

# The Iran Crisis, #6: Amb. Chas Freeman on Iran's war objectives, its likelihood of achieving them, and more

*Transcript of the conversation Helena Cobban had with Amb. Chas Freeman on 3/4/2026.  
The audio is [here](#).*

**[Helena Cobban]**

Hi everybody, I'm Helena Cobban with Just World Educational, and today I'm really delighted that my guest is Ambassador Chas Freeman, well known as probably the most distinguished diplomatist this country has ever seen, with a resume as long as your arm, and also a wonderful thinker. So anyway, Chas, great to have you with us again.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Well, thank you, Helena. We're speaking at about nine o'clock on Wednesday, March 4th. The war in West Asia is now a little over four days old, and it's settling into a clear pattern.

The objectives of the two sides are relatively clear in military terms, not necessarily in terms of political or geopolitical objectives. The United States has no clear or feasible objectives that it sticks to. It is all over the map, a laundry list of competing demands, and which demand is on top of the list depends on the time of day and the mood of our autocratic president.

In the case of Iran, there's not just a campaign plan as there is in the case of the US, there is a strategy. And the strategy consists of, at this point, I would say three elements. One is, of course, to keep pummeling Israel with a view to devastating it in response to its undertaking to devastate Iran.

In other words, an existential challenge to Iran is being met with an existential challenge to Israel, which Iran never previously posed. The second objective is to persuade those countries in the Gulf, the Gulf Cooperation Council, that have provided bases, anchorage, airfields, and the like to American forces, that this is incompatible with their own security. That is to say, those bases which were nominally established to defend them, in fact, were established by the United States to enable and facilitate attacks on Iran.

And as long as they are there, they are a threat to Iran. Therefore, Iran is escalating against these countries to persuade them that they should get rid of those bases. Objective two for Iran is to clear the Gulf of an American presence.

This is a longstanding objective. It is now being pursued militarily. One assumes that the military strikes on Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, on a limited basis on Oman, an anchorage that is provided and fuel supplies at Dukhum in Oman.

One assumes that this is accompanied by an active behind-the-scenes diplomatic dialogue between Iran and those countries telling them, you have to get rid of the American bases, or we're going to continue to escalate. So, we have a squeeze going on on that level. The third element is more a campaign plan than a strategic objective, and that is Iran has adopted a policy rather like Muhammad Ali's rope-a-dope strategy.

It is trying to exhaust, deplete the interception capabilities of the United States and Israel against its missiles. And this is entirely feasible. In fact, at the current rate, Iran has now settled into a pattern of rather sporadic attacks on Israel, not constant.

But each missile that is directed at Israel requires two or three either Patriots or THAAD missiles—very expensive, very limited supplies—to be intercepted, if it can be. And of course, Iran has again, as it did in the June war last year, led off with its least advanced missiles and drones, because their purpose is to deplete the defense capabilities of the United States and Israel. And this should be accomplished at the current rate, perhaps as early as midweek next week.

The supplies are very limited. The self-styled Secretary of Defense, Hegseth, claims that there are no constraints on supplies. But this is belied by the fact that we're busily dismantling a Patriot and other emplacements in places like South Korea, Japan, and elsewhere in the world.

So, the fight has come down to, I guess, rather similar to Ukraine in a way. A conflict between industrial capacities in a war of attrition. And this is a war in which Iran is very confident it can outlast the United States.

So, I just want to mention this because we have the usual bombastic declarations of superb military performance and imminent victory from the Central Command. I would take these with a great grain of salt. No doubt, indeed, Iran's navy has been sunk.

But here I want to make a key point. Yemen pioneered the land-based blockade of the Red Sea. Iran is in a far better position to conduct a land-based blockade of the Hormuz.

And many countries are within about a week of losing their capacity to produce power from oil fired generators. The worst hit in many ways is India. And I know that the Russians have just offered to resupply India.

They can't do it, obviously, through the Mediterranean and Suez Canal. So, they will have to do it, presumably, across the Pacific. That will take many weeks.

In the meantime, power in India is likely to go off. Japan, South Korea, both of which depend heavily on Middle Eastern oil, 20% of which of the world's supply goes through the state of Hormuz, are also in deep trouble, although both of them have strategic reserves which will tide them over for the time being. Anyway, we are seeing a picture that, as usual, is entirely distorted by media reporting.

As usual, the war itself is accompanied by a disinformation war, psychological operations of one sort or another, boastful claims on the part of the United States, I would say stoic

suffering on the part of Iran. Final comment, the international reaction is very interesting. This has definitively split the global South from the West, such as it is.

European allies of the United States have universally performed like Eastern European satellite countries did under the Soviet Union, saluting and amplifying the message from Washington. It's an absurd message. The most absurd message of all is coming out of Great Britain.

Sir Keir Starmer, the Prime Minister, probably not for long, has said that he is helping the United States to defend innocent civilians against the Iranian attacks. But of course, the United States and Israel started this war, over 800 civilians have been killed in Iran and hundreds wounded, 12 or so, maybe a dozen and a half Israelis have died, hundreds have been wounded. But there's no doubt, I mean, this is very Orwellian, indeed.

And it's not by any means the only such comment out of Europe. President Macron of France said that Iran should learn to negotiate in good faith. But we know now that the date of the attack was set on December 29th, at a Mar-a-Lago meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Trump.

And that it was later postponed for various reasons. But there's no doubt about the negotiations with Messrs. Witkoff and Kushner, having been an utter sham, with no intention of reaching an agreement, just conducted again, to cover the deployment of forces for a surprise attack, which occurred on Saturday morning.

And there, I'll just say, the miscalculation is obvious. I think Donald Trump imagined that Iran, like his United States, was a one man show. And if you got rid of the one man, it would all implode.

Well, it turns out Iran still has a constitution and a complex political system that is operating and quite independently of who is at the top. So while the damage was certainly great to the Iranian leadership echelon, not only Ali Khamenei, but probably 40 of his close associates were killed, his family was his wife, his daughter-in-law, his son-in-law, and so forth, his granddaughter. While he's been removed, the consequences of this are very unlikely to be what Donald Trump imagined.

For one thing, the June 12, so-called 12-day war, had already greatly enlarged the pressure on the Iranian regime to build a nuclear weapon. Ironically, the cork in the bottle on the nuclear project was the late Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, who was adamantly opposed to weapons of mass destruction on moral grounds. The next leader looks to be someone who favors building a nuclear weapon.

And we don't know exactly, because the constitutional body that was to select that leader has been murdered, all of them. But this leaves as the prime candidate an advocate for nuclear weapons. So ironically, the prime result of this attack will not be to set back Iran's nuclear program, but to accelerate it, and put it over the top.

It will not be to eliminate Iran's missile forces, which will survive the effort to intercept them. It will not end when the United States and Israel want it to end, as happened in the

12-day war, when Israel needed a ceasefire, and Iran didn't. It's going to go on as long as Iran determines it should.

And that means the entire world is going to suffer greatly from energy shortages. Price increases are already in progress. And the outcome of all this is highly uncertain.

And so, I think that's basically the picture at the moment. And we will see by midweek next week, whether the description I've just offered has any basis in reality. I think I'm pretty confident it does.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Thank you. Wow, you've raised so many questions that I want to follow up and ask about. But just before I do, I want to remind viewers that in addition to your distinguished diplomatic record as ambassador to Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, you've also served as Assistant Secretary of Defense.

So, when you talk about defense matters, what we would call defense matters, what Hegseth likes to call war matters, then you really are doing so from a very strong basis of understanding these systems and their governance and how that all works, just in case people don't know about that about your resume. So, my first question is you identify two protagonists in this war, the US and Iran. You didn't list Israel as an independent actor, but does that mean that you see no daylight between Israel and Trump?

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

In effect, no, I don't see any daylight between them, because Trump essentially takes his orders from Netanyahu. Under the Constitution, he should take his orders from the Congress. But he has substituted Netanyahu for the Congress, and we are in effect conducting a war on behalf of a foreign power, which has its own interests, which don't coincide with ours.

Its interests, I should say, are very clear, and you can see them on YouTube with Prime Minister Netanyahu chortling about he finally got somebody in the White House who would carry out his ambition of 40 years to reduce Iran to rubble, and, of course, break it up. Interestingly, to just illustrate the relationship, Netanyahu's list of ethnic minorities in Iran included one that is in Dagestan, in the Russian Federation, and Donald Trump's list of minorities also included it. So, Netanyahu's error was faithfully replicated by his stooge, the President of the United States.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Yeah, that was definitely a telling mistake. So, I want to also follow up. First of all, it's worth underlining the significance of what you just said, that there is no daylight, although the interests of the two diverge. I had a really good conversation with Elijah Magnier on Monday, and he said that whereas Netanyahu has a clear interest in essentially breaking up Iran, Donald Trump has no identified interest or day after or strategic goal. But it's probably, if he were to think about it, which is a big if, he would want to have some form of regime.

And he's kind of indicated that, gee, you know, we had these people in mind who could be the Del C.

Rodriguez, or, you know, in my view, the Emperor Hirohito, you know, the person who would do the deal at the end of a war, but they got killed in strikes. He didn't say whose strikes, and it occurred to me that it was most likely Israeli strikes rather than American strikes.

But anyway, operationally, they're acting hand in hand. So, maybe that doesn't make too much difference? It was an indication that he wanted to have a sort of a quiescent successor.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Several comments. First, Donald Trump has explicitly pointed to the example of Venezuela as a template for this operation. There is no Delcy Rodriguez in Iran. But it's clear that, as was the case in Syria, where the United States did not agree with Israel about the breakup of Syria into ethnic enclaves. The United States does not have such an agenda in Iran, whereas Israel does.

So, now, we are left with, you know, going back to the Gulf Arabs, the Israelis and Saudis had been cooperating very accurately in motivating various minorities, Arabs in Iran, Baluch, and other minorities, to try to pursue independence from Tehran. The Israelis have been entrenched in Iraqi Kurdistan, from which they've conducted operations in Iranian Kurdistan. So, there's another actor here that is in the background, and that is Turkey.

Turkey actively worked with the Gulf Arabs to try to prevent this war. As I mentioned, the Gulf Arabs are now faced with a serious dilemma. They allowed the United States to establish bases on their territory.

Those bases are now targeted by Iran. What they thought was an instrument for their defense has turned out to be an attractive nuisance, meaning that it invites attack rather than fence it off. And they can't afford to break with the United States, although there are interesting things going on.

Part of the munitions shortage that I mentioned has come home to, for example, the UAE, which petitioned the United States for the resupply of the roughly \$2 billion system of interceptors it put in place, which is now running out of interception capability, and was told, no, there's no supply for you, it's all for Israel. This is the sort of statement that has long-term implications. It greatly devalues the relationship with the United States for the UAE, which is probably the world's supreme practitioner at present of realpolitik.

So, I think the long-term implications of this may very well turn out to be the Iranian achievement of their long-term objective of removing the American military presence from the Gulf.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So, what you said about the relationship between the U.S. and Israel makes me think, I've been calling this aggression, this campaign, this war, a U.S.-Israeli war, maybe we should call it an Israeli-U.S. war?

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

That would be more accurate. And it would also conform to a brief period of public messaging by the administration, which said, well, we should let the Israelis go first so we can claim we're acting in defense. And then we had Marco Rubio testifying up on the Hill saying exactly that.

But we had to join this war because we knew the Israelis were going to go, and we couldn't stop them, which is, of course, nonsense. And we had to attack Iran preemptively because it would retaliate against Israel. So, this is a very complicated argument, which was immediately abandoned when Trump said, oh, no, no, I took the initiative to start this war.

But, you know, which is not entirely true either, given the Netanyahu ambition and meeting at Mar-a-Lago on December 29th.

**[Helena Cobban]**

But there is something really interesting there, Chas. One is that I think Marco Rubio, who is not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, I think he thought that branding the war as in some way in service of Israel would be good politically for him and his boss in this country. But I think other people in the administration really wanted to walk that back because they, you know, they're listening to Tucker Carlson, they're listening to Marjorie Taylor Greene.

They're listening to a lot of grassroots voices for whom association with Israel, you know, branding this as a pro-Israel operation is not a plus, it's a negative.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Well, that's correct. We are going into a possible election midterm, despite the efforts of the Trump administration to forestall it. And the MAGA movement is becoming more and more split.

This began really with Charlie Kirk's discovery of the pernicious influence of Israel on US policy, and his clash with the Zionist plutocrats who fund Donald Trump and potentially would fund Marco Rubio in a contest for the presidency. So, you're right, there are very clear domestic effects already from this war. But they're not, they're really rather moderate compared to what they will be.

We watch the price of gasoline at the pump. This is basically a direct tax on the American consumer, who is also, who's already beleaguered by price rises under the ridiculous protectionist policies that the administration has adopted. So, no, I think, as I mentioned, or perhaps I didn't mention it, I should have.

But not only the Iranians replicating the Houthi land-based blockade in the Strait of Hormuz, the Houthis are back blockading the Red Sea. And so, supply chains that involve passage

from Asia to Europe or vice versa, that is to the European market or Southeast Asian, or in South Asian market, are all going to be disrupted. And because we operate in a just-in-time inventory environment, the effects are going to be quite quick.

Probably within 10 days, we're going to see empty shelves in some stores. So, the implications of this in terms of impact on the global economy and the American economy, as we go forward to a midterm election here, are very considerable. And just leave it at that.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Well, I want to come back a little bit later to the question of Europe, because I want to push back a little bit. It's not all of Europe that has wholeheartedly joined the Israeli-US war effort. Spain has stood aside.

Norway has stood aside. I think the Irish are staying very, very quiet. But you're quite right that the major, the E3, whatever they call them, Britain, France, and Germany are all lining up to join.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Well, there's an interesting element here. Of course, I think Spain has emerged as probably the most honorable country in Europe in terms of its forthright moral judgments and actions.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And on Gaza, as well as on...

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

On Gaza, on the Palestinian issue generally. And of course, in this case, refusing to do what Keir Starmer has authorized Britain to do, namely provide support for the war through joint bases on its territory. But there's an interesting emergence of Italy as an intermediary.

Apparently, the Trump administration, probably having figured out that it's made a major mistake in this war, tried to get the Italians to get the Iranians to join in renewed negotiations. And Donald Trump actually claimed that he was going to talk to the Iranians. They wanted to talk.

To which Araghchi, the Iranian foreign minister, immediately retorted, no, I don't want to talk and we will not talk while all this is going on. And pointed also to the repeated use of negotiations as a cover for military action. Something which, by the way, was applied in the case of Venezuela, too.

That is, there were discussions going on with Nicolás Maduro until the very moment when his Cuban guard was murdered and he was seized.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And the same thing with the Hamas negotiators last September. I mean, this is what I call negotiation as entrapment, diplomacy as entrapment.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Exactly, exactly. And so, what we've done, this has broader implications because it accounts in part for the flagging interest of Vladimir Putin in receiving Witkoff and Kushner, who, after all, are real estate people, not diplomats, haven't really mastered the brief and don't seem to be able to deliver anything on the apparent agreements they reach. And those agreements get reversed by either Washington or Tel Aviv fairly quickly.

And so, they have a batting average of zero diplomatically. They've not produced a peace in Ukraine or an accommodation with Russia. They've not produced a peace in Gaza, quite the opposite.

The so-called Board of Peace is a farce, worse than a farce. It's a macabre distortion of the truth. And they have not done anything about the accelerating pogroms in the West Bank.

Their negotiations with Iran have been duplicitous. And who is going to want to talk to the United States now? I mean, this is true even if Donald Trump weren't erratic and unreliable and unbound by previous agreements, even those that he himself has made.

**[Helena Cobban]**

I agree with everything you just said. Obviously, it's kind of evident that Witkoff and Kushner have not achieved anything. I want to come back to the question of the situation across West Asia as a broad thing.

Because the Iranians are fighting not only for survival, but also to eliminate or reduce in a very serious way the continuing encirclement by American forces, but also Israel's expanding ability to impose its diktat on ever broader levels of the Levant, what I call the Very Much Greater Israel project, not just Greater Israel, but the Mike Huckabee style "Israel across the whole of West Asia, unchallenged" project. So you're saying that within roughly one week, we will see important indications whether Iran's strategy of the rope-a-dope strategy of depleting Israeli and US interceptor missile supplies, whether that is going to have some effect.

But this will have a massive effect across this whole region. If it's Israel versus Iran, and Iran is able to push Israel back, then that has massive effects, right?

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Well, I think so. Let me just add a couple of things or respond with a couple of comments. First, Israel is going to run out of defense capability before the United States.

It will be the first to lose that capability. That's not unimportant, because a good part of the Israeli population, if they can get out of Israel, will try to do so. That was the lesson of last year's June war, which only lasted 12 days.

12 days may be significant, because that was the limit of Israeli defense capability.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And what you're talking about now, with the attack that started on February 28th, 12 days would be roughly...

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Midweek next week. So the US will follow a little bit. As I said, we're cannibalizing other defenses around the globe to support this war.

We're sending more aircraft and so on. And we haven't apparently lost a major ship yet, but we could. Here, I want to mention, Donald Trump has responded to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz by insurance companies.

Of course, they pulled the plug on insurance for shippers as soon as there's a war threat, so that the ships can't get insured, and they're sitting at anchor in the Persian Gulf or diverting to some other location. And he responded with an executive order directing the International Development Finance Corporation of the United States to provide insurance, but it has no legal authority to do that. So that is not a credible response to this situation.

He also directed the US Navy to escort tankers that wanted to break the blockade. I don't think there will be many volunteers. If there are, I don't think they'll make it through the strait, because of the capability of the Iranians to use land-based systems, which they have carefully built over the last 20 years, basically since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and given the capability to keep the strait closed, probably, against almost all eventualities.

So, this isn't going to work, and it sets another time limit, as I suggested, because it has to do with the price of oil and the availability of supplies elsewhere. Of course, Iran is depriving itself of revenue when it blocks this path to its own exports, as well as those of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar. Qatar has shut down its gas production.

You mentioned the Norwegians, they have an aluminum plant in Qatar that's just been shut down. And I'll just end by, you mentioned the Irish, whose neutrality is dear to their hearts, and very much in evidence in this context. There is a very significant base of support for the Palestinians in Ireland, given their 800-year-long experience with British rule.

And so, they're behaving true to type. I don't see, on the other hand, much out of Viktor Orban, the great admirer and friend of Benjamin Netanyahu, or Robert Fico, another right-wing dissident within the European Union, but perhaps I'm just missing it. Overall, I guess, if I may comment briefly on your profession as a journalist, the performance of journalism in this context is appalling.

We're seeing great coverage of all the wonderful damage we're doing to Iran, and very little about Israel and the damage it is suffering, which is substantial. And that's because there's Israeli military censorship. And unlike in the case of Iran, and the Palestinians and others, the Western press respects and follows the censorship.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And does not mention it on air. For example, the contrast between when they're reporting on things in Gaza, and they always say, oh, the Gaza Ministry of Health says this, so we can't verify it, because of course, the Israelis don't let them go into Gaza, when the Israelis also don't let them report anything about the damage, the real damage in Israel. And they never say, we cannot report this because of the Israeli censorship.

And that's one of the many ways.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

There's a built in bias, the Israelis don't have to do anything. I went through the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait. And there were almost 50 scud attacks on Saudi Arabia, I was in Riyadh, we lost over 100 civilians.

None of it reported. The only reporting from Saudi Arabia was on the whiz bang technology that we were deploying. When Israelis died from having shot themselves with nerve gas antidotes, this was front page news.

So the story about Israel was human interest stories. The story about the Arabs was all technology, no humans. And so there's a long standing pattern here.

And I don't think we need to dwell on it, it's pretty obvious. But it does distort understanding. And, of course, we've just seen TikTok, which was an unwelcome source of direct information for much of the youth in the United States, taken over by Zionist plutocrats, who are altering the algorithm to suppress anything unfavorable to Israel.

So we're seeing a contraction, rather than an expansion of honest coverage of this part of the world, and others as well. And that is really, that means that we have a citizenry who are exceedingly ill informed, and unable to make proper judgments. Worst of all, of course, the Trump White House inhales its own propaganda.

So it is drunk on its own claims of success. Well, maybe those will prove to be justified. It's too early to say it's only the four and a half days since the war began.

And it's not going to end in the next four and a half days. So I think we have to reserve judgment on exactly what is going on, because we have very limited access to the truth. And any effort to inform yourself immediately runs up against a wall of psychological operations, disinformation, censorship, and other distortions.

So everything's plausible, nothing's true.

**[Helena Cobban]**

There are some truths, though. I mean, I think you paint a very bleak picture. I agree with the part of the picture you paint where you say that, you know, that the censorship is coming down much harder and faster than we had hoped.

I mean, I remember like being so hopeful that the internet and the blogosphere would open up the opportunity for citizens to speak, you know, freely across borders and whatever. And they have been very seriously trying to clamp down on that and using all kinds of very repressive algorithms through Palantir and all these other Zionist-controlled tech companies.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Which the internet has empowered as censors. Corporate censorship has been greatly strengthened. What used to be the free exchange of ideas in the public marketplace is now an exchange that is controlled by corporate entities and restricted to certain fora.

So this is the opposite of what the initial hope for the internet was, quite the opposite.

**[Helena Cobban]**

But still, there is a kind of a set of ground truths in this country. I want to come on to, I mean, I do also want to look at the shredding of the international system by the Israeli-U.S. axis. But let's start here in the United States, where obviously, it's not just the the president assuming the powers of Congress in regard to tariffs and spending and going to war.

It's interesting to me that the Supreme Court did actually reign in his power on tariffs. I thought that was something good about the Supreme Court majority there. And I noticed last week at the State of the Union, gosh, it was only like eight days ago, it seems like forever ago, that we had the State of the Union where he was playing to the crowd in the most populist and opportunistic way.

And the Supreme Court justices who were there sat on their hands. And the senior military officers who were there sat on their hands. They did not jump up and down and applaud.

They had po faces. And to me, that was very welcome. Even at a time when Elizabeth Warren was jumping to her feet to applaud his rhetoric against Iran, which she has now dialed back, it should be said.

But to see that there is a Supreme Court majority and a clear majority in the military chain of command that are not going to be riled up in this populist way. But there are some real fears. Obviously, you mentioned the fear that we may not have an election.

There's also a fear that the military may, that Pete Hegseth, the guy who proudly wears a very large crusader cross tattooed across half of his entire chest, that he and the people that he has brought into the Pentagon have been trying to propagandize and politicize the Pentagon, that this war is a crusade.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

No, indeed. Well, I join you in applauding the vestiges of civic virtue that you cite, which is what they are. They are vestiges in a highly polarized environment.

Both military and the Supreme Court have lived up to their responsibility to at least adopt a publicly neutral position. That is good. I'm not sure that the Supreme Court deserves quite the accolades.

But we'll leave that for another occasion. I'm concerned about the military for two reasons. The fact that there was no explanation at all for the purpose of this war, that it cannot be claimed to be a just war by any standard, is a great blow to the motivation of those who've been charged with conducting the war.

And we have operational tempo, operational up-tempo, it's called, operational tempos that are unsustainable. We have aircraft carriers that have been at sea for 11 months, which are now detectable by their odor because their toilet systems are broken. And the morale of the people aboard is also broken.

And we have seen, to go back to civic virtue, we've seen a steady decline in the willingness of young Americans to serve the country, whether in the military or in the civil service. I can't really imagine why anyone would do what I did, you know, 60 years ago, and try to serve the country as a diplomat, or in some other capacity at present, because of the oppressions, the lack of respect, the criticisms, the politicization, the unfairness, the injustices that are meted out to career people. Well, the same is true in the military.

You know, the removal of people, of flag officers of color, the removal of female flag officers.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Including service chiefs, I mean, the Chief of Naval Operations...

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

That's whom to whom I'm referring. And, you know, these things already are out of, they're an extreme polarized opinion within American society that is definitely a minority. And the use of the military for various unconstitutional purposes or illegal purposes, like the occupation of US cities by the National Guard, does not back up morale.

It's pretty good for trash collection, but not much.

**[Helena Cobban]**

No, it's not, honestly. I mean, we have National Guard here in Washington, DC, and we had a very serious snow emergency. Did I see one of them out there with a shovel?

No, they did nothing.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Interesting. Well, anyway, what I'm saying is that morale is vitally important in sustaining the functions of government, because government officials in our system are or should be

immune from corruption. That is to say, they should be motivated psychologically rather than financially to provide the services they do.

And the same is true in the military. I mean, we may bestow...

**[Helena Cobban]**

And could I just interject, free from politicization?

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Oh, of course. No, that's a great deal, part of it. You have to, you know, I'm fond of saying that optimism is to diplomats what courage is to soldiers.

You have to believe that you can succeed at whatever impossible task you have been assigned, and be willing to risk everything to accomplish it. Take that hill, the military are told. They know that half of them are going to die doing that, and yet they do it.

That is courage. But there is no courage if the cause of taking the hill is regarded as fraudulent in the service of some private interest rather than the public interest.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Or of a foreign country.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Yes, exactly. Well, there might be some who are motivated to help foreign countries because they have an affinity to them. You know, I mean, I don't want to go back too far, but one of my grandfathers would have been just as happy to fight on the German as on the British side in World War I.

Anyway, so sometimes there... But here again, we're in a war where there's no organic connection, no explained connection, no obvious connection. In fact, no real connection to American interests.

Everything is in the interest of Israel and its project of greater Israel, its project of reducing Iran to the level of Syria, a country with nominal sovereignty, but in fact, no real autonomy that has been devastated and is vulnerable to the divide and rule practices that Israel relies upon. So, how do you motivate people if we start taking major casualties, which we could? How do you do that?

That is a real question. And the longer term question is, who will now join the military? To do what?

And if the people who do join the military are the sort of people that believe that Secretary of War Hegseth embodies manly virtue, are they really people we want? Because you're quite correct. He has said, no rules of engagement, no respect for what he calls so-called international institutions, no respect for international law and constraints on combat.

And it's telling that the murder of 160 schoolgirls in Minab in southern Iran has not elicited an apology. There's been no acknowledgement that this was a mistake. Maybe it wasn't a mistake.

Whatever it was, it's a tragedy and it should call for a decent gesture of contrition.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And perhaps an investigation, a credible investigation of how it happened.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Well, we know what happens when countries investigate themselves from a handful of Israeli examples.

**[Helena Cobban]**

But there was My Lai. I mean, there was an investigation during, you know, one or two investigations.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Right. And who paid the price for that? Well, you know, I mean, it was uncovered by Sy Hersh. May he long be with us. But it took a huge effort on his part to even get that published. It wasn't until it was published that Lieutenant Calley was called to account.

His superiors were not called to account.

**[Helena Cobban]**

He was the sacrificial lamb.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Exactly. So I don't think our record is quite as good as we would like to believe.

**[Helena Cobban]**

No, that's true. And recently, of course, we've seen the Secretary of Homeland Security, Kristi Noem. Is that how you say it?

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

"Nome", I think.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Yeah. Refusing to apologize for the death, the killings of Renee Good and Michael Pretti. You know, she expressed a little bit of regret, but she did not apologize. So, you know, this is across the government. And it's a new set of norms that Americans are going to have to

come to terms with. I've been a citizen here for nearly 40 years and, you know, come to respect many things about the US system, including, although I live in the District of Columbia, where we have no representation in Congress, we do have, you know, some degree of home rule.

And I respect the fact that there are periodic elections. We may not, as you noted, we may not have one this fall. And if we do, it may be very badly corrupted.

So we've got about another three to five minutes, Chas Freeman. Do we have time to look at the shredding of the international system? Or should we leave that to another conversation?

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

I think we can get into that. Because there's an organic connection between the shredding of the rule of law and the disregard for the Constitution domestically, and the disregard for international law and the shredding of global norms internationally. They are directly connected.

We have exported our lawlessness and our disdain for rule of law abroad. And this administration has the distinction of being utterly forthright about that. And so, venality and corruption, which are the hallmark of this administration, have now also taken their place abroad.

So we have, sorry, trade policies that are essentially mafia-style shakedowns, coupled with, you know, if you'll invest in Donald Trump's son's projects, we will ensure that you get all sorts of benefits from the government. This is corruption by any definition. And that is now the norm in our international behavior.

So, arbitrary and capricious decisions, which are inconstant, they change frequently. Tariffs go up, down, disappear, and reappear like meteorites in the sky, unpredictably. And we have a president who was elected on the platform of being a peacemaker, and has now bombed more countries than any of his predecessors, by quite a margin.

So, we have wars, not only do we have the ongoing so-called global war on terror, with combat at a low intensity level in 82 countries, but we're bombing Somalia frequently, nobody reports that. We are aiding, we are a co-belligerent in the genocide in Gaza, and in the pogroms in the West Bank. We have twice bombed Iran.

We have conducted a proxy war in Ukraine, with very poor results, I must say. And we've invaded Venezuela. And this is on top of a long record of other violations of nation's sovereignty.

And we're gearing up for a war on China. 14% of our defense budget is apparently spent on preparing for that war with China. So, this is not a picture that the founding fathers, or the architects of the post-war order after World War Two would be at all comfortable with.

There's no evidence of the rule of law, or respect for international norms abroad. And this has done huge damage for our reputation. We actually have net emigration now.

That is, there are many Americans who are seeking to move to places like Spain, which have a better standard of adherence to the rule of law. Who would have thought that? I grew up in the era of Francisco Franco.

But Ireland is another great receiver of American migration. And of course, I can't conclude this without noting the utter incompetence with which the planning of this war in West Asia has been conducted. No preparation at all to remove American citizens from the combat zone.

And I can recall, in the Gulf War, when I was ambassador in Saudi Arabia, one of our principal tasks was to keep women and children safe, and if necessary, provide them with military transportation out of the country. We're apparently devoting all our military transport to munitions, not to people. This is a low standard indeed.

The only European countries that I know of that have actually managed to conduct effective retrieval of their citizens from the region are Czechia and Slovakia, which have each conducted evacuations from Jordan. I don't know about the others. Everybody talks a good game, but nobody does anything.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Well, goodness, there's such a lot more we can talk about, including the Board of Peace and the terrible situation in Gaza. And clearly, we're going to have to have another session, another discussion soon, Chas Freeman, but you've already given me and our viewers a huge amount to think about. So I want to thank you very much for giving us your time.

It's always really, really educational and informative to listen to you. This is the sixth in our current series on the Iran crisis. We're going to have tomorrow Barbara Slavin, who's a well-known specialist on Iran, author of several books about Iran.

And I want to urge everybody to follow us on our YouTube channel, on our Apple podcast channel and wherever, and to share some of these great educational materials as widely as you can. So once again, Ambassador Chas Freeman, thank you very much for being with me today.

**[Amb. Chas Freeman]**

Well, thank you, Helena Cobban.