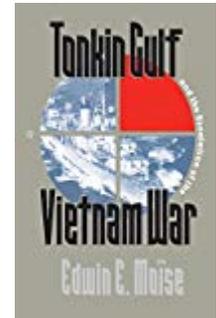


**Edwin E. Moise.** *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xviii + 304 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2300-2.



**Reviewed by** David Eyman

**Published on** H-War (January, 1997)

Any mention of the Tonkin Gulf is likely to bring contradictory images to the memories of those old enough to have been politically aware in 1964. Initially the announced attack on U.S. Navy ships in the Tonkin Gulf aroused feelings of righteous indignation and patriotism in Americans, most of whom approved of the retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam. As time passed and it became more evident that the destroyers involved were engaged in information-gathering activities, that at least one of the ships was not constantly in undisputed international waters, and that the attacks which precipitated the retaliatory air strikes probably never occurred, many Americans grew uneasy about the Tonkin Gulf incident and the veracity of the United States government, which had used the incident to begin an escalation of American participation in the Vietnam War.

The significance of the Tonkin Gulf incidents, briefly stated, is that the United States launched an air strike on August 5, 1964, against targets in North Vietnam in retaliation for an attack the previous day in the open waters of the Tonkin Gulf by

North Vietnamese patrol boats on the U.S. Navy destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. The attack was the second in three days, the *Maddox* having been attacked by patrol boats in the same general area on August 2. This air strike, code-named *Pierce Arrow*, is generally considered the point at which United States involvement in the Vietnam conflict began to escalate sharply. Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson extensive powers to "prevent further aggression" in the form of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution on August 7; the press and large supported the government view of the actions in the Gulf of Tonkin; and the American public rallied behind the president in support of the retaliatory strike. However, it became increasingly evident to the public after facts about the incident began to surface in 1967 that the August 4 attack probably had not occurred.

In this volume Edwin Moise has presented the reader with an exceptionally detailed analysis of the Tonkin Gulf incidents, based on lengthy research in declassified American documents and communication both with retired U.S. Navy personnel who were on the *Maddox* and the *Turner*

*Joy* and with government officials in the United States and Vietnam. He begins the book with a brief look at covert operations by South Vietnam against the North, then examines the thinking behind the more overt attacks of OPLAN 34A and the proposed OPLAN 37-64. Thoughts of escalation were in the minds of many American officials. The missing element seemed to be an appropriate reason for escalating action.

As the author notes in detail, the *Maddox* was present in the area because it was participating in an electronic communications surveillance exercise designated as a Desoto Patrol. Sailing from Taiwan, the *Maddox* went into the Tonkin Gulf on July 31 and began a sweep up the coast of North Vietnam that would carry it somewhat closer to the coast than most U.S. officials were willing to admit publicly. Further, it arrived in the gulf just after the level of tension had risen following an OPLAN 34A attack. There is some speculation about the reasons behind the first incident, but no dispute that the North Vietnamese attacked the *Maddox* on August 2 with three PT boats. Beyond taking one round of fire, the destroyer was not appreciably affected. The PT boats retreated under fire from the *Maddox* and from Navy aircraft responding from the carrier *Ticonderoga*.

The second incident is more problematic. The Desoto Patrol resumed, with the *Turner Joy* joining the *Maddox*, although both ships remained sufficiently well out into the Tonkin Gulf to make some Navy officers doubt the possible success of the Desoto activities. On the night of August 4, both destroyers reported that they were under attack. Air cover was provided from the *Ticonderoga* and the *Constellation*. The two destroyers zigged and zagged about, reporting radar and sonar contacts, visual sightings of lights and even of torpedo wakes. Much ammunition was expended, with reports of enemy boats being sunk. As calm was restored, many involved expressed doubt that any attack had taken place. But the

United States had already used the reported attack to launch air strikes at North Vietnam.

In analyzing the incident, the author examines in exhaustive detail the movements of the two ships, evidence from the ships themselves in the form of accounts by participants and ships' logs, and evidence from a variety of other sources, including statements by some of the pilots who were in the air over the destroyers when they reported the attacks. The evidence weighs heavily against the probability of an attack against the destroyers. As Moise notes, "The report was an error. The night was very dark, and the radar was playing tricks and showing ghost images that the men on the destroyers mistakenly interpreted as hostile vessels" (p. xi). The author's conclusion is that President Johnson ordered the retaliatory air strike believing that the August 4 attack had really occurred. When it became evident that an attack probably had not occurred, it was difficult to retreat from the earlier position.

Moise feels that the August 4 incident in the Tonkin Gulf was really a convenient excuse for escalation of the American participation in the war. He writes:

The general drift of U.S. policy toward bombing the North shows very clearly in the files of the Johnson administration even before August 1964. It would be very difficult to argue that President Johnson, in the absence of Tonkin Gulf, would not have ordered reprisal bombing of the North after some other incident, and then proceeded onward to a campaign of systematic bombing ... (p. 254).

This book is based on excellent research. The author has amassed an amazing amount of detail in support of the argument that the August 4 attack in the Tonkin Gulf never occurred. His conclusions seem justified. One might ask whether it is necessary to mount such a forceful argument at this late date. Apparently it is. The official position of the United States Navy, as expressed in several of its publications, is that the August 4 attack did indeed occur.

In 1986 the Naval Historical Center released the second volume of the official history of the Vietnam War in which some seventy pages were devoted to the Tonkin Gulf incidents and the retaliatory air strikes (Edward Marolda and Oscar Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, Vol. 2: *From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965* [Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1986], 393-462). The Navy makes a strong argument, concluding:

The night action of 4 August 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin dramatically influenced the American approach to the conflict in Southeast Asia. Based upon actual sightings, sonar and radar reports, intelligence on enemy activities, and other pertinent information, indicating that the North Vietnamese fast craft attacked *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* on the night of 4 August, U.S. Leaders initiated a prompt and forceful response (Marolda and Fitzgerald, p. 461).

Moise notes in his preface that in the Marolda and Fitzgerald history the "... evidence of an attack seemed overwhelming. If I had not already been far enough along with my research to be able to spot the errors and omissions, I would probably have been convinced" (p. xii). In a recent volume issued by the Naval Historical Center the same argument is made, although less forcefully (Edward J. Marolda, *By Sea, Air, and Land: An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia* [Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1994]). This later work, which includes a selected bibliography but no notes, seems intended for a broader audience, moving through the incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin rather quickly. Marolda writes:

Since 1964, several other witnesses to the events in the Gulf of Tonkin ... have expressed their belief that no North Vietnamese attack took place on the night of 4 August. However once they received additional information from Herrick's command and important intelligence from other sources, U.S. leaders were convinced that North

Vietnamese naval forces had attacked U.S. ships in international waters (Marolda, p. 53).

Proponents remain for both sides of the question. On balance, the research underlying Moise's book should quash the argument supporting the August 4 attack for any who take the time to read it, the publications of the U.S. Navy notwithstanding. Although this book will not attract the casual reader, it is well worth a serious examination by anyone involved in teaching or researching the Vietnam War.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** David Eyman. Review of Moise, Edwin E. *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=761>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.