

# The Gulf of Tonkin

The Vietnam War was America's longest war since the American Revolution. At its height, in 1969, it involved nearly 600,000 American troops. The war provoked massive protests at home. The U.S. government viewed the war as necessary to stop communist aggression and help our allies. Those opposed to the war thought it was meddling in the internal affairs of another country, or, at least, an un-winnable war because it involved the use of guerrilla tactics in which it was difficult to identify the enemy.

## Tonkin Gulf Resolution

In early August 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked American destroyers cruising in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam.

In response to these attacks, the Congress of the United States passed a resolution. The resolution authorized the President to take "all necessary measures" to repel armed attack and to prevent further aggression. The resolution also authorized the President to take "all necessary steps, including the use of armed force" to help South Vietnam.



## Your Task

You are to decide whether or not you would support the Tonkin Gulf resolution if you were a member of Congress in 1964. Below is background information on Vietnam. On the next page are facts about the "attacks" that took place in the Gulf of Tonkin.

## Background

The Vietnamese fought against French control after World War II. In 1954, the French withdrew and Vietnam was split into two parts. North Vietnam was communist. South Vietnam was to hold an election to choose a government. Ngo Diem was elected. In 1963, Ngo Diem was assassinated and the military took over the government. Meanwhile, a group called the Viet Cong was fighting to overthrow the government that had become dictatorial. To help the government of South Vietnam the United States sent military advisors to South Vietnam. U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam had grown from 685 in 1961 to 23,000 in 1963. While U.S. aid to South Vietnam increased, the U.S. government claimed that North Vietnam was helping the Viet Cong.

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## Events in the Tonkin Gulf as reported by the Defense Department.

On August 2, in international waters, the U.S. destroyer Maddox was attacked by three North Vietnamese torpedo boats. The Maddox, which was on routine patrol, fired warning shots at the rapidly approaching torpedo boats.

The torpedo boats continued to approach at a high speed and fired machine guns and launched torpedoes against the Maddox.

The Maddox responded with fire and four planes were called in for support. The torpedo boats were driven off and one was left "dead" in the water. The Maddox was 30 miles from the North Vietnamese coast, well beyond the 12 mile limit of North Vietnamese territory.

Secretary of Defense McNamara said that the North Vietnamese admitted the attack. McNamara did not give a reason for the attack other than saying that it might be the act of an irresponsible torpedo boat commander.

The United States government announced that it would not tolerate such attacks and would retaliate if there were any more attacks. The Maddox continued its patrol and was reinforced by another destroyer, the Turner Joy. Air cover was also provided for additional protection.

On the night of August 4 the Maddox and the Turner Joy were attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats which ambushed the destroyers. The attack continued for two hours.

The radar screens of the destroyers detected numerous "blips." While no torpedo boats were visually sighted on the dark night, a fighter plane flying cover did see a torpedo boat wake and an officer on one of the destroyers saw what seemed to be the cockpit lights of a torpedo boat. The wakes on one or two torpedoes were also seen. The sonar of the Maddox detected numerous torpedoes.

The attack was repelled by the destroyers and jet fighters. The Turner Joy reported two torpedo boats sunk. However, a search the following day revealed no debris or oil slicks.

The destroyers were in international waters.

How would you, if you were a member of Congress, vote for the following resolution?

YES ( )    NO ( )

The President should take all necessary measures to repel armed attack and to prevent further aggression. The President should take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to help the government of South Vietnam.

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## Events in the Tonkin Gulf as revealed by subsequent investigation by Congress and news reporters.

The Maddox was not on routine patrol but was carrying special electronics equipment for intelligence work. There was the suspicion that North Vietnam was helping Viet Cong rebels in South Vietnam. The main route to the south closely followed the coast.

The Maddox had sailed within the 12 mile limit declared by North Vietnam immediately before the attack on August 2.

The warning shots fired at the North Vietnamese torpedo boats were fired directly at the boats. The United States fired first.

The South Vietnamese had conducted raids on the North Vietnamese coast in the same area that the encounter on August 2 took place.

There was an attack by the South Vietnamese on the North Vietnamese coast on August 3. The Maddox had been sailing in the direction of the attack on August 3.

Torpedo boats do not normally attack a larger vessel in broad daylight and they do not normally launch torpedoes in a high speed run. They approached the destroyers at high speed.

In the second attack no one actually saw a torpedo boat.

While the sonar of the Maddox, which was operated by an inexperienced sonar operator, detected many torpedoes, the sonar of the Turner Joy did not. The sonar of the Turner Joy was operated by an experienced sonar man. Sonar will pick up the sound from the waves created by a ship and it takes an experienced operator to tell the difference in sound between the two. The Turner Joy was sailing behind the Maddox.

The planes that provided air cover did not sight any boats. One plane saw the wake of a possible high speed boat but did not sight the boat.

Both destroyers, particularly the Turner Joy, fired numerous rounds of shells at the blips they picked up on the radar screens. The firing was radar directed. The Turner Joy claimed two torpedo boats destroyed. Planes which searched the area the following day found no debris or oil slicks which would indicate a sinking.

Would you reconsider your vote in light of the facts above?

YES ( )    NO ( )