Opinion
Guest Voices



Smoke rises following an explosion in Tehran, Iran, March 7, 2026, amid the U.S.-Israel war with Iran. (OSV News/West Asia News Agency via Reuters/Naser Safarzadeh)



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The 1979 collapse of the Iranian monarchy coincided with the publication of Christopher Lasch's blockbuster book of ideas, *The Culture of Narcissism*, a critique of American celebrity, grandiosity and spiritual emptiness. In retrospect, the book explains the reasons Iran's young radicals rose up against the Shah's regime and the results of the revolution that put the first ayatollah, Ruhollah Khomeini, in power. It may also explain the reasons for the current war.

In the United States, a narcissistic "cult of the self," as Lasch puts it, tended then (and clearly tends now) to self-aggrandizement and an unhealthy focus on personal image and consumption. The current administration is a case study of the problem, even as it wraps itself in so-called Christian nationalism.

In prerevolutionary Iran, the overwhelming wealth of the monarchy, combined with aggressive modernization, presented Iranians with a worldview tilted toward an unattainable consumerism. They overthrew the Shah and his petrodollar trappings and replaced him with the austere presence of the supreme leader, a position that now appears to have become hereditary.

The face of the United States is the narcissistic — some say sociopathic — president who, though elected, can only be said to reign from the Oval Office, surrounded by gold leaf and billionaires. The face of Iran is the third in a series of hard-line clerics, Mojtaba Khamenei, who has replaced his father, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who replaced Khomeini.

Some call this Israel's war. To be sure, the United States' and Europe's interests in the Persian Gulf are enough to keep the bullets flying, but do not kid yourself. It is about money. The prosperity gospel is alive and well, promising good things, including actual material benefits, for those who believe in the righteousness of the "cause." In this case, the cause is suspiciously similar to that of the medieval Crusades.

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The Quran allows Muslims to fight aggression, as long as noncombatants are not harmed, but Iran's new supreme leader says his nation will continue avenging "the blood of [Iran's] martyrs." Opposing philosophies, distilled from two ancient sacred texts, are colliding in horrific ways, on the macro and micro levels.

What do the Trump administration, Iranian leadership and Israel have in common?

Nothing, and everything. Iran overthrew its glittering monarchy and replaced it with a stern theocracy. The United States suffers a gold-plated autocracy steeped in Christian apocalypticism. Israel's leader appears bent on steamrolling the societies of its neighbors, whoever stands in his way. Each country's constitution seems reduced to mere words.

The losers on all sides are the youth of each country. Beneath all the rubble in Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East are people. Stuck in war's quagmire are men and women, boys and girls, whose hopes, dreams, lives and limbs have suffered. All this is the result of what may very well be violations of international law, if not of religious doctrine, no matter which religion you are talking about.

In the United States, the crassest prosecutor of the conflict, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, complains about what he terms "stupid rules of engagement." Iran's new supreme leader is called "his father on steroids." Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu boasts, "We're not done yet."

Actually, we very well may be.

This story appears in the **War in Iran** feature series. View the full series.