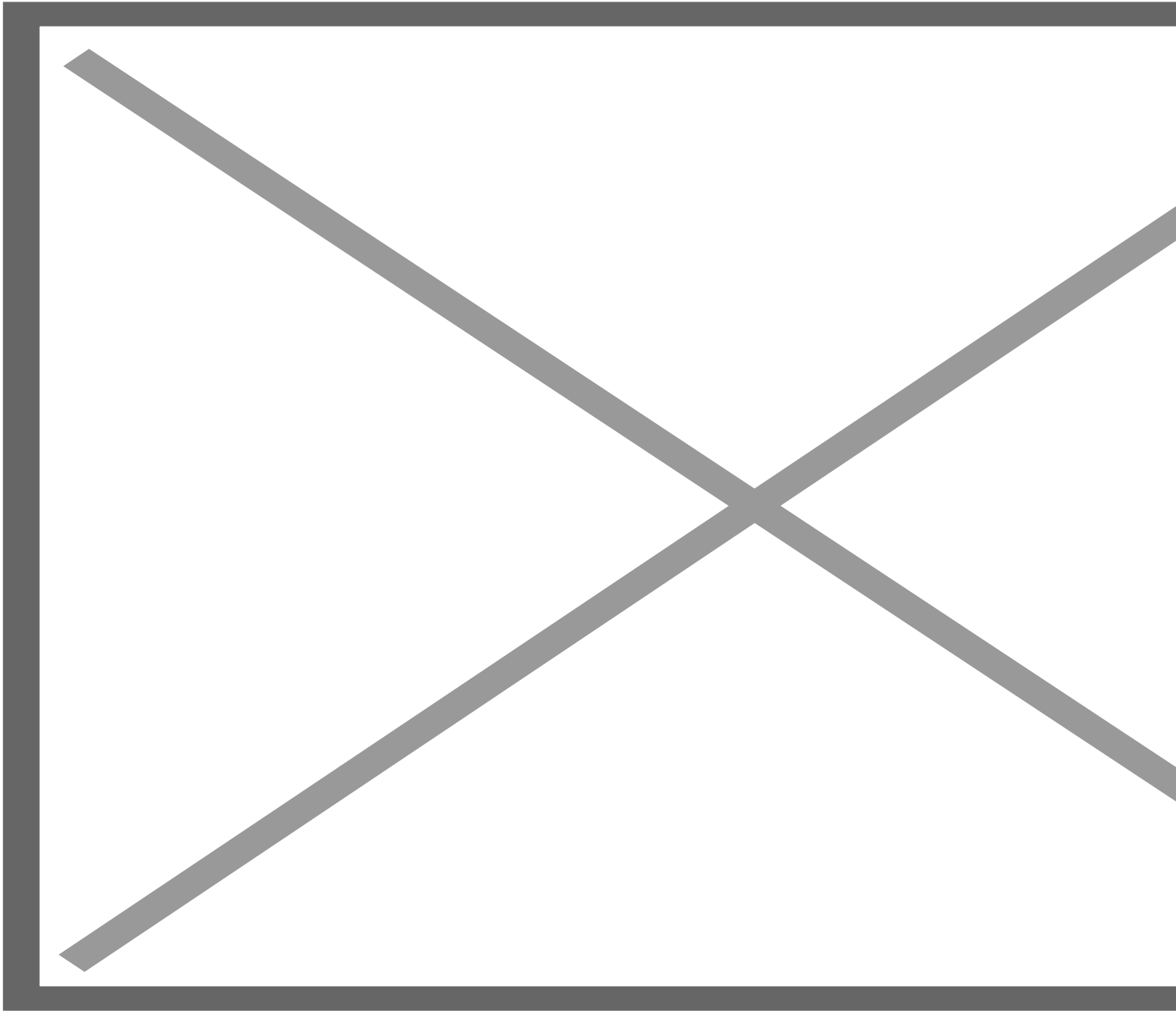


The war with Iran is the crowning stupidity of our stupid age

## **No work of art better unveils war's essential stupidity than Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.**

by [Mac Loftin](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue

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We live in a stupid age. I mean that in the sense of the word given by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for whom “stupidity is perhaps less a psychological than a sociological problem.” Stupidity, for Bonhoeffer, has nothing to do with intellectual ability and everything to do with the stupefying effects of power on a populace. To be stupid, he wrote, is to be so cowed by “the overwhelming impact of rising power” that one is unable to take “an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances.” Thinking requires taking some kind of inner distance from whatever one is doing in order to critically reflect on the world—as the phrase goes, we *stop* and think. Authoritarian violence makes us stupid because it demands quick obedience to constantly-shifting rules, preventing one from ever stopping to think about those rules. It’s easier (and safer) to check out and go with the crowd.

The crowning stupidity of our age (at the time of writing) is the current war with Iran. No one prosecuting it seems able to or interested in bringing it into the realm of reason and justification. The two closest things to reasons we’ve been given are opening the Strait of Hormuz (which was open before the war began) and getting assurances that Iran would not build a nuclear weapon (which we had until Trump tore up the agreement in his first term; on top of that Iran’s supreme leader had maintained a fatwa against nuclear weapons right up until we killed him). The sole aim of this war appears to be making things as they were the day before the war began—a kind of anti-reason cementing irrationality at the heart of the enterprise. This war is truly *stupid* in Bonhoeffer’s sociological sense: a cascade of violence hostile to thought itself.

If the war’s aims are stupid, its execution is somehow even more so. In his attempt to keep the markets calm (while perhaps also engaging in some insider trading), Trump has tried to wage the war exclusively on weekends, issuing deranged threats on Friday evenings only to rescind them with promises of negotiations on Monday mornings. Most stupid of all are the press briefings by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, with his bizarre compulsion to talk in Operator Podcast clichés: a numbing stream of *warfighters executing maximum lethality via high-intensity kinetic engagements*. Hegseth, more than anyone else, embodies Bonhoeffer’s description of the stupid person:

“One virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with a person, but with slogans, catchwords and the like, that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of *seeing* that it is evil.”

Instead of seeing the evil of this war for what it is—senseless murder—our leaders seem capable of seeing only the stupid hobbies of our stupid age: betting markets, video games, superhero movies.

This war is manifestly stupid. But we shouldn’t let the garishness of its stupidity fool us into thinking it’s unique. All war is stupid. Stupidity is the very substance of war. No work of art better unveils war’s essential stupidity than Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. The novel stands as an indispensable guide through our stupid times and a warning against becoming nostalgic for better wars.

*War and Peace* is, across its 1308 pages, Tolstoy’s attempt to answer the question *Why war?* He considers and rejects every explanation given for the Napoleonic wars: “To us it is incomprehensible that millions of Christian men killed and tortured each other either because Napoleon was ambitious or Alexander was firm, or because England’s policy was astute or the Duke of Oldenburg wronged. We cannot grasp what connection such circumstances have with the actual fact of slaughter and violence.”

Considering the actual fact of slaughter and violence, Tolstoy presents war as a realm of human activity fundamentally opposed to thinking. “On the twelfth of June, 1812,” book three begins, “war began, that is, an

event took place opposed to human reason and to human nature.” War and reason are antithetical. War is stupid and infects with stupidity everything it touches.

The stupidity of war is most obvious at the lowest rung of the military hierarchy. The grunt, whose activity is wholly obedience, is in a position of structural stupidity from which thought is expelled. *War and Peace*’s battle scenes linger with real compassion on those who do the actual work of war—digging ditches, charging and shooting, killing and dying—yet who are unconsulted about and uninformed of the *why* of this work. The grunt is not invited to deliberate; he is compelled to obey. Thinking is always deferred one rung up the ladder.

But for Tolstoy, the deferment is endless and thinking never occurs. At the top of the hierarchy sits Napoleon, the great military genius who appears to move the world at his command. Yet here, too, Tolstoy finds only thoughtless obedience. “The higher a man stands on the social ladder, the more people he is connected with,” he writes, “and the more power he has over others, the more evident is the predestination and inevitability of his every action.” The grunt who shoots does not shoot because Napoleon ordered the invasion of Russia; he shoots because he needs the job to feed his family and so feels he has no choice but to obey his officer, and the officer ordering him to shoot only became an officer to impress a girl, and the general told the officer to do this maneuver rather than that maneuver because he was annoyed that the man recommending that maneuver hadn’t ironed his shirt, and on and on all the way to Napoleon, who in fact only “orders” the invasion because all these coincident causes have lined up to make the invasion inevitable no matter what he orders: “The actions of Napoleon and Alexander, on whose words the event seemed to hang, were as little voluntary as the actions of any soldier who was drawn into the campaign by lot or by conscription.” To be a military leader is, for Tolstoy, to be stupid, because it requires at every moment mistaking this coincidence of a million tiny causes for the single cause of one’s own will. The grunt at least knows his action is thoughtless. War is “an event opposed to human reason” because at every rung on the military hierarchy, thought is evacuated and stupidity reigns.

The only characters in *War and Peace* who are able to truly think about war are those outside the military hierarchy; namely, women. “Of the war Princess Marya thought as women do think about wars,” we read. That sounds dismissive, but in *War and Peace* to think as women do is to *think*. “She feared for her brother who was in it, was horrified by and amazed at the strange cruelty that impels men to kill one another, but she did not understand the significance of this war, which seemed to her like all previous wars.” Marya’s lack of understanding bespeaks a deeper intelligence than the stupid assumption that this war must be significant and unique.

Thankfully there are still some today who share Princess Marya’s intelligent incomprehension. Pope Leo XIV has emerged as one of the few world leaders still capable of thinking. “God does not bless any conflict,” he [said](#) recently. He [called](#) war a “demonic cycle of evil” in which “death enslaves those who have turned their backs on the living God.” War is “a mute, blind and deaf idol to which they sacrifice every value... Enough of the idolatry of self and money! Enough of the display of power! Enough of war!”

Leo’s thoughtful simplicity—enough of war!—cuts through the stupidity of our age. Hannah Arendt says in her lecture “Thinking and Moral Considerations” that in moments “when everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.” Leo’s recent statements show how prayer can be for us what philosophy was for Arendt: a thoughtfulness that conspicuously wrenches us out of the rhythms of obedience.

If there is anything unique about this war with Iran, it’s only that those waging it have dispensed with the pretense of thought altogether. The Napoleonic charade of the “military genius” is over. Reveling in war’s stupidity, they at least do us the favor of speaking a bit more honestly. (We should be grateful to Hegseth for trading the nauseatingly euphemistic Department of Defense for the straightforwardly nauseating Department of War.) The one benefit of the world being marched into hell by the stupidest men alive is that speaking with

intelligence has never been simpler. We only have to say: Enough.

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Mac Loftin chats with the *Century's* community engagement editor Jon Mathieu about what Bonhoeffer, Arendt, and Tolstoy might say about the US war in Iran.

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