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STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE

SPECIAL ISSUE

US INTELLIGENCE AND VIETNAM

General Bruce Palmer, Jr.
(UNITED STATES ARMY, RETIRED)

The Editorial Board of *Studies in Intelligence*, in deliberations on 6-7 April and 8-9 June 1984, decided to devote a special issue of *Studies* to this account of the role of American intelligence in the Vietnam conflict, 1945-1975. This is a supplement to the seasonal editions of *Studies* for 1984.

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US Intelligence and Vietnam

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Illustrations: In addition to the maps that appear with the text, two oversize pull-out illustrations will assist the reader in following the account in this special issue of *Studies in Intelligence*. One is a chart, "US Leadership during the Vietnam Involvement," and the other is a map of Indochina as of 1973. Both are contained in envelopes at the back of the journal. The reader is cautioned that the chart, like this entire issue of *Studies*, is classified ~~SECRET/NOFORN~~.

CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS ISSUE

To this study, *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, General Bruce Palmer, Jr. (USA-Ret.) has applied the perspectives of a soldier, a scholar, and a consumer and evaluator of intelligence.

Born in Texas of an Army family, he was graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1936. During World War II, he served in North Africa, the Middle East, and in the Pacific. From 1946 to 1961, he carried out staff assignments in the United States and Europe, graduated from and taught at the Army War College, and commanded an infantry regiment in Germany.

After duty as Assistant Commander of the Eighty-second Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, N.C. 1961-62, and Chief of Staff, Eighth Army in Korea, 1962-63, he was promoted to Lieutenant General and served in Washington as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, US Army, from 1963 to 1965.

Ordered to the Dominican Republic in the crisis that erupted in the spring of 1965, he commanded US Forces there and concurrently served as Deputy Commander, Inter-American Peace Force, until 1966. In 1966-67 he commanded II Field Force, Vietnam, and was Senior Advisor to the Vietnamese Commanding General, III Corps, Republic of Vietnam. From May 1967 to August 1968, he was Deputy Commanding General, US Army, Vietnam.

Returning to the United States, he was promoted to four-star rank and served as Vice Chief of Staff, US Army, until 1973, with duty as Acting Chief of Staff in the July-October 1972 period. His final active duty military assignment was leading the US Readiness Command, consisting of the Army and Air Force tactical forces stationed in the continental United States, with headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, from February 1973 to August 1974. He then retired from the Army. His decorations include five Army Distinguished Service Medals, the Air Force Distinguished Service Medal, the Silver Star, the Legion of Merit, and the Bronze Star.

From October 1974 to June 1976, General Palmer was Executive Director, Defense Manpower Commission. In 1976-78 he was a defense policy consultant to the American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

The Director of Central Intelligence appointed General Palmer to the Central Intelligence Agency's Senior Review Panel in November 1978. The General served on the Panel until April 1982. In August 1982, he was awarded the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal.

General Palmer is author of *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam*, to be published this fall by the University of Kentucky Press.

Preface

This study of *US Intelligence and Vietnam* originated in the late summer of 1982 with the Center for the Study of Intelligence, Office of Training and Education, Directorate of Administration, Central Intelligence Agency. In October 1982 the Executive Director, CIA approved the appointment of the author, General Bruce Palmer, Jr., US Army-Retired, as a Senior Fellow with the Center under sponsorship from the Directorate of Intelligence to "undertake a detailed examination of finished intelligence relating to the Vietnam conflict from the time of introduction of US combat forces in 1965 through the fall of the Saigon Government in 1975." The author was granted Top Secret clearance on 14 October 1982 to work as an independent contractor and on 9 November 1982 was granted access to the Agency Archives and Records Center for the purpose of the study.

In settling on the scope of the study it was decided to go back to the beginning of the American involvement in Indochina toward the end of World War II and cover at least the major developments that occurred during a period of approximately three decades, 1945-1975. The author found it convenient, and fairly logical, to divide the overall period into a brief prologue covering the 1945-1950 years, followed by three parts: the first spanning the Truman-Eisenhower-Kennedy years, 1950-1963; the second, the Johnson years, 1963-1969; and the third, the Nixon-Ford years of our Vietnamese involvement, 1969-1975.

US intelligence was examined during each of the above timeframes. The focus was on finished intelligence, principally that produced by CIA and by the intelligence community on an interagency basis, with but limited coverage of Defense (DIA, CINCPAC and MACV), State/INR, and NSA analytical production. Current intelligence and reporting were given only a cursory look, although the author gained the impression that they were professionally well done and of high quality. Thus the primary research and study effort was on longer term estimates. Intelligence input into US policymaking and its influence on policy decisions and actual events were examined only tangentially. Collection, paramilitary operations, and covert action were outside the scope of the study.

The judgments expressed herein are for the most part the author's own for which he assumes sole responsibility. Moreover, the author acknowledges that many of these judgments reflect the clairvoyance of 20-20 hindsight.

For gathering and making available the large number of intelligence documents produced during the period of history under study, the author is indebted to the Office of Central Reference, Directorate of Intelligence; the Agency's Archives and Records Center; the Directorate of Operations; and the Agency's History Staff. The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board granted access to its files; the material on Tet 1968 was of specific interest.

The author is also deeply indebted to many individuals for their substantive contributions to this endeavor. Particularly valuable were the guidance, encouragement, and specific suggestions received from the Editorial Board, *Studies in Intelligence*.

Especially valuable as sources were:

— George Allen, who probably knows as much about the Indochina problem as any American. His manuscript (March 1983), "The Indochina Wars, 1950-1975" was in many respects the author's basic source, particularly with respect to Parts I and II of the study.

— John Kerry King's paper, "Vietnam and the Office of National Estimates (1951-1964)" (October 1969).

— David Coffin's three volume history of ORR/OER, *Development of Economic Intelligence, 1950-1972*.

— William E. Le Gro's study, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (1981), one of the most complete and authentic accounts of the military side of South Vietnam's last three years.

— R.J. Smith's study, "Richard Helms and Intelligence Production" (August 1983).

Finally the author would like to express his profound appreciation for the personal help received from Agency officers who were engaged in the Vietnam intelligence effort, and who shared their recollections and insights with him in the course of this study.

BRUCE PALMER
General, US Army—Retired

Center for the Study of Intelligence
4 May 1984

Prologue

The Beginning of US Involvement in Indochina, 1945-1950

Scholars and historians cannot objectively analyze the policies pursued and actions taken (or not taken) by a nation during a past crisis unless they can reconstruct in a reasonably accurate way the climate and circumstances surrounding the period examined. Particularly important to this reconstruction are the accuracy and completeness of the knowledge pertaining to the crisis available at the time to policymakers, advisers, and supporting staffs. In the absence of such a careful review, hindsight and the knowledge of significant happenings that occurred later tend to bestow on the historian inspirational insights that are denied to the responsible principals on the scene at the time in question.

Another essential ingredient of the overall picture of a period in time concerns the larger context within which events unfold. A nation with important interests world-wide, for example, can be profoundly influenced in its outlook with respect to protecting its interests in one area of the world, by its situation at home, or by the relative threat to its interests in another region. One purpose of this prologue, therefore, is to provide a broader perspective of the US involvement in Vietnam, which began near the end of World War II, by briefly reviewing, among other things, the sweep of world-shaking events that occurred in the immediate post-war period.

Background

The beginnings of the Indochina problem for the United States go back to the last months of World War II when Allied unity began to wane as victory neared and each ally devoted increasing attention to its national post-war goals and plans. The British, French, and other colonial powers had to consider the future of their overseas territories within the framework of their perceived accomplishments and prospects. The Soviets also had their own very specific political and territorial goals both in Europe and Asia.

Unfortunately, the United States lacked a clear view of its post-war objectives other than the idealistic issues and lofty purposes enshrined in the UN Charter. President Roosevelt's death in April 1945 came at a critical time, creating a vacuum in American political leadership just as post-war issues were coming to a head. Many American leaders wanted to concentrate on the military aspects of "winning" the war as quickly and with as few casualties as possible with little regard to the post-war political situation. Manifestations of this lack of foresight can be found in both Europe and Asia. In Europe, the agreed line between the Soviets and other Allied forces left the Soviets with a deep bridgehead in middle Europe and a Berlin isolated from Western Europe. In Asia, the liberation of Korea from Japanese occupation by Soviet and US forces was hastily conceived and led inevitably to the partition of Korea and the ensuing Korean War. Moreover, the hasty demobilization of US forces at the end of World War II drastically reduced American leverage to

influence post-war international developments as well as US ability to support its interests abroad.

Post-war prospects for France and its overseas interests were particularly troublesome for the Allies. The Free French, under de Gaulle and with US support, fought on the Allied side. Although the Free French contribution was small, de Gaulle tried to gain recognition as the legitimate leader of France and a coequal partner with the other Allied leaders, but was never fully accepted in such a role during World War II.

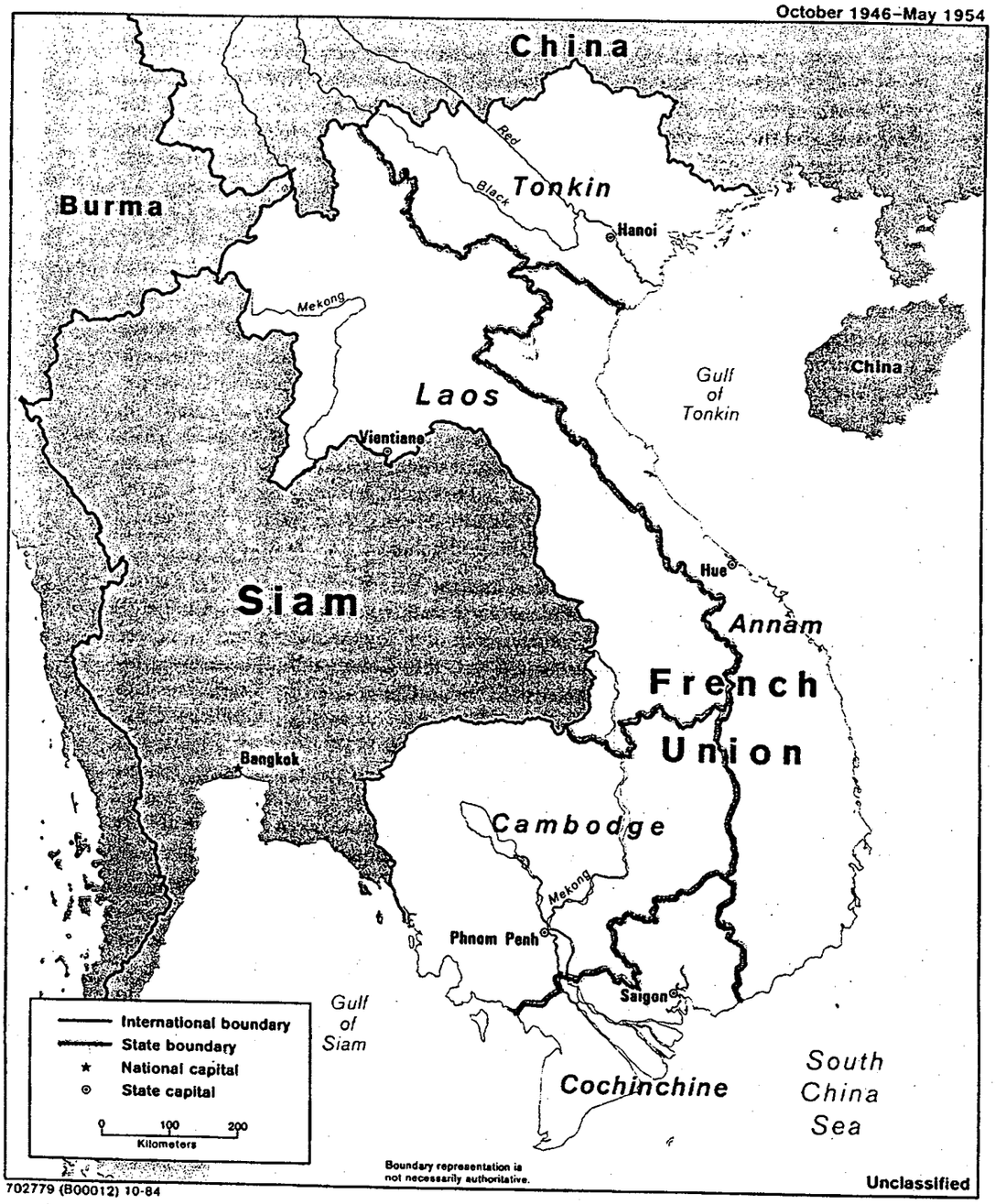
With respect to French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), President Roosevelt firmly opposed the French return to power in the region and proposed an internationally supervised trusteeship, but the idea did not survive his death. Nevertheless, the Allies had to solve the problem of how to accept the surrender of the occupying Japanese forces, and did so at the Potsdam conference in the summer of 1945, which the new US President, Harry S Truman, attended. Here it was agreed that Chinese Nationalist troops under Chiang Kai-Shek's China Command, an Allied headquarters in South China, would occupy Vietnam north of the 16th parallel. Indian troops under Lord Mountbatten's Southeast Asia Command were to take control of Vietnam south of the parallel. Division at the 16th parallel was intended to be a temporary administrative convenience until the Allies could work out a more permanent arrangement.

Early American Presence in Vietnam

The first US presence in Vietnam at the end of World War II was in the form of a small OSS detachment under Major Archimedes L. A. Patti, who arrived in Hanoi in August 1945 just before Chinese Nationalist troops moved in to take the Japanese surrender. Patti brought in with him a handful of Free French officials from South China. (During their occupation, Japanese forces had allowed the Vichy French to remain in Indochina and ostensibly control the region until March 1945 when the Japanese suddenly seized direct control and interned the French except for a few who escaped into China.) Patti's publicly avowed mission was to rescue Americans in Japanese POW camps; other OSS teams had such ostensible missions in various areas in the Far East. But their basic mission was to gather intelligence on the situation as it unfolded after Japan's surrender.

Earlier in the spring and summer of 1945, the OSS had developed a small intelligence organization in central and south China targeted primarily against the Japanese. Patti had been assigned the French Indochina part of the overall intelligence effort. His instructions with respect to the French were to cooperate with them, but give them no support whatsoever toward regaining their former colonial status. He attempted to use the Free French on intelligence operations, but the results were disappointing. Patti also supported Ho Chi Minh, who had led a relatively small nationalist movement for Vietnamese independence for many years and had been waging a campaign against the Japanese since 1941. Ho's movement, known as the Viet Minh, consisted of quite diverse Vietnamese groups, but was dominated by Ho and his fellow Communists, and was based in the north centered on Hanoi. Patti maintained an OSS team with Ho, who provided him with a steady flow of

October 1946–May 1954



useful information (according to Patti) and impressed him as an idealistic Marxist Socialist—a Vietnamese patriot first, not a Moscow-controlled Communist.[1]

Events moved swiftly in Vietnam in the summer and fall of 1945. By the time Chinese Nationalist troops arrived to receive the Japanese surrender north of the 16th parallel, Ho Chi Minh had gained control of much of the area and the Chinese tacitly allowed the Viet Minh to remain in control, there being no effective French troops in the region to dispute the issue. (An American liaison mission under Brigadier General Philip E. Gallagher, US Army, went to Hanoi with the Chinese general commanding the Chinese occupation forces. US instructions to Gallagher were to remain neutral and let the French, Chinese, and Vietnamese resolve the political problems involved.)

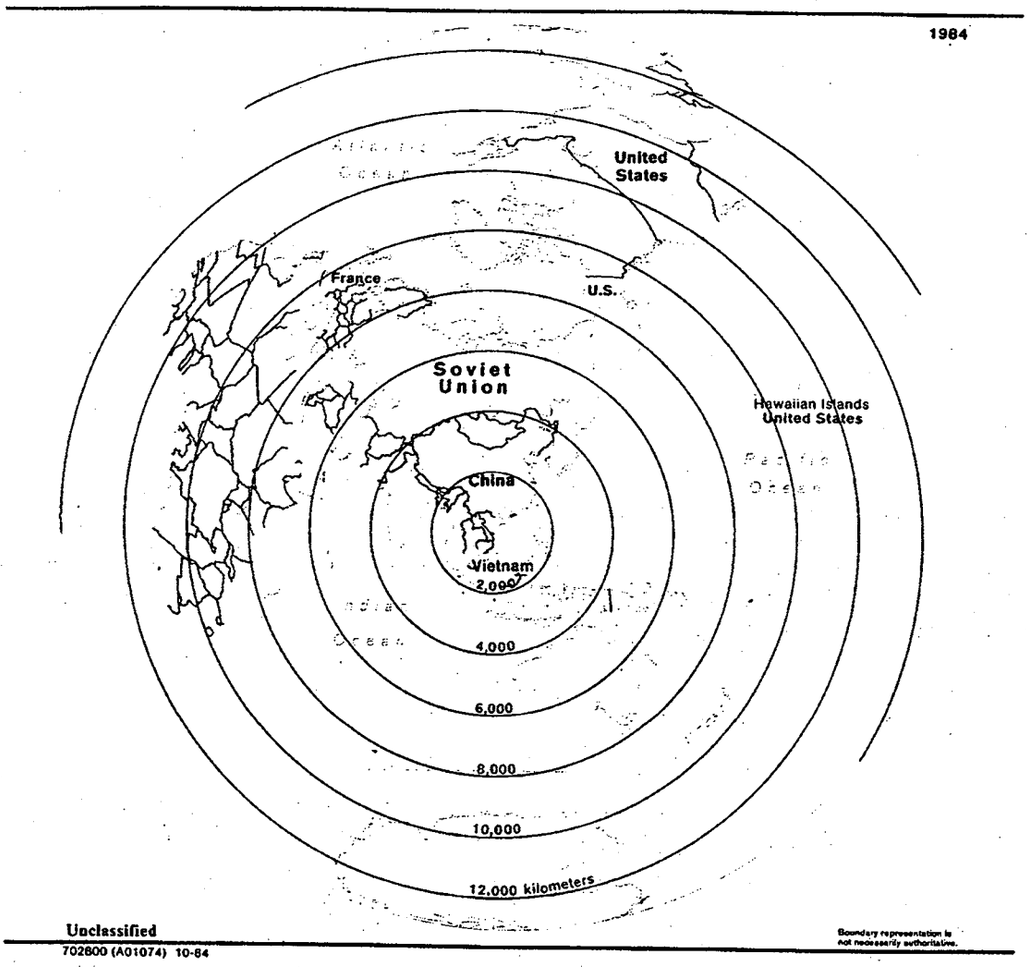
South of the 16th parallel it was a different story. By September 1945, British Indian Army and Free French troops established firm control of the Saigon area, the Viet Minh being relatively weak in the south. Sympathetic to the French position and concerned for the future of their own colonial empire, the British lost little time persuading the Allies to turn over responsibility in the south to the Free French. This was accomplished in October 1945. Meanwhile, the Viet Minh on 16 August 1945 proclaimed all of Vietnam (encompassing Tonkin, capital Hanoi, in the north; Annam, capital Hue, in the center; and Cochin China, capital Saigon, in the south) as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh.

Then in March 1946 the French and the Viet Minh agreed to: (1) French recognition of the DRV as an independent state within the French Union; (2) entry of a limited number of French troops into Tonkin and Annam to replace Chinese Nationalist troops who would return to China; and (3) later determination by referendum of the status of Cochin China as either a separate state or as part of Vietnam. Chinese Nationalist forces accordingly withdrew from Vietnam and returned home by the end of March 1946. However, by the end of 1946, the French agreement with Ho collapsed, Ho and his followers retired to their rural and mountain strongholds, and the Indochina war began. Thereafter, the French exercised little real power in the north and central part of Vietnam, and Vietnam in effect was divided along the 16th parallel.

Prior to this time, the French, who resented the US presence in Hanoi and perceived the Americans there as anti-French and pro-Vietnamese Nationalists, bitterly complained to Washington. Consequently in October 1945 the OSS mission in Hanoi was withdrawn, followed by the departure of the Gallagher mission in December 1945. (US intelligence collection in Southeast Asia and the Far East, however, continued without interruption.)[2] Unfortunately, this marked the end of any close, direct US contact with Ho Chi Minh. Some veteran observers are convinced that this was a major turning point in Vietnamese history and believe (most probably in hindsight) that the United States lost an irretrievable opportunity to avoid its later deep involvement in the region.[3]

End of East-West Cooperation

Relations between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union rapidly deteriorated after World War II. Soviet intransigence in eastern Europe and in



Iran in 1947 brought on the Truman Doctrine of containment which took concrete form with the provision of US aid to Greece and Turkey for the purpose of resisting Communist takeover. The loss of Czechoslovakia and the Berlin blockade occurred in 1948 and the Cold War was under way. To help restore the economic health of free Europe, the United States inaugurated the Marshall Plan in 1947 (the Soviet Union and its satellites declined to participate). To provide for the defense of western Europe, the United States, Canada, and ten European countries created NATO in 1949.

In Asia after the failure (most would say inevitable) of the Marshall mission to China, the Communist Chinese armies defeated Nationalist Chinese forces in 1948-49, the People's Republic of China was proclaimed in Peking under Mao Tse-tung in September 1949, and the Nationalist government fled to Taiwan in December of that year.[4] Then in 1950 the Soviet Union and

Communist China signed a 30-year treaty of friendship, repudiating the 1945 treaty between the Soviet Union and Nationalist China sanctioned by the Yalta Agreement. It is quite understandable in the light of such momentous events, which sent shock waves throughout the non-Communist world, that the United States would tend to view the world-wide Communist threat at that time as homogeneous and monolithic in nature, and initially to assess the Sino-Soviet accord as a strong, durable one despite the deep-seated, centuries-old enmity existing between the two countries. Many years were to pass before US policymakers gained a clearer understanding of Sino-Soviet relations and a realization that Ho Chi Minh and his successors were masters of their destinies, not to be manipulated as anyone's puppet, not even by the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China.

The Korean War, which began with the invasion in June 1950 of South Korea by North Korea, had a strong, pervasive, and prolonged influence on the United States. The American involvement in a major conflict so soon after the Allied victory in World War II and its inconclusive ending with a cease-fire in July 1953 after three years of bloody fighting was extremely difficult for the American people to understand. The Chinese intervention in the Korean War conditioned early US thinking with respect to Indochina as the United States looked beyond the Vietnamese insurgency in the north and perceived China as the ultimate Communist threat to be contained in Southeast Asia. This perception, which persisted for almost the duration of the Vietnam War, became sharper after the cease-fire in Korea that allowed Chinese troops to withdraw from North Korea and seemed to put the Chinese in a stronger position to intervene in Vietnam if they chose to do so.

Start of US Aid to Indochina

President Truman's decision on 1 May 1950 to provide aid to Indochina was no doubt strongly influenced by the military stalemate that had evolved in Vietnam with the French holding the main population centers and lines of communications in the north while the Viet Minh held the surrounding rural areas and mountainous regions. Unable to crack Viet Minh strongholds in 1947-1948, the French had become essentially resigned to a military standoff while they tried to create a semi-independent non-Communist government within the framework of the French Union. The Communist victory in China in 1949, followed by Peking's recognition of Ho Chi Minh in February 1950 and the start of substantial Chinese military aid to the Viet Minh at about the same time, greatly heightened French pessimism with respect to achieving military success.[5]

Especially damaging to French morale was the loss in 1950 of French outposts along the Chinese border, coming at about the same time as the massive Chinese intervention in the Korean War in October 1950. These French border defeats were at the hands of Viet Minh "main force" regiments organized, trained, and equipped with the help of China. By far the most significant impact of this development was that it opened the major overland routes linking China to the vast mountainous region of northeastern Vietnam, thus assuring a free flow of Chinese aid and the ready establishment of Viet Minh bases. It brought a fundamental change to the nature of the war—henceforth, any French or US actions to expand forces in Vietnam or Laos could be readily offset by Viet Minh force escalation.[6]

The initial US decision to provide military aid to Indochina apparently was made hastily without benefit of much analysis with respect to the relative strategic or geo-political importance of the region to the United States, the political and economic viability of the area, and the magnitude of the implied US commitment in terms of human, material, and financial resources. The United States, possessing relatively little first-hand knowledge about the region and the situation at the time, seemed to have acted instinctively in support of the US policy of containment then being applied arbitrarily on a world-wide basis.

In September 1950 President Truman authorized the establishment of a small US military assistance and advisory group (MAAG) in Saigon. American military aid was to be provided to the forces of the three Indochina states, but administered through the French authorities in the region. The French, moreover, retained the military training and operational role in Vietnam, the US role initially being primarily logistic.

It was soon to become evident that the continued military stalemate was eroding the French will to carry on the war even though by 1954 the United States was bearing about three-fourths of the war's financial costs. France, moreover, was faced with mounting insurgency in Algeria, which was far more important politically and economically to France than Vietnam. Finally, the cold facts were that France could not bear the burden of the Indochina war and still play an important role in the economic restoration and defense of Western Europe.

During this early period, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union could afford to oppose France openly with respect to Indochina. The United States wanted to rebuild France as a major member of the Western Alliance while the Soviet Union wooed French Leftist support. Neither nation wanted to alienate French national pride, which was still strong even with the Left. In any event, the Soviets did not formally recognize Ho Chi Minh until 1950, the same year when the Americans began giving military assistance to France for use in Indochina.

The basic contradiction between French and American objectives in Vietnam seemed to have been lost on US policymakers at the time. The French did not want an independent Vietnam as this removed any reason for their continuing to fight. Rather they wanted to preserve their special relationship with Vietnam and the other associated states as part of the French Union. Militarily they were willing to fight only enough to support their goals and to avoid defeat. The United States, on the other hand, sought an independent non-Communist Vietnam oriented toward the West and strong enough with US help to thwart a Communist takeover. These incompatible objectives ultimately brought about a French-American showdown that culminated in the mid-1950's with the displacement of France in the region by the United States.

Prologue References

1. A.L.A. Patti, *Why Vietnam—Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkely, California: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 45-58; 137-147; 151-160; 199-203; 220-224; 248-253; 366-374. Patti's book was reviewed in *Studies in Intelligence* (CIA, Washington, D.C., Summer 1981) by Carleton A. Swift (pp. 99-107), Richard D. Kovar (pp. 108-109), and Russell J. Bowen (pp. 111-116).

2. Carleton A. Swift, review of *Why Vietnam* (See Note 1), *Studies in Intelligence* (Summer 1981), pp. 103 and 107. Ronald H. Spector, *Advise and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, D.C.; Center of Military History, US Army in Vietnam Series, 1983), pp. 59-72.

3. One of those veteran observers was William E. Colby, former DCI. See his book, *Honorable Men, My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 289. Another was George W. Allen, a retired senior intelligence analyst with twenty-five years experience in US Army intelligence, DIA, and CIA working on Indochina, author of an unpublished manuscript, "The Indochina Wars, 1950-1975" (March 1983), pp. 345-347.

4. Swift, review of *Why Vietnam*, p. 107.

5. Allen, "The Indochina Wars" pp. 18-20.

6. *Ibid*, pp. 37-40.

Part I

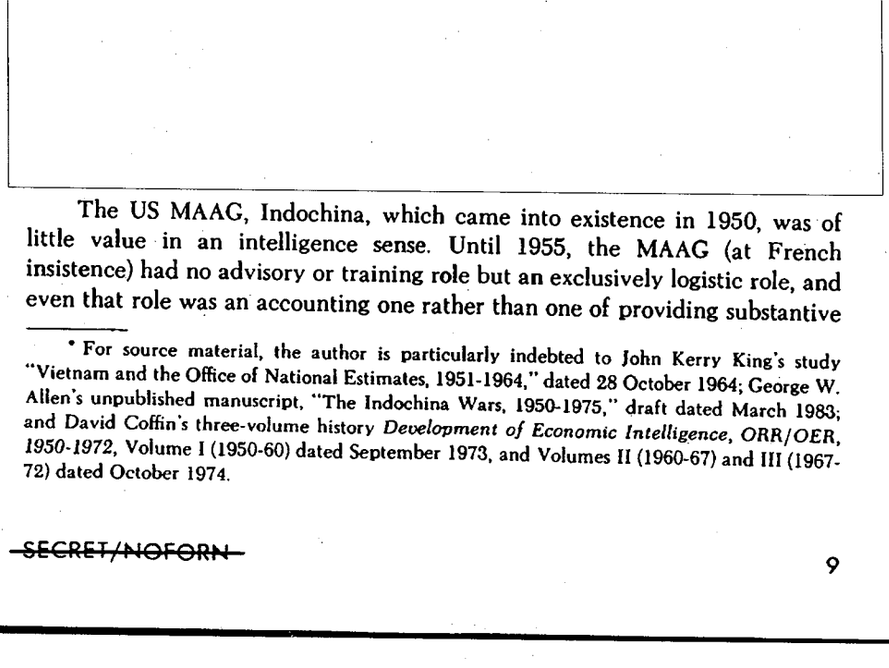
The Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy Years, 1950-1963

Introduction

This part spans the Truman Administration from 1950 to January 1953; Dwight D. Eisenhower's two terms as President, 1953-1961; and John F. Kennedy's presidential tenure from 20 January 1961 to his assassination on 22 November 1963, in all a period of thirteen years. The author's research of this period was relatively limited compared with that for the remainder of this paper, nor did the author possess as much personal knowledge of these thirteen years. Consequently Part I leans heavily on a few principal sources.*

US – French Intelligence Relations, 1950-56

The United States started almost from scratch in developing intelligence on French Indochina, long regarded as French domain and only remotely related to American political, economic, and security interests. From 1950 until the final French withdrawal in April 1956, the United States largely depended on the French for military information on the region. To a lesser extent this was true with respect to political and economic information.



The US MAAG, Indochina, which came into existence in 1950, was of little value in an intelligence sense. Until 1955, the MAAG (at French insistence) had no advisory or training role but an exclusively logistic role, and even that role was an accounting one rather than one of providing substantive

* For source material, the author is particularly indebted to John Kerry King's study "Vietnam and the Office of National Estimates, 1951-1964," dated 28 October 1964; George W. Allen's unpublished manuscript, "The Indochina Wars, 1950-1975," draft dated March 1983; and David Coffin's three-volume history *Development of Economic Intelligence, ORR/OER, 1950-1972*, Volume I (1950-60) dated September 1973, and Volumes II (1960-67) and III (1967-72) dated October 1974.

advice. [redacted]

Principal US Intelligence Agencies Involved with Indochina

(Principal agencies are considered to be organizations with significant collection, analysis, and production capabilities.)

National. At Washington level, these major organizations were:

CIA. Principally the Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) and the Office of Research and Reports (ORR). OCI, organized essentially on a country/regional basis and exercising a global reach, produced mostly intelligence on the current situation, often, however, making judgments and assessments of an estimative nature. ORR, originally called the Office of Reports and Estimates (ORE), dropped the estimates function when the Office of National Estimates (ONE) was established in November 1950. ORR's primary effort was directed at the Soviet Union; nevertheless, the various elements of ORR had their China/Taiwan specialists, who were also responsible for North Korea and North Vietnam (identified as such after the Geneva Accords of 1954), as well as East European specialists. At the most, the effort devoted to Vietnam was never more than five to ten percent of ORR's available economic research time. Fortuitously, this early research into such subjects as the Vietnamese transportation system and manpower availability gained valuable experience and knowledge that stood ORR in very good stead for the heavy demands that began in the mid-1960s.[5]

State. State's intelligence arm traditionally has been the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), a relatively small but highly competent organization capable of high quality independent research and analysis.

Defense. Army intelligence (G-2), called the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence (ACSI), played the principal intelligence role in Defense with

respect to Indochina until the creation of the Defense Intelligence Agency in the late summer of 1961. Naval and Air Force intelligence concerning this region played relatively minor roles in these early days. In the beginning in 1950, ACSI's Indochina desk was covered on a part-time basis. It had only very sketchy information on the order of battle of French Union and Viet Minh forces, and was in no position to assess military capabilities. By 1951, however, ACSI had developed not only a credible data base on the military forces in Indochina but had also attained a good understanding of the political-military strategies of the opposing forces. Moreover, in late 1953 ACSI obtained French permission to establish in Saigon a small combat intelligence unit with the mission of acquiring more detailed information on Viet Minh forces. However, throughout the mid and late 1950s, Army commanders in the Pacific (Hawaii and Saigon) complained that they lacked hard intelligence on the armed forces of North Vietnam [redacted] There was also a jurisdictional dispute between the MAAG Chief and the CIA Station Chief with respect to training South Vietnamese military personnel in clandestine operations that was not settled until late 1960 when CIA finally agreed to the establishment of an Army intelligence unit for this purpose.[6]

Unfortunately, when DIA took over the production responsibilities of the military services in October 1961, a major hiatus occurred in DOD knowledge of and intelligence capacity to deal with the military situation in Southeast Asia—a conflict that fundamentally involved a "people's war" on the ground. DIA's priority attention was quite properly on matters of a strategic nature.[7] But strategic targets were conspicuously absent in Vietnam where ground combat held the center of the stage. ACSI in the late 1950's had assigned principal responsibility for ground order of battle research for Indochina to Headquarters, US Army Pacific (USARPAC) in Hawaii, the Army component of the Pacific Command under a unified commander called the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) also located in Hawaii. USARPAC in the early 1960's lacked intelligence resources and neglected the order of battle function, partially in the belief that MACV, the US joint military headquarters established in Saigon in February 1962, was assuming this responsibility. So by 1963, after DIA had absorbed the analytical component of the Army intelligence staff, responsibility for doing the basic military intelligence research on Vietnam was diffused, and competent research on the subject scarcely existed.[8]

Prior to the creation of DIA, the Joint Staff serving the JCS included a J-2, Intelligence Section. It was small and had no production capability of its own. When DIA was established, its Director reported to both the Secretary of Defense and the JCS, and the J-2 function became a responsibility of DIA.

NSA. The National Security Agency, heading up the signal intercept and cryptological community, reported to the Secretary of Defense and had coordinating authority over the service security agencies which reported to their respective service chiefs, Army, Navy, and Air Force. (Elements of these agencies did not deploy to Vietnam until US forces were committed in 1965.)

ONE. The Office of National Estimates was established on 13 November 1950, only months after President Truman had approved a $10 million grant

for urgently needed military assistance items for Indochina.[9] ONE was established as an element of CIA, administered by that agency, and responsible to the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI).

Although ONE was an autonomous production entity answerable only to the DCI and the US Intelligence Board (USIB), it possessed no collection capabilities of its own and depended for most of its basic information on the US intelligence community. ONE did most of its own analytical work and drafting, and was capable of producing almost instant national estimates, but to a certain extent also had to rely on the ongoing research and analytical efforts within the community.

The principal contributors to ONE in the development of national estimates during this period were CIA (OCI and ORR), State (INR), Army (ACSI) and Air Force intelligence. Other service intelligence agencies and J-2 of the Joint Staff were relatively minor contributors.

During the period, November 1950 – October 1964, ONE produced forty-eight National Intelligence Estimates (NIE's) and Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIE's) dealing with Vietnam, a remarkably prolific accomplishment. (These figures do not include numerous estimates produced during the period dealing with China, Laos, Cambodia, France, and Southeast Asia in which Vietnamese considerations played a secondary part.) In addition to estimates, ONE produced fifty-one Memoranda for the Director of Central Intelligence concerning Vietnam over the same period. Indeed, ONE published more on Vietnam than any other single subject, except perhaps the Soviet Union.[10]

Overseas. The principal intelligence activities overseas concerned with Indochina were:

In Hawaii. The Pacific Command under CINCPAC and his Army (USARPAC), Navy (PACFLT), and Air Force (PACAF) component commands each with its own intelligence element. CINCPAC's major orientation was on naval and air aspects in Southeast Asia with considerable support from PACFLT and PACAF. As previously alluded to, USARPAC did not have the resources to conduct a major ground intelligence effort.

In Saigon. The US Mission under the US Ambassador reporting to the Secretary of State. Although the Ambassador had his own staff, to include military attaches, he normally looked to the CIA representative (Station Chief) as the principal American intelligence officer in the country.

Upon its establishment in February 1962, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), reporting to CINCPAC and thence to the Secretary of Defense and the JCS. (Prior to that time, the US MAAG, Indochina, as indicated above, did not perform a direct intelligence function, although later after it had taken over complete advisory and training responsibilities from the French, the MAAG was made responsible for Vietnam only and was supposed to advise the Vietnamese on the intelligence function.) Unfortunately, the first two J-2's assigned to MACV were USAF officers with little interest in the ground intelligence problems. The next J-2 was a US Marine Corps officer, well-motivated and intentioned, but with little intelligence experience. Not until July 1965, *over three years after MACV was established and fifteen*

years after the first US MAAG was organized in Saigon, was an experienced, trained US Army intelligence officer assigned to the J-2 job.[11] To say the least, this was an incomprehensible failure. On the plus side, DIA in 1962 did send its senior Indochina specialist, George W. Allen, a highly competent and experienced intelligence analyst, to Saigon for 90 days temporary duty for the purpose of setting up the first order of battle effort conducted in the theater of operations.[12]

The senior CIA representative reporting directly to the DCI.

Then in June 1954 another US mission was established, called the Saigon Military Mission (SMM) under Edward Lansdale. (Lansdale handled operational matters and reported directly to the DCI. His SMM was instrumental in helping President Ngo Dinh Diem consolidate power in South Vietnam after the Geneva Conference ended in July 1954.) turning over its reponsibilities to the Chief of Station, Saigon who had begun to act as the senior CIA representative in September 1953 under Emmett J. McCarthy. Finally in December 1956 the SMM was terminated and its functions were assumed by the Chief of Station, thus consolidating all CIA activities under one head. The Chief of Station played a key role not only in advising and providing intelligence to the US Ambassador, but also in providing current intelligence, as well as his own on-the-scene assessments of difficult, fast-moving situations, to CIA Headquarters.

Overall Coordination of Intelligence in Vietnam

Unity of US effort in the intelligence arena was never fully achieved in Vietnam, a regrettable failure considering the fundamental, central importance of intelligence as the basis for the entire counterinsurgency effort. A primary reason for this lack of a unified US intelligence effort was the basic jurisdictional competition for preeminence between the CIA Station and MACV. In peacetime, the CIA Station Chief is normally the principal US intelligence officer in the country, but in times of "war," CIA assets are passed to the control of the senior military commander, usually a unified commander in a theater of operations. Vietnam was a unique situation, however, since the United States was not at war, at least not in a legal, formal sense, and so a change in relationships was never invoked. Even after those elements of the US Mission carrying out pacification functions were placed under MACV in May 1967, the CIA Chief of Station remained responsible to the Ambassador as his principal intelligence adviser. Thereafter unity of command of all phases of US counterinsurgency effort, both civil and military, was exercised except for the intelligence element.

Nevertheless, some cooperation and coordination among US intelligence activities did evolve. On the combined side, some US-Vietnamese coordinated intelligence activities were established unilaterally by the military, but fully coordinated American-Vietnamese activities were severely inhibited by the same jurisdictional conflict between CIA-supported National Police intelligence activities and MACV-supported military intelligence activities. The lack

of effective exploitation of captured documents and prisoners was a prime example of the need for joint mechanisms to coordinate CIA and MACV intelligence advisory and operational activities, and to mesh them with those of the Vietnamese military and police intelligence and security services.[13]

Overview of ONE Production (1950-1963)

ONE played an influential role during these first years of American involvement in Southeast Asia, 1950-1963. In addition to the numerous and frequent national estimates published during the period, ONE produced, in approximately the same number and frequency, memoranda for the DCI that also carried weight in US councils of government, how much depending on the way the DCI used them and the extent to which they were circulated. Often such memoranda were precursors of estimates and at other times they had the same effect as national estimates.

The first national estimate on Indochina, NIE 5, 29 December 1950, "Indochina: Current Situation and Probable Developments," came at a time when regular Viet Minh forces were operating in battalion size and taking the offensive against French troops only a few miles from Hanoi. Published only a few months after the Chinese intervention in Korea, it was a very pessimistic estimate. It stated that the Viet Minh could probably drive the French out of Vietnam within six to nine months and that Chinese intervention might occur at any time if it had not already begun.

From this time on, the possibility of Chinese intervention became virtually an obsession with ONE and the question was addressed in some way in almost every NIE published on Vietnam as well as in many other estimates dealing with Asia. Another common thread running through many national estimates of the period concerned likely Chinese and Soviet reactions to direct US intervention in Indochina under various circumstances. After the alarming initial estimate, subsequent NIE's and SNIE's (two in 1951, four in 1952, and four in 1953) reflected general agreement within the US intelligence community that the odds were against Chinese intervention while French troops remained in Vietnam, and even after the armistice in Korea was signed in July 1953 when the Chinese were ostensibly in a better position to march across their southern border. A notable exception to the statements of general agreement was SNIE 53, 18 December 1953, "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain Possible US Courses of Action in Indochina Through 1954."[15]

SNIE 53 was the first time that the intelligence community tried to bite the bullet on the question of Communist reaction to US intervention. ONE and J-2 supported the estimate (approved by the DCI) which stated that even with the commitment of American forces sufficient to defeat the Viet Minh in the field, chances were better than even that the Chinese would not intervene provided that the United States made clear its willingness to use its retaliatory military (nuclear) power. The Department of State (INR) and all the service intelligence officers dissented from the estimate and called the chances better than even that the Chinese *would* intervene.[16] The intelligence community learned a good deal from this first effort to deal with the complex problem of estimating Communist reactions to given US actions, and thereafter tried to be

more precise in formulating possible US courses of action. Dissents within the community, however, continued to be fairly frequent on the question of possible Chinese intervention.

There were other common threads that ran through ONE papers during this early period. The internal political security situation in Vietnam, the ability of successive Vietnamese regimes in the South to survive, and the probable effects of a Communist takeover in Vietnam on the rest of Southeast Asia were frequently addressed. In addition, ONE estimates often included judgments concerning the French military position in Vietnam and probable developments in French policy toward Indochina.[17]

The high water mark of ONE production on Vietnam came in 1954-55 with sixteen estimates and eighteen memoranda for the DCI (about one third of the total produced by ONE during the 14-year period, 1950-63, surveyed by King). This effort covered, among other things, Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Conference, the assumption and consolidation of power in South Vietnam by Ngo Dinh Diem, consolidation by the Communist regime in the North, and the beginning of the French withdrawal from Indochina. Major estimative questions included the French willingness and ability to continue the struggle, the effects of the negotiated Geneva settlement, and the prospects for a viable regime in the South under Diem.[18]

ONE production in the period 1956-1960 was relatively low on Vietnam (only four estimates and four memoranda for the DCI in the five years), reflecting a phase of Viet Cong quiescence in the South as both North and South Vietnamese consolidated and strengthened their respective positions. The estimates published during this period nevertheless were lengthy and comprehensive in their treatment of the two Vietnams.[19]

The final period of ONE activity substantively reviewed by King, 1961-1963, covered the rapid buildup of guerrilla warfare in the South by the Viet Cong, the acceleration of the US commitment to South Vietnam, and the decline and fall of the Diem regime culminating in Diem's assassination on 1 November 1963. ONE production on Vietnam increased markedly, twelve estimates during the three years, reflecting the urgency of the situation in Vietnam. (It was also a period of crisis in Laos, particularly during 1961-62, when ONE produced eleven estimates on Laos in addition to those on Vietnam and the overall region of Southeast Asia.) Major estimative questions dealt with the relative strengths of the regimes in the North and the South, prospects for Diem before his assassination, and the ever present issue of probable Communist reactions to certain US courses of action.[20]

King in his overall review of ONE efforts concerning Vietnam generally gives ONE high marks, particularly with respect to "accuracy in analysis and forecasts of broad trends in Vietnam," to timeliness in relation to the needs of policymakers, and to balance. He also brings out instances where ONE missed the mark in the early 1950's in underestimating Viet Minh military capabilities against the French and in the specific case of Dien Bien Phu, judging that the French would hold. King points out that estimates on broad, complex matters in the final analysis must rest on a good background of information, a sense of history, logic, and sound judgment. He concludes that ONE for the

most part maintained a "remarkably consistent view" on key questions over the years despite the widely varying quality of information available to assist in arriving at estimative judgments.[21]

Two issues discussed at length in King's study require further comment. One concerns the issue of the military threat to South Vietnam and the kind of armed forces needed to counter it. King properly points out that in the early years, the primary threat was Communist subversion, infiltration, and guerrilla warfare rather than overt cross-the-border invasion by North Vietnamese or Chinese forces. But he does not paint the whole picture. He overlooks the fact that an important element of the Viet Minh threat consisted of the regular "main force" units which by 1951, with Chinese aid, had been expanded to six regular divisions (about six to seven thousand men each). These forces, fighting on their own ground, had held their own with the best French troops in Vietnam. Such Viet Minh regular forces in the North became an even greater threat to the South after French troops departed Vietnam in 1956 at a time when effective South Vietnamese troops had not yet been developed. South Vietnam, moreover, needed conventional forces in the beginning to establish preeminence over the various armed sects, pirates, and private armies that operated unopposed in various parts of the country. (In the last days of South Vietnam in 1975, conventional North Vietnamese divisions in overwhelming numbers with modern tanks, artillery, and other arms—*not* guerrillas—overran the country.) The point, of course, is that various kinds of forces were needed from the beginning to provide security for the people from the multifaceted threat that confronted them. Weakness in any part of the total security forces simply invited enemy attack at that weak area. King's point is nevertheless valid because the South Vietnamese government during its early years neglected the development of constabulary type units and local self-defense forces. These paramilitary forces were indeed needed to counter internal subversion and insurgency, but the latter were not recognized as major threats until the 1959-1960 period, while US military assistance for these forces was not provided in significant amounts until 1961. Thus it can be fairly stated that the United States was quite slow in recognizing the true nature of the *total* threat.[22]

The other issue concerned the assessment of President Diem and his ability to hold South Vietnam together in the face of severe internal political problems and the rapidly growing insurgency. Published ONE assessments in 1962 and early 1963 were straightforward and accurate in their judgments on Diem's weaknesses, but scrupulously stayed out of the policy realm. But then in the late summer of 1963, only a few weeks before the successful coup against Diem in the early fall, George Carver, a Directorate of Plans officer assigned to the ONE staff, submitted memoranda for the DCI * flatly asserting his own view—not ONE's—that the removal of Diem was in the best interests of South Vietnam and the United States. These memoranda went so far as to discuss various Vietnamese personalities who might replace Diem.[23]

* Memoranda for the DCI usually were intended to support the Director in his policy role, and at times relaxed the distinction between intelligence analysis and policy recommendations. The DCI disagreed with Carver's view.

Viet Minh Strategic Doctrine

At this point, it might be helpful to discuss the doctrine adopted by the Viet Minh in the North (and later by the Viet Cong in the South). It was essentially the doctrine of the People's War, which called for the gradual development of conventional capabilities, the rate of growth depending on the availability of arms, equipment, and supplies, and concurrently an emphasis on the development of guerrilla warfare capabilities. Theoretically, the skillful, orchestrated employment of a wide variety of conventional and unconventional capabilities would ultimately pin down enemy forces to the point where a "general counteroffensive" could be launched that would overwhelm remaining opposition.

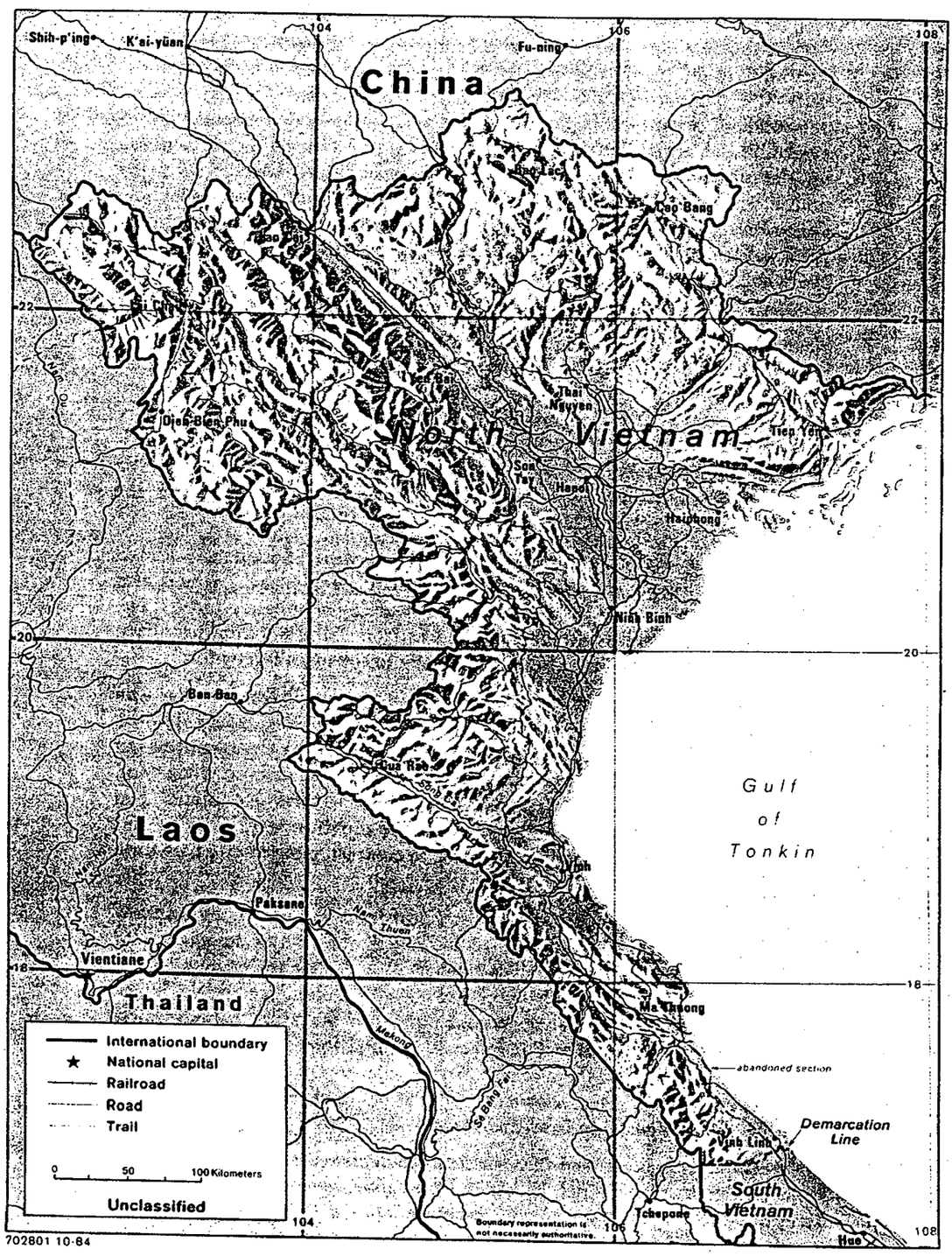
Under such a strategy, the Viet Minh's major conventional capabilities were vested in "main force" units, organized into regular units up to division size, whose role was to draw government forces into combat under circumstances where their superiority in firepower, mobility, and air support could be neutralized. The other elements of the Viet Minh's three-tiered military capabilities consisted of those forces designed primarily for guerrilla operations, the guerrilla-militia forces and the regional forces. The guerrilla-militia forces operated at the lowest levels and constituted the foundation of the People's War as without these it could not truly be a "people's" struggle.

At bottom level, the hamlet citizens were formed into partially armed militia units, usually platoons of thirty to fifty people each, which also provided a manpower pool for the other categories of military forces. The normal progression of proficient soldiers was from hamlet militia to village guerrilla units to the regional forces and finally to the main force units.

The next step up from the hamlet militia found the village guerrillas who were somewhat better armed and performed broader duties. Next came the regional forces—usually a company at district level and a battalion at province level. District companies provided a local strike force, backing up village and hamlet guerrilla-militia forces and supporting provincial operations. The provincial battalion had similar functions at the province level. District and provincial soldiers were essentially full-time in contrast to the mostly part-time guerrilla-militia forces.

Regional units, often referred to as "local force" units, were organized along conventional lines and had only limited capabilities to engage in conventional combat and then only for a short time. And so regional units, like guerrilla-militia forces, normally employed guerrilla tactics. Conversely, large-scale Viet Minh conventional operations often had guerrilla characteristics. The main objectives of regional and guerrilla-militia forces were to pin down government forces, cause them to disperse in order to protect valuable targets, and constantly wear them down, thus limiting their ability to take the offensive against Viet Minh bases and forces.

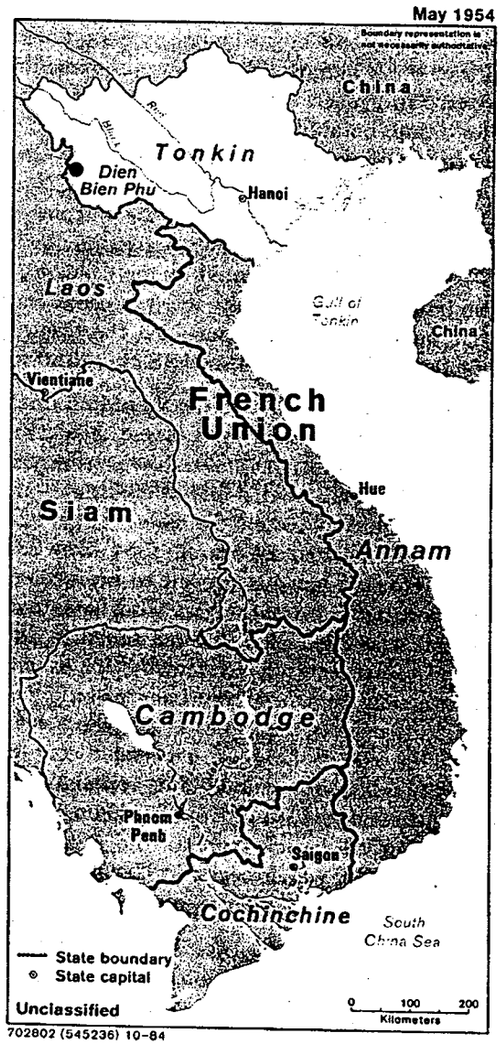
This force structure, and these tactics, which characterized both the Viet Minh war against the French Union and the subsequent struggle against the Americans and South Vietnamese, were not always very well understood outside of French and later US intelligence circles. One major consequence was that American leaders after taking over from the French in Vietnam were



slow in grasping the nature of the conflict and devising effective measures and means to counter the insurgency in the South.

Battle of Dien Bien Phu, 1953-1954

In the summer of 1953, the French decided to establish a major base at Dien Bien Phu in the remote, rugged northwestern part of Vietnam, intending to use it for mounting guerrilla operations against Viet Minh rear base areas northwest of Hanoi and against Viet Minh movements into Laos. There were no motorable roads into Dien Bien Phu; the base would be totally dependent on aerial delivery, pack trains, or porters for resupply. But the terrain was suitable for defense and could accommodate a large force (twelve to fifteen



infantry battalions), and so the French were confident that they could hold the position against any attack the Viet Minh could muster, and indeed looked forward to a major test of strength. The French, however, seriously underestimated the sheer will power of the Viet Minh and their ability to maintain the attack despite frightful casualties. The Viet Minh resorted to 17th century siege tactics to offset French advantages in firepower and air superiority; effectively nullified the superior French artillery with primitive but reliable artillery techniques of their own; and used their limited antiaircraft artillery weapons in ingenious ways to limit substantially the amount of supplies the French could deliver by air. And to make it all possible, the Viet Minh overcame a seemingly hopeless logistic situation.[24]

The performance of the US intelligence community was mixed in foreseeing the timing and nature of the Viet Minh attack, if there was to be one, and eventually the outcome of the battle. By early February 1954, when three reinforced Viet Minh infantry divisions were known to be in the area, there was little doubt in French or American intelligence circles about the scale of the Viet Minh buildup and their capabilities. DIA and Army intelligence analysts were divided on the question of whether the Viet Minh would actually launch the assault, but this was quickly settled when the offensive began in early March 1954. Assessing the outcome, of course, was a far more complicated matter as it entailed a net assessment of at least three interacting parties—the Viet Minh (supported by the Chinese), the French, and the Americans. US intelligence community analysts could readily assess likely enemy actions, but were less certain about what the French might do, and were in no position to judge the probable actions of their own government.[25]

Army intelligence was convinced that the Viet Minh would make a strong effort to defeat the French and that the Chinese would provide necessary support, but would not intervene with their own combat forces to ensure victory at Dien Bien Phu. ONE held similar views. Army intelligence could not believe that the French would allow themselves to be defeated. ONE in a memorandum for the DCI dated 24 March 1954 likewise stated that the French would hold. These judgments proved to be incorrect. The French could have launched an attack against the Viet Minh bases to disrupt their support of Viet Minh forces at Dien Bien Phu but failed to do so. The French could also have tried to extricate their forces by, for example, coordinated ground and airborne actions launched from Laos toward Dien Bien Phu, and apparently tried to do so but too late. By late April the French lost heart and Dien Bien Phu fell on 8 May 1954. In a broader context, however, the intelligence community was quite accurate in its appraisal of the political and psychological consequences of the loss of Dien Bien Phu, judging that it would probably be a fatal blow to French morale. And indeed the international conference on Southeast Asia, which began in Geneva in April 1954, was a French initiative that the intelligence community had anticipated.[26]

During the last few weeks before Dien Bien Phu fell, the United States seriously considered intervening with air and naval power in support of the French, and at one point the JCS, with the Army dissenting, recommended such action. The Army's view was that US airpower would not be decisive either in effectively interdicting the overland routes used by the Viet Minh to

resupply their forces at Dien Bien Phu or in dissuading the Viet Minh from pressing the attack. (The debate over the effectiveness of air interdiction was to continue within the US military services and the intelligence community for the next twenty years.) The Army also believed that the French lacked the military forces (French and Vietnamese) to turn the tide against the Viet Minh and stated that only intervention with a US corps-size ground force could swing the balance in favor of the French. This would entail at least partial mobilization of US manpower and industry, and the struggle would be long and costly. Finally, if the Chinese intervened, a likely event if defeat of the Viet Minh seemed imminent, the Army held that the US corps force might not be sufficient. President Eisenhower sided with the Army view and decided against any US intervention.[27] (In October 1951, several years before the French lost Dien Bien Phu, US Army War College students in a review of US policy in Southeast Asia unequivocally stated that Vietnam was of secondary strategic importance to the United States, that Vietnam would be extremely difficult to defend against either infiltration or overt attack, and that under no circumstances should the United States intervene with its own forces.)[28]

In these years US policymakers were heavily influenced by the views of senior US military leaders in the Pacific, especially the commander of US Army Pacific (USARPAC) (headquarters in Hawaii) and the chief of the US MAAG in Saigon. Unfortunately, some of these commanders had little grasp of the nature of the struggle, had a highly unrealistic perception of the political and military situation in Vietnam, and consistently were overly optimistic about French progress and prospects in the war. An example was Lieutenant General John W. O'Daniel, CG, USARPAC, in 1953 (and later Chief, US MAAG, Saigon), who visited Vietnam in the summer and fall of 1953, and visited Dien Bien Phu in March 1954. After this latter visit, he confidently advised the JCS that the French would not only hold Dien Bien Phu, but were getting stronger throughout Indochina with promising prospects for ultimate victory. A junior US Army attache in Indochina, who also visited the doomed French base not long before its capture, submitted a vastly different assessment that was quite pessimistic about the French ability to hold. Although the JCS were aware of the attache's report, they nevertheless accepted General O'Daniel's optimistic view. One adverse consequence of such unreliable reporting was that the US government was somewhat surprised by the rapid deterioration of the French position in Vietnam.[29]

Post-Geneva Prospects for Vietnam, 1954

But much of the intelligence community was not at all sanguine about the future prospects for Vietnam, whether guided and assisted by France or by the United States. This was particularly evident in the wake of the Geneva conference which concluded in July 1954 and resulted in the partition of the country at the 17th parallel, a division intended to be temporary pending elections two years later. (The elections did not take place.) France and North Vietnam (the DRV) were the two signatories of the Geneva Accords. The United States did not sign the accords but agreed in a separate declaration to support them. There were Army intelligence analysts who pointed out that the Communists would almost certainly gain control of the whole country if elections were held in 1956, and if elections were not held, would almost

certainly start a people's war in South Vietnam; who believed it unlikely that the United States could develop within South Vietnam the political cohesion and military capacity to prevent a Communist takeover; and who judged that even a great expenditure of US resources, including the commitment of substantial numbers of American troops, would not ensure success, particularly if the Chinese and Soviets continued to support the Vietnamese Communists. ONE took a similar line. A memorandum for the DCI, 12 July 1954, pointed out the enormous political, economic, social, and military problems to overcome if South Vietnam were to survive, and NIE 63-5-54, "Post Geneva Outlook in Indochina," dated 3 August 1954, gave no cause for optimism as to South Vietnam's future, estimating that prospects were poor and would probably worsen even with strong support from the United States and other allies.[30]

The JCS were also pessimistic about the post-Geneva future, declaring in mid-August 1954 that it was "hopeless to expect a US military training (and advisory) mission to achieve success" unless South Vietnam "can effectively perform those governmental functions essential to the raising and maintenance of armed forces." Secretary of State John Foster Dulles took the converse view that underscored the need "to bolster the (South Vietnamese) government by strengthening the Army which supports it." The President supported Dulles and approved a new, accelerated, and comprehensive military assistance program designed to improve the loyalty and effectiveness of South Vietnamese forces. For the record, however, the JCS in these early years were ambivalent about the strategic importance of the region. In 1950, for example, the Chiefs emphasized the strategic importance of Indochina in the cold war, while at the same time noting that the area was of little strategic value in a general, global conflict.[31]

Shortly after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the French reluctantly agreed to the US proposal to appoint Ngo Dinh Diem, an autocratic Catholic mandarin, as premier of South Vietnam. Immediately setting out to centralize control of the country, Diem ran into opposition from the French, who preferred a relatively weak central government. Diem wanted to break away from French influence and was greatly assisted in this effort by covert US aid to his secret services. Diem moved swiftly, subduing the private armies, river pirates, and religious sects that controlled various parts of the country. (Some US intelligence analysts, unaware of this covert effort, were "surprised" by Diem's unanticipated success.)[32] This initial success earned the firm support of the Eisenhower Administration. In the beginning, within both the US policy-making and intelligence communities, there were divided views on Diem's capacity to govern effectively as well as on the realistic prospects of the newly created "nation."[33]

It was now abundantly clear that American and French objectives in Vietnam were incompatible, the US seeking a strong, independent, non-Communist Vietnam oriented toward the West and France wanting a political solution that would preserve its special relationship with Vietnam and the associated states of Laos and Cambodia. The ensuing French-American showdown culminated in 1955-56 with the displacement of France in the region by the United States, a result bitterly resented by the French and an outcome that much have seemed hypocritical to all our European friends. No

doubt this episode contributed to the unwillingness of our European allies to support the United States in Vietnam.

Effects of the French Withdrawal from Indochina, 1955-1956

Meanwhile, Diem completed the initial stage of his consolidation of power by deposing Bao Dai as chief of state through a national referendum and on 26 October 1955 proclaiming Vietnam to be a Republic under Diem's presidency. With that the French recognized the futility of their position, and in April 1956 withdrew the last of the French Army troops and advisers from the country. (French air and naval advisers remained for one more year.) The French departure left an enormous vacuum in South Vietnam, the significance of which had been obvious to US intelligence officials but seemingly had escaped US policymakers at the time.

On the military side the French Expeditionary Corps (non-Vietnamese colonial troops for the most part), a tough, combat-experienced professional force 150,000 strong, and 6,000 French Army advisers (officers and noncommissioned officers) were replaced by an American military presence consisting of *no* troops and a US MAAG numbering about three hundred personnel, mostly logisticians. Moreover, the ceiling placed on the size of the US MAAG by the Geneva agreements was to limit severely American training and advisory efforts in Vietnam for the rest of the decade. The Vietnamese Army, most of whose officers and noncommissioned officers had been French or French colonials, was in a sorry state. The French had been unwilling to develop Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers in any significant numbers, and the Vietnamese were not prepared for leadership in the Army, especially at higher levels, and in technical areas such as logistics. Moreover, politicization was rampant among Army officers and the Army was heavily infiltrated by agents and sympathizers of the Viet Cong. The strength of the Army had decreased after Geneva, as a result of desertions and a hiatus in recruiting efforts, and facilities to handle the Army units regrouped from the North to the South did not exist. Equipment and supplies hastily evacuated from the North were scattered and were neither properly accounted for nor guarded.[34]

On the nonmilitary side, the French withdrawal was likewise a severe loss. French officials held influential positions, not only at bureau level in Saigon but also at province and district levels. And again the French had been slow to develop Vietnamese abilities to govern themselves. The loss of French technical know-how, financial support, and business and industrial activities, because it took place over a more extended period of time, was not so traumatic as the military withdrawal.[35]

Overall the situation in Vietnam inherited by the United States from France in 1956 was disadvantageous, if not hopeless. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the United States in deliberately pushing the French out of the way and replacing them in Vietnam acted unwisely.

Rise and Decline of South Vietnam Under Diem, 1955-1960

During the 1955-58 period, Diem appeared to be making progress in gaining internal control, resettling the refugees who moved South after

Geneva, and making a start toward economic development and agrarian reform. But it was only the lull before the storm. In late 1958 and in 1959 Viet Cong terrorist activities began to increase steadily. President Diem responded belatedly in 1959 with countermeasures and the commitment of more regular troops to internal security, but the situation continued to deteriorate. In January 1960 when a battalion-size Viet Cong force overran a South Vietnamese Army regimental headquarters in Tay Ninh Province, less than a hundred miles from Saigon, it was evident that a people's war was well under development. In early 1961 Diem asked for increased military assistance in material and training. Meanwhile in the fall of 1960, the US mission in Saigon, with the approval and support of the Departments of State and Defense, drew up the first comprehensive national planning document dealing with the political, military, and economic requirements for coping with insurgency in South Vietnam. This counterinsurgency plan urged the South Vietnamese government to carry out major reforms in the organization and direction of military, paramilitary, and civilian resources dedicated to the task.[36]

ONE closely followed the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam and consistently warned US policymakers on the growing crisis in the country. A 28 July 1960 memorandum for the DCI pointed out that while the Viet Cong stepped up the strength and tempo of their activities, public grievances against the Diem regime were becoming increasingly urgent and articulate. The paper highlighted the roles played by Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Ngu and Madame Ngu, and indicated an approaching crisis for Diem. The memorandum was followed up by an SNIE dated 23 August 1960 that clearly warned of the general decline in the political and security situation, which if not checked, could cause the collapse of the Diem regime within the next year or so. Only a little over two months later, the first of several coup attempts against Diem occurred on 10-11 November 1960.[37]

Concurrently with the stepped-up insurgency in Vietnam, internal conflict was boiling in Laos, which was supposed to remain neutral as a result of the 1954 Geneva agreements. With the entry of North Vietnamese troops and Soviet arms in Laos in the late 1950s, the United States responded with US Army special forces training teams and CIA logistic support for the tribes waging guerrilla warfare against Communist troops in the region.[38]

Kennedy Administration and Indochina 1961-1963

And so when President Kennedy was inaugurated in January 1961, he faced grim challenges in Southeast Asia. He directed a major expansion of the US military advisory effort in Vietnam that saw the number of advisers increase from about 900 in January 1961 to almost 17,000 by the end of 1963. As a result of the President's deep interest in counterinsurgency, education and training on this subject was expanded and emphasized in all of the US armed services. The President also authorized the commitment of US Army helicopters in direct combat support of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops, and the first airmobile assault against the Viet Cong by heliborne ARVN soldiers took place in December 1961 in an area about fifteen miles west of Saigon. By June 1963 ARVN troops were routinely going into battle via the American UH 1-B helicopter, dubbed the Huey, which was to become a universally recognized silhouette in Southeast Asia.

President Kennedy decided to go the diplomatic route and neutralize Laos, trying to separate it from the larger conflict in Vietnam. Consequently, a fourteen-nation conference in Geneva approved certain accords in July 1962 guaranteeing the neutrality and independence of Laos. In compliance with the agreement, the United States ceased support of the Meo and other tribes, and withdrew the US Army training teams from Laos; but 7,000 North Vietnamese troops remained in northern Laos in violation of the accords and continued to collaborate with the Pathet Lao in undermining the coalition government. Some time later the United States reinstated its support of the Meo effort and the so-called "secret war" in Laos escalated.[39]

In the meantime, Diem's position in South Vietnam was growing worse. National estimates produced in 1961 emphasized widespread dissatisfaction with Diem's leadership and tended to relate this with his failure to deal effectively with the Viet Cong, who were operating with greater impunity and in larger units. Coup d'etat indicators were markedly more evident. Nevertheless in 1962 Diem's strategic hamlet program with strong US support got off to a good start and South Vietnamese military effectiveness seemed to have checked, at least temporarily, the tide of Viet Cong successes, primarily as a result of increased tactical support by US helicopter and logistic units. This seemed to have lured both US policymakers and intelligence officials at this time into a false "all is well" frame of mind, exemplified by the encouraging tone of NIE 53-63, dated 17 April 1963, "Prospects in South Vietnam." The estimate took over six months to produce and illustrates what happens when estimates are too thoroughly coordinated and senior policymakers get too close to intelligence officials drafting the estimate. King in his study of ONE performance during the period makes the point.[40]

The Buddhist crisis, which ultimately led to the overthrow of the Diem regime, began in Hue in May 1963 less than three weeks after publication of the above cited NIE 53-63. It seemed clear to the intelligence community that an internal religious conflict had now been added to the almost insurmountable political and security problems already present and the resulting overload would be more than the regime could stand. Timely ONE papers produced during this period highlighted the adverse impact on US-Vietnamese relations of the Buddhist matter and the inflamed nature of Vietnamese emotions, and warned that the chances of a coup or assassination attempt against Diem were "better than even." [41]

Then in August and September 1963, George Carver of the ONE staff drafted two memoranda for the DCI that, according to John Kerry King, came closer to outright policy recommendations than any Vietnam papers written up to that time. These papers concluded that the United States no longer had a chance of achieving its objectives in Vietnam under a Ngu family-Diem regime and that there were other Vietnamese personalities who should be considered as alternative leaders.[42]

The Coup and Diem's Assassination, 1963

From August 1963 until 1 November 1963, when Diem and his brother Ngu were killed in a military takeover, a fierce debate between Diem supporters and Diem detractors raged in both Washington and Saigon. In

Saigon, US Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., who stood by Diem and wanted to give him one more chance, was replaced in August 1963 by Henry Cabot Lodge, who had made up his mind against Diem. According to William E. Colby, Chief, Far Eastern Division, Operations Directorate, CIA, at the time, CIA and Defense were pro-Diem while State was anti-Diem, but the State position ultimately carried the day. (As noted above, however, there were those in ONE who also strongly opposed Diem.) On 24 August 1963 a crucial State cable was sent to Saigon that Ambassador Lodge interpreted as a direct order to prepare for a military coup. This message stated in fact that the US Ambassador was "to examine all possible alternate leadership and make detailed plans as to how to bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary."[43] Under Secretary of State Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman, and a White House staff member, Michael Forrestal, had prepared and dispatched the message with only cursory clearance with the Under Secretary of State George Ball (on the golf course) and after telephonic clearance with President Kennedy at Hyannisport, Massachusetts. Neither the Secretary nor Deputy Secretary of Defense, nor the JCS were consulted. During the last few days of August, there were many after-thoughts in Washington about the message and Kennedy further discussed the matter with the Secretaries of State (Dean Rusk) and Defense (Robert S. McNamara), Chairman of the JCS (General Maxwell D. Taylor), and others, but it was too late. Lodge immediately upon receipt of the cable set out to implement State's instructions. Using CIA officers rather than US military in order to conceal the US hand, Lodge contacted the Chief of the Joint General Staff (Vietnamese armed forces), General Tran Thieu Khiem. The fat was now in the fire.[44]

In Saigon, General Paul D. Harkins, the first commander of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) (created in February 1962), admitted that the war could not be won with Diem and Ngu, but he wanted (as former Ambassador Nolting did) to make a last-ditch effort to persuade Diem to remove his brother Ngu and his wife from the government. Unfortunately, Lodge and Harkins were not on either close or good terms. Moreover, the Ambassador disagreed with the Chief of Station (CIA), John Richardson, on the Diem question and asked for his relief. Richardson departed in October 1963 and his successor did not arrive in Saigon until after the coup. Thus in effect the Ambassador called the shots in Saigon completely on his own.[45]

President Kennedy, concerned about reports that the senior US officials in Saigon were not pulling together, directed Secretary McNamara and General Taylor to make a quick trip to Vietnam in late September 1963. On 2 October, only one month before the coup that resulted in a disastrous setback for South Vietnam, McNamara and Taylor presented a report to the National Security Council that, certainly in hindsight, seems almost ludicrous in its misreading of the situation. They reported that the political situation, although serious, had not yet affected the South Vietnamese military, that the major military tasks in South Vietnam could be successfully completed by the end of 1965, and that a reduction of US military personnel could be started now with one thousand withdrawn at the end of 1963. They recommended that General Harkins be directed to plan for such reductions, withdrawing the bulk of US

military personnel by the end of 1965. Finally, they stated that Lodge and Harkins were in substantial agreement with these conclusions.[46] A few weeks later the US government was to discover that our US civilian and military leaders in Saigon were in essence ignorant of the true situation in Vietnam and that the optimistic American assessments coming out of Saigon were unjustified.

George Allen, having left the DIA and now working in CIA at the time of the coup, told his Agency associates just before the coup that although he agreed with those who felt that it was "not possible to win with Diem," he also agreed with those who seriously "doubted that we could win without him." It was a "no-win" situation. The Diem-Ngu family tightly controlled all the strands of power, a web that would quickly unravel if they were to be deposed. Allen was of the opinion that unless there were valid reasons to believe that a successor was prepared to pick up the pieces, the United States would be foolish to arrange a coup; and that over the long run, it was doubtful whether a coup against Diem was in the best interests of the United States. As for the wide discrepancies between American press reports emanating at the time from Saigon and the glowing reports of progress issued by MACV and the US Embassy, Allen believed that the press stories more accurately reflected the realities of a rapidly worsening situation.[47]

Aftermath of the Coup

According to General Taylor, President Kennedy was appalled by Diem's assassination and bitterly regretted the US role in it. (Kennedy, himself assassinated only three weeks later on 22 November 1963, did not live to see the consequences.) Diem's death no doubt prolonged the war and led to the increasing American involvement in later years. It brought on a sequence of political and military events over the next two years which in General Taylor's words, would force "President Johnson in 1965 to choose between accepting defeat or introducing American combat forces." [48]

Just before the coup, State/INR in an analysis dated 22 October 1963, concluded that the trend against South Vietnam was accelerating in the latter half of 1963 and that the military situation was deteriorating as rapidly as the political one. After the coup, the security situation was found to be far worse than Washington had realized. The Viet Cong in the Delta were not being "compressed" by government forces but were in reality lying low; a larger percentage of reported ground attacks were deliberately made against targets where the Viet Cong were known *not* to be; and the government statistics on the number of strategic hamlets and villages claimed to be under government control were greatly exaggerated.[49]

To appreciate the widespread impact of a coup or any shakeup of the South Vietnamese government, it is helpful to understand the Vietnamese customs in the selection of new top officials to succeed those officials rather abruptly turned out of office. It was the Vietnamese practice in both government and private sectors to pay for jobs, favors, even routine transactions. Both influence and affluence were acquired by the sale of jobs. A new corps/military region commander had a dozen or so province chief positions to sell, and each province chief had a half a dozen or more district chief jobs to put on the market. It was the same for corps, division, and province staffs.

Similar customs were prevalent at the Saigon governmental level. And so after the 1963 coup there were "loyalty" purges from Saigon to district levels and a wholesale peddling of job opportunities. The government changed some five times in rapid succession after Diem's death and each time, a new purge occurred and fortunes were made in a few months. The male principals usually stayed out of the direct transactions and let their wives handle them, apparently soothing their male consciences somewhat. All in all, such war profiteering seems to have been a fundamental characteristic of Vietnamese life. The consequences were obvious—principally, a loss of momentum and continuity in government and the war effort that was especially felt in the countryside. In fact during the 1964-65 period, the Viet Cong were able to dismantle systematically the strategic hamlet program started in 1962-63.

There were similar practices within the South Vietnamese Army. Although the pay in staff jobs and troop jobs was comparable, officers and noncommissioned officers paid "kickbacks," for example, ten percent of their pay, for the privilege of working on a staff. The demoralizing effect of such a custom on the Army was significant, although it probably bothered American advisers more than their Vietnamese counterparts who were accustomed to such arrangements.[50]

Finally, perhaps the most devastating setback as a result of the coup against Diem was the rapid collapse and dismantling of the secret policy and intelligence system which sought to identify and root out the Viet Cong. In the next several years as a result, the Viet Cong were relatively free to intimidate, terrorize, and recruit from the local population.

In sum, the Diem episode was one of the major turning points of the Vietnamese conflict. Certainly it was of enormous encouragement to Hanoi and an important cause of the costly prolongation of the war into the next decade.

Overall Judgments on US Intelligence, 1950-63

In brief, US intelligence performed overall in a mixed, but generally creditable fashion. Results were ambiguous on a few occasions, but generally during the first fourteen years or so of US involvement in Indochina, American intelligence had a good feel for the true situation and certainly a far better grasp than US policymakers and leaders who tended to deceive themselves in their desire to make their chosen policies succeed. On the other hand, it can also be said that US intelligence officials failed to articulate their views in a manner convincing enough to make US policymakers understand the harsh realities of the Vietnamese problem. It seems particularly ironic that the United States in essence ignored the French experience and committed itself in haste without adequate thought. Diem's death was probably the last time when the United States might have gracefully decided to disengage from the region. But by 1964 it was too late.

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4. Allen, "The Indochina Wars," pp. 15-16.
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7. Allen, "The Indochina Wars," pp. 171-172.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 139-142.
9. Collins, *Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, p 1.
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18. *Ibid*, pp. 38-79.
19. *Ibid*, pp. 72-87.
20. *Ibid*, pp. 87-134.
21. *Ibid*, p. 9.
22. *Ibid*, pp. 54-58; 79-82.
23. *Ibid*, pp. 128-133.
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Part II

The Johnson Years, November 1963 - January 1969

Introduction

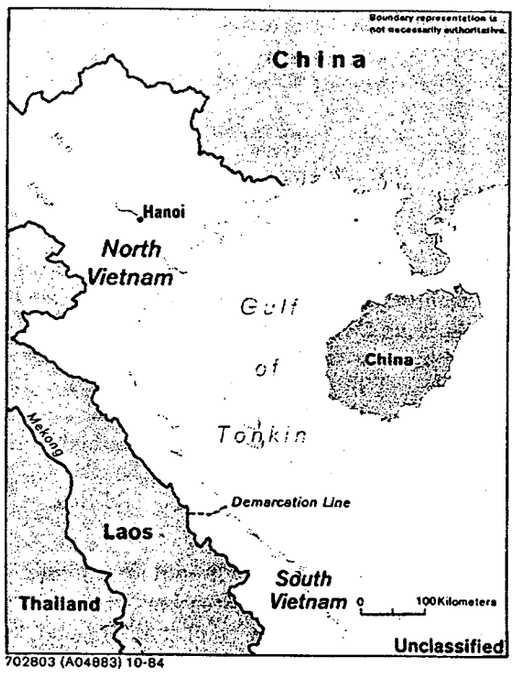
President Johnson, succeeding President Kennedy, who had been assassinated just three weeks after Diem's assassination, had been a supporter of Diem as the only qualified leader on the scene, and believed strongly that the actions of the United States that led to the coup in South Vietnam were serious blunders. President Johnson conducted his own personal review of the situation in Vietnam and by the end of 1963 concluded that things were much worse than he had previously believed. Blaming unreliable reporting on too much wishful thinking on the part of some American officials and too much uncritical reliance on South Vietnamese reports, he directed State, Defense, and CIA to demand realistic reporting from the field that pulled no punches and described problems as well as progress.[1]

John McCone was retained as the DCI until after Johnson was elected to his own term of the presidency in November 1964. McCone reportedly opposed the introduction of American combat troops and had reservations about US air attacks against North Vietnam; his views thus ran counter to presidential thinking. In April 1965 President Johnson replaced McCone as DCI with Vice Admiral William F. Raborn, who lacked any intelligence background. This appointment was interpreted by some to mean that like it or not, the United States was going to war, and that the intelligence community's role was to help win it. As the war continued to escalate, the President in June 1966 turned to an intelligence professional, Richard Helms, from the CIA (Directorate of Operations) to take over as DCI.[2] Helms' tenure lasted almost six years. He established a reputation that gained him the confidence of, and access to, the White House inner circle.

The Johnson Administration did not to any extent question US objectives in South Vietnam; they were simply accepted as inherited from previous administrations. These objectives, enunciated by the Eisenhower Administration in 1954 and reaffirmed by the Kennedy Administration in 1961, encompassed a strong, viable, independent, non-Communist South Vietnam oriented toward the West.

Post-Diem South Vietnam

The period following Diem's assassination was a climactic one for the United States and Vietnam as events seemed to lead inexorably to the direct commitment of US power in the region. The political situation in Saigon was to be a critical factor in South Vietnam's future for four years after Diem's death. The first change of government after the November 1963 coup occurred on 30 January 1964 when Major General Nguyen Khanh overthrew the ruling military junta. Khanh's regime lasted a little over six months. Nine more changes in power occurred during the ensuing ten months, August 1964 to June 1965. By 18 June 1965, General Nguyen Van Thieu, an obscure Army



colonel at the time of the coup against Diem, emerged as Chief of State and Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky became Premier. This combination governed South Vietnam for the next two years.

Meanwhile, the war was heating up. The Tonkin Gulf incidents in early August 1964 brought on the first US air strike against North Vietnam on 5 August 1964 (by Navy carrier aircraft). Later revelations cast some doubts as to the actual circumstances that triggered the US response.[3] Although North Vietnamese plans were not known to the United States at the time, later evidence indicated that Hanoi had already decided, probably before the Tonkin Gulf incidents, to escalate the war in the South, hoping to exploit the deteriorating situation following Diem's assassination. North Vietnamese soldiers moved south as replacements to bolster Viet Cong units along with complete North Vietnamese Army (NVA) combat and logistic units. Although the southward movement of such units had been suspected earlier by national intelligence, their presence in South Vietnam was not confirmed by US intelligence until December 1964 and early 1965.[4]

Commitment of US Air Power

The commitment of US air power to Vietnam was heavily debated in Washington in late 1963 and during 1964. After Diem's death US officials began to realize that the situation was much worse than they previously thought it was and that Hanoi was escalating its war against South Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were not in complete agreement as to the role and effectiveness of US air power. There was never any question that the United States could establish air superiority, nor was there ever any real enemy air

threat to our position in South Vietnam. Enemy air defenses, however, with massive support from the Soviet Union, eventually developed into the most formidable ever encountered by our forces; the price of admission for our attacking aircraft ultimately became very high. The US Air Force and US Marine Corps firmly believed that an all-out air offensive would make North Vietnam incapable of fighting any longer and would compel Hanoi to cease and desist in its efforts to take over South Vietnam. The US Army did not share this view and the US Navy was not completely convinced. The Army was likewise highly skeptical that air interdiction would be effective in Southeast Asia, especially in view of the infiltration tactics and techniques expertly employed by the enemy, the dense cover of the terrain, and the highly redundant road-trail-waterway networks found in the region. The Navy shared these Army reservations, but again the Air Force and Marine Corps were confident that air interdiction would be successful. Despite these basic internal disagreements with respect to air power, the JCS, beginning in 1964, submitted agreed recommendations to the Secretary of Defense and the President. The Chiefs' rationale in part was that the situation was worsening, that strong military actions were necessary to save the day, and that all-out employment of US air power was worth trying. Moreover the JCS were unanimous in the view that allied, that is US – South Vietnam, air attacks against the North would greatly bolster the morale of the South Vietnamese.[5]

The JCS moreover knew that the air power question was being hotly debated among US civilian officials and feared that submitting split views would play into the hands of those who opposed any direct US military involvement in Vietnam. Quite apart from the issue of the military effectiveness of air power, American civilian officials debated the political and psychological aspects, both domestic and international, as well as economic implications of bombing North Vietnam. Those who opposed air attacks emphasized the adverse repercussions and predicted the propaganda advantages Hanoi would reap internationally. They also pointed out that North Vietnam, with an economy based on agriculture and possessing only a cottage industry, was not vulnerable to strategic bombing and that Hanoi would exploit the bombing to harden North Vietnamese attitudes toward the United States and to whip up domestic and international support of the North Vietnamese regime. The critics were mostly right. Politically the United States, at least in part as a result of the bombing, lost support in Western Europe and most of the Third World. Air power proponents very properly point out, however, that the United States did not conduct an all-out air offensive from the outset but allowed North Vietnam ample time to build its air defenses, condition its people, and adjust economically to the damage caused by the US air attacks.[6]

The intelligence community, in assessing communist reactions to gradually increasing US air attacks against North Vietnam, judged in a 9 October 1964 estimate (SNIE 10-3-64, "Probable Communist Reactions to a Certain Possible US Course of Action") that Hanoi more likely would cease temporarily military attacks in South Vietnam, but would plan to renew the insurgency at a later date. INR/State dissented from this judgment, holding that Hanoi would be more likely to send its own armed forces on a large scale into Laos and South Vietnam. As events turned out, the SNIE was dead wrong while

INR was right on the money. Some of the later views held within the intelligence community with respect to the anticipated effect of US air power are covered briefly in the section entitled "National Intelligence Estimates, 1965," appearing below.

In any event, repeated Viet Cong attacks against Americans in South Vietnam brought on what amounted to a sustained US air offensive against North Vietnam beginning in late February – early March 1965, although it was later to be punctuated wth numerous bombing pauses. The air offensive was given the name, "Rolling Thunder," and a parallel air interdiction campaign against military targets in the Laotian panhandle, already begun on a limited scale in December 1964, was named "Barrel Roll." US air power was based in South Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, as well as on aircraft carriers in the South China Sea, while SAC B-52 bombers based in Guam were added to the US tactical air arsenal in June 1965.

Intelligence Estimates on South Vietnam (Late 1964 – Early 1965)

In Saigon newly arrived Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge had asked for the relief of John Richardson, the CIA Station Chief, who disagreed with Lodge over the way to handle the Diem crisis. Richardson departed Saigon in October 1963, just before the coup against Diem, and the new Station Chief, Peer de Silva, did not arrive until December 1963, shortly after the coup. In July 1964 General Maxwell D. Taylor, US Army-Retired, succeeded Lodge, who returned to the United States for the presidential campaign.[7] George W. Allen, a veteran intelligence officer with Army, DIA, and CIA experience in Southeast Asia, became Saigon Station's senior intelligence analyst in June 1964.[8]

In December 1964, believing that a critical period of the war was near, Allen drafted a Saigon Station assessment of the situation. Its thrust was bleak—enemy activity was intensifying while ARVN combat effectiveness was deteriorating, and government control of the countryside was steadily eroding while the military regime in Saigon showed continued disunity and instability. The assessment concluded that unless the South Vietnamese were soon bolstered by external military forces, an ARVN defeat in the near future was likely to take place. The cable was sent to CIA Headquarters as the view of the station; it was not coordinated with other elements of the US mission in Saigon.[9]

The Office of National Estimates was pessimistic, but to a lesser degree than Allen at this time. One of the Board's last estimates on the subject in 1964, SNIE 53-2-64, "The Situation in South Vietnam," dated 1 October 1964, pointed out that the situation continued to deteriorate, politically and militarily, and was unlikely to improve. It concluded that "we do not believe that the Viet Cong will make any early effort to seize power by force of arms; indeed, we doubt that they have the capability for such a takeover." (The accelerating infiltration of NVA troops into South Vietnam's border areas and into South Vietnam itself had not been confirmed at the time of this estimate.)

Early in 1965 Washington asked Saigon for a coordinated US mission intelligence assessment of the situation. Saigon station and MACV agreed on an assessment, similar to but somewhat toned down from the December 1964

Saigon Station message, but Ambassador Taylor approved it in February 1965 only after deleting conclusions that forecast discouraging trends (ARVN's diminishing effectiveness and North Vietnam's increasing capabilities). Saigon Station nevertheless sent the undiluted assessment to CIA Headquarters.[10] (Allen learned later that CIA analysts used the assessment in working on ongoing national estimates.)

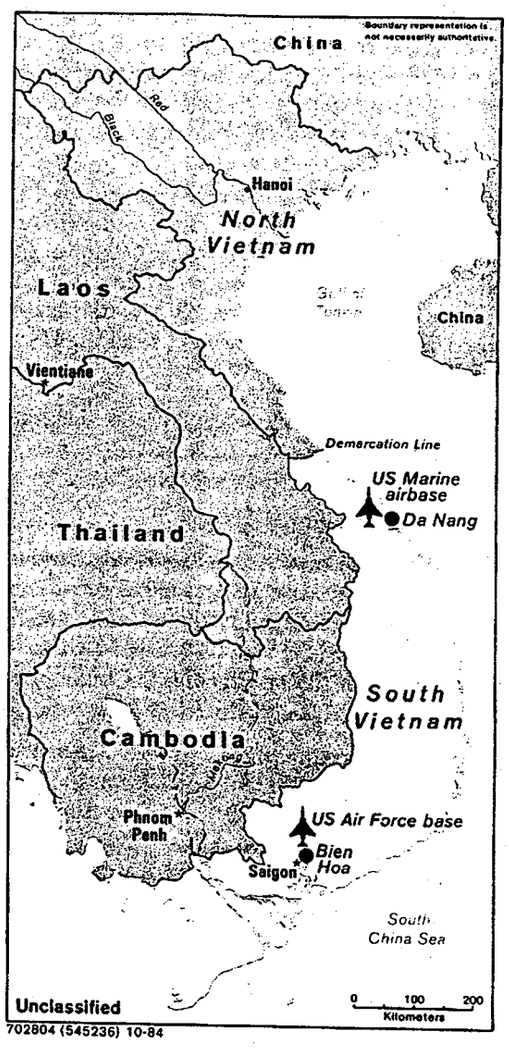
By early 1965 it was abundantly clear that Hanoi was dispatching not just individual soldiers, but complete, trained, and ready NVA battalions, regiments, and even divisions to South Vietnam. Moreover, these were new divisions, formed in the North from cadres of old NVA divisions, and the overall force structure and strength of the NVA were steadily growing. This knowledge triggered another special assessment from the US mission in Saigon in April 1965 with an outcome similar to that of the February 1965 assessment—Ambassador Taylor deleted the worst news from the outgoing cable. Nevertheless, the omitted text was again transmitted from Saigon Station to CIA headquarters.[11]

Commitment of US Ground Combat Troops

The presence in Vietnam of US combat aircraft manned by Americans led to the commitment of the first US ground combat troops in January-February 1965 when a Marine Hawk battalion and two Marine infantry battalions were deployed to protect the US Marine air base in the Da Nang area. In May 1965 the 173d Airborne Brigade, US Army, was moved to Bien Hoa to secure the US Air Force base there.

The US debate over the commitment of major American ground combat formations in Vietnam took a different turn from the air power debate. Proponents of air power had hoped that the US bombing would discourage Hanoi from sending more forces south and thereby escalating the war, but this had not happened. After the start of the bombing in early 1965, the number of NVA soldiers infiltrating south for the remainder of 1965 almost tripled (computed on an annualized basis). And for the first time regimental-size NVA units were sent down the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos, their destination being South Vietnam and base sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia along South Vietnam's border.[12] Ironically, US air attacks against North Vietnam seemed to have hastened the American intervention on the ground.

In the spring of 1965 the strong consensus in the US Department of Defense was that American ground force intervention was necessary if South Vietnam was to be saved. ARVN was demoralized by repeated defeats in the field while enemy attacks on the civilian population, public facilities, lines of communications, and government installations were accelerating. It seemed evident that it was only a matter of time before the Saigon regime would collapse.[13] But the debate in government councils was more over the size and nature of the US commitment, to include the role of US ground combat forces, than over the question of *whether* American troops should be committed. Whether South Vietnam was important enough to warrant the ultimate US commitment of ground forces, and whether South Vietnam was a viable nation internally strong enough to constitute a justifiable risk for the United States—such questions were not debated to any extent.



The JCS in mid-March 1965 recommended sending two US divisions to Vietnam, leaving the matter of how they were to be employed in the hands of the US commander, General William. C. Westmoreland, who had succeeded General Harkins in the spring of 1964. Ambassador Taylor opposed the introduction of major combat units and wanted to limit US troops to the defense of American enclaves and base areas. But Westmoreland had different ideas and persuaded Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in a crucial meeting in Saigon in July 1965 to agree to a US troop level equivalent of about three and one-half divisions (about 200,000 men) to be reached by the end of 1965. This precipitated an intense but short debate in Washington, the only thorough examination of US objectives and strategy until after the enemy Tet 1968 offensive. President Johnson's advisers were divided on the issue. The DCI

reportedly opposed the introduction of large numbers of US ground troops.[14] But on 28 July 1965 the President supported a US troop level of 175,000 and granted Westmoreland freedom to maneuver these forces as he saw fit.[15] The die was cast and the United States was committed to a showdown on South Vietnamese soil. The US objective was to defeat the enemy in South Vietnam, and to do it primarily with American forces.

National Intelligence Estimates, 1965

ONE issued an estimate, SNIE 53-65, "Short Term Prospects in South Vietnam," dated 4 February 1965, which addressed solely the political picture in South Vietnam and concluded that prospects for any improvement during the spring and summer of 1965 were dim. The estimate did not address the overall situation or the military aspects of the North-South struggle. On the same date, however, ONE addressed North Vietnamese military capabilities and intentions (near term only) in SNIE, 10-65, "Communist Military Capabilities and Near Term Intentions in Laos and South Vietnam."

The other twelve SNIEs concerning Vietnam produced during 1965 (there were no NIEs) were generally limited to assessing Communist (North Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet) reactions to specific postulated US courses of action related to Vietnam. For example, SNIE 10-9-65, "Communist and Free World Reactions to a Possible US Course of Action," dated 23 July 1965 postulated, among other things, that US forces in South Vietnam would be increased to about 175,000 by 1 November 1965 (the same number approved by President Johnson on 28 July 1965) and that the United States would mobilize its armed forces at a certain rate. The estimate's major conclusions were:

(1) Hanoi was still confident of early success in South Vietnam and the assumed US actions would not basically alter this expectation;

(2) extending US air attacks to military targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area would not significantly hurt the Communist war effort (Air Force intelligence disagreed with this conclusion);

(3) further extending US air attacks to include sustained interdiction efforts against land lines of communications leading from South China would make the delivery of Soviet and Chinese aid more difficult and costly, but would not have a critical effect on the Communists' determination to persevere;

(4) if extended US air attacks included effective strikes against North Vietnamese POL stocks and if escalating hostilities required the commitment of more and more NVA troops to South Vietnam, the accumulated strains of a prolonged war might lead Hanoi to consider negotiations (State/INR and Army intelligence dissented on the basis that demonstrated Communist resourcefulness in maintaining lines of communications would offset the effects of such escalation);

(5) the Chinese would not react to the assumed US ground force actions by overt intervention with combat forces; but

(6) the chances of Chinese air intervention would increase if US air strikes were extended to the Hanoi-Haiphong area, and could be high if these air strikes were extended to land routes from South China, particularly if large numbers of US aircraft operated close to Chinese frontiers (DIA, Army, Navy, and Air Force intelligence, and NSA disagreed with this judgment, believing it unlikely that Chinese aircraft would deliberately engage US aircraft over North Vietnam from bases within China); and

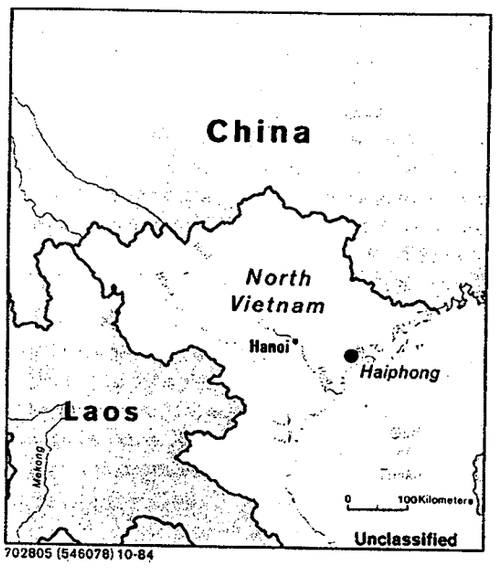
(7) the Soviet Union would continue to support Hanoi and expand its military aid, and would probably respond to US mobilization with an overt increase in its own military expenditures.

One of the more perceptive assessments of South Vietnam at the end of 1965 was State/INR's research memorandum, "The Balance Sheet in South Vietnam," dated 21 December 1965. The paper concluded that although the introduction of US air and ground forces had shattered enemy hopes of achieving a quick military victory, Communist determination to pursue the war had not been affected, and the South Vietnamese government and armed forces still had a long way to go to turn the situation around.

CIA Assessments, 1964-1965

CIA assessments during this period, 1964-65, were almost exclusively in the economic area and were produced by ORR (and one of its successors, OER). Economic interdiction was one category, assessing North Vietnam's vulnerability to sea blockade of its ports, as well as to the interdiction of the railroads leading to North Vietnam from China. As early as 1961, ORR had concluded that North Vietnam was not significantly vulnerable to sea blockade, judging that even if all sea and rail access to North Vietnam were denied, the economic impact would be limited. It was estimated, moreover, that while combined sea and rail interdiction would have the greatest effect, interdiction of the three major rail lines from China would produce results of almost equal magnitude. ORR consistently held to these views throughout the war.[16] CINCPAC, supported by the JCS and the DIA, on the other hand, took an optimistic view of the effectiveness of a US mining program against North Vietnamese ports and judged that it would reduce Hanoi's capability to support military action in South Vietnam, a judgment with which CIA disagreed. Apparently the CIA view prevailed for many years because US sea interdiction of North Vietnam was not attempted until May 1972.

Another category of CIA/ORR assessments concerned targeting intelligence on North Vietnam. This was initially requested by the NSC Staff in the White House (W.W. Rostow) to support contingency planning for possible clandestine operations. After the first bombing operations against North Vietnam in August 1964, ORR's support role became more operational in nature. Then when the US air offensive, "Rolling Thunder," began in early 1965, ORR studies of economic and military targets in North Vietnam intensified in scope and frequency, and not long thereafter ORR acquired the additional task of bomb damage assessments. Following a study of the Hanoi-Haiphong electric power networks in April 1965, ORR in June 1965 completed a detailed target study of key industrial plants, principal railroad and



highway bridges, POL storage areas, airfields, and naval bases, and Haiphong port installations. The study, made at the request of ONE (George Carver), discouraged any notion that bombing of such "strategic" targets could have a decisive effect on North Vietnam. The study also examined the possibility of flooding the Red River Delta by breaching the levees with the objective of destroying the rice crop. ORR judged the dikes to be extremely difficult to breach by conventional bombing and concluded that, even if bombing was successful, the damage to the rice crop would probably not be critical because North Vietnam could readily replace its rice losses by imports from China and South Asia, and would not have to resort to rationing.[17]

In developing the data base for the foregoing assessments, ORR examined in detail not only North Vietnam's transportation system but also its land line connections with China, as well as North Vietnam's extended transportation/infiltration system through the panhandle of Laos that eventually was to become Hanoi's logistic springboard for the subjugation of South Vietnam and the remainder of Indochina. The detailed analysis of ground observer reports and of both high- and low-level aerial photography required a sophisticated understanding of the limitations and potentialities of the source material. By mid-1965, ORR analysts had developed at least a limited grasp of the principal supply and infiltration routes used and their estimated capacities, as well as rough judgments about their actual use by the North Vietnamese.[18]

In late 1964 ORR also initiated detailed research and studies on the Viet Cong economy in South Vietnam. One of the early questions examined was the extent to which the Viet Cong war effort was sustained by local indigenous sources in South Vietnam (capture of ARVN weapons and ammunition, seizure of non-military supplies, materials grown or produced by the Viet Cong themselves) as opposed to the extent to which the Viet Cong were dependent on supplies infiltrated into South Vietnam overland and by sea.

The dependence of NVA troops operating in South Vietnam on infiltrated supplies was also examined. Because of a CIA-DIA disagreement on these questions, an ONE study was undertaken in October 1965. The results agreed with ORR's earlier judgment that most of the enemy's supplies needed in South Vietnam were being obtained locally although there was some dependence on external sources for arms, ammunition, and medical supplies. The Laotian corridor was considered to be the main route of supplies, the sea route and land and water routes from Cambodia handling significantly less tonnage. The Cambodian route later was to become a major bone of contention within the intelligence community.[19]

The economic viability of South Vietnam also became the object of heightened ORR study, particularly in the latter part of 1965 when the presence of US forces and the growing scale of US economic and military programs made it apparent that severe inflationary pressures were to be expected. At the request of the NSC staff (Robert W. Komer) a weekly ORR report on economic conditions in South Vietnam was inaugurated in April 1966 and continued well into 1973.[20]

Organizational Developments Within CIA/DI, 1965-1967

The magnitude of ORR's workload relating to the Vietnam War accelerated in 1964-65, ultimately leading to the establishment on 13 December 1966 of a separate Indochina Branch (under the International Division) within ORR responsible for general economic research of both North and South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, [redacted] However, logistic studies, bomb damage assessments, manpower estimates, targeting, and other operational analyses were conducted by transportation, construction, and other specialists in the Trade and Services Division and Resources Division of ORR, although work in these various subjects was centralized in an ad hoc task force beginning in late January 1967.[21]

Then on 1 July 1967 ORR was dissolved when the military-economic area functions [redacted] of ORR were combined with the military analysis elements of OCI to form a new Office of Strategic Research (OSR), oriented primarily on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but with responsibilities for military analysis with respect to major Free World nations, other Communist states, and Third World countries.[22] (OCI continued to carry out its current intelligence responsibilities with respect to the Vietnam War for the duration.)

Concurrently on 1 July 1967 the remainder of ORR became the Office of Economic Research (OER) under William N. Morell, Jr., who had been the Director of ORR since 1 January 1966. Morell saw the intelligence problem as primarily geographic and secondarily functional. Accordingly he placed all intelligence aspects of the war—the economies of North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, manpower estimates, bomb damage assessments, enemy supply routes including those through Laos and Cambodia, and Communist aid shipments to North Vietnam—in one organizational entity that was raised to division status. The emerging Indochina Division, later renamed the Southeast Asia Division, produced independent assessments and Agency contributions to national estimates as well as to other interagency intelligence undertakings.[23]

OSR, despite its military research orientation, did not become involved in Vietnam War military reporting and analysis. OER and OCI thus carried out CIA's basic analytical responsibilities pertaining to the war, including strategic assessments and comparative political-military-economic evaluations of North and South Vietnam that amounted to net assessments. Bruce Clark, Director of the newly created OSR, wanted to focus on Soviet affairs and considered Vietnam to be a distraction even though the war consumed the energies and attention of the US government for most of the 1960s and much of the 1970s. Indeed CIA's internal handling of the Vietnam War seems to reflect a somewhat ambivalent perception of the Agency's role in wartime.

In August 1965, the Office of the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs (SAVA) had been established within the Office of the DCI. Its function was to help the DCI keep track of burgeoning Vietnam War-related efforts within the Agency and the intelligence community, and to ensure coordinated and, where appropriate, integrated, Agency responses to specific requests from other government agencies. SAVA was to continue well after the January 1973 cease-fire in Vietnam and finally went out of existence shortly after the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. Peer de Silva was SAVA's first head and was succeeded in the summer of 1966 by George Carver, a senior intelligence official in the Office of National Estimates, who served as SAVA's chief for the remainder of its existence.

Under Carver SAVA oversaw *all* Agency activities—analytical, operational, and support—related to Vietnam and coordinated these activities with other Washington departments. As the designated point of contact within CIA on Vietnamese matters, Carver represented the Agency in most interagency efforts and played an important policy support role during the war.[24] Carver insisted on timely responses to policy issues and generally allowed all sides of a controversial matter to be presented in a SAVA paper.

Development of MACV Intelligence Capabilities, 1965-1967

As pointed out in the Prologue, the DIA and the US Army during the period 1961-65 failed to maintain a sound, sustained intelligence capability to deal with the military situation in Southeast Asia, fundamentally a "people's war" on the ground. MACV was established in February 1962. It was more than three years before an experienced, trained US Army intelligence officer was assigned to the J-2 MACV job. The new J-2, Major General Joseph A. McChristian, arrived in Saigon in late June 1965, having come from a two-year tour as the G-2 of US Headquarters Army Pacific (USARPAC), located in Hawaii.

McChristian inherited a somewhat disjointed, floundering staff of several hundred people. But he had the strong support of Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Director of DIA, Lieutenant General Joseph Carroll, who were well aware of the woefully inadequate state of MACV intelligence. When McChristian left Vietnam in July 1967, two years later, he had built a large military intelligence organization (several thousand strong) for collecting and analyzing great quantities of data, as well as for advising South Vietnamese intelligence. Although lacking in sophistication in much of its

analytical and estimative work, and hampered by the inherently cumbersome characteristics of a large bureaucracy, MACV intelligence did take on a more professional look and steadily improved in the exploitation of prisoners of war and captured documents (in both American and South Vietnamese channels), as well as in the systematic analysis of all sources of information in producing intelligence to support combat operations.[25]

On the other hand, many US field commanders in Vietnam, the author included, were of the opinion that the MACV intelligence organization was too highly centralized and concentrated at MACV headquarters level at the expense of the intelligence capabilities at lower command echelons. (This was not entirely MACV's doing, however, because electronic data collected in Southeast Asia generally had to be processed in the United States before it could be transmitted to intelligence echelons in the theater.) These commanders also believed that the J-2 MACV relied too heavily on information gathered by electronic means, which sometimes was less useful for tactical purposes, and that the J-2 MACV failed to develop adequate human intelligence sources. Nevertheless, MACV did succeed in establishing a respected intelligence capability. Unfortunately this was achieved years later than it should have been.

Assessments of US Air Attacks Against North Vietnam, 1965-1967

Almost as soon as "Rolling Thunder" (early 1965) and "Barrel Roll" (late 1964) began, senior officials of the Johnson Administration were calling for assessments of the effects of these air strikes. Secretary of Defense McNamara, aided and abetted by his chief systems analyst and program evaluator, Dr. Alain Enthoven, was unwilling to rely solely on assessments prepared by DIA or military authorities. In the summer of 1965 McNamara requested CIA to join with DIA in preparing a monthly report on the effects of "Rolling Thunder." This monthly series continued after McNamara's resignation on 1 March 1968 and President Johnson's partial bombing halt effective on 31 March 1968. The reports then became known as the "Clifford Reports" submitted to Clark Clifford, McNamara's successor, and continued up to the cessation of all bombing against North Vietnam on 31 October 1968. Unfortunately, these joint CIA-DIA monthly reports were not as straightforward and unvarnished as the independent CIA assessments made during the period.[26]

Another specific request made to CIA by the Secretary of Defense resulted in comprehensive periodic reporting on the effect of air attacks on major railroad and highway bridges in Vietnam. After discovering that DIA "bridge-kill" estimates were based on pilot claims, CIA, with the assistance of DIA, developed more reliable estimates based on aerial photography as the main source of information. Subsequently the first comprehensive estimate, completed in March 1966, revealed that only 216 bridges had been destroyed during the first years of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam as compared to 657 claimed in DIA's most conservative assessment for the same period. The figure based on hard evidence rose to a high of 541 destroyed bridges by the time of the complete bombing halt on 31 October 1968. But the most significant finding of these studies was that the North Vietnamese

became very adept at building multiple bypasses (alternate routes) at every bridge site, thus increasing the probability that at least one crossing at a site remained serviceable. The Paul Doumer Bridge over the Red River at Hanoi, for example, at one time was supported by twenty bypasses. Moreover it took as much ordnance to interdict a bypass as to take out the original bridge; thus the cost of bombing a water crossing increased much faster than the cost of repairing it with cheap local materials. More important, US aircraft were subjected to the same risks when attacking bypasses as when attacking the bridge.[27]

Still other requests came from the NSC staff. McGeorge Bundy in late 1965 asked for an independent CIA assessment of the level of civilian casualties resulting from US bombing in North Vietnam. And at about the same time W.W. Rostow requested an analysis of the probable political and social effect of a postulated escalation of the US air offensive. CIA's somber reply was that even an escalation against all major economic targets in North Vietnam would not substantially affect Hanoi's ability to supply its forces in South Vietnam, nor would it be likely to persuade the Hanoi regime to negotiate.[28] Similar judgments were to be repeated consistently by CIA for the next several years.

A resume of three important CIA assessments produced during this period is illustrative of the accuracy and consistency of CIA judgments on the effectiveness of US air attacks against North Vietnam.

— CIA Intelligence Report, "An Evaluation of Allied (US and GVN) Air Attacks Against North Vietnam," dated 8 November 1965. This report examined the effects of the first eight months of "Rolling Thunder," begun on 2 March 1965 against selected military and economic targets in carefully delineated areas of North Vietnam. It concluded that there was no evidence to date that air attacks had been successful in diminishing the willingness of Hanoi to support Communist forces in South Vietnam and Laos.

— CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Effectiveness of the Air Campaign Against North Vietnam, 1 January - 30 September 1966," dated 7 December 1966. This analysis covered "Rolling Thunder" operations during the first nine months of 1966, a period of greatly intensified and broadened operations compared with those of 1965. It concluded that despite the increased weight of air attack, North Vietnam continued to increase its support of the insurgency in South Vietnam (a threefold increase in personnel infiltrating from North to South occurred in 1966); that strains placed on the enemy's logistic system had been within acceptable limits; that the North Vietnamese capability to support the war effort had improved overall during the period (Soviet and Chinese aid received in the period amounted, in estimated value, to about five times the damage caused by air attacks); and that there was no evidence of any reduction in Hanoi's determination to continue the war or of any loss in public support of the regime. The report stated, however, that if "Rolling Thunder" were to be terminated without concessions, the United States would lose one major form of specific leverage against Hanoi.

— CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "An Assessment of the Rolling Thunder Program Through December 1967," dated March 1968. The memorandum covered the 1967 campaign, a sustained and intensive attack against almost every significant military and economic target in North Vietnam. The activity level was well above that of any previous year, the physical damage of 1967 exceeding that achieved during 1965 and 1966 combined. The campaign effectively neutralized most of North Vietnam's modern industry, and severely disrupted agriculture, trade, and transportation. The study concluded, however, that the total bombing results had not significantly weakened North Vietnam's military capabilities, the resolution of the regime to carry on the war, or the popular support of the regime. The memorandum also pointed out that the increasingly effective and aggressive North Vietnamese air defenses, as well as the large number of US attacks against heavily defended industrial and military targets in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas, had resulted in increasingly heavy losses of US aircraft and crews. (In 1967, 366 American aircraft were lost over North Vietnam, an increase of 16 percent over losses in 1966. Moreover, the ratio of US air losses to the number of sorties, which had been declining since 1965, reversed direction and increased during the last nine months of 1967.)

One of the most significant aspects of the foregoing examination was the fact that a wartime Secretary of Defense asked CIA for independent evaluations of the effectiveness of US air strikes against North Vietnam. McNamara specifically stated that he wanted CIA's views and did not want the studies to be coordinated with DIA, the US Air Force, the JCS, or any other part of the Department of Defense.[29] Moreover, McNamara's requests went far beyond bomb damage assessments—he wanted CIA to review the objectives of "Rolling Thunder" and to make judgments as to the current and potential likelihood of attaining those objectives through the employment of US air power. CIA responded in a timely, professional, and objective fashion throughout the 1965-1967 period. Significantly the last report, briefly described above, came in March 1968 at about the time McNamara was succeeded as Secretary of Defense by Clark Clifford and only a short time before President Johnson decided upon a partial halt of US bombing effective 31 March 1968.

Tactical Air Support (Including B-52s) in South Vietnam

The employment of US air power in direct support of friendly forces in South Vietnam was accepted and supported by all concerned as an effective means of inflicting casualties on enemy troops, supporting the maneuvers of friendly troops or protecting them in defensive positions, and saving the lives of friendly forces. There were times, however, when US forces were criticized if air support caused undue civilian casualties or material damage under circumstances when ground commanders did not exercise sufficient care in authorizing and directing such air support, particularly in built-up or densely populated areas. Moreover, there were other times when friendly ground

forces were faulted for becoming too dependent on such external firepower and for not relying enough on their own capabilities of fire and maneuvers.

There was little controversy over the employment of US air power to interdict the movement of enemy forces and supplies through the Laotian corridor, through the DMZ, and along lines of communications inside North Vietnam leading to Laos or the DMZ. (Interdiction of enemy lines of communications through Cambodia and the bombing of enemy base areas in Cambodia was a different story, and will be discussed later in this paper.) The overall effectiveness of US interdiction efforts, however, was another question. Generally it was concluded that although these operations caused considerable enemy casualties, loss of supplies, materiel damage, and disruption of the infiltration system, they were not decisive and did not impair Hanoi's ability to carry on the war against South Vietnam. A major reason for that lack of a decisive effect on the war was that there was no parallel, sustained ground effort in Laos to block the enemy's supply routes. North Vietnam had the manpower to prosecute a prolonged conflict and its materiel losses were replaced by the Soviet Union and China.

In June 1965, Secretary of Defense McNamara decided to add B-52s, normally employed in a strategic role, to the US tactical air arsenal in Southeast Asia. Initially B-52 strikes (identified as Arc Light) were limited to targets inside South Vietnam, but they were extended to targets in Laos in early 1966 and later to targets in the remote northwestern region of North Vietnam. They were not directed against defended areas of North Vietnam at this time because of the risk of losing a B-52 to enemy air defenses and the attendant psychological, political, and military repercussions. (B-52s began the so-called "secret bombing" of enemy bases in Cambodia in March 1969; it continued until the allied incursion into Cambodia in May 1970. B-52 operations in later phases of the war will be discussed in subsequent sections.)

Because of their enormous firepower, B-52s were not employed in so-called "close air support"—it was just too risky to friendly troops. For the same reason, B-52s were usually employed only in more remote, sparsely populated areas. The B-52 weapons system was accurate and reliable. There were a few tragic occasions when B-52 strikes hit the wrong target and caused severe civilian casualties, but these were the result of human errors in processing target data.

Targets selected for B-52 strikes normally were major headquarters, major supply facilities, base areas, and combat troop concentrations, all more or less stationary targets, and often located in remote enemy sanctuaries. Bombing from 30,000 feet (as opposed to 10,000 feet by other tactical aircraft), B-52s usually achieved surprise and devastating psychological impact. Because of the heavy foliage covering most targets, imagery interpretation of bomb damage was usually limited. Likewise ground observers rarely get into the remote areas involved. Thus conclusive evidence of B-52 bombing effects was often lacking, especially in the early years.[30] Over time, however, an accumulation of evidence from POW interrogations, captured documents, and the like clearly showed that the B-52 was a costly, but very potent weapon. Indeed it was probably the US weapon that the enemy most feared.

The War in South Vietnam, 1965-1967, and US Intelligence

Whereas in the spring of 1965 Hanoi had good reason to be optimistic about prospects for a relatively early military and political victory in South Vietnam, the regime a few months later was forced to reevaluate the situation when the United States intervened on the ground in strength. The massive infusion of US ground troops, nearly two hundred thousand in 1965, certainly set back North Vietnamese hopes and probably saved South Vietnam from defeat. Moreover, in the first major engagement between American and North Vietnamese Army troops in the jungle-covered La Drang Valley west of Pleiku in the Central Highlands, the American 1st Cavalry Division had soundly defeated three NVA regiments. Hanoi, impressed with the firepower and mobility of US forces, no doubt realized at this time that the war would be long and costly, that it could not be won by Viet Cong forces and guerrillas in South Vietnam alone, and that the North Vietnamese Army would have to carry the great burden of the fighting. The result was continued escalation by both North Vietnam and the United States throughout 1966 and 1967.

In South Vietnam the ability of the Viet Cong to expand its forces, replace its combat losses, and furnish replacements to NVA units fighting in the South began to decline in 1966. As the war ground on, the NVA took over more and more of the action, not only through the continuing deployment of fresh NVA units from the North but also through the increasing infusion of Viet Cong units with NVA personnel.

Secretary of Defense McNamara was a strong supporter of the US commitment initially, but in early 1966 his resolve was shaken by evidence of Hanoi's willingness and ability to accelerate the infiltration of NVA troops through Laos and on into South Vietnam, and to maintain a fairly favorable strength ratio in step with the US troop buildup. In May of 1966 McNamara asked CIA for an assessment of the North Vietnamese will and ability to continue the war. He wanted an analysis of the strength and morale of VC/NVA forces in South Vietnam; of the effect of Hanoi's commitments in South Vietnam and Laos on North Vietnamese manpower; of the effect of the US bombing offensive in North Vietnam; of the nature and extent of Soviet and Chinese aid to North Vietnam; of how Hanoi's leaders viewed their prospects of winning the war; and of the strengths and weaknesses of the government in South Vietnam, its armed forces, and its pacification program. The DI (mainly ORR and OCI) and ONE were responsible for what amounted to a very comprehensive and complex estimate. (Among other things the CIA effort led to the development of expertise within ORR/OER with respect to enemy manpower estimates concerning not only military forces in South Vietnam but also all aspects of the North Vietnamese manpower situation. Ultimately OER would get deeply involved in detailed order of battle intelligence, normally reserved to the military intelligence components.)[31]

One reason why McNamara turned to CIA for the above assessment was that the national estimate on Vietnam produced during the critical 1965-1966 period, when US power was being committed, reflected constantly shifting and often sharply differing views on Hanoi's will to persist and the North Vietnamese capabilities and intentions to wage war. A fascinating analysis of the

thinking within the community during this period was published by ONE in August 1970 (ONE Staff Memorandum No. 27-70, 11 August 1970, "NIEs on the Vietnam War Since October 1964").

The response to McNamara's request was CIA Memorandum, "The Vietnamese Communists' Will to Persist," dated 26 August 1966. (It was also referred to within CIA as "McNamara II"; McNamara I and McNamara III through VII, the last of the series of assessments requested by the Secretary of Defense, all concerned the US bombing offensive.) "McNamara II" was an extraordinary document that made a deep impression on McNamara and no doubt had much to do with changing his views about the war. The study judged that Hanoi had the manpower resources to prosecute a prolonged and expanding war, and that the US air offensive was not likely to diminish Hanoi's continued ability to provide materiel support to the war. It concluded that currently planned US efforts were not likely to deter the North Vietnamese or slow their effort. Disseminated only to a very few senior policy officers in Washington besides McNamara, the study was well received.[32]

According to the DDI at the time, R.J. Smith, CIA's study, "The Vietnamese Communists' Will to Persist," was commended by President Johnson, who directed it be briefed to three key senators—Mansfield, Fulbright, and Russell. DCI Helms reported in September 1966 that the briefing had been carried out but had not changed the views held by each senator on the Vietnam War. Mansfield thought the study was "thorough and objective," but remained noncommittal; Fulbright loudly maintained that the struggle was a "civil war"; and Russell said that he shared the study's conclusions.[33]

Numerous other high quality intelligence memoranda were published by CIA in 1966. Among the more impressive ones were:

— "North Vietnamese Intentions and Attitudes Toward the War," 25 July 1966, produced by DI and coordinated with ONE and SAVA. This study concluded that Hanoi's determination to continue the war in South Vietnam had not abated; and that although Hanoi felt secure in the military, economic, and political support it expected to receive from the Soviet Union and China, the regime would not permit either power to gain control of North Vietnamese war policies.

— "The South Vietnamese Army Today," 12 December 1966, produced by DDI (OCI and OER) and coordinated with ONE and SAVA. This was a realistic and accurate assessment of ARVN's performance during the year (1966) and of its capabilities. It concluded that ARVN's ability to cope alone with the Viet Cong was questionable and that ARVN was incapable by itself of handling NVA forces that had infiltrated into South Vietnam.

ONE published seven estimates (three NIE's and four SNIE's) pertaining to Vietnam during 1966. The most pertinent were:

— NIE 14.3-66, "North Vietnamese Military Potential for Fighting in South Vietnam," 7 July 1966. This was a straightforward estimate of the strength of NVA and VC forces in South Vietnam, the number of trained soldiers and units that North Vietnam could infiltrate into

South Vietnam, and the number of men that the Viet Cong could recruit and train in the South. The estimate's timeframe ran roughly from July 1966 through 1967. Its findings were compatible with CIA's broader assessment, "The Vietnamese Communists' Will to Persist" (August 1966) discussed above. This was the last time that the intelligence community was in agreement with the estimated strengths and capabilities of various categories of the enemy's forces laid out in this estimate. (The following year, 1967, a major controversy over enemy strengths was to break out within the intelligence community.)

— NIE 53-66, "Problems of Political Developments in South Vietnam Over the Next Year or So," 15 December 1966. This was an optimistic, and later demonstrated to be accurate, estimate. Among its principal judgments were that (1) despite numerous South Vietnamese political weaknesses, the Constituent Assembly would succeed in drafting a constitution; and (2) the chances were better than even that national elections (scheduled for the latter part of 1967) would be conducted successfully.

In May 1967, CIA (DI) produced another comprehensive study entitled, "The Vietnam Situation: An Analysis and Estimate." It covered both North and South Vietnam as well as international aspects of the war. Overall the study pointed out that although the Allies had seen some gains in the South, the strategic balance between North and South Vietnam had not been altered significantly. Some of its major judgments were: (1) Hanoi's determination to pursue the war had not been shaken; (2) the North Vietnamese had managed to keep pace with the US troop buildup (roughly 450,000 by mid-1967) and to improve their logistic position; (3) US air attacks on North Vietnam appeared to have strengthened Hanoi's determination not to negotiate from a position of weakness; and (4) North Vietnamese leaders apparently could see no prospect of formal negotiations on terms acceptable to them. The study also noted the "remarkable stability" of the political situation in South Vietnam, although it expressed some concern about the rivalry between General Thieu and Air Marshal Ky.

ONE produced eight estimates during 1967—one NIE and seven SNIEs. The most notable was SNIE 14.3-67, "Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam," 13 November 1967. Begun early in the year, this SNIE took many months to complete and generated controversy within the intelligence community that continues to have repercussions even today.

The origins of this controversy over enemy strength estimates stem basically from the nature of the war, more political and psychological than military, and involving a cunning mixture of conventional and unconventional warfare. The lack of major decisive battles, of identifiable "front lines," and of other characteristics of conventional warfare frustrated US civilian and military leaders, and forced US policymakers to seek other measures of progress.

One result was that the Vietnam War became the most "statistical" in American history while officials like Secretary McNamara became almost

obsessively eager to quantify every aspect of the hostilities. Econometric techniques were applied to various problems and statistics were produced regularly on pacification, battalion attacks, weapons captured and lost, ammunition expenditures, terrorist incidents, and so on in an endless litany. Computers massaged and manipulated such statistics in every conceivable way that imaginative analysts could devise. Some of these statistical series developed valuable insight on how the war was going. For example, the series on the infiltration of NVA personnel into South Vietnam was considered a valuable indication of enemy intentions. But this could not be said of all such series and analysts soon came to realize that significant biases, some unfathomable, existed in many instances. Most of the statistical measures developed were dependent on human judgments, or based on small samples, or derived from questionable methodologies. And so analysts found that many statistical exercises were of dubious value, particularly when attempts were made to integrate several series into a larger parameter.[34]

A major element in the US effort to find a statistical measurement of the progress of the war was the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). It was developed by CIA analysts in October 1966 at the request of Secretary McNamara, and then tested in Vietnam jointly with MACV in November 1966, following which the US Mission Council in Saigon approved it for implementation. Thus was set in motion a program that would continue for many years and consume many thousands of manyears of work by half a generation of American officers (mostly US Army) on advisory duty in South Vietnam. Unfortunately, high-level policymakers in Washington were interested principally in a single highly aggregated pacification "score" for the whole country, not seeming to realize that 18 different pacification factors in 13,000 hamlets were involved. Thus major inroads by enemy activity in one hundred or so hamlets in one part of South Vietnam could be offset statistically and masked by marginal improvements in several thousand other hamlets.[35]

Walt Rostow, President Johnson's National Security Advisor, became so intrigued with the monthly HES scores, which measured only the status of pacification and population control, that in early 1967 he asked CIA to explore the feasibility of developing a methodology that would weigh all the relevant factors and integrate them into a single, overall index that would show the fundamental trend of the war, much as the Dow Jones index indicates trends in the stockmarket. The interagency group that worked on the project concluded that a single "war index" would be meaningless and like a single HES score would conceal the effect of numerous significant factors bearing on the course of the war. The true meaning of such hidden factors might be overlooked because the overall single index would not register imperceptible, but important shifts. In the end the group reported that the task was impossible.[36]

Estimates of Enemy Forces and Strengths—the Order of Battle Problem, 1967-1968

Disagreement between Washington-based intelligence analysts (essentially CIA) and Saigon-based analysts (MACV primarily with some support from US Embassy officials) over enemy strength figures began in the mid-1960s. Sources of the problem, as already indicated above, were numerous and

complex. There were conceptual and philosophic differences with respect to the nature of the war. Interpretations varied widely as to the meaning of equivocal evidence pertaining to units, their capabilities, and their numerical strengths. There were various descriptions and depictions of the enemy's organizational structure, military and political, as well as differing views as to what categories of enemy personnel belonged in the order of battle. A deep-seated mindset existed among analysts in both Saigon and Washington, neither group willing to accept the strength figures or categories of the other party.

The tight political control that Washington exercised over the conduct of the war in Vietnam and Secretary McNamara's cost-effective, statistical approach to the war were unhelpful as far as MACV and the American Embassy were concerned. Great pressure was placed on the top-level command echelon in Saigon to produce data that reflected clear progress somehow commensurate with the effort expended. Since the United States had decided to fight a ground war of attrition confined to a defense of South Vietnam, having conceded the advantages of the strategic offensive to Hanoi, evidence was needed to show that the enemy forces were being attrited in South Vietnam if progress was to be claimed. Indeed MACV made claims in the latter part of 1967 that a "cross-over" point had been reached; i.e., North Vietnamese forces were losing more personnel than they were gaining, and were therefore declining in strength. These claims, however, were based on very soft figures both with regard to losses and gains, and MACV's claims did not attain much credence.[37] (For example, MACV's attrition model focused primarily, if not exclusively, on regular enemy combat units and then applied one hundred percent of enemy casualties reported against that category rather than distributing these casualties among all categories of the enemy organization.)

MACV and the Embassy also had a serious credibility problem with the American press corps in Saigon. The press took an adversarial position, keeping detailed "score" on all MACV statements, and disputing them at every opportunity. Understandably MACV officials became quite reluctant to recognize publicly that previous "numbers" might have been overtaken by new evidence and thus were caught in a credibility trap. As the US national election year, 1968, came nearer, the political pressure on MACV and the Embassy increased. Indeed, President Johnson in November 1967 ordered both Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland to return to the United States and to make upbeat speeches about the war. Both men tried to avoid the summons but to no avail.

Meanwhile the disagreement within the intelligence community over SNIE 14.3-67 hardened and seemed to be irreconcilable by July 1967. The split centered on the strength of forces other than regular units (main and local force), with MACV holding much lower numbers for non-regular personnel and not wanting to list some of the non-regular categories. Unwilling to present such a wide-open split, Director Helms sent his Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs (SAVA), George Carver, to Saigon to seek an agreement. (President Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and General Wheeler, Chairman, JCS, were all aware of the issue and supported Helms' efforts to achieve an agreement.)

Carver and Westmoreland agreed to a compromise that listed *agreed* figures on regular, organized forces (NVA and VC in South Vietnam) in the

strength tables of the estimate. Those components of the enemy structure where there were no agreed figures were not shown in any tables, but only described in the text.[38] Although, according to Carver's argument, the total North Vietnamese structure approaching the half million mark in strength is described in the text,[39] the fact remains that the summary of the estimate (all that would probably be read by most busy senior policymakers) cited only a strength figure of 118,000 for NVA and VC regular units in South Vietnam and an estimated 70,000-90,000 guerrillas in the South for a total of 188,000-208,000—less than one-half of the sum of strength figures for the various elements of the enemy structure in the South described in the discussion part of the estimate.

According to the DDI, CIA, R.J. Smith, the late publication of SNIE 14.3-67 in November 1967 marked only the end of a "battle," not the end of the "war" between CIA and the US military over strength estimates of the enemy structure in South Vietnam. But the controversy did propel CIA into the detailed ground order of battle business, normally the preserve of the Pentagon, and thereafter CIA (DI) took a very active role in this particular intelligence field. After the enemy Tet offensive of 1968, when new evidence indicated that MACV pre-Tet strength estimates had been low, the original disagreement erupted into a major issue and the debate went on through 1968 and 1969. Major differences between CIA and MACV estimates in the critical category of combat forces, however, mostly disappeared by the end of 1969 and in July 1970 the DDI/CIA reported to the DCI that the intelligence community was at long last in agreement on the enemy order of battle in Vietnam.[40] Actually, however, some differences, for example with respect to the strengths of so-called "administrative forces," continued on into 1971. Moreover, the varying guerrilla estimates were never fully reconciled, but with the decline in the overall guerrilla force level in South Vietnam as the war continued, the differences largely lost their importance.

This bruising bureaucratic battle at times took on a disagreeable and unsavory flavor, and when viewed in the overall scheme of things, the issue attracted far more public attention (and expenditure of costly manhours of work) than its importance warranted. Much of this can be attributed to the efforts of an aggressive, energetic CIA analyst, Sam Adams, whose exhaustive analytic work was largely the basis for CIA estimates on non-regular forces. Adams' zeal became so obsessive that he sought to refute not only the entire enemy order of battle for Vietnam but also for Cambodia. Eventually Adams, despite innumerable opportunities to present his case within the entire CIA chain of command, left CIA and took his cause to the public media, charging Director Helms and other intelligence officials with deliberate malfeasance.[41]

Adams reopened the issue again when he testified before the House Select Committee on Intelligence (Pike Committee) in September 1975 and alleged that the intelligence community was guilty of "corruption" of its reports in 1967, deliberately underestimating enemy strengths for domestic political reasons; he contended that this in turn led to an underestimate of enemy military capabilities before the Tet offensive of 1968 and ultimately contributed to US casualties during that offensive. The Pike Committee hearings were open and Adams' allegations made national headlines. Still later Adams played

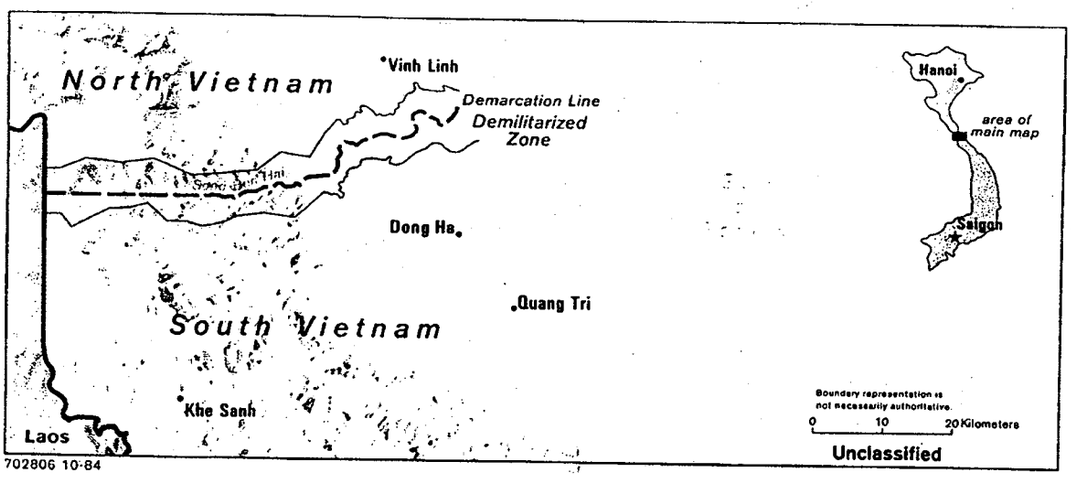
a key role in the TV production, *CBS Reports*, "The Uncounted Enemy—A Vietnam Deception," aired in the fall of 1982, that repeated basically the same allegations. This triggered a libel suit against CBS brought by General Westmoreland, Commander MACV, 1964-1968.

In retrospect it should be noted how easy it is to overdramatize the causes and relevance of the differences between MACV and CIA. The manpower data on the Vietnam War have always been subject to a fairly wide range of interpretations, few of which can be categorically dismissed as being devoid of any claim on validity. Furthermore it is too simplistic to conclude retrospectively that one methodology appears to have given the best answers and was therefore manifestly the best available at the time. Nevertheless it seems clear that at least in certain respects the CIA approach appears to have been the better one. In the kind of mixed conventional-unconventional warfare that went on in Vietnam, CIA's concept of an insurgency base, much broader and deeper than the enemy's main and local forces, that nurtured and supported the entire political-military-economic spectrum of the enemy's war effort, was a sound one. In the author's opinion, MACV was wrong in resisting such a concept for so long and in insisting that only regular, organized forces possessed any measurable military capabilities. But all things considered, the testing and probing, as well as the debate, that went on in the late 1960s within the intelligence community probably did far more good than harm in furthering the art of intelligence.

The allegation that the intelligence community deliberately conspired to deceive the President and the American people as to the enemy's strength is a different matter. Although President Johnson was well aware of the split within the community and urged the principals to reconcile their differences, he also brought heavy pressure to bear on Saigon to produce evidence of progress in the war. One could argue, therefore, that there was a certain amount of self-deception on the part of the White House, as well as MACV, and the US Embassy in Saigon, to emphasize good news and discount bad. The author is not aware of any specific evidence to support the charge of deliberately manipulating strength estimates and believes that it would be next to impossible to prove such an allegation. Nevertheless a suspicion of slanting the evidence persists today and it is doubtful whether this perception will ever completely disappear.

Tet 1968 and US Intelligence

During the dry monsoon (October 1966 – May 1967) prior to Tet 1968, US troops carried the fight to the enemy, seeking to destroy enemy bases in South Vietnam, to weaken enemy regular forces, and to drive them back to their base sanctuaries across the border in Cambodia and Laos, or back across the DMZ. MACV hoped that this would create a climate that would allow ARVN and the South Vietnamese paramilitary forces, the so-called Regional Forces and Popular Forces, to accelerate progress in pacifying the countryside. Following the wet monsoon, May-October 1967, MACV planned to continue offensive action in South Vietnam along these lines while US air power interdicted the NVA's supply lines through Laos and the DMZ to the South. Both sides continued the escalation during 1967, American troop strength

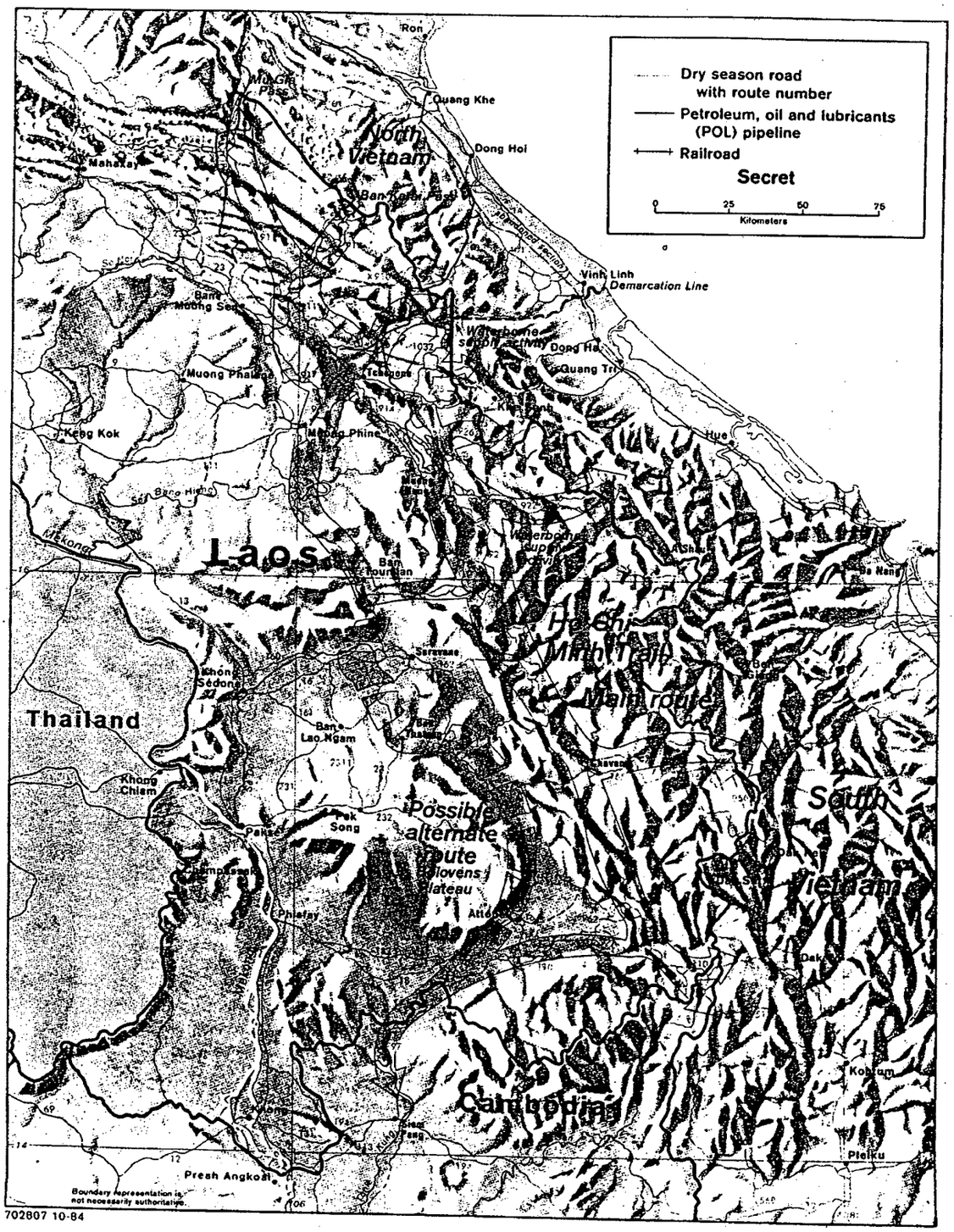


reaching about 450,000 by the year's end, while North Vietnam continued to send new NVA units down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and reinforced its troops in the DMZ area. Thus a war of attrition was in full swing. (Secretary of Defense McNamara, however, had already become concerned about the seemingly endless open-ended nature of the US ground force commitment, and by early 1967 had persuaded President Johnson to impose a troop ceiling on US forces in Vietnam of 470,000, not to be reached until June 1968. That ceiling did, more or less, set the limits of US commitment which peaked at about 550,000 in mid-1968.)

In the fall of 1967, the enemy took the offensive in a series of major assaults against Allied border positions extending from Con Thien in I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) to Loc Ninh and Song Be in III CTZ in September and October, the heaviest one of all being in November 1967 in the Dak To mountain region north of Pleiku in III CTZ. The Mekong Delta, IV CTZ, on the other hand, appeared to be quiet. Enemy losses were extremely high in the September – November 1967 period, the largest to date in the war, and seemed to vindicate MACV's concept of keeping the "big war" in the hinterlands away from the heavily populated coastal area and away from the cities. Then in late 1967 a large concentration of NVA forces in I CTZ began to converge on the Khe Sanh area and MACV, fearing a move by Hanoi to seize part of the northernmost province of South Vietnam, decided to reinforce Khe Sanh and hold it at all costs. Thus the stage was set for the enemy offensive of Tet 1968.

US and South Vietnamese intelligence in Saigon knew that something big was brewing—larger than anything to date—and had all kinds of fragmentary evidence that the enemy was planning a major offensive around the time of Tet. The Allies also knew that enemy units, especially in I CTZ but extending south into the Delta (IV CTZ), were being upgraded in terms of greater, more modern firepower and a better command and control capability to coordinate operations between regular and guerrilla forces, as well as between widely separated operational areas.

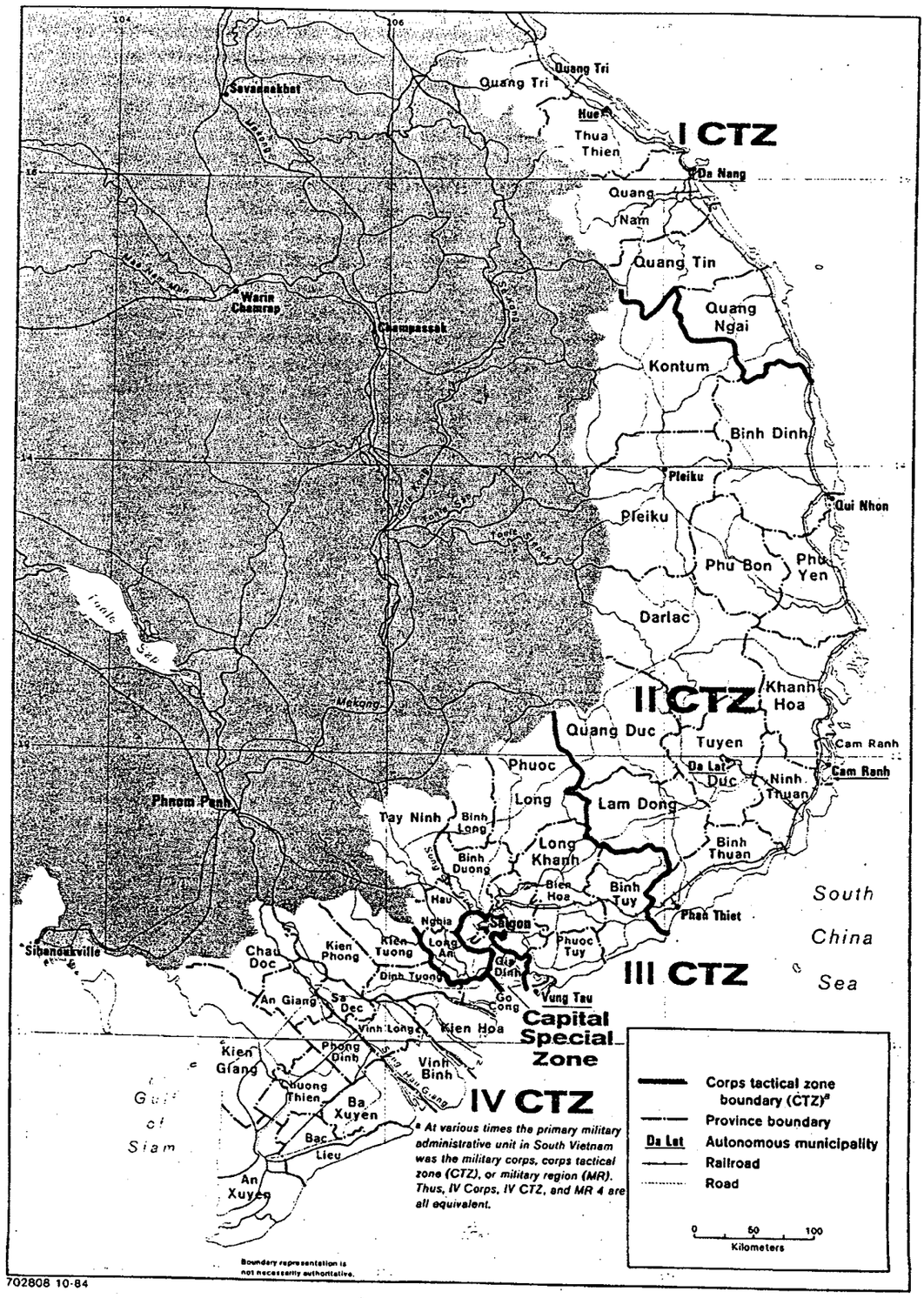
The DDI, CIA during this period had its own analytical intelligence element based in Saigon, a unique arrangement that had no counterpart



anywhere else in the world. Established around 1965, it was assigned to the Station Chief for administrative purposes, but reported independently and directly to the DDI in Washington. Robert E. Layton, who was the DDI representative in Saigon at the time of Tet 1968, as early as November 1967 warned in a cable to CIA (Saigon 4965, 24 November 1967 to the Director) that cumulative evidence indicated that the "decisive phase" of the war was near. This was followed up in December 1967 with detailed studies pertaining to the enemy's overall strategy and specifically to the Viet Cong – North Vietnam winter-spring campaign, 1967-1968. Although these papers pointed out the apparent lack of realism in setting unattainable goals for this campaign, they nevertheless warned that the enemy was planning a "supreme effort" to inflict unacceptable military and political losses on the Allies regardless of their own casualties. The studies concluded that the war was probably near a turning point and that the outcome of the 1967-1968 winter-spring campaign would in all likelihood determine the future direction of the war (an uncannily accurate forecast!). Unfortunately, George Carver, SAVA/CIA, in forwarding these studies to Walt W. Rostow, President Johnson's National Security Adviser (memorandum, dated 15 December 1967, subject: "Papers on Viet Cong Strategy") threw cold water on the studies, pointing out that "other evidence" (not identified except that it was sensitive and came from diplomatic sources) led CIA to reach somewhat different conclusions. In short, Carver did not buy the thesis that the coming enemy offensive would be an all-out affair of great portent. This memorandum to the White House no doubt contributed to the unprepared state of mind in Washington when Tet 1968 hit as will be discussed below.

In any event the Allies judged that the enemy would probably attack after Tet, and accordingly the South Vietnamese government allowed a large proportion of government troops to go on holiday leave. US forces, on the other hand, were at strength and were on the alert. Although Hanoi had apparently decided to open a countrywide offensive just at Tet on 31 January, some attacks started on 30 January 1968, 24 hours early. Many observers believe that there was simply a misunderstanding as to the exact time of the attack. Others believe senior enemy commanders knew that some local attack plans had come into the possession of US leaders in Da Nang (I CTZ), Qui Nhon (II CTZ), and Pleiku (II CTZ) before Tet and that these enemy commanders therefore ordered the attack early in those areas to achieve some measure of surprise. Despite this 24-hour warning, South Vietnamese units in III and IV CTZs were no better prepared on 31 January 1968 than their compatriots had been in the more northern regions on 30 January 1968. And so although North Vietnam did not achieve strategic surprise, it definitely achieved major tactical surprise. US and South Vietnamese officials could not believe that the enemy would risk the total condemnation of the people by attacking at Tet, and, of course, this is precisely why North Vietnam chose Tet for the effort, which was advertised to be a "general offensive," culminating in a "general uprising" by the people to achieve a "decisive victory." [42]

The other elements of surprise achieved by the enemy were the nature of the offensive—aimed at cities, towns, and other urban areas and targeted against the command and control facilities of the civilian, political leadership—the countrywide coordination of major assaults, and the all-out intensity



of those attacks. Indeed the enemy launched nearly simultaneous attacks on most of South Vietnam's cities, over three-fourths of its principal capitals, nearly seventy district towns, nearly all South Vietnamese military bases, and most US bases. During the last two weeks before Tet, there was evidence of a very large enemy buildup in the DMZ as well as concentrations of enemy troops near the largest cities in I and II CTZs, near some principal capitals in III and IV CTZs, and in the III CTZ provinces north of Saigon. (The Allies decided unilaterally on a 36-hour cease fire beginning on 30 January 1968. However, shortly before the enemy attacks began in the North, the cease fire was canceled in I CTZ.) The Allies also learned of enemy references to "D-Day" although its precise timing was unclear. Thus there was considerable evidence of an impending enemy offensive involving coordinated operations in at least I, II, and III CTZs.[43] As for IV CTZ, the Delta, there were two views in Saigon. One was that the enemy had broken up into small groups and was too weak to cause any major trouble. The other view was that the enemy was simply lying low, getting ready for the main event.

In hindsight it seems clear that the Allies were deceived by the large border fights in II and III CTZs and the large buildup in I CTZ, especially around Khe Sanh, in the fall of 1967, and that as a consequence, Hanoi successfully diverted American and South Vietnamese attention away from the populated areas. Almost one week before Tet, MACV did order II FFV (the US corps headquarters in III CTZ, counterpart to the ARVN III Corps) to move some US battalions from the border to areas closer to major cities in III CTZ and to move a few American combat units into the outskirts of Saigon (these latter moves turned out to be fortuitious). But the fact remains that when the enemy struck on 31 January 1968, slightly more than half of the American battalions in III CTZ assigned to II FFV were still in the border areas.

It likewise seems clear in retrospect that MACV underestimated enemy capabilities in South Vietnam. As an example of such underestimation, evidence accumulated right after Tet 1968 indicated that MACV's pre-Tet (late 1967) estimate of NVA and VC regular forces only was probably at least 40,000 men low, of which roughly half were in NVA combat units identified in South Vietnam immediately after Tet. This amounts to about a one-third underestimate.[44] MACV intelligence flatly did not believe that the enemy had either the strength or the command and control capability to launch a nationwide coordinated offensive.

It seems also apparent that the US intelligence community, not just MACV, rejected any notion that the enemy might make a go-for-broke general offensive aimed at the cities and towns, thus risking not only his regular forces and his best guerrilla forces, but also his political cadres, his underground administrative infrastructure, and even his local militia. The enemy had made grandiose attack plans before but these had not materialized. In short both Saigon and Washington had a mindset that dismissed the possibility of a massive enemy offensive against population centers to set off a general uprising among the people.

At the request of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) made in mid-February 1968, the intelligence community conducted a

"post-mortem" of Hanoi's Tet 1968 offensive. R.J. Smith, DDI, CIA chaired an investigative interagency group which included Major General Robert Glass, US Army, from DIA and representatives from the JCS, State/INR, and NSA. In March 1968 the group sent Richard Lehman, Deputy Director, OCI/CIA and Glass to Vietnam where they consulted numerous US and South Vietnamese military and civilian officials. The report of the group, dated 3 April 1968, was straightforward and low key, Smith and Lehman believing that MACV already had more than enough problems fighting the war and that a sensational indictment would be very unhelpful for all concerned. The DCI, Richard Helms, felt the same way.[45]

The post-mortem noted that numerous "pieces of the jigsaw puzzle" existed prior to Tet and could have been put together, but that inadequacies in the collection process as well as "analytic inadequacies, both in Saigon and in Washington" caused the intelligence community to "miss not only the enemy's overall plan and his precise timetable, but also his general capabilities and intent." In addition, the report noted that the urgency felt in Saigon before the offensive was not felt in Washington where finished intelligence did not reflect "the sense of immediacy and intensity which was present in Saigon." In its report to the President, dated 7 June 1968, the PFIAB agreed with the foregoing frank and revealing statement, pointing out that the *President's Daily Brief* (PDB) on 20 January 1968 made the first mention of a possible offensive and then was silent on the subject until 29 January 1968, when a low-key item noted that enemy forces in the western highlands were completing battle preparations.

The post-mortem also noted that "MACV's method of bookkeeping on enemy strength, unfortunately, had been designed more to maximize the appearance of progress than to give a complete picture of total enemy resources." (This, of course, alluded to the basic enemy order of battle question.) In short as the post-mortem group put it, ". . . few people in Saigon or Washington, even if they had been warned by a well-placed agent with access to the entire plan, would have credited the enemy with the capability of a serious try. . . ." Among the group's recommendations were that "an all-source central indications center" be established in the US Embassy in Saigon and that US order of battle "methodology and techniques for computing and analyzing enemy strengths" be reviewed to ensure that the intelligence community possesses the fullest possible picture of total enemy capabilities. (For the record, an all-source indications center was never established in Saigon. Order of battle methodology underwent a rigorous examination for several years after Tet 1968 but disagreements within the intelligence community were never fully resolved.) Overall the post-mortem took the line that although the program is not perfect, "the US civilian and military intelligence effort in Vietnam is very good and has rendered invaluable support to US military operations."[46]

In hindsight, one can logically conclude that MACV had been lulled into a false sense of security by its own estimates of enemy strength and capabilities. MACV's widely briefed claims of having reached the "cross-over point" in the fall of 1967 in its efforts to wear down enemy strength in Vietnam no doubt added to the general perception of the enemy's capabilities

just prior to Tet 1968. Thus the author concludes that the principal responsibility for the community's "missing the intelligence boat" must be attributed to MACV. On the other hand, the Washington-based community apparently did not communicate any sense of urgency to the policymakers. Although one can rationalize this with the judgment that Washington could have done little to affect the situation in Vietnam, the fact remains that Washington officialdom was surprised by the Tet offensive and was not prepared to deal with its political and psychological consequences.

Although the Communist leaders in South Vietnam were no doubt appalled by the results of their Tet 1968 efforts—they were defeated tactically at every turn and had suffered terrible losses, and the people had not revolted—North Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi probably judged the offensive as a strategic success. George Allen, deputy SAVA in CIA at the time, holds these views about the significance of Tet 1968:

> "They (the North Vietnamese leaders) accomplished what I believe was their basic purpose, i.e., moving the principal arena of the struggle from the battlefield to the peace table, creating conditions favorable for a negotiated settlement on their terms. . . . They did not want to face the prospect of a continuing US military buildup. . . . They calculated that they could not win militarily in the South in the face of the American military power then in place there . . . they preferred not to wage a war of attrition on the scale of 1967. Their top leaders were prepared to recognize—to themselves—that their peoples' war doctrine had been proven false, that there might well be limitations to the effectiveness of 'national liberation struggles' if the United States were willing to commit resources large enough to make them too costly. But they could not acknowledge defeat; there was the alternative of forcing negotiations to at least halt the American buildup, and perhaps to win at the negotiating table what they could not win on the battlefield except at an unacceptable cost. They were aware of the growing dissatisfaction with the war in the United States and they believed that they could exploit it. . . ." [47]

It would be difficult to disagree with the assessment that Tet 1968 was psychologically decisive in its effect on American public opinion. The image of near success in Vietnam cultivated by the Johnson Administration in the fall of 1967 was shattered by the drama of Tet 1968 on US television. The administration had lost its credibility. The furor caused in the United States was not lost on the South Vietnamese, many of whom now feared that the Americans would give up the struggle. Moreover, many South Vietnamese suffered from an inferiority complex with respect to the "northerners" and felt deep down that they could not defeat them without continuing substantial US help.

Aftermath of the Tet 1968 Offensive

The enemy's offensive in early 1968 badly damaged South Vietnam's pacification program in many parts of the country, lowered the morale of South Vietnamese armed forces, especially the ARVN, and sent many South

Vietnamese officials into a state of shock. Several weeks went by before government forces regained full control of all the towns and cities attacked by the enemy. Hue in II CTZ was not retaken until 24 February 1968 after a bitter battle that destroyed much of the ancient capital. It took vigorous American efforts by civilian and military officials alike, starting with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker (who took over in Saigon, May 1967) and General Westmoreland, to get the South Vietnamese government moving again.

On the plus side large segments of the South Vietnamese population, especially in III and IV CTZs, were outraged by the enemy violation of Tet and started lending more active support to the government. President Thieu, after he had shaken off the initial shock, felt confident enough of public support to order general mobilization and many young men volunteered to serve in the armed forces. Thieu also launched the formation of a large, countrywide people's self-defense force that had more of a psychological than practical effect because there was little in the way of modern arms and ammunition available for such an organization.

The enemy was considerably more badly hurt than South Vietnamese or US forces. High casualties were particularly destructive for many VC units and VC political cadres that surfaced prematurely and were practically wiped out. In retrospect some observers believe that this was deliberately planned by the top North Vietnamese leaders who had no intentions of giving any southern communists leading roles in a reunified Vietnam and concealed their true plans from the southerners. (Indeed there is much evidence of this northern domination in the southern parts of Vietnam today.) It also appears to many observers, the author included, that Hanoi concluded as a result of the Tet 1968 offensive that a "people's war" waged by the South Vietnamese populace could not be won and that thereafter North Vietnam would have to rely primarily on the NVA to conquer South Vietnam.

The enemy made two more offensive efforts, "mini-Tet's," in 1968—one in May and one in August. Again these enemy "high points" ended in military failure and only magnified enemy losses. Nevertheless, CIA in June 1968 estimated that even if enemy losses were sustained at their present high levels, North Vietnam could maintain, albeit with great difficulty, its forces in South Vietnam well beyond 1969 and could even, at least through 1968, significantly increase main force strength levels in the South by increasing infiltration or deploying additional new NVA units.[48]

SNIE 53-68, "The Vietnam Situation," dated 6 June 1968, concluded that Hanoi would conduct intensified, coordinated military and political operations in South Vietnam designed to weaken the South Vietnamese government, to intensify pressure for peace within the United States, and to bring about major concessions in the Paris talks that had begun in May 1968. The estimate also judged that enemy forces would be able to maintain a high level of military pressures during the summer of 1968, but that ARVN's fighting effectiveness would not be seriously weakened and that the Saigon government would probably retain the capability to cope with the problems of the war. With respect to the pacification effort in South Vietnam, SNIE 14-69, dated 16 January 1969, judged that although the South Vietnamese government was expanding its presence into the countryside, the effort was still vulnerable to

adverse military and security developments. The estimate concluded that a large part of the countryside was still contested and that the consolidation of government gains was likely to be slow and uncertain.

A New Look at the War by the Johnson Administration

In Washington the effect of the Tet 1968 offensive on President Johnson and his administration was profound. Secretary of Defense McNamara had advised the President late in 1967 that to continue the war at a high level of intensity was not in the best interests of the United States and had recommended the reduction of US air and ground operations in Vietnam. Johnson had not accepted McNamara's views and instead decided to replace him as Secretary of Defense, effective 1 March 1968, with Clark Clifford, one of the closest and most influential presidential advisers. The President asked Clifford to take a whole new look at the war and the options open to the United States. The report of the Clifford group, which included Rusk, McNamara, Helms, and General Taylor, was submitted on 4 March 1968. It was pessimistic in tone and in effect was a recommendation for US disengagement. Later in March, another group of advisers, nicknamed "the wise men," which included Dean Acheson, George Ball, Henry Cabot Lodge, and General Matthew Ridgeway, reinforced the Clifford group's views with similar thoughts.

These advisory reports plus his low ratings in US public opinion polls no doubt had much to do with the President's speech to the nation on 31 March 1968 announcing his withdrawal from the presidential race and a temporary halt to the bombing of North Vietnam. Johnson specified the 20th parallel, which was approximately the dividing line between the panhandle of North Vietnam and its heartland, as the boundary of the bombing, but the 19th parallel became the operational cutoff line. (No major military targets were located between the two parallels.)

The question of the political, military, and economic consequences of a bombing halt had been debated for many months prior to 31 March 1968. Generally MACV, CINCPAC, and the JCS took the hard line that bombing North Vietnam was the only offensive military weapon available to the United States and that it should not be abandoned without major concessions from Hanoi. Some American civilian officials, on the other hand, believed that Hanoi did not consider the bombings to be a decisive element of the war and that Hanoi would continue the struggle whether the bombing was halted or not. This group believed, therefore, that stopping the bombing would, on balance, gain significant diplomatic, political, and psychological advantages internationally for the United States, as well as domestic political advantages for the administration. CIA (DI) in an Intelligence Memorandum, "The Consequences of a Halt in the Bombardment of North Vietnam," 9 October 1967, concluded that in the event of a US bombing halt (no time limit specified), (1) Hanoi would probably be willing to enter into direct exploratory "talks" (as distinguished from formal negotiations); (2) Hanoi would see a cessation of bombing without a reciprocal action by North Vietnam as a sign of weakening US will; and (3) Hanoi would press harder for significant US concessions, seeking to prolong the "talks," to bring greater political pressure in the United States, and to improve its military capabilities. The paper judged

that Hanoi would restore transportation and industry in the North, expand its logistic routes to the South, and make itself much less vulnerable to any further attacks.

The partial bombing halt no doubt did contribute to the beginning of direct informal talks between American and North Vietnamese representatives on 13 May 1968 in Paris. Two weeks later after five sessions, the talks were substantively deadlocked over the issues of mutual troop withdrawals and President Thieu's future. In November 1968 separate South Vietnamese representatives were included in the talks.

In terms of the military and economic effects of the halt, CIA (OER-OCI) noted in an Intelligence Memorandum, dated 29 April 1968, "Evaluation of the Rolling Thunder Campaign as Presently Restricted," that:

— Port activity continued at a higher level in Haiphong with turnaround time decreasing significantly, probably as a direct result of the bombing halt.

— Restoration of the damaged North Vietnamese electric power system continued.

— The North Vietnamese were taking full advantage of the bombing restrictions to restore key rail and highway bridges in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas.

— Even though more US attack sorties were being flown against targets south of the 19th parallel in the North Vietnamese panhandle, a substantially heavier movement of enemy material was taking place. An increase in the number of enemy AAA systems in the panhandle was also noted, but no deployment southward of enemy SAM units or jet aircraft was observed.

The 31 October 1968 Complete Bombing Halt

How US policy on Vietnam was affected by social and political turbulence within the United States during the election year of 1968 is beyond the scope of this paper. In any event, by early fall there was an awakening of the dormant talks in Paris where the North Vietnamese offered to broaden the talks to include both the Saigon government and Viet Cong representatives if, in exchange, the US air strikes against North Vietnam were immediately stopped. Subsequently President Johnson, on 31 October 1968 in a televised address to the nation, announced a complete termination of the bombing in North Vietnam.[49]

The weeks preceeding the 31 October 1968 bombing halt saw numerous, almost frenzied efforts by President Johnson to find some negotiated agreement with Hanoi that could deescalate the war before the US national elections in November. It is no wonder that the US agreement to cease bombing on 31 October was made on the shaky basis of informal, unwritten "understandings" between American and North Vietnamese negotiators, which Hanoi neither accepted nor rejected at the time of the cessation, but later ignored. Hanoi, for example, henceforth was to refrain from indiscriminate rocket attacks against South Vietnamese towns and cities, and would not

attack US reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam in the DMZ area as far north as approximately the 18th parallel.

While stopping all air strikes against North Vietnam, the US increased the weight of air strikes in Laos, seeking to disrupt enemy movements and to destroy enemy trucks and supplies. There was no evidence, however, that this improved the overall effectiveness of the US interdiction effort in Laos.

The President went all out to get the support of his cabinet, the JCS, close advisers, and congressional leaders for the bombing halt. He did get the support of his own cabinet and advisers, but several senior leaders in the Congress, Senator Richard Russell in particular, thought that he was making a serious mistake. Although General Wheeler, Chairman JCS, supported the move, the service chiefs were unequivocally against it, pointing out the uncertainty of the "understandings" and the lack of any real concessions on the part of the North Vietnamese.

Summary of Part II

In Part II, covering US intelligence and Southeast Asia during the Johnson years (22 November 1963 – 20 January 1969), we have seen how US power was committed in Vietnam in 1965—air power against the North and combat troops in the ground war in the South—and how the war was in a large measure Americanized during the years 1965-1967. Overall, US intelligence continued to perform in a competent and highly professional manner.

Although ONE in July 1965 believed that extended US air attacks against North Vietnam, coupled with continuing escalation of the ground war in South Vietnam, might produce strains during a prolonged conflict that would lead Hanoi to consider a negotiated settlement, CIA consistently held the view that US air attacks against North Vietnam and US air interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail were not decisive in themselves, and that North Vietnam was not vulnerable to US interdiction efforts against ports and/or rail lines leading to North Vietnam from China. CIA, moreover, was consistent and accurate in its views about the long haul; namely, that North Vietnam had the manpower and material resources (the latter coming predominantly from the USSR and China) to fight a war of attrition indefinitely and that its leaders clearly demonstrated their will to persist.

One of the most telling aspects of this period was that Secretary of Defense McNamara stated openly that he was unwilling to rely solely on intelligence assessments concerning the war provided by the Department of Defense and that he wanted independent evaluations from CIA. Indeed it was evident that McNamara, from 1965 to the end of his tenure on 1 March 1968, looked primarily to CIA for intelligence support with respect to Southeast Asia.

In the US intelligence world, the period also saw the decline of ONE and national estimates in terms of their influence on US policymakers, and the accompanying rise in influence of CIA Intelligence Memoranda (IM) in governmental circles. During this time CIA produced numerous high quality IM's concerning a broad range of subjects pertaining to North Vietnam and its supporters in South Vietnam, as well as the political, military, and

economic viability of South Vietnam, and the strategic balance between the North and the South.

CIA's internal organization for and approach to the Vietnam War evolved during this period and continued essentially unchanged for the duration. An ambivalent perception of its wartime role seems to have surfaced within CIA during the period that may prove troublesome in the future. On the military side, the Department of Defense took entirely too long to develop an effective, professional intelligence capability in Vietnam to support MACV.

The establishment of SAVA (Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs) in the Office of the DCI in August 1965 and the assignment of George Carver to the post in the summer of 1966 were important milestones in the role of US intelligence during the Vietnam war. SAVA's charter was all-encompassing with respect to Vietnamese matters and under the politically sensitive and policy-oriented Carver, SAVA assumed a key policy support role for the rest of the war.

During the period the ground order of battle controversy over estimates of enemy strengths and capabilities erupted within the US intelligence community. The issue was a fundamental one because it dealt with the very nature of the war; the differences were deep; and major disagreements persisted into the 1970's, lasting for almost the duration of the war. This situation compelled CIA to go deeply into the order of battle business, a field normally reserved to the military intelligence agencies. Although the controversy unfortunately generated unfavorable national publicity, on balance it did more good than harm to the intelligence community because it uncovered conceptual, philosophic, and methodological differences that needed to be thoroughly aired and debated. All things considered, the author concludes that CIA was probably closer to the "ground truth" than any other element of the intelligence community and that MACV consistently underestimated total enemy capabilities. The author uncovered no persuasive evidence to support the charge that strength estimates were deliberately manipulated within the community for political purposes.

The enemy offensive of Tet 1968 proved to be the turning point in the fortunes of war. US intelligence was surprised by the timing, the nature, the countrywide scope, and the unprecedented intensity of the Tet offensive. A post-mortem conducted by the intelligence community (basically CIA and DIA) concluded that inadequacies, both in Saigon and Washington, caused the community to "miss not only the enemy's overall plan and his precise timetable, but also his general capabilities and intent." The author agrees with this judgment and feels strongly that the community's "missing the boat" must be laid primarily at MACV's door. MACV had been deceived by its own estimates of enemy strengths and capabilities, and in the fall of 1967 had declared that the Allies had reached the "cross-over" point in their efforts to wear down enemy forces in Vietnam. On the other hand, the Washington-based intelligence community was unable to communicate the sense of urgency present in Saigon on the eve of Tet with the result that Washington was not prepared to deal with the severe political and psychological consequences of the offensive.

It is likewise manifest that no one in Saigon or Washington, intelligence officials or policymakers, foresaw the ultimate significance of the enemy offensive and its effect on the United States, in particular on the Johnson Administration, with respect to the conduct of the war and the outcome of the US presidential election of 1968. President Johnson withdrew from the race on 31 March 1968, and announced a total bombing halt on 31 October 1968, thus setting the Vietnamese stage for the succeeding administration of Richard M. Nixon.

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Part III

The Nixon and Ford Administrations to the Fall of Saigon, 30 April 1975

Introduction

The first Nixon Administration included Melvin R. Laird as Secretary of Defense and William P. Rogers as Secretary of State. Laird, with long experience working on defense matters in the US Congress, was a strong, competent secretary who commanded wide respect in the government. By pre-agreement Laird served for only four years, voluntarily leaving Defense in January 1973 when he was succeeded by Elliot L. Richardson. Rogers, lacking the kind of government background possessed by Laird, found himself frequently upstaged by Henry Kissinger, the new National Security Adviser to the President, who eventually succeeded Rogers in September 1973 during Nixon's second term.

Laird's relations with the White House were often adversarial in nature when Laird questioned White House initiatives that did not seem compatible with his concept of US disengagement and Vietnamization of the war. Laird's problems with the White House coincided with the rapid growth of influence with the President exercised by Kissinger and his assistant Alexander M. Haig, who came to the job as an Army lieutenant colonel and left four years later as a four-star general, all without benefit of any commensurate military experience, or responsibility.

General Wheeler continued as the Chairman, JCS in the new administration until 2 July 1970, when he was succeeded by Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, who moved up from the position of Chief of Naval Operations and served until 30 June 1974. Moorer had quite a different background, primarily naval with little joint military service, or staff experience in the bureaucratic jungles of Washington, in contrast to Wheeler who knew his way around town. One result was that the Joint Chiefs were not as well informed about the inner thinking of senior US policymakers as they had been in the past. Moreover, as the Kissinger-Haig axis gained power and stature, the Joint Chiefs found themselves caught between operational requirements generated by the White House and the constraints on defense resources imposed by Laird with congressional support.

In Saigon Ambassador Bunker, who continued to serve in that capacity until after the January 1973 cease-fire, and General Creighton W. Abrams, who had succeeded Westmoreland as the MACV commander in June 1968, bore much of the brunt of this Washington in-fighting. It was particularly difficult for Abrams, who might receive instructions directly from the White House, or directly from Laird, as well as through the normal JCS channels from Washington. Abrams served as the MACV commander until July 1972 when he returned to the United States to become the Army Chief of Staff. General Frederick C. Weyand, deputy MACV commander, replaced Abrams.

In November 1968 another significant change in key US officials in Vietnam had taken place when William E. Colby succeeded Robert Komer as the MACV Deputy for CORDS (Civilian Operations and Revolutionary Development) and took charge of the pacification program that thereafter was to receive priority attention. Colby, a senior CIA official with experience going back to the days of OSS, had a long association with Vietnam, having been the Saigon Station Chief in 1960-62 and Chief, Far Eastern Division, DP during the period 1962-67, before temporarily leaving CIA in January 1968 for assignment in Vietnam as an AID official. Under Colby an accelerated pacification program progressed very well during the 1969-71 period. Colby also revitalized a concerted effort, called Phoenix, against the Viet Cong infrastructure in South Vietnam. (Colby left Vietnam in mid-1971 and returned to CIA in Washington.)

Richard Helms continued to serve as the DCI in the new administration but his close relations with other senior officials and access to the White House were eroded. One of the major reasons for this decline was Kissinger's modus operandi in his National Security Adviser role by means of which he could control and constrain intelligence input into policymaking. Another principal reason was the general climate in a White House that sought to politicize CIA and intelligence production, encouraged by senior members of the administration like Secretary of Defense Laird who were acutely attuned to partisan politics. A third major factor in this change in climate was the Vietnam War and the deep divisions and uncertainty about national purposes it created within American society.[1] A contributory factor was Helms' diffidence toward, if not lack of interest in, intelligence analysis and production.

Several significant developments of major import to the intelligence community, in particular the CIA, stemmed from this changing atmosphere. National estimates, which had flourished during the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Administrations, and had occupied a respected place in national policymaking because of their objectivity, lost favor in the Nixon Administration. Indeed there were times when national estimates were challenged as being slanted for political purposes and great pressure was put on the DCI to change intelligence judgments that Nixon, Kissinger, and/or Laird did not like. One inevitable result was that CIA was demoted from its traditional position as the primary White House source of objective reporting and analysis, and relegated to being just another contender for the attention of policymakers. In effect Kissinger and his NSC staff used their powerful position to take over the role Helms had previously played when, with the support of the Board of Estimates and CIA, he provided the President and the NSC the essential judgments pertaining to a particular issue that had been snythesized from a wide body of evidence.[2] A specific casualty of Kissinger's secretive ways, which tended to compartmentize the intelligence community and play one agency against another, was the departure of Ray S. Cline from the position of Director, INR/State. Cline, a former CIA official and astute intelligence analyst, described Kissinger's approach as "policy without intelligence."

A specially sensitive question, namely the role of the port of Sihanoukville and Cambodia in the support of enemy forces in South Vietnam, came to a

head in the spring of 1970 when new evidence showed that CIA's previous estimates had been wrong. It was an embarrassing moment for the DCI and not only hurt Helms personally, but also placed a lasting stigma upon the quality of CIA analysis in the minds of the Nixon policymaking group. (This matter will be covered in more detail in a later section.) By 1972 the President decided that he wanted a new DCI and shortly after his reelection in November 1972, Nixon so informed Helms.[3]

James R. Schlesinger succeeded Helms on 2 February 1973 but was destined to serve as the DCI for only five months because of the political turmoil growing out of the congressional hearings on Watergate that began in the summer of 1973. Then on 4 September 1973 William E. Colby took over as the DCI, serving for the remainder of Nixon's tenure and continuing with Gerald R. Ford, who became President when Nixon resigned in August 1974.

A New Look at the Vietnam War

Early in 1969 the new administration conducted a thorough review of how senior US policymakers saw the war. Results were mixed—civilian and military leaders in the Pacific and the JCS in Washington were reasonably optimistic about a satisfactory ending while civilian leaders in Washington leaned more to the pessimistic side.

A more formal vehicle for policy review, the National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM), was initiated by the new NSC adviser, Henry Kissinger. NSSM Number 1, 21 January 1969, concerning Vietnam, posed 29 key questions and required separate answers from the Departments of State, Defense, the CIA, the JCS, Ambassador Bunker, and General Abrams (COMUSMACV). Indeed the respondents were enjoined by Kissinger *not* to discuss or coordinate their replies with other government officials. The questions covered every important aspect of the conflict and generally cut to the heart of the matter. Significantly, however, they were asked in the context of the on-going strategy adopted by the United States—basically a passive defensive strategy confined to the boundaries of South Vietnam. The question of a possible change in US strategy was not raised in the paper. In all they were thoughtful and pointed questions, indicating considerable depth of knowledge on Vietnam on the part of the drafters. Three questions concerned DRV foreign policy objectives and the degree of influence exerted by Moscow and Peking on Hanoi; one pertained to the probable reactions within Southeast Asia to various outcomes of the war; two pertained to Hanoi's current political-military tactics and DRV military capabilities in the short term; two concerned enemy manpower capabilities, prospects for attriting enemy forces, and the enemy order of battle issue; one concerned how enemy forces in South Vietnam were supplied; four pertained to South Vietnamese armed forces—prospects for improvement, capabilities against the VC, NVA forces, or both, with various degrees of US support, and the estimated time element in developing better RVNAF capabilities; eight concerned various aspects of pacification to include the damage done to civilians and the effect of misconduct on the part of GVN forces; one concerned the attitudes of South Vietnamese elites, civilians, and military; two pertained to possible US policy changes designed to improve GVN performance; two concerned US military

deployments, tactics, and force levels related to combat capabilities; and three concerned the effects on the war of US airpower, including B-52 strikes, interdiction in Laos, and strikes against North Vietnam. Most of the so-called "29 questions" were multiple in nature, many involving different assumptions as points of departure. The question-askers, moreover, were aware of differing views on various issues and at times called for an explanation, after asking for specific evidence to support the view taken by the responding agency.

CIA by memorandum dated 7 February 1969 responded in some detail to 27 of the questions. On two questions pertaining to military deployments, tactics, and organization, the Agency deferred to DOD. In the author's view, CIA responses (mostly the work of OCI and OER) were straightforward and realistic, pulling no punches. A good example can be found in CIA's response to the critical matters posed in questions # 11, 12, and 13 pertaining to RVNAF capabilities with varying degrees of US support versus various combinations of enemy forces:

— CIA was cautiously optimistic that RVNAF alone (that is, without US troops) could hold its own against the VC augmented only by NVA replacements (*not* units) and supported logistically by North Vietnam, *provided* that at least some US tactical air and artillery support remained. Further, CIA's judgment was that without US support the situation over time could seriously deteriorate in South Vietnam.

— CIA was pessimistic about RVNAF's present capacity to handle the situation alone (that is, without US troops) against the combined NVA/VC forces currently committed to the war in South Vietnam *even with US air and artillery support.*

— CIA judged that the RVNAF alone could in time handle the VC augmented only by NVA replacements *provided* that RVNAF's own tactical air and artillery support were developed to a level comparable to that now provided by the United States. It was estimated that it would take several years to develop such capabilities within the RVNAF.

— CIA deemed it *unlikely* that RVNAF could be expanded in size and improved in effectiveness (even over a period of several years during which US forces remained in South Vietnam) with more and improved tactical air, artillery, and helicopter support, as well as other upgraded weapons and equipment, to the point that it could handle NVA/VC forces *at their present strength* without continued direct US support

An important factor in the South Vietnamese military equation, not specifically mentioned by CIA, was the US advisory element. American advisers were the backbone of a large portion of ARVN and frequently acted as the de facto leaders of ARVN units in battle. The loss of this American presence would be difficult to overcome, particularly when time began to run out.

As history has recorded, the above judgments by CIA about the prospective capabilities of the South Vietnamese armed forces proved to be remarkably accurate.

CIA's responses to NSSM-1 also brought out the continuing differences between CIA and the military commands with respect to enemy strength estimates (previously discussed in Part II) and reaffirmed CIA's judgments about the effects of US air strikes against North Vietnam.

But the review directed by NSSM-1 was only the beginning; thereafter the demands on CIA and on the intelligence community were frequent and heavy for the rest of the Vietnam War. Dr. Kissinger chaired numerous high-level special committees, some nearly identical in composition and many including the DCI. Among these were the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG), the NSC Senior Review Group, and the 40 Committee, which often called for reports on the progress of the war, estimates of the likely results of various courses of action, and intelligence judgments on a wide range of Vietnam-related problems. New kinds of questions constantly arose that demanded more sophisticated and intensive analysis in order to provide the more detailed and balanced assessments of the overall political-military situation in Indochina needed by Kissinger and the NSC staff.[4]

One of the principal vehicles for producing such intelligence inputs was the Vietnam Special Studies Group (VSSG) created by the President in October 1969 and made up of senior members of the various intelligence agencies. VSSG was heavily involved in supporting NSSM-99 which triggered a long series of studies pertaining to future allied diplomatic, military, and economic actions in Southeast Asia. Phase I of NSSM-99, begun early in 1970 before the allied invasion of Cambodia, required an overall assessment of the situation in Cambodia and judgments as to the probable consequences of various strategy options involving allied operations. Phase II, begun in early 1971 before the South Vietnamese advance into Laos, required similar assessments and judgments involving allied initiatives with respect to Laos. Moreover, Phase II required intelligence judgments with respect to the effects of the actual Laotian operation, LAMSON 719, on future North Vietnamese military capabilities. According to David Coffin (CIA/OER), CIA received special plaudits from the White House for the accuracy and high quality of its intelligence reports in support of NSSM-99.[5]

A New US Approach to the War

The Nixon Administration lost no time in adopting its own strategy of "Vietnamization" of the war concurrent with a US disengagement. Although President Johnson had likewise wanted to Vietnamize the fighting, he visualized a residual allied force in Vietnam and hoped to negotiate a settlement with Hanoi before withdrawing any American forces. President Nixon's negotiating strategy was quite different. He sought a steady buildup and improvement of South Vietnamese forces and institutions, at the same time bringing military pressure on the enemy to buy time for bringing about improvements in South Vietnamese forces, while slowly but steadily withdrawing US troops. Nixon counted on the success of Vietnamization, hoping that both Moscow and Peking would begin to cool about supporting the war, and wanted to strengthen the US-GVN position before negotiating seriously at the bargaining table. This hard-nosed strategy lay behind the presidential decisions to order the bombing of enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia (1969), as well as the invasion of Cambodia (1970) and of Laos (1971).

Few people, however, realized how soon South Vietnamese forces and the Vietnamization process would be put to the test. Even before the first American combat units were withdrawn, the enemy conducted a countrywide offensive (a "high point" but one of short duration) in February 1969, causing a surge in allied casualties, and hit Saigon in March 1969 with an indiscriminate rocket attack. The President responded by directing bombing attacks on enemy base sanctuaries inside Cambodia along the unpopulated border, the first strike on 18 March 1969, the beginning of the so-called "secret" bombing of Cambodia. MACV, the US Embassy in Saigon, and the JCS had long favored such bombing (but *not* on a covert basis) but civilian leaders in Washington previously had not been supportive for fear of widening the war. Prince Sihanouk reportedly acquiesced unofficially and Hanoi chose not to react for reasons of its own.

The White House decision to conceal the bombing from public knowledge was taken partly to preserve the myth of Cambodian neutrality (long since fractured by the presence of NVA troops, unofficially sanctioned by the Sihanouk regime) and partly to avoid domestic repercussions in the United States. The White House staff devised an elaborate scheme to cover the operation. Secret records were kept separately from regular reports, which covered up the nature of the operations, and great pains were taken to conceal such tell-tale things as the expenditures of munitions. Knowledge of the bombing was limited to only a handful of principals, even in the Pentagon.[6] Predictably, word of the bombing was bound to leak sooner or later, and ultimately stories began to appear in the press. Ironically CIA analysts by mid-May 1969 had considerable photographic evidence of B-52 strikes in Cambodian territory,[7] although most US officials did not learn about the operations until much later. In any event, the bombing went on "secretly" until the allied incursion into Cambodia in May 1970 after which US air strikes were conducted more or less openly although not officially acknowledged until 1973.[8] (In the author's view the decision to conceal these air strikes was a very unwise move. It placed the US military in an impossible position, having literally to lie publicly about a legitimate wartime operation. It also made a mockery of any congressional oversight because only a handful of members of Congress were informed and they had no realistic appreciation of the extent or of the implications of the bombing. The secret bombing no doubt aggravated the adversary-type relations between the Secretary of Defense and the Nixon White House. Laird pushed for faster and larger US troop withdrawals and lower draft calls, pointing out the budgetary and other constraints on operations in Southeast Asia as the war went on and congressional support weakened.)

After the strength of American forces in Vietnam had peaked in April 1969 at roughly 543,000, US troop withdrawals began in mid-1969 in accordance with the new strategy, and by year's end about one fourth of the Army's and one-half of the Marines' combat units had returned home. By the end of 1970, all Marine and roughly one-half of Army combat forces had departed. The withdrawal was accelerated in 1971 and by the summer of 1972 all US ground combat units were gone leaving only a small American logistic force in Vietnam. Concurrently with these troop withdrawals, US tactical air operations, including B-52 strikes, were also reduced substantially.

In the meantime, General Abrams in October 1969 had been ordered to keep offensive operations by American ground combat troops to a minimum. This meant that US air strikes, especially by B-52s, even though reduced in weight, thereafter became in reality Abrams' only usable strategic reserve.

National Intelligence 1969-70

Only two national estimates pertaining to Vietnam were published in 1969, both SNIE's. The first, issued in January 1969, concerning the allied pacification effort in South Vietnam, has previously been discussed in Part II. The other was SNIE 14.3-69, "Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam," dated 17 July 1969. The estimate's major conclusions:

— Although enemy military capabilities in the field declined over the past year, Hanoi nevertheless retained the capability, both in terms of manpower and logistics, to pursue military operations in South Vietnam through 1970 at substantially the same levels as pertained over the past year.

— Hanoi was unlikely either to escalate military pressures or to scale them back, but was more likely to undertake military operations at about the same levels as last year. At the same time, Hanoi would probably intensify actions on the political front both within South Vietnam and internationally. The estimate noted that there was some evidence of discouragement and war-weariness in North Vietnam, particularly after the heavy casualties during and after the 1968 Tet offensive with no clear prospect of success, but significantly added that "we certainly see no evidence . . . which suggests . . . any early collapse of the Communist war effort." (Not long after this estimate was published Ho Chi Minh died on 3 September 1969. Although there was a great emotional outburst in North Vietnam over the loss of such a national hero, Ho's mantle was passed to other senior leaders, such as Le Duan and Pham Van Dong, who had been fighting for independence for most of their adult lives and who steadfastly had refused to compromise for anything less than capitulation on the part of South Vietnam. Thus the prospects that the will of the new leadership would sag seemed remote.)

SNIE 14.3-70, "The Outlook from Hanoi," dated 5 February 1970, continued much in the same vein as the July 1969 estimate. The new SNIE stated that although Hanoi was apprehensive over Vietnamization and plainly realized that its position in the South had declined, the regime still considered that it had the will and strength of resources to prevail. The estimate concluded that Hanoi would most likely *not* risk any all-out military effort, at least in the short term; that the regime probably saw more risk than advantages in any serious negotiations to speed the US withdrawal; and that Hanoi's likeliest course through 1970 would be to pursue a prolonged war, seeking to set back Vietnamization and pacification, impose casualties on American troops, and keep pressure on South Vietnamese forces.*

* Five estimates about Southeast Asia, all SNIEs, were produced in 1970. Only one, discussed above, specifically concerned Vietnam; the other four pertained to China, Laos, and Cambodia.

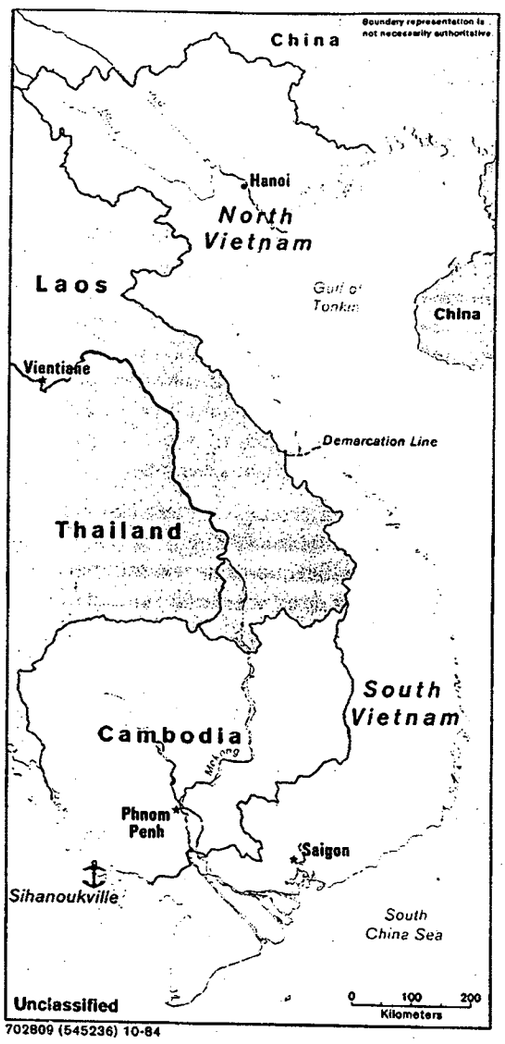
CIA also published an Intelligence Memorandum, "Hanoi's Short Term Intentions," dated 10 October 1970, that supported the foregoing line. The IM stated that Hanoi's fundamental views had not changed, that North Vietnamese leaders believed the struggle would be long and painful, but that they believed they had more staying power than their opponents, the United States and South Vietnam.

Somewhat earlier, however, on 31 August 1970, an Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (State-Defense-CIA), "South Vietnam in the 1970s," was quite optimistic about the longer term prospects. It pointed out that pacification was going well and would continue to improve, thus allowing ARVN troops to scale down their involvement in pacification missions and to become more available for main force missions as US forces continued to withdraw. The paper also mentioned that the South Vietnamese economy was doing well. Curiously, the memorandum did not address the crucial question of the longer term military balance between North and South Vietnam. Viewed in retrospect, the IIM seemed somewhat naive.

Role of Cambodia

The role of Cambodia with respect to the fighting in South Vietnam was a controversial one within the intelligence community almost from the beginning of the escalation of the war when the United States intervened with air and ground forces in 1965. By mid-1966 the community generally agreed that the enemy used Cambodia as a sanctuary for both NVA and VC troops operating against South Vietnam and as an extension of North Vietnam's infiltration routes through Laos. But a major issue developed over the extent to which Cambodia served as a logistic base and a source of supply for enemy troops; and more specifically over the extent to which Hanoi used sea routes and the port of Sihanoukville to support its forces in South Vietnam, particularly in central and southern SVN (III and IV CTZs and the southern part of II CTZ). The issue was given undue importance by the belief in some civilian and military quarters that if the Sihanoukville route were closed, North Vietnam would not be able to move a sufficient volume of supplies through Laos to sustain its effort in the South at desired levels. This view was supported generally by air power proponents, particularly in the Air Force, at DIA, and at CINCPAC. (To the best of the author's knowledge, MACV and the Army did not agree with this judgment.) Later it was shown that after the Cambodia route was closed, adequate enemy supplies managed to get through to the South despite intensified air strikes against the overland routes through Laos.[9]

Nevertheless, MACV, the US Embassy in Saigon, and CINCPAC felt that there was sufficient evidence to support the view that the water route to Sihanoukville was a major enemy supply line. The Washington intelligence community—CIA, State, and DIA—rejected the view, holding that the overland route through Laos was by far the more important route and that the Cambodian supply role, if any, was insignificant.[10] This disagreement lasted from 1965 until its resolution in mid-1970 after the allied incursion into Cambodia turned up documentary evidence establishing the magnitude of Cambodia's role and the details of the supply routes used.



Even after the enemy's Tet offensive of 1968 revealed the extensive new weaponry, together with an abundant supply of ammunition, in the hands of enemy forces in III and IV CTZs, CIA along with State/INR and DIA downgraded the importance of the Sihanoukville route although CIA conceded that Cambodia was a significant source of arms for the enemy.[11] A joint CIA-State-DIA team visited Vietnam in late 1968 to study the matter but still concluded that the overland route through Laos was the basic channel for supplies not only to enemy forces in I and II CTZs but also in III CTZ. CIA dug itself in deeper in its February 1969 response to the question on the subject posed by NSSM-1 when it stated among other things that "the preponderance of the evidence . . . supports the estimate that the basic channel for III Corps is the overland route from Laos"; implied that military deliveries

to Cambodia from China and the Soviet Union were for the Cambodian armed forces; and expressed doubt that Hanoi would run a logistic system under foreign (Cambodian) control as a primary supply route.[12] And as late as January 1970 CIA stated that "we are . . . unable to establish what percentage of total military supplies flow through either the Laotian or Cambodian systems."[13]

The true story of the importance of the Sihanoukville route and the Cambodian role finally came to light in 1970 as a result of the allied attacks into Cambodia. Information from thousands of pages of documents and voluminous statements from Cambodian officials made clear that starting in late 1966 an elaborate enemy logistic system had been developed based on Chinese shipments unloaded at Sihanoukville and delivered to NVA/VC base areas in Cambodia. (As of September 1970 the evidence indicated that about 22,000 tons of military supplies, far higher than the tonnage cited in any previous estimates, plus other amounts of food, clothes, and medicine had been delivered to enemy forces between December 1966 and April 1969.)[14]

In November 1970 a post-mortem conducted by CIA for the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) made a detailed review and assessment of the "Sihanoukville question" examining the collection effort, analytic performance, and other matters relevant to the matter. Its major conclusions were:

— With respect to the Sihanoukville route, there was no lack of a thorough collection effort, but there was a dearth of hard evidence prior to mid-1970.

— The capability of the overland trail complex through Laos to handle all the logistic requirements of NVA/VC forces in South Vietnam was well documented.

— The fact that Hanoi could service all its needs via the overland route did not necessarily mean that the regime would actually rely solely on the overland route. (It was also obvious that the water route through Sihanoukville was less difficult than the overland route.)

— The low estimate on Sihanoukville port, coupled with the valid capability estimate on the overland route, resulted in a mind-set that led CIA astray in its judgments as to what North Vietnam was actually doing.[15]

There were also other factors that contributed to the faulty estimate. The Washington intelligence community misjudged Prince Sihanouk's relations with China and the DRV, believing that he would genuinely try to maintain Cambodian neutrality and that Hanoi would be unwilling to depend on a supply route subject to Prince Sihanouk's whims.[16] Moreover, [redacted] who must have known better, insisted that Cambodia was not actively supporting the North Vietnamese in this manner.

The Sihanoukville matter was one of the very few times that CIA (as well as the Washington intelligence community) made a major misjudgment with respect to the Vietnam War. Paul Walsh, Deputy Director of Economic Research during the period and a major player with respect to Vietnam War

intelligence, described the discovery of the true situation in mid-1970 as not only the low point in his own career, but also probably the most difficult moment for Director Helms during his tenure under the Nixon Administration.[17] The incident badly hurt the Agency in the eyes of the administration and more or less permanently soured relations between CIA and the Nixon White House.

Invasion of Cambodia (May 1970) and Its Aftermath

Until Prince Sihanouk's overthrow in March 1970 Cambodia was "off limits" for major allied operations. Sihanouk had allowed the North Vietnamese (despite historic animosity between Cambodians and Vietnamese) to use Cambodia as a forward base, but had continued to proclaim his country's neutrality. Mistreatment of Cambodians in the border area by NVA forces, a faltering economy, and notorious corruption in the royal family led to Sihanouk's downfall. While he was vacationing in Paris, Premier Lon Nol took over the country in mid-March 1970 and promptly invited the NVA and the VC to leave.

Hanoi reacted swiftly and forcefully because the loss of a cooperative Cambodia meant that the North Vietnamese would have to defend their string of bases along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border and rely entirely on the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos to supply their forces in the South. And so the NVA and the Khmer Rouge, the Communist insurgents in Cambodia, launched a wave of attacks to secure a strip of Cambodian territory ten to fifteen kilometers wide virtually along the entire South Vietnamese frontier. The intelligence community's judgment at the time was that the the small, inexperienced Cambodian army (FANK) could contain the Khmer Rouge threat, but was helpless against the vastly superior NVA troops, who were about to take over control of Cambodia east of the Mekong River and were getting into a position to cut off all access to Phnom Penh. At this juncture Lon Nol called for help.*

Fear that a collapse of the Cambodian government would be a disastrous blow to South Vietnam's prospects for survival, coupled with the need to gain time for Vietnamization and an orderly withdrawal of American forces, which was now well underway, led to the presidential decision to launch a major allied offensive against NVA bases in Cambodia. The intent was to occupy Cambodian territory for a limited period with the objective of inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, destroying NVA base areas and supplies, and setting back NVA offensive plans until the next dry season (October 1970 – May 1971). The President's decision to send forces into Cambodia was taken late in April 1970 after a week of intensive consultations.[18] Both Secretaries Rogers and Laird generally opposed the operations if US troops were to be employed. Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams in Saigon agreed on the need to take offensive action, employing both South Vietnamese and American forces. Although the JCS concurred, they were lukewarm in their support. The JCS

* Lon Nol appears to have deposed Sihanouk without the knowledge or help of the United States. The author's research revealed no indication that CIA was involved in any way. Dr. Kissinger in his book, *White House Years*, states that Lon Nol was on his own as does Stanley Karnow in his book, *Vietnam: A History*.

role was minimal in the Cambodian operation which was conceived in the White House (NSC staff) and planned in the theater of operation. It seems apparent that few, if any, US officials at the time anticipated the sharp reaction among the American people.

At the President's direction, knowledge of the planned operation was limited to a very few. US policymakers in Washington relied for intelligence input on earlier national estimates (predating Sihanouk's overthrow) and on current reporting. Moreover, DCI Helms, although aware of the planning, was instructed by the White House not to inform any intelligence analysts, including the Chairman of the Board of National Estimates or any analyst working in the Indochina area. Apparently inhibited by this restriction, Helms decided not to forward to the White House an ONE memorandum, 17 April 1970, "Stocktaking in Indochina: Longer Term Prospects" that briefly addressed the fragile situation in Cambodia and the question of possible US intervention. The draft memorandum judged that to deny the use of sanctuary base areas in Cambodia would require a large number of US and/or South Vietnamese troops, as well as sustained US air attacks; and that although such an expanded allied effort would seriously handicap Hanoi in prosecuting the war, it probably would not prevent the North Vietnamese from continuing the struggle. Helms received the ONE memorandum about two weeks before the incursion into Cambodia was scheduled to start and then on the day before it began, decided not to send the paper to the White House. Years later (April 1974) when queried by the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities (chaired by Senator Frank Church) as to why he did not forward the paper, Helms stated that it was almost impossible to reconstruct all the relevant circumstances that went into his decision and that his memory was too hazy to describe his reasoning accurately. One member (unidentified) of the Board of National Estimates recalled for the Senate Select Committee that Helms would have judged it "most counter-productive" to send such a negative assessment to the White House. George Carver, SAVA at the time of the Cambodian affair, on the other hand, objected to this opinion and told the committee rather that Helms judged it would be inappropriate to forward a paper drafted by analysts who did not know about the planned operation.

The Church Committee in the above cited report also took Helms to task for deciding not to forward a later draft SNIE on North Vietnamese intentions that included a section on the impact of the US incursion in Cambodia. Completed just as the incursion was terminated (1 July 1970), the estimate contained numerous caveats concerning the difficulties of making judgments during a rapidly moving situation involving many unknown factors, and concluded that although an analysis of enemy losses (casualties, materiel, and supplies) suggested that the enemy situation was by no means critical, it was necessary "to retain a good deal of caution in judging the lasting impact of the Cambodian affair on the Communist position in Indochina." [19]

In the author's opinion, the Church Committee was not justified in faulting Director Helms on either of the above described counts. With respect to the first one, there was no useful purpose served in forwarding such a "blind" analysis written by analysts with inadequate knowledge of US

intentions, and moreover, there was a good chance of a leak that would have been most unhelpful to all concerned. As to the second count, the conclusion of the draft paper is so hedged as to make it of little value to anyone. The author would have faulted Helms if he *had* forwarded the paper. Moreover, the US policymakers involved were under no illusion that the Cambodian incursion would have any lasting impact on the war. They were well aware of the risks involved in widening the war during the critical period of US troop withdrawal and their main purpose was to buy time for the Vietnamization process. But as will be brought out below, the ultimate net result of the Cambodian affair was probably a minus rather than a plus.

In Vietnam the order to invade Cambodia hit US and South Vietnamese field commanders with little warning and insufficient time to plan properly or to acquire and evaluate the latest tactical intelligence. The initial and main attack, involving both American and South Vietnamese forces, was launched on 1 May 1970 from III CTZ with a secondary effort launched by ARVN troops alone from IV CTZ. A somewhat later and smaller attack from II CTZ was launched by ARVN troops followed by a US effort that was delayed because the American troops involved had to be returned to the Highlands from the coastal area where they were preparing to return to the United States. The performance of ARVN troops in III Corps was especially encouraging, but the weak South Vietnamese leadership and poor performance of ARVN troops evidenced in II CTZ boded ill for the future. The allied advance went no further than ten to fifteen kilometers inside Cambodia although hundreds of square kilometers in the border region were searched. Allied forces also cleared both banks of the Mekong all the way to Phnom Penh, about sixty kilometers by river. By then the advent of the wet monsoon and the domestic outcry in the United States made it prudent to terminate operations and by 1 July 1970 all allied forces were back in South Vietnam.

The immediate operational results of the Cambodian action were substantial. Enemy forces were surprised and badly scattered, their casualties were heavy compared to friendly losses, large quantities of their arms, ammunition, and food were captured, and many of their primary base areas were destroyed. The top enemy headquarters (COSVN) was completely disrupted and forced to move to a safer location, and numerous documents and records of high intelligence value were captured. These documents were a major factor in bringing about general agreement between CIA and DIA in mid-1970 with respect to NVA and VC main force combat and support units and their strength. The resolution of this part of the order of battle disagreement indicated that the generally higher numbers held by CIA were more nearly correct than MACV's strength estimates.[20]

For the United States and its allies, the initial consequences were favorable. Overall enemy offensive plans were set back; indeed, the enemy delayed mounting any major operations in III and IV CTZs for almost two years. Phnom Penh and the Lon Nol regime appeared to be secure for the present and the port of Sihanoukville was closed to Hanoi.

On the negotiating front, the generally successful operation raised President Nixon's confidence in Saigon enough to propose with President Thieu's concurrence a "stand-still cease-fire" in October 1970, essentially the

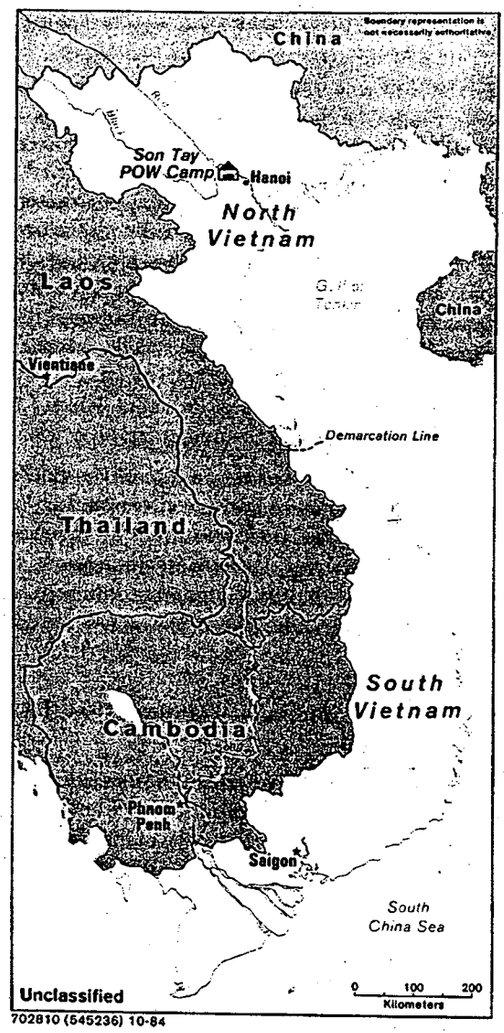
formula reached in late 1972.[21] The significant (and fateful) implication, of course, was that NVA forces would remain in South Vietnam if allied forces were unable to expel them and keep them out. In effect it was a very important concession on the part of the United States and South Vietnam.

The longer term consequences of the Cambodia operation, however, were very adverse. As during Tet 1968, the domestic repercussions in the United States resulted in a major political and psychological setback for the administration. Massive anti-war sentiment and civil disorders were triggered, culminating in the tragedy at Kent State on 4 May 1970. Cambodia also marked the beginning of a series of congressional actions that were to limit severely the executive power of the American president. Congress forbade the use of American advisers in Cambodia, limited US military aid to Cambodia, and by the end of 1970 imposed a legal prohibition on the expenditure of funds for any American ground troops operating outside Vietnam. Still other results of Cambodia were the speedup of US troop withdrawals, lowered draft calls, and congressional cuts in the defense budget. Overall, Cambodia not only accelerated a downward spiral of public and congressional support for US operations in Southeast Asia, but also resulted eventually in a drastic diminution in the US military advisory effort and military aid for South Vietnam.

In Southeast Asia, the loss of Cambodian cooperation forced Hanoi to rely solely on the overland routes from the North to maintain its forces in the South. As a consequence, Hanoi expanded and improved its initially primitive routes into a wide network (eventually running along both sides of the Vietnamese border) of all-weather roads and way stations that could handle tanks and heavy artillery, and greatly reduced the time it took to move NVA forces from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. The widening of the war in May 1970, moreover, led to the weakening of the Cambodian regime since Hanoi, initially unfriendly to Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, threw in with them because the North Vietnamese badly needed reinforcements. Thereafter the Lon Nol government struggled for five years against its North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge enemies with only token US assistance. Finally, when South Vietnamese defenses crumbled in the spring of 1975, Lon Nol gave up the unequal contest and Phnom Penh fell to Pol Pot on 16 April, two weeks before the fall of Saigon.

US Raid on the Son Tay POW Camp, November 1970

In the fall of 1970 it became increasingly clear that domestic pressures in the United States would compel a faster withdrawal of US troops and that the dry season of 1970-71 (October to May) would be the last time when substantial US forces would be present in Vietnam. Hanoi was also trying to recover from the setback caused by the Cambodian invasion. Intelligence indicated that the North Vietnamese dry-season supply effort through Laos to the South was now running at twice the rate of the previous year. Moreover, although substantive secret negotiations between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had been underway since February 1970, the North Vietnamese continued to be intransigent. And so there were compelling reasons for the United States to continue to apply military pressure on North Vietnam. These factors were a large part of the rationale for the US raid against the Son Tay POW camp in



November 1970 and the US-supported South Vietnamese incursion into Laos in February 1971.

The initiative for the raid on Son Tay, a camp housing American POWs about twenty miles from Hanoi, came from the JCS who hoped that a successful operation, in addition to rescuing prisoners, would greatly boost American morale at home and raise the spirits of our POWs held in North Vietnam. After months of meticulous planning and thorough rehearsing (conducted in the United States) and obtaining the President's approval, the raid was carried out on 20 November 1970. The raid proper was conducted by the US Air Force (providing the helicopter lift, air cover, and close air support) and commandos from the US Army's Special Forces while the US Navy and

Marine Corps made heavy diversionary air strikes against enemy supply installations in North Vietnam.

Operationally the raid was a success, but it nonetheless failed because the camp was empty of prisoners. It had been closed (as was determined later) in July 1970. The DOD had assumed complete responsibility for the operation, including the intelligence aspects, and the CIA was not directly involved. Before the raid, the JCS recognized that DIA could not guarantee the presence of American POWs at Son Tay, but strongly favored going ahead with the operation because it was no doubt the last opportunity to make such a raid, particularly one with a high probability of achieving surprise and freeing our POWs with only a very low risk of friendly casualties. At the last minute, DIA informed the Chairman JCS, Admiral Moorer, and Secretary Laird that new evidence indicated that most, if not all, of the POWs had been moved from Son Tay. (The other Chiefs were not informed at the time, nor apparently was President Nixon.) Nevertheless, the decision was to give the green light for the operation.

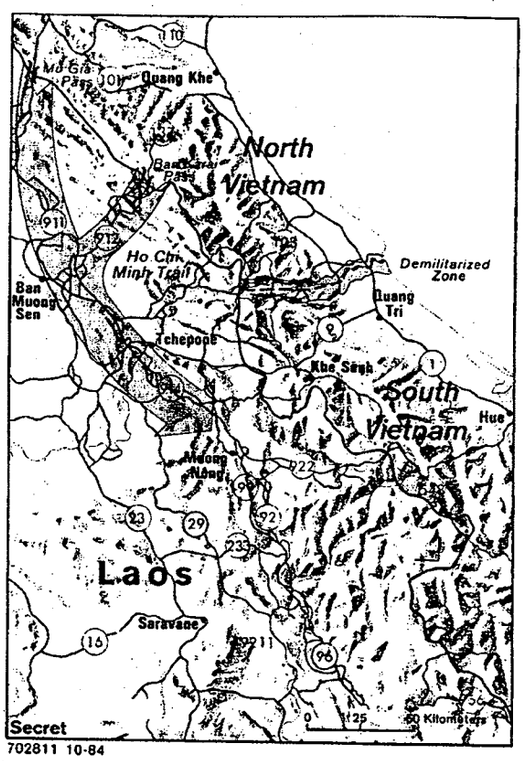
Although much unhappiness over the failure of the raid was expressed in Washington, the operation did have a positive effect because the morale of our POWs in the North was raised and their treatment by their captors noticeably improved after the raid. Moreover, there were indications that the Chinese were quite dissatisfied with the North Vietnamese failure to defend against a raid so close to their capital city and even threatened to reduce the level of military aid.[22]

South Vietnamese Incursion into Laos, February 1971 (LAMSON 719) and Its Result

MACV commanders and the American Ambassador in Saigon had for years favored major allied ground operations into Laos to cut the numerous trails, roads, and waterways comprising the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and several detailed plans were developed for such a cross-border mission. MACV, however, never secured authority for conducting anything more than small, harrassing-type raids into Laos and Cambodia. Small cross-border raids employing US and South Vietnamese commando-type troops were made frequently, but the results were only of marginal value.

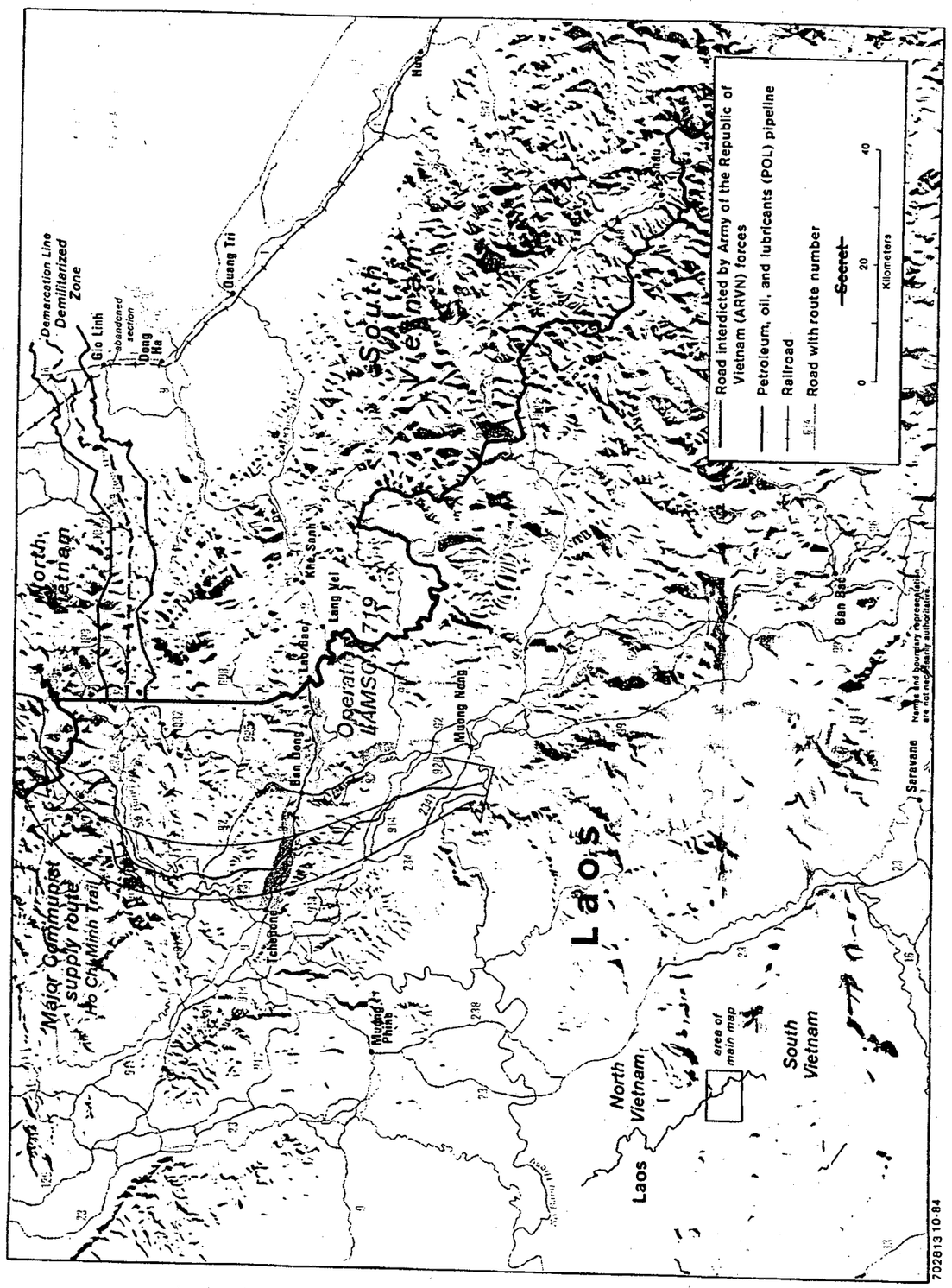
Thus the only sustained ground efforts against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao in the Laotian panhandle were CIA-supported and directed operations (not acknowledged by the United States—the so-called "secret" war in Laos) utilizing Meo and other tribesmen from the region. These gallant peoples fought a long, remarkable campaign against great odds and at times caused serious difficulties for the enemy, but in the end they became expendable.

The origins of the allied incursion into Laos illustrate how the White House at this time dominated the overall control and conduct of both the war and the closely interrelated negotiations to end the war. This was a proper role for President Nixon, who had the authority and bore the responsibility, but what was different was the dominant role of Nixon's National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, who at times functioned as the de facto chairman of the JCS, poached on the territory of the Secretary of Defense, and usurped the responsibilities of the Secretary of State.[23]



Serious consultations and planning for the Laotian operation began in December 1970. White House thinking originally considered an amphibious thrust into North Vietnam aimed at Vinh, but then settled on a proposal for another thrust into Cambodia. Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams, with President Thieu's agreement, countered with a far bolder and riskier proposal—to attack into Laos. (General Weyand, Abrams' deputy at the time, was extremely dubious about the proposal.) After weeks of skillful maneuvering, the President and his NSC advisers managed to get all US principals—Laird, Rogers, Helms, and Moorer—to agree on an attack into Laos in early February 1971 via Route 9 just south of the DMZ. Another operation would be launched from III CTZ into Cambodia to destroy a major enemy base in the Chup rubber plantation. Souvanna Phouma's agreement was obtained through Ambassador G. Mcm. Godley in Vientiane.[24]

Objectives of the Laotian operation, designated LAMSON 719 by the South Vietnamese, were to seize the logistic complex in the Tchepone area, located at a strategic junction of supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail about fifty kilometers by air from the border of South Vietnam; and then during the remainder of the dry season, to disrupt movement along the Trail and destroy the logistic facilities in the area. It was hoped that a successful campaign might buy as much as two years' time for the allies, assuming that the North Vietnamese would need about one year to rebuild their logistic system in order to support an offensive in the following dry season (October 1972 – May 1973).



As was the case with the Cambodian operation during the previous year, knowledge of the planned operation was on a very close hold basis in Washington and only a handful of people in DOD, State, and CIA were aware of it. Detailed planning was done in Vietnam where need-to-know was also strictly limited. Commanders, staff, and forces involved had only a bare minimum of time for preparations and in some instances lacked sufficient time for proper planning. For example, there was not enough time to disseminate some of the latest tactical intelligence to the ground and aviation units making the assault.

Senior officials in Washington and Saigon were well aware of the high risks of such an operation. Ever since the closing of Sihanoukville port and the Cambodian supply routes in the spring of 1970, Hanoi had anticipated that US and ARVN forces sooner or later would launch a major ground action into the Laotian panhandle. Hanoi was clearly concerned about the security of its remaining supply route to the South and as a result was expanding its logistic commands in the panhandle and beefing up its combat forces in southern Laos. A CIA study, coordinated with DIA, NSA, and State/INR, published on 14 December 1970 indicated that strong NVA infantry, armor, and artillery formations were in southern Laos, and that the largest concentration of these newly arrived forces was in the vicinity of Tchepone. It was also known that formidable air defenses were deployed along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and were particularly dense in the Tchepone area. Moreover, the mountainous, jungle-covered terrain was an added liability. Natural clearings for helicopter landing zones were scarce and likely to be heavily defended. Finally, the weather in the area was notoriously treacherous—even though it was the "dry" season, sudden, unexpected heavy rains could occur.

In January 1971 prior to the beginning of LAMSON 719, CIA was asked by Dr. Kissinger to prepare on a close hold basis an estimate of probable Communist reactions, particularly by Hanoi, to a large-scale ARVN raid into the Tchepone area of Laos backed by US air support (including helicopters) but without US ground participation (in obvious reference to LAMSON 719). CIA's response of 21 January 1971 (followed up by a 3 February study of the enemy's reinforcement capability) was remarkably accurate with respect to the nature, pattern, and all-out intensity of the NVA reactions to LAMSON 719.[25]

In addition to the above assessments, CIA submitted daily special operations situation reports to the White House, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and Chairman, JCS from 29 January through 8 February 1971, the day the attack into Laos was to begin. The clear thrust of these reports was that the NVA was readying itself for battle, intended to put up the fiercest possible resistance, and was especially serious about maximizing antiaircraft defenses against allied troop landings by helicopter and against air support of ARVN ground operations.[26]

Before LAMSON 719 began, the US Congress imposed a legal prohibition in December 1970 on the expenditure of funds for any US ground forces operating outside of Vietnam. This meant that the ground incursion into Laos would have to be conducted solely by South Vietnamese troops; moreover, no American advisers were to be permitted to accompany ARVN units into Laos.

US forces, however, were allowed to support LAMSON 719 with tactical air, helicopters, and long-range artillery operating from South Vietnamese bases. The prohibition was a new and potentially critical obstacle to coordinated operations because South Vietnamese commanders were accustomed to relying on their American counterparts to arrange for US air, assault helicopter, heavy artillery, and logistic support. Moreover, the language problem hindered effective close air support by US fighter-bombers and attack helicopters.

Plan I of LAMSON 719 involved the movement of US forces into the border area of I CTZ just south of the DMZ to secure Route 9 inside of Vietnam and to complete preparations for the support of Phase II, the South Vietnamese attack into Laos. Phase I was to begin on 30 January 1971 and Phase II, on 8 February 1971. Some of the best South Vietnamese troops, including most of their strategic reserves, were designated for the operation—the 1st ARVN Division, 1st ARVN Armored Brigade, and most of the elite Airborne Division and Marine Division. In concept, the 1st ARVN Division, reinforced with the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade, was to make the main effort into Laos along the axis of Route 9 (generally winding through a jungle-covered river valley) to seize the Tchepone area in the heart of the enemy's Base Area 604. The flanks of the main effort were to be protected on the north by ARVN airborne and ranger troops, and on the south by the Marines. Movements were a combination of overland advances and helicopter air assaults. The plan visualized that the objective area (Tchepone) would be reached in about five days and that South Vietnamese forces would remain in the area until the onset of heavy rains in May, disrupting the enemy's supply lines.

The attack into Laos went off on schedule on 8 February 1971 but things quickly turned sour. Bad weather limited tactical air support on the first day and heavy rains the next day turned Route 9 into a quagmire. Foul weather continued and not only delayed planned operations, but also greatly hindered resupply efforts and the evacuation of badly wounded men. By 20 February the attack had almost stalled, only about half way to the objective area, while the enemy (who had initially hesitated) was now reacting violently and in great strength, using heavy artillery and in some instances main battle tanks. By 3 March, after days of heavy fighting during which the now outnumbered South Vietnamese were mostly on the defensive, the enemy gained control of the high ground north of Route 9. Undaunted, South Vietnamese troops established new fire support bases further west on the northern flank on 3 March and by 6 March ARVN battalions had been flown onto several key positions just north and south of Tchepone. But these positions were quite isolated from the main South Vietnamese forces and their situations were precarious.

At this juncture, General Abrams urged President Thieu to reinforce his beleaguered troops in Laos and to continue the fight. Abrams believed that the NVA was being badly hurt, particularly by US B-52 bomb strikes which seemed relatively impervious to bad weather. (MACV estimated that B-52s alone were inflicting losses that were the equivalent of about one combat-effective NVA regiment per week.) South Vietnamese forces were taking casualties, too, but far less than the NVA, and Abrams wanted to inflict maximum damage before breaking off the engagement. Thieu and his

commanders, however, felt that the risks were too great and did not want to accept any more casualties, especially in their best fighting units. Abrams privately was of the opinion that Thieu lost his nerve, but Thieu's decision was understandable and probably prudent in the longer run. He strongly believed that the heaviest offensive from the North was yet to come, early in 1972, and that a prolonged campaign in Laos might leave ARVN exhausted.

Thieu in mid-March decided to withdraw his forces, now under pressure from the major assault elements of four NVA divisions operating in the area. As the withdrawal began the enemy made every effort to cut off and destroy the South Vietnamese forces but did not succeed. US air support and assault helicopter operations were instrumental in allowing the South Vietnamese to leave Laos in some semblance of good order. Press accounts created the false impression in the United States that the operation was a failure ending in a precipitous rout—an exaggerated assessment.

Later allegations appeared in the US media claiming certain "intelligence failures" in connection with LAMSON 719. Some accounts alleged that senior American officials had not been fully apprised of available intelligence on enemy capabilities, while others stated that US intelligence underestimated the enemy, and still others said that American and South Vietnamese commanders in the field lacked adequate intelligence. These allegations as they concern the intelligence provided to senior US officials in Washington, as well as that furnished to senior Americans and South Vietnamese officials in Saigon, were clearly not substantiated.[27] How much of the available intelligence reached commanders in the field is another matter.

As evaluated by the US intelligence community, the military results of LAMSON 719 were mixed. The NVA suffered heavy casualties (over 13,000 killed) and lost large amounts of weapons, tanks, vehicles, and supplies. South Vietnamese losses were also severe but much fewer than the enemy's.[28] South Vietnamese troop performance was spotty, serious weaknesses in command and control capabilities were apparent, and the degradation of effectiveness caused by the absence of American advisers was conspicuous. The ARVN, moreover, demonstrated that it did not know how to conduct large scale conventional operations. Even more serious was the heavy South Vietnamese dependence on US air and other fire support. The South Vietnamese could not match such support within their own means. Finally, it was also apparent that South Vietnam not only lacked sufficient strategic reserves but also could not shift forces rapidly within South Vietnam. The implications of these weaknesses did not bode well for the future of South Vietnam.

On the other hand, both CIA and State/INR pointed out that the NVA had the advantages of a favorable force ratio and close familiarity with extremely difficult terrain in an area where ARVN had not previously operated. Hanoi, therefore, had to recognize that under the circumstances, the South Vietnamese had not done badly.[29]

In a wider context, the impact of LAMSON 719 on enemy prospects was less than the allies had hoped. Although the operation did temporarily disrupt the enemy's supply line to the South, the NVA had been able to confine the ARVN advance to a relatively narrow penetration, thus enabling enemy supplies to continue down routes further to the west. US intelligence estimated that even at the height of the fighting, Hanoi was able to sustain a sufficient

flow of supplies to support its forces in the South. While public morale in South Vietnam was raised for a brief period, the North Vietnamese got even a larger psychological boost from the fact that the NVA was able to drive ARVN forces back into South Vietnam despite massive US air, artillery, and logistic support.[30] As a measure of South Vietnamese progress in Vietnamization of the war, LAMSON 719 on balance was at best a shaky draw and in reality a psychological defeat for the ARVN.

Nevertheless, the operation had demonstrated the vulnerability of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Henceforth, the intelligence community concluded, Hanoi would have to devote more resources to improving the security of its supply route to the South.[31] Moreover, a special CIA/OER report to Secretary Laird and Dr. Kissinger, dated March 1971, concluded that large-scale enemy military operations in South Vietnam for the remainder of 1971 were probably impossible and that Hanoi would have to undertake a major resupply campaign before any offensive could be launched in 1972.[32]

Overall LAMSON 719 no doubt was a major factor in delaying the next major North Vietnamese offensive until a year later in the spring of 1972. But other factors contributed to that delay, such as the need to correct NVA deficiencies in conducting offensive operations and to decrease the NVA's vulnerability to US air attacks.

In the United States domestic reaction to the Laotian venture was not as strong as in May 1970 during the Cambodian incursion. But there were major demonstrations in Washington during April and May 1971 against American involvement in the war, with more congressional efforts and pressure from the media to limit the President's power to conduct military operations.

US Intelligence and the Post-LAMSON 719 Period, Spring 1971 – Spring 1972

The earliest attempt to gauge the longer term consequences of LAMSON 719 appeared in a perceptive CIA memorandum (prepared for the DCI to be sent to the President) written while the South Vietnamese were completing their withdrawal from Laos and dated 22 March 1971.[33] The paper judged that Hanoi would make some strenuous efforts over the next six to eight months in both South Vietnam and Cambodia to demonstrate that its capacity to fight had not been damaged and to discredit President Thieu in his bid for re-election in the fall. (In fact, the enemy did step up the tempo of its military activities in April and May 1971 in western I CTZ, in the highlands of II CTZ, and in the border areas of III CTZ.) The CIA paper, moreover, took the line that Hanoi was not in a position in the short term to alter significantly the situation on the ground in South Vietnam (and probably not in Cambodia), and that the regime, therefore, would not make any all-out efforts during the next few months, but very likely would plan its next major offensive for late 1971 or early 1972. The paper hedged on the question of South Vietnamese public attitudes and Thieu's political prospects, saying that "the jury on that issue will render its verdict in October" when national elections were scheduled to be held.

About a month later, NIE 53-71, dated 29 April 1971, "South Vietnam: Problems and Prospects" (the only NIE produced on Vietnam during 1971) estimated that the outlook in South Vietnam for the remainder of 1971 was

"reasonably good" and that the odds in the presidential election of October 1971 appeared to favor a Thieu victory. As for 1972 the NIE stated that prospects were "less clear," pointing out that the US election in November 1972, coupled with the continued withdrawal of US combat troops, "make it probable" that Hanoi would step up its military activity by early 1972, although *not* to the degree that would duplicate the scale or intensity of the 1968 Tet offensive. As for South Vietnam, the estimate judged that its armed forces would "probably require substantial US support for many years" to cope with the threat; and that although the South Vietnamese will to survive presently showed some signs of durability, there was "no way to determine how tenacious they (as a people and as a nation) will be a few years hence when the United States is much further along the road to disengagement." The NIE concluded that "the longer term survival of the GVN is by no means assured."

This was a remarkably accurate estimate with one exception—its judgment that North Vietnam's offensive in 1972 would not approach the scale and intensity of the 1968 Tet offensive. US intelligence continued to hold this view until as late as January 1972 when it was flatly stated: "One thing Hanoi cannot do in the remaining months of this dry season; it cannot launch a nationwide military offensive on anything approaching the scale of Tet 1968." [34] As will be brought out later, this judgment was based at least in part on estimates of NVA troop infiltration and resupply activities beginning in September 1971 that proved to be quite low.[35] This underestimate of infiltration probably stemmed from several factors—the degradation of US detection systems; North Vietnamese measures to hide the extent of infiltration; and the North Vietnamese practice of infiltrating large numbers directly through the DMZ, thus bypassing the normal NVA infiltration system running though Laos.[36]

As a matter of interest, it should be noted that the above cited NIE of April 1971 was the last NIE, or SNIE, to be published on Vietnam for almost two and one-half years. Only one estimate was produced on Vietnam in 1971, none in 1972, and the first one appearing in 1973 came on 12 October. According to John Huizenga, deputy chairman of the Board of National Estimates at the time, numerous important developments in other parts of the world absorbed the attention of ONE during this period. Another major reason for this hiatus, however, was the fact that the office of SAVA in CIA had become the focal point for national estimates rather than ONE.

During 1970 and 1971, enemy main force units were generally absent from South Vietnam while they concentrated on reconstituting battle-damaged units, and rebuilding, expanding, and securing their lines of supply and base areas in Cambodia and Laos. This allowed the South Vietnamese to make considerable progress in pacification during the local force struggle for control of the countryside. As a result, by the end of 1971 the South Vietnamese enjoyed quite a favorable local balance of power in most regions of South Vietnam while North Vietnam became extremely concerned over the deterioration of its position in the South. Indeed, many senior US veterans of the war, men like Ellsworth Bunker, Robert Komer, and William Colby, believe to this day that this side of the war was definitely won. Even so, the

continuation of this favorable local balance required an effective shield of ground and air forces to keep main force units, in particular NVA troops, from upsetting that balance. Without that shield, simple "geography"—the extensive size and shape of South Vietnam—was too much for South Vietnam's forces alone to defend against the NVA. Moreover, while South Vietnamese forces had reached the practical limits of what they could sustain and what the United States was willing to support, the NVA continued to grow in numbers and to acquire all the prerequisites of a modern, mobile, heavily armed force.

In February 1972, US intelligence modified its line with respect to Hanoi's capabilities and intentions in the short term when CIA/OCI on 7 February 1972 published an Intelligence Memorandum, "The Communist Winter-Spring Offensive in South Vietnam." It declared that "the next major enemy campaign will soon erupt in South Vietnam." (President Thieu had been saying for some time that an all-out enemy push would come in early 1972 while President Nixon, also expecting the heaviest offensive of the war to come at that time, ordered the reinforcement of US air power in the western Pacific—carrier and land-based.) American political moves, designed partly to put more pressure on Hanoi, were also in the offing. Nixon's trip to Peking to reopen Chinese-American relations, scheduled in late February, and a US-Soviet Union summit meeting in Moscow (ostensibly to pursue strategic arms limitation talks), scheduled for May, were beginning to make Hanoi very nervous. These developments, coupled with the realization that 1972 was a US election year, were major factors in the CIA conclusion (in the IM cited above) that Hanoi would make a major effort to undercut American plans.

The above CIA IM stressed the enemy buildup of over three NVA divisions in the northern provinces of I CTZ where there were no longer any US troops (the US 101st Airborne Division and 3d Marine Division had been withdrawn), and only the 1st ARVN Division and a new, untested 3d ARVN Division were located in the area. The paper also brought out a possibly even more dangerous enemy buildup of roughly three NVA divisions in the central highlands of II CTZ, where again there were no American forces (the US 4th Division had long been withdrawn in early 1970). The IM particularly stressed the belief that Hanoi was well aware that the bulk of US ground forces had departed (the last combat troops would depart in August 1972) and saw the time as a golden opportunity to strike a devastating blow that would shake the confidence of South Vietnamese forces. The paper concluded that a major round of attacks would begin either sometime around Tet in mid-February 1972, or during Nixon's visit to China in late February; and that heavy fighting might well last through May and then taper off at the onset of the wet monsoon.

Easter Offensive, 1972, and Its Results

The long expected enemy offensive arrived considerably later than US intelligence had predicted it would. Under cover of a drizzle and fog which hugged the ground, the enemy launched an all-out assault on 31 March 1972 across the DMZ, a campaign that was to become known as the Easter offensive. Why it was delayed is not quite clear but it does seem apparent that Hanoi was simply not ready to go before the end of March. Even then the

offensive did not begin simultaneously (or near simultaneously as was the case of Tet 1968), coming somewhat later in other parts of the country. Although the Easter offensive was not an unexpected, sudden turn of events as alleged by some war correspondents, the direction of the attack in the north, straight though the DMZ, did come as a major surprise because the invasion was expected to come from the direction of Laos. Apparently the consensus of allied commanders and intelligence officers was that the enemy would not even consider violating the DMZ for fear of giving the United States a good reason for resuming the sustained bombing of North Vietnam.[37] Nevertheless, the author faults the allied military commanders, American and South Vietnamese, as well as their intelligence officers, for accepting the above judgment. For some time it had been known that the enemy was developing modern, mobile forces, including armor and heavy artillery, and the logical axis of an attack by such forces was directly through the DMZ because this route offered the shortest and best developed lines of communication. The DMZ area, moreover, was tied into the North Vietnamese POL pipeline system and could therefore provide the large quantities of fuel required by modern conventional forces.

The enemy assault through the DMZ included hundreds of medium tanks and armored personnel carriers, supported by heavy artillery, rockets, and modern, mobile air defense weapons. The main effort struck not only in the area where the green 3d ARVN Division was deployed, but also just as some of its units were being rotated at forward fire bases. One regiment located north of Dong Ha in the east was quickly driven back while part of another regiment to the west at Camp Carroll surrendered without much of a fight. (In this connection, it was primarily the sheer weight of heavy accurate artillery fire, rather than close contact on the ground, that drove ARVN troops off their forward positions.)

On 4 April the enemy opened up a second front in III CTZ, surrounding Loc Ninh and An Loc near the Cambodian border and employing a force that was to total three NVA divisions. President Nixon at this point responded by ordering the resumption of US bombing of North Vietnam up to the 18th parallel. Then on 23 April the NVA invaded Kontum Province in the highlands of II CTZ with a two-division force.

By late April in I CTZ the enemy overran Quang Tri Province and laid siege to its capital, Quang Tri City, seriously threatening the ancient city of Hue further south. But after President Thieu shook up the ARVN high command in I CTZ, and with the help of massive US air support, the South Vietnamese stiffened and fought a successful defense of Hue. Later in August the South Vietnamese retook Quang Tri City.

Bitter fighting likewise took place in both II and III CTZs. ARVN held Kontum City against a large NVA force which finally quit the fight and withdrew on 31 May. The defense of An Loc went on even longer until the enemy withdrew across the border on 9 June.

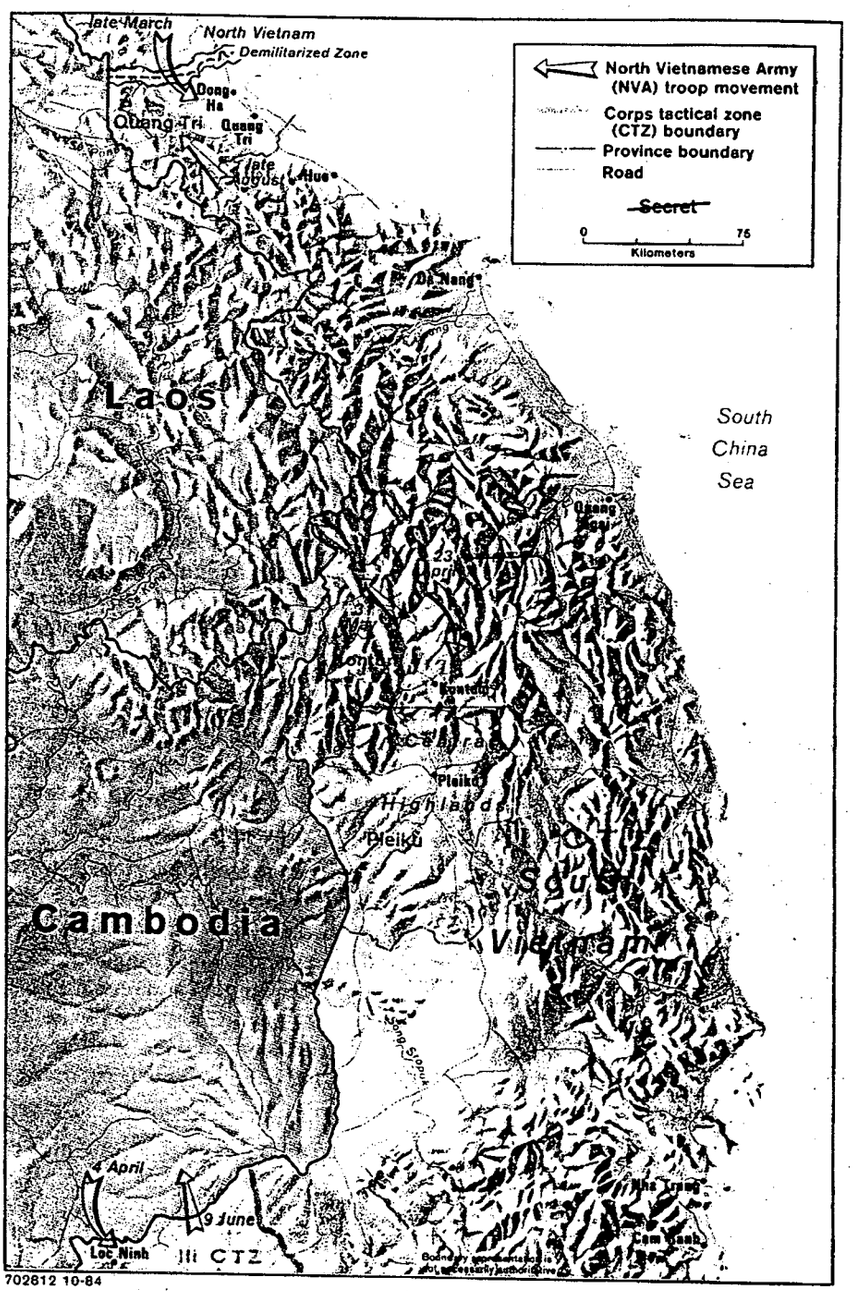
By late summer, it was clear that Hanoi's countrywide offensive had failed even though the North Vietnamese were playing for keeps, trying to achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield prior to the US election. Having been denied a major "headline grabbing victory" since Tet 1968 (with the

possible exception of LAMSON 719 in Laos in March 1971), Hanoi badly needed a clear-cut decision over the South Vietnamese.[38] How much North Vietnam had thrown into this campaign was not fully known to the allies at the time. A CIA/OER analysis of the North Vietnamese manpower investment in the Easter offensive was published in November 1972 (CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "NVA Infiltration and Unit Deployments since September 1971"). This study showed that the manpower commitment over the period September 1971 – August 1972 was the largest ever sent south from North Vietnam, surpassing the 1967-68 period associated with the Tet 1968 offensive (an estimated total of 248,000 men compared to the former high of 230,000 troops sent down in the 1967-68 timeframe). Moreover, the number of men in deploying units (as opposed to individuals) was greater in the 1971-72 period (69,000 as compared to 50,000 in 1967-68; these numbers are included in the total figures given above). The result was the largest NVA/VC force structure seen thus far in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Finally, Hanoi continued to send large numbers south even after the wet season was in full swing (July-August 1972), another unprecedented move. In short, Hanoi had abandoned any protracted warfare strategy in favor of large-scale, large-unit, conventional warfare in its unceasing drive to achieve its ultimate goal—the armed conquest of not only South Vietnam but all of Indochina.

Although the South Vietnamese had finally stopped the enemy offensive, they had not been able to regain control of all their territory. In I CTZ, the enemy remained in strength north of the Cua Viet River, in effect moving the boundary between North and South Vietnam at least 10-15 kilometers south of the DMZ. Indeed the enemy "owned" much of the western part of I CTZ and likewise in II CTZ remained in control of much of Kontum and Pleiku Provinces in the central highlands. And in III CTZ the enemy effectively controlled Highway 13 from the Cambodian border to Lai Khi, almost half way to Saigon. South Vietnam's territory remained intact only in the Delta, IV CTZ. (The constant encroachment of the border area by the enemy was to continue until the end of 1973. South Vietnam had in effect lost a continuous, wide expanse of territory extending along the border from the DMZ to the northern Delta, an area which North Vietnam referred to as the "Third Vietnam.") But the Easter offensive had been costly to the NVA; its personnel losses for the March-September 1972 period were conservatively estimated at over 100,000 killed. NVA material losses were the highest yet in the war. CIA estimated in June 1972 that as many as 40 percent of the NVA infantry regiments committed to the campaign were at best marginally effective, if not temporarily combat ineffective.[39]

There was a major difference in the impact of the offensive on the countryside, however, as compared to the Tet 1968 offensive—the enemy caused far less damage to the government's hold over the population and to government security forces in the countryside. The principal reasons for this were that invading NVA regular troops constituted the enemy's striking forces, with relatively little participation by local Viet Cong forces, and much of the fighting was in the border region well away from the populated areas.[40]

Nevertheless, despite enormous casualties and heavy materiel losses, Hanoi's capacity and will to prosecute the war remained unimpaired. The North Vietnamese had the raw manpower needed to compensate for their



losses (although the loss in quality in terms of experience in practically all ranks was undoubtedly an increasingly serious problem) and they could count on the Soviet Union and China, at least for the present, to provide their material needs. This was CIA's judgment at the time,[1] quite consistent with the views that the Agency had long held.

Changing Balance of Military Power In the South, 1971-72

While the war ground on in South Vietnam in 1971-72, the American disengagement continued without interruption, the withdrawal taking place across the spectrum of the US presence. By mid-1971 almost two-thirds of US combat troops had departed Vietnam and by the end of 1971 there was less than an American division equivalent in the northern half of the country. Many of the so-called Free World forces had also returned home, although the government of South Korea agreed to retain its two-division force in II CTZ until the end of 1972. (ROK troops, however, by their government's orders were operationally kept under wraps.)

In addition to the withdrawal of American combat units, the senior American military headquarters—MACV, USARV, 7th Air Force, and III MAF—were also sharply reduced in size. The large US headquarters in each CTZ that had controlled US ground operations were eliminated, and most of the extensive, complex American military intelligence, communications, and logistic structures in Vietnam were dismantled. Virtually all US-built bases were turned over to the South Vietnamese, who lacked the means to secure and maintain them, and the facilities consequently rapidly deteriorated.

The US advisory structure was also reduced during this period. By mid-1972 American advisers were assigned only at ARVN corps, division, and province levels, a drastic cutback. But the remaining advisory commitment was given the highest priority for quality personnel, a status it had not always enjoyed in the past.

Concurrently, South Vietnamese regular and paramilitary forces were expanded and a special effort was made to build greater capabilities in air, naval, artillery, armor, and logistic support forces. Ambitious training programs were instituted and large quantities of US aircraft, naval ships, armored vehicles, and artillery pieces were turned over to the South Vietnamese. But it was very late in the day and there was simply not enough time for the South Vietnamese to develop the long-term skills needed to absorb this equipment, maintain it properly, and operate it effectively. There are no easy short cuts to the development of effective, modern forces.

Periodically the Joint Staff of the US JCS assessed the progress of Vietnamization and submitted a report to the Secretary of Defense and the Chiefs. The report of November 1971 was enlightening and pulled few punches, bringing out serious shortcomings in the South Vietnamese Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines as US redeployments accelerated. It stated that the ARVN could not handle another LAMSON 719 without an extensive US presence; that the Vietnamese Air Force was incapable of continuing an air war on the scale of US air operations in the 1968-71 period, especially with respect to interdiction operations in Laos, tactical airlift, and maritime air

patrol; and that the removal of the US B-52 capability was an "irreplaceable loss"—an understatement. The report judged that the South Vietnamese could not operate an effective communications system without permanent US contractor support; that with respect to intelligence matters, the South Vietnamese could not handle SIGINT or COMSEC systems; and that substantial American military assistance would be required to keep the South Vietnamese logistic system going. In the critical area of leadership, the report found the South Vietnamese improving but still marginal in most respects. Overall, the Joint Staff report concluded that the South Vietnamese position was drastically weakened by the US withdrawal and that loss of control of some South Vietnamese territory and population was inevitable. Written in the fall of 1971, this assessment was a sobering, realistic statement of South Vietnamese military prospects.

A year later with the winding down of the enemy's Easter offensive and the departure of the last US ground combat units in the summer of 1972, it was apparent that the balance of military power in South Vietnam depended on the performance of the ARVN and the availability of US air power. It seemed clear, too, that there was a practical limit to the overall size of the South Vietnamese ground forces and this had been reached. Most of their principal strategic reserves, consisting of one ARVN airborne division and one Marine division (each expanded to four brigades), had now been permanently committed in I CTZ and the remaining reserve consisting of a few battalions was woefully inadequate. Furthermore, the tactical air lift to move reserves quickly was inadequate. Finally and perhaps most significantly, the South Vietnamese Air Force could not make up the difference on the ground. Thus the only strategic reserve that could spell the difference between defeat and survival was US air power, in particular the B-52s. With dwindling public and congressional support in the United States, the implications of the above conclusions were ominous.

Renewed Air and Naval Campaign Against North Vietnam, April-August 1972

The resumption of sustained air attacks against North Vietnam north of the 20th parallel began in mid-April and for the first time included virtually unlimited strikes against military-industrial targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. Called the Linebacker series, the offensive later focused on specific systems such as POL distribution and electric power generation. Air attacks were followed by the mining of North Vietnamese harbors in the Haiphong area. These activities triggered a demand on CIA/OER for numerous logistic assessments concerning the effects of these attacks on Hanoi's war-making capacity. Predictably there were differences of opinion within the intelligence community on these effects, particularly between CIA and DIA and military intelligence in the field (CINCPAC).[42]

As previously brought out, CIA had long held the view that although about 85 percent of North Vietnam's imports, including foodstuffs and petroleum, arrived by sea, this traffic could be diverted to overland routes from China. Moreover, CIA was convinced that combat materiel (weaponry, ammunition, air defense systems, and military aircraft, for example) was

moving overland rather than by sea, although military support items such as trucks were shipped by sea. Indeed CIA had stated that North Vietnam was not vulnerable to a sea blockade, estimating that all war-essential imports could be moved over railroads and roads from China; that air interdiction could reduce the overland flow but could not stop it because damage could be repaired so quickly; and that cargo from oceangoing ships anchored outside the mined major harbor areas could be taken ashore on smaller vessels through shallow waters. Finally CIA had said as far back as October 1969 that the diversion of North Vietnam's seaborne import traffic was well within the capabilities of the overland transport system of China, the Soviet Union, and North Vietnam, and that the disruption caused by a mining program should not exceed two or three months.[43]

Assessments subsequent to the new US bombing and mining program pretty well bore out CIA's earlier judgments. In August 1972 CIA estimated that although the total level of imports into North Vietnam had been reduced, it was more than enough to meet minimum economic needs and provide sufficient supplies for its forces in the South.* CIA also stated that Hanoi had to divert large numbers of people to repair bomb damage and keep its transportation system operational, but that North Vietnam had sufficient manpower to maintain essential activities and its military manpower pool had not been materially affected. CIA recognized that North Vietnam's fledgling modern industry, rebuilt since the 1965-68 bombing campaign, once again had been destroyed, but that nevertheless Hanoi was not yet faced with unmanageable economic and sociological difficulties. Indeed Hanoi seemed optimistic about its overland import prospects from China, especially of foodstuffs and petroleum. With respect to the latter, Hanoi reacted very quickly and by late June had completed a new pipeline that connected its POL pipeline complex at Hai Duong east of Hanoi with a POL storage area located inside China near the border.

One year after the above CIA IM had been published, DIA published an intelligence appraisal, "Effectiveness of US Mining in North Vietnam, May 1972 – January 1973," dated 23 August 1973. The study enumerated the delays and disruptions caused by the operation, such as the drop in sea imports and exports, and by the necessity to divert supply movements overland. It also brought out that US air strikes had severely damaged North Vietnamese rail lines, thus placing a greater burden on highway transport (most of the major inland waterways had also been mined). But nowhere did the study assess the impact of these delays and disruptions on the ability of Hanoi to continue the war. On the other hand, the DIA concluded, *without a shred of supporting data or analysis*, that mining of the ports in conjunction with the earlier US air offensive (1965-68) could have shortened the war significantly.

On the more purely military side, CIA in its August 1972 paper also judged that enemy combat losses in South Vietnam and the pounding taken by the NVA on the ground and from the air would be more important than the logistic situation in determining the fighting effectiveness of the NVA. Overall, the CIA assessment held out little hope that the US military actions in

* CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Overall Impact of US Bombing and Mining Program on North Vietnam," dated 11 August 1972.

the North would have decisive results during the rest of 1972 and through early 1973. CIA did hedge somewhat by stating that a *combination* of heavy pressures brought to bear by other factors (for example, a major agricultural failure, severe flooding, a drastic loss in support from China or the Soviet Union) in addition to the US interdiction effort might compel Hanoi to alter its present policy of unrelenting pursuit of its war aims.

Judging from the strident North Vietnamese propaganda campaign against the 1972 US bombing offensive, American air strikes undoubtedly were a source of great concern to Hanoi. In July 1972 Hanoi repeatedly accused the United States of deliberately bombing the elaborate dike system of water control in North Vietnam and tried to convince foreign observers that the American effort was aimed at killing civilians. At the request of the Department of State, CIA/OER analyzed Hanoi's claims, thoroughly studying all available photography. The results showed conclusively that there had been no concerted, intentional bombing of North Vietnam's vital dike system, although a few stray hits had caused minor damage. The study, moreover, brought out that the dike system was resilient and that it would be extremely difficult to cause any major damage of a lasting nature by conventional bomb attacks.[44]

Achievement of a Negotiated Cease-fire, 27 January 1973

During the long, painful period of intermittent secret negotiations between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, which had been underway since 1970, it had been apparent that Hanoi had little to negotiate about other than to get the United States out of Vietnam. One of the principal stumbling blocks had been the North Vietnamese insistence that President Thieu be removed from office as a precondition. In 1972 the pace of these negotiations in Paris measurably picked up, no doubt stirred up by President Nixon's trip to Peking in February and his summit meeting in Moscow in May, and heavily influenced by the approach of the US election in November. After the blunting of the North Vietnamese Easter offensive and the resumption of heavy US air action against North Vietnam, indications began to appear in mid-1972 that Hanoi might be willing to reach a political accommodation. The so-called "break through" occurred on 8 October 1972 when Hanoi dropped its demands that Thieu be replaced by an interim coalition. The price had been high, for the United States had made important concessions, the most significant being to drop the condition of mutual troop withdrawals, thus opening the way for NVA troops to remain in the South while US forces had to be withdrawn. President Thieu, moreover, was not aware of the state of play in the negotiations and most certainly would not have accepted a cease-fire agreement that demanded a political accommodation with communist elements or left NVA troops in South Vietnam, a judgment which the intelligence community completely shared. Predictably Thieu in his mid-October meeting with Kissinger in Saigon rejected the entire negotiating package as written. This led to President Nixon's decision to pull back from any agreement with Hanoi until after the elections.

Even after Nixon's strong victory at the polls, an agreement continued to be elusive. Kissinger, for Thieu's benefit, sought numerous changes in the draft agreement that would be more favorable for South Vietnam, but got nowhere

with Le Duc Tho, who suspected trickery and asked for a temporary adjournment of the talks. Meanwhile Nixon approved a massive military aid lift for South Vietnam and assured Thieu in a letter that if Hanoi failed to abide by the agreement, he (Nixon) would take swift, retaliatory action. (President Nixon repeated this assurance to President Thieu in April 1973 and in addition told Thieu that Saigon could count on military aid at about one billion dollars a year as well as economic aid in the eight-hundred million dollar range annually.)

But after US-North Vietnamese talks resumed in Paris in early December and it became apparent that the North Vietnamese were dragging their feet, using our POWs in North Vietnam as a trump card to get more concessions out of the United States, President Nixon ran out of patience. After a 72-hour ultimatum to Hanoi expired, he ordered the resumption of bombing (which had been suspended in late October) and on 18 December, Linebacker II, the so-called "Christmas bombing" began. It was around-the-clock, the heaviest air offensive of the war, and included the few additional targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area that heretofore had been off limits. For the first time in the war, B-52s struck near Hanoi, operating at night. Other US bombers attacked during daylight. Twelve days later the North Vietnamese called for a halt, promising to resume "serious negotiations" at once.

President Thieu continued to balk, however, and it took enormous American pressure and the threat to conclude a separate agreement with Hanoi before Thieu finally caved in on 20 January 1973 and agreed to a cease-fire. On 27 January the formal signing ceremonies took place in Paris.

In the last few weeks before the cease-fire went into effect, all parties tried to improve their position, the North Vietnamese sending large numbers of men and amounts of supplies southward, while the United States mounted a large airlift of military equipment for South Vietnam. And in South Vietnam both sides maneuvered to expand the territory each would claim to be under its control at the time of the cease-fire.

Under the terms of the cease-fire agreement, the United States and all other third countries agreed to remove their remaining forces from South Vietnam within sixty days. In addition, the United States agreed that it would "stop all its military activities against the territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." Since the agreement was silent on the presence of North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam, Hanoi in effect was permitted to keep its forces there supported from safe bases in Laos and North Vietnam. South Vietnamese bases and lines of communications, on the other hand, were exposed to attack. Neither side was to permit the introduction of troops, military advisers, armor, or even material into South Vietnam. Destroyed, damaged, or worn out equipment could be replaced on a one-for-one basis of like items. These restrictions, however, did not apply to military assistance flowing into North Vietnam from the Soviet Union and China. Thus, if it is assumed that the respective benefactors of North and South Vietnam would continue to support their clients, the asymmetries of the military aspects of the agreement greatly favored Hanoi.

Although US air forces remained in Thailand and the Philippines, and US naval forces continued to operate in the South China Sea, the United States

was inhibited from attacking North Vietnam or supporting South Vietnam not only by the proscriptions of the cease-fire agreement, but also by the virtual disappearance of domestic support for such moves. As time passed Hanoi grew even bolder in moving against South Vietnam as the likelihood of US reprisal diminished.

To replace MACV and to carry out the traditional functions of a US defense attache for South Vietnam, as well as to monitor cease-fire activities, a small military headquarters called the Defense Attache Office (DAO), Saigon, was established early in 1973. The DAO was located in the former MACV headquarters facility at Tan Son Nhut Air Base and had small field offices in major cities in each military region (thus duplicating much of the field organization of the CIA Chief of Station in Saigon). General Frederick C. Weyand, the last MACV commander, departed Saigon in the late spring of 1973 to become the Vice Chief of Staff, US Army. (Weyand replaced General Alexander M. Haig, Dr. Kissinger's deputy, in the White House from 1969-73, who had been ordered back to the White House to be President Nixon's Chief of Staff when Congress began its investigation of the Watergate affair.) Major General John E. Murray, US Army, took over as the head of the DAO and as the senior US military officer in Vietnam. Murray was replaced in August 1974 by Major General Homer D. Smith, US Army, who served as DAO chief until the fall of Saigon.

Ellsworth Bunker remained as the US Ambassador to Saigon until May 1973. A man of extraordinary capacity, Bunker had served as ambassador for over six years. He was succeeded by Graham Martin, a man possessing rare talents and an extremely complex personality, who was destined to preside over the dissolution of the US presence in Vietnam. His senior intelligence adviser was Thomas Polgar, who had taken over as Chief of Station, Saigon, in the early fall of 1972, replacing Theodore Shackley, the Station Chief in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

After the cease-fire the United States also established a headquarters known as the US Support Activities Group and Seventh Air Force (USSAG/7th AF) located at Nakhom Phanom in northeast Thailand. This headquarters planned for the employment of air and naval power in Southeast Asia in the event that the United States decided to take such action. USSAG took over a USAF operational control site that previously had controlled and monitored all 7th Air Force combat and reconnaissance missions in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. US bombing attacks against NVA and Khmer Rouge troops in Cambodia continued until the Congress in August 1973 prohibited any further air operations in that country. This marked the end of US B-52 and fighter-bomber operations in Southeast Asia.

US air reconnaissance operations continued over Laos until June 1974 when they were terminated because of domestic political pressures in the United States. Thereafter much of the timely and factual evidence of the flow of enemy personnel, arms, and equipment into the South was permanently lost to both American and South Vietnamese intelligence.

In Washington important changes were made in the councils of the government. Henry Kissinger became Secretary of State in September 1973, in addition retaining the NSC adviser job until November 1975. Elliot L.

Richardson succeeded Laird as Secretary of Defense on 30 January 1973, serving only a few months before becoming the Attorney General. James R. Schlesinger succeeded Richardson in Defense on 2 July 1973 and served until 30 October 1974, working for both Presidents Nixon and Ford. Admiral Moorer retired on 30 June 1974 and was followed by General George S. Brown, who moved to the Chairman JCS position from his post as Chief of Staff, US Air Force.

First Year of the Cease-Fire, January 1973 – January 1974

In the spring of 1973, the NVA had an estimated 150-160,000 troops inside South Vietnam and approximately another 100,000 regular forces in Laos and Cambodia.[45] These forces were only in fair shape (almost 40 percent of NVA combat regiments judged to be only marginally operational) as a result of the Easter 1972 enemy offensive, which had gone on for almost six months. South Vietnamese forces had also suffered heavy, if lesser, casualties in 1972, but were for the most part intact and still controlled the great bulk of the populated areas of South Vietnam. The NVA, however, controlled large parts of I, II, and III CTZs along the border with Laos and Cambodia.

During the December 1972 – March 1973 period, Hanoi, unhindered by US air strikes, moved large numbers of tanks and artillery pieces, and large quantities of supplies into or near South Vietnam—the tonnages far exceeding the requirements of the enemy forces in these areas. In addition, Hanoi committed an unprecedented number of AAA guns and SAMs to South Vietnam, particularly to I CTZ. To expedite this flow of materiel and supplies, the enemy built or improved an estimated 300-400 miles of roads leading directly to and inside South Vietnam. One result was a two-thirds reduction in infiltration travel time from North to South.[46]

Assessing the overall military balance at this time (spring 1973), CIA pointed out that although South Vietnam combat troop strength overall was greater than the NVA's in South Vietnam, the numbers were about even in I CTZ where the NVA now had a definite advantage in firepower. (Even to stay even, however, the South Vietnamese had permanently moved to I CTZ the bulk of the ARVN Airborne Division and the Marine Division, leaving only a few battalions in strategic reserve in III CTZ. Moreover, without direct US support, Saigon lacked the helicopter and troop carrier lift to move its reserves quickly from one CTZ to another.) CIA judged that although there were no indications of such an intent at the time, Hanoi already had the capability in place to launch a major offensive throughout South Vietnam and to sustain it for a considerable period.[47]

As time went by it seemed evident that Hanoi did not intend to abide by the cease-fire agreements, explicit, implicit, or informally understood, and the North Vietnamese proceeded to violate the agreements repeatedly. South Vietnam also sought opportunities to gain an advantage and likewise violated some of the terms of the January 1973 cease-fire but not to the same extent as North Vietnam. The United States, on the other hand, closely abided by the cease-fire terms.

Although the NVA was "supposed to" withdraw from Laos and to stop using Laos and Cambodia as an infiltration corridor, the opposite occurred.

Hanoi continued to move tens of thousands of troops and large amounts of supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was converted into a complex of all-weather routes running both outside and inside South Vietnam.* To make matters worse, the International Commission of Control and Supervision set up under the cease-fire was completely frustrated by an uncontrollable situation and ceased to function in any meaningful way.[48]

Hanoi was content to hold down the level of fighting in South Vietnam during 1973 although the NVA continued to probe and test government forces in all four CTZs. Neither side appeared prepared to see the cease-fire agreement collapse and therefore avoided resumption of large-scale warfare. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho met again in Paris in the spring of 1973 and issued a joint communique in June reaffirming the January 1973 agreement, but the two sides remained deadlocked on the basic political issues and a political solution seemed out of the question. At the end of 1973 South Vietnam's most serious problems were perhaps economic (the October 1973 Arab oil embargo had been damaging) rather than military because Saigon during the first year of the cease-fire had demonstrated its ability to cope with low-level enemy encroachments. While both sides used the relative lull to strengthen their forces, few Vietnamese believed that peace was at hand, but rather that this was the lull before the storm which sooner or later would hit South Vietnam. A State/INR Research Study, "Vietnam: The Cease-Fire—One Year Later," 28 January 1974, painted such a picture quite succinctly.

The intelligence community somewhat hedged on the question of when Hanoi might resort again to major military action to gain its objectives if other means failed. NIE 53/14.3-73, "Short Term Prospects for Vietnam," 12 October 1973 (reaffirmed by a subsequent Memorandum for Holders, 8 November 1973) stated flatly that Hanoi must believe that ultimately it would have to return to the battlefield; the question was when. The NIE estimated that heavy infiltration and supply movements might shift the military balance in South Vietnam to Hanoi's advantage by mid-1974, but that whether the enemy would opt for a major offensive in the current dry season (October 1973 – May 1974) was a toss-up. If there was no offensive this dry season, the estimate stated that Hanoi would continue limited-objective attacks in various regions of South Vietnam to test Saigon's resolution. Significantly the NIE warned that the future depended on the United States—the drastic reduction or suspension of US air support or a clear indication that the United States was no longer committed to South Vietnam's survival would seriously affect the viability of the nation.

On 31 January 1974 another Memorandum to Holders was published that did make a definitive judgment on the question of timing, stating that the enemy was unlikely to conduct a major offensive for the next two months (February and March 1974), but that prospects were less certain for the last two months of the dry season (April and May 1974). The paper concluded that

* The extent of NVA infiltration during the first year of the cease-fire is clearly brought out in a CIA/DIA estimate, dated 21 January 1974, which stated that about 106,000 personnel moved south—95,000 combat troops and 11,000 specialists. About 81,000 started south after the cease-fire, the other 25,000 were already in the pipeline at the date of the cease-fire.

the odds against a major offensive this current dry season outweighed the odds favoring such action, a pretty safe bet.

During this period (January 1973 – January 1974) the Board of National Estimates went out of existence. National estimates as an art form had been slowly going downhill during the Nixon-Kissinger regime, and the prestige of the Board had likewise declined. Moreover, neither Helms nor Schlesinger had shown much interest in ONE. When William Colby became the DCI in September 1973 one of his first acts was to dissolve the Board and in its place to organize the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) system. Helms had established in effect an NIO for Vietnam (SAVA) for some time and Schlesinger had felt the need for a similar officer for the Middle East. And so Colby extended the concept to the whole range of intelligence matters, looking to his NIOs to carry the intelligence ball in their assigned areas of responsibility (and expertise) and to develop interagency assessments, to include national estimates. The last chairman of the Board of Estimates, John Huizenga, was strongly opposed to the change, fearing a loss of independence of the national estimative process, and retired rather than accept the change.

Another major factor in the eventual demise of ONE was the creation of SAVA in August 1965. Under George Carver (formerly of ONE, who took over SAVA in the summer of 1966), SAVA in a sense usurped the Vietnam intelligence role of ONE, a process which was accelerated during the Kissinger regime as National Security Adviser to the President (1969-1975). ONE, however, often contributed to SAVA-coordinated studies, many of which, like the McNamara series, were in effect national estimates, but not labeled as such.

1974—Balance of Power Shifts to North Vietnam

CIA-State/INR-DIA published an interagency memorandum, "South Vietnam: A Net Military Assessment," dated 2 April 1974. This assessment stated that North Vietnamese forces deployed in South Vietnam (currently twelve infantry divisions) lacked the capability to make lasting gains against South Vietnam and that South Vietnamese forces likewise could not make major gains against their enemies. However, the paper stated, the situation would change rapidly if Hanoi committed its reconstituted strategic reserves (now six combat infantry divisions) in a major offensive. In that event it was doubtful whether South Vietnam could stop the offensive and regain the initiative without large-scale US logistic assistance and possibly US air and naval support.

This assessment was followed by an NIE, dated 23 May 1974, "The Likelihood of a Major North Vietnamese Offensive Against South Vietnam before June 30, 1975." The NIE judged that a major offensive was unlikely during 1974 and stated with respect to the first half of 1975, that the picture was less clear but that "our best judgment now" was that Hanoi would not opt for a major offensive. (DIA footnoted this judgment with the view that the odds were at least even that Hanoi would undertake a major offensive in the first half of 1975.) The NIE pointed out that NVA forces were considerably stronger than they were at the time of the cease-fire, and estimated that should a major offensive occur "it would be questionable" whether South Vietnam

could survive without US air and naval support, and that at a minimum, large-scale US logistic support would be required to stop the enemy drive. (Written in the spring of 1974, the NIE, in this respect, was remarkably prescient.) The NIE also brought out that Hanoi would probably reassess the situation in the summer or fall of 1974, and flatly concluded that it was clear that at some time Hanoi would shift to major warfare.

Meanwhile very late in 1973, while the Watergate hearings were underway in Congress, military aid funds for South Vietnam were drastically cut, following which ammunition, fuel, and other critical supplies in the pipeline from the United States began to dry up in the first part of 1974. Military assistance levels were never restored to even austere levels. (US military aid was funded at $1.2 billion for FY74 as compared to $2.3 billion in FY73, and for FY75 only $700 million was made available.) Draconian measures were applied in South Vietnam where the number of dead-lined tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft rose steadily; and battles were lost because of inadequate air and artillery support, or insufficient air lift to bring in reinforcements, all arising out of shortages of ammunition, spare parts, and fuel. Medical supplies were cut to the bone, and vehicles and combat aircraft were cannibalized or grounded. In the South Vietnamese Air Force ten combat squadrons were disbanded and both the riverine and blue water elements of the South Vietnamese Navy were sharply reduced in size for lack of operational aircraft and ships. The morale of South Vietnam's armed forces was badly hurt by these shortages, the reasons for which they could not fully comprehend.[49]

The US Congress also enacted in November 1973 the War Powers Act which was to inhibit severely the executive powers of the presidency. Such congressional actions, coupled with the traumatic effects of the Watergate affair, served virtually to paralyze the presidency during the last months of the short life of the Republic of Vietnam.

Having recouped their personnel and material losses of 1972, using most of 1973 to accomplish this, the North Vietnamese stepped up the pressure against South Vietnam during 1974 in what amounted to a series of strong "strategic raids" in key localities countrywide. (Later it was learned that the 21st Plenum of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party meeting in October 1973 had ordered a "strategic offensive" against South Vietnam and that in March 1974 the Central Military Party Committee met in Hanoi to develop a strategic plan to implement the order. The Committee directed offensive actions during the April-October 1974 period to uncover major South Vietnamese weaknesses that might be exploited in the projected strategic offensive.)[50]

Heavy fighting erupted in III CTZ in early spring and in the highlands of II CTZ in June, and spread to I CTZ in mid-July 1974. Skillful and daring counterattacks by the ARVN in early 1974, however, thwarted enemy efforts to isolate Saigon from the Delta, and in III CTZ the ARVN generally held its own, although in the northeastern sector the NVA gained several base positions closer to Saigon.

But the situation was grim in the northern half of the country. In the highlands of II CTZ and in western I CTZ, the NVA force overran several

important ARVN positions and moved closer to the more populated coastal lowlands. By the end of the year, the ARVN held only the major cities in the central highlands with but tenuous lines of communications to the coastal area of II CTZ. In I CTZ, there simply were not enough friendly forces to protect the Da Nang-Chu Lai-Quang Ngai coastal areas south of Hai Van Pass and the important Hue-Phu Bai area north of the pass. By year's end, the 1st ARVN Division was low in strength, the 2d ARVN Division was exhausted, the 3d ARVN Division was almost ineffective, and many ranger and airborne battalions, as well as marine units were in poor condition. It was clear, at least to the fighting troops, that the worst was yet to come.[51]

The unceasing effects of having all the fighting on South Vietnamese soil was also beginning to tell. While the NVA received trained, fresh replacements and ample resupply from a secure homeland via a safe, all-weather logistic structure immune from attack, ARVN's replacement and supply system was subject to almost constant enemy disruption, and the South Vietnamese people and their homeland were never safe from sudden attack. Understandably morale in South Vietnam was constantly eroding.

President Nixon's Watergate-forced resignation in August 1974 and the swearing in of a non-elected president, Gerald R. Ford, came as a heavy blow for South Vietnam and a great boon for North Vietnam. By the fall of 1974 as the cuts in US aid were having a devastating effect on the South Vietnamese armed forces and while the South Vietnamese economy faltered, it seemed clear that South Vietnamese morale was sinking lower. American visitors to Saigon at the time were dismayed and reported that President Thieu felt betrayed and abandoned.[52] Yet Saigon Station, CIA, reported on 23 November 1974 that morale in South Vietnam was still solid and that the will of the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces had not been adversely affected. US intelligence assessments published in the last part of 1974 only partially reflected the situation in South Vietnam described above. An Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, 18 November 1974, "Factors Influencing the Course of Events in the Republic of Vietnam Over the Next Five Years" (written in response to National Security Study Memorandum 213) highlighted the following points:

— The intelligence community generally agreed that Hanoi would probably not mount a new 1972-type offensive in the current dry season (that is between November 1974 and June 1975) although some escalation of enemy activity was likely. Such a limited campaign would force the South Vietnamese armed forces to draw down further on their military stock and would put them in a more vulnerable position, but would not lead to a critical military situation during this dry season. DIA and the Army and Air Force intelligence representatives, however, believed that a campaign of even limited scope would significantly erode South Vietnamese capabilities to withstand future enemy military pressures, while CIA and State/INR did not believe that it would significantly change the present military balance.

— Beyond the current dry season it was prudent to assume that Hanoi might launch an all-out offensive within the next few years, although CIA/OCI believed that "certain emerging factors" (basically economic) could restrain the North Vietnamese.

— If there was an all-out enemy offensive, one in which Hanoi's strategic reserve (now estimated to be seven combat infantry divisons) was committed, the whole intelligence community believed that South Vietnam would suffer heavy reverses; and that at a minimum massive US logistic support would be required to prevent a decisive South Vietnamese defeat; and at least a "symbolic use" of US air power would probably also be required.

— Finally, if there was no all-out offensive, most of the intelligence community believed that the process of decline in the effectiveness of South Vietnamese forces would accelerate unless there was a major increase in US military aid. CIA/OCI and the NIO/SEA, however, believed that South Vietnam could hold its own in a strategic sense so long as military aid to both sides remained in the same relative balance as at present.

At about this time (late 1974) both Saigon Station CIA, and the DAO, Saigon, reported that COSVN, the enemy's high command in the South, in interpreting the party directives emanating out of Hanoi, had issued its own directive for the coming dry season offensive, beginning in December 1974 and lasting until mid-1975, that called for an intense, countrywide campaign aimed at defeating pacification and destroying one-third to one-half of South Vietnam's regular and paramilitary forces.[53] The intelligence community was also aware of the existence of an enemy two-year campaign plan for the liberation of the South and of the very broad aspects of the military strategy involved.[54] Later (1976) it was learned that, according to General Van Tien Dung, commander of the NVA's final offensive in the spring of 1975, Le Duan made the crucial judgment in October 1974 that the United States was permanently out of the war and that Hanoi was free to act accordingly.[55] General Dung also wrote in 1976 about a meeting of Politburo leaders in Hanoi with party leaders from South Vietnam, 18 December 1974 – 8 January 1975, held to assess the results of the NVA "high point" offensive in Phuoc Long Province, 13 December 1974 – 6 January 1975 (see below). The Politburo decreed at the meeting that while the basic plan was to achieve final victory in 1976, NVA forces should remain flexible to seize opportunities that could gain final victory in 1975.[56] Apparently the intelligence community did not become specifically aware of this decision until Saigon Station on 7 March 1975 reported that in February 1975 the Communist leadership believed that a military victory was now possible and that the NVA should be prepared to drive for a quick victory.[57] This was about one month *before* the final offensive began in early March 1975 in the Central Highlands.

The last national estimate of 1974, NIE 53/14.3-2-74, dated 23 December 1974, "Short Term Prospects for Vietnam," came closer to the mark than the previously described interagency paper of November 1974. The NIE estimated that there would be a marked increase in enemy military actions between the present (December 1974) and mid-1975, and that Hanoi would commit part of its strategic reserve to exploit major vulnerabilities in the South Vietnamese position. The estimate stressed the importance of US military assistance, stating that without an immediate increase in such aid, Saigon's situation would become parlous, and that at current levels of US aid, the extent

of combat anticipated in the next six months would place Hanoi in a position of significant advantage in subsequent fighting. The NIE also discussed the possibility—in response to a major opportunity—that Hanoi might undertake an all-out offensive by committing all or most of its strategic reserves. The estimate's "best judgment" at the present, however, was that Hanoi would not follow such a course. Although it missed the mark in judging the weakened condition of South Vietnamese armed forces, it was nevertheless a sobering estimate. US policymakers clearly should have been forewarned at the end of 1974 that the prospects for South Vietnam were not good.

While the above estimate was being prepared the last enemy offensive of 1974 was underway in Phuoc Long Province in northeastern III CTZ about sixty kilometers (by air) north of Saigon. Various ARVN positions in the province were attacked beginning in mid-December 1974 and after a long, gallant fight the outnumbered garrison defending the province capital, Song Be, fell with heavy losses on 6 January 1975. Although the State Department issued a strong protest on 11 January 1975 denouncing the flagrant violation of the January 1973 cease-fire, President Ford in his State of the Union message to the Congress on 15 January 1975 made no mention of Vietnam, and in a press conference on 21 January 1975 stated that he could foresee no circumstances in which the United States would reenter the war.[58] The message was not lost on Hanoi.

1 March 1975—The Situation in Vietnam on the Eve of the Final Offensive

As of the end of February 1975, NVA combat forces in South Vietnam numbered approximately 200,000 men totaling seventeen infantry divisions (nine in I and II CTZs and eight in III and IV CTZs). Two of these divisions, deployed south from Hanoi's strategic reserve, had slipped into South Vietnam undetected between late January and 1 March 1975. One more NVA infantry division was on its way south, leaving four divisions in strategic reserve in North Vietnam. The NVA now had about 700 medium tanks in South Vietnam, roughly twice as many as the ARVN possessed. The ARVN, however, had about a 4 to 1 advantage in the number of artillery pieces although the NVA had over 400 medium artillery cannon that gave it the edge in range. South Vietnam's Air Force, although greatly reduced in capabilities as a result of the shortage of US military aid, was offense-oriented and still intact. North Vietnam's Air Force, on the other hand, was basically oriented to air defense of the homeland, and the NVA had deployed massive air defenses of its own into South Vietnam.[59]

Infiltration figures for the period since the January 1973 cease-fire were especially revealing:

1973	75,000
1974	96,500
Jan-Feb 1975	63,000
TOTAL	234,000

The above numbers, particularly the accelerated rate of infiltration for the first two months of 1975, showed that Hanoi was getting into a posture that could support a sustained major offensive.[60]

It was now clear that Hanoi had deployed to South Vietnam the strongest military force yet in the history of the war. Allied intelligence considered this force to be better trained and equipped than it was at the time of the 1972 Easter offensive. In 1974 the NVA undertook intensive combined-arms training, stressing infantry-tank coordination, to correct deficiencies evident in 1972. Logistically the NVA continued to receive adequate military assistance from the Soviet Union and China that allowed not only the replacement of materiel battle losses but also a buildup in the NVA's weapons, ammunition, and equipment inventories. Moreover, Hanoi could resupply and reinforce its forces in the South faster than ever. Finally the NVA had greatly increased its command and control capability to conduct large-scale operations on a countrywide basis. Three new NVA corps headquarters had been identified in South Vietnam since late 1973—two in I CTZ and one in III CTZ—and a fourth was located in the panhandle of North Vietnam.[61]

To face this formidable threat, South Vietnam had combat forces numbering approximately 350,000-210,000 in ARVN and Marine divisions and 140,000 in Regional Force battalions (under province and district chief control).[62] These forces, however, had to defend the people and government facilities, and thus many were tied down to more static defense missions.

South Vietnam's thirteen divisions (twelve ARVN and one Marine) were deployed as follows—five (including most of the Airborne Division and most of the Marine Division, formerly held in III CTZ in strategic reserve) in I CTZ; two in II CTZ (one mostly in the highlands, and one generally in the coastal area); and three each in III and IV CTZs. Since the most dangerous enemy threats were posed against I, II, and III CTZs with a relatively much lesser threat against IV CTZ, it was obvious that some South Vietnamese forces should be shifted from the southern half to the northern half of the country. It was also evident that the strategic reserve (particularly in the absence of heavy US air power) was woefully inadequate. Unfortunately for the South, ARVN was a territorial based army under a system where divisions were located in areas that the troops called home. Moreover, the families of ARVN soldiers lived close to their bases and were dependent (housing for example) on support from the ARVN or the government. (Families of the Airborne and Marine Divisions lived near bases in the vicinity of Saigon.) And so the NVA had another enormous advantage over the ARVN—it was unencumbered by dependents and could move quickly without any worry about their safety or well-being. This would prove to be a fatal weakness for the ARVN in I and II CTZs.

President Thieu, and General Cao Van Vien, Chairman, JGS, were fully aware of the maldeployment of the nation's forces, and early in 1975 seriously considered the possibilities of shifting troops or giving up territory and thereby reducing the area that had to be defended, or a combination of both. Some US advisers and some Vietnamese officials had advocated a truncated-Vietnam concept—drawing back from the highlands of II CTZ and from northern I CTZ, for example. But Thieu could not bring himself to any drastic change in his defense policy, fearing not only a devastating psychological blow to the South Vietnamese people and their armed forces, but also the effect on American attitudes toward South Vietnam. And so the only change made was to shift a division from IV CTZ a short distance north into the upper delta just south of Saigon in III CTZ. In addition, the commander of I CTZ was warned

to be prepared to release the Airborne Division from I CTZ to the strategic reserve, while the commander of II CTZ was warned that he could not expect any reinforcement (II Corps with the largest zone to defend had the smallest force of any ARVN Corps) and would have to fight with what he had.[63]

The stage was set for the last act.

Final Offensive, 1 March – 30 April 1975

The final NVA offensive began early in March 1975 in II CTZ with diversionary attacks in the Kontum and Pleiku City areas, as well as along Highway 19 leading from the Central Highlands to the coast. These attacks were designed to conceal the main effort, a three-division assault against Ban Me Thuot, the traditional capital of the Montagnard country. Elements of the 23d ARVN Division and local forces fought hard but were overrun, and the city was captured on 11 March.

In mid-February the J-2, JGS, and the ARVN II Corps G-2 had insisted that Ban Me Thuot was the enemy's principal objective, but Lieutenant General Phan Van Phu, the commander of II Corps, had not agreed. Believing instead that Pleiku City was the main NVA objective, Phu planned his moves accordingly. (In mid-February 1975 a CIA memorandum (typescript) stated that recent NVA movements, involving at least one division southward from Pleiku, suggested that Ban Me Thuot was at least an alternative NVA objective to Pleiku City.) The overall commander of the final offensive, Senior General Van Tien Dung, revealed in 1976 that the decision to begin the 1975 offensive (Hanoi initially not expecting total victory that year) in the Central Highlands with Ban Me Thuot as the main objective was taken on 8 January 1975 at the Politburo meeting previously mentioned.[64] General Dung also wrote an article with General Vo Nguyen Giap, which first appeared in the official communist paper, Nhan Dan (Hanoi) in the summer of 1975, entitled "Great Victory of the Spring 1975 General Offensive and Uprising," that among other things stressed the key nature of two decisions: where to make the main attack—Ban Me Thuot—and when to time the attack.[65]

For years South Vietnamese leaders and American advisers serving in Vietnam had recognized the strategic importance of the Central Highlands because from this fulcrum hostile forces were in a position to drive eastward and cut South Vietnam in two. Pleiku and Kontum had been considered the most important part of the highlands, while Ban Me Thuot was also considered important because it was the center of the politically sensitive Montagnard region. And so the ARVN II Corps commander, Lieutenant General Phu, immediately after the fall of the city started counterattack plans in motion to retake Ban Me Thuot.

Shortly thereafter, however, on 14 March, Phu met with President Thieu at Cam Ranh where Thieu revealed his willingness to give up Kontum and Pleiku cities in order to recover Ban Me Thuot. Since Highway 19 leading to the coast from Pleiku and Highway 14 connecting Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot to the south were both cut by enemy forces, only route 7b, an unimproved logging trail, was available for the extrication of the ARVN forces in the Kontum-Pleiku region. Thieu and Phu agreed that these forces would be withdrawn along this route, in effect abandoning the northern part of the Central

Highlands, and then assembled on the coast for a counterattack to the west along Highway 21 to recapture Ban Me Thuot. Phu then flew back to his headquarters at Pleiku.[66] II Corps headquarters had long been located at this forward position so that the government could keep its eye on the Montagnards. This was a major factor in the resulting confusion during the withdrawal because communications between the corps commander and his subordinate units became almost impossible as soon as the movement began.

Phu issued the withdrawal orders hastily, hoping that his troops could reach Tuy Hoa on the coast before the enemy could discover and react to the movement. Accordingly only a few commanders and staff officers were told of the plan in advance and the province chiefs affected learned of the plan only when they saw the ARVN units on the move. As soon as the populace discovered what was going on, a mass civilian exodus began. No Americans were informed—not even the Ambassador.[67] Martin was on leave in the United States at the time, having left Vietnam in the latter part of February.

The net result was disaster as troops, their families, and civilian refugees moved along Route 7b, harassed, ambushed, and pursued by the enemy until finally reaching Tuy Hoa on 31 March. To the north the 22d ARVN Division, which for over three weeks had valiantly blocked the advance of two NVA divisions along Highway 19, was forced back with heavy casualties to Qui Nhon on the coast. Shortly thereafter, on 1-2 April the division and other forces in the area were evacuated by sea to Ving Tau in III CTZ and Qui Nhon fell to the enemy.

Meanwhile a brigade of ARVN paratroopers, which earlier had been shifted from I CTZ, defended the approaches along Highway 21 to Ninh Hoa on the coast, allowing remnants of the ill-fated 23d ARVN Division to escape. By the end of March the paratroopers and regional forces in the area had been forced back, losing many men in heavy fighting and after a vain defense of Nha Trang in early April, and had to be rescued by sea. By mid-April organized South Vietnamese resistance had ceased in II CTZ.[68]

In the meantime, in early March, the NVA launched another multi-divisional offensive in I CTZ, advancing on key positions protecting Hue and further south, Da Nang. President Thieu chose this time to order the Airborne Division to be moved from the Da Nang area to III CTZ for the defense of Saigon. (Later one brigade of the division was diverted to help in the defense of southern II CTZ as previously described.) To replace the airborne troops, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, the I Corps commander, shifted most of the Marine division from Quang Tri City in the extreme north to the Da Nang area, leaving the 1st ARVN Division and one Marine brigade to cover Hue. Anticipating a civilian flight from Quang Tri City, Truong directed the I Corps staff to assist the refugee movement but it soon became a flood heading south. At this moment, President Thieu intervened again in the tactical operations in I CTZ. Having initially told Truong that the Da Nang area was the most important part and that the rest of I CTZ could be sacrificed if necessary, Thieu one week later changed signals and directed that *both* Hue and Da Nang be held at all costs. But the exodus south had already started and now included people from Hue while Da Nang was already massively swollen with refugees. When territorial forces defending north of Hue withdrew without

orders because they feared for their families in the Hue area, a general rout developed. Truong, realizing that Hue could no longer be defended, ordered the troops in the area to withdraw on foot along the beach toward Hai Van Pass and Da Nang. Tanks, guns, trucks, and other military gear had to be destroyed in place.[69]

In the southern part of I CTZ, the 2d ARVN Division and other forces in Quang Nhai Province were being concentrated for the defense of Chu Lai. Once more, however, Saigon intervened and Truong was ordered to give up Chu Lai, to release the Marine Division for movement to Saigon, and to employ the 2d ARVN Division in the final defense of Da Nang. Thereafter it was all downhill for the South Vietnamese. The 1st and 2d ARVN Divisions and the Marine Division tried to reach the Da Nang area but enemy troops already controlled the main coastal road, Highway 1, north and south of the city. Soldiers of the 3d ARVN Division, originally responsible for the defense of Da Nang, now became more and more concerned for their families in the area, which had come under heavy enemy artillery and rocket attack, and began to melt away. Truong had no choice but to try to save what troops that he could and managed to ship all organized forces, mostly Marines, out of Da Nang for movement to III CTZ. By 30 March 1975, Da Nang belonged to the NVA. (The rescuing fleet included South Vietnamese craft of every description. American warships were also in Da Nang waters, but outside the three-mile limit, having been committed by President Ford to support the South Vietnamese evacuation.)[70]

The NVA offensive struck in III CTZ at about the same time (early March) as it did in the northern CTZs. On 11 March, NVA divisions launched multi-pronged attacks toward Saigon from the north, northwest, and west, while local main force battalions attacked from the south along Highway 4 toward Saigon. But the main front opened in mid-March when another three NVA divisions struck the 18th ARVN Division at Xuan Loc east of Saigon. ARVN troops fought well and generally held their own during the month of March except in the area along Highway 13 north of Saigon.[71]

By this time the extent of the disastrous chain of events in South Vietnam had finally penetrated to the highest levels in Washington. SNIE 53/14.3-75, 27 March 1975, the last US national estimate published on Vietnam, was both pessimistic and prophetic. It stated that the loss of I and II CTZs was probably permanent and that South Vietnam would probably be left in control over little more than Saigon, surrounding populated areas, and the Delta. The SNIE estimated that remaining South Vietnamese forces might be able to hold in the south, at least through the beginning of the wet monsoon in May 1975, but that in any case the end result was likely to be defeat by early 1976. At about the time of this estimate, President Ford decided to send General Weyand, the last MACV commander and now the Army's Chief of Staff, to Saigon for a personal assessment. Weyand was also to deliver a personal message from President Ford to President Thieu that although the US government would support South Vietnam to the best of its ability, the United States would not fight again in Vietnam. Ambassador Martin, who had been in the United States for several weeks during a most critical time for South Vietnam, accompanied Weyand to Saigon on 27 March 1975.

General Weyand very quickly learned the true extent of the disaster in the north and the bleak situation in the south. South Vietnam had three ARVN Divisions in the Delta (IV CTZ) in fairly good shape, but for the defense of Saigon had only six understrength ARVN divisions in III CTZ, and these had been fighting for weeks against large NVA forces. Sixteen NVA divisions were now deployed either in or very close to III CTZ—about half of these divisions had also been fighting for weeks, the other half were up to strength and fresh. The DAO, Saigon estimated that the enemy would not give the South Vietnamese a chance to recover but would go all out to seize Saigon (ignoring the Delta) and end the war. The DAO concluded that although a renewed US commitment of aid and an emergency air resupply would help, it was extremely doubtful that the South Vietnamese could hold without, at a minimum, US airpower directed at NVA troops, supply lines, and bases in South Vietnam. (The South Vietnamese Air Force had tried to bomb NVA troop concentrations and to give friendly ground forces close air support but had been generally ineffective because of the intense enemy AAA fire encountered.) It was a gloomy, realistic, and as history records, an accurate estimate.

An informal memorandum for the record, dated 2 April 1975, prepared by the East Asian Division, DDO gave a brief rundown of the successive disasters in South Vietnam and made a similar judgment, noting that Saigon could fall in a matter of weeks. Saigon Station although agreeing with the DAO assessment insofar as the military situation was concerned, as late as 2 April 1975 reported that Thieu was finished as head of state, that replacing him would hasten the end of the Saigon regime, and that Hanoi would therefore probably settle for a political solution rather than make a final military assault on Saigon. Likewise interagency assessments made by CIA, DIA, and State/INR on 3 and 5 April 1975 and published in the *National Intelligence Daily*, concluded that Saigon's fate was sealed, that it was only a matter of months if not weeks, that Hanoi could take either the military or political route but would probably opt for the less costly political course of action.

Weyand agreed with the assessment that the situation could not be retrieved without direct US intervention and so reported to President Ford upon returning to Washington in early April. Weyand also recommended massive military aid even though he recognized that it was a forlorn hope. A CIA-DIA Intelligence Memorandum (typescript), dated 14 April 1975, prepared to support General Weyand's testimony in Congress with respect to the situation, reached essentially the same conclusions that Weyand had reached during his visit to South Vietnam. The IM stated that ARVN units were still fighting in the southern part of South Vietnam and acquitting themselves well, but that the NVA now had a decisive military superiority in the south, having committed the bulk of its strategic reserves, and within a month would be in a position to achieve "total victory" in 1975 as called for in recent COSVN instructions. The probable outcome, the paper indicated, was that remaining ARVN forces defending Saigon would be overwhelmed before the South Vietnamese could rebuild additional effective units from the troops evacuated from the north.

While South Vietnam was coming apart at the seams, North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge troops closed in on the capital city of Cambodia. In mid-April Lon Nol gave up and on 16 April 1975, Phnom Penh fell. The lack of any American response was a loud and clear sign throughout the region that the United States would not intervene.

But, despite the critical military situation in Vietnam, Ambassador Martin, encouraged by belated French political initiatives and by Secretary of State Kissinger, still clung to the hope of a negotiated settlement that would leave a new Saigon government, possibly without Thieu, in control of the remaining territory of the republic. The Chief of Station Saigon, Tom Polgar, supported Martin and contended that a political solution, which might even include a US presence in Saigon, was still a possibility. Members of the Hungarian and Polish delegations to the ICC (International Commission for Control and Supervision) also encouraged Martin and Polgar to cherish hopes which turned out to be unfounded and false. The Soviet Union played a part in keeping such hopes alive during the last days of Saigon, although the Soviets had also let it be known that Hanoi would not militarily interfere with the evacuation of Americans and South Vietnamese.[72]

As anticipated, Hanoi continued the attack, resuming the assault in the Xuan Loc area with a total of now five divisions (two more than the initial attack) and by 20 April had driven ARVN forces back to the Long Binh-Bien Hoa area east of Saigon. An unnatural quiet then descended on all fronts around Saigon for about six days. (Some speculate that Hanoi wanted to give the United States a "decent interval" to evacuate remaining Americans and "high risk" South Vietnamese from the country.) President Thieu resigned on 21 April and was succeeded by Vice President Tran Van Huong in a futile effort to form a government with which Hanoi would negotiate. Hanoi's response was to renew the offensive with even greater intensity on 26 April against Saigon's outer defenses. As NVA forces began to penetrate into the inner defense ring, the South Vietnamese General Assembly voted to turn over the presidency to General Duong Van Minh ("Big" Minh) who was sworn in on 28 April.[73] Meanwhile, full-scale American evacuation had begun on 20 April, initially by air to off-shore safehavens, and then later, when Tan Son Nhut air base came under heavy attack on 29 April, by helicopter to a larger armada from the US Pacific Fleet which lay off the nearby coast. Ambassador Martin, again loyally supported by the Chief of Station, Saigon, had adamantly refused to consider advance planning and preparations for the evacuations. Fortunately, however, the DAO, US Embassy officials, and officers of Saigon Station, with the assistance of CINCPAC, secretly developed contingency plans for the evacuation. The concept was sound and the planning was well done, the details remaining secret until the last possible moment. On the Vietnamese side, neither the government nor the military knew anything official about the plans, but it was generally known that the United States would evacuate Vietnamese relatives of US citizens and certain "high-risk" Vietnamese. Vietnamese military personnel, for example, had only personal contacts, mostly with their American military counterparts, who advised them in advance that their families would be evacuated. By dawn 30 April the last Americans, other selected foreign nationals, and many thousands of South

Vietnamese had departed Saigon for good. Estimates of the number of South Vietnamese evacuated vary from about 60,000 to 130,000.[74]

Much criticism has been leveled against Martin and Polgar for dragging their feet with respect to the evacuation. But criticism in hindsight is easy and cheap, particularly by those who were not there and bore no responsibility. These men faced an exquisite dilemma because they knew all too well that a premature "bug-out" would not only create panic, but also would destroy any chance of Saigon's survival, and yet they also recognized that many lives were at stake. The author concludes that the evacuation was well planned and reasonably well executed under the most difficult imaginable circumstances, and that the US Embassy, CIA, and DAO people involved deserve commendation.

On the morning of 30 April President Minh surrendered the country to the NVA. When "Big" Minh told them to lay down their arms, South Vietnamese troops were still defending their positions within the inner ring of defenses around Saigon while almost all of the main district towns and provincial capitals in the Delta were still in friendly hands.[75]

Although the wearing down of South Vietnamese forces by NVA offensive actions during 1974 and the decline of American support were among the most crucial factors in the collapse of South Vietnam, the proximate cause in a military sense was the South Vietnamese decision to withdraw from the Central Highlands in March 1975 and the ensuing debacle in II CTZ. An ill-fated corps commander, Lieutenant General Phu, was directly responsible for the calamity, but President Thieu and General Vien, Chairman, JGS must also share the blame. Because his JGS role was primarily advisory to Thieu, General Vien in his book, *The Final Collapse*, points the finger at Thieu, but Vien and the JGS nevertheless should not have left the planning and execution of such a critical movement entirely up to the corps commander. As a postscript, General Phu, after arranging for the evacuation of his family in late April, committed suicide in the JGS compound at Tan Son Nhut air base.[76]

Anyone in retrospect can criticize Thieu and his advisers on the late decision to withdraw from the Central Highlands, pointing out that had it been made earlier before the final NVA offensive began, the ending might have been very different. But one must not overlook the enormous difficulty of abandoning land and people that South Vietnam had fought so long—over twenty years—and so hard to defend.

In the final analysis, South Vietnam simply lacked the means to defend the entire country against an aggressive, relentless enemy who would not give up its goal of conquest. Specifically South Vietnam did not have sufficient ground forces and tactical mobility to pursue a flawed defensive strategy which had been inherited from the United States. Nor did the South Vietnamese have the air power needed to make up the difference on the ground. Their air force was not capable of carrying out an offensive or interdiction role against North Vietnam, and in fact only rarely could provide effective close air support for their own troops because of the tremendous increase in the AAA defenses of the NVA. Admittedly the above makes no mention of the numerous, serious nonmilitary shortcomings of South

Vietnam—political, sociological, economic, and institutional. But it does get to the nitty-gritty bottom line of military power.

Great credit is due the North Vietnamese. They developed a powerful, modern, mechanized force, which trained carefully and extensively, steadily improving after every major offensive—1968, 1972, and 1975. They supported the NVA with a streamlined efficient logistic pipeline that extended from North Vietnam into Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. And they developed a brilliant strategic concept and sound supporting tactical plans that were executed in an excellent manner.

In this connection the role of the Soviets in the final offensive is an interesting subject on which to speculate. While Kissinger up until the fall of Saigon apparently believed that the Soviets were trying to play a constructive role, other evidence points to the contrary. The Chief of Staff of the Soviet Army, General Georiyevich Kulikov, visited Hanoi in December 1974 and could have been involved in, or at least gained knowledge of, the planned 1975 offensive. The timing of Kulikov's visit (21-27 December 1974) during the period when the Politburo session blessed the operational proposals of the NVA high command (18 December 1974 – 8 January 1975) gives credence to this thesis. If the Soviets did indeed help the North Vietnamese in their strategic planning at such a critical time, it further tipped the scale in Hanoi's preference for the Soviets over the Chinese.[77]

In brooding about the relative suddenness of the final collapse in the South and the surprise and disappointment it caused among many Americans, officials and private citizens alike, the author has often been struck by the nagging question, "why?". The judgment of the intelligence community had long been that the South Vietnamese would not be able to cope alone with the North Vietnamese and that the key was American support. US military leaders, the author included, shared that judgment. Aware of this feeling, the Nixon Administration tried to give South Vietnam time to develop—politically, sociologically, economically, and militarily—all the while steadily withdrawing US troops and seeking a negotiated settlement with Hanoi. This took four years to achieve with the cease-fire in January 1973, but overall, there had not been enough time to develop a strong, stable nation. General Cao Van Vien has stated that it would have taken a generation to clean up corruption, weed out incompetence, and develop able leadership in South Vietnam.

After the cease-fire and the withdrawal of not only all US forces *but also all military advisers*, most American military men, the author included, felt that the odds for South Vietnam's survival fell below 50-50. The year 1973 passed relatively quickly as the opposing forces in South Vietnam jockeyed for position, but then in 1974 Hanoi in reality opened its final offensive. By the end of the year South Vietnamese forces were tired, dispirited, and understrength, while still facing the prospect of endless combat against fresh, well-armed, and well-equipped NVA troops, But in addition, South Vietnam as a nation was demoralized, in particular affected by the events in the United States and the drastic reduction in US aid. As 1975 began, the realization that the United States was prepared to cut South Vietnam loose finally sank home. The calamities of March 1975 in the northern half of the country served only

to accelerate this process of demoralization, but looking at it cold-bloodedly, total collapse sooner or later would probably have occurred in any event.

The seeming surprise in Washington over the sudden turn of events in the spring of 1975 is another question. It can be argued that US intelligence assessments and reports did not loudly sound the alarm until late in March 1975, but the bald facts of life with respect to South Vietnam were there all the time. In the author's view the simple truth was that the United States in 1974 and early 1975 was heavily preoccupied with domestic problems, in particular, Watergate, the disgrace of a serving president, and his replacement by a non-elected president, a combination of factors that paralyzed the presidency. It was not so much that the American people were uninterested as it was that they would support neither a reengagement of US power nor an indefinite commitment to provide military aid to South Vietnam. The war had gone on too long and there was no convincing evidence to show that continued American support would not be throwing good money after bad.

Summary of Part III

In Part III, pertaining to the Nixon and Ford Administrations until the collapse of South Vietnam on 30 April 1975, we have seen how a new approach to the war was taken with its de-Americanization during the 1969-72 period and how a negotiated cease-fire was achieved in January 1973. We have traced the process of Vietnamization and have seen how South Vietnamese forces fared in increasingly severe combat tests—Cambodia in 1970, Laos in 1971, and the Easter offensive of 1972. The renewed US air war against North Vietnam and the mining of Haiphong in 1972 have been examined. Developments after the 1973 cease-fire have been reviewed and we have seen how the balance of power shifted to North Vietnam during 1974. Finally, we have seen the ensuing sudden denouement in the spring of 1975 culminating in the fall of Saigon. Throughout this period, 20 January 1969 – 30 April 1975, CIA and the US intelligence community continued to perform in an outstanding manner except for a few relatively minor aberrations.

The Agency was embarrassed by the revelations resulting from the Cambodian incursion of May 1970 that clearly demonstrated the importance of the sea route from North Vietnam to Sihanoukville as the major supply route for enemy forces in the southern half of South Vietnam. Although this episode badly hurt CIA in the eyes of the Nixon Administration, it did not adversely affect allied fortunes in Southeast Asia and was blown out of proportion by critics of the intelligence community. On the other hand, intelligence gained from the Cambodian affair generally confirmed CIA's position with respect to the order of battle controversy that for so long plagued the intelligence community.

The Pentagon was also embarrassed by the dry hole encountered in the US raid on the Son Tay POW Camp in November 1970. This result, naturally, obscured the spectacularly successful operational performance of the American forces involved, but the raid did result in some favorable consequences.

Some critics tried to blame the lack of complete success in the South Vietnamese Laotian venture in February-March 1971 on inadequate intelligence, but the facts of the matter do not support such allegations. The

incursion was a gamble and the US civilian and military officials involved in the operation, both in Vietnam and in the United States, knew it.

The mining of Haiphong in May 1972 largely confirmed CIA's long held (and not especially popular) view with respect to North Vietnam's vulnerability to sea and overland interdiction. The consequences of the operation bore out the accuracy of the Agency's assessment that Hanoi's war efforts would not be decisively affected by such actions.

During the period covered by Part III, CIA's role and stature within US government councils were somewhat damaged by the latent hostility of President Nixon and the power plays of his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, who in effect preempted the Agency's proper role. But the record is also clear that Kissinger, as he himself documents in his book *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1982), was also very appreciative of CIA's analytical and operational resources. David Coffin, in Volume III (1967-1972) of his history of OER (October 1974) also chronicles frequent commendations from the White House/NSC Staff, as well as from OSD, for high quality CIA/OER studies and assessments on important subjects. Administration officials were especially commendatory with respect to Agency net assessments of the balance of military forces in South Vietnam, both before and after the January 1973 cease-fire.

The period of Part III also saw the further decline of ONE and the ultimate demise of the Board of National Estimates in the fall of 1973. There was no apparent decline, however, in the quality of Agency and interagency assessments and estimates after that date.

Part III closes with the final chapter in the history of South Vietnam The author has attempted an explanation of sorts of "what happened?", but it should be recognized that Vietnam is an immensely complex and subtle puzzle that will probably be debated for decades to come.

Part III References

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27. *Ibid*, p. 10.
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30. *Ibid*, p. 5.
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32. Coffin, "Development of Economic Intelligence, OER, Volume III, 1967-1972," p. 113.
33. CIA Memorandum, "The Probable Consequences of the Termination of LAMSON 719," dated 22 March 1971.
34. CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Enemy Strategy and Capabilities in Indochina Through May 1972," dated 7 January 1972.
35. CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "North Vietnam's Capabilities to Continue to Wage War," May 1971.
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37. Lieutenant General Hilman Dickinson, US Army-Retired, who was the senior adviser to the 1st ARVN Division (as a colonel) at the time of the Easter offensive, confirmed these statements to the author in February 1984. MACV intelligence, according to Dickinson, called 1 April 1972 as the beginning date, only one day off. Dickinson said that just prior to the attack, elements of the 1st ARVN Division had been in the Ashau Valley in northwestern I CTZ near the border, where they had captured several Soviet heavy artillery pieces and found much evidence that convinced the ARVN commanders that the main attack would come from Laos. Dickinson also said that not until after the offensive had begun did he learn of intelligence that indicated the enemy plan to come through the DMZ.
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51. Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, pp. 96-131.
52. One such visitor was the late Warren G. Nutter, former Assistant Secretary of Defense, ISA under Laird who visited South Vietnam in the fall of 1974 and discussed the situation with the author upon his return home.
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Conclusions

What the record reflected in these pages makes clear is that immediately after World War II and in the early years of American involvement in Southeast Asia (1945-56) US policymakers neither understood the region nor had available in the intelligence community the information they needed to permit that understanding to develop. This situation goes far to explain American ambivalence about the region in those years. It raises doubts as to whether the United States acted wisely in displacing the French from Indochina following the conclusion of the Geneva Accords. With all the advantages of hindsight we can see now that our anti-colonial credentials as Americans, our recognition of the long-term Communist threat both to US interests in the region and to the well-being of the peoples of Southeast Asia, and the massive economic and military power of the United States were simply not enough to ensure our success. Nor could our policymakers, given their ignorance of the history, culture and politics of the region, define US aims so that they made sense domestically and internationally. And without such a definition we were unable to devise an effective course of action and sustain it until we prevailed.

As the United States became more directly involved in Indochina, the US intelligence community likewise began to focus attention on the region. The performance was mixed, but generally creditable during the fourteen or so years spanning the Truman-Eisenhower-Kennedy years (1950-1963). During this formative period, while US policy toward Southeast Asia was evolving, the record shows that American intelligence officers demonstrated a much better grasp of the complex and difficult problems confronting the United States than the great majority of American policymakers and leaders. During these years, the heyday of ONE and the Board of National Estimates, ONE maintained basically consistent views of key questions pertaining to Vietnam and Laos, despite the dearth of solid information about these countries.

Overall, during 1963-1969 (the Johnson Years), US intelligence in general and CIA in particular performed in a competent and highly professional manner. Although the influence of national estimates in the intelligence and policymaking worlds began to decline in this period, a rise occurred in the influence of other products—numerous, timely, and high quality intelligence memoranda on a broad range of political, military, and economic subjects pertaining to Vietnam.

The commitment of US power in Southeast Asia in the 1964-1965 period and the escalation of the Vietnam War resulted in a major involvement of CIA in every aspect of the conflict. Within CIA, ORR and its successor, OER, responded to the challenge and for the duration of hostilities demonstrated commendable initiative, ingenuity, and professional analytical skills with respect to Vietnam. With the reorganization of CIA in July 1967, CIA's decision to let OER (as well as OCI) continue to carry out the Agency's basic analytical responsibilities pertaining to the war served to be a pragmatic one because these offices were already in the business. The exclusion of the newly

created OSR from Vietnam affairs, nevertheless, seems a curious one because OSR was oriented primarily on military research. Indeed, as one senior CIA official commented, "It was a strange division of labor." Whether this reflects an ambivalent perception on the part of CIA with respect to its wartime role is not entirely clear, but it behooves the Agency to reflect further on the question.

CIA's increasingly close involvement with Vietnamese matters was accelerated by requests beginning in 1965 from Secretary of Defense McNamara for independent CIA evaluations of a broad range of subjects pertaining to both North and South Vietnam. From 1965 to the end of his tenure on 1 March 1968, McNamara looked primarily to CIA for intelligence support with respect to Vietnam.

CIA's record was demonstrably noteworthy with regard to its longer term assessments of North Vietnam. Throughout the war the Agency consistently held the view that US air attacks against North Vietnam and US air interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail were not decisive in themselves, and that North Vietnam was not vulnerable to sea blockade of its ports and/or interdiction of its overland links with China. CIA was likewise consistent and accurate in its judgments that North Vietnam had the manpower and could obtain sufficient materiel from the Soviet Union and China to fight a war of attrition indefinitely, and that its leaders possessed the will to persist.

The ground order of battle controversy over estimates of enemy strengths and capabilities that erupted within the US intelligence community in the late 1960s and persisted into the 1970s, in the author's opinion, was inevitable because it involved fundamental issues—the nature of the war and how it was being fought by both sides. The controversy was exacerbated by the obsession of US policymakers in Washington with numbers—quantifiable aspects and statistics that would conclusively demonstrate US progress or lack thereof in the war. Deep and wide disagreements opened on the question of whether the enemy in the South was getting stronger, weaker, or holding his own. Essentially the disagreements were between CIA in Washington and MACV in Saigon. This situation compelled CIA to get deeply into the order of battle business, a field normally reserved for the military intelligence agencies. Although the controversy generated unfortunate national publicity, on balance it probably did more good than harm because it uncovered conceptual, philosophic, and methodological differences within the intelligence community that needed to be thoroughly aired and debated. All things considered, CIA was probably closer to the "ground truth" than any other agency in the community, while MACV consistently underestimated total enemy capabilities. No persuasive evidence has been uncovered to support the charge that strength estimates were deliberately manipulated within the community for political purposes.

An "extenuating circumstance" that at least partially contributed to MACV shortcomings in the intelligence field is the inordinate time it took the Department of Defense to establish a credible, competent intelligence organization in Vietnam. Although a MAAG was established in Saigon in September 1950 and MACV came into existence in February 1962, a professional J-2 organization capable of handling the ground warfare aspects of the war was

not developed until mid-1967. This is not a satisfactory performance. Moreover, the United States never achieved unity of the intelligence effort in South Vietnam, a regrettable failure considering the central importance of intelligence as the basis for an effective counterinsurgency program. Reasons for this lack of unity are well known and transcend the intelligence community. In fact the problem is probably not susceptible to an ideal solution. Nevertheless, the United States can and must do better in this regard in future conflicts that may arise.

The enemy offensive of Tet 1968, certainly one of the turning points of the war, surprised US intelligence with respect to its timing, nature, country-wide scope, and unprecedented intensity. US intelligence in Saigon, both MACV and Saigon Station, had ample strategic warning of a major attack and indeed the DDI/CIA representative in Saigon sent an uncannily accurate forecast of the offensive to CIA Headquarters in December 1967, but the sense of urgency felt in Saigon did not penetrate to US policymakers in Washington. (George Carver, SAVA, had a clear opportunity in mid-December 1967 to alert the White House but threw cold water on the studies coming from the DDI/CIA representative in Saigon.) The net result was that a surprised Washington was not prepared to deal with the political and psychological consequences of the Tet offensive. A post-mortem conducted by the intelligence community for the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) concluded in April 1968 that inadequacies both in Saigon and Washington caused the community to "miss not only the enemy's overall plan and his precise timetable, but also his general capabilities and intent." The author agrees with this judgment and believes that MACV must accept much of the responsibility for "missing the boat." Because of an inflexible mindset within the MACV J-2 organization, MACV had been deceived by its own estimates of enemy capabilities and consequently had not sufficiently warned Washington of the potential for an unprecedented level of enemy actions at the time of Tet 1968. Finally, it is likewise manifest that no one in Saigon or Washington foresaw the ultimate significance of the enemy offensive and its effect on the United States, especially the Johnson Administration.

Throughout the Nixon and Ford years from January 1969 to the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, CIA and the US intelligence community performed in an outstanding manner except for a few relatively minor aberrations.

The Agency was embarrassed by the Sihanoukville issue when the Cambodian incursion of May 1970 clearly demonstrated the importance of the sea route from North Vietnam in supplying enemy forces in the southern half of South Vietnam. The episode hurt CIA in the eyes of the Nixon Administration but did not appreciably affect the allied war effort. On the other hand, the allied actions in Cambodia uncovered valuable intelligence that generally supported CIA's views with respect to the order of battle controversy that for so long plagued the intelligence community.

The Department of Defense was likewise embarrassed by the dry hole encountered in the US raid on the Son Tay POW camp in North Vietnam in November 1970. DOD officials were criticized for proceeding with the raid despite last minute intelligence indicating that the American POWs could have been removed from Son Tay, but the overall consequence of the raid, in the author's opinion, justified the operation.

The intelligence community was unfairly accused of an inadequate intelligence performance in connection with the South Vietnamese operation into Laos (LAMSON 719) in February-March 1971, as well as with the enemy's Easter offensive of 1972. The facts of the matter do not support such allegations in either case. To the contrary, CIA and the community did an excellent job before, during, and after these operations.

The mining of Haiphong in May 1972 largely confirmed CIA's long held (and frequently challenged) view that North Vietnam was not vulnerable to sea blockade or interdiction of its overland links with China. The consequences of the US mining operations essentially bore out the accuracy of the Agency's judgment that Hanoi's war effort would not be decisively affected.

During the early 1970s, the influence of ONE declined further and in the fall of 1973 the Board of National Estimates went out of existence. SAVA continued its dominance of the national intelligence scene pertaining to Vietnam.

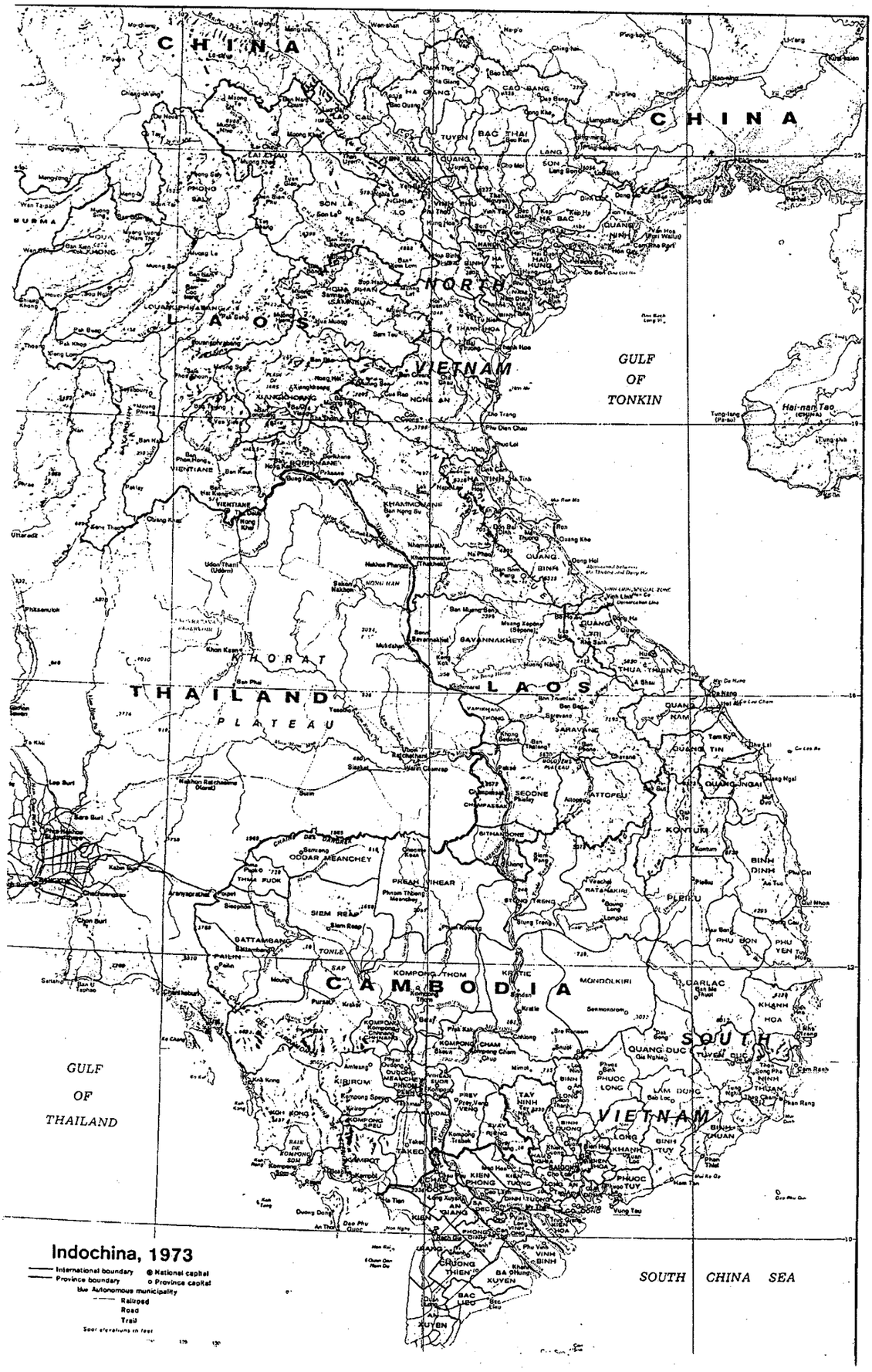
CIA's overall performance record in retrospect looks particularly good in connection with its longer term assessments of South Vietnam's political, economic, and military prospects. For example, CIA's estimates of South Vietnam's military capabilities under various combinations of enemy forces and US support made in February 1969 at the beginning of the Nixon Administration proved to be remarkably accurate. The CIA and the community were likewise close to the mark in their long term assessments of South Vietnam's military prospects under the January 1973 cease-fire agreements, but the Washington community definitely missed the mark in 1974, not seeming to realize the state of near exhaustion in the ARVN and the serious demoralization that occurred in South Vietnam during 1974 among its people, armed forces, and leaders amidst a sagging economy. Nor did the Washington community seem to appreciate fully the marked increase in North Vietnamese military capability during the same period. Consequently Washington was badly surprised by the ARVN collapse in the northern half of South Vietnam in the spring of 1975 not long after Hanoi's final offensive began. The fatal implications of the situation were quickly gauged, however, and the community's assessments of South Vietnam's prospects as well as the current reporting of the situation were outstanding through the last days of the American presence.

Presidential relations with the DCI had their ups and downs during the American involvement in Vietnam. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy appear to have been quite content with their respective choices for DCI, Allen Dulles and John McCone, but were not faced with a major "hot" war during their tenures in office. On the other hand, President Johnson, who committed the United States to major hostilities, had two DCIs (John McCone and William Raborn) before settling on Richard Helms in mid-1966. White House-CIA relations reached their zenith during the Johnson-Helms period and then went downhill when Nixon became President. The basic problem appeared to have been Nixon's distrust of the whole Washington bureaucracy, not just of CIA. During this period, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger did not add to the image and status of CIA although eventually he came to value

highly the extraordinary capabilities existing within the Agency. Nixon, after replacing Helms with James Schlesinger at the beginning of his second term, only a few months later appointed William Colby as DCI in September 1973, a change occurring during the Nixon cabinet shakeup brought on by the congressional Watergate hearings. Colby survived Nixon's resignation in August 1974 and served under President Ford for the rest of the Vietnam War. Looking back, the author is struck by the fact that CIA remained on a relatively stable keel and steady course during a decades-long period of great international and domestic turbulence.

The foregoing raises the question of why the President and senior US policymakers seemingly did not pay more attention to CIA views and known disagreements within the intelligence community during the Vietnam War. Secretary of Defense McNamara did value CIA judgments and beginning in 1965 relied more and more on CIA until President Johnson replaced him in March 1968. But McNamara seemed to have been the exception. The answer probably lies very much with the President and his basic attitudes which conditioned his decisions regarding the war. As committed in wartime as Johnson was in 1965, no President could afford to show a lack of will, at least publicly, in the pursuit of the war, regardless of differing views within his cabinet and the intelligence community pertaining to the conduct of the war. Moreover, the DCI faces a formidable array of senior policymakers who usually have strong personalities and do not hesitate to exercise the clout of their respective departments. In such an environment, it seems unreasonable to expect the DCI to wield much influence unless he is personally close to the President and has his confidence. Nevertheless, our Vietnam experience should tell us that in wartime it is more important than ever that the DCI serve the President directly and that his central role in intelligence not be diminished in any way. To do otherwise is to court disaster.

One astute observer has said that the American involvement in Vietnam can be briefly described as a "failure in intellect" in the beginning that ended with a "failure in spirit." It may be naive to believe that CIA realistically can exercise a major influence in those major policy areas involving the premises upon which the President and other political leaders (both in the executive branch and the Congress) came to office in the first place. But CIA must try to do its best, regardless of the odds, to conduct serious, objective analysis in the hope of assisting political leaders to reexamine their premises, even if not expecting them to change their minds.



US Leadership During the Vietnam I

	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	19
President of the United States	Harry S Truman April 1945–January 1953			Dwight D. Eisenhower 20 January 1953–20 January 1961				
Secretary of State	Dean G. Acheson January 1949–January 1953			John Foster Dulles January 1953–April 1959				
Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Affairs	Dean Rusk March 1950–January 1952		John M. Allison Jan 52–Mar 53	Walter S. Robertson March 1953–April 1959				
Secretary of Defense	George C. Marshall 1950–Sep 1951		Robert A. Lovett Sep 51–Jan 53	Charles E. Wilson January 1953–October 1957				
National Security Adviser to the President				Office of Special Assistant for Nation.				
				Robert Cutler 1953–Mid 1955		Dillon Anderson Mid 1955–56	William J 1956–57 (	
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff	GEN Omar Bradley 1949–August 1953			ADM Arthur W. Radford August 1953–August 1957				
Special Positions								
Director of Central Intelligence		GEN Walter Bedell Smith Oct 1950–Feb 1953		Allen W. Dulles Feb 1953–Nov 1961				
CIA Special Assistant for Vietnam Affairs								
Chairman, Board of National Estimates	William L. Langer Ass't. Dir. Off. of National Estimates Nov 1950–Jan 1952			Sherman Kent January 1952–1968				
Chief, Far Eastern Division, DDO	Lloyd George -October 1952		ACFE	George E. Aurell January 1953–June 1956			June 1956–?	
Director, Defense Intelligence Agency								
CINCPAC Honolulu, Hawaii	ADM Arthur Radford 1949–1953			ADM Felix Stump 1953–1958				
US Ambassador Saigon, Vietnam	Donald R. Heath 1950–1955 July 1952– Station raised to Ambassador						G. Frederick Re 1956–57	
CIA Chiefs of Station					Ed G. Lansdale C/SMM 6/54–12/55		John G. Anderton 6/56–6/57	
Chief, US Military Assistance and Advisory Group	BGEN Francis G. Brink Oct 1950–Aug 1952		BGEN Thomas J. Trapnell 8/52–4/54		LTG John W. O'Daniel 4/54–10/55		LTG Samuel T. Wil Oct 1955–Aug 1960	
Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)								
MACV								
Defense Attaché Office, Saigon								
	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	

May 1950 Pres. Truman First military involvement

May 1954 Fall of Dien Bien Phu

26 October 1955 Republic of Vietnam proclaimed with Diem

Fall 1 French