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Abstract

In 2008, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a poll to determine just how informed voters were following that year’s presidential election. One of the most shocking things they found was that 46.4% of those polled still believed that Saddam Hussein played a role in the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11th, 2001. No evidence had ever emerged linking him to it after 5 years of war in Iraq, but that did not matter, as “voters, once deceived, tend to stay that way despite all evidence.” Botched initial reporting can permanently entrench false information into the public’s mind and influence them to come to faulty conclusions as a result. This power of first impressions gives journalists an immense and solemn responsibility when conveying events. A misleading headline or an unsubstantiated report can sway the public towards similarly flawed conclusions with disastrous results.

Keywords

Vietnam War, Gulf of Tonkin, Propaganda, US Media, Fake News, Manufacturing Consent

Disciplines

History | Journalism Studies | United States History

Comments

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"Reds Driven Off:" the US Media's Propaganda During the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

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History 300: Historical Methods

Professor William Birkner

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In 2008, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a poll to determine just how informed voters were following that year's presidential election. One of the most shocking things they found was that 46.4% of those polled still believed that Saddam Hussein played a role in the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11th, 2001. No evidence had ever emerged linking him to it after 5 years of war in Iraq, but that did not matter, as "voters, once deceived, tend to stay that way despite all evidence." Botched initial reporting can permanently entrench false information into the public's mind and influence them to come to faulty conclusions as a result. This power of first impressions gives journalists an immense and solemn responsibility when conveying events. A misleading headline or an unsubstantiated report can sway the public towards similarly flawed conclusions with disastrous results.¹

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident of August 2-4, 1964 is one such example of the power of shoddy journalism in perpetuating a narrative based in falsehood. In this case, such a narrative significantly contributed to an escalation of the American role in the 2nd Indochina War, leading to the loss of tens of thousands of American and millions of Vietnamese lives. As the incident unfolded, the printed media uncritically spread the disinformation that the US government provided, serving to portray the Americans in the Gulf as the victims of an unprovoked attack from aggressors. More generally, the media drew starkly heroic and villainous images of the USA and DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam), respectively, in its portrayal of the incident. In total, Whether by design or inadvertently the printed media served as the American government's propaganda wing in its crucial initial reporting of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, and the consequences would be severe. It would take years for the reality of the situation to become available to the public, but by that point, the war had already reached a deadly climax, and thousands were already dead.

¹ Kathleen Jamieson and Brooks Jackson, "Our Disinformed Electorate," *FactCheck.org*, December 12, 2008, <https://tinyurl.com/gunukzu>.

An ordinary American picking up the *New York Times* on August 3rd, 1964, would immediately be met with the stern face of Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp “talking with reporters yesterday in Honolulu, HI.” This mildly inquisitive reader would thus naturally feel drawn to the article in question: “Red PT Boats Fire at U.S. Destroyer on Vietnam Duty.” Upon reading the article, this intrigued reader would discover that The US Destroyer *Maddox* had been the victim of an “unprovoked attack” on the 2nd while “30 miles off North Vietnam,” clearly within international waters. The *Maddox* was apparently “on a routine patrol” during this attack, and there was “no ready explanation why the PT boats would in effect attack the powerful Seventh Fleet.” Fortunately, however, the PT boats were driven off, and the American *Maddox*, ever conscious of international law, made “no effort to sink [them], because the fleet was not at war.” Here is the reader’s crucial first impression, and here some of the flaws in the media’s role in supporting the official American story are clear. For one thing, the “PT boats” of the article’s title are not “North Vietnamese” or even “Communist.” They are a simply, crudely, and ominously “Red,” an easy way for the paper to draw obvious associations with the “Red Terror” under Stalin and thus to imply the DRV’s villainy. In addition, it is clear that the article’s only real sourcing is from official government channels. This explains the blatant falsehoods in the report. For one thing, the *Maddox* had been 15 miles from the coast, not the innocuous 30 that the government claimed and the *Times* reported. For another, the *Maddox* did indeed make every effort to attempt to sink the PT boats, even scoring hits with her shells’ shrapnel. Furthermore, the attack was not strictly “unprovoked.” The *Maddox* was in fact a heavily-armed destroyer, and it had entered those waters mere days after a classified South Vietnamese raid in the area. The DRV had every reason to assume that a powerful ship dangerously close to their marine boundaries appearing so soon after an attack on their territory might be an imminent threat.²

² Arnold Lubasch, “Red PT Boats Fire at U.S. Destroyer on Vietnam Duty,” *New York Times*, 3 Aug., 1964, online at <https://nyti.ms/3fIRrWj>; Edwin E Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf and the escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 87-88. See esp. pp 66-67 for NRV’s reason for concern.

This same reader, his first impressions already tilted in favor of the *Maddox* as innocent and the “Reds” as aggressors in the Gulf, may have picked up the same paper on the 5th of August, wondering if the tension had escalated over the preceding days. The unfortunate reader might have spat out his morning coffee in surprise to see the massive frontpage headline: “U.S. Planes Attack North Vietnam Bases; President Orders 'Limited' Retaliation after Communists' PT Boats Renew Raids.” Apparently, the previous day, the “North Vietnamese made a 'deliberate attack'” on the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy*, which had joined her following the incident on the 2nd. After an engagement of several hours, during which the two American destroyers unleashed massive firepower against the assailants, they “apparently sank at least two of [the PT boats].” The entire article once again relied almost solely on the Pentagon as a source, and the trusting reader would have had no doubt that the US had been attacked, once again, in international waters. In a token show of objectivity, the *Times* actually included the DRV’s response inside a diminutive, parenthetical paragraph: ‘Fabrication,’ Reds Say: [The North Vietnamese regime said Wednesday that the report of another attack on United States ships was a 'fabrication'].” Not only did the *Times* apparently seek to diminish this response by affording it a minuscule amount of space in the article and enclosing it in brackets like an afterthought, the paper’s reporting referred to the DRV under the pernicious term of “Reds,” and called the government in Hanoi a “regime” -- a term with clear connotations of illegitimacy, corruption, and mendacity. The US government’s version of events was gospel, and the DRV’s side of the story was incidental. In reality, in this instance the “Reds” version of events was more accurate than the Pentagon’s. Although the evidence does not indicate that the US government’s story was a deliberate lie, said evidence overwhelmingly indicates that there was no attack on the US destroyers by DRV PT boats on August 4th. Indeed, there was apparently no military engagement at all except for the US destroyers shooting at the empty ocean. A combination of the gulf’s unique effects on radar technology and the crew’s paranoia and nerves led the destroyers to see a battle where no occurred. To be fair, not all of this evidence was available immediately after the incident, but

that certainly did not stop the US from immediately jumping on the North Vietnamese “aggression” as an excuse to escalate the war.³

Our poor *Times* reader must by now have been hoping that the US would soon retaliate against these “Reds” “aggression.” Twice now, apparently, American ships in international waters were attacked without provocation by Communist aggressors, and there was no doubt or moral ambiguity about it. Thus, upon checking the front page on August 8th, he might be relieved to see that “Congress Backs President on Southeast Asia Moves.” 88 to 2 in the Senate and 416-0 in the House of Representatives, the US Congress swiftly sent President Lyndon B. Johnson the resolution he requested for “dealing with Communist aggression in Southeast Asia.” The terms of this resolution were rather broad, giving Johnson approval for “all necessary measures ... to repel any armed attack” against the US and to “prevent further aggression.” History would term this the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and it was essentially a blank check giving the administration free rein to do whatever he wanted in Vietnam, soon culminating in American infantry in combat against the Vietnamese military and the NLF. The article expounded President Johnson’s wishes for establishing “peace and security” in the region and the world. To the *Times*’ credit, it did note that the resolution’s unanimity was not as adamant as the vote record indicated. Some members simply felt that a vote against it would give “an impression of disunity and nonsupport that did not, in fact, exist.” Some legislators also felt that the language of the resolution was “too broad,” and might “be interpreted as giving Congressional support for direct participation by United States troops in the war in South Vietnam.” Regardless of any misgivings, however, both chambers approved Johnson’s desired resolution with meteoric speed, and the US was about to have a much larger role in Vietnam than ever before. To observers like the hypothetical *Times* reader, however, what was the problem with responding to unprovoked aggression from insatiable “Reds?”⁴

³ Arnold Lubasch, “Reds Driven off: Two Torpedo Vessels Believed Sunk in Gulf of Tonkin,” *New York Times*, 5 Aug., 1964, online at <https://nyti.ms/3dFdJ9U>; Moise, *Tonkin Gulf*, 203-207.

⁴ E.W. Kenworthy, “Resolution Wins: Senate Vote is 88 to 2 After House Adopts Measure, 416-0,” *New York Times*, 8 Aug., 1964, online at <https://nyti.ms/2WSZFTs>.

It was not just the *Times* that sought to paint a particular picture of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. Publications like *Time* magazine also had a story to tell. And what a story it was. On August 14th, after a week to craft a coherent composition about the incidents in the Gulf and the resultant resolution, *Time* published an account for its readership. It first made its villains very clear: the Gulf was on the shores of two sinister states: “the belligerent Red regime of North Viet Nam's Ho Chi Minh, [and] the ominous expanse of Communist China” Through prose that would not seem out of place in a novel, the article introduced the reader to the crew of the *Maddox*, utterly innocuous, with a mission “mainly to show the U.S. flag and keep a casual lookout for Communist gun runners,” although “the real challenge to her sailors was to stay awake on lonely watches.” In just two small paragraphs, the perspective of the article was clear. The Americans on the *Maddox* were merely innocently patrolling near (but reasonably away from) the shores of the diabolical Red states.

The account went on to describe the August 2nd incident in great detail, showing these heroes' harrowing triumph over the Red PT boats. The article then shifted to more protagonists in the White House and Pentagon and came painfully close to an epiphany when discussing the DRV's possible motivation for an attack. “Even in private, Washington officials could not ... explain why the puny Hanoi mosquito fleet challenged the” Americans. “Some speculated that Hanoi had somehow connected the *Maddox* with recent South Vietnamese raids . . . Yet the *Maddox* was at least 30 miles from either island at the time of those attacks.” If the magazine had been aware that the *Maddox* was only half that distance from the raid areas, its writers and editors would perhaps have put the pieces together, but to be fair, the Pentagon kept the Senate and the press misinformed about such pesky details.

The article continued to describe the alleged contact on the 4th, stating that there were “at least six” enemy ships, “Russian-designed ‘Swatow’ gunboats armed with 37-mm. and 28-mm. guns, and P-4s.” It would be one thing simply to state that there had been an attack, but the use of such minute details about these phantom ships lent an air of authenticity to the magazine's account, and the complete certainty with which the article continued to describe the attack would leave absolutely no room for doubt

that the incident had occurred. As such, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was simply a natural, obvious reaction to clear Red aggression. The article concluded with an account of the retaliatory air strikes the US had launched on the DRV, describing the looming military threat of Red China and North Vietnam, and giving ample room for politicians like President Johnson to emphasize that the DRV were the aggressors and that the US response was a measured and acceptable one. The article closed with a note of righteous solidarity with the US Government: “At week's end U.S. forces around the world stood alert. And behind them stood their nation.” It is difficult to describe such an article as anything other than rank propaganda. It not only perpetuated falsehoods and distortions about the incident straight from the government’s official releases, but it framed the whole event like a Manichean struggle between an inscrutable, looming Communist menace and a gentle giant who sought only peace until forced into a confrontation. It endorsed the Johnson administration’s resolve to escalate the American role in Indochina and painted the picture of an entire nation united behind him, ready to defend itself from aggression. Whether this was *Time*’s editorial intention or not is irrelevant: as a result of articles like this, the average reader would come away from the situation seeing only one, distorted side of the story and thus be more inclined to sympathize with the US government and thus with military action in Vietnam.⁵

Another magazine, *Life*, provided a similarly misleading perspective on the incident. This “Special Report” on August 14th gave a similar account of the two incidents that *Time* did, with some similar problems, especially the use of very specific details about the supposed enemy ships and their movements, again like the action in a novel. Of course, this article was meant to be an account of the incident from the perspective of the sailors on the *Maddox* rather than from a broader, more objective point of view. The article also proudly acknowledged “the help of U.S. Navy Intelligence and the Department of Defense” in its composition, so a careful reader could thereby conclude that the story was completely one-sided. The article never even bothered to add caveats like “according to the Defense Department” or “the Pentagon stated.” The magazine issue also carried no such article with the North

⁵ “Action in Tonkin Gulf,” *Time*, August 14, 1964, online at <https://tinyurl.com/ybmk7pl>.

Vietnamese or Chinese perspective on the incident, and in fact never even mentioned the fact that those two countries officially and vocally viewed the first incident as defensive and the second as an American “fabrication.” Those adversaries were a faceless, voiceless mass who clearly had nothing to say worth hearing. In this way, *Life* also functioned as propaganda for the US government, continuing to perpetuate a narrative in which the righteousness of the US in whatever they did was a given – an axiom. They never even entertained the possibility that there was another perspective to the engagement or that the government was lying through its teeth about almost everything it said about the incident. The next week, *Life* published pictures of the navy pilots who engaged in air attacks after the incident. They were called “Heroes of the Gulf of Tonkin.” They were the good guys. Their actions were right by definition because they were American.⁶

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky have noted that “in subsequent weeks, the [*New York Times*] published a number of brief references to what was 'charged' or 'asserted' in the generally accurate reports from North Vietnam, ... while front-page stories and headlines presented the false Washington version as fact...” It is clearly evident from the ways these publications covered the Gulf of Tonkin Incident that they so trusted their government’s word that they were willing to go along with everything it said and thereby to invite the American public to do likewise. This insidious credulity with regards to reporting was chiefly a problem with the mainstream American press institutions. Herman and Chomsky have pointed out the more nuanced manner in which international newspapers like France’s *Le Monde* and independent American newspapers like the *National Guardian* covered the unfolding incident. To be more impartial, all that these newspapers had to do was “simply [describe] the facts that were available.” The national media’s “jingoistic passion,” in effect, “failed to provide even minimally adequate coverage of this crucial event,” and “the willingness of the media to serve as a vehicle for government propaganda helped to impel the country toward what they were later to regard as 'the tragedy' of Vietnam.” The

⁶ Bill Wise, “From the Files of Navy Intelligence: Aboard the Maddox,” *Life*, August 14, 1964, 21, online at <https://tinyurl.com/ya48mmcz>; Ibid., August 21, 1964, 31, online at <https://tinyurl.com/y85xfhix>.

purpose of the media was to keep those in power accountable and to inform the public to the best of their ability. Through their failure to carry out this crucial facet of a functioning democracy, the media not only missed an opportunity to slow the escalation of the war but actively exacerbated said escalation.⁷

More than 50,000 American servicemen died in the 2nd Indochina War. Some of them enlisted believing that their sacrifice would be for a righteous cause against an evil, Red aggressor. The government soon considered this cause so important that some men were conscripted into it – made to die for it. Since then, the legacy of Vietnam in American memory has been a scar, never fading and ever stinging. Part of that legacy has been the realization that sometimes the government lies to its constituents to maintain its own image, even when that puts ordinary people’s lives at risk. As such, one would expect the media to have learned from its mistakes and to make every effort to provide the public with the truth. After all, in cases like the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, failure to exercise responsible journalistic practice has led to real, tangible damage including deaths on a massive scale. And yet, since Vietnam, governmental misinformation and journalistic malpractice have helped to contribute towards American haste in entering war again, with Iraq in 2003. That is why on the eve of Barack Obama’s presidency, about half of voters still believed blatant falsehoods about the reality in Iraq, such as the motives and allegiances of Saddam Hussein, which the US government used to drum up support for an invasion and which publications like the *Times* once again perpetuated uncritically. In that case, hundreds of thousands more would die due to faulty narratives.⁸

The historian’s job only comes into play years after events have already transpired. The information we have determined about the Gulf of Tonkin through torturously slow declassification processes and the occasional leak cannot retroactively edit the articles in these publications as the incident

⁷ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002) 209.

⁸ In 2004, the *Times* apologized for its role in spreading misinformation about Saddam Hussein. “The Times and Iraq.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 26 May 2004, <https://tinyurl.com/y9za95pk>.

unfolded. Nor can it resurrect the many thousands of servicemen who died in Vietnam as a result of America's eagerness to follow its government's and media's siren calls into the abyss. All that the historian can do in this case is to compose a warning for the future based on the mistakes of the past. In the age of social media, where misinformation spreads more rapidly than ever before, it is now time, more than ever before, for journalists to exercise the utmost integrity in their work. A contemporary "Gulf of Tonkin Incident" with a country like North Korea could lead not only to war, but to a nuclear Armageddon. In that case, there will not be any historians left to critique their bad reporting.

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