

# '...All necessary steps, including the use of armed force'

## The President's War: The Story of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and How the Nation Was Trapped in Vietnam

By Anthony Austin  
Lippincott. 368 pp. \$7.50

Reviewed by  
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Anyone writing a book on Vietnam these days must know he's challenging boredom. Such is the American appetite for novelty that even a war grows boring, even death and destruction can no longer seize attention. Especially when we've long since lost the certainty that we're the good guys and when the nation is trying to avoid facing the fact that America, which always wins, has lost the war. The press certainly recognizes the public's boredom—press coverage becomes increasingly sketchy—and Mr. Nixon is counting on it to drain the political impact of a war he cannot end on his own terms and will not end on any other. Yet serious men like Anthony Austin keep piling up the evidence. One wonders why. It can only be that such men are able somehow to sustain their capacity for anguish and anger when most of us have been overcome by frustration. The war seems to have its own momentum, to be beyond the reach of citizenry, press, even the Congress. If you can't fight City Hall with massive demonstrations, editorial attack, congressional disapproval, even presidential election, why bother any more? It's easier, in New York for instance, to find outrage over the

departure of a third-rate football team than it is over the entrance into a second decade of death, misery, and injustice in South Vietnam.

But the war is not a natural phenomenon. It did not begin by spontaneous combustion. If we are to avoid another such catastrophe, we must learn how this one began. Austin, assistant editor of *The New York Times's* invaluable *The Week in Review* section, focuses on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the "functional equivalent" of a declaration of war that Lyndon Johnson used, until it became threadbare, as the justification for all that followed.

There can be scarcely anyone left who believes the Johnson administration's account of the PT-boat "attack" on two American destroyers in the

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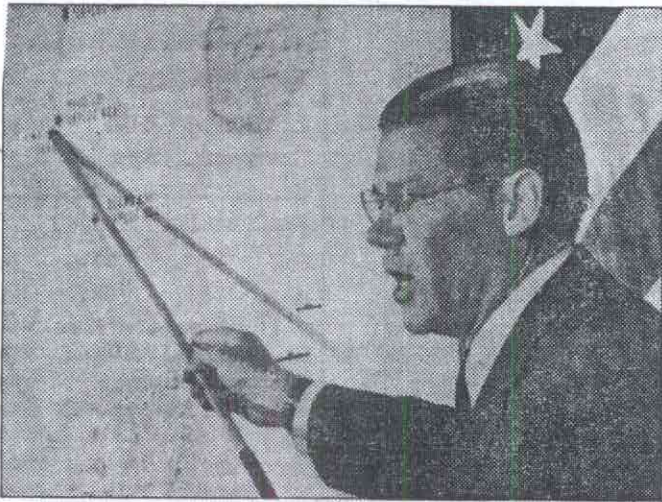
Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 that led to the U.S. air strikes on North Vietnam and, more importantly, to the congressional resolution that empowered Mr. Johnson "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom. . . ." Much of what the author presents here has appeared earlier, in the daily press, in magazines, and in Joseph C. Goulden's splendid and powerful book of a couple of years ago, *Truth Is the First Casualty*. But Austin draws it together in good, quick-reading journalistic prose: the incidents in the Gulf themselves, the response within the Johnson administration, the reaction in Congress leading to the passage of the historic reso-

lution and, months later, the growing doubts of J. William Fulbright and other senators. He dwells overlong, however, on Fulbright's personal agonies about breaking with a president to whom he had been so close and for whom he felt such a deep obligation of loyalty. And occasionally he digresses for stories that are interesting enough in themselves but not really germane to his

thesis.

But Austin has added to what was already known some significant new material. It had long been widely believed that the Johnson administration had had such a resolution ready, waiting only for the right psychological moment when it could be pushed through Congress without too many questions being asked. Through skillful digging, completed before the Pentagon Papers emerged, Austin gathered evidence that greatly strengthens this conviction. More important, he directly challenges what remains of the Johnson administration's "proof" that the second attack in the Gulf actually took place. The evidence first offered—primarily radar and sonar readings—was given very little credence. It was not entirely trusted even by those on the scene who offered it, because the weather was so bad that it adversely affected the radar and because an inexperienced sonarman operated the equipment under circumstances that made it inherently unreliable. And the commodore of the task force warned higher commands to take no action without further investigation.

Yet Robert McNamara said that the Pentagon had positive proof, intercepts of North Vietnamese radio messages, that the attack did take place. But despite the efforts of Senator Fulbright, McNamara would not let these intercepts be read by staff members of the Foreign Relations Committee who



Secretary McNamara explaining

had become experts on the events of that stormy August night. Claiming that security would be dangerously compromised by letting these staff members, already cleared for top secret, read the messages even three-and-a-half years after the event, McNamara

would allow them to be read only by the senators themselves. They, of course, could read them only as laymen, not as the experts the staff members had become. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Pentagon was afraid to let the experts read them.

Although, in a way, it is a shame to disclose Austin's conclusions, since they constitute the climax of his fine book, he says he has reliable evidence that the intercepts were made after the attack of August 2, with which they are consistent, and not after the supposed attack of August 4, with which they are not consistent and which Hanoi has asserted never took place. If this is so, what an irony—and a poetic one at that—that the mighty McNamara, who worshiped at the altar of the false gods of statistical precision, was the victim of a clerical mistake.

It could be, of course, that Austin is entirely wrong but, as he himself writes,

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. It is difficult to believe that the security of the United States would be endan-

gered by the disclosure of a few plaintext messages seven years after the events.

But Austin is after bigger game than just the stupidity, or duplicity, of the Tonkin affair. By titling his book *The President's War*, and in his final pages, he joins his voice to those who have cautioned in recent years about any president's almost unlimited power to wage war without the support of the people or even of Congress. Even though Congress, belatedly by decades, is finally trying to redress the balance, Mr. Nixon continues the war, and widened it in Cambodia and Laos. Yet, although one is rash to make predictions about the Vietnam War, I am certain that Nixon, despite his apparently successful attempts to make cosmetic changes in the war, will fall victim to it, if not immediately like Johnson, in history like John Kennedy. □