

# Trump at the Kennedy Center: The criminal underworld in power

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In an hour-long public appearance at the Kennedy Center—renamed after himself by his own decree—US President Donald Trump defended his launching of the war against Iran and proclaimed its results had already constituted a major success. In a manner which has become increasingly deranged, his remarks consisted of rambling anecdotes, non-sequiturs, observations about the wives of his political cronies, comments on the acoustics of the theater, all interspersed with boasts about obliterating a nation of 93 million people.

Trump talked like a character from a Martin Scorsese film. His register is that of organized crime: the casual discussion of killing leaders, the loyalty tests, the transactional view of alliances, the implicit threats, the self-congratulation after acts of violence, the jovial indifference to the suffering of others.

Anyone tuning in for the first time would be compelled to ask: Is this person really the president of the United States? The inescapable conclusion is that the criminal underworld has risen to the summit of American politics.

Trump began his remarks with a litany of the destruction rained down on Iran. “Our powerful military campaign,” Trump began, “continued in full force over the past few days. They have been literally obliterated. The Air Force is gone. The navy is gone. Many, many ships have been sunk. They were war-fighting ships, but I guess they didn’t know how to use them. And anti-aircraft is decimated. Their radar is gone, and their leaders are gone. Other than that, they’re doing quite well.”

This grotesque joking expresses a reveling in the human cost of the war that he has launched. Thousands of Iranians have been killed, and nearly a thousand Lebanese have died under Israeli bombardment—using weapons supplied by the US. Thirteen US soldiers have also been killed.

Trump boasted that more than 7,000 targets across Iran had been hit in just over two weeks, moving from military installations to factories which manufacture munitions and electrical components, as well as government buildings of all kinds. He claimed 100 Iranian Navy ships sunk, and said US missiles and bombs had destroyed every military facility on Kharg Island, Iran’s main oil-export hub. “We left the pipes,” Trump said, but the oil facilities could be destroyed “on five minutes’ notice. It’ll be over.”

This bravado conceals mounting desperation as the US plan for a quick knockout of Iran by killing its leaders has manifestly failed. While calling Iran “a paper tiger now,” Trump issued a renewed appeal for the European powers, Japan and even China to help

guarantee the flow of oil out of the Persian Gulf. After more than a year of bullying the world by imposing illegal tariffs, Trump now finds that his spurned allies, particularly rival imperialist powers like Germany, Britain and France, are unwilling to send minesweepers to join in a US-led operation to “reopen” the Strait of Hormuz.

It is now widely reported that Trump was entirely oblivious to the likelihood that Iran would close the Strait of Hormuz in response to an American military attack, though in his press conference he boasted that he had “predicted” everything, including the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Perhaps the most remarkable comment from the US president came when he criticized the reluctance of many US allies to join the war with Iran. Citing an imaginary conversation with such an ally, he said, “You mean for 40 years we’re protecting you and you don’t want to get involved in something that is very minor, very few shots going to be taken because they don’t have many shots left, but they said we’d rather not get involved.”

Trump’s approach to foreign policy is that of a protection racket run by a criminal syndicate. As for the “very minor” conflict, it brings the world another giant step closer to the outbreak of nuclear war. Pentagon war planners are already drawing up scenarios in which US Marines seek to clear the Strait of Hormuz by storming the mountainous territory along the Iranian coastline. A full-scale ground war could well ensue.

Speaking on a podcast Friday, billionaire David Sacks, the administration’s AI and crypto “czar” and ardent Zionist, stated, “Israel could just be destroyed or very large parts of it” if the war continues, and hinted that the Netanyahu government might use nuclear weapons if Iran continues to resist.

After reveling in the violence of the criminal war against Iran, Trump digressed into increasingly aimless personal remarks to the political cronies seated around the table, including White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles and House Speaker Mike Johnson.

He gave a grisly account of an elderly Republican congressman’s near-death, crediting himself with convincing Neil Dunn (Republican-Florida) to get treatment to preserve Johnson’s three-vote margin in the House. “I did it for him first and for the vote second, but it was a close second,” Trump remarked.

In his semi-coherent anecdotes, Trump provided a window into the social physiognomy of the regime: a ruling clique of billionaires, fixers and political operatives. At one point he paused to congratulate the “rich board” of the “Trump-Kennedy Center”

and single out individual plutocrats as models to be celebrated. “So under the leadership of this exceptionally talented and rich board,” he said. “It’s a very rich board... most of you are loaded. Ike Perlmutter [whose wife Laura is actually on the board] has got so much money. Look at Ike Perlmutter. He ended up being the largest owner of Disney.”

And he held up yet another businessman as the emblem of success in Trump’s America: “Anthony’s another one. He started off with one truck ... he ended up with 4,000 trucks, and he sold his company for billions of dollars. ... He’s a member of one of my clubs, and all he has is cash.”

At one point Trump announced that the Ultimate Fighting Championship would hold a fight on the grounds of the White House on his birthday, at his invitation. The group has also been given a contract by the Pentagon to train soldiers in the type of brutality that Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) fighters routinely display in the ring.

To what past president can Trump be compared? He stands outside of any democratic tradition. The White House has been the home of a fair number of rotten individuals. But Trump represents a level of intellectual and moral degeneracy that makes even Richard Nixon appear as a pillar of integrity.

Trump’s odious characteristics personify the historical decay of the American ruling elite as a whole. All the filth and corruption that characterizes the tech and financial industry and the oligarchy that it has spawned is concentrated in Trump’s persona. As we have noted earlier, not every corporate CEO is a Donald Trump. But there is a particle of Donald Trump in every corporate CEO. Mark Zuckerberg’s motto, “Move fast, break things,” finds its criminal realization, on a vaster scale, in the unstated motto of the Iran War: “Bomb countries, kill people.”

There is a profound link between the persona of Trump and the interests of the capitalist oligarchy. How else is it possible that such a person tightly controls one of the two major parties of big business, having been nominated as the Republican candidate for president in three consecutive elections?

The United States is conducting a major war under the direction of a man who is, in the moment of that war, functionally elsewhere—mentally, emotionally, morally. He is at the breakfast meeting of the heads of auto dealerships. He is at the grand opening of a golf resort. He is wherever his narcissism places him at any given moment, and the war is simply the current backdrop to the permanent performance of self.

The American ruling class has constructed a political order in which the presidency can be occupied by someone who treats mass death as a form of entertainment and self-aggrandizement, like Caligula presiding over a gladiatorial combat in a Roman stadium.

The Democratic Party’s response to this crisis has been, characteristically, a combination of procedural complaint and political impotence. Senator Adam Schiff appeared on television over the weekend to note that Trump had not “leveled with the American people.” This is the political equivalent of observing that Hitler’s Austrian diction was stylistically deficient.

The Democrats are incapable of mounting a serious opposition to Trump’s war or his authoritarian degradation of democratic norms because they are themselves deeply implicated in the political,

economic and military structures that produced both. The truth is that they support his war and the underlying agenda. They voted for the military budgets. They supported the sanctions architecture. They maintained and expanded the imperial presidency under Obama and Biden. They differ from Trump not in their commitment to American global hegemony but only in their preference for conducting it with better manners and a more polished vocabulary.

The bankruptcy of the Democratic opposition is not incidental to the crisis. It is constitutive of it. Trump’s gangster presidency is possible precisely because the American two-party system offers no genuine alternative. The tens of millions of Americans who are horrified by what they are watching have no political vehicle through which to act. Their choices are the party of the crime boss or the party that issues press releases expressing concern about the crime boss while funding his wars.

Trump is the representative of a ruling class that has reached the end of the line. The question is whether this class will drag the entire world toward catastrophe as it fights to preserve the capitalist system, which is the basis of its wealth and privileges.

The working class of the United States and of the world has not yet spoken on this crisis. The millions who are horrified, the millions who cannot reconcile what they are seeing with any conception of legitimate governance, the millions who sense that something fundamental has broken—these millions have yet to find their political voice and their political organization.

But the crisis itself is generating the conditions for that response. A war launched by a gangster president, assented to by a feckless and fraudulent non-opposition party, conducted in an atmosphere of surreal banality, destabilizing the global economy while its author combines boasts about killing thousands with boasts about his talent for ballroom renovations—This is not a situation that can be sustained indefinitely.

The first step in fighting back against Trump’s policies of austerity, war and attacks on democratic rights is to recognize that the working class—and no section of the capitalist class—is the social force that can and must defeat this government. The independent political mobilization of the working class, through a break with the capitalist two-party system and the fight for a socialist and anti-war program, is the task of the hour.



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