

# Trump and War

## *Killing Machines:*

*Trump, the Law of War, and the Future of Military Impunity*

Thomas Gift

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026, £23

## John Newsinger

**T**his book could not be more timely as, at the time of writing, the United States has been bombing Iran every day, Donald Trump has been regularly threatening to unleash hell on the country and a very fragile ceasefire is in place. On the other hand the book was obviously written before the attack on Iran and is an account of how at least some of the ground for this war was prepared: not the US strategic thinking – or, rather, the lack of it – behind the war, but the actual implementation of Trump’s doctrine of ‘Military Impunity’. (p. 2)

What concerns Gift is ‘Trump’s assault on American military justice’. As he points out:

. . . as either a candidate or president, Trump has denounced the Geneva Conventions as “the problem” and “out of date”, pledged to bring back “a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding”, advocated the killing of civilians, promoted the widespread loosening of military rules of engagement, praised torture.

In February 2016, Fox News quoted him proclaiming that ‘Torture works, okay folks’. He has even advocated the deliberate killing of the families of terrorists: ‘you have to take out their families’, he told Fox and Friends in December 2015. Gift quotes one headline from the *Washington Times* in March 2016: ‘Trump Says He’d Force US Military To Commit War Crimes’. More recently he ‘has threatened to bomb cultural sites, proposed pillaging Middle Eastern oil fields for profit, and lambasted the need to fight “politically correct” wars’. All this adds up to ‘Trump’s impunity agenda’, in his pursuit and advocacy of which he is, according to Gift, ‘unique’. Gift does not argue that the US military has not broken the laws of war in previous conflicts, but rather that in the past they did their best to cover-up war crimes, not celebrate them. (pp. 2-3, 15, 23, 29, 59,

68)

Gift very usefully explores the way that Trump used his championing of military excess as a way of building support for his first run for the presidency, successfully enlisting Fox News and in particular Pete Hegseth in his camp. In November 2019 he granted clemency to Matthew Goldsteyn, Clint Lorance, and Eddie Gallagher. Goldsteyn had been charged with killing an unarmed Iraqi detainee, Lorance with killing two Afghan civilians and Gallagher with cutting a young Iraqi's throat and then photographing himself together with the corpse. Trump told a rally in Florida that 'I stuck up for three great warriors against the deep state. You know what I'm talking about'. What is interesting here is the rhetorical transformation of the 'deep state' concept. What for the left is the perpetrator of war crimes, the Republican right sees as 'woke' agencies, trying to stop war crimes and to punish those responsible. As Gift makes absolutely clear, Fox News played an important part in getting Trump involved in all this. (pp 38-39)

Pete Hegseth played a crucial role in persuading Trump to go down this road, transforming him from someone who regarded soldiers, especially the dead and wounded, as just so many 'losers' and 'suckers', into the outspoken champion of military prowess and excess. He was just one of a number of Fox News personalities Trump avidly watched and, indeed, turned to for advice. He was apparently known as 'Trump's War Whisperer'. According to Gift, 'Hegseth reportedly conversed one-on-one with Trump' on this issue, and he writes of how officials within the White House:

. . . even became concerned that Hegseth was privately supplying Trump misleading or incorrect details about the cases . . . One official, for example, recounted that Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs gen Mark Milley were placed in a position where "(t)hey were trying to convince the president these guys were actually criminals, not heroes".

Fox News also led the way in campaigning for Trump to pardon the four Blackwater mercenaries jailed for their part in killing fourteen Afghan civilians; and he duly complied in December 2020. Although Gift writes that 'evidence points to Hegseth's lobbying as decisive in the Blackwater pardons', one suspects that the Blackwater boss, Erik Prince, one of Trump's unofficial advisers during his first term, although not mentioned by Gift, also played an important role in this. (pp. 42, 44)

Gift also provides us with a very interesting discussion of how successfully Trump – a draft-dodger, remember – rallied the military vote. Exit polling showed that serving military and veterans voted for Trump in 2016 'over Hillary

Clinton at a rate of nearly two to one . . . In 2024, Trump won 65 percent of the military vote over Kamala Harris'. Once again, Fox News played a role in this as it is the most popular TV channel on military bases. Military veterans were also prominent in the various hard right militia groups that supported Trump, making up a quarter of the membership of the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys. And perhaps as many as '20 percent of the Capitol rioters had military backgrounds, a rate nearly triple their representation in the national population'. He chronicles their involvement in the insurrection to good effect and, of course, Trump subsequently pardoned them all. As Gift puts it: 'Trump's record as commander-in-chief has appeared to empower extremism in the military'. This embrace of domestic violence and insurrection has been celebrated by Hegseth, who has actually urged Trump's supporters to arm themselves and to prepare for 'some form of civil war' which he regarded as inevitable. (pp. 131, 145, 151, 248)

What still astonishes is that someone as unqualified and unsuitable as Hegseth should actually be installed as Secretary for Defense, (aptly renamed in 2025 as Secretary of War), in Trump's second term. His were not the hands into which the United States' military machine would be placed under normal circumstances. As it was, this was a close-run thing with his nomination only going through the Senate with Vice-President Vance's casting vote. Some reluctant Republicans had to be intimidated into supporting him. (p. 194) Gift chronicles the campaign in support of his nomination, not least the 'Heritage Foundation . . . pro-Hegseth TV ad'. The result is an administration wholly committed to support and celebrate military excess, an administration with what can be usefully characterised as a gangster approach to international relations.

Initially the best demonstration of this was the sinking of boats supposedly suspected of smuggling drugs in the Caribbean that began in early September 2025. Instead of these boats being intercepted, searched for drugs and the crew arrested, they were attacked, sunk and the crew killed, with getting on for 200 fatalities so far. On one occasion at least, in September 2025, a second strike was made to kill survivors of the first strike and there was a ferocious debate over whether or not Hegseth had ordered a 'no survivors' policy. The Trump administration was routinely committing war crimes and, far from covering them up, boasting about it. This initiative was to culminate in the raid on Venezuela and the kidnapping of President Nicolas Maduro and his wife on 3 January 2026. It is difficult to know how seriously to take Trump's war on the so-called 'narco-terrorists'. Is it purely demonstrative, an exercise intended to rally his supporters? Is it about asserting US power over South America, for example, by getting control of Venezuelan oil? Or is it really about curbing the

importation of drugs? Certainly Trump's pardoning of the former President of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernandez, extradited to the US and sentenced to 45 years in prison for smuggling more than 400 tons of cocaine into the country during Joe Biden's Presidency, suggests that it was not really about curbing drug importation.

Which brings us to the US-Israeli attack on Iran. How has Trump's 'impunity agenda' affected the conduct of this conflict? Trump seems to have been manoeuvred into the war by the Israelis and their supporters in his administration and the Republican Party. The Israelis have been urging the United States to attack Iran for many years and previous presidents, including Trump in his first term, refused. Now, encouraged by the success of the Venezuelan raid and surrounded by a team of incompetent sycophants, with Hegseth urging him on, he agreed. He seems to have assumed that the war would be short-lived, the Iranian regime brought to heel by an overwhelming bombardment, with few US casualties.

Almost always overlooked is the fact that Israel has a covert ally in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime has been Israel's accomplice for many years and without doubt its influence was brought to bear in persuading Trump to attack Iran. The result has been a disaster for both Trump and the United States. Whereas in the past Israel was used by the US to boost its position in the Middle East and reined in when it was seen as going too far, now the tail was wagging the dog. How this conflict unfolds remains to be seen, but it has seriously damaged the United States' international standing and has further undermined Trump's domestic position. The war is not popular in the US.

But what of the conduct of the war? This brings us to an important point that Gift acknowledges, but does not explore deeply enough: the fact that both Trump and Hegseth have championed military excess and apparently have no problem with war crimes. While the rhetoric of the likes of Trump and Hegseth is something new, and while atrocities and war crimes have certainly been committed in Iran, the scale and ferocity of the violence inflicted on civilian populations has been far worse in earlier conflicts.

US bombing in Korea was carried out without any restraint, bar the use of nuclear weapons. The US Air Force General Curtis LeMay subsequently boasted that 'We burned down just about every city in North Korea and South Korea . . . during the three years of warfare we killed off over a million civilian Koreans and drove several more million from their homes'. One raid on Pyongyang on 29 August 1952 saw nearly 700 tons of bombs and 10,000 litres of napalm dropped, killing over 6,000 civilians.<sup>1</sup> This slaughter was carried out under

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<sup>1</sup> See my 'When old Labour went to war', *International Socialism* 118, Spring 2008.

Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, both of whose rhetoric was very different from that of Donald Trump.

Similarly, the Vietnam War saw the most terrible war crimes committed, including relentless aerial bombardment. Most notorious was the My Lai massacre of 16 March 1968 when US troops butchered some 500 civilians, including many women and children, a massacre accompanied by gang rape and mutilation. Lieutenant William Calley was prosecuted for his part in the atrocity and sentenced to life imprisonment, but only served three years under house arrest before being pardoned by President Nixon. In reality, Calley was a scapegoat, certainly guilty of war crimes, but thrown under the bus to protect others more senior.<sup>2</sup>

One last point: Hegseth has imposed his celebration of violence and excess on US history as well. For many years there has been a campaign to strip the Medal of Honor from the twenty US soldiers who were awarded it for their part in the Wounded Knee massacre of 29 December 1890. Some 500 troops under the command of Colonel James Forsyth killed over 250 Native Americans, most of them women and children. Forsyth's commanding officer, General Nelson Miles, certainly not woke by any definition, was appalled and outraged by the episode, describing it as 'the most abominable criminal military blunder and a horrible massacre of women and children'.<sup>3</sup> He actually suspended Forsyth from duty. President Benjamin Harrison, however, could not afford such a scandal and so the decision was taken to celebrate the massacre as a heroic victory. Forsyth was reinstated, soon after promoted, and no less than twenty of the participants were awarded their country's highest military medal. For years, Native Americans have been campaigning to have them stripped of the medal and in 2024 President Biden reluctantly ordered a review. Hegseth settled the matter when he proudly announced that the recipients were 'brave soldiers', that they were keeping their medals, and that 'This decision is now final, and their place in our nation's history is no longer up for debate.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Often forgotten today is how much public support there was for this war criminal at the time. The recording of the 'Battle Hymn of Lt Calley', by Terry Nelson, sold over a million copies in four days. It was released while Calley was standing trial. See my review of Aaron Leonard's *Whole World In An Uproar* in *Lobster* 86 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/86/whole-world-in-an-uproar-music-rebellion-and-repression-1955-1972/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter DeMontravel, *A Hero To His Fighting men: Nelson A Miles 1839-1925* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press 1998), p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> *Guardian*, 26 September 2025 <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/26/pete-hegseth-wounded-knee-massacre-medals-of-honor>>.

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