3 | False Flag II: LBJ & the Gulf of Tonkin

‘Cuba and Vietnam bracket Frontier Camelot as the ends of a coffin.’
—Carl Oglesby

In Oglesby’s schema, the geo-strategic transition from Atlanticism to Pacificism served as the primary flashpoint between the Yankee and Cowboy factions, the primary indicator of a wider shift in the U.S. political economy away from the East and traditional industrial capitalism and towards the West and the newly coalescing ‘military industrial complex’.

Precisely according to their material interests and their historical perspectives, Yankee consciousness affirmed the priority of the Atlantic basin while Cowboy consciousness affirmed the priority of the Pacific Rim. [Prior to Vietnam] these images had been harmonized in the conduct of a two-front, two-ocean, two-theater war, a great Atlantic and Pacific effort joined and supported equally by all descendants of Civil War foes. This World War II coalition endured in the strategy of two-front Cold War in which Red Russia traded places with Nazi Germany and Red China with Fascist Japan, a friend for a foe and a foe for a
Unlike in the UK, which had been replaced as Hegemon by the U.S. after 1945, the American political system was not able to successfully maintain the war coalition indefinitely; in Great Britain, the monolithic nature of the ruling class permitted imperialism to act as a unifying force that thwarted regionalism, whereas in America, the entrenched regional autonomy of two qualitatively different political elites inevitably gave way to internecine struggle. Ironically, it had been the sudden acquisition of a vast ‘hinterland’ following the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48) that set the stage for the ‘irrepressible conflict’ of the War Between the States; the outbreak of secessionist warfare itself is *prima facie* evidence of the radical, and potentially subversive, independence of Southern/Cowboy elites. In the future, therefore, any attempt to make permanent the ascendancy of Pacificism would require the successful staging of an integrated spectacle.

In his Introduction to *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, the standard history of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, Edwin Moise relates an unintentionally revealing anecdote.

There was one point on which all of the Vietnamese [I interviewed] advocated a viewpoint I could not accept. All said they believed that the United States had planned, ahead of time, the sequence of events that culminated with the air-strikes [against North Vietnam; DRV] of August 5, carried out in retaliation for the supposed incident of the previous night. This had been the view

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1 Oglesby, *Yankee-Cowboy War*, 160.

2 On imperialism as the political lubricant of the British political system, see Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass*, generally, and Nairn, *Pariah*, 32-60.
in Hanoi right from the start; an article in the November 1964 issue of the DRV Navy Journal *Hai Quan* (Navy) said: ‘After fabricating the ‘second Tonkin Gulf incident,’ the Americans used it as a pretext to retaliate. But actually, all their plots were arranged beforehand.’ This was precisely what I would have believed had I been in the place of the Vietnamese. I am convinced, on the basis of my own research on the way Washington handled the affair, that these events had not been planned, and that the report of the second incident [August 4] had not been a deliberate fabrication. The first time I tried to explain this to the historians in Hanoi, however, I felt embarrassed. I was quite sure that President Johnson had been making an honest mistake when he bombed the DRV in ‘retaliation’ for an action the DRV had not committed, but I was acutely aware of how preposterous this tale must have sounded to my audience.³

Ironically, Moise’s attitude mirrors none other than that of Secretary of Defense McNamara.

I find it inconceivable that anyone even remotely familiar with our society and system of Government could suspect the existence of a conspiracy which would have included almost, if not all, the entire chain of military command in the Pacific, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of Defense and his chief assistants, the Secretary of State, and the President of the United States.⁴

Moise (along with McNamara) evidences no understanding of the spectacular power of the false-flag. It is useful to sharply contrast his attitude with that of James G.  

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³ Moise, xiv-xv. Emphasis added.  
⁴ Bamford, 300.
Hershberg on Cuba concerning the potential for Cuba to serve as an integrated spectacle.

A review of Pentagon planning makes it clear that for a small circle of high civilian and military officials, the idea that the United States might deliberately provoke events in Cuba that could serve as a pretext for U.S. intervention represented a possible course of action, frequently invoked, rather than an unthinkable libel that had emerged from the paranoid fantasies of Havana and Moscow.  

It is useful to recall at this juncture the centrality of ‘maritime incidents’ to the parapolitical imaginary of the Pentagon planners of OPERATION NORTHWOODS.

A ‘Remember the Maine’ incident could be arranged in several forms:

a. We could blow up a U.S. ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba.  

b. We could blow up a drone (unmanned) vessel anywhere in the Cuban waters. We could arrange to cause such incident in the vicinity of Havana or Santiago as a spectacular result of Cuban attack from the air or sea, or both. The presence of Cuban planes or ships merely investigating the intent of the vessel could be fairly compelling evidence that the ship was under attack. The nearness to Havana or Santiago would add credibility especially to those people that might have heard the blast or seen the fire. The U.S. could follow up with an air/sea rescue operation covered by U.S.

5 Hershberg, 163.

6 This appears to have been what RFK was referencing on October 16, 1962 during the Missile Crisis.
fighters to ‘evacuate’ remaining members of the non-existent crew. Casualty lists in U.S. newspapers would cause a helpful wave of national indignation.\(^7\)

As one might expect by now, OPLAN-34A (as incorporated into the draft version of NSAM 273) explicitly ‘required the intelligence community to provide detailed intelligence about the [South Vietnamese/RVN] commando targets, the North’s coastal defenses and related surveillance systems.’\(^8\) And under Section 7, we find ‘With respect to action against North Vietnam, there should be a detailed plan for the development of additional Government of Vietnam resources, especially for sea-going activity, and such planning should indicate the time and investment necessary to achieve a wholly new level of effectiveness in the field of action.’\(^9\)

From the time of the implementation of NSAM 273 on November 26, 1963, all U.S. Navy signals intelligence (SIGINT\(^{10}\)) operations were conducted in strict compliance with OPLAN-34A. Colloquially, these operations were known as ‘Desoto missions’, their objective being to determine the extent of North Vietnam’s maritime penetration of the South and to evaluate effectiveness of North Vietnamese coastal defenses;\(^{11}\) at the same time, these missions were to double as a highly public means of asserting ‘American freedom of navigation in international waters.’\(^{12}\) At all times, Desoto missions

\(^7\) Davis, 140.
\(^8\) Schuster, 30.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) See Hanyok generally.
\(^11\) Bamford, 292-99; Moise, 51; Hanyok, 4-12.
\(^12\) At that time, North Vietnam was unilaterally claiming a five nautical mile territorial limit; Schuster, 30; Moise, 55.
were to be strictly coordinated with independent but concurrent South Vietnamese commando raids against the North; on several occasions U.S. naval actions were curtailed in order to prevent interference with the South Vietnamese operations. In other words, the DeSoto missions were enveloped by the clandestine disinformation of plausible denial; by early 1964,

Covert [South Vietnamese] maritime operations were in full swing, and some of the missions succeeded in blowing up small installations along the coast, leading General Westmoreland to conclude that any close connection between 34A and Desoto would destroy the thin veneer of deniability surrounding the operations. In the end, the [U.S.] Navy agreed, and in concert with [Westmoreland], took steps to ensure that ‘34A operations will be adjusted to prevent interference’ with Desoto patrols.¹³

The first Desoto mission was conducted by the USS Craig in March, 1964; ‘The North Vietnamese did not react, probably because no South Vietnamese commando operations were underway at that time.’¹⁴ However, for some ‘mysterious’ reason, the second Desoto mission, to be undertaken by the USS Maddox, ‘was not canceled even though it was scheduled to start at the same time that a late July commando mission was being launched. Consequently, while Maddox was in the patrol area, a South Vietnamese commando raid was underway southwest of its position.’¹⁵ The obvious question that arises is: was the Maddox Desoto mission of August 1964 in-

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¹³ Andrade and Conroy, page 2 of 7.
¹⁴ Schuster, 31.
¹⁵ Ibid. The 34A mission in question took place on the night of 4-5 August. Hanyok, 30.
tended to induce a North Vietnamese attack? Admittedly it is ‘difficult to imagine that the North Vietnamese could come to any other conclusion that the 34A and Desoto missions were all part of the same operation.’

Former Under-Secretary of State George Ball is unequivocal on this point.

At the time there’s no question that many of the people who were associated with the [Vietnam] war were looking for any excuse to initiate bombing…The ‘DeSoto’ patrols, the sending of a destroyer up the Tonkin Gulf was primarily for provocation…I think there was a feeling that if the destroyer got into some trouble, that it would provide the provocation we needed.

The dilemma in its entirety is perhaps best expressed by Vietnam War historian Fredrik Logevall.

This all leads to one very large question: Did U.S. leaders engineer the crisis in the Tonkin Gulf? Did they, in other words, deliberately seek to provoke a North Vietnamese reaction in order to secure a casus belli? The provocative nature of the Oplan 34-A and Desoto patrols is beyond dispute, but provocation can be deliberate or incidental, intended or unintended. Was it deliberate in this case? Certainly with respect to the alleged second attack, on 4 August, a good case can be made that it was deliberate…Concludes historian John Prados: ‘A two-destroyer force [ordered] to sail in close proximity to the North Vietnamese coast for

16 Andrade and Conroy, 3 of 7; also Hanyok, 29-30. It is interesting to note, therefore, that when discussing ‘the U.S. decision to have the 34A raids and the DeSoto patrol taking place at the same time, William Bundy [the Deputy Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs] said, “Rational minds could not readily have foreseen that Hanoi might confuse them.”’ Moise, 67.

17 Bamford, 301.
ninety-six hours? Rationalize as you may, it was taunting Hanoi to do so.¹⁸

To complicate things even further, the Maddox was in fact misidentified by the North Vietnamese as an operational vessel in support of a South Vietnamese commando raid on Hon Me and Hon Nieu Islands on July 30, 1964.¹⁹

The North Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made all this clear in September [1964] when it published a ‘Memorandum Regarding the U.S. War Acts Against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the First Days of August 1964.’ Hanoi pointed out what Washington denied: ‘On July 30, 1964…U.S. and South Vietnamese warships intruded into the territorial waters of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and simultaneously shelled: Hon Nieu Island, 4 kilometers off the coast of Thank Hoa Province [and] Hon Me Island, 12 kilometers off the coast of Thank Hoa Province.’ It also outlined the Maddox’s path along the coast on 2 August and the 34A attacks on Vinh Son the following day.²⁰

On August 2, North Vietnamese patrol boats launched an unsuccessful attack on the Maddox;²¹ On August 4, although both vessels reported being under ‘enemy’ torpedo attack, neither the USS Maddox or the USS Turner Joy were targeted by the North Vietnamese coastal pa-

¹⁸ Logevall, 199-200.
¹⁹ Moise, 67.
²⁰ Andrade and Conroy, 4 of 7.
²¹ ‘The three [RVN] torpedo boats continued through the American barrage and launched their torpedoes at 1516. All missed, probably because the North Vietnamese had fired too soon. One 12.7mm machine gun bullet hit Maddox before the boats broke off and started to withdraw.’ Schuster, 32.
trols; instead, errors with SIGNIT ‘led U.S destroyers to open fire on spurious radar contacts, misinterpret their own propeller noises as incoming torpedoes, and ultimately report an attack that never occurred.’ Discernible in both incidents is the logic of the false-flag; after the failed Vietnamese attack of August 2, the ‘non-event’ of August 4 was retroactively seized upon by U.S. military intelligence and re-presented as the ‘real thing’. According to Ray S. Cline, CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence in 1964,

> What in effect happened…is that somebody from the Pentagon, I suppose it was McNamara, had taken over raw Sigint and [had] shown the President what they thought was evidence of a second attack on a [U.S.] naval vessel. And it was just what Johnson was looking for…Everybody was demanding the Sigint; they wanted it quick, they didn’t want anybody to take any time to analyze.'

SIGINT served as the basis for LBJ’s (apparent) belief in the reality of the August 4 torpedo attack and has been exhaustively analyzed by cryptology expert Robert J. Hanyok, who identified three fatal flaws with the intelligence: (i) more than 90% of all signals were omitted from both the post-attack summary report and the final report submitted in October 1964 which relied upon only six transmissions; (ii) there are unmistakable signs of the misleading editing of intercepts; (iii) there was a misleading translation and re-editing of several North

22 Ibid, 33.
23 Bamford, 299.
24 Hanyok, 49.
25 ‘The SIGINT was not manufactured. Instead, it consisted of fragments of legitimate intercept lifted out of its context and inserted into summary reports to support the contention of a pre-meditated North Vietnamese attack on 4 August.’ Ibid, 3.
Vietnamese after-action reports that appeared to be indicating an imminent torpedo attack, but were, in fact, referring in a rather confused manner to the August 2 incident.\textsuperscript{26} Read in its entirety, Hanyok’s conclusion is inescapable:

> Beginning with the period of the crisis in early August, into the days of the immediate aftermath, and continuing into October 1964, SIGINT information was presented in such a manner as to preclude responsible decision-makers in the Johnson administration from having the complete and objective narrative of events of 4 August 1964. Instead, only SIGINT that supported the claim that the communists had attacked the two destroyers was given to administration officials.\textsuperscript{27}

Yet, like Moise, Hanyok dare not call this ‘conspiracy’.

> This mishandling of the SIGINT was not done in a manner that can be construed as conspiratorial, that is, with manufactured evidence and collusion at all levels.\textsuperscript{28} Rather, the objective of these individuals was to support the Navy’s claim that the Desoto patrol had been deliberately attacked by the North Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{29}

Highly selective intelligence analysis, or ‘cherry-picking’,\textsuperscript{30} is, in fact, wholly consistent with deliberations

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\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 33-7.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{28} In fact, neither are required for a conspiracy: disinformation coupled with an intent to deceive by merely some of the parties involved are all that is necessary.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{30} This is essentially Hanyok’s understanding of the event: ‘While the [intelligence assessment] initially issued on the 4 August incident may be contentious, thin, and mistaken, what was issued in the Gulf of Tonkin
within both the Pentagon and the National Security Council that had been taking place ever since the implementation of NSAM 273. In contrast to Hanyok, Gareth Porter’s interpretation of the Tonkin Gulf incident reflects a far more sophisticated understanding of parapolitical logic; for him, ‘Lyndon Johnson’s decisions for war were the result of a continuing struggle between Johnson and his principal advisors—and particularly Robert S. McNamara—over escalation of the war.’ It is an historical cliché of the LBJ administration that Johnson’s actions in Vietnam were governed by an over-arching fear of being politically out-flanked by the Republican right: aggressive Cold War containment and expanded intervention in Vietnam were acts of political expediency offered in exchange for the domestic implementation of the progressive Great Society agenda. As a result, by late 1964 ‘Johnson’s advisors knew that Johnson was not going to agree to start the bombing [of North Vietnam] while he was campaigning for the presidency.’ At a meeting between Johnson and the JCS on March 4 1964 the President pointedly remarked: “[W]e haven’t got any Congress that will go with us, and we haven’t got any mothers that will go with us in a war…”

summaries beginning late on 4 August was deliberately skewed to support the notion that there had been an attack…That the NSA personnel believed that the attack happened and rationalized the contradictory evidence away is probably all that is necessary to know in order to understand what was done.” Ibid, 49.

31 See generally Porter, Chapter Six.
32 Porter, 181. The ‘S’ in McNamara’s name stands for ‘Strange’.
33 Ibid, 191. A political calculation that is not terribly difficult to understand by the JCS, Johnson’s perceived status as a Cowboy notwithstanding. An additional factor at work here, however, may have been growing concerns over the political stability of the post-Diem regime of General Nguyen Khanh; a surge in U.S. military support may have been felt necessary to stabilize South Vietnam. Hanyok, 9 and Porter, 185-8.
I’ve got to win an election.” Two weeks later White House aide Michael Forrestal advised [NSC Advisor] McGeorge Bundy that the JCS believed that Johnson was avoiding the “correct decisions” on Vietnam in order to assure his election.’ According to Porter, the ‘most serious pressure for military action in the Gulf came not from the Republicans but from Johnson’s own national security team.’

It is very important, therefore, to reconstruct carefully the chronology of parapolitical events from March to August 1964, focusing in particular upon the actions of the Department of Defense’s ever enigmatic Secretary McNamara. Porter highlights one incident that is particularly disturbing in its implications.

In mid-May, for the first time in Johnson’s presidency, Johnson’s principal advisers—McNamara, Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, CIA Director John McCone and Taylor—constituted themselves as the Executive Committee of the NSC, or ‘ExComm’. The political significance of that decision can hardly be overestimated. The ExComm had been convened in the Kennedy administration only at Kennedy’s direction during the Cuban Missile Crisis and then in late August 1963 over the political crisis in Saigon, and in both cases, the president had attended almost all of the meetings of the group. Johnson’s five principal advisors, however, used it as a mechanism to develop a strategy for getting him to escalate the war. Those meetings produced the first intense pressures from the national security bureaucracy on Johnson to make a commitment to the use of direct US military force

34 Porter, 189. Perhaps disingenuously, in early April Johnson claimed to long-time Kennedy insider Richard Goodwin that “‘They’re trying to get me in a war over there”’. Ibid.
35 Porter, 193.
against North Vietnam.  

At a June 10 1964 joint meeting of the JCS and the NSC, McNamara opined “that in the event of a dramatic event in Southeast Asia we would go promptly for a Congressional resolution” for greater military intervention in Vietnam. Although at that time still formally engaged in contingency planning for future possible interventions in Indochina, CINCPAC (the U.S. military command in the Pacific) ‘had decided by August 2 [1964] that the planning for an expansion of the war would need to be completed by November 1. The date implies that CINCPAC wanted to be ready to carry out such plans promptly after the presidential election, if this turned out to be necessary.’ Accordingly, when the

36 Ibid, 190. With no apparent show of irony, McNamara himself had by this time turned against OPLAN 34A, which he had such a central role in creating; after returning from another inspection trip to South Vietnam in March 1964 he openly referred to the plan as “a program so limited that it is unlikely to have any significant effect.” Hanyok, 9.

37 Moise, 30. It is important to note that one of the primary objectives of the (apparently) self-appointed ExComm headed by McNamara was to develop a draft of a future congressional resolution widening U.S. military intervention in Indochina. The operative provision of one draft prepared in mid-June did not, in fact, call for congressional approval at all but merely asserted the unilateral intent of the Executive to directly attack Hanoi, stating that the U.S. “is determined to prevent by whatever means may be necessary, including the use of arms, the Communist regime in North Vietnam, with the aid and support of the Communist regime in China, from extending, by force or threat of force, its aggressive or subversive activities against any non-Communist nations in Southeast Asia.” This draft was ultimately rejected on the grounds that it would have committed Johnson to a much more ambitious military program than he was willing to accept at that time. Porter, 192. See also Hanyok on this: ‘President Johnson demurred, fearing that it would ruin the image of moderation he had been cultivating for the presidential election in November. The draft resolution was quietly shelved until another opportunity came along.’ Hanyok, 46. Emphasis added.

38 Moise, 42. ‘It seemed very likely that the administration would have to escalate the war soon after the election; indeed, President Johnson had [National Security Advisor] McGeorge Bundy ask Ray Cline, the CIA’s
SIGINT began to flow into Washington on August 4, ‘McNamara was clearly determined that the administration should take full advantage of any second naval incident in the Tonkin Gulf to bomb the North.’ 39 At a pivotal lunch session between McNamara and Johnson on August 4, the President agreed with the Secretary’s recommendation for an ‘execute order’ for air strikes against the North Vietnamese PT boat and fuel depot in Vinh, the time being set was for 7:00 pm Washington time.40 At 4:08 pm EST that same day, McNamara telephoned the chief of CINCPAC Admiral Ulysses S. Sharp, ‘not to launch...an investigation but to see if he could get a statement from him that the attack had definitely taken place.’ 41 Porter relates that

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Deputy Director for Intelligence, whether the United States could afford to wait that long. Would Vietnam already be irretrievably lost? Cline’s evaluation was that it would just barely be possible to put off a major increase in the U.S. effort until after the election; “you’re going to have your back to the wall.”’ Ibid. 45.

39 Porter, 193. As Hanyok somewhat laconically remarks, “That there might have been a lot of pressure on the NSA people to produce “proof” is quite likely. Regarding that charged period, Ray Cline, the former CIA deputy director, recalled that “Everybody was demanding the sigint...they wanted it quick, they didn’t want anybody to take any time to analyse it.”’ Hanyok, 38.

40 Porter, 194.

41 Ibid.
As Porter correctly notes, this incident is even more unsettling than the anomalous meetings of ExComm.

It was the responsibility of the president—not that of the secretary of defense—to decide to go ahead with an order for the bombing of a foreign country when new information made it unclear whether US ships had been attacked or not. Yet the president’s log conversations for August 4 show that McNamara did not call Johnson following that crucial conversation with Sharp. Instead, he proceeded with his own plan to issue the execute order. At 4:49 pm, according to the Pentagon’s subsequent chronology, the strike execute message was transmitted from the Pentagon to CINCPAC headquarters in Hawaii for re-transmission to the Seventh Fleet. One minute after that message had been sent, the president’s phone log indicates that he called McNamara from the mansion. Again, that call was not recorded, but the subsequent phone conversations between McNamara and Johnson show that McNamara still did not alert Johnson to the latest developments.

Porter also makes much of Johnson’s request on August 7 for ‘a full accounting of communications between

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42 Ibid, 195. ‘McNamara did not want to delay the execute order, because he would then have to explain the delay to Johnson, which might well have led to the cancellation of the strike pending a full investigation. Instead, McNamara insisted on proceeding with the strike execute order even before the earlier reports of torpedo attacks on U.S. vessels had been verified.’ Ibid, 195.

43 McNamara had two other telephone conversations with Johnson earlier in the day, both unrecorded—at 3:44 pm and 3:51 pm, both immediately prior to the critical telephone call to Admiral Sharp. Ibid, 194.

CINCPAC and DOD on August 4-5—suggesting a suspicion that he had not been fully informed about what McNamara knew...Johnson’s intense interest in getting the full facts on what had happened and what McNamara had known suggests that Johnson felt he had been kept in the dark.’45 Porter is, therefore, ultimately able to conclude that the ‘real target’ of ExComm’s machinations ‘was Lyndon Johnson himself.’46

It is of more than passing interest to note how Porter’s somewhat revisionist reading of LBJ’s culpability neatly parallels the wider literature about JFK’s withdrawal plans: both Chief Executives intuitively sought restraint and both were ultimately undone by the conspiratorial ‘evil courtiers’ of the NSC and JCS—a standard motif of western political discourse that extends at least as far back as the rediscovery during the Renaissance of Tacitus’ account of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. However, just as with JFK, an alternative reading of LBJ is possible—namely that he had set up a two-track approach within his own administration.47 Johnson having used McNamara as a surrogate is as consistent with the historical evidence of Johnson as doubting Cowboy. It is inherently implausible for ExComm to have convened without either presidential knowledge or approval; it is fully possible, however, that LBJ did not attend those sessions, especially if he was using McNamara as a ventriloquist’s dummy to project his own hawkish voice—a striking example, if true, of plausible

46 Ibid, 192.
47 Porter himself should not be adverse to this possibility; in establishing his case for JFK’s desire to withdraw from Vietnam altogether, he describes the President’s deft exploitation of ‘multiple levels of deception’ as a ‘triumph of Machiavellian manoeuvring’. Ibid, 177-8.
denial within the White House itself. The Gulf of Tonkin incident presented LBJ with a golden opportunity for staging his own integrated spectacle: assuming a public stance of reluctant warrior, Johnson could appear to be both reasonable and ferocious at the same time, completely outmaneuvering his Republican rival Barry Goldwater on both counts. Additionally, there are at least a few indications that the pressure being applied to the NSA concerning the SIGINT was actually coming from LBJ himself. As Hanyok writes

Yet, despite doubts [about August 4], people in the intelligence and defense communities kept their silence. As much as anything else, it was an awareness that President Johnson would brook no uncertainty that could undermine his position. Faced with this attitude [CIA deputy director] Ray Cline was quoted as saying: ‘…we knew it was bum dope that we were getting from the Seventh Fleet, but we were told only to give the facts with no elaboration on the nature of the evidence. Everyone knew how volatile LBJ was. He did not like to deal with uncertainties.’

Last, and not least, is an anecdote that directly recalls Kevin Spacey’s ‘Francis Underwood’ from House of Cards; according to George Ball, in meetings with McNamara after August 4, Johnson would refer ‘in a “sort of kidding way”…to his own doubts that the [torpedo]

48 Similarly, LBJ’s request on August 7 can be as easily understood as an exercise in ‘covering his tracks’ as an attempt to uncover the truth; it may also have doubled as useful political blackmail to be used against McNamara in the event of dissension. As Porter comments on McNamara’s memoirs, ‘Consciously or unconsciously, McNamara has remembered what he needed to shift his responsibility for going to war over Vietnam from his own shoulders to those of Lyndon Johnson.’ Porter, 180.

49 Hanyok, 39.
attack had actually taken place.’

On any interpretation, however, the explicit deference shown to overtly political factors in the recommendations of CINCPAC clearly indicates a sensitivity for the need to forge a political consensus; if a Cowboy-style of intervention was being planned for Vietnam—in lieu of Cuba having been removed as a target—then the JCS, as a parapolitical entity within the U.S. Dual State, would have been fully aware of the need to circumvent Yankee intransigence, which Johnson himself was publicly manipulating for electoral gain. It was very much the clearly simulated nature of the (non-) event in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 4 that is precisely the basis of the historical (and parapolitical) status of the ‘Incident’ as a deep event: ‘If President Johnson had had to make do with genuine incidents, none of which involved so brazen a challenge to the United States, public enthusiasm for retaliatory strikes would have been weaker, and he could not have gotten his resolution through Congress with so little debate or by so overwhelming a vote.’

Furthermore, Washington’s ‘framing’ of the Tonkin Gulf incidents were in strict compliance with the parapolitical logic of OPERATION NORTHWOODS; in the absence of substantive combat on August 2 (which would have included the possible loss of American lives), the non-attack of August 4 was re-staged as a spectacle, proof of North Vietnam’s status (instead of Cuba) as an ‘international menace’. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed virtually unanimously by the U.S. Congress on August 10, 1964, served as both the successful performance of the NORTHWOODS script as well as the final stage in the implementation of NSAM 273. The Resolution reads

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51 Moise, 254.
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 already created a serious threat to international peace...the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander and Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent any further aggression...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.\(^{52}\)

Not surprisingly, the passage of the Resolution did nothing to abate the U.S. intelligence community’s appetite for false-flag stagecraft. On September 8, 1964, less than one month after the Tonkin Resolution, Johnson received an exceptionally forward looking memo authored by Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy, entitled ‘Courses of Action for South Vietnam’.

The main further question is the extent to which we should add elements to the above actions that would tend deliberately to provoke a DRV reaction, and subsequent retaliation by us. Example of actions to be considered would be running U.S. naval patrols increasingly close to the North Viet-

\(^{52}\) Schuster, 28.
namese coast and/or associating them with 34A operations. We believe that such deliberately provocative elements should not be added in the immediate future while the [RVN] is still struggling to its feet. By early October, however, we may recommend such actions depending on [RVN] progress and Communist reaction in the meantime, especially to U.S. naval patrols.\textsuperscript{53}

As Debord reminds us, ‘The spectacle is continually re-discovering its own basic assumptions—and each time in a more concrete manner.’\textsuperscript{54} JFK/DALLAS, was a remarkably abstract, or reified, spectacle—the integrative function of the successfully pre-empted Phase I was appropriated by the authors of Phase II and strategically redeployed as a media offensive of disinformation, securing the opaqueness of the Dual State. With the double fiction of both (para-) political unity and cognitive transparency endlessly circulating throughout the capillaries of the post-Oswald mass media, the Dual State was now in a position to attempt the badly overdue suspension of Civil War II through an even more audacious clandestine action—the successful staging of the false-flag targeting an ‘enemy’ combatant that possessed the irresistible virtues of inhabiting the geo-strategic ‘prime real estate’ of the Pacific while remaining a geo-politically safe theater of (future) operations. The U.S. phase of the Vietnam War(s), 1965 to 1973, was not merely the product of a spectacle; it was the spawning ground of an effusion of new and ever greater demonstrations of spectacular power, ‘the first televised war.’

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\textsuperscript{53} Reprinted in \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, 359.
\textsuperscript{54} Debord, \textit{Society}, 22.