

Trump's quest to kick America's 'Iraq War syndrome'

by Leah Schroeder Jan 14, 2026 (quotes Stephen Zunes)

Experts say the 'easy' Venezuela operation is reminiscent of George H.W. Bush's 1989 invasion of Panama, which in part served to bury the ghosts of Vietnam

[“*Panama mattered because it showed the U.S. would continue intervention even after the Cold War,*” said Stephen Zunes, professor of politics and Program Director for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of San Francisco. “*Many people thought the end of communism meant the U.S. would become a good world citizen and stop violating international law. Panama showed the Cold War was more an excuse than the reason, and that the U.S. would continue as an imperial, interventionist power.*”

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American forces invaded Panama in 1989 to capture Manuel Noriega, a former U.S. ally whose rule over Panama was marred by drug trafficking, corruption and human rights abuses.

But experts point to another, perhaps just as critical goal: to cure the American public of “[Vietnam syndrome](#),” described as a national malaise and aversion of foreign interventions in the wake of the failed Vietnam War.

On both fronts, the operation was a success. With Noriega in custody and democracy restored, President George H. W. Bush could make the case that the U.S. military was back to peak performance and that force — including regime change — could be used effectively for good, [commencing a new era of foreign interventionism in America](#).

Nearly four decades and several disastrous conflicts later, the public has overwhelmingly become skeptical once more, especially after the 20 years of war following the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

President Donald Trump first latched onto this sentiment in 2016, [calling the Iraq War a “failure” and promising](#) to get the country out of the business of regime change and forever wars. But just under a year into his second term, Trump seems determined instead to do his part in kicking America’s “Iraq syndrome,” using extraordinary military might to shock adversaries into submission.

The administration went back to the Panama model last week, bombing military and civilian targets in Venezuela and capturing President Nicolás Maduro and his wife to face criminal charges in the U.S.

And as was the case with Panama, the operation was less about accomplishing certain political objectives and more about “employ[ing] military force as a way to restore a sense of confidence in the military,” according to Professor of History at Texas A&M University Gregory Daddis, who is also an Iraq War veteran and author of [“Faith and Fear: America’s Relationship with War Since 1945.”](#)

“I think what you’re seeing [with the Venezuela invasion] is a similar gesture of trying to use military force as a way to demonstrate the armed forces now under the Secretary of Defense’s leadership as a more lethal force, and that somehow is intended to make Americans feel better about themselves and have confidence in their ability to project power overseas,” Daddis said.

Catherine Lutz, a professor of International Studies at Brown University and founder of the Costs of War Project there, agrees. With the operation, Trump wanted to show that a military that he “disparag[ed]” during conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan was now “competent” under his leadership.

“That’s his psychology: that everything he touches turns to gold, and that if he were to use the military, as he has in many different ways already in the first year of his administration, he would do it right. He would do it with overwhelming force,” Lutz said.

But the invasion of Panama received plenty of criticism at the time and the Venezuela invasion won’t be immune from the same. How the invasion will be received by the American public — and what this could mean for the future of interventionism in America — depends on several different factors, Lutz said.

“We live in such a fragmented news environment that if you’re watching Fox News, you take away that America is back, that we are a strong nation whose strength lies in its military,” Lutz said. “If you’re watching MSNBC or CNN or a number of other outlets, you are disgusted. You see this as violating his promise to be less interventionist militarily, taking him at his word that Iraq was a mistake and that we didn’t need to do it better; we needed to do it not at all.”

The American public’s response, Daddis said, will influence whether the Venezuela invasion will “restore a sense of honor” in the armed forces and be parlayed into an era of interventionism, or whether the operation will further “undermine the confidence” of an American public already disillusioned with military force. In order to kick the Iraq War syndrome, an aversion to long, open-ended conflicts that involve regime change, American boots on the ground, and nation building, Trump has to make sure Venezuela is anything but.

He is off to a good start. For one, both the stated goals of the Venezuela invasion and its military footprint are much smaller than other American conflicts. Around [1.5 million U.S. service members](#) were sent to Iraq during the course of the war, whereas a smaller number of Delta Force commandos and federal law enforcement [engaged in the hours-long raid and capture of Maduro](#), leaving no U.S. boots left on the ground.

Additionally, “democracy” fell behind drugs and oil as the chief motivators for the invasion, signaling that a full regime change which might require forces on the ground and U.S. physical presence would not be required, according to senior analyst at the National Security Archive and the director of the Cuba Documentation Project Peter Kornbluh.

“He’s not claiming that there are any goals to promote democracy or human rights or stability,” Kornbluh said. “He is simply saying the United States is the bully on the block, the most powerful country; might makes right. We want that oil, and we’re just going to take it.”

Perhaps the most notable difference with previous conflicts like Iraq or the invasion of Panama is that Venezuela is part of Trump’s plan to reassert “American dominance in the Western Hemisphere,” as Trump said in a [recent news conference at Mar-a-Lago](#).

“Under our new national security strategy, American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again,” Trump said [in the press conference](#).

The invasion was a display of power designed to “transparently open the door to a new era of U.S. imperialism,” according to Kornbluh. While the conflict in Iraq took place halfway across the world, Venezuela is a country right in America’s backyard.

Thus, it is the responsibility of a “great power,” like America to intervene, Vice President J.D. Vance said in a social [media](#) post Sunday.

“I understand the anxiety over the use of military force, but are we just supposed to allow a communist to steal our stuff in our hemisphere and do nothing,” Vance said in a post on X. “Great powers don’t act like that. The United States, thanks to President Trump’s leadership, is a great power again. Everyone should take note.”

But will the successful operation be enough to convince an American public scarred from costly conflicts to become war hawks once more? Early polls are saying possibly.

Based on [data collected in an Economist/YouGov survey](#), still only a quarter of Americans say they strongly or somewhat support the invasion of Venezuela using military force. However, this is up seven percentage points from data collected before the invasion.

And while still more Americans oppose the intervention than support it, the amount in favor has risen 11 percentage points in the last two weeks, increasing most among Republicans.

While this data is preliminary and public opinion can still change as events develop, the success of this operation could encourage a wary American public to be more forgiving toward interventionism, if given the resonating justifications for the use of force — just like Panama in 1989.

“Panama mattered because it showed the U.S. would continue intervention even after the Cold War,” said Stephen Zunes, professor of politics and Program Director for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of San Francisco. “Many people thought the end of communism meant the U.S. would become a good world citizen and stop violating international law. Panama showed the Cold War was more an excuse than the reason, and that the U.S. would continue as an imperial, interventionist power.”

But where Trump might scare away a cautious population is with impulsive comments in which he says the [U.S. could “run” Venezuela for years](#). “What makes Venezuela more serious on certain levels is that this is not a one-and-done,” Zunes said.

It remains to be seen whether Trump successfully made intervention great again and cured the American public of its “Iraq syndrome,” or if a years-long foreign commitment will be too much for an American public warily coming back around to interventionism.