

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](#)).
