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# America's Longest War:

The United States and Vietnam,  
1950–1975

SECOND EDITION

George C. Herring

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS  Philadelphia

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*For Nancy, John, and Lisa*

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Second Edition

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population of South Vietnam, and in many areas it was so firmly entrenched that it could not be dislodged without the application of massive force. Where it could function freely, the government was hampered by a shortage of skilled officials and by what one American described as "outmoded concepts, directives and practices, bureaucratic constipation, [and] insufficient on-the-spot resources."<sup>15</sup> As a result of spiraling desertion rates, the ARVN's strength remained well below the figure authorized before the projected increase. The army won a few minor engagements in the early summer, but it was never able to gain the initiative. American officials publicly lavished praise on Khanh's "able and energetic leadership," and Khanh dutifully followed American suggestions for gaining popular support, visiting numerous villages and cities and even making a series of "fireside chats." But while a word from well-placed Americans could topple governments in Vietnam, it could not induce stability, and mere speeches were inadequate to bring together South Vietnam's disparate political forces. Catholics and Buddhists mobilized against each other and agitated against a government neither trusted. After a period of quiescence, the students began to stir again. The government itself was rent by internal dissension, and a coup plot in July failed only because the United States made known its opposition. Maxwell Taylor, who replaced Lodge as Ambassador in midsummer, advised Washington in August that "the best thing that can be said about Khanh's government is that it has lasted six months and has about a 50-50 chance of lasting out the year."<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, Hanoi had responded defiantly to American warnings. There is no reason to suppose that the North Vietnamese leaders wanted war with the United States. Rather, they seem to have remained hopeful that intensification of aid to the Vietcong would force the collapse of the South Vietnamese government, leaving the United States no choice but to abandon its ally. They may have dismissed the various U.S. "signals" as mere bluff. In any event, they were not prepared to abandon their goal in the face of American threats. In the spring and summer of 1964, North Vietnam mobilized its own forces for war, speeded up the transforma-

<sup>15</sup> William Colby memorandum, May 11, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 3.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Pentagon Papers* (Gravel), III, 82.

tion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail into a modern logistical network capable of handling large trucks, and began to prepare units of its own regular army for infiltration into South Vietnam intact. Premier Pham Van Dong bluntly informed Canadian Blair Seaborn in June that the stakes were high for North Vietnam as well as for the United States and that the NLF and its supporters were prepared to endure regardless of the cost. If the United States forced war upon North Vietnam, he concluded with a ringing declaration, "We shall win!"<sup>17</sup>

Under these circumstances, Americans increasingly looked north for a solution they could not find in the south. Alarmed by the persistent lack of progress in South Vietnam, annoyed by Hanoi's defiant response, and fearful that the North Vietnamese might seek to exploit the administration's presumed immobility in an election year, some of Johnson's advisers by the midsummer of 1964 had developed a full "scenario" of graduated overt pressures against the north, according to which the President, after securing a Congressional resolution, would authorize air strikes against selected North Vietnamese targets. Secretaries Rusk and McNamara finally rejected the program for fear that it would "raise a whole series of disagreeable questions" which might jeopardize passage of the administration's civil rights legislation, but the proposals clearly indicate the drift of official attitudes during this period.<sup>18</sup>

The administration implemented much of the proposed "scenario" in response to a series of incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin in early August. While engaged in electronic espionage off the coast of North Vietnam on the morning of August 1, the destroyer *Maddox* encountered a group of North Vietnamese torpedo boats. South Vietnamese gunboats involved in OPLAN 34A operations had bombarded the nearby island of Hon Me the preceding evening, and the North Vietnamese, apparently assuming that the *Maddox* had been supporting the covert attacks, closed in on the destroyer. In a brief and frenzied engagement, the *Maddox* opened fire, the patrol boats launched torpedoes, and aircraft from the *USS Ticonderoga* joined the fighting. The torpedo boats were driven away, and one was badly damaged.

<sup>17</sup> George C. Herring, ed., *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin, Tex., 1983), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> McNamara-Rusk memorandum, June 11, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 4.



Johnson was reportedly enraged when he learned of the encounter, but no retaliation was ordered. "The other side got a sting out of this," Secretary of State Rusk remarked. "If they do it again, they'll get another sting."<sup>19</sup> To avoid any appearance of weakness and to assert traditional claims to freedom of the seas, the Navy ordered the *Maddox* to resume operations in the Gulf of Tonkin and sent the destroyer *C. Turner Joy* to support it. The United States was not seeking to provoke another attack, but it did not go out of its way to avoid one either. The administration kept the destroyers close to North Vietnamese shores, where they were vulnerable to attack. Eager for "open season" on the North Vietnamese, responsible military officials in the area were choosing targets for retaliatory raids before reports of a second attack began to come in.

On the night of August 4, while operating in heavy seas some sixty miles off the North Vietnamese coast, the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* suddenly reported that they were under attack. The initial reports were based on sonar and radar contacts, both of which were admittedly unreliable under the adverse weather conditions, and on visual sightings of torpedoes and enemy searchlights on a night which one seaman described as "darker than the hubs of Hell." The captain of the *Maddox* later conceded that evidence of an attack was less than conclusive. North Vietnamese gunboats were probably operating in the area, but no evidence has ever been produced to demonstrate that they committed hostile acts.

This time, Washington was poised to strike back. Reports of an impending attack began to arrive in the capital early on the morning of August 4, and the Joint Chiefs immediately insisted that the United States must "clobber" the attackers. Throughout the morning, while the destroyers reported being under continuous attack, the Joint Chiefs worked out a series of retaliatory options ranging from limited air strikes against North Vietnamese naval installations to mining of parts of the coastline. When the President met with his advisers in the early afternoon, there was no doubt that an attack had taken place. The CIA pointed out quite logically that the North Vietnamese might be responding defensively to the commando raids on their territory, but the administration concluded that Hanoi was trying to make the United States appear a

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in John Galloway, *The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* (Rutherford, N.J., 1970), p. 52. For a good short account, see "The 'Phantom Battle' That Led to War," *U.S. News & World Report* (July 23, 1984), pp. 56-67.

"paper tiger." Johnson and his advisers agreed, as McNamara put it, that "we cannot sit still as a nation and let them attack us on the high seas and get away with it." They quickly decided on a "firm, swift retaliatory [air] strike" against North Vietnamese torpedo boat bases.<sup>20</sup>

Although serious questions were subsequently raised about the nature and even existence of the alleged attacks, the administration stuck by its decision. "FLASH" messages from the *Maddox* arriving in Washington early in the afternoon indicated that "freak weather effects" on the radar and sonar, as well as "overeager" sonarmen, may have accounted for many of the reported torpedo attacks and enemy contacts. Contradicting earlier messages, the commander of the *Maddox* also reported that there had been no "visual sightings" and that a "complete evaluation" of all the evidence should be made before retaliation was ordered. McNamara postponed implementation of the air strikes temporarily to make "damned sure that the attacks had taken place." By late afternoon, however, he was convinced, on the basis of evidence which appears suspect. Ignoring the belated uncertainty of the men on the scene, the Secretary of Defense accepted at face value the judgment of the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, in Honolulu, whose certainty was based on the first reports from the *Maddox* and intercepts of North Vietnamese messages indicating that two patrol boats had been "sacrificed." McNamara and his military advisers did not knowingly lie about the alleged attacks, but they were obviously in a mood to retaliate and they seem to have selected from the evidence available to them those parts that confirmed what they wanted to believe. Accepting McNamara's conclusions without question, Johnson in the late afternoon authorized retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnamese torpedo boat bases and nearby oil storage dumps. Described by the Joint Chiefs as a "pretty good effort," the strikes destroyed or damaged twenty-five patrol boats and 90 percent of the oil storage facilities at Vinh.<sup>21</sup>

The President also seized the opportunity to secure passage of

<sup>20</sup> "Chronology of Events, Tuesday, August 4 and Wednesday, August 5, 1964, Tonkin Gulf Strike," Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 18; summary notes of 538th NSC meeting, August 4, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, NSC Meetings File, Box 1; Rusk to Taylor, August 8, 1964, DDCS(75)845-H.

<sup>21</sup> "Chronology of Events," Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 18; "Transcripts of Telephone Conversations, 4-5 August," Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 228.

Attack  
Suspect?