



Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To Expel U.S. Troops After Strike; Interview With Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-IL); Pompeo Brushes Off Skepticism Of Whether Strike Was Justified; Impeachment At An Impasse As Lawmakers Return To D.C.; Some Military Families Caught Off Guard As Troops Head To The Middle East. Aired 6-7p ET

CNN THE SITUATION ROOM 6:00 PM EST

January 5, 2020 Sunday

Copyright 2020 Cable News Network All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Domestic

Length: 7862 words

Byline: Wolf Blitzer, Frederik Pleitgen, Kaitlan Collins, Christine Romans, Samantha Vinograd, Laura Coates, Natasha Chen

Guests: Chuck Hagel, Bill Richardson, Adam Kinzinger

Highlight: Iranian foreign minister mocks Pompeo as arrogant clown. GOP Congressman Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) weighs in on Iraq's parliamentary vote to expel U.S. troops from Iraq and on the deployment of nearly 3,000 American servicemen to the region amid escalating tensions with Iran and Iraq. President Trump's impeachment remains at an impasse as lawmakers return to Capitol Hill this week with the standoff between the House and the Senate still continuing, with House Speaker Pelosi saying she is withholding the two articles of impeachment until it is clear there will be a fair trial in the Senate.

Body

[18:00:00]

WOLF BLITZER, CNN HOST: We want to welcome our viewers here in the United States and around the world. I'm Wolf Blitzer in Washington. You're watching a special edition of THE SITUATION ROOM.

Right now, military threats are flying between the United States and Iran, threats of revenge and destruction, and neither side appears to be backing down at all. Top military advisers to Iran's leaders are telling CNN that the United States can expect a military response against military targets as an answer to the killing of a top Iranian general two days ago.

Just in to CNN a short time ago, these images, the casket of General Qasem Soleimani being carried through the capital of Tehran. We'll take you live to Tehran in just a moment.

President Trump this weekend, meanwhile, is pointing to more than 50 places in Iran that he says will be targeted if Iranian forces retaliate against any Americans. Repeating that threat earlier this afternoon, he tweeted this, quote,

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

should Iran strike any U.S. person or target, the United States will quickly and fully strike back and perhaps in a disproportionate manner.

Our Senior International Correspondent, Fred Pleitgen is joining us now live from the Iranian capital of Tehran. Fred, you personally spoke to that that senior military adviser to Iran's supreme leader. He told you the plan is definitely an Iranian reprisal attack. Update our viewers.

FREDERIK PLEITGEN, CNN SENIOR INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENT: Yes, that's exactly what he said, Wolf. And it's been interesting, because we've been hearing from all levels of Iran's -- government of Iran's power structure ever since Qasem Soleimani has been assassinated, saying that there would be revenge, there would be some sort of response from the Iranians.

But this is the most specific that we've heard from an Iranian official. And this adviser to the supreme leader, someone who is extremely close to the decision-making and to the power structure here in Iran. In fact, he's very much part of a decision-making and very close to Iran's supreme leader.

There were three things that stood out. He said that the Iranians would conduct a military response. It would be against military targets. But he also said, and this was very important, that the Iranians do not want a wider war with the United States. Here's what he said.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

HOSSEIN DEGHAN, MILITARY ADVISER TO IRAN'S SUPREME LEADER: The response, for sure, will be military and against military sites. Let me tell you one thing, our leadership has officially announced that we've never been seeking war and we will not be seeking war. It was America that has started the war, therefore they should expect appropriate reactions to their actions.

The only thing that can end this period of war is for the Americans to receive a blow equal that is equal to the blow they have inflicted. Afterwards they should not seek a new cycle.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

PLEITGENS: Iranians are essentially saying, Wolf, that they are going to strike back but they want it to end there.

I did press that official on what exactly that means or whether or not there was some sort of timeframe. He said that he was not going to give me any more details than that.

But one of the things that he did say, he said despite the fact that Qasem Soleimani has been killed, and, of course, he was a towering figure, Wolf, whom we've been reporting about for years in the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, he says that the Iranian foreign operations are not going to miss a beat. A successor for Qasem Soleimani is already in place. And the Iranians say they have all the capabilities that they had when Qasem Soleimani was still alive.

Finally, Wolf, I also asked this senior adviser whether or not there was still a chance to even talk to the Trump administration or some sort of negotiations, he said at this point in time, absolutely not, Wolf.

BLITZER: All right. Fred, we will get back to you. Fred Pleitgen is in Tehran for us.

As these threats clearly escalate, President Trump seemed to notify Congress by tweet of any potential future strike on Iran if there is retaliation. He tweeted in part, once again, I'm quoting now the president, these media posts will serve as notification to the United States Congress that should Iran strike any U.S. person or target, the United States will quickly and fully strike back, and perhaps in a disproportionate manner.

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

Under the War Powers Act, the president is required to keep Congress informed of military decisions. It's a sign of the times as that act was enacted in 1973 when no one could envision, clearly, Twitter. It's also unclear if President Trump's tweet satisfies that requirement.

I want to bring in our White House Correspondent, Kaitlan Collins. Kaitlan, you're back at the White House right now. Clearly, the rising tension with Iran is coming as the president is facing potentially an impending Senate impeachment trial. You have some new reporting on how President Trump and his staff are preparing. Tell our viewers what you're learning.

KAITLAN COLLINS, CNN WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Yes, Wolf. The president is coming back to the White House here within the next hour after two weeks down in Palm Beach at his Mar-a-Lago club. And when he left Washington before Christmas, he thought he was going to be coming back ready for that trial to start and hoping to be vindicated quickly.

But now that there are still questions about when that trial is even going to start, that is letting uncertainty cloud what his legal plans are going to be. And an indication of this, the president's White House Counsel, Pat Cipollone, who is expected to lead his defense in the Senate impeachment trial, did not travel to Palm Beach with the president and instead remained here at the White House still in touch with the president but working instead from the Legal Counsel's Office here in the West Wing, as did the president's impeachment advisers.

[18:05:10]

And, essentially, what our sources are telling us, Wolf, is the biggest question that is still unanswered, is who exactly it is that's going to be defending the president in this trial. They say, what's affecting that, is they still don't know when it's going to start, what the format of that trial is going to look like, as they are waiting on the House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, to send over those articles of impeachment.

And while it does appear that Pat Cipollone is still going to be the lead for the president, sources tell us that he also wants Jay Sekulow, his outside attorney, to play a role in that. Of course, he wants some of those House Republicans who have been aggressively defending him to do so as well, but he hasn't narrowed down exactly who it is that's going to be.

And he was seen golfing with the former South Carolina congressman, Trey Gowdy, while he was in Palm Beach, raising questions about whether or not the president is going to attempt to put him whether publicly or behind the scenes in his impeachment defense.

Now, those are still big questions that are facing him. A lot of those questions, Wolf, they thought they were going to have answered by the time the president got back to Washington, but they still have not. And now, it's not only that the president is coming back to deal with this Senate impeachment trial, he's also got this challenge from Iran that is facing him.

And you're already seeing Democrats and Republicans tying the two of those together with Democrats saying that the president is trying to distract from impeachment with this and Republicans saying that having something like impeachment on his plate is distracting the president from being able to essentially focus on foreign policy.

So a lot going on as the president is coming back here any minute to the White House.

BLITZER: All right. We'll stay very close touch with you as well, Kaitlan, excellent reporting, as usual.

Joining us now, the former Defense Secretary under President Obama, Chuck Hagel. He served two terms as a U.S. senator from Nebraska as a Republican. Mr. Secretary, thanks so much for coming in.

I'll just give you a list of the few of the developments over the past day or so, a couple of days that have unfolded since Soleimani's killing, and we'll put it up on the screen.

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

Iran is advancing its nuclear program. U.S. Troops may be expelled from Iraq, the Pentagon has temporarily stopped the fight against ISIS in order to focus in protecting U.S. military sites. Trump administration is warning that retaliation from Iran could come within weeks and thousands of U.S. troops from the 82nd Airborne Division are now being deployed to the Middle East.

Amidst all of this, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insists America is safer today following the killing of Soleimani. What do you think?

CHUCK HAGEL, DEFENSE SECRETARY UNDER PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, we start with, Wolf, actions have consequences and always included in that are unintended consequences. You never take actions like this without thinking through second and third order consequences, what happens if, what happens if. I haven't seen any intelligence on this, Wolf.

But it appears to me that that wasn't thought through. I don't know what the strategic interests are, diplomatic strategic objectives are here, how we're accomplishing those. I mean, we are further destabilizing an already violently unstable and combustible area of the world. So adding more troops, isolating ourselves in the Middle East, our European allies have made some pretty strong comments about our actions, as the United Nations have. I don't know how we've won so far in the last two days on this.

BLITZER: Was it a mistake to kill Qasem Soleimani?

HAGEL: Well, Soleimani was a dreadful man. He was an enemy of the United States. He was responsible for killing hundreds of Americans. But there's a smart way to do this, Wolf, and then a not so smart way to do this.

I mean, I find it very interesting when I hear the argument that we killed Soleimani, all those attacks would stop and we deter Iran from any further terrorist actions. That's not the way it works. One man doesn't stop that. I mean, just as we know, 24 hours after he was killed, his deputy was put in charge of the Quds Force of Revolutionary Guard. So it's bigger than that.

And I'm not sure that anybody has really thought this through.

BLITZER: When you were defense secretary during the Obama administration, was he on target your list, Qasem Soleimani?

HAGEL: Sure, he was on all target lists. And --

BLITZER: Were you close to killing him at one point but decided not to because of the ramifications?

HAGEL: You always plan options. You always think about possibilities. But, again, you've got to go back to what your larger strategic interest. What do you want to accomplish? That's a short- term kill, okay? One man is down and there will be others to fill in.

But the bigger point is what do you want to accomplish in Iraq, in the Middle East. During my time with President Obama, we tried to stabilize things, the 2015 nuclear deal. That actually stabilized things. We had big problems. Sure, Iran didn't step away from its terrorist actions.

[18:10:00]

But we were able to get some control over what was going on over there with the world with us, China, Russia and all of our European allies.

BLITZER: By the way, we're showing our viewers these pictures that have just come in from Tehran. That's the casket containing the body of Qasem Soleimani, and it's just been returned -- just arrived in Tehran from Baghdad. He was killed outside the Baghdad International Airport. I just want to let our viewers know what they were seeing. But go ahead, finish your thought.

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

HAGEL: No, that was the point I wanted to make, is it seems to me in the least Secretary Pompeo and President Trump keep talking about wanting to stabilize, de-escalate. Well, threatening 52 Iranian locations, some of them cultural sites, that's not de-escalation. That's further escalating at least the rhetoric.

And I don't think that's where you want to go here. Because this country is dealing with Russia, with China, with North Korea, Impeachment, with trade issues, we've got so many big issues out there, and why do we want to start something here we don't know how it's going to end.

And that's my point about when you take actions like these, there are always consequences. You have to think through every consequence of an option.

BLITZER: I want you to go inside the Pentagon. Earlier today, I was driving by the Pentagon. I'm a former Pentagon Correspondent during the first Gulf War. And I remember whenever there was a crisis, you could see there was a crisis, so the parking lots started filling up. And I saw some of those parking lots, it's a Sunday. They're clearly considering contingencies right now if Iran were to retaliate. What do you anticipate?

HAGEL: Well, of course, like you said, that's the job of the Pentagon contingencies and giving the president an option and other leaders. What happens next there, what do I anticipate, I don't know. My guess is what they're working on every kind of contingency, because we have vulnerabilities around the world, certainly in the Middle East, our civilians, our embassies. Obviously, the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, trade, traffic, allies, we have troops there. We are now sending more than 4,000 more troops to the Middle East. I think a few thousand were sent earlier this year or last year.

And so we'll have to -- and when I say, we, I mean, the Pentagon, the country will have to work through contingencies for all those situations, what if what if.

BLITZER: I spoke to Leon Panetta, the former defense secretary, who said he fears the U.S. is closer to war with Iran now, closer than it's been in 40 years.

HAGEL: I think Leon is right when you add it all up. I mean, this action that was taken a couple days ago was very significant for many, many reasons, because there were consequences that flowed out. Look at what the Iraqi parliament did today and what the essentially acting prime minister of Iraq said today, the United States troops must be expelled, they must leave. I mean, that's a significant development if that happens.

BLITZER: It would be a huge win for Iran if the U.S. were to pull out not only 5,000 military troops, the thousands of military contractors, civilians and the American diplomats who are there in big, big numbers.

HAGEL: It would be a huge win for them. And that also cuts right to our ability to not only monitor ISIS but help our allies in getting rid of the other contingents that still exist, ISIS contingents. If they force us out of there, it would affect all of our relationships in the Middle East.

BLITZER: What did you think of the president's tweet just a little while ago when he said he's going to notify Congress with military action via Twitter. He says he doesn't have to do it. But if he does, he'll do it via Twitter.

HAGEL: Well, I don't understand this president at all and it follows a similar pattern to how he's governed the last three years, essentially via Twitter. That's a bit abnormal but it's dangerous because it doesn't bring in the Congress.

And this is a government of three co-equal branches of government. That's the way our Constitution laid it out. That's the way we have governed. That's a smart way to govern. And he is continuing to just dismiss the responsibility of the Congress.

And for the life of me, Wolf, I don't understand how so many of my Republican colleagues are not standing up for the institutions that are very clear, Article I in the Constitution that he just rolls over. It is dangerous. And it will present some very difficult consequences as we are seeing right now at the outset.

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

BLITZER: Secretary Chuck Hagel, thanks so much for coming in, a very dangerous moment right now in the Middle East. Hopefully it won't escalate, although I fear potentially it could. Thanks so much for joining us.

HAGEL: Thanks, Wolf.

BLITZER: Still to come, President Trump says Iranian culture sites could be U.S. military targets and others questions whether that act would constitute a war crime.

[18:15:00]

I will speak with a former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson. He's standing by live.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DONALD TRUMP, U.S. PRESIDENT: War and aggression will not be my first instinct.

A super power understands that caution and restraint are really truly signs of strength.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: That was back in 2016, and a flashback of then candidate Donald Trump pledging restraint on the world stage. Fast forward today and the president's threat to hit 52 targets in Iran, including cultural sites and is prompting this response from the Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif.

A reminder of those hallucinating about emulating ISIS war crimes by targeting our cultural heritage, he says. Through millennia of history, barbarians have come and ravaged our cities, razed our monuments and burnt our libraries. Where are they now? We're still here and standing tall, that tweet that from Javad Zarif.

Joining us now, the former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, the former Governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson.

Governor, thanks so much for joining us. And I know you had a chance to meet recently with the foreign minister, Javad Zarif. I think it was just last month, you've been deeply involved in trying to negotiate a prisoner swap between the U.S. and Iran. So what's your reaction to hearing him say that this threat from the president emulates ISIS war crimes?

FMR. GOV. BILL RICHARDSON (D-NM): Well, what the president has done by talking about the cultural sites is unite the Iranian people against us completely, because there was division. Some in Iran were mad at the regime. Now, everybody, young people, senior citizens, the entire country is united against the United States.

Now, I've dealt with Zarif three weeks ago. You mentioned, we met at the Doha Summit in Qatar. And we were successful with the help of the Trump administration about four weeks ago in getting a Chinese- American student out from Iran, a Princeton scholar, in exchange for a Soleimani, this nameless scientist in Atlanta.

So my worry is what we've also done. There are five Americans still detained in Iran. There's Michael White, whose health, a Navy veteran, is not good. There's Robert Levinson, who's disappeared for a long time, three Iranian-Americans. My worry is that this action is going to have a chilling effect on our ability to get those prisoners out.

These are American hostages. I've been concentrating a lot on these hostages, not just in Iran but in Russia, Mr. Whelan, Jason Tice in Syria, in Venezuela, some Citgo workers.

[18:20:12] So I'm very concerned especially in Iran about these five Americans that are detained.

BLITZER: The former minister, Javad Zarif, also referred to the secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, and I'm quoting Zarif now, as an arrogant clown masquerading as a diplomat, after Pompeo said Iraqis were dancing in the street with the news of Soleimani's killing. Is there a diplomatic off-ramp in light of this escalating tension?

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

RICHARDSON: Well, my worry is that the secretary of state is getting too political here, blaming the Obama administration, we're cleaning up their mess. Instead of explaining, show, for instance, why -- if you're going to have proportional hits, why not go after Iranian missiles, why not go after Iranian ships, why not go after some of the militias? Instead, they chose this worst option.

And the concern I have is the national security team seems to be putting the president in very tough positions or maybe it's the other way around, inviting the Taliban to Camp David, abandoning the Kurds, so many decisions made at the last minute, stopping the Iranian airstrikes ten minutes before they're going off. We need a long-term strategy and the consequences.

But most importantly, I was with you in the Congress during the Iraq War. The Congress needs to be brought in. The law says that you bring in the eight members of Congress in the leadership, notify them. The drone strike, they were not notified when that happened. Yes, do you it afterwards, but it was a classified document.

The president needs to explain to the American people what he's doing, what are our objectives, what's our strategies, how are we going to protect our personnel in the Middle East? Why is it that this action was better than some of the other proportional actions that we could have taken?

Look, I've criticized the Iran regime many times but I think this prisoner issue, Wolf, the prisoner issue, the negotiations with Zarif, I also negotiated with the Iranian ambassador at the U.N., Ravanchi. I think this is a possible area of humanitarian pathway to perhaps cool things down. I hope that isn't snuffed off by this event that's just taken place. BLITZER: You've been frequently called into troubleshoot various dangerous situations, including especially North Korea. I know that personally. Do you believe that the killing of Qasem Soleimani sends any specific message to Kim Jong-un right now, because it's a very tense moment between the U.S. and North Korea?

RICHARDSON: Well, the first thing that Kim Jong-un is going to do is he's going to say, hey, I'm still around too. So I would expect that he's going to do his missile test. Hopefully, it's not a long-range missile very soon.

I think the president needs to step back, not promise another summit with Kim Jong-un. But Kim Jong-un is going to find a way to take a strategic advantage of this situation, and I would expect him to make a move soon. Hopefully, it's not a negative move. But I think it probably is. The denuclearization talks are not going well.

And here, the president needs to listen to his negotiators instead of going out and trying to negotiate this himself with another summit with Kim Jong-un.

BLITZER: All right. Former Ambassador and former Governor Bill Richardson, former member of Congress as well, you and I go way, way back here in Washington, thanks so much for joining us.

All right, up next, we're going to talk to a Republican lawmaker who's also an Iraq War veteran about the killing of Iran's top military commander, his thoughts on the dangerous escalations and tensions between the U.S. and Iran, just ahead.

But, first, here is CNN's Christine Romans with a preview of what to watch as stock markets begin their first trading session of 2020.

CHRISTINE ROMANS, CNN CHIEF BUSINESS CORRESPONDENT: Tomorrow, investors kick off the first full trading week of 2020. Of course, 2019 was a very good year for investors. The Dow gained more than 22 percent, its third best year of the decade. The S&P 500 and the Nasdaq did even better, posting their second best years of the decade.

So can the upward momentum continue? There's optimism around a phase one trade deal with china. President Trump is expected to sign that next week on the 15th.

But at the same time, investors are worried now about escalating tensions in the Middle East. That's after the United States killed a top Iranian commander at a Baghdad airport. Oil prices spiked and stocks fell on that news.

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

Investors also have economic data to consider this week. On Friday, the government releases the December jobs report.

[18:25:02]

In November, U.S. employers added 266,000 jobs. The unemployment rate slipped to 3.5 percent, matching a 50 year low.

Investors are hoping the strong labor market continued at the end of the year.

In New York, I'm Christine Romans.

BLITZER: New pressure tonight on the U.S. to leave Iraq after the killing of Iran's top military leader. The Iraqi parliament passed a resolution to work on a plan for ending the presence of foreign troops, including U.S. troops. The measure is not binding but the State Department says the U.S. is, quote, disappointed by the action, adding, we believe it is in the shared interests of the United States and Iraq to continue fighting ISIS together.

Republican Congressman Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, he's joining us right now. He's a veteran of the Iraq War. He serves on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Congressman, thanks so much for being with us.

REP. ADAM KINZINGER (R-IL): You bet, yes.

BLITZER: All right. So how concerned are you by this vote by the Iraqi parliament?

KINZINGER: Well, it's a little concerning. But keep in mind how we got where we're at in the first place. So Iraqi people were out on the street protesting against Iranian, basically, infection of their government, takeover of their country, the Iranians, in order to change the subject, started doing these attacks on the embassy and elsewhere, and that's how we got to the point we are today.

It's a -- you have a lame duck prime minister and the Iraqi people, I heard your prior guest saying, Iran and Iraq, now everybody is united against the United States. It's not true. The reality is those people that want Iran out of Iraq and it's a majority.

So, yes, it's something I don't like to see.

[18:30:00]

But, ultimately, if Iraq wants to be a client state of Iran, who actually kills people that protest against the government, that's their choice. I don't think they do.

BLITZER: You're a military veteran. What's your message to the troops, nearly 4,000 U.S. troops including from the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina who are now urgently being deployed to the Middle East?

KINZINGER: Well, my message is, you know, go and do what you're trained for. Hopefully, you're not called into action. But America's job -- the American military's job is not to be safe; it's to keep the American people safe. That's why they do what they do. That's why they train for times like this when we need them.

You know, people think and I've heard a lot of people say the President never thought through second and third-order effects on this. The fact that these troops are ready to go to protect American assets, to be on the ground -- if called, if Iran decides to escalate.

Keep in mind, this attack against Soleimani was the first kinetic action we've taken against Iran despite repeated ratcheting up of not just hitting a drone, not just hitting our ally's oil fields, then hitting Americans. What would come next?

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

This was our first and only kinetic response. This was not an escalation. This was a reaction to continued provocations. And now, it's Iran's choice if they want to escalate. And, you know, frankly, the consequences to them will be devastating, I certainly hope they don't do it.

BLITZER: Well, do you think they will escalate, they will retaliate? That clearly would lead to further U.S. retaliation.

KINZINGER: It depends on what form that is. So it's a couple of things. We don't have an alternate kind of reality machine where we can see different options here. They're going to have to do something to save face, obviously because they don't want to look weak, but I think the President's tweet yesterday has been much maligned.

And I may not have said everything that was in it, but it was important because it said, look, choose wisely what you are going to do. And so, what Iran -- reaction may be now may have been far different than what they planned, you know, two or three days ago until the President made it clear that we will react if we have to.

And this is the other thing. I've been -- I was critical of the President when he didn't react to the drone strike, when he didn't react to Saudi Arabia. But he made it clear he had a red line, that was affecting Americans. The Iranians didn't believe him. They went after Americans, and there was a price.

And that price was against the man who designed it, not against -- as Secretary Richardson said, we could've bombed a bunch of boats and radar sites. We may have to do that eventually, but that would have killed dozens, if not hundreds, of people that really had nothing to do with planning and executing those.

BLITZER: So, clearly, Congressman, you think the President did the right thing in targeting, with this drone strike, Qasem Soleimani?

KINZINGER: Yes, I do. It was a targeted attack on the man that's caused all these problems. It was a legal attack in a country where American troops are legally in, where they have a legal right by the status of forces agreement and AUMF to defend themselves, not just against an imminent attack but against escalating attacks and escalating threats.

And the President, under Article 2, has a right to defend that. Again, this was done in Iraqi territory. What was Soleimani doing in Iraq? Was he going to plan the next Thanksgiving dinner? Was he going to de-escalate tensions? Probably not.

BLITZER: I want to get your reaction to some tweets that have just been released from the President and members of Congress. Earlier today, the President tweeted what he called a notification to Congress about potential counterstrikes. And he said they could be done in a disproportionate manner.

Then House Foreign Affairs Committee, your committee, moments ago, went tweet for tweet, responding in language mirroring the President. This media post will serve as a reminder that war powers reside in the Congress, it said, under the United States Constitution. And that you should read the War Powers Act. And that you're not a dictator.

What do you think of this tweet for tweet between the President and the leadership of the House Foreign Affairs Committee?

KINZINGER: Well, you know, I've been disappointed in the leadership of the House Foreign Affairs Committee because it's become extremely partisan.

Defending what the President's doing or opposing, it doesn't have to be based on the politics or whether or not you like the President. As you know, Wolf, I was on your show many times under President Obama, defending President Obama's and his actions in a number of things.

Now, the President and his tweets, I get that it makes the American people uncomfortable. I'm critical of some of the domestic policy tweets that make me uncomfortable. But when it comes to international policy like this, those

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

aren't designed to make the American people comfortable or uncomfortable. They're designed to make the Iranian government uncomfortable.

If they make us uncomfortable, they're making them uncomfortable. And they're making them think twice before they do something reacting. I actually think the President putting out that the response could be disproportionate and that we have a number of sites targeted could lead to, at least, a mitigation or a moderation of what the Iranian response could be.

But, you know, this idea that Iran is a victim and they're only responding to circumstances, they've been the one poking the bear for a long time. We have exercised a lot of restraint. And then when we responded, we targeted the man that did it, not other innocent people.

[18:34:59]

BLITZER: I want to get your reaction to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a man you know well. He used to serve in Congress. He says Americans are safer today than they were before the killing of Qasem Soleimani. Do you agree?

KINZINGER: Yes, I do agree. Look, short-term, there may be an escalation of danger, but I -- there always was. Iran has been unilaterally attacking the United States trying to provoke us. Iran has been constantly trying to show us as weak by seeing no response.

And so, whether it's in the short-term, maybe a little rise in tension, or long-term, we've killed the man that designed the Iranian- Middle East strategy that killed half a million Syrians, 50,000 of which are children. And by the way, we've also said that you can no longer use cutaway proxy forces to do your bidding without bearing responsibility. That's a huge message for Vladimir Putin, who uses the Wagner Group, whether it's in -- whether it's in Venezuela, in Syria and elsewhere.

Jim Sciutto wrote a great book about that. That below the threshold response, we have now said that we consider that your action. That has a chilling effect to dictators around the world, including and especially Vladimir Putin.

BLITZER: And we hope these nearly 4,000 U.S. troops from the 82nd Airborne Division who are now on their way to the region will be safe. You're a military veteran, and --

KINZINGER: I do (ph).

BLITZER: -- you hope that as well. All right, Congressman Adam Kinzinger, as usual, thanks so much for joining us.

KINZINGER: You bet, Wolf. See you.

BLITZER: All right, so we're going to have much more coverage coming up as we go to break. I want to show you these live pictures coming in right now, Air Force One arriving just moments ago at Joint Base Andrews outside of Washington, D.C. Much more in our -- on our special coverage right after this.

BLITZER: Amid increasing questions about the justification of the U.S. killing of Qasem Soleimani, the Trump administration has maintained that Iran's top general was an imminent threat to Americans in the region. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo continued to defend the decision earlier this morning on CNN's "STATE OF THE UNION."

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JAKE TAPPER, CNN ANCHOR: When you say the attacks were imminent, how imminent were they? Were you talking about days? Were you talking about weeks?

MIKE POMPEO, SECRETARY OF STATE: If you're an American in the region, days and weeks, this is not something that's relevant. We have to prepare, we have to be ready, and we took a bad guy off the battlefield.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

BLITZER: Brings me to a special edition of the "Weekend Presidential Brief" right here in THE SITUATION ROOM. I want to bring in CNN national security analyst Sam Vinograd to break down the most pressing national security issues the President is facing.

All right, so let's talk about this use of the word imminent, "imminent threat." How significant is that right now in this debate that's going on between the President and Congress? [18:39:54]

SAMANTHA VINOGRAD, CNN NATIONAL SECURITY ANALYST: Well, let's put this in context. I've been part of targeting deliberations, and it is unlikely that the imminent threat reporting was the only piece of the targeting package. There was also probably Soleimani's lengthy terrorism rap sheet.

It is somewhat important from a legal perspective, however. It bolsters the administration's case that this strike was in self- defense. That has bearing under domestic laws, specifically Article 2 of the Constitution, as well as international law. But my bigger question is, what other intelligence briefing did President Trump get aside from this imminent threat reporting?

Typically, targeting discussions involve a really big cost-benefit analysis. The President --

BLITZER: By the way, the President and the first lady are now walking down Air Force One. They just returned from Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach to Joint Base Andrews outside of Washington, D.C. We'll monitor this to see if the President stops to speak with reporters, but go ahead.

VINOGRAD: Well, in any case, in targeting discussions, the President wants to make a cost-benefit decision. Do the ends justify the means? In this case, does removing Soleimani actually make Americans safer? And what we're seeing, Wolf, is that in the near term, at least, Americans are not safer.

The President achieves -- achieved his objective, he removed Soleimani from the battlefield, but we have increased threats to Americans. Our forces have to refocus away from counterterrorism on to force protection and more. So it's possible that the President didn't receive or failed to adjust -- or failed to digest that cost-benefit analysis.

BLITZER: The President tweeted -- and he's now boarding Marine One to take him and the family over to the south lawn of the White House. We'll continue to watch this.

But the President threatened in a tweet that if the Iranians retaliate and go after Americans, he will order the destruction of 52 targets in Iran, including cultural sites. What do you think about that?

VINOGRAD: This is preschool level deterrence, and it doesn't instill a lot of confidence that the President is listening to his military planners or intelligence analysts.

I've looked at a lot of military plans, Wolf. None of them actually included committing potential war crimes. Destroying cultural sites would do that.

I've also spent a lot of time with intelligence analysts. They do not recommend tweeting out details of a potential strike. That's bad opsec or operational security. And while President Trump and the Iranian regime tweet us closer to war every minute, the question is, what's happening behind the scenes? We don't have direct communications with the Iranians.

If the President actually wants to de-escalate right now, he has to find an intermediary, a trusted third party, to credibly communicate a message to the Iranians. He's going to have a hard time finding someone to vouch for him at this point based upon this unilateral action as well as things like his unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

BLITZER: You spent, what, almost a year in Baghdad --

VINOGRAD: Exactly.

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

BLITZER: -- at the U.S. embassy, working as a civilian in that so-called green zone. How seriously should the U.S. take this parliamentary decision in Baghdad today, the Iranian -- the Iraqi parliament to go ahead and call for the removal of all U.S. troops from Iraq?

VINOGRAD: Well, while this bill did pass not only because a lot of lawmakers who didn't support it didn't show up, its future is uncertain. It is nonbinding. And the Iraqi government is in a caretaker status, so it's unclear whether they have the authority to actually implement it.

But, Wolf, even if this bill is dead on arrival, our security mission in Iraq is already impacted. Our forces have had to refocus away from countering ISIS to force protection. Our diplomats who work on things like countering Iran and counterterrorism are locked down in the green zone and may have to evacuate.

And finally, Wolf, our ability to really trust that the Iraqi Security Forces, the ISF, will come to our protection is seriously in question. We did not just strike Qasem Soleimani; we also killed an Iraqi government official, Abu Muhandis. And the Iraqi Security Forces incorporated some of those Iranian militias into their forces over a year ago. So, at this point, our relationship with the Iraqi Security Forces is seriously strained.

BLITZER: It certainly is. All right, Sam Vinograd, thanks so much --

VINOGRAD: Thanks, Wolf.

BLITZER: -- for joining us. Much more of our special coverage right after this.

[18:44:05]

BLITZER: Lawmakers return to Capitol Hill this week with impeachment right now at an impasse. The standoff between the House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, and the Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, continues big time. Pelosi is withholding the two articles of impeachment until she says it's clear there will be what she describes as a fair trial in the U.S. Senate.

I want to talk more about this with our legal analyst, Laura Coates. Laura, today, Senator Lindsey Graham floated the idea of actually changing the Senate rules assuming the Speaker still refuses to hand over those two articles of impeachment. What do you think?

LAURA COATES, CNN LEGAL ANALYST: I mean, quite a chess move at that point going on, but the problem is he'd have to actually change the Senate impeachment rules and the Senate rules in general, which, of course, could have long-term consequences for the senators and going forward, even after the whole impeachment issue is resolved in some way, shape, or form.

Also, it may actually end up being moot here, Wolf, because we have no idea when Pelosi will hand over the articles of impeachment. We assume that she will.

She's hoping for a guarantee of a fair trial, some indication before she tells everyone who her House managers are going to be. Which makes sense, in a way, to say before I hand over to you who's going to essentially prosecute and present evidence, I want to know there are actually going to be rules in place to keep this an above-board actual impeachment trial.

BLITZER: A top House attorney, today, floated the idea of a third article of impeachment going back to the Mueller report. Is that realistic?

COATES: I don't know that at this point it is. And the reason for that, of course, is you have this sense of urgency that went down for these first two articles of impeachment, abuse -- you know, abuse of power, essentially, and also obstruction of Congress. Why? Based on a whistleblower complaint about this discussion with the President of Ukraine.

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

To go back in time and add on the issues of Mueller would only make sense if you're talking about the continual obstruction of Congress. Essentially, the Mueller report laid out in many -- in many details that there was a separation of powers issue here. The President was thumbing his nose at the power of oversight of Congress.

If that is the crux of the issue, it makes sense now. But to go back and kind of relitigate what Mueller said was not going to be prosecuted would not be a good idea.

BLITZER: Interesting. You know, the Senate Minority Leader, Chuck Schumer, he said, today, it all depends right now on four Republican senators. As you know, there are 53 Republicans in the Senate, 47 Democrats.

You need a simple majority, 51, to call witnesses, to change the rules. You need 67 to convict and remove a president from office. That's clearly unlikely, at least right now. But do you think four Republicans -- assuming all the Democrats stay put, four Republicans are doable? COATES: You know, it's interesting to think that you only need four Republicans to go on the side of the Democrats to do so. But we're seeing this very big trend about some Republicans already broadcasting that they don't even want to have a trial. If they do, they're not going to really be impartial jurors. They have foregone conclusions. This is all an exercise in futility.

But if you're able to have open member -- open-minded jurors to say, listen, I am receptive to the evidence out there. There may be time for witnesses.

And particularly, who have we not seen, Wolf? We haven't heard from Mulvaney. We haven't heard from Bolton? We haven't heard from a number of people who are in the position to tell you whether or not the President of the United States directed these actions. If you don't want to know the answers to those questions, how can it be a fair trial?

[18:50:05]

BLITZER: We always learn something from you, Laura Coates.

COATES: Thank you.

BLITZER: Thanks so much for joining us.

And later tonight, I'll be taking a look back at the drama and the suspense that surrounded the Bill Clinton impeachment trial in a special CNN report, "THE TRIAL OF WILLIAM JEFFERSON CLINTON." Here is a preview.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REP. BILL MCCOLLUM (R-FL), HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES MANAGER: The House definitely holds to the position that we should call witnesses.

DAVID KENDALL, WHITE HOUSE COUNSEL: What would the witnesses add?

REP. ASA HUTCHINSON (R-AR), HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES MANAGER: The need for witnesses is so basic and fundamental to our truth-seeking system of justice in this country.

GREGORY CRAIG, WHITE HOUSE COUNSEL: We didn't know whether there were going to be live witnesses, whether there would be any witnesses.

We're not afraid of witnesses, but we do not want fairness.

JOHN KING, CNN CHIEF NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT: The big uncertainty was, is Monica Lewinsky going to be a live witness? Is she going to be sitting there in the well of the Senate on national television, on global television, saying those things?

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

MONICA LEWINSKY, FORMER WHITE HOUSE INTERN (via telephone): I never expected to feel this way about him. And I'm not kidding you.

KING: And if that happened, would the Democrats stay with the President?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Good morning, sir.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We were worried and we had reason to worry.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: "THE TRIAL OF WILLIAM JEFFERSON CLINTON" airs later tonight, 9:00 p.m. Eastern, only here on CNN.

We'll be right back.

[18:55:06]

BLITZER: It's a dangerous world for U.S. troops abroad as illustrated today by the killing of three Americans near a base in Kenya, but that reality is hitting home anew for military families across the country.

More than 3,000 U.S. service -- service members are now headed to the Middle East as tensions with Iran escalate rapidly. Many are from the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Despite the fact that some of these soldiers are from the immediate response force of the 82nd, they and their families have been caught off-guard by this rapid deployment.

CNN's Natasha Chen has more from Fort Bragg.

NATASHA CHEN, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Wolf, there is definitely a feeling of unease here in the Fort Bragg community. It is a very tight-knit group of people, of course. And this was a sudden thing for them. A lot of these families found out at the tail end of the holidays that they would have to say goodbye to their loved ones.

While the family members of those being deployed have been asked not to talk about it or post about it publicly on social media for security reasons, Fort Bragg officials have talked to us about the process of sending this first brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division overseas.

Now, keep in mind, this is what they are designed to do, to respond rapidly to situations like this. They have been prepared. But still, it is a jarring feeling for these families, especially at the new year when this happened.

Some of these families, we're hearing, have not experienced the deployment of a loved one before. I'm hearing about that from Sabrina Johannes, who is the executive director of Deployed Love, a volunteer organization that really helps families during these times.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SABRINA JOHANNES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DEPLOYED LOVE: They're obviously just reaching out, saying, I'm really scared, I don't know what to expect that's coming up. Obviously, they -- you get some training along the way, but there -- it -- you never know when to expect them.

It's a quick turnaround, and they're not going to hear from their spouse for a few days while they're in transition. And so, a lot of it is just we're scared and we need someone there to talk to.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

Iranian Advisers Say, Response To U.S. Will Be Military; Iranian Foreign Minister To Trump: Targeting Cultural Sites Is A War Crime; Iraq's Parliament Votes To

CHEN: Yes. She told me that her organization started out as helping people take holiday photos to send to their loved ones who are away from home. And now, she's finding herself really trying to coordinate some social events where families can come together right now to lean on each other during these difficult times.

She also observed something that she's never seen before. In the last few days, they've gotten a lot of messages from parents of soldiers who are perhaps a little more out of the information loop here at Fort Bragg. They are looking for answers as well.

So there are a lot of family members, relatives, across the nation who are very concerned about this. They don't know when it will be that they'll be able to see their loved ones again. And there's just a lot of questions and a lot of unease. Wolf, back to you.

BLITZER: Natasha Chen, thanks very much.

That does it for me. I'm Wolf Blitzer. Stay right here. Up next, join Jim Sciutto and Poppy Harlow for the latest on the President's upcoming trial. "THE IMPEACHMENT OF DONALD J. TRUMP" starts right after a quick break.

[19:00:09]

Load-Date: January 7, 2020

End of Document