



By: Timothy Snyder

# How to build an America that does not capitulate?



America has capitulated to Iran. The “memorandum of understanding” signed by the two sides specifies terms that spell victory for the Islamic Republic and humiliation for President Donald Trump and the United States.

War, as some people apparently needed to learn, is not about the pleasure one takes in watching things blow up.

It is politics by other means. And as Iran has just demonstrated, winning means changing the enemy’s politics so that they are forced to surrender.

From the beginning, the unprovoked US-Israeli war on Iran put **Trump’s incompetence** on display for all to see.

Instead of trying to understand how the Iranian leadership thinks and operates, Trump, US Secretary of “War” Pete Hegseth, and other US officials treated them as stooges who would immediately submit as soon as the bombs started falling.

With no strategy of its own, it did not occur to the Trump administration that Iran would have a plan: retaliate with long-range strikes and close the Strait of Hormuz.

US officials had no second move, except to dress up defeat as victory (which they are, laughably, still trying to do).

This is what happens when voters entrust entertainers to wage war, and profiteers to negotiate peace.

## Trump’s geopolitical legacy

Many Americans still seem to be under the illusion that Trump is a shrewd dealmaker. He never was—that was a character he played on television.

Trump and his cabinet members talk big in front of the cameras but know nothing about how global power works.

Trump is vulnerable to flattery, always in a hurry, unable to focus, and indifferent to any issue beyond his own comfort.

After starting the war against Iran on a lark, he surrendered for political convenience: lower gas prices would bolster his bid to stay in the White House forever.

## Trump will be remembered as the architect of the brutal Iranian regime’s revival

Until now, I figured that Trump’s geopolitical legacy would be as a footnote in the Ukraine war: a wannabe oligarch who artificially extended a real oligarch’s war of aggression.

Now, Trump will also be remembered as the architect of the brutal Iranian regime’s revival.

By attacking Iran, Trump generated sympathy for **torturers and murderers**. By losing to Iran, he expanded its power in the Middle East.

And by capitulating to Iran, he created an enduring revenue stream for its rulers.

Iran will charge fees for transit through the Strait of Hormuz, and the US will unfreeze \$24 billion in Iranian assets and pay \$300 billion in reconstruction funds.

Gone is any leverage that America had to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon.

## A strategic and an ethical disaster

We tend to think of evil and folly as mutually exclusive. If something is evil, it must serve an intelligent purpose; if it is foolish, it must not be very malicious.

But Trump’s war in Iran shows that evil and folly can march hand in hand along the path to national self-destruction.

Trump’s war on Iran was both a strategic and

an ethical disaster. Fighting an undeclared and illegal war of aggression, flouting the laws of war, and killing scores of civilians do not bring victory.

Delighting in such actions is not a sign of canny calculation. It is simply wrong.

## Thanks to Trump, the US has caused widespread economic pain

One can enjoy violence and still be a loser. One can be both hard-hearted and soft-headed, as Trump and Hegseth have proven.

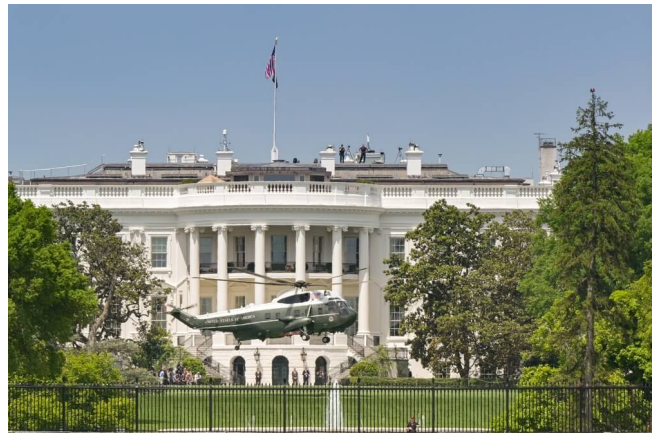
In other words, there is no consolation. The Trump administration used evil means foolishly, not for some good purpose, and left the world far worse off than it was before.

Thanks to Trump, the US has caused widespread economic pain and—to the delight of China, Russia, and Iran—created a more **disorderly international order**, less bound by law.

## Wars of whimsy are a symptom of tyranny

But if evil and folly can march together, so, too, can virtue and wisdom. The US reached this point because it allowed political, economic, and media power to be concentrated in the hands of a few.

While it's tempting to blame America's capitulation on incompetent leadership, it stems more from the policies and institutions that allow such people to rise to power.



*To build an America that does not capitulate requires the opposite of Trump's hard-heartedness and soft-headedness*

Wars of whimsy are a symptom of tyranny, and a warning for those who prefer republics.

They must be opposed; but, more fundamentally, they must be prevented by removing money from politics, addressing basic inequalities, breaking up monopolies, and enabling social mobility.

Iran easily won this war because it had only to threaten the self-interest of an aspiring tyrant.

To build an America that does not capitulate requires the opposite of Trump's hard-heartedness and soft-headedness.

Americans should value leaders with harder heads—people who have demonstrated genuine qualifications and done some good with their lives—and resist charismatic charlatans who stick their hands in our pockets and send our children to war.

We must also value leaders with softer hearts—leaders who channel our desire to care for one another and to create a government that enables better lives for us all.

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