

Essay: 40th Anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

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On this 40th anniversary of the Tonkin Gulf incident it is appropriate to recall an affair that has much history wound around it, a watershed in the U.S. move toward full-scale war in Vietnam. At the time, in August 1964, the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson used the incident as a pretext to seek from Congress a joint resolution approving the use of force in Southeast Asia, which it then relied upon as legal justification for all-out war. The episode opened the way for an American military commitment that ultimately peaked in March 1969 with 548,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam plus additional supporting forces in Thailand. Some 59,000 Americans and several million Vietnamese died in the conflict. More recently, the Tonkin Gulf incident has regularly been invoked in connection with the lead-up to the war in Iraq, where the administration of President George W. Bush also cited threats to the United States to obtain congressional approval for the use of force. Those claims, too, proved to be based largely on seriously flawed intelligence and possibly, according to some critics, manipulated. The parallels to Tonkin make it all the more worthwhile to re-examine the events of 40 years ago on the basis of newly acquired evidence.

Background

The particulars of the incidents of early August 1964, as reported by the Johnson administration, were crucial to gaining the legislative authority President Johnson sought, which came in the form of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. At the time and for some years afterward, the United States government took the position that it had done nothing to provoke a naval engagement in the Tonkin Gulf between North Vietnamese and U.S. warships. The Johnson administration also maintained that it had acted with restraint, refusing to respond to an initial North Vietnamese attack on August 2, 1964, and reacting only after North Vietnam made a second naval attack two nights later. Both of these assertions turned out to be misleading. In fact the United States at the time was carrying out a program of covert naval commando attacks against North Vietnam and had been engaged in this effort since its approval by Johnson in January

1964. (For documentation of this program, carried out under Operations Plan (OPLAN) 34-A, see the Tonkin Gulf subset of the National Security Archive's microfiche collection, *U.S. Policy in the Vietnam War, I: 1954-1968*.) A fresh addition to the declassified record is the intelligence estimate included in this briefing book, Special National Intelligence Estimate 50-2-64. Published in May 1964, the estimate again demonstrates that the United States purposefully directed OPLAN 34-A to pressure North Vietnam, to the extent of attempting to anticipate Hanoi's reaction. It wrongly concluded that North Vietnam, while taking precautionary measures, "might reduce the level of the insurrections for the moment." [\(Note 1\)](#) In fact Hanoi decided instead to commit its regular army forces to the fighting in South Vietnam.

The Johnson administration's characterization of the specifics of the Tonkin Gulf incident has proven to be inaccurate. Administration officials contended that the U.S. warship simply happened to be cruising in the Gulf to exert a U.S. presence -- engaged in "innocent passage" under international law. The naval battle between the destroyer *USS Maddox* and several North Vietnamese torpedo boats occurred on August 2, 1964, in the immediate aftermath of a series of 34-A maritime raids on North Vietnamese coastal targets. Among the targets were two offshore islands, Hon Me and Hon Ngu, which were closely approached by the *Maddox* prior to the August 2 engagement. The American destroyer was in international waters when the battle itself took place but the North Vietnamese made the logical connection that the 34-A raids and the destroyer's appearance were related. In fact the mission of the *Maddox* was specifically to record North Vietnamese radar and other electronic emissions which could be expected to spike after a 34-A raid.

Senior administration officials were well aware of the connection between the 34-A raids and the destroyer's intelligence cruise, called a "DeSoto Patrol." Secretary of Defense Robert S.

McNamara, in his very first telephone conversation with President Johnson about the battle, at 10:30 a.m. Washington time on August 3, raised the issue. LBJ wanted McNamara to hold a private briefing for congressional leaders on Capitol Hill. McNamara replied, "I think I should also, or we should also at that time, Mr. President, explain this OPLAN 34-A. There's no question but what that had bearing on." [\(Note 2\)](#) McNamara went on to describe the 34-A mission, including mention of the two islands, the number of

attack boats participating, their ammunition expenditures, and other details.

Appearing before the legislators, Secretary McNamara did mention the 34-A raids but asserted they were *South Vietnamese* naval missions and had nothing to do with the United States. In fact the 34-A missions were unilaterally controlled by the U.S., using boats procured and maintained by the U.S. Navy, attacking targets selected by the CIA, in an operation paid for by the United States. The only South Vietnamese aspect of 34-A was the administrative responsibility borne by that government's special forces for their nationals recruited as the commandos for the missions, commandos who were nevertheless led by Americans. Some accounts by Americans who participated in such missions actually maintain that Americans were present aboard the attack boats during the raids of August 2. [\(Note 3\)](#)

Secretary McNamara not only advanced the fiction of 34-A as a South Vietnamese enterprise in a private meeting with congressmen, he repeated it at congressional hearings on the administration's requested use of force resolution. At an executive session hearing held on August 6, McNamara declared, "Our Navy played absolutely no part in, was not associated with, was not aware of, any South Vietnamese actions, if there were any." [\(Note 4\)](#) Controversy over Johnson administration claims regarding the Gulf of Tonkin incident began not long after the events themselves and grew over time, leading to an unusual review of the events in a new set of hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 1968. Secretary McNamara again served as the administration's lead witness and claimed that the issue of provocation had been "fully explored" at the 1964 hearings. Specifically, McNamara declared that Congress had investigated whether the attacks "were in any way provoked by or related to certain South Vietnamese naval activity." McNamara later reasserted that the 34-A missions were "countermeasures being taken by the South Vietnamese in response to North Vietnamese aggression." [\(Note 5\)](#) These administration assertions were highly misleading as the declassified documentary record of OPLAN 34-A makes abundantly clear.

The leading edge of doubt which ultimately forced the February 1968 review of the Gulf of Tonkin incident arose over whether a second attack on U.S. warships had occurred on the night of August 4. Following the initial naval battle of August 2, President Johnson ordered a second U.S. destroyer, the *USS C. Turner Joy*,

to join the *Maddox*, after which both ships sailed back up the Gulf of Tonkin. On the night of August 4, both ships thought they had come under attack again and sent messages reporting enemy contacts, torpedoes in the water, and so on, while directing a good deal of fire at the supposed adversary. Following this supposed repeat challenge to "innocent passage," President Johnson ordered retaliatory bombing against North Vietnam and asked for the congressional resolution with which he prosecuted the Vietnam war.

But the certainty of the "second attack" would never be so clear as the first. The initial battle took place in daylight. There were photographs of the North Vietnamese torpedo boats engaged in a fire-fight with the *Maddox*, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer retained a dud shell from one of the Vietnamese vessels as a souvenir, and numerous *Maddox* sailors confirmed sighting at least three torpedoes. However, there was no physical evidence at all for the August 4 attack claims. The supposed surface action took place at night and in poor weather. The skipper and four seamen aboard the *C. Turner Joy* variously claimed having seen a searchlight, boat cockpit lights, smoke at a location where they claimed their gunfire had hit a Vietnamese vessel in the water, and one, or perhaps two, torpedo wakes. The Navy further claimed their vessels had sunk two attacking torpedo boats. But there was no wreckage, nor bodies of dead sailors. No photographs or other physical evidence existed. Radar and sonar sightings provided an exceedingly confusing set of data at best. [\(Note 6\)](#)

American pilots from the carrier *USS Ticonderoga* sent to help defend the destroyers from their supposed attackers told the same story. Commander James B. Stockdale, who led this flight of jets, spotted no enemy, and at one point saw the *Turner Joy* pointing her guns at the *Maddox*. As Stockdale, who retired an admiral after a distinguished career that included being shot down and imprisoned by the North Vietnamese, later wrote: "There was absolutely no gunfire except our own, no PT boat wakes, not a candle light let alone a burning ship. None could have been there and not have been seen on such a black night." [\(Note 7\)](#) In his memoir, Stockdale also remarked on the situation: "I had the best seat in the house from which to detect boats-if there were any. I didn't have to look through surface haze and spray like the destroyers did, and yet I could see the destroyers' every move vividly." [\(Note 8\)](#) These comments reinforce the dispatches from the Navy's on-scene commander, Captain John Herrick, who after

filing various reports of attacks sent a cable that questioned them all. A Top Secret August 28, 1964 chronology prepared for President Johnson summarized Herrick's report, sent at 1:27 p.m. Washington time on August 4, as follows: "a review of the action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired 'appear doubtful'. 'Freak weather effects' on radar, and 'over-eager' sonarmen may have accounted for many reports. 'No visual sightings' have been reported by the *Maddox*, and the Commander suggests that a 'complete evaluation' be undertaken before any further action." But Washington had already decided to strike North Vietnam.

Stockdale's commentaries came after America's Vietnam war had ended, but questions regarding the "second attack" were already strong enough by 1968 to force renewed congressional attention. Secretary McNamara pulled out a trump card during the 1968 hearings to silence doubters. The trump was a set of communications intercepts made by the Naval Security Group detachment on the destroyer *Maddox*, the very unit whose presence defined this cruise as a DeSoto Patrol. As McNamara described the intercepts in his testimony: "Intelligence reports from a highly classified and unimpeachable source reported that North Vietnam was making preparations to attack our destroyers with two Swatow [patrol] boats and one PT boat if the PT could be made ready in time. The same source reported, while the engagement was in progress on August 4, that the attack was underway. Immediately after the attack ended, the source reported that the North Vietnamese lost two ships in the engagement."

[\(Note 9\)](#)

Secretary McNamara played the intercepts very close to his chest. Describing them only in general terms, he refused to leave copies with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Staff member J. Norvill Jones later recalled that McNamara cited the staff's lack of proper clearances as a reason, but also notes that McNamara's Pentagon had stalled the Committee's investigation of Tonkin Gulf since 1965, and had furnished some requested documents only after the intercession of Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, the powerful chairman of the Armed Services Committee and a close friend of Lyndon Johnson's. Years later, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright was finally able to arrange with the Nixon administration for Jones and staff director Carl Marcy to actually view the intercepts. Jones' reaction is important to record:

Of the several messages we were allowed to scan, only one was from August 4. The others clearly related to the incident on August 2.

My reading of the Aug. 4 intercept was that it was a boastful summary of the attack on August 2. Even the NSA [National Security Agency] officials could not say that it definitely related to the Aug. 4 action. In addition the time sequence of the intercept and the reported action from the U.S. destroyers did not jibe. Curiously, NSA could not find the original of the Aug. 4 intercept, although it did have originals of the others. [\(Note 10\)](#)

A 1980s investigation of these events by reporters for *U.S. News and World Report* found intelligence officers who agreed with Jones' reading of the Tonkin Gulf intercepts. They quoted Ray S. Cline, who at the time headed the CIA's Intelligence Directorate and would later become chief of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research: "I began to see that the [intercepts] which were being received at the time of the second attack almost certainly could not have referred to the second attack because of the time differences involved. Things were being referred to which although they might have been taking place at that time, could not have been reported back so quickly." [\(Note 11\)](#) Also suspect was the fact that intercepts from August 2 had been recorded widely by NSA stations as well as the *Maddox* while those of the 4th reportedly were recorded only by a listening post at Phu Bai in South Vietnam. Louis Tordella, long-serving deputy director of the National Security Agency, was among those intelligence officers who discount the validity of the August 4 intercepts.

New Evidence

Now, forty years later, Americans for the first time have the opportunity to make up their own minds on the Tonkin Gulf intercepts. After repeated requests using the Mandatory Declassification Review process, this analyst was able to get them declassified in March 2003.

The cables included here *are* the relevant NSA intercepts. In the immediate aftermath of the "crisis," the White House *asked* for the intercepted radio traffic and it was sent over. A cover note for National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy on August 8 reads: "Last night the White House Situation Room relayed a request from Mr. Bundy for all intercepts which preceded and related to the second attack on the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. The attached messages were selected by CIA and NSA." [\(Note 12\)](#) The note covered a list that contained the exact items reproduced here,

including the five (out of eight) which have been declassified as of this writing.

A review of the documents will make clear that the cables were *not* raw intercepts of North Vietnamese radio traffic but rather *reports* from the intercepting units on the *Maddox* and elsewhere which *summarize* the contents of the raw intercepts. This point is important because it means that the infamous intercepts *could not have been simultaneously passed along* to the Hawaii headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief Pacific or to Washington. Radio intelligence units had to perform *three* activities before the information could be passed up the chain of command: the intercepts themselves had to be recorded, the North Vietnamese communications had to be decoded and translated, and a message had to be assembled using the new information. Of course, those messages themselves had then to be coded and encrypted in U.S. systems before being transmitted on American radio nets. All this is crucial to bear in mind because claims as to the unimpeachability of the intelligence advanced by the Johnson administration turn on comparisons of the time these messages were sent versus the times that Captain Herrick and his destroyers reported various actions supposedly taking place in the Tonkin Gulf.

Since time is literally of the essence here, the reader should understand how to interpret the times printed on these messages. All United States military traffic is sent using "Zulu" time, or Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), and each message contains a "date/time group" that identifies the time of transmission. Messages are frequently referred to by their date/time groups in official commentaries and in references in subsequent message traffic. A date/time group is composed first of two numbers identifying a day then of four numbers that show the hour and minute (using a twenty-four hour clock). Sometimes messages also list the month and the year, the latter indicated by two final numbers. Thus "03/1211Z Aug" refers to 12:11 p.m. GMT on August 3, 1964. Local time in the Tonkin Gulf is seven hours ahead of GMT, and twelve hours ahead of Washington, DC. The date/time above therefore equates to 7:11 p.m. on August 3 in the Tonkin Gulf, and 7:11 a.m. on August 3 in Washington. Keep these time differences in mind when examining the message traffic below.

Not mentioned thus far in regard to possible U.S. provocation is the fact that 34-A forces carried out *another* raid on North Vietnam during the night of August 3/4, when the U.S. destroyers were beginning their run back up the Tonkin Gulf. If Hanoi was

responding to the first raid, a second one furnished an equivalent reason to act against the reinforced DeSoto Patrol. Yet, it appears Hanoi decided not to act. North Vietnamese officials, including Defense Minister General Vo Nguyen Giap, explained at a retrospective international conference in 1997 that their August 2 response had been ordered by a local naval command, not the Hanoi leadership. [\(Note 13\)](#) The Vietnamese said they had mounted no naval sortie on the 4th. This is consistent. Concerned at the severity of the U.S. reaction to the August 2 engagement, the Hanoi leadership could very well have made sure not to mount a subsequent operation, *even in the face of a second 34-A coastal raid.*

Congressional staffer Jones and others are quite right to observe that a number of the intercepts describe the naval action of August 2. In that battle there *were* shootouts between North Vietnamese torpedo boats and U.S. aircraft, and two of the North Vietnamese boats were sunk, as described in one of the messages. Another message describes a sighting of "two enemy assault vessels" east of the island of Hon Me. The time of day reported in the message, 8:28 p.m. local (message 03/1328Z), actually corresponds very closely to the time, 9:35 p.m., when the *Maddox* had been in this position on August 1, prior to the initial naval engagement. That time is recorded on track charts of the *Maddox's* position in the official U.S. Navy history for this period of the Vietnam war.

[\(Note 14\)](#) The two destroyers traveling together were near Hon Me only in mid-afternoon of August 4. Hon Me had been one of the targets of the initial 34-A maritime operation, which had hit at half past midnight, July 31 -- a rather close connection. The North Vietnamese message had included orders to naval officers to shadow the Americans.

The next message in the series (04/1140Z) reports a preparatory order to two North Vietnamese patrol boats to prepare for operations and informs them that a torpedo boat, the T-333, may join them if it can be made ready in time. Three minutes later there was a sighting report for a U.S. destroyer. This sounds like possible support for the hypothesis that the North Vietnamese fought Americans again on August 4, but only until the American side is also examined. Captain Herrick's destroyers first reported radar sightings in a message with the date/time group 04/1240Z. The base for the North Vietnamese Swatow patrol vessels referenced in these messages was at Quang Khe, near Dong Hoi, roughly 110 nautical miles from Hon Me. Not even a well-maintained and fully

fuelled Swatow able to sustain its maximum speed of over 40 knots could cover that distance from Quang Khe in the time interval between the intercepts and the U.S. message.

Meanwhile, in Washington, at 9:43 a.m. on August 4, Secretary McNamara had another conversation with President Johnson. Their discussion reflects McNamara's knowledge of the intercepts where he says, referring to the U.S. destroyer (McNamara uses the singular), "this ship is allegedly, uh, to be attacked tonight." [\(Note 15\)](#) McNamara and the president went on to discuss what retaliation they could carry out for the attack (that had not happened), including bombing targets in North Vietnam or undertaking more 34-A maritime assaults. An hour later, when McNamara called in the first report that the alleged attack had begun, he was already prepared with a list of options.

Much of the supposed action of August 4 occurred between the U.S. message just mentioned and another from Captain Herrick at 04/1602Z, in which the destroyers reported having evaded torpedoes and to having "sunk" at least one attacking surface craft. It was during this time that the wild melee of radar and sonar observations and heavy gunfire occurred, and that Commander Stockdale's aircraft saw nothing. The next of the NSA intercepts is recorded at 04/1630Z. It summarized the North Vietnamese reporting about having shot at aircraft and observing one fall into the sea, with "an enemy vessel perhaps wounded." An amplification message followed at 04/1644Z admitting "we sacrificed two comrades," and specifying they had fired at two aircraft. That matched the events of August 2, when there had been exchanges between the Vietnamese torpedo boats and U.S. planes, and when the *Maddox* had been hit by at least some small-caliber cannon shells from the North Vietnamese torpedo boats. The reports did *not* match the facts of August 4, when no boats had passed beneath the U.S. planes to shoot at them. The history of U.S. destroyers carried on the Navy's official website no longer contains any reference to a naval engagement having occurred on August 4.

The last two messages in this set (05/0438Z, 05/0627Z) show the North Vietnamese Swatow boats to have regrouped *at Hon Me* island with a couple of torpedo boats and to have received orders for some action to be carried out in the northern Gulf of Tonkin in the afternoon of August 5. By that time Captain Herrick's DeSoto Patrol had cleared the Gulf and was no longer a factor.

An equally plausible construction of the events pictured in these

intercepts is that the North Vietnamese, in the face of the 34-A maritime raids and sudden appearance of a heavy U.S. warship, ordered their Swatow patrol boats to rendezvous at Hon Me with surviving torpedo boats in preparation for defensive action against the U.S. destroyers, by then gone. It is not probable that the North Vietnamese, who knew from official U.S. statements that Captain Herrick had been reinforced, would have sent their Swatow boats, with no armament capable of sinking a destroyer (machineguns and light cannon only, no torpedoes), against the strengthened U.S. destroyer force. The intercepts themselves confirm that the torpedo boat T-333, the only survivor of the August 2 battle, was not ready to sail at the critical moment on August 4, when Hanoi could have set up a battle for that day.

Conclusion

Among the most prophetic and disturbing statements in the declassified record are those by national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, at the White House staff meeting at 8 a.m. on August 5, 1964. Bundy told the staff, according to the memorandum for the record drafted by military aide William Y. Smith: "On the first attack, the evidence would be pretty good. On the second one the amount of evidence we have today is less than we had yesterday. This resulted primarily from correlating bits and pieces of information eliminating double counting and mistaken signals. This much seemed certain: There was an attack. How many PT boats were involved, how many torpedoes were fired, etc. - all this was still somewhat uncertain. This matter may be of some importance since Hanoi has denied making the second attack." We now know this denial was accurate and Washington's claims were not, and that senior officials knew of the "double counting and mistaken signals." But when new staffer Douglass Cater - attending his first morning meeting on August 5, 1964 - questioned the need for a Congressional resolution, "Bundy, in reply, jokingly told him perhaps the matter should not be thought through too far. For his own part, he welcomed the recent events as justification for a resolution the Administration had wanted for some time."

Change a few of the words in these quotes - perhaps substitute "weapons of mass destruction" for "PT boats" and "torpedoes," and "Baghdad" for "Hanoi" - and the parallels with today become all too apt.

This new evidence permits us to view more accurately the internal deliberations of the Johnson administration. Especially in

combination with LBJ's telephone conversations with McNamara, recently made available to the public with transcriptions, the material clearly shows Washington rushing to a judgment on event in the Tonkin Gulf, which it seized upon as evidence in support of its predetermined intention to escalate the conflict in Vietnam. Those who questioned the veracity of the Johnson administration's description of the Gulf of Tonkin incident at the time were right to do so. The manipulation of this international situation for the administration's political purpose of obtaining a congressional authorization for the use of force bears considerable similarity to the manner in which the Bush administration manipulated intelligence regarding the possibility that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction to gain its own legislative approval for war against that country. [\(Note 16\)](#) In both cases, truth became the first casualty. In both cases, the consequences far outweighed anything anticipated by the presidents involved.

Notes

1. CIA, SNIE 50-2-64, "Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos," May 25, 1964 (declassified June 8, 2004). Source: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL): Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers (LBJP): National Security File: Country File Vietnam, b. 89, folder: "Vietnam 3S: CIA Assesses Communist Reactions to Certain US Actions, 5/64-1/68."
2. Johnson-McNamara Telephone conversation, 10:30 AM, August 3, 1964, in John Prados, ed. *The White House Tapes*. New York: The New Press, 2003, p. 185.
3. Michael Lee Lanning and Ray W. Stubbe. *Inside Force Recon: Recon Marines in Vietnam*. New York: Ballantine, 1989.
4. U.S. Congress (88th Congress, 2nd Session) Foreign Relations Committee. *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Historical Series, v. XVI*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988, p. 293.
5. McNamara Opening Statement, February 20, 1968. Reprinted, *The New York Times*, February 21, 1968, p. 21.
6. The best survey of the data is in Edwin E. Moise. *The Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Also see Anthony Austin, *The President's War: The Story of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and How the Nation was Trapped in Vietnam*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1971; and Eugene C Windchych,

- Tonkin Gulf*. Garden City (NY): Doubleday, 1971.
7. Admiral James B. Stockdale, "Another Gulf, Other Blips on a Screen," *The Washington Post*, August 7, 1988, p. B7.
 8. James B. Stockdale, *In Love and War*. New York: Bantam Books, 1985, p. 17.
 9. McNamara Testimony Excerpts Gathered for President Johnson, February 20, 1968. LBJL: LBJP: National Security File (NSF): NSC Histories series, box 39, folder: "Gulf of Tonkin, v. III (Tabs 23-31)."
 10. J. Norvill Jones, Letter to the Editor, *Washington Post*, November 23, 1995, p. A22.
 11. "The Phantom Battle that Led to War: Can It Happen Again?" *U.S. News and World Report*, July 23, 1984, quoted p. 63.
 12. CIA Cover Note, August 8, 1964. LBJL: LBJP: NSF: Country File Vietnam, box 77, Folder: "Vietnam 3(A)3 Gulf of Tonkin, 8/6 [3 of 3]."
 13. The author was a member of the U.S. delegation to the conference, and personally witnessed General Giap make this statement to Robert McNamara. The conference, "Missed Opportunities? Former U.S. and Vietnamese Reexamine the Vietnam War, 1961-1968," was held in Hanoi, June 20-23, 1997. It was sponsored by Brown University's Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies and the Institute for International Relations (Hanoi). The National Security Archive provided the documentary base, along with other support, for the conference.
 14. Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy in the Vietnam Conflict, II: From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965*. Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1986, map p. 412.
 15. Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson-Robert S. McNamara, August 4, 1964, 9:43 AM. Prados, ed. *The White House Tapes*, p. 193.
 16. Readers interested in a detailed treatment of the Bush administration and Iraq may refer to John Prados, *Hoodwinked: The Documents that Reveal How Bush sold Us a War*. New York: The New Press, 2004.