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## ***Pulling Back From War: Trump and the Politics of De-Escalation***



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As “the loudest voice” in the room, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo successfully lobbied for President Trump to authorize the illegal assassination strike against Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. This “victory” proved fleeting, however, considering the risks to this administration’s reelection that accompanied all-out war. A full-blown conflict appeared increasingly likely following Iran’s missile strikes on American bases in Iraq’s Anbar province and in Erbil, so it is understandable for Americans to be surprised by Trump’s

reversing course, and with the de-escalation he announced in his latest speech to the nation.

American politics has become increasingly carnivalesque in the era of Trump. Making effective predictions is difficult with a leader this volatile. One day, he's escalating the conflict with Iran by ordering the assassination of a major state leader. The next, he's pulling back from the precipice of war, showing restraint by avoiding a full-blown conflict. Despite this schizophrenia, I believe there is a coherent explanation for why Trump reversed course with Iran, and it is directly motivated by fear of public fallout in the face of war.

For one, it's worth pointing out that the Jekyll and Hyde foreign policy approach has become routine with this President. Trump has a long history of playing chicken with foreign leaders, particularly with regard to potential military conflicts. Consider examples that litter his presidency: 1. The threat to "totally destroy North Korea," followed by rhetorical overtures in the form of a diplomatic PR meeting with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un; 2. Trump's "escalation-deescalation" against Syria's Bashar Assad, via the 2017 bombing of the Shayrat air base. The strike was undertaken in the name of stopping Syria from future use of chemical weapons against its own people. But the bombing was largely symbolic, as it was accompanied by Trump providing Russian and Syrian leaders with advance warning, and which wrought minimal damage on the Syrian government's military capabilities; 3. Trump's back-and-forth with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in which he repeatedly insisted, despite seeking to avoid a Turkish invasion of Syria, that Erdogan was free to invade, but that Turkey would be forced to take over anti-ISIS operations following its occupation. These examples, in addition to his latest actions with Iran, reveal a picture of a president who thinks that militarism and aggressive posturing are central to maintaining his "credibility" as a strong-man and a decisive leader, even as he has little interest in pursuing all-out wars with foreign adversaries.

This aversion to all-out war is also apparent with regard to Iran. Trump spoke explicitly in mid-2019 about U.S. military engagement against Iran in terms of avoiding a commitment to American "boots on the ground." The reluctance to commit ground troops is no sign of principled anti-imperialism, and it is not unique to Trump, but rather has become a structural feature of American politics following Bush's extremely unpopular war with Iraq. Barack Obama also spoke repeatedly about limiting U.S. military conflicts in the Middle East, about ending conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and promising to

avoid “boots on the ground” in Syria. Obama eventually reneged on his promise of no ground forces in Syria, secretly introducing a few thousand troops to commit to the U.S. anti-ISIS campaign from late 2015 onward. Still, Obama’s secret escalation, coupled with the relatively limited military engagement of troops, spoke to a new reality in which mass anti-war sentiment restricts U.S. military engagements abroad, even if it hasn’t ended them.

The reluctance of both Democratic and Republican officials to introduce ground troops in U.S. conflicts overlaps with the public’s opposition to open-ended military campaigns in the Middle East, and with their concern about American military casualties. It’s worth pointing out that one of the first comments Trump made in his “de-escalation” speech with Iran was to note that no American servicemen or women had been killed in Iran’s strikes on U.S. military bases. Clearly, this issue was highly salient for this administration, as it stood at the brink of war. And insider accounts now make it clear that American casualties were a primary concern for members of the Trump administration, as they assessed how to respond to Iran’s missile strikes on U.S. military bases in Irbil and al Asad.

It is probably the case that a prolonged war with Iran would have spelled the end of an already unpopular Trump administration. By going “all-in” on war, any resulting bloodshed and loss of American life would fall squarely at Trump’s feet. The primary obstacle Trump would face in such a campaign is the public itself, which has long been casualty averse. With the U.S. nearly two decades into its “War on Terrorism,” foreign conflicts have cost the country trillions in financial resources, and thousands of lives, not to mention the mass destruction brought upon other nations. And Americans are increasingly unwilling to pay these costs.

It was clear as early as the mid-2000s that Americans were becoming increasingly intolerant of extended wars, in light of steadily rising military casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with rising opposition to war. Having studied the period exhaustively, I found that public frustrations with American casualties and with the financial costs of war were significant in encouraging opposition to war. Year after year, I found through analyses of national opinion surveys that there was a (statistically) significant relationship between support for withdrawal from Iraq on the one hand, and feelings that “removing Saddam Hussein from power was not worth the number of U.S. military casualties and the financial cost of war” on the other [1]. Furthermore, I found

that opposition to the Iraq war transcended “cost-benefit” calculations, as most Americans believed the war was no longer “morally defensible” by the mid-to-late 2000s. Importantly, perceptions of immorality were the strongest predictor of opposition to war – stronger than competing factors such as partisanship, ideology, or beliefs about the lack of “progress” in the war.

The simplest conclusion to draw from the statistics above is that, short of some traumatizing national event like another September 11<sup>th</sup>, the American people have little tolerance for war, especially conflicts in which American servicemen and women find themselves in harm’s way. This trend overlaps with public opinion in the era of Trump. The public is heavily split about the legitimacy of war. Gallup polling from mid-2019 found the public was almost evenly split on beliefs regarding whether the war in Afghanistan “made the United States safer or less safe from terrorism,” while a slim majority (51 percent) thought the war in Iraq made the U.S. less safe (39 percent said it made the U.S. safer) [2]. Furthermore, the public was close to evenly split in late-2019 when asked about whether the U.S. had a “responsibility to remain involved” in the war in Syria, with 51 percent believing the U.S. should remain involved, and 43 percent favoring non-involvement [3].

In the case of a full-blown conflict with Iran, it is not clear that Trump would benefit from a “rally-around-the-flag” effect in terms of cultivating greater public support. As past research finds, rally effects are most likely when a president receives bi-partisan support for the initiative in question. But this has not been the case regarding Trump’s strike on Soleimani, which has received sustained criticism from Democratic officials seeking to impose restraints on the ability of Trump to go to war. As with Trump’s pull-back from war, Democratic attempts at restraint are hardly a sign of principled anti-imperialism, since the party has never been shy about going to war. Rather, Democratic reluctance appears to reflect the same calculus that was made by the Trump administration about the low probability of another war gaining mass support.

The public is quite divided on Trump’s assassination order. The most recent Reuters poll conducted from January 6-7, immediately after the drone strike against Soleimani, reveals that 53 percent of Americans disapprove of Trump’s “handling” of Iran, an increase of 9 percentage points from December 2019, with 39 percent of Americans “strongly disapproving” – a growth of 10 percent from the month prior.

Reuter’s results suggest a deep division among Americans on Trump’s actions. As of this month, nearly all Democratic Americans (almost 9 in 10) disapprove of Trump’s

handling of Iran, while a large majority of Republicans (8 in 10) approve of Trump. Self-described “independents” are split, with 48 percent disapproving and 36 percent approving of the president on Iran. Support among these independents, however, was likely to drop even further over time the longer a conflict with Iran continued, particularly if the U.S. suffered sustained military casualties.

Even without the use of ground troops in a war with Iran, attacks against U.S. servicemen and women throughout the Middle East were likely. These casualties would have resulted in a significant drop in public support the longer a conflict continued. The most recent polling aggregation from this month shows Trump with a 45 percent approval rating. An extended war, if continuing throughout 2020, would likely have produced a significant drop in Trump’s support.

Americans often fall victim to wartime propaganda and deceit, in a nation where roughly half the population pays no attention to politics or votes. But 2020 is not 2001, and short of another major terrorist attack on U.S. soil, Trump is not going to transform into a popular “war president,” akin to what George W. Bush became after the September 11 attacks. Even if Trump’s job approval saw a bump following the onset of war, that support was unlikely to persist in the event of an extended conflict.

Trump’s decision to pull back from the brink of war should not be interpreted as some sort of philosophical commitment to a principled anti-war politics. The assassination of Soleimani would most certainly have ended in war if Iran’s counter-strike had produced American casualties. Rather, the pull-back from war should be understood within a broader political context that recognizes the power of bottom-up pressures placed on modern presidents by a casualty-averse nation.

## **Notes**

[1] The relationship between feelings that the Iraq war was not worth it due to rising financial and military costs is consistently statistically significant across numerous polls from the mid to late 2000s, after controlling for various factors, including partisanship, ideology, gender, race, age, income, and education. This analysis is based on an examination of polling data from the iPoll database, drawn from Wall Street Journal/NBC polling during those years.

[2] These findings are revealed via Gallup’s August 2019 polling, covering public perceptions of both Afghanistan and Iraq.

[3] CNN's October 2019 poll surveyed Americans on their beliefs regarding whether the U.S. should remain in Syria following Trump's claims that he would be withdrawing from the country in light of ISIS's "defeat."