

Venezuela's Two Presidents Collide

Juan Guaidó's uprising, backed by the U.S., failed to depose Nicolás Maduro—but his supporters remain loyal. Will the country's divisions lead to an international crisis?

By [Jon Lee Anderson](#)

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After a failed uprising, Juan Guaidó has refused to relinquish his claim to the Presidency. "Hope was not born in order to die, Venezuela!" he tweeted.

There are a few rules for how to topple a government. Make sure that you have the military on your side, or at least enough of it to dissuade unsympathetic soldiers from intervening. Spread money around, to inspire loyalty. Determine which part of the populace will join your uprising, which part will resist, and which part will stand aside and watch. Neutralize the resistance quickly; take over the media so that you can disseminate orders. Once the ruler is displaced, kill him or hustle him out of the country as fast as you can.

When Juan Guaidó, the leader of Venezuela's uprising, announced the "final phase of Operation Freedom," on April 30th, he seemed to have done none of those things. He arrived before dawn outside the La Carlota airbase, in Caracas, and recorded a video declaring that the time had come to force out the country's increasingly tyrannical ruler, Nicolás Maduro. Guaidó, thirty-five years old, had recently been named the speaker of the National Assembly, and he looked a bit surprised to find himself where he was. With a few dozen military sympathizers at his side, he said, "There have been years of sacrifice. There have been years of persecution. There have been years of fear, even. Today, that fear is overcome."

The previous May, Maduro had been elected to a second six-year term, but the election was widely viewed as illegitimate. One criticism was that his principal rivals were either in exile, under house arrest, or banned from political activity. Another was that his first term had been so disastrous that an honest victory seemed inconceivable.

Maduro had entered government as a protégé of the charismatic leftist Hugo Chávez, who ruled for fourteen years and used the country's oil wealth to bolster a "Pink Tide" of socialist-leaning governments in Latin America. Since Chávez's death, in 2013, Maduro has presided over Venezuela's unravelling. Its economy collapsed as the price of crude oil fell; corruption and mismanagement made things worse. Hyperinflation, which is expected to reach ten million per cent this year, has left the currency worthless. Hunger and disease are epidemic. In Caracas, people go panning in the filthy water of the Guaire River for gold jewelry that has been dropped down sinks; butchers sell cow hooves to customers desperate for protein; women give up careers to work as prostitutes in neighboring countries. More than ten per cent of Venezuela's population has fled. Maduro has responded blithely, alternately denying the problems and advising his departed citizens to "stop cleaning toilets abroad and come home."

The current crisis began in 2016, when the National Assembly launched a referendum to remove Maduro from power, and he responded by creating a rival legislature, filled with his loyalists. Months of demonstrations followed, and more than a hundred protesters were killed. As tensions rose, the persecution of political dissidents, whom Maduro has derided to me as “counter-revolutionaries,” grew more common. Last August, as Maduro presided over a military parade, an armed drone exploded overhead, in an apparent assassination attempt. No one died, but an opposition politician named Fernando Albán was arrested. Three days later, he fell to his death from the tenth floor of the intelligence headquarters. The official explanation was suicide, but rumors persisted that agents had drowned him in “the bathtub,” a local equivalent of waterboarding, and then thrown his body out a window.

At a rally on January 23rd, Guaidó invoked a constitutional clause to assert that Maduro’s sham election had rendered the office vacant, and to name himself Venezuela’s legitimate leader. Since then, the country has been caught in a seesawing conflict between two Presidents—one spuriously elected but backed by the armed forces, the other self-proclaimed but endorsed by much of the Western world.

Since taking office, Donald Trump has frequently called for Maduro to be removed, by military coup if necessary. Within minutes of Guaidó’s speech, Trump publicly recognized him as the rightful leader of Venezuela. John Bolton, Trump’s pugnacious national-security adviser, added a warning: “Any violence and intimidation against U.S. diplomatic personnel, Venezuela’s democratic leader, Juan Guaido, or the National Assembly itself would represent a grave assault on the rule of law and will be met with a significant response.” More than fifty other governments, including those of Canada and most countries in the European Union, quickly endorsed Guaidó. His supporters began referring to him as “Presidente” and to Maduro as “the usurper.”

When the final phase of Operation Freedom commenced, though, it was a disaster. At the airbase, Guaidó’s political mentor, Leopoldo López, appeared unexpectedly, after several years under house arrest, but stood by silently, looking wary and slightly dazed. Guaidó’s speech for the video cameras seemed hastily improvised. In the middle of it, a cell phone rang for several seconds before someone turned it off. “Today, brave soldiers, brave patriots, brave men loyal to the Constitution have responded to our call,” Guaidó announced. But not many soldiers seemed to be joining the fight. A few thousand civilians gathered near La Carlota, where loyalist troops surrounded them, sometimes firing guns. Assault vehicles drove through the crowds, scattering the protesters. Within a few hours, the soldiers who had joined Guaidó sought refuge in the Brazilian Embassy. That evening, Maduro gave a speech, claiming victory over a small group of plotters who had “handed their souls over to the coup-mongering far right.”

For three days, Guaidó was missing, and rumors spread that he was sleeping at a different foreign embassy every night. Finally, he appeared at a press conference, in the back yard of a house belonging to political allies. Despite the mayhem in the country, Guaidó smiled imperturbably and flashed a thumbs-up. When asked

about the *fracaso*—the failed uprising—he had a ready answer. “It’s true that Maduro, the usurper, is still in power,” he said. “And that’s a *fracaso* for all Venezuela. But we are going to continue going forward, to fight for change.” Guaidó’s calm determination suggested a young man with unusual political acumen, and also one with powerful friends.

One morning in March, a few weeks before the uprising, Guaidó took me with him to Vargas, his home state, on the Caribbean coast. For the trip, an hour’s drive from Guaidó’s apartment in Caracas, we sat in the back of an armored S.U.V. A man in owlish glasses sat between us. He introduced himself as David, the President’s astrologer.

As we set out, David said that he hoped we wouldn’t meet any *colectivos*—groups of paramilitary thugs, who roam around on motorcycles, shooting at anti-government protesters. The *colectivos*, he declared, were “*la encarnación del mal*”—the incarnation of evil—and “representatives of the Devil on earth.”

Riding in front was Guaidó’s chief of staff, Roberto Marrero. An extroverted man with a goatee and the demeanor of a stage villain, Marrero lightened the mood by playing us a video clip on his phone. It showed a young man riffing on an irreverent taunt that has become a ritual across Venezuela: one person shouts “Maduro!” and everyone within earshot shouts back “*Coño e’ tu madre!*” —a supremely rude reference to his mother’s anatomy. (In Buenos Aires, where there is a burgeoning Venezuelan expat community, a sympathizer recently opened a restaurant called Maduro Coño e’ Tu Madre.) In Marrero’s clip, the young man had turned the taunt into a rap, with a reggaetón beat and a raucous chorus harmonizing in the background. Marrero said delightedly, “That’s Vargas style, man. It’s where we’re going.”

Along the highway that leads down the mountain from Caracas to the sea, Guaidó pointed out the spot where he had been arrested by Maduro’s intelligence agents. It had happened on January 13th, eight days after his inauguration as speaker, during which he had condemned Maduro as “illegitimate.” He was held for only a few hours, but passing drivers had caught the arrest on camera; they spread video of it on social media, causing a global outcry and galvanizing the opposition. Guaidó quickly became the center of an international effort to depose an autocrat.

Everything has happened fast for Guaidó, and at times his inexperience shows. During our car trip, he was boyishly restless, drumming on his knees and distractedly whistling a tune. At one point, he recalled an encounter he’d had the previous day, when a little girl approached him and proclaimed, “*Queremos futuro*”—“We want a future.” Guaidó repeated the phrase several times, imitating her falsetto, before breaking into a giggle. Someone who works closely with the Trump Administration on Venezuela policy told me, “Look, Guaidó is not yet a leader. But you have to understand, the Venezuelans are so desperate at this point that if you put a dog on a podium they’d vote for it.”

He was very much an accidental President. The job of speaker of the National Assembly rotates among parties; when the new term began, last December, it happened to be his party’s turn. There were three people ahead of Guaidó for the job. But Leopoldo López, the head of the party, was under house arrest; his second-

in-command had been forced into exile; and the third man was under political asylum in the Chilean Embassy.

Guaidó was young, likable, and a quick learner, and, in a country where all the experienced politicians had failed, he was a virtual unknown. Unlike most Venezuelan officials, he did not seem to be personally corrupt. Slim and fresh-faced, with brown skin and a wide smile, Guaidó invites comparisons to the young Barack Obama, a perception that he has encouraged by adopting the slogan “Yes, we can!” Chely Escalona, one of Guaidó’s former schoolteachers, told me, “Let’s be honest here. Juan Guaidó is an ordinary guy, nothing special about him. A nice guy, yes, but ordinary. And that’s fine! We have to get past this strongman fixation we have in Venezuela.”

Guaidó grew up, with four siblings, in a suburb of La Guaira, a port town at the foot of the jungly mountains below Caracas. As we reached the coast and began driving east, he pointed out familiar places. There was the international airport of Maiquetía, where his father once worked as a pilot. There was a series of white sandy beaches and beat-up resort hotels—a traditional weekend escape for *caraqueños*. Entering La Guaira, we passed a small stadium, erected by the government. Guaidó scowled. The stadium had been under construction for seven years, and, seat for seat, “it cost more than Yankee Stadium,” he claimed. “The corruption has finished them off,” he said, disgustedly, of the *chavistas*. Venezuela’s oil wealth is like a spigot, he added: “As long as water comes out, everything’s fine. It’s only when it stops flowing that people start asking what’s up. And that’s what’s happened here.”

Guaidó’s parents divorced when he was young, and his father immigrated to the Canary Islands, where he now works as a taxi-driver. But Guaidó was surrounded by family, and he was popular in the neighborhood, an avid salsa dancer and a fan of the local baseball team, the Guaira Sharks. Things changed in 1999, when, during his senior year of high school, a mudslide, swollen by days of heavy rain, crashed down on the town. The catastrophe killed thousands of people and left many more homeless. Guaidó’s house was destroyed; so was his school.

Chávez had come to power earlier that year, and the mudslide was among his first major tests as Venezuela’s leader. His response was widely seen as a colossal failure. Soldiers sent to Vargas as rescuers were accused of lootings, killings, and other crimes; a government program to rebuild public housing and other infrastructure was inexplicably slow. “*El desastre de Vargas*,” as Venezuelans call it, was the turning point of Guaidó’s young life; he invokes it constantly in speeches. Displaced by the catastrophe, his family moved to a temporary home in Caracas, where he was enrolled in a new high school. He stayed in Caracas to attend a Catholic university, and graduated in 2007, with a degree in industrial engineering.

In those years, Chávez’s regime was following an increasingly radical socialist ideology. Guaidó and several other students formed a movement to oppose him. He and his comrades became known as the 2007 Generation, and a number of them have remained active in the opposition. In 2009, Guaidó joined Leopoldo López to found Voluntad Popular—a right-of-center party that is part of a broad coalition

opposed to the regime. The next year, while still in his twenties, he entered the National Assembly.

López—thirteen years older, a charismatic graduate of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government—became the opposition’s most prominent leader. But many poor Venezuelans suspected that his loyalties ultimately lay with the *sifrin*os, the country’s wealthy class, which is predominantly white and fiercely anti-*chavista*. He was also a target of the regime. In 2014, he was arrested, after leading a series of protests, and given a thirteen-year sentence. When Guaidó became the face of the opposition, his humble origins helped attract sympathy to the cause, in Venezuela and in the United States. A former senior U.S. official told me, with a laugh, “We needed someone who wasn’t a member of the Caracas Polo Club.”

At his home one morning, Guaidó introduced me to his wife, Fabiana, a slender woman of twenty-seven, who greeted me with a shy smile. They met at a Voluntad Popular youth rally in 2013, when Fabiana had just graduated from college with a degree in journalism, and they married soon afterward; they now have a two-year-old daughter named Miranda. At the apartment, Guaidó picked up Miranda and kissed her, encouraging her to wave to me. The apartment was a no-frills two-bedroom, with a galley kitchen, a narrow living room, and a view of nearby apartment buildings. Guaidó laughed: “It’s not much, but it’s home.”

An aide pointed out that the apartment was at least safe. One day while Guaidó was away, he said, special-forces agents had showed up and intimidated Fabiana and Miranda. Watchful neighbors had seen the agents approaching; they berated the men until they left. The aide said, “Here, everyone is with him, and they are watching out for him.”

That afternoon, Guaidó had lunch at El Mosquero (roughly, the Place of Flies), an open-air fish market next to the Guaira port. He sat at a Formica table to eat empanadas; within minutes, he was mobbed by locals, calling out “Guaidó Presidente!” and taking selfies with him. An elderly woman cooed, “My love! My prince!” Others kissed and hugged him. A man told me that he had worked in the port for thirty-five years, but now there were no jobs, and he could not feed his family. He reached across the table to fist-bump Guaidó, and instructed him, “You have to go forward, never back.” A woman with a walker was seated next to Guaidó and given an empanada. Between bites, she raised her voice and yelled, like a soccer fan, “We have to win!”

Away from the crowd, David informed me that Guaidó was a descendant of Guaicaipuro, a sixteenth-century indigenous chieftain who had fought the Spanish conquest before being ambushed and killed. Chávez had resurrected Guaicaipuro as a national hero, ordering that his remains be symbolically reinterred in the National Pantheon. Seeing my bemusement, David explained that all of Venezuela’s leaders were the reincarnations of predecessors. Chávez wanted to be Simón Bolívar but was really Guaicaipuro, while Guaidó was mostly Guaicaipuro, with a little bit of Tiuna, another indigenous chief. Maduro, however, was just “the axis of evil.” David explained that “the Cubans”—Maduro’s rumored team of secret advisers—had practiced the “dark arts” of Santería to lead Maduro to evil.

“Venezuela is ordained to be the best country in the region, and after a world war, which is now unfolding, it will receive many people from all over the world,” he said. “In order to be ready, however, it must be liberated.” Guaidó would bring about that liberation, he claimed: “I met him in December, and I told him, ‘You are the Chosen One.’”

Many of Guaidó’s followers were similarly fervent, but for more practical reasons: he offered hope, and he was willing to risk making a public argument for sweeping change. After lunch, his team drove to a small plaza, where he jumped onto a stage and gave a speech. It was, like all his speeches, economical and inspirational. He told the crowd that it wouldn’t be long before “we the people” occupied Miraflores, the Presidential palace, where “the usurper” Maduro still lived. But a long road lay ahead, and unity and fortitude were essential. A group of women in the crowd raised their hands in the air, like believers at a Pentecostal sermon. One had her eyes closed, a beatific expression on her face.

In March, Venezuela’s electrical grid crashed, and the lights went out all over the country. The blackout, or *apagón*, lasted for five days, deepening the crisis. As Maduro went on television to accuse the Trump Administration of launching an “electromagnetic attack,” most Venezuelans blamed governmental ineptitude and negligence. It emerged that underbrush had not been cleared around key electrical installations, and fires had broken out. The effects were calamitous. The Internet failed, water stopped running, and hospitals scrambled to keep incubators and dialysis machines going. Satellite images showed Venezuela as a dark spot on the South American map, like a black hole in a starry constellation.

I had arrived in Caracas on the second day of the *apagón*. The airport had no electricity or air-conditioning, and immigration and customs officials appeared hot and exhausted. The rest of the country was effectively shut down: Maduro had closed schools and told public employees to stay home. At the hotel where I was booked, the generator had burned out, so the elevator didn’t work and there was no water. The hotels with functioning generators were full, their lobbies packed with well-to-do Venezuelan families and their servants. In an elegant hotel favored by Caracas’s upper class, I saw a woman in designer leisure clothes handing the reception staff a wad of crisp hundred-dollar bills, as she lamented being forced to leave her Cavalier King Charles spaniel alone in her house. She had gone to visit him, she said, and found him “all depressed, *pobrecito*.” The receptionists clucked sympathetically.

Throughout the city, the opposing sides had marked territory. On the highway into Caracas, graffiti in the Soviet style that Maduro favors showed his profile linked with Chávez’s. A newly erected signboard portrayed Simón Bolívar, the great hero of the *chavista* revolution, with the aphorism “If tyranny is chaos, revolution is order.” In the middle-class opposition strongholds of Altamira and Los Palos Grandes, there were messages spray-painted on walls: “Maduro = Murderer,” “Medicine is not a privilege.” Someone had defaced a “Long live Maduro” sign, replacing the President’s name with “hunger.” On the raised highway that runs through Caracas, a convoy of armored personnel carriers belonging to the National Guard had blocked an exit. On the road below, hundreds of people had gathered to

march in support of the opposition, but their progress was stopped by Guardsmen poised with riot gear and guns.

After dark, the streets were eerily silent. Caracas was one of the world's most dangerous cities at the best of times; now it felt flatly apocalyptic. Masked colectivo thugs roamed the backstreets on motorbikes. One night, after midnight, I saw that soldiers had blocked the darkened approaches to the Miraflores palace. Outside, the embers of rubber tires were still burning where protest barricades had been erected. Wherever there was power, people gathered to plug in their phones. Near a mobile-phone relay tower, some had pulled up their cars to check e-mail. Their hazard signals, blinking in the darkness, were the only light that could be seen.

The *caraqueños* refer to their slums as *los cerros*—the hills—because they occupy the mountainsides above Caracas. Some extend for miles, spreading over hilltops and down into canyons, where countless people live in red brick shanties and unpainted cement huts. The state is effectively nonexistent in the *cerros*, except for a few services instituted during the Chávez era: monthly food handouts, small allowances, and teams of Cuban doctors who provide primary health care. Even these services have become irregular, and life is precarious. Unemployment and crime are ubiquitous. Residents usually get electricity by cannibalizing weak current from municipal lines. Now even that was unavailable.

On the third day of the *apagón*, I visited San Blas, a grimy, defoliated area of the sprawling Petare slum, and came across a group of people lined up on a dirt road with plastic buckets. At the front of the line, a spigot, linked to an underground spring, poked up from a pool of muddy water. It gave out only a thin trickle, and each bucket took nearly half an hour to fill. The people sat in the scant shade of nearby houses, slumped from exhaustion.

A woman near the front of the line said that she had been waiting since before dawn, nine hours earlier. It would be two more hours before it was her turn. The people around her nodded; everyone was in the same predicament. An older woman said that the water problems predated the *apagón*; there had been no running water for a month in San Blas, where thirty thousand residents shared three spigots. No one from the government had come to inspect, or to supply water from cistern trucks. With a disgusted look, she said, "It's been like this since the Fourth Republic," the forty-year period of democracy that preceded Chávez. "Back in those days, we had water all the time. But these people"—she waved down the hill toward the authorities—"do nothing for anyone but themselves."

Most of her listeners were too young to remember life before Chávez. All they knew was that they had no water, and that lining up with a bucket was the way to get some. When I asked a woman if she was planning to go into the city to join one of Guaidó's demonstrations, she shook her head and gave me an uncomprehending look.

Guaidó often says that his message is gaining support in the *cerros*, but most people I spoke to there seemed too accustomed to crisis to believe in the possibility of transformative change. At the summit of the Petare hill, a shopkeeper looked out from the half-closed grilles of his storefront. He had lost all his refrigerated food, and couldn't operate the oven he used to bake bread, so he had nothing to sell

except batteries, candy, and a few other sundries. Shrugging, he said, “There’s nothing to be done.”

He was no more hopeful about the political situation. When I mentioned Guaidó’s movement, he said laconically, “*Pueblo no tumba gobierno*”—ordinary people don’t topple governments. In Caracas, the opposition leader Henrique Capriles had told me much the same thing. “Let’s imagine that I’ve been kidnapped,” he said. “My family wants to rescue me, but, if the kidnapper doesn’t pick up the telephone, what’s to be done? Who frees me? That’s the situation we’re in here.”

The question of the United States’ intentions hung over the crisis in Venezuela, but Guaidó admitted to being hazy on American politics. In Vargas, he took me aside to ask about the 2020 elections. He noted that Bernie Sanders had announced his intention to run, but he knew little about Beto O’Rourke. Asked about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez during a recent Fox Business interview, he had drawn a blank. He’d Googled her afterward, and he told me with a laugh that she didn’t seem all that radical: “What they refer to as socialist in the United States is what we’d call a Social Democrat here.”

David interrupted to say that he had “read the cards” and that Trump was likely to win reelection, but that it depended on Venezuela’s becoming free. He added that Trump had a “Karmic problem,” because he “didn’t know how to express himself,” but that he was successful despite his impediments. “He’s like Maxwell Smart,” David said—the bumbling spy in the sixties sitcom. “Everything he does is wrong but turns out well in the end.”

Trump became interested in Venezuela early in his term. In February, 2017, he received a visit at the White House from Lilian Tintori, the wife of Leopoldo López. Tintori—a former reality-TV star and champion kite-surfer—gave an impassioned talk about human rights in Venezuela and her husband’s plight. Afterward, she posed for pictures. According to U.S. officials, Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence were smitten.

Fernando Cutz, who at the time led Latin-American initiatives for the National Security Council, told me that Trump called him in for a briefing on Venezuela. “He asked me what we could do,” Cutz said. “Why were the people suffering there?” Cutz said that Trump almost never mentioned Cuba, traditionally the U.S.’s central concern in Latin America, but regularly asked about Venezuela. “Clearly, it was a priority for him,” Cutz said.

For months, Trump said nothing about an armed intervention. Then, in August, 2017, he brought up Venezuela at a meeting in the Oval Office with John Kelly, the chief of staff; H. R. McMaster, the national-security adviser; and Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State. According to attendees, he asked, “Why don’t we use the military?” McMaster replied, “Well, Mr. President, there are other options.” Trump asked the other officials what they thought, and they all tried to dissuade him. Trump nodded, but then, the next day, he announced to reporters at his golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, “We have many options for Venezuela, including a possible military option.” Kelly and Tillerson were there; they stood stolidly. Nikki Haley, the U.N. Ambassador, apparently hearing the suggestion for the first time, gave Trump a look of befuddled alarm.

A U.S. military intervention would have enormous implications around the world. Maduro has few allies in Latin America; the Pink Tide of leftist leaders has mostly receded. But Cuba remains tightly entwined with Venezuela, which for years has supplied it with oil in exchange for experts, including thousands of doctors and, by all accounts, some military and intelligence advisers. Maduro also has substantial alliances with China, which has made enormous investments in Venezuela, and particularly with Russia. After the U.S. endorsed Guaidó, Vladimir Putin called Maduro to offer support and to denounce “destructive external interference.” In late March, Putin dispatched a hundred military advisers and technicians to Venezuela, purportedly to repair air defenses that Chávez had put in place. The gesture was conspicuous: the military aircraft carrying the troops flew from Syria, where Russia is also agitating against U.S. interests, and landed at the main airport in Caracas. The Russians’ actions caused acute frustration in Washington. “They’ve figured out that with very little cost they can get into an international situation and become a player,” Cutz said. “Russia is no longer a superpower, but it’s fairly good at acting like one. A hundred troops to Venezuela? That’s nothing. But we in the U.S. have not figured out how to extract them or to respond to this.”

McMaster favored an incremental approach to the crisis, with gradually increasing sanctions, intended to encourage talks. The Administration invited the rebels to Washington for advice and urged anti-Maduro factions to unite, apparently with little success. In 2017, the U.S. helped bring the regime and the opposition together for talks, in the Dominican Republic, but they quickly fell apart.

Before the invasion of Afghanistan, Americans flew in with millions of dollars of cash to inspire local warlords to support a campaign against the Taliban. In Venezuela, Trump officials have occasionally offered incentives to officers who defected, but there has apparently been no budget for a wider effort to convert the military. After Bolton replaced McMaster, in April, 2018, the Administration imposed financial sanctions on Venezuela’s state-owned oil company, designed so that any new profits would be deposited in an account under Guaidó’s authority. But the Administration has not yet figured out how to disburse the funds to Guaidó.

Mostly, Trump officials seem to believe that they can effect change by making pronouncements. Since Bolton took office, he has devoted a majority of his tweets to confronting Maduro. In one, he wrote, “I wish Nicolas Maduro and his top advisors a long, quiet retirement, living on a nice beach somewhere far from Venezuela.”

Senator Marco Rubio, of Florida, has tweeted with particularly Trumpish zeal, mocking small crowds at a pro-regime rally (“Wow! . . . Very impressive turnout”) and assailing Maduro’s potency (“the emperor . . . has no clothes”). At times, he has made forthright threats. In a tweet addressed to the “Maduro Crime Family,” he promised that “the willingness of many nations to support stronger multilateral actions to dislodge them has increased dramatically.” At one point, he tweeted a series of photographs of deposed dictators: Manuel Noriega, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and, in a gruesome image, Muammar Qaddafi being brutalized by rebels just before his murder, in 2011.

When I asked Guaidó if the photographs had helped his cause, he gave a knowing laugh and quickly formulated a politic answer: “I don’t know if they help, but I understand their language. Now, extricating myself from those images, the only possible comparisons to the Venezuelan case are dictatorships of that type, or of cases of countries at war. O.K., maybe those are hateful comparisons. But if you take those photos away and you put in their place access to water, inflation, gross domestic product, access to information, to justice, political prisoners, there are no other comparisons possible.”

The regime uses these provocations for maximum propaganda value. In March, Diosdado Cabello, a member of Maduro’s cabinet, appeared on his weekly TV show, whose name translates loosely as “Beat Them with a Club,” to lead the audience in a chant of “Yankee, go home!” An influential Venezuelan politician told me, “If I could talk to Trump, I would tell him, and also Bolton, Pence, and Rubio, to stop! *Por favor!*” Other observers told me that the Trump Administration’s messages helped provide cover for Maduro’s repressiveness. “Rubio is like a scarecrow for Maduro,” a diplomat in Caracas said. “He uses his tweets to prove there is an invasion coming.” In recent meetings, the diplomat said, Maduro had seemed galvanized by the standoff, saying that he felt “excited about confronting Trump.” He had also said, “I’m not going to end up like Qaddafi, or like Mubarak. After me, someone else will come.” He had begun comparing himself to the Chilean President Salvador Allende, who was overthrown in a U.S.-backed coup in 1973, and committed suicide rather than be taken prisoner. The diplomat rolled his eyes in disdain.

The Administration’s most dramatic action on Guaidó’s behalf was a high-profile operation, in February, to deliver humanitarian aid to Venezuela. As U.S. military planes flew food and medical supplies to the border with Colombia, Guaidó and his American backers urged the regime to allow the shipments through. Humanitarian-aid missions are traditionally kept separate from politics. In this case, though, public offers were made to specific senior officers to defect in exchange for amnesty for past abuses. A military attaché to Washington had switched sides, as had a general, who broke with the regime on social media. This was less significant than it might have seemed; Venezuela’s Army has more than two thousand generals. Meanwhile, the defense minister, Vladimir Padrino López, declared that he and his troops remained loyal to Maduro and the Bolivarian revolution.

The delivery was scheduled for February 23rd, and, in the preceding days, Maduro rejected the aid, saying, “We are not beggars.” He sent tankers and shipping containers to block three crucial border bridges, and deployed the National Guard for added security. That morning, Guaidó appeared on the Colombian side, standing alongside a group of conservative leaders from the region. A crowd had gathered, and Guaidó urged them to be brave, promising that the aid would “restore prosperity to Venezuela.” The tycoon Richard Branson had organized a concert, Venezuela Aid Live, on the Colombian side, where top Latin entertainers attracted more than two hundred thousand people. A counter-concert organized by Maduro’s people flopped, as most of the performers pulled out beforehand.

In a TV interview, Rubio said that Maduro was powerless to stop the aid: “The question is whether it gets through in a way that he’s cooperative with or in a way that he’s not.” On Twitter, Guaidó announced, “As commander-in-chief of the armed forces . . . I declare that soldiers who cross the border will not be considered traitors to their homeland,” and some sixty disgruntled soldiers took him up on the guarantee. The initiative, though, turned out to be devastatingly underplanned. Guaidó hoped to form a “human chain” to pass bags of food and medical supplies across the bridges. But the regime’s soldiers wouldn’t move the barricades, and the standoff devolved into violence.

Emiliana Duarte, a Venezuelan journalist who was there that day, shot video of a chaotic scene. A truck loaded with supplies had been accidentally set on fire, apparently by anti-Maduro demonstrators hurling Molotov cocktails. Armed loyalists on motorbikes terrorized protesters. “The most frightening thing was how the *colectivos* and the National Guardsmen coordinated their efforts,” Duarte said. She showed me video of protesters running and hiding from the *colectivos*, and of the National Guard firing pellet guns into the crowd. One Guardsman fired at Duarte from a dozen paces away, and she dropped her camera as the shot whizzed past. Maduro’s men injured hundreds of protesters. On the Brazilian border, National Guardsmen broke up an effort to bring in aid by firing at activists from the Pemón indigenous community, killing four.

In the capital, Maduro held a rally, at which he called himself “stronger than ever” and danced with his wife onstage. Guaidó, frustrated, made his first major misstep: he posted a tweet in which he appeared to advocate military force against Maduro. “Today’s events oblige me to take a decision: to propose formally to the international community that we keep all the doors open to achieve the liberation of this fatherland that struggles and will continue to struggle. Hope was not born in order to die, Venezuela!”

In support, Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that “all options are on the table.” But the rest of the region was alarmed by the prospect of an invasion. At a subsequent meeting of the Lima Group, a council of fourteen Latin-American countries, which had been set up in 2017 to deal with the Venezuela crisis, several senior officials said that they would not support a war to unseat Maduro. “We have never contemplated a military solution,” the Colombian foreign minister, Carlos Trujillo, said in a radio interview. “All the actions are political and diplomatic, and I say that emphatically, so there’s no more speculation on Colombia’s position.”

During the blackout, a looting spree erupted in the oil city of Maracaibo, after an ice vender refused to serve customers unless they paid in U.S. dollars. (Throughout Venezuela, as hyperinflation has devalued the currency, the economy has run increasingly on dollars.) The ice seller’s sweltering customers grew frustrated, and then violent. The unrest spread; in the following week, more than five hundred businesses were ransacked or burned, and several major factories and warehouses were stripped, with even their wiring hauled away. The looters were determined and, in some cases, armed; the police did not intervene, apparently out of fear for their lives.

With the lights still out and the looters unchecked, many people felt that Maduro had lost the ability to govern. The diplomat told me that his regime represented the death of the *chavista* dream: “They’ve lasted for twenty years, but I think they’ve hit their limit, and the reason is that these people aren’t real revolutionaries. They’re *malandros*”—villains. “They like money. Oil has created a shallow and short-term political culture in Venezuela. In the seventies, Venezuelans would take the Concorde to Paris just to take a shower, or to New York to dance at Studio 54, and the nomenklatura of those days has simply been replaced by the nouveau-riche *chavistas* of today. On top of that, they have created a security state. There is repression, political prisoners, torture, and even executions, but there is no security for the citizens. This is ‘Ubu Roi’—that’s what this is. Totally aberrant.”

Still, Maduro is undeniably able to rally Venezuelans to defend his regime, especially in the slums. In Caracas, one of the traditional *chavista* bastions is the community known as the 23rd of January, for the date of the military coup that overthrew the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, in 1958. El 23, as it is known, is a vast housing complex in northwestern Caracas. It was erected in the fifties, when the country’s oil economy was booming, and was modelled on Le Corbusier’s Cité Radieuse, in Marseille. In those days, the government built projects across the country: universities, highways, bridges, dams. They now serve as reminders of a lost era. At El 23, the gardens that were planted after the complex was built have been obliterated by thousands of shanties.

Colectivo Alexis Vives was founded in El 23, with financial support from Chávez, as a community-support organization. It is situated in a former commercial block, next to a burned-out supermarket. A mural outside depicts the Last Supper, with Christ as a brown-skinned man with a bushy beard, surrounded by revolutionary apostles: Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Mao, Lenin, Chávez.

It has been run for years by a diehard *chavista* named Roberto Longa. A burly, voluble man, Longa holds court in a kind of command center, with a panel of sixteen video screens that monitor security cameras around the estate. When I visited Longa during the blackout, he claimed, improbably, “The *chavistas* have never had a better moment than the present one.” His reasoning was quintessentially Marxist: “the contradictions are deepening” in Venezuelan society—part of a necessary process of broadening the revolution. “The contradictions need to deepen even more before a dialogue can take place between the government and the popular forces,” he said. There was no need to include Guaidó in such a dialogue, he stressed. “We’re confronting the Empire”—the United States. “Guaidó is a symbol of the Empire, and he should be imprisoned and then tried for treason.”

Longa confided that he believes “the Empire” murdered Chávez, by injecting him with an aggressive strain of cancer. He showed me a photograph of Chávez during a visit to El 23. He said, “Our love is for Chávez, and we are never going to stop loving him for all of our lives.” In his view, Maduro was carrying on Chávez’s work, and his explanations for the real cause of the country’s woes were inarguable. The blackout had been brought about by American sabotage; the widespread poverty and hunger resulted from an “economic war” led by the U.S. “The gringos have

said, ‘We’re going to asphyxiate you,’ and we can see it happening,” he said. If the Americans forced Maduro from power, he vowed to take up arms. “We’ll radicalize the revolution,” he said. “We’ll initiate a prolonged popular war, an insurrection, and then move against the rancid oligarchy, and take over the oil industry, and so on.”

Later, Jefferson González, a young member of Longa’s *colectivo*, told me that most *chavistas* had closed ranks with Maduro: “People might have their complaints, but we wash our dirty laundry in private. One thing I can assure you is that, if there is a gringo invasion, the people will come out of the barrios to fight. Meanwhile, Maduro is the leader of the revolution, and he has told the gringos that they should get out of here. What we are all waiting for is for him to arrest Guaidó.” He wore a truculent look, and added, “We saw Guaidó’s ass—which he offered up to the gringos—before we ever saw his face. That’s why Mike Pence is always talking about Venezuela, because he’s the real leader. The opposition right now is the American government.”

If the unrest in Venezuela turned to open conflict, it was not clear that Guaidó’s supporters would come to the streets and fight. On Saturdays, the regime and the opposition held rallies in Caracas, and the contrast was telling. The opposition’s events often had the ritual earnestness of a campus protest. The regime’s felt like a cross between a block party and an Army Reserve parade.

One weekend during my visit, police blocked off a main avenue downtown, and people dressed in red, the official *chavista* color, began arriving on buses, carrying pro-government signs. A few hundred men and women in militia uniforms had organized themselves into marching ranks. These *milicianos*, as they are called, make up an all-volunteer force that Maduro has heralded as the core of a people’s resistance army, which will help defend against a Yankee invasion. They are mostly untrained and inexperienced—one diplomat I spoke to derided them as “wheelchair shooters”—but they are enthusiastic, and they have the regime’s support.

A d.j. had set up a booth and was blaring *chavista* salsa through loudspeakers. “Our *comandante* always goes onward with the revolution,” the lyrics of one song went, and people sang along, as some broke out of line to dance. The mood was festive, but the *milicianos* also provide evidence of Venezuela’s militarization. At a rally in April, Maduro announced proudly that their membership had grown to two million, and soon there would be a million more. “With your rifles on your shoulders, be ready to defend the fatherland and dig the furrow to plant the seeds to produce food for the community,” Maduro told them. He asked them to swear to fight “imperialist aggressions”—even if it cost them their lives.

Most *chavistas* take it as self-evident that Guaidó is a Yankee stooge. In February, Maduro called him “a puppet, a Judas who has tried to help the American empire take control of our country politically and militarily.” The charge rankles Guaidó, but he cannot entirely refute it. As long as the U.S. backs him, he is protected—a kind of one-man no-fly zone.

A few weeks before Guaidó launched the “final phase of Operation Freedom,” I visited him at his de-facto headquarters, at a small hotel in a pro-opposition neighborhood of Caracas. When I asked him to clarify his position on the prospect

of a U.S. military invasion, he instead talked at length about the destructive effects of Maduro's rule. Finally, he said, "If we want to be responsible about things, we have to consider all the available options for changing our situation, because the people are paying a social cost that is without precedent."

Ever since the Lima Group rejected military action, Guaidó's American supporters had limited their threats, suggesting that they would invade only if the regime touched him. I asked if he was prepared to sacrifice himself in order to bring on an invasion. His reply was scattershot: "If that's the cost there is to pay, where do I sign? Of course, nobody wants to risk their freedom, nobody is prepared for that, nobody is born to do that. But for me that would not be a dilemma. It would be very strange if it were to happen. And, look, I know how political that element"—a U.S. military action—"would be. I know the scars that have been left in the region with all of this, but this case is also very different from many others. What is happening in Venezuela is very atypical."

In the end, he said, it wasn't fair that he be held accountable for a decision that wasn't his to make. Meanwhile, he and his comrades were doing what they could to find "a Venezuelan solution to a Venezuelan problem." Guaidó spoke vaguely about the plan that was taking shape. They would hold rallies around the country, and eventually march on Miraflores, to force out Maduro. "It's a gamble," he acknowledged. "But we have no other options available to us to channel and contain people's emotions, because all the other options are violent ones—and that way is craziness. People are going around saying, 'Miraflores, Miraflores, Miraflores,' because they're desperate, and they need to feel there's a solution to the conflict. Who wants intervention? Nobody! But telling someone who is dying of hunger, 'Just wait a little more'—that's not easy to do. It's hard to know what to say when people come up and tell you their wife died a week ago because there were no drugs for her chemo."

On the day of the uprising, Bolton went on Twitter to threaten the regime: "This is your last chance. Accept Interim President Guaidó's amnesty, protect the Constitution, and remove Maduro, and we will take you off our sanctions list. Stay with Maduro, and go down with the ship." Trump warned Cuba that he would impose "a full and complete embargo" if it didn't withdraw support for Maduro. But, as the uprising foundered, there was no action from Washington. Days later, the Administration announced that a naval hospital ship called the U.S.N.S. Comfort would be deployed to the Caribbean in June, with a vague directive from Pence to help countries that were "overwhelmed" by the crisis.

The night of the uprising, Maduro appeared on live television, alongside his high command. He railed against the American-backed attempt to overthrow him, and boasted of demonstrating "nerves of steel, maximum severity, and effective action." During the uprising, Bolton had named several senior Venezuelan officials, including the defense minister, Padrino López, as supporters of the coup, and urged them to "make good on their commitments." It emerged that at least one official, the head of intelligence, had broken with the regime; he was now missing. But during the broadcast Padrino López sat next to Maduro, in a display of unity. Speculation spread that Guaidó had been duped by a counterintelligence sting, in

which Army officers encouraged the uprising in order to smoke out disloyal soldiers.

In the coming days, Maduro's men began pursuing members of the opposition. Officers had detained Roberto Marrero, Guaidó's chief of staff, before the uprising. Now they searched his cell phone for contacts, and accused several people of taking part in a "terrorist plot." Many of them promptly fled the country. In Caracas, security officers surrounded Guaidó's "Vice-President," Edgar Zambrano, as he sat in his car; when he refused to get out, a tow truck picked up the car, with him inside, and hauled it to intelligence headquarters. Another thirteen legislators had their parliamentary immunity revoked.

There was a gathering sense that the Americans had overplayed their hand. Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, met with Pompeo in Helsinki and announced afterward that he was "not at all worried" about a U.S. military intervention. As several officials pointed out to me, an intervention would take months to organize; Southcom, the branch of the U.S. military that handles operations in Latin America, doesn't have enough men, so troops would have to be mustered. Maduro could easily see that such a process was not under way.

Trump seems to have lost interest in a confrontation; he has reportedly complained that things in Venezuela hadn't gone as smoothly as Bolton suggested they would, and has shown some grudging respect for Maduro, calling him a "tough cookie." An American official with experience in the region joked, "It won't be long before Trump invites Maduro to Mar-a-Lago."

Another U.S. official said, "I have no problem with trying policies that don't work, but we have no Venezuela policy. And the problem is, a reset is tough now. We need some personnel changes. How do you go from tweeting images of a dead Maduro to saying 'Let's talk?'" American oil sanctions will cripple the economy, deepening the humanitarian crisis, but they won't insure Maduro's downfall. He and his cohort could hunker down, like the regime in North Korea, and wait until the resistance and its sympathizers give up and leave the country.

Luis Vicente León, Venezuela's most prominent political pollster, told me, "The real uncertainty is what the military is going to do." It had been a mistake to try to force the Army to split with Maduro, he said. "The military is the government, and they want to know how they stand after he goes." He added that a successful coup would not necessarily lead to a less brutal government: "What happens if the military moves against Maduro but remains at odds with the opposition? They may become more powerful and repressive. Then you become a real dictatorship." The only realistic solution, León believed, was to somehow work out a consensus. "We are condemned to negotiate with the bad guys," he said. "Otherwise, this country will soon become ungovernable."

Guaidó has described the regime as irredeemable. "There are those who question the existence of evil," he told me. "I know it exists, because I've seen its face." But, in May, the opposition agreed to talks with Maduro's representatives—an acknowledgment that it had no choice but to negotiate. The talks, in Oslo, ended on May 29th with no deal, but both sides expressed a willingness to meet again. An agreement will not be easy to reach. The Trump Administration insists that it will

not accept any outcome other than Maduro's departure, which many observers believe is impossible. A power-sharing agreement would have to overcome steep obstacles: years' worth of strife and distrust, an economy in shambles, an unpredictable military. The most optimistic possibility is for new elections to be called. Guaidó would have significant support in an election, but he would also have to convince the country that he is capable of leadership, which would entail setting aside the legacy of the failed uprising.

After Guaidó returned to public view, the opposition organized an afternoon memorial service for protesters who had been killed. Some four hundred people assembled in the Altamira district, where a stage had been erected before a pair of financial towers. Two priests recited psalms and sang songs, backed by women with guitars. As night fell, many in the crowd lit votive candles and sang along. Finally, one of the priests announced that President Guaidó had sent a message: he had hoped to come but could not leave a certain meeting, and so he sent his apologies.

As people began wandering off, my cell phone rang. It was Guaidó's assistant, asking if I could see him. I found Guaidó in his apartment, sitting on a couch as aides came and went from his bedroom and the kitchen. His wife and daughter weren't there; word was that they were in Colombia. Venezuelan politicians on both sides had sent relatives out of the country to keep safe. Behind the couch were a pile of boxes and a baby stroller. With a laugh, Guaidó said, "We were all ready to move into Miraflores, but I guess we'll have to wait a little longer."

I asked why he hadn't appeared at the memorial, and he shrugged and told me that he hadn't been able to. When I said that it seemed unlikely that he would draw the same kinds of crowds he had before April 30th, he made a dismissive gesture. Nothing had changed in the country, he said; the people would rally again. So would the military, eventually. He couldn't put a date on it, but he knew they would; they were all Venezuelans and were all fed up with the situation. Guaidó wouldn't elucidate the reasons that the uprising had failed. He said only that, when he had stood with the soldiers outside La Carlota, he really did believe that Maduro's government was going to fall that day. "It was going to be just like 1958," he said, referring to the revolt that ousted the dictator Jiménez. He had thought it would happen, and then it hadn't, and he couldn't explain why. ♦

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