**Select events surrounding the Vietnam War and Gulf of Tonkin Resolution Chronology**

**July 1950** The United States pledges $15 million worth of

military aid to France to help them fight and keep their control in Vietnam.

**October 1950** Chinese Communist Party takes control of Mainland China.

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

**July 21, 1954** The Geneva Accords declares a cease-fire 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.

**December 20, 1960** The National Liberation Front (NLF), or VietCong, is

established in South Vietnam.

**1961** President John F. Kennedy sends helicopters and advisors to support the South Vietnamese government against the VietCong.

**1962** U.S. military transporting South Vietnamese soldiers and using Agent Orange to clear brush from roads used by the VietCong.

**1963** President Kennedy assassinated

**August 2 1964** North Vietnamese attack a destroyer, the U.S.S Maddox, in international waters in the gulf of Tonkin.

**Aug 4, 1964** Report of attack on two U.S. destroyers in the Tonkin gulf.

These two August attacks become known as the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.

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

**October, 1964** Chinese test atomic bomb

**March 2, 1965** The U.S. begins a bombing campaign of North Vietnam

Operation Rolling Thunder.

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

**1971** The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution is repealed.

## Document A: President Johnson’s Speech (Modified)

*On August 2, 1964, a U.S. warship was attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin by the North Vietnamese. The warship, the U.S.S. Maddox was in international water thirty miles off of North Vietnam. On August 4, another attack was reported. At close to midnight that day, President Johnson spoke to the American people on television about that second attack on U.S. warships.*

My fellow Americans: As President and Commander in Chief, it is my duty to report that renewed hostile [unfriendly] actions against United States ships in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply.

The first attack on the destroyer Maddox, on August 2, was repeated today by a number of hostile vessels attacking two U.S. destroyers with torpedoes. The destroyers and supporting aircraft acted at once on the orders I gave after the first act of aggression. We believe at least two of the attacking boats were sunk. There were no U.S. losses.

. . . Repeated acts of violence against the Armed Forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defense, but with positive reply. That reply is being given as I speak to you tonight. Air action is now happening against gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Vietnam which have been used in these hostile operations.

In the larger sense this new act of aggression, aimed directly at our own forces, again brings home to all of us in the United States the importance of the struggle for peace and security in southeast Asia. Aggression by terror against the peaceful villagers of South Vietnam has now been joined by open aggression against the United States of America.

The determination of all Americans to carry out our full commitment to the people and the government of South Vietnam will be increased by this outrage. Yet our response, for the present, will be limited and fitting. . . We still seek no wider war. . . .

I shall immediately request the Congress to pass a resolution making it clear that our Government is united in its determination to take all necessary measures in support of freedom and in defense of peace in southeast Asia. . . .

**Source**: Excerpt from President Johnson’s address to the American people on August 4, 1964, at around 11:30 pm.

## Document B: NSC Memo (Modified)

*The National Security Council (NSC) was created after WWII to help the President in matters relating to national security. The NSC included members of the President’s cabinet, who are referred to as “secretary.” The memo below was secret and only certain high-ranking government officials like the President were allowed to see it. The notes became public in 1995. The memo summarizes the meeting held after the reports of a second attack on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin.*

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

SUMMARY NOTES OF 538TH NSC MEETING

August 4, 1964; 6:15 to 6:40 p.m. Gulf of Tonkin Attack

Secretary McNamara: The North Vietnamese PT boats have continued their attacks on the two

U.S. destroyers in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin.. . . One of the two destroyers was fired on by automatic weapons and was lit up by search lights.

Secretary Rusk: An immediate and direct reaction by us is necessary. The unprovoked attack on the high seas is an act of war for all practical purposes. . .

Secretary McNamara: We have agreed to air strikes on two bases in the north of North Vietnam and two base complexes in the south of North Vietnam. A fifth target has been deleted because it is close to Communist China. . . .

CIA Director McCone: The proposed U.S. reprisals [counterattacks] will result in a sharp North Vietnamese military reaction, but our actions would not represent a deliberate decision to provoke or accept a major escalation of the Vietnamese war. . .

The President: Do they want a war by attacking our ships in the middle of the Gulf of Tonkin?

Director McCone: No. The North Vietnamese are reacting defensively to our attacks on their off- shore islands. They are responding out of pride and on the basis of defense considerations. The attack is a signal to us that the North Vietnamese have the will and determination to continue the war. They are raising the ante. . . .

USIA Director Rowan: Do we know for a fact that the North Vietnamese provocation took place? Can we nail down exactly what happened? We must be prepared to be accused of fabricating [making up] the incident.

Secretary McNamara: We will know definitely in the morning. As of now, only highly classified information nails down the incident...

Secretary McNamara: In addition to the air strikes, we plan to send major U.S. reinforcements into the area. These include ships, men and planes… A draft statement for the President was revised. It is to be made public by the President as soon as the U.S. attack planes are over target.

**Source:** Excerpt from the Summary Notes of 538th National Security Council Meeting held August 4, 1964. Written by NSC staff member Bromley Smith.

# Tool A

**Gulf of Tonkin Warm-Up Activity Organizer**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Document** | **Publication date and time** | **Type of document** | **According to this document, why did the North Vietnamese attack?** | **According to this document, did the attack definitely happen? Include a quotation to support**  **your answer.** |
| President Johnson’s speech |  |  |  |  |
| NSC memo |  |  |  |  |

***Which account do you find more believable? Why?***