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Trump Cannot See That the Opposition Is Real

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If you can set aside both the unconstitutionality and the immorality of President Trump's unprovoked war on Iran and focus on the operation itself, it is hard not to be bewildered by the utter lack of real planning or even basic strategic thinking that has gone into it.

Trump and his aides, according to recent reporting, did not plan for Iran to target shipping and close the Strait of Hormuz. They also do not seem to have planned for serious and sustained retaliation against America's gulf state allies. They did not plan for an energy crisis and the potential disruption to the global economy, and they did not plan for America's European allies to, by and large, reject their call for support.

To read about the administration's decision-making process is to learn that it did not really plan for or expect much in the way of anything that now defines the war. This raises two obvious questions: What did they plan for? And what exactly did they expect to happen?

It appears that both the president and the White House expected token resistance, followed by the collapse of the Iranian regime, the installation of a pro-American government — or at least one we could tolerate — and a return to the status quo ante: a replay, in essence, of the president's first intervention of the year, in Venezuela. Now that this replay fantasy has collided with a more complex, indeterminate and difficult reality, Trump is unable to explain his objectives or even give the country a sense of when the war might end. He told Fox News radio that he would "feel it in my bones." Let's just say that that is a far cry from traditional political leadership during wartime.

If anything, Trump is caught in a classic escalation spiral. When one approach fails (in this case, the initial airstrikes), he moves to the next. When that fails, he bids higher. And when escalation still doesn't produce the desired result — when he faces the choice between accepting defeat or stalemate or going even further — he goes further. Which is how we have arrived closer and closer to the use of ground troops: Thousands of Marines and now paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne are headed to the Middle East as Trump weighs a new offensive tied to either the Strait of Hormuz or Iranian nuclear materials.

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It should be said that at no point has Congress either authorized this war or provided funding for ground operations. For his part, the president is either bragging about a forthcoming agreement — “They’re going to make a deal,” he said of Iranian leaders in a news conference on Tuesday — or threatening attacks on Iran’s civilian infrastructure. “If I want to take down that power plant, that very big, powerful power plant, they can’t do a thing about it,” Trump said during the same news conference.

What’s striking is how familiar this pattern feels. The administration did not expect the public to be repelled by DOGE. It did not expect outrage over the treatment of Kilmar Abrego Garcia. It did not expect Democrats to respond to threats of partisan gerrymandering with their own push to wring as many Democratic seats as possible out of so-called blue states. The administration certainly did not expect the mass mobilizations against the deployment of National Guard troops and the use of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection as a roving paramilitary force. Minnesota, in particular, appears to have caught them entirely off guard — a tendency toward docility, it seems, is their base-line assumption about everyone they oppose.

Which raises another key question: Why can’t the White House see what others could have easily predicted? None of this should have been a surprise. Anyone capable of thinking through the actions of other people — of imagining their perspectives and of recognizing that they have agency — should have been able to anticipate these outcomes and plan accordingly. And in the case of the war in Iran, the president ignored counsel that warned of something like the current situation.

This gets to the real problem. Trump is famously indifferent to the concerns of those around him. He is a consummate narcissist, and he is, without question, the most solipsistic person ever to occupy the Oval Office. Over his decades on the public stage, we have seen little to no evidence that he believes in the existence of other minds.

Every presidential administration takes on the character of its principal, and this one is no different. Like Trump, the White House does not seem to understand that other people have agency, too. It sees itself the same way the president sees himself: as the protagonist of the universe, with everyone else acting as a supporting character or a nonplayer one — extras with no will of their own.

And so, whenever other people do act of their own accord, both the president and his administration find themselves flat-footed. For their opponents, this is an opportunity.

The White House’s inability to grasp the agency of others — its apparent lack of a theory of mind for everyone outside its walls — gives Democrats, especially, a distinct advantage. They can seize the initiative, knowing the president will struggle to respond in a constructive way. We have already seen this with the current partial shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security, where Trump has thus far refused to budge, as if his stubborn intransigence would bend the world to his desires. The result has been chaos in the nation’s airports and a decline in the president’s standing with the American public.

By virtue of his position, Trump is a dangerous figure. But he is also a weak and deeply unpopular president. The upshot of his impenetrable egotism, for his opponents, is that there are plenty of opportunities to make him weaker and even more unpopular. For as much as he is in love with violence — for as much as he clearly wants to terrorize the nation into submission — he is also cursed with a kind of blindness. He cannot see that his opposition is real. He cannot see that it can act.

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