

The Madness of King Trump

di Doug Bandow

President Donald Trump has lawlessly launched a full-scale war against a distant nation that neither attacked nor threatened America. Instead, Iran was negotiating with the United States, offering substantial concessions. The president justified his aggression with rhetoric [similar to that](#) of Russia's Vladimir Putin in launching Moscow's "special military operation" against Ukraine.

So far [some 1,200 civilians](#), including more than 160 children, have been killed by American and Israeli (underwritten by America) action. Iran continues to retaliate, [raising energy prices](#) and roiling the [global economy](#). Nevertheless, Trump demands Tehran's abject surrender, [even refusing to rule out](#) the [possibility](#) of [deploying ground forces](#) in Iran.

He is acting more as Roman emperor than American president, wandering the globe conquering foreign lands and looting subject peoples for [personal](#) as well as national gain. He has become the sort of reckless despot feared by the nation's founders. This tragic perversion of the American experiment demonstrates the terrible truth of Lord Acton's famous axiom: "absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Indeed, the U.S. no longer contains the president's ambitions. Trump's fantasies have metastasized. As he [explained last year](#), "The first time, I had two things to do—run the country and survive." But "the second time, I run the country and the world." When asked if there was any limit to his powers, [he responded](#): "My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me." When will he decide that his writ extends to the entire universe?

The president has pursued a policy of war and plunder.

Trump now uses the American republic's military guardians to rain death and destruction on other peoples for the benefit of—indeed, [pushed](#) and

even **directed** by—another nation and government, whose leader exhibits a similar taste for **international aggrandizement** and **self-enrichment**. Trump even **promotes**, or at least tolerates, subordinates **who promote** the bloody military campaign as a sacred religious crusade.

All this from a president who promised to put America first.

Admittedly, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a tempting target. To start, it is brutally repressive. However, that's likely of no concern to the president. After all, most of his favorite foreign leaders, **such as** Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman, are ruthless, even murderous, authoritarians.

Although also a loathsome regime, Iran **does not threaten** America. Antagonisms between Washington and Tehran are many, but Americans have done their share of escalating the conflict. While **Trump complained** that Iran's activities "endanger" U.S. bases, it was not Tehran which encircled its adversary with military forces and launched military strikes.

As for the Islamic Republic's potential nuclear ambition, even if it had nukes it would not attack America, since doing so would trigger annihilating retaliation. Ironically, its nuclear program was begun by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the U.S.-backed shah, or monarch, who was overthrown in 1979. In any case, American intelligence agencies long ago concluded that the Islamist regime abandoned weapons development. Instead, Tehran sought nuclear latency, preserving the possibility of weaponization. After all, the regime had barely survived a murderous invasion by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, **supported by** the U.S. and Gulf states, and then suffered through years of economic sanctions and military threats from Washington, and, more recently, nearly continuous, low-grade warfare from Israel. Today the president's aggressions are proving Iranian hawks to be right: Only nukes can secure the regime.

Nevertheless, Tehran negotiated serious restrictions over its nuclear activities with the Obama administration, restrictions that contained Iran's nuclear ambitions. Trump foolishly dropped the accord during his first term—more out of personal pique than perspicacity in policy. The Islamic regime moved ahead with its nuclear program, but later offered the Trump II administration even more concessions. However, the president decided—or **was talked** into, **even forced**—to wage war on Iran despite the

lack of any serious, let alone convincing, justification. Last year he claimed to have “obliterated” Tehran’s nuclear program, yet he now demands that Iran surrender its missiles as well, which would leave it defenseless against Israel as well as America. He also [insists on approving](#) the country’s next leader, something no serious government anywhere would accept.

Iran is not the president’s only target. He is ostentatiously employing America’s armed forces globally to squeeze money and resources out of other nations. In Venezuela he kidnapped President Nicolas Maduro—but left in place the Chavista dictatorship in exchange for control over oil and other resources. He dismissed the opposition’s María Corina Machado [while calling](#) then-Vice President and now President Delcy Rodríguez, a product of the Maduro regime, “a wonderful leader.” He appears determined to turn Venezuela into his foreign policy template. Even though war continues to rage in the Persian Gulf, he is talking about additional military targets, [such as Cuba](#).

In this way, Trump is entrenching authoritarian regimes, making liberal, democratic transitions elsewhere *less likely*. Indeed, he appears to prefer that result. For instance, Venezuela’s Rodríguez may be more likely than Machado, who would have trouble consolidating power, to do business with him. Moreover, Trump has employed various coercive tactics [against allies and friends](#), such as Denmark, Mexico, and Panama, prioritizing territorial and commercial benefits for privileged Americans, including his family. European policymakers [frankly admit](#) that [they now](#) make economic concessions to buy military protection. Japan and South Korea are behaving similarly. [Using its enormous power](#) for [predatory purposes](#) undermines America. Overall, Trump has made American foreign policy about little more than power and dollars. [Observed Harvard’s Stephen Walt](#), the president seems determined “to use Washington’s privileged position to extract concessions, tribute, and displays of deference from both allies and adversaries, pursuing short-term gains in what it sees as a purely zero-sum world.” This ignores the extraordinary benefits of mutual cooperation, as well as the vital importance of constraints on every government, including America’s. Nothing in principle distinguishes [Trump’s approach](#) in, say, [Venezuela](#), from that of dictators the world over.

Indeed, his policy of untrammelled national and personal aggrandizement is classic mercantilism and [imperialism](#). The Roman Empire perfected this approach. European colonial powers followed, though they usually focused their ill-attention on much weaker, nominally “uncivilized” peoples. The U.S. joined this process with the Spanish-American war, seizing the Philippines from Spain and [cruelly crushing](#) a pre-existing indigenous independence movement. Later the terrible totalitarian dictators, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, perfected the practice of extorting and extracting wealth from anyone within geopolitical reach. Obviously, Trump is no Hitler or Stalin, but his strategy is still remarkably un-American.

He is degrading constitutional limits on presidential power, claiming the right to bomb, invade, and occupy other nations at will. Even Alexander Hamilton, the great apostle of executive authority, emphasized that the founders were not replicating the English king’s powers, but rather, shifting the authority to go to war [to Congress](#). The president’s authority as commander-in-chief “would amount to nothing more than the supreme command and direction of the military and naval forces.” Although the president would manage any conflict, Congress was to decide whether there was one for him to fight.

Moreover, Trump is romanticizing the use of force, ignoring the terrible human cost of war. Instead of reducing dangerous U.S. military commitments and risks to America and its people, he is waging unnecessary wars. He routinely backs mass slaughter by allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel, and does not even acknowledge those killed by Washington, such as [the scores of Iranian school children](#) in its February 28 [strike on](#) the Iranian town of Minab. Indeed, his officials, most notably Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, showcase the sort of [ugly bloodlust](#) normally expected from America’s adversaries, such as Tehran.

Ultimately, like [the French “Sun King” Louis XIV](#), Trump apparently believes that “*L’état, c’est moi*,” or “I am the state.” All that matters is his will. For instance, the president [talked of banning trade](#) with Spain because Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez criticized his counterproductive war of choice: “We don’t want anything to do with Spain.” This mimics his petulant outburst against Canada, accompanied by a massive

tariff hike, after one province ran an ad quoting President Ronald Reagan's [criticism of protectionism](#). The interests of more than 340 million Americans matter not at all.

A decade ago [candidate Trump denounced](#) “a reckless, rudderless and aimless foreign policy, one that has blazed the path of destruction in its wake.” He highlighted his opposition to the invasion of Iraq, promising that “unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct. You cannot have a foreign policy without diplomacy. A superpower understands that caution and restraint are really truly signs of strength.”

Alas, his policy has become one of careless and callous brutality, with his ambition bounded by neither morality nor principle. He has become a threat to global peace, killing prodigiously while setting an entire region on fire, and doing so for no recognizable U.S. interest. Ultimately, he is likely to prove more dangerous to Americans than anyone else.