

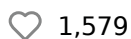
The Desire for Terror

And the defense of democracy



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A purpose of the war on Iran might well be to provoke a terrorist attack inside the United States. This would provide Donald Trump with a pretext to try to cancel or “federalize” the coming Congressional elections.

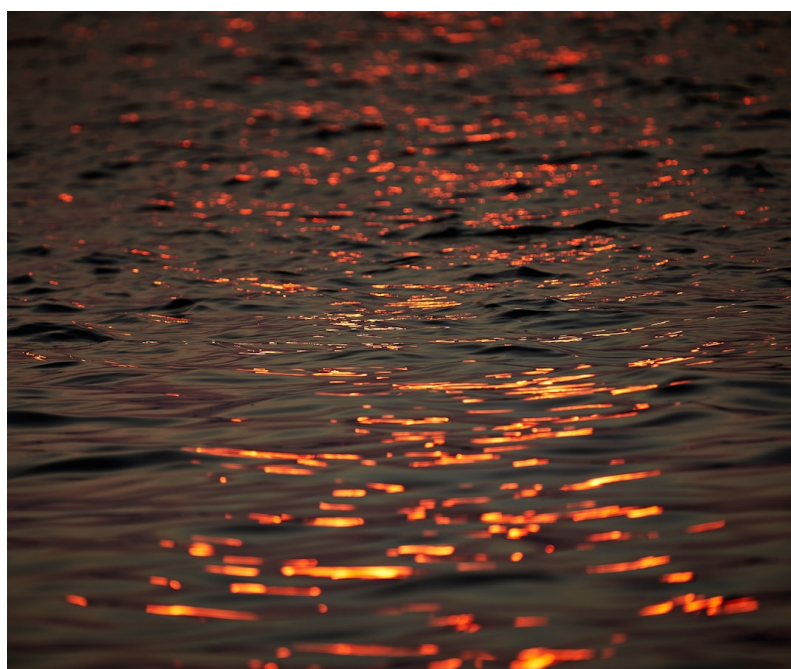
[Self-terrorism](#) might not have been the initial aim; but as time goes by, and failures and atrocities mount, its appeal will grow. Trump could think that he has much to gain; the war itself makes terrorism more likely; there are plausible vectors of terror; and the United States has let down its defenses.

Trump has already telegraphed the move. We know that he is obsessed with the fall elections, which his party will almost certainly lose by spectacular margins, and that he fears the accordant loss of power. This is clear from his own statements and actions. In a social post right after starting the war, he [claimed](#) (wrongly) that Iran had tried to hurt his cause in past elections.

We lack any other explanation for the war, at least from the American side. Trump is incoherent, and his administration is [inconsistent](#). Much of what has been said about Iran is not true. The propaganda is contradictory. It is as though the war itself is not the main goal, but that it was simply important to somehow get the thing started.

War, famously, is the extension of politics by other means. But what are the politics? The president and especially the Secretary of Defense present the United States as a kind of war crimes central, a place where the rules do not apply. War crimes do not win wars. Instead they provoke further war

provocation of terror. Iran is ruled by ruthless people with a record and a capacity for carrying out terrorist attacks beyond its borders. A terrorist attack on the territory of the United States might be a response by Iran or one of its proxies. Trump seems to have anticipated this, [without seeming to care](#) about loss of life: “Like I said, some people will die.” And if they do, he has his pretext.



The actions of Americans and Israelis in Iran could give rise to the sort of rage that could generate spontaneous terror by people associated with Iran and by people who are not. We bombed a [school](#) and killed 175 children. We are [killing](#) first responders. Bombing Iran's civilian energy infrastructure and setting Teheran on fire is not simply a war crime; it is an experience of millions of people. After last night's (apparently Israeli) strikes on oil depots, people are being warned that the air is not safe to breathe, and black rain is falling from a [black sky](#). Because Iran is largely cut off from the internet, we are not seeing much of this.

Worse, we stand at the brink of a water war that could threaten the lives of tens of millions of people. The region lacks fresh water and depends upon the [desalinization](#) of sea water. Iran was facing a catastrophic drought before the

war began. Its government is [now claiming](#) that one of its desalinization plants was targeted. And Bahrain is [also claiming](#) that Iran has attacked one of its desalinization plants. The truth will emerge with time. If this war becomes a water war, there will be plenty of blame to share. But people who survive the deprivation of water would not be wrong to believe that an American war was the ultimate cause.

Another possibility is an *American* act of terrorism on the territory of the United States, either presented as an Iranian attack or not. Most terrorism inside the United States is domestic and is [right-wing](#), and this war has been very [divisive](#) among American fascists. Historically, fascist competitions for power have been accompanied by internal violence.

Russia is another possible source of a terror attack inside the United States. It is not hard to see why Moscow would contemplate such a thing. In the current circumstances, it would be easy to deflect blame. Given that Putin himself [consolidated](#) authoritarian power on the strength of wars against Muslims and terrorist attacks inside his own country, he will have had no trouble imagining such a path for Trump. It is not hard to see him giving Trump such a gift. Russia has some [relevant capabilities](#).

During the first year of this second Trump administration, defenses against all of these vectors of terrorism have been removed. There are three levels of the problem: policies have been changed; leadership is incompetent and experienced personnel are gone; and fiction about immigrants has displaced the actual problem of terrorism.

At the level of Trump-era policy change, Russia is the most curious case. The Trump administration has been [resolutely pro-Kremlin](#), to the point of tolerating Russian backing of Iran in this war and ensuring that Russia [makes money](#) from selling oil. Right now the Trump administration is asking Ukraine for help with drone defense in the Persian Gulf region, while denying the significance of the Russian war on Ukraine that led the Ukrainians to develop that capacity in the first place. Under Trump, American monitoring of Russian sabotage has been [scaled back](#).

Domestic terrorists are also getting a pass if they are right-wing; the Department of Homeland Security has deprioritized domestic terrorism and is no longer keeping up its [database](#). An unqualified but right-wing recent college graduate [is in charge](#) of its program designed to prevent domestic terrorism. These examples could be [multiplied](#).

Tulsi Gabbard, who is in charge of the agency that coordinates intelligence, has no qualifications. She was last observed [taking part](#) in the federal seizure of ballots in Georgia: this has nothing to do with her job description, and strongly suggests an intention to “federalize” the coming election.

It goes on. Kash Patel, the head of the FBI, is also lacking in qualifications. He treats his job as the infrastructure of celebrity. There is currently no director of Homeland Security. The last one was fired for a scandal of titanic self-absorption. The presumptive successor, Markwayne Mullin, has no relevant experience. His single qualification is that he is a Trump loyalist and is willing to tell the Trump story to the media. He has been [taking part](#) in all of the fiction.

And fiction is the problem. Calling American protestors terrorists after killing them makes everything worse; it is crime covered by indecency inviting incompetence. Everything has to be adjusted to Trump’s view of the world. We cannot follow right-wing terrorists because they are seen as Trump’s allies, to be pardoned and forgiven. We cannot take the Russian threat seriously, because Trump treats Putin with sympathy and no doubt [understands](#) that Russia [intervenes](#) on his [behalf](#). The Trump administration cannot take real terrorism seriously because it must inhabit the grand fiction that the real danger to the United States are undocumented immigrants. A year of using the word “terrorism” in reference to that unreal threat has created [unreality](#), and unreality undoes capability.

None of this requires any sort of grand plan in the White House, let alone a conspiracy. None of it even requires very much initiative. [Self-terrorism](#) is more a matter of allowing things to fall apart, and then grabbing opportunely at a bit of the falling wreckage, which is something that Trump does well. The chain of events -- the disabling of counter-terror; the war on Iran; the terror

attack; the attempt to cancel elections -- might not be completed. The last piece that has to fall into place is the public reaction. Our reaction.

It is up to the relevant authorities, local and state as well as federal, to try to prevent a terrorist attack -- the third link in the chain. May those who are trying succeed. But it is up to us, all of us, to prevent the attempt to cancel elections, the fourth and final link. The self-terrorism chain is closed *only if we play our assigned part*, only if we choose to ignore the patterns and fail to make the mental preparations.

We must not allow ourselves the luxury of surprise. In the circumstances, we have no excuse for being surprised. Let me cite lesson 18 of [On Tyranny](#):

18. Be calm when the unthinkable arrives. Modern tyranny is terror management. When the terrorist attack comes, remember that authoritarians exploit such events in order to consolidate power. The sudden disaster that requires the end of checks and balances, the dissolution of opposition parties, the suspension of freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial, and so on, is the oldest trick in the Hitlerian book. Do not fall for it.

It is not just Hitler in 1933. That is one case among many. History is rife with examples of leaders who exploit, generate or manufacture crisis in order to stay in power. In the moment when a republic is meant to give way to a new form of authoritarian regime, the provocation and exploitation of terror is just what one would expect to happen. It is not, in a historical or a political sense, surprising. If we fail to remember history now, we will help the Trump regime generate a sense of panic when the terror attack comes.

We must anticipate, with sadness and resolution. We will be horrified, *but we cannot be surprised*, if there is a terrorist attack on the United States. If we choose to be surprised, we co-create a moment that Trump will exploit to undo what remains of our democracy. If the unthinkable happens, it will happen because some of Trump's people thought about it, some of them created the conditions for it, and some of them looked away. The responsibility for catastrophe will be theirs. And the responsibility for democracy will be ours.