

LETTER FROM TRUMP'S WASHINGTON

# THE COSTS OF TRUMP'S IRAN-WAR FOLLY

*If this is “total and complete victory,” imagine what failure looks like.*

By Susan B. Glasser

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American hubris dies hard. Listening to the hyperventilations of Pete Hegseth on Wednesday morning, as he enthused about a tenuous ceasefire with Iran that may or may not mark the end of what President Donald Trump has called his “little excursion” in the Middle East, one might have been forgiven for thinking that America, aided by the hand of the Almighty himself and the “courage and resolve” of its Commander-in-Chief,

had just pulled off one of the greatest wins in the long history of armed combat. Trump's self-styled Secretary of War revelled in what he called "a capital-V military victory" against a "humiliated and demoralized" Iranian regime, cataloguing a six-week campaign of destruction that had "eliminated" the country's senior leadership, sunk its Navy to "the bottom of the sea," "wiped out" its Air Force, and "functionally destroyed" its missile program. Operation Epic Fury, he exulted, "achieved every single objective, on plan, on schedule, exactly as laid out from Day One."

The President himself has been similarly effusive about his own great success since announcing a two-week cessation of hostilities with Iran at 6:32 P.M. on Tuesday, approximately an hour and a half before his self-imposed deadline for the Iranian government to agree to a deal or face civilizational erasure. The war, Trump told one of many journalists to whom he has granted quickie phone interviews this week, was nothing less than a "total and complete victory. One hundred per cent. No doubt about it."

If this was victory, I'd hate to see what failure looks like. Perhaps the most immediate problem with the ceasefire—which was, according to Trump, supposed to be conditioned on the "COMPLETE, IMMEDIATE, and SAFE OPENING of the Strait of Hormuz"—is that it has not actually resulted in the complete, immediate, and safe opening of the Strait of Hormuz, according to those who have been monitoring it. On Wednesday, just four ships, none of them oil tankers, passed through the strait, fewer than on the day before the ceasefire. By Thursday, traffic continued to be at a virtual standstill, with just seven ships transiting the strait, about ninety per cent less than normal. "Let's be clear," Sultan al-Jaber, the head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, said. "The Strait of Hormuz is not open."

Iran has not only retained control over the strait through which one-fifth of the world's oil-and-gas supply flows; it now asserts the right to charge millions of dollars in tolls to ships that wish to pass—a new status quo sanctioned by Trump that will enrich and entrench the theocratic

government he started out the war wanting to topple. As long as this continues, oil prices will remain high and the world economy will pay the price for America's costly war.

Instead of regime change, Trump has succeeded merely in swapping one Supreme Leader named Khamenei—the aging ayatollah whose killing Trump celebrated on the first day of the war—for another Supreme Leader named Khamenei, the ayatollah's son, who appears to be even more of a hard-liner than his father was. As for the many, many other goals for the conflict that Trump had offered at various points, suffice it to say that he failed to achieve anything like the obliteration of Iran's nuclear program, ballistic-missile arsenal, or proxy network of terrorist allies that might have constituted a positive outcome. (The reason, no doubt, that Israel kept firing away at Hezbollah in Lebanon even after the ceasefire was announced.) “Unconditional surrender” this was not.

The costs of Trump's folly include far more than the thousands of deaths and tens of billions of dollars the Pentagon has spent on the war—from billions of dollars in damage to U.S. military installations, oil-and-gas production facilities, and civilian infrastructure in Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, to the disruption of global supply chains and air-traffic routes, to the depletion of hard-to-replace air-defense and munitions stockpiles. The longer-term and less tangible costs may be even higher, as measured in the strained alliances in Asia and Europe with allies who refused to join Trump's war and the erosion of the very idea of America as a global leader.

No wonder, then, that where the Trumpists see victory, the rest of the world does not. A sampling of headlines from the past few days: “Donald Trump is the war's biggest loser” (*The Economist*); “‘There are no winners’: US and Iran enter into a fragile truce” (*Financial Times*); “Trump's Iran War Leaves the US Looking Weakened to Adversaries” (*Bloomberg*); “Why the US-Iran ceasefire is seen as a failure for Donald Trump” (*South China Morning Post*).

Even Trump-friendly Fox News displayed a huge graphic that listed the President's various unmet goals in the war, as a host announced, "the President's demands—we have not reached any of those objectives." Superpowers rarely inflict such swift and straightforwardly embarrassing injury to themselves. The Vietnam War lasted nearly two decades. The war in Iraq unfolded over nearly nine years. This act of self-harm took just thirty-eight days.

That Trump's experiment in military adventurism would end so badly was not much of a surprise. For years, experts have gamed out exactly such a war with the Islamic Republic of Iran, with predictable consequences just like those that awaited Trump. This is why his predecessors Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden didn't try it—it wasn't because, as Trump suggested the other night, they were all cowards and losers.

The shocker here was more that Trump—he of the "no new wars" campaign pledge—chose to go for it. This was no doubt because he was operating under his own version of the autocrat's delusion: that he would achieve fast and nearly cost-free victory over a weakened enemy. As the *Times* reporters Jonathan Swan and Maggie Haberman revealed this week in their [in-the-Situation Room account](#) of how Trump decided to start the war, no one in his Cabinet of courtiers had the guts to challenge his mistaken assumptions. Reading it, I could not help but think of Vladimir Putin back in 2022, ordering his generals to invade Ukraine with their dress uniforms packed and ready for the victory parade in Kyiv that would surely soon follow. Sycophants make terrible war planners. Is it Hegseth's fault, or Trump's, that all that divine intervention and all those thirteen thousand strikes that our leaders have bragged about did not enable them to defeat Iran?

Much of what made the outcome of the war so embarrassing was Trump's conduct during it—not only the constant lies and dissimulations about why he had launched the conflict and what he hoped to achieve from it but, even

more, the spectacle he presented of unhinged, unaccountable American power. For weeks, culminating in his threat, on Tuesday morning, to wipe out the ancient civilization of Persia, the President crudely celebrated death and destruction, made light of the suffering he had unleashed, and encouraged America's powerful military to engage in war crimes against a civilian population in whose name he had launched the war in the first place. All over the world, people wondered how this could possibly be: Had the most powerful man on the planet suddenly gone mad?

How awful, then, to have to admit what we Americans have seen for a decade now—this is not a new Trump but a very old one. Defeat will not temper his mania. There is no strategic setback so big as to embarrass him. Unchastened by failure, Trump, on Thursday morning, was shit-posting on social media about his plans for the U.S. military's "next Conquest."

To Trump, the inability to achieve the goals he himself articulated in a war of his choosing against Iran is just one more screwup. He has, after all, made a lifetime of catastrophic mistakes and still ended up as President—twice. He'll handle this like all the rest by moving on and getting over it even before the cleanup crews have finished in Tel Aviv and Tehran. ♦



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