and Russia seek to establish alternative models of governance that reject liberal democracy in favor of state control and nationalist mobilization. They exploit Western openness to corrupt democratic institutions, spread disinformation, and extend their influence through economic coercion and military intimidation. Internally, Western societies are fracturing under the weight of identity politics, fiscal irresponsibility, demographic decline, and a loss of civilizational confidence.

President Trump's defense of "Western civilization" in his 2017 Warsaw speech was entirely appropriate and necessary. He called on the West to summon "the courage and the will to defend our civilization" and to stand for "the great civilized ideas: individual liberty, representative government, and the rule of law under God". These are not, as leftist critics claimed, coded appeals to white nationalism. They are universal values that emanated from the West - from Greek democracy, through Magna Carta and the Renaissance, to the Enlightenment principles that inspired America's founding - but which belong to all humanity.

The notion that defending Western civilization is somehow bigoted represents a catastrophic failure of moral and intellectual clarity. As one scholar noted, "Western values are universal values". They have done more to ease human suffering, expand human freedom, and increase human prosperity than any other system of thought in history. To refuse to defend them is to abandon billions of people to tyranny and poverty.

This defense requires more than rhetoric; it requires action. And sometimes that action must be forceful. The world does not respect weakness. Authoritarian regimes interpret restraint as permission and diplomatic niceties as vulnerability. President Putin invaded Ukraine because he calculated that the West lacked the will to stop him. China threatens Taiwan because it doubts American resolve. Iran pursued nuclear weapons because it believed America would not act.

Paul Gardner Brook

The American Sheriff: Why U.S. Leadership Is Indispensable

The post-Cold War period has been marked by confusion about America's proper role in the world. Should the United States continue to act as the guarantor of international security, or should it retreat into a more isolationist posture? The question has divided both political parties, with libertarian Republicans and progressive Democrats often finding common cause in opposition to American interventionism.

This debate fundamentally misunderstands the nature of global order. As Richard Haass argued in his seminal work *The Reluctant Sheriff*, the United States must adopt the role of "global sheriff" in the post-Cold War world—forging coalitions to address specific challenges and maintaining a rules-based order that prevents the emergence of new great-power conflicts. The alternative is not a more peaceful world in which nations resolve their disputes through international institutions and diplomatic dialogue; the alternative is chaos, with regional powers filling the vacuum left by American withdrawal and authoritarian regimes operating with impunity.

The evidence is overwhelming: when America leads, the world is more stable, more prosperous, and freer. The Pax Americana that followed World War II created an unprecedented period of peace among great powers, facilitated the most dramatic expansion of global trade and economic development in human history, and saw the spread of democracy to regions that had never known it. This was not accidental; it was the result of American leadership backed by American power.

President Trump understands this reality in a way that his predecessor did not. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy, despite its flaws and internal contradictions, represents a fundamental shift back toward American assertiveness. It explicitly rejects the Obama-era emphasis on "international order" divorced from American interests and instead focuses on defending Western civilization and American leadership. It designates drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and authorizes military action against them. It reasserts the Monroe Doctrine for the 21st century, declaring the Western Hemisphere a sphere of vital American interest.

Critics have attacked this strategy as neo-imperialism or unilateralism. They miss the point. American leadership is not imperialism; it is the exercise of hegemonic power in defense of a liberal international order that benefits not just the United States but all nations that embrace free markets, democratic governance, and the rule of law. And when that leadership occasionally requires unilateral action, as in the case of Maduro, it is because multilateral institutions have failed to address threats that directly harm American citizens and interests.

The UN Security Council, paralyzed by Russian and Chinese vetoes, is incapable of authorizing action against rogue regimes that enjoy the patronage of authoritarian great powers. The International Criminal Court lacks the enforcement mechanisms to bring powerful leaders to justice. Regional organizations like the Organization of American States issue resolutions but

Paul Gardner Brook

lack the will or capacity to compel compliance. In this environment, American action, backed by American military power, becomes the only effective means of enforcing accountability.

The Venezuela Precedent: Implications for Global Order

Operation Absolute Resolve sets a precedent that will reverberate far beyond Caracas. It demonstrates that leaders who traffic narcotics into the United States, sponsor terrorism, brutalize their populations, and destabilize their regions cannot hide behind claims of sovereignty. It establishes that the United States will act unilaterally when necessary to defend its interests and its citizens, regardless of the objections of authoritarian powers or nervous allies.

Some will argue that this precedent is dangerous, that it gives license to other powerful nations to violate sovereignty and kidnap foreign leaders they find objectionable. This is a false equivalence. There is a fundamental difference between the United States - a democratic nation operating under the rule of law and accountable to its citizens taking action against a narco-terrorist dictator who has been duly indicted by a federal grand jury, and an authoritarian regime like Russia or China abducting dissidents or opposition leaders for political purposes.

The distinction lies in legitimacy and accountability. American actions are authorized by democratically elected officials, scrutinized by a free press, and subject to judicial review. Maduro received a fair trial before a federal judge, with legal representation and all the constitutional protections afforded to criminal defendants in the United States. This is not kidnapping; it is law enforcement. This is not imperialism; it is justice.

Moreover, the alternative to American action is not a more orderly world governed by international institutions; it is a world in which authoritarian regimes operate with complete impunity. As Maduro himself demonstrated, dictators who know they will never face consequences have no incentive to moderate their behavior. They will continue to traffic drugs, launder money, sponsor terrorism, and brutalize their populations - secure in the knowledge that no one will stop them.

Conclusion: A New Era of Accountability

President Trump's arrest of Nicolás Maduro marks a turning point. It signals the end of an era in which corrupt politicians could operate with impunity, confident that their positions would shield them from accountability. It demonstrates that the United States will defend its citizens and interests with decisive action when necessary. And it reasserts American leadership at a time when Western civilization desperately needs a sheriff willing to enforce the rules.

The legal grounds for the arrest are solid: Maduro was indicted on narco-terrorism charges under statutes specifically designed to combat the nexus between drug trafficking and terrorism. The operational justification is compelling: his drug trafficking operations posed a direct threat to American national security. And the moral imperative is overwhelming: a dictator who

Paul Gardner Brook

impoverished his nation, enriched himself through criminal enterprise, and flooded American streets with deadly narcotics had forfeited any claim to immunity.

For too long, particularly since the end of the Cold War, the world has watched-on as corrupt politicians, especially those on the Left espousing anti-capitalist ideologies, have crippled nations and threatened global stability while facing no consequences. It was overdue for the United States to reassert itself as the global sheriff, to demonstrate that actions have consequences and that power does not confer immunity from justice.

The survival of Western civilization requires this kind of leadership. It requires a willingness to defend our values, individual liberty, property rights, the rule of law, and market economics - not just with words but with actions. It requires the recognition that authoritarian adversaries respect only strength and that diplomatic engagement unsupported by the credible threat of force is an invitation to aggression. And it requires the moral clarity to distinguish between legitimate exercises of American power in defense of universal values and the naked aggression of authoritarian regimes pursuing narrow interests.

President Trump has demonstrated that moral clarity. By arresting Maduro, he has sent a message that will resonate in Havana, Tehran, Pyongyang, and Beijing: the era of impunity is over. Those who threaten American interests, traffic in deadly narcotics, and brutalize their people will face consequences. This is not warmongering; it is deterrence. This is not imperialism; it is leadership. And it is exactly what the world needs.

The arrest of Nicolás Maduro was not just legally justified - it was morally imperative. It represents the reassertion of American power in defense of Western civilization, the enforcement of accountability against corrupt authoritarian regimes, and the restoration of a global order in which rules matter and dictators cannot act with impunity. For that, we should be grateful. And for that, President Trump deserves recognition as a leader willing to do what his predecessors would not: defend the West with the full force of American power.

Paul Gardner Brook is an investment banker and a close observer of global geopolitics. The views expressed here are his own.