

# The Gulf of Tonkin Events and the American Escalation in Vietnam

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## **The Gulf of Tonkin Events and the American Escalation in Vietnam**

Moise, Edwin E. *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*. Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Morgan, Joseph J. *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955-1975*. Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Siff, Ezra Y. *Why the Senate Slept: The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the Beginning of America's Vietnam War*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999.

The United States was approaching the brink of open warfare with North Vietnam by the time the tension-filled Gulf of Tonkin events of August 1964 occurred. These events soon became crucially important because they provided an immediate justification for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and for a greater American military role. The Gulf conflict also solidified a pattern of presidential control over the Vietnam War without any significant Congressional interference. Lyndon Johnson's political goals took precedent over nearly all military considerations, and the American escalation of the war began in earnest.

Among the three books under review, Edwin E. Moise's *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Gulf War* offers the richest, most complete coverage of the war's initial intensification. Moise analyzes the growing conflict with an admirable mastery of naval strategies, technologies and manpower. His research is enhanced by a meticulous study of declassified documents and personal interviews conducted with American and Vietnamese military and political participants. Moise concludes that the Johnson administration and the US Navy brought the nation to the brink of war through incompetence rather than by design or conspiracy.

As Moise reports, the American naval presence in the Gulf of Tonkin had been growing apace immediately before the events of August 1964. Instead of the usual naval patrols, however, the US had opted for the OPLAN 34A covert operations. Since this plan combined American control over training, strategy and raids and South Vietnamese personnel, the North Vietnamese quickly learned that these coastal raids represented US foreign policy. The OPLAN 34A attacks had several disastrous and unintended consequences. First, the raiding parties were consistently captured and in turn gave valuable intelligence to their captors. Secondly, North Vietnam was alerted to the American designs on the Gulf, and accordingly became more vigilant with its radar, patrols and well-developed espionage system. Finally, when the covert raids later coincided with DeSoto patrol cruises by the destroyers Maddox and Turner Joy, North Vietnam correctly anticipated a full-scale war. It then began to send combat troops down the Ho Chi Minh Trail for the first time; the consequent National Liberation Front infiltration into South Vietnam further weakened that government's authority. When the US launched the Rolling Thunder bombings in February 1965, it became apparent that the Tonkin Gulf incidents of the previous August had marked a point of no return toward a full-scale war.

Moise presents an impressive array of evidence in his argument that the August 1964 Tonkin Gulf incidents were considered real attacks and not fabrications by US officials. The question thus becomes, what circumstances led to such an erroneous judgment? For starters, nearly all sailors aboard the Maddox and the Turner Joy lacked actual combat experience, and so the first "engagement" with the enemy seemed real enough. In addition, these DeSoto patrol crews were unfamiliar with the Gulf of Tonkin and consequently misinterpreted numerous unexplained signs as enemy vessels and fire. The extremely dark and stormy Gulf on the night of 4 August produced mysterious radar blips or "ghosts" which were quite numerous and ephemeral. Inexperienced sonarmen could not distinguish between apparent enemy boats and sea squalls, sea gulls and sea shadows created by air cover overhead. Inexplicable "noise spooks" were also reported, which probably stemmed from the horrendous weather and even the ships' own engines. These bogus sights and sounds were communicated to the nearby aircraft carrier Ticonderoga, and frequently found their way into reports to Washington. In the midst of the 1964 presidential election, the Johnson administration was encouraging such exaggerated military information so that it could take a tougher stance against Vietnamese communism.

Besides covering the Gulf of Tonkin military situation quite well, Moise also displays an acute knowledge of the American political context. Instead of engaging in trite Johnson administration bashing, Moise captures the complexity of the escalation in Vietnam. For example, he notes how confusing it was in the White House to receive a blizzard of hasty and often contradictory messages from the Gulf. According to Moise, "McNamara did not have a clear picture of what was happening on the far side of the Pacific. The president probably knew considerably less." (p. 216) Thus, Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara assumed that North Vietnam was deliberately provocative toward the US in the absence of clear cut information to the contrary. In retaliation for the supposed North Vietnam attacks on 4 August, the next day Johnson announced bombing raids on national television. However, the announcement ruined the element of surprise as the pilots were told, while in preparation, that "Johnson had gone on television a half an hour before and announced the raids." (p. 219) Because such mistakes were not well-known, Johnson's actions in the Gulf received overwhelming public support. From such support he achieved his goal of getting Congressional backing when the notorious Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed on 7 August.

While Moise's monograph makes a major contribution to our understanding of the Vietnam War's origins, the same cannot be said of Ezra Y. Siff's *Why the Senate Slept: The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the Beginning of America's Vietnam War*. Whereas Moise empathizes with the political figures involved in this Resolution, Siff virtually divides the politicians into good and bad guys. In Siff's simplified typology, McNamara and presidential advisor McGeorge Bundy seem to rank as the chief bad guys who somehow conspire to shift US policy toward a state of war with Vietnam. When McNamara gave contradictory testimony to the Senate regarding the Gulf events, Siff chalks this outcome up to a dangerous, manipulative manner on McNamara's part. Although such an argument has been made many times, Siff resorts to sarcasm and ad hominem attacks and thus weakens his case. For example, Siff writes that McNamara is "supposedly intelligent," (p. 65) which is a totally inaccurate caricature of his intellect,

regardless of McNamara's other faults. In addition, Siff states that McNamara, Bundy and several others manipulated Johnson on Vietnam and even "forced his hand." (p. 8) This interpretation brings up another fault of Siff's study: he continuously depicts Johnson as a weak, vacillating leader who was often bullied on foreign policy, and this is a skewed picture of LBJ's governing style.

While Siff places Johnson in a bad guy category for going along with the Vietnam War, he curiously paints President John Kennedy as a good guy who would have gotten the US out of the war. Of course, this is a popular myth held by many others besides Siff, but it is a myth that should die a permanent death. Kennedy had increased US troop strength in Vietnam from 750 in early 1961 to 16,000 by late 1963, and there were no realistic signs of any potential withdrawal. In reality, Kennedy had become more militantly anti-communist after the Berlin Wall construction, the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, and a tough stance against North Vietnam was popular with the public and the military. Strangely, Siff keeps referring to a JFK Senate speech from 1954 to support his thesis concerning the late president, but that speech had almost no effect on the Kennedy presidency years later. Besides Kennedy, Siff also constructs a few senators as anti-war heroes. He reserves the most praise for Senator Wayne Morse (D-OR), a committed anti-war figure from the outset, and Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-WI), who later became anti-war. When these senators continually lose political fights with the Johnson administration over Vietnam, they are canonized as prophets without honor in Washington. This hagiography is more understandable if we consider that Siff served Nelson as a legislative assistant from 1965 to 1968.

In contrast to Moise and Siff's narrow chronological time frames, Joseph G. Morgan offers a broader overview of the Vietnam War in his work *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955-1975*. This study examines the role that the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) played in shaping the US's Vietnam policy before and during the war. An appealing aspect of Morgan's approach is that he constantly shifts between the AFV's activities and the major events of the conflict. While Morgan sometimes lacks depth of analysis concerning volatile US-Vietnam relations, he makes up for it with solid summaries on topics ranging from the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 to the US troop withdrawal in 1973. Mainly, Morgan sets out to debunk the concept that the AFV was a particularly powerful special interest group that was largely responsible for the US commitment to Vietnam. Since the 1960s many liberals have decried the AFV's apparently pernicious influence over US foreign policy. However, Morgan concludes that "the AFV played a marginal role, at best, in bringing about this intervention." (p. 153) When the American government increased its Vietnam commitment under Kennedy and Johnson, it saw the AFV as a small but convenient cheerleader for its policies. However, when the anti-communist AFV questioned either the South Vietnam regime or US military strategy, political leaders simply ignored the group as a marginal lobbying faction.

In conclusion, Moise's *Tonkin Gulf* provides the most thorough account of the Vietnam War's initial phase. Overall, Moise provides an excellent survey of the US Navy in the Gulf, all thoroughly supported by massive archival research and personal interviews. By

contrast, Siff's *Why the Senate Slept* grinds too many political axes and overly simplifies too many complex issues. Finally, Morgan's *The Vietnam Lobby* is well-documented and well-written, its only serious drawback being that it covers a fairly obscure organization. Ultimately, Moise's *Tonkin Gulf* should achieve the most enduring impact on Vietnam War scholarship.

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