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Viet Nam Wars

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Intelligence failures in the Vietnam War

The Vietnam war was riddled with intelligence failure regarding the strength, organization and intentions of the Viet Cong throughout the later part of the 1960's. This was influenced by a plethora of factors, but primarily a grave lack of vietnamese speakers working for the CIA, as well as a general underestimation of the Viet Cong forces, and a lack of proper communication between Saigon and US intelligence centers. This was only compounded by the governments political oversight on the war and the direct intervention from Mcnamara over many critical military operations throughout the war. Besides political pressure, given the unusual legal nature of the American involvement in Viet Nam, the different branches of intelligence were not working in unity and created a large amount of infighting between agencies throughout the war about whose reports were correct. The American hubris present throughout the Vietnam war led the grave lack of proper intelligence infrastructure and a great deal of unwise decisions encouraged by faulty information, competing political goals, or both. This hubris built throughout the 60s and peaked on the event of the Tet Offensive, but continued to persist throughout the rest of the conflict until the US pulled out of armed conflict with North Vietnam in August 1973.

First and foremost, the greatest failure in the US intelligence network in North Vietnam throughout the Vietnam war was the severe lack of Vietnamese speakers. The Viet Cong had tens of thousands of agents scattered throughout South Viet Nam, delivering information back to

Ha Noi. Conversely, the CIA only had about a few hundred Vietnamese speaking agents within North Viet Nam, meaning the information that they received about the enemy's movements in the region was very sparse and incomplete.¹ In fact the amount of CIA case officers who could speak Vietnamese numbered little more than three by early 1969². This was due to several different special cases about the Viet Nam war. The first was that, in the beginning, the US was never officially at war with the nation of Vietnam, the war was instead a massive counter insurgency operation. Because of this the assets of the CIA were not under the control senior military commander as is protocol during war times, but instead remained under the jurisdiction of the CIA Chief of station. Because the assets were not under military authority, the intelligence aspect of the counter insurgency operation worked separately from the rest of the phases of the US conflict. This difference in jurisdiction greatly inhibited the ability for the military commanders to properly expand their intelligence base in northern vietnam to help with their operations. The lack of US intelligence operatives within North Vietnam also meant that the estimates of the enemy forces' numbers and their munitions and firepower were at great risk of being critically incorrect. These estimates were also used to figure out how long the enemy could last in a certain position and even how long the enemy force would be expected to last from the start of the conflict. One example being the estimates of the Viet Minh's forces in the 1950's and how best to counter their tactics. One estimate concluded that it was best to try and counter, localized communist subversion and guerrilla warfare; however, this estimate did not account for tens of thousands of chinese supported regular Viet Minh soldiers in north Vietnam, which were fortified enough to fight against the best french battalions.³

¹ Samuel A. Adams, *Intelligence Failures In Vietnam: Suggestions for Reform*. CIA Headquarters, 1969, 1

² Ibid, 2

³ General Bruce Palmer Jr., *US Intelligence and Vietnam*. (Volume 28, 1984). 16

The lack of proper intelligence infrastructure also meant that the south vietnamese government was woefully underprepared to properly combat against the Viet Minh at first. Given that the US did not respond to the total threat until 1961 showed that this lacking infrastructure led to a very delayed response to the military threat in North Vietnam.

The close relationship between the policy makers of Washington and the military and intelligence leader led to certain pitfalls throughout the war which produced very grave decisions based on a faulty mindset. One early one was in 1962-63 when Diem's support as the president of South Vietnam was steadily declining, while indicators of an assassination attempt on him or a coup d'etat were growing. However, because of the temporary success of the strategic hamlets project and the political power it carried, many of the policy makers who were leading over the intelligence network and the military leaders entered a faulty mindset that the war was going fine and nothing was the matter.⁴ When Diem was assassinated during the Buddhist crisis, it sparked a great deal of outrage in saigon and Washington between those who supported him and those who denounced him as a leader. Due to this heated atmosphere, Kennedy rushed the search to find an alternative leader for South Vietnam without consulting the head secretaries of defense and was part of the reason that the replacement for Diem was so chaotic.⁵ Another example of an egregious intelligence failure was when Kennedy and Mcnamara visited Viet Nam a month before Diem's assassination and reported back in a way that seriously misread the actual situation happening in vietnam. They claimed that the political situation in South Vietnam was no major threat to the military operations that were happening and that the US would be able to complete all of their military goals by 1965. This was a consequence both of the lack of proper

⁴ Gen Palmer, 25

⁵ Ibid, 26

intelligence about the political situation and viet nam, but also the effect of politics being too closely involved in the military intelligence decisions about the Viet nam war. As Jim Monaghan mentioned in my interview of him “the problem is you can't have a civilian directing operations for the military”⁶ They recommended such moves as withdrawing the bulk of US forces in 1965 and letting South Viet Nam settle its political turmoil. Much of these problems point back to the political power that Diem held both directly as leader of South Vietnam, and indirectly as the person the US had chosen as their figurehead for leading the fight against the communists. Because he was such a divisive figure in Washington, many people who made more accurate analyses of the situation in Viet Nam at the time but were against Diem, went often ignored at the CIA or the white house⁷. The death of Diem had many setbacks for South Viet Nam and the US, but by far the most significant one was that it dismantled the intelligence network built up to root out the Viet Cong within South Viet Nam. This gave the Viet Cong a great amount of freedom to weaken the morale and infrastructure of the South compared to before Diem’s assassination, while at the same time greatly reducing the US’ ability to gather new information about the Viet Cong.

Heading into the Johnson administration the estimations of South Viet Nam and its capabilities only became worse. Despite the constant turmoil present in the politics of South Viet Nam after Diem’s assassination, The US still wasn't increasing the intelligence network and focusing on the Viet Cong’s movements more closely. This led to major mistakes like not accounting for additional Viet Cong reinforcements to the regular North Viet Nam troops⁸. There was also the problem of the disparity in how effective the American bombing campaign was in

⁶ Monaghan, James. Interview By Jack Hunter and James Barker. Personal Interview. Haverford College. November 19, 2018.

⁷ Gen Palmer, 28

⁸ Ibid, 35

North Viet Nam, while the Marines and the Air force believed that it was the key to defeating the Viet Cong; the Army and the Navy were quite doubtful of it. The issue here was not the disagreement but the fact the JCS went on and recommended the increase of US airpower in Viet Nam without settling the disputes between the different branches of the military. The reason that the JCS went ahead with the recommendation to increase air power was not due to a detailed intelligence report showing that the weakness of the Viet Cong was air bombing, but instead from a political motivation, which was that they were worried about the dispute building up support for those who opposed direct military involvement in Viet Nam. This meant that instead of taking the time to flesh out an effective method of battle against North Viet Nam, Washington went ahead with an already somewhat ineffective method. However this method was sorted out by 1968 when multiple CIA reports showed the the Operation Rolling Thunder results were not very effective at halting Hanoi's capability to wage a continuous and long term war against the South and the US; ultimately resulting in the partial halting of the bombing runs of North Viet Nam.

The larger issue was the order of Battle problem which was that Washington and Saigon analysts disagreed on the size of the enemy forces throughout the 1960's. One source of the problem was Mcnamara's approach to managing the US involvement in Viet Nam which was focusing on a war of attrition method and using statistics to maximize the amount of enemies killed compared to the number of soldiers lost. Because of the raw amount of soldiers that the Viet Cong had, the war of attrition method was a faulty approach for counter insurgency. On top of this, there was a lot of political pressure on officers in Saigon to produce reports that reflected

clear progress in the war, regardless of how accurate the report was⁹. This was very clear in the ratio of the reported success rates to the actual success rates of the strategic hamlets program. The MACV made multiple reports about the Viet Cong losing more personnel than they were gaining and therefore suffering a weakening of military strength, however the figures used for that report were very uncertain and the report only faintly reflected the situation at the time. These faulty reports also allowed for the war of attrition method to continue on far longer than it should of which trapped the military leaders of South Viet Nam and the US in a downward spiral of having to continually escalate force to try and completely obliterate the military strength of Hanoi, which was something that was impossible for the scale they were working at. Another issue was that the press was becoming more scrutinous of the figures being put out by the MACV and was very anxious to jump on figures that supported their position, this led the MACV to avoid acknowledging figures that overwrote their older figures and therefore undermine their credibility for their assessments. This was only worsened by the 1968 election where ambassador Bunker and general Westmoreland were ordered to return to America and deliver positive speeches about the current state of the war which they ended up very reluctantly delivering¹⁰.

All of these pressures led to a report in 1967 which cited there being around 208'000 NVA and Viet Cong present in North Viet Nam when there was much closer to 500'000 present in the area at the time¹¹. This represented an ongoing war that the CIA and the US military had over the estimates of the enemy's military strength. During the lead up to the Tet offensive in 1968, both the US and Saigon intelligence centers were aware of something big about to happen

⁹ Gen Palmer, 45

¹⁰ Ibid, 45

¹¹ Ibid, 53

around the time of the holiday. However, the CIA had its own intelligence network that reported independently only to Washington without going through the Saigon military headquarters which sent a report to Washington that the Viet Cong were planning a massive attack on many fronts in South Viet Nam without regard for their losses, and that such an attack would change the course of the war. When the CIA's George Carver forwarded this briefing to Johnson's National Security advisor, he threw cold water on the findings of the paper because he did not believe that the assault would be significant at all¹². Because of this hubris and lax attitude towards the Viet Cong, Washington was considerably underprepared for the full force of the Viet Cong's Tet Offensive. While the US troops were generally aware and alert for an attack coming on January 31 1968, many of the ARVN troops were on Holiday leave and were very unprepared for the attacks.

After the Tet offensive, Johnson's subsequent withdrawal from the presidential race, and the beginning of Nixon's presidential administration, there were multiple significant changes to the intelligence network and reporting methods for Viet Nam as well. The most significant change was that the Nixon administration did not favor the CIA the same way that the Johnson administration did, so there were times when reports that Nixon or Kissinger didn't like would be ignored or suppressed in order to maintain his political favorability with the war.¹³ Kissinger continued to play the agencies against each other to increase his administration's own political power and in turn, greatly reduced the efficacy of the White House's decisions about military goals in the Viet Nam war. Nixon and his cabinet justified this treatment of the CIA due to the error in the estimates they delivered from the earlier stages of the war when the United States

¹² Gen Palmer, 55

¹³ Ibid, 70

was still fighting it as a counter insurgency battle instead of a war of attrition. This led to only more infighting between the CIA and the military and led to many mistakes and casualties that didn't need to occur. This infighting was partly responsible for the failure of Nixon's Vietnamization plan.

One of the greater intelligence issues with the Vietnamization process was the role of Cambodia and the lie that the government was telling about the Neutrality of Cambodia during the war. Because the bombing of Cambodia was a very politically and domestically unpopular decision, the White House kept many congressmen in the dark about which meant that the policy makers were highly uninformed about the current state of the war. The bombing campaign was also kept secret because using an unpopular tactic in a war against what many considered to be a minor country was a big hit to the pride of American political and military leaders. Because of the political repercussions of the bombing campaign, the tensions between the Nixon administration and the Secretary of Defense only became higher. In fact Cambodia served as a flashpoint for many US intelligence conflicts, most notably that the intelligence agencies were divided over the significance of Cambodia as a shipping lane for enemy munitions during the mid to late 1960's. At the time, despite the CIA mentioning that there was a large presence of enemy movement throughout the country, the general conclusion of the intelligence agencies was to downgrade the priority of Cambodia as a place to intercept enemy movement. This turned out to be a grave mistake when in 1970, reports revealed that the Viet Cong had created a sophisticated logistics network throughout Cambodia and shipped over 22,000 tons of military equipment through the country. After this was revealed the CIA conducted a review of the process and found that there was a "dearth of hard evidence prior to the mid 1970's," showing how the lack of a proper

intelligence network throughout indochina allowed for the Viet Cong and the NVA to conduct massive military shipments and troop movements under the radar of the US and Saigon.¹⁴

The numerous poor decisions made throughout the Viet Nam war by the intelligence communities serve to reinforce the remark that Jim Monaghan made about Mcnamara's direct involvement in the planning of the American military strategies. Often reports were skewed to favor political goals instead of efficiency and accuracy, this was a problem throughout all of the different presidents during the war. With Kennedy's dangerously lax attitude about tumultuous domestic situation in the war, to Johnson's Tendency to rely on highly ineffective mass bombing campaigns, to Nixon's outright silencing of intelligence reports that he did not like. However, on top of the large amount of civilian interference in military planning, many of the intelligence failure and mistake were also due to the fact that the US was trying to fight a counter insurgency war against the Viet Cong without properly setting up even the most basic of intelligence networks to uncover the enemy movements. This lack of preparedness propagated throughout the rest of the war and meant that for a long time the reactions of the US forces were very delayed for a country with such an impressive military and intelligence agency. It exposes how the hubris that America had towards Viet Nam's status as a minor country produced an environment in the early stages of the war, which in turn fostered infighting and complex narrative filled with lies about what the best course was to conclude the war; and more fundamentally, what was actually happening during the war.

¹⁴Gen Palmer, 78

Works Cited

- 1: Monaghan, James. Interview By Jack Hunter and James Barker. Personal Interview. Haverford College. November 19, 2018.
- 2: Samuel A. Adams, *Intelligence Failures In Vietnam: Suggestions for Reform*. CIA Headquarters, 1969.
- 3: General Bruce Palmer Jr., *US Intelligence and Vietnam*. (Volume 28, 1984).

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Oral History Project Reflection paper

Overall the interview process was rather smooth through and through. Our interviewee was quite responsive and was very willing to make accommodations when we had to change our initial date for the interview. I found that what I learned most from the project is how differently information is gathered when you are learning of someone's personal experience rather than an aggregate of experiences through a lecture or a text. I also learned that one of the most important and time consuming part is not the actual interview but instead creating a proper set of questions that will actually create an environment to gain a lot of knowledge about a subject. What I found the most interesting and useful was having to frame the questions as mainly open-ended but also slightly guided so as to gain the information I was looking for as well as keep the interview feeling natural.

What I found was the most uninteresting and useless was the very tedious IRB training process which took a good amount of time and almost none of it applied to the interview we were conducting. The biggest challenges were actually trying to get our interview to last at least one hour because many of our interviewees stories were shorter than we expected and several of the questions we had prepared for him were rendered null and void during the interview because he didn't have any experience with the scenario or it barely affected him in an immediate or personal way. We worked to overcome this challenge by trying to dive deeper into what he had experienced and get as much as we could out of the stories he had. Another big challenge was the transcribing of the interview because it was incredibly tedious and took a very long time.

I feel that it was somewhat difficult to find a good research topic at first after interviewing James Monaghan because he didn't really see any combat and wasn't really involved in anything besides maintenance. However, I realized I could use the lack of information he had during the war in write about that.

All in all I enjoyed this project even though it was a little rushed at the end with our interviews being delayed by the IRB training and exemption process.