

Trump's Deja Vu Wartime Playbook

By [Dr. Jack Rasmus](#)

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History repeats itself, as they say. But in the age of American empire, not just twice. Or even three times. But with disturbing regularity.

The past half century shows two things about how America goes to war:

First, it creates a provocation based on a lie. Second, it then makes its target adversary an 'offer they can only refuse', as the final justification for US military action once the adversary rejects the unacceptable offer.

Here's how it has worked in the past half century—a playbook to war that Trump is now clearly following in the case of Iran with his recent ordered assassination of that country's general and government diplomat.

As for the initial provocations based on a lie:

1. In 1964 there was the infamous 'Tonkin Gulf' incident that provided then president Johnson the cover to escalate US involvement in Vietnam. Later Pentagon documents made public revealed the alleged attacks on US ships off Vietnam by North Vietnamese patrol boats was a total fabrication. 58,000 US and 2 million Vietnamese deaths later, the evidence came out that it was all a hoax.

2. Then there was the 1991 Gulf War. The convenient provocation that turned out to be a lie once again was the Bush administration claim that Iraq was killing babies in incubators in Kuwait. That too turned out to be false, propagated by a family member of the Kuwaiti royal elite who stood before US cameras showing the broken incubators. The US media of course did not properly identify her, instead depicting her as a concerned woman protesting the deaths of premature babies. The US media flooded the American evening news to create final public support for the subsequent US invasion. After the invasion of Kuwait and Iraq forces it was revealed it was all a staged event. Also revealed afterward was how the Bush Sr. administration, through the US ambassador, had told Saddam Hussein, that the US would not intervene if Saddam invaded Kuwait in the first place.

3. In 2001 immediately after 9-11 events in the US the excuse for invading Afghanistan was that the Taliban government in power at the time had assisted Bin Laden in attacking New York and Washington. It later came out the Taliban had nothing to do with planning or launching the attacks of 9-11. And little was said in the weeks, after 9-11 and preceding the US invasion of Afghanistan, that 18 of the 20 or so terrorists who flew the planes into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon were in fact Saudi Arabian Wahhabi sect terrorists aided and supported by the Saudi government. Saudis in the US at the time of 9-11 were quickly flown out of the US by a plane arranged by the George W. Bush administration. Who left on the US aided flight is still publicly unknown to this day. The US

'unacceptable offer' to the Taliban was the demand it turn over Bin Laden and all his supporters in Afghanistan-i.e. something impossible without the Taliban provoking its own internal civil war.

4, Then we have the 2003 decision by Bush Jr. invading Iraq. Now the cover lie was that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, having amassed 'yellow cake' uranium material with which to make a nuclear weapon. That too proved totally false after the fact. After the US invasion, nothing remotely representing weapons of mass destruction could be found anywhere despite intense US military efforts to discover such. But in the run-up to war in 2002-03 the lie provided the cover to start the war. And the US demand that Saddam allow US military personnel to roam free anywhere in Iraq-i.e. accept the invasion without resistance-constituted the 'unacceptable offer' that the US bet Saddam would reject.

All these lies as bases for provocation represent the standard approach by the US when it wants to go to war. The provocations are then followed by extending an unacceptable 'offer they cannot accept' to the targeted adversary. The unacceptable offer is the signal the US has already decided to go to war and is setting up a pretext to justify military action. By refusing the unacceptable offer, the adversary thus gives the US no alternative but to commence the military action.

In the case of the 2nd Gulf War the unacceptable offer was the US demand that US forces be allowed to enter Iraq, roam free unannounced wherever they wanted, and inspect all military bases and other government institutions without interference. In the first Gulf War, it was the similar demand that Saddam pull out all his forces from Kuwait, redeploy far from its borders, and permit US coalition inspectors into Iraq. In Vietnam, it was the Vietcong should disband and both it and North Vietnam should accept a permanent two-state solution, forever dividing North and South Vietnam.

In all cases the US way to war is to make an offer it knows will be refused so that it appears further negotiation or diplomatic efforts are fruitless. Thus only military action is left.

Trump's Deja Vu Provocation

Trump's recently ordered assassination of Iran's senior military leader (who was also a senior Iranian diplomat, Soleimani, is being justified by the Trump administration based on claims that Soleimani and Iran were planning widespread terrorist actions that would have killed scores, if not hundreds, of Americans, if he weren't assassinated. But no evidence of such a threat is being produced by Trump or his government to date. Evidence of the threat was not even given to members of Congress, after the fact over this past weekend, as Trump post-hoc gave Congress an initial briefing on the action already taken. According to the War Powers Act, and well established precedent, Trump was required to consult Congress before the action, not after. And it has been leaked, though not picked up much by the US press, that that post-hoc briefing was considered seriously insufficient by many members of Congress in attendance.

Evidence lately is leaking out that Trump and his neocon foreign policy radical advisors have been planning the assassination at least since late December, and probably earlier. The Trump administration has been escalating its provocations since at least then. A mercenary US contractor was killed and the US compound in Baghdad was 'attacked' by protestors. That in itself was insufficient to launch the assassination provocation. For that, we now have

the story of imminent threat to hundreds of Americans that Soleimani and Iran were planning.

In the case of Vietnam there at least was something tangible, in the false photos of the Tonkin Gulf incident. In the first Gulf War they flooded the US media with pictures of broken baby incubators. In 2003 we had then ambassador Colin Powell showing the United Nations his fake placards of installations in Baghdad where 'yellow cake' might be stored. Now with Trump all we get is to believe his claim widespread terrorist operations against the US were being planned. Claims from an administration already notorious for its lying, fake news, and fantasy tweets.

What's Trump's 'Unacceptable Offer'?

Events in the days and weeks ahead (surely not months) will reveal what will be Trump's 'unacceptable offer'.

Following the assassination, Trump is now clearly waiting on Iran to take some kind of military action against US forces first. The US will use that attack by Iran as an excuse to reciprocate, which is what it apparently has decided to do in the first place back in late December. Since December Trump has been clearly engaged in escalating acts of provocation. The US is betting on Iran falling into the trap—a trap it can hardly avoid given its domestic politics and international commitments.

But in the current domestic US political climate, Trump cannot take military action first. He is prevented by the War Powers Act from doing so. He is also engaged in a domestic political fight over impeachment. A violation of the War Powers Act could potentially add another article of impeachment for violating the War Powers Act law. So he needs to provoke further military action by Iran. That will enable him to actually use the War Powers Act to reciprocate militarily against Iran, and remain still within the War Powers Act. For the Act permits the president to 'protect US forces' immediately and later come back to Congress for justification of the action. Trump will launch an attack on Iran should the latter attack US forces, and he'll then argue his response was protected by the War Powers Act and not a violation of it.

Trump's latest tweets identifying Iranian targets, including cultural targets, are also designed to threaten and infuriate Iran and get them to attack US forces first. Iran has already indicated it considers the assassination an 'act of war'. Having said such, for it to do nothing would be politically unacceptable. Iran has publicly declared, however, its targets would be only US military. The likeliest military targets are in Iraq. Once Iran makes the next move, and where, and how, will define what Trump America's 'unacceptable offer' as a prelude to war might well be.

The provocation (assassination of Soleimani) has been made. The US 'unacceptable offer' may not be long in coming.

Postscript On the Origins of War in the Period of Late American Empire

The past half century shows that America's wars are more often than not precipitated by its presidents and their bureaucrat-intellectual advisors. The reasons are some combination of ideology, over-estimation of US power (and under-estimation of adversaries), and decisions by politicians to divert attention from domestic troubles, economic or political, to buttress

their political standing or re-elections.

In the case of LBJ in the 1960s, it was clearly ideological in part. LBJ was obsessed with not losing Vietnam on his watch, as Truman 'lost China' on his, as he often said. Stop communism and the 'domino theory' was widely held by politicians and bureaucrats alike. LBJ was also surrounded by bureaucrat-intellectuals who believed US military power was omnipotent. How could jungle guerrillas in pajamas and sandals dare to resist US military might! Like the Japanese attack on the US in 1941, the thinking was to overwhelm them (guerrillas or USA) with a massive initial force and attack and they'd sue for peace and negotiate. The war would be short. But the USA in 1965 made the same miscalculation as did the militarists in Japan in 1941.

In 1991 the domestic political scene clearly played a role. The US had just experienced a deep financial crisis and a recession in 1990-91. The first Gulf War was a convenient distraction, and a way for then president George Bush Sr. to hopefully boost his re-election bid in 1992-by boosting the economy with war spending and by wearing the mantle of war victor.

In 2003 George W. Bush faced a similar economic and re-election dilemma. The recovery from the 2001 recession was weak. Military spending in Afghanistan was limited. There was no clear military victory. While US forces took over Kabul, the Taliban simply slipped away into the mountains to fight another day. The US economy began to weaken noticeably in 2002 once again. Bush and his neocon advisors had identified and targeted what they called an 'Axis of Evil' of countries that were not willing to abide by its rules of American global empire. The countries were: Libya, Iraq, Syria, and North Korea. Except for the latter, they were all easy military targets. Moreover, little evidence of 'defeat' of terrorists post 9-11 called for a necessary military action before the 2004 elections. Invading Iraq in 2003 would also boost the US economy in 2004. Bush Jr. would enter the 2004 race with a military-spending boosted economy and with military victory under his belt. Once again, distraction from domestic problems and/or boosting re-election were the main determinants-along with neocon-ultra conservative ideological rationalization for military action.

Something of a similar scenario exists today with Trump. Despite Trump hyperbole on the economy, deep weaknesses exist and threaten to emerge more full blown in an election year. Trump's trade wars have produced little economic gain after two years. Domestic politics have left Trump with a pending impeachment hanging over his head, and unknown developments about his personal finances, deals made with foreign powers, and failures to deliver in foreign policy nearly everywhere.

Precipitating a war in his final year in office-should impeachment move forward and the economy move backward-is a card Trump the reckless, high risk taker, convinced of his own personal ego and superiority is very likely to play. He is clearly setting the stage for his big bet: will war with Iran boost his re-election plans and re-energize a weakening economy? Or will it lead to his political demise-as in the case of Johnson or Bush Sr.?

Which road will Trump take? (Which has he already decided to take?). Given the nature of his pre-war provocation in the recent assassination-and Iran's apparent decision to take Trump's bait-the odds are great that Trump is 'rolling the dice' and willing to engage in a risky military adventure. The 'unacceptable offer' when it comes will not be difficult to identify. It appears just a matter of time, and more likely sooner rather than later.

Trump's imminent military adventure holds little in strategic gain for the USA, and great possible loss globally politically as well. But Trump has always been most concerned with his own personal interests, in this case his political re-election. He will, as he already has, sacrifice US long term interests. Trump is about Trump. And nothing else. Americans will not be made safer but less so. So too the world. And before it's all over, political instability as we enter the current 2020s decade may well precipitate economic instability on a scale not yet seen.

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Dr. Rasmus is author of the just published, January 2020 book, 'The Scourge of Neoliberalism: US Economic Policy from Reagan to Trump', Clarity Press, available on his blog at discount at jackrasmus.com. He hosts the Alternative Visions radio show on the Progressive Radio Network and tweets at @drjackrasmus.

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