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## Monroe County tense as Trump tangles with Iran

By Claire Galofaro, AP National Writer

Monroe – He flipped anxiously between news stations, bracing for an announcement of bombs falling and troops boarding planes destined for the Middle East. It was a nightmare he hoped he would never see again.

Michael Ingram's son, Michael Jr., died in Afghanistan in 2010 at age 23. Every day since, Ingram has prayed for American presidents to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and bring every last soldier home. Instead, it seemed to him this week that the United States was edging perilously close to another one.

The highest-stakes week of President Donald Trump's administration, when a standoff with Iran pushed the countries to the brink of war, was felt most viscerally by people like Ingram and in places such as Monroe. This blue-collar corner of southeast Michigan has buried young soldiers at a rate higher than in most other places of the country. Here, matters of war and peace are deeply personal.

They may also be politically important come November. Monroe is a swing county in a swing state, part of a cluster of Rust Belt communities along the border of Ohio and Michigan that voted for Democrat Barack Obama but then flipped to help put Trump in the White House in 2016. Its assessment of his performance as commander in chief could decide whether he stays there next year.

Conversations with people here, including many with veterans and military families, reveal how complex that assessment is. Trump's campaign promise to stop the "endless wars" resonated with many, but so did his pledged to answer aggression with relentless strength. Trump supporters in Monroe say they are not against military action. They just want to win and win quickly. They said they trust Trump will.

A week that began with uncertainty and terror ended with Ingram, and others here, seeming to stand more resolutely behind Trump. Last week, Trump authorized the targeted killing of Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani. Iran responded by firing more



Michael Ingram touches the framed uniform of his son, Sgt. Michael Ingram Jr., as he talks about the 2010 death of his son in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Jan. 8, 2020, in Carlton, Mich. (Photo: Claire Galofaro, AP)

than a dozen missiles at American bases in Iraq in its most aggressive assault since seizing the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979.

As the bombs rained down, Ingram had been so tense that he remembered the exact moment Trump walked behind a podium to announce a detente that meant America was not going immediately into war: 11:22 a.m. Wednesday.

"I was proud of Trump because I thought it was going to get a lot worse. I thought it was going to be bombing all night long, and I don't want anyone to die," Ingram said of the president he voted for three years ago and suspects he will again.

His sentiment was repeated by others in this former union stronghold of about 150,000 people, where American flags fly from poles in lawn after lawn. The median household income nears \$60,000, higher than the national average, even as the area has suffered some of the same blows to its manufacturing economy as other Rust Belt counties.

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Larry Mortimer, a 36-year-old veteran of the Iraq War, did not vote in 2016. He now considers himself undecided. But this past week pushed him closer to Trump, he said, because the president made America look tough.

“It shows that if you pick on us, we’re not going to let you get away with it,” Mortimer said, “and in turn we’re going to show force, we’re not backing down.”

Monroe County, population 150,000, has had six military casualties since 2001, putting it above the national per capita averages.

Places such as Monroe that have seen their sons and daughters die overseas at higher rates voted disproportionately for Trump, according to a 2017 study by researchers from Boston University and the University of Minnesota. Even when the authors accounted for other factors that could tilt the scales in Trump’s favor – lower college graduation rates, income level, racial diversity – they found Trump did better than previous Republicans candidates in communities that have shouldered a heavier burden for the war.

Doug Kriner, one of the authors of the study, sees the connection as part of Trump’s appeal to the forgotten men and women of America. Much of the country pays scant attention to the wars, while only a small slice of Americans go to fight. The research found those Americans responded to the politician who promised they would no longer be overlooked, Kriner wrote.

Kriner, now a professor at Cornell University, saw a warning for Trump in his research: Trump risks turning off voters who embraced his pledge to avoid “stupid wars” and being viewed as “another politician who overlooks the invisible inequality of military sacrifice.”

“For most of the first three years, Trump barked loudly at times, but was quite restrained militarily,” Kriner wrote in an email interview this past week.



Patricia Kitts discusses the 2010 death of her son, Sgt. Michael Ingram Jr., in Kandahar, Afghanistan, on Wednesday in Monroe. (Photo: Claire Galofaro, AP)

“But now his saber-rattling has crossed over into a dangerous escalation that risks a wider conflagration. I don’t think voters in these constituencies where Trump made inroads are necessarily anti-war. But he might not seem like a breath of fresh air anymore, but rather more of the same.”

After voting twice for Obama, Monroe County swung hard toward Trump, selecting him by a margin of more than 20 percentage points. His victory here was critical to claiming Michigan and the White House.

Sgt. Michael Ingram’s mother hasn’t voted in years. Politicians kept promising to bring home American troops and no one ever did, Patricia Kitts said.

“When my son passed away, everything went out of me,” she said. “I felt like why vote for somebody that keeps saying they’re going to do something and nothing ever changes?”

She’s going to vote this time, she said. It will be for whichever candidate convinces her that ending the wars will be the priority.

“Bring our babies back,” she said. “And if you promise to bring our troops home, you better bring them home.”

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**The study finds that “there is a significant and meaningful relationship between a community’s rate of military sacrifice and its support for Trump,” and the data suggest “that if three states key to Trump’s victory — Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin — had suffered even a modestly lower casualty rate, all three could have flipped from red to blue and sent Hillary Clinton to the White House.” — *The Nation*, July 13, 2017**