

## Interpreting History: Vietnam—What Really Happened in the Gulf of Tonkin?

### Introduction

Thus far in this unit you have studied the nature of History. You have learned what evidence and sources are, and you have seen examples of each. You have seen how the use of words, photographs, and cartoons can affect one's interpretation of events. You have learned about oral history and you have learned some basic principles of writing history.

Now let's put it all together. In this experiment you will be developing a historical account. You will be gathering and interpreting evidence—primary and secondary sources, a chronology, maps, and photographs.

The subject is an event that happened off the coast of North Vietnam in August 1964. The consequences of what happened then have an important impact upon our nation and our world even today. In this experiment you will discover for yourself what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin that led to America's fighting a war in southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s.

The basis for American involvement in Vietnam is rooted in the cold war—the tensions that developed between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II. The United States and the Soviet Union had been allies during World War II. After the war, however, the Soviet Union began to force its communist system of government on the countries of Eastern Europe. In 1949 mainland China also fell to the communists. In response, the United

### Vietnam



*Vietnam, on the coast of Southeast Asia, became the site of America's longest war.*

States developed a policy of "containment." This policy was designed to limit the expansion of communism.

Containment was an outgrowth of the "domino theory," which claimed that nations were like dominos. When one domino falls, all the others fall in a row. This was the reason that in the early 1950s United States troops made up the largest part of the United Nations' forces fighting against

the communists in South Korea. For the most part the United States followed the policy of containment until the late 1980s.

After World War II, the Vietnamese wanted independence. But France, assisted financially by the United States, fought to reestablish control over Vietnam. In 1954, France admitted defeat and Vietnam was divided into a communist North and an anti-communist South. The North Vietnamese never accepted the 1954 division and invaded the South to reunify the country. The United States sent money and military advisers to South Vietnam to repel the attacks from the North. Then in the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy increased aid to South Vietnam. By the end of 1963, about 16,000 American troops were serving in South Vietnam as advisers.

Throughout 1964, the fighting between the communist Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese increased. American "advisers" were losing their lives in Vietnam. Then in August 1964, the news came that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked the United States destroyer *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam. What happened there set the stage for a much wider war in which the United States would give up its role of military adviser. Instead, United States troops became the primary fighting force against the communists.

Historians are still trying to determine exactly what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin during that first week of August 1964. In this experiment, you will have a chance to examine a wide range of historical evidence, including newspaper accounts and the words of President Lyndon B. Johnson and his staff. As you go through the evidence, be alert to all the things we have discussed in this unit.

When you read each source, ask yourself these questions: Does the evidence seem to be objective or subjective? Does the speaker or writer benefit in any way if people believe his or her words? Do the words have a negative or positive connotation? Are any facts taken out of context? Can you spot any inferences and opinions? Can you tell which statements are facts? What are the frames of reference of the sources of this information? Are any key facts omitted? Think about these questions for a while. Make sure you know how to apply the necessary skills to answer the questions before you continue with this experiment. If anything is not clear to you, be sure to take the time to go back through this unit and review the material you are uncertain about.

In this experiment you will confront a great amount of evidence. Not all of the evidence is in agreement, so you will have to make decisions about which evidence to believe and which evidence you do not trust enough to use in your own historical account.

Some of the sources you will use may be difficult to read. But if you can learn to read, understand, and interpret the material presented in this experiment, you will have acquired valuable skills. Even if you do not choose a career as a professional historian, you will be using those skills for the rest of your life.