The Monitor, Merrimac, and Middle East

American presidents love to describe the U.S. commitment to Israeli security as "ironclad." But is this what they mean?

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Articles & Testimony

Was President Obama's use of "ironclad" to describe the U.S.commitment to Israel really the best choice of words?

"Our ironclad commitment -- and I mean ironclad -- to Israel's security has meant the closest military cooperation between our two countries in history."

President Barack Obama has a new favorite adjective to describe the U.S.-Israeli relationship. In an apparent effort to silence any doubters about his administration's commitment to Israel, he invoked the word "ironclad" not once, but twice, in a key passage of his State of the Union address in January. One can almost envision the ayatollahs in Tehran throwing their hands up in surrender when they heard the second "ironclad" -- something like: "Mahmoud, forget about building the A-bomb. Two 'ironclads' -- Obama must be really, really serious!"

But before the mullahs voluntarily mothball their enrichment plants they might want to ask a few basic questions: What does ironclad mean? How have presidents used the term in the past? And how strong, really, is an "ironclad commitment"?

The word "ironclad," as is commonly known, harkens back to mid-19th century naval shipbuilding, when the vulnerability of wooden ships set off a race among European powers to develop hulls that could survive the more powerful weaponry of the industrial age. The first of these new, well-protected vessels were old boats with metal plates installed on their hulls -- hence "iron clad." The French can claim the first ironclad, but it was the British who excelled in designing fast, powerful versions of these new type of ships, and soon transformed their entire fleet into ironclads.

Still, "ironclad" is forever associated with the United States, home of the first-ever maritime battle between such ships -- the legendary Civil War clash between the Union's *Monitor* and the Confederacy's *Virginia* (formerly, the

Merrimac). That's the context of the first of 52 presidential uses of the term "ironclad" -- an April 5, 1862, executive order by Abraham Lincoln affirming the secretary of war's commendation for the "skillful and gallant movements" of Union troops and seamen that led to the "destruction of the rebel ironclad steamer *Merrimac*." (Data used throughout this article is taken from the indispensable American Presidency Project of the University of California at Santa Barbara.)

For the next 67 years, successive presidents always used the term "ironclad" the way Lincoln did -- to refer to a type of ship. But in the early years of the 20th century, when ironclads gave way to dreadnoughts, the term was unmoored from its nautical roots and evolved into a general description of something firm and solid.

In 1929, just weeks after the Great Crash, Herbert Hoover offered the first non-naval presidential usage of the term when he referred to "exact ironclad proposals" for improvements to the judicial system. Except for a fleeting reference by the former naval submariner Jimmy Carter, never again did a president use the word "ironclad" to refer to a boat.

But many chief executives liked the image that "ironclad" conjured up -- of something cast in stone. Harry Truman was proud of his "ironclad" budget," impervious to tinkering. Dwight Eisenhower wanted to negotiate "ironclad" arms control agreements, unbreakable accords that would be "self-enforcing." And Gerald Ford opposed across-the-board bans on abortion "so ironclad you couldn't under any circumstances have [the procedure]."

The notion of an "ironclad commitment" to a foreign nation -- Obama's terminology -- is an even more recent phenomenon, dating back only to Ronald Reagan. Despite the formation of great alliances to combat fascism in Europe and Asia, expansionism on the Korean peninsula, and communism throughout the world, presidents had never before characterized American guarantees to its allies as "ironclad." But once the Great Communicator used the word in 1982, it struck such a powerful chord that it soon became the most common presidential usage of the term. Of the 24 times that presidents have said the word "ironclad" over the last 30 years, nearly half have been in the context of an "ironclad commitment" to a foreign nation.

Even so, only three countries have earned "ironclad" presidential commitments -- a shoo-in for a 'Final Jeopardy' question one of these days.

In second and third place are Afghanistan and Poland, respectively. George W. Bush twice used this formulation regarding the government that replaced the Taliban, promising the Afghans an "ironclad and lasting partnership" in 2003, and an "ironclad commitment to help Afghanistan succeed and prosper" in 2004. And during a visit to Warsaw in 2011, Obama characterized the U.S.-Polish alliance as "cemented through NATO and the ironclad commitment that Article 5 of NATO" -- the mutual defense guarantee -- "represents."

In first place, far outstripping any other country to earn "ironclad" status, is Israel. American presidents have promised "ironclad commitments" to the Jewish state no fewer than seven times. And the usage is bipartisan -- Reagan was the first, employing the term in his landmark Sept. 1, 1982, speech laying out the "Reagan Plan" for Middle East peace, whereas Bill Clinton was the most frequent, promising an "ironclad commitment to Israel's security" four of the eight years of his presidency. Interestingly, neither Bush -- not the father, who lost votes for being too critical of Israel, and not the son, who championed his status as Israel's best friend -- apparently ever used the phrase in the context of the Jewish state.

For decades, presidents of both parties have issued strong, powerful statements of friendship and support to Israel. The U.S.-Israel alliance is rightly viewed as a vital element of Israel's strategic deterrent. Still, when Israelis hear the term "ironclad commitment," should they take comfort? Not really.

First, with no disrespect to the Afghans or the Poles, Israel doesn't find itself in great company. Presidential promises notwithstanding, most Americans seem so eager to relegate the Afghan experience to history that it is

difficult to imagine U.S. economic aid -- let alone a credible U.S. military commitment -- to Afghanistan a decade from now. And even with a rock-solid Article V commitment from NATO, poor Poland's track record of having been swallowed up by the Nazis and then the Soviets, despite Great Power promises, doesn't exactly inspire confidence.

Second, there has always been something conditional -- unspoken but still real -- about America's "ironclad commitment" to Israel's security. When Reagan introduced the phrase, it was designed to make the idea of Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank -- then still described as Palestinian "autonomy" -- more palatable to a Likud-led government. Menachem Begin, Israel's prime minister at the time, was not impressed, famously rejecting the Reagan peace plan with his "banana republic" tirade to then-U.S. ambassador Samuel W. Lewis.

Obama's appeal to an "ironclad commitment" was, like Reagan's, designed to offset a Likud-led government's fears about U.S. policy preferences in Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. Obama first used the phrase just two days after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered his own version of a "banana republic" rebuke, when he reprimanded the president -- in the Oval Office, no less -- for calling on Israel to accept border negotiations based on the 1967 lines. So far, Obama's turn of phrase does not seem to have been any more successful than Reagan's.

And then there are the fundamental drawbacks to the "ironclad" metaphor itself. Shielding boats with sheets of iron or steel was a tactic that worked for a limited time, and then was overtaken by the tide of change. What seemed invincible wasn't. Ironclads were sunk. That's why nobody builds them anymore.

If presidents want to signal the strength of American's commitment to Israel, they should consider scuttling the word "ironclad" and its has-been, so-last-century connotation and instead use timeless terms that emphasize the ends, not the means, of a policy. Three words that are long-time presidential favorites for signaling strength and constancy of purpose are unbreakable (92 presidential uses); unshakable (226); and unwavering (312) -- as in Jimmy Carter's "unbreakable ties of friendship with the Shah of Iran," Harry Truman's paean to the "unshakable unity" of the United Nations, and Lyndon Johnson's "unwavering" commitment to Vietnam. But that's another story.

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