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# Tonkin Message: A Clerical Error?

Reviewed by  
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## Books

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Before the Vietnam war ends, those who bore its heaviest burden should at least be accorded the dignity of an honest explanation of how it began.

Congress is still weighing just how it will explore the Pentagon Papers, which helped shatter the official illusion that the storm broke unprovoked on innocent United States' strategists in the Gulf of Tonkin in August, 1964.

Does it really matter how it began? Isn't it true that few wars have "tidy" beginnings?

It matters for only two reasons, neither of which will resolve the stupidity or righteousness of the war. Congress is now groping for methods of sharing war-making power that might save it from legislating so blindly as it did in 1964. If it can pinpoint exactly what it did wrong, it might avoid repeating the blunder. Also, one day the war will end; to learn from history, it helps to know what happened in order to accept the consequences.

These two latest studies of

*THE PRESIDENT'S WAR.* By Anthony Austin.

(A New York Times Book/Lippincott; 368 pp.; \$7.50)

*TOKIN GULF.* By Eugene G. Windchy.

(Doubleday, 358 pp., \$7.95)

The repeatedly-examined Gulf of Tonkin incidents pursue the inquest. In "The President's War," Anthony Austin, an assistant editor for *The Week* in Review section of *The New York Times*, reaches a particularly provocative new conclusion.

Austin charges that "a clerical error" mixed up reports on the alleged Aug. 4, 1964, attack by Communist torpedo boats on the U.S. destroyers Maddox and Turner Joy—which North Vietnam denied happened—with Aug. 2, 1964 attack on the Maddox alone, which clearly did occur, but under far less innocent circumstances than claimed.

It was the reported Aug. 4 attack that was the key. Without it, the Aug. 2 attack would have been treated as an isolated incident, and there would have been no Gulf of Tonkin resolution. But an administration seeking to go to war could have readily found rationales to do so.

The messages that author

Austin claims were mixed up were among four intercepted North Vietnamese radio instructions. They were described by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara in February, 1968, in a reinvestigation of the 1964 incidents, after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was told by informants that it was misled in its original, cursory, one hour and 40-minute inquiry four years earlier.

According to Austin, the two most important "August 4" intercepts, specifying that an attack took place, match the encounter on Aug. 2, not Aug. 4. Sonar and radar "freaks" surrounded the Aug. 4 incident, arousing dispute about whether there was any torpedo boat attack that night. No physical evidence was ever produced, except for the radio intercepts, which McNamara used in his originally-secret 1968 testimony while withholding the intercepts themselves from the record.

Austin claims that

"whoever wrote the summary" about the Aug. 4 intercepts "made a clerical error, confusing the sequence of some of the messages, with the result that the August 2 messages that spoke of damaging an enemy vessel, downing planes and sacrificing two boats . . . were recorded mistakenly as having been intercepted on August 4."

The author suggests that when McNamara was recalled for questioning in 1968 by the Committee headed by Sen. J. William Fulbright, and under pressure to produce what McNamara labeled "unimpeachable" proof of the Aug. 4 attack, McNamara's subordinates in their search for evidence could have "found in the faulty wrap-up the proof they were seeking without being aware of the mistake that had occurred . . ."

Austin has made a serious broadside accusation. He says he recognizes the "shortcoming" of his "inability to provide sources for much of my information," then adds: "If the government wishes to dispute these conclusions, it can release the intercepts or at least permit the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to examine them."

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This would appear to assure a challenge in the Fulbright Committee's own scheduled investigation of the Pentagon Papers. Daniel Ellsberg, acknowledged leaker of the Pentagon Papers, said in July that a Command and Control Study of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, made available to Congress with the Pentagon Papers, shows McNamara gave "highly misleading" testimony in 1964 about the affair.

Ellsberg told newsmen that while McNamara testified that the Aug. 2 and Aug. 4 attacks were both "deliberate and unprovoked," telephone tapes of McNamara's conversation at the time with Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp, then commander of U.S. Pacific

forces, revealed "their state of uncertainty" about the Aug. 4 attack. Ellsberg said the command study of the incidents was "deliberately withheld" from McNamara himself for three years by staff officers of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The study does not show conclusively that the second attack ever occurred, said Ellsberg, and he said he was unconvinced himself until he talked to Austin, who was completing his book when the Pentagon Papers leaked, and that convinced Ellsberg that no second attack took place.

In "Tonkin Gulf," by Eugene G. Windchy, heavy doubt is cast on the official account, although Windchy makes no claim to the confidential sources cited by Austin. Windchy, who served 11 years with the U.S. Information Agency in the Far East

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before becoming a freelance writer, lists 4½ years spent interviewing witnesses, examining records, and concentrating on what happened in the Gulf. His is an exhaustive—and exhausting—account of details, challenging, as Austin, does, the official claim that the Gulf incidents were "unprovoked."

Windchy concludes that "In the light of presently available information, I would suggest that a premeditated attack on August 4 seems to have been improbable, though not absolutely impossible."

"The Communists definitely were provoked, as on August 2, if one considers the circumstances as well as the nature of the destroyer patrol." The purpose was to check Communist radar and coastal defenses, in an area overlapping a zone in which North Vietnamese installations were being attacked by American-supplied boats, in a Washington-authorized operation which was misrepresented to Congress in its fleeting 1964 hearing.

"On the night of August 3, for whatever reason," Wind-

chy continues, "the destroyers had led the way toward raiding (allied) gunboats," in a raid in-between Aug. 2 and Aug. 4 incidents, a raid which was concealed from Congress in 1964.

"Expecting the same thing to happen on Tuesday night (as happened on Aug. 2 when allied boats did become involved in firing with the Maddox—which fired first) the North Vietnamese might have dispatched hastily a few patrol boats which, drawing fire from the destroyers, scattered amid excited radio chatter..."

U.S. officials were warned by the commanding officer of the Maddox, Comdr. John J. Herrick, immediately after the Aug. 4 incident, that his ship's original reports of 20 or more torpedo attacks that night were questionable, with freak sonar readings, Windchy and Austin both emphasize. Herrick urged "complete evaluation before any further action."

But while "top U.S. officials had their doubts about the Aug. 4 attack," Windchy continues, they "gave no hint of them to the people

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# Clerical Error?

or the Congress. The 'second' attack was portrayed as an absolute, spectacular, premeditated certainty. Of course, if the administration were committed to the bombing of North Vietnam, there could be no public soul-searching. It would not look well to bomb a foreign country because of a possible attack, nor even because of a probable attack.

"Yet, however one looks at it, taking into account the political realities, the Johnson administration went too far. Officials exaggerated the facts and distorted them. They concealed the elements of provocation. They alleged repeated bolts from the blue to be explained only by the implacable nature of aggressive communism; and they trumped up a great threat to the peace, insinuating that Red China was behind this flagrant challenge on the high seas."

Two and a half hours after the first flash reports of the Aug. 4 incident, the published records now show, the Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously agreed on retaliatory attack targets in North Vietnam—selecting them from a list of 94 targets drawn up the previous May. At 11:36 p.m. the night of Aug. 4, President Johnson went on the air to announce the bombing raid—after

McNamara spent frantic hours on the telephone to Adm. Sharp to try to gain confirmation that there was an Aug. 4 attack—and was given Sharp's own assurance that there was.

On Aug. 7, the Senate by a vote of 88 to 2 (only Sens. Morse and Gruening dissenting), and the House by a vote of 416 to 0, gave President unlimited authority to use armed force. Only later was it disclosed that this resolution, in its original form, also was drafted in May, 1964—but officials dismissed that, as they subsequently have dismissed all the secret preplanning of ex-calatory moves in the Vietnamese war, as "normal contingency planning."

Austin acidly recalls that President Johnson, who carried the record of the 504 to 2 vote in his pocket to flash at critics, mockingly has said: "it was a shame somebody didn't think of calling it the Fulbright resolution . . . because Senator Fulbright introduced it . . . Don't tell me a Rhodes scholar didn't understand everything in that resolution . . . Congress gave us this authority to do 'whatever may be necessary'—that's pretty far-reaching, that's 'the sky's the limit.'"

LBJ of course had a point: Fulbright was to cry out in dismay that he had been "hornswoggled." He and the Congress were lured into signing a blank check. LBJ had out-slickered everyone: the Congress, the public, and ultimately, himself. It was enough to make some men laugh, and many, many weep.

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