

Zombie Colonialism, 2026

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We live in brutal times. Inherited concepts struggle to explain the new realities which have befallen us. I address a single aspect of this larger conundrum, asking how (or if) the familiar category of colonialism, or of postcolonialism, is serviceable in explaining present historical circumstances. I focus on the second Donald Trump presidency, when Washington's faith in the unilateral power of American empire was becoming increasingly awkward to uphold, marking a decisive element in the dynamics of the current global conjuncture. Furthermore, the long-term consequences of the financial crisis of 2008 continue to reverberate.¹ I draw from an earlier argument when I considered the geopolitics of the present conjuncture.² Here, after a short recap, I move to the issue of Trump's second administration, asking if a revamped reading of the category of colonialism can illuminate the political present, even while the cartographies of "colony" and "metropole" no longer quite conform to the familiar geographical properties of the period of the classic European empires.³

To proceed in this way is complicated by the fact that in much contemporary journalism decolonization operates as a kind of absent centre. In the middle decades of the twentieth century freedom from

colonial rule defined -- up to a point -- what a democratic politics *was*, creating a broad spectrum of progressive opinion, from liberals and social democrats in the centre to marxists and anarchists who comprised the Left flank. Yet it's indisputable that the great promise of decolonization now lies shattered all around us. This is a broken history of staggering proportions in which we all, as the children of colonizers or colonized, continue to be implicated. Even so, the enormity of the inner forms of the long-running catastrophe are difficult to reach, frequently defying even the most agile historical explorations. We are habituated to the fact that the loss of the promise of the sovereignty of the nations of the Global South appears as a fatalistic given. The hopes which once animated collective aspirations for decolonization have vanished from the public world.

The orchestrated festivals pronouncing the New Global Order, on the other hand, enter our lives with a striking immediacy. This is in great part their purpose. They are spectacles for the future, working from the presentiment that the end of the epoch of the unilateral American imperium has arrived. Current strategic geopolitics now turn on the business of parcelling out what was once the effective global hegemony of the United States. This is the fate which has fallen to Trump to oversee, his desperate mantra to 'Make America Great Again' revealing what the leaders in Washington have long refused to admit, from Saigon in 1975 to Kabul in 2021: that the USA no longer dominates the globe as once it did.

Behind the razzamatazz this was the logic which underwrote the summit of Trump and Vladimir Putin in Anchorage in August 2025 and which, a month later, brought together in Beijing a colossal display of military prowess overseen by the self-styled architects of the future: Kim Jong Um, Xi Jinping and Putin.

During the Cold War years, the two super-powers – the US and the USSR – thrived on the colonial dependency of their respective

'backyards'. These were seldom regarded as colonies, even though the realities of colonial power determined their fates.

In 1979 the USSR initiated a long and ultimately failed bid to exert dominance in Central Asia by dispatching its armies to Afghanistan. This generated a degree of hostility from the United States, as it was understood to be heralding an expansion of what previously had been recognized as Russia's legitimate sphere of influence, even as the brunt of the fighting fell to proxies rather than to the US itself. Even so, the current campaign in the Ukraine has significant precedents. A short but effective skirmish befell Georgia in 2008 when Russian troops unleashed a show of force. Moscow keeps close watch on the putatively independent satellites closer to home which continue to operate as Russia's semi-colonies. This was preceded in Chechnya 1994-5 and 1999-2000 when Russian forces were mobilized, prompting the United Nations to declare Grozny to be 'the most destroyed' city on the planet. (That heart-breaking designation must by now have migrated to Gaza.) Diplomatic pragmatism ensured that Chechnya functioned as Russia's backyard, allowing the Kremlin a free hand. Moscow's battle for the Ukraine today, moreover, leaks out into other locations in the Baltic and Central Europe, confirmed by the sight of 'wayward' drones in the Polish and Scandinavian skies.

The fact that 30,000 North Koreans have been conscripted as cannon-fodder in the eastern enclaves of Ukraine, combined with substantial numbers of Korean antiballistic missiles, signals a further shift in the new global arrangement -- although who knows what on Earth occupies the minds of those unfortunates who, from way across the landmass, have been conscripted to battle on the mud wastes of Ukraine's East.

The absence of Trump in Beijing was telling, highlighting the unresolved alliances of the contending great powers.

In the first weeks of his second term, in a tsunami of belligerent rhetoric the US president threatened in quick succession the sovereign

lands of Canada, Panama and Greenland. It was impossible to distinguish between breathless bluster and seriousness, between pantomime and business. I doubt, if pressed, whether Trump himself could have decided. The prospect of US troops marching across the 49th Parallel seems, to say the least, unlikely, although not impossible. In the Central American isthmus and the Caribbean, as well as in the larger nations of South America, the US has a long and undistinguished record of destabilization, doing as it will in its ‘own’ backyard. Much like Russia’s assault on Grozny in the eyes of the Pentagon, for the Russians or the Chinese, Washington is ceded free rein in ‘its’ isthmus to do as it sees fit. Which is one reason why China is hostile to US endeavours to consolidate its hegemony in Taiwan. Greenland though, with its minuscule population, is some way off from the Americas. It isn’t of *immediate* importance to Trump. However, there’s no reason to assume that it won’t yet find itself in jeopardy. Strictly these strategic imperatives, although they demonstrate the everyday realities of the great-power states toward their smaller neighbours, have only loosely been designated exercises in colonial hegemony.

I added this paragraph to my initial draft article early in the morning of 3 January 2026, just prior to pressing the button and sending it off to *Postcolonial Interventions*. At this precise moment the news flashed across my screen that the US had bombed military bases in and around Caracas, US special forces capturing the Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. At first it wasn’t clear where they’d been taken, nor the extent of the Venezuelan casualties. The scale of the assault soon came to be known and we learned also of the death of some thirty-three Cuban soldiers who had been posted in the presidential offices. As events unfolded we discovered that Maduro and Flores had been flown to the United States to face a range of charges, including drug trafficking. In this very moment, the dispositions of ‘the colonial’ and ‘the postcolonial’ shifted, like tectonic plates creaking below the Earth’s surface. It became apparent that US interests in Greenland were of greater consequence than I’d imagined, and Cuba

also swiftly entered the line of Washington's vision. Appropriately, the mediations were to the fore. As Trump celebrated the abduction of his adversaries he declared "I watched it literally like I was watching a television show."

I gradually realized that I had been too preoccupied by the persona of Trump – the pantomime-or-business question – and hadn't noticed the larger forces at work. From the very start of Trump's second administration his government has been peculiarly single-minded in reinforcing the military power of the US throughout the western hemisphere. From the late summer of 2024 a concerted build-up of the US military took place across the Caribbean region. Months of covert operations followed. The fact that this was so broke into the open long before the intervention of 3 January. Uncompromising military assaults on Venezuela occurred, on the (baseless) pretext that Caracas was responsible for the traffic of supplies of narcotics into the United States. In the lead-up to the attack of 3 January airstrikes had caused more than one hundred deaths. Simultaneously the US secured military deals with Paraguay, Ecuador, Peru, Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Panama and Trinidad, in addition to strengthening existing bases in Puerto Rico, Honduras, El Salvador and Cuba. This amounted to a comprehensive militarization of the region. Or, to revive an older vocabulary, it resurrected the essentials of an old-school gun-boat diplomacy, in which a colonial logic prevails.

Nor, indeed, was the White House silent about the extent of the military intensification of the Western hemisphere. In November 2025 Trump launched a glossy twenty-nine-page document, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, available online. It's difficult to know how to read it. It doesn't seriously attempt to review the complexities of the actualities of a present or future 'security strategy'. It resembles a glossy real-estate brochure, intent on accentuating harmony, with Trump heralded as the presiding maestro of a new world order which lies just around the corner. It's as much a tawdry exercise in public relations as it is 'politics'. Even so, we shouldn't underestimate what the document does seek to clarify.

The opening two pages have Trump speaking in the first person, where the litany of the manifold successes of his administration is breathlessly recorded. “After four years of weakness, extremism, and deadly failures, my administration has moved with urgency and historic speed to restore American strength at home and aboard, and bring peace and stability to our world … No administration in history has achieved so dramatic a turnaround in so short a time.” (i) Not only has Trump “settled eight raging conflicts” but, as he boasts in his third paragraph, he has also countered “radical gender ideology and woke lunacy”. (i) All is set for the US to continue on its destiny to becoming “the greatest and most successful nation in human history, and the home of freedom on earth”. (ii)

The single issue the which document does propose is framed in these terms. How is the US to secure the future? The answer, it seems, is for the US to abandon the postwar objective of conducting US hegemony as a global power and concentrate instead on its role in the ‘Western Hemisphere’. (5) Trump’s Republicans are keen to free themselves from the habits of previous administrations, desperate not to get embroiled in over-reaching overseas military entanglements – for which, we might note, the Make America Great Again (MAGA) militants have little enthusiasm. While the White House document advocates a policy in which the United States refrains from acting as the pre-eminent global hegemon, in fact this represents little more than recognizing historic realities.

However, in an unexpected move, the authors of the National Security Strategy turn to the historical past as a means for heralding the new future, alighting upon the two-hundred-year-old Monroe Doctrine of 1823. This represented a shot across the bows of the European powers, warning the established European nations not to interfere in the Americas, leaving the emerging American republics to their own devices. Which, by and large, they did. The spirit of the Monroe

Doctrine was enunciated in a democratic – indeed, an anti-colonial -- voice. Yet as things turned out, Munroe's 'Doctrine' served relentlessly, decade by decade, as the alibi for the United States to exert its authority throughout the continent. Munroe came to sanction the idea that Washington could act with impunity in its own sphere of influence. Yet as Greg Grandin observed shortly after 3 January, this excursion to the past should be better known as the Monroe Creed, 'because, really, it is more an article of faith than a doctrine of international law' (Grandin 2026). This is the sentiment on which Trump's threats to Canada, Panama and Greenland were based. According to the document this guiding principle amounts to the 'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine. (5) Quite what the 'corollary' in the 'Trump Corollary' entails remains a mystery.

Nor, for all the repetitious declarations on the priorities of the Western Hemisphere, does the 'Trump Corollary' ignore non-Western parts of the globe. Readers are informed that the US needs the "Indo-Pacific [to be] free and open". (5) Europe urgently requires US backing in its battle to restore its "civilizational self-confidence and Western identity", an ominous premise. (5) Hostile forces must be prevented "from dominating the Middle East." (5) "President Trump", it's promised, will employ "unconventional diplomacy, America's military might, and economic leverage to surgically extinguish embers of division between nuclear-capable nations and violent wars caused by centuries-long hatred." (8) The *National Security* brief goes no further in considering how these objectives will be realized. Nowhere does it explicitly announce that Trump's USA will endeavour to avoid future incursions on other lands which call for GI 'boots on the ground'. We can only conclude that the attraction of global supremacy hasn't been entirely extinguished, even as the primary drive of the new 'policy' is framed almost entirely in terms of the Western Hemisphere.

In fact, Trump's newly burnished foreign policy is not greatly different from its predecessors, even while the new administration places a

diminishing emphasis on the virtue of outright regime change. (A temptation avoided, for the while at least, in Venezuela).⁵ Indeed, nor has this been the preserve only of Republicans. Two years after the fiery president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, had died Barack Obama declared the nation to be a “national security threat” (Reuters 2015). Trump’s faith in “America’s military might” and its “economic leverage” hardly signifies a remodelled future, while “surgically” extinguishing foes makes the blood run cold. This is a question of tactics, not of strategy. All that is “unconventional” about Trump’s vision for the future of the United States is that, far from creating new possibilities, it doubles down on the brutalities which neighbouring nations might reasonably expect and to which, in any case, they’ve been much accustomed. For sure, maybe a greater role will be accorded to client states, with the usual incentives, so long as they serve as proxies for the US. But the preponderant political picture is clear.⁶ Very little will change.

The Trumpites parade their *National Security Strategy* as evidence of the administration’s deep-seated power, resolve and intelligence. Perhaps. But Grandin is right to insist that it could, equally, be read as a sign of national weakness, indicative “of a regional hegemon that can’t effectively organise its hinterlands, much less respond to challenges it lays out for itself, especially countering Chinese influence.” (2026)

It might seem as if the Trump administrations mark an unparalleled break with the past. But I’m not sure. There’s no doubt about the political vitality of MAGA populism, wreaking havoc with the inherited political institutions. But it has important precedents. We need only return to Richard Hofstadter’s celebrated, if controversial, 1963 musings on “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”⁷. Hofstadter launches into his assertion that “American politics has often been an arena for angry minds” (Hofstadter 1964). In a blistering *tour de force*, he compiles an audit of the occasions when a “paranoid style” entered the bloodstream of the United States, from the earliest moments of the Republic up until the moment when he delivered his lecture. He

reproduces a dark reading of America's past which -- in some ways -- echoes the sensibilities emanating from black America, where racialization was conceived as a primary factor in the logic of dispossession. If Hofstadter is right, or if he's partly right, it's clear that Trump should not be regarded as an exception. As he likes to imagine himself, he is emblematic of America's virtue, confirmed beyond all doubt by his own colossal wealth.

Trump's terms in office reveal a curious phenomenon. He himself personifies the phenomenon of what, long ago, Frantz Fanon identified as a *dying colonialism*⁸. What, today, does this comprise? In part, it can be witnessed in the continuing urge for the powerful nations to dismantle the livelihoods of poorer neighbours whose very impoverishment, it seems, stands as a rebuke to the self-possession of the wealthy. This is the colonialism of old, driven by a rapacious greed which can never be appeased, generating ever-more vicious cycles of destitution.

Yet the vulnerability of the US state in the current geopolitical moment raises a cognate matter. In our own times relations between metropole and colony are more plural and varied than ever. The traffic between the two, not least the traffic of peoples, now carries an unprecedented historic weight, a *longue-durée* in the structures of migration which has coincided with the startling innovations in the invention of virtual, as opposed to strictly geographical, worlds. For all the stark and visible divergences which continue to bleed into the present, metropoles and their erstwhile colonies are more deeply locked each inside the other. Colonialism ceases to be essentially, or perhaps even primarily, a spatial matter. The vectors of colonial authority now burrow into the nations of the Global North, with fearful consequences.

In the twenty-first century dreams of pristine *white* peoples, and of *white* nations, have become an impossibilism, incessantly played out

inside a remembered syntax of the imperial pasts which had once articulated the privileges promised by racial whiteness. The death-pangs of the colonial past are still with us and will stretch long into the future. For those of Trumpite sensibilities, this represents a disturbing irruption in the body politic, amounting to a defeat that urgently needs to be lanced.

Prominent in this respect is the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, ICE, of which much has been heard in recent years. This is where, day by day, we can *see* Trumpite populism settling into the interstices of the state. ICE has become the Praetorian Guard of Trumpism, effectively above the law and subject only to the whims of the President. A day doesn't pass when we don't see photos or videos of phalanxes of ICE operatives sweeping through local parks and streets for America's *sans papiers*, much as we are regaled with images of the National Guard dispatched by the White House to cities deemed by Trump to have spun out of control. The tempo of official hostility to black and brown immigrants settled in the United States continues to inform the new populisms, becoming increasingly toxic. Why should I call this a 'new' populism? Not because the precedents are absent but because the 'colonial' properties of the erstwhile metropoles are assuming an ever-greater visibility. A growing number of urban locations in the United States are becoming the sites of a reversion to the colonial logics of a prior age. Pockets of the metropole are treated *as if* they are today's colonized. They feature as today's enemies within. Colonial violence comes home.

Undoubtedly ICE targets first and foremost the black and brown underclass in the cities. But the violence of the Trumpite state seeps into larger the body politic. As we know from the time of George W. Bush and his dedication to the 'War on Terror', the state effectively launched a war against an abstraction: that is, against terror. This is a logic which the more it is invoked, the more it expands. Who comes to embody 'terror'? *Anyone*. Similarly, in current times, Trump turns his

sights on those who *are*, or who are deemed *to be*, woke. This, too, is an abstraction, in infinite flux, meaning only what its detractors believe it to mean. With Trump, ‘woke’ has become an active ingredient in the workings of the state. It appears on the opening page of Trump’s *National Security Strategy*. The enemy is within, alluding to a Manichean battle between Good and Evil, the outcome of which will determine the future of the United States.

Decolonization comprises both the end of the historic colonial order and, simultaneously, its unruly resurgence. The two temporalities coexist. How this plays out in real time can only be resolved empirically, recognizing the contemporary colonial order as at the same time both dying and resurgent. This doubleness is the dynamic which prevails in the zombie colonialism of our own times.

NOTES

1. Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (London: Penguin, 2019).
2. Bill Schwarz, ‘Late Colonial Unreason’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, published online 11 Nov. 2025.
3. I thank Abin Chakraborty and the *Postcolonial Interventions* posse for inviting me to submit this contribution. It’s been too long since I’ve ordered my thoughts on the value and purpose in thinking about the world after the end of the classic European powers. I’ve been disturbed to hear, on occasion, the observation that the histories of colonialism and postcolonialism are becoming passé and predictable. I welcomed the opportunity to marshal my thoughts.
4. Greg Grandin, ‘Trump, Venezuela and the Doctrine Which Would Not Die’, *Financial Times*, 10 Jan. 2026. The principal author of the ‘Munroe’

Doctrine was in fact John Quincy Adams. Grandin argues that the document represented a full-bloodied defence of the right of the Union States to intervene in the hemisphere whenever and however it saw fit. It embodied, Grandin argues, Trump's allegiance to 'America first'.

5. Long ago Jenny Pearce exhaustively reconstructed the realities of the Munroe Doctrine: *Under the Eagle: United States Intervention in Central America and the Caribbean* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1982). The Latin America Bureau list amplified, nation by nation, the fuller story.
6. Tiago Rogero, 'Gunboat Diplomacy on Steroids: US Signs Security Deals across Latin America', *Guardian*, 23 Dec. 2025.
7. This first appeared as the Herbert Spencer Lecture, delivered at Oxford University in November 1963. It was subsequently published in Harper's Magazine in Nov. 1964. Available online: https://moodle2.units.it/pluginfile.php/586107/mod_resource/content/1/R.%20J.%20Hofstadter%20%20%9CThe%20Paranoid%20Style%20in%20American%20Politics%20%9D%2C%20Harper%20%99s%20Magazine%20November%201964%20pp.%2077%20%20%93%2086..pdf
8. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (London: Penguin, 1970).

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