

War Requires Ugly Choices



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By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

Presidents miscalculate in war all the time, from John F. Kennedy launching the Bay of Pigs invasion and inviting the Diem coup in Vietnam, to Lyndon Johnson escalating without believing in victory, to Harry Truman failing to draw a red line around Korea, to George W. Bush pinning so much of the public case against Saddam Hussein on weapons of mass destruction.

The Trump administration didn't fail to perceive the Hormuz Strait risk. It bet a regime survivor (aka an Iranian Delcy Rodriguez) would quickly sue for peace and make the issue moot, in a case of scenario fixation syndrome.

Now U.S. prestige has been committed. The best must be made of it. Options include a convoying and fire-suppression effort to take back control of the Persian Gulf—an open-ended military commitment. Or the U.S. might make a hostage of Iran's own oil exports, which are actually increasing while the regime gives itself free passage in the Gulf. A U.S. Marine flotilla may be on its way to Kharg Island, where it would need constant overhead protection against Iranian drones and missiles. Add that Iran is believed to have 50 days of output

stored on tankers, about half of it around Singapore.

Then an idea that seems to be grudgingly considered: leveling Iran's oil industry, forcing Iran's customers, neighbors and allies to deal with the mess.

Mr. Trump understandably finds the notion repulsive, just days earlier picturing a friendly or at least compliant regime that would marry its oil power to America's, in the great game with China.

Mr. Trump bombed military emplacements on Kharg but, as he put it, spared an attack that would "knock the hell" out of "the pipes."

Iran's normal incentive, let's understand, is *not* to interfere with Hormuz shipping, making an enemy of its own customers, importantly China. The exception: when the regime is under existential, terminal threat—exactly the consideration Mr. Trump set out to create.

That's why his regime-change war has become an oil war.

I'm aware of the speculation that the U.S. acted to take an Iran threat off the board in light of a possible Taiwan contingency. The counterargument: Weakness is provocative. The U.S. has shown its military highly capable, all the more reason to challenge it while it's distracted and its stocks are low.

Mr. Trump has made a situation for himself. If Iran can't be coaxed by China or other mediators to reach terms, he may have to esca-

late more than he ever intended or wanted to.

The only U.S. flag officer to win a Pulitzer, Adm. William Sims, wrote in 1920's "The Victory at Sea" that the point of escorting Allied shipping in World War I wasn't to protect the ships. Convoys were bait. German subs were forced to surface in the presence of Allied destroyers or give up the fight, as they did.

If Trump wants to exit rather than escalate, he can take out Iran's oil infrastructure.

In the Gulf today, the parallels are exactly zip. Iran not only fields elusive, multi-pronged threats to shipping traffic via speedboat, drone, mine and missile. It need only threaten the flow to stop it.

But there's a flip side. The U.S. is a net exporter; oil is a shrinking share of household budgets and total domestic output. The U.S. economy is more flexible, not least because of the Carter-era deregulation of transportation.

In the Iranian revolution of 1979, oil reached \$165 in today's dollars. Analysts are fretting now about the possibility of \$150.

The Soviet Union is no more. The main beneficiary of 1980's Carter Doctrine, which held that the U.S. must defend the Gulf even at the risk of nuclear war, is China.

Strategic conceptions are ripe to be overhauled in the heat of crisis. U.S. troops don't need to be risked to protect China's oil. If a reasonable settlement isn't forthcoming, Mr. Trump can tell Tehran the U.S. will unleash its precision munitions on its export infrastructure.

Mr. Trump can still hope a better option will materialize—the outcome I'd bet on. China or other intercessors will engineer the out he seeks because they fear his escalation. But this outcome will receive impetus only if he shows himself willing to follow the logic of the regime-change war he started and the oil war he got.

Ironically, the U.S. was already in a good and improving position in Iran, thanks to the regime's domestic unpopularity, Mr. Trump's sanctions, and U.S. and Israeli suppression of its nuclear program and air defenses.

The U.S., in other words, was in a good position to attend to other priorities, such as rebuilding its military stockpiles and adapting to a new strategic environment and new war technologies.

More than its allies, the U.S. has done the right things on energy and national-security investments. China is still a long way from being able to act militarily in the Gulf. Remember, Mr. Trump's larger purpose was supposed to be redistributing peacekeeping duties to regional stakeholders so the U.S. can focus on bigger matters.