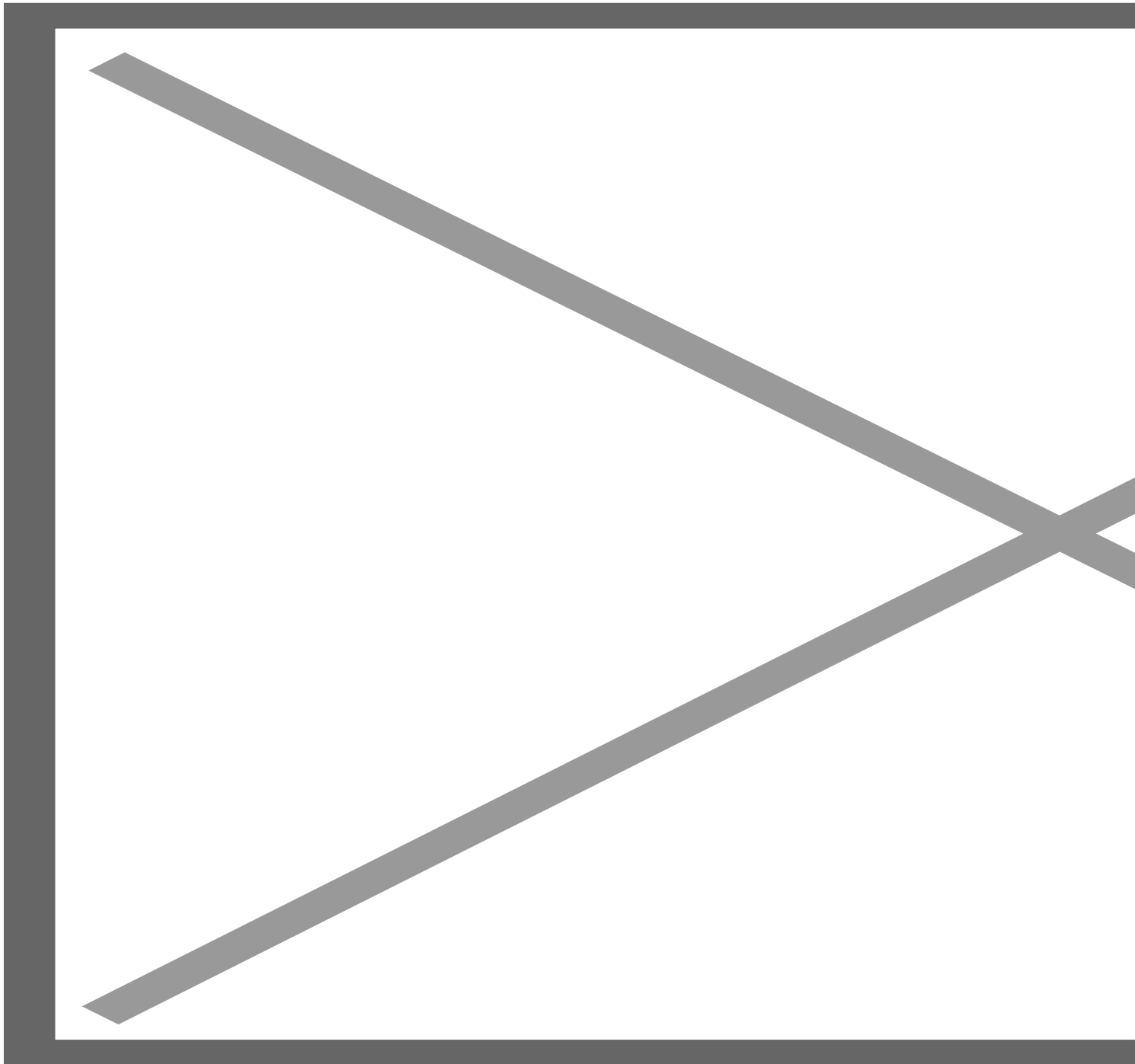


The president's brokenness

The war in Iran underscores what was already evident: Trump goes on instinct, and his instinct is to dominate others.

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Century illustration (Source photo: White House / Molly Riley)

One of the stark divides in American culture is how we frame problems and assign blame: to individuals, their character and choices? Or to systemic issues within institutions, movements, and communities? In Christian contexts this comes up in our language around sin, in the distinction between personal brokenness and collective or structural evil.

It's a potent dichotomy but also a false one. Both the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19) and the powers and principalities (Eph. 6:12) are readily observable in the wild. They are mutually reinforcing; they constitute each other. A collective is formed of individuals, and those individuals are formed by the collective.

Donald Trump's ruinous presidency is the result of harmful systems he didn't create: White supremacy, American hegemony, economic inequality, cultural resentment, political tribalism, and more. It is also an expression of Trump's own vicious impulses. While there are structural forces behind his rise and resilience, much of his wake of destruction is directly attributable to the ungoverned id of this deeply broken man.

Central to that brokenness is Trump's evident need to dominate others. His lies are too obvious to accomplish much real deception; their function is to demonstrate his status beyond the reach of truth itself. His betrayal of allies looks less like hard-nosed strategy and more like relishing the chance to humiliate them. When he bullies other political leaders foreign and domestic, often they can't appease him with substantive concessions, only with obeisance and flattery.

And now he has assassinated Iran's leaders and started a war in the region. It's a truly shocking turn of events, arguably the apex of this White House's toxic mix of authoritarian defiance, ideological bankruptcy, and strategic incompetence. But Trump's war also reinforces what we already know about him. Why not ask Congress for permission? Because other people's opinions don't matter. Why not try to rally the public? Because the guy in charge doesn't need the hassle—he just goes on instinct. What are the strategic goals? To dominate Iran and its leaders with violence. And what's the postwar plan? To make its future leaders fear him and do his bidding.

Trump follows his whims, and perhaps the only thing that's predictable about those whims is this theme of domination. Years ago that meant stiffing partners in real estate deals; now it means sending a volatile region of the world into violent chaos. This war doesn't promote American security or interests. It offers no apparent electoral advantage to Trump's party. Few Americans want it. Yet Trump is waging it anyway—perhaps simply because he can and it makes him feel tough. Such motivations are dangerously powerful for someone who shows few signs of maturity, empathy, or restraint.

American politics is broken. Elected officials have stronger incentives to fight culture wars than to govern. They can't or won't deliver material gains to the people, who are increasingly open to scapegoating others for their own dim prospects. Trust in institutions is almost gone. And presiding over this disaster is an emperor with no clothes who is no longer content to parade before his sycophants. Foreign conquest has caught his fancy, and so Iranian schoolchildren and American soldiers will simply have to die. Trump's personal brokenness is causing unfathomable harm.