

Bill Kaplan: Syrian missile strike

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Last Tuesday, the Syrian regime launched a chemical weapons attack against Syrian civilians, in violation of a 2013 U.S. – Russian deal requiring Syria to destroy its entire chemical weapons program. Syria lied. Although international weapons inspectors supervised the destruction of the Syrian regime’s “declared” chemical weapons stockpile, not all chemical arms were eliminated. On Thursday, Trump gave the go-ahead for a retaliatory U.S. missile strike against Syria. There was no consultation with Congress or congressional authorization. Nor did the Trump administration seek international support from the United Nations or allies.

Politico said: “The White House tried to paint Trump’s Syria strike as rising to a presidential moment. On Friday morning, the administration released a photograph of Trump ... being briefed on the airstrike. ... But if that image was meant to project competence and confidence, it came after days of vacillation over how the administration would handle Assad (Syrian president)” Shortly before the Syrian chemical weapons attack Secretary of State Tillerson and White House press secretary Spicer said regime change was not U.S. policy. There’s more.

Trump has long tweeted about Syria: “We should stay the hell out of Syria” (and) “The president must get congressional approval before attacking Syria – big mistake if he does not!” But that was then, when President Obama was in the Oval Office. Same problem for GOP House Speaker Paul Ryan and Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson. Both tied themselves in knots, opposing Obama’s request for Congress to authorize air strikes against Syria in 2013. Now Ryan and Johnson issue press releases supporting Trump, not standing up for the separation of powers and the constitutional role of Congress to authorize force. It gets worse.

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Trump is in big political trouble and maybe more. The Trump presidential campaign is being investigated by Congress, and the FBI on “whether there was any coordination between the campaign and Russia’s efforts” (to interfere in the 2016 presidential election). Then there is the GOP health care debacle, a draconian Trump budget – dead on arrival, a pattern of incompetence and incoherence by the administration and historic low polls. However, the Syrian missile strike will not solve Trump’s political problems. Nor is it a long-term strategy for Middle East peace and stability. A whiff of Nixon.

When Nixon fired Archibald Cox, Watergate Special Prosecutor, there were calls for impeachment. Then Nixon “ordered a worldwide military alert of American forces, both conventional and nuclear. The move reflected the administration’s perception of Soviet (Russian) intentions to intervene in the Middle East ...” (The Wars of Watergate by Stanley Kutler, late UW-Madison professor). Diversion from Watergate? One constitutional crisis can lead to another.

Now is the time for Speaker Ryan to stop being a Trump toady. Ryan is Speaker of the entire House. He has unique constitutional responsibilities to seriously look into campaign wrongdoing by the Trump administration, and not protecting Trump. Moreover, Congress must authorize the use of force by Trump. History will not be forgiving if Ryan falters in defending the Constitution.

— Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.