



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



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Revisiting the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

The Bureaucrats of War

Americans celebrated Vietnam Veterans Day earlier this week. What some of our citizens do not know is that the war was started under false pretences. As a Vietnam vet, I have been resisting this “rumor” since the Gulf of Tonkin incidents of August 2 and 4, 1964. I have railed against it because, like so many men and women who served in Vietnam, I had invested much mental and physical capital into the war. I refused to accept such hateful hearsay.



Attacking boat. Photo taken by officer aboard Maddox.

The reason for this accusation was attributable to President Lyndon Johnson, who needed an unassailable excuse to commit massive “boots on the ground” in Vietnam. Critics say Johnson would have gone to war based on another pretext, but an attack on an American ship was a certain way to fire-up the citizenry. Whatever the pretext, the fact remains and is now uncontestable, that the President, Congress, and the American public emotionally rushed to war based on a supposed incident on August 4 that never happened.

How could such a catastrophic tragedy on a scale such as the Vietnam War have occurred? Because the National Security Agency (NSA), an organization chartered to provide facts to the citizenry, made a mistake or lied about North Vietnamese PT boats attacking American warships on August 4, 1965. It then covered-up this mistake

Most Americans know that the Congressional Gulf of Tonkin Resolution led to the landing of a Marine battalion in Danang, Vietnam, March 1965, which jump-started the beginning of an eight-year war. Most of us know this resolution came about because of a reported *second* day of battle on the South China Sea between two American warships (*USS Maddox* and *USS Turner Joy*) and North Vietnamese PT boats.

This second day of battle never occurred even though the NSA reported that it did. After altering its mistake (or falsehood), the agency *covered up its error* from the President of the United States, Congress, and the American public. Thus, the President at that time, Lyndon Johnson, *did not deceive* the American people into committing to the Vietnam War, nor did Congress. LBJ may have been itching for a fight, but he used a bogus excuse for starting the tragic struggle.

The News Leaks

The issue lay dormant to the general public until October 2005 when the *New York Times* wrote that an NSA historian, Robert J. Hanyok, stated the NSA deliberately distorted reports passed to policy makers. The admission was made in 2001 in the *Cryptologic Quarterly* (periodical.) According to this historian, “mid-level NSA officials almost immediately discovered the error, but covered it up by altering documents, to make it appear a second attack had occurred. There was also concern that this mistake would be related to the faulty intelligence used to justify the second Iraqi war.”

Mr. Hanyok wrote that the Johnson administration received NSA information “in such a manner as to preclude responsible decision makers in the Johnson administration from having the complete and objective narrative of events.” Instead, “only information that supported the claim that the communists had attacked the two destroyers was given to Johnson administration officials.”

Former NSA Head Clears-up Controversy

The truth about the events of August 4, 1965, was at last confirmed by a high-level NSA official, the former director of NSA, Michael Hayden. There may have been earlier major player revelations, but this statement is the first admission by a high-level intelligence player that I have come across (which is the reason I have written this article). In his 2016 book, *Playing to the Edge*, p. 52, Mr. Michael writes:

Then, two nights later [on August 4 after the August 2 attack], in the midst of Johnson administration *warnings* [my italics] to North Vietnam about further action, SIGNET [a system run by NSA] misread North Vietnamese reporting on their continuing recovery operations from the first night as a second attack and issued a CRITIC (a kind of global warning). Subsequent US Navy evasive action and firing at some spurious radar hits were duly noted in North Vietnamese shore-based communications, which were in turn picked up by NSA and errantly catalogued as further evidence that a second attack was under way. President Johnson ordered air attacks against the torpedo boat bases, and Congress delivered the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing the president to take "all necessary steps" to halt Communist aggression in Southeast Asia.

In the aftermath of the resolution, NSA stuck to its story that a second attack had occurred. [The italics are mine.] It's unclear if the agency's subsequent investigation was careless, misguided, or just consciously ignored evidence. But it is clear that the August 4 reporting was wrong.

This distortion should be deeply upsetting to Americans. The tail is wagging the dog. The Vietnam War changed our country. It has nothing to do with philosophy of the justness or unjustness of the war. It has to do with historical accuracy and slothful, misleading practices of writers and especially intelligence personnel---the very people we Americans rely on to tell the truth as they see it.

Michael Hayden's recent book lays the controversy to rest. It also confirms the story of former Vietnam People's Army General Võ Nguyên Giáp telling former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara that absolutely nothing happened on August 4, 1964, in the Gulf of Tonkin---except the beginning of a war that almost tore-apart America.

The Vietnam War was a tragedy of immeasurable consequences. America and especially Vietnam suffered greatly. Much of this came about because of a bureaucratic cover-up. An American governmental bureaucracy, the most powerful intelligence service on earth, supposedly uses secrecy to protect democracy. For the Tonkin Gulf incident, it used secrecy to thwart the very process it was supposed to champion.

We should thank Michael Hayden for his candor. We should shutter at his two-paragraph, off-handed dismissal of the matter. In the meantime fellow Vietnam Vets, let's enjoy our Agent Orange cocktails, courtesy of our fellow warfare comrades.