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<http://reason.com/archives/2017/04/20/trumps-empty-bluster-and-bombin/print>

Trump's Empty Bluster and Bombing There's no actual foreign policy here.

Steve Chapman

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Dept. of Defense When terrorism raises its head, governments often take steps that are supposed to make us safer—banning tiny knives from airplanes, putting metal detectors at stadium entrances, issuing "orange" alerts. Skeptics dismiss these measures as "security theater." They're a show, not a genuine obstacle to terrorists.

The Trump administration, obsessed with imagery, has adapted this approach to national security. The president tweets bellicose warnings to North Korea. The vice president goes to South Korea to don a bomber jacket and stare implacably across the Demilitarized Zone. An

aircraft carrier steams toward the Sea of Japan—or rather, Trump claims it's doing so even as it heads the opposite direction, thousands of miles away.

Anyone who heard Donald Trump brag about his choice for defense secretary knows that half the appeal of James Mattis was his nickname, "Mad Dog," which the president used every chance he got. Had Mattis been known as "Peewee" or "Mouse," he would have been passed over.

With all the noise and spectacle, this presidency often seems less like an attempt at governance and more like a rehearsal for a Broadway musical. It's just not clear whether it will be a comedy or a tragedy.

Some of the props are real. When the military dropped the biggest conventional bomb in the U.S. arsenal on an Islamic State position in Afghanistan, it came as a surprise. But you know the Pentagon had Trump at "mother of all bombs." Once he heard about it, he had to use it.

The problem is that these gestures are no substitute for strategies. This sortie was meant to highlight our power in a way no one could miss. But what happens if you drop your biggest bomb and it doesn't win the war?

Those on the other side conclude that they can take the worst you can inflict. The rest of the world sees the same thing. It's known as shooting your bolt.

The most important question in fighting a war is often, "Then what?" It's one of many questions Trump doesn't spend hours contemplating. He certainly didn't let it delay his missile strike on a Syrian air base, which was supposed to punish President Bashar Assad's use of chemical weapons.

That attack sent a couple of signals. The first is that if Assad resorts again to chemical weapons, the U.S. may respond with military force. The second is that if the Syrian dictator uses other methods—as he has done in killing some 100,000 civilians—he has nothing to worry about.

Assad can take a hint. In the week after the missile strike, according to the *Voice of America*, the Syrian Network for Human Rights noted an increase in his use of cluster munitions, incendiary weapons and barrel bombs, which killed at least 98 civilians, 24 of them children.

The 22,000-pound bomb that hit a network of caves used by the Islamic State in Afghanistan was said to have killed 96 enemy fighters while causing no civilian casualties. The latter claim invites skepticism. George W. Bush and Barack Obama both declined to use this weapon because of its indiscriminate effects.

Bush considered it for taking out Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. In the end, the danger to innocent bystanders was deemed so great that it was left on the shelf—until now. Trump clearly thinks that worrying about civilian casualties makes you look weak.

But indifference to collateral damage doesn't mean he will succeed in Afghanistan or Syria. One huge conventional bomb, or two or five, won't defeat the Islamic State—which isn't even our chief enemy in Afghanistan. And deploying it against the Taliban, who have a wider and deeper presence, would doubtless spawn more terrorists than it would kill.

The missile strike and the giant bomb drop both amount to an admission of impotence. We can't win in Syria without dispatching a large number of ground troops, and so far Trump is not willing to do that. We haven't won in Afghanistan even with large numbers of ground troops.

Trump's loud but ineffectual tactics confirm to Assad and the Islamic State that winning matters more to them than it does to us. The North Koreans likewise understand that he has no good options for imposing his will.

They are all likely to realize that behind the act is a void. Trump blusters and bombs because he doesn't know what else to do.