

Opinion | This Is Not a Man in Control of Himself

Jamelle Bouie

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To have spent any amount of time observing President Trump over the last month is to conclude that he is in far over his head.

The president is struggling with the consequences of his actions, raging in protest of the fact that for all its firepower, the United States cannot bomb Iran into submission. When Trump launched his “[short-term excursion](#),” he assumed that it would be — in the words of a Pentagon official in the last Republican administration to launch a Middle East war — a “cakewalk.”

That, as Trump’s own intelligence agencies told him, was a mistake. Now, he is stuck. And he lacks the skill and patience to find a way out of his self-inflicted catastrophe. Unable to will a better outcome into existence — there are limits to the power of positive thinking — and frustrated by his own impotence, his response, familiar to anyone who must manage the emotions of a young child, is to throw a tantrum.

Over the last few days, Trump has [denounced](#) “the Fake News Media” as “CRAZY, or just plain CORRUPT!” for its reporting on the war. He [attacked](#) Pope Leo XIV in a bizarre rant, calling him “WEAK on Crime” and “terrible for Foreign Policy.” And he [posted](#) an A.I. image of himself as Jesus, surrounded by devotees, healing an unnamed man.

This is not a man in control of himself, or a president in control of the situation around him.

I've written before about the irony of a strongman president so uninterested in governing that he has handed his power over to a handful of deputies. Trump's behavior as he faces failure in Iran underscores another such irony.

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Months before Trump won his second term, and well before he took office, the Supreme Court [handed](#) him the reins of the unitary executive — the promise of an active, energetic administration free of what the court deemed unnecessary constraints. The president has used this power to run wild, trampling over constitutional government. But he has also, at the same time, shown himself to be the weakest and most ineffectual president of recent memory, less a man of commanding authority than, well, a buffoon.

This is not to say that Trump has been an inconsequential president, that he hasn't presided over the wholesale destruction of large parts of the federal government, or that he hasn't turned the sharp edge of the state against the most vulnerable people in the country.

First under the Department of Government Efficiency and then under the direction of Russell Vought, director of the Office of Management and Budget, the administration summarily liquidated several key agencies. Among them: the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the United States Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Trump's White House has also slashed hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer funding for new medicines and technologies in a crushing blow to scientific research in the United States.

Under the direction of Stephen Miller, a White House deputy chief of staff and the architect of the president's deportation program, the administration has used its court-sanctioned authority to build a roving secret police of armed immigration agents, used both to terrorize the president's political enemies and to remove as many immigrants from the country as possible, regardless of legal status.

But these grim facts of Trump's tenure should not blind us to the way his unilateral action betrays the weakness of his regime. Trump works almost exclusively through executive orders — presidential directives used to shape the priorities of the federal bureaucracy. This allows him to move quickly. But there are also limits to his reach. In areas where Trump cannot compel political actors to obey his demands — where there is no legal basis for his authority — he struggles to do anything of consequence.

Consider his effort to impose a new citizenship requirement for voting, as well as a national voter ID. He has issued two executive orders that purport to change federal elections to suit his demands. But neither has much in the way of legal force. Presidential power does not extend to election administration. There is the SAVE Act — a bill that would write these restrictions into law — but other than writing posts on his social media website, Trump has done little to nothing to push that bill through Congress.

He's done little to nothing with Congress, period. He's taken few, if any, steps to work with the supine Republican majority to consolidate his transformation of the executive branch through legislation. Some of this is no doubt strategy, with destruction as a *fait accompli*. But most of it reflects his inability to engage the legislative process. The weakness we see abroad is the weakness we see at home, and vice versa.

Politically, the president's unilateralism has been a disaster. His universal tariffs — a vanity project as much as an economic program — are a drag on both the economy and his approval rating.

The same goes for his immigration policies, which also started with a broad assertion of executive authority. They then produced an enormous backlash from Americans under siege by ICE and Customs and Border Protection. The resistance in Minnesota, in particular, underscored the extent to which the president cannot withstand significant pushback. And it ultimately forced him to fire his secretary of homeland security, Kristi Noem, sideline the face of his efforts, Greg Bovino, and execute a strategic retreat.

Nothing underscores Trump's weakness as an executive more than the war with Iran. This is not to downplay the president's decision to circumvent Congress and start a war without so much as a nod to democratic decision-making. It is the imperial project of a would-be authoritarian. But, like many such projects throughout history, it is a showcase for the pathologies and dysfunctions of the regime in question. Initial operational success has given way to what is essentially a stalemate, with Trump screaming at the world, unwilling to do much else.

For as much as Trump is uniquely unsuited for the tremendous power of his office, it is also true that the idea of the unitary executive rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the American political system. It imagines that

government *can* be managed by a single figure, directing each part of the executive branch as an extension of his person. But the American system rests on consensus and collaboration. It depends on an active relationship between the three branches, each working to steer the affairs of a state and each entitled to its influence.

As weak as Trump is, it's not clear that any president could unilaterally govern the country with any success. Even our strongest and most aggressive presidents — Franklin Roosevelt comes to mind — worked in conjunction and cooperation with congressional majorities and allies within and outside the federal government. They understood that American governance was a partnership and that collaboration is necessary if one wants a durable and lasting legacy.

This raises what is already the most important question of the Trump years thus far: Will his legacy be durable and lasting? Does it represent a new template for American government going forward? Or is it more like an unfortunate detour into a dark alley?

There is a decent chance that Trump is the beginning of something, and not the end. But if we can escape these years intact and respond accordingly, we may find that Trump stands less as an example and more as a cautionary tale of what happens when we embrace unaccountable, unilateral authority.

In the end, it just doesn't work.

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