

How To Do Colonialism Well in Venezuela

By Bruce Gilley

Having asserted its imperial interests in Venezuela, the United States now finds itself in the inevitable transition to a more colonial occupation. The country cannot be left to its own devices in the post-Maduro era, which would lead to a reborn Chavismo regime or a civil war. But getting colonialism right in Venezuela requires a focus on five key objectives, all of which are within the capabilities of the United States.



First, the aim of any occupation regime is to rebuild a legitimate new political order. Every other goal, economic, political, or security, needs to be subordinated to this task. Elections will probably be needed. The oil industry needs to be revived. But none of that should be done in a manner that makes Venezuelans see the new order as something apart from

themselves. National ownership of the reconstruction process is key. As I [wrote](#) in 2014 for a National Defense University publication, once the “external agenda” that drives an intervention is over, the “internal agenda” of re legitimization comes to the fore.

Secondly, of all the goals needed for legitimacy, rebuilding state institutions will be key. This was a key focus of the new civil affairs designations in U.S. military that were created in the wake of Iraq by the Institute for Military Support to Governance at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center. Those designations, which I contributed to, recognize the centrality of building up institutions (the civil service, the courts, police, local governments) to a successful occupation.

Third, there is no rush. A broad, transitional government created from a cross-section of *ancien régime*, opposition, and local elites is sufficient to govern the country under the existing constitution in the interim. Rushing into elections or sending in external governors of the political system or the oil industry would be damaging.

Fourth, the Trump administration needs to get its messaging right on what is happening in Venezuela. Like every U.S. intervention from the Korea to Iraq, what began as an imperial police action has now become a colonial project. And the U.S. has an excellent record on colonialism, despite the cavils of critics. Our intention, as in Japan, Germany, the Philippines and Iraq, is to leave behind a legitimate political order that will benefit the local population. We can use fudge words like “external governance” or “shared sovereignty”, but the mission should be clear.

Finally, Washington needs to be realistic about what will result. We should not expect Venezuela to become a close U.S. ally, and we should not expect the majority of Venezuelans to welcome this external irruption into their national history. A

successful mission is one that rebuilds Venezuelan support for the political community and institutions at home, not one that turns the country into a U.S. ally. *Yankee Go Home!* will come soon enough, and that's OK. It will signal success.

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