

FIREPOINT

The Gulf of Tonkin Crisis, August 1964

An Abstract
of

A Thesis

Presented To The Graduate Faculty
Of Western Connecticut State University

By

Susann Walens

In Partial Fulfillment
Of The Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Thesis Advisor
Dr. David Detzer

November, 1983

Abstract

Firepoint

The Gulf of Tonkin Crisis, August 1964

Historians are only now beginning to understand the implications of the Vietnam war. Discovering how and why the United States became involved in the only war this country lost can help avoid future calamities. Learning about the behavior of Presidents and other members of government can help us to understand how foreign policy is conducted.

The implications of the Gulf of Tonkin crisis of August 1964 are far deeper than an exploration of a minor naval engagement. The behavior of the United States government was shown clearly, in patterns that were to be repeated for four years, until President Lyndon Johnson withdrew from another political campaign.

Although the United States government announced that, on August 2, 1964 the USS destroyer Maddox was attacked without provocation by North Vietnamese patrol torpedo boats while the Maddox was on a routine patrol, this statement is utterly untrue. The Maddox was a spy ship, lying four miles off a North Vietnamese island which had been attacked fourteen hours earlier by South Vietnamese paramilitary forces armed and trained by the Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA had purchased the boats used by the South Vietnamese in their attack on the island.

The Maddox was warned that she was intruding into North Vietnamese territorial waters, but, despite the warning she was not ordered to withdraw. When the North Vietnamese sent out their PT boats, which were armed lightly with machine guns and two torpedoes each, the massive destroyer opened fire before the PT's

DS557.A63W4

were within range of their own weapons capability. The destroyer fired continuously over a period of twenty minutes and severely damaged two of the PT boats. The third boat, which attempted to escape, was pursued and strafed by F-8 jets launched from the near-by United States aircraft carrier Ticonderoga.

By opening fire first, by failing to heed warnings that she was invading territorial waters, the Maddox clearly violated many tenets of international law. But this was disregarded by the American government which turned the situation to full advantage by stating the Maddox had been "attacked."

The Maddox patrol was reinforced within several hours by the USS destroyer C. Turner Joy. Both ships continued to sail within North Vietnamese waters, since the American government refused to accept the twelve mile limit claimed by North Vietnam.

On August 4, 1964, the government of the United States was alerted that the two destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin were engaging North Vietnamese PT boats once again. Reports came into the Pentagon that as many as twenty-two torpedoes had been launched against the destroyers. Later, the destroyer division commander, Captain John Herrick, claimed that faulty equipment and over-eager sonarmen may have accounted for many of the reports. In fact, no evidence, either debris, survivors, or damage to the destroyers was ever found to prove that an engagement had in fact occurred.

Yet the American government, using these engagements as flimsy excuses, proceeded, on August 5, 1964 to bomb North Vietnam. Further, President Johnson was able to obtain, on August 7, 1964 a Congressional Resolution which was not only an ex post facto

approval of the bombing of a country which was without any of its own aircraft, but the Resolution authorized the President to take all future steps he deemed necessary in the defense of South-east Asia.

The United States government manipulated two very minor events into an international crisis. No Americans were injured; there were no casualties except, as one historian had remarked, truth. Even today, a great deal of information regarding these incidents remains firmly classified and cannot be obtained. This paper, then, deals with documents available which illuminate the events.