

# An Ominous Non-Event: The Gulf of Tonkin and the Strait of Hormuz

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Global Research, January 09, 2008

9 January 2008

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As the U.S. government continues to demonstrate its inability to learn from history, an alarming report from the Strait of Hormuz was broadcast to the world on January 7. The Associated Press reported the following: "In what U.S. officials called a serious provocation, Iranian boats harassed and provoked three U.S. Navy ships in the strategic Strait of Hormuz, threatening to explode the American vessels." These Iranian ships are believed to part of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's navy, the organization that the U.S. Congress officially decreed a 'terrorist' organization.

Those either old enough to remember, or cognizant enough to understand history, will immediately be reminded of the infamous 'Gulf of Tonkin' incident, reported on August 2, 1964. On that day, the U.S. destroyer Maddox, on an espionage mission in the Gulf of Tonkin off the Vietnam coast, reported being fired on by North Vietnamese torpedo patrol boats. In response the Maddox fired back, sinking one boat. Tensions in the area were already growing, and now the world watched and waited.

On August 4 of that same year, the Maddox and the C. Turner Joy, another destroyer, were again patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin. Instruments on the Maddox indicated that it was either attacked or was under attack, and both the Maddox and the C. Turner Joy began firing back, with assistance from U.S. air power.

It was less than 24 hours later when the captain concluded that there might not have been an attack; why the instruments indicated otherwise was not clearly explained. The pilot of a Crusader jet, James B. Stockdale, undertook a reconnaissance flight over the gulf that evening. He was asked if he saw any North Vietnamese attack vessels. Mr. Stockdale did not equivocate in his response. Said he: "Not a one. No boats, no wakes, no ricochets off boats, no boat impacts, no torpedo wakes—nothing but black sea and American firepower."

Yet this non-event, either misinterpreted or fabricated altogether, was seen by an hysterical U.S. Congress, ever willing to protect America from its enemies, real or imagined, as aggression against the U.S. It also provided members of that august body with some additional 'I'm-strong-on-Communism' credentials, which were ever in demand from the end of World War II until the dawn of the world's newest bugaboo, 'terrorism.' Congress quickly passed the so-called 'Gulf of Tonkin Resolution,' which empowered President Lyndon Johnson to take all measures he deemed necessary to repel aggression. While this was not the start of the Vietnam War, it represented the first major escalation that did not end for over a decade, and cost the lives of over 50,000 U.S. soldiers, and between 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 Vietnamese citizens. It caused havoc with the U.S. economy, brought near-revolution to American streets and campuses and drew hostility towards the U.S. from most

of the world.

Today, an unidentified Pentagon official called this 'incident' in the Strait of Hormuz "a serious provocation." Defense Department spokesman Bryan Whitman referred to it as a "serious incident." Mr. Gordon Johndore, National Security Council spokesman said the United States urges the Iranians "to refrain from such provocative actions that could lead to a dangerous incident in the future."

It must be remembered that it was just a month ago that the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) determined that Iran ceased its nuclear weapons program four years ago. As President Bush was busy rattling his saber, and apparently itching to start yet another war, the NIE took the wind out of his bloody sails. He huffed and puffed and said, inexplicably, that the NIE report proved that Iran was still a great threat to the U.S., but it seemed that no one took him too seriously. Now, however, we have an 'incident.' Obviously, we are told, like in the Gulf of Tonkin 44 years ago, the U.S. has been the victim of 'aggression.'

It is, of course, unimportant to consider that Iran might understandably be a little trigger-happy when it sees U.S. naval vessels approaching. Just because Iran's next-door neighbor was invaded by the U.S. without provocation, and now is in the midst of a deadly occupation, should not in any way justify Iran's wariness. The fact that it was only a year ago that Mr. Bush sent a second aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf for no other reason than to intimidate Iran, and to participate in 'war games' (an oxymoron if ever there was one) in clear sight of one of the members of Mr. Bush's 'axis of evil,' should simply be ignored by Iran. The fact that the U.S. has a long and violent history of invading countries that displease it in some way (perhaps they have a democratically elected government that does not bow and scrape to the occupant of the White House throne) should not alarm Iran. Mr. Bush and his spokesman have not said that they plan to invade Iran; they simply said no options are off the table.

One waits in anxious impatience to see how Congress will react. Surely the slowly-dwindling multitudes seeking the Republican and Democratic presidential nominations will race each other to the microphone to denounce Iranian aggression, thus shining their patriotic credentials. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), who last fall voted to name Iran's Revolutionary Guard a terrorist organization, can gloat and glow with jingoistic satisfaction that that organization has now proven her right and her critics wrong, at least in her own mind. Perhaps former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, stumbling along on the path if not towards the Republican nomination, at least in its general direction, will endorse whatever Mr. Bush proclaims; after all, Mr. Romney has stated that it is Mr. Bush who has kept America safe (save for one or two unfortunate incidents in September of 2001). Will former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who never tires of reminding the voters that he and he alone was mayor of New York on September 11 2001 (whatever that may be worth), now raise the specter of Iranian terrorism in the U.S.?

One could sit back and laugh at the nonsense proclaimed by the men and women who seek to lead the United States if their actions were not so dangerous. In 1964 an incident not unlike the one that allegedly took place in the Strait of Hormuz on January 8 of this year caused Congress to officially embark on America's most deadly imperial disaster. 'Flawed intelligence,' at best, and outright lies at worst paved the way for the current imperial mess which has the potential to dwarf America's Vietnam catastrophe. And now, with a lame duck president seeking to salvage his disgraced reputation, one wonders if this reported incident

from Iran will have the same effect as the non-incident in the Gulf of Tonkin 44 years ago.

Mr. Bush & Co. have never been particularly interested in facts. They have not had any desire to listen to opposing opinions. They have happily ignored the wishes of the U.S. citizens. They apparently have been very interested in enriching themselves and their cronies, and have focused their desire for riches on oil, at the expense of the blood of their own, and Iraq's, citizens. They have used fear to get Congress to support their crimes. There is nothing to cause one to think things will be different now. Congress has proved its spinelessness over and over, and we all know that there is no reason for statesmanship when interesting, pander-to-the-fear-of-the-moment sound bytes are so much easier.

Whether or not this current situation leads Congress to justify an invasion of Iran, or other actions that will lead to an invasion, remains to be seen. But the U.S. has not learned from its own history, and another repeat of an unneeded and catastrophic war is not, unfortunately, unthinkable. That the president will not stop it is not surprising; that Congress will be complicit once again is unspeakable.

*Robert Fantina is author of 'Desertion and the American Soldier: 1776-2006.'*

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