**VIETNAM WAR: GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT**

**HISTORY TEXTBOOK ANALYSIS**

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**This collection of history textbooks all come from the United States and shows how the story of the ‘Gulf of Tonkin Incident’ has changed over time. Ask students to read through each section, along with their own U.S. History textbook, and write up a summary explaining how this story has changed over the years and why they think it has changed. Ask students why they think this story has changed over time. Often students will discuss that society has changed and we view the Vietnam War differently today. They might also discuss the fact that there has been more research done on this topic as well. Students can also do some online research to see what new research has been done that adds to this story.**

**\*Take from the workbook series, *History vs. History: Understanding Historical Thinking and Historiography,* by Dr. Kyle Ward**

**THE GULF OF TONKIN**

*The textbook history of the Vietnam War has evolved rapidly over the space of 30 years. It is not surprising then that the immediate “cause” of the war—the alleged attack by North Vietnam on US warships operating in the Gulf of Tonkin—showed itself to be the subject of much historical controversy.*

**1967**

*With the war in Vietnam still raging, American students learned in this history textbook that there was no question of the nature of the attack against American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin and that unlike their French counterparts, the US was in this war for the long haul.*

The climatic test of American policy came in Southeast Asia. The weakness of the successive military governments that had attempted to establish their legitimacy after the death of Diem encouraged the National Liberation Front to step up its guerrilla campaign. Disorder forced Saigon into greater expenditures and more extensive recruitment of troops, which compounded its difficulties. Toward the end of 1963, the assassination of President Kennedy and the mistaken assumption that the change of administration would confuse American policy encouraged the Vietcong in the belief that victory was near. Regular troops from North Vietnam moved south to give the *coup de grace* to the tottering regime in the South.

An attack on United States ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 was the occasion for the decision to honor American commitments even though that might involve a large-scale war in Asia. A resolution of Congress gave the President authority to resist aggression in Southeast Asia. The number of military personnel increased and the conflict deepened.

Hanoi, deceived by the belief that weariness over a remote conflict would compel the Americans to yield as the French had, refused to back down. There followed the game of escalation that the strategists had predicted. The United States bombed naval installations to retaliate against the incident in the Gulf. Air attacks upon North Vietnam and the full-scale use of American troops followed a Vietcong assault on the American camp at Pleiku in February 1965. The failure of the enemy to respond to the 37-day suspension of air strikes beginning on December 24, 1965, led in June 1966 to the bombing of oil depots near Hanoi and Haiphong. Meanwhile American troops, supplied with helicopters and heavy armaments, broke up the Vietcong main forces and began to strike at the guerrilla strongholds in the Mekong delta.

The objective of the United States was to make its power credible. It did not seek to destroy the Hanoi regime; rather, it used only as much force as would persuade the Communists that they had no hope of victory and had better negotiate peace.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**1982**

*In the 1980s, the historiography of the Gulf of Tonkin had slightly shifted, now emphasizing that the US had actually been involved militarily in that region before the “attacks” against American naval ships. Although this textbook makes no claims that the whole incident was falsified, it does argue that President Johnson “exaggerated” the crisis in order to deepen US involvement.*

By early 1964 the Viet Cong controlled nearly half of South Vietnam. Because the new Saigon govern­ment was shaky and seemed to be leaning toward neu­tralism, United States officials cooperated in a second coup. In neighboring Laos, American bombers hit supply routes connecting the Viet Cong with the North Vietnamese, thus widening the scope of the war. Then in August an incident in the Gulf of Ton­kin, off the coast of North Vietnam, drew the United States even deeper into the Vietnamese quagmire. While assisting South Vietnamese raiders, the U.S.S. *Maddox and C. Turner Joy* were attacked by North Vietnamese boats.

Johnson seized the chance to go on national tele­vision and announce retaliatory air strikes above the 17th parallel. He exaggerated the crisis, comparing it to Greece and Turkey in 1947, Berlin in 1948, and Korea in 1950. On August 7 Congress obliged him with the Tonkin Gulf resolution, passed 466-0 in the House and 88-2 in the Senate following brief debate. Only Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska dissented from the resolution's sweeping language. The document authorized the president to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." Over time the Tonkin Gulf resolution would come to serve as the declaration of war Congress never voted on. Only in 1970 would senators repeal it, realizing too late that they had surrendered their powers in the foreign pol­icy process by giving the president wide latitude to conduct the war as he saw fit.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**1992**

*From unprovoked attack against the US to the President of the United States being a liar. In this early 1990s selection, there is no question that the Tonkin events served as a pretext for war.*

**The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**

In early August Johnson announced that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked two U.S. destroyers patrolling in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam. Johnson angrily declared that Americans had been the victims of "unprovoked" attacks. He urged Congress to pass a resolution giving him authority to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." An alarmed Congress almost unani­mously passed the so-called Gulf of Tonkin Resolu­tion. The resolution was not a declaration of war, but it authorized Johnson to widen the war. The resolu­tion, he said, "was like grandma's nightshirt-it cov­ered everything."

Few Americans questioned the president's account of the incident. Years later, however, it was revealed that Johnson had withheld the truth from the public and Congress. The American warships had been helping South Vietnamese commandos raid two North Vietnamese islands the night of the attacks.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Handlin, Oscar. *America a History.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967, 1045-1047. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Norton, Mary Beth, et al. *A People & A Nation: A History of the United States.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982, 907. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nash, Gary B. *American Odyssey: The United States in the Twentieth Century.* Lake Forest, IL: Glencoe MacMillan/McGraw-Hill, 1992, 657-658. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)