

OP-ED

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY

TONKIN GHOSTS

The Tonkin Gulf Incident in 12 Scenes

by STEVE BRODNER



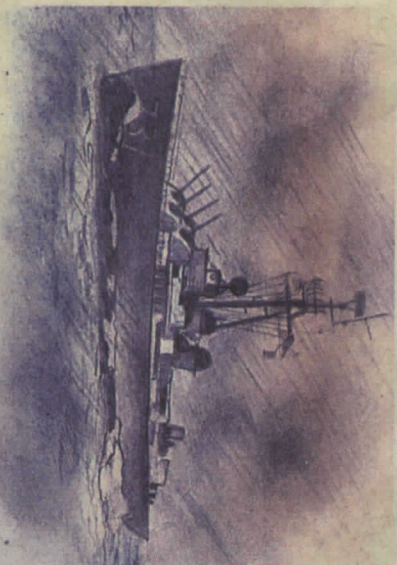
Before his assassination, President Kennedy considers reductions in the number of U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam. What communist North Vietnam sees as a revolution against colonialism, the U.S. sees as dominoes falling. But Kennedy's view may be changing.



Lyndon B. Johnson takes office as the situation in Vietnam worsens. Pressured by the Pentagon, his own Cold War mind-set and his potential GOP rival, Barry Goldwater, he orders covert operations and considers escalation to deal with the "biggest damn mess that I ever saw."



Late in July 1964, the South Vietnamese launch U.S.-backed raids on targets in the Gulf of Tonkin. The destroyer Maddox, on separate orders, patrols the gulf, eavesdropping on the North. On Aug. 2, seeing these as coordinated efforts, the North attacks. The Maddox is barely scratched. The North Vietnamese limp away.



Johnson orders the Maddox and another destroyer back to the gulf. On Aug. 4, at night, in bad weather, Capt. John J. Herrick radios that they are under attack.



Herrick begins backtracking. The torpedo sightings and reported enemy contacts "appear doubtful." "Freak weather effects" and "over eager" sonar operators may be to blame. The phantom enemy of Aug. 4 will come to be called Tonkin Ghosts.



What is murky in Southeast Asia is forced into clarity in Washington. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara seizes on faulty intelligence reports that seem to confirm a second attack later



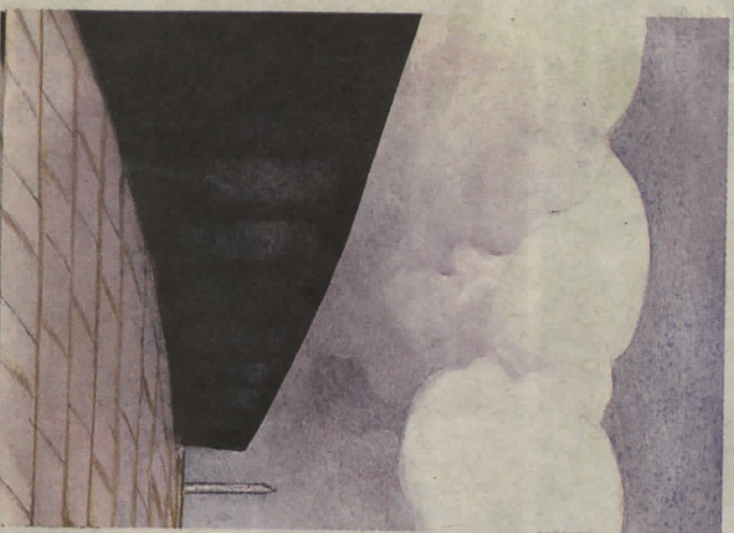
Near midnight on Aug. 4, the president addresses the nation: "A new act of aggression" requires a reply; U.S. planes are already bombing the North. Congress promises "overwhelming support." The door to all-out war opens.



Arkansas Sen. J. William Fulbright, powerful Democratic chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, gives in to Johnson and pushes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through the Senate -- in crisis mode, with little debate. It hands nearly unchecked power to the commander-in-chief.



Sen. Wayne Morse (D-Ore.), resists. An anonymous caller from the Pentagon suggests he ask for the Maddox's logs to check the administration's story, but the White House fends off doubts. Final tally, both houses: Only Morse and Sen. Wayne Gruening (D-Alaska) vote against the resolution.



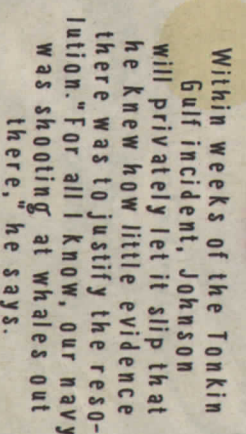
The war in Vietnam rages for another 11 years. More than 58,000 U.S. soldiers die; Vietnamese deaths may be as high as 1.3 million. And there are other casualties: Americans' trust in government; the Constitution, which authorizes the Congress to declare war; Johnson's legacy.



WE ARE GIVING THE PRESIDENT
WAR-MAKING POWERS IN THE
ABSENCE OF A DECLARATION OF
WAR... I BELIEVE THAT TO BE
A HISTORIC MISTAKE."



Morse's outspokenness will earn him defeat in his next election in 1968. Fulbright's later strenuous antiwar position will be fueled by bitter Tonkin Gulf regrets.



Within weeks of the Tonkin Gulf incident, Johnson will privately let it slip that he knew how little evidence there was to justify the resolution. "For all I know, our navy was shooting at whales out there," he says.