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Trump's War Whoop: a Gulf of Tonkin Moment?

By Mike Whitney

April 6, 2017



An attack on an ammunition dump that contained chemical weapons has touched off a massive propaganda blitz aimed at drawing the United States deeper into Syria's six year-long war. The incident which took place in the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun, killed an estimated 72 people and left several hundred others severely ill. According to Russia Today:

“The warehouse (that was bombed) was used to both produce and store shells containing toxic gas...The shells were delivered to Iraq and repeatedly used there... Both Iraq and international organizations have confirmed the use of such weapons by militants.” (RT)

Reports in the western media have dismissed the RT account as “nonsense” and placed the blame squarely on Syrian President Bashar al Assad. Leading the charge once again is the *New York Times* chief propagandist Michael R. Gordon who, readers may recall, co-authored fake news stories with Judith Miller about Saddam’s elusive Weapons of Mass Destruction. Here’s a sample of Gordon’s work from a piece he wrote (with Miller) in 2002. It helps to put Tuesday’s incident into perspective:

“More than a decade after Saddam Hussein agreed to give up weapons of mass destruction, Iraq has stepped up its quest for nuclear weapons and has embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb, Bush administration officials said today. In the last 14 months, Iraq has sought to buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes, which American officials believe were intended as components of centrifuges to enrich uranium. American officials said....” (New York Times)

Gordon’s article helped pave the way for invasion of Iraq, the killing of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and the destruction of one of the world’s oldest civilizations. Now he’s moved on to Syria. Here’s a blurb from his latest piece titled “Worst Chemical Attack in Years in Syria; U.S. Blames Assad”:

“The United States blamed the Syrian government and its patrons, Russia and Iran, on Tuesday for one of the deadliest chemical weapons attacks in years in Syria, one that killed dozens of people in Idlib Province, including children, and sickened scores more.

A senior State Department official said the attack appeared to be a war crime and called on Russia and Iran to restrain the government of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria from carrying out further chemical strikes.

Britain, France and Turkey joined Washington in condemning the attack, which they also attributed to Mr. Assad’s government. The United Nations Security Council was scheduled to be briefed on the attack on Wednesday.” (New York Times)

Does that sound like a justification for war? Gordon seems to think so.

And Gordon is not alone either. He is joined by the entire western media and their blood-thirsty colleagues on Capital Hill. Now it appears that President Donald Trump –who promised an end to Washington’s regime change wars– has joined their ranks. Here’s the statement Trump issued on Tuesday shortly after the attack:

“Today’s chemical attack in Syria against innocent people, including women and children, is reprehensible and cannot be ignored by the civilized world. These heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime are a consequence of the past administration’s weakness and irresolution. President Obama said in 2012 that he would establish a “red line” against the use of chemical weapons and then did nothing. The United States stands with our allies across the globe to condemn this intolerable attack.” President Donald J. Trump, Office of the Press Secretary, April 04, 2017

Repeat: “These heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime ...cannot be ignored by the civilized world”.

Is Trump planning to lead the U.S. into a war with Syria?

Compare ‘President Trump’s’ comments this week to ‘Candidate Trump’s’ comments in December 2016:

“We will pursue a new foreign policy that finally learns from the mistakes of the past... We will stop looking to topple regimes and overthrow governments.... Our goal is stability not chaos, because we want to rebuild our country (the United States) ...In our dealings with other countries, we will seek shared interests wherever possible and pursue a new era of peace, understanding, and good will.”

Quite a difference, eh? Now check out these blurbs on Trump’s Twitter account in 2013 when Citizen Trump was trying to persuade Obama that he should “stay the hell out” of the Syrian conflict.

From the Real Donald J. Trump– “We should stay the hell out of Syria, the “rebels” are just as bad as the current regime. WHAT WILL WE GET FOR OUR LIVES AND \$ BILLIONS?ZERO”

5:33 PM – 15 Jun 2013

Donald J. Trump– “President Obama, do not attack Syria. There is no upside and tremendous downside. Save your “powder” for another (and more important) day!”

6:21 AM – 7 Sep 2013

Donald J. Trump– “What will we get for bombing Syria besides more debt and a possible long term conflict? Obama needs Congressional approval.”

11:14 AM – 29 Aug 2013

The difference between Citizen Trump and President Trump could not be starker. Citizen Trump was nearly a pacifist while President Trump has deployed more Marines and Special Forces to Iraq and Syria, 2,000 more US combat troops to Kuwait (in anticipation of a broader conflict) and stepped up US operations in Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan and beyond. Even more troubling is the fact that he has loaded his foreign policy team with right-wing militarists like James “Mad Dog” Mattis (who leveled the Iraqi city of Falluja in a vicious fit of rage.) and Lt Gen HR McMaster, who was recently denounced by a retired senior US Military Police officer, Arnaldo Claudio, as a war criminal for “human rights abuses of detainees in Tal Afar, during the Iraq war.” (See: “US Army Investigator Accuses National Security Adviser McMaster of War Crimes in Iraq”, The Libertarian Institute)

What's so disturbing about the appointments of Mattis and McMaster is that Trump has apparently relinquished control over foreign policy and handed it over to his generals whose political orientation is at the far right-end of the spectrum.. Check out this clip from an article at Antiwar.com by Jason Ditz:

“Trump Expands Pentagon’s War Authority– Trump Giving Commanders Increasing Autonomy to Conduct Operations

While most of the talk about the Pentagon’s proposals for various wars to President Trump has focused on requests for more troops in more countries, a much less publicized effort has also been getting rubber stamped, one giving commanders in those wars increasing autonomy on operations....

While President Trump is eager to make such moves early on to show that he is “listening to the generals,” granting so much autonomy to the military to fight its own wars without political oversight is risky business.... as it further distances America’s direct foreign interventions from politicians, and by extension from the voters, turning the details of major military operations into little more than bureaucratic details for career military brass.

These major changes are happening in almost complete silence, as while there have been mentions of the Pentagon seeking these new authorities, always as an afterthought to getting more troops, there is little to no interest in debating the question.” (antiwar.com)

Think about that for a minute: The world’s most lethal killing machine is now in the hands of career militarists who are trained to win wars not seek political solutions. How can this not lead to a dramatic escalation? Trump thinks that by abdicating his responsibility as Commander in Chief he is showing his support for his generals, but what he’s really doing is revealing his feeble grasp of how the system works. His approach can only lead to more needless carnage, that much is certain.

So what happens now, and how does all this fit with Tuesday’s chemical attack in Syria?

The western media and the political class have already decided that the incident is going to be used for two purposes:

1. Discredit Syrian President Bashar al Assad
2. Create a justification for increasing US military involvement.

The fact that Assad and Putin have already denied that Syria used chemical weapons (“We deny completely the use of any chemical or toxic material in Khan Sheikhoun town today and the army has not used nor will use in any place or time, neither in past or in future,” the army said in a statement, as quoted by Reuters) is not going to make any difference at all. The pretext has already been established and the Pentagon’s strategy may soon be launched.

At the very least, we can expect a more forceful attempt to seize and occupy the eastern quadrant of the country, establish military bases, impose a no-fly zone, and boost the number US combat troops in the theater. There's also a good chance that the US will engage the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) at Deir Ezzor in their effort to clear and capture east Syria.

The prospects of a conflagration between the United States and Russia are increasing by the day.

God help us all.