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MESSAGE VERSUS PERCEPTION IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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Over the forty years since the beginning of the Vietnam War, a historical narrative has developed in the United States to explain the substantial support the war initially enjoyed with the American people. The Johnson administration, as this narrative goes, deceived the American people into war. Historians differ on the specific culprits and their motives and methods, but nearly all agree on the result--the American people did not know their government was taking them to war.

Or did they? A great deal has been written about the motives and actions of political and military leaders in the critical period between August 1964 and July 1965, when dramatic military escalation turned the Vietnam War into an American war. Through this process, historians have built an overwhelming, incontrovertible case that the Johnson administration was *trying* to deceive the American people. But did it succeed?

Virtually nothing has been written about this period from the perspective it was seen by the American people, in the media of the day.

Again and again, at every step of the escalation, an examination of contemporary media clearly shows that the American people were not deceived. The American press had a very clear picture of the growing American commitment in Vietnam and clearly communicated this picture to the American people. In fact, dramatic, growing escalation in Vietnam was overwhelmingly the dominant media narrative of the war at the time, filling the pages of America's most influential news sources.

To illustrate this point, this article will examine the national print media of the day. These sources reached a huge audience. For instance, in January 1965, the circulation of *Time* was 3.1 million.¹ Between 1963 and 1969, the circulation of the *New York Times'* Sunday edition alone was consistently over 1.3 million (nearly half of that circulation was outside of New York).² The *Saturday Evening Post's* circulation was an incredible 6.5 million in November 1964.³ However, beyond their own circulation, these publications were also important because they had a huge influence on the content of other news sources. Smaller, regional newspapers, lacking the resources for international news gathering, often parroted the news in national publications. Print media also drove television news, just coming of age during this period. For the first time in 1963, over half of Americans said that television was their primary news source.⁴ Also in this year, national and then local television news went from 15 to 30 minute broadcasts.⁵ Yet, during this period, television news was only beginning to develop as an independent investigative arm of the fourth estate. Until the second half of 1965, there were no television newsmen permanently stationed in Vietnam.⁶ For stories about Vietnam, television news still relied heavily on print and wire media sources.⁷ Thus, during this critical period, national print media drove virtually all news coverage of the Vietnam War.

THE GULF OF TONKIN

America's road to war in Vietnam began in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam, two months before the 1964 US presidential election. The *USS Maddox* was in the gulf supporting raids by South Vietnamese commandos (with American advisors in support). On 2 August 1964, three North Vietnamese patrol boats launched an attack on the *Maddox*. The attack was turned away, with one patrol boat sunk and the others damaged. On the fourth, the *Maddox*, joined by the destroyer, the *Turner Joy*, reported it was again attacked. President Johnson responded by ordering the bombing of North Vietnam. A few days later, the Congress responded as well, with the so-called Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave President Johnson a free hand to answer any future communist aggression in South Vietnam.

Two Johnson administration deceptions are central to these events. First, the administration repeatedly insisted that the North Vietnamese attack had been unprovoked, despite the fact that the *Maddox* had been in the Gulf of Tonkin supporting commando raids--designated "OPLAN 34A" for the military order directing them. Additionally, the second attack, the one which triggered the American bombing, almost certainly did not occur. H.R. McMaster wrote that, in press conferences and congressional testimony, administration officials repeatedly "misled" Congress and the American people by "misrepresenting America's role in the 34A attacks and by glossing over the confusion surrounding the August 4 incident."⁸

Contemporary media reports indicated that the Johnson administration was at least partially successful in deceiving the media as to the pretext for the bombing. According to *Time Magazine*, "Two torpedo-boat attacks against U.S. destroyers that had been steaming in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin" provoked the US response. There was no hint of the administration's doubts about the second attack. The article expressed the "widespread...bafflement" on the basic question, "Why did Hanoi mount attacks

on the U.S. might in the first place?"⁹ Interestingly, elsewhere in the same issue, *Time* did posit the OPLAN 34A raids occurring in the area as a possible answer. "Some speculated," *Time* wrote, "that Hanoi had somehow connected the *Maddox* with recent South Vietnamese raids on Hon Me and the neighboring island of Hon Ngu." Ultimately, however, *Time* dismissed these raids as unconnected to the presence of the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* in the Gulf of Tonkin.¹⁰ The *New York Times* also seemed convinced by the administration's version of events. The 5 August 1964 issue of the *New York Times* faithfully reported the second attack on the *Maddox*. The *Times* did note, "The North Vietnamese regime said Wednesday that the report of another attack on United States ships was a 'fabrication.'" But this denial was little more than a sidebar in a story filled with the official US government version of the event.¹¹

While the American press was successfully deceived about the pretext for the escalation, clearly neither the escalation itself nor its scale was a secret. President Johnson gave a televised address as the attack was underway, telling the American people that "air action is now in execution against gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Viet Nam which have been used in these hostile operations." *Time* Magazine reported the timeline for the decision to retaliate and very specific details on the numbers and types of aircraft and armaments used in the US reprisal.¹² Nor did the press miss the significance of the change in policy, from supporting the South Vietnamese to directly attacking the North with American bombers. In the 7 August 1964 issue of *Time*, written before the attacks, there was only one article on Vietnam. In the three issues published in August after the attack, Vietnam was mentioned in ten articles and numerous letters to the editor. *Time* also emphasized the significance of the US reprisal to the Cold War balance of power. "The U.S. action was precisely limited," *Time* reported.

However, recalling the specter of the Cuban Missile Crisis, *Time* continued, "In a sense, this nation had once more gone to the brink."¹³

Based on stories in the media just before the American reprisals, the escalation wasn't a total surprise to the American people, either. A *Time* article written days before the US response to the Gulf of Tonkin attack (but published on 7 August 1964, just after the bombing), makes it clear that direct American action in Vietnam was a very real possibility. The article described US plans to, under certain conditions, support "bombings inside North Viet Nam" in the form of "tit-for-tat reprisals," "general punishment of North Viet Nam from the air," or even the "blockading or mining Ho Chi Minh's ports."¹⁴

FLAMING DART

The American people responded to the bombing of North Vietnam by giving Johnson a landslide reelection victory. The Vietcong, on the other hand, answered the US escalation with an escalation of its own. Only days before the US presidential election, the Vietcong shelled an airbase at Bien Hoa, killing several Americans and destroying a number of US B-57 bombers. In December 1964, President Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnamese supply routes through Laos. The Vietcong again responded, bombing a US officer's billet in Saigon on Christmas Eve. This attack was followed, on 7 February 1965, by a Vietcong attack on the American barracks at Pleiku, killing eight and wounding over 100. President Johnson responded later the same day with a bombing raid of over 132 bombers against three barracks in North Vietnam. The operation was called "Flaming Dart." He also ordered the evacuation of American dependents from South Vietnam.

Historians making the case for Johnson administration deception have focused on the fact that the Flaming Dart bombing was being planned even before the Vietcong attacked Pleiku, the supposed reason for retaliation. As