

Trump is becoming Carter

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No two human beings, let alone US presidents, could be less alike than Donald Trump and Jimmy Carter. One was a frugal “citizen servant”; the other is Trump. But they have Iran in common. Carter’s presidency was hijacked by the Iran hostage crisis — a disaster he could never escape. Operation Epic Fury is a trap Trump entered blithely. Iran’s theocrats are thus also defining his presidency.

Both share an allergy to US body bags. Carter was conscience-stricken after losing eight Americans in his aborted hostage rescue attempt. So far Trump has lost 13 US service members in the Gulf. He fears a public backlash to more US deaths. “There was a time at the very beginning when we thought about doing that,” Trump said last week when asked if he planned to seize Iran’s stash of highly enriched uranium. “I didn’t want to be Jimmy Carter.”

Yet that is who Trump is becoming. Once the idea forms that a US president is prisoner to what others decide, the scent of impotence is hard to shake. That invites danger. Carter’s inability to free the hostages fed into the Soviet Union’s decision to invade Afghanistan a few weeks after the US embassy in Tehran was stormed. But for the actions of Pope John Paul II and Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Soviets would probably have invaded Poland.

Trump is the hostage at the heart of today’s Middle Eastern maze. This weekend the president told me: “I call the shots. I call all the shots.” That seems doubtful.

Though he urged Israel not to retaliate against Iran’s missile attacks on Sunday, Israel went ahead anyway. Hours later, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered an attack on Iran. It is possible that Trump tacitly approved Israel’s response. But the near-universal impression that he is unable to control Netanyahu could be fatal to his prospects of ending this war. Iran will not concede anything big to a president who cannot control Israel’s response.

Trump is thus also hostage to Iran’s mindset. As a precondition to talks, Iran insists on a complete ceasefire in Lebanon. Whenever Israel strikes targets in Lebanon, including in response to Hizbollah’s rocket attacks, Trump’s bar to reaching a deal is raised. That Hizbollah, Iran’s proxy, has not agreed to any ceasefires rubs it in. Iran is undermining any chance of peace in Lebanon. That only reinforces Trump’s powerlessness; Iran and Israel are now dictating the direction and duration of this war.

How can he escape this nightmare? By doing three things that he will be loath to do. The first would be to prove he has a veto on Israel by threatening to cut off US military aid unless Israel sticks to a ceasefire and withdraws forces from all but a narrow strip of

Lebanon. The second would be to array as much expertise as the Iranians to haggle over detail and for as long as necessary. The third would be to communicate consistently that he will stick to those two paths. But he lacks the patience. Character U-turns are rare in people turning 80.

Which leaves compensating actions. This is where Trump diverges from Carter. America's 39th president turned the hostage crisis into a barometer of his power. He adopted the "Rose Garden strategy" of refusing to campaign for re-election — and even left the National Christmas Tree near the White House dark. In so doing, he handed control of the narrative to the Iranians. Trump has also lost control of the plot. But he is a showman, not a preacher, so his instinct is to change it. That means actions in theatres where he can prevail.

The meat of Trump's national security strategy published last December was to reassert US dominance in the western hemisphere. The word Iran appeared three times but only to brag that last summer's Israel-Iran ceasefire was one of the eight supposed peace deals Trump had negotiated. This document was published soon after the Nobel Peace Prize was announced. The winner, María Corina Machado, Venezuela's opposition leader, donated her trophy to Trump, who had brazenly campaigned for the prize. Though Trump now controls Venezuela's regime, Machado has yet to see any benefit from her gesture.

Here is where Trump and Carter enter parallel universes. Carter rejected the Monroe Doctrine on which America had based its original hemispheric dominance. Trump has revived it. Cuba should watch out. Canada can never sleep easily. Denmark should note that Greenland is still in Trump's sights. Carter won the Nobel Peace Prize partly for brokering peace between Israel and Egypt. Trump has shown he is not in a position to broker anything outside his own backyard.