NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY
FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, MARYLAND

Serial: N1017
25 August 1964

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE MEMBERS OF USIB

SUBJECT: Article by Jack Anderson on "The Tonkin Gulf Snafu" in the 16 August 1964 Washington Post (U)

1. Reference is made to Special Annex, USIB-M-344, 19 August 1964, Item 8, in which is recorded USIB's request that I attempt to assess the possible SIGINT damage should a case against the author of the subject article be brought to trial. I have had the following preliminary assessment prepared not only to respond to the Board's specific request, but also to provide information and judgment concerning the following related matters:

a. Actual damage attributable to the publication of the article.

b. Potential damage which may result from publication of the article.

2. Actual Damage. As of this date no change has occurred in North Vietnamese communications which can be attributed to the publication of the Anderson article. DRV Naval communications have reached the pre-incident volume level with no change in cipher system.

3. Potential Damage. The DRV could well take any of the following courses of COMSEC action with respect to DRV Naval ciphers, or other [redacted] systems. These options are listed in descending order of likelihood:

a. Continue the use of the current grades of cipher systems but institute frequent changes of key. The resultant reduced volume per key could limit us to partial exploitation of such systems. The most likely results would be inability to report perishable operational information on a timely basis (perhaps inability to report it at all), and incomplete as well as delayed order-of-battle updating.

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b. Change the basic code card frequently. Normally, following such change it requires analysis [redacted] of traffic receipt to permit recovery of the code cards. Thus, weekly or more frequent change would make full recovery unlikely and produce the same disadvantages of partial exploitation as set forth in para. a. above.

c. Restrict the use of the current exploitable types of systems to routine low classification traffic and introduce high grade hand systems for more important and highly classified messages. The net effect of restricting use of the exploitable systems would be (depending upon how much the volume in any given system was reduced) similar to that set forth in para. a. above. The full effect of this kind of introduction of a hypothetical high grade system cannot of course be gauged in advance, however, the chances are that operational needs for speed and simplicity of communications would argue against introduction of those complexities which must almost always be added to hand ciphers to give them high grade security. Intercepted messages have revealed that DRV Navy communicators have often been unable to properly use the relatively simple ciphers now in effect.

d. Completely change to high grade hand ciphers. Such a development could put us [redacted]. However, for the reasons cited in para. c. above, there is considerable doubt that the DRV would introduce such ciphers for operational use where rapid communications are essential.

e. Change to high grade machine ciphers. This is considered to be extremely unlikely.

4. In summary, exercise of any of the above COMSEC options by the DRV could:

a. Impair, COMINT capability to provide in the future to U.S. 7th Fleet operational elements early warning of attack or imminent hostilities.

b. Impair or preclude updating of DRV Naval Order of Battle.

c. Affect other [redacted] DRV communications.

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5. Possible Damage from Disclosures in Court. This Agency has not been able to identify any specific SIGINT item which would, by itself, have been the basis for the statements made by Mr. Anderson in his article. There were three specific SIGINT items issued in advance of the 2 August attack, and one in advance of the 4 August attack, all of which provided warning of the imminence of an attack and all of which were sent to the U.S.S. Maddox. None of these can be identified as providing the 2 hour warning time mentioned in the article. So far as is known by this Agency none of the North Vietnamese Naval messages on which these four SIGINT items are based were intercepted by the Maddox.

6. Beyond these four specific SIGINT warning items there was a profusion of SIGINT reporting, almost any, or all, of which could have provided a basis for portions of Mr. Anderson's article. The article, however, contains factual errors to an extent which suggests that none of it was actually based on SIGINT reporting accomplished prior to, during, or after the Gulf of Tonkin affair. Because of these inaccuracies and because statements to the effect that prior to the attack the Maddox received intelligence warning were made on the floor of the U.S. Senate on 6 August, ten days prior to the Anderson article, it would seem quite difficult to prove that Mr. Anderson's statements were indeed derived from the aforementioned COMINT items. The release of these particular items concerning the advance warning would, however, create a sensation in the world press and would undoubtedly have serious repercussions on the continued success of our SIGINT efforts against North Vietnam. Thus far we have observed no tightening of DRV communications security subsequent to the Anderson article, however, should these COMINT items be revealed, the likelihood of the DRV taking up one or more of the options listed in paras. 3.a. through e. above, with attendent impairment of our capability, would be tremendously increased. The possibility that other country COMSEC efforts might also be stimulated by such disclosures must not be overlooked.

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