

The Legacy of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident: “Real American War” in Vietnam¹

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Introduction

I would like to discuss in this article the following two points with regard to the legacy of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident; the historical significance of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and Vietnamese civilian suffering in the Vietnam War. First, It is now clear that the justification given by the Johnson administration at that time of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident was inaccurate and that the public was manipulated. In this sense, the incident reminds us of the following classic quotation by Aeschylus, an ancient Greek tragic dramatist (525 B.C.–456 B.C.): “In war, truth is the first casualty.” The Gulf of Tonkin Incident could also be considered as a turning point for the U.S. move toward an open-ended military commitment in Vietnam. Secondly, I will touch upon Vietnamese civilian suffering as a consequence of this open-ended military commitment.

I: Historical Significance of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

1.1. The Justification by the Johnson administration

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident occurred on August 2, 1964, when the *USS Maddox* was attacked by three Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). We now know that the August 2 attack had been ordered by a Vietnamese locally based commander, and not one from Hanoi.² Johnson did not order any retaliation in response to this

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1. This article is based on my presentation given at the seminar entitled “50th Anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Gulf of Tonkin Incident” on May 24, 2014. The main ideas in this article were also described in my short essay in *The American Studies Newsletter* (No. 185, p. 1) published in July 2014 by the Japanese Association of American Studies.

2. Robert S. McNamara, et. al. *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy*, (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 202.

first attack, but the *Maddox* continued to resume patrols the next day, August 3, with another destroyer, the *USS Turner Joy* joining. On the night of August 4, the crews of the two destroyers reported to Washington that they were under attack again. The Johnson administration portrayed these two attacks as “unprovoked” and, immediately after the alleged second attack, authorized a single retaliatory measure of sixty-four sorties against North Vietnamese patrol boat bases and a nearby supporting oil complex.

At the time of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the presidential election campaign of 1964 was in a crucial stage, for Johnson was opposing the hawkish Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. Johnson swiftly decided to retaliate against the DRV to show the public his toughness and to portray his opponent as weak.

President Johnson seized this opportunity as a pretext to seek a congressional resolution (the so-called Gulf of Tonkin Resolution) approving the use of force in Southeast Asia. This authorized the president to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”³ Since the legislators believed the alleged second attack from the DRV to be “unprovoked,” they passed, on August 7, the proposed resolution with unanimous approval in the House and with only two senators, Wayne Morse from Oregon and Ernest Gruening from Alaska, dissenting. It amounted to a blank check for the president to initiate an open-ended American military action in Vietnam.

1.2. The Johnson Administration’s Deception of Congress and the American People

This year, the 50th anniversary of the incident, we know that recently declassified documents confirm the findings of historical studies that the justification for the retaliatory attack by the Johnson administration was inaccurate as well as misleading.⁴ I would like to put forward the following two

3. Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young and H. Bruce Franklin, eds., “The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Aug. 7, 1964,” in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 250.

4. The historical studies on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident include Edwin E. Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Anthony Austin, *The President’s War: The Story of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and How the Nation Was Trapped in Vietnam* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1971); Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* [Chapter 5: Johnson, McNamara, and the Tonkin Gulf Episode] (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005). For detailed list of the books and articles on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, see “The Tonkin Gulf Incidents, 1964,” in Edwin Moïse’s Vietnam War Bibliography. <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/facultypages/edmoise/tonkin.html> (accessed August 23, 2014).

facts: firstly, the U.S. controlled naval raids against the DRV by South Vietnam before the Gulf of Tonkin Incident; secondly, it is now clear that the second attack never took place. In discussing these two points, I mainly rely on the essays written by John Prados, now a senior fellow at the National Security Archive, an independent non-governmental research institute in Washington, D. C..⁵

Johnson claimed that the U.S. had done nothing to provoke the DRV. At a congressional executive session on August 6, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara maintained; “Our Navy played absolutely no part in, was not associated with, [and] was not aware of, any South Vietnamese actions.”⁶ We know from the *Pentagon Papers* that the *Maddox* was in charge of electronic espionage in the Gulf of Tonkin (the so-called “DeSoto Patrol”), and one of the objectives was to review the reaction of the DRV’s radars to the OPLAN 34-A covert command attacks against the DRV carried out by South Vietnamese naval gunboats, but controlled by the U.S.⁷ It is now clear from the recently declassified White House tapes that Johnson and McNamara were well aware of the fact that a series of raids had been carried out on North Vietnamese coastal targets, the two offshore islands, Hon Me and Hon Ngu, and that there were connections between the OPLAN 34-A raids and the destroyer’s “DeSoto Patrol,” intelligence mission. For example, in a telephone conversation with Johnson at 10:30 a.m. on August 3, one day after the first attack by Vietnamese torpedo boats, McNamara explained to Johnson about the OPLAN 34-A covert operations:

Secretary McNamara: Right. And we’re going to, and I think I should also, or we should also at that time, Mr. President, explain this Op Plan 34-A, these covert operations. There’s no question but what that had bearing on. And on Friday night,

5. John Prados, ed., “The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, 40 Years Later: Flawed Intelligence and the Decision for War in Vietnam,” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 132, Posted on August 4, 2014. <http://www2.gwu.edu/~narchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/> (accessed May 20, 2014) : John Prados, “Essay: 40th Anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident,” The National Security Archive, Posted August 4, 2004. <http://www2.gwu.edu/~narchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/essay.htm> (accessed May 20, 2014); *idem*, “Tonkin Gulf Intelligence “Skewed” According to Official History and Intercepts,” The National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 132-Update. <http://www2.gwu.edu/~narchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm> (accessed May 17, 2014).

6. Cited from the remarks by Robert S. McNamara before a joint executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Service Committees to testify on the August 2 and 4 events in the Gulf of Tonkin. Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 137.

7. *The Pentagon Papers as Published by New York Times* [Ch. 5: The Covert War and Tonkin Gulf: February-August, 1964] (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971).

as you probably know, we had four TP [McNamara means PT] boats from Vietnam manned by Vietnamese or other nationals, attack two islands. And we expended, oh, a thousand rounds of ammunition of one kind or another against them. We probably shot up a radar station and a few other miscellaneous buildings. And following twenty-four hours after that, with this destroyer in that same area, undoubtedly led them to connect the two events.⁸

Vo Nguyen Giap, the former Vietnamese defense minister, informed McNamara, at the retrospective conference in Hanoi in November 1996 that there had been no attack on August 4.⁹ Among newly released documents regarding the uncertainty of the second attack are those declassified by the National Security Agency (NSA) on December 1, 2005, which revealed that NSA officials provided the leaders in the Johnson administration only with information supporting the claims that the second attack had occurred. According to a NSA historian Robert J. Hanyok, who wrote an article in *Cryptologic Quarterly*, an internal publication, in early 2001, “The overwhelming body of reports, if used, would have told the story that no attack occurred.”¹⁰ Johnson and McNamara considered these NSA reports as vital evidence of the second attack and used it as a pretext to support retaliatory air strikes and to get a Congressional resolution to give the president freedom of action in Vietnam.

Based on these two reasons, it is important to note that at the time of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, Johnson and McNamara manipulated and deceived Congress as well as the American people.

II: The American Way of War in Vietnam

2.1. U.S. Direct Military Commitment in Vietnam

President Johnson had been reluctant to escalate the war until after the Presidential election in November 1964 to maximize the chance of realizing his

8. Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson-Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, 10:30 a.m., August 3, 1964, in “LBJ Tapes on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.” National Security Archive. Accessed May 18, 2014. <http://www2.gwu.edu/~narchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/tapes.htm> See also John Prados, ed., *The White House Tapes* (New York: New Press, 2003), 185.

9. McNamara, et al, *Argument Without End*, 202.

10. Robert J. Hanyok, “Shunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August, 1964,” *Cryptologic Quarterly* [the National Security Agency’s classified journal] (early 2001), in John Prados, “Tonkin Gulf Intelligence “Skewed” According to Official History and Intercepts.” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 132-Update, December 1, 2005. <http://www2.gwu.edu/~narchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/relead000012/pdf> (accessed May 17, 2014).

Great Society programs, including promoting civil rights. However, his decision at the time of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident paved the way for a far heavier price to be paid than the administration had anticipated. Given the growing deterioration of the situation into South Vietnam, in March 1965, the Johnson administration started resuming regular bombing of North Vietnam as well as sending the first American combat troops into South Vietnam. By July 1965, the war in Vietnam had turned into an “American War.” The U.S. also had resumed sustained bombing campaigns in both North and South Vietnam and had initiated “Search and Destroy” missions in the South. At peak strength, about 543,400 U.S. military personnel were deployed in South Vietnam.¹¹

Regarding the sustained bombing, Vietnam ended up the most bombed country in world history. The air campaigns against Vietnam were based on the idea of “strategic bombing” from the Second World War and the Korean War. Between 1965 and 1972, the total amount of explosives dropped on Vietnam was about four and a half million tons; around three and a half million tons in the South and about one million tons in the North.

2.2. “Search and Destroy” Missions and the Dilemma of American Military Strategy

“Search and Destroy” missions aimed to suppress national liberation movements in South Vietnam by conducting ground operations with gradually escalating numbers of American combat troops. The major objective was to locate and eliminate the National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese regular units. “Search and Destroy” missions relied on America’s advanced technology and vast material resources.

In the war without fronts in South Vietnam, it was very hard for American soldiers to distinguish combatants and non-combatants. Under these circumstances, mass civilian killings and discriminatory bombings became common in American military operations. As a retired U.S. Army Colonel Herbert Y. Schandler suggested, “The supreme paradox of the Vietnam War, for those Americans who fought in the jungle of Vietnam, was that the American strategy for winning the war led to disdain for the South Vietnamese people themselves, on whose behalf the United States had ostensibly intervened in the first place. Thus did an insoluble contradiction exist between the overriding U.S. political objectives of the war and the actual situation on the ground in Vietnam.”¹²

11. George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 5th Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013), 188.

12. McNamara, et al, *Argument Without End*, 354.

III: Vietnamese Civilian Suffering in the American War in Vietnam—The My Lai (Son My) Massacre in March, 1968 and “Many My Lais”—

On March 16, 1968, one U.S. Army infantry company killed 504 innocent civilians (among them, about seventy percent of these people were women and children) in the sub-hamlets of My Lai 4, in Son My village, Quang Ngai Province. The My Lai (Son My) Massacre was one of the largest single American war atrocities and was the only one which was made public in the U.S. in November 1969, about one and a half years after the incident.¹³ When over one hundred Vietnam veterans testified before the Winter Soldiers Investigation, sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans against the War (VVAW) in early 1971, they claimed that such war atrocities as the My Lai Massacre were the consequences of American conduct in Vietnam.¹⁴ After the revelation of the massacre, President Nixon said, at a news conference on December 8, 1969, that My Lai was an “isolated incident.”¹⁵

Regarding American war atrocities in Vietnam, it is worth noting that in August 2006 the *Los Angeles Times* published a series of articles¹⁶ based on official government documents from the “Vietnam War Crimes Working Group” archive.¹⁷ These articles were written by Deborah Nelson, then a staff writer at the Washington bureau of the *Los Angeles Times*, and Nick Turse, a freelance journalist. The documents (9,000 pages long) were assembled by a Pentagon task force just after the revelation of the My Lai Massacre and were declassified in 1994.

13. For a detailed account of the My Lai Massacre, see Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992); Seymour M. Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1970).

14. For the Winter Soldier Investigation, see Congressional Record, 92nd Cong., 1st Sess., April 6, 1971, Vol. 117, Pt. 8, 9947–10055. See also Vietnam Veterans Against the War, ed., *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes in Vietnam* (New York: Beacon Press, 1972).

15. “The President’s News Conference of December 8, 1969,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 1004.

16. A series of articles were published in the *Los Angeles Times* under the following titles: “Civilian Killings Went Unpublished,” August 6, 2006; “Verified Civilian Slayings,” August 6, 2006; “A Tortured Past,” August 20, 2006; “Lasting Pain, Minimal Punishment,” August 20, 2006. For these four articles, see the following website. *Vietnam—The War Crimes Files*. <http://www.latimes.com/la-na-vietnam20aug20-sg-storygallery.html> (accessed August 13, 2014).

17. Records of the “Vietnam War Crimes Working Group,” Records of the Army Staff, RG 319, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland, USA. For the significance of these records, see Jon Weiner, “Beyond My Lai: New Revelations of Vietnam Atrocities,” *Nation*, August 8, 2006.

Although the documents had been unnoticed for a while, Turse, then a graduate student at Columbia University, discovered them. The documents detail 320 alleged incidents that were substantiated by Army investigators. We now know that, as Nelson and Turse point out in the *Los Angeles Times* articles, the documents “confirmed atrocities by U.S. forces in Vietnam were more extensive than was previously shown.”¹⁸

IV: The Legacy of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

As mentioned in this article, the decision of the Johnson administration to launch a single retaliatory attack against the DRV and to get absolute presidential power to wage the war was a starting point for an open-ended American military commitment in Vietnam.

In conclusion, two significant points concerning the legacy of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident are worth noting. First, the flawed intelligence and manipulation of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident bear a similarity to the manner of how the G. W. Bush administration at the time of the war in Iraq manipulated intelligence to make the public believe that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Second, the open-ended American military commitment in Vietnam resulted in large Vietnamese civilian casualties. According to an estimate of the Vietnamese government made public in April 1995, twenty years after the end of the Vietnam War, more than three million Vietnamese, including two million civilians died in the conflict.¹⁹ The Vietnamese government also announced that 5.3 million Vietnamese civilians were wounded.²⁰

Regarding the scale of casualties, as freelance journalist Nick Turse points out in the last chapter of his recent book, in “America’s preferred postwar narrative...many would like to forget, and so many others refuse to remember” the reality of the Vietnam War, especially the suffering of the Vietnamese

18. Deborah Nelson and Nick Turse, “Civilian Killings Went Unpublished,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 2006. Based on their research, Deborah Nelson, now an associate professor of investigative Journalism, College of Journalism, University of Maryland, and Nick Turse, now an associate editor of TomDispatch.com. published a monograph respectively: Deborah Nelson, *The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About U.S. War Crimes* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012). For Deborah Nelson’s arguments, see Ken Silverstein, “Six Questions for Deborah Nelson on Vietnam War Crimes and Why They Matter Now,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 2009; Tara McKeivy, “Many My Lais,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2008 (A review of Nelson’s book).

19. AFP, “Hanoi Gives Official Count of 3 Million Dead”: “War Killed 3m Says Hanoi,” *Financial Times* [London] April 5, 1995; Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 13, 268.

20. Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 13. Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembering from All Sides* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 364.

civilians.²¹ He changed one of Peter Seeger's famous songs, "Where have all the flower gone?" to "Where have all the war crimes gone?" as the title of the last chapter of his book. One recent example of "America's preferred narratives," in the words of Turse, is a 13-year long program (2012–2025) to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the ending of the Vietnam War, which President Obama announced on May 25, 2012. The main objective of this program is "to pay tribute to more than three million servicemen and women who left their families bravely" for Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War."²² In the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War, beginning on Memorial Day (May 28, 2012), and continuing through to Veterans Day (November 11, 2025), the American federal government will try to partner with State and local governments, veterans organizations, and other private organizations to develop various programs to honor "our Vietnam veterans, our fallen, our wounded, those unaccounted for, their families...."²³ By August 24, 2014, 904 events have been conducted and the total number of partners for the commemoration was 6256.²⁴ For this commemoration, nothing has been mentioned about the far greater Vietnamese civilian suffering.

As the American government wages a perpetual war in Afghanistan and has been forced to respond to unstable situations in Iraq and Syria, it has been crucial for the administration of Barack Obama to emphasize the bravery and sacrifice of ordinary soldiers as well as to underscore the individual sacrifices of ordinary American people. Within this tendency to glorify the war in Vietnam initiated by the current administration, the bitter legacy of the Vietnam War is now being

21. Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 262.

22. "Presidential Proclamation—Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War," May 25, 2012. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/25/presidential-proclamation-commemoration-50th-anniversary-vietnam-war> (accessed November 6, 2012).

23. "Presidential Proclamation—Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War," May 25, 2012.

24. Official website of the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam. <http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/> (accessed August 24, 2014). According to the website, the commemorative program will include various activities and ceremonies to attain the following five objectives: "(1). To thank and honor veterans of the Vietnam War, including personnel who were held as prisoners of war (POW), or listed as missing in action (MIA), for their service on behalf of the United States and to thank and honor the families of these veterans. (2). To highlight the service of the American Forces during the Vietnam War and the contributions of Federal agencies and governmental and non-governmental organizations that served with, or in support of, the Armed Forces. (3). To pay tribute to the contributions made on the home front by the people of the United States during the Vietnam War. (4). To highlight the advances in technology, science, and medicine related to military research conducted during the Vietnam War. (5). To recognize the contributions and sacrifices made by the allies of the United States during the Vietnam War."

transformed into “a celebratory story of American heroism in its intent and its conduct.”²⁵

Therefore, it is still an unfinished journey for American leaders as well as ordinary American citizens to overcome their ethnocentrism and to come to terms with the reality of the far greater suffering of Vietnamese civilians. In this sense, at the time of its 50th anniversary, it is still worthwhile reflecting on the legacy of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident of 1964.

25. Andrew Priest, “The Rhetoric of Revisionism: Presidential Rhetoric about the Vietnam War since 9/11,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, Issue 3 (September 2013): 540. For a historical analysis of the contested memory of the Vietnam War since 1975, see Robert J. McMahon, “Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975–2001,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2002): 159–184.