

Fifty years since the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

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7 August 2014

Fifty years ago, on August 7, 1964, the US Senate and the House of Representatives adopted a resolution “To promote the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia.” What became known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, not a declaration of war but the quasi-legal cover for the eight years of aggression and mass murder by US imperialism in Vietnam, passed the House by 418-0 and the Senate 98-2.

The vote was a demonstration of the unity of the American ruling class, with every Republican in the House and Senate, every House Democrat, and all but two Senate Democrats giving their support to the resolution, which provided an open-ended authorization for President Lyndon Johnson to order military operations throughout Southeast Asia.

The resolution is only six paragraphs long, three filled with lies about the events in the Gulf of Tonkin and the nature of the war in Vietnam and three giving broad powers to the Johnson administration to wage war throughout Southeast Asia. It read as follows:

Whereas naval units of the communist regime in Vietnam, in violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law, have deliberately and repeatedly attacked United States naval vessels lawfully present in international waters, and have thereby created a serious threat to international peace; and

Whereas these attacks are part of a deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression that the communist regime in North Vietnam has been waging against its neighbors and the nations joined with them in the collective defense of their freedom; and

Whereas the United States is assisting the peoples of Southeast Asia to protect their freedom and has no territorial, military or political ambitions in that area, but desires only that these peoples should be left in peace to work out their own destinies in their own way:

Now, therefore, be it resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.

Sec. 2. The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.

Sec. 3. This resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.

A text prepared in advance

The resolution was pushed through Congress in only three days, using language prepared ahead of time by the State Department, awaiting only a suitable pretext. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, introduced the resolution in the Senate and led the debate in its favor. While two Democrats, Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska, voted against, all of the Democrats who would later run for president as liberal or “anti-war” candidates endorsed the war resolution, including Frank Church of Idaho, Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, and George McGovern of South Dakota.

In the wake of the November 1963 coup that overthrew the dictatorial regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, the ruler of South Vietnam since the US-backed partition of the country in 1954, it had been clear to US military planners that the Saigon regime was too corrupt, unstable and inept to prevail on its own in a struggle against a highly motivated revolutionary nationalist movement with deep roots in the peasant masses in the rural areas.

At the direction of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the Pentagon was actively preparing several options, including deployment of large numbers of US ground troops, and massive bombing of North Vietnam and the rural areas of South Vietnam. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy and other hawkish officials were pushing for escalation of the war.

There was even discussion, in the early part of 1964, on the use of nuclear weapons against North Vietnam. According to Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers to the media in 1971, there was “discussion of the possible use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam in that very month, in May of 1964, involved Lodge, McNamara and others” (Michael MacLear, *The Ten Thousand Day War*, 1981, p. 116-117).

On March 1, 1964, William Bundy sent a memo to President Johnson with recommendations for blockading Haiphong harbor and bombing railways, roads, industrial facilities and training camps. “To launch operations against North Vietnam, he noted, would ‘normally require’ a declaration of war under the US Constitution, and that might spark domestic controversy. Yet to proceed without legislative endorsement would be ‘unsatisfactory.’ The ‘best answer,’ therefore, was a congressional resolution of the sort that had freed President Eisenhower’s

hands to act in 1955, when the Chinese Communists menaced the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu. It was unclear how Johnson could persuade Congress to pass the resolution” (Cited in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 1983, pp. 344-345).

Bundy developed a draft resolution in response to Johnson’s desire to “establish a clear-cut American policy for the future.” It was modeled on a similar resolution passed during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, but was even more broadly worded. Fulbright embraced Bundy’s text as the basis of his own resolution at a meeting August 5.

Manufacturing a pretext

The pretext for the resolution came as the byproduct of a series of provocations staged against North Vietnam by the US puppet regime in South Vietnam, working in conjunction with US naval forces operating in the Gulf of Tonkin, the arm of the South China Sea immediately east of the most populous region of North Vietnam.

Early in 1964, the Johnson administration authorized a covert campaign designated OPLAN 34-A, under which the South Vietnamese regime was supplied with PT boats for use in raids along the coastline of North Vietnam, north of the 17th parallel, the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North and South. The raids were intended to force North Vietnamese coastal defense forces to use their radar systems to detect and repulse the attackers, thus revealing them to electronic signal collection systems on board US warships.

These were called DE SOTO operations, using a codename applied to similar probes conducted under the auspices of the Pentagon against all the borders of the Soviet bloc countries, China and North Korea, as well as North Vietnam.

DE SOTO operations were a constant feature of the Cold War. The most infamous was the simulated US attack on Soviet Far East defenses in September 1983 by a large group of RC-135 electronic warfare planes, which have the same radar signature as a Boeing 727. This provoked the mobilization of Soviet air defense fighters, one of which shot down KAL Flight 007 as it passed through Soviet airspace on a flight from the United States to Seoul, South Korea.

Although the Soviet fighter pilot clearly thought the passenger jet was an American electronic warfare plane invading Soviet airspace—and the South Korean jet seems to have been involved in screening the attack—the Reagan administration raised an international hue and cry, portraying the shoot down as a wanton attack on commercial air traffic that had murdered 269 people.

The intelligence gathered through the DE SOTO raids on the Vietnamese coast helped the Pentagon plan future air strikes on North Vietnamese targets. At the same time, the raids served to create the conditions under which the Johnson administration could portray these air strikes as an act of “self-defense.”

What happened in the Gulf of Tonkin

On July 30, 1964, South Vietnamese PT boats left Danang harbor and moved north to attack several small islands off the North Vietnamese coast just north of the DMZ, including Hon Me and Hon Ngo. The raid was shadowed by the destroyer USS Maddox, which was carrying specialized electronic warfare equipment to locate North Vietnamese radar systems for future attack.

The Maddox continued north along the North Vietnamese coast until, two days later, on August 2, it was in the Gulf of Tonkin about eight miles offshore, well within the 12-mile limit claimed by North Vietnam as territorial waters. Three North Vietnamese PT boats emerged to challenge the US warship, which exchanged fire with its tiny opponents, crippling two of them.

President Johnson was awakened at midnight Washington time and ordered a second destroyer, the C. Turner Joy, to join the Maddox. The captain of the Maddox pulled his ship away from the Vietnamese coastline and asked permission to withdraw from the area entirely, which the Pentagon denied.

Two days later, on August 4, the Maddox and C. Turner Joy resumed their intelligence mission in conjunction with another OPLAN 34-A raid on the North Vietnamese coast. Both ships reported being under attack, and the C. Turner Joy fired more than 200 shells against the attackers, although no sailor actually sighted an enemy target.

President Johnson later observed cynically, “Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish!” But this understanding did not stop the US leader from seizing on the confused reports of a second round of clashes with North Vietnamese PT boats as the basis for obtaining congressional backing for an all-out escalation of the US military effort in Southeast Asia.

Johnson’s first action was to order a prearranged phase one “retaliatory” strike by fighter bombers of the Seventh Fleet, codenamed Pierce Arrow, with launch at 10:30am on August 5. Congressional leaders were summoned to the Oval Office and gave their support. Sixty four naval aircraft struck oil storage and port facilities in Vinh, just north of the DMZ, destroying about 10 percent of the country’s oil supply.

While the bombers were boring in on their targets, Johnson went on national television to announce the air strikes. Like the subsequent congressional resolution, Johnson’s speech denounced alleged aggression by North Vietnam—in its own coastal waters!—and portrayed the US role in Southeast Asia as the defense of peace and democracy. Two days later, the US Congress ratified the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

Lies and distortions

In a press conference after the bombing raid, Defense Secretary McNamara was asked about South Vietnamese operations off the North Vietnamese coast. He claimed these were defense maneuvers of small vessels, called junks, to forestall North Vietnamese infiltration, adding, in a brazen lie, “Our naval personnel do not participate in the junk operations.”

In his message to Congress requesting passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, Johnson declared, “We must make it clear to all that the United States is united in its determination to bring about the end of Communist subversion and aggression in the area. We seek the full and effective restoration of the international agreements signed in Geneva in 1954, with respect to South Vietnam, and against at Geneva with respect to Laos.”

This was another grotesque lie, since the skirmish in the Gulf of Tonkin had been produced by South Vietnamese attacks on the North in flagrant violation of the Geneva Accords. The very existence of the Saigon regime was the result of US violation of the 1954 agreement, which called for nationwide elections to unify the country, elections that Washington blocked to prevent the certain victory of the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh.

The coverage by the *New York Times* dovetailed with the administration lies. Its first banner headline on the Gulf of Tonkin incident, using the language typical at the height of the Cold War, reads: RED PT BOATS

FIRE AT U.S. DESTROYER ON VIETNAM DUTY.” Subsequent reports described the second “incident” in similar terms.

On August 8, 1964, the *Times* published a breathless insider account of Johnson’s decision to launch air strikes, headlined, “Tonkin Gulf Decision: 12 Tense Hours Led to Swift U. S. Move.” It wrote, “As the National Security Council began to discuss the problem, a consensus emerged: The North Vietnamese attack should not go unpunished. After a brief discussion of the possibility of retaliation by South Vietnamese forces, the President decided unequivocally that the job should be done by the United States itself.” The report made no mention of OPLAN-34A or the mission of the Navy ships that had supposedly been attacked.

The *Times* gave editorial support to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, hailing Johnson’s alleged restraint, and declaring that with the bombing raids of August 5, “This should and will end the incident if North Vietnam and Communist China want it to end. The United States plans no further military strikes unless there are further Communist attacks. President Johnson has made it clear that ‘we still want no wider war’.” Some 50,000 Americans and two million Vietnamese were still to die as a result of the US war.

The *Times* was not operating out of ignorance. On the contrary, the facts set out above were widely known at the time by journalists in South Vietnam and throughout official Washington. Wayne Morse, in a speech on the Senate floor opposing the Tonkin Gulf resolution, gave a full account of the South Vietnamese raids and the role of the US ships, and described the role of the US government as a “provocateur” in the conflict. He was dismissed as a crank.

The example of the Gulf of Tonkin incident has enormous contemporary relevance, particularly in the systematic lying by US government officials, echoed and amplified by the American media, to stampede public opinion at home. Changing only the details of the country and the pretext, the method of provocation by the White House and the American media in relation to the war in Iraq or the current conflict in east Ukraine directly mirrors their conduct during the Gulf of Tonkin crisis.



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