

"An illuminating book and a cautionary tale about the perils of intellectual arrogance overpowering good judgment at the highest levels of national security decision making. Every public servant and every citizen should know the story of McGeorge Bundy and how he lost his way."

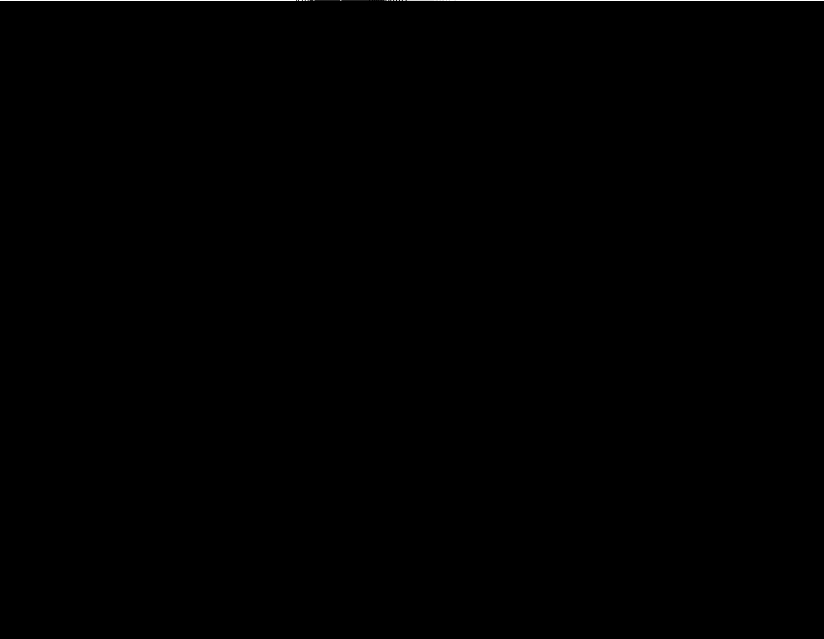
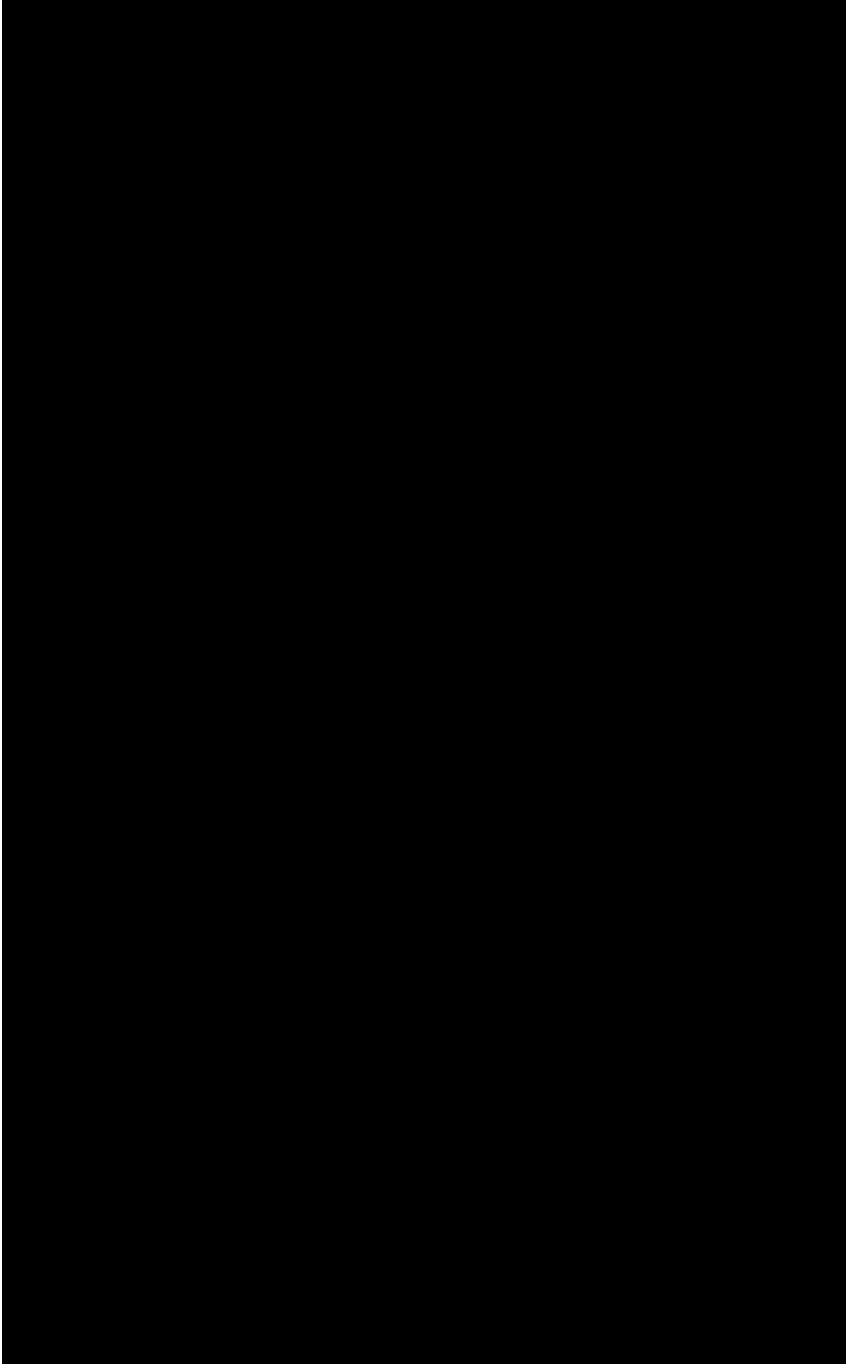
—TOM BROKAW

LESSONS IN DISASTER

McGEORGE BUNDY
AND THE
PATH TO WAR IN VIETNAM

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Far away from the fervid political atmosphere of Washington, on July 30, 1964, four high-speed South Vietnamese patrol boats attacked two North Vietnamese islands, Hon Me and Hon Ngu, that were suspected of supporting infiltration missions into the south. The attacks were part of a covert CIA mission known as Plan 34-A, conducted in concert with the Saigon regime. That program fell under the jurisdiction of the 303 Committee, the global covert operations oversight group chaired by McGeorge Bundy. Frequently characterized as ineffectual by its critics, Plan 34-A operations generally resulted in South Vietnamese agents being captured or killed, while "the seaborne attacks," as Robert McNamara noted, "amounted to little more than pinpricks." Plan 34-A covert operations nonetheless persisted because, as McNamara explained, "the South Vietnamese government saw them as a relatively low-cost means of harassing North Vietnam in retaliation for Hanoi's support of the Vietcong."⁶²

On the afternoon of Sunday, August 2, just three days after the covert 34-A attacks, the naval destroyer USS *Maddox* traversed the Gulf of Tonkin. The *Maddox* was engaged in a so-called DESOTO patrol, a routine

military mission conducted in international waters to intercept radio and radar signals from shore-based stations in North Vietnam. At 3:40 p.m. Saigon time the *Maddox* encountered a cluster of enemy boats exhibiting an "apparent intention of torpedo attack."⁶³ Twenty-seven minutes later the *Maddox* reported it was under fire from three North Vietnamese patrol craft and had retaliated. "In the ensuing engagement," the State Department history reports, "the *Maddox* and aircraft from the U.S.S. Ticonderoga damaged two of the patrol craft which retreated to the North, and left one dead in the water. Reports on the incident reached Washington shortly after 4 a.m."⁶⁴ There were no U.S. casualties, and the *Maddox* suffered no damage. Yet, there was physical evidence of the hostilities in the form of a North Vietnamese shell fragment later examined by the Pentagon.⁶⁵

Senior government officials in Washington first learned about the attack in the predawn hours of Sunday morning. At 5:00 a.m., a meeting was convened at Dean Rusk's home, where the secretary of state conferred with Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance, Undersecretary of State George Ball, Thomas Hughes of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and General Earle G. Wheeler, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As they gathered to puzzle through the significance of the attack, Rusk and the others pondered a map of Southeast Asia. Where was the Gulf of Tonkin? How many miles was it from shore? And what about the 34-A covert operations just recently conducted in the area? Following hours of inconclusive discussion, they went to the White House at 9:00 a.m. to brief President Johnson. Rather than a counsel of war, notes Hughes, their meeting "was a session full of levity."⁶⁶

"Where are my *Bundys*?" Johnson thundered as his advisers assembled, notably missing the brothers Mac and Bill, who had fled Washington that August weekend for more inviting summer retreats. "I know where they are," the president continued. "They're up there at that female

island of theirs, *Martha's Vineyard*. That's where you'll find them, playing tennis at the *female* island." Johnson was half-right. While Mac was at the Bundy vacation home in Manchester, Bill had just started an ill-timed family vacation on the Vineyard. Having dispensed his derisive opening salvo, Johnson turned to business. "What's the big emergency?" he asked.

"Well, Mr. President, one of our destroyers has been attacked," Johnson was told.

"One of our destroyers has been attacked?" Johnson shot back. "How do you know that?"

Johnson was informed about the sketchy details of a torpedo attack by North Vietnamese patrol boats. The president paused. "We weren't up to any *mischief* out here, were we?" he inquired.

"Well, you remember, Mr. President," Ball explained, "that you signed off on those 34-A operations last December, that were left as recommendations from the previous administration."

"Oh yes, I remember," said Johnson. "Would it have happened that any of those 34-A operations might have occurred sometime in the vicinity of the attack?"

"Well, we're not sure if we keep exact traffic of Bundy's numbers," one of the president's men ventured. "But it could well be that something happened a couple of nights ago, attacking some of the islands."

"I see," said Johnson, "and that's all we know about it?" Yes, Johnson was told, that was all that was known. "Well," said Johnson, "it reminds me of the movies in Texas. You're sitting next to a pretty girl and you have your hand on her ankle and nothing happens. And you move it up to her knee and nothing happens. You move it up further and you're thinking about moving a bit more and all of a sudden you get slapped. I think we got slapped."

Hughes scribbled a note to Rusk: "Now that we know what happens in the movies in Texas, do you wish to continue to call this an unprovoked

attack?" The secretary of state was not amused. "We'll ask Cy Vance, who's our lawyer," said Rusk.

"This was an unprovoked attack, was it not, Cy?" queried Hughes. Vance, "rising to the occasion with a wonderful non-sequitur," as Hughes recalled, offered his legal verdict: "Of course," said Vance. "It happened in international waters."

"Well, it seems a bit murky and we won't have any retaliation," declared Johnson. "But we will warn them against doing anything further. Now, let's get on to something serious." The president then stunned his advisers by shifting the subject of discussion from the hostilities in the Gulf of Tonkin to a somewhat less urgent legislative matter. Johnson asked General Wheeler to comment on the prospects of the U.S. Postal Pay Bill.

"Now, General, you're my chief strategist," explained the president, apparently without a trace of irony, "and this Postal Pay Bill is coming down Pennsylvania Avenue—it's already at 9th Street, going on 10th Street—and I'm going to be damned if I sign it, and damned if I veto it. You're my *strategist*. You tell me how to get out of this!" A flummoxed General Wheeler struggled to answer the president's question. Johnson grew increasingly impatient. "General, you're wasting time," admonished Johnson. "The bill is already at 12th Street!" As the meeting came to a close and the advisers shuffled off, a perplexed General Wheeler asked his colleagues, "Is it always like this?"⁶⁷

Mac Bundy and Bill Bundy, reached in Manchester and Martha's Vineyard, were told to return to Washington. Before their arrival President Johnson met with several of his advisers at an 11:30 a.m. White House meeting.⁶⁸ General Maxwell Taylor, who had just replaced Lodge as the new U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, recommended an immediate reprisal attack. Johnson overruled him, deciding only to send a note of protest to Hanoi and to dispatch another destroyer to conduct patrols with the *Maddox*.⁶⁹ Johnson's note was released to the press and broadcast on the Voice of America. The president warned North Vietnam to be

"under no misapprehension as to the grave consequences which would inevitably result from any further unprovoked offensive military action against United States forces."⁷⁰

Despite Johnson's posturing, it was well known within the administration that the CIA-sponsored commando raids in the Gulf of Tonkin had probably been the trigger for the attack against the *Maddox*. As McGeorge Bundy was informed by his aide, Mike Forrestal, "It seems likely that the North Vietnamese and perhaps the Chicoms [Chinese Communists] have assumed that the destroyer was part of this operation. . . . It is also possible that Hanoi deliberately ordered the attacks in retaliation for the harassment of the islands."⁷¹ John McCone made the same point directly to President Johnson. "The North Vietnamese are reacting defensively to our attacks on their off-shore islands," he explained.⁷²

The *Maddox* returned to the Gulf of Tonkin on Tuesday evening, August 4, accompanied by another American destroyer, the USS *C. Turner Joy*. At 7:40 p.m.—7:40 a.m. in Washington—the *Maddox* reported that unidentified vessels appeared to be preparing for an imminent attack. American fighter aircraft in the area were launched to provide protection. More than ninety minutes later no attack had been initiated, but the *Maddox* remained on alert, looking for signs of enemy action on a moonless night of low hanging clouds and thunderstorms.⁷³

On that Tuesday morning, McGeorge Bundy was ensconced in his White House basement office intently monitoring the flow of cable traffic. The summer torpor of Washington had been replaced by a heightened sense of expectation. No attack had been reported, but what would happen next? It was a political moment that Bundy had prepared for and to some degree predicted, but he was nonetheless surprised by an unannounced visit from the president.

It was time to take the draft resolution to Congress, Johnson explained. "I know the firmness and strength of the President's decision because I was one of the first to question it," Bundy wrote years later of his

encounter with Johnson in the White House basement that morning.⁷⁴ The day had started for the president with a congressional leadership breakfast at 8:45 a.m. to discuss his legislative program.⁷⁵ Johnson then descended to the national security adviser's office in the White House basement, which was itself "most unusual," Bundy remembered.⁷⁶

"Get the resolution your brother drafted," Johnson instructed Bundy.

"Mr. President, we ought to think about this," Bundy replied.

"I didn't say that. I didn't ask you what you *thought*," said Johnson. "I told you what to *do*."⁷⁷

Bundy now grasped Johnson's determination to proceed with the resolution. When the national security adviser briefed his staff later that morning, Douglass Cater, a special assistant to the president, asked essentially the same question Bundy had posed to Johnson.

"I would like to think about this proposal," Cater ventured.

"Don't," instructed Bundy. He later said he was not trying to cut off debate but rather to preempt Cater from engaging in resistance that would prove futile.⁷⁸

President Johnson returned to the Oval Office and spoke by phone with the secretary of defense. Although an attack had not yet been reported, Johnson instructed McNamara to identify North Vietnamese targets, "one of their bridges or something," for potential reprisal action. "I wish we could have something that we've already picked out and just hit about three of them damn quick and go right after them," the president explained.

"We will have that," McNamara replied. "And I talked to Mac Bundy a moment ago and told him . . . we should . . . be prepared to recommend to you a response—a retaliation move against North Vietnam—in the event this attack takes place within the next six to nine hours."⁷⁹ At about 11:00 a.m. Washington time, more than an hour after McNamara's conversation with Johnson, a North Vietnamese attack was reported. McNamara later informed the National Security Council that nine or ten

torpedoes were launched at the American vessels, which returned fire and reportedly sunk two North Vietnamese ships.⁸⁰

At the time, the details of this second attack were hazy and the sequence of events jumbled. As Bundy noted in a chronology he prepared for President Johnson and other senior officials, a cable sent from the *Maddox* within hours of the presumptive torpedo attack "makes many reported contacts and torpedoes 'appear doubtful.' 'Freak weather effects' on radar, and 'over-eager' sonar-men may have accounted for many reports. 'No visual sightings' have been reported by the *Maddox*, and the Commander suggests that a 'complete evaluation' be undertaken before further action."⁸¹

At a 6:15 p.m. meeting of the National Security Council, McNamara reviewed the evidence supporting the occurrence of a second attack. He recommended a reprisal raid, a proposal that enjoyed unanimous support among the president's advisers. Johnson ordered naval aircraft to launch sixty-four sorties of air strikes directed against North Vietnamese patrol boat bases and a supporting oil complex.⁸²

The debate over what happened that night in the Gulf of Tonkin has persisted for decades. The North Vietnamese, while acknowledging that an order was issued for the first attack on the *Maddox*, have consistently contested the facts about an alleged second attack.⁸³ The former North Vietnamese defense minister Vo Nguyen Giap told Robert McNamara in 1995 that the second attack did not occur, an assertion reaffirmed by General Nguyen Dinh Uoc, the director of Hanoi's Institute of Military History, at a June 1997 conference of American and Vietnamese scholars and former government officials. In late 2005 the National Security Agency leaked an internal review concluding there were multiple intelligence errors in 1964 contributing to the determination that a second attack occurred. The documentary record of those errors had been deliberately altered and kept secret for more than forty years.⁸⁴

President Johnson, Bundy recalled, "clearly felt that Bob McNamara

had told him he could count on there having been an attack. In terms of the real situation, this is all in a sense show business anyway. The real question of whether you wanted to stay and fight in Vietnam is much wider and deeper than what happens in the Gulf of Tonkin.”⁸⁵

At a 6:45 p.m. meeting with congressional leaders, the president formally set in motion the legislative strategy he had been preparing all summer. Flanked by McNamara, Rusk, and General Wheeler, Johnson explained that he would submit a resolution seeking congressional authority for U.S. combat operations in Southeast Asia if such escalation proved necessary.⁸⁶ “In my time with Lyndon Johnson, I do not remember a large decision more quickly reached,” recalled Bundy. Johnson had concluded that the Gulf of Tonkin incident was the ideal pretext for the swift passage of legislation “long proposed and debated” in the State Department—a resolution that would deliver “clear cut” authorization from Congress “for a Presidential decision to conduct warfare in Southeast Asia.”⁸⁷

On August 7, 1964, after eight hours of debate, the Senate passed the resolution 88–2, with the ten absent senators publicly endorsing the measure. The vote in the House was 416–0.⁸⁸