

Trump's 'Wag the Dog' Moment

Exclusive: President Trump earned neocon applause for his hasty decision to attack Syria and kill about a dozen Syrians, but his rash act has all the earmarks of a “wag the dog” moment, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Just two days after news broke of an alleged poison-gas attack in northern Syria, President Trump brushed aside advice from some U.S. intelligence analysts doubting the Syrian regime's guilt and launched a lethal retaliatory missile strike against a Syrian airfield.

Trump immediately won plaudits from Official Washington, especially from neoconservatives who have been trying to wrestle control of his foreign policy away from his nationalist and personal advisers since the days after his surprise victory on Nov. 8.

There is also an internal dispute over the intelligence. On Thursday night, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the U.S. intelligence community assessed with a “high degree of confidence” that the Syrian government had dropped a poison gas bomb on civilians in Idlib province.

But a number of intelligence sources have made contradictory assessments, saying the preponderance of evidence suggests that Al Qaeda-affiliated rebels were at fault, either by orchestrating an intentional release of a chemical agent as a provocation or by possessing containers of poison gas that ruptured during a conventional bombing raid.

One intelligence source told me that the most likely scenario was a staged event by the rebels intended to force Trump to reverse a policy, announced only days earlier, that the U.S. government would no longer seek “regime change” in Syria and would focus on attacking the common enemy, Islamic terror groups that represent the core of the rebel forces.

The source said the Trump national security team split between the President's close personal advisers, such as nationalist firebrand Steve Bannon and son-in-law Jared Kushner, on one side and old-line neocons who have regrouped under National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, an Army general who was a protégé of neocon favorite Gen. David Petraeus.

White House Infighting

In this telling, the earlier ouster of retired Gen. Michael Flynn as national

security adviser and this week's removal of Bannon from the National Security Council were key steps in the reassertion of neocon influence inside the Trump presidency. The strange personalities and ideological extremism of Flynn and Bannon made their ousters easier, but they were obstacles that the neocons wanted removed.

Though Bannon and Kushner are often presented as rivals, the source said, they shared the belief that Trump should tell the truth about Syria, revealing the Obama administration's CIA analysis that a fatal sarin gas attack in 2013 was a "false-flag" operation intended to sucker President Obama into fully joining the Syrian war on the side of the rebels – and the intelligence analysts' similar beliefs about Tuesday's incident.

Instead, Trump went along with the idea of embracing the initial rush to judgment blaming Assad for the Idlib poison-gas event. The source added that Trump saw Thursday night's missile assault as a way to change the conversation in Washington, where his administration has been under fierce attack from Democrats claiming that his election resulted from a Russian covert operation.

If changing the narrative was Trump's goal, it achieved some initial success with several of Trump's fiercest neocon critics, such as neocon Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, praising the missile strike, as did Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The neocons and Israel have long sought "regime change" in Damascus even if the ouster of Assad might lead to a victory by Islamic extremists associated with Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State.

Wagging the Dog

Trump employing a "wag the dog" strategy, in which he highlights his leadership on an international crisis to divert attention from domestic political problems, is reminiscent of President Bill Clinton's threats to attack Serbia in early 1999 as his impeachment trial was underway over his sexual relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky. (Clinton also was accused of a "wag-the-dog" strategy when he fired missiles at supposed Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998 in retaliation for the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.)

Trump's advisers, in briefing the press on Thursday night, went to great lengths to highlight Trump's compassion toward the victims of the poison gas and his decisiveness in bombing Assad's military in contrast to Obama's willingness to allow the intelligence community to conduct a serious review of the evidence surrounding the 2013 sarin-gas case.

Ultimately, Obama listened to his intelligence advisers who told him there was no "slam-dunk" evidence implicating Assad's regime and he pulled back from a

military strike at the last minute – while publicly maintaining the fiction that the U.S. government was certain of Assad's guilt.

In both cases – 2013 and 2017 – there were strong reasons to doubt Assad's responsibility. In 2013, he had just invited United Nations inspectors into Syria to investigate cases of alleged rebel use of chemical weapons and thus it made no sense that he would launch a sarin attack in the Damascus suburbs, guaranteeing that the U.N. inspectors would be diverted to that case.

Similarly, now, Assad's military has gained a decisive advantage over the rebels and he had just scored a major diplomatic victory with the Trump administration's announcement that the U.S. was no longer seeking "regime change" in Syria. The savvy Assad would know that a chemical weapon attack now would likely result in U.S. retaliation and jeopardize the gains that his military has achieved with Russian and Iranian help.

The counter-argument to this logic – made by The New York Times and other neocon-oriented news outlets – essentially maintains that Assad is a crazed barbarian who was testing out his newfound position of strength by baiting President Trump. Of course, if that were the case, it would have made sense that Assad would have boasted of his act, rather than deny it.

But logic and respect for facts no longer prevail inside Official Washington, nor inside the mainstream U.S. news media.

Intelligence Uprising

Alarm within the U.S. intelligence community about Trump's hasty decision to attack Syria reverberated from the Middle East back to Washington, where former CIA officer Philip Giraldi reported hearing from his intelligence contacts in the field that they were shocked at how the new poison-gas story was being distorted by Trump and the mainstream U.S. news media.

Giraldi told Scott Horton's Webcast: "I'm hearing from sources on the ground in the Middle East, people who are intimately familiar with the intelligence that is available who are saying that the essential narrative that we're all hearing about the Syrian government or the Russians using chemical weapons on innocent civilians is a sham."

Giraldi said his sources were more in line with an analysis postulating an accidental release of the poison gas after an Al Qaeda arms depot was hit by a Russian airstrike.

"The intelligence confirms pretty much the account that the Russians have been giving ... which is that they hit a warehouse where the rebels – now these are

rebels that are, of course, connected with Al Qaeda – where the rebels were storing chemicals of their own and it basically caused an explosion that resulted in the casualties. Apparently the intelligence on this is very clear.”

Giraldi said the anger within the intelligence community over the distortion of intelligence to justify Trump’s military retaliation was so great that some covert officers were considering going public.

“People in both the agency [the CIA] and in the military who are aware of the intelligence are freaking out about this because essentially Trump completely misrepresented what he already should have known – but maybe he didn’t – and they’re afraid that this is moving toward a situation that could easily turn into an armed conflict,” Giraldi said before Thursday night’s missile strike. “They are astonished by how this is being played by the administration and by the U.S. media.”

One-Sided Coverage

The mainstream U.S. media has presented the current crisis with the same profound neocon bias that has infected the coverage of Syria and the larger Middle East for decades. For instance, The New York Times on Friday published a lead story by Michael R. Gordon and Michael D. Shear that treated the Syrian government’s responsibility for the poison-gas incident as flat-fact. The lengthy story did not even deign to include the denials from Syria and Russia that they were responsible for any intentional deployment of poison gas.

The article also fit with Trump’s desire that he be portrayed as a decisive and forceful leader. He is depicted as presiding over intense deliberations of war or peace and displaying a deep humanitarianism regarding the poison-gas victims, one of the rare moments when the Times, which has become a reliable neocon propaganda sheet, has written anything favorable about Trump at all.

According to Syrian reports on Friday, the U.S. attack killed 13 people, including five soldiers at the airbase.

Gordon, whose service to the neocon cause is notorious, was the lead author with Judith Miller of the Times’ bogus “aluminum tube” story in 2002 which falsely claimed that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was reconstituting a nuclear-weapons program, an article that was then cited by President George W. Bush’s aides as a key argument for invading Iraq in 2003.

Regarding this week’s events, Trump’s desperation to reverse his negative media coverage and the dubious evidence blaming Assad for the Idlib incident could fit with the “Wag the Dog” movie from 1997 in which an embattled president creates a phony foreign crisis in Albania.

In the movie, the White House operation is a cynical psychological operation to convince the American people that innocent Albanian children, including an attractive girl carrying a cat, are in danger when, In reality, the girl was an actor posing before a green screen that allowed scenes of fiery ruins to be inserted as background.

Today, because Trump and his administration are now committed to convincing Americans that Assad really was responsible for Tuesday's poison-gas tragedy, the prospects for a full and open investigation are effectively ended. We may never know if there is truth to those allegations or whether we are being manipulated by another "wag the dog" psyop.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).
