ANNALS OF WAR

WHAT'S BEHIND TRUMP'S NEW WORLD DISORDER?

A foreign policy freed of liberal pretenses and imperial ambitions could lead to restraint—or, as the Iran attack shows, simply license hit-and-run belligerence.

By Daniel Immerwahr

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In place of global hegemony, Trump offered narrow self-interest. Asked to define the Trump Doctrine, a senior Administration official put it curtly: "We're America, bitches." Illustration by Emmanuel Polanco

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If you've ever wondered what three billion dollars buys in bombs and missiles, wonder no more. In the first hundred hours of Operation Epic Fury, the United States flung munitions costing about that much at Iran, striking nearly two thousand targets. This won the U.S. and Israel nearly "complete control" of Iran's airspace, allowing them to unleash "death and destruction from the sky all day long," Pete Hegseth, the Secretary of Defense, crowed. "We are punching them while they're down."

Why is this happening? That is a reasonable question (and, per Google Trends, a popular one in the United States). But the United States has been freaking out about Iran since 1979. That was the year revolutionaries overthrew the U.S.-backed monarch, established an Islamic republic, and took dozens of people hostage inside the U.S. Embassy. The two countries have since been locked in a standoff that has lasted longer than the Cold War. Perhaps the real question is: Why is this only happening *now*?

American Presidents have had Iran in their sights for decades. When Bill Clinton warned of "rogue states" in the nineteen-nineties, Iran was the first example he gave. When George W. Bush spoke of a three-country "axis of evil" in 2002, Iran was in it. In 2019, Donald Trump designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization, the first time another country's military had been thus classified. Nor is it clear that Kamala Harris would have reversed that designation had she won the 2024 election. When asked to name the United States' greatest adversary, she

replied that the answer was "obvious." Iran, she explained, has "American blood" on its hands.

Whatever has held back the dogs of war, it hasn't been a lack of American ability. The current conflict shows how wildly mismatched the two powers are: the U.S. picking off targets at will, Iran unable to land missiles anywhere near North America. "This was never meant to be a fair fight," Hegseth observed. That isn't new, though. U.S. planes could have rained hell down on Iran anytime in the past decades.

That possibility has lurked deep in the national subconscious. During the hostage crisis, it spilled out in song. "We're gonna push the big button," the Baritone Dwarfs sang. Dick Allen's "Go to Hell Ayatollah" addressed Iran's new Supreme Leader directly: "When we get through with your nation, son, ain't gonna be nothing left but the sand." The most enduring song, "Bomb Iran," is set to the tune of the doo-wop classic "Barbara-Ann." Several versions exist, one of which advocates turning Iran "into a parking lot." In 2007, a voter asked the Presidential candidate John McCain when the United States would give up diplomacy and finally send an "airmail message to Tehran." McCain chuckled and started singing "Bomb Iran."

But this was a childish joke, the stuff of novelty songs. The United States had not, until Trump, bombed Iran. Nor had Iran directly attacked the United States. A close brush came in 1988, when, during some sea skirmishes between the two countries, a U.S. missile cruiser shot down an Iran Air flight carrying two hundred and ninety passengers and crew members. That was an accident, though, and President Ronald Reagan sent Iran's leaders a note expressing "deep regret." In nearly half a century of bombastic threats, the United States and Iran had never actually fought a war.

The reasons for that are becoming clearer. Since the end of the Second

World War, in 1945, the United States sought to oversee world affairs. This involved interpreting U.S. interests broadly, so that nearly anything, anywhere, could be seen as relevant to national security. As the 9/11 Commission Report put it, "The American homeland is the planet."

That global mission, in turn, has required justification, of the sort that allies could accept. "The world does not organize itself," Joe Biden offered. It needs the United States "at the head of the table" to enforce the rules. No other country can effectively champion freedom, democracy, and human rights.

The hubris of all this became especially clear when George W. Bush, pursuing what he called a "freedom agenda," invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein. It was against such crusading that Donald Trump campaigned. He promised to put America first, and to take the fallen world as it was. Intervention was warranted only if there was a "direct threat to our national interests," he maintained, and, even then, "we'd better have an airtight plan to win and get out." Until this year, it was possible to argue that this shrunken sense of mission made Trump less likely to start wars.

Not anymore. For all the Bush-style recklessness that U.S. hegemony engendered, it also imposed limits. Past Presidents held back on attacking Iran for fear of damaging America's legitimacy or its interests, broadly construed. Trump, caring little for either, has entered a major conflict with astonishing blitheness; the White House press secretary explained that Trump acted on a "feeling" that Iran would attack. His minimal commitments, rather than yielding a restrained foreign policy, have lowered the barrier to war.

Peter Beinart, writing in the *Times*, recently described Trump's foreign policy as "imperialism." Yet imperialism strives for empire—for control. Classic imperialism sought to bind disparate places together under a vast administrative structure, animated by a civilizing mission. It's not hard to pin

the "empire" charge on Trump's predecessors, who have jealously guarded U.S. custody of the world system. But what's striking about Trump is his shrugging indifference to overseas outcomes. You could call this regime-change nihilism; you can't call it imperialism.

When the United States attacked Iran's nuclear facilities in June of last year, Trump posted a video of bombers releasing their payloads to the tune of "Bomb Iran." In starting this war, Trump has not only wreaked enormous havoc; he's also liberated himself from the burdens of empire.

Although enmity between Washington and Tehran sprang up in 1979, the seeds were planted in the nineteen-fifties. That was when Iran's Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, made headlines by nationalizing Iran's oil, reclaiming profits that had flowed overwhelmingly to Britain. In 1952, *Time* named Mosaddegh its Man of the Year.

The British wanted Mosaddegh removed. But President Dwight Eisenhower saw Mosaddegh—a popular, Western-educated liberal who was friendly to the U.S.—as a hopeful figure. "I would like to give the guy ten million bucks," he told Britain's Foreign Secretary.

It was only by appealing to wider concerns, to the global chessboard, that the British brought Eisenhower around. Fearing that Mosaddegh might inadvertently destabilize Iran, which would then provide the Soviets an opening, Eisenhower O.K.'d a coup in 1953. The C.I.A. planted negative stories, hired false-flag actors, and persuaded the constitutional monarch of Iran, the Shah, to arrest Mosaddegh and reassert his own royal power. The operation went off like fireworks. "I owe my throne to my God, my people, my Army, and to you!" the elated Shah told his C.I.A. handler.

This was the C.I.A.'s breakout performance. The United States had just fought a bloody, expensive, and inconclusive war to beat back Communism in Korea. Ousting Mosaddegh, by contrast, was a crisp victory for just a few sacks of cash. The agency went on a spree. The political scientist Lindsey

O'Rourke has counted sixty-four occasions when the U.S. sought to secretly oust a government or tilt an election during the Cold War. More than two-thirds of these attempts were, like the Iran coup, in support of authoritarians.

It was crucial that this all be done in the dark. If the C.I.A.'s acts in Iran were to come to light, Eisenhower…noted, the U.S. would be "embarrassed" in the Middle East, and its ability to cheaply sculpt the region's politics "would almost totally disappear." Secrecy was the price of legitimacy, in other words. And legitimacy was the precondition for U.S. primacy.

Initially, this seemed to work. Even as U.S. meddling stoked anger abroad, the Shah stood firm and kept selling oil. The trouble was that this stance unbalanced him at home. His most nettlesome critic, an ayatollah named Ruhollah Khomeini, derided the "American Shah." Iranian intellectuals condemned their country's "Westoxification," its intoxication by the West. In 1979, when this bubbling dissent finally boiled over, millions of Iranians joined the anti-Shah revolution. Khomeini seized power and denounced the United States as the "Great Satan."

Khomeini's theology was novel, but his grievance was old. After Iranian students seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, one of them told a captured diplomat, "You have no right to complain. You took our whole country hostage in 1953."

In 2000, the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, publicly acknowledged that the United States had "played a significant role" in overthrowing Mosaddegh. It had done so for "strategic reasons," but perhaps not good ones, in hindsight. "It is easy to see now," Albright said, "why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention."

The world is large, and it is possible for two hostile countries to coexist within it. Yet U.S. Presidents have not found the Islamic Republic easy to circumvent. One after another, they've barked their shins on it, cursing all the while.

For Jimmy Carter, Iran was agony. The final year of his Presidency—an election year—was consumed by the hostage crisis, which played out nightly on the news. Carter knew that he "could have wiped Iran off the map," and faced pressure to do so, but he feared the consequences, including for the hostages. He instead tried an ill-fated rescue mission. Its failure forced him to negotiate, an interminable process that he believed cost him the election. In a final humiliation, news of the hostages' release didn't arrive until partway through the Inaugural Address of his successor, Ronald Reagan.

The Reagan Administration took a hard line with Iran. To Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, its leaders were "fanatical terrorists whose principal platform is vitriolic and unreasoning hostility to America." Yet, when the Iran-connected Hezbollah organization seized U.S. captives in the Lebanese civil war, even Reagan's men could take the broader view. They tried a complex chess combination whereby arms would go to the Islamic Republic, hostages would return home, and funds would find their way to the Contras, right-wing insurgents battling the Nicaraguan government. When these illegal maneuvers were exposed, Reagan's poll numbers collapsed. "It was a dark and hurtful time," Nancy Reagan remembered. "The entire government seemed to grind to a halt."

Reagan and his Vice-President, George H. W. Bush, ultimately dodged much of the blame. Still, the Iran-Contra scandal scorched the lower ranks of the Administration, including several officials who would become principals in the George W. Bush Administration. The lesson they learned, according to the journalist James Mann's "Rise of the Vulcans" (2004), was to shun back-channel deals. Dictators must be openly confronted.

The result, George W. Bush's War on Terror, was a bellicose version of U.S. hegemony that eschewed short-term stability for long-term transformation. For the neoconservatives whose thought informed the Bush approach, remaking the Middle East was the aim, and Iran was the pinnacle. Bill Kristol, Robert Kagan, David Frum, Charles Krauthammer, Norman

Podhoretz, and Richard Perle all advised overthrowing the Islamic Republic. High-ranking Administration officials also saw this as the stretch goal, it appears. After Jay Garner returned from overseeing the Iraq occupation, Bush reportedly asked him, "You want to do Iran for the next one?"

Bush was often criticized as lawless. In the glare of recent years, though, what stands out is how consumed with law, with process, his Administration was. The lead-up to the invasion of Iraq involved an intense public debate over reasons and evidence. Officials seeking the forceful interrogation of terror suspects scoured the globe and scanned law books to determine exactly the places and ways in which detainees could, in theory, be legally tormented. That members of the Administration lied about the war only underlines the point. To feel the need to lie is, in a perverse way, to respect the process.

Bush rationalized his way into invading Iraq. But his determination to be seen as acting within bounds appears to have checked his Iran ambitions. He regarded the Islamic Republic as an existential threat and considered military strikes. ("The president made it very clear that all options were on the table," his Vice-President, Dick Cheney, wrote.) Yet Bush recalled worrying that attacking Iran might create "serious problems" for Iraq, which he was struggling to pacify. Then came the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, which, having collected the work of sixteen agencies, concluded with "high confidence" that Iran had halted its nuclear program years ago. This had a "big impact—and not a good one," Bush fumed. It "tied my hands on the military side," and made bombing Iran impossible to justify.

Bush also lacked the resources to invade. He was already heavily engaged in Iraq, where, obeying what members of his Cabinet called the "Pottery Barn rule"—you break it, you own it—he kept extending the exhausting occupation. Trump, watching from the sidelines, couldn't understand why Bush was intent on imposing order on a faltering Iraq. Bush should just "declare victory and leave," Trump huffed in 2007. "I think Bush is probably

the worst President in the history of the United States."

Bush's successor, Barack Obama, had little taste for Bush's adventurism. But this wasn't a retreat from hegemony so much as a preference for a more calmly managed form of it. "America must always lead on the world stage," he insisted. "If we don't, no one else will."

It was partly to regain squandered influence that, twelve and a half minutes into his first Inaugural Address, Obama turned to "the Muslim world." In a message aimed at Tehran, he said, "We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." Two months later, Obama released a video celebrating the Persian New Year, in which he expressed hope for "mutual respect" with the "Islamic Republic of Iran." As John Ghazvinian notes in his absorbing history "America and Iran" (2021), this was the first time a U.S. President had been willing to use the country's official name.

The needle appeared to move. While giving a speech, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, quieted his audience during its ritual chant of "Death to America." "We do not have any experience with this new American President," he explained. "We will observe and judge." He had a message for Obama, too: "You change, and our behavior will change as well." To an outsider, this might have sounded piddling. But, Ghazvinian writes, "for anyone who had followed Iran closely over the past thirty years, it was nothing short of a historic opening."

If Obama was hoping for a Nixon-in-China moment, however, he'd have to fight the U.S. political establishment. Even his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented engagement with Tehran to Congress as mainly a pretext that would place Washington on "much stronger international footing," presuming talks fell through, to impose "crippling sanctions." Under enormous political pressure, including from supporters of Israel, Obama let the broad negotiations he'd envisaged shrink into a brusque take-it-or-leave-it proposition regarding Iran's uranium stockpile.

As Clinton had anticipated, the talks fell through. The Administration then orchestrated what Vice-President Joe Biden trumpeted as "the most crippling sanctions in the history of sanctions, period." Ghazvinian explains that Iran's oil production cratered, its currency tanked, and doctors scrambled to provide care with expired drugs and faltering equipment.

Obama tried negotiations again in his second term, with a more enthusiastic Secretary of State, John Kerry. Still, he was paddling upstream. As a deal took shape that would lift some sanctions in exchange for limits on Iran's nuclear capabilities, a skeptical Congress invited the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to speak against it. The deal would legitimatize Iran's nuclear program and, by alleviating sanctions, help a "genocidal" country flourish, Netanyahu believed. "We must all stand together to stop Iran's march of conquest, subjugation, and terror," he said to applause.

Obama secured the accord, in 2015, only by threatening to veto Congress. The Iran deal was the "Obamacare of foreign policy," the political scientist Dalia Dassa Kaye writes in her new book, "Enduring Hostility," and it left the same bitter aftertaste. It was the "worst deal ever," Trump insisted. And Obama was "perhaps the worst president in the history of the United States."

Trump, running for office, promised to rip up the deal. If so, then Iran would set fire to it, Ayatollah Khamenei responded. It seemed, Kaye writes, that the only force holding the omnidirectionally imperilled deal together after Trump's 2016 election was the so-called axis of adults in his White House: National-Security Adviser H. R. McMaster, Defense Secretary James Mattis, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. John Bolton, brought in to help fight that axis, remembered the Iran deal being the "most palpable manifestation" of the Administration's internal divisions. The adults won the first round, but the fight wasn't finished. "I'm never signing one of these certifications again," Trump seethed, after endorsing one of the accord's routine documents. "I can't believe I'm signing this one."

In retrospect, it's impressive that Trump made it to 2018 before abandoning the accord. Ripping up deals was his hallmark. The most fundamental deal—that the United States should govern world affairs—looked no better to him. "We are in countries most people haven't even heard of. Frankly, it's ridiculous," he complained, in a speech to service members in Iraq. "The United States cannot continue to be the policeman of the world." To rally the troops, he offered this: "We're no longer the suckers, folks."

It was a sharp turn. In place of global hegemony, Trump offered narrow self-interest. In place of principles, threats. Asked to define the Trump Doctrine, a senior Administration official put it curtly: "We're America, bitches."

Having rejected the need to carry allies along, Trump saw little point in concealing U.S. power. In 2019, he tweeted a detailed photo of an Iranian missile launchpad, demonstrably taken by an advanced U.S. spy satellite. When officials rushed to redact the classified details, Trump protested, "That's the sexy part." His aides learned to steer sensitive materials around him.

Trump also dispensed with the notion that U.S. interests were everywhere at stake. He floated allowing Japan and South Korea to develop nuclear arsenals to wean them from U.S. protection. And if this triggered war between Japan and North Korea? "If they do, they do," he said. "Good luck, folks. Enjoy yourself."

Perhaps they would. Iran, under renewed sanctions and no longer feeling fully bound by the nuclear deal, began enriching uranium at a higher level, closer to the point of developing nuclear weapons. Although Joe Biden promised to reverse this with a "longer and stronger" deal, he delayed and eventually did nothing. Instead, "Iran essentially became a nuclear threshold state," Kaye writes. And then Trump was reëlected.

Could he abide the Islamic Republic? In June, 2025, Trump joined an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Yet the attack did not flare into a wider war,

and Trump's National Security Strategy, released months later, suggested that it might never. The document railed against the "foreign policy elites" who had "convinced themselves that permanent American domination of the entire world was in the best interest of our country." With Iran's nuclear program knocked back by the air strikes, "the days in which the Middle East dominated American foreign policy" were "thankfully over."

This was the promise of Trump's outlook: that indifference might bring peace. But the other possibility lingered: that indifference might remove guardrails. At a National Security Council meeting in his first term, John Bolton recounted, Trump was asked by aides about his tolerance for risk in foreign affairs. "I have an almost unbelievable capacity for risk," Trump answered. "Risk is good." He then proposed ousting Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela to take the country's oil.

Early this year, U.S. planes opened fire on Venezuelan targets while commandos captured Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. Trump made desultory mention of ideals ("peace, liberty, and justice for the great people of Venezuela") but within moments started speaking of oil markets. It sounded like George W. Bush without the pretense, though Trump's speech also lacked Bush's sweeping ambitions. Maduro had trafficked "gigantic amounts of illegal drugs" and sent "savage and murderous gangs" into the United States, Trump claimed, but his Vice-President, Delcy Rodríguez, was "quite gracious," so perhaps she could stay.

In fact, she did. "Everybody's kept their job except for two people," a satisfied Trump explained. It was as if this had been an episode of "The Apprentice": not a military strike so much as a round of layoffs.

It's not clear how long Delcy Rodríguez, now Venezuela's Acting President, will be able to both meet U.S. demands and ward off internal opposition. The Shah managed that balancing act, though not forever. Still, in the short run, Venezuela put gas in Trump's tank, and he has sped

headlong into war with Iran. This is "going to work very easily," he assured CNN. "It's going to work like in Venezuela."

That confidence has a familiar ring. Writing in the *Times*, Ross Douthat has argued that the spirit of Bush "broods over the Trump administration." Yet what's missing, as Douthat acknowledges, is any vision for controlling the Middle East. The Bush Administration's names for two of its major actions in the region, Operation New Dawn and Operation Enduring Freedom, evoked wide horizons and deep transformations, ones that might secure U.S. influence for generations. Compare those with the names of Trump's Iran actions: Operation Midnight Hammer and Operation Epic Fury.

The difference between dawn and midnight, between freedom and fury, is hegemonic aspiration—or the lack thereof. It's not just that Trump is rash and reckless. It's that he has rejected the overarching systematic concerns that both pushed his predecessors forward and at times held them back. The world's most powerful military exists in his hands not to impose order but to lash out. This isn't hegemony; it's a hit-and-run.

Having helped Israel kill Iran's Supreme Leader, Trump has only the vaguest notion of what should come next. Perhaps the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps should hand over its weapons and "surrender to the people," or perhaps the Corps and the people should make a revolution together. Alternatively, the defanged Islamic Republic could remain intact and Trump could choose a leader from its ranks. He mentioned "three very good choices," though it now seems that these candidates may have been killed. "Everybody that seems to want to be a leader, they end up dead," Trump mused, with unconcealed relish. Iran's government, meanwhile, has made its own choice: Mojtaba Khamenei, the dead Ayatollah's son, who was himself reportedly wounded by the air strikes. Trump called this choice "unacceptable" and warned the new Supreme Leader that he would not last long without Washington's approval. Which is to say, Trump has no plan but reserves the right to reject everyone else's.

Past Presidents, for all their destructive crusades and covert actions, stopped short of invading Iran out of regard for the global chessboard. They worried about Iran blocking oil flows, attacking allies, or imploding and sending refugees streaming through the region. Trump has unburdened himself of such concerns. He's not playing chess and doesn't ultimately mind if pieces are captured.

After Trump seized Maduro, Defense Secretary Hegseth summed up Maduro's story: "He effed around and he found out." In a larger sense, though, it's Trump who effs around. His life has been an unbroken string of outrageous "what if?" experiments. What if I stiff this contractor? Pocket this cash? Reject this election?

Or bomb this country? Trump effed around, and we're all finding out. He has shrugged off the imperial mantle, the force that propelled his predecessors into ruinous meddling. From another President, that could have been welcome, but from a wrathful tyrant like Trump it's terrifying. Because the quest for global control was never just a compulsion. It was also, in hindsight, a constraint. ♦

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Daniel Immerwahr, a contributing writer at The New Yorker, teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of "How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States."