

History's Mysteries - The Gulf of Tonkin Incident

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed almost unanimously by Congress after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, arguably gave President Johnson more power than any other American president in history. This resolution allowed the president to use the American armed forces without a formal declaration of war in S.E. Asia. In essence, the president could use the American military without a vote in congress, which is a break from the war powers outlined in the U.S. Constitution.

Examine the events that led up to the passing of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and decide for yourself whether or not this was a good idea.

Video Questions

Video 1 – President Johnson addresses the nation on television

1. What does President Johnson say happened on August 4?

2. What is the U.S. response Johnson describes in the video? _____

3. What does President Johnson say about the U.S. government's determination? _____

4. What is President Johnson's point regarding "firmness"? _____

Do you agree with Johnson? Why or why not? _____

Video 2 – Gulf of Tonkin Incident – "Vietnam: A television history"

1. According to the video, why does President Johnson need to appear tough on communism?

2. What type of resolution did Johnson have drafted in May? Why was it not introduced to Congress?

3. What is the counter-claim regarding the August 4th attacks by the North Vietnamese?

4. What evidence is presented by video that makes the events seem questionable or unreliable?

5. After watching this video, do you think president Johnson made the right decision to order air attacks on North Vietnamese targets? Why or why not?

Video 3 – “The Fog of War”; documentary about Robert McNamara (former U.S. secretary of Defense)

1. What evidence is presented in the documentary about the first attack on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin?

2. What evidence is presented in the documentary about the 2nd attack on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin?

3. According to former secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, did the 2nd attack really happen? What is his decision based on?
