

The Long, Sad History of U.S. Regime Change Promises

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From FDR to the Bushes, Washington’s pledges to bring “freedom” to the Middle East have ended badly.

In ways too many to count, President Donald Trump has broken the mold for U.S. leaders. But in mixing the use of U.S. force with repeated calls for Iranians to change their regime, he is the fourth president in the past century to raise the banner of “freedom” in the Middle East. One can only hope the story ends better for the citizens of Iran than it did for those in the three earlier episodes.

The first president to promise Middle Easterners that American power would free them from tyranny was Franklin D. Roosevelt. The context was Operation Torch, when U.S. and British forces landed in Morocco and Algeria in November 1942—the first major Allied offensive operation of World War II and, up until then, the largest amphibious operation in history.

To complement the invasion, a message was distributed in Arabic, in Roosevelt’s name, to the people of the area, then controlled by Vichy France, Nazi Germany’s fascist collaborators. The statement called the Allied invasion a “[great Jihad of Freedom \(https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/fdr-addresses-the-arabs\)](https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/fdr-addresses-the-arabs)” and asked local Muslims to join in defeating their common enemies: “We have come to set you free...Greet us therefore as brothers as we will greet you, and help us. If we are thirsty, show us the way to water. If we lose our way, lead us back to our camping places...Help us as we have come to help you.”

Allied troops defeated the Vichy forces in just three days. But those promises of “freedom” went unfulfilled.

Roosevelt preferred to cut a [Delcy Rodriguez-in-Venezuela-type deal](#)

[\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operation-torch-and-birth-american-middle-east-policy-75-years\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operation-torch-and-birth-american-middle-east-policy-75-years) with an opportunistic Vichy admiral to maintain the status quo in the region under new leadership.

It would be almost a decade before any North African country finally enjoyed freedom from foreign control.

One must jump ahead nearly 50 years to find a second example of an American president encouraging Middle Easterners to claim their freedom. This was February 1991, after the bombing that opened the U.S.-led Gulf War but before the ground assault that forced Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's troops from Kuwait. In a televised speech, President George H.W. Bush **called on the Iraqi people (<https://www.c-span.org/clip/white-house-event/user-clip-george-hw-bush-speech-2-15-91-raytheon/5044186>)** to rise up and "take matters into their own hands." As he said, "We have no argument with the people of Iraq. Our differences are with that brutal dictator in Baghdad."

After the U.S. military pushed Hussein's troops back into Iraq, the Iraqi people heeded Bush's call. Rebellions broke out in both Iraq's Shiite south and Kurdish north. Emboldened by Bush's call to action, Iraqis waited anxiously for America to support their drive for freedom. But the cavalry never arrived. Hussein quashed the revolts, ruthlessly using helicopter gunships to mow down thousands.

In 2003, President George W. Bush took a different approach to bringing freedom to Iraq. On the eve of a new war, he **delivered a speech (<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030319-17.html>)** highlighting regime change as the goal of the campaign: "Helping Iraqis achieve a united, stable and free country will require our sustained commitment...We have no ambition in Iraq, except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people...We will bring freedom to others, and we will prevail."

In retrospect, this was the classic case of regime-change-gone-awry. Operation Iraqi Freedom lasted nine bloody years. Three years after it ended, U.S. forces returned to Iraq to battle the fanatical Islamic State, itself born out of the disaffection and contempt produced by the post-Hussein U.S. occupation. While Iraqis today enjoy far more freedom than under Hussein's regime, Iraq remains a broken, fractured state, and both the Iraqi and American peoples paid a heavy price for even that.

Enter Trump. One of his earliest political insights was to recognize the emotive power of Iraq's disastrous legacy. He made denouncing the pursuit of regime change a rallying cry for his MAGA movement, a theme that remained key to his "America First" foreign policy in the White House. As **he said last year (<https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-speech-saudi-investment-forum-riyadh-saudi-arabia-may-13-2025>)** in a speech in Saudi Arabia, "the so-called nation builders wrecked far more nations than they built, and the interventionists were intervening in complex societies that they did not even understand themselves."

So, it is no small surprise that Trump specifically defined regime change as a goal of Operation Epic Fury. With faint echoes of Roosevelt and the two Bushes, **Trump declared (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/read-trumps-full-statement-on-iran-attack>)**, "To the great proud people of Iran, I say tonight that the hour of your freedom is at hand...Now is the time to seize control of your destiny, and to unleash the prosperous and glorious future that is close within your reach. This is the moment for action. Do not let it pass."

Operationally, the key question is how committed Trump is to that vision. On one end of the spectrum, will he, like Roosevelt, find an Iranian Delcy Rodriguez, leaving the structure of the regime intact under a new, more pliant leader? Or will he, like the first Bush, content himself with inflicting massive damage on Iran's offensive military capability and choose an expedient path to end the war?

Or, on the other end of the spectrum, will he, like the second Bush, get stuck in the muck of Iranian nation-building, triggering problems that we can't even imagine today? Or, more hopefully, will Trump—the first of the four to rely on air power to achieve victory—find a Goldilocks solution that empowers the Iranian people at modest cost to American lives and American treasure? For both the long-suffering people of Iran and Americans fearful of open-ended, faraway entanglements, no question could be more consequential.

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