



0. THE GULF OF TONKIN - Story Preface

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On August 2, 1964, the USS *Maddox* was patrolling the coastline of North Vietnam. The American destroyer was in international waters. Naval History and Heritage Command [describes this official U.S. Navy photo](#): "Photograph taken from USS *Maddox* (DD-731) during her engagement with three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, 2 August 1964. The view shows one of the boats racing by, with what appears to be smoke from *Maddox*' shells in its wake."

At the time of President Kennedy's assassination, about 16,000 American military advisors were in Vietnam. Before Diem's death, the Kennedy Administration thought it would [pull out](#) 1,000 of those men by the end of 1963.

Robert McNamara (Secretary of Defense) and General Maxwell Taylor (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs) believed U.S. involvement in the volatile political situation could be over [by 1965](#) and recognized:

...any significant slowing in the rate of progress would surely have a serious effect on U.S. popular support for the [U.S. effort](#).

But what if U.S. forces were attacked? Would that change the public's opinion? It had happened before, at Pearl Harbor.

American naval ships were attacked by the North Vietnamese in the [Gulf of Tonkin](#) on August 2, 1964. Historians now believe, however, that those attacks were in response to U.S. and South Vietnamese espionage along the North Vietnam coast. Supporting this conclusion is a conversation that McNamara had with President Johnson the morning after the attack:

I think I should also, or we should also at that time, Mr. President, explain this Op Plan 34-A, these covert operations. There's no question but what that had bearing on. And on Friday night, as you probably know, we had four TP [McNamara means PT] boats from Vietnam manned by Vietnamese or other nationals, attack two islands. And we expended, oh, a thousand rounds of ammunition of one kind or another against them. We probably shot up a radar station and a few other miscellaneous buildings. And following twenty-four hours after that, with this destroyer in that same area, undoubtedly led them to connect the two events. (See the now-declassified [telephone conversation between McNamara and LBJ on 3 August 1964 at 10:30 AM.](#))

Whatever the reason for the August 2nd attack, U.S. military forces did not respond. But when another attack allegedly took place on August 4th, the course of the Vietnam War changed forever.

The real question is: Was there actually a second attack?

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Gulf of Tonkin - Satellite View

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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