

The United States Leadership and Operation Epic Fury

“The entire country can be eliminated in a single night, and that night might be imminent”, the United States (US) President Donald Trump recently stated in a post on Truth Social, further asserting, “An entire civilisation could perish tonight, never to be restored”.¹ This occurred prior to President Trump subsequently moderating his stance and agreeing to a 12-day truce. His supporters contend that such forceful declarations compelled Iran to concede and agree to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. While this interpretation may appear plausible at first glance, its validity warrants closer scrutiny. This article seeks to examine whether these pronouncements—threatening the destruction of a civilisation by the leader of the ‘Free’ world—formed part of a coherent strategy or instead reflected a fundamentally flawed approach from the outset.

Blockage of Strait of Hormuz

Analysts have argued that the US leadership failed to adequately consider the higher-order effects of Operation Epic Fury.² Nobel Prize-winning scholar Thomas Schelling, in his 1960 work *The Strategy of Conflict*, observed that “Coercive bargaining is fundamentally about the manipulation of shared risk rather than the direct application of force”. Any rigorous wargaming exercise would likely have indicated that, in a conflict imposed on Iran, the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz would be a near inevitability. Iran effectively transformed the Strait into a strategic hostage whose value increased in proportion to American desperation.³ The Trump administration appeared to assume that bombardment and destruction would yield Iranian capitulation; however, this expectation proved misplaced. Instead, such actions merely generated a bargaining environment in which Iran, despite being under pressure, acted with calculated restraint and leveraged its position to render the American exit diplomatically awkward. A President inclined toward grandiose assertions, having entered the conflict with promises of securing an agreement superior to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, now appears to be in a position of strategic retreat.

The Canons of the War Goals

A military Commander-in-Chief approaching the situation with objectivity and strategic clarity would, at the outset, have recognised the geographic constraints, critically assessed the limitations of the proposed military instruments in relation to the stated objectives, and accounted for the evident reluctance to deploy ground forces. Such an approach would have ensured that the aims of the conflict remained realistically attainable. President Trump, by contrast, appears to have pursued a course of action intended to demonstrate qualitative superiority over his predecessors, rather than one grounded in carefully calibrated strategic judgment.

Operation Epic Fury emerged from the breakdown of nuclear negotiations in Feb 2026. Launched on 28 Feb 2026 and coordinated with Israel’s Operation Roaring Lion, it was directed toward denuclearisation, military degradation, the weakening of proxy

networks, and potential regime change in Iran. These objectives extended beyond counterproliferation to encompass broader coercive aims intended to diminish Iran's regional influence and, possibly, its governing structure. Iran's retaliation, however, appeared to catch the US unprepared, despite the well-established principle that "The enemy always has a vote".⁴ President Trump, thus, initiated what may be characterised as a 'War of Choice' and subsequently invoked the notion of 'Unconditional Surrender', seemingly prioritising personal assertion over coherent strategic calculation.

Had the US leadership adequately understood the basic principles underlying its stated war aims, the selection of means would likely have been more appropriately aligned with those objectives. A coherent strategy would have recognised that air strikes can degrade launch systems, industrial facilities, and fixed nuclear sites, yet are insufficient for securing durable regime change or dismantling an entrenched proxy network. Reliance on stand-off strikes in the absence of ground forces is unlikely to compel full capitulation from a deeply embedded state apparatus. While such means are suitable for capability degradation, they remain inadequate for achieving more ambitious political end states. The much-praised decapitation strikes, rather than producing decisive outcomes, appear to have reinforced Iranian resilience. If this constitutes a strategy, its deficiencies are readily apparent.

If denuclearisation was the primary objective, the US leadership should have avoided regime-change rhetoric and aligned its goals from the outset. Conversely, if regime change was intended, greater emphasis should have been placed on post-conflict planning and internal opposition rather than an extensive air campaign.⁵ While the military tools employed were suitable for degrading capabilities, they were insufficient for achieving lasting political transformation. The absence of a coherent strategy indicates that leadership neither clearly defined the desired end state nor aligned the means accordingly. Subsequent escalations lacked a consistent objective, reflecting reactive decision-making, with outcomes suggesting reliance on external resolution—partly realised when Iran agreed to reopen the Strait for a limited 12-day period.

The Nuclear Gamer

Given President Trump's preference for expansive and dramatic posturing, it is reasonable to question whether, under the strain of a self-inflicted strategic setback, he would maintain the tradition of nuclear restraint observed since President Truman.⁶ In a 30 Mar 2016 MSNBC town hall with Chris Matthews, he remarked, "Then why are we making them? Why do we make them?"⁷ In an Apr 2016 NBC interview with Matt Lauer, he stated that while nuclear use was a "Horror", he would "Never, ever rule it out".⁸ Accounts such as Peter Baker and Susan Glasser's *The Divider* further suggest he even entertained their use under deceptive attribution.⁹ In such a context, a leader who initiates an avoidable conflict, misjudges the adversary, and lacks strategic coherence risks rendering the unthinkable increasingly conceivable.

Fault Analysis

There appears to have been a marked degree of overconfidence within the US leadership, resulting in a disconnect from operational realities during the execution of Operation Epic Fury. The pursuit of maximalist objectives, including unconditional surrender without a clearly defined end state, reflected a misreading of Iranian cohesion and resilience. Moreover, there was insufficient appreciation of the limitations inherent in the military instruments employed to achieve these aims. This posture was further reinforced by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's promotional rhetoric, emphasising "Most-lethal" capabilities while dismissing rules of engagement—an approach underscored by controversial incidents such as a school strike resulting in significant civilian casualties.¹⁰

This hardline approach also contributed to the reluctance of key allies to provide full military support. The unilateral nature of the operation, undertaken without broad consultation, further compounded the issue. European partners, including Spain, rejected the operation outright, while the United Kingdom, France, and Germany emphasised diplomacy and declined participation in strikes lacking the United Nations authorisation. President Trump's adversarial rhetoric toward allies, including public criticism and accusations of burden-sharing failures, deepened existing divisions. This dynamic highlights the absence of a coherent strategy to secure allied support, suggesting that their participation was assumed rather than systematically cultivated.

Conclusion

To summarise, the strategy failed to achieve its core objectives across multiple domains. Iranian missile and drone production was not fully neutralised, and air defence systems remained capable of contesting the US air operations, leading to costly and high-risk recovery efforts. Nuclear-related targets were only partially degraded, while decapitation strikes did not collapse command structures; instead, Iran adapted through a dispersed 'Mosaic' strategy, preserving operational resilience. Allied coordination also faltered, with limited North Atlantic Treaty Organization participation, and the assumed strategic centre of gravity—the regime's will to resist—remained intact.

Although the US claimed extensive tactical gains, including strikes on thousands of targets and damage to naval and air assets, it failed to secure broad acceptance of *jus ad bellum* (right to war). Ultimately, when measured against pre-war objectives and post-ceasefire outcomes, the operation reflects a limited military success but a broader strategic failure to achieve decisive political ends.

Endnotes

¹ Truth Social, Donald J Trump, accessed 15 Apr 2026, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/116363336033995961>

² Federica D'Alessandra, "Operation Epic Fury and the International Law on the Use of Force", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 Mar 2026, accessed 08 Apr 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/03/operation-epic-fury-and-the-international-law-on-the-use-of-force>

³ Hussein Banai, "The Last Temptation of Trump at the End of a Failed War", *New Lines Magazine*, 07 Apr 2026, accessed 08 Apr 2026, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/the-last-temptation-of-trump-at-the-end-of-a-failed-war/>

⁴ Joseph Rodgers and Bailey Schiff, "Operation Epic Fury and the Remnants of Iran's Nuclear Program", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 28 Feb 2026, accessed 08 Apr 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/operation-epic-fury-and-remnants-irans-nuclear-program>

⁵ Davit Khachatryan, "Operation Epic Fury, Regime Change, and the Collapse of Legal Constraint", Center for International Policy, 04 Mar 2026, accessed 08 Apr 2026, <https://internationalpolicy.org/publications/epic-fury-international-law/>

⁶ Hussein Banai, "The Last Temptation".

⁷ Anthony Zurcher, "Donald Trump's nuclear fixation - from the 1980s to now", *BBC*, 11 Aug 2017, accessed 08 Apr 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40879868>

⁸ Time Staff, "Here's What Donald Trump Has Said About Nuclear Weapons", *TIME*, 03 Aug 2016, accessed 08 Apr 2026, <https://time.com/4437089/donald-trump-nuclear-weapons-nukes/>

⁹ Hussein Banai, "The Last Temptation".

¹⁰ Hugo Balta, "The spectacle of Operation Epic Fury", *Fulcrum*, 06 Mar 2026, accessed 08 Apr 2026, <https://thefulcrum.us/ethics-leadership/operation-epic-fury-hegseth-rhetoric-trivializes-war>