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Half-Truths About Tonkin

By making public only selective portions of classified material to support its version of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, the Pentagon has stirred justifiable anger among members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who have access to more complete information. What is worse, the failure to tell the whole story—or to give any adequate explanation of what security considerations stand in the way—contributes to the Administration's already overlarge credibility gap. Americans have a right to wonder what is being withheld from the intercepted North Vietnamese radio transmissions—and why. Now that it is acknowledged that American intelligence was able to intercept and interpret enemy communications three and a half years ago—and much more recently in the Pueblo affair—the Administration cannot argue that it would compromise intelligence secrets to make public the full story of transmissions during the Tonkin incidents.

Even without the questions raised by partly told secrets, Secretary McNamara's testimony this week regarding the Tonkin incident is less than satisfying as justification for all the escalation of American war aims that followed.

Mr. McNamara concedes that the United States warships in the Tonkin Gulf were authorized to approach to within eight miles of the mainland and within four miles of North Vietnamese islands. In common with most Communist nations and many non-Communist ones, North Vietnam claims a twelve-mile limit. The United States recognizes only a three-mile limit, Mr. McNamara says, but this country was not able to persuade the 1960 Geneva Conference on the Law of the Sea to accept that limitation.

The Secretary insists that the American ships were in no way associated with South Vietnamese naval attacks on North Vietnamese islands at about the time of the incidents. He says the local American commander had "absolutely no knowledge" of these South Vietnamese actions, although this information was available to higher American naval authorities.

But, what way was there for the North Vietnamese to know our warships were not related to the attacks on their shores? Why wasn't the American commander informed of these hostile actions in his area of operations—actions which certainly compromised the safety of his ship and his crew? How is it that the United States was so well informed about the intentions and activities of the North Vietnamese and so poorly informed about the operations of its own allies in the vicinity?

Even if the Administration version of the Tonkin incidents is accepted, does this justify the subsequent actions of the United States Government? Much more serious incidents in the Mediterranean last June and in the Sea of Japan last month produced far less traumatic results.

In light of the still incalculable consequences, the Tonkin affair needs much fuller exploration. The public is entitled to all available facts.