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STATINTL

Congress Responds To Tonkin Incident

This is the fourth of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE VIETNAM 1964-1965"

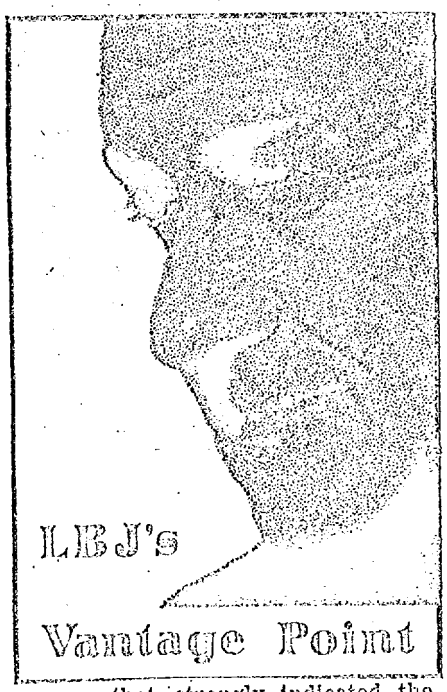
In August 1964 an unexpected crisis developed, one that threatened for a time to change the nature of the war in Vietnam. During the early hours of Sunday morning, August 2, a high-priority message came in reporting that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked the destroyer USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Maddox was on what we called the De Soto patrol. One purpose was to spot evidence of Hanoi's continuing infiltration of men and war supplies into South Vietnam by sea. Another was to gather electronic intelligence.

Another form of naval activity, not connected with our patrol, was going on in the area. During 1964 the South Vietnamese navy made small-scale strikes against installations along the North Vietnamese coast. The purpose was to interfere with Hanoi's continuing program of sending men and supplies into the South by sea. Senators and Representatives designated to oversee our intelligence operations were fully briefed on these South Vietnamese activities, and on our supporting role, in January 1964, again in May, twice in June, and again in early August. Secretary McNamara described the operations, codenamed 34-A, in a closed session with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on August 3, 1964.

One 34-A attack occurred on July 30. At the time, the destroyer Maddox had not started its patrol and was 120 miles away. A second South Vietnamese attack took place the night of August 3 when the De Soto patrol was at least 70 miles away. It was later alleged that our destroyers were supporting the South Vietnamese naval action. The fact is our De Soto commanders did not even know where or when the 34-A attacks would occur.

Two days later the North Vietnamese struck again at our destroyers, this time at night (midmorning Washington time) on August 4. A few minutes after nine o'clock I had a call from McNamara. He informed me that our intelligence people had intercepted a



message that strongly indicated the North Vietnamese were preparing another attack on our ships in the Tonkin Gulf. Soon we received messages from the destroyer Maddox that its radar and that of the USS C. Turner Joy had spotted vessels they believed to be hostile. The enemy ships appeared to be preparing an ambush. The Maddox and C. Turner Joy had changed course to avoid contact, but they then sent word that the enemy vessels were closing in at high speed. Within an hour the destroyers advised that they were being attacked by torpedoes and were firing on the enemy PT boats. As messages flowed in from Pacific Command Headquarters, McNamara passed along the key facts to me.

We had scheduled a noon meeting of the National Security Council to discuss the situation in Cyprus, and several key advisers had assembled for that session.

I closed the NSC meeting and asked Rusk, McNamara, Vance, McCone, and Bundy to join me for lunch. The unanimous view of those advisers was that we could not ignore this second provocation and that the attack required retaliation. I agreed. We decided on air strikes against North Vietnamese PT boats and their bases plus a strike on one oil depot.

During the afternoon additional intelligence reports flowed in. We intercepted a message from one of the attacking North Vietnamese boats in which it boasted of having fired at two "enemy airplanes" and claimed to have damaged one. The North Vietnamese skipper reported that his unit had "sacrificed two comrades." Our experts said this meant either two enemy boats or two men in the attack group. Another message to North Vietnamese PT boat headquarters boasted: "Enemy vessel perhaps wounded." Clearly the North Vietnamese knew they were attacking us.

Action reports continued to arrive from our destroyers, and from the Pacific Command. A few were ambiguous. One from the destroyer Maddox questioned whether the many reports of enemy torpedo firings were all valid.

I instructed McNamara to investigate these reports and obtain clarification. He immediately got in touch with Admiral U. S. G. Sharp Jr., the Commander in Chief, Pacific, and the Admiral in turn made contact with the De Soto patrol. McNamara and his civilian and military specialist went over all the evidence in specific detail. We wanted to be absolutely certain that our ships had actually been attacked before we retaliated.

Admiral Sharp called McNamara to report that after checking all the reports and evidence, he had no doubt whatsoever that an attack had taken place. McNamara and his associates reached the same firm conclusion. Detailed studies made after the incident confirmed this judgment.

I summoned the National Security Council for another meeting at 6:15 p.m. to discuss in detail the incident and our plans for a sharp but limited response. About seven o'clock I met with the congressional leadership in the White House for the same purpose. I told them that I believed a congressional resolution of support for our entire position in Southeast Asia was necessary and would strengthen our hand. I said that we might be forced to further action, and that I did not "want to go in unless Congress goes in with me."

I was determined, from the time I became President, to seek the fullest support of Congress for any major action that I took, whether in foreign affairs or in the domestic field.

Concerning Vietnam, I repeatedly told Secretaries Rusk and McNamara that I never wanted to receive any recommendation for action we might have to take unless it was accompanied by a proposal for assuring the backing of Congress.

Because of this, it became routine for all contingency plans to include suggestions for informing Congress and winning its support. As we considered the possibility of having to expand our efforts in Vietnam, proposals for seeking a congressional resolution became part of the normal contingency

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