

# DAILY BEAST

## ***Ed Asner: Trump's Anti-Protest Authoritarianism Has Echoes of Venezuela***

**The Emmy-winning acting legend and activist writes about why Trump's tear-gassing of protesters has bone-chilling parallels to the chaos in Venezuela under Chavez and Maduro.**

*Edward Asner*

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America loves a posse. Western movies are populated with lawmen deputizing regular Joes. There's something stirring about citizens stepping up in times of need to serve and protect the community. But paramilitaries are also red flags.

The posse has left the screen and entered America under this administration. Inspiring, coddling and stoking extrajudicial forces is [a harbinger of authoritarianism](#). What happened and continues to happen in Venezuela is a timely lesson now. A script that includes vigilante groups warns of the all-too-familiar descent into dictatorship.

I executive produced *Tupamaro: Urban Guerrillas* to document [Venezuela's slide into autocracy](#). The parallels to the assault on democracy by the GOP are unmistakable. Over two decades ago, [Hugo Chavez](#) rose to lead a populist government, aided by *colectivos*, a loose paramilitary confederation.

As a progressive activist, I initially believed in Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution. He redistributed Venezuela's vast oil wealth from the largest reserves in the world to lower poverty, improved healthcare and education. I liked that he took an anti-imperialist stance toward Washington. But Chavez relied on a makeshift military, the corrupt *colectivos*, which hastened the country's economic collapse and fueled authoritarian actions. I was wrong and ended my support. Inflation rose to six digits, food lines were long. Venezuela's capital, Caracas under Chavez and his handpicked successor [Nicolás Maduro](#), remains one of the most dangerous cities in the world.

*Tupamaro: Urban Guerrillas* shows this crisis and one of the instigators, *colectivo* leader Alberto "Chino" Carías, a [Tony Soprano-type](#) known for robbing banks and killing cops. He soon became one of Caracas's police chiefs and earned a post in the national assembly. Under President Nicolás Maduro, Chino and his posse were believed to have attacked and killed protesters. Chino defended himself on CNN, saying his group was never armed. The movie shows otherwise: "don't believe your lying eyes" is another warning sign. President Maduro then used *colectivo* groups to attack and intimidate protestors after the economy collapsed in 2013. Sound familiar?

Ad hoc militias and solo vigilantes are on the rise in the United States. Some "patrol" our southern border to dump water left for suffering migrants, while others show up at state houses to threaten their neighbors, playing soldier by wearing camouflage while shouldering very real AR-15 rifles. Checks and balances have become casualties in every branch of this chaos-driven government.

America's top law-enforcement officer, Attorney General [William Barr](#), is comfortable calling for thuggish tactics like firing rubber bullets and tear gas into peaceful

protestors, like Maduro. Makeshift [military members without insignias](#) patrol the Nation's Capital, like the *colectivos*. But what force do they represent? Whom do they report to? Who are they? I don't know, do you?

They are our history lesson. A posse is summoned when the government is weak and desperate. The Second Amendment starts by naming "A well-regulated militia..." Who is regulating these troops? When First Amendment rights of free speech, assembly and petitioning the government are violently attacked by irregular forces, it looks a lot like Caracas in recent years. Here, right-wing fear-mongering is already stoking vigilantes through relentless propaganda and gaslighting. Acts of domestic terrorism are soaring. Will this administration continue to undermine fair elections, encourage violence against opponents, actually allow a peaceful transition of power? As the *Tupamaro* documentary explores, we need to learn Venezuela's lessons.

The international call for police accountability is the antithesis of state-promoted vigilantism. This convergence of systemic racism, anti-democratic legislators and their Frankenstein armies is alarming. When you send warzone-level munitions into a group wearing flip-flops and Black Lives Matter T-shirts, that's a problem of historic proportions. In the Land of the Free, we should stop ticking off the tin-pot dictator to-do list.

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The *Tupamaro* vigilantes take the law into their own hands, supposedly to help the state and enforce their own brand of justice. America is grappling with the more racially charged [Boogaloo movement](#), also a loosely organized extremist citizen-militia, as are the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and the TIKI torch-bearing “fine people” in Charlottesville, inflamed by terrorism-touting tweets. There are the “ghost skins,” white supremacists who don’t display their beliefs in order to blend into society, police departments and the military to further their racist agenda. All trace their lineage back to the Fred Trump-era Ku Klux Klan.

Mercenaries are the pretend police of an incompetent and lawless administration, a swampy government that is also fiscally reckless, and runs on a toxic injection of machine politics. We should remember that absolute power corrupts absolutely, whether in the United States or Latin America. Chino said that “Venezuela has to be transformed by revolutionary violence.”

America doesn’t. America wants dialogue then legislation, accountability then action. We want to face [the original sin of slavery](#), and myriad social issues, and not hide in a bunker behind yet another failed wall. In the recent past, the cult of personality all but destroyed the hopes of the Venezuelan people. We need to heed their cautionary tale and edit our script. Before Election Day.

*Emmy Award-winning actor and human rights activist Edward Asner executive produced **Tupamaro: Urban Guerrillas**, streaming now on Amazon Prime and [YouTube](#).*

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