

Are We Doomed to Repeat the Rhetorical Past in Conflict with Iran?

By Richard Cherwitz

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This image released by the U.S. Department of Defense on Monday, June 17, 2019, is a view of hull penetration/blast damage on the starboard side of the motor vessel M/T Kokuka Courageous, which the Navy says was sustained from a limpet mine attack while operating in the Gulf of Oman, on June 13th. (U.S. Department of Defense via AP)

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

Case in point: The much-questioned attack by the Islamic Republic of Iran last week on a tanker in the Gulf of Oman is reminiscent of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents during the Lyndon B. Johnson presidency. In August 1964, the destroyer USS Maddox and then the USS Turner Joy allegedly 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 events 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.

My research demonstrated that, while the exact nature of the Gulf of Tonkin attacks was unclear, President Johnson's discourse in August 1964 rhetorically succeeded in creating a crisis, enabling him to convince 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 reached, 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 the 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 the Gulf of Tonkin 55 years 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 Mike Pompeo's threatening statements regarding Iran, as well as the decision to send an additional 1,000 troops to supplement the 6,000 already sent 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 evolving policy toward Iran. It is worrisome that we have a leader 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 reluctant 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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