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ATTACK \[\text{(nation)}\] Cover - Congress & Pentagon

It was mid-afternoon, Tuesday, when the rumors began to fly about Washington that there had been a new, provocative attack on U.S. naval forces in the Bay of Pigs. The rumors came from the Pentagon, and soon were being carried by the wire services. Up on Capitol Hill, the Congressional leaders were totally in the dark; they knew nothing. There had been no alert from the White House, no intelligence passed from any source. Only the rumors — actually low-echelon leaks to the press.

"If it's nothing important," snapped one Democratic Congressional leader, "they let us know right away. When it's important, we have to read about it in the newspapers."
A Democratic Senate leader, told that the Pentagon
grapesvine reported the attack and that the U.S. forces had sunk
at least one of the attackers, voiced no qualms at punishing the
enemy. "If it's true," he said, "they deserve it."

The wire stories forced the Johnson Administration
to make an announcement on the attack and its repulse. Then, in
late afternoon, the White House switchboard started to place the
calls to the Congressional leaders: they were being summoned to a
conference with the President at the White House. The subject was
not announced, but it was more than obvious. The meeting was
bi-partisan; North-Vietnam pt boats had attacked again. The
discussion could center about nothing else.
Invited were Dirksen and Mansfield, Humphrey and Fuschel, Russell and Saltonstall, Fulbright and Aiken from the Senate; Speaker McCormack, Halleck, Albert, Arends, Boggs, Vinson, Morgan and Mrs. Bolton from the House. They were the Democratic and Republican leaders of the Senate and the House and the Chairmen and ranking Republican members of the Senate and House Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations.

Absent -- notably -- were the leaders of the Senate and House appropriations Committees, all of whom have a large and powerful voice in the U.S. military and intelligence.

The meeting convened maximax in the cabinet room of the White House, with the Congressional leaders scattered around the huge oval table. Present to greet them was a deeply grim Lyndon Baines Johnson, his Defense and State secretaries, CIA's John McCone and the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Wheeler, in full uniform.
Johnson obviously was gravely concerned about the sudden turn in events off the coast of Viet-Nam. Only the day before, McNamara and Rusk had gone before the House leadership and the Senate leadership, separately this time, and gave them their solemn understanding of Sunday's attack on the Maddox.

"We believe," said Rusk then, "that this is an isolated instance."

McNamara confirmed Rusk's statement for the military. New orders to retaliate had been issued by Johnson. The Maddox had been supported by another destroyer. The highest echelon of the Johnson administration had not expected any further provocative attacks.

The McNamara and his lieutenants put out the explanation that the Maddox had not proved effective against the North Viet-nam PT boats on Sunday because the ship's five-inch batteries simply were not "effective" against darting, tiny PT boats.
By off-chance, Republican Representative Melvin Laird, a ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee and only recently the Chairman of the GOP national convention platform committee, had served on the Maddox in World War II. He denied privately the Pentagon rationale for the failure of the Maddox on Sunday to bag any of the attacking PT boats.

"That's a damn lie," snorted one GOP Congressional leader, of McNamara's explanation of the Maddox's failure.

"What happened," this GOP leader went on, "was that there was a 20-minute delay on Sunday between the attack and the skipper reporting it to headquarters and getting his orders back. They didn't have the orders they have now. The PT boats were getting out of range when the orders arrived."
McNamara on Monday also explained that the aircraft in the area were ill-equipped to attack the PT boats. They had air-to-air weapons, not weapons to sink a ship. "Why," asked a GOP Congressional leader, "couldn't those planes be armed with multi-purpose armaments?"

The repetition of the attack on Tuesday and its greater intensity washed away any sense that had existed that this was merely an "isolated" affair. That, of itself, intensified the gravity of the White House meeting between the President and the Congressional leaders.

The atmosphere of the cabinet room was tense and grim. It did not have the high intensity of that similar session 22 months ago when John Kennedy had called in the same leaders to brief them on the Russian missiles in Cuba and announce his plan to quarantine Cuba. But it was tense all the same, gravely intense, for everyone there knew the implications of war that were involved.
President Johnson opened the session. There were none
of the jovial familiarities now by the President with these men he had
known so long and well. Even at the height of the Cuban crisis, Kennedy
had been able to crack a quip or two, josh an old colleague from his
senate days. Not so with Lyndon Johnson.

One aspect of the Viet-Nam problem was quickly obvious
to the Congressional leaders: the Johnson administration had not
been able to fathom the cause for the attacks by the North Viet-Nam
forces. The Pentagon and the CIA and State simply could not
give a sound explanation of just what the Communist camp intended —
merely an annoyance on the U.S. forces, a deliberate provocation
to escalate the war in South-East Asia, a desire to pull Russia
closer behind China's machinations in South East Asia. The Johnson
administration did not know, and this was disquieting to everyone, including
the President.

"There are," said one Congressional Senate leader,

"so many imponderables."
"This thing caught them with the pants down," said a Republican Congressional leader, after the meeting. "I don't think they have it analysed yet."

In opening the briefing, Johnson laid it out cold to the Congressional leaders. "I want to talk to you," he said, "about a statement I am going to give out." He briefly mentioned the attacks, the proposed reply. Then he turned the meeting over to his top lieutenants.

McNamara was first, detailing the military situation, what forces the U.S. has in the area of conflict or moving there, and spelling out what the U.S. forces proposed to do.

Johnson put it bluntly that he was acting on the advice of McNamara in ordering the retaliatory attack on the North Viet-Nam base and that McNamara made that recommendation to him on the unanimous recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
Rusk followed McNamara, spelling out the political situation in the area. McCone followed with an intelligence briefing and then Wheeler, most of whose material had already been detailed by McNamara, concluded. Wheeler was briefest; the others tersely summed up their reports in about 10 minutes each. The meeting began at 6:45 and the four top lieutenants took a little more than a half hour to spell out their best information in their areas and the government's planned retaliatory attack.

"These," summed up Johnson, "are our plans."

He made it more than obvious that he was not seeking advice of the Congressional leaders. He was merely informing them — as they had to be informed — of his decision, on the advice of the Pentagon, to act in South-East Asia.

"He was in a very serious mood," said one of those at the White House briefing. "There was no wise-cracking going on, I'll tell you."
Johnson, McNamara and Wheeler all spelled out one essential in the area: the U.S. has there at hand the men and material to execute the maneuver, the reply as Johnson called it, of attacking the North Viet-Nam bases.

Not only that, but they also spelled out -- without getting into great detail -- that the U.S. is prepared to escalate the war in SouthEast-Asia in response to further actions by the North Viet-nam communists or the Chinese. "This was top secret," said one of those present.

At least some, if not all of the Congressional leaders, were glad not to be given the complete picture of U.S. battle plans to meet new possible contingencies. They did not want the responsibility of knowing such security secrets.
Necessarily, this stage of the briefing was somewhat clouded, both because of its top secret nature and because the U.S. Government, at this point, has no way to calculate the next moves of the Chines and North Viet-namese. Not only that, but the U.S. government — as of Tuesday night when the attack was ordered — did not have a solid reading on the motivation of the North Viet-namese in Sunday's and Tuesday's attacks.

It is important to note that the Johnson contingency plans for further anti-communist operations in this area — as detailed in Tuesday night's briefing — were confined entirely to naval and naval-air operations. The President and his top lieutenants did not discuss escalating the land war in Viet-Nam.

"We'll probably augment our boats out there," said one congressional leader, after the briefing, "— and let them know it!"
All this was a gamey business for the Congressional leaders. And they listened to Johnson and the others with the same grimness that the President showed. President Johnson's personnel served coffee only to the conferees. Some of them could have used a stiff drink. "They ought to be ashamed of themselves," quipped one of the leaders on the absence of a bottle of Scotch.

"They told us that they had the equipment to do what they were going to do," one GOP leader said.

"We're in good shape out there," summed up another of the leaders about the briefing. "We are in good shape to do what they thought ought to be done."

At the time of the briefing — from 6:15 to 8:15 — U.S. Forces were not yet ready to strike. In some areas, the U.S. forces were handicapped by the weather, and Johnson told them that he was therefore holding up the announcement of the strike until it was underway.

"They swore us to secrecy," said one of the leaders.
McNamara reiterated this matter of secrecy — with the obvious implication that Congress long has been the worst place to keep a secret, the leaks are so numerous. Dirksen picked him up on that point, told him what was perfectly true: on this one, the leaks had come from the Pentagon, not Capitol Hill.

"Bob," said Dirksen, in the closest thing to humor at the session, "maybe you'd better monitor your own shop better."

But the Congressmen took the implied oath, of course.

That secrecy applied to the "prospective plans" as well as the actual attack then being ordered. These prospective plans, of course, are subject to change depending on the actions of the enemy. And the Johnson administration had no way to anticipate the communist response to the American attack.

Johnson then read to the Congressmen statement he later read that night to the American people. He in effect requested their approval of that statement, which by implication was given. There were no dissents to either the actual attack Johnson briefed them on — which, of course, is the gravest of actions for it is an act of war — or the statement he'd had drafted.
Johnson read the statement with the same grimness and solemnity that marked his behaviour throughout the crisis.

In the judgment of at least one of the leaders, the Johnson crowd had been caught by surprise by the Sunday attack -- as indicated by their responses and by the inability to destroy the enemy from sea or air. But the Tuesday attack -- "that shock them."

Throughout the entire military discussions, the Senators and Representatives were encouraged to ask questions and they did. Many had heard nothing but the wire service reports of the rumors. They got the information they requested -- although some were not certain just how full a reading they were given. At least one thought the briefing was "very candid -- more franker than I would have been."

There were questions about North Viet-Nam planes. (There aren't any.) They were told the PT boats fired 20 torpedoes from a range of 5,000 yards. And they were given a detailed run-down on the difficulties of operations in the contested waters, almost completely surrounded by Communist China, North Viet-Nam and Hainan Island, which contains, they were told, four communist air fields, and sits
over the sea "like a silent guard."

Johnson made no request for approval of his military decisions: they were his and he made them under existing authorities vested in the President. He did, however, plead with his former Congressional colleagues for the passage of a Congressional resolution endorsing the government's stand. This he was preparing for submission and he threw the question open for full discussion. "It was his real reason for calling the Congressional leaders: "Grave, deeply serious, grim and resolute, Johnson said baldly to the Congressional leaders:"

"I hope we can get overwhelming support on this resolution."

He not only asked for approval from those there in a general way, the President actually moved around the table, Senator by Senator, Representative by Representative, to get an acknowledgment of personal support for the idea. He got it — in effect at least — from all. No dissent.

His old friend and rival, the key Republican on Capitol Hill, Everett Dirksen, did not reply verbally when Johnson looked at him and asked for his critically important support. Instead, Dirksen
simply raised his right hand and waved a token "okay" back to the
President. Dirksen would go along.

Everyone was behind him -- as everyone is always behind
the President in an hour of national peril.

A critical matter is to evaluate just how well Johnson
behaved and is behaving throughout this, his first real test in the
savageries
maxergizes of modern cold-hot war. To one who has known Johnson
intimately for decades, and who has known as well and intimately
Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy, we get this reading of Johnson
in this crisis: (Not for attribution, the reading is from Dirksen)

"Unless all signs fail, I think he's shown a rather
steady nerve. He hasn't panicked at all. But pressure does get to
him. This was not so tense as the Cuban missile crisis, yet everybody
there had a sense of its gravity of the thing and its possibilities. He
feels he's playing for keeps."

In sum, an utterly humorless, totally grim President
was moving with sureness, nerve, and resolution in the eyes of those
who know him best.
His address to the nation and his address at Syracuse have been extraordinarily well received by the Congressional leaders. None of them want it any other way.

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In the political aftermath of all this, no one in national politics is prepared to evaluate this with any sureness of its effect on the November election. "It's too early," we were repeatedly told by both sides, Democrats and Republicans. But political speculation.

The Democrats generally see one very clear benefit to Johnson -- an end to the Goldwater thrust that the Administration has been too soft on Communism in Southeast Asia. They see this confrontation as shooting down that GOP charge, that GOP issue in the campaign.

"We've not gone far enough yet," said one GOP senate professional. "It's too early to tell."
There was -- as is usual -- a remarkable silence among the politicians in this area. "Everyone is quietly waiting to see which way the cat jumps," said one Democrat. With tension at its peak, the politicians on the Hill leave the matter totally to the President. They did this in all recent crises, but that doesn't mean they'll leave it that way. The Congressional Republicans, for example, readily and totally endorsed Truman's intervention in Korea in June, 1950, but within a few months, they were denouncing that action as "Truman's War" -- it was the casualty lists that made the Korean war controversial.

The Congressional democrats are fully aware of that Korean result -- and talking about it quietly now in privacy. The endorsement of the resolution doesn't guarantee that the Republicans will stand still through the campaign -- especially if there are more actions to come and if the way escalates, casualty lists climb.

If this ends the incident -- which no one knows -- Johnson has made a big gain in the foreign and controversial field, and in its most ongoing controversial arena: Viet-Nam. But if it only leads to others, who can tell the results politically? And even if it ends here, it's still a full three months from election time -- and may well
have faded from the voters' memories.

Importantly, however, this incident has not altered — as yet — the *dilemma* of the U.S. in South Viet-Nam, which is a different battlefield. "More important than this," says one GOP critic of U.S. policy in South east Asia, "is whether they get to the root of the problem.... the land problem. He's got to have some results there."

On points right now, Lyndon Johnson is well ahead on this one.

The trouble is that, for him politically, this may lead to other unforeseeable incidents, even war, and it's not possible to evaluate the response politically of the voters to those unknown events to come.