

The Nation-Building Trap

Why Regime Change Weakens Democratic Movements

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Mar 05, 2026

In the Smart Bomb Trap framework, Stage I is the precision strike – the “shock and awe” in June – B2s vs Fordo – what the President called “obliteration” – that failed to destroy the nuclear program.

Stage II is the regime air campaign — leadership decapitation plus other efforts to destabilize governing authority. Make no mistake – whether incremental or sustained – you cannot destabilize a regime without creating lasting fissures and consequences – positive, negative, and cumulative.

Calls for regime change in Iran are growing. Many assume that air strikes — especially when combined with sanctions and intelligence operations — could weaken hard-liners and create space for democratic forces.

This is the Stage II wager.

And Stage II is not simply “more force.” It is a threshold.

In Stage I, a president can bomb for a day and walk away. The strike may fail to resolve the underlying objective, but disengagement remains a unilateral choice. The United States can absorb ambiguity and move on.

Stage II is different.

Once leadership targeting begins in earnest — even if only for a short period — the threshold into systemic confrontation is crossed. Attacking the governing core of a state does not merely degrade capacity. It signals an attempt to reorder political authority.

At that point, disengagement is no longer unilateral. Momentum develops on its own – like thunderclaps destabilizing a massive snow shelf on a mountain. Retaliation pressures rise – like the weight of tons of snow no longer solidly in place. Domestic legitimacy adjusts and reorganizes. Regional actors adapt. Political incentives change for a multitude of actors. What began as a decision becomes a sequence.

The wager, then, is not simply about military effectiveness.

It is about political transformation of the escalation process. This is what strategists of escalation like Thomas Schelling spent their lives studying – and what political leaders usually only learn under fire – even when they have noble motives, such as to support pro-democracy movements.

Regime change is not merely the removal of senior leaders. It requires dismantling the governing apparatus, neutralizing hard-liners throughout the security and administrative state, and installing a successor government capable of consolidating authority. In Iran's case, it would also require a leadership willing to permanently abandon any nuclear weapons ambition.

Put differently, it would require something akin to what the United States and the United Kingdom achieved in 1953, when they helped orchestrate a military coup that toppled Iran's elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, and replaced him with the Western-backed regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

But there is a crucial difference.

In 1953, foreign powers operated through indigenous elites — elements of Iran's own military and political class. Proposals today envision airpower as the principal instrument of regime collapse.

That difference is decisive.

Airpower, even when paired with intelligence networks and sanctions, has never toppled a government by inducing its population to rise up.

Across more than forty strategic bombing campaigns between 1914 and 1991 — including city bombing, leadership targeting, and incremental coercive campaigns — there is no documented case in which bombing produced large-scale civilian uprisings that destabilized a regime.

Bombing to Win is still required reading at our US war colleges. I just gave a talk on it to our Army War College last week.

History is not destiny. Patterns can be broken. But when a century of evidence points in one direction, the burden of proof lies with those who argue that this time will be different.

Hoping to win is not a strategy.

And if the wager fails, the price will not be paid by policymakers in Washington. It will be paid by millions of Iranians whose prospects for democratic reform could be set back for a generation.

The reason past campaigns have failed is not a lack of democratic aspiration.

The reason is structural.

External force → nationalist consolidation → repression of challengers

This is the domestic political mechanism triggered by Stage II escalation.

Why the Hawk–Dove Theory Fails

Proponents argue that authoritarian societies contain latent democratic majorities. External force, they claim, shifts the balance. Doves gain leverage. Hard-liners fracture.

Intelligence reporting — often drawn from expatriate communities — reinforces the perception of a submerged opposition waiting for a catalyst.

Here's what this view misses: The external attack transforms the political field itself.

When a state is bombed, the central cleavage is no longer regime versus reformers. It becomes nation versus foreign outsider. Sovereignty – nationalist commitment to self-determination -- becomes the organizing principle of political life.

Populations that resent repression also resist foreign efforts to shape their future. The issue ceases to be democracy versus authoritarianism and becomes self-government versus external control.

Americans in 1776 did not reject representative institutions; they rejected governance by a distant power. Modern democratic movements operate under the same logic. They seek to rule themselves.

Air campaigns, however framed, insert an external actor into the domestic struggle.

They do not simply degrade capacity.

They restructure legitimacy.

The Mechanisms

Stage II escalation activates three reinforcing dynamics.

First, *nationalist strengthening and hardening*. External force compresses pluralism. Pro-democracy protesters risk being labeled collaborators – not just by the regime, but by everyone. Even moderates rally defensively around the flag when sovereignty is threatened.

Second, *increased dependence on the regime*. Sanctions combined with air strikes accelerate centralization of economic and security authority in the very institutions reformers seek to weaken. Material scarcity increases reliance on state distribution networks. Emergency powers expand. Surveillance deepens. Repression becomes easier to justify. Sanctions cut Iraq's oil revenues by over 90% -- and GDP in half – from 1990 to 2003, and only increased Saddam Hussein's grip on power. **Good intentions by the sanctions advocates met the reality of the Nation-Building Trap.**

Third, *loss of legitimacy for local reformers*. Reformers must now demonstrate not only opposition to domestic repression but independence from foreign political control. In wartime conditions, that burden is often fatal to bottom-up mobilization.

Who are you acting for? becomes the dominate question. Whose nation are you building? Ours or America's? After the US and UK toppled a democratic leader to install the Shah in 1953, this may become the only question once US bombs and intel agents start attacking Iran's government in earnest.

The result is predictable: hard-liner consolidation, not democratic opening.

This is not an argument against supporting democratic movements.

It is an argument about thresholds.

Once Stage II is crossed, the political environment inside the targeted state reorganizes in ways that are difficult to reverse.

Lessons for Iran

Iran contains real democratic currents — women's movements, students, labor networks, reformist clerics. These are endogenous forces.

A sanctions-plus-leadership campaign would activate the same structural sequence observed repeatedly over the past century:

External force → nationalist consolidation → repression of challengers

The Revolutionary Guard would gain authority. Emergency powers would expand. Reformers would face accusations of treason. Political space would narrow.

Policymakers often underestimate this outcome because they treat airpower as subtracting regime capacity.

In reality, Stage II escalation reorganizes the domestic balance of legitimacy in favor of the state.

Serbia illustrates the contrast. NATO bombing in 1999 strengthened Slobodan Milosevic's nationalist position during the campaign. Only after the bombing ended did Serbian citizens, acting without foreign military force, mobilize and remove him in 2000.

Foreign military force strengthened him in war. Domestic agency removed him in peace.

The Nation-Building Trap

The nation-building trap lies in confusing pressure with positive political transformation toward the attacker's goals.

In the Smart Bomb Trap sequence, Stage I succeeds tactically, fails strategically and generates growing fear. That fear creates pressure for Stage II — leadership targeting intended to resolve uncertainty decisively.

But Stage II is not just a discrete escalation step — more on this in future articles.

It is a structural threshold.

Once crossed, disengagement is no longer simply a matter of US presidential will. The conflict acquires momentum — internally within the targeted state and externally across the region.

In March 1999, Clinton bombed dozens of strategic targets in and around Belgrade, including Milosevic's home. Milosevic responded by ordering 30,000 troops to ethnically cleanse 1 million Albanians from Kosovo. Clinton had to respond by sending 35,000 NATO ground troops to prepare for a major ground offensive.

Before the regime threatening strikes, Clinton thought this would be a 3-day air campaign — I know, because I saw with my own eyes the briefings given at the NSC prior to the attack from the staffer who gave them in my post-war interviews on the case.

After Milosevic attacked viciously in response, Clinton had no choice but to escalate — he was caught in the Nation-Building Trap.

Regime change through airpower is not merely difficult. It is structurally misaligned with how democratic legitimacy forms — and structurally prone to deepen commitment rather than resolve it.

For more than a century, strategists have hoped that force from above would produce revolution from below. History has been remarkably consistent.

That does not mean the pattern cannot break. But crossing Stage II is an “in for a dime, in for a dollar” decision.

And democracy cannot be delivered by air.