

COMMENT

TRUMP'S STRATEGIC AND MORAL FAILURE IN IRAN

From the first day of his Presidency, Trump has posed an emergency to both his country and the world.

By David Remnick

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Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty



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Not many years ago, a ruthless man with an uneasy mind took power in his country and created a cult of personality. In the center of the capital, he erected a gold statue of himself that rotated with the sun. He stashed billions in a foreign bank. He closed the academy of sciences, the ballet, the philharmonic, the circus, and all provincial libraries. His autobiography became the nation's spiritual guide. He banned dogs from the capital for their "unappealing odor." He renamed the months: January for himself, April for his mother. He was fond of melons. The second Sunday of August became National Melon Day. Such was the world of Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's leader from 1985 until his death, by cardiac arrest, in 2006. For the Turkmen people, there was nothing comical about life under his dictatorship. He barred dissent and packed his jails with prisoners of conscience. The only consolation was that he could not impose his grandiosity on the globe.

Donald Trump, by contrast, has, from the first day of his Presidency, posed an emergency to both his country and the world, even as he has ceaselessly invoked the language of "emergency" to inflate threats, suspend norms, and expand his own power. A decade ago, he was already making statements that flouted the ordinary standards of adult behavior. When it came to North Korea, for example, he alternated between cooing words of affection for Kim Jong Un and issuing taunts that mixed nuclear brinkmanship with masculine insecurity: "I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"

Trump embodies the notion that, with age, you become what you always were, only more so. In the final days of the 2024 campaign, he met with the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board. When asked whether he would deploy the U.S. military if China, under Xi Jinping, were to blockade Taiwan, Trump replied, "I wouldn't have to, because he respects me, and he knows I'm fucking crazy."

The MAGA coalition has long countenanced Trump's bigotry and cruelty. But now, with the repeated violations of an America First foreign policy, his poll numbers have plummeted. Since returning to office, Trump has ordered military strikes on Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Venezuela, and Iran, and has felt little need to provide a coherent rationale for any of them. According to reporting by Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan, of the *Times*, Trump and his national-security advisers gathered in the Situation Room on February 11th to listen to the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, argue for a coordinated attack on Iran. Even though the Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, the C.I.A. director, John Ratcliffe, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Dan Caine, made their reservations plain—Rubio called Netanyahu's talk of regime change "bullshit"—Trump blundered ahead. And, as in the days of the Turkmen dictator, everyone fell into line.

But when the Iranian regime failed to collapse or capitulate, when Netanyahu's prediction of a national uprising failed to materialize, Trump turned to threats of war crimes and genocide against the very people he claimed to be helping liberate:

A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again. I don't want that to happen, but it probably will. However, now that we have Complete and Total Regime Change, where different, smarter, and less radicalized minds prevail, maybe something revolutionarily wonderful can happen, WHO KNOWS?

These were not the words of a strategist. They were the words of a maniac. And they had a galvanizing effect, though hardly in the way Trump might have intended. Some of his erstwhile acolytes—Marjorie Taylor Greene, Tucker Carlson, Alex Jones—seem to have woken up to how dangerous he has always been. Yet around the Cabinet table, at Mar-a-Lago, and in the Republican caucus on Capitol Hill, it is gospel that his deranged threats forced a ceasefire and scored a major victory. The President’s war, though, seems poised to achieve little that was not already available through prewar diplomacy, or through some renewed version of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or J.C.P.O.A., the Iran nuclear deal secured by the Obama Administration.

In fact, the original sin of this disaster was Trump’s abandonment of that deal, in 2018. For all its limits, it had stalled Iran’s march toward an atomic weapon. But Netanyahu, long eager for a full-scale war against Iran—aimed not only at its nuclear program but at its proxies, such as Hezbollah—shrewdly played on Trump’s vanity and his contempt for Barack Obama. Trump destroyed the J.C.P.O.A. with nothing to replace it.

So the war stands as a strategic failure and a moral calamity. The ceasefire is already fragile. “The whole point of this exercise was supposedly to advance the cause of freedom in Iran,” Karim Sadjadpour, a Washington-based specialist on the country, said. “To go from ‘help is on the way’ to ‘we are going to wipe out your civilization’ is strategic malpractice.” According to Danny Citrinowicz, an Iran expert who formerly worked in Israeli intelligence, Trump’s principal envoys to the region, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, almost certainly misread Iran’s capabilities and intentions. “This is a colossal disaster and should never have happened,” Citrinowicz said, noting that it will “haunt the region and world for many years to come.”

In the opening days of the war, the United States and Israel killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and wiped out much of Iran’s defense and intelligence leadership, apparently believing that the regime would somehow give way to

“moderates” and “pragmatists.” Instead, the theocracy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps remain in place, equally radical, equally repressive, and more determined than ever to acquire the ultimate deterrent: a nuclear weapon. Why give up that pursuit, as Libya did, and leave yourself exposed, when you can, like North Korea, achieve it and deter attack?

Trump has gone far toward shattering what’s left of America’s global stature. His preposterous bluster about Greenland, Cuba, and NATO has undermined the postwar alliance. He has humiliated and betrayed the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky. And all the while Vladimir Putin, who aims to press Ukraine for still more territory, and Xi Jinping, who keeps Taiwan in view, watch the spectacle of Donald Trump for what it reveals about both his instability and the cratering credibility of American leadership.

In the midst of the war, Trump released plans for his Presidential library. Its centerpiece will be an auditorium with an immense gold statue of himself. Whether it will turn with the sun is not yet known. ♦

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