

ABC News Special

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STEVE GAYNARD: I think — short on details, George. I mean, they basically rehashed how they built up to this, but they really didn't tell us how the war is going, what they think the assessment looks like, and I understand operational security, but we didn't get that much out of this, and I do think that the questions here about the conventional, the umbrella that they were worried about with the Iranians building over the nuclear facility, so what he's getting at there. Is that we didn't want the nuclear facilities within Iran to be to be protected anymore. They wanted to keep them vulnerable, but just not getting the sense of the cohesion here behind all of their arguments.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS: Yeah, I want to take that to our chief White House correspondent Mary Bruce. Mary, the Defense Secretary focused on this 47 years of violence coming from the Iranian regime, declined to lay out what the imminent threat was here. He talked about the nuclear weapons. Those were set back last year. He talked about the ballistic missiles. According to our Defense Intelligence Agency, Iran was about 10 years away from developing any kind of a missile that could hit the United States.

MARY BRUCE: Yeah, George, about nine years away is what U.S. intelligence had concluded. The Secretary of Defense here is arguing that the U.S. didn't start this war, citing that long litany of Iranian hostilities, but he still hasn't gotten that question of why the U.S. acted now, because as he said, there's been 47 years of Iranian belligerence, as you noted. He is arguing that they did pose a threat to the U.S. because they were developing missiles and drones that were capable of creating this conventional shield, he said, for nuclear blackmail ambition, saying that Iran had a conventional gun to their head, but again without evidence and without specifics. Now that takes care of their explanation for why they were acting now, but as — as to what comes next, the Secretary of Defense arguing that this is, you know, not a war about regime change, despite the fact that the President has made clear he did seek to create a power vacuum here, but they are clearly putting the onus for what comes next on the Iranian people, saying they need to take advantage of this opportunity. And the Secretary went to great lengths to push back against the criticism that the President long promised not to be in the business of regime change, not to drag the U.S. into more foreign conflicts. He is saying that this is going to be a decisive mission without laying out a timeline. He is not ruling out U.S. troops on the ground, and he is arguing that they're not going to be involved in a nation building quagmire. That's how he described it, George.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Okay, Mary Bruce, I want to go to Rachel Scott. She's our chief congressional correspondent. Of course, Rachel, Congress is going to have a say this week.

RACHEL SCOTT: Yes, George, they will. We've been working our sources during this briefing. We have new information to report. We are told by multiple sources that top Trump administration officials told congressional staff in a briefing just yesterday that U.S. intelligence

did not suggest that Iran was preparing to launch a primitive strike against — against the United States. This is important because this does serve in sharp contrast to what the President's top administration officials and even the President had said himself, saying that our objective is to defend the American people by eliminating an imminent threat from the Iranian regime. I posed this question to the President what exactly was the imminent threat? The President told me he believed there was a threat but did not provide any other details. And again, we have not heard him address the nation, George.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Rachel Scott, thanks. Finally, I want to go to Ian Panel in Tel Aviv as we've been talking, the war has been widening.

IAN PANNELL: Yes, that's right, and interestingly, while that press conference was taking place, we heard from the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani, someone who was very close to the Ayatollah, essentially saying and posting Iran, unlike the United States, has prepared for a long war, and I think that should be a pause — and a cause for concern for many of us. We saw what happened in Afghanistan. We saw what happened in Iraq and other conflicts. I think the key questions are to what extent can Iran maintain cohesion in terms of command and control, and to what extent it can maintain the ability to project strength and attacks.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So many unknowns right now.