**Gulf of Tonkin Incident**

**From The Black Vault Encyclopedia Project**



Chart showing the US Navy’s interpretation of the events of the first part of the Gulf of Tonkin incident

The **Gulf of Tonkin Incident** was a pair of alleged attacks by [North Vietnamese](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=North_Vietnam&action=edit&redlink=1) [gunboats](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Gunboats&action=edit&redlink=1) on two American [destroyers](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Destroyers&action=edit&redlink=1), the [USS *Maddox*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=USS_Maddox_(DD-731)&action=edit&redlink=1) and the [USS *C. Turner Joy*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=USS_C._Turner_Joy&action=edit&redlink=1), in August of [1964](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1964&action=edit&redlink=1) in the [Gulf of Tonkin](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Gulf_of_Tonkin&action=edit&redlink=1). Later research, including a report released in [2005](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=2005&action=edit&redlink=1) by the [National Security Agency](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/National_Security_Agency), indicates that the second attack did not occur.

The Tonkin incident occurred during the first year of the [Lyndon B. Johnson](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Lyndon_B._Johnson&action=edit&redlink=1) administration — less than a year after the [Kennedy](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Kennedy&action=edit&redlink=1) [assassination](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Assassination_of_John_F._Kennedy). While Kennedy had originally supported the policy of sending "military advisors" to Vietnam in an "advisory role", he had begun to change his thinking and shortly before his death in November 1963, he had begun limited recall of American forces. Johnson's views had been likewise complex, but had supported [escalation](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Escalation&action=edit&redlink=1) in Vietnam as a means to challenge [Soviet](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Soviet_Union&action=edit&redlink=1)-[Communist](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Communism&action=edit&redlink=1) [expansion](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Expansionism&action=edit&redlink=1) in a policy called "[containment](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Containment&action=edit&redlink=1)". After Kennedy's death, Johnson would order more forces to support the west-allied [South Vietnam](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=South_Vietnam&action=edit&redlink=1) government, beginning the United States' protracted presence in [Southeast Asia](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Southeast_Asia&action=edit&redlink=1).

**The incident**

On [July 31](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=July_31&action=edit&redlink=1), [1964](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1964&action=edit&redlink=1), the American [destroyer](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Destroyer&action=edit&redlink=1) [*USS Maddox (DD-731)*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=USS_Maddox_(DD-731)&action=edit&redlink=1) began a reconnaissance mission in the [Gulf of Tonkin](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Gulf_of_Tonkin&action=edit&redlink=1) and was attacked by three North Vietnamese patrol boats, in international waters, on August 2, 1964. Admiral [George Stephen Morrison](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=George_Stephen_Morrison&action=edit&redlink=1) was in command the local fleet from his flagship [USS Bon Homme Richard (CVA-31)](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=USS_Bon_Homme_Richard_(CVA-31)&action=edit&redlink=1).

The *Maddox*, suffering only superficial damage by a single [machine gun](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Machine_gun&action=edit&redlink=1) bullet, retired to South Vietnamese waters where she was joined by the destroyer [*C. Turner Joy*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=USS_C._Turner_Joy&action=edit&redlink=1).

On [August 4](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=August_4&action=edit&redlink=1), a [DESOTO patrol](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=DESOTO_patrol&action=edit&redlink=1) to North Vietnam coast was launched by *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy*. The latter received radar and radio signals that they believed to signal another attack by the North Vietnamese. For some two hours the ships fired on radar targets and maneuvered vigorously amid electronic and visual reports of foes. It is highly unlikely that any North Vietnamese forces were actually in the area during this gunfight. Captain John J. Herrick even admitted that it was nothing more than an "overeager sonarman" who "was hearing his ship's own propeller beat." However, at the time most of the crew had believed they were under attack. Also in [1995](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1995&action=edit&redlink=1), General [Vo Nguyen Giap](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Vo_Nguyen_Giap&action=edit&redlink=1), commander-in-chief of North Vietnamese forces at the time, disavowed any involvement with the [August 4](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=August_4&action=edit&redlink=1) incident, though he did confirm the [August 2](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=August_2&action=edit&redlink=1) attack.

**Contradicting claims**

During 1964, U.S. involvement in the [Vietnam War](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&action=edit&redlink=1) increased. A program of covert [South Vietnamese](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=South_Vietnam&action=edit&redlink=1) operations, designed to impose "progressively escalating pressure" upon the North, initiated on a small and ineffective scale in February. The active U.S. role in the few covert operations that were carried out was limited essentially to planning, equipping, and training of the South Vietnamese forces involved. However, U.S. responsibility for the launching and conduct of these activities was unequivocal and carried with it an implicit symbolic and psychological intensification of the U.S. commitment. In any case, the facts were completely at odds with Secretary McNamara's claim on August 6, 1964: "Our Navy played absolutely no part in, was not associated with, was not aware of, any South Vietnamese actions, if there were any." Four years later, McNamara admitted to Congress that the US ships had in fact been cooperating in South Vietnamese attacks against the North.

On November 30, 2005, the National Security Agency released hundreds of pages of long-secret documents on the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident. The most provocative document is a 2001 article in which an agency historian, [Robert J. Hanyok](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Robert_J._Hanyok&action=edit&redlink=1), argued that the agency's intelligence officers "deliberately skewed" the evidence passed on to policy makers and the public to falsely suggest that North Vietnamese ships had attacked American destroyers on Aug. 4, 1964. Mr. Hanyok wrote that 90 percent of the intercepts of North Vietnamese communications relevant to the supposed Aug. 4, 1964, attack were omitted from the major agency documents going to policy makers.

Although information obtained well after the fact indicates that there was actually no North Vietnamese attack that night, U.S. authorities and all of the crew at the time said they were convinced at the time that an attack had taken place. As a result, planes from the carriers [*Ticonderoga*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=USS_Ticonderoga_(CV-14)&action=edit&redlink=1) and [*Constellation*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=USS_Constellation_(CV-64)&action=edit&redlink=1) were sent to hit North Vietnamese torpedo boat bases and fuel facilities.

**Activity in the area at the time**

Regarding claims that the attacks on the US were *unprovoked*, veterans of US Navy SEAL teams say that US-trained South Vietnamese commandos were active in the area on the days of the attacks. Deployed from Da Nang in Norwegian-built fast patrol boats, the Lien Doi Nguoi Nhai (LDNN, soldiers that fight under the sea), made attacks in the Gulf area on both of the nights in question. However, the *Maddox* operation was for intelligence purposes and did not directly support the covert operations. Also, since the U.S. only recognized the North-Vietnamese territorial waters to extent 3 miles from shore, the U.S. was under the impression that their ship was in international waters, sailing 8 miles from shore.

On July 31, LDNN in "Nastys" (the name commandos gave to the fast attack boats) attacked a radio transmitter on the island of Hon Nieu. On Aug. 3, they used a shipboard-mounted cannon to bombard a radar site at Cape Vinh Son. The North Vietnamese responded by attacking hostile ships visible in the area. While US officials were less than honest about the full extent of hostilities that led to the [Gulf of Tonkin Resolution](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Gulf_of_Tonkin_Resolution&action=edit&redlink=1), critical claims that a naval commander fired weapons solely to create an international incident tend to overlook circumstances and opportunistic responses that suggest a less intentional motivation.

Some, such as U.S. Admiral Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief of the Pacific at the time, maintained that U.S. actions did not provoke the confirmed [August 2](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=August_2&action=edit&redlink=1) attack. He claims that North Vietnamese radar tracked the *Maddox* along the coast, thus being aware that the destroyer had not actually attacked [North Vietnam](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=North_Vietnam&action=edit&redlink=1). Yet they ordered their PT boats to engage it anyway. He also notes that orders given to the *Maddox* to stay eight miles from the North Vietnamese coast put the ship inside international waters, as North Vietnam claimed only five nautical miles as their ocean territory. In addition, many nations had previously carried out similar missions all over the world, and the U.S.S. *Craig* had earlier conducted an intelligence-gathering mission in similar circumstances to the *Maddox* without incident.

[Daniel Ellsberg](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Daniel_Ellsberg), who was on duty in the Pentagon that night receiving messages from the ship, reports that the ships were on a secret mission (codenamed DeSoto Patrols) inside North Vietnamese territorial waters. Their purpose was to provoke the North Vietnamese into turning on their coastal defense radar so they could be plotted.

Squadron commander [James Stockdale](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=James_Stockdale&action=edit&redlink=1) was one of the U.S. pilots flying overhead [August 4](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=August_4&action=edit&redlink=1). In the [1990s](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1990s&action=edit&redlink=1) Stockdale stated:

[I] had the best seat in the house to watch that event, and our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets — there were no PT boats there… There was nothing there but black water and American fire power.

**Later statements**

In [1995](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1995&action=edit&redlink=1), retired Vietnamese General Nguyen Giap meeting with former Secretary of Defense [Robert McNamara](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Robert_McNamara&action=edit&redlink=1), categorically denied that Vietnamese gunboats had attacked American destroyers on Aug. 4, 1964. A taped conversation was released in [2001](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=2001&action=edit&redlink=1) of a meeting several weeks after passage of the [Gulf of Tonkin Resolution](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Gulf_of_Tonkin_Resolution&action=edit&redlink=1), revealing that Robert McNamara expressed doubts to President Johnson that the attack had even occurred.

In [October](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=October&action=edit&redlink=1), [2005](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=2005&action=edit&redlink=1) the [New York Times](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=New_York_Times&action=edit&redlink=1) reported that Robert J. Hanyok, a historian for the United States [National Security Agency](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/National_Security_Agency), concluded that the NSA deliberately distorted intelligence reports regarding the August 4 incident. He concluded that the motive was not political but was probably to cover up honest intelligence errors.

Mr. Hanyok's conclusions were initially published within the NSA in the Winter 2000/Spring 2001 Edition of Cryptologic Quarterly, about five years before being revealed in the New York Times article. According to intelligence officials, the view of government historians that the report should become public was rebuffed by policymakers concerned that comparisons might be made to intelligence used to justify the [Iraq war](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Iraq_war&action=edit&redlink=1) that commenced in 2003.

Reviewing the NSA's archives, Mr. Hanyok concluded that the NSA had initially (probably innocently) misinterpreted North Vietnamese intercepts so as to make it appear there was an attack on August 4. Midlevel NSA officials almost immediately discovered the error, he concluded, but covered it up by altering documents, so as to make it appear the second attack had happened. [Robert McNamara](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Robert_McNamara&action=edit&redlink=1), who was defense secretary at the time of the incident, said in [October](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=October&action=edit&redlink=1), [2005](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=2005&action=edit&redlink=1) that he believed intelligence reports regarding the Gulf of Tonkin incident were decisive to the war's expansion.

On November 30, 2005, the NSA released the first installment of previously classified information regarding the Gulf of Tonkin incident, including Mr. Hanyok's article, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964" Cryptologic Quarterly, Winter 2000/Spring 2001 Edition, Vol. 19, No. 4 / Vol. 20, No. 1.

The Hanyok article states that intelligence information was presented to the Johnson administration "in such a manner as to preclude responsible decisionmakers in the Johnson administration from having the complete and objective narrative of events of 4 August 1964." Instead, "only information that supported the claim that the communists had attacked the two destroyers was given to Johnson administration officials."

**Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**

*Main article:* [*Gulf of Tonkin Resolution*](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Gulf_of_Tonkin_Resolution&action=edit&redlink=1)

[Lyndon Johnson](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Lyndon_Johnson&action=edit&redlink=1), who was up for election that year, launched retaliatory strikes and went on national television on [August 4](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=August_4&action=edit&redlink=1). Although the *Maddox* had been involved in providing intelligence support for South Vietnamese attacks at [Hon Me](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Hon_Me&action=edit&redlink=1) and [Hon Ngu](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Hon_Ngu&action=edit&redlink=1), [Johnson's](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Lyndon_Johnson&action=edit&redlink=1) [Secretary of Defense](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States_Secretary_of_Defense&action=edit&redlink=1), [Robert McNamara](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Robert_McNamara&action=edit&redlink=1), went before [Congress](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States_Congress&action=edit&redlink=1) and denied that the United States Navy was supporting [South Vietnamese](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=South_Vietnam&action=edit&redlink=1) military operations. He thus characterized the attack as "unprovoked." He also claimed before Congress that there was "unequivocal proof" of an "unprovoked" second attack against the *Maddox*.

As a result of McNamara's testimony, on [August 7](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=August_7&action=edit&redlink=1) Congress passed a [joint resolution](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Joint_resolution&action=edit&redlink=1) ([H.J. RES 1145](http://sources.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.J._RES_1145)), known as the [Gulf of Tonkin Resolution](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Gulf_of_Tonkin_Resolution&action=edit&redlink=1), that facilitated increased U.S. involvement in the [Vietnam War](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&action=edit&redlink=1). The Resolution gave President Johnson approval "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](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Southeast_Asia_Collective_Defense_Treaty&action=edit&redlink=1) requesting assistance in defense of its freedom." Both Johnson and President [Richard Nixon](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Richard_Nixon) used the Resolution as a justification for escalated involvement in [Indochina](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Indochina&action=edit&redlink=1).

**Interpretation**

The "Gulf of Tonkin Incident" defined the beginning of large-scale involvement of U.S. armed forces in Vietnam. Historians have shown that the second incident was, at its best interpretation, an overreaction of eager naval forces, or at its worst, a crafted pretext for making overt the American covert involvement in [Vietnam](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Vietnam&action=edit&redlink=1).

[North Vietnam](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=North_Vietnam&action=edit&redlink=1)'s Navy Anniversary Day is [August 5](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=August_5&action=edit&redlink=1), the date of the second attack, Vietnamese time, where "one of our torpedo squadrons chased the U.S.S. *Maddox* from our coastal waters, our first victory over the U.S. Navy".



Photograph allegedly taken from the USS *Maddox* August 2, 1964 and allegedly showing North Vietnamese patrol boats

**NSA Declassified Documents**

Compliments of [The Black Vault](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/The_Black_Vault)

* [Chronologies of Events](http://www.blackvault.com/documents/tonkin/chronologies.pdf)
* [Miscellaneous Memoranda and Notes](http://www.blackvault.com/documents/tonkin/misc.pdf)
* [Material relating to proposed "History of Southeast Asia" article by NSA Historian William Gerhard, circa 1972](http://www.blackvault.com/documents/tonkin/gerhard.pdf)
* [Articles](http://www.blackvault.com/documents/tonkin/articles.pdf)
* [Oral History Interviews](http://www.blackvault.com/documents/tonkin/oral.pdf)
* [Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) Reports (R) and Translations (T) Mar 64 - Oct 64](http://www.blackvault.com/documents/tonkin/sigint.pdf)
* [Related Command and Technical Messages from 02 Aug 64 to 26 Aug 64](http://www.blackvault.com/documents/tonkin/related.pdf)

**See also**

* [Gulf of Tonkin Resolution](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Gulf_of_Tonkin_Resolution&action=edit&redlink=1)
* [The Fog of War](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=The_Fog_of_War&action=edit&redlink=1)

**External links**

* [Vietnam Study, Casting Doubts, Remains Secret](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/31/politics/31war.html)
* [Tonkin Gulf reports cooked? Historian's research finds intelligence errors covered up](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/10/31/MNG99FGN521.DTL)
* [LBJ's address to the nation, August 5, 1964](http://www.luminet.net/~tgort/johnson.htm)
* [Pentagon Papers](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Pentagon_Papers) [[1]](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon3/pent3.htm)
* [Cronkite: Gulf of Tonkin's Phantom Attack](http://www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wfId=3810724)
* [US Navy Historical Site showing charts and photos of the incident](http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/sh-usn/usnsh-m/dd731-k.htm)
* [FAIR.ORG: 30-Year Anniversary: Tonkin Gulf Lie Launched Vietnam War](http://www.fair.org/media-beat/940727.html)
* [Analysis Casts Doubt on Vietnam War Claims](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20051202/ap_on_go_ot/vietnam_skewed_intelligence) - Calvin Woodward, Associated Press, Dec. 1, 2005. "A spy-agency analysis released Thursday contends a second attack on U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin never happened, casting further doubt on the leading rationale for escalation of the Vietnam War."
* [Robert J. Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964" Cryptologic Quarterly, Winter 2000/Spring 2001 Edition, Vol. 19, No. 4 / Vol. 20, No. 1.](http://www.nsa.gov/vietnam/releases/relea00012.pdf)
* [<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2261> -30-year Anniversary: Tonkin Gulf Lie Launched Vietnam War- Media Beat (7/27/94)
* [<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm> -Tonkin Gulf Intelligence "Skewed"

According to Official History and Intercepts]

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