

COMMENT

THE FIRST CASUALTY OF TRUMP'S WAR IN IRAN WAS THE TRUTH

The cruellest irony is that of a President who addresses the Iranian people in the language of liberation and then threatens freedom of the press back home.

By David Remnick

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Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

“In war, truth is the first casualty.” It’s a line often attributed to Aeschylus, and it has never lost its relevance. Sometimes the culprit is the observer—the propagandizing correspondent, the mythologizing historian. Now, three weeks into a war of choice, the chief offender is the President of the United States.

On February 28th, at two-thirty in the morning, the White House press operation released a prerecorded video of Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago standing at a lectern in dim light. Wearing an oversized U.S.A. ball cap and no tie, the President announced that he had ordered American bombers to commence destroying targets throughout the Islamic Republic of Iran. Trump made a claim of preemption. He was acting, he said, to “defend the American people by eliminating imminent threats from the Iranian regime.” (This was confusing. Hadn’t Trump declared last June that he had “obliterated” Iran’s nuclear program? Hadn’t the Omani foreign minister, a mediator between the U.S. and Iran at negotiations in Geneva, just told “Face the Nation” that “a peace deal is within our reach”?) Trump went on to counsel the Iranian people to find refuge somehow—“It’s very dangerous outside, bombs will be dropping everywhere”—but then, at some unspecified moment, they should “take over” their government. “Let’s see how you respond.” And to his American listeners, he admitted, “We may have casualties. That often happens in war.”

For a narcissist obsessed with the projection of strength and grandeur, Trump gave a peculiarly gravity-free performance. The bill of his ball cap obscured his gaze. He raced and rambled through his text. And, rather than hustle back to the White House, he lingered at his country club. He had a fund-raising dinner to attend. It was left to the communications director, Steven Cheung, to

provide clear instructions on how to react to the prospect of another American war in the Middle East. “NO PANICANS!” he wrote on X. “TRUST IN TRUMP!”

The President, together with the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, could soon be heard lauding the precision with which they had “decapitated” the Iranian leadership and flattened military, police, and intelligence installations. And yet, as the late Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once blithely said, in the thick of America’s catastrophic misadventure in Iraq, “Stuff happens.” The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and much of the Iranian security hierarchy, would not survive the first day of bombing; neither would about a hundred and seventy-five innocents in the southern city of Minab, most of them children. When asked about a girls’ school there, which was struck by what was likely an American cruise missile, Trump blamed Iran. “They are very inaccurate, as you know, with their munitions,” he said.

Now, as war has engulfed both the region and the global economy, Trump and his sycophantic advisers have taken to improvising on the fly, floating conflicting justifications for war and predictions about its duration. The Iranians were close to developing missiles that could reach the U.S. (They weren’t.) They were weeks away from building a nuclear weapon. (They weren’t.) Israel forced America’s hand. (Marco Rubio.) “No, I might have forced *their* hand.” (Trump.) It’s all about regime change. (Trump.) It’s *not* about regime change. (Trump, later.) When confronted with these contradictions and falsehoods, all the President’s men followed his lead: they blamed the media.

With increasing frequency, Trump berates reporters (particularly female reporters). He sues media outlets for sport. Resolve is in short supply. The owner of the Washington Post, the newspaper of Watergate, has done

irreparable violence to his property merely to stay in Trump's good graces.

But, while the President has little regard for the freedom of the press, he craves its ceaseless attention. His need has the quality of addiction. In Washington these days, there is hardly a reporter who does not have the President's cellphone number. It is said that the best time to call is late at night while he is watching himself on TV and shitposting in his pajamas. He loves to muse aloud, then watch as those musings register in foreign capitals, and in the markets. Lately, he has been willing to say anything. The war will be over soon. Or maybe not. Whatever. Each pseudo-scoop is as ephemeral as a mayfly. But who can resist? When asked about the possibility of sending his infantry into Iran, he answers in the language of golf: "I don't have the yips with respect to boots on the ground." At other moments, he simply changes the subject to, say, his taste in interior decoration—"If you look behind me, see the nice gold curtains." Are you not entertained?

His advisers, of course, know what to do. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, who has cracked down on actual reporting at the Pentagon and has filled his pressroom with "influencers" and propagandists, spoke in his usual tone of rage recently when he lambasted CNN's coverage of the war as "fake news." He would be pleased, he said, when the Trump-friendly Ellison family, which has already swallowed up CBS News, finally takes possession of CNN, too.

Brendan Carr, who runs the Federal Communications Commission for Trump, eagerly joined the fray by threatening to revoke the licenses of television networks that are, in his view, "running hoaxes and news distortions." Trump pronounced himself "thrilled" with Carr's outburst. On Truth Social, he accused "Highly Unpatriotic 'News' Organizations" of airing "LIES." Perhaps, he wrote, he will prosecute unruly journalists on "Charges for TREASON."

Carr's threats to pull network licenses have no legal weight; the more

immediate danger is that media owners, who are all too aware of the economic pressures they face, will quietly cut back on critical coverage of the Trump Presidency in general, and the war in particular. They will fear landing outside the boundary of what is deemed patriotic. The historian Garry Wills, in an essay on Phillip Knightley's 1975 book about wartime journalism, "The First Casualty," wrote, "A liberal democracy submits to propaganda more readily than a totalitarian state. Self-censorship is always more effective than bureaucratic censorship."

The cruellest irony is that the President who addresses the Iranian people in the language of liberation, urging them to throw off the yoke of a regime that has brutalized them for decades, is the same man who threatens American journalists with treason charges and tries to strong-arm broadcasters into subservience. Having torn up a nuclear agreement in his first term and gone to war with no coherent goal in his second, Trump now directs his fire at the one thing he cannot afford to leave standing: the truth. What's at stake is democracy's oldest promise—that the people may call on their government to answer for what it does in their name. ♦

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