



The War America Wasn't Told the Truth About

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There is a particular kind of political moment when the official story and the real story part company so visibly that even the people tasked with defending the official story struggle to keep their faces straight. Washington reached that moment this week.

On Tuesday, senators emerged from a classified briefing on Operation Epic Fury the US-Israeli war on Iran that began four days ago and what they said was remarkable. Not because it was unexpected to those of us who have been watching this unfold, but because it was said out loud, by sitting US lawmakers, after being shown whatever it is the administration considers its best case.

Senator Elizabeth Warren was direct:

It is so much worse than you thought. The Trump administration has no plan in Iran. This illegal war is based on lies and it was launched without any imminent threat to our nation.

Senator Brian Schatz put it differently, but no less bluntly:

There are times when you go into a classified session and walk out having a better understanding of the gravity of the situation and the rationale behind the military action. This is not one of those times. We remain as confused as the American people are.

Senator Rebecca Balint was more specific still: what she heard, she said, did not give her any confidence that there was an imminent threat to the US and that, she added, should always be the measure by which we decide whether to send our troops into harm's way.

Let me pause on that phrase. Imminent threat. It is not an abstract legal nicety.



It is the foundational justification the United States has used for military action since at least the Bush doctrine of 2002 the argument that you can strike first if the danger is real, present, and immediate. It is also, as Senator Mark Warner pointed out after the Senate Intelligence Committee briefing on Monday, precisely what was absent here. ‘This is still a war of choice,’ Warner said. ‘There was no imminent threat to the United States by the Iranians. There was a threat to Israel.’ His conclusion was the more important observation: ‘If we equate a threat to Israel as the equivalent of an imminent threat to the US, then we are in uncharted territory.’

Uncharted territory. That is a careful phrase from a senior intelligence committee member. What he is describing is the quiet abandonment of the legal threshold that has governed, however imperfectly, American decisions about when to go to war.

What makes this week’s Senate reactions so significant is not simply that Democrats are angry they were always going to be angry. It is that the anger is now attaching itself to a specific and documented failure of justification. Secretary Rubio effectively confirmed the problem himself, before the briefings, when he told reporters that the US had known an Israeli strike was coming, that this would trigger Iranian retaliation against American forces, and that the pre-emptive decision was made to get in first. The logic, stripped of its presentation, runs like this: Israel decided to act; Iran would have responded against US assets; therefore America struck first. The threat that supposedly justified the war was a threat that the planning for the war had itself created.

Four different justifications in four days. Nuclear capacity. Ballistic missiles. Regime change. Imminent threat. And as Senator Van Hollen noted, walking out of the closed-door session: what you hear behind closed doors is essentially what you hear in the public domain complete incoherence, no explanation for why Donald Trump broke his promise not to drag the country into additional wars, and constantly shifting narratives about what this is all about. The classified version, in other words, is no more coherent than the public one. The administration did not have a tighter story to tell in private. It just had the same shifting story told in a more expensive room.

Here is what I think this actually tells us and why it matters beyond the current crisis.

For some years now, the United States has been quietly evolving its relationship with the question of international legitimacy for military action. Kosovo in



1999, Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011 each intervention showed, in different ways, that the absence of UN Security Council authorisation was not, in practice, the obstacle it was supposed to be. The legal architecture exists. The enforcement mechanisms do not. Washington has understood this for a long time, and has acted accordingly.

What has not evolved at the same pace is the domestic requirement. International legitimacy can be bypassed. Public legitimacy the need to convince the American people that the war is just, necessary, and worth the cost in lives and treasure remains stubbornly intact. Not because Americans are uniquely principled about military action, but because the political consequences of losing public support for a war are real and serious. Vietnam taught that lesson. Iraq taught it again.

And that is precisely where the current crisis is becoming genuinely dangerous for the administration not in Geneva, not at the Security Council, but in the living rooms and town halls of the American domestic audience. The senators walking out of Tuesday's briefing were not performing for a foreign audience. They were speaking to voters. Senator Van Hollen's description of constantly shifting narratives and Trump breaking his promise not to drag the country into additional wars is not legal argument. It is political argument. It is the beginning of the domestic pressure campaign that historically has done what international condemnation could not.

This is where I want to make an observation that I think is underappreciated in current commentary, particularly outside the United States.

If the way this war ends or is constrained comes from domestic American political pressure rather than from international diplomacy or military stalemate, then the leverage point for other countries is not in Washington's foreign policy establishment. It is in Washington's domestic political conversation. The question for European governments, for Gulf states, for countries like Iraq that have real and ongoing stakes in what happens next, is not primarily how to lobby the State Department. It is how to speak to the American public, and how to amplify the voices within the United States that are already making the case that this war was launched on a lie.

That is an uncomfortable thought for governments that prefer quiet diplomacy. But quiet diplomacy is not what this moment requires. What Senator Warren said in public this week that the war was launched without an imminent threat to the United States is precisely the argument that international law has been



making since the operation began. The difference is that when Warren says it, it lands in the American domestic conversation in a way that a statement from the Arab League or the European Council simply does not.

There is one more thing worth saying, and I say it as someone who has spent years studying the legal frameworks that govern decisions to go to war.

The precedent being set here is the one that should frighten everyone, regardless of their view of Iran or of American power. If the threshold for preemptive military action can be reduced to ‘we anticipated that our ally’s planned strike would trigger retaliation against our forces,’ then any closely coordinated pair of states can manufacture the legal justification for war against a third party at virtually any time. The Rubio doctrine, if it hardens into precedent, does not narrow the circumstances under which force can be used. It eliminates them.

The American senators walking out of Tuesday’s briefing understand this, even if they are articulating it in political rather than legal terms. They are saying, in plain language, that the bar was not met — and that if this bar is accepted, there is no bar. That is not a Democrat problem or a Republican problem. It is the problem of anyone who has a stake in an international order that still, just about, operates on the principle that wars require justification.

The question now is whether the domestic American conversation that is beginning to open up this week can generate enough pressure, fast enough, to matter. History suggests it can. It is the only thing that reliably has.