

In harm's way

By David Seavey, USA TODAY

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Guest columnist

Stay the course in Middle East

WASHINGTON — The Iraqi attack on the USS Stark comes almost 20 years after an Israeli attack on the USS Liberty killed 34 sailors. That the Israeli attack was visual, while the Iraqis released their missiles on radar identification, proves the advance of the state of the art and little else.

By no conceivable logic could the Iraqis have wanted to attack a U.S. frigate, although logic is an inadequate tool for analyzing Middle East events.

Should the American frigate have been there? The answer is probably, though painfully, yes. Two presidents, Carter and Reagan, have affirmed their determination to safeguard the security of the strategically vital Persian Gulf area. And in view of the passivity of our general Middle East policy, a visible presence was needed. This is risky, but a superpower cannot afford to be absent from an area where its vital interests are concerned.

The Soviets, too, have small naval craft in the area, but they are fortunate that the silhouettes of their ships don't look like those of Iran. (The shah bought Iran's vessels from us.)

Certainly, Iraq has to be sternly warned to identify its targets more carefully before attacking. But to retaliate against Iraq could serve no purpose. By no stretch of the imagination could a victory by Iran — unleashing fundamentalist, radical forces — be considered in the national interest.

In the long run, the beginning of a credible peace process could start to defuse the wider area. However, neither the USA, nor the Soviet Union, nor the Arab or Islamic states, nor the United Nations has been able to make the slightest impression on Khomeini, whose determination to destroy the Iraqi regime keeps the war going. Nor is anyone in Iran likely to do so as long as the ayatollah remains alive.

There is an American proclivity to seek quick solutions to intractable problems. Those have almost never worked and certainly will not work in the gulf war.

In the absence of realistic remedies, the United States has no alternative but to stay its course and accept the burdens and risks of a superpower.

One would wish that the 28 brave American sailors might be the last victims of that blood-drenched region. Unfortunately, the opposite is much more likely.

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