

Post 10-2-71
"Tonkin Gulf" Notes

In reviewing my book, "Tonkin Gulf," Murray Marder said "the purpose of the destroyer patrol—which led to the present war—was to gather certain types of military information. The reviewer is entitled to his opinion, but I would like to note that the conclusion drawn by Mr. Marder is not shared by my book."

The basic purpose of the destroyer patrol is one of the major questions—perhaps the major question—of the whole Tonkin Gulf episode. In 1964 the patrol was described originally as "routine." My book tells how the destroyer Maddox collected intelligence, and speculates on the probable use of this intelligence. But as to the primary purpose of the patrol, "Tonkin Gulf" opens up some additional possibilities. Among them is the possibility—for which evidence exists—that the ship's primary mission in the Tonkin Gulf was to get sunk or shot at.

The latter possibility is discussed by the Pentagon Papers and rejected by them. They say "the purpose of the patrols was mainly psychological, as a show of force" (New York Times version). The once-secret documents report that U.S. officials had no intention of using American warships as bait for North Vietnamese attack.

But the Pentagon Papers, while extremely valuable in other respects, offer a skimpy and rather inaccurate account of naval action in the Tonkin Gulf, and I think that this calls into question the accuracy of their conclusion. The weakness of the official documents is most easily demonstrated in the case of the night attack alleged to have taken place in September of 1964. The authors of the Pentagon Papers do not seem to have known that a secret Navy Board of Inquiry found no credible evidence for this attack.

The above and other deficiencies in the Pentagon Papers remind me of certain stories that were leaked to the press seven years ago by anonymous American officials. This gave my impression that the Pentagon's team of analysts, without realizing it, found the elements of a cover story in their top secret documents.

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