Leadership and Decision Making

Activity 4: The Gulf of Tonkin Incident

Period Covered: 1964

Grade Levels: 9-12

Introduction:

Students examine the circumstances that led to the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the decisions made to authorize the resolution that bears its name.

Video Clips:

- The USS Maddox Is Attacked
- The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
- 1964: President Johnson Responds

Summarizing Points:

- South Vietnamese ships attack North Vietnamese islands
- North Vietnamese patrol torpedo (PT) boat squadron attacks USS Maddox in international waters
- Controversy over who ordered the North Vietnamese attack
- Both sides make threats of further action
- Mystery of the second attack on the USS Turner Joy
- President Johnson’s message to the public
- Decision to send the resolution to Congress

Procedure:

1. Before showing the video segments, tell students that since President Johnson took over after the assassination of President Kennedy, Johnson sought better results in South Vietnam. He gradually escalated US military pressure, hoping to bring the North to negotiate before the 1964 election. But he dared not push too hard for fear of Soviet and Chinese reprisals. He asked his aid, William Bundy, to draft a congressional resolution authorizing him to use force, if needed.

2. View the segments, “The USS Maddox Is Attacked,” and “The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution,” and listen to the [LBJ Tapes of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident from the National Security Archive](http://archive.williamjacobsonlaw.com/).

3. Discuss the segments as a class using the summarizing points. Explain to students
that operating on the information he had at the time, President Johnson sends to Congress the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Now distribute copies of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

**Tell students: Acting as members of Congress you must decide whether you will:**

a) Approve the resolution.
b) Reject the resolution.
c) Ask the Johnson administration to provide more information before making a decision.
d) Formally ask Congress to declare war on North Vietnam.

**Students can work in groups or individually to determine their recommendation. They should be prepared to present and defend their decision**

4. Show the final segment, “1964: President Johnson Responds,” which reveals what Congress decided to do and why. Have students compare and contrast their decisions with that of Congress and then write a brief analysis of Congress’s and their own decisions.

**Post-Activity Questions:**

- What surprised you most about the outcome of Congress’s decision to approve the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution? Does this change your decision in any way? Explain.
- What is your opinion of Congress’s decision? Explain.
- What might have been the outcome if Congress had chosen a different option, like rejecting the resolution or declaring war on North Vietnam?
- After reading the text of the resolution, how do you think this action will impact US strategic plans for South Vietnam? How might it impact President Johnson’s war-making capability? What are your thoughts on giving any president this amount of power and discretion?