

Trump the Iran Escape Artist

di Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

Our commentariat in the past week has discovered parallels between [Donald Trump's Iran](#) war and Vladimir Putin's [Ukraine](#) war. They miss the point of actual interest. It's the differences that are alive and interesting, not the similarities, which galumphingly apply in all times and places to leaders who start wars expecting quick and easy victories that don't materialize.

The difference: Mr. Trump can eat crow and walk away without being any (or at least much) worse for it politically, whereas Mr. Putin would likely end up hanging from a lamppost.

Add that the U.S. military has gloriously achieved every mission assigned to it. Add the impolitic corollary: The serial failures of Messrs. Putin and Trump might be the best thing to happen to the world if they deter Xi Jinping over Taiwan.

Mr. Trump's Iran outcome naturally disappoints those who, perhaps forgetting what planet they are living on, had high hopes for regime change and a nuclear solution.

Mr. Trump is useful in many ways but makes a poor candidate for war president. He can give orders to the military but, vitally, he can't make credible U.S. threats to escalate, to pay any price, bear any burden, fight them on the beaches, etc., because the enemy knows Mr. Trump can't deliver the American people. Too many U.S. voters treat his every act as illegitimate.

As a war president, he's also flighty, overly verbose and prone to self-contradiction, qualities better befitting an escape artist than a war leader.

This week's outcome, if it holds, is a poor cousin even to the simpler walkaway option. At least then sanctions would be sure to continue and the U.S. and Israel would be free to resume warfare as necessary to curb Iran's weapons programs.

As the U.S. might have learned during [Reagan's tanker war](#) in the 1980s, Mr. Trump shouldn't have let Iran's actions to block the Gulf distract him from larger purposes. Yes, be ready with the U.S. Navy to close the Gulf in U.S. interests. Be ready, during the Cold War, to use nukes to deter a Soviet oil grab. But in local disputes, the locals have every reason to get the oil flowing again eventually without the U.S. inserting itself.

If Mr. Trump wanted to exit while creating the best chance of triggering regime change on his way out, he could have bombed Iran's oil-export infrastructure. Just the credible threat would likely have produced better terms from Iran.

But Mr. Trump wasn't willing. Many Americans and others would have recoiled. They may be ready to cast [Exxon](#) into the abyss, but they grow misty-eyed over state oil monopolies as the foundation of plenteous socialism, though it seldom works out that way.

But the point is, Mr. Trump's Iran adventure wasn't even worth enough to him to accept the risk (such as Iranian attacks on Saudi oil) to develop this leverage. For a year, hardly has a column gone by without my referring to his coming impeachments. His much bigger bet now is on Democrats and the media to conduct themselves once more in a way that rallies his base and obscures his policy failures. He needs the Iran war to end and oil prices to come back down, but not somehow to pull a rabbit out of a hat during the coming midterms. He needs Iran not to be in control of the narrative next year so he can resell himself as the champion of ordinary Americans being impeached by corrupt elites. Will his enemies, for once, refrain from turning the tables on themselves instead of Mr. Trump? That will be the interesting lookout.

So the one salutary lesson from the episode may be a president who trusts his political skills enough to cut his losses, where another (say, LBJ) would be prone to the sunk-cost fallacy. Iran's regime, after all, remains fatally at odds with its own people. Take comfort also that the U.S. failure in Iran, like Mr. Putin's failure in Ukraine, will have Beijing questioning its assumptions about a Taiwanese adventure. I've [said it before](#) in connection to both the Ukraine and Iran gambits. The world will be a better place when statesmen and their cronies routinely submit their strategic brainstorm

to an LLM, free of wishful thinking or tunnel vision. The essence of many bad decisions, decision theorists have long [shown us](#), is privileging a single outcome or scenario as if it's the only possible one. The world doesn't need to see a third costly example.