

Study of Johnson
9/1/64
TOP SECRET

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FOR THE PRESIDENT

Evening reading 9/4/64
Toulson Hull

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as amended

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

September 4, 1964

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Chronology of the Gulf of Tonkin

I attach the chronology of the Gulf of Tonkin affair which you asked for from McNamara. I had sent it back for correction on a couple of small points, and I have read it myself to see if I could save you any time, but my conclusion is that you will probably want to read it all the way through yourself when you have time.

There is still no evidence whatever that the timing of your announcement adversely affected the success of the operation in any way. All the evidence, indeed, runs the other way. The appendix to this report shows that North Vietnamese did have the aircraft in their screens before you spoke. The post-strike estimates show that there was no significant alert in the ports struck by the first attack from TICONDEROGA. The planes we lost were lost in the second strike several hours later, long after a complete alert had been given by the first attack. Moreover, it is clear that you yourself never gave any assurance of the kind Halleck claimed. Finally, the record of public discussion suggests that Goldwater's charges and Halleck's have been rejected by sober commentators and by the American people. Nevertheless this record does make it clear that we narrowly escaped a dangerously early announcement of the attacks. The reasons for this are four:

(1) Admiral Sharp and other military officers repeatedly assured McNamara that it would be a simple matter to mount an air strike in the early morning in the Gulf of Tonkin. This assurance led to initial planning built around a 7 p. m. announcement here, and when these estimates proved gravely optimistic, McNamara himself became increasingly impatient and eager to get the matter announced.

(2) Communications in this around-the-world operation were slower than McNamara and Sharp expected them to be. Thus, there were repeated delays in getting the final orders to execute from Washington to the carriers. There was also confusion about time zones which cost us an hour of planned time.

(3) This same time lag, in reverse, made us slow to understand the difference between the real operation and the one which Sharp and McNamara had in their mind's eye. Neither of them knew until late in the evening, our time, that there would be a time interval of 2-1/2 hours

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between the first launch and the actual strike in the case of TICONDEROGA. They assumed 40 minutes to one hour.

(4) Finally, we were a little casual in Washington about acting on this accurate information of TICONDEROGA's strike plan when it did arrive. It was known to McNamara in the Pentagon and to officers in the Situation Room here ^{just} before you went on the air, but no one told me -- or you -- as far as I know. Indeed, Bob McNamara does not seem to have got this fact clearly in his own mind, because in his own press conference just after midnight he wrongly said that the carriers "have already conducted air strikes against the North Vietnamese bases."

The net of this is that we were saved from real trouble by your own stern and repeated insistence on positive assurance that the planes were in the air well before you spoke, and by the other facts cited earlier.

Bob McNamara is the ablest man in the government, but when he makes a basic decision and gets up a head of steam, he does not always keep the sharpest eye out for new evidence. Others of us could have been more alert than we were to help guard against this one weakness of an extraordinary man.

h. f. B.

McG. B.

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CHRONOLOGY

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July 30 -

1730 Two DRV vessels T142 and T146 report enemy attack on Hon Me. Time of attack set at 1656. Efforts to catch the foe at 1830 fail and they return to port 1900.

July 31 -

1354 T142 and T146 at port in Hon Me, ready for action.

1825 Naval headquarters communications net working.

1920 DRV base at Ben Thy (southern base) reports sighting of "enemy" vessel - Maddox - 20 nm from Ly Hoa. This is the first DRV reflection of DeSoto patrol for July-August.

August 1 -

1419- T146 and T142 note Maddox course.
1422

1627 Ben Thy message of decision to attack Maddox.

1652 Intense coverage of Maddox reported; actual coverage close since 1000 and continuous. DRV Hq liaison protest to ICC over the attack of July 30.

August 2 -

0309- DRV close track of Maddox.
0732

0431 Maddox tracked by Raid number 5804 - Patrol boats T142 and T146 and Motor torpedo flotilla 135 (T333, T336, T339) on through torpedo attack. Raid number 5805 (unknown) was alerted.

0444 T142 reports to Port ^Wallut (northern base) that it received orders to attack.

0807/8 DRV attack on Maddox at 19-4^{1.5} N and 106-3^{5.6} E. At the time five of the seven DRV vessels in Port Wallut area were near or engaged in the attack (T142, T146, T333, T336, T339).

0830 US planes counter-attack, sinking T339, and damaging T336 seriously, T333 less seriously.

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August 2 (Cont.)

- 0900 T142 and T146 returned to Hon Me.
- 1430 DRV naval element kept close track of Maddox until this time.

August 3 -

- 0720 Two US destroyers noted, 25 miles from Hon Me with air cover.
- 0855-0859 T142 messages tracking DeSoto.
- 0904 Hon Me reported tracking two "enemy" vessels at 0620.
- 0934 T142 ordered to shadow destroyer closely.
- 1018 Possible DRV air surveillance of DeSoto.

Late in
day:

North Fleet active: an SO-1, T231; T142, T146; T333 (hit), T336(hit), 3 unidentified. T231 and one unknown boat headed away from the combat area.

South Fleet active: T164; T379; 1 unidentified.

August 4 -

- 0512 DRV report: tracking vessels at 19-18 N, 106E to 19-16N 106-02E around 0100Z.
- 0600 DRV tracking the destroyers
- 1140 T142, T146 alerted to prepare for battle; T333 also, if possible.
- 1240 Maddox says attack imminent.
- 1336 DeSoto Patrol reported sighting 2 surface craft and 3 aircraft. Four aircraft launched from Ticonderoga followed by 4 aircraft fifteen minutes later.
- 1408 Ticonderoga reported that aircraft sighted disappeared from radar screen. Surface craft maintaining 27 mile distance. Aircraft patrol over DeSoto Patrol.
- 1434 Ticonderoga reported two original boats opened to 40 miles. Three new boats contacted at 13 miles. Evaluated as hostile.
- 1440 DeSoto Patrol (USS Maddox and USS Turner Joy) reported intercepting communication that (DRV) PT boat attack imminent. Patrol position 19.7 N 107.0 E (75 miles off coast) heading southeast.

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