

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Washington Iran War Pessimists

When the Marines headed toward the beach on the Tarawa atoll in 1943, things didn't go well. The tide was lower than expected, so the landing craft were hung up on a reef. Marines became easy targets for the Japanese defenders, and hundreds died that day, with more than 3,100 killed or wounded in the four-day battle.

We shudder to think what the reaction would be in Washington if the battle of Tarawa were fought again today. The New York Times wrote after Tarawa in 1943 that "we must steel ourselves now to pay that price" going forward. Today it would be calling for Franklin Roosevelt's impeachment, as would a parade of outraged right-wing podcasters.

This history seems apt given the remarkable pessimism in the media and political class about the U.S. bombing campaign against the terrorist regime in Iran. Five days into the war, you'd think from the coverage and commentary that the U.S. is losing.

Financial markets are said to be in turmoil, the war is "engulfing" the region and maybe the world, the U.S. is running out of missiles, the war is a gift to Russia, and there's no plan for how this ends—these are only a few of the dire media themes.

It's true that war is unpredictable and this one could take bad turns. The six U.S. dead and others wounded are heart-breaking. But judging from the Beltway panic, you'd think America is destined for defeat and deserves it. Rarely have so many seemed so eager to predict American humiliation.

Yet on the evidence so far, the war is going better than expected. Iran's political and military leaders were killed in the first hour in a remarkable display of intelligence collection and precision bombing. Iran's missile stocks, its launchers and production are gradually being destroyed. Its navy may soon be reduced to a few fast skiffs, if they dare to leave shore.

Gen. Dan Caine, the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, said Wednesday that "Iran's theater ballistic missile shots fired are down 86% from the first day of fighting, with a 23% decrease just in the last 24 hours." Their "one-way attack drones" are down 73% from opening salvos.

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The Pentagon says U.S. dominance of the air is so complete that it no longer needs to use as many "standoff" weapons that fire from a distance. Instead it can use more precision-guided gravity bombs that the U.S. has in far greater numbers. Israel and the U.S. are now turning these weapons against the regime's means of domestic control—

the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the paramilitary *basij*.

As for the markets, the surprise so far is how relatively mild the disruption has been. The prices of oil and gasoline are up, but Brent crude is barely higher than it was amid Operation Midnight Hammer last June. A long-term shutdown of oil and natural gas through the Strait of Hormuz would do greater harm, but President Trump says the U.S. Navy may escort tankers. U.S. equity markets dove at first but have since largely recovered.

All of this looks like progress toward achieving the war aims that President Trump laid out on Saturday. The Iranian nuclear sites and missile and naval forces are being degraded to an extent that it would take years to rebuild them, and U.S. casualties have been light.

Yes, regime elements remain in control, and no one knows whether the Iranian people will be able to rise up and overthrow them. Even if they do, the outcome is impossible to predict. A pro-Western regime might emerge, as could rule by leaders who are part of the current regime but swear off designs to build a bomb, dominate their neighbors, or spread terrorism around the world.

A worse outcome is also possible, such as a long civil war that creates refugees that destabilize some neighbors. Wars always lead to surprises, and Mr. Trump took a risk in choosing to bomb again. We wish he had prepared the country better before the war.

But now that the war is underway, and our troops are in harm's way, our perhaps old-fashioned view is that we ought to hope for American success, both military and strategic. The world will be safer if there is a better regime in Tehran that isn't bent on the mission of "death to America." And maybe, before anticipating or cheering failure, we could wait and see how it goes.