Q111 – Why did the United States enter the Vietnam War?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:
The United States entered the Vietnam War to stop the spread of communism – from North Vietnam to the South. According to the Domino Theory, if the South fell to communists, so might Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. America plunged into Vietnam amid the fog of war.

On the night of August 4th, 1964, the U.S. destroyer Turner Joy reported being attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Lyndon Johnson urged the Congress to act. Three days later it passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution – authorizing the president to "take all necessary measures" to "prevent further aggression." The resolution passed the Senate with only two votes against it. It passed the House unanimously.
With that open-ended authorization, two presidents sent more than 2.5 million Americans to Vietnam. Almost 60,000 died there. Years later, declassified intelligence revealed that on that fateful night in the Gulf of Tonkin, the Navy was – as one witness said – “shooting at phantom targets.”
To avoid another open-ended war, in 1973 the Congress passed the War Powers Act. Among other things, it limits how long the president can commit troops without the consent of Congress.
Presidents still send troops into battle without a declaration of war. And the War Powers Act still lets the Congress shirk its constitutional responsibility to decide whether to take the country into war.