

The Media's Handling of Bolton's Iran Threats, Recalls the Run-Up to the Iraq War

By [Ben Armbruster](#)

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Media-savvy U.S. government officials, political operatives, and lawmakers and their staffs from all political parties and ideological persuasions have no doubt, throughout the history of our great country, duped a fair-minded but unwitting reporter into writing a juicy story in order to get a piece of information into the public bloodstream without their fingerprints on it.

This is, in large part, how the Bush administration **sold the U.S. invasion of Iraq to the American people**: Feeding knowingly bogus or unsubstantiated intelligence on Iraq's (nonexistent) WMD programs to reporters, who then published it as fact, without much in the way of critical scrutiny.

Despite the lessons we've learned from that debacle, it's happening again with regard to the Trump administration's march toward war with Iran.

In one now infamous incident during the months leading up to the start of the Iraq war, **then-Vice President Dick Cheney** [went on NBC's Meet the Press](#) and issued a dire warning. Saddam Hussein was trying "through his illicit procurement network, to acquire the equipment he needs to be able to enrich uranium to make the bombs. ... specifically aluminum tubes."

But Cheney made sure to point out that he wasn't just making this assertion out of thin air (or passing on classified material), but that, in fact, the claim came from the paper of record, *The New York Times*.

The *Times* story was even [the catalyst](#) for **then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's** infamous assertion:

"We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

We have since learned, of course, that Bush administration officials deliberately [leaked the story](#) to *Times* reporter **Judith Miller** — who co-wrote the big front page scoop with her colleague **Michael Gordon** — to build the case that that Saddam was building nuclear bombs. *The Times* later walked back the reporting, saying there was some internal disagreement about what the tubes were actually for (and in truth, it turned out, the tubes were actually not made for nuclear weapons). [For more on the provenance and use by Cheney, his colleagues, and neoconservatives of the Saddam-is-on-the-verge-of-obtaining-

nuclear-weapons fabrication, see [this 2005 account](#) by Jim Lobe in TomDispatch.com.]

We saw a similar dynamic play out this week, albeit on a smaller scale, after Donald Trump's **National Security Adviser John Bolton** issued an unusual [statement](#) on Sunday evening announcing that the U.S. was sending a carrier and bomber group to the Middle East to counter unspecified Iranian threats.

STATEMENTS & RELEASES

Statement from the National Security Advisor Ambassador John Bolton

— NATIONAL SECURITY & DEFENSE | Issued on: May 5, 2019



In response to a number of troubling and escalatory indications and warnings, the United States is deploying the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force to the U.S. Central Command region to send a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime that any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force. The United States is not seeking war with the Iranian regime, but we are fully prepared to respond to any attack, whether by proxy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or regular Iranian forces.

Source: [White House](#)

Instead of expressing skepticism about such a statement from someone who's been gunning for war with Iran for nearly two decades, and from an administration that has been doing the same for the past two and a half years, reports from U.S. mainstream media outlets basically served as a public relations service, simply repeating Bolton's statement with little scrutiny across multiple mediums. For example, this was a headline [from CNN](#) the next day:

"US deploying carrier and bomber task force in response to 'troubling' Iran actions."

Much of the piece then repeated almost verbatim administration claims about the supposed Iranian threat. And it wasn't until the 24th paragraph that the story noted that such deployments are "routine" and that the carrier group in question, the Lincoln Carrier Strike Group, had [already been deployed](#) to "the Central Command region," as Bolton put it in his statement.

If the Lincoln group had already been deployed, was Bolton — again, who has made it no secret that he's wanted war with Iran for some time — simply using this routine matter to goad Iran into some kind of conflict? CNN asked no such questions.

Then there was the question of the intelligence itself. Was it accurate? Was John Bolton — who also has a [well-documented history](#) of manipulating intelligence for his own policy preferences — playing fast and loose with the facts?

Here again, U.S. reporters simply just repeated Trump administration claims of this alleged dire Iranian threat. For example, this is what CNN's Barbara Starr [tweeted](#) the following day:

“Just In: US officials tell me the threats from Iran included ‘specific and credible’ intelligence that Iranian forces and proxies were targeting US forces in Syria, Iraq and at sea. There were multiple threads of intelligence about multiple locations, the officials said. [#Iran](#).”

But that turned out to be false, or misleading at best. Subsequent news stories reported that the intelligence Bolton was working from was “[unclear](#).” Other [reports](#) referred to unnamed U.S. officials citing “potential preparations,” intel that “may indicate possible attacks,” and that the U.S. “was not expecting any imminent Iranian attack.” So in other words, nothing concrete, specific, or severe enough to merit an entire carrier group and [B-52 bombers](#) being sent to the Middle East.

Later in the week, Starr (like many, many other reporters) [was duped again](#), reporting — based on unnamed sources — that “[i]ntelligence showing that Iran is likely moving short-range ballistic missiles aboard boats in the Persian Gulf was one of the critical reasons the US decided to move an aircraft carrier strike group and B-52 bombers into the region.” But a subsequent NBC [report](#) downplayed this claim, noting that U.S. officials have actually “accused Iran of moving missiles and missile components through the region’s waterways for years.”

However, that NBC story too was guilty of uncritically repeating unnamed officials’ claims about intelligence on Iran, asserting that the *actual* reason for the increased U.S. military posture in the region was “a call [by Iran’s leaders] to awaken and activate” Iranian proxies in Iraq.

But what does that even mean? Does this kind of “threat” necessitate such a gargantuan military response? And isn’t it possible that the Trump administration’s so-called “maximum pressure” campaign toward Iran and ramping up threats (like designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps a terror group) might have caused the Iranians themselves to shift to high alert?

Here again though, buried at the end of the NBC story, we are provided with a take from a Democratic congressional source who has seen the same intelligence, saying Trump and Bolton’s response to it “seems wildly out of proportion.” Even so, we should think a reporter would be able to conclude that the threat was overblown on his or her own (is a call to a proxy really cause for such a drastic military response?).

And that’s exactly what this intelligence is: overblown. The Daily Beast [reported](#) this week that that “multiple sources close to the situation” said Bolton and Team Trump blew the intelligence on Iran “out of proportion, characterizing the threat as more significant than it

actually was.”

Unfortunately, the damage has already most likely been done. The Trump administration’s claims about this supposed Iranian threat has been repeated by credulous reporters and TV news programs far and wide. And after all, that was the goal. Bolton and Co. knew the media would take the bait for a few days (war and conflict sell after all) and that, by the time the truth about what they were up to was eventually uncovered, the narrative about dire and nefarious Iranian threats — which is already baked into the American psyche anyway — would, in the saying often [mistakenly](#) attributed to Winston Churchill or Mark Twain, have “travel[ed] halfway around the world while the truth was still putting on its shoes.”

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Ben Armbruster is the communications director for Win Without War and previously served as National Security Editor at ThinkProgress.

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[The Globalization of War: America’s “Long War” against Humanity](#)

Michel Chossudovsky

The “globalization of war” is a hegemonic project. Major military and covert intelligence operations are being undertaken simultaneously in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia and the Far East. The U.S. military agenda combines both major theater operations as well as covert actions geared towards destabilizing sovereign states.

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Articles by: **Ben Armbruster**

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