

Gulf of Tonkin Crisis: Model for Cheney's War

by Carl Osgood

Despite his strong desire for war on Iran, Vice President Dick Cheney is not likely to be able to launch it on his own, especially since, as sources have told *EIR*, President Bush has not decided for war, yet. However, the movement of U.S. naval forces into and out of the Persian Gulf, the conduct of U.S. intelligence activities directed against Iran, the accusation that Iran is supplying Shi'ite militias with weapons that are used to kill American soldiers in Iraq, and the intensification of operations by the U.S. Air Force in both Iraq and Afghanistan, have created the danger of an incident, a "Gulf of Tonkin II," as Lyndon LaRouche has warned, that could provide Cheney with the pretext that he needs to convince Bush to start yet another war.

The model indeed is the original Gulf of Tonkin incident of August 1964, which was used by the Lyndon Johnson Administration as the pretext to expand the war in Vietnam to the point where it became an American war. President Johnson and Robert McNamara, his Secretary of Defense, were able to use that incident to stampede the Congress into giving Johnson a blank check to wage war as he saw fit.

The Johnson Administration began laying out plans for expanding the American presence in South Vietnam early in 1964, and the need for a Congressional resolution was suggested as early as February by Walt Rostow, an official in Johnson's State Department. The idea was twofold: to give Johnson a free hand to wage the war as he saw fit, and to take Vietnam off the table as an issue in the upcoming election campaign against Republican Sen. Barry Goldwater. Johnson did not want Goldwater to be able to accuse him of being "soft on communism."

Covert Operations

The first rough draft of a resolution was completed by Johnson's National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, by late May. That same month, the CIA issued a special national intelligence estimate, entitled "Probable Consequences of Certain U.S. Actions with respect to Vietnam and Laos" (available, today, on the website of the National Security Archive). The estimate assumed that U.S. actions to bring about a cessation of North Vietnamese support for the insurgency in the South, would include air and naval strikes, which "would be on a graduated scale of intensity, ranging from reconnaissance, threats, cross-border operations and limited strikes on logistical targets" in North Vietnam, indicating that such plans were already being

drawn up. Based on that assumption, the CIA concluded, wrongly, that under increasing U.S. military pressure, the Hanoi regime would likely back off from pursuing its war in the South.

Pressure was already being applied against North Vietnam via covert operations. Under Operations Plan 34A (a.k.a. OPlan 34A), which dated back to late 1963, commando raids were being carried out along North Vietnam's coast by raiders transported in boats supplied by the United States. In conjunction with these raids, U.S. Navy destroyers, equipped with electronic eavesdropping teams, would sail along the coast to monitor and record North Vietnamese radio and radar traffic in response to the raids.

What Actually Happened in the Gulf of Tonkin

It was in apparent reaction to one such OPlan 34A raid that North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the *USS Maddox* on Aug. 2. The *Maddox* called for air support from the aircraft carrier *USS Ticonderoga*, and fired back, crippling two boats and sinking a third. There seems to be little doubt that this attack did, indeed occur. It took place during daylight hours, and was acknowledged by Hanoi Radio ten days later. President Johnson concluded, that because no Americans were hurt, retaliatory action was unnecessary, but the U.S.A. warned Hanoi that "grave consequences would inevitably result from any further unprovoked offensive military action."

The real reaction was not public, however. A second destroyer, the *USS C. Turner Joy*, was ordered to join the *Maddox*, and further OPlan 34A raids were launched on Aug. 3. The two destroyers were ordered to run to within eight miles of the North Vietnamese coast "to assert the right of freedom of the seas." The following night, in darkness and in bad weather, both destroyers started firing at what their crews thought were patrol boats coming at them from all directions. However, doubts as to what had actually happened began as soon as the guns on the two destroyers fell silent. Capt. John Herrick, the commander of the destroyer task force, radioed to his superiors that "a review of the action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects on radar and over-eager sonarmen may have accounted for many reports. No visual sightings have been reported ... and the Commander suggests that a complete evaluation be undertaken before any further action."

Herrick's message, however, caused only a brief pause in the planning then already underway at the Pentagon for retaliatory strikes against North Vietnam. Later that evening, President Johnson went on national television to announce the second "incident," and accused North Vietnam of "open aggression on the high seas against the United States of America." An hour and a half later, the first retaliatory air strikes were conducted against North Vietnamese naval facilities. Two days later, on Aug. 6, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed the Senate with only two dissenting votes.