

Where Was CIA's Pompeo on Syria?

Exclusive: As President Trump was launching his missile strike against Syria, CIA Director Pompeo and other intelligence officials weren't at the table, suggesting their doubts about Bashar al-Assad's guilt, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There is a dark mystery behind the White House-released photo showing President Trump and more than a dozen advisers meeting at his estate in Mar-a-Lago after his decision to strike Syria with Tomahawk missiles: Where are CIA Director Mike Pompeo and other top intelligence officials?

Before the photo was released on Friday, a source told me that Pompeo had personally briefed Trump on April 6 about the CIA's belief that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was likely not responsible for the lethal poison-gas incident in northern Syria two days earlier – and thus Pompeo was excluded from the larger meeting as Trump reached a contrary decision.

At the time, I found the information dubious since Trump, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and other senior U.S. officials were declaring quite confidently that Assad was at fault. Given that apparent confidence, I assumed that Pompeo and the CIA must have signed off on the conclusion of Assad's guilt even though I knew that some U.S. intelligence analysts had contrary opinions, that they viewed the incident as either an accidental release of chemicals or an intentional ploy by Al Qaeda rebels to sucker the U.S. into attacking Syria.

As strange as the Trump administration has been in its early months, it was hard for me to believe that Trump would have listened to the CIA's views and then shooed the director away from the larger meeting before launching a military strike against a country not threatening America.

After the strike against Syria by 59 Tomahawk missiles, which Syrian officials said killed seven people including four children, Trump gave a speech to the American people declaring flatly:

“On Tuesday, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad launched a horrible chemical weapons attack on innocent civilians. Using a deadly nerve agent, Assad choked out the lives of helpless men, women, and children. It was a slow and brutal death for so many. Even beautiful babies were cruelly murdered in this very barbaric attack. No child of God should ever suffer such horror.”

As much as Trump stood to benefit politically by acting aggressively in attacking Syria – and thus winning praise even from his harshest critics – the

idea that he would ignore the views of the U.S. intelligence community on an issue of war or peace was something that I found hard to believe.

So, I put aside what I had heard from the source about the discordant Pompeo-Trump meeting as the sort of tidbit that may come from someone who lacks first-hand knowledge and doesn't get all the details right.

After all, in almost every similar situation that I had covered over decades, the CIA Director or the Director of National Intelligence has played a prominent role in decisions that depend heavily on the intelligence community's assessments and actions.

For instance, in the famous photo of President Obama and his team waiting out the results of the 2011 raid to kill Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, CIA Director Leon Panetta is the one on the conference screen that everyone is looking at.

Even when the U.S. government is presenting false information, such as Secretary of State Colin Powell's 2003 speech laying out the bogus evidence of Iraq hiding WMDs, CIA Director George Tenet was seated behind Powell to lend credibility to the falsehoods.

At the Table

But in the photo of Trump and his advisers, no one from the intelligence community is in the frame. You see Trump, Secretary of State Tillerson, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, White House chief of staff Reince Priebus, strategic adviser Steve Bannon, son-in-law Jared Kushner and a variety of other officials, including some economic advisers who were at Mar-a-Lago in Florida for the meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

However, you don't see Pompeo or Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats or any other intelligence official. Even The New York Times noted the oddity in its Saturday editions, writing: "If there were C.I.A. and other intelligence briefers around, ... they are not in the picture."

That made me wonder whether perhaps my original source did know something. The claim was that CIA Director Pompeo had briefed Trump personally on the analysts' assessment that Assad's forces were not responsible, but – then with Pompeo sidelined – Trump conveyed his own version of the intelligence to his senior staff.

In other words, the other officials didn't get the direct word from Pompeo but rather received a second-hand account from the President, the source said. Did Trump choose to rely on the smug certainty from the TV shows and the mainstream

news media that Assad was guilty, rather than the contrary view of U.S. intelligence analysts?

After the attack, Secretary of State Tillerson, who is not an institutional intelligence official and has little experience with the subtleties of intelligence, was the one to claim that 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.

While Tillerson’s comment meshed with Official Washington’s hastily formed groupthink of Assad’s guilt, it is hard to believe that CIA analysts would have settled on such a firm conclusion so quickly, especially given the remote location of the incident and the fact that the initial information was coming from pro-rebel (or Al Qaeda) sources.

Thus, a serious question arises whether President Trump did receive that “high degree of confidence” assessment from the intelligence community or whether he shunted Pompeo aside to eliminate an obstacle to his desire to launch the April 6 rocket attack.

If so, such a dangerous deception more than anything else we’ve seen in the first two-plus months of the Trump administration would be grounds for impeachment – ignoring the opinion of the U.S. intelligence community so the President could carry out a politically popular (albeit illegal) missile strike that killed Syrians.

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](#)).

Luring Trump into Mideast Wars

Exclusive: After launching a missile strike on Syria, President Trump is basking in praise from his former critics – neocons, Democrats and mainstream media – who want to lure him into more Mideast wars, reports Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Donald Trump entered military terra incognita on Thursday by launching an illegal Tomahawk missile strike on an air base in eastern Syria. Beyond the

clear violation of international law, the practical results are likely to be disastrous, drawing the U.S. deeper into the Syrian quagmire.

But it would be a mistake to focus all the criticism on Trump. Not only are Democrats also at fault, but a good argument could be made that they bear even greater responsibility.

For years, near-total unanimity has reigned on Capitol Hill concerning America's latest villains du jour, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Congressmen, senators, think-tank strategists, and op-ed analysts all have agreed that Putin and Assad are the prime enemies of "peace," by which is meant global American hegemony, and that therefore the U.S. must stop at nothing to weaken or neutralize them or force them to exit the world stage.

Until recently, in fact, just about the only politically significant dissenter was Trump. Accusing reporters of twisting the news at a tumultuous press conference in late February, he told them, "Now tomorrow, you'll say, 'Donald Trump wants to get along with Russia, this is terrible.' It's not terrible. It's good."

But since getting along with Russia was terrible for America's perpetually bellicose foreign-policy establishment, Official Washington declared war on Trump, building on Hillary Clinton's charge during the last presidential debate that he was Putin's "puppet." It became the conventional wisdom that Trump was a "Siberian candidate" being inserted in the White House by a satanic Kremlin determined to bend freedom-loving Americans to its will.

As Inauguration Day approached, President Obama's intelligence chiefs pulled out all stops to persuade the public that (a) Russian intelligence had engineered Clinton's defeat by hacking the Democratic National Committee's computers and placing thousands of embarrassing emails in the hands of WikiLeaks and that (b) Trump was somehow complicit in the effort.

The campaign was highly effective. The alleged Putin-Trump relationship was a major feature at the anti-Trump protests surrounding his inauguration and the major U.S. news media pounded on the Russia "scandal" daily.

On Feb. 13, barely four weeks after taking office, Trump crumbled under a mounting barrage of political abuse and gave National Security Adviser Michael Flynn the boot after it was revealed that he had talked with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the transition, supposedly in violation of the 1799 Logan Act, an absurd piece of ancient legislation that even The New York Times referred to as "a dusty, old law" that should have been repealed generations ago.

Under Media Pressure

A day later, the administration reeled again when the Times charged in a front-page exposé that “members of Donald J. Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and other Trump associates had repeated contacts with senior Russian intelligence officials in the year before the election.”

The article provided no evidence and no names and said nothing about whether such contacts were knowing or unknowing, i.e., whether they involved a John le Carré-style midnight rendezvous or merely an exchange of pleasantries with someone who may or may not have been connected to the FSB, as Russia’s version of the CIA is known.

In a March 6 article entitled “Pause This Presidency,” Times columnist Charles M. Blow called for little less than a coup d’état: “The American people must immediately demand a cessation of all consequential actions by this ‘president’ until we can be assured that Russian efforts to hack our election ... did not also include collusion with or cover-up by anyone involved in the Trump campaign and now administration.”

How “the American people” would demand such a cessation or who would provide such assurances was not specified.

On March 31, CNN quoted an unnamed senior administration official saying that Trump’s hopes of a rapprochement with Russia were fading because he “believes in the current atmosphere – with so much media scrutiny and ongoing probes into Trump-Russia ties and election meddling – that it won’t be possible to ‘make a deal.’”

Thus, Trump found himself increasingly boxed in by hostile forces. But he still tried to fulfill his promise to concentrate on defeating terrorists in Syria and Iraq. On March 30, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley announced that the U.S. administration “priority is no longer to sit there and focus on getting Assad out,” but to concentrate on defeating Al Qaeda and ISIS instead.

But the more Trump contemplated his predicament in the following days, the more he realized how untenable it had come. Tuesday’s poison-gas incident in Idlib thus offered a way out regardless of who was actually responsible. The only way for Trump to make peace with the “deep state” in Washington was by waging war on Syria.

Finally, on Thursday, hours before Trump sent a volley of cruise missiles wafting towards Syria, Hillary Clinton taunted him by declaring that America “should take out his [Assad’s] airfields and prevent him from being able to use them to bomb innocent people.” The effect was to all but force Trump to show

that he was every bit as macho as the former First Lady.

Frog-Marching Trump

Trump is certainly a fool for going ahead with such an attack in clear contravention of international law and entangling the United States more deeply into the complicated Syrian conflict. But the blame also should go to the people who frog-marched him to the precipice and then all but commanded him to step over the edge.

Within hours, all the usual suspects were congratulating one of the most scorned U.S. presidents in history for taking the leap.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said: "Making sure Assad knows that when he commits such despicable atrocities he will pay a price is the right thing to do." House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi described Trump's missile barrage as "a proportional response to the regime's use of chemical weapons."

Republican super-hawks Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, previously as anti-administration as any Democrat, issued a joint statement declaring that Trump "deserves the support of the American people," while liberal heart-throb Sen. Elizabeth Warren also agreed that "the Syrian regime must be held accountable for this horrific act."

The Guardian, as fiercely anti-Trump as it is anti-Putin and anti-Assad, conceded that "Donald Trump has made his point" and that the next step would be up to Russia. All in all, Trump had never gotten such good press. It's clear that Official Washington was pleased with Trump's handiwork and was eager to encourage him to do more.

But the missile barrage was not just an assault on Syria but on reason and good sense, too. Although the Washington Post's Adam Taylor tried to make it seem that the only critics of the missile barrage are members of the alt-right "known for espousing racist, anti-Semitic and sexist points of view," the fact is that criticism flowed in from other quarters.

At Alternet, Vijay Prashad pointed out that there were few independent observers in Khan Shaykhun, the farming town where the April 4 incident occurred, to provide an accurate account. Eyewitnesses "with the densest relationship to the armed opposition," he wrote, "are the first to claim that this attack was done by the government."

Consortiumnews' Robert Parry pointed out that rather than dropping the gas themselves, Syrian or Russian warplanes could well have triggered an outbreak by bombing a facility containing "chemicals that the rebels were planning to use in

some future attack." Parry also noted that Al Qaeda, which controls Idlib province, could have "staged the incident to elicit precisely the international outrage directed at Assad as has occurred."

[Previously, United Nations investigators have received eyewitness testimony from Syrians about rebels staging an alleged chlorine-bomb attack so it would be pinned on the Assad regime.]

Something similar may well have occurred in August 2013, a sarin-gas missile attack on the outskirts of Damascus that killed hundreds and that appears to have been launched from a rebel-controlled area two kilometers away. The two incidents are curiously parallel.

The August 2013 incident, which horrified the world and brought the Obama administration to the brink of its own attack on the Syrian government, occurred just days after a U.N. team had arrived in Damascus to investigate an alleged chemical attack by rebels against Syrian government troops some four months earlier.

It made little sense for the Assad regime to have invited U.N. investigators in and then launch a more horrific chemical-weapons attack just miles from the investigators' hotel. It would be a bit like someone inviting a police inspector to dinner and then committing a murder in full view.

Not Making Sense

As one independent analysis noted in 2013, the Assad regime would have to have decided to carry out a large-scale attack "despite (a) making steady gains against rebel positions, (b) receiving a direct threat from the US that the use of chemical weapons would trigger intervention, (c) having constantly assured their Russian allies that they will not use such weapons, (d) prior to the attack, only using non-lethal chemicals and only against military targets."

The Assad government would also have had to decide "to (a) send forces into rebel-held area, where they are exposed to sniper fire from multiple directions, (b) use locally manufactured short-range rockets, instead of any of the long-range high quality chemical weapons in their arsenal, and (c) use low quality sarin."

All of which seems supremely unlikely, but much of the mainstream U.S. media still treats the 2013 sarin-gas attack as the undeniable case of Assad crossing Obama's "red line" against using chemical weapons. And the highly dubious 2013 incident is cited as a key reason to believe that Assad has done it again.

[Recently, The New York Times has quietly backed off the 2013 claims although not explicitly retracting its earlier reporting blaming the attack on the Assad

regime.]

Assad would have possibly even stronger reasons not to deploy sarin gas on April 4, 2017. He would have to make a conscious decision to court world opprobrium at a time when the tide of the war was finally turning in his favor with the liberation of Aleppo last December and with most world leaders having concluded that the Assad regime was here to stay.

To have produced and deployed a sarin bomb would have meant deliberately risking military intervention more than three years after Syria reached an agreement with the United Nations to destroy its entire chemical-weapons stockpile so as to avoid ... military intervention.

All of which seems supremely unlikely as well. It would be an act of suicide – and after holding off a combined U.S., Saudi, Qatari, and Turkish assault for half a decade or more, one thing that Assad does not appear to be is suicidal.

Although Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, “there is no doubt in our mind that the Syrian regime under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad is responsible for this horrific attack,” in reality there is plenty of doubt.

Nevertheless, Trump decided to fire away before the facts were in because the enemy he is most worried about is not the one half a world away in Syria, but the Democratic-neocon alliance in his own backyard. The political warfare in Washington is now generating more agony from real wars in the Middle East.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

Trump’s 59-Tomahawk ‘Tweet’

In what amounted to a 59-Tomahawk middle-of-the-night “tweet,” an impulsive President Trump reacted emotionally, not rationally, in attacking Syria, says ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Before President Trump’s “retaliatory” strike against Syria on Thursday, I had written: “This, fundamentally is the question posed by the alleged chemical attack in Syria this week: Do Western Intelligence Services still retain an

ability to speak-out to 'power,' warning against going with the easy, immediate, 'go-along' MSM (mainstream media) 24/7 news memes – and counsel their governments, rather, to await careful investigation?

“Can they *also* reflect on the wider strategic implications of any flawed rush to judgment’? Or, is the Intelligence ‘Community’ still hostage to having to make politicized intelligence assessments in order to validate some muscular show of US strength?”

Well, now we know. The system failed again.

Though, perhaps, there was some candle flame of light flickering weakly somewhere in the darkness: It seems that President Trump was in a “rush,” indeed: he *was* warned. Some senior persons argued the toss. And the military action was scaled down from what had been originally demanded by the President.

Still, the Tomahawks flew, and the question becomes: can the Intelligence Services regain some integrity in the aftermath? In the aftermath therefore, this is the kind of thing that they ought to now say:

–The Russians briefed the United States on the proposed [Syrian Air Force] target in Idlib. There is a dedicated phone line that is being used to coordinate and de-conflict on any upcoming operation (i.e. prevent U.S. and Russian air assets from shooting at each other).

–The United States was fully briefed on the fact that there was a target in Idlib that the Russians believed was a weapons/explosives depot for Islamic rebels.

–The Syrian Air Force hit the target with conventional weapons. All involved expected to see a massive secondary explosion. That did not happen. Instead, smoke – chemical smoke – began billowing from the site. It turns out that the Jihadist rebels used that site to store chemicals (not sarin) that were deadly. The chemicals included organic phosphates and chlorine and they followed the wind, and killed civilians.

–There was a strong wind blowing that day and the cloud was driven to a nearby village and caused casualties.

–We know it was not sarin. How? Very simple. The so-called “first responders” handled the victims without gloves. If this had been sarin they would have died. Sarin on the skin will kill you.

Need for Intelligence Integrity

The American *Defense Intelligence Agency* almost certainly knows this kind of

detail. The “state of health” of the Western intelligence system now can be judged by whether such doubts and explanations subsequently emerge in the wake of the U.S. attack, and some integrity is regained, or whether official ranks simply close behind the “Assad-certainly-ordered it” meme – in order to preserve U.S. face.

Paradoxically, Trump’s “war” on fake news may, on this occasion, rebound against him: already tidbits of information are emerging on well-informed U.S. news sites. And, if it does turn out that this was another false flag, flown by an avid MSM news, 24/7, and not born out by the evidence and facts, what will be the political consequences?

What should an Intelligence Service – with integrity – have said to the “powers that be” about this event? Well firstly, they would warn – from bitter experience – that first initial impressions, in intelligence terms – are often wrong impressions. That to conclude that “Assad did it” because he supposedly had already “done it” (in 2013), is not supported by evidence. It would be facile, and wrong.

Then perhaps, the services would remind the “powers that be” that America was brought into the first Gulf War – in no small part – levitated, atop an emotional wave amassed from a similarly heart-tugging episode: the story of Kuwaiti babies being torn from their hospital incubators by Iraqi soldiers, and left to die on the hospital floor. It was a complete fabrication, but it impacted heavily on America’s decision to go to war.

And, ever since, “activists” across the Middle East have understood this to be the West’s Achilles’ heel: images of dying children simply swamp and erase any subsequently emerging evidence on the truth of the matter. The emotional import eclipses too, any cool-headed thinking.

This is their point. We live in an era in which the media loves to play the heartstrings, and cares little for the subsequent truth of things. All manner of interest groups across the world understand this – and use it to try to force the hand of Western intervention (always in support of those interests). In short, “beware the false-flag, humanitarian outrage”: it is often deliberately contrived, to provoke an overreaction.

Reasons for Doubt

In this latest instance of claimed “use of chemical weapons,” there was every reason for the U.S. (and European) intelligence services to avoid any rush to judgment – that is, if they still retain that capacity.

Firstly, what occurred is disputed; secondly, the Russians (who *do* have

professional intelligence services) have given their differing understanding of events which should be duly considered since they are on the ground, and are also widely present *inside* all the various arms of the Syrian government.

Thirdly, the credibility of the White Helmet “witnesses” is open to question. And fourth, because it makes no sense – in terms of “*cui bono*” – to attribute the chemical bombing of women and children to the deliberate decision of President Assad, this assumption should be rigorously tested.

What a nonsense it would be to take it as a given: why should attacking women and children (or anyone, for that matter) with chemical weapons, conceivably be in President Assad’s interest – particularly now? President Trump should have asked his services for a serious delve into this issue of *cui bono*. This is not partisan: such questions are the obvious requisites of intelligence professionalism.

So what are the consequences? Some may assess that there will be almost none: the Russians were forewarned of the missile attack – and they, in turn, had forewarned the Syrians, who had removed most of their aircraft from the airfield before the attack occurred.

And the missile attack was focused on a secondary airport from which the Syrian air attack had launched. In short, the event could be viewed as nothing more than a muscular, missile-delivered, (\$59 million) “tweet” from Trump. Message sent and done.

It could be (viewed in this way), but it won’t. It will not be business as usual, after Trump’s firing-off his 59 Tomahawk “tweets” (39 percent of which reached their target), but nor will it precipitate the opening of war. There will be no visible military reaction, and some may congratulate themselves on America having somehow “stood up” for its values.

The Tomahawk “Tweets”

But silently, geo-strategic calculations are being re-formulated. The world today has changed. Tomahawk “tweets” do not strike terror into “non-compliant” governments, as once they might have. The “non-West” has learned a different repertoire of responses against which the U.S. lately has floundered.

Consider what happened: less than a week ago, Rex Tillerson was saying (in Ankara), that the “longer-term status of President Assad will be decided by the Syrian people.” Then, some 100 hours later, Assad has become a “war criminal”; and Russia is complicit in the chemical “attack” (according to Nicki Haley, the U.S. Ambassador at the U.N.), and 24 hours after that, missiles are flying.

The message seems pretty clear: the U.S. has reverted completely. It has reverted to its old, neocon, groupthink. Russia, China, Iran and many others must now factor this in. They will all be amazed at how quickly U.S. doctrine has flip-flopped – with nary a moment's reflection – on a whim, as it were.

Russia, China and Iran will not launch the cavalry in response, but China will be considering what this means for its South China Sea spat with the Trump Administration; Russia will be re-calculating on Syria, now that “the possibility of anti-terror co-operation with the U.S. has been undermined,” and Iran will be reinforcing in Syria, Iraq (and in Yemen).

More dangerously, the fault line in the region between Iran and its allies, and Saudi Arabia and its allies, will sharpen and become more belligerent – now that the U.S. has explicitly placed itself in the Israeli and Gulf States' camp.

The point is that these 59 Tomahawks have demonstrated that America's foreign policy has no strategic “anchor,” and will revert to its neocon “default mode” when faced with a sudden event. Trump really did not pretend at a conceptual foreign policy (as Robert Parry has noted). It was essentially transactional: “demanding that ‘allies’ – from Japan to Saudi Arabia to European nations in NATO – pay more for their costly U.S. security umbrella.” It never amounted to a foreign policy, *per se* – and therefore is, to a large extent, anchorless.

As a simple message that every American could grasp, however, it worked. Yet those very states give to the U.S. “less than peanuts” in return. The U.S. cannot afford this “generosity” any longer: it needs to rebuild its home. Most Americans can respond to such a plain statement of obvious truth.

Shackled by Groupthink

True, as Parry wrote, there had been some hints of “new thinking including abandoning President Obama's fitful – and bloody – campaign to force ‘regime change’ in Syria; accepting a more realistic solution to the political mess in Libya; and trying to cooperate with Russia on combating terrorism, such as the fight against Islamic State and Al Qaeda, and reducing international tensions, such as the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.”

But the fundamental weakness to this approach, as Parry observes, has been that the Administration has been “hobbled by its inability to break free from many of the groupthinks that have dominated Official Washington for the past quarter century or so as the foreign policy establishment fell under the domination of the neoconservatives and their junior partners, the liberal interventionists, virtually banishing the formerly influential ‘realists’ as well as the few peace

advocates.”

The consequence has been that Trump’s team periodically lurches off in pursuit of one or other of these dominating mantras, whether it is “pandering to the Saudis and the Israelis; repeating the neocon mantra that ‘Iran is the principal source of terrorism’ (though that is clearly not true given the support for Al Qaeda and other Sunni terror groups coming from U.S. ‘allies’ such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar); [or] falling into line with NATO’s hype of Russia as the new global villain.”

“But without any strong strategic thinker” Robert Parry has argued, “capable of separating one from the other and leading the administration in a thoughtful direction,” foreign policy will lack any real geo-strategic directionality.

Indeed, it is not clear that the “team” as whole (i.e. members such as Nikki Haley) ever truly concurred with Trump’s pivotal foreign policy insight: that America’s security interests, together with those of Europe, fundamentally intersect in détente with Russia. That notion, now, has been – possibly irrevocably – undermined.

How did this all go so wrong? One can only speculate. But it seems that Trump was reeling from the series of legislative and operational setbacks. Perhaps he was attracted by a wish to demonstrate decisive, bold, immediate action – and this chemical weapon episode seemed to offer him this possibility? There are too, profound rivalries at play in this new Administration, pulling Trump policy in different directions: *Politico* sums this up saying: the “Big fight [in the team] is between nationalists and the ‘West Wing Democrats’”. Steve Bannon and allies are the “nationalists,” and the “West Wing Democrats” is a reference to Jared Kushner (an erstwhile New York, Democrat), and his circle. And Bannon has just been removed from the U.S. National Security Council – either by his own volition, or by Kushner and National Security Adviser McMaster’s maneuverings (it is not so clear).

The rift is deep between the two key advisers, and no doubt is adding to policy volatility, as Kushner vies for the more liberal and popular approach (he complains that Bannon is weakening his father-in-law’s popularity). Bannon represents the more radical and nationalist line.

Perhaps bombing Syria was somehow viewed as a bipartisan and widely popular move in America – a low hanging (\$59 million) fruit?

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.

Trampling the US Constitution for War

Donald Trump's unilateral decision to attack Syria under a preposterous claim of protecting a "vital national security interest" of the U.S. was another case of a President violating the U.S. Constitution, as Daniel C. Maguire explains.

By Daniel C. Maguire

I am old enough to remember the last time the United States declared war in accord with Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution. The date was Dec. 8, 1941, and I was ten-years-old. I remember hearing on the radio all the Yay votes and I was jarred to hear one female vote saying Nay. That was Rep. Jeannette Rankin of Montana.

War, by definition, is state sponsored violence. It kills people and animals and savages the natural environment. It is "development" in full reverse, a dreadfully serious undertaking, a power that kings once wielded arbitrarily on their own impulse and authority. But the Founders would have none of that.

So, the U.S. Constitution gave the war power to the Congress, "the immediate representatives of the people." Congress also received the crucial power of the purse to continue or discontinue war after it starts.

James Madison, the Constitution's principal architect, wrote: "In no part of the Constitution is more wisdom to be found than in the clause which confides the question of war and peace to the legislature and not to the executive department."

Yet, in recent decades, the United States has repeatedly trashed that wisdom and done so as recently as April 6, 2017, as President Trump displayed his bully virility and his need to use kill-power to bolster his sagging ratings.

As military analyst Robert Previdi writes: "We have distorted the Constitution by allowing all Presidents since Harry S. Truman to use military power on their own authority. ... For more than 160 years, from Washington to Roosevelt, no President claimed that he had the power to move the country from peace to war without first getting authority to do so from Congress."

But a servile Congress has whittled away its signal prerogative to make war. In the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964, Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson a blank check signed by a responsibility-shedding Congress.

In 1973, with the War Powers Resolution, it allowed the President to commit troops anywhere in the world for up to 60 days without congressional involvement. By that time in modern warfare, the die would be cast with Congress left holding the President's coat as he uses the power abandoned by congressional defection.

The Iraq Resolution in October of 2002 transferred war-making authority to President George W. Bush for him to use or not use at his whim and discretion. And so it came to pass that another George in American history was given kingly power with predictably disastrous results, much as the arrogance of King George III precipitated Great Britain's break with its American colonies.

Barack Obama, after winning the Nobel Peace prize, went on to make war in places such as Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq Afghanistan, and Pakistan without a congressional declaration of war. The sort of abuse of executive power has become "second nature" to us now.

But at least Obama asked Congress to authorize war on Syria, a move that contributed to the decision to avoid a full-scale U.S. military intervention in another Mideast war. There were other moments of sanity when constitutional restraint peeked through. On April 5, 1954, when President Eisenhower was under pressure to do an air strike in Indochina, he replied to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles: "Such a move is impossible" and would be "completely unconstitutional and indefensible." (Remember when Republicans could say such things!)

Commander-in-Chief?

The term "Commander-in-Chief" is perverted to justify Congressional surrender of its constitutional war-declaring power to the royal president. The term runs like a greased pig through political discourse these days.

As Robert Previdi notes: "The President's power as Commander-in-Chief in time of war takes over only *after* authority to deploy our forces has been received from Congress." The key word there is *after*.

And here is another irony in this story of serially rampaging bombs-away presidents. Richard Falk writes that World War II ended with an historic understanding that recourse to war by individual nations could no longer be treated as "a matter of national discretion."

The legal framework embodied in the United Nations Charter, largely shaped by American jurists, was "to entrust the Security Council with administering a prohibition of recourse to international force (Article 2, Section 4) by states except in circumstances of self-defense, which itself was restricted to response

to a prior 'armed attack' (Article 51) and only then until the Security Council had the chance to review the claim."

This is known in the literature as "the policing paradigm." It means that state-sponsored violence can only be justified in a community context with legal and internationally enforceable restrictions comparable to the restraints we put upon our police. This civilizing understanding lies amid the smoking rubble of a world of endless war.

A president can become the despotic shepherd only when the people become his sheep. In recent decades, the *vox populi* has only bleated when it should have been screaming. Teddy Roosevelt said: "To announce that there must be no criticism of the President, or that we are to stand by the President, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American People."

Yes, members of Congress, with a few noble exceptions, are groveling wimps and aliens to the lost art of diplomacy, but it's also true that an ill-informed, lazy and indolent citizenry is neck high in treasonous negligence. In the end, the buck stops with us.

Daniel C. Maguire is a Professor of Moral Theology at Marquette University, a Catholic, Jesuit institution in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is author of *A Moral Creed for All Christians* and *The Horrors We Bless: Rethinking the Just-War Legacy [Fortress Press]*. He can be reached at daniel.maguire@marquette.edu .
