

# 1964: The Vietnam War

## Context

Long before WWII, the Vietnamese fought for independence from French Indochina. Resistance continued when Japanese troops occupied the colony during the war. Much of the region reverted to French control after the war. As early as 1950, the U.S. aided French efforts to defeat the Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary forces. When France lost a decisive battle in 1954, the Geneva Accord recognized the independence of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Vietnam was "temporarily" divided. Ngo Dinh Diem's repressive regime in South Vietnam was backed by thousands of U.S. military "advisors." A military coup overthrew Diem in November 1963.<sup>59</sup>

That same month, President Kennedy – who had resisted escalating the war – was assassinated. President Johnson took power and began intensified U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

## Pretext Incident

On July 30, 1964, enemy torpedo boats supposedly attacked a U.S. destroyer, the USS Maddox, in North Vietnam's Gulf of Tonkin. This lie of an "unprovoked attack" against a "routine patrol" threw the U.S. headlong into war.

The Maddox was actually involved in "aggressive intelligence gathering in coordination with actual attacks by South Vietnam and the Laotian Air Force against targets in North Vietnam."<sup>60</sup> They wanted to provoke a response "but the North Vietnamese wouldn't bite. So, Johnson invented the attack."<sup>61</sup>

The U.S. task force commander for the Gulf of Tonkin "cabled Washington that the report was the result of an 'over-eager' sonarman who picked up the sounds of his own ship's screws and panicked."<sup>62</sup>

## Follow Up

On August 5, 1964, although he knew the attack had not occurred, Johnson couldn't resist this opportunity for a full-scale war. Johnson went on national TV to lie about the Tonkin incident and to announce a bombing campaign to



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"retaliate." The media repeated the lie *ad nauseam*. The fabricated assault was "used as justification for goading Congress into granting the president the authorization to initiate a protracted and highly lucrative war with North Vietnam."<sup>63</sup> Johnson asked Congress for powers "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the U.S. and to prevent further aggression."<sup>64</sup> Johnson escalated the Vietnam war by signing the "Gulf of Tonkin resolution" on August 10, 1964.

By 1975, about four million people had been killed by the U.S. war in Southeast Asia.

## Real Reasons

As during the Spanish-American war, the American business elite sought to acquire colonies from a failing imperial power, in this case, France. U.S. corporations wanted access to region's markets and resources, like tin, tungsten and rubber.<sup>65</sup> The war also gave a huge boost to the military-industrial complex in the U.S.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower propounded the 'Domino Theory' in 1954.<sup>66</sup> If South Vietnam 'fell,' then other countries would too, 'like a set of dominos.' The Vietnam War was a threat to all revolutionaries and their supporters.

## Footnotes:

59. Sandra M. Wittman, "Chronology of U.S.-Vietnamese Relations," *Vietnam: Yesterday and Today*.

60. Rivero

61. John DiNardo, "The CIA and the Gulf

War," aired by Pacifica Radio.

62. Rivero

63. DiNardo

64. Joint Resolution, U.S. Congress, Aug. 7, 1964, "The Tonkin Bay Resolution, 1964," *Modern History Sourcebook*, July 1998.

65. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Domino Theory Principle, 1954," *Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954*, pp.381-390. (News Conference, April 7, 1954.)

66. Eisenhower.

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# Gulf of Tonkin: The Lie that Launched the War

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By Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon, co-authors, *Adventures in Medialand: Behind the News, Beyond the Pundits* (1993).

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In 1964, it all seemed very clear. “American Planes Hit North Vietnam After Second Attack on Our Destroyers; Move Taken to Halt New Aggression,” announced a *Washington Post* headline on August 5, 1964.

That same day, the front page of the *New York Times* reported: “President Johnson has ordered retaliatory action against gunboats and ‘certain supporting facilities in North Vietnam’ after renewed attacks against American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin.”

But there was no “second attack” by North Vietnam – no “renewed attacks against American destroyers.” By reporting official claims as absolute truths, American journalism opened the floodgates for the bloody Vietnam War.

A pattern took hold: continuous government lies passed on by pliant mass media...leading to over 50,000 American deaths and millions of Vietnamese casualties.

The official story was that North Vietnamese torpedo boats launched an “unprovoked attack” against a U.S. destroyer on “routine patrol” in the Tonkin Gulf on August 2 and that North Vietnamese PT boats followed up with a “deliberate attack” on a pair of U.S. ships two days later. The truth was very different.

Rather than being on a routine patrol on August 2, the U.S. destroyer Maddox was actually engaged in aggressive intelligence-gathering maneuvers – in sync with coordinated attacks on North Vietnam by the South Vietnamese navy and Laotian air force.

“The day before, two attacks on North Vietnam... had taken place,” writes scholar Daniel C. Hallin. Those assaults were “part of a campaign of increasing military pressure on the North that the United States had been pursuing since early 1964.”

On the night of August 4, the Pentagon proclaimed that a second attack by North Vietnamese PT boats had occurred earlier that day in the Tonkin

Gulf – a report cited by President Johnson as he went on national TV that evening to announce a momentous escalation in the war: air strikes against North Vietnam.

Johnson ordered U.S. bombers to “retaliate” for a North Vietnamese torpedo attack that never happened.

Prior to the U.S. air strikes, top officials in Washington had reason to doubt that any August 4 attack by North Vietnam had occurred. Cables from the U.S. task force commander in the Tonkin Gulf, Captain John J. Herrick, referred to “freak weather effects,” “almost total darkness” and an

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**The “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution” authorized the president “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the U.S. and to prevent further aggression.”**

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“overeager sonarman” who “was hearing ship’s own propeller beat.”

One of the Navy pilots flying that night was James Stockdale, who gained fame later as a prisoner of war and then as Ross Perot’s vice presidential candidate. “I had the best seat in the house to watch that event,” recalled Stockdale a few years ago, “our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets – there were no PT boats there.... There was nothing there but black water and American fire power.”

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson commented: “For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there.”

But Johnson’s deceitful speech of August 4, 1964, won accolades from editorial writers. The president, proclaimed the *New York Times*, “went to the American people last night with the somber facts.” The *Los Angeles Times* urged Americans to “face the fact that the Communists, by their attack on American vessels in international waters, have themselves escalated the hostilities.”

An exhaustive book, *The War Within: America’s Battle Over Vietnam*, begins with a dramatic account of the Tonkin Gulf incidents. In an

interview, author Tom Wells told us that American media “described the air strikes that Johnson launched in response as merely ‘tit for tat’ – when in reality they reflected plans the administration had already drawn up for gradually increasing its overt military pressure against the North.”

Why such inaccurate news coverage? Wells points to the media’s “almost exclusive reliance on U.S. government officials as sources of information” — as well as “reluctance to question official pronouncements on ‘national security issues.’”

Daniel Hallin’s classic book *The Uncensored War* observes that journalists had “a great deal of information available which contradicted the official account [of Tonkin Gulf events]; it simply wasn’t used. The day before the first incident, Hanoi had protested the attacks on its territory by Laotian aircraft and South Vietnamese gunboats.” What’s more, “It was generally known... that ‘covert’ operations against North Vietnam, carried out by South Vietnamese forces with U.S. support and direction, had been going on for some time.”

In the absence of independent journalism, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution – the closest thing to a declaration of war against North Vietnam – sailed through Congress on August 7. (Two courageous senators, Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening, provided the only “no” votes.) The resolution authorized Johnson “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the U.S. and to prevent further aggression.” The rest is tragic history.

Nearly three decades later, during the Gulf War, columnist Sydney Schanberg warned journalists not to forget “our unquestioning chorus of agreeability when Lyndon Johnson bamboozled us with his fabrication of the Gulf of Tonkin incident.”

Schanberg blamed the press and “the apparent amnesia of the wider American public... We Americans are the ultimate innocents. We are forever desperate to believe that this time the government is telling us the truth.”

**Source:** *Media Beat*, July 27, 1994.