

Pompeo's Gulf of Tonkin Incident. Provocation to War

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Like the crucial steps toward public acceptance preceding the U.S. invasions of Vietnam and Iraq, the assassination of Qassem Soleimani was aimed at building popular support for war on Iran. Not only the justification, but the assassination itself were part of a broader strategy to grease the skids into war.

The Soleimani ploy has apparently failed, however, thanks to the carefully prepared Iranian response, which did not provoke Donald Trump to raise the stakes further. At least not yet.

The fingerprints of Pompeo are all over this provocation to war. In a striking parallel to the deception that accompanied the Gulf of Tonkin crisis in 1964—in which the American public was told about an attack on a U.S. ship that never happened, precipitating the Vietnam War—Pompeo and his allies carried out a complex deception in regard to the Soleimani hit. They claimed they had to kill the second most popular leader of Iran with no advance notice to Congress because the Iranian general was planning a massive attack that put the country in “imminent” danger. Trump officials have so far not provided any evidence publicly to back up this version of events. In fact, when briefed by DoD officials [Wednesday](#), Democrats complained about the lack of hard evidence presented, leaving them unconvinced there was an imminent threat. Republican Sen. Rand Paul, R-KY., said the briefing was [“less than satisfying.”](#)

The deception accompanying Soleimani's killing was just the latest in a much longer string of efforts by Pompeo that began in September 2018. That's when Pompeo and then-National Security Advisor John Bolton established the basic propaganda line that was used to sell the Soleimani assassination. They claimed that a few mortar rounds in the vicinity of the U.S. embassy and a consulate in Basra were evidence of an effort by Tehran to kill or injure U.S. diplomats. Bolton then demanded the Pentagon come up with retaliatory options if any Americans were harmed by any action of an Iranian “proxy,” Pompeo [issued a public threat to attack Iran over the incidents.](#)

But in fact those rockets landed a kilometer away from the U.S. Embassy in the Green Zone where all foreign embassies are located, and that the one that fell near the Basra airport's outer perimeter was nowhere near the U.S. consulate. And they were fired the same night that anti-Iran rioters were [setting fire to the Iranian consulate](#) in Basra and shutting down the country's only seaport, and at the same time Sadrist protesters were [rallying against the Iraqi government at the entrance to the Green Zone](#) in sympathy with the anti-Iran protests.

In May 2019, Bolton claimed [new “escalatory indications and warnings”](#) of a threat to U.S. personnel in the Middle East and vowed, “[A]ny attack on United States interests or on those

of our allies will be met with unrelenting force.” He and Pompeo leaked to major news outlets that there was intelligence about Iran ordering militia allies in the region to [“target” Americans](#). But other officials who had seen the intelligence [told the Wall Street Journal](#) that Tehran sent its allies a directive telling them to prepare for possible attack by the United States.

The Bolton-Pompeo effort to lure Trump into a war with Iran faltered when the president twice refused their advice to retaliate militarily over the shoot-down of a U.S. drone and the drone attack on a key Saudi oil facility. Bolton got fired in September, but Pompeo continued what they had begun. On December 13, he condemned two attacks on a Iraqi military base located near the Baghdad Airport on Dec. 7 and Dec. 9, in which two Iraqi anti-terrorist troops were injured, and then [added](#).

“We must also use this opportunity to remind Iran’s leaders that any attacks by them, or their proxies of any identity, that harm Americans, our allies, or our interests will be answered with a decisive U.S. response.”

But the circumstances surrounding those rocket attacks made it unclear who might have fired the two to four mortars or rockets at the Iraqi Security Forces headquarters near Baghdad Airport, wounding two Iraqi counter-terrorism personnel. Opponents of the government had just launched new protests against repression of demonstrations by lethal forces by Iraqi security forces, including anti-riot police, and Moqtada al Sadr, who had been supporting the Iraqi government, but had [just started to support the demonstrators](#). It is entirely possible that Sadrist militiamen or other opponents of the government had fired the rockets at the base in protest.

Two weeks later, on December 27, a rocket attack on the K1 Iraqi base near Kirkuk killed an American contractor, as [“Operation Inherent Resolve” command confirmed](#). The Trump administration immediately went into crisis mode, discussing both killing Soleimani and retaliatory strikes against Kataib Hezbollah. But the provenance of the event that triggered the fateful decisions that followed is shrouded in ambiguity. As *The New York Times* reported on Dec. 27, “It wasn’t clear who was responsible for the attack,” adding that the base had been [threatened previously](#) by both Iranian-backed militias and Islamic State forces.

The IS forces in the area of Kirkuk where the K1 base was located had become increasingly active in 2018 and 2019, with a [rapidly growing pace of attacks](#), operating freely out of the rugged mountainous north and south of the city. In fact there had been more attacks by IS on government targets in Kirkuk in 2018 than anywhere else in Iraq, and it had the highest rate of growth as well.

To confirm the origins of the rockets might have taken some time, but Pompeo wasn’t interested in waiting. Instead of taking on the responsibility of investigating the incident thoroughly, the Pentagon and the command of Operation Inherent Resolve turned that responsibility over to the Iraqi Security Forces. If there was indeed an investigation that turned up information indicating that Kataib Hezbollah was responsible, it would certainly have been released publicly, but no further information on the incident has been forthcoming from either Iraqi or U.S. commands. The only specific information available has been a [Reuters report](#) from “security sources that Iraqi security forces had found a

'launchpad' for Katyusha rockets in 'an abandoned vehicle near the base,'" which further deepened the mystery.

But it can be argued that Pompeo was eager for the United States to provoke a military confrontation with Iran, just as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was eager to begin airstrikes against North Vietnamese targets in August 1964. Even though he knew there were serious doubts on the part of the U.S. commander in the Gulf of Tonkin that an American ship had been attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats on Aug. 4, McNamara did not inform President Lyndon Johnson, and went ahead with the order for retaliatory strikes that night. Similarly, Pompeo apparently led Trump to believe that there was no doubt that pro-Iranian militia forces had killed an American in Kirkuk, despite the genuine uncertainty about the provenance of the attack.

In the initial meeting with Trump to discuss retaliation for the Dec. 27 attack, Pompeo, Defense Secretary Mark Esper, and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark A. Milley presented the option of assassinating Gen. Soleimani along with strikes against Kataib Hezbollah, which they were blaming for the attack. According [to The New York Times](#), the principals suggested the "improbable" assassination option only to make the retaliatory airstrikes more palatable. But considering Pompeo's record of pushing for a military confrontation with Iran, and everything he has said publicly since, "taking Soleimani out" was probably Pompeo's ultimate objective.

The U.S. retaliatory strikes against the militia's weapons storage sites and other targets on Dec. 29 were [nowhere near Kirkuk](#). One of the strikes was against al Qaim on the Syrian border 400 kilometers away from Kirkuk and two others were in Syria. It was obvious those retaliatory strikes would provoke a response by pro-Iranian militias in Baghdad that could be used to justify the assassination of Soleimani. And the response was not long in coming: thousands of angry pro-Iranian Shiite militants, many in militia uniforms, broke into the Embassy compound and set fire to three trailers near the outer wall a reception area before being ordered by militia leaders to disperse, because they had [delivered the desired "message."](#)

That was enough to persuade Trump to support the Soleimani assassination option. Pompeo had achieved his objective of U.S. military aggression, while publicly making the obviously specious argument that it was aimed at "detering" Iran from further military actions. No one in the national security elite, which was universally convinced that Iran would have to retaliate against the assassination, took Pompeo's argument seriously.

Iran is too clever, however, to allow Pompeo to so easily maneuver it into a confrontation that would serve the interests of American hawks and Israel. Iran has its own much more complex political-military strategy for managing the problem of the Trump administration's policy of economic and military warfare. It now appears from the results of Iran's military retaliation Tuesday night that it has foregone any mass casualty strike in revenge for the U.S. assassination of its second most prominent official. And Trump, as yet, will not retaliate in response. Now Pompeo will have to come up with a new deception to try to provoke U.S.-Iran war.

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