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## Captor Country Profile

### Venezuela: A Clear Pattern of Abuse

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#### Executive Summary

A defining feature of Nicolás Maduro's regime (2013–present) has been the systematic use of foreign detainees as political leverage.<sup>i</sup> While isolated cases occurred under Hugo Chávez (1999–2013), Venezuela's economic collapse after 2014,<sup>ii</sup> and escalating U.S. sanctions transformed hostage-taking into a deliberate strategy. In total, under Maduro's leadership, at least 37 Americans<sup>1</sup> have been taken hostage for the purpose of leverage. More efforts focused on prevention (e.g., targeted communication campaign, warning on the dangers of traveling to Venezuela and its bordering regions) and deterrence are needed. The temporary, private Chevron licenses, up for renewal at the end of 2025, offer a unique opportunity to build in a deterrence mechanism and bring accountability to survivors.



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<sup>1</sup> This number does not include Dahud Hanid Ortiz, who was convicted of murdering three people in Spain

# Americans Wrongfully Detained in Venezuela, 2013-2025 YTD



Hostage Diplomacy in Venezuela, 2013-2025 YTD



## 1. April 2013: Initial Detention under Maduro

The graph's upward trend starts in early 2013, highlighted by the arrest of an American filmmaker, Timothy Tracy, who was charged with inciting violence following Venezuela's presidential elections. This event is largely seen as the first overt example of President Maduro using the arrest of U.S. citizens as a means of political bargaining, establishing a pattern for future cases

## 2. June 2016: The Arrest of Joshua Holt

There is a spike in mid-2016 with the arrest of Joshua Holt, a Mormon missionary imprisoned on disputed weapons charges. Holt's jailing came amid increased U.S. pressure for a recall referendum against Maduro, implying a revenge motive on the part of Venezuelan officials. His case, pending for two years, was a contributor to the ongoing spike in the number of detained Americans.



### **3. November 2017: Detention of the Citgo Six**

Late 2017 witnesses a major spike after the U.S. imposes sanctions on Venezuela. Six Citgo executives—Tomeu Vadell, Alirio Zambrano, Jose Luis Zambrano, Jorge Toledo, Gustavo Cardenas, and Jose Pereira—were arrested on sham corruption charges. This change in focus to corporate executives led to the highest levels recorded on the chart, with detentions for almost five years.

### **4. October 2022: The First Major Prisoner Swap**

There is a notable drop-off in late 2022, as the Citgo Six and Marine veteran Matthew Heath are freed in a high-profile prisoner exchange. The negotiation, which included the release of Maduro's nephews, led to a brief decrease in the number of detained Americans, though later stability in the graph suggests the practice continued.

### **5. December 2023: The Alex Saab Exchange**

A sharp decline is again seen at the end of 2023 when ten Americans were freed in a swap for Alex Saab, a key financier of Maduro, in addition to the release of twenty Venezuelan opposition figures. By year's end, no Americans remained detained—a historic low—though analysts cautioned that this respite might prove temporary with the 2024 elections approaching.

### **6. August 2024: Post-Election Increase**

After Venezuela's disputed July 2024 elections, the chart spikes dramatically. The arrest of U.S. Navy sailor Wilbert Castañeda in August 2024, and the subsequent detentions of Jorge Marcelo Vargas and Lucas Hunter (abducted from Colombia by Venezuelan authorities), resulted in eight Americans detained by mid-2025, representing a significant proportion of all cases since 2013.

**7. January–July 2025:** Releases under the Trump Administration There are two significant reductions in early 2025. Six Americans were freed on January 31 after negotiations by Special Envoy Richard Grenell. Another release, that of Air Force veteran Joseph St. Clair, occurred on May 20. Followed in July by the release of all remaining American captives.



## **A History of Venezuela's Hostage Diplomacy**

The arrest of U.S. filmmaker Timothy Tracy<sup>iii</sup> in April 2013, weeks after Maduro took power, marked the beginning of Maduro's reliance on hostage diplomacy. Accused of inciting post-election violence, Tracy's detention set a precedent: U.S. nationals would be arrested during periods of domestic unrest or bilateral tensions, often tied to U.S. policy shifts.<sup>iv</sup> Venezuela's reliance on hostage diplomacy intensified as its economy crumbled and the regime's international isolation grew. Detentions spiked after key U.S. actions, such as sanctions or diplomatic overtures. In 2016, Joshua Holt,<sup>v</sup> an American missionary, was arrested on dubious weapons charges, amid U.S. calls for Maduro's recall. Holt's two-year imprisonment ended only after successful backchannel negotiations.<sup>vi</sup>

## **2022 Releases**

High-profile cases reveal a clear playbook. In 2017, following the imposition of U.S. sanctions against Maduro himself, six Citgo executives were wrongfully detained by the government of Venezuela.<sup>vii</sup> They were unjustly held for almost five years. Their release in October 2022,<sup>viii</sup> along with U.S. Marine Corps veteran Matthew Heath,<sup>ix</sup> was secured through a prisoner exchange for Maduro's nephews, Efraín Campo Flores and Francisco Flores de Freitas, convicted of drug trafficking, sentenced, and imprisoned in the United States.<sup>x</sup> In total, the seven American hostages released from Venezuela in 2022 were unjustly imprisoned, on average, for just under four years.<sup>2</sup>

## **2023 Releases**

The next major release of American hostages held in Venezuela occurred in December 2023. In exchange for Alex Saab, a Maduro ally, Maduro released ten Americans and 20 opposition leaders.<sup>xi</sup> Additionally, as part of the deal, Venezuelan authorities turned over Leonard Glenn Francis. Francis, a corrupt defense contractor, was a leading figure in one of the largest known, military bribery schemes in U.S. history.<sup>xii</sup> In total, the Americans released had been imprisoned, on average, for just under two years.<sup>3</sup> By the end of 2023, there were no Americans wrongfully detained in Venezuela.<sup>xiii</sup> However, in a report that proved prescient, Foley Foundation researcher Cindy Loertscher noted the July 2024 election may bring uncertainty and a heightened possibility for new wrongful detentions.<sup>xiv</sup>

## **2025 Releases**

After the July 2024 elections in Venezuela, a new cycle of hostage diplomacy began. The first known arrest of an American during the current hostage-taking cycle occurred about a month after the elections on August 27, 2024, with the wrongful

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<sup>2</sup> The range spanned from seven months to 4.9 years, with the group median of time held of 4.9 years

<sup>3</sup> The range spanned from two months to a little over three and half years, with a median of just over a year and a half; the Foley Foundation is missing information for one individual released during this timeframe and they are not included in this analysis



detention of active-duty U.S. Navy sailor Wilbert Castaneda. Castaneda's unjust detention was quickly followed by more, as Maduro seized other Americans. From August 2024 through early January 2025, 16 Americans were taken hostage by Maduro and leveraged for bargaining.<sup>4</sup> Maduro's hostage taking extended to the border regions of Venezuela. For example, Lucas Hunter was in Colombia at the time of his cross-border abduction by Venezuelan authorities.<sup>xv</sup> The U.S. government recognized these detentions as wrongful in early 2025. In total, Americans detained in Venezuela between August 2024 and July 2025 account for almost 40% of all such cases of Americans being held hostage in Venezuela since 2013.

Unlike in earlier hostage cycles in Venezuela, the newly elected Trump administration moved quickly. On January 31, 2025, Special Presidential Envoy for Special Missions Richard Grenell announced he was flying back from Venezuela with six Americans that had been held hostage there.<sup>xvi</sup> Envoy Grenell also proved instrumental in securing the release of Air Force veteran Joseph St. Clair on May 20, 2025.<sup>xvii</sup> And then, on July 18, 2025, an additional 10 Americans were released from Venezuela in exchange for over 250 Venezuelans held in prisons in El Salvador.<sup>xviii</sup> At the time of release, Secretary Rubio declared that there were no more Americans wrongfully detained in Venezuela.<sup>xix</sup> In total, the Americans captured during this hostage taking cycle were unjustly imprisoned, on average, for about six months.<sup>5</sup>

## **A Continuing Threat**

It is imperative that the United States government continue to put effort into the prevention and deterrence of hostage taking, as Maduro is unlikely to forgo this tactic. The U.S. State Department has been clear on the threat that the Maduro regime poses to Americans. In May 2025, the State Department issued multiple public advisories emphasizing the danger of travel to Venezuela.<sup>xx</sup> The message was clear: do not travel to Venezuela or venture close to any areas that border Venezuela. Additionally, the State Department increased its reward for information leading to Maduro's arrest to \$50 million.<sup>xxi</sup> However, even as the U.S. Department of State warned against travel to Venezuela, a private, six-month operating license for Chevron was approved.<sup>xxii</sup>

## **Advocacy Call: Moving Towards Deterrence**

It is unlikely that Maduro will stop engaging in hostage diplomacy, therefore it is critical the U.S. government take actions to deter future hostage taking and ensure accountability for the Americans victimized. Because Chevron's current operating license is set to expire at the end of 2025, steps can, and should, be taken to build accountability and deterrence into the next license. For example, a victim's fund

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<sup>4</sup> Dahud Hanid Ortiz was imprisoned prior to this timeframe, and is not considered a hostage for purposes of this paper

<sup>5</sup> The range spanned from under one month to just under one year, with a median of 192 days, or just over six months



could be established with Venezuelan government funds paid in, calculated as a percentage of the expected profits anticipated from the oil sales. Furthermore, strong, specific deterrence needs to be built into the framework for in-country oil and gas licenses, such that if Maduro wrongfully detains an American over the duration of the licenses, then the revenue received from oil sales plus a large (e.g., 50%) penalty are returned and distributed among the Americans unjustly held and victimized by Maduro and his government.

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<sup>xii</sup> Baldor, L. C., & Watson, J. (2023, December 20). 'Fat Leonard,' a fugitive now returning to the US, was behind one of the military's biggest scandals. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/fat-leonard-navy-bribery-scandal-venezuela-extradition-57c07f7efdf9e0cbcaad35d04eff3b6e>

<sup>xiii</sup> Loertscher, C. (n.d.). (rep.). BRINGING AMERICANS HOME 2024 (pp. 1–101). James W. Foley Legacy Foundation. <https://jamesfoleyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/FINAL-Bringing-Americans-Home-2024-V4.pdf>

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