

GUEST ESSAY

What Trump Is Really Doing With His Boat Strikes

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By Phil Klay

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When Trump administration officials post snuff films of alleged drug boats blowing up, of a weeping migrant handcuffed by immigration officers or of themselves in front of inmates at a brutal El Salvadoran prison, I often think of a story St. Augustine told in his “Confessions.”

In the fourth century A.D., a young man named Alypius arrived in Rome to study law. He was a decent sort. He knew the people at the center of the empire delighted in cruel gladiatorial games, and he promised himself he would not go. Eventually, though, his fellow students dragged him to a match. At first, the crowd appalled Alypius. “The entire place seethed with the most monstrous delight in the cruelty,” Augustine wrote, and Alypius kept his eyes shut, refusing to look at the evil around him.

But then a man fell in combat, a great roar came from the crowd and curiosity forced open Alypius’s eyes. He was “struck in the soul by a wound graver than the gladiator in his body.” He saw the blood, and he drank in savagery. Riveted, “he imbibed madness.” Soon, Augustine said, he became “a fit companion for those who had brought him.”

There are many reasons to object to the policies that the Trump administration’s videos and memes showcase. Yet the images themselves also inflict wounds, of the kind that Alypius suffered when he raised his eyelids. The president inhabits a position of moral leadership. When the president and his officials sell their policies, they’re selling a version of what it means to be an American — what should evoke our love and our hate, our disgust and our delight. If all governments rest on opinion, as James Madison thought, then it is this moral shaping of the electorate that gives the president his freedom of action, and that we will still have to reckon with once he is gone.

Amid the swirl of horrors, scandals and accusations, then, it’s worth considering what President Trump and his administration are doing to the soul of the nation — what sort of “fit companions” they’d like to make us. Their behavior during the controversy around a Sept. 2 U.S. military strike on a boat off the coast of Trinidad offers some clarity.

The Washington Post reported last week that Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth issued an order to kill everyone on that boat, which the administration says was ferrying drugs. When an initial missile disabled the vehicle but left two survivors clinging to it, the Special Operations commander overseeing the attack, Adm. Frank M. Bradley, ordered another strike that killed the helpless men. The chief Pentagon spokesman, Sean Parnell, said, “This entire narrative was false,” then Mr. Trump said he “wouldn’t have wanted” a second strike but “Pete said that didn’t happen.” The White House press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, confirmed that actually, yes, there was a second strike ordered by Admiral Bradley, but it was fine because the admiral was “well within his authority and the law directing the engagement to ensure the boat was destroyed and the threat to the United States of America was eliminated.” Mr. Hegseth posted a cartoon in

the style of a children's book depicting a turtle in a helicopter shooting a rocket-propelled grenade at a boat carrying drugs and "narcoterrorists."

A legal discussion ensued. Was the "double tap" strike a war crime? The Geneva Conventions say shipwrecked persons must be "respected and protected." The Department of Defense Law of War Manual states that helpless, shipwrecked survivors are not lawful targets, while The Hague regulations forbid orders declaring that no quarter will be given.

Or was the strike simply a crime? Under the War Powers Resolution, the president must give Congress notice within 48 hours of U.S. forces entering hostilities, and hostilities that last more than 60 days are impermissible without congressional authorization. Since the president's boat strike campaign has continued well past 60 days, the strikes support no war, and the entire campaign is unauthorized. Adil Haque, an executive editor at Just Security and an international law professor at Rutgers University, put it on X: "There is no armed conflict, so there are no legitimate targets. Not the people. Not the boats. Not the drugs. It's murder whether Bradley was aiming at the people or aiming at the drugs knowing the people would die."

This discussion misses the bigger effort the Trump administration seems to be engaged in. In lieu of careful analysis of the campaign's legality, detailed rationales for the boat strikes and explanations of why they couldn't be done with more traditional methods, we get Mr. Hegseth posting an image of himself with laser eyes and video after video of alleged drug traffickers being killed. The cartoon turtle is just one example in an avalanche of juvenile public messaging about those we kill. I suspect the question the administration cares about is not "is this legal," "is this a war crime," "is this murder" or even "is this good for America," but rather, "isn't this violence delightful?"

The president's supporters seem to grasp this. Fox News's Jesse Watters responded with utter incredulity that the United States would offer quarter to an enemy. "We're blowing up terrorists in the Caribbean," he said on Monday, "but we're supposed to rescue them from drowning if they survive?" Others went further. "I really do kind of not only want to see them killed in the water, whether they're on the boat or in the water," Megyn Kelly, the conservative podcaster, said, "but I'd really like to see them suffer. I would like Trump and Hegseth to make it last a long time so they lose a limb and bleed out."

An Associated Press investigation suggests that the men Ms. Kelly would like to watch slowly die are often poor laborers: a fisherman, a motorcycle taxi driver, a bus driver, living in cinder-block homes with spotty water and power service, making at least \$500 per trip ferrying cocaine, a crime Americans normally judge worthy of a prison sentence rather than a torturous death.

The Trump administration's celebration of death brings us far from discussions of the law of armed conflict, the constitutionality of the strikes or even the Christian morality that would eventually push Augustine to formulate an early version of just-war theory. We're in the Colosseum, one brought to us digitally so that we need not leave our homes to hear the cheers of the crowd, to watch the killing done for our entertainment and suffer the same harm that injured Alypius more than 1,600 years ago.

This wounding of the national soul is hard for me to watch. Twenty years ago, I joined the Marine Corps because I thought military service would be an honorable profession. Its honor derives from fighting prowess and adherence to a code of conduct. Military training is about character formation, with virtues taught alongside tactics. But barbaric behavior tarnishes all who wear, or once wore, the uniform, and lust for cruelty turns a noble vocation into mere thuggery. "The real evils in war," Augustine said, "are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power." Such lusts, he thought, drove the pagan world's wars. We'd be fools not to suspect that such lusts drive some of us today.

In "The City of God," Augustine distinguishes between a people bound by common loves and those ruled by a lust for domination. A president who wants to lead a nation bound by common loves might offer up something like Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, which sorrows over war, indulges in no bombast, accepts that both sides in a conflict have sinned and declares that we must fight "with malice toward none, with charity for all." For a nation devoted to the lust for domination, a president needs to foster

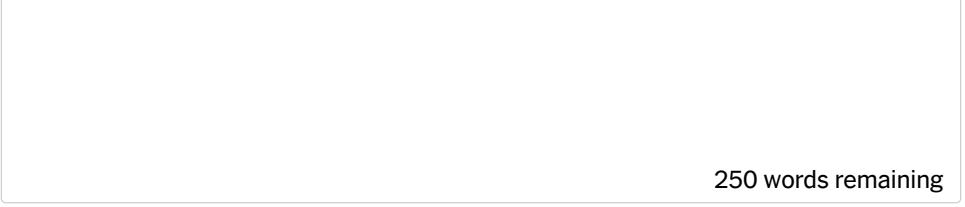
a citizenry that thrills in displays of dominance and cruelty. Hence this administration's braggadocio about death, its officials' memes about suffering, their promises to inflict pain on America's enemies followed by scant rationales for their own policies.

We are far from the Christian nation Lincoln thought he was addressing, and tried to shape, when he gave his Second Inaugural Address. But we must still ask ourselves a fundamental, private question that, at scale, has broad political implications: Given that we are all, every day, imbibing madness, how do we guard our souls?

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