

“BORDER SECURITY IS THE PRIMARY ELEMENT OF NATIONAL SECURITY.”

That sentence – “Border security is the primary element of national security” – comes from page 11 of the National Security Strategy.

Border security is *the primary element* of national security. Not one important element. The primary one.

That’s an insane assertion, of course. The military, the economy, real terrorism (including far right terrorism), cybersecurity, sovereign democracy all take a back seat to whatever Stephen Miller flunky had final control over the edit of the NSS, who wrote down something insane, prioritizing the border over all else.

I’ve been obsessing about that comment ever since I read it, and kept thinking of it as I read this long NYT article that purports to explain Trump’s “policy” to target Venezuela. The article came out after I wrote this post attempting to understand Stephen Miller’s most prominent reversal over the last year, and in-between these two Tweets that make it very clear Miller’s entire conception about immigration to the US – even his own family’s immigration to the US – is based off his historically ignorant fantasies.



Stephen Miller 
@StephenM



Watched the Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra Family Christmas with my kids.

Imagine watching that and thinking America needed infinity migrants from the third world.

5:03 PM · Dec 26, 2025 · **10M** Views



Stephen Miller 
@StephenM



Someone should write an alternate historical novel where Americans are the first to master the automobile, the first in flight, the first to harness the atom, the first to land on the moon — but just keep going and never open our borders to the entire third world for sixty years.

1:44 AM · Dec 28, 2025 · 1.4M Views

The story might be better staged as a Coen Brothers buddy movie featuring Stephen Miller, channeling Dr. Strangelove, looking for any opportunity to push harder against immigration, preferably in the form of bombing, even if it contributes to the root cause of drug trafficking and immigration, while Marco Rubio pursues the most stale kind of Cuban-American politics.

The story is so rambling, presumably because the subject and the insanity requires it, that I will attempt to map it.

NYT claims the current focus on Venezuela started when Marco Rubio signed a deal with Nayib Bukele to deport 300 people to his concentration camp.

The seeds of militarizing the approach to Mr. Maduro and Venezuelans were planted in February, when Mr. Rubio struck a deal with Nayib Bukele, the authoritarian leader of El Salvador, at his lakeside villa: The United States would pay nearly \$5 million to send about 300 Venezuelans accused of being gang members to El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT.

Soon after his visit with Mr. Bukele, Mr. Rubio designated eight Latin American criminal groups as foreign terrorist organizations. Tren de Aragua, a Venezuelan gang, topped the list.

Mr. Miller had already landed on a legal tool to bypass due process: the Alien Enemies Act, an 18th-century law that permits immediate detention and deportations of citizens of a country

that has invaded the United States or is at war with it.

Mr. Trump signed an executive order in March invoking the act, with a title warning of “the invasion of the United States by Tren de Aragua.” In retrospect, the order was an important opening salvo against Mr. Maduro: It was the administration’s first formal framing of Mr. Maduro and the United States as being in a type of war. Contrary to a secret U.S. intelligence assessment, it said Tren de Aragua was an instrument of Mr. Maduro.

In this story, NYT is silent about Bukele’s goal with this deal – to obtain the return of MS-13 members who were testifying to his own ties to the gang (it is also silent about Trump’s pardon of Juan Orlando Hernández). It nods to the multiple lies Trump’s Administration told to claim the men it was sending to CECOT were gang members or even criminals (something covered at more length in this story, which it links). But it doesn’t describe how by misrepresenting the men, the Trump Administration failed to fulfill the terms of the deal made with Bukele.

Stephen Miller’s lies were a problem even for Nayib Bukele.

But NYT also doesn’t explain a temporal problem with this story: As the next major section of the story explains, at the beginning of the Administration, Ric Grenell had gotten Nicolás Maduro to accept deportation flights.

It began when Cuban American lawmakers pressed Mr. Trump early this year to end Chevron’s Biden-era confidential license. After Mr. Trump and Mr. Rubio announced in late February that they would do so, Mr. Maduro stopped accepting deportation flights of Venezuelans. Mr. Maduro had agreed to them on Jan. 31 with Richard Grenell, a

special envoy for Mr. Trump.

One point of sending the men Stephen Miller falsely claimed were TdA members to CECOT was that Maduro was refusing to accept them. But Maduro had earlier agreed to accept them. So to understand the need to send planes full of men falsely claimed to be TdA members to Bukele's concentration camp, you have to review Trump's flip-flops on Chevron's license to export Venezuelan oil.

That Chevron section goes like this:

- January 31: Maduro makes a deal with Grenell.
- February: Cuban-American Members of Congress (CAMC) pressure Trump to pull the Chevron license, which he does in late February (possibly between the time Rubio signs the deal with Bukele and the day 200 mostly-innocent men are loaded on planes?).
- Chevron CEO Mike Wirth notes that if Chevron can't export Venezuela's oil, China will do so.
- CAMC learn that Trump might reverse his decision, so threaten to vote against the Big Ugly Bill.
- Stephen Miller pitches Trump on murderboats.
- Trump lets Chevron license expire on May 27.
- CAMC vote to pass Big Ugly.
- Around the same time Trump

considers a pardon for convicted drug kingpin Hernández, Marco Rubio sells Trump on a claim that Maduro is a drug kingpin.

- July: Based in part on Wirth's China argument, Trump reverses course, again, on Chevron license, Maduro accepts the CECOT prisoners and releases 10 Americans, including a triple murderer.

So while Trump was helping Nayib Bukele bury his ties with a dangerous gang and weighing a pitch to free convicted drug kingpin Juan Orlando Hernández, he began entertaining the idea of using the claim that Maduro is a drug kingpin so he can satisfy Stephen Miller's need to bomb something and Marco Rubio's Cuban-American fantasies.

Meanwhile, for reasons NYT doesn't fully explain (though it suggests this was about SCOTUS' decisions against the Alien Enemies Act), Stephen Miller was searching for things to bomb.

At the same time, Mr. Miller was exploring policies unrelated to Venezuela that, like the deportations, had their roots in the so-called U.S. war on terror. He looked at the idea of bombing fentanyl labs in Mexico. But it became clear that Mexican leaders would not consent, and the administration feared losing their cooperation on drug and migrant issues. The Washington Post reported earlier on Mr. Miller's discussions about striking cartels in Mexico.

By early May, Mr. Miller's team began asking for further options for using

force against drug cartels.

White House officials and others bandied around relatively more constrained ideas, including using the C.I.A. to carry out covert strikes on docked boats that did not have people in them. But Mr. Miller's team wanted to publicize the strikes. Officials also discussed blowing up fake drug boats to instill fear in traffickers. But Mr. Miller's aides wanted the real thing, officials said.

This passage adds to what The Atlantic reported – that Miller wanted to murderbomb people “to paint immigrants as a dangerous menace.” But Miller demanded that he get real dead people, not just fake drug boats (and to be fair, given the degree to which various nations are tracking the specific people being murderboated, Miller was right that he needed real dead people for whatever purpose he believes this serves, even if his claim it serves that purpose is probably baseless).

Then Trump or Miller or Marco came up with a list of drug gangs they wanted to target, some of which have little relation to the danger the gangs represent, some of which are (like many of the claims about Tren de Aragua beforehand) invented.

On July 25, [Trump] signed a secret order telling the Pentagon to take action against drug-trafficking groups, putting in motion the targeting of Venezuelans.

[snip]

The two-page order contained a previously unreported written proposal for boat strikes. It directed Mr. Hegseth to target vessels in international waters carrying drugs for any of 24 Latin American “narco-terrorist” groups. The attached list

included ones from Venezuela.

[snip]

The secret list of 24 groups included major cartels and groups that the Trump administration had formally designated as terrorists, along with numerous relatively obscure Mexican gangs. The same day Mr. Trump signed the directive, the Treasury Department announced sanctions against “Cartel de los Soles,” a slang term for drug corruption in Venezuela’s military, declaring it a terrorist organization led by Mr. Maduro. The name was at the bottom of Mr. Trump’s secret list.

And that’s where Trump’s flunkies turned to cutting and pasting legal rulings from the war on terror to be used in Stephen Miller’s campaign to create dead bodies that he can spin as evidence of the danger of immigrants.

Only, in their rush to brainlessly cut-and-paste from a WOT policy that was unsuccessful in its original incarnation, these geniuses failed to consider that drone strikes on the sea are different, legally, from drone strikes on land.

Around the same time, a Trump appointee with little national security law experience was drafting a Justice Department memo saying boat strikes would be lawful based on Mr. Trump’s wartime powers. The legal blessing was already developed by late July, when the Senate confirmed the top two lawyers responsible for reviewing such an operation – T. Elliot Gaiser, head of the department’s Office of Legal Counsel, and Earl G. Matthews, Pentagon general counsel. They were essentially presented with a done deal.

[snip]

Mr. Hegseth signed an execute order that

created the operational framework for the attacks. Dated Aug. 5 and written without input from many career Pentagon officials, it lifted language from previous orders developed for drone strikes against Al Qaeda targets in places like rural Yemen.

It lacked elements crucial to maritime operations – including any mention of what to do with shipwrecked survivors of an attack, officials said.

[snip]

The Pentagon also bypassed a process called the Maritime Operational Threat Response, used to get input from various agencies when proposing a maritime action with international implications, said William D. Baumgartner, a retired Coast Guard rear admiral and lawyer who oversaw Caribbean operations.

Which is how Miller, Rubio, and Whiskey Pete Hegseth got themselves in trouble for even worse murder, that of survivors of the initial drone strike.

But that wasn't yet good enough for Strangelove Miller. One of his top aides then loosened the standards from what they were in the WOT.

During the planning, an aide to Mr. Miller, Anthony Salisbury, pushed the Pentagon for ways to expand the scope of the operations, including loosening standards – like the level of confidence military officials would need that a target meets the criteria. Gen. Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised that the military establish targeting criteria using lessons learned from the post-Sept. 11 wars. Ms. Kelly, the White House spokeswoman, said the account of Mr. Salisbury's role was "made up."

The NYT story ends with the unresolved problem posed by murderboats – what to do with survivors.

On the same day, WaPo described what happened when one of the only survivors – a known drug trafficker – was returned to Ecuador.

The police arrived at the airport prepared to arrest a drug trafficker – a mariner whose crewmates the U.S. military had just killed.

Andrés Fernando Tufiño Chila was one of only two people known to have survived a U.S. strike on a vessel that the Trump administration alleged was smuggling drugs from South America. President Donald Trump had described the Ecuadorian and a fellow survivor of the Oct. 16 strike in the Atlantic Ocean as “terrorists” who would be returned to their countries of origin “for detention and prosecution.”

[snip]

Tufiño, then 41, stepped off the U.S. military plane at the Quito airport on the morning of Oct. 18 in shackles, cut and bruised from the attack but walking on his own, according to Col. Carlos Ortega, then the director of anti-narcotics for Ecuador’s national police. He was already a known trafficker: He had pleaded guilty in U.S. federal court to cocaine distribution conspiracy in 2021 and served more than three years in a U.S. prison before he was deported home to Ecuador last year. Now the U.S. military had picked him up amid the wreckage of a semisubmersible vessel – a “narco sub.”

In his gang-controlled hometown, Tufiño was known as Fresco Solo, neighbors said, a skilled navigator who they alleged was recruited by criminals to smuggle drugs north.

But in transferring him to Ecuadorian custody, three officials here said, U.S. forces didn't provide any evidence that could be used to detain him – no seized drugs, no phone or GPS records, no videos, none of the intelligence that led them to target his vessel.

On landing in Quito, U.S. officials told the Ecuadorians that the transfer was a “humanitarian” repatriation, Ortega said.

Within hours, Tufiño was let go.

There's very little discussion in the NYT about what happens if Marco and his Cuban-American cheerleaders get their wish, a collapse of the Maduro and Cuban Communist regimes. As noted, they ignore the degree to which this policy has led to three drug traffickers – Hernández, Bukele, and Tufiño – going free. There actually *is* an interesting question about what will happen to the drug trade if the US makes sea trafficking less lucrative after having shut down the US-Mexico border to illegal entries. Drug markets don't disappear; they morph, and such shifts can bring really serious unintended consequences.

After all, one of Miller's blind spots are the American citizens who play a key role in all this trafficking. And by treating drug trafficking as an immigrant problem, he surely makes it easier for citizens to go undetected – the kind of detail real drug criminals tend not to miss.

Meanwhile “China” is mentioned just twice in NYT's 3,400-word article laying out how a rather senseless “policy” on Latin America has developed. But then these are the same geniuses who started a trade war with China that gave China a great deal of new leverage over the United States based, in part, on claims of fentanyl trafficking.

As noted, this NYT story really would be better

as a humorous buddy flick, because it is so full of idiocy.

Update: Trump is murderboating off invented intelligence not just against Latin America; it appears he did the same in Nigeria.