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OPINION

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Trump Is Hiding the Truth About the War in Iran

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Illustration by Rebecca Chew/The New York Times.

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By The Editorial Board
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From his first announcement of the attack on Iran on Feb. 28, President Trump has issued a stream of falsehoods about the war. He has said Iran wants to engage in negotiations, though its government shows no sign of it. He has claimed that the United States "destroyed 100% of Iran's Military capability" when Tehran continues to inflict damage throughout the region. He has said the war is almost complete even as he calls in reinforcements from around the globe.

Lying is standard behavior for Mr. Trump, of course. His political career began with a lie about Barack Obama's birthplace, and he has lied about his business, his wealth, his inauguration crowd size, his defeat in the 2020 election and so much more. A CNN tally of Mr. Trump's falsehoods during one part of his first term found that he averaged eight false claims per day. Many people are so accustomed to his lies that they hardly notice them anymore.

Yet lying about war is uniquely corrosive. When a president signals that the truth does not matter in wartime, he encourages his cabinet and his generals to mislead the country and one another about how the war is going. He creates a culture in which deadly mistakes and even war crimes can become more common. He makes it harder to win by hiding the realities of conflict and by making allies wary of joining the fight. Ultimately, he undermines American values and interests.

There is a reasonable debate to have about the wisdom of this war. Iran's murderous government does indeed present a threat — to its own people, to its region and to global stability. Mr. Trump could make a fact-based argument for confronting the regime now, especially to prevent it from menacing its neighbors and, above all, from developing a nuclear weapon. We are skeptical, but we acknowledge that there is a case to be made.

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Mr. Trump is not making it. Instead, he has lied about the reasons for the war and about its progress, in an apparent attempt to disguise his poor planning and the war's questionable basis.

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The president was only a few minutes into his Feb. 28 announcement of the start of the conflict when he offered an obviously contradictory rationale for it. He repeated his claim that American attacks last June "obliterated" Iran's nuclear program while also citing that program as a reason to go to war. The claim of obliteration is false: Iran retains about 970 pounds of highly enriched uranium, potentially enough for 10 warheads.

The lies have continued since then. Days later, Mr. Trump said the U.S. military had a "virtually unlimited supply" of high-end munitions. The Pentagon nevertheless has had to withdraw weapons from South Korea to sustain its efforts in the Middle East. He has also asserted that "nobody" believed Iran would retaliate by attacking Arab countries. On Monday, he said that "no, the greatest experts, nobody thought they were going to hit" neighboring countries. In truth, some experts had warned of precisely this scenario.

In another instance, Mr. Trump has used false information to continue his alarming penchant to portray people who contradict him as un-American. Last weekend, he posted an allegation that "Iran, working in close coordination with the Fake News Media" had spread fake videos of an American aircraft burning in the ocean. The White House has offered no example of American media outlets having done so. Instead, several debunked fake online videos, CNN reported. Nonetheless, Mr. Trump wrote that "you can say that those Media Outlets that generated it should be brought up on Charges for TREASON for the dissemination of false information!"

A shocking falsehood came on March 7, when Mr. Trump claimed in his typically offhand way that a strike on an elementary school in the town of Minab during the first hours of the war "was done by Iran." The attack killed at least 175 people, most of them children. The U.S. military has conducted an investigation and preliminarily concluded that an American missile mistakenly hit the school. The military deserves credit for its honesty. The commander in chief, however, still has not retracted his statement.

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This pattern is an echo of the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, when small lies grew into a bigger ones, such as the covered-up massacres in My Lai and Haditha. The consequences of those untruths were long-lasting. Americans' faith in government never recovered from the deceptions of Vietnam. And the second Iraq war, which George W. Bush's administration sold on the grounds of fictitious weapons of mass destruction, represents the start of our cynical modern political era. Since that war began in 2003, every Gallup poll asking about the country's direction has shown that most Americans are dissatisfied with it.

Lies about war also make it harder to achieve victory: The more one spreads falsehoods, the less one feels obliged to face reality. In retrospect, Americans understand that their leaders' refusal to confront the truth in Iraq and Vietnam led to strategic errors. The pattern is repeating. Before Mr. Trump began this war, he brushed aside warnings from his top military adviser that Iran could close the Strait of Hormuz to traffic it does not approve. The global economy is now dealing with the consequences of his overconfidence.

He may yet learn a more personal lesson about lying in war. Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush will forever be remembered as having misled Americans about U.S. military action. They learned that falsehoods can boomerang on the leaders who tell them.

Starting a war is the most serious action that a political leader can take. It ends lives and can change history. The decisions that guide war must be based in reality, and presidents owe American service members and their families the truth about why they are being asked to fight. Whatever short-term gain Mr. Trump thinks he is getting by lying about the war in Iran is far exceeded by the cost, for him, the country and the world.

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