Choose your words carefully

As a communications scholar, I have studied how presidents can rhetorically construct or manufacture crises. For example, my research documents how President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 used speech to create a crisis in Tonkin Gulf. Why was that significant? Because it gave him the pretext to intervene in Vietnam without substantial opposition -- something that produced years of war, bloodshed and loss of treasury.

It is understandable, therefore, why I am now troubled by President Donald Trump's escalating bellicose rhetoric toward North Korea. Whether or not this is an intentional and strategic ploy is arguable. Nevertheless, we should worry that Trump's crisis language may preclude the needed flexibility to address a difficult situation requiring nuanced and thoughtful options.

In fact, Trump's discourse might lock us into policies with potentially cataclysmic outcomes. Words, after all, have consequences; they can enable or disenable possibilities -- and it is the latter that frightens me.

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