

Attack to renew debate over role of U.S. military

By Andrew J. Glass
N.Y. Times News Service

WASHINGTON — The large loss of lives aboard a U.S. warship in the Persian Gulf is likely to rekindle a long simmering national debate over the projection of American military power into dangerous parts of the world.

In weeks to come, congressional investigators will undoubtedly pose searching questions to Pentagon officials on how it was that the USS Stark proved unable to defend itself Sunday against a deadly assault from missile-firing Iraqi warplanes. Yet the initial reaction from Capitol Hill is to wait and see until more is known about who did what — and why.

"We need answers and until we get them there should be no rush to judgment," said Rep. Dick Cheney of Wyoming, a member of the House Intelligence Committee and a Republican House leader.

Nevertheless, Cheney and several of his fellow legislators regarded the initial Navy explanation of events as insufficient. In essence, the Navy brass argued Monday that the fate of the Stark was akin to someone who took a quiet stroll, only to be suddenly punched from behind.

One problem with this explanation, however, is that there's nothing at all routine about the Persian Gulf.

For one thing, the waterway serves as a vital conduit for most of the oil that fuels the economies of both Western Europe and Japan. For another, it provides a theater of operations for the Iran-Iraq war — the costliest and bloodiest struggle to erupt in the Middle East in modern times.

Andrew J. Glass is a columnist for Cox Newspapers.

Commentary

Shortly before that war broke out, former President Jimmy Carter, in his 1980 State of the Union message, asserted that the United States held an abiding interest in the region. It was a doctrine from which Ronald Reagan, as Carter's successor, never recoiled.

Said Carter: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America."

Carter's threat was aimed at the Soviet Union, which had then just become embroiled in a guerrilla struggle in Afghanistan that is still under way. Although subsequently Moscow has displayed a keen interest in the area, the Russians have stayed out of the Iran-Iraq war.

Surveys show that while most Americans revile Iran as a hostage-taking regime, they also have little sympathy for Iraq, a Soviet client widely seen as having started the war.

The Reagan administration's public stance was to wish a plague on both houses. Yet, as the Iran-Contra debacle revealed, the administration also maneuvered secretly for advantage with both parties — shipping arms to Iran while offering electronic intelligence to Iraq.

While casualties on both sides have exceeded 1 million, the Iraqis have sought to bring matters to a head by cutting off Iranian oil sales and, thereby, draining Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini of the financial resources he needs to carry on the struggle.

A major aim has been to harass European and Japanese tankers to the point where their own-

ers would no longer undertake the risk of loading Iranian oil. In practice, the main result has been to provoke Iranian retaliation against Iraqi-bound shipping and to drastically raise maritime insurance rates in the Persian Gulf. The Stark's nominal mission was to offer aid, as needed, to any U.S.-flag vessel which encountered trouble during the dangerous run up to Kuwait, at the headwaters of the gulf.

But, on a broader plane, the American missile frigate came in harm's way because Washington had sought to show the combatants that, as a superpower, the United States, could not be bullied out of international waters.

It was largely this kind of open-ended peace-keeping role that once brought U.S. Marines to war-torn Beirut — only to see, in 1983, 240 of the Americans killed in a terrorist attack.

In the aftermath of the slaughter, President Reagan vowed to continue the U.S. presence in Lebanon. However, as the 1984 elections approached, the Marines were quietly evacuated.

With another presidential election due next year, the question of how far the United States should go in projecting its military forces will be raised anew.

Following the Vietnam War, which ended in the mid-1970s, public policy favored retrenchment. Then, with the advent of the Reagan presidency, came a buildup in military might. It was coupled with a renewed willingness to employ U.S. forces, in limited engagements, in such places as Libya and Grenada.

For the moment, the Stark episode is being portrayed here in official circles as a tragic accident. All the same, it is an accident with a past and a future in the tangle of Middle East fighting and politics.