

US History

The Vietnam War

Learning Target:

I can examine the Gulf of Tonkin incident and determine how a declaration of war was issued on an event that never happened.

4. The Tonkin Gulf Incident

Location & Time –

- August 1964
- Tonkin Gulf –
 - Off the coast of North Vietnam

August 2, 1964 –

- USS Maddox –
 - A Naval Destroyer
 - Was attacked by three North Vietnamese patrol boats
- Maddox opened fire
- Air support called in from the USS Ticonderoga (An aircraft carrier)
 - One Vietnamese boat was sunk
 - No damage to the Maddox or its crew
- LBJ very angry but shows restraint
 - Orders USS Turner Joy to join the Maddox on patrols –

August 4, 1964 –

- A 2nd alleged attack occurs
- Three radar contacts spotted at 9:40 PM
 - Thought to be Vietnamese torpedo boats
- The Maddox and Turner Joy begin firing
- They begin and continue evasive maneuvers for two hours
- Sonar operators reported many torpedoes in the water
 - Were poorly trained and inexperienced

Doubts About the Attack –

- Captain John Herrick began to doubt whether or not an attack even occurred
- Had received a count of 21 torpedoes in the water from his crew
- Sends a telegram to LBJ recommending a complete review of the incident
- Attributed the radar and sonar contacts to weather effects and to his crew's inexperience and anxiety

LBJ's Initial Reaction To The Attacks –

“Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish.”

-James B. Stockdale –

- Later a prisoner of war, vice admiral, and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, testified before a Senate investigation
- At the time of the incident he was a young Lieutenant aboard the Ticonderoga

“I had the best seat in the house from which to detect boats, if there were any. I didn’t have to look through surface haze and spray like the destroyers did and yet I could see the destroyers’ ever move vividly. Time and time again I flew over the Maddox and the Joy, throttled back, lights out, like a near silent stalking owl, conserving fuel . . . When the destroyers were convinced that they had some battle action going, I zigged and zagged and fired where they fired . . . The edges of the black hole I was flying in were still periodically lit by flashes of lightning, but now wakes or dark shapes other than those of the destroyers were ever visible to me.”

LBJ’s Decision –

- LBJ went on TV and announced the first US bombing raids into North Vietnam
- Retaliation for an attack that may or may not of occurred

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution –

- LBJ asked Congress to pass this
- In effect the equivalent of a declaration of war based on an event that never happened

“The Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander-in-Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression . . .”

-Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon –

- One of two senators who voted no on The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

“We are in effect giving the president . . . war, making powers in absence of a declaration of war. I believe that to be a historic mistake.”

Why did LBJ do it?

- An election year – 1964
- In the heat of the presidential campaign in August
- Barry Goldwater, a hawk, Senator from Arizona – Republican said nuke Hanoi
- LBJ did not want to appear too soft
- “By neutralizing Goldwater, Johnson effectively removed the war issue from the upcoming election campaign.”