

Luring Trump into Mideast Wars

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Frog-Marching Donald Trump entered military terra incognita on Thursday by launching an illegal Tomahawk missile strike on an air base in eastern Syria. Beyond the clear violation of international law, the practical results are likely to be disastrous, drawing the U.S. deeper into the Syrian quagmire.

But it would be a mistake to focus all the criticism on Trump. Not only are Democrats also at fault, but a good argument could be made that they bear even greater responsibility.

For years, near-total unanimity has reigned on Capitol Hill concerning America's latest villains du jour, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Congressmen, senators, think-tank strategists, and op-ed analysts all have agreed that Putin and Assad are the prime enemies of "peace," by which is meant global American hegemony, and that therefore the U.S. must stop at nothing to weaken or neutralize them or force them to exit the world stage.

Until recently, in fact, just about the only politically significant dissenter was Trump. Accusing reporters of twisting the news at a tumultuous press conference in late February, he told them,

"Now tomorrow, you'll say, 'Donald Trump wants to get along with Russia, this is terrible.' It's not terrible. It's good."



Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

But since getting along with Russia was terrible for America's perpetually bellicose foreign-policy establishment, Official Washington declared war on Trump, building on Hillary Clinton's [charge](#) during the last presidential debate that he was Putin's "puppet." It became the conventional wisdom that Trump was a "[Siberian candidate](#)" being inserted in the White House by a satanic Kremlin determined to bend freedom-loving Americans to its will.

As Inauguration Day approached, President Obama's intelligence chiefs pulled out all stops to persuade the public that (a) Russian intelligence had engineered Clinton's defeat by hacking the Democratic National Committee's computers and placing thousands of embarrassing emails in the hands of WikiLeaks and that (b) Trump was somehow complicit in the effort.

The campaign was highly effective. The alleged Putin-Trump relationship was a major feature at the anti-Trump protests surrounding his inauguration and the major U.S. news

media pounded on the Russia “scandal” daily.

On Feb. 13, barely four weeks after taking office, Trump crumbled under a mounting barrage of political abuse and gave National Security Adviser Michael Flynn the boot after it was revealed that he had talked with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the transition, supposedly in violation of the 1799 Logan Act, an absurd piece of ancient legislation that even The New York Times [referred to](#) as “a dusty, old law” that should have been repealed generations ago.

Under Media Pressure

A day later, the administration reeled again when the Times charged in a front-page exposé that “members of Donald J. Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and other Trump associates had repeated contacts with senior Russian intelligence officials in the year before the election.”

The article provided no evidence and no names and said nothing about whether such contacts were knowing or unknowing, i.e., whether they involved a John le Carré-style midnight rendezvous or merely an exchange of pleasantries with someone who may or may not have been connected to the FSB, as Russia’s version of the CIA is known.

In a March 6 article entitled “Pause This Presidency,” Times columnist Charles M. Blow called for little less than a coup d’état:

“The American people must immediately demand a cessation of all consequential actions by this ‘president’ until we can be assured that Russian efforts to hack our election ... did not also include collusion with or cover-up by anyone involved in the Trump campaign and now administration.”

How “the American people” would demand such a cessation or who would provide such assurances was not specified.



President Donald Trump delivering his inaugural address on Jan. 20, 2017. (Screen shot from Whitehouse.gov)

On March 31, CNN [quoted](#) an unnamed senior administration official saying that Trump’s hopes of a rapprochement with Russia were fading because he “believes in the current atmosphere – with so much media scrutiny and ongoing probes into Trump-Russia ties and election meddling – that it won’t be possible to ‘make a deal.’”

Thus, Trump found himself increasingly boxed in by hostile forces. But he still tried to fulfill his promise to concentrate on defeating terrorists in Syria and Iraq. On March 30, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley announced that the U.S. administration “priority is no longer to sit there and focus on getting Assad out,” but to concentrate on defeating Al Qaeda and ISIS instead.

But the more Trump contemplated his predicament in the following days, the more he realized how untenable it had come. Tuesday’s poison-gas incident in Idlib thus offered a way out regardless of who was actually responsible. The only way for Trump to make peace with the “deep state” in Washington was by waging war on Syria.

Finally, on Thursday, hours before Trump sent a volley of cruise missiles wafting towards Syria, Hillary Clinton taunted him by [declaring](#) that

America “should take out his [Assad’s] airfields and prevent him from being able to use them to bomb innocent people.”

The effect was to all but force Trump to show that he was every bit as macho as the former First Lady.

Frog-Marching Trump

Trump is certainly a fool for going ahead with such an attack in clear contravention of international law and entangling the United States more deeply into the complicated Syrian conflict. But the blame also should go to the people who frog-marched him to the precipice and then all but commanded him to step over the edge.

Within hours, all the usual suspects were congratulating one of the most scorned U.S. presidents in history for taking the leap.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said:

“Making sure Assad knows that when he commits such despicable atrocities he will pay a price is the right thing to do.” House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi described Trump’s missile barrage as “a proportional response to the regime’s use of chemical weapons.”

Republican super-hawks Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, previously as anti-administration as any Democrat, [issued](#) a joint statement declaring that Trump “deserves the support of the American people,” while liberal heart-throb Sen. Elizabeth Warren also [agreed](#) that “the Syrian regime must be held accountable for this horrific act.”

The Guardian, as fiercely anti-Trump as it is anti-Putin and anti-Assad, [conceded](#) that “Donald Trump has made his point” and that the next step would be up to Russia. All in all, Trump had never gotten such good press. It’s clear that Official Washington was pleased with Trump’s handiwork and was eager to encourage him to do more.

But the missile barrage was not just an assault on Syria but on reason and good sense, too. Although the Washington Post’s Adam Taylor tried to make it seem that the only critics of the missile barrage are [members of the alt-right](#) “known for espousing racist, anti-Semitic

and sexist points of view,” the fact is that criticism flowed in from other quarters.

At Alternet, Vijay Prashad pointed out that there were few independent observers in Khan Shaykhun, the farming town where the April 4 incident occurred, to provide an accurate account. Eyewitnesses “with the densest relationship to the armed opposition,” he [wrote](#), “are the first to claim that this attack was done by the government.”

Consortiumnews’ Robert Parry [pointed out](#) that rather than dropping the gas themselves, Syrian or Russian warplanes could well have triggered an outbreak by bombing a facility containing “chemicals that the rebels were planning to use in some future attack.” Parry also noted that Al Qaeda, which controls Idlib province, could have “staged the incident to elicit precisely the international outrage directed at Assad as has occurred.”

[Previously, United Nations investigators have received [eyewitness testimony from Syrians](#) about rebels staging an alleged chlorine-bomb attack so it would be pinned on the Assad regime.]

Something similar may well have occurred in August 2013, a sarin-gas missile attack on the outskirts of Damascus that killed hundreds and that appears to have been launched from a rebel-controlled area two kilometers away. The two incidents are curiously parallel.

The August 2013 incident, which horrified the world and brought the Obama administration to the brink of its own attack on the Syrian government, occurred just days after a U.N. team had arrived in Damascus to investigate an alleged chemical attack by rebels against Syrian government troops some four months earlier.

It made little sense for the Assad regime to have invited U.N. investigators in and then launch a more horrific chemical-weapons attack just miles from the investigators’ hotel. It would be a bit like someone inviting a police inspector to dinner and then committing a murder in full view.

Not Making Sense

As one independent analysis [noted](#) in 2013, the Assad regime would have to have decided to carry out a large-scale attack “despite (a) making steady gains against rebel positions, (b) receiving a direct threat from the US that the use of chemical weapons would trigger intervention, (c) having constantly assured their Russian allies that they will not use such weapons, (d) prior to the attack, only using non-lethal chemicals and only against military targets.”

The Assad government would also have had to decide “to (a) send forces into rebel-held area, where they are exposed to sniper fire from multiple directions, (b) use locally manufactured short-range rockets, instead of any of the long-range high quality chemical weapons in their arsenal, and (c) use low quality sarin.”

All of which seems supremely unlikely, but much of the mainstream U.S. media still treats the 2013 sarin-gas attack as the undeniable case of Assad crossing Obama’s “red line” against using chemical weapons. And the highly dubious 2013 incident is cited as a key reason to believe that Assad has done it again. [Recently, The New York Times has [quietly backed off the 2013 claims](#) although not explicitly retracting its earlier reporting blaming the attack on the Assad regime.]



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Assad would have possibly even stronger reasons not to deploy sarin gas on April 4, 2017. He would have to make a conscious decision to court world opprobrium at a time when the tide of the war was finally turning in his favor with the liberation of Aleppo last December and with most world leaders having concluded that the Assad regime was here to stay.

To have produced and deployed a sarin bomb would have meant deliberately risking military intervention more than three years after Syria reached an agreement with the United Nations to destroy its entire chemical-weapons stockpile so as to avoid ... military intervention.

All of which seems supremely unlikely as well. It would be an act of suicide – and after holding off a combined U.S., Saudi, Qatari, and Turkish assault for half a decade or more, one thing that Assad does not appear to be is suicidal.

Although Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [said](#),

“there is no doubt in our mind that the Syrian regime under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad is responsible for this horrific attack,” in reality there is plenty of doubt.

Nevertheless, Trump decided to fire away before the facts were in because the enemy he is most worried about is not the one half a world away in Syria, but the Democratic-neocon alliance in his own backyard. The political warfare in Washington is now generating more agony from real wars in the Middle East.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including [The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy](#) (Harcourt Brace).

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