Events early Friday at Baghdad International Airport are exactly the paradigm case of rhetorical projection, deflection and crisis-building that was fictionally portrayed in the 1997 movie, “Wag the Dog.” It is hardly a surprise that when we awoke on Friday morning, the media were no longer talking primarily about impeachment and the Ukraine scandal, the major headlines of prior weeks. The story now has changed suddenly and dramatically.

As a scholar and teacher of political communication for over 40 years, I don’t think I am being a cynic to suggest that the timing of President Donald Trump’s order to kill Qassem Soleimani, the top Iranian general — which is tantamount to a declaration of war — is far from a
coincidence. Wouldn’t we be naïve to assume that this president is reluctant to use war as a political strategy to change the narrative and rhetorically extricate himself from the mounting evidence about his inappropriate and illegal actions in Ukraine?

Consider the facts. The assassination of Soleimani came with Trump's approval rating mired at 42%. It occurred as new email evidence was just released indicating that he directly ordered the hold on congressionally appropriated aid to Ukraine — something undermining Trump’s defense. And it came with the president facing removal from office through impeachment in a U.S. election year.

President Trump, it should be remembered, is the rhetorical master of deflection and projection. It is his modus operandi. For years, dating back to his time in business, Trump regularly has shifted the topic away from something threatening him. He also has done precisely what he has accused others of doing. All of this provided Trump with a usually successful escape hatch.

For example, on numerous occasions in the past, Trump wrongly predicted that President Barack Obama would attack Iran in order to get reelected. In 2011 and 2012, Trump repeatedly accused Obama of seeking war with Iran to help win the 2012 presidential election: "In order to get elected, @BarackObama will start a war with Iran," Trump tweeted in 2011, years before he began his own presidential campaign. He also said: “Now that Obama’s poll numbers are in tailspin — watch for him to launch a strike in Libya or Iran. He is desperate.” In 2012 Trump tweeted: “Don't let Obama play the Iran card in order to start a war in order to get elected — be careful Republicans!”

In addition to deflection and projection, President Trump offers an archetypal example of what in communication research is called the “rhetorical construction of reality.” As I wrote in an op-ed for this newspaper in June and drawing on my own research pertaining to the
events in 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin, when faced with a difficult political situation, presidents often resort to the rhetorical tactic of constructing a crisis.

The aim of this maneuver is to deflect attention from a pressing problem by focusing our eyes on a seemingly more dramatic event — one that has the potential to rally Americans behind the president and allow him to control the narrative. This rhetorical tactic is clearly reflected by the fact that Trump's only statement immediately following the assassination of Soleimani was to tweet a picture of the U.S. flag.

It’s time to acknowledge the recurrent and habitual knee-jerk pattern of Trump’s discourse — something documented by his responses to charges of personal wrongdoing and illegality well before becoming president of the United States. Failure to recognize his rhetorical strategy and to understand we have a chief executive without a disciplined and well-thought-out approach to foreign policy and national security this time will be costly, almost assuredly leading to the increased shedding of blood both abroad and at home, sudden terrorist retaliation, cyberattacks, as well as dangerous instability around the world.

All of us, regardless of political ideology and party affiliation, should be worried. The stakes of President Trump’s behavior are enormous.

Richard Cherwitz is the Ernest A. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus in the Moody College of Communication, The University of Texas at Austin.