

Trump's disdain for wounds suffered by troops in Iraq sparks protest

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US President Donald Trump's cover-up and subsequent expression of disdain for the wounds suffered by US troops caught in a missile strike launched by Iran in retaliation for the assassination of Gen. Qassem Suleimani has provoked protest and anger from veterans' groups and within US military circles.

In his initial speech from the White House on the day of the January 8 strike, in which 11 missiles were fired into the al-Asad air base west of Baghdad and one into another facility housing US troops near the city of Erbil, Trump stated, "The American people should be extremely grateful and happy no Americans were harmed in last night's attack by the Iranian regime... We suffered no casualties; all of our soldiers are safe."

On January 16, it was first reported that 11 US soldiers had been evacuated from Iraq aboard medical flights to Germany and Kuwait to be treated for traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and symptoms of concussion caused by their close proximity to the Iranian missile blasts.

Last Friday, the Pentagon revealed that the real number of troops who had suffered traumatic brain injuries in Iraq was 34, three times the number initially reported. Eight of the soldiers had been transferred to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center outside of Washington for treatment, while nine others were being treated at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. Seventeen others were returned to duty in Iraq.

While attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Trump was asked about the contradiction between his original statements and the Pentagon's admission of medical evacuations, as well as the apparent delay in reporting the injuries suffered by US personnel in the January 8 attack.

"I heard they had headaches and a couple of other

things... and I can report it is not very serious," Trump responded. Pressed by a reporter, he repeated, "No, I don't consider them very serious injuries relative to other injuries that I've seen... No, I do not consider that to be bad injuries, no."

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), which in the past Trump has used as a backdrop for his campaign-style right-wing rants, issued a statement Friday demanding the US president apologize for his remarks.

"Veterans of Foreign Wars cannot stand idle on this matter," William Schmitz, the VFW's national commander, said in a statement. "TBI is a serious injury and one that cannot be taken lightly... The VFW expects an apology from the president to our service men and women for his misguided remarks." As yet, there has been no response from the White House.

Similarly, Randy Reese, executive director of the million-member Disabled American Veterans, said, "It just appears the commander-in-chief is somewhat out of touch regarding the seriousness of this injury. There is no mild TBI that doesn't have consequences."

Paul Rieckhoff, founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, tweeted the day after Trump's remarks at the Davos press conference: "Don't just be outraged by #PresidentMayhem's latest asinine comments. Take action to help vets facing TBIs." He added that Trump "really displayed remarkable ignorance about what could be the signature injury of our generation."

According to the Pentagon's Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, more than 408,000 US military personnel have suffered traumatic brain injuries since 2000, making it the most common wound inflicted upon troops deployed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While most recover from these injuries, they can and have caused lasting debilitating effects

that lead to dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's disease and other neurological conditions.

The dismissive attitude taken by Trump toward the wounds suffered by the US troops in Iraq is part of a longstanding pattern. In 2016, while running for president, Trump—who managed to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War with a medical diagnosis of bone spurs—voiced the opinion that “strong” soldiers could go through combat without suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And in a 2017 “condolence” call, he dismissively told the widow of Sgt. La David Johnson, killed in Niger, that he “knew what he signed up for,” while unable to remember the slain soldier's name.

All of this only serves to lay bare the indifference of not only Trump, but the entire US ruling establishment, including both Democratic and Republican administrations, toward the lives of the rank and file of the US military. Behind the cynical “support our troops” rhetoric, they regard them as expendable cannon fodder. This indifference mirrors their attitude toward the working class, in both the United States, from which most of the troops are drawn, and in Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries, where millions have died as a result of US wars of aggression.

In the assassination of Suleimani, one of the most senior leaders in the Iranian government, who was on an official visit to Iraq for a meeting with the country's prime minister, the Trump administration carried out both an act of war against Iran and a war crime, punishable under both international and US law. In this reckless act of aggression, Trump was betting, in the first instance, with the lives of some 80,000 US troops deployed in the Persian Gulf region, all of them within range of Iranian ballistic missiles.

The fact that 34 US troops suffered brain injuries, as opposed to scores or hundreds being killed, was due to Iran's having provided advance warning of the coming attack and calibrating its missile strikes to avoid casualties. Had it been otherwise, a spiral of retaliation and counterretaliation would have led to thousands of deaths on the first day of a confrontation, while inevitably dragging the entire region into a catastrophic war, posing the threat of a global conflagration.

An article published in the *New York Times* Sunday, purportedly based upon interviews with Iranian officials—but more likely sourced within the

CIA—provides a glimpse into how close the world came to such a disaster. The *Times* account is directed at exposing the debate within the Iranian government following the shoot-down of a Ukrainian passenger jet, killing all 172 aboard, over what to reveal to the public. It reveals, however, how close the world came to a major war.

The article states that the tragic incident had been prepared in part by the Iranian authorities' decision not to shut down commercial flights in and out of Tehran's international airport, as missiles were launched at the bases in Iraq. The fear, the *Times* reported, was that this “would create a mass panic that war with the United States was imminent,” something that the largely symbolic Iranian retaliation was designed to avoid.

The results of this decision were compounded by an alert issued by Iran's central air defense command to anti-aircraft units that US warplanes and cruise missiles were on their way to strike Iran, a false alarm that was subsequently retracted. The commander of the missile defense unit near Tehran's airport, however, received the alert, but not the false alarm notice. Nor was he able to communicate with superiors because Iran's communications networks had been jammed by an American cyber-attack. Perceiving the Ukrainian passenger plane as a US warplane attacking Tehran, the Iranian air defense unit fired two missiles that brought the passenger jet down.

The threat of a war in the Middle East escalating into a Third World War has not subsided. The Pentagon prevailed upon Trump not to continue the escalation of aggression following the Suleimani assassination and the largely harmless Iranian counterattack because it was not yet prepared for a full-scale war with Iran. The US military is now making the necessary preparations for just such a catastrophic confrontation.



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