

Trump's Press Secretary Falsely Accuses Iran of Attacking U.S. Navy Vessel, "an Act of War"

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White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer asserted at Thursday's press briefing that Iran had attacked a U.S. naval vessel, as part of his argument defending the administration's bellicose announcement that Iran is "on notice."

National Security Adviser Michael Flynn on Wednesday said he was "[officially putting Iran on notice](#)" following the country's ballistic missile test and an attack on a Saudi naval vessel by Houthi rebels in Yemen (the Houthis are [tenuously](#) aligned with Iran's government but are distinct from it).

The White House press corps wanted to know what being put "on notice" entailed, and Spicer responded by claiming that Iran's government took actions against a U.S. naval vessel, which would be an act of war. "I think General Flynn was really clear yesterday that Iran has violated the Joint Resolution, that Iran's additional hostile actions that it took against our Navy vessel are ones that we are very clear are not going to sit by and take," he said. "I think that we will have further updates for you on those additional actions."



Major Garrett of CBS News quietly corrected him, saying "a Saudi vessel," and Spicer then responded almost inaudibly: "Sorry, thank you, yes a Saudi vessel. Yes, that's right." He did not in any way address his false claim that it was an Iranian attack, however.

Watch Spicer's remarks:

Pentagon spokesman Christopher Sherwood confirmed to The Intercept that the attack was in fact conducted against a Saudi warship, and that the Pentagon suspects Houthi rebels. "It was a Saudi ship - it was actually a frigate" said Sherwood. "It was [conducted by] suspected Houthi rebels off the coast of Yemen."

Fox News initially misreported that a U.S. ship was somehow the target — which is perhaps where some of the confusion in the White House originated

This is the huge banner on [@FoxNews](#) right now. I have some important context to follow, from a US official. [#Yemen](#) <https://t.co/QcfRzD71QL>
[pic.twitter.com/coBrDwAujO](https://t.co/coBrDwAujO)

— Samuel Oakford (@samueloakford) [31 January 2017](#)

This, of course, is how American wars start. In the infamous 1964 “Gulf of Tonkin incident,” as it is often referred to, the White House and the Pentagon accused North Vietnamese forces of attacking two Navy destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin off Vietnam on August 4. President Lyndon Johnson used the attacks to coax Congress into approving a resolution, known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, that authorized military action in Vietnam. As the New York Times [noted](#) a few years ago, the “attack never happened.”

And way back in February 1898, a U.S. warship, the Maine, was moored in Havana’s harbor when a huge explosion blew it apart, killing most of its crew. The explosion was blamed on Spain, and led to a rallying cry particularly in U.S. newspapers of “Remember the Maine!” In April of that year, the United States declared war on Spain, even though there was no proof of Spanish responsibility for the explosion, and much reason to doubt it. As the Washington Post [reported](#), an official Navy inquiry concluded in the 1970s that “a mine or torpedo could not have been responsible for the blast. The likely cause was a coal bunker fire that ignited the ship’s magazine.”

The U.S. and Iran both have ships in the Gulf area. The U.S. [dispatched](#) ships to the Bab-el Mandeb strait off the coast of Yemen in October to reinforce a Saudi-led naval [blockade](#) that has devastated the country and left [14 million people](#) going hungry. At the time, an anonymous government official told [Fox News](#) that “this is a show of force.” Later that month, after rockets fired from Houthi-controlled territory appeared to target a U.S. warship, the Obama administration [authorized](#) strikes on three radar sites in Western Yemen.

In early January, a U.S. Navy ship [fired warning shots](#) at Iranian vessels the Pentagon said were approaching it in the Strait of Hormuz, on the opposite side of the Arabian peninsula.

Update: February 2, 2017

This story has been updated to include Spicer’s comments partially correcting himself.

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