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Tonkin
 by [Joe Escobar](#) - Thursday, 15 October 2009, 03:13 PM

Discuss the significance of incident in the Gulf of Tonkin and it's repercussions during this 1964-65 time period. In particular, what impact did it have on the conflict?

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Re: Tonkin
 by [Brian Hein](#) - Tuesday, 20 October 2009, 11:21 PM

It seems to me the reaction of the Johnson administration to the Gulf of Tonkin incident served several purposes. First, it allowed President Johnson, facing re-election, to be seen with a "firm but restrained response to the alleged North Vietnamese attacks won broad popular support, his rating in the Louis Harris poll skyrocketed from 42 to 72 percent overnight" (Herring) helping him win the election. Also with his popularity so high it also gave President Johnson the opportunity to pass a congressional resolution basically giving him the ability to wage war without oversight.

One of two senators to not vote for what was to be called the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Senator Wayne Morse summed up what was the most significant result of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the resolution "seeks to give the president of the United States the power to make war without a declaration of war" was able to be passed through congress. Having prepared the resolution in advance President Johnson's advisors did not try to pass it earlier due to fears it "might jeopardize passage of the administration's civil rights legislation." (Herring) The Gulf of Tonkin incident was seized as an opportunity to allow for this passage of legislation.

This appears to me to be the first step toward the escalation of America's involvement in Vietnam. Without having to report to Congress President Johnson was able to start retaliatory bombing of North Vietnam in February 1965 and bring the first U.S. combat troops into the country soon after. The impact of the ability of President Johnson to do as he please is shown when he "secretly authorized them (the troops) to move out and engage NLF and North Vietnamese soldiers in combat." (Herring) This all laid the ground for more troops over the next few years.

I thought I would end this with a few questions to help get some discussions going, hope this is ok. I know my opinion of the impact of the Gulf of Tonkin incident revolves around the political gains Johnson derived from it, is there any other non-political reasons? Are there any other factors that were impacted by the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin?

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Re: Tonkin
 by [William Wymer](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 08:46 PM

Brian, I like your post very much. To the first question that you asked, I think Johnson was also trying to state that the U.S. will not take attacks on their military and just step back out of the picture. Johnson just like the U.S. was and is a very strong country and needed to show that they would back up what they say and who they said they would. So in short I don't think that it was all about his political gain as it was to show the United States will back up what they say and they will use any force they need to. Now with saying that Should Johnson have called for more bombings as he was advise to do?

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Rate... **Re: Tonkin**by [Brian Hein](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 09:18 PM

Thanks for your response William. I understand where you are coming from, but it this still could be seen as political gain to show that President Johnson would stand up to the North Vietnamese. And if taken from a world view this was done to show China and Russia we were not weak, and from a domestic view to show the people of the United States he was able to stand up to anyone, thus gaining popular support for is domestic programs.

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Rate... **Re: Tonkin**by [William Wymer](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 09:31 PM

I also see your point, I do think that Johnson and his party did and was looking at how it would help him in his political career. I also do think that it helped him win the election as was stated in the book. Thanks for responding to my post.

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Rate... **Re: Tonkin**by [Robert Nicholls](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 07:09 PM

I definatly see the point of Johnson's political leverage he was using during his campaign. However, i do not exactly agree with it. Like i mentioned in my posts, i feel that it is morally wrong to make acts and decisions based on your own benefit while you have the life of American soldiers in your hands. Although nothing escalated to that point, i still do not agree with the selfishness of Johnson's actions during his attempt to become re-elected.

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Rate... **Re: Tonkin**by [Tish Bottensek](#) - Wednesday, 21 October 2009, 01:59 PM

As Brian Hein stated he felt the force behind the Gulf Tonkin incident stemmed from the selfish agenda of Johnson. I too have to agree with this stand, but I also must point out the other repercussions forced on the innocent villagers who were caught in the middle of the war.

The United States began deploying and drafting young men, sending them into battle as trained killers. As many men stated during their tour they often did not think about any repercussions of their actions. They simply looked at the situation as a job to do. Many innocent women and children were caught in the line of fire, brutally beaten, villages were destroyed, and lives were taken. This to me is a repercussion of the actions taken by a political greedy president.

Not to dishearten the treatment of civilian life, but the amount of money spent sending troops was astronomical. The United States was spending "More than \$2 billion per month on the war", not to mention having "Half million combat troops in Vietnam" (Herring). This in itself is a repercussion of the war.

Though many lives were lost and villager's were relocated, excess funds were spent, Johnson succeeded in his personal and political goals. Does his personal agenda excuse the behavior or treatment of soldiers and

civilians? In my opinion, no. We had a job to do, personal agendas should have been set aside, and the best interests of the country should have come first. As with any war, there are going to be repercussions; however we must ask at what point are we willing to say enough is enough.

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Re: Tonkin

by [Brian Hein](#) - Wednesday, 21 October 2009, 09:19 PM

Hi Tish, you are right; one of the most important consequences of the expansion of the war is the human cost. I have practiced self defense for many years and one of the adages we have is "there is no winner in a fight."

Just to stir the pot, I do have a question for you. It looks as if Johnson did use this incident for his personal agenda, but that in its self does not mean his actions with regard to Vietnam were not done in what he believed the best interests for the United States or Vietnam. Johnson still looks as if he still believed at that time, if the United States pulled out of the war "it might as well give up everywhere else- pull out of Berlin, Japan, South America." (Herring p.167) I was wondering what your thoughts (and the others in this forum) are about what direction Johnson should have taken, if any?

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Re: Tonkin

by [Kelly Culhane](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 11:51 AM

I agree with you. I believe that we should definitely have said enough is enough. Then again, i do not even think that this should have been a concern of ours from the start. What right do we have to come in and tell other people how they should live? Is that not what we, the United States fought our Independence War for? We wanted our own independence from England and we fought and won it in 1776. Why should the Vietnamese not have the right to do the same thing? Why is it that what we think, and what morals and beliefs we think other people should have, is all we think about.

Yes, it probably would not have been a good thing if more countries turned to Communism, but shouldn't that be their choice? Why should their innocent lives as well as that of our own young men be sacrificed for what we think is best. What is even worse is that this did not, at least to me, have anything to do about what was best for Vietnam, but what was best for the United states politically. How could we not have seen that this fighting had become a way of life for the Vietnamese, it clearly was not just a war to them. If they had been able to defeat the french over many years of fighting, why would we think that our outcome would be any different? Not everyone thinks that we are "The All Powerful United States of America", not everyone will just cower away, not everyone is intimidated. Anyway, I enjoyed your post, good job!

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Re: Tonkin

by [Tish Bottensek](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 07:36 PM

Kelly,

I disagree with you on the point that we should consider the treatment of those villagers we invade. The villagers were the innocent ones; they were forced to fight a war not of her choosing. Many villagers were forced to relocate, brutalized and murdered. Granted the United States were there for a purpose and the villagers often got in the way. I agree with you the Vietnamese wanted their independence, as you graciously pointed out,

but the villagers were an unfortunate statistic of war.

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Re: Tonkin

by [William Wymer](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 08:45 PM

Tish, I think that in every war we need to look at the innocent people that are involved. I was in the military, and I knew that there would be casualties in war. But, I also trained to know we were there to help those innocent people and keep the civilian casualties to a minimum. The problem that I see with Vietnam is we could not ever really tell who the innocent people were. I also think that that the Vietnamese themselves were unsure who to trust. I also think this lack of trust is what made it easy for the north to get people help them.

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Re: Tonkin

by [William Wymer](#) - Wednesday, 21 October 2009, 06:53 PM

The Gulf of Tonkin had a great effect on the Vietnam War and American history. The Herring book and the video both stated and showed that attacks by North Vietnam on the U.S. ships Maddox and C. Turner Joy gave way for Johnson to be able to get the resolution passed. This also gave Johnson the power to take all necessary measures to stop enemy forces. These incidents gave Johnson the golden opportunity that he needed to get the resolution passed that he needed to help him show that the U.S. was not to be messed with. The incidents also gave him political clout and helped him win the election as most American people thought Johnson was acting correctly in retaliating on the attacks of the American ships. The resolution in my mind was a good and bad thing, it gave the power needed to the president to do what needed to be done, but it also took away the rights of having war declared first and not needing the over whelming consensus of the governing body. I do think that we needed to strike back but we should have first found out if the second attack happened. I also think that we kind asked for the second attack or antagonized it to some degree by be there a second time with more ships so close to the North Vietnamese shore line after we knew of the first incident. They also told us what was going to happen if we did it again. I think that we would have done the same thing. I also think that even though Johnson did not want to escalate the war he did so by not verifying the information provided till after he all ready retaliated. I also believe that the Tonkin incidents and bombings by the U.S. brought about the bombing and attacks on the U.S. air bases and installations.

I think over all the Tonkin Gulf incidents had great effects on the way we entered the Vietnam war, as well as how it escalated. I do think that Johnson did not want to escalate the war, but inadvertently did so by looking at his political career and the look it would have on the United States if they did nothing. Johnson did not want himself or the United states to look weak and just take a slap in the face and do nothing. I also think that once things heated up Johnson did not use everything at his disposal to make a stronger statement and stand.

My big question is should Johnson have bombed more like he was advised to do? I also cannot stop thinking that if he was not running in the election would he have acted in the same manner? I am also just throwing this out there if the resolution would not have passed, how do you think things might have been different?

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Re: Tonkin

by [Kelly Culhane](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 11:40 AM

I believe that Johnson should not have bombed more like he was advised. But then again, I am also a big believer of knowing when it is time to get out. I think that Johnson running for election had everything to do with the decisions that he made, as it does for the politicians today. I also believed that if he could not have

gotten the resolution passed someone close to him, if not him himself would have found another way, or another "attack" to get done what was wanted from the start. I think that it easily happened then, and yet again in 2001 with 9/11. No one in any sort of way wants to stand in the way if they feel like they are being protected from that person. The only problem is, what do you give up for that safety, and when is it too much? How many civil rights is needed to secure your protection, and how do you get ut of a bad situation without looking weak? Anyway, I enjoyed your post, good job!

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Re: Tonkin

by [William Wymer](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 09:16 PM

Kelly thanks for your response to my post. My thoughts with the bombing issues, I think that Johnson should have done one of two things. First, if he would not have decided to retaliate against North Vietnam then he did right by not listening to the advise that was given to him about bombing. Second, Johnson did make a decision to retaliate so I think that he should have done more bombing as advised and maybe the Vietnam War may have went in a different direction. What do you think?

As for your last part of your post to my post, I think that there was a way for the United States to handle the incident better. With that being said yes, I do think that there is a way to get out of a bad situation. I think that if Johnson would have looked and listen to all of the info that was available to him before he acted, Johnson would have reacted differently. I think that maybe there could have been talks between the U.S. and Vietnam. This may have lead to a way out without looking weak. I also think that he would have found out that there might not have been a second attack on American ships as was reported. I can't say that there was not a second attack, but I can say that with the information that we were provided that it does not look like there was one. I also think that the U.S. was kind of acting like a bully when they sent in the two ships the second time and they went in so close to the North Vietnamese shore line to show them that we were the big dog. What do you think?

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Re: Tonkin

by [Kelly Culhane](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 03:45 PM

William,

I am not sure if I think that the war may have gone a different way if Johnson had bombed more. We may have appeared to be a bigger threat in the Vietnamese eyes, but I still believe that the Vietnamese were so strong in their courage and convictions that more bombs might have only meant more loss of life. I think that would have been an acceptable risk for them. If it meant to get their independence from everyone, I think they would still be fighting today if they had to.

I also think that the US was acting like a bully. I agree that there should have been strong evidence and confirmations that there actually was an attack before we actually started to retaliate. I just do not understand, what gives us(the US government) to decide that we automatically know what is right for another government or its people? Look at how much destruction we can do, but we can't even have our own politicians sit down and have a serious and constructional conversation about whether it is a right for each citizen to have health care. Yet we act so condescending like we are on the high moral ground. No wonder there is such anger towards Americans and our politics.

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**Re: Tonkin**by [William Wymer](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 08:30 PM

Kelly for me I found that Johnson wanted to act like the big kid on the block and at other time he acted as the mature adult on the block. What I mean by this is when North Vietnam attacked our ships, we had to retaliate immediately. but when he was advised to bomb more he held off. I think Johnson was unsure of how to handle the situation that was unfolding. But, I do think that he had to let the entire world know that the United States would not be pushed around and would not stand by and take it on the chin. Johnson knew with what was going on with other conflicts at the time, if the United States took a back seat and waited to see what had happened was true or to see what would happen next without the U.S. reacting, The rest of the world would see the United States as weak. Johnson could not let this happen, that's why I think that he did what he did and it just happened to be at an election time and worked to his advantage. I do think that Johnson's political staff help make the choices that would help him win the election.

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**Re: Tonkin**by [Brian Hein](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 09:07 PM

I think the bombing was done mostly for political profit. As it was said in the third episode of *Vietnam: A Television History* there were two problems recognized by the administration. First with North Vietnam there were very few targets to bomb, and second they knew the bombing would not break the will of the people of North Vietnam. It may have very well strengthened their will, unifying it against the United States. So it seems that the administration knew the limited impact it would have had on North Vietnam. President Johnson was more concerned with passing his reforms of the "Great Society" rather than with Vietnam. He would have bombed only if it could have helped with the passage of his reforms.

Your question about what would have happened if the resolution would have not passed is a great one. To me it probably would have not made much deference early into the war while public opinion was still in favor of support, but later it could have limited further expansion of the war as it became less popular. Johnson would have had to have congresses approval. What do you think would have happened?

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**Re: Tonkin**by [William Wymer](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 09:27 PM

Brain I agree with most of what you said in your response. The one thing that I would like to add is that I think Johnson was also acting in the interest of the United States. I come by this as I was in the Army myself, although not during Vietnam only in the late eighties. I think that it was important that Johnson reacted in some fashion to the act of military ships. I think that he should have taken the time to take into consideration all of the info that was available to him. I think that if he would have done this then there may have been a different response.

As for your question, sorry I can't expand much further as I was think along the same lines as you were. I think that if it would not have passed we may have went into talks though and maybe this could have lead to a different outcome.

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**Re: Tonkin**by [Kelly Culhane](#) - Wednesday, 21 October 2009, 08:14 PM

I have to agree with Brian as well. The book and video both clearly show how Johnson was affected by the Gulf of Tonkin incident. One can clearly see how things could have gotten so out of hand so quickly. Tensions are high on both sides, The United States is fighting an opponent that we are clearly not prepared for. There is also a lot of misinformation and exaggeration being thought of as credible information. With all of that going on, I believe that politics was the number one reason why this conflict happened the way that it did.

Johnson got to look like he was being hard and that he was defending our troops and what we were doing there. The scariest part of it all is that it was so easy for him to do. The fact that he could get a resolution passed giving him "all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression"(Herring) so quickly is what bothered me the most. The fact that McNamara knew that some of the evidence was pointing towards this incident not being a full attack by the opposition.

When the captain of the Maddox "conceded that the attack was less than conclusive"(Herring) I am sure that this got back to McNamara, as well as some of the other statements that were stating that this may have been a misunderstanding. But instead of waiting and getting the full truth, Johnson and McNamara had no issues with attacking the North Vietnamese. It was like Johnson was just handed over the keys to the future of many young Americans and there was no accountability.

his makes me wonder how this was possible then, and even still now? Is that not how we ended up in Iraq now? Misinformation, decisions based solely on how someone will appear politically? Why is it that it is so easy to exert force, but not think about the long term ramifications of things? But I think with all that has happened and where our country is now, the biggest question should be what have we really learned from the Vietnam War?

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Re: Tonkin

by [Brian Hein](#) - Thursday, 22 October 2009, 09:33 PM

Hi Kelly, I enjoyed your forum you make some very good arguments. I wanted to respond to your question regarding about what we have learned from Vietnam. Listening and reading about the parallels with Iran, Afghanistan and Vietnam it looks like we learned just how important a stable government is to the stability of the country we are trying to help. One of the problems the United States had with Vietnam was the forever changing Vietnam government creating distrust with its own people. This is why in Iran the U.S. military worked hard to have elections as quickly as possible. And in Afghanistan I think this may have been part of the reason they are having a run-off in the election of their president, to make sure it is seen as legitimate to its people and the world. What do you think?

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Re: Tonkin

by [Kelly Culhane](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 03:55 PM

Brian, I understand how important a stable government is in a wr torn country, but how easily we have forgotten that Vietnam had not been able to choose their own government for a long time before we had become involved. I think that the uS has just been content on going along with who had control. We helped the French try to win. Then, we put in a president of our choice while Vietnam was divided between the north and the south. When had anyone ever let the pepole of Vietnam choose for themselves? Each country wanted control of Vietnam for their own benefit.

Just like in Iraq. We helped put Hussein in power, then did not like it when he would not comply to our demands or wishes. So, 9/11 was a convenient yet horrible way to try to correct that problem. I just wonder who or what designated the US government the worlds watchdog? Why is it that there is no responsibility or accountability for the things that we have done wrong?

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Rate... **Re: Tonkin**by [Brian Hein](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 07:17 PM

You make a great point Kelly, this is what I was trying to convey that Vietnam was in need of a stable government. Without it the people of South Vietnam never supported the government, whether it was chosen for them or not. I have wondered too, why the US has decided to be the world's watchdog. I think Vietnam is a good example of trying to "nation build" where our best efforts are insufficient to determine an outcome of our liking.

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Rate... **Re: Tonkin**by [Robert Nicholls](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 07:02 PM

The day of August 2nd caused a lot of turmoil and uproar in the world of politics between Vietnam and America. The significance of this attack was great due to many reasons. For starters, the simple fact that the initial attack on the *Maddox* was never officially confirmed and obtained no real reason to engage in battle. This caused great trouble to the American people because it now gave them no excuse to counter attack the Vietnamese people with "no official signal of war." (Herring) This escalated to further naval attacks in the Gulf of Tonkin with no confirmation of attacks.

The repercussions of this attack consisted of many political changes. I feel that the greatest example of this was the fact that Johnson used the event to his advantage in his political campaign during his efforts in getting re-elected. He often did not retaliate against common attacks by the North Vietnam in fear of further escalating the war and losing popularity in the polls. I personally think this is a horrible idea. I feel that you should do no matter what it takes at the exact time to better yourself in the war, and not worry about your own personal political status and popularity.

The impact this event had on the war was great. It caused Johnson to "break a long-standing barrier against taking the war to the north." (Herring) After breaking this barrier, the North Vietnamese now raised their war efforts in the south, creating a more intense and involved war. This event also impacted the political positions in South Vietnam. It caused Khanh to resort to near dictatorship and caused the Saigonese to riot and rage. This definitely did not help the establishment of government in the south. It was now more America's responsibility to overtake this war then ever, putting more pressure on our politicians and soldiers.

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Rate... **Re: Tonkin**by [Tish Bottensek](#) - Saturday, 24 October 2009, 07:51 PM

Robert,

You made some very good points in your posts. You stated that you felt there were many political repercussions regarding the Gulf of Tonkin. I too agree, I believe many decisions were made with a bias political agenda. This is not a way to make decisions regarding the future. The impact of the decisions made affected many. Any decisions made should be made based on statistical and strategically made decisions. There were many lives lost including the many innocent villagers who were trapped in the middle of a war. The United States had an agenda for being in Vietnam; however, the manner in which decisions were made to further a political agenda was not the way they needed to be made. Very good post, I enjoyed your many good points.

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