Lesson Three

Questioning the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

In the opening pages of his autobiography, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, Daniel Ellsberg describes the dramatic events leading up to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in early August 1964. According to the public announcements of President Lyndon Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, twice in two days the North Vietnamese had attacked U.S. warships “on routine patrol in international waters,” and engaged in a “deliberate” pattern of “naked aggression;” evidence of both attacks was “unequivocal,” and these had been “unprovoked.” According to Johnson and McNamara, the United States would respond in order to deter future attacks but was planning no wider war.

Each of these claims was a lie. Ellsberg had just begun his new job in the Pentagon. As he writes in *Secrets*, “By midnight on the fourth [of August], or within a day or two, I knew that each one of these assurances was false.”

And yet, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed Congress without a single dissent in the House of Representatives, and only two “no” votes in the Senate. It gave the president carte blanche to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” As they say, the rest is history.

One of the essential aims of the school curriculum should be to nurture skepticism—to prompt students to question and demand evidence. This lesson invites students to travel back to August 1964 and to imagine that they were members of Congress when the Johnson administration proposed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. It asks them to practice critical thinking.

Materials Needed

Copies of the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution” for each student in the class.

Suggested Procedure

1. The more students know about events in Vietnam prior to August of 1964, the better. If they have not studied anything about Vietnam, you might review with them some of the basics—the colonization of Vietnam by France, the Japanese control during World War II, French attempts to reconquer Vietnam following the war, U.S. assistance to France, the 1954 division of Vietnam into two parts—a U.S.-supported South and a North under Communist leadership—pending elections that were never held. In order to not give away the “punchline,” it’s important that students do this activity before they have watched *The Most Dangerous Man in America* or have studied the Tonkin Gulf events.

2. Distribute a copy of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to each student.

3. Divide students into pairs and ask them to imagine that they are members of Congress when this resolution was introduced in 1964. Their assignment is to come up with at least five critical questions that they would have wanted fully answered before they voted on the resolution. They needn’t have opinions on the resolution, simply questions. (When we’ve done this activity, we explain the structure of the resolution as an upside-down essay, with each “whereas” intended as a piece of evidence supporting the thesis, i.e., the resolution.)

4. Our students have shown themselves to be much more critical and inquisitive than the compliant members of Congress who handed LBJ vast war-making powers in 1964. For example, students have asked: “How do we know that the attacks were part of a ‘deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression’?” “What damage did the alleged attacks cause?” “What is the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam?”

There are many choice points in the history of the Vietnam War, and August 1964 is a crucial one. Ask students to imagine how this history might have played out had more Congresspeople been as curious and critical as they were.
in questioning the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Why did virtually the entire Congress go along with Johnson? Why didn’t more of the American people question or protest the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution?

As a follow-up, watch the excerpt from early in the film, The Most Dangerous Man in America, where the filmmakers juxtapose President Johnson’s statements with Ellsberg’s critique:

President Johnson: We still seek no wider war.

Daniel Ellsberg: No wider war? As I found out day by day in the Pentagon, that was our highest priority: preparing a wider war which we expected to take place immediately after the [1964] election [between Republican Barry Goldwater and Democrat President Lyndon Johnson].

Johnson: It’s a war that I think ought to be fought by the boys of Asia to help protect their own land. And for that reason, I haven’t chosen to enlarge the war.

Ellsberg: And that was a conscious lie. We all knew that inside the government, and not one of us told the press or the public or the electorate during that election. It was a well-kept secret by thousands and thousands of people, including me.

Ellsberg offers more detail about the supposed North Vietnamese attacks on U.S. warships in his autobiography, Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers, on pp. 7-20. This is excellent teacher background, and excerpts of this could also be shared with students. Students might then return to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and choose a statement to “talkback to” as Ellsberg does with Johnson’s claims above.

Ellsberg is a “dangerous man” because he refuses to remain silent about the government secrets that he knows. The heart of these secrets is that each administration from Truman through Nixon lied to the American people. In an interview included in the film, Hearts and Minds, Ellsberg says, “The American public was lied to month by month by each of these five administrations. As I say, it’s a tribute to the American public that their leaders perceived that they had to be lied to, it’s no tribute to us that it was so easy to fool the public.”

Ask students: Why did U.S. leaders feel that they needed to lie to the public about U.S. involvement in Vietnam? Why was it “so easy to fool the public”? In what way might people’s schooling have made it easier for their government to lie to them? Do you think that it would be easier or harder for a government today to lie to the public about U.S. involvement in other countries?

This article or lesson is offered for use in educational settings as part of the Zinn Education Project (a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change) and Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith. It was developed to accompany the film, The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers.

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**Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964)**

Eighty-eighth Congress of the United States of America

Joint Resolution

To promote the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia.

Whereas naval units of the Communist regime in Vietnam, in violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law, have deliberately and repeatedly attacked United States naval vessels lawfully present in international waters, and have thereby created a serious threat to international peace; and

Whereas these attackers are part of deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression that the Communist regime in North Vietnam has been waging against its neighbors and the nations joined with them in the collective defense of their freedom; and

Whereas the United States is assisting the peoples of southeast Asia to protest their freedom and has no territorial, military or political ambitions in that area, but desires only that these people should be left in peace to work out their destinies in their own way: Now, therefore be it

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.

Section 2. The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.

Section 3. This resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.