

The radical honesty of Donald Trump, Lexington, *The Economist*, Jan 7th 2026

Although Donald Trump lies a lot, even by the standards of American presidents, a bleak, transgressive honesty about how the world really works has always been core to his peculiar political appeal: politicians are corrupted by big donations; only stupid people pay higher taxes than they can get away with; he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and not lose a vote.

Mr Trump's forthrightness about his interest in Venezuela is of a piece with this politics and worldview. He is not intent on regime change, let alone on spreading democracy. In fact, he seems content with regime stabilisation, as long as the regime recognises America is "in charge", because what he wants most is the oil. "We're going to be taking out a tremendous amount of wealth out of the ground," Mr Trump said after American forces snatched the country's despotic leader, Nicolás Maduro.

Because gaps between a politician's stated principles and his actions supply the easiest targets for his critics, Mr Trump's unabashed cynicism lends him a shield. Some may whinge that Mr Trump is violating his "America First" standards, but on this point he is no hypocrite. To him, the slogan does not imply isolationism. It licenses American aggression in pursuit of naked self-interest. Other objections to Mr Trump's lightning strike seem even less likely to gain purchase.

Democrats may keep complaining he violated the constitution by assuming Congress's authority to declare war, but so what? Presidents have been doing that for well over a century. A Congress that could not bestir itself to restrain Mr Trump from executing anonymous suspected drug-runners, without producing any evidence, is not likely to impeach him for going to such lengths to bring an indicted cocaine lord to justice (however at odds those tactics may be—and even though Mr Trump had previously pardoned a convicted drug lord, the former president of Honduras, for smuggling cocaine from Venezuela). [...]

At home and abroad, longtime critics of American foreign policy may even take some satisfaction from Mr Trump's bluntness. America has not been "so innocent" in dozens of interventions in Latin America during the cold war, waiving concern for human rights or democracy when American commerce and control were actually, or also, at stake. Such critics may console themselves—as so many of this president's supporters have for so long—that Mr Trump, though coarse, is telling it as it is.

While the administration of Barack Obama declared the Monroe Doctrine defunct, Mr Trump has not merely revived it but, in his 2025 National Security Strategy, appended a "Trump corollary", since rebranded, clumsily, the "Donroe doctrine". Beyond the old doctrine's prohibition against European colonisation in the hemisphere, the corollary asserts an American imperative for commercial pre-eminence. As ever with Mr Trump, those countries that have come to rely most on America are his low-hanging fruit.

Maybe this will all work out well. More likely, in years to come, everyone, including America, will come to miss the old hypocrisy. [...] Not just Colombia and Cuba but Mexico and Denmark have every reason to take Mr Trump's threats seriously. Mr Trump demonstrates daily that what matters, in the real world, is power. Yet the claim that this will make America safer and more prosperous in the long haul is his biggest delusion.

bleak [i:] : désolant ; pe'culiar = particular ; forthrightness /'fɔ:rθraɪtnəs/ = radical honesty of piece with = consistent with ; to snatch = to grab ; unabashed /ʌnə'bæft/ = assumé to whinge /wɪndʒ/ = to complain ; to license /'laɪsəns/ = to authorize ; a lightning strike : un coup de tonnerre ; to gain purchase : être efficace ; well over = a lot more than to bestir oneself /bɪ'stɜːr/ : se décider à agir ; at odds /ɒdz/ = in contradiction ; bluntness = radical honesty ; coarse /kɔːrs/ : grossier ; defunct /dɪ'fʌŋkt/ = obsolete ; merely /'mɪərli/ = simply ; corollary /'kɒrə'ləri/ : conséquence logique ; his low-hanging fruit = easy targets ; in the long haul /hɔːl/ = in the long term ; delusion /dɪ'luːʒən/ = false belief
