

# Failing Tonkin Gulf Test on Ukraine

**Exclusive:** As the Ukraine crisis worsens, Official Washington fumes only about “Russian aggression” – much as a half century ago, the Tonkin Gulf talk was all about “North Vietnamese aggression.” But then and now there were other sides to the story and questions that Congress needed to ask, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Many current members of Congress, especially progressives, may have envisioned how they would have handled the Tonkin Gulf crisis in 1964. In their imaginations, they would have asked probing questions and treated the dubious assertions from the White House with tough skepticism before voting on whether to give President Lyndon Johnson the authority to go to war in Vietnam.

If they had discovered what CIA and Pentagon insiders already knew that the crucial second North Vietnamese “attack” on U.S. destroyers likely never happened and that the U.S. warships were not on some “routine” patrol but rather supporting a covert attack on North Vietnamese territory today’s members of Congress would likely see themselves joining Sens. Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening as the only ones voting no.

Bravery in hindsight is always easy, but things feel quite different when Official Washington is locked in one of its pro-war “group thinks” when all the “important people” from government to the media to think tanks are pounding their chests and talking tough, as they are now on Russia and Ukraine.

Then, if you ask your probing questions and show your tough skepticism, you will have your patriotism, if not your sanity, questioned. You will be “controversialized,” “marginalized,” “pariahed.” You will be called somebody’s “apologist,” whether it’s Ho Chi Minh or Vladimir Putin.

And nobody wants to go through that because here’s the truth about Official Washington: if you run with the pack if you stay within the herd you’ll be safe. Even if things go terribly wrong even if thousands of American soldiers die along with many, many more foreign civilians you can expect little or no accountability. You will likely keep your job and may well get promoted. But if you stand in the way of the stampede, you’ll be trampled.

After all, remember what happened to Morse and Gruening in their next elections. They both lost. As one Washington insider once told me about the U.S. capital’s culture, “there’s no honor in being right too soon. People just remember that you were out of step and crazy.”

So, the choice often is to do the right thing and be crushed or to run with the pack and be safe. But there are moments when even the most craven member of Congress should look for whatever courage he or she has left and behave like a Morse or a Gruening, especially in a case like the Ukraine crisis which has the potential to spin out of control and into a nuclear confrontation.

Though the last Congress already whipped through belligerent resolutions denouncing "Russian aggression" and urging a military response with only five Democrats and five Republicans dissenting members of the new Congress could at least ascertain the facts that have driven the Ukraine conflict. Before the world lurches into a nuclear showdown, it might make a little sense to know what got us here.

### **The Nuland Phone Call**

For instance, Congress could investigate the role of Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt in orchestrating the political crisis that led to a violent coup overthrowing Ukraine's constitutionally elected President Viktor Yanukovich a year ago.

What was the significance of the Nuland-Pyatt phone call in early February 2014 in which Nuland exclaimed "Fuck the EU!" and seemed to be handpicking the leaders of a new government? "Yats is the guy," she said referring to her favorite, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, with Pyatt musing about how to "midwife this thing"?

Among other questions that Congress could pose would be: What does U.S. intelligence know about the role of neo-Nazi extremists whose "sotin" militias infiltrated the Maidan protests and escalated the violence against police last February? [See Consortiumnews.com's "NYT Still Pretends No Coup in Ukraine."]

And, what does U.S. intelligence know about the mysterious snipers who brought the crisis to a boil on Feb. 20, 2014, by opening fire on police apparently from positions controlled by the extremist Right Sektor, touching off a violent clash that left scores dead, including police and protesters. [A worthwhile documentary on this mystery is "Maidan Massacre."]

Congress might also seek to determine what was the U.S. government's role over the next two days as three European countries Poland, France and Germany negotiated a deal with Yanukovich on Feb. 21 in which the embattled president agreed to Maidan demands for reducing his powers and accepting early elections to vote him out of office.

Instead of accepting this agreement, which might have averted a civil war, neo-Nazi and other Maidan militants attacked undefended government positions on Feb.

22 and forced officials to flee for their lives. Then, instead of standing by the European deal, the U.S. State Department quickly embraced the coup regime as “legitimate.” And, surprise, surprise, Yatsenyuk emerged as the new Prime Minister.

What followed the coup was a Western propaganda barrage to make it appear that the Ukrainian people were fully behind this “regime change” even though many ethnic Russian Ukrainians in the east and south clearly felt disenfranchised by the unconstitutional ouster of their president.

A U.S. congressional inquiry also might ask: Was there any internal U.S. government assessment of the risks involved in allowing Nuland and Pyatt to pursue a “regime change” strategy on Russia’s border? If so, did the assessment take into account the likely Russian reaction to having an ally next door overthrown by anti-Russian extremists with the intent to put Ukraine into NATO and potentially bring NATO armaments to Russia’s frontyard?

Since the entire crisis has been presented to the American people within an anti-Yanukovych/anti-Moscow propaganda paradigm both by the U.S. mainstream news media and by the U.S. political/academic elites there has been virtually no serious examination of the U.S. complicity. No one in Official Washington dares say anything but “Russian aggression.”

### **Post-Coup Realities**

Beyond the events surrounding the coup a year ago, there were other pivotal moments as this crisis careened out of control. For instance, what does U.S. intelligence know about the public opinion in Crimea prior to the peninsula’s vote for secession from Ukraine and reunification with Russia on March 16?

The State Department portrayed the referendum as a “sham” but more objective observers acknowledge that the vote although hasty reflected a broad consensus inside Crimea to bail out of the failed Ukrainian state and rejoin a somewhat more functional Russia, where pensions are about three times higher and have a better chance of being paid.

Then, there was the massacre of ethnic Russians burned alive in Odessa’s trade union building on May 2, with neo-Nazi militias again on the front lines. Like other topics that put the U.S.-backed coup regime in a bad light, the Odessa massacre quickly moved off the front pages and there has been little follow-up from international agencies that supposedly care about human rights. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Ukraine’s ‘Dr. Strangelove’ Reality.”](#)]

The next major catastrophe associated with the Ukraine crisis was the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17. Again, the

State Department rushed to a judgment blaming the ethnic Russian rebels and Russia for the tragedy that killed all 298 people onboard. However, I've been told that some U.S. intelligence analysts had a very different take on who was responsible, finding evidence implicating a rogue element of the Ukrainian government.

However, following the pattern of going silent whenever the Kiev coup regime might look bad, there was a sudden drop-off of interest in the MH-17 case, apparently not wanting to disrupt the usefulness of the earlier anti-Russian propaganda. When a Dutch-led inquiry into the crash issued an interim report last October, there was no indication that the Obama administration had shared its intelligence information. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.](#)"]

There also is little interest from Congress about what the MH-17 evidence shows. Even some progressive members are afraid to ask for a briefing from U.S. intelligence analysts, possibly because the answers might force a decision about whether to blow the whistle on a deception that involved Secretary of State John Kerry and other senior Obama administration officials.

This sort of cowardly misfeasance of duty marks the latest step in a long retreat from the days after the Vietnam War when Congress actually conducted some valuable investigations. In the 1970s, there were historic inquiries into Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, led by Sen. Sam Ervin, and into CIA intelligence abuses by Sen. Frank Church.

### **A Downward Spiral**

Since then, congressional investigations have become increasingly timid, such as the Iran-Contra and October Surprise investigations led by Rep. Lee Hamilton in the late 1980s and early 1990s, shying away from evidence of impeachable wrongdoing by President Ronald Reagan. Then, in the 1990s, a Republican-controlled Congress obsessed over trivial matters such as President Bill Clinton's personal finances and sex life.

Congressional oversight dysfunction reached a new low when President George W. Bush made baseless claims about Iraq's WMD and Saddam Hussein's intent to share nuclear, chemical and biological weapons with al-Qaeda. Rather than perform any meaningful due diligence, Congress did little more than rubber stamp Bush's claims by authorizing the Iraq War.

Years afterwards, there were slow-moving investigations into the WMD intelligence "failure" and into the torture practices that were used to help fabricate evidence for the fake WMD claims. Those investigations, however, were

conducted behind closed doors and did little to educate the broader American public. There apparently wasn't much stomach to call the perpetrators of those abuses before televised hearings.

The only high-profile foreign-affairs hearings that have been held in recent years have been staged by House Republicans on the made-up scandal over an alleged cover-up of the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, a hot-button issue for the GOP base but essentially a non-story.

Now, the United States is hurtling toward a potential nuclear confrontation with Russia over Ukraine and this congressional ineptness could become an existential threat to the planet. The situation also has disturbing similarities to the Tonkin Gulf situation although arguably much, much more dangerous.

### **Misleading Americans to War**

In 1964, there also was a Democratic president in Lyndon Johnson with Republicans generally to his right demanding a more aggressive military response to fight communism in Vietnam. So, like today with President Barack Obama in the White House and Republicans demanding a tougher line against Russia, there was little reason for Republicans to challenge Johnson when he seized on the Tonkin Gulf incident to justify a ratcheting up of attacks on North Vietnam. Meanwhile, also like today, Democrats weren't eager to undermine a Democratic president.

The result was a lack of oversight regarding the White House's public claims that the North Vietnamese launched an unprovoked attack on U.S. warships on Aug. 4, 1964, even though Pentagon and CIA officials realized very quickly that the initial alarmist reports about torpedoes in the water were almost surely false.

Daniel Ellsberg, who in 1964 was a young Defense Department official, recounts in his 2002 book *Secrets* how the Tonkin Gulf falsehoods took shape, first with the panicked cables from a U.S. Navy captain relaying confused sonar readings and then with that false storyline presented to the American people.

As Ellsberg describes, President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara announced retaliatory airstrikes on Aug. 4, 1964, telling "the American public that the North Vietnamese, for the second time in two days, had attacked U.S. warships on 'routine patrol in international waters'; that this was clearly a 'deliberate' pattern of 'naked aggression'; that the evidence for the second attack, like the first, was 'unequivocal'; that the attack had been 'unprovoked'; and that the United States, by responding in order to deter any repetition, intended no wider war."

Ellsberg wrote: "By midnight on the fourth, or within a day or two, I knew that each one of those assurances was false." Yet, the White House made no effort to

clarify the false or misleading statements. The falsehoods were left standing for several years while Johnson sharply escalated the war by dispatching a half million soldiers to Vietnam.

In August 1964, the Johnson administration also misled Congress about the facts of the Tonkin Gulf incident. Though not challenging that official story, some key members worried about the broad language in the Tonkin Gulf resolution authorizing the President “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression including the use of armed force.”

As Ellsberg noted, Sen. Gaylord Nelson tried to attach an amendment seeking to limit U.S. involvement to military assistance not a direct combat role but that was set aside because of Johnson’s concern that it “would weaken the image of unified national support for the president’s recent actions.”

Ellsberg wrote, “Several senators, including George McGovern, Frank Church, Albert Gore [Sr.], and the Republican John Sherman Cooper, had expressed the same concern as Nelson” but were assured that Johnson had no intention of expanding the war by introducing ground combat forces.

In other words, members of Congress failed to check out the facts and passed the fateful Tonkin Gulf resolution on Aug. 7, 1964. It should be noted, too, that the mainstream U.S. media of 1964 wasn’t asking many probing questions either.

Looking back at that history, it’s easy for today’s members of Congress to think how differently they would have handled that rush to judgment, how they would have demanded to know the details of what the CIA and the Pentagon knew, how they wouldn’t let themselves be duped by White House deceptions.

However, a half century later, the U.S. political/media process is back to the Tonkin Gulf moment, accepting propaganda themes as fact and showing no skepticism about the official line. Except today, Official Washington’s war fever is not over a remote corner of Southeast Asia but over a country on the border of nuclear-armed Russia.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[President Gollum’s ‘Precious’ Secrets](#)”; “[NYT Whites Out Ukraine’s Brownshirts](#)”; and “[Nuclear War and Clashing Ukraine Narratives](#).”]

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The**

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