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Blank Checks for War: Congressional Abdication from Tonkin to Gaza

With the U.S.- backed carnage in Gaza continuing and the threat of growing violence looming throughout the region (in Lebanon, Iran, and who knows where else), we need to think more deeply than ever about how the American people have historically been excluded from foreign policy decision-making. An upcoming anniversary should remind us of what sent us down this undemocratic path.

Sixty years ago, on August 7, 1964, Congress handed President Lyndon Johnson the power to wage a major war in Vietnam, solidifying its long-standing deference to the presidency on foreign policy. Not once since World War II has Congress exercised its constitutional responsibility to vote on declarations to decide if, when, and where the United States goes to war.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964 flew through Congress, in part because most members trusted the president's assurance that he sought "no wider war." Their trust was misplaced. The Johnson administration kept secret and lied about its plans for future military escalation in Vietnam. It also lied about the incident used to persuade Congress to give LBJ a blank check to use military force however he wanted: the false claim that American ships had been the targets of unprovoked and unequivocal attacks by North Vietnamese patrol boats.

In fact, the United States had been fighting a secret war against North Vietnam since 1961. The U.S. destroyers that LBJ said were innocently sailing on the "high seas" were there to support South Vietnamese attacks (organized by the U.S. military and CIA) on North Vietnamese coastal villages. On August 2, 1964, these ongoing acts of war finally provoked a

few Vietnamese patrol boats to chase after a U.S. destroyer which, firing first, easily disabled the small vessels. The Vietnamese managed to fire a few torpedoes but missed. There were no American casualties. Not exactly Pearl Harbor.

What's more, the White House also claimed it had "unequivocal" evidence that North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked again on August 4. In fact, the U.S. commander on the scene sent a "flash message" urging civilian authorities to delay any decision—because what first seemed like an attack may have been a false alarm caused by "freak weather effects on radar and overeager sonarmen." Within days it was all but certain that no second attack had occurred. As President Johnson said to an aide, "Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish!"

Nonetheless, Johnson went on television near midnight on August 4 to announce that it was his "duty" to launch a "retaliatory" airstrike. As he spoke, 64 U.S. warplanes were on their way to bomb North Vietnam. The next day LBJ asked Congress for a resolution giving him the authority "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States." We now know that the heart of this resolution had been drafted months earlier. The administration had just been waiting for a pretext to ram it through Congress.

We also know the lies didn't stop there. That fall, as Johnson campaigned for the presidency, he sounded like a peace candidate, promising that he would not send "our boys to do the fighting for Asian boys." Running against prowar Republican Barry Goldwater, LBJ won in a landslide. Americans voted for peace and ended up with a war that killed more than three million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans.

Virtually every top U.S. foreign policy official knew the Johnson administration was lying about the Gulf of Tonkin incident, including thirty-three-year-old Daniel Ellsberg. By chance, Ellsberg's first full day on the job, as one of Robert McNamara's Pentagon "whiz kids," was August 4, 1964. Ellsberg was then a Cold War hawk who supported the U.S. mission in Vietnam. Like all his colleagues, he raised no internal objections to Johnson's airstrikes or the administration's effort to sell the Tonkin Gulf Resolution through deceit. And no insider gave a second's thought to revealing those lies to Congress, the media, or the public.

After a year in the Pentagon, nearly two years in Vietnam, and two more years meeting young antiwar activists and intensely studying the 7000-page top-secret history of decision-making in Vietnam that became known as the Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg underwent a dramatic political and moral conversion. By 1967, he believed the war an unwinnable stalemate from which the U.S. should find a face-saving exit. By 1969, he regarded it as

fundamentally immoral and unjust, and thought the U.S. should withdraw unilaterally and immediately.

At that point, Ellsberg decided to photocopy the Pentagon Papers and make them public, hoping that their sordid record of government lying would further ignite antiwar activism. He did so with the knowledge that it might bring him a life sentence in prison. First Ellsberg tried to persuade antiwar Senators to put the Pentagon Papers into the public record. When that effort failed, he took the papers to the *New York Times* and 18 other newspapers. Each of them published substantial portions in June 1971.

Later that year, Ellsberg spoke with former Oregon Senator Wayne Morse, one of only two members of Congress who voted against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. They talked about the documents in the Pentagon Papers that contained detailed evidence of the Johnson administration's lies about the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Morse said to Ellsberg, "If you'd given me those documents, at the time, in 1964, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution would never have gotten out of committee. And if they had brought it to the floor, it would have lost."

You can't replay history, so we can't test Morse's claim, but Ellsberg has many times said that the greatest regret of his life was not exposing the government's lies about Vietnam much earlier. There were many reasons why he didn't, and why so few officials ever expose national security wrongdoing. The biggest reason, Ellsberg came to realize, was the intense culture of power, loyalty, and careerism that characterizes foreign policy circles. Almost no one in those positions, even those who have serious objections to ongoing policies, is willing to risk their insider status and their access to power and privileged information. Most fully internalize the arrogant assumption that the foreign policy elite understands far better than Congress or the people how the world works and how the U.S. should exercise its power.

And Congress, for its part, continues to enable an ever more imperial presidency that decides when and where the U.S. goes to war. It almost never uses the power of the purse to reduce U.S. militarism or to cut funding for unpopular wars. The nearly trillion-dollar Pentagon budget is rubber stamped every year. There is no guarantee that a more engaged Congress would give us a less militarized and interventionist foreign policy. But it would make it more accountable to a public which historically has been substantially more antiwar than its representatives. As in the Vietnam era, a majority of Americans opposed the 21st century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan many years before they ended. And since at least March 2024 a majority of Americans have opposed the Israeli government's war on Gaza, yet Congress continues to bankroll U.S. support for it.

We have seen, in the last ten months, an unprecedented outpouring of American protest in support of Palestinian rights. For good reason. At least 40,000 Gazans, most of them civilians, and many of them children, have been killed by the Israeli military's indiscriminate and disproportionate response to the Hamas killing of some 1200 Israelis on October 7, 2023. At least 2 percent of the Gazan population (2.14 million) have been killed and at least 75 percent displaced from their homes (many have had to flee multiple times). A recent study by the medical journal *The Lancet*, estimates that the death toll in Gaza could reach 186,000 even if there is a ceasefire today.

For most Americans, this level of suffering is unimaginable. Yet we must try to imagine it. If we were Gaza, at least 6.5 million of us would be dead, the vast majority women, children and other civilians. Many millions more would be among the uncounted dead and dying – buried, lost, sick, starving. At least 240 million of us would be forced from our homes, on the road seeking shelter, food, and water under ongoing military attacks and perils beyond description.

That is the reality in Gaza.

In the end, only a mass democratic movement has the potential to dramatically change U.S. foreign policy. The first challenge is to overthrow the baseless claim that the United States is the greatest force for good in the world, the “indispensable nation” that stands for the rule of law, freedom, and democracy. Our record does not warrant such a delusion. Only when that ideology and naïve faith is broadly undermined can we hope to chip away at the long-standing infrastructure of U.S. militarism—the 750 military bases on foreign soil, the annual military exercises in two-thirds of the world's nations, and the “defense” budget that equals the next nine most militarized nations combined.

Ellsberg and Morse were right. The people must know the truth. But we have long had more than enough evidence to demand fundamental changes in U.S. foreign policy. We can't wait for Congress to represent us faithfully. The people's voice must be heard.

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