

# The Next Coup Attempt

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We are seven months away from the most consequential midterm election in the history of the United States. Meanwhile, we are fighting a war. These are the structural conditions for a coup attempt in which a president tries to nullify elections and take permanent power as a dictator. If we see this, we can stop it, overcome the movement that brought us to this point, and make a turn towards something better.

President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Pete Hegseth are stuck in the logic of escalation, according to which the [feeling](#) of defeat today can be reversed by doing the first thing that comes to mind tomorrow. Trump is surrounded by people who are making money from the war; each day of war strengthens a warmongering lobby with personal access to the president. As the war lengthens, the chance that it will be exploited for a coup attempt increases.

Trump tells us that he is chiefly concerned with the permanence of his own comfort and power (think about ballroom and bunker), much of which he will lose when his party is defeated decisively in the midterms. He regularly declares his intention to meddle in the elections. His party backed a bill which would have turned elections into a sham. Trump wants to increase the defense budget by nearly 50% without any review of what the money is for; this is strategic nonsense, and has to be understood as a payoff for the men who, as he imagines, will help him install a dictatorship. Hegseth is meanwhile purging the highest officer ranks of people of principle.

It is up to us to put two and two together: Trump will seek to exploit the war (or the next one) to alter the elections. We bear responsibility for what comes next.

The eventuality can seem frightening, but Trump's position is weak. The gambit of turning a foreign war into a domestic dictatorship is complicated and difficult. Its success depends on us. If the possibility of such a coup is not anticipated and the variants of the gambit are not called out as they emerge, he can succeed. He has attempted a coup (or, technically, a self-coup) once, in January 2021 -- there is no reason to think that he will not try to do so again.

As always, history can help us to imagine the immediate future. History does not repeat, but it does instruct. We know that war offers at least five kinds of opportunities for aspiring dictators. Let us consider the moves that Trump could make, and how they could be stopped. I offer them as five clear types; in practice, of course, they will be mixed and matched from day to day. But if we have the concepts in advance, we can recognize the threat, and turn any sort of coup attempt against Trump.

We are not spectators of this unfolding drama. We are actors inside every scenario. And "we" means journalists who report, judges who follow the law, servicemen and servicewomen who follow the Constitution, and above all citizens who organize, protest and vote. If we know the coup scripts in advance, we know when to take the stage — and where to take the stage.

So here are the scenarios:

1. *The Steady Hand*. A war is going on, is the claim here, and so we should not change leadership, regardless of what happens in an election. This stance nicely dodges the questions of whether the war was worth starting in the first place, and whether the people in charge are the best qualified to make war (or peace). The steady hand argument has been used countless times; it was the approach that George W. Bush took against John Kerry in the presidential campaign of 2004. But whereas Bush was using such arguments to *win* an election, Trump will have to use them to *overturn* the results of an election that his party loses, most likely by huge margins. Given that Trump's polling on the war is terrible, he is in a

weaker position than Bush was, and would have to do much more. It is unclear why a steady hand would rig elections; and, for that matter, Trump's conduct during this war has made his hand seem (even) less steady. To rig an election, he needs a tight elite consensus around him; he needs allies who are willing to break the law and the Constitution, risking not only prison time but also historical infamy as people who wanted to end the republic. The war is [breaking up](#) that consensus and leading to the [firing](#) of some of the likely election riggers. The case for a steady hand that should not be hindered by electoral results should be easy to defeat; but we have to see the logic and work to break the ranks of Trump allies who would follow orders to rig elections. They have to know that they will fail and that when they will bear the consequences for the rest of their lives. The one truly steady hand is that of justice.

2. *Bonapartism*. In this tactic the aspiring dictator says: I know that you would like democracy at home, and so let us prove our ardor together by fighting a war for democracy abroad. This is meant to allow the tyrant to claim the mantle of democracy even while he undoes it at home. This approach was behind the original Napoleonic wars; it was perfected by Napoleon III in the 1850s as "diplomatic nationality." Trump, however, is not pretending to care about democracy. He prefers dictators; and among dictators, he prefers Putin more than the rest. Trump's allies though will make the case that war spreads "the American way" or something of the sort. But such arguments can be easily defeated. Whether by insider trading, political bets, arms dealing or (in Putin's case) higher oil prices and conveniently dropped sanctions, the people around Trump are making money on this war -- they are literally warmongers. What is good in America is bled away in this war; as oligarchs foreign and domestic make billions of dollars, as we are asked to sacrifice everything in exchange for nothing. Trump himself ran for office on an anti-Bonapartist platform: no wars abroad for democracy, spend money instead at home. Instead he is proposing to defund basic domestic services in order to bribe the armed services with a ridiculous funding increase during a senseless war.



3. *Bismarckian Unification*. Here the ruler no longer pretends to care about democracy (so far so good for Trump), but speaks about bringing the nation together. This was the great success of Otto von Bismarck in central Europe between 1864 and 1871. Germany before Bismarck was a culture but not a unified state; in the age of nationalism the question was who would succeed in bringing numerous German entities together. By winning three wars (against Denmark, the Habsburgs, and France), the Prussian leader was able to create the conditions for the establishment of a new, united German *Reich*. Because unification was achieved by force of arms rather than by revolution or elections (as many Germans had hoped in 1848), the new state was a militaristic monarchy from the beginning, with an essentially symbolic parliament. Trump would no doubt like this model; but he has the problem of being unable to win one war, let alone three; also, the war that he is fighting do not address an essential national problem. Instead it seems to be about tearing the American republic apart. Trump's budget proposal, offered during the war, amounts to this: the wealth of working Americans will be transferred to oligarchs and defense contractors, and the government will no longer provide basic services. It uses war to advance the impoverishment and peonization of everyone but a tiny elite.

4. *Fascist Sacrifice*. The [fascist leader](#) kills enough of his own people in a major campaign so that the survivors begin to accept the worldview: that all is struggle, that enemies are everywhere, that the world is a conspiracy against us, etc. Death on a mass scale becomes a source of meaning, uniting the *Führer* with his *Volk*. There is an element of this in Putin's war in Ukraine, but the classic example is the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. The very difficulty of the war after 1941 helped fascist arguments in Germany -- Victor Klemperer's [diaries](#) are helpful here -- for more than three years. Trump, however, lacks some of the attributes of historical fascism: the historical fascists actually did believe in struggle, which he does not. Trump believes in saying words and then having things handed to him on a silver platter. Fascists always believed in war; Trump converted to war late in life, having become convinced that it was a way to easy "wins" abroad that could be translated into dictatorship at home. Having boasted of winning in Iran dozens of times already, he is in a poor position to call for the large-scale land invasion that would be necessary to trigger huge American casualties and the bloody fascist dialectic of events and sentiments. Even if he did order a land invasion, it would probably not work, either militarily or politically. He has not done any of the ideological spadework; no one, listening to Trump, would think that he believed in a struggle for survival. By 1941, Hitler had already won quick wars in Poland and France, which created a sense among previously doubtful military commanders and civilians that he knew what he was doing, which then opened the way for a second, more ideological, stage of the war. Military commanders are presumably dubious of Trump; in any event, they are being fired by Hegseth at an extraordinary rate during a war. It is in this light, again, that one must understand Trump's strategically senseless notion that we should increase the military budget right now by nearly 50%: it is meant as a payoff for officers, soldiers, and sailors -- people he has openly disrespected his entire life, people whose funerals he treats as an opportunity to sell his own branded merchandise -- to assist him in a coup against Americans. That bribe should fail, for many reasons; but it will not fail unless we notice what is happening.

5. *Exploitation of Terror*. This gambit (or one variant of it) depends on something happening during a war. A foreign enemy carries out an act of [terrorist violence](#) against Americans, providing an aspiring dictator with a pretext for a state of emergency and a suspension of elections. Nothing exactly like this has happened in the United States, although we can recall our self-destructive reactions to 9/11. This is Trump's best hope among all of these scenarios, which is one reason why it might not happen: Iranian leaders must be aware that Trump would seek to exploit such an event. Iranian [propaganda](#) certainly involves threats against individual American leaders, but it seems unlikely that they would carry them out. Teheran has more to gain by mocking Pete Hegseth (as in a recent video) than by seeking to assassinate him. (Indeed, given Hegseth's particular combination of strategic incompetence and Christian nationalism, he must seem like a God-given enemy for the regime in Teheran.)

Another possibility is that Iranians do nothing inside US borders, but Trump and his people pretend that they have, or even organize a fake terrorist strike themselves. It is important to understand that such things do happen, and have been done by the people Trump admires the most. Consider the 1999 [false flag terrorist attacks](#) in Russia, the bombing of apartment buildings by the Russian secret services, which began a [chain of events](#) that allowed Putin begin his march towards dictatorship. Self-terror is a Putinist strategy, and it worked. This means that it can be presumed to have been considered by Trump, [Putin's client](#) in the White House. Putin is one of the people to whom Trump listens.

But Trump unlike Putin does not come from the secret services, and it is hard to imagine him not botching such an operation (even the Russians had some slips); it is also hard to imagine that Americans ordered to do such a thing would not leak such a plan before it could be realized (it did leak in Russia and was reported before it happened -- but it still worked). Even if the false flag attack itself took place, Trump would have to go from self-terror to a state of emergency and some sort of self-invasion to halt the elections. But a self-invasion by whom? ICE is unpopular and untrained. The war has not been run in a way that brings military commanders to trust the president. Again, one has to see Trump's proposal to increase the defense budget by nearly 50% as a kind of desperate bribe. There are sound strategic reasons why it is a terrible idea, but there is also a political one.

Elements of these scenarios can be mixed together. Some variant of terrorism is Trump's best bet. And so one should be (preemptively, now) skeptical of Trump's account of any future terrorist attack; we can be

sure that, whatever its true origins and character, Trump will provide a self-serving account meant to serve a coup and a dictatorship. It is utterly predictable that he will attempt to pass responsibility for any act of terror to his domestic political opponents and discredit or undo elections. We have to think through this chain of events now to make sure that we are ready to block it -- and to turn any such attempt against him.

The terrorism scenario [should not work](#). We should consider it in advance, and hold Trump responsible for any horror inside the United States brought about by his mad war. None of the other scenarios should work either, in any combination. Indeed, all of them should only hurt him, if we are attentive and active. But there is no neutral position. We cannot do nothing and expect the republic to make it through. Indeed, Trump's one chance to succeed, in any of these scenarios, is our own silent collaboration. He can only carry out a coup if we decide to [obey in advance](#): to pretend that wartime pretexts for coups are never used, although history instructs us that they are; and then to offer our surprise to Trump as the unique political resource that can transform his weak position into a strong one.

Trump is weak, but weakness only matters if it is treated as vulnerability and pushed towards defeat. He will try to make his weak position strong, which will expose further vulnerabilities that have to be seen and exploited. All of his policies make him vulnerable; the war in particular makes him vulnerable; and any gambit to exploit that war should make him and his party easy to defeat and discredit his authoritarian movement forever.

A coup attempt is not at all unthinkable; Trump has done it before, and he makes it very clear that he is thinking about it now. When we think about it now, about how it might take shape, we make it less likely; indeed, we deter it. Knowledge of history can change the future. If we remember what history shows us is possible, we can prevent a coup from succeeding -- and turn any such attempt against its instigator.

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