

U.S., Iran at odds on tanker flags

*Gulf attacks to proceed
as usual, official says*

From news services

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and a top Iranian official disputed whether putting U.S. flags on Kuwaiti tankers in the Persian Gulf would further risk U.S. involvement in the Iraq-Iran war.

The disagreement came yesterday as the Reagan administration prepared to fly U.S. flags on Kuwaiti tankers, a move that has drawn criticism from members of Congress worried that it would leave the impression that the United States was taking sides in the 7-year-old Iran-Iraq war.

Also yesterday in Bahrain, Sen. James Sasser, D-Tenn., expressed horror after a visit to the Mayport-based Stark and said it was too soon to tell whether the warship could have prevented the Iraqi missile attack that killed 37 U.S. sailors.

Sasser, one of three U.S. senators chosen to tour the region after the May 17 attack, said he did not know why the missile frigate was unable to protect itself.

"A lot of the ship's records which contained this vital evidence had been destroyed," he told reporters after returning to shore. "There's no way of saying conclusively that the attack could have been prevented."

Sasser said he did not know whether all defense systems on the Stark were functioning properly when the ship left port and sailed into the Persian Gulf, where it sustained the deadliest attack yet on noncombatant ships in the Iran-Iraq war.

Both Iran and Iraq have previously fired on other nations' commercial shipping in an effort to isolate its enemy and strangle its economy.

"If my country has the intention of attacking a Kuwaiti tanker, it will continue with that policy, regardless of whose flag it is carrying. And we hope that an impartial flag will not be involved," Rajaie-Khorassani, the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations, said on ABC-TV's *This Week With David Brinkley*.

However, Weinberger, speaking on NBC-TV's *Meet The Press*, said the U.S. support for Kuwait would discourage Iran from attacking because that might lead to a U.S. retaliatory strike against Iran.

"Iran, I'm sure, would not want to take the consequences," Weinberger said. "But the simple fact of the matter is that they [the Iranians] have not, with all of their irrationality, as yet attacked American ships — American warships or American commercial ships."

The United States is officially neutral in the conflict but has been unofficially backing Iraq, despite last week's attack by an Iraqi jet on the Stark.

Kuwait, an ally of Iraq, asked to have its tankers put under the U.S. flag in hopes of deterring Iranian attacks. In addition, U.S. Navy ships

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Iran will stop tankers, official says

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will escort tankers in the northern portion of the gulf.

The Stark was one of a group of Navy vessels cruising in the gulf, which is used for shipping much of the oil used by Western nations.

Weinberger said the United States had no choice but to respond to Kuwait's request to fly U.S. flags because "if you don't respond to the requests of friendly, moderate Arab nations for assistance ... then you're creating a vacuum. And the Soviets will be very quick to rush into that."

The Soviets have leased several tankers to the Kuwaitis. A day before the attack on the Stark, a Soviet oil tanker leased to Kuwait hit a mine in the gulf. A large hole was blown in the hull.

Weinberger acknowledged that the superpowers were risking being drawn into the Iran-Iraq conflict.

"Well, there is a risk. There is no question in the world. You can't be anywhere in this kind of a world without having some kind of risks and some kind of hazards," he said.

Weinberger warned that "anyone who attacks or tries to prevent" U.S. ships from using the gulf "is, in turn, going to have something to think about. And that is very vital for everyone to realize."

But Khorassani said his nation would continue to target tankers that might be helping Iraq.

"If the United States wants to shield a tanker, which we want to attack, then we have no choice ... of continuing with our defensive strike against the tanker," he said.

Sen. John Warner, R-Va., a former Navy secretary, said on the ABC show, "We're at the threshold of a major strategic decision, namely, moving from a position of neutrality in this war to one of really almost being an ally, one step removed."

Sen. John Glenn, D-Ohio, also appearing on the ABC show, criticized the administration move. "I do not think we have adequately considered all the ramifications of this," he said. "I think our commitment in the gulf right now has not been adequately considered."

Warner and Glenn were the other two senators appointed by Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., to visit the gulf region after the attack. They are expected to fly to the area after Sasser returns to Washington tomorrow.

Sasser met aboard the Stark with its commanding officer, Capt. Glenn Brindel, and Adm. Grant Sharp, who heads a 10-man U.S. Navy team investigating the attack.

The navy's investigation has focused on the possibility that a failure in the Stark's Phalanx anti-missile system kept the crew from knowing that an Iraqi warplane had fired missiles at the ship.

U.S. Navy officials in Bahrain first

denied that the computer system that runs the Phalanx was faulty, then refused to comment further.

Asked about this, Sasser said: "I determined that this was a matter which for the present time might best be left to a court of inquiry."

Sasser said the attack probably would have been less tragic if the Stark had taken evasive action or fired chaff to decoy the missiles, or locked on to the Iraqi plane and activated its anti-missile system.

However, he added, "Let's not prejudge the situation. It's not something to make snap judgment on."

The senator said his first impression after boarding the Stark, anchored three miles off Bahrain, was one of "horror as to what occurred with those who were in compartments when missiles penetrated and exploded in their sleeping area."

Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., speaking on the NBC show, called the new U.S. policy "a substantial change" in the U.S. position.

Lugar also criticized Reagan and the administration for not making a clearer case in support of the increased U.S. involvement.

"The public doesn't understand," he said. "But the public does need to understand and in order for the public to understand, the president of the United States must be highly articulate on these questions."