

# U.S.-Iranian incident: How the Pentagon Planted a False Hormuz Story

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Senior Pentagon officials, evidently reflecting a broader administration policy decision, used an off-the-record Pentagon briefing to turn the Jan. 6 U.S.-Iranian incident in the Strait of Hormuz into a sensational story demonstrating Iran's military aggressiveness, a reconstruction of the events following the incident shows.

The initial press stories on the incident, all of which can be traced to a briefing by deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs in charge of media operations Bryan Whitman, contained similar information that has since been repudiated by the Navy itself.

Then the Navy disseminated a short video into which was spliced the audio of a phone call warning that U.S. warships would "explode" in "a few seconds". Although it was ostensibly a Navy production, IPS has learned that the ultimate decision on its content was made by top officials of the Defense Department.

The encounter between five small and apparently unarmed speedboats, each carrying a crew of two to four men, and the three U.S. warships occurred very early on Saturday Jan. 6, Washington time. But no information was released to the public about the incident for more than 24 hours, indicating that it was not viewed initially as being very urgent.

The reason for that absence of public information on the incident for more than a full day is that it was not that different from many others in the Gulf over more than a decade. A Pentagon consultant who asked not to be identified told IPS that he had spoken with officers who had experienced similar encounters with small Iranian boats throughout the 1990s, and that such incidents are "just not a major threat to the U.S. Navy by any stretch of the imagination".

Just two weeks earlier, on Dec. 19, the USS Whidbey Island, an amphibious warship, had fired warning shots after a small Iranian boat allegedly approached it at high speed. But that incident had gone without public notice.

With the reports from 5th Fleet commander Vice-Adm. Kevin Cosgriff in hand early that morning, top Pentagon officials had all day Sunday, Jan. 6, to discuss what to do about the encounter in the Strait of Hormuz. The result was a decision to play it up as a major incident.

The decision came just as President George W. Bush was about to leave on a Middle East trip aimed in part at rallying Arab states to join the United States in an anti-Iran coalition.

That decision in Washington was followed by a news release by the commander of the 5th

Fleet on the incident at about 4:00 a.m. Washington time Jan. 7. It was the first time the 5th Fleet had ever issued a news release on an incident with small Iranian boats.

The release reported that the Iranian “small boats” had “maneuvered aggressively in close proximity of [sic] the Hopper [the lead ship of the three-ship convoy].” But it did not suggest that the Iranian boats had threatened the boats or that it had nearly resulted in firing on the Iranian boats.

On the contrary, the release made the U.S. warships handling of the incident sound almost routine. “Following standard procedures,” the release said, “Hopper issued warnings, attempted to establish communications with the small boats and conducted evasive maneuvering.”

The release did not refer to a U.S. ship being close to firing on the Iranian boats, or to a call threatening that U.S. ships would “explode in a few minutes”, as later stories would report, or to the dropping of objects into the path of a U.S. ship as a potential danger.

That press release was ignored by the news media, however, because later that Monday morning, the Pentagon provided correspondents with a very different account of the episode.

At 9 a.m., Barbara Starr of CNN reported that “military officials” had told her that the Iranian boats had not only carried out “threatening maneuvers”, but had transmitted a message by radio that “I am coming at you” and “you will explode”. She reported the dramatic news that the commander of one boat was “in the process of giving the order to shoot when they moved away”.

CBS News broadcast a similar story, adding the detail that the Iranian boats “dropped boxes that could have been filled with explosives into the water”. Other news outlets carried almost identical accounts of the incident.

The source of this spate of stories can now be identified as Bryan Whitman, the top Pentagon official in charge of media relations, who gave a press briefing for Pentagon correspondents that morning. Although Whitman did offer a few remarks on the record, most of the Whitman briefing was off the record, meaning that he could not be cited as the source.

In an apparent slip-up, however, an Associated Press story that morning cited Whitman as the source for the statement that U.S. ships were about to fire when the Iranian boats turned and moved away — a part of the story that other correspondents had attributed to an unnamed Pentagon official.

On Jan. 9, the U.S. Navy released excerpts of a video of the incident in which a strange voice — one that was clearly very different from the voice of the Iranian officer who calls the U.S. ship in the Iranian video — appears to threaten the U.S. warships.

A separate audio recording of that voice, which came across the VHS channel open to anyone with access to it, was spliced into a video on which the voice apparently could not be heard. That was a political decision, and Lt. Col. Mark Ballesteros of the Pentagon’s Public Affairs Office told IPS the decision on what to include in the video was “a collaborative effort of leadership here, the Central Command and Navy leadership in the field.”

“Leadership here”, of course, refers to the secretary of defense and other top policymakers at the department. An official in the U.S. Navy Office of Information in Washington, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the issue, said that decision was made in the office of the secretary of defense.

That decision involved a high risk of getting caught in an obvious attempt to mislead. As an official at 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain told IPS, it is common knowledge among officers there that hecklers — often referred to as “Filipino Monkey” — frequently intervene on the VHF ship-to-ship channel to make threats or rude comments.

One of the popular threats made by such hecklers, according to British journalist Lewis Page, who had transited the Strait with the Royal Navy is, “Look out, I am going to hit [collide with] you.”

By Jan. 11, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell was already disavowing the story that Whitman had been instrumental in creating only four days earlier. “No one in the military has said that the transmission emanated from those boats,” said Morrell.

The other elements of the story given to Pentagon correspondents were also discredited. The commanding officer of the guided missile cruiser Port Royal, Capt. David Adler, dismissed the Pentagon’s story that he had felt threatened by the dropping of white boxes in the water. Meeting with reporters on Monday, Adler said, “I saw them float by. They didn’t look threatening to me.”

The naval commanders seemed most determined, however, to scotch the idea that they had been close to firing on the Iranians. Vice-Adm. Kevin Cosgriff, the commander of the 5th Fleet, denied the story in a press briefing on Jan. 7. A week later, Comdr. Jeffery James, commander of the destroyer Hopper, told reporters that the Iranians had moved away “before we got to the point where we needed to open fire”.

The decision to treat the Jan. 6 incident as evidence of an Iranian threat reveals a chasm between the interests of political officials in Washington and Navy officials in the Gulf. Asked whether the Navy’s reporting of the episode was distorted by Pentagon officials, Cmdr Robertson of 5th Fleet Public Affairs would not comment directly. But she said, “There is a different perspective over there.”

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