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## Trump's Iran Strike Leaves Anti-War Republicans Out in the Cold Again

Sam Brodey

January 8, 2020

The Trump era was supposed to be an ascendant one for Republicans like Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, who had tried unsuccessfully for years to win the GOP's bitter internal debate over U.S. entanglements in the Middle East.

Under the banner of "America First," Trump the candidate vowed to implement a nationalist foreign policy by ending wars abroad and instead refocusing on domestic priorities.

But days after President Trump ordered a drone strike to kill a top Iranian general—prompting widespread fears of all-out war—Paul found himself in a familiar place that libertarian-minded Republicans hoped they'd be leaving behind: the minority.

By Tuesday afternoon, Paul was the only Senate Republican to openly back a measure to curb Trump's power to wage war with Iran, his usual band of non-interventionist lawmakers mostly stayed away. Meanwhile, rivals like the hawkish Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) lobbed Twitter potshots at him for arguing that Gen. Qassem Soleimani's death amounted to the "death of diplomacy."

As Paul walked alone to the Senate floor Tuesday, The Daily Beast asked him if the strike meant that Trump had finally turned away from the America First platform he ran on. "I think the President's sentiments are still against large, land-based wars," Paul responded. "I think he really, truly believes that the Iraq War was a mistake. Whether or not that's consistent with the escalation of things with Iran, I think time will tell. My fear is that escalating things with Iran could turn out with the same repercussions as the war with Iraq did."

Trump's decision to take out Soleimani is among the most consequential of his presidency; in the realm of foreign policy, it's the boldest in a series of decisions that saw the president take the more hawkish direction his party has historically preferred. Since taking office, Trump has vetoed legislation to end U.S. involvement in the civil war in Yemen, ordered military strikes against the Syrian regime in 2017 and 2018, and has failed to make good on promises to end U.S. involvement in Afghanistan under substantial pressure from allies like Graham.

To the hawkish camp, the Soleimani strike presents another significant piece of evidence that Trump is simply reflecting the consensus in his party. "I'd reject the idea that there's a split on this particular issue in the GOP," said one senior House Republican aide. "You have all Republicans and the president on one side, and Rand on the other."

Others who have openly backed Trump's brand of America First foreign policy, meanwhile, have argued that the Soleimani strike is not inconsistent with that aim. Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT), a

libertarian-minded conservative who often joins Paul on foreign policy votes, said the move doesn't mean Trump has become an interventionist. "He is looking to punch harder to protect a narrow set of U.S. interests," Lee said in a statement to The Daily Beast. "He is not looking to save the world through extended U.S. involvement."

In a speech to the nation on Wednesday morning, Trump attempted to strike that exact balance, telling Americans that war was not on the horizon and declaring that the removal of Soleimani was necessary to avoid further conflict. He also cast Iran's decision to retaliate by launching missiles at U.S. military targets in Iraq—but reportedly not causing casualties—on Tuesday night as a victory, saying that "Iran appears to be standing down, which is a good thing for all parties concerned."

However, instead of moving on from the potential conflict, Trump reverted back to the years-long, so-called "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran, announcing new "punishing economic sanctions" on Iran's economy. "These powerful sanctions will remain until Iran changes its behavior," said Trump.

Despite it all, some non-interventionists still believe Trump's end-the-wars instincts haven't changed and won't change—meaning that each day presents a new opportunity for them to win him over. "I don't think there's any sort of solace in believing that somehow Hillary Clinton would have been less belligerent in the Middle East," asserted Paul. "So, I still hope for the best."

A close confidante of Trump's, Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.) has not been a hawk in his time in office. The congressman, who is leaving the Capitol soon for a to-be-disclosed job with Trump, is certain that the president remains in that camp, too.

"I know he's in that space," Meadows told The Daily Beast on Tuesday. "I don't think—I know he's in that space."

But if Trump's foreign policy decisions are, as Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA) quipped, seemingly most influenced by "the last person that talks to him," the hawks seem poised to win out. Hardly any lawmakers, even those in party leadership, were briefed ahead of the U.S. strike on Soleimani—but Graham, perhaps the most hawkish member of the Senate, was. And Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who has long advocated an aggressive stance on Iran, had for months urged Trump to take out Soleimani.

It's people like Pompeo—who Paul called an "unabashed Iran hawk" and "advocate of regime change"—that Paul says are to blame for why the president keeps making decisions that seemingly don't reflect his non-interventionist instincts.

"The President says their goal is not regime change and I believe him when he says that," said Paul, "but I'm not sure if that's the same policy that Pompeo or [former national security adviser John] Bolton advocated. I think there's never been somebody that he's appointed who actually truly reflected his position."

That leaves an increasingly lonely group of people like Paul trying to make the case from Capitol Hill while balancing their own political imperatives.

"I feel for Sen. Paul a little bit," said John Glaser, director of foreign policy at the libertarian Cato Institute think tank. "He's constrained by his constituents back home. At the same time, he

also knows since he has the president's ear, he has at least the opportunity to influence policy in a direction he desires.”

Paul and others certainly intend to keep making that case—but as possible hostilities with Iran loom, the vast majority of the congressional GOP is taking pains to show they are fully behind Trump. In this moment, that entails voting against measures in both chambers to block the president's ability to wage war on Iran.

Votes on that same subject were taken last year, and a number of Republicans joined most Democrats to send a message that Trump couldn't bypass Congress in matters of war. In the Senate, seven GOP senators voted to restrain the president's war powers on Iran; in the House, 27 Republicans did so.

When the Senate takes up that legislation again—Kaine is forcing a vote in the coming days—the number of Republicans voting to rein in Trump will be diminished. As of Wednesday, Paul is the only yes; Lee, the closest in the chamber to him ideologically, said Tuesday he'd vote no, citing issues with some claims made in Kaine's bill. In the House, meanwhile, some in the GOP are bullish that few, if any, of their members will vote yes when the Iran war bill from Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA) comes up this week for another vote.

The Republican most aligned with Paul in the House, Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY), told *The Daily Beast* he would “probably” vote for the Khanna amendment. But he also evinced a desire to move on: “I would love to see us end the current back-and-forth, call it a day, and start planning our withdrawal from the Middle East,” he said.

It's possible that well of GOP support could run low, depending on what happens next. Some of those who have cheered the Soleimani decision nevertheless do not want to see a broader escalation on Iran.

Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), a freshman Republican who has praised the president's rhetoric about moving the U.S. away from Middle East wars, said the Soleimani strike was consistent with a limited counter-terrorism mission. But, he said, “I don't love the long multi-month trend towards sending more and more and more troops to Central Command... So, I'm keeping my eye on and I think we need to be careful about that.”

For now, hawks seemed reluctant to gloat that they'd edged out their rivals—not even Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY), who got in an epic Twitter fight with Paul in September over the question of which of their foreign policy viewpoints Trump actually held. Cheney, surfacing a GOP primary-era Trump tweet slamming Paul, called the senator a “big loser” and quipped that his motto “seems to be Terrorists First, America Second.”

Asked by *The Daily Beast* on Tuesday if Trump had fully come around, Cheney simply said that the president made the right call to take out Soleimani, declining to wade into the GOP foreign policy debate she'd participated in last year.

That reluctance could stem from the fact that, ultimately, even close Trump allies are unsure what the president will do next on any given day or topic. “Trying to define Trump absolutely in one camp or the other,” said the House GOP aide, “is a fool's errand.”