12-30-93

Untangling the Truth About Vietnam

by Phyllis Schlafly

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive." The end of the year is a good time to untangle some falsehoods that have crept into our history, specifically, on how the Vietnam War got started.

In 1964, this is how the American people were told the Vietnam War started. On August 2, three little North Vietnamese PT boats attacked one U.S. destroyer in the Tonkin Gulf, and U.S. forces easily defended themselves without suffering any casualties or damage.

Then on August 4, the Defense Department announced that North Vietnamese PT boats attacked two U.S. destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf, again with no U.S. casualties or damage. However, President Johnson went on national television at midnight and announced U.S. military retaliation against North Vietnam.

The following day, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara said that U.S. planes had bombed North Vietnamese bases and naval craft, and destroyed 25 North Vietnamese patrol boats and an oil depot. The cost to us was two planes lost, two damaged, and one pilot who became a POW. McNamara also began large-scale deployment of troops to Southeast Asia.

The Johnson Administration used the so-called Communist attack on August 4 as the excuse to get the Tonkin Gulf resolution passed and to start us on the road to what became a costly, no-win, nine-year war.

Now we learn from an unimpeachable eye-witness source that there was no Communist attack on August 4 at all, and the Defense Department knew this but chose to pretend otherwise.

The man who led the U.S. retaliation against the alleged Communist attacks in the Tonkin Gulf was Admiral James B. Stockdale. He was then a Navy commander of a carrier fighter squadron; he subsequently spent eight years as a prison(?r of war in Vietnam, and he is now a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

--------- In an article published this year, Stockdale said that there was absolutely no attack on us by the Communists on August 4. No American serviceman on any ship or in the air saw any sign of enemy craft, either surface or air, and both U. S. aircraft carriers in the area confirmed this fact in clear messages to Washington.

Stockdale said that, on August 4, the carriers merely received what turned out to be false radar contacts from thunderstorms in the middle of the Gulf, and so he was ordered into the air. When he returned to the carrier Ticonderoga, he shared some laughs with his pilots about the "absurd fire drill" in which they had just been involved.

Yet, a few hours later, he was awakened and ordered by Washington to lead retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam. But there wasn't "a shred of on-scene evidence to justify the retaliation!"

Within a couple of days, the Johnson Administration realized that it couldn't justify the raids and our losses, and so sent this message to our Pacific commanders: "An urgent requirement exists for proof and evidence of second attack by DRV [i.e., North Vietnam] naval units against TG 72.1 [i.e., the U. S. destroyers] on the night of 4 August. ... Material must be of type which will convince United Nations Organization that the attack did in fact occur."

This request for false information did not go to Stockdale, probably because someone along the line figured he would not collaborate in a coverup. But others did, and years later

when Stockdale returned from the prisoner of war camps and checked Pentagon records, he discovered quotations about "sightings" from men whom he had personally heard say there were no such sightings.

The way Stockdale sizes it up is that the Johnson Administration seized on the early false reports of an August 4 attack to justify its Tonkin Gulf Resolution and then, when it couldn't back up the retaliation it had ordered, it just "wrote off the truth, went ahead with its plans, and decided to work on cover-ups later."

Within weeks of the Tonkin Gulf "battle," Lyndon Johnson plunged into a vicious campaign against the Republican presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater. The principal campaign attack against Goldwater (completely false, but highly effective) was that he was a "trigger-happy" warmonger.

It' s pretty clear, now, who was the trigger-happy warmonger. President Johnson's fast and aggressive retaliation against what he told the public was a Communist attack enabled him to avoid being called soft on Communism or weak on national defense.

This foolhardy decision, based on false information, plunged us into a nine-year war that cost 58,000 lives and alienated a whole generation -- but it helped Lyndon Johnson win the 1964 election! What a terrible price America had to pay for the misfortune of having a trigger-happy Commander-in-Chief and Secretary of Defense.

The favorite joke of Goldwater conservatives after the 1964 election told about the conservative who met the liberal on the street and complained: "You told me that, if I voted for Goldwater, we would soon be in a war. I did, and we are."