Opinion

NCR Voices



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks at the G7 Summit in Evian-les-Bains, France, June 17, 2026. That day Trump signed a memorandum of understanding between the U.S. and Iran to end the war between the two countries. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signed it June 18. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



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June 25, 2026
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The peeling paint in the Reflecting Pool on the National Mall in Washington is a metaphor for the Trump administration at this moment. President Donald Trump did not like the look of the pool, so he hired a guy he knew on a no-bid contract to fix the problem. Instead, the problem got worse, the algae came back and the paint began to peel. The Art of the Peel.

Trump ran and won as an instrument of anti-establishment fervor. After years of stalemate, and the failure of our political leaders to adequately address some of the nation's key problems, voters wanted to throw the bums out, and who better than a successful businessman to do things right? That Trump effectively channeled the mood of anger did not hurt him politically, but people thought he really might fix some of the problems that worried them. He thought so too. "I alone can fix it," he famously told the Republican National Convention in 2016.

Somewhere in the bowels of the National Park Service, there is a study or two on how to build and maintain reflecting pools. If you have a backyard pool, you know keeping it clean is trickier than it seems. But, Trump wanted results, and he wanted them fast, and believing his own propaganda about his ability to fix the nation's problems on his own, he brought in his guy to do just that. It didn't work.

The situation mirrors that of the war in Iran. No consultation with allies or congressional leaders. Trump knew best. He launched a war against the Iranian regime, which was daily losing what little legitimacy it had left with its own people — thousands of whom it had to kill in January to squash an uprising. Now, that regime has strengthened its control over the Iranian population as a result of Trump providing a common, foreign enemy. The war, like the paint, did not fix the problem; it made it worse.

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth demonstrated his lack of appreciation for America's religious pluralism when he issued a revised list of "recognized religions" for the armed forces, reducing the number from 211 to 31. The Mormons were upset that they were not listed as Christian. There was no differentiation among the

various branches of Judaism, nor of Islam. Twenty-one of the 31 religions were Christian denominations. His policy could have stolen its name from the 2025 show "Goyz in the Hood."

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On this eve of the nation's 250th anniversary, it is important to not only appreciate our religious pluralism, but to celebrate how America has faced it. The original 13 colonies were quite diverse religiously. Three of New England's colonies had established Congregationalism by law, but the Great Awakening caused schisms within the ranks. Rhode Island, founded by Baptist Roger Williams, was the most religiously tolerant colony.

New York was mostly Church of England folk with a smattering of Dutch Calvinists from earlier settlements. New Jersey was a hotbed of Presbyterianism and Pennsylvania had a Quaker elite with a variety of different Christian denominations in the hinterlands and a few Roman Catholics in Philadelphia. Maryland, founded by Catholics, was soon overrun by Protestants who stripped Catholics of their civil rights. Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia were all populated mostly by adherents of the Church of England, with some Baptists and others in the rural parts. Pluralism was a fact before it was a cause for celebration.

Our Founding Fathers decided to steer the federal government clear of these differences, and we got the First Amendment's two religious clauses: There would be no establishment of religion by the federal government and the government would not restrict the free exercise of religion. We all joined Rhode Island in respect for conscience and the practice of religious tolerance. The 19th century brought waves of Catholic migrants to these shores, which stirred up waves of anti-Catholicism, and the 20th century witnessed increases in the number of non-Christians coming to America. Our national ethos grew with the country and we were taught to shun religious bigotry and celebrate our religious pluralism. Hegseth missed that day in class.

Finally, as the Iran war comes to an ignominious end, we have to ask ourselves: Was it just a diversion? Trump achieved none of the goals he stated when he started the war. Iran is certainly in a better position strategically than it was before the war began. The whole world knows how easy it is to get the U.S. government to cry "uncle" if you raise gas prices. Was the war really about getting the Epstein scandal

off the front pages?

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We don't know, but we do know the Epstein scandal is not done. If the Democrats gain control of one house of Congress in November, it won't take long for them to hold hearings on the financial corruption that seems to be Job No. 1 in this White House. "Last week, the president filed a report with the Office of Government Ethics detailing the stock trades he made this year," Michael Waldman wrote recently at the Brennan Center for Justice. "It is a novelistic tale of profiteering, recognizable as insider trading in every way except, perhaps, under the law."

This makes people in Cuba and Greenland very nervous. Trump has not turned the economy around, as promised. His crackdown on migration has been tamed after two U.S. citizens were killed in Minneapolis. He has done nothing to address the looming deficits in the Social Security Trust Fund. He seems to care more about his ballroom than he does the welfare of the people who elected him. In such a situation, is it not likely that he will soon be wagging more tails than Iran's?

The Art of the Peel. Goyz in the Hood. Wag All the Tails. This is where we are.

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