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Trump has an ear for the isolationists in US politics as well as the hawks

Does President Trump want a war with Iran? The answer seems to be no, and that's certainly the conclusion markets have come to after recovering from a brief failure of nerve when Iran's top general was killed.

The President's opponents have liked to paint him as erratic, irrational, narcissistic and quick to anger. On that reading, the jitters that went round the world earlier this week are understandable.

But note too that in the heat of the crisis the President retweeted an item from a Tucker Carlson show on Fox News, something he rarely does. The item in question related to homelessness in San Francisco, but the piece that immediately preceded was another one of Carlson's impassioned pleas for America to take a more isolationist stance.

Yes, there are Republican hawks like John Bolton, who would like nothing more than to have it out with Iran. But there's also a strong strand of opinion on the US right that would like nothing more to do with any overseas conflict. Isolationism as a motivating factor in US politics has always been significant. It led to the now hackneyed old joke that the US always turned up late to wars, but still won them anyway.

More recently, though, the US has been on time, and on the losing side. A pundit on Carlson's show recently described the Vietnam War and the Iraq War as the two greatest foreign policy blunders in America's post-war history. One might also add the diplomatic isolation of post-Soviet Russia that began under the Clinton administration and was continued by George W Bush. Or even, going back to the 1950s, the US handling of the Suez Crisis. In the latter two, though, no lives were lost. And that's really the key to the isolationist's pitch: to echo a phrase made famous by Neville Chamberlain, US entanglements in "far away places of which we know little" are best avoided.

By retweeting Carlson at such a crucial juncture in the recent crisis Trump is signalling that he has heard the message from the isolationist right, and that he understands it. For his part, Carlson himself made no direct criticism of Trump. As is the case in all fairy tales where the king makes a suspect decision, it's always his advisers that are to blame.

Trump himself, however, has a long track record of speaking out against foreign entanglements for the US. One rallying cry in the Trump-dominated Republican party in recent years has been to denounce opponent Hilary Clinton as "a war-monger."

Thus far, although he has indulged in a certain amount of extra-judicial assassination, President Trump has shown little appetite for any major military undertaking, and for better or for worse has even brought some US troops home, particularly from certain areas of Syria.

Perhaps it's not just his inclination, though. It could be that an old adage of politics in the Anglophone world - that winning a good war is a good way to get elected - is now defunct. It worked for Mrs Thatcher. And it worked, to some extent, for George W Bush. But once bitten, voters have now become twice shy. In this information age, the idea of a good war has been debunked once and for all. Yes, there is a certain amount of dispassionate distance generated by the television footage provided by unmanned drones striking buildings in the darkness.

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But US body bags have generated media attention in a way that's been exponentially increasing since the Vietnam War, or to put it another way, since the onset of the television age. And now we have moved into the internet age, the scrutiny is at a whole new level.

Colonial wars have always generated casualties. That's as true of British wars, like the war in Sudan in the 1890s, as it is of the American wars in Vietnam and the Middle East. But a century ago, the despatches took several weeks to return home. Now, these deaths can be streamed live not just into people's homes, but onto their phones wherever they are: at a baseball game, at the mall, at a restaurant.

There's never been any doubt that the information age is having an impact on society, but its impact on policy too are important considerations. In spite of all the evil that goes on on social media, could it be true also that it's a considerable restraining factor on the more bellicose elements of western society?

Time will tell. But make no mistake. President Trump is very aware of the strong traditional strains that run through US politics and mitigate against foreign entanglements. The next big news will be on trade with China, not war with Iran.

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