The much questioned attack by Iran last week on a tanker in the Gulf of Oman is reminiscent of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents in 1964. As a scholar of communication I encourage the public to understand how events like this can be used rhetorically as an excuse to wage an unwanted and unjustified war.

This was the topic of my dissertation in 1978 and subsequently published in numerous journals. I showed how 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 a 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.

Of note is the fact that Johnson’s Tonkin Gulf speeches were drawn almost 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 armed LBJ 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.

What happened in Tonkin Gulf fifty-five hearst ago should give us pause today. We must wonder how President Donald Trump, an unpredictable and arguably dangerous Commander-in-Chief, will respond 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.

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.

The media and leaders of both political parties, therefore, must keep a close eye on the President and his evolving policy toward 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.

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