

Deception and lies from the White House to justify a war in Venezuela? We've seen this movie before in run-ups to wars in Vietnam and Iraq

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Military personnel on the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima on Dec. 16, 2025, in Ponce, Puerto Rico, during a U.S. military campaign in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific.

Miguel J. Rodriguez Carrillo/AFP via Getty Images

Are Americans about to be led again into a war based on misrepresentations and lies? It's happened before, most recently with the wars in Iraq and Vietnam.

President Donald Trump and his administration have presented the country's growing military operations against Venezuela as a war against drug trafficking and terrorism. Trump has designated the government of Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro as a foreign terrorist organization, the first country to ever receive that designation.

The U.S. military has killed at least 99 crew members of small boats that Trump claims, without presenting evidence, were carrying illegal drugs destined for the U.S. The New York Times reports, however, that “Venezuela is not a drug producer, and the cocaine that transits through the country and the waters around it is generally bound for Europe.”

Trump’s administration has justified the bombing of these boats by declaring they are manned by combatants. U.S. Sen. Jack Reed, a Democrat from Rhode Island, told the Intercept news outlet that the administration “has offered no credible legal justification, evidence or intelligence for these strikes.”

There is no war. Yet.

On Dec. 12, 2025, Trump said, “It’s going to be starting on land pretty soon” and announced four days later a “total and complete blockade of all sanctioned oil tankers going into, and out of, Venezuela.”

As Trump increasingly sounds like he is preparing to go to war against Venezuela, it might be helpful to examine the run-ups to the wars in Iraq and Vietnam – two wars based on lies that led, together, to the deaths of 62,744 Americans.

As an investigative journalist who has written about the vast, secret operations of the FBI and the man who ran it for decades, I am well aware of the dangerous ability the government has to deceive the public. I also covered the opposition to the Vietnam war and the release of information years later that revealed that lies were at the heart of the start of both the Vietnam and Iraq wars.

Fear used to gin up public support

Consider the run-up to the Iraq War.

Fear was the main tool used to convince the public that it was essential for the U.S. to go to war in Iraq. The manufacturing of fear was evident in a speech by Vice President Dick Cheney in August 2002 to a convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Cheney said, without evidence, that Iraq’s Saddam Hussein was planning to use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and its allies. If the U.S. did not go to war against Iraq, he said, it might experience another Pearl Harbor.

President George W. Bush chose Secretary of State Colin Powell to make the administration’s most prominent public case for going to war in Iraq in a televised speech at the United Nations. Powell was perhaps the most respected official in the Bush administration.

The White House provided Powell with a draft speech. But Powell pressed the CIA regarding what he thought were unsupported claims in the White House draft. Despite his efforts, his speech on Feb. 5, 2003, contained significant unsupported claims, including that Hussein had authorized his military to use poison gas if the U.S. invaded.

“Leaving Saddam Hussein in possession of weapons of mass destruction for a few more months or years is not an option, not in a post-September 11th world,” Powell solemnly declared that day.

He later expressed regret for making the case for war.

“I’m the one who presented it on behalf of the United States to the world,” Powell later said. By then, he said, the speech was “painful” for him personally and would forever be a “blot” on his reputation.

Intelligence agencies pressed to justify war

No weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq, nor was Hussein connected with al-Qaida, as the Bush administration had said it was. And Iraq did not release poison gas when the U.S. invaded the country. Early postwar assessments of how the U.S. could have invaded Iraq on the basis of serious false claims suggested it happened because the CIA and other intelligence agencies gave President Bush false or inadequate intelligence.

But as extensive official records of pre-war deliberations became available to journalists and others in response to Freedom of Information Act requests, a different explanation emerged.

John Prados, historian at the National Security Archives, discovered an explanation in hundreds of official records that meticulously document the run-up to the war.

They revealed that U.S. intelligence agencies had let themselves be used, he wrote, as “a tool of a political effort, vitiating the intelligence function ... They all yielded intelligence predictions of exactly the kind the Bush administration wanted to hear ... The intense focus on achieving the conditions for war instead of solving an international problem led to crucial faults in military planning and diplomatic action.”

The administration did not attempt to engage in diplomacy before deciding to go to war. There never was a serious effort, even within the administration, to consider alternatives to war.

George J. Tenet, director of the CIA at the time, later wrote that “based on conversations with colleagues, in none of the meetings can anyone remember a discussion of the central questions: Was it wise to go to war? Was it the right thing to do?”

Most journalists accepted PR at face value

A dearth of serious reporting contributed to the public being ill-informed.

Dan Kennedy, professor of journalism at Northeastern University, recently wrote that only one news organization, the Washington bureau of Knight Ridder – later known as McClatchy – exposed the Bush-Cheney “administration’s lies and falsehoods during the run-up to the disastrous war in Iraq.”

Other reporters relied on the public relations push for war being made to journalists by high-level political appointees in the military, foreign service and intelligence agencies. But Knight Ridder journalists relied on expert, longtime career officers in those agencies who were “deeply troubled by what they regarded as the administration’s deliberate misrepresentation of intelligence, ranging from overstating the case to outright fabrication.”

Lies to Congress and the public also were at the heart of the run-up to the war in Vietnam.

Of the two attacks on a destroyer that the administration of President Lyndon Johnson said required an immediate vast buildup of troops in August 1964, one was provoked by the United States and the other one never happened.

Few if any questions were asked when the House and Senate voted – with only two no votes – on the request for what would be known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The resolution was used by Johnson and his successor, President Richard Nixon, to keep expanding the war for nearly a decade. By mid-1969, there were 543,400 American troops in Vietnam.

Truth and transparency are crucial

It may seem obvious that the most important lesson to be learned from those wars is that the president and all who contribute to decisions to go to war should tell the truth. But, as shown by the presidents who led the U.S. into wars in Iraq and Vietnam and from Trump’s daily remarks, truth is a frequent casualty.

That increases the need for Congress, the public and the press to demand to be fully informed about these decisions that will be carried out in their name, with their money and with the blood of their sons and daughters. That’s necessary to prevent a president and Congress from making decisions that lead to consequences like these:

In the Iraq War, 4,492 American military members were killed and approximately 200,000 Iraqi civilians were killed. In the Vietnam War, 58,252 American military members were killed, 1.1 million Vietnamese military members were killed, and a staggering 2 million Vietnamese civilians were killed.

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