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A number of military experts – including the defense secretary, James Mattis – have warned that a US war against North Korea would be hard, incredibly destructive and bloody, with civilian casualties in the millions, and could go badly for US forces. But Lt. Gen. Herbert Raymond McMaster, President Trump's national security adviser, is [apparently](#) insistent that 'a military strike be considered as a serious option'.

One of Gen. McMaster's claims to fame is a Silver Star he was awarded for a tank 'battle' he led in the desert during the so-called Gulf War of 1991. As a young captain leading a troop with nine new Abrams M1A1 battle tanks, McMaster destroyed 28 Iraqi tanks in 23 minutes without losing any of his own or suffering any casualties.

McMaster's exploit (later embellished with a name, the 'Battle of 73 Easting') was little more than a case of his having dramatically better equipment. His tanks were several generations ahead of the antique Russian-built T-72s of his Iraqi opponents. They were protected by depleted uranium armour – a dense metal virtually impenetrable by conventional tank shells, anti-tank rockets and RPGs – and carried anti-tank munitions tipped with depleted uranium penetrators, which can punch through steel armour as if it were cardboard. They then ignite a tank's interior, exploding any ordnance inside and incinerating the crew. The Abrams main cannon also has a significantly longer range than the tanks McMaster was confronting, meaning he and his men were able to pick off the Iraqi tanks while the shells fired back at them all fell short.

McMaster also fought in the Iraq War of the following decade. In 2005, running counter-insurgency operations in Tal Afar, a northern city of 200,000 people, McMaster ordered up a massive ground assault and aerial bombardment that levelled 60 per cent of the buildings in the old city centre. His experiences in Iraq raise concerns that Trump's national security adviser may misperceive war as a one-sided affair in which an invincible US, with its super-powerful war machine, can smash its enemies with impunity.

I spoke to Lawrence Wilkerson, a retired army colonel who was chief of staff to Colin Powell when he was George W. Bush's secretary of state. 'McMaster knows very little about the [Korean] peninsula, period,' he told me. 'Thus far, his comments and – I must assume – his counsel to the NSC and its head, Trump, reflects that ignorance.' Asked whether McMaster may be underestimating the risks of attacking North Korea, Wilkerson said: 'That could be said of almost any US flag officer and reinforced with any who had combat experience in Iraq in 1990-91 or 2003.'

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, my father, a professor of electrical engineering, was doing contract research work for the US Navy's nuclear submarine programme. Twelve at the time, I went with him to check out a company in town that was making and selling home fallout shelters.

It was actually a septic tank firm whose entrepreneurial owner had seen a business opportunity in the crisis, and had converted some of his big asphalt-coated steel tanks into one-room hideouts to be buried in suburban back yards and stocked with food and water for the long haul. Dad climbed down the access tube into a couple of these tanks and emerged to say that the whole idea was preposterous. I think he had visions of being stuck in a septic tank for a couple of months with my mother and their three children, all of us cooped up, frustrated and getting on one another's nerves, and figured he'd rather be dead. (A Second World War Marine veteran, he ended up a pacifist like my mother and retired from the university to become a Jungian psychoanalyst.)

Now we are seeing a new [boom in bomb shelter sales](#) as a new generation of septic tank makers looks to capitalise on an alternative source of revenue as housebuilding stagnates in Trump's America.

In 1976, as a reporter at the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, I got hold of a list of building permits for bomb shelters from the late 1950s and early 1960s and called the current owners of the properties to see what people were doing with them. One woman who answered had a Japanese accent. I asked her what she was doing with her bomb shelter. 'What bomb shelter?' she replied.

I explained that town records showed there was a shelter built into the corner of her basement. 'Wait a minute,' she said. 'I'm going to go check.' A few minutes later she returned to the phone, furious. 'You are right! I am going to have that thing completely torn out!' She had

survived the bombing of Hiroshima as a child; many of her family had not. 'Trying to survive a nuclear attack is madness!' she told me. 'We should not be attempting to do that. We should be letting our politicians know that we need to make nuclear war impossible!'