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TRUMP'S GULF WAR

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION sometimes seems intent—so stark is the difference between its first and second incarnations—on inverting the apothegm from the opening of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to the effect that ‘all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice . . . the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.’¹ Then it was the nephew, Louis Napoleon, reprising the role of his famous uncle. Today, Trump has reprised his own role, in a second act bursting with cruelty and carnage; here, the repetition-alteration is more rapid and self-reflexive, as befits the actor and the age. Others have made productive use of neo-Bonapartism to analyse the socio-political coalition on which Trumpism was initially built. But we now seem to be living through the re-run of a later moment in the career of the second Napoleon—not the plebiscitary roll of the dice with which the story began, but the bad bet of the gambler whose luck has run out in a risky foreign adventure.² Trump is not facing a Sedan. But eight weeks into the US–Israeli war on Iran, things are not going as planned.

I

If Trump's second term has been a sharp contrast to his first, the starkest differences have lain in foreign policy. Here America First had appeared to promise a turn inward—away from forever wars and foreign occupations, and even away from allies, seen as ripping the US off in Europe

and East Asia. Much of the sense of a popular insurgency attaching to Trump's 2016 campaign came in his barbed exchanges with Jeb Bush and other mainstream Republicans, whom he attacked mercilessly over their role in the Iraq War. Trump had some basis for his claim to have started no new wars in his first term in office. But this is far from the case in his second. He had already ordered attacks across three continents—the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arabian Peninsula—before launching his full-blown assault on the Islamic Republic of Iran.

For all that is novel about Trump, it would be a mistake to ignore the American foreign-policy continuities that underlie his actions; indeed, were it not for the longstanding desiderata of various internal and external pressure groups, it would be hard to explain how a man whose promise to wage no more 'stupid wars' was so important to his outsider appeal ended up fighting the war of all neoconservative wars against Iran. To understand that we need to look at the changing three-way relationship between Iran, the US and Israel, as well as enduring imperial structures and projects. Trump may have miscalculated in striking Tehran, but his Administration can also claim with considerable justice to be pursuing aims that Western governments have long backed.

2

The Islamic Republic has been in Washington's sights since 1979, when the pro-American Shah was overthrown by the Iranian Revolution. In some respects, the war is the logical conclusion of the way the US has

¹ One of the lines that may have inspired Marx is to be found in the 1837 edition of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: 'A coup d'état is sanctioned as it were in the opinion of the people if it is repeated. Thus, Napoleon was defeated twice and twice the Bourbons were driven out. Through repetition, what at the beginning seemed to be merely accidental and possible, becomes real and established.'

² It was also in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and then *The Civil War in France* that Marx referred to *imperialism*; not yet with the colonial connotations it would later acquire, but with some of the meaning it would keep, as adventurer: 'And in Bonaparte the imperial pretender was so intimately bound up with the adventurer down on his luck that the one great idea, that he was called to restore the empire, was always supplemented by the other, that it was the mission of the French people to pay his debts.' Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach, London and New York 2010 [1973], p. 185.

demonized Iran ever since.³ Israel initially maintained better relations with the Khomeini-ites, counting the ‘outer ring’ states represented by Iran and Turkey as potential allies against the ‘inner ring’ of militant Arab-nationalist republics—and funnelling arms to the Iranian military in the 1980s to help them fight the ‘near enemy’, Iraq. It was only after Saddam Hussein’s army was crushed in the 1991 Gulf War that Israel switched its attention to the now strengthened and stabilized Islamic Republic, urging Washington to block Tehran’s acquisition of a nuclear deterrent—in other words, to help preserve Israel’s nuclear monopoly in the region.

Against the much larger Israeli nuclear arsenal, Iran has a perfect right—that of national self-defence—to acquire its own deterrent.⁴ Here Iran’s clerical leadership has proved inept. By combining fantasy maximalism in its rhetoric about destroying the ‘Zionist entity’—which of course it would never be capable of doing—with quiescent minimalism in its practice, insisting on its respect for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and its American-led inspectorate, it invited the negation of the sovereignty that the ayatollahs and Republican Guards claimed to hold sacrosanct. Had Tehran followed Pyongyang’s course, it might not be in this situation today.

The idea that Iran had to be prevented from this at all costs has been unanimously accepted by the Western states—and backed at key moments by Russia and China, each with its own vast nuclear hoard. The techniques of economic warfare through primary and secondary sanctions, refined by the US over many years in pursuit of Iran’s nuclear surrender, are thus not only a matter of bipartisan consensus at home,

³ ‘One administration after another has made it an article of faith that Iranian activities were wholly unparalleled, threatened vital US interests and justified the use of force’: Robert Malley and Steven Wertheim, ‘Of Course Trump Bombed Iran’, *New York Times*, 5 March 2026.

⁴ Raymond Williams’s recognition of the validity of nuclear deterrence as a national-defence strategy, voiced in the context of the 1980s’ European Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, still holds good: ‘The natural and wholly reasonable desire of all peoples to be secure against direct attack’, as he put it, ‘ought never for a moment be denied, or even questioned, by those of us who are against nuclear arms and the arms race’: ‘The Politics of Nuclear Disarmament’, *NLR* 1/124, November–December 1980, p. 32. On the history and politics of the NPT, see Susan Watkins, ‘The Nuclear Non-Protetation Treaty’, *NLR* 54, November–December 2008.

but also unite Washington's principal European allies. Successively tightened in 2006, 2011, 2018 and 2025, their cumulative effect has been devastating for Iranian society, without ever seriously threatening the regime that is their supposed target.⁵ Sanctions on Iran might even be said to exemplify the virtues of multilateralism—in such short supply these days, laments many a liberal commentator—with the UN the main vehicle for implementing and legitimating them at a global level. Perhaps this is one reason why, despite the flagrant illegality and even more transparent immorality of the US–Israeli kinetic attack on Iran, bleats of protest from these allies have been muted. Critical of the means, they nevertheless will the ends, and Europe has quietly served as a giant aircraft carrier for Operation Epic Fury: from RAF Fairford in England and Ramstein in Germany, to bases in Italy, Crete and Portugal.

3

In addition, although Trump may have promised no more *dumb* or *forever* wars, that never ruled out *cheap*, *quick* and *smart* ones, because led by him. His first foray was the Twelve-Day War with Israel against Iran in June 2025, for which his generals dusted off Obama-era plans for B2 bombers and submarines to unload 400,000lbs of ordinance on nuclear fuel-cycle facilities in Natanz, Isfahan and Fordow. The special forces operation to seize Maduro in Venezuela at the start of January 2026 ('a perfect scenario') then seemed to confirm Trump in his belief that a quick war against Iran, where nationwide protests were unfolding against the latest sanctions-induced economic crisis and the clerical regime, could work just as well. Not enough has been said about the cynicism of justifications for intervening on their behalf ('help is on the way') that came *after* the regime had suppressed the protests. The 'great Iranian people' invoked in Trump's rant to the nation on 28 February were never meant to inherit power.⁶ They could at best provide a cheering backdrop to an internal transition—in which, after the assassination of

⁵ Worsening over the last seven years, US, UN and EU sanctions have brought currency crisis, galloping inflation, collapse of real wages, crumbling infrastructure and deteriorating industrial production, with the middle classes hard hit and the poor reduced to near-indigence: Ervand Abrahamian, 'Iran under Fire', NLR 157, January–February 2026, p. 46.

⁶ For the mix of annihilationist rhetoric and implausible summons to a popular uprising with which Trump launched the war, see 'Trump's Full Statement on Iran Attacks', PBS News, 28 February 2026.

Khamenei and his military and intelligence chiefs, more pliant elements would take over, handpicked by Mossad and the CIA, and ‘working with’ the US and Israel as in Venezuela: ‘I have to be involved in the appointment, like with Delcy in Venezuela’, Trump tweeted.⁷

Overwhelming airpower would be the means to this end. Here too Trump has proven to be in line with the deepest reflexes for deploying US military power abroad—carried aloft by a dream of aerial bombardment as a form of ‘governing from the skies’. Pete Hegseth, the muscly former Fox anchor, is the Id-like incarnation of this desire. For all intents and purposes an actor hired to play the Secretary of War, Hegseth’s press appearances have certainly been hammy, bordering on unhinged: promising ‘death and destruction from the sky all day long’, he even pantomimed Iranian leaders ‘looking up and seeing only US and Israeli air power every minute of every day’; his threats are alliterative (‘finding, fixing and finishing’, ‘dismantle, demoralize, destroy, defeat’). To a journalist, Hegseth boasted, ‘this is not a fair fight, we are punching them while they are down, which is exactly how it should be’.⁸

This swagger speaks to the fantasy of achieving total dominance over a helpless enemy through airpower alone. It is a longstanding one, whose siren song has seduced many military planners and politicians in the US since the Second World War. Hegseth is the latest in a long line. Major General Curtis Le May, an early practitioner of ‘strategic bombing’, ordered the fire-bombing of Tokyo that killed 100,000, ‘scorched and boiled and baked to death’; later he bragged that he had ‘burned down every town in North Korea and South Korea too’, in a campaign codenamed ‘Operation Strangle’ that by his own estimate killed 20 per cent of the population between 1950–53. Before he was relieved of his command, General MacArthur had wanted ‘to drop between thirty to sixty atomic bombs across the neck of Manchuria’—creating a *cordon sanitaire* against the Chinese Communists. In Vietnam, the pathology of air power reached new heights of perversity, as the lack of obvious targets (a perennial ‘problem’ for air wars from the start) led to a constant extension of acceptable targets, so that the combat zone grew to include new enemies—i.e., more and more civilians—to meet quotas, and

⁷ Ali Harb, ‘Trump Says He Must Be “Involved” in Choosing Iran’s Next Supreme Leader’, *Al-Jazeera*, 5 March 2026.

⁸ David Smith, ‘“A Very Dangerous Person”: Alarm as Pete Hegseth Revels in Carnage of Iran War’, *Guardian*, 8 March 2026.

the testing of ever more destructive weapons.⁹ Strategists and military historians have often pointed out that air power has never on its own achieved the strategic aims allotted to it. But the idea has endured, from Yugoslavia to Libya: victory without US casualties. In Iran, the same old mania for ‘targeting’ has been given an exciting new gloss with AI; but the underlying impulse is grimly familiar, as thousands of sorties in the first ten days led to 20,000 non-military buildings being struck, among them 17,353 residences.¹⁰

4

In terms of war aims, Operation Epic Fury went off the wheels almost immediately, once the Israeli decapitation strike on Khamenei on 28 February failed to force what was left of Iran’s leadership to the table—and, as Trump let slip, inadvertently bumped off the figure they had chosen to be the Iranian Delcy. There is nothing especially sophisticated or ingenious about murdering an 86-year-old man and his wife in their home in central Tehran, nor is the tactic—however shocking—new. NATO bombed Milosevic’s house in Belgrade in 1999 and the US targeted Saddam at the start of the Iraq War, while Israel has made decapitation strikes into a kind of national pastime. This particular assassination during Ramadan, however, was—as a British general, a former deputy commander of NATO, put it in a bracing interview—‘about as subtle as murdering the Pope on the steps of St Peter’s in Holy Week’; its effects, he predicted, were likely to be just as galvanizing for many Shi’a Muslims.¹¹ Iran duly struck back against US and Israeli targets across the region—and, with a few shots across the bows of merchant vessels, shut down shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, thereby locking in over a fifth

⁹ See Thomas Hippler, *Governing from the Skies: A Global History of Aerial Bombing*, London and New York 2017, p. 3; Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945–1990*, New York 1991, pp. 130, 140.

¹⁰ Madhumita Murgia *et al.*, ‘The AI-Driven Kill Chain Transforming How the US Wages War’, *Financial Times*, 11 March 2026. See also, Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon*, New Haven 1987.

¹¹ ‘Khamenei was not just the Iranian head of state. He was a religious symbol for worldwide Shi’ites . . . The Americans need to have thought all this through, and the fact that they haven’t is a real worry—a real indicator that this could well turn into something like Iraq, to the power of ten’: Gen. Richard Shirreff, speaking on *Andrew Marr Tonight*, LBC Radio, 4 March 2026.

of the world's oil and gas supplies. With storage facilities, refineries and ports shuttered, oil surged towards \$120 a barrel.

Here it is worth recalling something Giovanni Arrighi used to say, that a declining hegemon will always, by dint of its status, have multiple options; but that each option will turn out to have a downside, which will serve to hasten its decline. The downside of Trump's war for regime change was to trigger the Hormuz shutdown, a move that earlier Washington planners had tended to judge too risky for Tehran to undertake—too destructive of its position in the region. Now the risk was Trump's—whether to tough it out, as oil and liquefied natural gas prices were driven up, along with the costs of production, transportation and fertilizer for the coming year's harvests, potentially embedding inflationary tendencies in the world's economy for years to come; or to negotiate a truce, which would mean agreeing to at least some of Iran's demands. Since these included lifting all sanctions, acquiescing to Iran's custodianship over the Strait of Hormuz, a permanent end to the war and to Israeli strikes on Lebanon, and a guarantee that Iran will not be attacked again, that option too would mean a retreat.

5

The release of 400 million barrels of oil from IEA member states' strategic reserves—and the unsanctioning of Russian energy—has temporarily kept at bay the full economic impact caused by Iran's tourniquet on Hormuz. But as the head of the IEA made clear, this will be enormous, even if the war ends soon: 'More oil has been lost . . . than during the twin shocks of the 1970s that triggered recessions and fuel rationing around the world', while the volume of gas that has been cut off by the war is twice as much as Europe forewent with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And the longer the fighting goes on, the more time it will take to bring shut-down or damaged oil and gas fields back online.¹²

¹² Fatih Biroll, quoted in Malcolm Moore, 'Iran War Is the Greatest Threat to Global Energy "In History", Warns IEA', *FT*, 20 March 2026; see also Malcolm Moore, 'Countries Must Not Hoard Fuel during Iran War, Warns IEA', *FT*, 5 April 2026. Meanwhile, in what may be another historic first, for the first month of the war the White House exempted Iranian oil from the sanctions imposed on it in peacetime. By one estimate, in March 2026 Iran was pumping 50 per cent more oil and earning up to twice as much per barrel for it.

Staunching the flow of petrodollars, along with petrol, also increases the risk of popping the AI bubble that has been responsible for the greatest share of US GDP growth in the past year: rising inflation and interest rates, plus semiconductor shortages, could put new data-centre investments at risk, as well as tech valuations.

This has implications for the lopsided bargain that has helped to underpin the global dominance of the US dollar since the 1970s. After Nixon took the US off the gold standard, his Treasury secretary negotiated a deal with the Saudis, which traded US security guarantees for the investment of the Kingdom's huge oil-related financial surpluses into US bonds, alongside the agreement of OPEC countries to set the oil price in dollars. This has enormously enriched British, French and above all US weapons firms: the GCC states are together the largest buyers of military equipment in the world.¹³ What happens to this bargain when the Arabs cannot get their oil to market? Iran provided one possible answer when it allowed safe passage for oil through the Strait of Hormuz for friendly ships that paid a toll fee in Chinese yuan.

6

The immediate US–Israeli reaction was to bombard Tehran into re-opening the Strait—destroying schools, hospitals, universities and historic monuments, as well as military and government targets. The Iranian response was methodical: striking US bases in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, its ballistic missiles and cheap, effective drones exhausted US THAAD and Patriot air defences, whose interceptors are not only costly but scarce. Two days after the decapitation strikes took out a dozen of its top military leaders, Iran hit the US Embassy in Kuwait; on 3 March, it struck the CIA station in Riyadh, along with Amazon data-centres in the UAE and Bahrain. The following day, after the US destroyed Iranian warships in the Gulf of Oman, it hit the Al Udeid US

¹³ In 2017, Saudi Arabia alone ‘signed the largest arms deal in history’ with the US, estimated to be worth \$350 billion. Tom Stevenson argues that even more important from the perspective of Washington and London is that it renders the GCC states dependent, since ‘training, maintenance and spare parts can only be supplied by the source country’: ‘What Are We There For?’, *LRB*, vol. 41, no. 9, May 2019. Nor is the recycling of petrodollars through New York and London confined to weapons but takes the form of financial assets, real estate, airlines, luxury brands and football clubs.

airbase in Qatar, the largest in the region, whose 10,000 US troops had to be evacuated. When the US bombed military defences on Kharg Island on 13 March, Iran struck an international hotel in Baghdad's Green Zone; when Israel hit the South Pars natural gas field on 18 March, Iran attacked a Haifa oil refinery the next day. On 21 March, the US dropped bunker-busting bombs on Natanz; an Iranian ballistic missile duly hit Dimona. When, on 22 March, Trump threatened to strike Iran's power plants if it didn't open the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours, Tehran said it would counter-attack against energy and desalination plants across the region.

In the 3rd century AD, Shapur, the great leader of Sasanian Iran, dealt the Romans a series of stinging defeats and obtained a peace treaty on his own terms. At the Battle of Edessa in 260 AD, Shapur took the Emperor Valerian prisoner. This was the first time such a fate had befallen a Roman emperor. When the latter offered a ransom to obtain his freedom—as one, instructive, legend has it—Shapur responded by choking him with molten gold. It doesn't need to be said that the new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, by all accounts more narrow-minded than his father, is no Shapur. Yet Iran can be said to have held the US to a draw in this opening round, insisting, with some success, that the tactical ceasefire Trump began seeking in late March must include a halt to Israel's attack on Lebanon. The ceasefire that commenced on 8 April was widely understood as a pause before the next round. For Washington, this began as soon as 13 April when it imposed a naval blockade—a shift to military-backed economic warfare—targeting any ships entering or leaving Iranian ports. Tehran, deeming this an act of war, reimposed its shutdown on the Strait of Hormuz, which it had lifted with the onset of the ceasefire, and demanded the end of the US blockade as a condition for continuing peace talks in Islamabad.

7

If it failed to produce an Iranian surrender, the US–Israeli area bombing did succeed in wreaking a great deal of damage. On the eve of the 8 April ceasefire, some 3,540 Iranians had been killed, of whom 1,616 were civilians, including 244 children.¹⁴ In Tehran, much of the

¹⁴ Nayera Abdallah, 'How Many People Have Been Killed in the US–Israel War on Iran since the Conflict Began?', *Independent*, 7 April 2026.

infrastructure had been hit, along with 300 healthcare facilities, 760 schools and 46,000 residential and commercial units.¹⁵ Heavy industry and arms-production plants across the country were destroyed. The economic crisis—worsened by the regime’s shutdown of the internet, which cut off gig workers’ employment—is said to have caused 2 million layoffs.¹⁶ As he fought off domestic criticism for agreeing to Trump’s ceasefire, Netanyahu could boast in his 8 April address to the nation that Iran was weaker and Israel stronger than ever, thanks to the unparalleled partnership with the US and the Pentagon’s soaring appreciation for Israel as a battlefield ally, ‘our heroism, courage and skill’. The war remains spectacularly popular in Israel, despite the damage caused by Iranian drones, with support for it running at 78 per cent in late March. Still deeply unpopular himself, Netanyahu vowed that the ceasefire was just ‘a way station’ on the road to achieving ‘all our goals’—‘We are prepared to return to combat at any necessary moment. Our finger is on the trigger.’¹⁷

The bombing campaign has also imposed costs on the global hegemon, however. The first weeks of fighting revealed a series of vulnerabilities in the US defence posture. First, far from keeping them safe, the presence of US bases—many evacuated in advance—made Gulf states targets for Iranian retaliation: the destruction of advanced radars and missile batteries will take billions of dollars and many years to rebuild, leaving them exposed for the foreseeable future to counter-strikes on their oil fields, electricity grids and desalination plants (on which so many rely for potable water)—all put at risk by US–Israeli attacks on Iranian infrastructure. Second, dozens of advanced drones and manned aircraft—an F-35, an E-3 Sentry AWACS radar plane, several F-15s and KC-135 refuelling

¹⁵ Leanne Abraham *et al.*, ‘How the US–Israeli Strikes on Iran Have Damaged Schools and Hospitals’, *NYT*, 9 April 2026.

¹⁶ Behrang Tajdin, ‘Iran Sees Mass Redundancies from War with US and Israel’, *BBC News*, 21 April 2026.

¹⁷ See respectively: ‘Statement by PM Netanyahu’, 8 April 2026, available on the Israeli government website; Mariav Zonszein, ‘For Israel, War Is the Only Answer’, *NYT*, 13 April 2026; Aaron Boxerman, ‘Netanyahu Says War with Iran Is “Not Yet Over”’, *NYT*, 12 April 2026. According to official figures, 66 of the 650 Iranian missiles fired at Israel struck populated areas, killing 24 civilians, injuring over 7,000 and displacing over 5,500 from damaged homes: Emanuel Fabian, ‘The War in Numbers: 650 Iranian Missiles Fired; 24 Killed in Israel, West Bank; 10,800 Israeli Strikes’, *Times of Israel*, 10 April 2026.

tankers, an A-10 ‘Warthog’—have been hit or crashed. The US Navy’s flagship aircraft carrier, the nuclear-powered USS Gerald Ford, plagued from the start by sewage-system malfunctions, has been put out of action indefinitely—possibly by its own crew, after a fire that broke out in the laundry room raged for thirty hours; though Trump, in his down-home fashion, appeared to tell a business forum in Miami that it had been hit by Iranian drones.¹⁸

More importantly, the US is struggling to produce munitions fast enough or cheaply enough to resupply itself and its allies and is having to pilfer *matériel* from its stocks in East Asia. The US can of course *spend* more: as a percentage of GDP, its military expenditure today is lower than at any point in the Cold War. But its *productive* powers are in question. Industrial decline, the loss of mid-range engineering skills to automation and the shift of the work force into all levels of the service sector place limits on any easy resort to military-Keynesian stimulus.¹⁹

8

‘War is the health of the State’, wrote Randolph Bourne, a liberal critic radicalized in 1917 by opposition to US entry into the First World War. ‘And it is during war that one best understands the nature of that institution.’²⁰ There is an apparent gap between the fantasies of the Trumpian warlords and the sort of state planning and investment that would be required to revive and sustain a drive to rearmament; between the forces and relations of production that tariffs have done nothing to alter. DOGE cuts to the State Department and Pentagon in the run-up to the attack point in the same direction (to say nothing of the ongoing dismissal of senior officers, including the Army Chief of Staff, in the middle of the war). Since the emergence of fiscal-military states in the early modern era, wars have generally been waged and won by soldiers, industrialists and bureaucrats, not by real-estate developers, streamers, venture capitalists or Bitcoin farmers.

¹⁸ Donald Trump, Address to the FII Institute, Miami, 27 March 2026.

¹⁹ As Tim Barker argued at the time of Trump’s quickly wound-down Yemen intervention, Operation Rough Rider (in a contribution to the NLR event at the Verso office in NYC, 27 May 2025).

²⁰ Randolph Bourne, ‘The State’, in *Untimely Papers*, New York 1919, p. 193.

One aspect of this superstructural element of decay—what Bourne described as the ‘oligarchic features hidden behind a smokescreen of democratic principles’—is captured by the outsized role that Israel has played at each stage of the conflict. The outsourcing to Tel Aviv of the decision for war, as outlined by the US Secretary of State,²¹ and the adoption of Israeli tactics to fight it, are evidence not only of the ‘oligarchic features’ of the American state, of which the enormous firepower of the Israel lobby in Congress, the media and higher education is but one instance.²² They also signal the US state’s diminished intellectual capacity: Iran experts critical of the White House approach have been dismissed from the State Department.²³ Of course Witkoff and Kushner are unversed in nuclear science; but that is the point, ensuring the Israeli line is followed.

9

At the start of the First Gulf War, Baudrillard analogized the buildup to war to the new, deregulated flows of global capital. ‘Just as wealth is no longer measured by the ostentation of wealth but by the secret circulation of speculative capital, so war is not measured by being waged but by its speculative unfolding in an abstract, electronic and informational space, the same space in which capital moves.’²⁴ What would the great philosopher of the image have said about the acceleration of the tempo of war and capital in the imperial personage of Trump?

The US–Israeli assault on Iran has been fought to the rhythm of markets, syncopated by tweets. The booming stock market remains the 47th President’s greatest fan. In a pattern that has become familiar, Trump would predict the imminent end of the war, or allude to the rapid progress of negotiations, in comments that ‘calm markets’ before the

²¹ According to Rubio, the US had no choice but to join Israel’s war on Iran, as a form of pre-emptive defence against the presumed Iranian response: Chris Stein, ‘US Strikes on Iran Triggered by Israel’s Plan to Launch Attack, Rubio Says’, *Guardian*, 3 March 2026.

²² The locus classicus of this argument is the work by Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer published in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, for which Israel also lobbied: *The Israel Lobby*, New York 2007.

²³ The point is made by the historian of Iran, Ervand Abrahamian in NLR 157, p. 54: ‘Has anyone actually defined what America’s interests are in Iran?’.

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Bloomington ID 1991, p. 56.

opening bell or at the start of the business week—before issuing threats of annihilation and ultimatums when they were closed, or pausing them, or doing the exact opposite and attacking, as the case may be. Three weeks in, it was clear that another pattern was threading through those jagged ups and downs: self-dealing. On 23 March, trades were placed—not for the first time—on oil futures worth \$580 million, minutes before Trump posted about ‘productive’ talks with Iran on Truth Social.²⁵ Today, market manipulation is itself *raison d’état*, and the Commander in Chief’s cronies revel in their status as insider traders.

As for today’s images: war crimes no longer detain the society of the spectacle for more than a few flickering moments. On the first day of the war, 150 girls were killed in Minab, in southern Iran, when US missiles struck their school (twice). Trump waved it away—‘I can live with that’. After a few days, much of the media learned to live with it too. In the first and second Gulf Wars, images and words were curated for the public by ‘embedded reporters’. In the present one, the reality of the war is largely screened from Western publics—but curated for the President in two-minute ‘reels’ of what one aide described as ‘stuff blowing up’.²⁶

IO

The Iranians see three American factors that currently play in their favour: munitions, markets and midterms.²⁷ There are plenty of signs that the war on Iran—and the widespread perception that Trump was manipulated into it by Netanyahu—are reshaping public opinion. Polling indicates the war enjoys less support than any the US fought in the twentieth century: just 41 per cent of adults approved in a poll from mid-March—falling to less than a quarter among independents and under a tenth of Democrats. In contrast, a majority of Americans backed ‘military action’ in Iraq in 2003, rising as high as 73 per cent over the first six weeks of ‘shock and awe’, when George Bush strode onto

²⁵ George Steer, Amelia Pollard and Malcolm Moore, ‘Traders Placed \$580 million in Oil Bets Ahead of Donald Trump’s Social Media Post on Iran Talks’, *FT*, 23 March 2026.

²⁶ Katherine Doyle *et al.*, ‘Inside Trump’s Daily Video Montage Briefing on the Iran War’, *NBC News*, 25 March 2026.

²⁷ Hassan Ahmadian, professor at the University of Tehran, speaking to *Dropsite’s* Jeremy Scahill, ‘As Trump’s Narrative on Negotiations Flails, Iran Is Setting Its Own Terms for Ending the War’, *Dropsite*, 27 April 2026.

the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln in a flight suit under the banner ‘Mission Accomplished’.²⁸

That antipathy is not yet showing up in an American anti-war movement. Paradoxically, the absence of a concerted campaign to manufacture consent at home may have cut short the time needed to develop the sort of protests that were organized in the lead-up to Iraq. Another reason for the relative quiescence of this moment is the harsh repression of the peace movement that *did* emerge in summer 2024: the student-led occupations touching hundreds of college campuses across the country in defence of Gaza. Yet despite the heightened risks of doing so, crowds have taken to the street under Trump. In the Twin Cities, protesters kicked ICE out of the city themselves, effectively ending ‘Operation Metro Surge’; millions more marched in the nationwide ‘No Kings’ demonstrations in late March to anti-war chants and slogans—notwithstanding the depressingly vague banner under which the progressive NGOs and unions organize them.

II

But if a change is palpable in American public opinion, and especially among Democrat and independent voters, that is far from the case with the Democratic leadership in Congress or the blue-state governors’ mansions. Today, it is this party apparatus which constitutes the greatest barrier to a radical change of direction, since it increasingly blocks not only the desire of its own base for a less blood-soaked foreign policy but that of a majority of all voting-age adults. There are therefore reasons to doubt that the Democrats will be able to put the unpopularity of Trump and his war to good account, even if Republicans lose control of both houses of Congress in the 2026 midterms, as many now predict. With each new turn of the imperial screw, with each new piece of lawless banditry and thuggishness, a current or former Democratic operative or politician has blessed the action, if not always the means used to attain it.

This complicity has been apparent in the striking lack of opposition—from the Party of Opposition—at each and every stage of the unfolding

²⁸ Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, ‘A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered US Public Support for War in Iraq’, Pew Research Center, 14 March 2023.

war with Iran. In the eight days leading up to the outbreak of hostilities, as the US assembled the largest armada in the Middle East since Operation Iraqi Freedom with the clear intent of using it, Democrats did nothing. Pressure for a War Powers Resolution vote was reportedly delayed by members of the Foreign Affairs Committee until after the outbreak of war; once underway, the resolution failed with the precise number of Democratic defections (four) needed to sink it in the House. The preferred outcome for many AIPAC-aligned Senate Democrats, according to a senior foreign-policy aide to Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, was precisely for Trump to act unilaterally, ‘weakening Iran while absorbing the domestic backlash ahead of the mid-terms’.²⁹ Even top Democrats who voted for the War Powers Resolution signalled their ‘openness’ to supporting a \$50 billion supplemental funding bill to ‘keep US troops safe’.³⁰ Schumer is one of the fiercest Iran hawks in either party, whose public criticism of the war has been confined to nit-picking requests for ‘critical details’ about ‘the objectives of these strikes’; privately, he assured a Jewish group that his job is ‘to fight for *all* the aid that Israel needs’.³¹

12

Though escalation may conceivably turn the tide, at the time of writing the US–Israeli attack has not succeeded in annihilating Iran as a military force; nor in engineering a split in the clerical regime; nor even in restoring the *status quo ante*, by opening the Strait of Hormuz. A mooted Iranian Kurdish uprising fizzled, though it brought a hail of IRGC missile and drone fire down on Erbil.³² The attempt to establish a Special Ops bridgehead south of Isfahan, possibly aiming at the theft of enriched

²⁹ Aída Chávez, ‘Top Democrats Try to Stop Vote That Would Put Them on Record for Trump’s Iran War’, *Capital and Empire*, 24 February 2026. The War Powers Resolution vote failed 212:219—with those four votes it would have passed 216:215.

³⁰ Jennifer Scholtes and Katherine Tully-McManus, ‘Lawmakers Anticipate Trump Will Seek Emergency Funding for “Open-Ended” Iran War’, *Politico*, 3 March 2026.

³¹ The comic side of one report reveals that Senate Democrats including Elizabeth Warren, Tina Smith and Chris Murphy have a Signal chat called ‘Fight Club’—but it does not intend to try to ‘chuck Chuck’ before the November midterms: Siobhan Hughes, ‘Growing Frustration with Chuck Schumer Spurs Talk of Replacing Him’, *WSJ*, 20 March 2026.

³² TOI Staff, ‘US–Israeli Plan for Kurdish Invasion of Iran Reportedly Collapsed Amid Leaks, Distrust’, *Times of Israel*, 29 March 2026.

uranium, ended with the US Air Force destroying its own planes under news-blackout camouflage produced by the loyal American media.³³

With the blockade of the Gulf of Oman, Trump is following his generals' advice—the 'sober option' they proposed at the start of the war, judging the Iranian economy to be the regime's weakest link. But that may need to go on for years to have any effect, while oil prices rise, inflation beds in—and the Iranians divert imports to multiple land routes, via Turkey, the Caucasus or Pakistan. Trump still has plenty of options, as Arrighi would have noted: trying to seize control of Kharg Island or other strategic locations or oil hubs; further bombardment or regime assassinations; capturing Iran's enriched uranium; some attempt to seize control of the Strait.³⁴ Yet with each step, he will be getting deeper into trouble: a forceful land intervention would mean US casualties, feeding the disaffection of the MAGA base; prolonging the Gulf of Oman blockade without opening the Strait of Hormuz is deepening the global economic damage. Rather than bringing about an uprising against the regime in Iran, the war has rallied the spirits of its formerly demoralized religious base, which now owns the streets in Tehran and other big cities with its nightly motorcades, flags and martial music.

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Where will all this end? It's worth recalling the unforeseen trajectories of America's previous Gulf Wars. In 1991, G. H. W. Bush, former head of the CIA and a consummate old-elite insider, produced what many empire loyalists still regard as the perfect war.³⁵ After winking at Saddam Hussein's attempted annexation of Kuwait, Washington declared it to be an international outrage; spent half a year assembling a global allied coalition against it, extending elaborate diplomatic courtesies to

³³ For the version according to Iran's Press TV, see *Palestine Chronicle* Staff, 'Step-by-Step Inside the Failed US Raid on Isfahan, According to Iranian Media', *Palestine Chronicle*, 7 April 2026. For the US account: Greg Jaffe *et al.*, 'A Harrowing Race against Time to Find a Downed US Airman in Iran', *NYT*, 5 April 2026.

³⁴ With the encouragement of the *Wall Street Journal*: 'Trump Blockades the Blockaders in Iran', 13 April 2026; and Richard Haas, Niall Ferguson and Philip Zelikow in the *Free Press*: 'How to Stop Iran from Winning the War', 9 April 2026.

³⁵ See, for example, Monica Duffy Toft's contribution to the Quincy Institute discussion, 'Grand Strategy Implications of Trump's Iran Debacle', 23 April 2026.

Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, as well as the Arab leaders, while keeping Israel out of it for fear of provoking feelings of Arab brotherhood with Iraq; won permission for US airbases across the Arabian peninsula; and readied the new generation of smart missiles for their video-equipped performance against Saddam's fleeing infantry.

But after this exquisite orchestration, what finale? Bush half-called for the overthrow of Saddam, but at the last minute reverted to a more cautious policy of leaving him militarily crippled, but still in office. A CIA-backed Iraqi Shi'a uprising went ahead anyway and was brutally repressed by Baghdad. The first Gulf War turned out to be the start of a decade-long economic war against Iraq, waged by crippling UN sanctions and infant malnutrition, reinforced by Anglo-American bombing under Clinton and Blair,³⁶ while Washington neocons built up a head of steam around the call to 'finish the job'. The upshot was the second Gulf War: Bush and Blair's invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed by an eight-year military occupation before Obama thought it safe to withdraw US forces 'over the horizon' to Bahrain and Qatar; only to resume bombing as the Iraqi Sunni resistance morphed into ISIS and established a caliphate headquartered in Mosul.

The decline in American diplomatic niceties and international support between 1991 and 2026, and the alteration in Israel's role—from embarrassing accoutrement to initiator and co-belligerent—need no underlining.³⁷ The main lesson of these historical precedents—'signal crises', in Arrighi's vocabulary—is their unintended duration. Trump may call off this phase, or launch a new escalation; but the US-Israeli war on Iran that he began in June 2025 is unlikely to be ending any time soon.

³⁶ Tariq Ali, 'Throttling Iraq', *NLR* 5, September–October 2000.

³⁷ At the time of the Second Gulf War, Chalmers Johnson noted the declining ability of the US to extract tribute from allies to pay for it, by comparison with the First Gulf War, as a symptom of declining hegemony: *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic*, London 2004, pp. 25, 307.