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Patrick's Politics:

Trump’s Iran war is an unnecessary and directionless disaster

by Patrick Minnerly | ASSOCIATE OPINION EDITOR | HE/HIM/HIS | patrick.minnerly@uconn.edu

In America, we like to think of ourselves as negotiators for the world. If there’s a conflict going on, we’re often involved in the talks. But the sudden strikes on Iran this past week have once again shown that the United States’ favorite word of choice is the missile. Our language is spoken with the roar of bombs and dead strewn among the rubble. This language has been delivered in a ramble, with few clear objectives beside destruction and ruin. Trump’s war with Iran – and it is a war, declared or not – was fully avoidable, and it outlines the price of unthinking aggression.

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The war, which has already seen more than 1,000 Iranians and six American service members killed, clearly did not need to happen. The situation escalated recently when a large military buildup of U.S. forces began in the region. As a result, tensions were high, but negotiations were still ongoing right before the war started. As munitions rained onto Iranian territory in the dead of night, fired from both US and Israeli forces, nothing had yet been established about why. It was only later, after explosions had echoed around Tehran and other cities, that Trump and his administration offered any explanation for the strikes.

The explanations were, to say the least, conflicting. Secretary of State Marco Rubio claimed that Israel was planning to take military action against Iran, and the US decided to strike Iran as well before they could think about retaliating. However, in Trump’s telling, it was his “opinion” that Iran was going to attack first, and Israel was brought into the conflict by the U.S. If the foremost directors of government foreign policy are unaligned on why the conflict began, that signals a dire lack of cohesion on the administration’s part.

On the war’s objectives, the Trump administration is equally if not more confused. Shortly after the attacks began and Iran’s leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed, Trump posted, “This is the single greatest chance for the Iranian people to take back their Country.” Trump’s statement heavily implied the goal of regime change. This would mean the U.S. anticipates Iran’s government being overthrown as a result of the strikes, eliminating the Islamic fundamentalist regime that has existed since 1979. Trump also implied America’s desire to influence

who becomes the next leader of Iran, but then said that “most of the people we had in mind are dead,” killed by the joint Israeli-U.S. strikes.

The impetus for regime change rests on the assertion that Iran was close to having the capability to make a nuclear weapon. This has been a major concern for the U.S. for several years and came to a head last June, when America and Israel both tried to take out Iran’s nuclear enrichment facilities. Then, Trump claimed that Iran’s nuclear capabilities were “obliterated.” But in the past few weeks, the adminis-

tration has changed its tune. Steve Witkoff, Trump’s lead negotiator in the talks with Iran, said on Feb. 23 that Iran was “a week away” from being able to develop nuclear bomb material. No evidence has been brought forward to support this notion, and the government’s scattered reasoning for starting the war has only muddled the waters.

But we knew already that Trump is obsessed with the twisted idea of “strength,” and the war is an extension of that desire for a show of force. What matters is whether Trump will face restrictions on his dangerous thirst for blood-soaked and ruinous conflict.

This disjointed attempt to alter Iran’s government echoes the grave mistakes of past American policy in the Middle East. The most famous example involves former President George W. Bush, who invaded Iraq and toppled its dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003 because of supposed evidence that the country was making “weapons of mass destruction.” It was later determined that these WMDs did not exist and that the basis for the war was false. Similar to Khomeini, Hussein was a brutal autocrat who repressed the population but killing Hussein did not fix Iraq’s situation. Instead, the American invasion created a vacuum of power only filled with military force, and the war dragged on for almost nine years. More than 100,000 Iraqi civilians were killed, along with thousands of U.S. and allied troops.

The American experience in Iraq taught the lesson that basing a war on flimsy claims, especially when that war is focused on completely changing nation’s government, does not end well. Despite Trump’s promises in the present day

that the Iran conflict will not last long, the administration is already warning that the military effort is just beginning. The Pentagon also announced that additional American casualties should be expected. In other words, the U.S. will soon be mired in another unnecessary and senseless war in the Middle East that costs many lives.

As bad as Bush’s war (and associated war crimes) turned out to be, Trump’s attack on Iran is held up by even less legitimate support. Despite significant expansion of the president’s power to take military action in recent years, conducting such a barrage of strikes and killing a nation’s leader should certainly be above the threshold for needing a declaration of war. Yet asking for a formal declaration or even congressional approval has rarely even been discussed by the administration. Trump did not notify Congress nor many of our allies, simply choosing to recklessly strike out on his own, endangering the lives of U.S. troops, as well as American and Iranian citizens. On the first day of the conflict, a girls’ elementary school in Iran was struck, resulting in the deaths of dozens of

children. On March 2, three American jets were accidentally shot down by Kuwait, an American ally in the Middle East. At the same time, Americans in several affected countries have been unable to leave, since there was no indication war was imminent. These events demonstrate the haphazard and indiscriminate nature of the attacks; our allies don’t even know where we’re operating, our own citizens are stranded by our choices and we don’t seem to care where our bombs fall.

Trump’s entire approach to conflict with Iran has been deeply disjointed. We know from Iraq’s example that such a war, focused as it is on regime change, is doomed to fail. He has put lives on the line unnecessarily and without thought, all for the flimsiest of justifications. But we knew already that Trump is obsessed with the twisted idea of “strength,” and the war is an extension of that desire for a show of force. What matters is whether Trump will face restrictions on his dangerous thirst for blood-soaked and ruinous conflict.