

Congressional Timeline Lesson Plan: "Gulf of Tonkin Incident, August 1964"



SUBJECTS

American Government, Social Studies, U.S. History, Journalism



GRADE LEVEL

10-12



OBJECTIVES

This lesson will introduce students to real-time reporting on the Gulf of Tonkin incident which led to the passage by Congress of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The resolution gave President Lyndon Johnson the authority to assist any Southeast Asian country whose government was considered to be threatened by communist aggression.

Students will analyze a historical document using the following strategies: summarizing, contextualizing, inferring, monitoring, and corroborating.



LESSON PLAN

Context:

The Gulf of Tonkin incident involved a sea battle between the American destroyer USS Maddox and North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2, 1964. A second incident, later proven to have been fabricated, was reported on August 4. The incidents have been controversial in explaining U.S. expansion of the war in Vietnam. Other sources deal with the controversy; this lesson focuses on events of August 4-6 as reported by Time magazine congressional correspondent [Neil MacNeil](#).

MacNeil's report took the form of a 19-page wire to senior editors in New York. Link to the annotated report here

http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/88th_08101964_McNeilReport.pdf.

Among the subjects MacNeil covers are these: congressional reactions to rumors about the nature of the incident; a White House briefing for congressional leaders on the **attack; an assessment of President Johnson's presentation; and the political implications** of the attack.

Lesson:

The instructor shall introduce the historical questions to be addressed by MacNeil's report on the Gulf of Tonkin incident and subsequent White House briefing. Here are some possible questions: Under what circumstances is the president obligated to inform Congress of his military actions? Are members of Congress duty-bound to support the president in times of military conflict? Does party affiliation matter in terms of congressional support or opposition to the president?

1. In this phase, students examine the text of MacNeil's report to find information that is clearly stated in the report. They should consider these questions: What type of document is MacNeil's report? What specific information or perspectives does the report provide about the Gulf of Tonkin incident? Who were the people who attended the White House briefing and why were they included? What is **the source of MacNeil's** reporting? What is the purpose of his story? What do you know about MacNeil and Time magazine?

2. Next, students will place MacNeil's report in context. This phase will require them to consult sources beyond the document. Among the questions to answer are these: When and where was the report produced? Why did MacNeil write the story? What was happening in U.S. foreign policy at the time? What was the partisan composition of the federal government (White House and Congress)?

3. Inferring provides students with the chance to revisit initial facts gleaned from the source and expand their understanding of the information. Possible questions include **the following: What interpretations may be drawn about President Johnson's** expectations for the meeting, that is, what did he want to accomplish? What points of view did other participants bring to the White House briefing? What evidence indicates whether or not the president accomplished his objective? What missing information could MacNeil have included in his report?

4. Students should reflect upon the historical question(s) posed by the instructor and **reconsider their assumptions about how MacNeil's report addresses the question(s): What additional evidence beyond MacNeil's report is necessary to answer the historical question? What ideas or terms need further defining? How useful is MacNeil's report in** answering the historical question?

5. To extend the lesson, students should examine other sources that describe the events of August 2-6, **1964. For example, students could read President Johnson's public** statements about the Gulf of Tonkin incident at the time. Questions: What similarities **and differences exist between MacNeil's report and Johnson's statements? What** conclusions may be drawn from them? What additional information or sources are necessary to answer more fully the guiding historical question?

6. Additional questions and activities:

If an incident like the Gulf of Tonkin battle took place today, who should be invited to the White House briefing and why?

How might events have changed if the participants in Johnson's briefing had known that the second attack (August 4) did not really happen?
No one seemed to know why North Vietnam attacked the USS Maddox--can you add to the speculation on page 7?
How important were the political implications of the event as described by MacNeil near the end of his report?



RESOURCES

Neil MacNeil's report, August 6, 1964

http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/88th_08101964_McNeilReport.pdf

President Lyndon Johnson's [public statements, August 3-7, 1964](#)



CREDIT

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November 2012