

## Why were we there?

### August 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin, and the Decision to Escalate

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## LESSON OVERVIEW

Students will engage with primary sources and discuss with peers how the communication of certain events impacted the involvement of the United States. Prior to this lesson, students should have an understanding of the time period, the Cold War, and the level of U.S. involvement prior to August 1964.

## WYOMING STANDARDS

### Social Studies:

SS12.4.4: Describe the historical interactions between and among individuals, groups, and/or institutions (e.g., family, neighborhood, political, economic, religious, social, cultural, and workplace) and their impact on significant historical events.

SS12.4.5: Using primary and secondary sources, apply historical research methods to interpret and evaluate important historical events from multiple perspectives.

SS12.6.1: Analyze, evaluate, and/or synthesize multiple sources of information in diverse formats and media in order to address a question or solve a problem.

SS12.6.2: Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text supports the author's claims.

SS12.6.4: Evaluate and integrate accurate, sufficient, and relevant information from primary and secondary sources to support writing.

### English/Language Arts:

[ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1](#): Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3](#): Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

[ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7](#): Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

[ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1](#): Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2](#): Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

[ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3](#): Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1.a](#): Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

## OBJECTIVES

- Students will read and analyze texts regarding the incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 and the subsequent action taken by Congress and President Johnson.
- Students will evaluate the quality of information and the decisions made to provide President Johnson with broad authority to take military action in Vietnam.
- Students will consider whether or not increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam was necessary based on the information provided.
- Students will discuss their findings with peers and write a claim statement that reflects their reasoning.

## MATERIALS

- Packets with student copies of texts
- Highlighters

- Writing utensils
- Laptop/chromebook to look up terms
- Notebook paper/sticky notes
- Document camera or technology to model annotations

Suggested order for texts:

- 1.) Memorandum
- 2.) Cable
- 3.) Formerly Classified Documents (optional)
- 4.) Message to Congress
- 5.) Joint Resolution

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### **Warm-up:**

A game similar to telephone: Explain to students that they will be presented with a relatable problem and solution. Each student will write down what they are told (not showing it to anyone) and then whisper the information to the next student. The teacher will whisper the problem to the first student and the solution to the last student, and the game will start. As each student receives information, it will be interesting to see how the details change as the problem is shared. The last person will receive the information and announce it to the class along with the solution. The whole group can discuss how the information changed as it traveled and if the solution was realistic. *For example:*  
*PROBLEM: Two high school students have been caught sneaking out of their hotel room during a weekend tournament. SOLUTION: The students are suspended for two games and are not allowed to travel with the team for the remainder of the season.*

### **Group Discussion:**

Before handing out materials, discuss the following general question as a whole group:

- *Why were we (the U.S.) in Vietnam?*

Guide the discussion as needed then pose the following guiding questions for students to consider while reading the texts provided:

- *Were the incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin threats to the U.S.?*

- *Would you have sent people to war based on the communications from the August events in the Gulf of Tonkin?*
- *If there was already tension and the Cold War was already happening, why was there a shift to escalate the conflict and send more U.S. troops?*
- *Should a president have the power (without Congressional approval) to send troops into war?*

**Read & Annotate:**

Break students into small groups and hand out student copies. Direct students to Text #2 (Cable Regarding the Attack on the U.S.S. Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin). Using a document camera or other technology to model annotations, walk students through the text highlighting and providing a think-aloud for certain areas. Students should copy the teacher's highlighting and annotations, adding their own as needed. Possible excerpts to discuss:

- Page 1, paragraph 1: "RCVD info that DRV intended attack" – What information had been received?
- Page 2, paragraph 4: "The first boat to close Maddox *probably* fired torpedo at Maddox which was heard but not seen...Reports are *doubtful* in that it is suspected the sonarman was hearing the ships own propeller beat reflected off rudders during course changes" – Discuss vague/imprecise language used such as probably and doubtful. What impact could this have had on who received the cable?
- Page 2, paragraph 5: "Weather was overcast with limited visibility. There were no stars or moon resulting in almost total darkness throughout action" – What problems could this have caused for first-hand accounts?
- Page 2, paragraph 7: "Maddox URC-32 INOP due to broken transmission line probably caused by vibration... Four cases of heat prostration experienced by Maddox engineering personnel" – What issues could arise from broken equipment and sailors suffering from heat exhaustion?
- Page 2, paragraph 8: "*Suspect* positioning of DRV craft previous night. *Believe ...* craft were waiting my intended night steam area" – Again, discuss leading/imprecise language. What impact could that have had on who received the cable?

Discuss highlighted portions and annotations from the text and any insight it could provide for the guiding questions, encouraging students to share their thinking in their small groups. Revisit annotation/highlighting expectations and provide small groups time to read

through other texts. Circle the room as students work, directing them back to the guiding questions.

Reading time will depend on the students, but guidelines are:

- Memorandum (5 minutes)
- Message to Congress (10 minutes)
- Joint Resolution (10 minutes)

*The website for the formerly classified documents will add time and is optional for this activity; however, it provides the opportunity for students to evaluate personal statements as provided by the crew and commanding officers from the vessels involved. Including this activity would probably add another class period.*

### **Discussion & Exit Ticket:**

Provide 5 minutes for small groups to review their annotations and come up with their answer to the guiding questions, writing the group answer on a sheet of notebook paper. As a whole group, have students share their thinking and answer, providing specific evidence from the texts as support.

To complete the lesson, each student will use a sticky note to write a claim statement answering the following prompt: *Based on the communications from the August events in the Gulf of Tonkin, should we (the U.S.) have escalated our involvement in Vietnam?*

## COMPILATION OF SOURCES

Cable Regarding the Attack on the U.S.S. Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin (4 August 1964), 593267, Vietnam Country Files, LBJ-NSF: National Security Files, National Archives Catalog, Austin, TX [Online version, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/593267>, June 9, 2025].

“Formerly Classified Documents Subsequent to 4 August 1964.” Naval History and Heritage Command, The Navy Department Library, Published August 25, 2015, Accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/library/online->

[reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/t/tonkin-gulf-crisis/tonkin-gulf-incidents-of-2-4-aug-1964.html](https://catalog.archives.gov/reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/t/tonkin-gulf-crisis/tonkin-gulf-incidents-of-2-4-aug-1964.html).

Joint Resolution for the Maintenance of Peace and Security in Southeast Asia (10 August 1964), 2803448, Heritage Asset Artifacts Relating to the Life and Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, LBJ-MCOLL: Lyndon B. Johnson Museum Collection, Austin, TX [Online version, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2803448>, June 4, 2025].

Memorandum Notifying President Johnson of Attack on the U.S.S. Maddox (2 August 1964), 2803386, Vietnam Country Files, LBJ-NSF: National Security Files, National Archives Catalog, Austin, TX [Online version, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2803386?objectPage=2>, June 4, 2025].

Message to U.S. Congress Regarding Tonkin Gulf incidents (5 August 1964), 2803396, White House Press Releases, LBJ-WHPRS: White House Press Office Files, National Archives Catalog, Washington D.C. [Online version, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2803396>, June 9, 2025].

## PLANNING A VISIT TO THE NMMV

1. In the entrance to the Puller Gallery, significant statistics concerning demobilization and the United States military are presented on the walls. After reading through these statistics, move through into the Consequences Theater. This film explains international relations and rising tensions during the Cold War.
  - a. The Consequences film gives an overview of the post WWII period across the world, providing background for the Vietnam War. Additionally, it names specific historical figures, events, and policies that are relevant to this lesson plan's activities.
2. Entry into the Vietnam War exhibit:
  - a. There are 5 panels in the entrance to this exhibit that briefly explain the circumstances leading up to the Vietnam War. The two tied to this lesson are "U.S. Advisors," and "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution." All 5 can be used to provide specific examples of events leading up to the war.
3. At the end of Convoy, listen to Veteran Oral History's to get a first hand account of experiences.

4. The “Jungle Warfare” panels and displays present a variety of information about soldiers’ experiences, the challenges they faced, and the conditions of fighting in Vietnam. Read through the display cases titled “Tribal Allies,” “The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese,” and “Prisoners of War.”
  - a. Use this information to encourage students to think about the war from the perspectives of different people who experienced it. Ask students to keep in mind the first-person story analysis and discussion activity here.
  - b. Read the “Surprising Encounters” panel and walk through the interactive jungle exhibit. Ask students to make note of what they observe here and what thoughts they have about the Vietnam War.
5. The video played in the “Living Room War” display, through the exit of the “Fire Support,” provides a great model for the students’ news broadcasts. Watch this brief video all the way through to observe how events of the Vietnam War were reported on to the American public during the war.
6. At the end of the Vietnam War exhibit, spend time discussing the “Consequences of the Vietnam War” statistics displayed on the walls. Pay close attention to the death tolls for both sides, number of veterans treated for Agent Orange and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Americans wounded and missing in action.
  - a. In this section, also read the “Coming Home” panel to further the students’ understanding of consequences of the conflict.