THE WAR ESCALATES



- 0. THE WAR ESCALATES Story Preface
- 1. POLITICAL UNREST
- 2. WHY ARE WE IN VIETNAM?
- 3. STUDENT PROTESTS

4. THE WAR ESCALATES

- 5. LBJ LEAVES THE WHITE HOUSE
- 6. SCHOOLS IN TURMOIL
- 7. T. C. WILLIAMS HIGH SCHOOL
- 8. HERMAN BOONE GETS THE JOB
- 9. GERRY BERTIER
- 10. SCHOOL BUSING AN ISSUE AGAIN



With the Gulf-of-Tonkin Resolution in hand, President Johnson and his administration had the power to escalate American action in Vietnam. Such increased action included the dropping of bombs—including white-phosphorus bombs. This U.S. Air Force image depicts a Douglas A-1E Skyraider dropping a white phosphorus bomb on a "Viet Cong" position in South Vietnam during 1966. White phosphorus, a now-banned chemical weapon which was dubbed "Willie Pete" during the Vietnam war, is a substance which continues to burn until it disappears. Click on the image for a full-page view.

In April of 1964 (about a month after LBJ's conversation with Richard Russell), Senator Robert F. Kennedy gave an <u>oral history</u> to the Kennedy Library about his brother's intentions in Vietnam. The President and his advisors had been concerned about communism taking hold in Vietnam. Their fear was the "<u>Domino Theory</u>" (scroll to the last part of this helpful description).

Lyndon Johnson, as demonstrated by his taped conversations, had very strong initial reservations about sending American personnel to Vietnam. Both he and his long-standing closest advisors were concerned that the American people would not support a war in that distant land.

But instead of ending the war, the Johnson Administration sent more than half a million military personnel to Southeast Asia. How—and why—did that happen?

President Johnson had many of the same advisors as President Kennedy. Robert McNamara was still Secretary of Defense. McGeorge Bundy was still National Security Advisor.

These were men who had recommended (in October of 1963) that the U.S. be out of Vietnam by the end of 1965. One is left to wonder why they radically changed their advice months later.

The Johnson Administration wanted a resolution from Congress to handle the situation in Vietnam as the President and his advisors saw fit. Between August 2-4, 1964 events occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin which gave them the power they had sought for months.

According to an <u>article</u> at the LBJ Presidential Library web-site, American naval ships had been attacked by North Vietnamese ships in the <u>Gulf of Tonkin</u> on August 2, 1964. The American people were told a second attack had occurred on August 4th.

The cover notes for LBJ's August 4th "Presidential Daily Diary" state the President received a message about the second attack during his mid-morning meeting with Congressman George Mahon:

- The Diary reflects Mahon was with the President between 10:40 and 11:30 a.m., but there is <u>no specific</u> <u>mention</u> of a call regarding the second attack.
- There is a note of an "Off Record" event that took place during the Mahon meeting.

Between 12:35 and 12:58, the President had a <u>meeting</u> with his National Security Council where the reported second attack was discussed. He also had a luncheon meeting with his senior foreign policy advisors where the decision was made to respond with a limited air attack. The Diary reflects that meeting lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes.

Immediately afterwards, the President met with Mrs. Johnson's "tea group," sent flowers to friends and submitted judicial nominations to the Senate.

Later in the day, after receiving clarifying information about the second attack, the President met with the

National Security Council and the Congressional leadership:

- The Administration wanted a resolution from Congress to give the President power to respond to all North Vietnamese aggression with the force he deemed appropriate.
- Later in the evening, LBJ told the American people about the second attack in a live televised report.
- The next day, the President addressed the Congress.

On August 7th, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. It was as close as America would ever come to actually declaring war on North Vietnam.

Within a week, the President's power in Vietnam had gone from providing military advisor support to doing whatever he thought was necessary.

Full-scale war, with many American casualties, was just around the corner.

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Media Stream



McGeorge Bundy with President Johnson

Image online, courtesy the LBJ Presidential Library.

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Gulf of Tonkin

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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President Johnson's Daily Diary - August 4, 1964

Image online, courtesy the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum $\underline{\text{website}}.$ PD

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