Opinion
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U.S. President Donald Trump delivers a speech at the White House April 1, 2026, about the U.

U.S. President Donald Trump delivers a speech at the White House April 1, 2026, about the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran. (OSV News photo/Alex Brandon pool via Reuters)



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If there was a symbol of the Trump administration, would it be the pompom? The president is surrounded by cheerleaders. Given these acolytes' frequent invocations of the Lord Jesus, perhaps we could devise a Crusader version of the pompom?

"President Trump is doing what no other president had the guts to do," Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth said during a press briefing last week on the war in Iran. "Previous presidents were all talk. He's all action." It does not occur to the impulsive Pentagon chief that other presidents did not take action out of prudence, rather than cowardice.

Hegseth claimed a host of statistics to justify his claim that the U.S. was winning this war. But he could not link those to any particular strategic objective. He has learned that the nation's strategic objectives are likely to shift whenever the president

reaches for his smartphone.

He finished his remarks: "May God watch over all of them (the U.S. troops), each day and each night. May his almighty and eternal arms of Providence stretch over them and protect them and bring them peace. In the name of Jesus Christ. And Amen." I guess he missed Pope Leo's Palm Sunday sermon at which the Holy Father said God "does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them."

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Hegseth's performance was almost as cringeworthy as that delivered by White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt at her press briefing on March 30. After telling the assembled members of the press corps that she and her team had just shared a prayer, and that the president and first lady would be celebrating Holy Week, Leavitt assured the American people: "Operation Epic Fury is moving ahead successfully and according to plan." She did not share that plan with the American people. How could she?

Leavitt went on to blame the Democrats on Capitol Hill for failing to fund the Department of Homeland Security, despite the fact that it is the Republicans who control Congress, and, importantly, despite the fact that "President Trump is working hard every single day to protect the United States from foreign enemies." Leavitt's performances make Leni Riefenstahl's work seem subtle.

I confess I can no longer watch these press briefings through to the end. They put me in mind of an extraordinary scene in the second episode of Masterpiece Theater's brilliant production of "Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light," in which Thomas Cromwell is interrogating Thomas Howard the Lesser, who fancies himself a poet. Cromwell recites a few lines of his regrettable poetry and then passes the paper to his assistant, commenting dryly, "Would you go on, Mr. Risley. I cannot. It's not the handwriting; it's very good. It's just my tongue. It just refuses to do it." That is how I feel while watching Leavitt at the lectern in the press room. I just can't watch it. The English is unexceptionable. The syntax is occasionally mangled but that happens to all press secretaries. It is the content from which one feels the

urgent need to turn away.

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Of course, no one celebrates the greatness of the Donald like the man himself. He is the first to applaud his speeches. He is the first to enumerate his achievements, real or imagined. He is the first to believe his own propaganda. A narcissist par excellence, he fails to distinguish the self from the non-self.

His April 1 address to the nation was no exception. "Essentially, I did what no other president was willing to do. They made mistakes and I am correcting them," Trump intoned. Even if you think the Iran nuclear deal was a mistake and Trump was right to tear it up, his argument that he alone is capable of conducting foreign policy correctly fundamentally misunderstands geopolitics. Yes, leadership matters, and good decisions matter. But Trump fails to realize that any president of the United States is only as strong as the nation he represents and that America's most essential strength has been the continuity of its values, its commitment to human rights and democracy. The next president will have to reset the terms on which the nation engages the world.

This is the pompom presidency. Its first task is to heap praise upon the dear leader. Decisions are not assessed on the merits, but on their coherence with the president's ego. He strides the world stage, indifferent to the havoc and misery he leaves in his wake. As we prepare to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of our nation, it is a hideous fact that we are simultaneously witnessing the historical nadir of our country's political leadership.