

**Volume 14**

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**Last Full Measure: Gulf of Tonkin**  
**Incident - II**

**Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on A Moment in Time is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose devotion gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, the last full measure.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: On August 2, 1964 USS *Maddox*, a destroyer on intelligence watch in the Gulf of Tonkin off the**

coast of North Vietnam, was attacked by three enemy torpedo patrol boats. *Maddox* destroyed the boats, but narrowly escaped a triple torpedo spread launched before the boats were sunk. The destroyer was ordered to remain on station as an assertion of freedom of the seas and two days later, now joined by another destroyer, USS *Turner Joy*, the whole scenario seemed about to repeat itself. *Maddox's* radar picked up three enemy boats that seemed to be closing fast in an attack pattern. Commodore John Herrick, commander of the patrol, radioed for air support and soon both ships and planes were pounding away at the approaching bogies. There was no unimpeachable evidence that an attack command had

**been broadcast on enemy frequencies as there had been two days before, there was no evidence of debris after the engagement and no real evidence that the three contacts actually attacked the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. Nevertheless, officers and crew of the two ships certainly felt they were under attack and acted accordingly.**

**Decades later there remain powerful doubts about the true nature of the so-called Gulf of Tonkin incident. U.S. policy makers from President Johnson on down, even if they were also in doubt as to the nature of the challenge, certainly saw it as an opportunity. On August 5<sup>th</sup> U.S. planes conducted air strikes against North Vietnamese**

**installations on the mainland and Johnson requested that Congress pass a resolution giving him power to “take all necessary action to protect our Armed Forces.” This Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was pretty much a blank check to escalate U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia and was the closest thing to a declaration of war to emerge from Congress.**

**The incident probably did little to compel either U.S. or North Vietnamese leaders in the course they had chosen. By summer 1964, Johnson wanted to expand the war after the election and sensed he needed the commitment of the Congress if he was to widen the conflict. Both the real attack and the**

**questionable one in the Gulf provided the context for his request for the Resolution and air attacks on the North. Since he was committed to an expanded engagement anyway, he probably was looking for a vivid example of North Vietnamese hostility as reason for war.**

**Hanoi was committed to eventual Vietnamese independence and was prepared to continue the war indefinitely. Whether the first attack was ordered from the top or just a rogue operation as Johnson originally conjectured, the result was the same. Using the attack as the reason, the United States vastly expanded the war, the North resisted until American public opinion wearied of**

**the conflict, the United States was forced to withdraw and Vietnam, albeit as a communist state, was unified and independent. The incident in the Gulf of Tonkin was neither a blip on the horizon nor a great event. As in the summer of 1914, powerful forces were already in play seeking only a spark to light the fire.**

**At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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