

The “Tonkin Gulf War Pretext Incidents”: When the US Wants to Start a War, it Lies ...

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As the Obama administration manoeuvres to get traction for more overt and deadly military intervention in Syria, it may be time to reflect on other times at which a US administration has tried to legitimise a military response. There were Colin Powell’s 2003 lies about WMD. In 1990 there were lies about babies being thrown out of incubators.

Susan Rice lied by telling the world that Libyan loyalist troops were being issued Viagra and instructed to commit mass rapes. When the US wants to start a war, it lies, and these are very big lies. What is more, even once the lies are discovered and broadcast our historical narrative is somehow contrived to seem as if there were no such lies. With a rigidity that rivals any “totalitarian” regime you could name it becomes impossible to deviate. Just because the US put huge amounts of time and effort into deceiving everyone in order to go to war, it doesn’t mean they wanted war. On the contrary, they were victims of their own lies. In Stalin’s or Hitler’s regimes it was unthinkable to accuse the authorities of any mistakes, in our totalitarianism it is impossible to accuse the US regime of doing anything on purpose.

The greatest and most successful of US lies is that of the first Tonkin Gulf incident. Contrary to widespread belief, a US Naval vessel opened fire on Vietnamese vessels first on the occasion of that first incident. The US was guilty of an act of aggression. This was confirmed and aggravated by its lies about the incident, its subsequent lies about a second incident, and above all by the criminal bombing campaign it immediately launched. The truth of this has been public since 2005, but is hardly widespread knowledge. Worse still, the knowledge wasn’t even really hidden before that. Anyone with basic mathematical knowledge could work out from the official Naval history that the US initiated the exchange, and there is no evidence that the Vietnamese even tried to fire torpedoes in return. More to the point (in comparison with current accusations against Syria), no one stopped to question the underlying contention that a weak and poor state would gratuitously go out of its way to provide the US (then and now the world’s most terrifyingly armed state) with exactly the pretext it desired to wage the war it desired at the time it desired.

Moreover, it seems that Western pedagogical discourse (as embodied in textbooks) is not even capable of conveying the known information due to ideological constraints. Our level of indoctrination is such that there is no foreseeable time when a student might read a balanced account such as: “Having determined to unleash its massive military might against the Democratic People’s Republic of Vietnam, the Johnson administration sought to create a pretext. On August the 2nd a US Navy vessel attacked Vietnamese craft that were within their own territorial waters. The US claimed, rather unbelievably, that it was they who had been attacked. Following this a second ‘incident’ took place which seems to have resulted from interference with sonar and radar aboard two US vessels. Though there were no enemy

vessels involved at all, this was accompanied by deliberately fabricated signals intelligence designed to convince elements within the US military and civilian command that the Vietnamese had attacked a second time, when they had never attacked at all. The Tonkin Gulf incidents were a highly successful staged pretext for open warfare that rightly should be placed alongside the Marco Polo bridge incident or the Gleiwitz incident.”

What became the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was drafted by Johnson administration and US military officials in Honolulu two months before any incidents took place.⁽¹⁾ This means that the Johnson administration was already intending to widen the war and, given the domestic political circumstances, must have been very desirous of a pretext. The US was conducting a series of provocations, amphibious military raids, known as “OPLAN 34a”, conducted by Republic of Vietnam (RVN) commandos under US command. These were considered militarily useless and “essentially worthless” by US officials and tended to result in great numbers of commandos killed or captured.⁽²⁾

At the same time the US Navy was conducting “DESOTO” intelligence gathering missions by using destroyers to “stimulate and record” Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) defences in order to locate radar installations.⁽³⁾ For obvious reasons this meant that they had to manoeuvre in such a way as to cause the Vietnamese to believe that there was a potential attack, violating waters that the DRV claimed as territorial. Though officially separate, there were linkages between these US Navy operations and the commando raids sufficient to lead Spencer Tucker to conclude that “[i]t was thus not unreasonable for the DRV to assume that the two programmes were one and the same.”⁽⁴⁾ In mid-July 1964 a DESOTO mission was authorised for the USS Maddox. It was to approach up to 4 miles from islands which were the subject of simultaneous OPLAN raids.⁽⁵⁾

On July 30-31 an OPLAN raid was carried out on Hon Me island. On August the 2nd the USS Maddox, which was in the vicinity of Hon Me, fired on Vietnamese torpedo boats before any fire from the Vietnamese. This is not usually the accepted version of events, so it is worth replicating John Prados’ description, which is based on the US Navy’s own records:

“Now the records show that the Maddox commenced fire at 9,000 yards at precisely 4:08 p.m. local time, three minutes after firing initial warning shots.

...the navy’s official history shows that the Maddox made a positive identification of the PT boats at 9800 yards, but that the lead Vietnamese warship launched its first torpedo-“unobserved by the Maddox”-somewhere between 9,000 and 5,000 yards from the speeding U.S. destroyer.

... Captain Herrick’s messages to higher command make clear more-over, that he considered the Maddox threatened and expected to defend her. Mission commander and commander of Destroyer Division 192, Herrick had been warned by his NSA detachment of a probable attack, estimated the risk as unacceptable, and asked higher authority to cancel the patrol.

... All evidence indicates the Maddox opened fire based on the approach of the North Vietnamese vessels; initiation of engagement was thus on the basis of perceived intent, without reference to an actual attack.”⁽⁶⁾

The point is that anyone who has even a vague grasp of mathematics can discern from the

US Navy's official history that the US fired first in the first Tonkin Gulf incident. This was confirmed in a 1998 article for the National Security Agency (NSA) journal *Cryptological Quarterly* (declassified in 2005).⁽⁷⁾ The same article points out that "Hanoi's tactical specifications for its P-4s called for torpedo launches at ranges under 1,000 yards. At over 6,000 yards, it was unlikely a torpedo launched at a moving target could hit anything."⁽⁸⁾

After this attack by the US it was announced that the DRV had attacked US vessels in international waters, but since the only damage sustained by the Maddox was a single bullet hole, Johnson decided on the minimal reaction of a diplomatic protest. Two days later the Maddox was joined by another destroyer, the USS C. Turner Joy which opened fire on non-existent torpedo boats on the basis of false radar and sonar signals.⁽⁹⁾ An engagement was briefly reported before being thrown into severe doubt within hours. Within an hour of the second "incident" the DRV had denied any activity.⁽¹⁰⁾ Herrick sent the following about 4 hours after reporting the incident:

"Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. ... No actual visual sighting by Maddox. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action taken."

Nonetheless an allegedly "furious" Lyndon Johnson ordered air strikes.⁽¹¹⁾ Even more brazenly McNamara lied to congress, telling them that both destroyers had been attacked. This helped secure the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which had very broad provisions including the right to instantly respond with force in the case of attack on US forces and, on request by any Southeast Asian government, to use "all measures including the use of armed force to assist that nation in the defense of its political independence and territorial integrity against aggression or subversion."⁽¹²⁾ That was what facilitated the full-scale invasion of Vietnam; when the illegitimate government that the US had installed over the fictional sovereign state that the US created dutifully invited the "assistance" of the US.

The events are, admittedly, complicated. For example, I have not even mentioned yet that the DRV boats on August 2nd were apparently intending to attack the Maddox. I am not sure how much credence one should put into these claims, but it seems that Prime Minister Le Duan had gone behind the backs of President Ho Chi Minh and armed forces commander Vo Nguyen Giap to order attacks and that those orders had been countermanded but that this was not received by the DRV torpedo boats.⁽¹³⁾ Nor does it alter the fact that the US was engaged in offensive operations against the DRV, and in fact had been attacking with US personnel since no later than 1961.⁽¹⁴⁾ The question is whether to examine the events by emphasizing US mistakes and confusion, or whether base an analysis or narrative on the deliberate and calculated acts of the US. It is, of course, the former which dominates the scholarly discourse.

By concentrating on known deliberate provocations and deceptions we can construct a narrative which completely obviates any need to refer to US mistakes and misunderstandings. That the US wanted to start bombing the DRV and make a major ground force commitment should not be in doubt. As mentioned, the resolution which would make use of the Tonkin Gulf incidents to achieve those ends was already drafted, and US officials

where convinced (rightly) that without a major escalation of US involvement they would “fail”.⁽¹⁵⁾ “Failure” for the US meant a negotiated solution between the leaders in Saigon and other parties, primarily the National Liberation Front (NLF). “Failure” meant the advent of peace.⁽¹⁶⁾

The various commando raids committed under US command, usually by RVN personnel who were very callously expended, were clearly deliberate provocations. As mentioned, they were not considered militarily useful. The explanation given by scholars to explain why the US would thus choose to sacrifice lives and resources thus is that they sought to reassure the Saigon regime. As Hanyok puts it, “if America’s determination to succeed could be communicated to Khanh, then the South Vietnamese might be reassured of the prospects for victory.”⁽¹⁷⁾ This begs the question of what exactly is supposed to be reassuring in the US demonstrating that they are willing to sacrifice the lives of the most highly trained and dedicated RVN personnel in militarily useless endeavours? Either scholars have a rather racially informed view of RVN leader General Nguyen Khanh’s intellect and military acumen, or the actual reassurance could only be derived from the knowledge that these were provocations undertaken in order to lay the groundwork for a massive expansion of the war. As it happens Khanh demonstrably was not reassured, not that any scholars seem to think that this fact might be relevant. He sought to neutralise South Vietnam after the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, but when the US found out that he sought negotiations with the NLF to end the war they overthrew him.⁽¹⁸⁾

Having provoked a minor response, the only damage to the Maddox being a single bullet hole, clearly the Johnson administration felt that the incident was not sufficient to persuade Congress to authorize full-scale war. They warned Hanoi that “any further unprovoked offensive military action against United States forces” would “inevitably” result in “grave consequences.”⁽¹⁹⁾ Those scholars who note Johnson’s limited reaction suggest that it indicates his reluctance to take that step, but this is to ignore the wealth of evidence that he actively sought this massive expansion of the war. Among other things Johnson lied about the nature of the first incident, making it seem like a completely unprovoked attack by the DRV in international waters. Had he wished to avoid war in any way he might still have lied, but using a very different cover story emphasizing the potential for mistakes in areas of tension and calling for calm, not accusing the DRV of an act of aggression. Had the US wished in any way to avoid war, they would not have scheduled and conducted another OPLAN raid on the night of 4-5 August. But they did exactly that.⁽²⁰⁾ At the same time, immediately after the first incident, the Maddox and C. Turner Joy were authorized to approach to 11 miles of the DRV coastline (well within range of the destroyers’ 5 inch guns)⁽²¹⁾, deliberately breaking the territorial limit claimed by the DRV.⁽²²⁾

The second Tonkin Gulf incident and Johnson’s reaction to it reinforce the following position: the US persistently and consistently pursued actions designed to prevent a negotiated settlement of the insurgency in the South and simultaneously to facilitate the expansion of the war with major US troop commitments and massive bombing campaigns which would come to engulf most of Indochina. Further, Johnson’s appearance of having been deceived is belied by his acts and words at the time and later. As such, the fact that Johnson created deniability over his decision to bomb the DRV is actually suggestive of premeditation.

On August 4 a series of cables arrived at the Pentagon detailing extraordinary events.

Daniel Ellsberg gives the following account:

“The messages were vivid. Herrick must have been dictating them from the bridge in between giving orders, as his two ships swerved to avoid torpedoes picked up on the sonar of the Maddox and fired in the darkness at targets shown on the radar of the Turner Joy: “Torpedoes missed. Another fired at us. Four torpedoes in water. And five torpedoes in water. . . . Have ... successfully avoided at least six torpedoes.”

Nine torpedoes had been fired at his ships, fourteen, twenty-six. More attacking boats had been hit; at least one sunk. This action wasn't ending after forty minutes or an hour. It was going on, ships dodging and firing in choppy seas, planes overhead firing rockets at locations given them by the Turner Joy's radar, for an incredible two hours before the stream of continuous combat updates finally ended. Then, suddenly, an hour later, full stop. A message arrived that took back not quite all of it, but enough to put everything earlier in question.”⁽²³⁾

In fact, there were no attacks at all, nor enemy vessels. It was also clear even during the “engagement” that both radar and sonar aboard both destroyers were giving unreliable readings. With reports from the field immediately thrown into doubt, it was signals intelligence which was used as the final justification, the only problem being that someone somewhere fabricated the most crucial message. Before this, however, a misinterpretation of a partial intercept warned of a possible attack. Next, a report based on a complete intercept contradicting that was issued at about the exact time that the destroyers opened fire:

“For NSA and the rest of the SIGINT participants, the second Phu Bai report should have acted as a brake to any further reporting about an attack. It directly contradicted the interpretation - remember, it was an interpretation only - contained in the initial Critic which claimed an attack was being prepared. At this point, all the SIGINT community could accurately state was that there was no signals intelligence reflecting a planned or ongoing attack against the Desoto mission.”⁽²⁴⁾

With the PT boats being ruled out as attackers the NSA decided that it must be SWATOW boats which were attacking. The problem with this being that these boats were not equipped with torpedoes and were not close enough to have reached the destroyers after the alleged attack order had been issued.⁽²⁵⁾ Thus signals intelligence fairly well ruled out an attack at an early stage. A complete lack of intercepts, such as DRV radar activity, that would confirm an attack made this a certainty, as Hanyok points out it was the dog that didn't bark in the night.⁽²⁶⁾

The intercept which was used, by Robert McNamara, to “prove” that an attack took place was an after-action report. The original decryption, in Vietnamese, is lost and the translation seems somewhat incoherent, however it is known that the translation altered some of the original message. Additionally, the first version of this “after-action” report was issued at or before the time at which the destroyers opened fire, but somehow the translation failed to highlight the original transmission time. Worse still, the translation was actually made up from two different intercepts and, as Hanyok points out, it is clear that the original reports

were being discussed among intelligence and defense officials.(27)

Johnson and McNamara both deliberately deceived by covering up the doubts to which both were privy. Even if Johnson was himself misled, as Gareth Porter contends,(28) he was still aware that matters left room for doubt, but chose to present the attack as a complete certainty and launched airstrikes with incredible haste. There was no posturing brinksmanship, no ultimatum, no summits, not even bullying, just destruction and death dropped abruptly from above.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution, passed on August the 7th, was nearly as hasty as the air strikes. It is not merely hard but impossible to seriously conceive that the rapidity of these actions was prompted by anything so much as by a knowledge that the *casus belli* would soon disintegrate. Johnson was on record as expressing doubt before the resolution was passed.(29) McNamara was definitely apprised of ample evidence to conclude that there had been no attacks, but used the fabricated intercept as his “smoking gun” proof in addressing Congress.(30) Congress believed McNamara’s story, as did the media. I. F. Stone was a lone voice when he pointed out that reprisal strikes were illegal in peacetime(31), so from this point on the precedent for bombing the DRV had been created and the President had been granted virtually unlimited powers with which to prosecute a full-scale war.

The purpose of spending so much space on the Tonkin Gulf incidents is primarily historiographical. With regard to the first incident, most works touching on the subject will implicitly or explicitly characterize the incident as an unprovoked Vietnamese attack. Until 2005, no one at all acknowledged that the US had attacked first despite the fact that the evidence (namely those numbers that appear in the official US Navy history) had been widely available for decades. Now you would still find it very hard to find any historical account which did not falsify the events. Moreover, the second incident is very odd in its historiography.

Often the second incident is mentioned as if it were roughly equivalent the Gleiwitz incident, staged by the Germans as a pretext for invading Poland. Yet when discussed in more detail, the narrative of the second incident tends to be overtaken with supposed misapprehensions, technical failures, psychological failings. By directing critics of US actions, including scholarly critics, into the contemplation of the strange non-events of the second incident, the US has managed to perpetrate a Gleiwitz-like incident but to maintain the central deception for half a century. Most disturbing of all, not only did the academic world ignore clear evidence of US aggression, but now, years after the declassification of an intelligence study that implicitly documented a US act of aggression, there is no sign that the broader historical discourse will change to reflect this.

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Notes

1 Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States And Vietnam, 1941-1975*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p 151; Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, London: Longman, 1980, p 476.

- 2 Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and its Consequences*, New York: Viking, 2004, p 160.
- 3 Robert J. Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4August 1964", *Cryptological Quarterly*, Winter 1998, FOIA case # 43933, p 6.
- 4 Spencer C. Tucker, *Vietnam*, Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1999, p 107.
- 5 Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies...", p 6.
- 6 John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995, pp 50-1.
- 7 Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies...", p 6.
- 8 Ibid, p 22.
- 9 Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, p 53.
- 10 Tucker, *Vietnam*, p 108.
- 11 Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, pp 301-2.
- 12 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, pp 151-2.
- 13 Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1945-65*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp 310-1.
- 14 Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, p 37.
- 15 Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, London: Penguin, 2003, pp 1-2.
- 16 Kieran Kelly, *Beyond Stalemate: The Second Indochina War as a Genocidal War System*, Saarbrücken, LAP, 2013, pp 75-6.
- 17 Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds....", p 9.
- 18 Ironically Khanh had gained US support for his overthrow of his predecessor, General Minh, by citing the threat of neutralism. Obviously, once he gained power he also gained some perspective on the likely outcome of a wider war.
- 19 Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds....", p 18.
- 20 Ibid, p 30.
- 21 Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, p 300.
- 22 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, p151.
- 23 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, p6.
- 24 Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds....", p28.
- 25 Ibid, p29.

26 Ibid,p31.

27 Ibid, pp 34-7.

28 Gareth Porter, Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006, pp 193-200.

29 Ibid, p 200.

30 Schulzinger, A Time for War, pp 151-2.

31 Langguth, Our Vietnam, p 305.

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