

Example 2: CA5 Vietnam 1960-75

The significance of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, 1964.

Student response

The Gulf of Tonkin incident was an alleged military attack on American Naval ships by the North Vietnamese during the cold war period. On the 2nd of August 1964 the US destroyer Maddox was gathering intelligence information in what it claimed to be international waters when it was fired at by North Vietnamese patrol boats. On the 4th of August further attacks were reported. However, subsequent evidence suggests the second attack may not have occurred and even President Johnson later said, "those dumb sailors were just shooting at flying fish."

Despite it's controversy the Gulf of Tonkin incident was still a very significant event. One reason for this was it gained president Johnson public and congressional support. Johnson gained the support of Congress as he was 'able to present the (Gulf of Tonkin) attack ... as an example of North Vietnamese aggression, and evidence of the North's intention to wage war against the United States.'" Therefore, Congress supported Johnson and agreed to the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. This was significant because it gave the President the power "to take all necessary steps" to defend America against communist North Vietnam. Moreover Johnson now practically had the power to take whatever action he wanted in Vietnam. Johnson also gained public support from the Incident. This became evidence in the 1964 presidential election results where although "Johnson was preceived as the peace candidate ... he also gained votes by appearing tough over the Gulf of Tonkin incident". This was significant because although Johnson had congressional support he also needed public support to really be able to take whatever action he wanted in Vietnam with little opposition.

Possibly the most prominent effects of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident which contribute largely to its significance was increased military involvement. Before the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the United States had restricted it's intervention in Vietnam to financial support and military advice. "In 1961 the USA spent \$270 million in military support" and "By the time of Kennedy's death there were more than 16,000 American advisers training the South Vietnamese army". However the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution enabled Johnson to increase military involvement. So after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident there was a large escalation of war in Vietnam. This included American bombings using chemical defoliants such as Agent Orange. However it began with large-scale bombings called Operation Rolling Thunder which "lasted three and a half years... (and) the US dropped 1 million tons of bombs in Vietnam". Also the deployment of combat troops which ment that "By the end of 1965 there were about 150,000 US troops in Vietnam". This change was triggered by the Gulf of Tonkin incident and was significant because it ment that America became directly involved in the Vietnam conflict. Moreover, the American army became engaged in guerilla warfare with the Vietcong. This must have had damaging effects on America as a nation as the death of American soldiers would have lowered public morale. Also the involvement may have destroyed America's international relations as it broke the terms of the Geneva peace agreement.

Although the Gulf of Tonkin Incident was a very singnificant event I think that the Domino theory could have been more important. The Domino Theory was an American idea which suggested that if one country became communist others would follow and like a row of dominos 'fall' to communism. I think this may have been

more important because if the Domino Theory had not been accepted then America wouldn't have been so fearful of Vietnam becoming communist so the Gulf of Tonkin incident would not have occurred. Moreover, I think that if the Gulf of Tonkin incident had not occurred that the Domino Theory along with other American attitudes such as Anti-Communism and Dollar Imperialism (America's attempt to spread its own economic control and influence) full scale military intervention would have occurred anyway.

From these points we can conclude that the Gulf of Tonkin Incident resulted in almost dictatorial presidential powers which were not repealed until early in Nixon's presidency. This subsequently changed the way the war was fought and led to the death of thousands of American soldiers. Furthermore, although the Domino Theory and fear of communism meant US increased involvement was inevitable, the Gulf of Tonkin incident was the short-term cause that triggered 12 years of guerilla combat and America's physical war against communism.

Moderator comment

This response exemplifies work in Level 4 in terms of its analysis and quality of written communication, but it is less secure in the identification of sources of information. That will reduce the mark. It is evident from the use of quoted material that the enquiry has used sources of information, but this should be made more evident either by direct attribution or by cross referencing of quotations to notes and bibliography. An analysis of notes and bibliography submitted indicated that the teacher had sufficient evidence of use of a range of source of information to allow the award of level four.

Throughout the response there is focus on the question with explicit analysis of the significance of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The focus is sustained on the impact - what difference the incident made to the conflict. The analysis is developed, for example exploring the implications of the incident for Johnson's congressional and electoral support. The student can also explore the interrelationship of factors contributing to the USA's increased involvement in Vietnam after Tonkin and uses this as a basis for evaluating the significance of Tonkin in context.