
Source A

This article appeared on the front page of the New York Times on Monday, August 3, 1964. Similar front-page articles in newspapers across the country told readers of a conflict between a U.S. destroyer and North Vietnamese patrol (PT) boats off the coast of North Vietnam. As you read this article, ask yourself what your reaction might have been if you were a teenager reading this in 1964. After you read the article, try to summarize the facts. Ask yourself: "What happened in the Gulf of Tonkin on Sunday, August 2, 1964?"

380 Unit 7

Red PT Boats Fire at U.S. Destroyer on Vietnam Duty

Maddox and Four Aircraft Shoot Back After Assault 30 Miles Off Coast

By Arnold H. Lubasch

Special Correspondent to the *New York Times*

WASHINGTON, AUG. 2—Three North Vietnamese PT boats fired torpedoes and 37-mm. shells at a United States destroyer in international waters about 30 miles off North Vietnam today.

The destroyer and four United States aircraft fired back, damaged them and drove them off.

The incident was announced here in an official statement by the Defense Department. It said that neither the destroyer nor the aircraft sustained casualties or damage.

The statement said that the destroyer, the 3,300-ton *Maddox*, was on a routine patrol when an unprovoked attack took place in the Gulf of Tonkin. . . .

Government officials said later that the attack was not regarded as a major crisis. They said the United States Seventh Fleet had been patrolling the area for some time, would continue its patrols and had sufficient strength on hand.

Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp Jr., Commander in Chief in the Pacific, was advised of the incident by radio as he flew

back to his Pearl Harbor headquarters from a visit to South Vietnam.

The Defense Department statement said that the boats were damaged by gunfire from the *Maddox* and the four carrier-based jet aircraft. The statement said:

"While on routine patrol in international waters at 4:08 A.M., E.D.T. [Eastern Daylight Time], the United States destroyer *Maddox* underwent an unprovoked attack by three PT-type boats at latitude 19-40 north, longitude 106-34 east, in Tonkin Gulf. The attacking boats launched three torpedoes and used 37-mm. gunfire.

"The *Maddox* answered with 5-inch gunfire. Shortly thereafter, four F-8 aircraft from the U.S.S. *Ticonderoga* joined in the

defense of *Maddox*, using Zuni rockets and 20-mm. strafing attacks.

"The PT boats were driven off with one seen to be badly damaged and not moving and the other two damaged and retreating slowly. No casualties or damage was sustained by the *Maddox* or the aircraft."

The attacking boats, which displayed no flags or other identifying marks, were picked up on the destroyer's radar, kept coming and opened fire, according to the Defense Department officials.

After the attackers were driven off, they said, the United States forces resumed their patrol. No effort was made to sink the PT boats, because the fleet was not at war, they said.

The *Maddox* was apparently carrying out a surveillance mission, according to officials here. They said there was no ready explanation why the PT boats would attack the powerful Seventh Fleet.

State Department officials noted that Seventh Fleet patrols in the area were nothing new and would continue, although shooting incidents could not be precluded. They indicated that the United States did not plan an immediate diplomatic protest as a result of the incident.

One reason the Seventh Fleet patrols the area of the incident is that it attempts to maintain surveillance on supplies that might be moving by sea from ports in Communist North Vietnam to Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam.

Source B

The next day, Tuesday, August 4, this follow-up news story appeared on the front page of the Los Angeles Times. What new information does it give you that you did not find in Source A? Does this information seem to agree or disagree with Source A?

Johnson Orders Navy to Destroy Viet Attackers American Fleet, Air Power Bolstered in Area of Raid on Ship

*By Richard Reston
Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON— . . . In the wake of Sunday's "unprovoked" torpedo boat attack on the U.S. destroyer *Maddox*, the President ordered a second destroyer into the Gulf of Tonkin and directed air combat patrols to protect these ships. The Navy announced that the destroyer *C. Turner Joy* had joined the destroyer *Maddox*. . . .

Shortly after Mr. Johnson acted, the State Department announced it is sending to North Vietnam a formal protest against the attack on the *Maddox*. . . .

The Defense Department released details of Sunday's attack in which one of three Communist PT-boats apparently was sunk when the *Maddox* and four Navy F-8 Crusader jets returned the fire.

Officials gave this account:

The three high-speed patrol boats began a close-formation run at the *Maddox*. All three boats were traveling at approximately 50 knots.

They were observed several miles away by radar on the *Maddox*, but since all the

boats were in international waters, and no state of war exists between the United States and North Vietnam, the destroyer did not fire first. . . .

The three boats turned slightly toward the *Maddox* and fired one torpedo each. At this point the destroyer turned hard to port, avoiding two of the torpedoes by about 100 and 200 yds. respectively. The other torpedo was not seen to run.

The *Maddox* opened fire with its 5-inchers, hitting one boat directly.

Meanwhile, air support was on its way from the carrier *Ticonderoga*, which was cruising some 300 miles to the south. The jets, arriving in less than 30 minutes, damaged the two fleeing boats with rockets and 20-mm strafing attacks.

The chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Richard B. Russell (D-Ga), told reporters, "there have been naval operations in the Gulf of Tonkin by South Vietnamese and this could have confused the North Vietnamese. . . ."

The State Department also rejected as "without foundation" two recent charges made by North Vietnam. The charges, made over the weekend, were that four U.S. fighter-bombers had launched an attack from Laos on a North Vietnamese village near the border and that American and South Vietnamese ships shelled two North Vietnamese islands last Thursday.

Asked about possible reasons for the North Vietnamese attack, [press officer at the State Department, Robert J.] McCloskey said any such speculation on this point would be "ill-advised." But, he added, the North Vietnamese attack is "part of continued aggressive actions against the South Vietnamese."

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times.

LATE CITY EDITION
U.S. Weather Bureau Report 1742 80 August
Variable cloudiness today; clear
tonight. Fair and cool tomorrow.
Temp. Range 80-83; yesterday 81-85.
Temp. -Hum. today low 70; yesterday 73.

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TRN CENTS

U.S. PLANES ATTACK NORTH VIETNAM BASES; PRESIDENT ORDERS 'LIMITED' RETALIATION AFTER COMMUNISTS' PT BOATS RENEW RAIDS

The New York Times, as well as other newspapers across the country, carried headlines of President Johnson's response to North Vietnam.

Source C

The following article from the Wednesday, August 5, Washington Post tells the story of a second incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, which the writer says happened two days after the first incident. As you read this article, ask yourself these questions: What does the writer say happened? Why did the North Vietnamese attack U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin for the second time in two days? What was the response of the United States government to this new incident? What was the North Vietnamese version of this story?

Johnson Orders Action, Stresses It Is Limited; U.N. to Hear Charges

By Murrey Marder

President Johnson last night ordered United States "air action" against "gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Vietnam" after the second attack in three days upon American warships by Communist torpedo boats. . . .

But it was emphasized last night that the intent of the United States is not to esca-

late the war but only to retaliate against the Communist attacks. . . .

The President has already asked Senate and House leaders for action "immediately" on a congressional resolution expressing United States unity in a determination "to take all necessary measures in support of freedom, and in defense of peace, in Southeast Asia."

The official news of the latest attack yesterday on U.S. vessels off the North Vietnam coast came at 6 p.m. in a Defense Department announcement calling it "a second deliberate attack."

Again it was repeated that there was no American casualties or damage. It was believed that at least two Communist PT boats were sunk and two others damaged, out of six or more attacking vessels.

Yesterday's attack was double the scale of the first shooting encounter on Sunday in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the North Vietnam coast. This time, in a three-hour night battle, attack aircraft from the American carriers *Ticonderoga* and *Constellation* joined in beating off the torpedo boats.

The new assault added major dimensions to what appeared to be a whole new pattern of boldness by the Communists in

challenging overwhelming U.S. naval power in the Pacific.

On Sunday the United States took the position that the first attack on the destroyer *Maddox*, that reportedly occurred about 28 miles from the Vietnam coast in international waters, may have been an "isolated incident." The second attack was much farther out in international waters—65 miles, the Defense Department said. . . .

The Defense Department's official announcement of the second attack, issued at 6 p.m. yesterday by Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester said:

"A second deliberate attack was made during darkness by an undetermined number of North Vietnamese PT boats on the USS *Maddox* and USS *C. Turner Joy* while the two destroyers were cruising in company on routine patrol in the Tonkin Gulf in international waters about 65 miles from the nearest land.

"The attack came at 10:30 p.m. local time (10:30 a.m., Aug. 4, Washington time).

"The PT boats were taken under fire by the destroyers and thereafter by attack aircraft from the *Ticonderoga* and the *Constellation*.

The attackers were driven off with no U.S. casualties, no hits, and no damage to either destroyer.

"It is believed that at least two of the PT boats were sunk and two others damaged.

Fight in Bad Weather

Defense officials said that during the three hours of battle there were some lulls and new attacks. The weather was described as "miserable," with rough seas, an 800-foot ceiling and scattered thunderstorms. . . .

The PT boats were said to have fired torpedoes repeatedly, scoring no hits. Because of the darkness, the bad weather, and the swirling attack, American officers do not know exactly how many PT boats were engaged, although some reports referred to six.

Most of the damage to the PT boats probably was done by destroyers, it was thought, as the American jet pilots could see little in the dark.

When officials were asked how they knew the attacking boats were North Vietnamese, they replied "We're satisfied" that they were. Officials expressed similar conviction in Sunday's attack, while declining to disclose their precise method of identification. . . .

After news of the second PT-boat attack in the Gulf of Tonkin reverberated around Washington, there was a rush of policy conferences at the State Department, Pentagon and White House.

Then the President, facing the greatest international test of his Administration, called in the National Security Council for a decision at 6:15 p.m.

This challenge for President Johnson embraced a broad combination of international uncertainties over an anti-Communist conflict where more than 16,000 U.S. servicemen are already serving in South Vietnam, with several thousand more on the way. . . .

The great questions confronting United States policy makers are these: Were the North Vietnamese, perhaps encouraged by their Chinese Communist allies, deliberately trying to provoke the United States into a direct retaliatory attack on North Vietnam? If so, what is the motivation, in

view of the fact that the United States obviously can bring superior air and naval power to bear against North Vietnam. . . .

American officials who have been debating these questions since the first attack, now are under much greater pressure to come up with a conclusion since the second attack ruled out the "isolated incident" premise. Many were convinced from the outset, despite the official party line, that the first attack indicated the pattern that the second attack proved.

Hanoi Accuses U.S.

Radio Hanoi in its first comment on Sunday's attack on the USS *Maddox* said early today that the incident occurred in North Vietnamese territorial waters.

"Our boats came into action to protect our territorial waters and our people and to chase the enemy ship out of our waters," the radio said.

It accused the U.S. Seventh Fleet of aggressive action and said the United States was attempting to cover up its "aggression" with a story of a so-called unprovoked attack on North Vietnamese boats.

The broadcast contained a warning that North Vietnam would take the necessary steps in case of further American aggressive acts.

North Vietnam on Sunday charged that the United States and South Vietnam had sent warships "to shell the Hon Me and Hon Ngu islands in the territorial waters" of North Vietnam. Those islands are near the area where the *Maddox* was attacked on Sunday. Hon Me is used as a naval base, American sources said, and Communist PT boats have been seen in the area.

The United States has denied that any of its warships shelled the islands of Hon Me and Hon Ngu. However, despite some reports published yesterday, the State Department denial did not [clear] South Vietnam. It only denied American participation.

Speculation on Attack

There are some indications, however, that the South Vietnamese may in fact

have attacked the two islands. American officials have declined to discuss that, although U.S. warships on occasion reportedly have escorted South Vietnam vessels part-way to their targets. . . .

U.S. officials, however, were explicit on that point. They said they had no reason to believe Sunday's attack was the result of accident or confusion in any way. The second attack yesterday appeared to confirm that.

Source D

This Chicago Tribune article appeared in the August 5 edition on the second page. It is reprinted here in its entirety. How does this account differ from the North Vietnamese story in Source C? What new information does this article give you? How does the viewpoint of the North Vietnamese differ? Why do you think the facts are different here? Which set of facts do you think are more reliable? Why?

No. Vietnam Calls Attack Story a Lie

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Aug. 5 [Wednesday] [Reuters]—Communist North Viet-

nam today denied reports of Tuesday night's attack on the American destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. Radio Hanoi was quoted here by the Vietnamese news agency as saying the news of the second attack on the United States warships was "completely invented and fabricated by the United States."

"It is part of United States imperialists' new scheme for provocations and is aimed at covering up their illegal acts of flagrantly violating the security of North Vietnam and further aggravating the situation in southeast Asia," the radio was quoted as saying.

Source E

On Friday, August 7, after brief discussions, both houses of Congress overwhelmingly passed the Southeast Asia Resolution that President Johnson requested. Why do you think that the Southeast Asia Resolution is usually called the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution? What reasons are given for the passage of the Resolution? What powers were given to the President? To Congress?

Southeast Asia Resolution (The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution)

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;

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;

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 [U.N.] or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.

Source F

The following statement was given by President Johnson's press secretary at a news conference held early in the afternoon of August 7 at the White House. The statement expresses President Johnson's viewpoint on the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution by Congress. As you read, think about the following questions: What did the second Gulf of Tonkin incident have to do with the passage of this resolution by Congress? Why did President Johnson feel so strongly about this? Why did President Johnson thank Congress for passing the resolution? Why do you think the President was "sure the American people" joined him in thanking Congress?

Statement by the President on the Passage of the Joint Resolution on Southeast Asia August 7, 1964

The 414-to-nothing House vote and the 88-to-2 Senate vote on the passage of the Joint Resolution on Southeast Asia is a demonstration to all the world of the unity of all Americans. They prove our determination to defend our own forces, to prevent aggression, and to work firmly and steadily for peace and security in the area.

I am sure the American people join with me in expressing the deepest appreciation to the leaders and Members of both parties, in both Houses of Congress, for their patriotic, resolute, and rapid action.

Source G

On Saturday, August 8, the President invited journalists to his Texas ranch for a barbecue and press conference. In this excerpt, reporters ask President Johnson for his opinions on the motives for the second North Vietnamese attack on U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. As you read this brief excerpt, ask yourself: What did President Johnson think North Vietnam's motives were for the second Gulf of Tonkin attack? Do you think it is important to know what Johnson was thinking at the time?

The President's News Conference at the LBJ Ranch August 8, 1964

Q: Sir, have you been able to better establish the motives in the two Vietnamese attacks?

THE PRESIDENT: You had better find out about their motives from them.

Q: Do you have any ideas or do you assume why?

THE PRESIDENT: The same answer would go to that same question. I am unable to speak with any accuracy on the imaginations or motives or ideas they might have had in mind on what they did. It would be pure speculation and I don't care to indulge in that.

Source H

Lyndon Johnson had won the 1964 presidential election by an overwhelming margin. Although Johnson was eligible for reelection in 1968, the fighting in Vietnam had gone so badly in the previous four years that he went on nationwide television to announce that he would not run again for president. Three years later, Johnson told this version of the Tonkin Gulf incident in his autobiography. How does this

agree with or disagree with all the sources you have read? What do you think accounts for the differences?

In August 1964 an unexpected crisis developed, one that threatened for a time to change the nature of the war in Vietnam. During the early hours of Sunday morning, August 2, a high-priority message came in reporting that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked the

destroyer USS *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin. The duty officer in the White House Situation Room gathered all the available data, prepared a summary and sent it to my bedroom. The report began:

Mr. President:

Early this morning the USS *Maddox* was attacked by three DRV [Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam] PT boats while on patrol approximately 30 miles off the North Vietnamese coast in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Captain of the *Maddox* returned the fire with 5-inch guns and requested air support from the carrier *Ticonderoga* on station nearby in connection with reconnaissance flights in that area.

Ticonderoga jets arrived shortly and made strafing attacks on the PT boats resulting in one enemy boat dead in the water, two others damaged and turned tail for home.

The *Maddox* reports no personnel or material damages.

The *Maddox* was on what we called the DeSoto patrol. One purpose was to spot evidence of Hanoi's continuing infiltration of men and war supplies into South Vietnam by sea. Another was to gather electronic intelligence. The actions and objectives of the patrol were similar to those of Soviet trawlers off our coasts and to the intelligence activities of many nations throughout the world. In an important way our DeSoto patrol was far more justified, for Hanoi was sending troops south to kill Americans.

I called a meeting of key advisers later that morning in the White House. . . . We studied the latest reports and discussed what we should do about this attack on the high seas. We concluded that an over-eager North Vietnamese boat commander

might have been at fault or that a shore station had miscalculated. So we decided against retaliation, but I ordered the Navy to continue the patrol, add another destroyer, and provide air cover. We were determined not to be provocative, nor were we going to run away. We would give Hanoi the benefit of the doubt—this time—and assume the unprovoked attack had been a mistake. . . .

Though we had decided to treat the first North Vietnamese strike against our destroyer as a possible error, we drafted a stiff note to the Hanoi regime. We said that our ships had always operated freely on the high seas, and added: "They will continue to do so." We advised the North Vietnamese to be "under no misapprehension as to the grave consequences which would inevitably result from any further unprovoked offensive military action against United States forces." When prompt delivery to Hanoi proved impossible, we broadcast the note on Voice of America radio and released it to the world press.

Two days later the North Vietnamese struck again at our destroyers, this time at night (midmorning Washington time) on August 4. A few minutes after nine o'clock I had a call from [Secretary of Defense] McNamara. He informed me that our intelligence people had intercepted a message that strongly indicated the North Vietnamese were preparing another attack on our ships in the Tonkin Gulf. Soon we received messages from the destroyer *Maddox* that its radar and that of the USS *C. Turner Joy* had spotted vessels they believed to be hostile. The enemy ships appeared to be preparing an ambush. The *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy* had changed course to avoid contact, but they then sent word

that the enemy vessels were closing in at high speed. Within an hour the destroyers advised that they were being attacked by torpedoes and were firing on the enemy PT boats. As messages flowed in from Pacific Command Headquarters, McNamara passed along the key facts to me.

We had scheduled a noon meeting of the National Security Council. . . . We immediately took up the crisis in the Tonkin Gulf. McNamara gave us the latest available information. [Secretary of State] Rusk said that he and McNamara were developing a set of options for response but that the proposals were not yet ready for presentation. I closed the NSC meeting and asked Rusk, McNamara, [NSC members] Vance, McCone, and Bundy to join me for lunch. The unanimous view of these advisors was that we could not ignore this second provocation and that the attack required retaliation. I agreed. We decided on air strikes against North Vietnamese PT boats and their bases plus a strike on one oil depot. . . .

Action reports continued to arrive from our destroyers, and from the Pacific Command. A few were ambiguous. One from the destroyer *Maddox* questioned whether the many reports of enemy torpedo firings were all valid.

I instructed McNamara to investigate these reports and obtain clarification. He immediately got in touch with Admiral U.S.G. Sharp, Jr., the Commander in Chief, Pacific. . . . McNamara and his civilian and military specialists went over all the evidence in specific detail. We wanted to be absolutely certain that our ships had actually been attacked before we retaliated.

Admiral Sharp called McNamara to report that after checking all the reports and

evidence, he had no doubt whatsoever that an attack had taken place. McNamara and his associates reached the same firm conclusion. Detailed studies made after the incident confirmed this judgment.

I summoned the National Security Council for another meeting at 6:15 P.M. to discuss in detail the incident and our plans for a sharp but limited response. About seven o'clock I met with the congressional leadership in the White House for the same purpose. I told them that I believed a congressional resolution of support for our entire position in Southeast Asia was necessary and would strengthen our hand. . . .

As we considered the possibility of having to expand our efforts in Vietnam, proposals for seeking a congressional resolution became part of the normal contingency planning effort. But I never

adopted these proposals, for I continued to hope that we could keep our role in Vietnam limited.

With the attack on our ships in the Tonkin Gulf, the picture changed. We could not be sure how Hanoi would react to our reprisal strike. We thought it was possible they might overreact and launch an all-out invasion of South Vietnam. They might ask the Chinese Communists to join them in the battle. Any one of a dozen things could have happened, and I wanted to be ready for the worst. Part of being ready, to me, was having the advance support of Congress for anything that might prove to be necessary. It was better to have a firm

congressional resolution, and not need it, than some day to need it and not have it. This was the thinking behind my decision to ask Congress for its backing. . . .

Nine Senators and seven Congressmen [members of the House of Representatives] joined me in the Cabinet room for that meeting. . . . We discussed the advantages and disadvantages of a congressional resolution. . . .

At the close of the meeting I felt encouraged by this show of solidarity and support. As Speaker [of the House of Representatives], McCormack said near the end of our discussions, we were presenting "a united front to the world."

Source I

The New York Times, Newsweek, Time, and virtually all of the most widely read and the most influential American periodicals published accounts of the Tonkin Gulf incidents that were in agreement with the official White House version. Not all of the world press, however, printed the White House version of the story. On August 14, 1964, the following article appeared in the New Statesman, a British publication. How does this information differ from the information in the previous sources. Is it reliable? How do you know?

The Guns of August

By Karl E. Meyer

. . . In the retrospect of a week, the incidents in Vietnam do not seem quite so simple as the initial headlines indicated. Last Friday, the conservative *Washington Star* published an account by its Pentagon

correspondent, Richard Fryklund, which threw a new light on what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin. According to Fryklund, the South Vietnamese navy landed guerrilla forces on the island of Hon Me [which is part of North Vietnam], about 10 miles off the coast of North Vietnam on Saturday 1 August. These guerrilla raids . . . are coordinated with "American advisors" in Saigon, who failed to notify the American Seventh Fleet of these operations.

Thus on the fateful Saturday the destroyer *Maddox* was on a wholly unrelated reconnaissance mission when she happened to sail past Hon Me Island, which is about 30 miles from the PT-boat base subsequently attacked by US planes. Apparently, the North Vietnamese thought that the *Maddox* had been shelling the island or had been escorting the raiding vessels. Hence, the first attack on the *Maddox*, which Washington sought to [minimize] in the belief that the incident was caused by an error. On Monday,

there was the second attack, this time on the destroyers *Maddox* and *C. Turner Joy*. But because of foul weather, it was impossible to tell how many boats had attacked, according to the official account.

Observers familiar with Vietnam and naval warfare are puzzled by this detail, since radar blips are not affected by bad

weather. Is it possible that the destroyers could not count the attacking vessels because they could not be distinguished from South Vietnamese craft that were engaged in another raiding mission? There is so little trust in official accounts about Vietnam that the suspicion is surely understandable. . . .

Source J

On August 15, 1964, The National Guardian published this story on its front page. The National Guardian was a weekly "alternative" newspaper. It published stories that the larger national daily newspapers either reported in a different way or did not report at all. How do the facts and opinions here differ from accounts in the other sources you have read? How are they similar? What important questions does this article pose to you?

Tonkin Gulf: The Questions

By David Wesley

On Aug. 5 the United States, after nearly two decades of brinksmanship in its self-proclaimed Cold War with the Communist world, finally plunged over the brink with a direct assault on the territory of a Communist state. . . . [T]he "ravaging" three-hour air attack on five coastal areas of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) had been launched, the Johnson administration announced, in retaliation for the two North Vietnam torpedo boat attacks, Aug. 2 and 4, on . . . U.S. destroyers patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin. . . .

In the non-Communist world . . . the dominant feeling was that Johnson had "over-responded" because of his election

race with a hardliner, Sen. Barry Goldwater. . . .

The American press lined up almost unanimously behind the act of brinkplunging. In essence, the editorial comment . . . added up to the contention: "We cannot allow the American flag to be shot at anywhere on earth if we are to retain our respect and prestige."

The DRV government, while fully acknowledging the Aug. 2 skirmish, denounced the charge of a second attack by its boats as "sheer fabrication" devised to extend the war to North Vietnam. Peking [the Chinese Communist government] called it "an out-and-out lie" and declared: "In fact, the so-called second Tonkin Gulf incident of Aug. 4 never occurred. That night the DRV did not have a single war vessel on the waters where the U.S. warships were."

In spite of these protestations . . . the word of the U.S. government was accepted implicitly throughout the . . . press of the western world. The crisis thus showed how easily a manufactured provocation could set off World War III.

The nature of the two incidents differed in every respect. This was indirectly recognized in Western comment, which found the quick hit-and-run raid on the *Maddox* Aug. 2 a standard naval defensive maneuver, but the second four-hour engagement

Sources for the Gulf of Tonkin Case Study

- Source A** *New York Times* article, Monday, August 3, 1964: "Red PT Boats Fire at U.S. Destroyer on Vietnam Duty"
- Source B** *Los Angeles Times* article, Tuesday, August 4, 1964: "Johnson Orders Navy to Destroy Viet Attackers"
- Source C** *Washington Post* article, Wednesday, August 5, 1964: "Johnson Orders Action, Stresses It Is Limited"
- Source D** *Chicago Tribune* article, Wednesday, August 5, 1964: "No. Viet Nam Calls Attack Story a Lie"
- Source E** Congressional Resolution, Friday, August 7, 1964: *Southeast Asia Resolution (The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution)*
- Source F** Statement by the President *On the Passage of the Joint Resolution on Southeast Asia*, Friday, August 7, 1964
- Source G** President's news conference at the LBJ Ranch, Saturday, August 8, 1964
- Source H** Excerpt from *Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, by Lyndon Baines Johnson
- Source I** *New Statesman* article, Friday, August 14, 1964: "The Guns of August"
- Source J** *National Guardian* article, Saturday, August 15, 1964: "Tonkin Gulf: The Questions"
-