

Media, War Boosters Slam Trump for ‘Chicken’ Response to Iran

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UPDATE 6/21, 6:30 a.m. As late as 7 p.m. EST last night the military was prepared, on the president's orders, to launch limited, retaliatory strikes against a handful of Iranian assets, but the White House later called for the military to stand down. According to news reports quoting multiple administration officials Friday morning, planes were already in air and ships positioned, but no missiles had yet been fired when the word came to call off the strikes.

While President Donald Trump indicated Thursday that Iran may have shot down an American drone accidentally, Iran war boosters throughout the media bellowed that any note of caution by the president would be interpreted as weakness inside the Islamic Republic.

The U.S. military said that an unarmed and unmanned U.S. RQ-4A Global Hawk drone flying over the Gulf of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz was shot down in international airspace. U.S. Air Forces Central Command Lt. Gen. Joseph Gastella said it was an “unprovoked attack,” but Iran disputed that narrative, claiming the drone had entered its territory.

Trump tweeted a third narrative: “Iran made a very big mistake,” he wrote after an Iranian commander announced that the Islamic Republic was “ready for war.”

“I find it hard to believe it was intentional, if you want to know the truth,” Trump told reporters. “It could have been somebody who was loose and stupid that did it.”

“I would imagine... somebody... made a mistake in shooting the drone down,” he added. “Fortunately, that drone was unarmed. It was not — there was no man in it, it was in international waters but we didn’t have a man or woman in the drone, we had nobody in the drone. Would have made a big, big difference.”

“And I’m not just talking about the country made a mistake; somebody under the command of the country made a mistake.”

Not so fast, several war agitators were quick to respond.

Trump bizarrely chickens out of responding to a direct attack from Iran, a piece for Business Insider charged.

“President Donald Trump bizarrely dismissed Iran shooting down a US drone as a ‘mistake’—after the country admitted to it and declared itself ready for war—in what looks like a bold but counterfactual move to avoid war,” writes Alex Lockie. “Indeed, Trump has talked a big game on Iran, but according to multiple and persistent reports, he has pushed his officials to take a softer tone on Iran to avoid war.... Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on CBS’s Face the Nation on Sunday morning that the U.S. would endeavor to ‘restore deterrence’ toward Iran, presumably by letting them know a harsh response awaited any further aggression.”

The piece approvingly cites Mark Dubowitz, chief executive of the hawkish Foundation of Defense for Democracies, who told The New York Times that Iran had likely mined oil tankers in the region in order “to demonstrate that Trump is a Twitter Tiger.”

Meanwhile, invoking Ronald Reagan, David Adesnik at the National Review ladles all the praise on Trump’s hawkish secretary of state. “Mike Pompeo brought a Reagan-esque flourish to the Trump administration’s foreign policy, demanding nothing short of Iranian surrender. While insisting that President Trump is prepared to negotiate a new deal with Tehran, Pompeo listed no fewer than twelve preconditions for an end to American pressure.”

The more demands, the better, according to Adesnik, despite the fact that “no one should be holding their breath in anticipation of Iran’s acquiescence.”

What, then, is the point of these demands? To push Iran to the brink of war, argues Victor Davis Hanson in a piece entitled “U.S. Holds All the Cards in the Showdown with Iran,” for National Review.

“Time... is certainly not on the side of a bankrupt and impoverished Iran that either must escalate or face ruin,” writes Hanson. “If Iran starts sinking ships or attacking U.S. assets, Trump can simply replay the ISIS strategy of selective off-and-on bombing... that would mean disproportionately replying to each Iranian attack on a U.S. asset with a far more punishing air response against an Iranian base or port. The key would be to avoid the use of ground troops and yet not unleash a full-fledged air war.”

He’s hardly the only commentator that believes war with Iran would come to a quick and successful conclusion.

In the Wall Street Journal Thursday, Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh wrote a piece headlined “America Can Face Down a Fragile Iran.”

“The regime is dangerous, but it isn’t nearly strong enough to withstand a prolonged confrontation,” they write. “The regime is in a politically precarious position... [Iran’s] essential weakness means it can’t muster sufficient strength for a prolonged conflict with a determined superpower. The mullahs’ clenched fists, slogans of martyrdom, and staged demonstrations shouldn’t be confused with real power. ”

Gerecht, a senior fellow for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, distinguished himself in a November 2002 op-ed he penned titled, “An Iraq War Won’t Destabilize the Mideast.”

“The one truly unsettling thing a second Persian Gulf war might unleash is Iraqi democracy,” he wrote back then. More:

“Arguments against a war in Iraq often revolve around the belief that an American invasion would destabilize the Middle East. According to this critique, the region is a powder keg of instability that a war, with all its inevitable unintended consequences, could well ignite. The Arab street would rise, radical Islamist recruiters would benefit from yet another grievance and Iraq’s fractious citizens — Arab Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds — would possibly crack their country apart. Those cracks would spread throughout the region.

But a war with Iraq might not shake up the Middle East much at all.

Most regimes in the area are too stable, strong and clever. For example, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt appears to be vastly more adept than was Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, the shah of Iran.”

Unlike Gerecht’s pie-in-the-sky predictions, Mubarak was overthrown in 2011 when Arabs hit the streets in what touched off the Arab Spring. Tens of thousands have died in Iraq due to sectarian violence, and “radical Islamist recruiters” formed not Al Qaeda in Iraq but an offshoot no one even heard of at the time—ISIS.

American talking-head Bret Stephens, who advocated over a decade ago for war with Iraq, now stridently argues without a hint of irony that, “If Iran won’t change its behavior, we should sink its navy.”

“Nobody wants a war with Iran. But not wanting a war does not mean remaining supine in the face of its outrages,” writes Stephens. “We sank Iran’s navy before. Tehran should be put on notice that we are prepared and able to do it again.”

He writes:

“What’s the proper U.S. response?

It can’t be the usual Trumpian cycle of bluster and concession. Neither can it be the liberal counsel of feckless condemnation followed by inaction. Firing on unarmed ships in international waters is a direct assault on the rules-based international order in which liberals claim to believe. To allow it to go unpunished isn’t an option.

What is appropriate is a new set of rules — with swift consequences if Iran chooses to break them.”

Stephens is arguing for a revamped version of Obama’s “red line” with Syria. This time, though, the U.S. should go ahead and sink Iran’s navy.

If that sounds crazy, consider Sen. Tom Cotton’s interview Sunday with CBS News’ Face the Nation, where he argued that it would take just two strikes to “win a war with Iran.”

Cotton’s statements bring to mind the words of King Pyrrhus, after his army suffered heavy casualties defeating the Romans at the Battle of Heraclea in 280 B.C. After lavish praise for his success, the King famously remarked that “one more such victory would ruin me,” thus giving rise to the phrase Pyrrhic victory.

Cotton should consider that when he says the U.S. would “win” a war with Iran. What does winning mean? What does a victory for the U.S. look like?

Clearly, the U.S. military will prevail in any fire fight; but just like in Iraq, simply eliminating Iran’s army or navy does not mean that victory would be secured.

Iran is three times larger than Iraq, and according to Harry Kazianis in The American Conservative, war games simulating Iran’s ability to respond to hostilities in the Persian Gulf led to an ugly outcome:

“...Iran decides such an action cannot be allowed to stand, and decides to make a statement that not only is its military powerful, but it can cause serious damage to US

naval assets in the region. They counterattack with a massive volley of anti-ship missiles pointed at the ultimate symbol of US military might: America's only aircraft carrier operating in the region. Firing over 100 missiles, the carrier's defenses are overwhelmed and the 100,000-ton vessel is destroyed, with over 2,000 sailors and airmen lost.

Iran doesn't stop there. To make clear that it won't tolerate any further US military operations against its forces, Iranian conventional attack submarines - purchased from Russia - launch a series of attacks on US surface combatants in the Persian Gulf. While Tehran loses two of its prized subs, one American Littoral Combat Vessel is sunk, with over 62 sailors killed."

Today's war hawks have promised us an easy, swift victory before.

As Jack Hunter points out, "the same club of neoconservative hawks [Sen. Cotton] belongs to also predicted an expeditious war back then. 'Five days or five weeks or five months, but it certainly isn't going to last any longer than that,' then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld insisted in 2002."

We have seen where the hawks' predictions of easy success lead. This time, the U.S. should not let us be so easily persuaded into the path of war.

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