

Chapter 5

Exit Ngo Dinh Diem and the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

A thin, elderly Buddhist monk stopped in the middle of a Saigon street on June 11, 1963. He was dressed in the usual manner of Buddhist priests: sandals and loose clothes that hung on him. His face was serious as he sat down and crossed his legs while several monks and nuns stood



Altogether 7 Buddhist monks burned themselves to protest various aspects of Diem's policies, including bans on celebrating Buddha's birthday

around him. One of them poured gasoline on his head; another lit a match. The monk put his hands together in prayer as his robe and then his body were consumed by a bright flame. Traffic stopped; shocked passers-by knelt in prayer. When an ambulance finally arrived on the scene the body remained on fire with only the heart still intact.

In the summer of 1963 other Buddhist monks protested the policies of the U.S. backed Diem government. Some also set themselves on fire. The protests by these monks were only the "tip of the iceberg." They represented a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the government of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. The dissatisfaction was so great that it paralyzed all efforts to win the war against the Vietcong. Some example of the reasons for the South Vietnamese unhappiness follow:

- The jails were full of thousands of people, some communists, but others just enemies of the Ngo brothers.
- The brothers were Catholic while most South Vietnamese were Buddhist. Catholicism was considered non-Vietnamese. It was the religion of the French who had conquered and ruled Vietnam.
- In August, 1963 Diem's brother Nhu rounded up thousands of monks, nuns, students and ordinary citizens in a crack down on Buddhist temples all over the country, touching off a wave of fury against the brothers
- To stop real or imagined plots against them, the Ngo brothers constantly moved generals from one army to another. They were most scared of generals who were popular with the soldier These were the men, the brothers thought, who might use the army to take control of the government away from them. The chiefs who the brothers appointed in the villages were hated. Many kept

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the money they were supposed to use for the hamlets. Anyone who complained could be considered a communist and thrown in jail.

- The government was so corrupt that everything had its price: a promotion in the army; a permit to build a building; a passport granting permission to travel outside of Vietnam. Hardly anything was done without money changing hands.

Exit Diem and Nhu

By 1963, President Kennedy and his advisors believed it would be impossible to win the war in Vietnam with Diem and Nhu running the country. After some discussion among his advisors, President Kennedy let the top American civilian leader in Saigon, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, know that the U.S. would not object to having someone other than Diem and Nhu in charge of the government. Lodge passed the word to generals in Saigon. Caught in a series of contradicting instructions from President Kennedy, Lodge later described his role in the coup as having sowed the seeds on orders from Washington and then not having prevented their flowering.

On November 1, 1963, Nhu and Diem learned of the last of a series of military plots to get rid of them. The brothers retreated to their underground shelter in the palace and made frantic telephone calls to generals, commanders, and loyal government officials. However, nobody promised they would help save them. Realizing they had lost all support, they appealed to Ambassador Lodge.

Lodge informed the brothers that the U.S. might get them safe conduct out of the country, but no arrangements had been made to find a plane to fly them or a country that would accept them. The brothers decided to escape on their own. They fled through a mile long tunnel, and came out in a Catholic church where they were given communion. Shortly afterwards they were discovered by army plotters, thrown into the back of an armored car, and killed.

Too Early to Celebrate

Word quickly spread that the brothers were dead. Hearing the news, people poured into the streets, singing and dancing with great merriment. Jails were thrown open to free political prisoners; enemies of the regime came out of hiding, chefs prepared sumptuous feasts, and the bars filled with revelers. There was no denying that the people of Saigon were overjoyed that the hated Ngo brothers were gone.

In Washington, DC, there was both shock and relief that Nhu and Diem had been eliminated. But less than three weeks later, on November 22, 1963, there was a far greater shock in Washington when President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas, Texas. As Americans mourned their much-loved leader, Lyndon Baines Johnson became President of the United States.

Shortly after taking the oath of office, President Johnson made an important decision. He would continue the war in Vietnam until the V.C. were defeated. He did not plan to be the first American president to lose a war.

From Bad to Worse

Winning in Vietnam turned out to be much more difficult than Lyndon Johnson had ever imagined. The generals who had worked together to overthrow Diem and Nhu could not cooperate with one another to form an effective and stable government. For the next 19 months they played a power game. By shifting alliances with one another each sought to control the power and patronage that would allow

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them to give lucrative jobs to friends and relatives. No sooner would one group form a government than another would rebel and replace it. There were 7 different governments in Saigon in the 19 months from November 1963 to June 1965 producing a new set of leaders that would hold office on the average for fewer than three months at a time. •

While all this pushing and shoving was taking place in Saigon, no one in the countryside was minding the store. As a result, one strategic hamlet after another collapsed. Some were taken over by the Vietcong, but in many cases families of disgruntled peasants simply pulled up stakes and went back to the villages where they had lived all their lives. Meanwhile the Vietnamese army was even less effective than before Diem's demise; American troops were playing a larger role in the war, pacification efforts were failing, and the Vietminh presence in South Vietnam was increasing. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the aid from the North and the lack of a coherent government action in the South was dooming the American war effort. Unless some changes were made, Ho Chi Minh would unite Vietnam under his leadership. President Johnson might still become the first American president to lose a war.

The Goldwater Challenge

1964 was an election year in the United States. The Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater, charged President Johnson with not using enough force to win the war. In his acceptance speech before a jubilant Republican National Convention in San Francisco, Goldwater reeled off a series of accusations that Johnson and the Democrats were 'soft on Communism'. Charged by opponents with extremism, Goldwater countered with the ringing declaration that:

... Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice.

While President Johnson did not want to be accused of not doing enough to win the war in Vietnam he was confronted by a growing chorus of anti-Vietnam war demonstrators who accused him of sending American boys to needlessly die in Asia. Beset by both sides of the debate over Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson needed an incident that would unite public opinion behind him. On August 2 and 4, 1964, it seemed that he had one which would suit his purposes.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident



The C Turner Joy in 1964

A few days after the event, Americans heard that an American destroyer, the U.S.S. *Maddox*, had been attacked by North Vietnamese PT (patrol torpedo) boats. It seemed there had been no cause for this attack, which took place outside the three mile limit that the French had claimed belonged to them when they ruled Indochina. The *Maddox* had escaped with one bullet hole but was forced to dodge torpedoes from three North Vietnamese boats. The fighting ended with one of the patrol boats sunk and the others badly damaged. President Johnson's response to the August 2 incident was a restrained but hard warning to the North Vietnamese that another attack would lead to 'grave consequences'.

• with the ascent of President Nguyen Van Thieu in June, 1965 some measure of stability was established and the same leader remained in power for ten years.

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Two days later another incident took place. The second event occurred at night, and involved two ships, the *Maddox* and another destroyer, the *C. Turner Joy*. These ships, it was reported, were attacked by North Vietnamese PT boats while they were in international waters (assuming North Vietnam still held to the 3 mile territorial limits claimed by the French.) This time, Johnson did not play down the incident.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Upon hearing of the second occurrence, President Johnson ordered a full-scale air attack on North Vietnam. The targets, chosen a long time before the incident, included 14 huge oil storage tanks, and the North Vietnamese 54 boat navy. About half the ships were destroyed.

The day after these air strikes, President Johnson spoke to the nation on TV:

The North Vietnamese have decided to attack the U.S. This fact is plain for all the world to see. If we do not challenge these attacks, they will continue....

But this was not the first time they have provoked us

For 10 years, three American Presidents, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and myself, have been trying to protect South Vietnam from the communist government of North Vietnam. All we have wanted to do is to have North and South Vietnam:

- *honor their international obligations*
- *leave each other alone;*
- *settle their differences peacefully;*
- *try to better the lives of their people by fighting against poverty, disease and ignorance*

Peace requires that we and our allies stand tall against the attacks from North Vietnam.

President Johnson then introduced the following resolution to Congress which had actually been in preparation since February 1964:

Whereas ships from communist Vietnam, broke the rules of international law and attacked U.S. ships;

Whereas these attacks are part of a plot of this communist country waging war against its neighbors . . .

And whereas the U.S. is helping the people of Southeast Asia to protect their freedom and live in peace.

Resolve that Congress agrees with and supports the President to take all needed steps to repel any armed attack against U.S. forces and to prevent further aggression by communist North Vietnam.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. What was the situation in South Vietnam and the U.S. during the eight-month period prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident and how might it affect the war effort?
2. Do you agree with President Johnson's analysis of the situation in Vietnam as expressed in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution? Explain.
3. Would you have voted for the above Resolution? Why or why not?

Epilogue

Congress voted overwhelmingly for the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. The vote was 89 to 2, in the Senate and there was not a single dissenting vote in the House of Representatives. President Johnson got what he had long desired during the Vietnam war: The power needed to do what he thought necessary to 'prevent further aggression' in Vietnam.

In retrospect, one sees that President Johnson was not completely honest in his description of the events in the Tonkin Gulf. Was the Maddox in international waters when it was attacked? It was 10 miles from the shores of North Vietnam. Most countries claim their territorial waters extend to 12 miles. When the French ruled Vietnam, they only claimed 3 miles - and North Vietnam never officially declared their territorial waters. But China, its ally and neighbor in the North, claimed a 12 mile limit

Whether in international waters or not, the Maddox was on a support mission for South Vietnamese commandos. They were sent in PT boats to identify targets along the coast of North Vietnam. The Maddox was supposed to pick up signals of North Vietnamese radar. From this information Vietnamese and American military planners could find what parts of the coast were being defended.

While the incident on August 2nd occurred pretty much the way it was reported, the second incident did not. On the night of August 4, 1964 the seas in the Gulf of Tonkin were rough; the crew was expecting an attack. Experts now believe that heavy seas made waves appear like PT boats on the radar screen. The bullets fired by the Turner Joy were probably shot at these phantoms. Captain Herrick of the *Maddox* had reported his doubts about the incident, saying his crew had not made any "actual visual sightings," and blamed the blips supposedly revealing enemy ships on "freak weather effects."

President Johnson had been told that the second incident was probably a case of mistaken identity. That is not what he wished to hear. The President went ahead with the speech written before he learned the truth. One of his aids even said, "We don't know what happened, but it had the desired result." The outlines of the resolution had been written five months before the incident took place. The President had used the Gulf of Tonkin incidents to get what he wanted from Congress -- the power to expand the war in Vietnam.

A Serious Question

We know that President Lyndon Johnson had purposely misled (some would say lied to) the American people on the events in the Gulf of Tonkin. Their support for the U.S. government was asked on the basis of this misleading information. We know from previous chapters that the American people were not told the whole truth about Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, democracy in South Vietnam, the Strategic Hamlet Program, and the progress that was made in the Vietnam war.

The events in this chapter necessarily give rise to two important questions. (1) does the President of the United States have the right to lie to the American people to give him/her the power to carry out policies he/she thinks are good for the country; and (2) if the government lies to the American people to get their support, are the people who were deceived by their government still morally bound to support its conduct of that war by paying taxes and fighting for it?