Gulf of Tonkin Incident, By Ian Duthie

Although claims made at the time by the US government claim otherwise, all real evidence and documentation points to the Vietnamese attack on the USS Maddox to be a provoked action. The Vietnamese were forced into a situation far beyond their control, just to defend themselves.

The first time the American public heard about the “unprovoked attack” on the USS Maddox was, thanks to television, only a few days after the attack. However, in that short time frame it had already been decided by the government how the news was to be broken to the public. This news break came in the form of an interview with the secretary of state, Dean Rusk, speaking to an NBC-TV crew on live television, saying: “They see what we think of as the real world in wholly different terms. Their very process of logic is different… I can’t come to a rational explanation of it; perhaps they will offer one someday. But thus far we have to take it as we see it. And the essential fact is that our vessels were being attacked on the high seas by these boats, and we had to do something about it…” *[Tonkin document #2]*

Even without trying to read the silences, there is a bias so heavy here it’s hard to miss. That bias is the complete lack of support of or even recognition for the Vietnamese point of view. It hardly seems logical, that for absolutely no reason, the Vietnamese would attack a heavily armed American gunship. Based on that, what was so important in the Gulf of Tonkin that the government won’t share it with its own citizens?

Long before the attack, two letters of special interest to this report were sent to President Lyndon B. Johnson. These letters were personal in nature, however they prompted Johnson to make decisions that would affect America as well as Vietnam. The first, a letter from McGeorge Bundy, was written in opposition to a senator who sought a truce and subsequent peace within South Vietnam. Here are the details, according to Bundy’s letter:

“To neutralize South Vietnam today, or even for the United States Government to seem to move in that direction would mean the following:

1. A rapid collapse of anti- communist forces in South Vietnam, and a unification of the whole county on communist terms
2. Neutrality in Thailand , and increased influence for Hanoi and Peking
3. Collapse of the anti-Communist forces in Laos
4. Heavy pressure on Malaya and Malaysia
5. A shift toward neutrality in Japan and the Philippines
6. Blows to US prestige in South Korea and Taiwan which would require compensating increases in American commitment there, or else further retreat…

“If we neutralize, it should not be because we have quit, but because others have. Today a move in this direction would be regarded as betrayal by the newly elected regime in Saigon and by all communist Vietnamese. There are enough of them to lose us an election.” *[Tonkin document #4]*

Bundy provides some very clear reasoning for why the President should get involved in Vietnam. However, note the political bias **for** the democrats. One of his main reasons for writing this letter seems to be advice regarding the next election. Johnson of course, not wanting to wait for the (possible?) larger conflict, or lose his next election, begins to bolster the amount of military personnel in Vietnam. This continues until the next important letter on the subject arrives – five months later from the US embassy in Vietnam. It said:

“Literally eyes only for [Secretary of State Dean] Rusk and McNamara from Lodge.

“It would help here and possibly in Laos and Thailand if there were some screams from North Vietnam that they had been hit. They are looking much too tall…We want a scream from them that they had been hit from something from our side. I would not object if they blamed us. They could prove nothing… In a situation such as described above you don’t have to escalate if you don’t want to… Surely this kind of limited carefully modulated action does not require approval of Congress…Not only would screams from the North have a very tonic affect and strengthen morale here; It is also vital to frighten Ho…”

It seems that this letter may have encouraged whatever caused the Vietnamese to retaliate in the first place. I say this because the actual attack was only one month later. I doubt that this was the only thing taken into consideration when the decision was made, but it certainly seems to have influenced it. Based on just this collective data, we know that President Johnson certainly had enough reasons to justify what was about to happen for himself, but once again the question is: What was that? What provoked the attack? The answer is provided in two additional places: from the Vietnamese response to the American media, as well as from Johnson himself.

First some background:

After the American media response to the attack, the Vietnamese were obviously angry. Imagine if a state governor and a homeless man got in a fight and nobody saw the fight happen, but the governor won’t stop talking about it, specifically to favor his own viewpoint. On the other hand, the homeless man has his own view: Whether it’s true or not doesn’t matter. Far fewer people will hear it, or even believe it.

That is about what happened to the Vietnamese following the attack.

Here is the Vietnamese’s view on the situation:

“In the last two days, American news agencies have made a fuss about the so-called ‘unprovoked attack’ … Over recent times, in an attempt to retrieve their defeat and flounder in South Vietnam, along with increased military buildup and intensified war efforts, the US imperialists and their henchmen have not only ranted about extending war to the North but have also conducted provocative and sabotage activities against North Vietnam.” *[Tonkin document #9]*

The Vietnamese provide their own explanation of this sabotage effort, but it feels much more real coming from the mouth of President Johnson himself. The following is from a personal conversation between Johnson and President Eisenhower’s former Secretary of the Treasury, Robert Anderson. The conversation took place a day after the Gulf of Tonkin event, and a day before the White House let the media know about this “unprovoked” attack:

“There have been some covert operations in that area that we have been carrying on – blowing up some bridges and things of that kind, roads and so forth. So I imagine they wanted to put a stop to it… What happened was we’ve been playing around up there, and they came out and gave us a warning and we knocked the hell out of ’em.” *[Tonkin document #3]*

So there you have it: The attack on the USS Maddox was an action that was very much provoked. As a result, the Vietnamese were forced into a no-choice war just to defend themselves. At the time, the North Vietnamese were just beginning to take root as a country, albeit a communist one. As such they were forced to put up with provocations of “defenders of democracy and freedom” as the United States attempted to force capitalistic ideals on a country that wanted no part of them.

Like with anything that’s been bullied, the moment North Vietnam struck back, *it* was the one in the wrong, *it* was the one in trouble. The moment the world saw the North Vietnamese strike, at that moment was created the “reason” for the Vietnam war.

 All this, in self-defense.