

Persian Gulf of Tonkin Incident

Spoiling for another fight, the United States may try to provoke Iran.

By Leon Hadar

THE IRAQ WAR has produced many, sometimes contradictory, historical analogies, ranging from Munich to the fall of Saigon, as pundits highlight their dubious relevance to Mesopotamia.

Following President Bush's Jan. 11 speech on U.S. policy in Iraq, in which he accused Tehran of meddling and threatened to "interrupt" the flow of support to Iraqi insurgents, Sen. Chuck Hagel added a new analogy: Nixon's decision to expand the war in Vietnam into Cambodia as part of a strategy to "interrupt" the flow of support to those other insurgents, the National Liberation Front, from sanctuaries along Cambodia's eastern border.

"[O]nce you get to hot pursuit, no one can say we won't engage across border," Hagel told Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during a Foreign Relations Committee hearing. "Some of us remember 1970 and Cambodia, and our government lied to us and said we didn't cross the border," he said. "When you set in motion the kind of policy the president is talking about here, it is very, very dangerous."

But Cambodia was never a regional power in Southeast Asia in the way that Iran is today. Like North Vietnam's anti-U.S. strategy in South Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s, Iran has the military power and policy influence to disrupt U.S. policies in neighboring Iraq, with the Shi'ite militias it supports playing a similar role to that of the Vietcong in South Vietnam.

Thus the correct historical analogy may not be Nixon's secret air campaign and incursions into Cambodia, but the

Tonkin Gulf incident—the alleged pair of attacks by North Vietnamese naval forces against American destroyers that President Lyndon B. Johnson used to win public support and congressional approval for escalating the confrontation with North Vietnam.

For years, the U.S. government asserted that the Americans had done nothing to provoke a naval engagement in the Tonkin Gulf. In fact, the Johnson administration argued that it acted with restraint by refusing to respond to the first attack on Aug. 2, 1964, and retaliated only after North Vietnam made a second attack two days later. But recent research, based among other things on declassified signal intercepts as well as personal recollections, suggests that the second attack probably didn't take place and that the first was provoked by covert U.S. action against North Vietnam.

According to respected military historian and Vietnam expert John Prados, the U.S. had been pursuing a program of covert naval commando attacks since January 1964 to pressure Hanoi to stop sponsoring operations in South Vietnam. Prados, who as a fellow with the National Security Archive at The George Washington University studied many declassified intercepts, White House tapes, and other documents related to the Tonkin Gulf incident, has concluded that contrary to the Johnson administration's characterization of the Tonkin Gulf incident—that an American warship simply happened to be cruising in the Gulf to exert a U.S. presence—"the naval battle between the destroyer USS Maddox and several North Vietnamese

torpedo boats occurred on August 2, 1964, in the immediate aftermath of a series of 34-A maritime raids on North Vietnamese coastal targets," including two offshore islands. When Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara briefed U.S. lawmakers on the incident, however, he asserted that the raids on North Vietnam were South Vietnamese naval missions and had nothing to do with the United States, Prados reports.

But the major challenge to the official version of the Tonkin Gulf incident has focused on another question: did a second attack on U.S. warships occur on the night of Aug. 4? In the aftermath of the naval battle of Aug. 2, President Johnson ordered a second U.S. destroyer, the *USS C. Turner Joy*, to join the *Maddox* and sail to the Gulf of Tonkin. On the night of Aug. 4, both ships reported that they were coming under attack again and sent messages reporting contacts with the enemy. It was after that alleged second attack that President Johnson ordered retaliatory bombing and asked for the congressional resolution, which passed on Aug. 7.

But the certainty of the second attack was never as clear as the first. "The supposed surface action took place at night and in poor weather," Prados recalls. "The skipper and four seamen aboard the *C. Turner Joy* variously claimed having seen a searchlight, boat cockpit lights, smoke at a location where they claimed their gunfire had hit a Vietnamese vessel in the water, and one, or perhaps two, torpedo wakes." But no physical evidence such as wreckage, bodies, or photographs from Aug. 4 were ever discovered.

Indeed, the documents and transcripts that have been released by the National Security Agency and the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum tend to support the consensus among researchers that the “second attack” never happened. Retired Vietnamese Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, meeting with McNamara in 1995, categorically denied that Vietnamese gunboats attacked American destroyers on Aug. 4, while admitting to the attack on Aug. 2. Furthermore, on Oct. 31, 2005, the *New York Times* reported that according to a classified finding, NSA historian Robert J. Hanyok concluded in 2001 that North Vietnamese intercepts were falsified and evidence skewed, if not for political motives, to cover translation mistakes.

Historians will continue to debate whether policymakers were aware that intelligence reports about the incidents were incomplete—Johnson is said to have told Undersecretary of State George Ball, “Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish”—or whether the administration believed it was providing Congress with accurate information. What is certain, however, is that the Johnson and his advisers wanted military action against Hanoi and used the incident as a pretext to seek a resolution approving the use of force and creating legal justification for full-blown war.

Critics of the Bush administration have invoked Tonkin before, accusing the White House of citing flawed intelligence about Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction and then trying to cover-up these political and bureaucratic machinations. And as is the case with the Tonkin Gulf incident, we will probably have to wait for the declassification of government documents before we find out whether President Bush and his advisers were aware that their allegations were based on questionable evidence.

But as storm clouds gather over the Persian Gulf, those who studied the administration’s *modus operandi* in the period leading to the ouster of Saddam Hussein are wondering whether the White House is again manipulating evidence to create the conditions for a U.S. military confrontation.

The new chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV, has sharply criticized the administration’s increasingly combative stance, telling the *New York Times* that efforts to portray Iran as a growing threat are uncomfortably reminiscent of rhetoric about Iraq before the American invasion. He warned that the administration is building a case even as intelligence agencies still know little about either Iran’s internal dynamics or its intentions in the Middle East. “To be quite honest, I’m a little concerned that it’s Iraq again,” the senator said. “This whole concept of moving against Iran is bizarre.”

At the same time, the decision by the Bush administration to appoint Adm. William Fallon to oversee military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has raised red flags among observers in Washington. Why choose a navy admiral to lead two ground wars in the Middle East and South Asia unless you are expecting an “incident” that would trigger a military confrontation with Iran? If that happened, Iran would retaliate by attacking oil platforms and tankers, closing the Strait of Hormuz, and perhaps hitting oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia; the U.S. Navy would then play a key role in protecting the oil flowing from the Persian Gulf.

The Bush administration’s decision to dispatch a second carrier group to the Persian Gulf—the *USS John C. Stennis*—to back up the *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower*, marking the first time since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that the U.S. has had two carrier battle groups in the Gulf, raises more concern, as did President Bush’s authorization of American forces

in Iraq to pursue Iranian operatives involved in aiding insurgents.

Those like Rockefeller who suspect that the administration is gearing up for war against Iran through a campaign of disinformation could also point to recent media reports that the U.S. is investigating possible Iranian involvement in an attack that killed five American soldiers in Karbala, as well as the continuing barrage of statements by top administration officials accusing Iran of meddling in Iraq.

At the Senate confirmation hearing for his nomination to be deputy secretary of state, intelligence chief John Negroponte said, “Iran has been emboldened in its behavior during the past couple of years and has played a more assertive role and that certainly manifests itself in Iraq, where we have increasing evidence that they have been providing lethal assistance to extremist Shia groups in that country.” Like other officials, Negroponte has downplayed the notion that the U.S. is using “gun diplomacy” to deal with Iran and suggests that Washington is just trying, in the aftermath of setbacks in Iraq, to reassert its position in the Persian Gulf.

But Sen. Barack Obama warned during a hearing against drifting into hostilities with Iran: “You’ve got a policy that appears to be purposely somewhat ambiguous in terms of how the administration is going to pursue Iranians who are on Iraqi soil. This has led to grave concern on the part of many observers that we are stumbling into a more aggressive posture ...”

If the past is any guide, we may less stumble than step—while claiming to have been pushed. You say “Persian Gulf,” I say “Tonkin Gulf.” Let’s go to war. ■

Leon Hadar is a Cato Institute research fellow in foreign-policy studies and author, most recently, of Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East.

Hide and Seek with Scooter

As the Plame affair plays out in court, Americans may learn who manipulated pre-war intelligence.

By Justin Raimondo

IN A COURT OF LAW, everyone is entitled to the presumption of innocence, but there was a moment during the trial of I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, the vice president’s former chief of staff, when this axiom was seriously shaken. It came during the cross-examination of Debbie Bonds, one of the FBI agents who had questioned Libby. She admitted, “It took a long time to get him to tell us what his first initial stood for.” Libby’s lawyer tried to make a joke of this—“He still won’t tell me,” Ted Wells quipped—but one has to wonder what the jury made of a suspect who wouldn’t come clean on such a simple matter.

His first name, by the way, is Irving.

As to why he would want to keep this—and so much else—secret is, perhaps, the key to understanding Libby, a man who, despite being one of the most powerful figures in Washington, was unknown to the general public before his indictment. As *Slate* reporter John Dickerson put it, Libby “represents the other side of the Bush administration: the secret undisclosed side. Like the vice president he works for, Libby prefers to work on policy in the shadows and leave the politics to others.” Well, yes, but that depends on what one means by “politics.”

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the president and his team were front and center, serving up the case for war, while Cheney and Libby, in their shadowy kitchen, were cooking the intelligence and beating back the CIA’s efforts to throw out their recipe. An anonymous

Cheney aide told the *Washington Post* during the investigation’s early stages that the vice president’s involvement in the leaking of CIA agent Valerie Plame’s name was “‘implausible’ . . . because he rarely if ever involved himself in press strategy.” Libby’s trial has shown this up as pure malarkey.

Working behind the scenes, Cheney and Libby sought to manipulate the media coverage of their war propaganda, with the vice president himself taking an active role—via Scooter—in distributing “talking points” to his underlings. As Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald has invested so much time and effort showing with a parade of witnesses—including Ari Fleischer, former White House press secretary, and Cathie Martin, former communications director for the vice president’s office—one aspect of this, amounting almost to an obsession, was the pushback against former Amb. Joseph Wilson, husband of Valerie Plame. According to the defense team, however, Wilson was just “a sliver,” a minor irritant, and didn’t merit much attention. Yet testimony reveals daily discussions about Wilson and efforts to shape a convincing response—personally directed by the vice president. On one occasion, Cheney dictated a script for Scooter to read to reporters asking about the Wilson matter, and, after doing so, the vice president’s loyal consigliere dutifully spread the news of Plame’s CIA affiliation.

Whether this was a freelancing innovation by Scooter or a deed done at the

direction of the vice president is the question hanging over this trial. And it is likely to come up, at least by implication, in Fitzgerald’s cross-examination of Cheney, if and when that comes to pass.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius writes that what the Libby trial reveals is “a failed cover up”—but what did Libby and Cheney have to hide? What’s being covered up here—albeit not for long—looks very much like the deliberate falsification of the “intelligence” that sparked the Iraq War. The office of the vice president was the headquarters of this campaign, which led to the outing of a CIA agent. Cheney’s consistent involvement in the day-to-day details of the cover-up is potentially the most explosive issue to come out of Libby’s trial.

It all started in the early months of 2002, when the vice president received uncorroborated reports that the Iraqis were trying to buy uranium from the African nation Niger. Cheney made inquiries to the CIA, and they duly investigated. Langley was skeptical; the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon’s own spook factory, was more enthusiastic about the allegations, and the Niger uranium issue became a major bone of contention between the CIA and the neoconservatives within the administration who were pushing for war. A heated intra-bureaucratic battle ensued, with the CIA debunking the Niger uranium “intelligence” and the vice president’s office energetically defending it. George Tenet, then CIA director, person-