

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution

Directions: The United States first became involved in Vietnam in the early years of the Cold War, but significant military involvement didn't begin until 1964, following the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution by Congress. The resolution, which gave President Lyndon Johnson the power to wage war against communist North Vietnam, came as a result of a controversial series of incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the northeastern coast of North Vietnam. To better understand how the US went from South Vietnam's sponsor to fighting a war, first read about the events of early August, 1964, then listen to taped phone conversations between Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. Finally, in your groups, prepare an investigative editorial report, that answers the following: Why did the U.S. begin fighting the Vietnam War in 1964? Was the fighting justified?

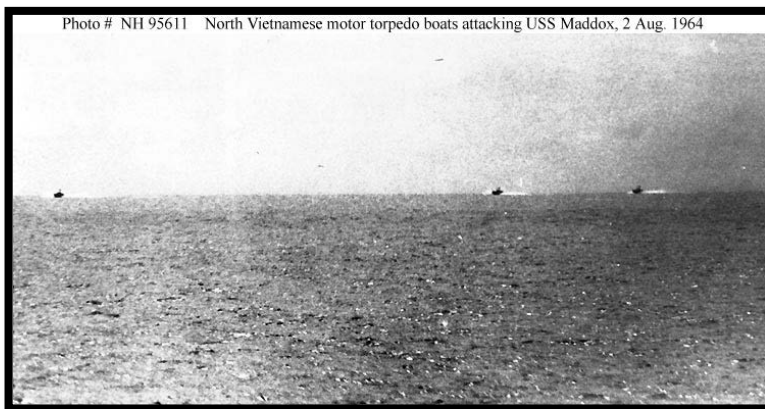


Photo #: NH 95611 North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats attacking USS Maddox, 2 Aug. 1964
 Photo #: NH 95611, Tonkin Gulf Incident, August 1964, Source: Official U.S. Navy Photograph, Naval History & Heritage Command, <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/sh-usn/usnsh-m/dd731-k.htm>

Historical Context, Part 1: On August 2, 1964, the U.S. Maddox was collecting evidence while patrolling in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the eastern boarder of North Vietnam. Also in the Gulf were South Vietnamese gunboats, which had just launched a clandestine raid on the North Vietnamese coastline as part of Operations Plan (OPLAN) - 34A, a covert intelligence operation coordinated by the United States. The Maddox was fired upon by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. In the battle that followed, two DRV (North Vietnamese) ships were sunk, but the Maddox sustained no losses. When word reached Washington, President Johnson and

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, along with other senior advisors began to discuss how the US should respond and what information should be shared with Congress and the public at large about the incident.

On August 3, at 10:30 Washington time, McNamara and Johnson discussed the incident on the phone. As you listen to their discussion, and follow along using the transcript below, consider the following questions to discuss with your group:

1. What did McNamara and Johnson want Congress and the public to know about what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2?
2. Why do you think Johnson and McNamara were so worried about controlling what the public heard about the incident?

****Note:** LBJ and McNamara reference a number of congressional leaders, including Speaker of the House John McCormick, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, and Minority Leader Everett Dirksen, as well as U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk. At the end of the call, they mention Goldwater, in reference to Barry Goldwater, the conservative Republican who challenged Johnson in the 1964 presidential election, George Ball, an American diplomat who opposed the U.S.' increasing involvement in Vietnam, George Reedy, Johnson's Press Secretary, and Walter Jenkins, a longtime Johnson aide.

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Clip 1: Telephone conversation between President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, August 3, 1964, 10:30 EST.*

*Source for transcript and audio recording: the National Security Archive at George Washington University:
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/tapes.htm>

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Now I wonder if you don't think it'd be wise for you and Rusk to get Mac, uh, the Speaker and Mansfield to call a group of fifteen to twenty people together eh from the Armed Services and Foreign Relations to tell them what happened.

A good many of them are saying to me

Secretary Robert McNamara: Right. I've been thinking about this myself, and I thought that uh

President Johnson: They're going to start an investigation

Secretary McNamara: Yeah.

President Johnson: if you don't.

Secretary McNamara: Yeah.

President Johnson: And you got Dirksen up there

Secretary McNamara: Yeah

President Johnson: and he's saying you've got to study it further,

and say to Mansfield, "Now the President wants us, you, to get the proper people." And we come in and you say, "They fired at us. We responded immediately. And we took out one of their boats and put the other two running. And we kept our..., we're puttin' our boats right there, and we're not running on in."

Secretary McNamara: And it's hard to destroy.

President Johnson: That's right

Secretary McNamara: Right. And we're going to, and I think I should also, or we should also at that time, Mr. President, explain this Op Plan 34-A, these covert operations. There's no question but what that had bearing on. And on Friday night, as you probably know, we had four TP [McNamara means PT] boats from Vietnam manned by Vietnamese or other nationals, attack two islands. And we expended, oh, a thousand rounds of ammunition of one kind or another against them. We probably shot up a radar station and a few other miscellaneous buildings. And following twenty-four hours after that, with this destroyer in that same area, undoubtedly led them to connect the two events.

President Johnson: Well say that to Dirksen.

Secretary McNamara: That's what I know he'll like.

President Johnson: You notice Dirksen says this morning, that "we got to reassess the situation, do something about it." I'd tell him that we're doing what he's talking about.

Secretary McNamara: Well, I, I was, I was thinking doing this myself in personal visits. But I think your thought is better. We'll get the group together. You want us to do it at the White House or would you rather do it at State or Defense?



Lyndon B. Johnson, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing left, June, 1964.

*Source: Library of Congress,
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96522661>*

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President Johnson: I believe it'd be better to do it uh up on the Hill.

Secretary McNamara: All right.

President Johnson: I believe it'd be better if you say to Mansfield, "You call"

Secretary McNamara: Yup

President Johnson: Foreign Relations

Secretary McNamara: Yup, OK.

President Johnson: Armed Services

Secretary McNamara: OK. OK.

President Johnson: and get Speaker to do it over on his side [i.e., within the House of Representatives, as opposed to the Senate].

Secretary McNamara: We'll do it

President Johnson: And just say it's very, I'd tell him awfully quiet, though, so they won't go in and be making a bunch of speeches. And tell Rusk that a, that's my idea.

Secretary McNamara: Great. .

President Johnson: And he's in New York, so I don't know whether he's got back.

Secretary McNamara: Well I just talked to George Ball a few minutes ago, and I'll have George arrange it. Or at least I'll tell him that, and then I'll call the Speaker and Mansfield himself.

President Johnson: Now I wish that uh you'd give me some guidance on what we ought to say. I want to leave an impression on the background in the people we talk to over here that we're gonna be firm as hell without saying something that's dangerous. Now what do you think? Uh, uh, the people that are calling me up, I just talked to a New York banker, I just talked to a fellow in Texas, they all feel that the Navy responded wonderfully and that's good. But they want to be damned sure I don't pull 'em out and run, and they want to be damned sure that we're firm. That's what all the country wants because Goldwater's raising so much hell about how he's gonna blow 'em off the moon, and they say that we oughten to do anything that the national interest doesn't require. But we sure oughta always leave the impression that if you shoot at us, you're going to get hit.

Secretary McNamara: Well I think you would want to instruct George Reedy this morning at his news conference to say that you you personally have ordered the, the Navy to carry on the routine patrols uh off the coast of North Vietnam, uh to add an additional destroyer to the one that has been carrying on the patrols, to provide an air cap, and to issue instructions to the commanders to destroy any uh force that attacks our force in international waters.

President Johnson: [speaks over McNamara] Bob, if you don't mind,

Secretary McNamara: . . . I think that's the way...

President Johnson: If you don't mind, call Walter Jenkins and tell him

Secretary McNamara: Sure

President Johnson: that you want to dictate this to me

Secretary McNamara: I'll do it right now

President Johnson: to give to my people or George Reedy because I'm over at the Mansion with some folks here

Secretary McNamara: I'll do it right now.

President Johnson: OK. Right

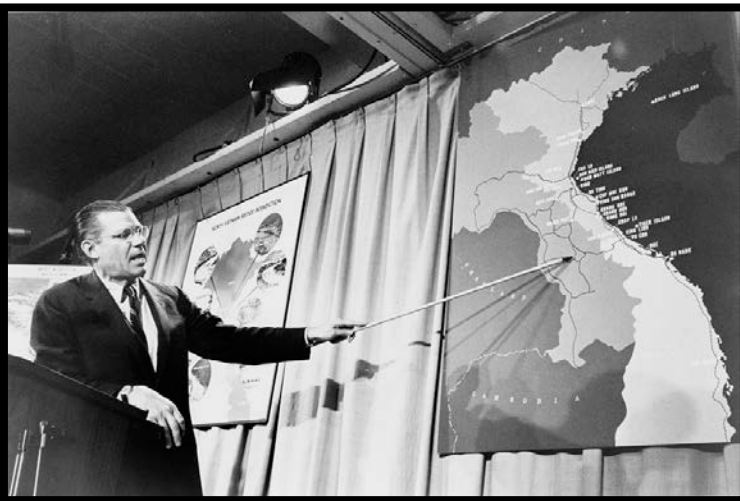


Advisors; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, 02/08/1968, President Johnson White House Photographs. Source: National Archives, ARC Identifier # 192540.

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Clip 2: Telephone conversation between President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, August 3, 1964, 1:21 pm EST.

*Source for transcript and audio recording: the National Security Archive at George Washington University: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/tapes.htm>



Sec. of Defense Robert McNamara pointing to a map of Vietnam at a press conference, Marion S. Trikosko, Photographer, US News & World Report Magazine Photograph, April 26, 1965. Source: Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004666288/>

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Yes?

Secretary Robert McNamara: Mr. President, I set up those meetings for this afternoon with the Senate and House leaders and I thought if it was agreeable with you, I would say to them that some months ago you asked us to be prepared for any eventuality in the Southeast Asia area and as a result of that we have prepared and just completed in great detail target analyses of the targets of North Vietnam. As a matter of fact in ten minutes I'm going over with the Chiefs [the Joint Chiefs of Staff] the final work on this. We have pictures, analyses, numbers of sorties, bomb loadings, everything prepared for all the target systems of North Vietnam, and I would describe this to the the leaders, simply indicating your desire that we be fully prepared for whatever may develop. And furthermore we've prepared detailed

movement studies of any contingency forces required, air squadrons, et cetera.

President Johnson: So obviously now, if you go put this in the paper...

Secretary McNamara: Yeah, and I, I'm going to tell 'em that

President Johnson: and your enemy reads about it then he thinks we're already taking off and obviously you've got us in a war. But I've got to be candid with you and I want to tell you the truth.

Secretary McNamara: Exactly. I was going to start my remarks by that, but be damn sure it doesn't, or try to be sure it doesn't get in the paper.

President Johnson: And uh, uh I think it's right, and I, I will tell 'em that yesterday morning that uh, uh they reported the *Maddox* incident and uh during the day yesterday we sent we sent out this order and read them the statement I made this morning.

Secretary McNamara: Right, I'll do that.

President Johnson: And, so that Dirksen doesn't think that we have to wait on him, and that we...

Secretary McNamara: Yeah.

President Johnson: did go out when.

Secretary McNamara: Yes, I'll tell them the order went out yesterday and you were simply repeating it to the press this morning.

President Johnson: OK.

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Historical Context, Part 2: Two days later, on August 4, the *Maddox*, and another US ship, the *C. Turner Joy*, were in the Gulf of Tonkin together. Both ships were on high alert, following the August 2 attack. Both ships recorded a number of sonar and radar signals they assumed to be from hostile DRV torpedo boats. In addition, naval personnel confused North Vietnamese radio signals actually sent on August 2 as new orders from Hanoi to attack the American ships. In this confusion, the ships radioed to Washington that they were under attack. The local commander, Captain John D. Herrick, quickly questioned this initial report, but the head of the Pacific fleet and Washington moved forward as if the initial confused reports were accurate.

On August 4, at 9:43 am Washington time, McNamara and Johnson discussed the incident on the phone. As you listen to their discussion, and follow along using the transcript below, consider the following questions to discuss with your group:

1. Why did President Johnson and Secretary McNamara believe the early reports which erroneously claimed that the U.S. was attacked by North Vietnam on August 4?

Clip 3: Telephone conversation between President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, August 4, 1964, 9:43 am EST.*

*Source for transcript and audio recording: the National Security Archive at George Washington University: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/tapes.htm>

Male Voice: Yes, sir. Off limits.

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Hello?

Female Voice: Secretary Robert McNamara's calling you again, sir. "0"

Secretary Robert McNamara: Mr. President, uh, General Wheeler and I are sitting here together. We just received a cable from Admiral Sharp [Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr. was the American commander for the Pacific] making three recommendations with respect to our destroyer tracks and enemy action responses. And I wanted to mention them to you with a recommendation. I discussed this with with Dean Rusk [secretary of state] and he and I are in agreement on the recommendations. Sharp recommends first that the uh, the track of the destroyer be shifted from eleven miles offshore to eight miles offshore. This makes no sense to us; we would recommend against it. His purpose, by shifting the track, is simply to make clear that we we believe the twelve-mile limit is not an effective limit on us. We don't, we think we do that adequately by sailing at eleven miles as opposed to eight. Secondly, Sharp recommends that we authorize the task

President Johnson: What reason does he give for his eight?

Secretary McNamara: Simply that it more clearly indicates our, our refusal to accept a twelve-mile restriction. We think we've clearly indicated our refusal to accept a twelve-mile restriction with the, the eleven-mile limit; we see no need to change the track at this time.

President Johnson: Why, what, what other objections do you have?

Secretary McNamara: It, it, uh, changes a program that that uh shouldn't be changed frequently. These orders are very precise; the tracks are laid down very clearly; they go through the three command channels to get out there; this ship is allegedly uh to be attacked tonight-we don't like to see a change in operation plan of this kind at this time. And we don't think it achieves any any uh international purpose, so no, certainly no military

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McNamara (continued): purpose is served by it.

President Johnson: All right.

Secretary McNamara: Secondly, he recommends that the task force commander be authorized to pursue the attacking vessels in the event he is attacked and destroy their bases. In this case, it would be

President Johnson: Wait just a minute. [Speaking away from the telephone: I've got a call. I can't hear him. I've got a real important thing...]. Go ahead, Mac.

Secretary McNamara: Secondly, he recommends that the task force commander be authorized to pursue any attacker and destroy the base of the attacker. In this instance, if he were attacked by patrol boats, it would mean that he would pursue the patrol craft into the shore line, uh identify the base of the patrol craft and destroy that base. Now this is an action that we might well wish to consider after the second attack. But I think it would be inappropriate, and General Wheeler agrees, and Dean Rusk agrees, inappropriate to provide the task force commander that authority. There will be ample time for us, after a second attack, to bring this problem to your attention, and you can then decide how far you wish to pursue the attacker into his base area.

President Johnson: What objections do you have to pursuing it?

Secretary McNamara: With only the objection that if we give such authority, you have, in a sense, lost control of, of the degree of our uh response to the North Vietnamese. If you don't op, exactly what bases will be attacked, where they are in relation to population centers, how much force will be applied to attack them, when it will occur. I, I personally would recommend to you, after a second attack on our ships, that we do retaliate against the coast of North Vietnam some way or other. And we'll be prepared

President Johnson: **What I was thinking about when I was eating breakfast, but I couldn't talk it-I was thinking that it looks to me like the weakness of our position is that, uh, we respond only to an action and we don't have any of our own. But when they, when they move on us, and they shoot at us, I think we not only ought to shoot at them, but almost simultaneously, uh, uh, pull one of these things that you've, you've been doing**

Secretary McNamara: Right.

President Johnson: **on one of their bridges or something.**

Secretary McNamara: Exactly. I, I quite agree with you, Mr. President. And I'm not, not sure that the response ought to be as Admiral Sharp suggests

President Johnson: Well me not, I'm not either, I'm not either. I don't know, unless I knew what base it was

Secretary McNamara: Yes.

President Johnson: and what is compelled, but I wish we could have something that we already picked out, and uh

Secretary McNamara: We'll see

President Johnson: and just hit about three of them damned quick. Right after

Secretary McNamara: **We will have that, and, and I, I've talked to Mac Bundy [national security adviser] a moment ago and told him that I thought that was the most important subject we should consider today, and, and be prepared to recommend to you a response, a retaliation move against North Vietnam in the event this attack takes place within the next six to nine hours. And we**

President Johnson: All right. Now we better do that at lunch. There's some things I don't want to go in with these other, I want to keep this as close as I can. So let's just try to keep it to the two.

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Secretary McNamara: I, I

President Johnson: three...

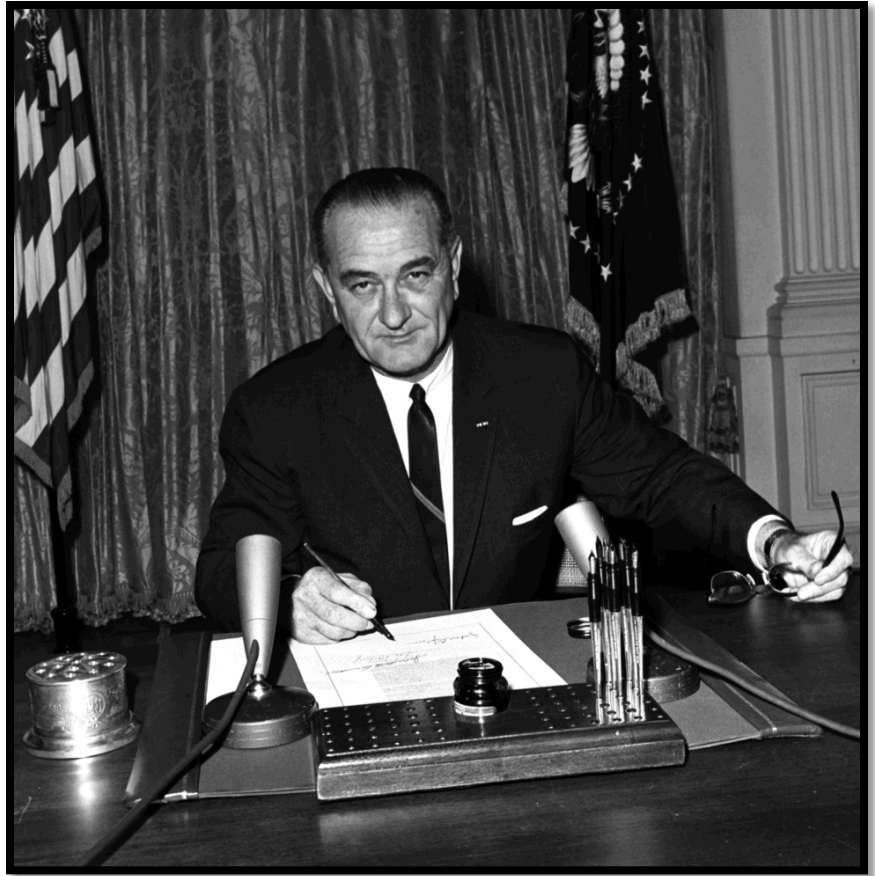
Secretary McNamara: I will be prepared to do so at lunch.

President Johnson: All right.

Secretary McNamara: Now, thirdly, Sharp recommends that, that, uh, the, uh, task force commander be authorized to engage in hot pursuit beyond the eleven-mile limit in as far as the three-mile limit, which we [i.e., the United States] accept as the definition of territorial waters. At present the instructions to the commander are: do not pursue an attacker, uh, closer to shore than eleven miles. Uh, Sharp recommends that that eleven mile limit be shifted to three miles. I've talked to Dean about this; he agrees, uh, as far as air pursuit is concerned. Pursue by air as close as three miles to shore. Do not pursue by sea closer than eleven miles. Uh, his reason for differentiating sea from air is that we can always argue that the, uh, the uh, air, uh, uh, was further out than three miles and he is concerned about taking the ships in as close as three miles to shore. I'm willing to accept his, his point for a different reason, however. I don't think ship pursuit uh, between eleven miles and three miles, would be effective anyhow because our ships travel at about twenty-seven knots, and these patrol boats travel at fifty knots, and the possibility of a ship being effective in that eleven to three mile area is not very great. The air power is likely the most effective power anyhow. And I would, therefore, recommend that we accept Sharp's recommendation but limit it to air.

President Johnson: All right. OK.

Secretary McNamara: Fine.



President Lyndon B. Johnson signs (Gulf of Tonkin) resolution, August 10, 1964, Official White House Photo. Source: Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Serial # 313-4-WH64