

## Gulf of Tonkin Resolution Lesson Plan

### Central Historical Question:

*Was the U.S. planning to go to war with North Vietnam before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution?*

### Materials:

- Gulf of Tonkin Powerpoint
- Gulf of Tonkin Timeline
- Gulf of Tonkin Documents A-D
- Gulf of Tonkin Guiding Questions

### Plan of Instruction:

1. Show map of Vietnam (PPT) and hand out Gulf of Tonkin Timeline. Have students follow along as you lecture on background to Vietnam War:
  - *French colonialism in Vietnam: 1800s-1941.*
  - *Japan took over Vietnam during WWII, but when Japan was defeated in 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence.*
  - *But French came back in and tried to take over again; U.S. supported French. The French lost in 1954.*
  - *1954: Geneva Convention split the country into North and South, with the idea that there would be free elections in the near future.*
  - *(U.S. DID NOT sign Geneva Accords, for fear that Communists would win the general elections).*
  - *U.S. supported South Vietnam leader, Diem. But Diem turned out to be oppressive and unpopular. He canceled elections, repressed Buddhists; caused major discontent in South Vietnam.*
  - *U.S. feared that Diem's unpopularity will push more South Vietnamese to support Communists. So they supported a coup and Diem was overthrown and assassinated—Nov. 1, 1963.*
  - *JFK assassinated only weeks later. LBJ inherited the problem in Vietnam.*
  - *Under new weak South Vietnam government, support for Communism grew; North Vietnam smuggled weapons into South Vietnam to support Communist insurgents through a network of trails through Laos and Cambodia (Ho Chi Minh trails).*
  - *Aug. 2, 1964- North Vietnamese attacked U.S.S. Maddox; Aug. 4. —another attack provided grounds for Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (second attack turned out to be fake—never happened).*
  - *President Johnson asked Congress to pass Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which gave him authorization to use military force in Vietnam (not a declaration of war).*

2. Inquiry: *Was the U.S. planning to go to war with North Vietnam before the Gulf of Tonkin incident?*

Hand out Gulf of Tonkin Documents A-D and Guiding Questions.

READ THE TOP OF THE GUIDING QUESTIONS SHEET TO THE CLASS.

Have students complete in their notebooks.

3. Discussion:

- What types of documents are these? Do you think they're reliable?
- What evidence do the documents offer that the U.S. was planning to go to war with North Vietnam *before* the Gulf of Tonkin incident?
- Is this *strong* evidence that the U.S. was planning an attack?
- What were some of the reasons why the U.S. was hesitant about attacking North Vietnam?
- Is there evidence that the U.S. was planning a full-scale war?
- What additional evidence would you want to see before deciding?
- What additional evidence would you want to see in order to determine whether the U.S. was planning a war with North Vietnam?

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Citations:

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Joint Resolution of Congress: H.J. RES 1145 August 7, 1964.  
<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=98&page=transcript>

Johnson Library, National Security File, Aides File, McGeorge Bundy, Luncheon with the President, Vol. I, Part 1. Top Secret Sensitive. Also published in Declassified Documents, 2979, 473B. <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d173>

Department of State, Central Files, POL 27 VIET S. Top Secret: Priority; Nodis. Drafted by William Bundy, cleared by Sullivan, and approved by Rusk.  
<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d166#fn2>

Johnson Library, Recordings and Transcripts, Recording of a telephone conversation between the President and McGeorge Bundy, Tape 64.28 PNO 111.U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-68, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia: Regional Affairs, Washington, DC, Document Number 53.  
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam/lbjbundy.htm>

## Vietnam War Timeline

**September 2, 1945** - Ho Chi Minh declares an independent Vietnam called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

**July 1950** - The United States pledges \$15 million worth of military aid to France to help them fight in Vietnam.

**May 7, 1954** - The French are defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

**July 21, 1954** - The Geneva Accords declares a cease-fire for the withdrawal of the French from Vietnam and creates a temporary boundary between North and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel.

**October 26, 1955** - South Vietnam declares itself the Republic of Vietnam (GVN).

**December 20, 1960** - The National Liberation Front (NLF), a.k.a. the Viet Cong, is established in South Vietnam.

**November 2, 1963** – During a coup, South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem is executed.

**August 2 and 4, 1964** - North Vietnamese attack two U.S. destroyers in international waters, which becomes known as the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.

**August 7, 1964** - The U.S. Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

**March 2, 1965** – The U.S. begins bombing campaign of North Vietnam - Operation Rolling Thunder.

**March 8, 1965** - The first U.S. combat troops arrive in Vietnam.

## Document A (Modified)

### **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** **Congressional Joint Resolution, August 7, 1964**

The North Vietnamese Navy, in violation of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law, have deliberately and repeatedly attacked United States naval vessels lawfully present in international waters, and have thereby created a serious threat to international peace; and

These attacks are part of a deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression that the Communist regime in North Vietnam has been waging against its neighbors and other free the nations; and

The United States is assisting the peoples of Southeast Asia to protect their freedom and has no territorial, military or political ambitions in that area, but desires only that these peoples should be left in peace to work out their own destinies in their own way:

Therefore the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America have decided that we approve and support the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary military actions to combat Communist forces and to prevent further aggression.

The United States is prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.

## Document B (Modified)

### Memorandum from Foreign Affairs Advisor (Bundy) to the President

Washington, May 25, 1964.

It is recommended that you make a Presidential decision that the U.S. will use selected and carefully graduated military force against North Vietnam. . .

This basic Presidential decision is recommended on these premises:

(1) that the U.S. cannot tolerate the loss of Southeast Asia to Communism;

(2) that without a decision to resort to military action if necessary the present prospect is not hopeful, in South Vietnam or in Laos;

(3) that a decision to use force if necessary, backed by resolute and extensive deployment, and conveyed by every possible means to our adversaries (enemies), gives the best present chance of avoiding the actual use of such force.

It is further recommended that our clear purpose in this decision should be to use all our influence to bring about a major reduction or elimination of North Vietnamese interference in Laos and in South Vietnam, and not to unroll a scenario aimed at the use of force as an end in itself.

*Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Aides File, McGeorge Bundy, Luncheon with the President, Vol. I, Part 1. Top Secret Sensitive.*

## Document C (Modified)

### Telegram From the Department of State (Rusk) to the Embassy in Vietnam (Lodge)

Washington, May 22, 1964—7:40 p.m.

On the other question, whether initial substantial attacks – [against North Vietnam] could proceed without notice, it is our present view here that this would simply not be possible. Even if Hanoi (North Vietnam) itself did not publicize them, there are enough observers in North Vietnam who might pick them up and there is also the major possibility of leakage at the South Vietnam end. Thus, publicity seems almost inevitable to us here for any attack that did significant damage. Once such publicity occurred, I think you can see that the finger would point straight at us and that the President would then be put in perhaps a far more difficult position toward the American public and the Congress.

Thus, we are using a GVN-or-U.S.-acknowledged plan at the present time, although we do recognize that something a little stronger than the present OPLAN 34-A\* might be carried out on the basis you propose.

\*OPLAN 34-A was implemented in 1961. It was a covert or secret operation to collect information about North Vietnam.

*Source: Department of State, Central Files, POL 27 VIET S. Top Secret: Priority; Nodis. Drafted by William Bundy, cleared by Sullivan, and approved by Rusk.*

## Document D (Modified)

### Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) Washington, May 27, 1964, 11:24 a.m.

Johnson: I will tell you the more, I just stayed awake last night thinking of this thing, and the more that I think of it I don't know what in the hell, it looks like to me that we're getting into another Korea. It just worries the hell out of me. I don't see what we can ever hope to get out of there with once we're committed. . . . I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think we can get out. And it's just the biggest damn mess that I ever saw.

Bundy: It is an awful mess.

Johnson: And we just got to think about it. . . I just thought about ordering all those kids in there. And what in the hell am I ordering them out there for? What in the hell is Vietnam worth to me? . . .

Bundy: Yeah, yeah.

Johnson: Of course, if you start running from the Communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen.

Bundy: Yeah, that's the trouble. And that is what the rest of that half of the world is going to think if this thing comes apart on us. That's the dilemma, that's exactly the dilemma.

. . .

Johnson: But this is a terrible thing that we're getting ready to do.

Bundy: . . . I think, also, Mr. President, you can do, what I think Kennedy did at least once which is to make the threat without having made your own internal decision that you would actually carry it through.

*Source: Johnson Library, Recordings and Transcripts, Recording of a telephone conversation between the President and McGeorge Bundy, Tape 64.28 PNO 111. U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-68, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia: Regional Affairs, Washington, DC, Document Number 53.*

## Gulf of Tonkin Resolution Guiding Questions

*Most history books say that the United States war in Vietnam began in 1964, after Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. However, it's no secret that the United States had been very involved in the region for at least a decade before. By the time JFK was assassinated in 1963, the United States had 16,000 military troops in Vietnam. Today we're going to try to answer the question:*

***Was the U.S. planning to go to war in Vietnam before August 1964?***

### Document A

1. According to this document, what did the North Vietnamese do?
2. Why did the United States feel compelled to respond at this point?
3. According to this document, was the U.S. planning to go to war in Vietnam before August 1964? Explain your answer.

### Document B

1. When was this document written? Who wrote it?
2. What did Bundy suggest to the President?
3. What are three reasons why Bundy made this recommendation?
4. According to this document, was the U.S. planning to go to war in Vietnam before August 1964? Explain your answer.

### Document C

1. When was this document written? Who wrote it?
2. How did Rusk feel about the South Vietnamese government's ability to fight the Communists? Support your answer with evidence.
3. Why did Rusk think attacking the North Vietnamese is not a smart idea?
4. According to this document, was the U.S. planning to go to war in Vietnam before August 1964? Explain your answer.

### Document D

1. What type of document is this? How trustworthy do you think this type of document is?
2. What is the dilemma facing President Johnson?
3. According to this document, was the U.S. planning to go to war in Vietnam before August 1964? Explain your answer.

Using all four documents, write a paragraph in response to the question:

***Was the U.S. planning to go to war in Vietnam before August 1964?***