

Teenagers and the Tonkin Gulf

In the presidential election of 1960, I worked for John Kennedy's campaign in Manhattan and most of the young people I knew admired JFK a great deal. But Lyndon Johnson was a different story and even before Kennedy's assassination, I had taken a dislike to him. In 1961, while in Karachi on a worldwide goodwill tour, Johnson invited a Pakistani camel driver to visit him in the United States. Although, the Vice President's invitation had been of the "come over and see us sometime" variety, when the Pakistani took him up on it, Johnson had the good grace and political savvy to follow through. The camel driver came to the US and the story was treated as a diplomatic and public relations coup for the Vice President. But what I most remembered about the episode was a post-tour interview with Johnson where he said he hadn't met anyone in all the nations he visited who wouldn't rather leave their country and live in the United States. I figured that most citizens of foreign nations, like Americans, loved their country. So Johnson's statement seemed to me to be naive and chauvinistic - - a foolish thing to say.

In the summer of 1964, my brother Mike and I and most of our close friends were working in in Kips Bay Boys Camp in Westchester County, about twenty miles north of New York City. The camp was run by Kips Bay Boys Club, which was located on East 52nd Street in Manhattan, right in our neighborhood. Most of us had been camp counselors for several years, but as we grew older, some had become heads of specific camp programs. In the summer of 1964, when I was nineteen, I was in charge of the Craft Shop and, rather than sleeping in a cabin with campers, I got to live in a space between two large cabins called a "cube". I shared this small living area with the head of the swimming program and it became a hangout for all our friends.

On August 4th, Johnson went on the air to speak about the crisis in the Gulf of Tonkin where, according to news reports, ships of the U.S. Navy had been attacked by North Vietnamese forces. A bunch of us had gathered around the radio in the cube to listen to the President's speech. Although the prospect of war was exciting to us teenagers and gave us a bit of an adrenaline rush, we mostly thought the speech was stupid, perhaps for no more reason than Johnson's unctuous Texas accent and our New York prejudice against Southerners. The next day in the Craft Shop, I painted an old toilet seat with red and white vertical stripes on the lid and lower rim and with a blue field and white stars on the hinge end. It looked just like the shield on the Great Seal of the United States. Hung on the wall in the cube as "art", it turned into a piece of political commentary when you lifted the lid, revealing a picture of Lyndon Johnson in the crapper.

After Johnson was elected to the presidency in November 1964, the Tonkin Gulf incident and the conflict in Vietnam seemed to recede into the background. But my dislike for the president never subsided and the toilet seat, which always drew a chuckle

from visitors, remained on the wall until Kips Camp shut down in 1966. By then, the “conflict” had become a real war.