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Trump's stunning shift on 'America First'

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Analysis by Aaron Blake

President Donald Trump holds a news conference at his Mar-a-Lago Club following a US strike ...



Critics of the US ouster of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro this weekend have regularly invoked President Donald Trump's comments during the 2016 campaign.

Back then, Trump vocally decried "regime change," setting himself up as the non-

interventionist candidate in the race. **“Donald the Dove, Hillary the Hawk,”** read a headline on a piece by The New York Times’ Maureen Dowd.

Some have suggested this mission isn’t exactly in line with Trump’s “America First” rhetoric, including a few **Republicans** like Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky and outgoing Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia.

But to better understand just what Trump ordered in Venezuela, you’ve got to go back to the first time he (briefly) ran for president: 1999.

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During Trump’s appearance on MSNBC’s “Hardball,” Chris Matthews peppered the new third-party candidate with questions about recent US foreign policy adventures. And some of his answers would sound at home in his 2016 campaign. Vietnam was a “disaster.” As for the idea of forcibly replacing leaders we don’t like, like in Grenada? “I don’t like it.”

But there were a couple of notable exceptions.

One was Cuba, where Trump said he supported the Bay of Pigs invasion but actually wanted to go further – with bombings. (“I think that you wouldn’t have had a Fidel Castro had Kennedy done the bombing,” Trump said in that 1999 interview.)

The other was the ouster of its Panama’s strongman leader, Manuel Noriega – which many have **compared to Trump’s ouster of Maduro.**

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“I tend to like it,” Trump said. “What he’s done with Panama was terrible. I mean, generally speaking, I want to stay away. But Panama is getting very close to home. A bad guy. Drug trade all over the place, killing people all over the place.”

That does sound a lot like Trump’s case for deposing Maduro.

Indeed, there have always been caveats to Trump’s criticisms of “regime change” and **holes in his anti-war veneer**, particularly in the Western Hemisphere. But he didn’t dwell on them because the US was a very war-weary country after more than a decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it was more politically advantageous to look like the “dove” candidate.

But there is no question that Trump’s second term has featured a rather stark shift in how he defines and carries out an “America First” foreign policy.

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While before it clearly had an isolationist bent; today Trump’s “America First” is mostly along the lines of *America does and takes what it decides is in its interest*.

It's not just Venezuela, after all.

Trump has in recent days also threatened a bevy of other countries, including the aforementioned **Cuba, as well as Colombia, Greenland, Mexico and Iran.**

He previously spoke about taking the Panama Canal, as well as making Canada the 51st state.

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And he's launched more than half a dozen high-profile bombings this year – of alleged drug boats in the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean, as well as in Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

In about one year, Trump has struck or threatened roughly 1 out of every 15 countries in the world.

That is decidedly not as advertised.

Last decade, Trump said all of the following:

- “We must abandon the failed policy of nation-building and regime change that Hillary Clinton pushed in Iraq, Libya, Egypt and Syria.” (2016 Republican National Convention)
- “The current strategy of toppling regimes with no plan for what to do in the day after only produces power vacuums that are filled simply by terrorists.”

(September 2016)

- “Hillary Clinton is trigger-happy. She’s raced to invade, intervene and topple regimes. She believes in globalism, not Americanism.” (September 2016)
- “We will break the cycle of regime change and refugee crisis that has gone on for so many years.” (September 2016)
- “We will abandon the policy of reckless regime change favored by my opponent.” (September 2016)
- “We will stop racing to topple ... foreign regimes that we know nothing about, that we shouldn’t be involved with.” (December 2016)
- “Our policy of never-ending war, regime change, and nation-building is being replaced by the clear-eyed pursuit of American interests. It is the job of our military to protect our security, not to be the policeman of the world.” (2019)

As you can see, these comments didn’t generally rule out regime change, full stop, but rather cast Clinton’s and others’ versions of it as haphazard and counterproductive. Trump generally focused on opposing regime change and nation-building *in the Middle East*.

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Today, Trump is making a different argument, more akin to what he said in 1999. Places like Venezuela are closer to home and, thus, of more concern to the United States. So keeping them in line and policing them is apparently “America First.”

That's basically what Trump has said in recent days when he has been challenged on this point.

Asked Saturday how invading Venezuela is "America First," Trump responded much like he did to Matthews.

"I think it is because we want to surround ourself with good neighbors," Trump said. "We want to surround ourself with stability. We want to surround ourself with energy."

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Pressed Sunday on his past comments opposing "regime change," Trump responded: "This isn't a country that's on the other side of the world. This isn't a country, like, we have to travel 24 hours in an airplane. This is Venezuela. It's in our area."

The president added that getting Venezuelan oil would bring prices down, and that's "good for our country."

It's certainly *a version of* America First. It's just not the version he was selling when he first ran for president – or even in his most recent campaign.

But it didn't take long after that 2024 campaign for Trump to start talking about **taking Canada and Greenland**, then about "**manifest destiny**." That started very shortly after his win.

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Today, his political social media account is depicting him **lording over all of North and South America**, while a State Department account is declaring the Western Hemisphere to be **“OUR Hemisphere.”**

This seems to be a version of Trump that was always there, but that he just suppressed for a while because it wasn't politically feasible.

And now all the people that jumped on board with him because they thought he was a “dove” get to confront a new reality – that Trump might actually be the most expansionist American president in many decades.



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