The Gulf of Oman—Repeating the Rhetorical Past?

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On Monday, the United States ordered the deployment of an additional 1,000 troops to the Middle East. This followed last week’s alleged attack by Iran on an oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman which resulted in the Administration’s continued and increasing inflammatory rhetoric aimed at the Islamic Republic of Iran. What are we to make of this high stakes escalating situation?

It is often said that those who forget the past are doomed, perhaps condemned, to repeat it.

Case in point: The much questioned event in the Gulf of Oman and President Trump’s language are reminiscent of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents during the Lyndon Johnson presidency. In August of 1964, the destroyer U.S.S. Maddox and then the C. Turner Joy purportedly were attacked by naval vessels operated by the government of North Vietnam. To this day, we still do not have a complete answer about what precisely occurred.

Those of us who study communication believe it is necessary for the public to understand how often uncertain occurrences like this can be used rhetorically as an excuse to wage war and become embroiled in an unwanted, unpopular and
unjustified conflict. This was the topic of my dissertation research in 1978 and subsequently published in numerous academic journals. This investigation is again relevant in 2019.

How so?

My research demonstrated that, while the exact nature of the attacks was unclear, President Lyndon Johnson’s Gulf of Tonkin discourse in August, 1964 rhetorically succeeded in creating a crisis enabling him to convince the Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution giving him the power unilaterally to send troops to Vietnam. The alleged attacks thus 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 and something Johnson refuted during the campaign.

Of note is the fact that Johnson’s Tonkin Gulf speeches were drawn largely word for word from a memo drafted by chairman of the State Department’s Policy Planning Council Walt Rostow well in advance of the Tonkin Gulf attacks. This memo was requested by Johnson and armed him 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 an Asian war that should be fought by Asian boys.

What happened in Tonkin Gulf fifty-five hears ago should give us pause today. We must wonder what additional actions will be taken by President Donald Trump, an unpredictable and arguably dangerous Commander-in-Chef, as a response to Iran regarding what transpired in the Gulf of Oman—especially given his and Secretary of State Pompeo’s harsh statements about and threatening tone taken with Iran, as well as the decision to send an additional 1,000 troops to the region.

Of special concern to communication scholars is the fact that Trump is quite deft at using rhetoric to deflect attention from other issues and mold the political narrative to his advantage. As a marketer, he knows how to use language for his personal benefit, even when that is not in the best interest of the nation.

What can and should be done?
The media and leaders of both political parties must keep a close eye on the President and his escalating policy in Iran. It is worrisome that we have a Commander-in-Chief who lacks a thoughtfully articulated foreign policy philosophy. This is another reason why Republicans, who thus far have been reluctant if not afraid to hold Trump accountable, must not be reticent now to stop him from taking our country to war.

That may be the only antidote to our repeating the past and its devastating consequences.

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