Excuses to wage unjustified wars

June 23, 2019

Re: "Blasts blamed on Iran — U.S. slams 'unprovoked attacks' on two tankers; Tehran denies any role," June 14 news story.

The much-questioned attack by Iran on a tanker in the Gulf of Oman is reminiscent of the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. As a scholar of communication, I encourage the public to understand how events like this can become an excuse to wage an unwanted and unjustified war. This was the topic of my dissertation in 1978, which was subsequently published in numerous journals.

I showed how President Lyndon Baines Johnson's Gulf of Tonkin discourse in August 1964 rhetorically created a crisis enabling him to convince Congress to pass a resolution giving him the power unilaterally to send troops to Vietnam. Thus, the alleged attacks were used as a pretext to enact Johnson's previously arrived-at private decision to intervene in Vietnam — something his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, advocated.

Of note is the fact that Johnson's Tonkin Gulf speeches were drawn largely from a memo drafted by deputy national security adviser Walt Rostow well in advance of the Tonkin Gulf attacks. This memo armed Johnson with the persuasive ammunition needed to rally the public behind sending troops into a protracted and costly war thousands of miles from home. It simultaneously reconciled Johnson's private decision to intervene with his prior public rhetoric that claimed he would not allow American boys to fight a war that should be fought by Asian boys.

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