

What the hell happened when the US kidnapped Maduro?

The Grayzone's Max Blumenthal and Anya Parampil discuss various theories about the US raid on Caracas and abduction of Venezuelan President Maduro the day after it took place. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

#Max

Hey, what's up, everybody? Welcome to The Grayzone. It's kind of an emergency stream. About 12 hours ago, the U.S. regime attacked Venezuela—attacked Caracas—with a combined assault of special forces, Delta Force, and something like 150 aircraft, following months of a siege on Venezuela and a massive naval show of force. This culminated in the kidnapping of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, who are to be taken to the Guantánamo Bay prison run by the United States—territory taken from Cuba—until they're brought to New York, where they'll be put on trial in the Southern District Court of New York. Well, yeah, it's been a long night and day following this, and we have our—well, you know, there are a lot of theories to entertain.

That was actually a preview of what I have to say later. You know, I'd heard some ruminations about some kind of deal to shunt Maduro aside, but I was very surprised by the violent assault on Caracas—by the sheer gangsterism on display—although it's in keeping with what Trump has been doing across the world. He apparently delayed this bombing because he wanted to bomb Nigeria first, the country with the largest oil reserves in Africa. But Anya, you've been covering Venezuela for as long as I have, and you actually produced a pretty valuable book about it, **Corporate Coup**, which everyone watching here should get. That's what it looks like—a portrait of a corporate business executive holding a Molotov cocktail on the cover—which I think is pretty apt for the moment we're in now, as Trump announces that the U.S. is going to take ownership of Venezuela and make a lot of money. Anya, what's your reaction to what just took place? What's going on here?

#Anya

On January 3rd—the anniversary of the similar operation in Panama that removed Manuel Noriega—that really stuck out to me when someone pointed it out. There must be some synchronicity in these dates, or maybe, I don't know, some online people who are into numerology or astrology or any of that occult study could illuminate why that date came up twice in such a blatant act of U.S. aggression in the region—an act of what I guess Donald Trump is now calling the Monroe Doctrine.

That's what he said during his press conference today, about exercising force against sovereign nations in our hemisphere. I'm shocked that this seemed to take place with little resistance from the Venezuelan side.

What surprises me the most is that this was even possible to begin with, because this is Venezuela. It's a serious country with a serious military. They have anti-aircraft weapons that could have easily taken those helicopters out of the sky. From what I understand, weapons not even as sophisticated as anti-aircraft ones could have taken them down, considering they flew so low. It also reminds me of what happened to Manuel Zelaya in Honduras back in—what was it—2009, when the Obama administration oversaw a coup in which the Honduran military entered the presidential home, dragged Zelaya out of bed in his pajamas, and put him on a flight to Costa Rica.

This is far more flagrant because it actually involved the U.S. military. It's beyond an act of war—kidnapping the president of a country. I can only imagine how Americans would feel about that. I know they wouldn't be happy if it happened here. I think even if it were someone like Donald Trump kidnapped by the Russians, you'd see a lot of Democrats upset about it. So to see so many Venezuelans online cheering this is... well, I guess these people are now just open about the fact that they want a war on their own country. And they know that ultimately, the regime is still intact. The regime is not just one man.

Maduro was not a totalitarian dictator. That's not even what I think the U.S. has tried to paint him as. But the system—the party he represented, Chavismo, the movement that has existed in Venezuela for over 20 years and ruled the country for over 20 years—is still firmly in place, both in the streets and in the military, from what we can see. So it's not actually a regime change that has taken place here, as far as I'm concerned. It's more of a shuffling of the cards, or the face, of Chavismo. And that raises questions about how any of this was allowed to happen and who had an interest in getting Maduro out of the picture. I think those are legitimate questions to raise at this point.

And I think that anybody looking at Venezuela as an outside observer would benefit from understanding that no country is one-dimensional, two-dimensional, or even three-dimensional. There are so many layers, factions, and interests at play, even within a political movement like Chavismo, that openings like this are possible. And honestly, what stands out to me again is that it reminds me a lot of the Syria case, where when Syria fell last year, it was in no way at the height of the dirty war against the country. It was not at their worst moment. And it's the same thing with Venezuela. I write in the book about how the peak of the dirty war—the financial war—

#Max

Kind of a hybrid war.

#Anya

The hybrid war, in terms of suffering on the ground in Venezuela, was several years ago—around 2015 to 2017. Since 2019, there was another downturn because of the oil sanctions that Trump introduced, but they've actually been on the up and up since then. They had the election in 2024, which Maduro declared victory in, and the opposition definitely saw that as a moment—and the U.S. saw it as a moment—to try and seize power again. But he succeeded in keeping power, regardless of what you think about how that election was conducted. He succeeded.

So in a lot of ways, it felt as if Venezuela had defeated this regime-change war, that they were actually doing better, that they were on the up. And just like Syria, to wake up one day and find out the president is gone—it feels as if the empire comes forward, puts a card on the table, and says, "Yep, this is it. It's done." For whatever reason, what we thought—or what appeared to be—a strong government just collapses, and not even at a time when it made sense. So I definitely think that suggests there are many interests at play here, and that the United States was probably able to exploit a very tricky situation.

#Max

So I was planning to go through Trump's press conference right away, but you brought up the possibility of some kind of negotiated exit, which has been—well, we've seen lots of rumors about it, reported by places like Sky News and other corporate media outlets. There's been a lot of discussion about it. You've mentioned it on Twitter. Should we talk about it now? Yeah, we might as well. All right, well, I just want to highlight something I said in our last live stream, and also some comments you made today on Twitter. This will be me with A.A. Ron from our last stream in 2025. I said four days ago that I speculated Trump did not take María Corina Machado seriously and was therefore determined to force a managed coup ordeal to replace Maduro with someone inside the Chavista camp.

Not sure if that's what went down, but even if it were, it happened. It might not resolve so cleanly. So here's that clip of me just kind of calling it. If anything—and I just get this vibe when I read the mainstream media coverage and hear what Trump officials are saying—they're not really pumping up María Corina. So they must be trying to finagle some kind of deal where Maduro leaves, and then they claim they'll get some more moderate figure from within the Chavista realm, and then they can start whittling them down. But that's not going to happen without the involvement of a figure like Diosdado Cabello, who's in the Maduro administration but really holds a lot of sway among the military.

All right, so that's a plausible scenario now, and we'll get into Trump's comments, which actually back up the possibility of that kind of outcome. But here's what you said today, in more detail, citing your sources. Multiple U.S. sources told me over the holiday weeks that the Trump administration was not serious about installing María Corina Machado and instead proposed a deal in which Maduro would leave and be replaced by Delcy Rodríguez. This now appears to be what Venezuela got by

force. One source told me the deal was ill-fated because Venezuela's military would not necessarily accept that change. I pray that this criminal attack from the U.S. does not plunge the country into civil war. And yeah, you have good sources.

Well, we kind of share sources because we share a roof, and we have multiple. So I'd say we have multiple sources who've been close to the negotiations or have some knowledge of what's been going on behind the scenes in Washington and Caracas. And, you know, it's still not clear—speaking for myself—exactly whether this went down, or what exactly went down. But then, when Trump's press conference took place, he made some comments that really reinforced what we were hearing. This might not be all of it, but it's part of it. And StreamYard makes it really hard to get stuff on screen these days. So the question was, "Have you heard of the location of the opposition leader, Machado, and have you been in touch with her?" And Trump then makes some pretty brutal comments.

#Speaker 03

They're asking all about Monday.

#Trump

I think it would be very tough for her to be the leader. She doesn't have the support or the respect within the country. She's a very nice woman, but she just doesn't have the respect.

#Max

So, pretty brutal. And then he goes on to say that Marco Rubio has been talking to Delcy Rodríguez and that, in Trump's words, "she'll do whatever we want." So how do you interpret all of this, based on the comments you made today—what you were hearing from your sources, and I guess our sources—and what Trump said and what we're seeing? And also, we should mention Diosdado Cabello, who is an extremely important figure. There's this triad in what was the Maduro administration: Maduro and his wife; then you have Delcy and her brother, Jorge Rodríguez—they're a power faction—and then you have Diosdado Cabello, who has massive support within the military and the colectivos, who are kind of like the militant supporters in the street. And Diosdado Cabello—there was this rumor that he was assassinated—but he's been out in the street with armed men. Delcy Rodríguez has now delivered messages; she's been sworn in as president. What do you think went down with Maduro's kidnapping, and where is this leading?

#Anya

I hate to speculate, because—well, we have more than speculation. Yes, we do have good sources. And I should say that when I say "multiple sources," they're not just people all hanging out in the same room and confirming things so we can call it multiple people. These are people from different

worlds who are both privy to these negotiations and the deals that were put forward—and not just both, actually, many. I would say, yeah, multiple sources. Right, and these aren't people who know each other necessarily or hang out. No, exactly. So I know some people might say, "Oh, multiple sources—well, it's just two people who were negotiating together and told you." No, it's more than that. So I feel confident saying that there was a deal put forward in the last few weeks that did ask Maduro to step aside and simply put Delcy in his place.

And if you look at it from a face-saving perspective, you can see how that's a good off-ramp for the Trump administration if they don't want to go fully into Venezuela with the military or push Machado in some way when they don't have confidence in her—which, I was told, is the case. They don't believe she's viable, and Trump confirmed that today. So what you have then is a dynamic in which, if that was put out there, it could have caused some tensions in Caracas. I can only imagine that was probably even the goal of putting forward such a plan.

And to just see Maduro dragged out of his home in his pajamas—it just feels too bizarre to me that that actually happened, because I don't think the Venezuelans are incompetent. I'm really just shocked by that image. And it makes me wonder about that deal that was put forward earlier, because now they got that either way. And it's not like we're necessarily going to get the truth out of the Trump administration or the Venezuelan side right now. I think it's probably more complicated than either side is going to let on.

But I do know definitely that Delcy herself and her brother already were possibly the most powerful duo in Venezuela—Maduro and his wife being very powerful, of course—but when you step back and actually look at the government, Delcy's the vice president. She's acted as the economy minister, she's the head of PDVSA, the oil company, and her brother is the leader of the parliament, though the parliament is supposed to be sworn in this next week. So they've accumulated a lot of power over the last few years, and she's a natural successor to Maduro in that way. But as I said earlier, these kinds of relationships, I think, are more complicated than Americans can really process.

#Max

Well, we've met Delcy Rodríguez and her brother Jorge, and I interviewed her in her office. She's a very effective communicator, and she's extremely open to courting media and political figures from around the world. I think she was probably a name that was unknown to most Americans—all these CNN hosts just reading off cards from their producers, who have no idea what's going on, had never heard of her. But she was one of the most powerful women in Latin America for years. And her brother—any Venezuelan knows that he's a powerful figure, a former communications minister as well.

They're the children of Jorge Antonio Rodríguez, who was tortured to death during the Fourth Republic—the kind of democracy the United States wants to restore in Venezuela. In 1976, while in prison, he was a revolutionary leader in Venezuela's left at the time. Under the Acción Democrática

government of Carlos Andrés Pérez, which was center-left, social democratic, but also kind of run by the IMF, they wanted to neutralize the socialist left. So they ran a dirty war and disappeared, I think, over a thousand people. She comes from that legacy and that tradition. That's why I asked her about it at the end of our interview, which mostly focused on economic and hybrid warfare against Venezuela and how they were responding—how they were dealing with COVID, and so on.

And she got very emotional. So the question is, if Delcy Rodríguez is going to be president for now, is she going to maintain the Chavista character—economically, politically, ideologically—of a government that hasn't been decapitated but has seen its leadership destroyed, absconded, kidnapped, abused by the U.S. regime? And we've also seen the bombing, apparently by the U.S., of the mausoleum of Hugo Chávez at Cuatro F, the Cuartel de la Montaña, where we visited—where each day a cannon is fired to commemorate the Bolivarian Revolution. So the central symbol of Chavismo and the Bolivarian Revolution was attacked. Yet Delcy, Padrino López, and Diosdado Cabello remain. Can we assume that Chavismo is still in effect? And then, where does Rubio go with that?

#Anya

Chavismo is still in power. So it could have been as simple as the fact that Trump was so obsessed with Maduro—he had made Maduro the issue and gone so far with this war that he needed a trophy. Removing Maduro was the best they could do, even though they knew that going further or actually forcing regime change was impossible. So I think that could have been the scenario. And for whatever reason, somehow it played out in Venezuela the way they wanted it to.

#Max

Yeah, it gives Trump kind of a climb-down. One theory is that it gives Trump a way to climb down, and he gets to reenact Panama and seem like Rambo—a major PR win—does a fake drug trial.

#Anya

Right.

#Max

Even though his whole press conference was about stealing Venezuela's oil, he barely even mentioned drugs. When he did, Marco Rubio seemed to get nervous for some reason. But there's that theory that this is Trump's exit strategy—except he's also threatened to go back in. So how do you take over Venezuela, as he's pledged to do, when these Chavista figures are still in power unless they've just ceded control and given up on Chavismo? I don't see what the political plan is.

#Anya

There isn't one. I think the political bet, perhaps, is that they thought by removing Maduro, it could ignite so much chaos and instability that it would allow them to come in, exploit the situation, and install someone they wanted. So right now, the Venezuelans have to demonstrate that they have the situation under control and that there is unity behind Delcy and the military. The U.S. was probably hoping—especially by saying these things about Delcy—to stir the pot and create a situation where people are vying for power or trying to remove her. I don't think the Venezuelans will necessarily fall for that right away. I think they're going to try to just maintain order in the country, and that there's no way for the U.S. to actually take the oil without going in with U.S. troops and fighting the Venezuelan military. I don't know if the Venezuelan military made a great showing yesterday, but I don't—I just...

#Max

Yeah, that's a question. And there's that question, and then I have one more—just about the possible kind of deal-making, or dirty deal-making. My fear is, when I saw that Nicolás Maduro had been captured—why are they saying “captured”? He's not captured; he's been kidnapped. He's a hostage of the U.S. regime. This is completely illegal gangsterism, such as it is. How is that possible? How is it possible to do such a clean Delta Force raid unless somebody sold them out or there was a deal? That was just my first initial thought.

#Anya

It's either that or total incompetence, and I just can't accept that.

#Max

Yeah, and Chinook helicopters were circling so low over Caracas that, you know, it could have turned into a Black Hawk Down scenario—getting hit with an RPG, like we saw in Mogadishu. They didn't need advanced aircraft systems, but they were just proceeding without any apparent resistance. And now you see the colectivos out on the streets, the supporters of Chavismo out fighting. Was this choreographed? That's a question that lingers and will have to be answered by the new Venezuelan leadership, because I think everyone's asking that right now.

#Anya

And at what point did Maduro—I mean, it's really stunning. It's another one of those images in my lifetime that I couldn't believe, whether it's Saddam getting hung or Gaddafi murdered like that. In this case, thank God there was no death. That, I think, would have been something the region wouldn't have been able to take. I think it would have become a disaster. But this is bad enough—this image of Maduro in his pajamas on a plane, blindfolded. You know, this is the president of a country, and you don't have to think he's perfect or anything, but he was really beloved by his people. I saw it firsthand. He's a very—uh, you know, we've met him, you've interviewed him—and it'

s just shocking to see someone who was in that position marched out by the U.S. military in that way. I don't know. I mean, people are saying if it's choreographed, does that mean he negotiated his exit this way? I don't think so.

#Max

But Trump has denied that he negotiated his exit. Essentially, Trump said he refused to leave under what he called "colonial orders."

#Anya

And so, it's possible he refused a deal, and then it was carried out by force.

#Max

And the CIA is leaking that they had some insider, but they also have this story out there, through all their propagandists on CNN, that they followed his movements carefully—and this is what they do with terrorists: pattern-of-life analysis. What is pattern-of-life analysis, John Miller? Well, it's what we do against terrorists.

#Anya

As if it's that hard to know where the president of a foreign country sleeps.

#Max

Yeah, I mean, he was doing interviews in vehicles he was driving up until two days ago, so it wasn't like he was hiding. He was singing "Don't Worry, Be Happy" at public rallies. His pattern of life was pretty open—maybe it should have been more vigilant. It seems like he may have thought there was a deal on the table that could have avoided this kind of violence.