ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1, PART I

LOS ANGELES TIMES
29 April 1985

Cables, Accounts Declassified

Tonkin — Dubious Premise for a War

By ROBERT SCHEER, *Times Staff Writer*

Twenty years ago, on the blackest of nights in the Gulf of Tonkin, when the moon died and dense fog, angry seas, electrical storms and luminescent ocean microorganisms conspired to play tricks with a sailor's mind, America went to war.

A murky incident—a purported attack on U.S. vessels by North Vietnam—led President Lyndon B. Johnson to order the bombing of North Vietnam, to obtain a congressional resolution approving the Americanization of the war in Southeast Asia and eventually to station half a million U.S. troops in Vietnam.

However, a reconstruction of those events, based on once-secret government cables and formerly classified eyewitness accounts, indicates that the attack never occurred.

The confusion began the night of Aug. 4, 1964, high on the bridge of the Maddox, an aging destroyer outfitted as a spy ship. Unable to see objects a few feet into the blustery dark, dependent on electronic information gleaned from radar, sonar and intercepted enemy communications, Capt. John J. Herrick—a 44-year-old veteran of two wars—concluded that the mysterious dots on his radar screen were North Vietnamese PT boats bent on attacking his two-ship flotilla.

Herrick, commodore of the 7th Fleet's Destroyer Division 192, radioed an emergency call to Pacific naval headquarters in Honolulu that would soon be read to the President, who was eating breakfast in the White House 12 time zones away. Johnson was furious.

Two days before, the Maddox had fired first on three North Vietnamese PT boats that had closed to within 10 miles of the Maddox in what Herrick believed was an imminent attack. Now, there had apparently been a second incident, and for the next 14 hours, the President's men would plan a retaliatory air strike.

Johnson—in the midst of an election campaign—insisted that decisive action be taken soon enough for him to announce it on television that night, even as his staff frantically tried to determine whether an attack had indeed occurred.

In order to meet that deadline, Johnson would overrule the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet and announce the bombing of North Vietnam before some of the U.S. pilots had even arrived over their targets.

Not So Clear in Gulf

In the daylight of Washington it was all very clear and simple—but not so clear back in the darkened gulf.

From its inception, the purpose of Herrick's mission—which had been conceived in the White House and directed by the President's national security adviser—was largely secret, even to him. It had begun a week earlier, when the Maddox was re-equipped as an intelligence-gathering ship and sent to obtain information on Hanoi's radar and communications, as well as to make a show of force close to the North Vietnamese coast.

Simultaneously, South Vietnamese navy personnel, trained by the United States and using U.S.-supplied boats, had begun conducting secret raids on targets in North Vietnam.

Unknown to Herrick, one such attack had begun the night of July 30, immediately before he began sailing along the North Vietnamese coast. The North Vietnamese PT boats that closed on the Maddox on Aug. 2 were probably retaliating for that assault.

Then-Secretary of State Dean Rusk conceded as much in a classified cable to Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, the following night. The "Maddox incident is directly related to (North Vietnam's) efforts to resist these activities," Rusk said.

Request Denied

On Aug. 3, the day after that first Gulf of Tonkin episode, Herrick requested that his patrol be ended because he thought the mission made the Maddox vulnerable. He was turned down by Adm. Ulysses Grant Sharp Jr., commander in chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific, who felt this might call into question U.S. "resolve to assert our legitimate rights in these international waters."

Sharp recently said that he had obtained permission from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to strengthen Herrick's patrol by placing a second destroyer, the Turner Joy, under his command.

Radio monitoring—which was the purpose of Herrick's mission—was conducted by a communications box that had been placed between the Maddox's smokestacks. Intelligence experts stood watch inside the box, intercepting and translating North Vietnamese communications. Occasionally, the officer in charge of monitoring these communications would pop out with messages about what he thought the North Vietnamese were doing.

On the night of Aug. 3, another U.S.-directed South Vietnamese commando raid was launched and,

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according to communications monitored by the Maddox, the North Vietnamese confused that mission with Herrick's patrol.

Early on the evening of Aug. 4, the intelligence officer reported to Herrick that the radio communications indicated an imminent attack on the Maddox and her sister ship.

Warning to Washington

Herrick passed the warning on to Washington. It was 9 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time, when the message was handed to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara.

Twelve minutes later, McNamara called the President, who had been with Democratic congressional leaders.

"They have?" Johnson thundered when he heard about the supposed attack, according to then-House Majority Leader Carl Albert, who had stayed on after the congressional breakfast. "Now, I'll tell you what I want," Johnson said to McNamara. "I not only want those patrol boats that attacked the Maddox destroyed, I want everything at that harbor destroyed; I want the whole works destroyed. I want to give them a real dose."

At this point, however, Herrick had not said that his ships were under attack, only that his radio intercepts pointed to the likelihood of an attack.

Political Repercussions

Immediately after breakfast, Johnson—who was preoccupied with his campaign against Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater—took a walk with adviser Kenneth O'Donnell.

"The President was wondering aloud as to the political repercussions and questioned me rather closely as to my political reaction to his making a military retaliation," O'Donnell recalled four years later in a letter to Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), then chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

"The attack upon Lyndon Johnson," O'Donnell wrote, "was going to come from the right and the hawks, and he must not allow them to accuse him of vacillating or being an indecisive leader. The emergence of the (Gulf of Tonkin) resolution itself was nothing but political coloration for a decision already taken."

After the gulf incident and the U.S. retaliation, a Harris Poll showed that public opinion on the U.S. role in Vietnam had reversed. Before the incident, 58% of those polled had a negative view of the Johnson Administration's handling of Vietnam policy; afterward, 72% approved.

'Capable of Quick Response'

While denying that Johnson wanted to expand the war, national security adviser McGeorge Bundy said recently that the President was concerned about his image as a leader. Johnson wanted "to be seen to be capable of an adequately quick response, no doubt about that," Bundy recalled.

While Johnson's reaction may have been quick enough that morning, it was based on reports from the gulf that became more uncertain as the day went on.

On the Maddox, the man in the communications box whose reports of an impending attack started the incident was known to some as "the hairball man"—after the character in Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" who looked into a hairball and foresaw the future.

"Every time the hairball man came out of that van, I got worried," said Dr. Samuel E. Halpern, who was the ship's physician and is now a professor of radiology at UC San Diego. "He'd go running onto the bridge, and then the order came over the intercom and said that these PT boats were approaching us and that they were going to try to torpedo us. And so we weren't going to wait, we were going to fire and we did, of course. . . ."

Halpern added that after the battle, "some of the chiefs were really upset about the hairball man and the box. . . . And one of them said, 'We ought to throw the God-damned box overboard.' "

Testimony 4 Years Later

Later, investigations within the executive branch and Congress would cast doubts on whether the radio intercepts of an impending attack even applied to the action around Herrick's ships. In testimony four years later before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, McNamara revealed that the communications intercepted that morning of Aug. 4 consisted simply of North Vietnamese orders to "make ready for military operations" sent to two boats that were incapable of carrying torpedoes.

That night, though, with the radio man's intercepts in hand, Herrick and his officers began to interpret oddly moving radar dots and sonar noises as torpedo attacks from enemy vessels they could not see. The Maddox increased speed to its maximum 30 knots and followed a zigzag course.

At 9:52 p.m., Herrick reported that both his ships were under torpedo attack. Between 22 and 30 torpedoes were counted during the next two hours, during which the destroyers thrashed about in high-speed evasive action while frenetically firing their cannon at targets that simply were not visible.

The report of so many torpedoes aroused suspicion among the Maddox's officers because the North Vietnamese navy was thought to have only 24 torpedoes on all its PT boats. Ultimately, the Americans began to suspect that whatever their instruments said, no attack was in progress.

As Halpern recalled: "Immediately after the attack, the officers came streaming into the wardroom and it was hysterical. . . just hysterical laughter. Everybody was laughing like mad, and then suddenly, I realized I was laughing too, the same way. And it was this tremendous release from pressure."

Fighter pilots from two nearby carriers that were providing cover for the destroyers swooped down dangerously close to the breaking waves to drop flares and fire volley after volley where the radar dots said the targets would be. However, they also could not confirm the presence of enemy boats or torpedoes.

'A Decent Interval'

Retired Vice Adm. James B. Stockdale, a pilot who flew above the Maddox and Turner Joy, searching out their attackers, recently broke a silence his superiors had asked him to observe because, he said, "I thought 20 years was a decent interval." Stockdale now says categorically that the attack never occurred.

In his book, "In Love and War," written with his wife Sybil, Stockdale recalls returning to his ship and consulting with the other pilots. None had seen anything. He quotes one pilot as saying, "No boat wakes, no ricochets off boats, no boat gunfire, no torpedo wakes—nothing but black sea and American firepower."

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At the end of the "battle," no destroyers had been hit and no torpedoes exploded. Back in Washington, however, the gears were moving inexorably and without the complications of doubt.

About 10 a.m. on Aug. 4, McGeorge Bundy's brother, William, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, who was vacationing on Martha's Vineyard, got an urgent call from Rusk asking him to return to Washington forthwith.

"So, I got down to Washington at 3:30 in the afternoon," William Bundy recalled, "and I went to the office and learned that (Under Secretary of State) George Ball and Abe (Abram) Chayes (who had recently resigned as the State Department's chief legal adviser) were drafting a congressional resolution.

"I was told the basic story that there . . . apparently had been a second attack and that the President was determined to retaliate and . . . to seek a congressional resolution."

No Doubt Expressed

Bundy said that he never heard anyone in the State Department that day, from the secretary of state on down, express the slightest doubt about the facts of the attack.

"My understanding was that the President was looking to McNamara, and he in turn was looking to Admiral Sharp and other intelligence people for what he, in the end, judged to be solid evidence that it had taken place."

In the gulf, the evidence was collapsing. Several hours after the so-called attack, Herrick climbed to the bridge of the Maddox, his stomach tight with apprehension that a bizarre error may have occurred. As Herrick reached the top of the ladder, his worst fears were confirmed. He was met there by his second-in-command, Cmdr. Herbert L. Ogier, skipper of the Maddox, who informed Herrick that the reports of the attack were wrong.

The destroyer had been going unusually fast and zigzagging, and some, if not all, of the sonar sightings had simply been the ship's electronic signals bouncing off its own rudder rather than enemy torpedoes, Ogier told Herrick. Then, Herrick and his top officers huddled and agreed on the source of the error and the necessity of informing Washington.

'Suggest Complete Evaluation'

Herrick cabled word of his discovery: "Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects on radar and over-eager sonar men may have accounted for many reports. No actual visual sightings by Maddox. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action taken."

Herrick's decision to reverse himself was not an easy one. "You know, we've led them on now for three or four hours and all of a sudden we're changing our tune," he recalled in a recent interview, "and you wonder how they're going to react to that. . . . There's a sort of gung-ho spirit in any of the services, and not many people like to admit they're wrong or have been wrong, but the stakes were too great in this case. I couldn't stonewall this thing then and pretend—you know, yeah, damn it, it really happened, I just can't take that chance."

He did hesitate about sending that cable.

"I talked it over with Ogier and Jackson (Lt. Cmdr. Dempster M. Jackson, executive officer of the Maddox) and my staff, and of course, I had to make the decision. But pretty much all agreed that—you know—God, this could be serious if it goes all the way, and of course it did."

Herrick's report went up the chain of command to McNamara, but back in Washington a gung-ho spirit every bit as strong as the one Herrick had fought to overcome was driving events.

Goldwater, Kennedy Factors

"There were two factors at work," recalled Bill Moyers, the longtime presidential aide who was then working on Johnson's reelection campaign.

"The threat from the right of a Barry Goldwater and the threat within his own party from the hawks, from the Cold War wing of the Democratic Party—which a lot of people have forgotten was still very pronounced in the early '60s and chiefly had been carried into Democratic policy by the Kennedy wing of the party. Johnson would look at the Kennedy people around him, like Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk, and he would later muse out loud as to what they would think if he had taken a position which in their mind would have seemed softer."

McGeorge Bundy insisted in an interview, however, that it was Johnson himself who took the initiative: "This, I remember quite specifically. He called me up and said we're going to go for a resolution and I said something skeptical (because) of a general feeling that if you want a durable congressional resolution you don't go for it on the basis of some snap event and a surge of feeling around the snap event. And he makes it clear to me that the matter's decided and he's not calling for my advice—he's calling for my staff action in carrying out a decision, which I then do."

That telephone call between Bundy and the President took place in the morning. There was still no reason to doubt that an attack had occurred when, at 1 p.m., the President had lunch at the White House with McNamara, Rusk, Bundy, CIA Director John A. McCone and then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus R. Vance. Johnson was insistent that the North Vietnamese be punished.

The record shows that Herrick's cable expressing doubt about the attack arrived in Washington at 1:30 p.m., but there is no indication that the men at lunch were informed of its content. McNamara received the cable sometime after lunch and then called Adm. Sharp in Honolulu.

The conversation between Sharp and McNamara, which was not declassified until 1982 under the Freedom of Information Act and which was omitted from previous Defense Department compilations of telephone conversations pertaining to the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, reveals the developing uncertainty that afternoon.

McNamara asked Sharp, "There isn't any possibility there was no attack, is there?" Sharp replied, "Yes, I would say there is a slight possibility." McNamara then said, "We obviously don't want to do it (attack North Vietnam) until we are damned sure what happened," and asked Sharp, "How do we reconcile all this?"

Ehen the admiral suggested that the order to retaliate be postponed "until we have a definite indication that this happened," McNamara instructed him to leave the "execute" order in force.

McNamara informed Johnson and McGeorge Bundy about the doubts, but Bundy said he depended on McNamara's evaluation of the data.

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Realities of Process

"Look at the realities of how these decisions are made," said Ball, who participated in key meetings that day. "They sit around a Cabinet table with the President. The head of the CIA briefs you on what the events are, or maybe the secretary of defense briefs you on what the events are. You don't look at the cables, you don't look at the underlying documents. If he tells you that the evidence is that there was an attack, then that is the basis for the discussion, that's the underlying assumption and you discuss on that basis.

"If you're secretary of state or if you were in my position as a deputy secretary, you don't insist on looking at the intelligence yourself in a situation like that because, presumably, it's been vetted with the experts who are much better able to interpret it than you are."

At 4:34 p.m., Washington time, Herrick, in response to Sharp's insistence for clarification, cabled, "Details of action present a confusing picture although certain that original ambush (on Aug. 4) was bona fide."

Herrick said there were also some sailors on the Turner Joy who reported seeing lights on the ocean as well as torpedo wakes. Some experts, including Herrick and Sharp, now discount those sightings as a common visual effect created by luminescent ocean microorganisms.

In his cable, Herrick was responding to what he had been told about intercepted North Vietnamese communications rather than to what he saw. As he recalled recently: "Who am I to doubt stuff that's coming to me on official messages from the intelligence people in the services, you know? And I think that's what McNamara used. I think that's how he made his decision."

All Doubt Removed

Four years later, McNamara would tell the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the second Herrick cable removed all doubt that an attack had occurred.

However, Fulbright, who had not known of either cable until the 1968 Foreign Relations Committee hearings, said that he and the rest of Congress were misled in 1964. If he had known of the telegrams, he said, "I certainly don't believe I would have rushed into action" and introduced the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution for the Johnson Administration. "I think I did a great disservice to the Senate. . . . The least I can do . . . is to alert . . . future Senates that these matters are not to be dealt with in this casual manner."

At the time of the Fulbright hearings, McNamara cited then-classified government cables to counter the committee's suspicions that no attack had occurred. Yet, recently declassified documents show that throughout the evening of Aug. 4, the defense secretary had his own doubts but was under mounting pressure to make sure the matter was resolved in time to get the President on the evening news.

In a now-declassified phone conversation with Sharp at 8:39 p.m., Washington time, McNamara said: "Part of the problem here is just hanging on to this news, you see. The President has to make a statement to the people, and I am holding him back from making it, but we're 40 minutes past the time I told him we would launch."

'Wouldn't Recommend It'

At 9:09 p.m., Sharp told McNamara that the planes could not finish arriving at their targets before midnight, Washington time. "How serious do you think would be a presidential statement about the time of launch?" McNamara asked. Sharp replied: "I don't think it would be good, sir, frankly, because it will alert them. No doubt about it. . . . Wouldn't recommend it."

In the next hour, Sharp had to inform the defense secretary that the air launch had to be delayed further for technical reasons. But McNamara replied, "The President wants to go on the air at 11:15 p.m., that is the problem."

The pressure to make a televised announcement before the nation went to sleep went on to distort two interconnected and critical processes. One was the still-annoying detail of determining whether an attack had, in fact, occurred. After Herrick's cable, Sharp continued frantically to send messages out to the ships demanding clarification on the attacks. The military's other concern was that all the planes sent to attack North Vietnam must hit their targets before a presidential announcement robbed them of the element of surprise.

There was to be failure on both counts. Planes were sent to bomb North Vietnam before definitive word was reached from the ships about the torpedo attack—and a number of those planes arrived at their destination after Johnson had informed the world of the raid.

To this day, Sharp remains bitter that the President's refusal to delay his televised address alerted the North Vietnamese and endangered the lives of American pilots.

"That's a very bad thing to do," said Sharp, who lives in retirement in San Diego, in a recent interview. He said he argued the point with McNamara, who "decided to do it anyway."

"Just doing things like that for political reasons, without considering the lives of our pilots and the lives of our soldiers, you know," Sharp said. "The wrong thing to do, God damn it, just as dumb as hell."

The problem, Sharp said, was "you alerted the North Vietnamese that an attack was going to take place. So naturally, when they're alerted, they're better able to strike at you, and the pilots lose as a result of that. A surprise is extremely important in military operations."

Sharp added with some bitterness, "The President had to get on evening TV. . . ."

In the attack, two planes were shot down. One pilot was killed and the other captured.

Sharp still believes that there was a North Vietnamese attack on the two destroyers Aug. 4. Vehemently tapping a coffee table in his living room, he said U.S. retaliation was necessary to "send a message, especially when you're dealing with a bunch of God-damned Communists because they're ruthless bastards."

On the night of the gulf incident, though, the record shows that Sharp was concerned up until the end about whether a PT boat attack had actually been made by the North Vietnamese. A couple of hours before the planes were launched, McNamara had a top aide contact Sharp at his Honolulu headquarters to check once again. Sharp messaged Capt. Herrick asking him to confirm that his ships had been attacked.

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No Hits, No Positive ID

Herrick's reply was received in Washington at one minute before 11 p.m., 16 minutes after the first U.S. planes had taken off to attack North Vietnam:

"Maddox scored no known hits and never positively identified a boat as such. . . . Weather was overcast with limited visibility. . . . Air support not successful in locating targets. . . . There were no stars or moon resulting in almost total darkness throughout action. . . . No known damage or personnel casualties to either ship. . . . Turner Joy claims sinking one boat and damaging another. . . . The first boat to close Maddox probably fired torpedo at Maddox which was heard but not seen. All subsequent Maddox torpedo reports were doubtful in that it is supposed that sonar man was hearing ship's own propeller beat."

Recently, Herrick told The Times that he confirmed the one torpedo firing because he assumed that the Maddox was moving at a slower speed and the sonar equipment only picked up rudder noises as torpedoes when the ship was moving at more than 25 knots. But when shown for the first time that his notes and the ship's log indicated that the Maddox had been traveling at 30 knots when the first alleged attack occurred, Herrick conceded that in all probability, no torpedo had been fired.

At 11:37 p.m., while Sharp was still searching out evidence to confirm an attack, 38 minutes after Herrick's last cable listing the missing signs of a battle, Johnson went on television and denounced the North Vietnamese for their unprovoked attack.

"Renewed hostile actions against United States ships on the high seas have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply," Johnson said.

He continued that he would ask Congress for a resolution that authorized him "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."

Legal Justification

What had begun as a murky skirmish against mysterious dots and slashes on a radar screen became the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, a finely honed legal justification for America's participation in what would become its most divisive foreign war. The U.S. presence in Vietnam, limited at the time of the gulf incident to 21,000 so-called military advisers, eventually reached 543,000 combat and support troops.

Despite Johnson's rhetorical certainty that night, doubts about the attack would continue to pour in. The skipper of the Turner Joy, Capt. Robert C. Barnhart, answered Sharp's last request for information on witnesses with the plaintive query: "Who are witnesses, what is witness reliability? Most important that present evidence substantiating type and number of forces be gathered and disseminated."

But it was too late for gathering evidence, for that message was received at 1:15 a.m., Washington time—almost two hours after the President had spoken to the nation.

By then, it was daylight out in the gulf, where a startled Herrick stood on the bridge of the Maddox watching planes fly overhead. At first he thought they might be Chinese. Then he realized they were U.S. planes on their way to bomb North Vietnam, and he recalls feeling despair and muttering "good grief" or harsher words to that effect.

Then-Capt. Stockdale led that air attack. In his book, he recalls that he had read Herrick's cable before going to sleep, thankful that "at least there's a commodore up there in the gulf who has the guts to blow the whistle on a screw-up, and take the heat to set the record straight. As I lay down, and turned out the bed lamp, musing on the . . . absurdity of the goings-on up in the gulf, I would never have guessed that commodores in charge on the scene of action are sometimes not allowed to blow the whistle on a screw-up or set records straight themselves."

At 4:45 a.m., Saigon time, Stockdale had been rudely awakened by a junior officer and told: "We just got a message from Washington telling us to prepare to launch strikes against the beach. . . . The (skipper) wants you to start getting ready to lead the big one, sir. . . . Your target is Washington's priority No. 1."

Stockdale asked the young officer: "What's the idea of the strikes?" He was told, "Reprisals, sir." "Reprisal for what?" Stockdale asked. "For last night's attack on the destroyers, sir," came the answer.

Stockdale writes, "I felt like I had been doused with ice water. How do I get in touch with the President? He's going off half-cocked."

Stockdale went on that raid and others—until he was shot down and held prisoner for 7½ years.

Promotion Preempted

The Herricks now live in retirement in Santa Fe, N.M., in a modest home, with the "Captain Herrick" shingle proudly displayed over the front door.

A likeable, no-nonsense type, Herrick was on his way to promotion to rear admiral's rank. He never made it. His dream died that night in the Gulf of Tonkin. He won't quite come out and say it, but his wife—whom he dated as a midshipman at Annapolis and who waited at one Navy base after another while rearing three children during three wars—will.

The President got his television appearance and won reelection. Goldwater suffered a crushing defeat that November, and in a recently published 1980 interview told the Congressional Research Service that he thought the whole Tonkin Gulf incident was politically motivated.

"I'll be perfectly honest with you," Goldwater said, "I think it was a complete phony. I think Johnson plain lied to the Congress and got the resolution."

Johnson aides like McGeorge Bundy say such accusations are false, but there are indications that even the President had his doubts. As Ball recalled in a recent interview, the President complained to him about "those God-damned slap-happy admirals shooting at flying fish."

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Ball added that Johnson "wasn't convinced at all after the thing . . . but they had been waiting for a provocation for a hell of a long time. . . . I don't think he was sure, I think he had grave doubts that this attack had occurred . . . but from the point of view of the President and those who were around him who were eager for a stronger American line to be taken, this served the purpose."

Congress Stunned

Indeed it did. Three days after Johnson's televised speech, Congress, stunned by what it had been told was an unprovoked attack on American ships peacefully sailing the high seas, passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Johnson would carry a copy of it in his coat pocket until the day he left office.

As Moyers, now a CBS News reporter and commentator, recalled recently: "Any time that anyone would raise the question of the grounding for his actions in Vietnam, he would pull that out and say, 'Look, I have the overwhelming support of Congress.' "

For the remainder of his presidency, Johnson would claim that the resolution legally authorized him to send a total of 3.7 million American servicemen to Indochina. By the time the war ended, 11 years later, 58,022 of them died.