

# Opinion

## MY VIEW

# Mahjong, the universal language

Walk into a mahjong room anywhere in the United States, and you might notice something remarkable: a dozen people of different ages, backgrounds, and experiences huddled around a table, eyes on the same set of tiles, speaking a language without words. Whether the clatter of tiles echoes through a Chinatown community center, a suburban living room, or a college dorm, the game communicates something deeper than strategy—it communicates connection.

Mahjong is more than a pastime. Across cultures, it is a ritual, a shared heartbeat, a bridge between generations. Its tactile rhythm—the shuffling, the building of walls, the tapping of tiles—creates an immediate sense of familiarity. Even without a common spoken language, players can sit down, learn each other’s style, and share in a universal experience. In this sense, mahjong has earned a reputation as a “wordless” language, one that transcends borders, backgrounds, and rule-books.

The United States is home to an astonishing variety of mahjong styles. There is the classic Chinese and Hong Kong style, played widely across North America, the American version with its ever-changing “cards” of winning hands and strategic Charleston, and the Japanese Riichi variant, beloved for its tac-



SHARONA SALTZMAN  
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tical depth and growing popularity online. There are also regional variations—Taiwanese rules, Wright-Patterson mahjong, and countless house-specific tweaks. Despite these differences, the common thread is the joy of play and the bonds it creates.

Mahjong’s appeal is as social as it is strategic. It is recognized as a “mind sport,” demanding memory, logic, and pattern recognition, yet it also encourages laughter, conversation, and intergenerational teaching. Many families use it to connect grandparents with grandchildren, neighbors with new arrivals, or longtime friends with casual acquaintances. In doing so, mahjong becomes not just a game, but a living, evolving tradition that reflects the communities that embrace it.

The benefits extend beyond connection. Research has shown that playing mahjong supports cognitive health, particularly in older adults, boosting memory, focus, and problem-solving skills. It is a social prescription as much as a mental exercise, offering stress relief, companionship, and a sense of belong-

ing—all around a simple, elegant table of tiles.

Perhaps what makes mahjong truly special in the United States is its inclusivity. You can find players from every corner of the globe, each bringing a story, a strategy, and a love for the game. It is played in casual homes and formal clubs, online and in person, by novices and seasoned experts alike. In every instance, the shared love of mahjong creates community.

The enduring magic of mahjong lies in this paradox: it is a game that is at once highly structured and endlessly adaptable, deeply traditional and yet continuously reinvented. The clatter of the tiles, the shared anticipation of a winning hand, the quiet satisfaction of strategy—it speaks a language everyone can understand, regardless of age, origin, or preferred style.

Mahjong, in its many forms, reminds us that games are more than entertainment. They are vessels for culture, carriers of memory, and bridges between people. Across the United States, from living rooms to senior centers to bustling city clubs, the tiles continue to unite players in ways both profound and joyful.

**Sharona Saltzman is the founder of Mahjong West Media and the creator of Tiles That Unite: Portraits of Mahjong Players Across the U.S.**

## MY VIEW

# U.S. Military capture Maduros but future is unclear



ARTHUR CYR  
ONE CYR’S VIEW

The capture of brutal Venezuelan dictator President Nicolás Maduro Moros and his wife, Cilia Flores de Maduro, by Delta Force of Army Special Forces represents a spectacular success. The snatch team was the tip of a sizable specially organized United States combined military and law enforcement task force.

There were no U.S. losses in this thoroughly planned mission, which achieved total surprise and complete success.

The longer-term implications, reverberations and consequences of this daring move are a different matter.

Maduro and his wife are now in federal custody in New York. An indictment unsealed there reiterates long-standing charges, including drug trafficking, conspiracy, and narcoterrorism, but has dropped accusations related to the Cartel de las Olas.

Before unsealing the indictments, the largely general, vague comments of President Donald Trump and senior civilian associates at a January 3 press conference at Trump’s club in Mar-a-Lago, Florida, reinforce the uncertainty.

Trump stated the United States will “run” Venezuela and “fix” the economically devastated oil industry of the nation. In fact, there is no U.S. military, sizable commercial or other significant presence in Venezuela. The Maduro regime remains in place.

Air Force General Dan Caine, current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stood out in the Mar-a-Lago event. He was the one official there who provided specific, detailed information on the highly successful mission, dubbed “Operation Absolute Resolve.”

In fine military manner, he credited and praised the service personnel involved. Many politicians should, but won’t, learn worthwhile lessons about the value of public deference and praise of subordinates who work every day in the front lines.

The extraordinary success of the mission adds further, particularly persuasive evidence of the wisdom and insight of President Richard Nixon and associates in ending the military draft in January 1973 and moving to all-volunteer professional forces. The Vietnam War had proven to be a long-term poison in the system of our military, especially the Army.

The long-term recovery has been profound, and Nixon deserves credit here and in numerous other areas of policy.

The situation with Venezuela’s leaders is evolving and understandably uncertain. Vice President Delcy Rodríguez initially was angry and defiant. However, she sounded more cooperative following a public threat by Trump of possible further action.

Venezuela’s military has recognized Rodríguez’s authority. Under the constitution elections are to be held in thirty days, though martial law could overrule. Venezuela Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello urged citizens to remain calm and trust the leadership.

Trump at the press conference was rather dismissive of Venezuela opposition leader María Corina Machado, but she is formidable. On October 10, she received the Nobel Peace Prize. She deserves the distinctive honor, personifies courage, and has earned enormous global influence. Trump should be praising her.

In 2024, she was barred from running in the presidential election. Nevertheless, independent outside analysts agreed that the opposition won the balloting. Brutally heavy-handed President Maduro and his corrupt associates brazenly stole yet another presidential election. Opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia found asylum in Spain.

Ms. Machado is a conservative, fundamentally opposed to the Venezuelan regime. She supports the latest U.S. move, clearly trying to position herself for a return home. She has been in exile.

The Maduro regime since the election has been exceptionally aggressive in trying to silence dissent.

The greatest U.S. advantage is the profound long-term global trend toward democracy. Earlier, Venezuela was among the few democracies present in Latin America.

**Arthur I. Cyr is the author of “After the Cold War—American Foreign Policy, Europe and Asia,” NYU Press and Palgrave/Macmillan. Contact acyr@carthage.edu**

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## ANOTHER VIEW



## MY VIEW

# Trump’s toadies tried to bury big news on New Year’s Eve

Leave it to MAGA Republicans to ring out the old year with one last blast of craven stupidity.

Mike Johnson’s House crew apparently assumed releasing Jack Smith’s recent secret testimony in the midst of holiday festivities would somehow ensure nobody notice the ex-special counsel eviscerated his hapless inquisitors, leaving no doubt he had abundant ammo to paint Trump as a criminal in a federal court of law.

Trump and his House toadies tried everything to stack the deck against Smith. He wanted a public hearing, but was refused. Meanwhile, in the run up to his Dec. 17 closed-door appearance, Trump called him “deranged,” a “thug,” a “criminal,” and a “disgrace to humanity.” But Smith, a career adherent to evidentiary facts and the rule of law, was not deterred. Here he was, in the opening minutes of the hearing:

“Jan. 6 was an attack on the structure of our democracy...Our investigation developed proof beyond a reasonable doubt that President Trump engaged in a criminal scheme to overturn the results of the 2020 election and to prevent the lawful transfer of power.”

A House Republican staffer (whose name was redacted), pointing out Trump repeatedly claimed in the weeks prior to Jan. 6 the 2020 election was stolen, asked if you could prosecute someone for speaking his mind and if those statements are protected by the First Amendment.

“Absolutely not,” Smith said. “If (the statements) are made to target a lawful government function” - the peaceful transfer of power - “and they are made with knowing falsity, then no, they are not” protected by the First Amendment.

“When someone...commits an ‘affinity fraud’ - where you try to gain someone’s trust... and then you rip them off - you defraud them,” Smith added. “And in a lot of ways this case

was an affinity fraud. The president had people who had built up trust in him, including people in his own party, and he preyed on that,” by stoking followers to violently storm the Capitol, armed with lies about a stolen election.

The staffer tried several other tacks, including claiming Trump merely heeded what his close advisors told him. Smith flatly denied that was the case and had lined up numerous witnesses - all Republicans - who tried to tell Trump the 2020 results were legit. Trump reached out to many of them, including the top Republicans in swing state Arizona, only to be told what he didn’t want to hear.

“There was a pattern in our case where any time any information came in that would mean he could no longer be president, he would reject it,” Smith said. “And any theory, no matter how far-fetched, no matter how not based in law, that would indicate that he could, he latched on to that.”

Later in the day Smith piled it on: “The pattern and the depth of the pattern and the length of the pattern was pretty damning evidence that he knew (his stolen election claims) were false. He only brought ‘fraud’ claims in states in states that he lost. When he was told that a ‘fraud’ claim wasn’t true, he didn’t stop making it...claims that were so outlandish and so just fantastical, continuing to push those claims after they’d been disabused, was strong evidence (for) our case... False claims about dead voters. It would be false claims about underage voters. It would be false claims about illegal alien voters.”

At this point, the House Republican inquisitor was flailing. How come Smith was so “laser focused only on President Trump”? Wasn’t Smith part of a political conspiracy to hurt Trump’s 2024 candidacy, “keeping him off the campaign trail”?

“All of that is false,” Smith replied, saying he only cared about the evi-



DICK POLMAN  
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dence he’d amassed, not the campaign calendar. And particularly with respect to Jan. 6, “the evidence made clear that President Trump was by a large measure the most culpable and most responsible person in this conspiracy. These crimes were committed for his benefit. The attack that happened at the Capitol, part of this case, does not happen without him. The other co-conspirators were doing this for his benefit...Our view of the evidence was that he caused it and that he exploited it.”

If you’ve read this far, you’re likely wondering whether the effort was even worth it. Jack Smith’s case feels like ancient history, the rule of law has no more value than a clump of soiled tissue, and Generalissimo Bone Spurs is off the leash and plotting imperial conquest in the southern hemisphere.

But if you have read this far, you may well believe that it’s vitally important to do whatever we can, however modest those efforts might be, to document Trump’s criminality for the historical record, in the fervent hope that future Americans will be free to listen and learn.

Because, as Smith warned during his testimony, if there’s no accountability, even in the rear-view mirror, for what Trump did to obstruct the peaceful transfer of power, “it becomes the new norm.” That would be, in his word, “catastrophic.”

And that’s why I wrote this.

**Dick Polman, a veteran national political columnist based in Philadelphia and a Writer in Residence at the University of Pennsylvania, writes the Subject to Change newsletter. Email him at dick-polman7@gmail.com**