

THE WAY A DRUNK USES A LAMP POST: INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS
AND POLICY DURING THE VIETNAM WAR, 1962 - 1968

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the relationship between intelligence analysis and policy formation during the Vietnam War from 1962 to 1968. Rooted in a multidisciplinary approach that draws from history and international relations theory, it argues that Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, along with most of their top advisors, used intelligence analysis to confirm their preconceived notions about the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. Both presidents and the majority of their advisors all agreed that while victory in Vietnam would be difficult, allowing the Republic of (South) Vietnam (RVN) to fall to Communism was unthinkable. They filtered out intelligence analyses that suggested the U.S. could not win or that its geopolitical position could withstand the RVN's loss.

JFK and LBJ's national security decision-making system enabled this dysfunctional use of intelligence. Both presidents relied on an *ad hoc* system of policy formation in which major policy decisions took place in informal meetings staffed only by their most trusted advisors. Doing so allowed either president or their advisors latitude to expel intelligence officers from critical meetings for any reason. Analysts who became bearers of bad news on the war effort or developed negative personal relationships with any influential member of the administration risked banishment to the policy wilderness. On the other hand, analysts who reinforced their customers' preconceptions received more access to policy circles.

Top Kennedy and Johnson administration officials abused intelligence in several different ways. Ignoring or disregarding analyses that cast doubt on the war effort's

prospects was most common. In such cases, officials favored more optimistic reporting or used their own reasoning. In doing the latter, most policymakers and military officials based decisions on personal insecurity, rigid anti-Communism, previous personal experiences during World War II, and interpretations of history that justified American involvement in Vietnam. They also “cherry-picked” or pulled language from analyses that justified their positions while ignoring language elsewhere in the same reports that did not. And when the war became more controversial within the Johnson administration in 1967, some pro-war officials began openly politicizing intelligence, or pressuring analysts to advance a particular conclusion regardless of evidence.

Finally, gaps in intelligence collection and analytic tradecraft worsened the intelligence community’s standing during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Throughout the war, American intelligence collectors were unable to break the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam’s high-level communication codes or recruit any defectors or spies within the Hanoi government. Analysts thus used less reliable evidence, which weakened the reliability of their conclusions. Many analysts did not even cite sources at all. Analysts also used vague language that made their findings appear untrustworthy. All of these factors made Vietnam-era intelligence analyses easier for their readers to ignore. The result was flawed policy and strategy in Vietnam.

For Beth and Michael

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

A “MISSING DIMENSION” OF AMERICA’S WAR IN VIETNAM

For with wise advice thou shalt make thy war; and in the multitude of counselors there is safety.

-Proverbs 24:6¹

I suppose that if we in intelligence were one day given three wishes, they would be to know everything, to be believed when we spoke, and in such a way to exercise an influence to the good in the matter of policy.

-Sherman Kent²

Interested policymakers soon learn they can use intelligence the way a drunk uses a lamp post: for support, rather than illumination.

-Thomas L. Hughes³

By autumn 1967, Lyndon Johnson was growing impatient. The bombing of the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam (DRV), or Operation Rolling Thunder, was by most indicators a disappointment. Rolling Thunder officially began in March of 1965 and had three major goals: boosting the morale of the Republic of (South) Vietnam’s (RVN) government and armed forces, restricting if not interdicting the southward infiltration of troops and materiel down the Ho Chi Minh trail, and pressuring the Hanoi government to agree to peace talks. But the bombing at most only accomplished its first objective:

improving RVN morale. DRV infiltration remained high, and Hanoi refused to negotiate

¹ *The Tanakh. JPS 1917 Version* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917).

² Sherman Kent, “Estimates and Influence,” in *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), 42.

³ Thomas L. Hughes, *The Fate of Facts In A World of Men: Foreign Policy and Intelligence-Making* (Headline Series, Foreign Policy Association, No. 233), 24.

without a total bombing cessation. Analyses from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) chronicled Rolling Thunder's failure to pressure Hanoi into negotiating for years. But Johnson ignored those assessments. And though he scheduled a ten-day bombing pause for the summer of 1967 to aid the negotiators, he also authorized escalated bombing immediately before the pause. Weeks of silence from DRV diplomats followed those strikes. Johnson's frustration escalated.

It boiled over during a meeting on October 4. To the extent that chief American negotiator Dr. Henry A. Kissinger had heard from Hanoi at all, it had been to dispute specific phrasing in preliminary negotiation agreements and to issue provocative statements such as describing an American diplomatic proposal as a "faked desire for peace."⁴ During the October 4 meeting, Secretary of State Dean Rusk grumbled, "They are still weaseling on us." In response both to Hanoi's intransigence and pressure to escalate the bombing from National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, an infuriated Johnson exclaimed at the meeting, "I know this bombing must be hurting them. Despite any reports to the contrary, I can feel it in my bones ... We need to pour the steel on. Let's hit them every day and go every place except Hanoi." No one protested.⁵

Johnson's belligerence helped sink the talks. On October 6, American aviators hit targets in the DRV port city of Haiphong. Strikes near Hanoi and on a major enemy air

⁴ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 110.

⁵ Notes of Meeting, Oct. 4, 1967. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1964-1968, Vol. V, Vietnam 1967*, ed. Kent Sieg (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), Doc. 346, p. 857.

base at Phuc Yen followed several weeks later.⁶ Johnson's willingness to bomb these targets represented an expansion of Rolling Thunder far beyond what he had allowed in the past. But "pouring the steel on" had the opposite effect of what Johnson intended. The air raids deepened the conviction of many Communist hard-liners in Hanoi that LBJ was not serious about negotiating. The talks collapsed.⁷

Intelligence and Policymaking during the Vietnam War

Johnson was rarely as obvious about his disregard for intelligence analysis as he was in the October 4 meeting; otherwise the incident is representative of his and his predecessor's relationship with intelligence during the war. Both Johnson and John F. Kennedy frequently ignored or disregarded analyses that contravened their preconceived notions on the war effort. Those analyses, particularly that produced by the CIA and INR, judged from an early stage in the conflict that the American war effort stood little chance of success. Kennedy, Johnson, and their top advisors refused to accept those judgments due to their deep-seated preconception that while victory in Vietnam would be difficult to achieve, defeat there was unthinkable and unacceptable.

This dissertation examines how Kennedy, Johnson, and their top advisors used intelligence analysis to form war-related policy in Vietnam from July 1962 until November 1968. Using meeting notes, memoranda, private correspondence, the White House tapes, and newly available intelligence analyses, I argue that Kennedy and

⁶ Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 110.

⁷ Robert K. Brigham, "A Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam." *The New York Times* Opinion Page, Jun. 16, 2017.

Johnson's national security decision-making apparatus obstructed most attempts at effective policy formation based on intelligence. In practice, most important decisions related to foreign policy took place in small, informal meetings with the president and a tiny number of his most trusted advisors. In this *ad hoc* system, an intelligence analyst could be excluded from policy circles for any reason, especially if he (or in rare cases she) cast doubt on the war effort's prospects. As a result, policymakers and military officials relied more heavily on their preconceived notions on the war effort than on intelligence.

Specific preconceptions varied depending on who held them, but most often they were derived from that official's interpretations of history, past experiences, rigid anti-communism, or personal insecurity. Policymakers and military officials sought to avoid repeating such mistakes as those they identified with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's capitulation to Hitler in the 1938 Munich Conference or U.S. President Harry Truman's 1949 "loss" of China. They also drew analogies from their experiences during World War II or the Korean War that they applied to Vietnam despite the differences between those conflicts. Fear of weakness was another critical factor, particularly for Johnson. LBJ had doubts about the war effort as early as mid-1964. But he thought that being the first U.S. president to lose a war would result in an unacceptable blow to his image and legacy. Johnson, along with many of his close advisors, ignored reliable intelligence that was pessimistic on the war effort's chances repeatedly because their preconceived notions proved more powerful.

This dynamic ruined the relationship between intelligence and policy during the Vietnam War. Intelligence analysts should be central to policy formation. Their job is to

reduce uncertainty for their policymaker and military official customers. Former Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research and Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Analysis Thomas Fingar characterizes reducing uncertainty as “[enhancing] understanding of what is known, what remains unknown, what is happening, where events seem to be headed, what is driving them, and what might alter the trajectory of developments.”⁸ Analysts interpret raw intelligence such as reports from clandestine agents, testimony from indigenous assets, technologically-intercepted communications, and photographs to produce written assessments and oral briefings. In doing so they inform decision-making by identifying leverage points and trends that can be transformed into opportunities or exploited to preempt or deter adversarial behavior.⁹ The relationship between intelligence and policy is inherently unequal, as policymakers and military officials are never required to use intelligence. But in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, customer preconceptions often rendered intelligence analysis all but irrelevant.

Negative personal relationships between intelligence officers and their customers were another critical factor in the wartime intelligence-policy nexus’ degradation. Positive, professional relationships are central to a healthy connection between intelligence and policy. Analysts must tailor their reports to specific customers by

⁸ Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 3.

⁹ Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty*, 33-49. See also Jennifer E. Sims, “Decision Advantage and the Nature of Intelligence Analysis,” in *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence*, ed. Loch K. Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 395-402; Mark M. Lowenthal, “The Policymaker-Intelligence Relationship,” in Johnson, *Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence*, 438-51.

understanding those customers' experience, expectations, needs, and goals. In return, policymakers must respect the intelligence producer's professionalism and avoid casting about for analysis that confirms their preconceived notions. The key, according to Fingar, is a solid foundation of trust between policymaker and intelligence officer.¹⁰ Yet personal relationships can also corrupt or even pervert the interaction between intelligence and policy. Analysts may tell their customers what they want to hear out of a sense of affection, obligation, or ambition.¹¹ Likewise, an analyst may lose access to her policymaker customer if the relationship between the two sours. Both happened in the Kennedy and Johnson White Houses. At the same time, policymakers and military officials often disregarded accurate intelligence assessments due to personal feuds with the intelligence officers who presented them.

Even when policymakers and military officials paid attention to intelligence reporting and estimates, it was frequently to exploit them as tools to defend their arguments rather than as impartial guides to forming sound policy. JFK and LBJ's top advisors often engaged in selective reading, or "cherry picking," of intelligence. This meant lifting language from an intelligence analysis that seemed to confirm one side of an argument while ignoring other language in the analysis that did not. It also meant using reports whose judgments reinforced their arguments while disregarding disconfirming ones published contemporaneously.

¹⁰ Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty*, 52.

¹¹ See Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 7; Stephen Marrin, "At Arm's Length or at the Elbow?: Explaining the Distance Between Analysts and Decisionmakers," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 20(3) (May 2007): 401-14. See also Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Additionally, senior JFK and LBJ advisors engaged in outright politicization of intelligence. Here, I use former Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' definition of politicization: forcing analysis to conform to an observer's opinions regardless of evidence.¹² So too did officials conduct what the political scientist Joshua Rovner has called "indirect politicization," when policymakers send "tacit signals to the intelligence community about the desired direction of estimates."¹³ In such cases, policymakers and military officials did not need to instruct analysts to reach a particular conclusion. Analysts already understood what findings their customers would find unacceptable. In a healthy intelligence-policy relationship, analysts need not fear reprisal for publishing unpopular conclusions. But as maintaining a positive relationship with their customers was so critical to informing policy, analysts often softened pessimistic conclusions rather than risk damaging their careers if they did not.

Hawkish officials' preferred methods for abusing intelligence changed over the course of the war. Cherry picking was most common from 1962 through 1966. Officials found it easier to ignore pessimistic analyses during this period because the war was popular among the American public and few dissenters on the war effort held influential positions within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. But as the failure of U.S. forces to achieve their strategic objectives became increasingly evident, the anti-war movement grew in strength and an increasing number of senior Johnson administration officials lost faith in American prospects in Vietnam. Hawkish policymakers and military

¹² Robert M. Gates, "Guarding Against Politicization: A Message to Analysts," *Studies in Intelligence* 36 (1992), 5: <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/volume-36-number-1/pdf/v36i1a01p.pdf> (accessed Oct. 15, 2017).

¹³ Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 5.

officials reacted by politicizing intelligence to promote their agendas. For example, we shall see that during the 1967 Order of Battle controversy, senior military officials manipulated intelligence to argue that success in Vietnam was imminent.

Neither cherry picking intelligence nor disregarding reports that contravened customer preconceptions were limited to officials who favored the war effort. Undersecretary of State and outspoken dove George W. Ball advised against escalating the war effort throughout 1964 and the first half of 1965. Though Ball often had support from INR for his arguments, he also cherry picked language from other agencies' analysis that supported his arguments while ignoring contradictory language or flaws elsewhere in the documents. Robert McNamara was one of the war effort's staunchest supporters for all of the Kennedy and most of the Johnson administrations. To buttress that support, he cherry picked intelligence reports throughout 1964 and 1965 to justify sending American ground troops to Vietnam. By 1967 he had lost faith in the war effort. But he continued cherry picking intelligence to validate this new stance. In the words of Thomas L. Hughes, INR Director from 1963 through 1969, officials on all sides of the war used intelligence "the way a drunk uses a lamp post: for support, rather than illumination."¹⁴

The informal nature of Kennedy and Johnson's national security decision-making apparatus eroded the boundary between intelligence analysts and policy makers. Intelligence analysts do not, or at least should not, recommend policy. Rather, their reports should help inform and shape policy formation by illuminating opportunities, leverage points, and threats for decision-makers. But in JFK and LBJ's *ad hoc* system,

¹⁴ Hughes, *The Fate Of Facts In A World Of Men*, 24.

some analysts began to think of themselves as policy advisors. In particular, George A. Carver, who became the CIA's chief Vietnam analyst in 1966, frequently recommended policies to JFK, LBJ, and their top advisors. While this behavior was inappropriate for a professional intelligence analyst, Carver was never disciplined for crossing the line. Instead, his customers rewarded these breaches by granting Carver more influence over policy, not less.

Insufficient intelligence collection in the DRV likewise contributed to the poor relationship between intelligence and policy. Changes to enemy communication security in April 1962 rendered Hanoi's high-level codes unbreakable by the National Security Agency's cryptologists. And throughout the war, the CIA failed to recruit high-level defectors or spies in the DRV government. This lack of high-level signals intelligence (SIGINT) and human intelligence (HUMINT) left the IC dependent on less reliable source material to assess Hanoi's actions such as aerial photography and extrapolation from past behavior. As a result, much analysis was reactive; analysts reported what the enemy had done without providing context. But intelligence analysis is most valuable for policy formation when it estimates an adversary's future actions and assigns probabilities to them. Insufficiently confident in the sources required for such estimates, and wary of policymakers' reactions, analysts were normally content with providing descriptive narratives. Policymakers, as a consequence, had the latitude to reach their own conclusions based on their preconceptions.

Many Vietnam-era analysts did not even reference sources at all, which also reduced their influence in policy circles. Citing sources and providing transparent assessments of their reliability is a critical aspect of producing good intelligence because

it allows customers to better evaluate the analysts' conclusions.¹⁵ Failure to do so made it easier for analysts' customers to ignore intelligence analyses that contravened their preconceptions. Those policymakers and military officials could allege that unfavorable judgments were based on inaccurate information. Citing sources was no panacea against being ignored. Many policymakers disregarded analyses that used reliable evidence (although the reliability was frequently ambiguous). But in neglecting to cite sources, analysts made their jobs of informing policy more difficult.

Tradecraft flaws extended to language within assessments. Unlike historians, intelligence analysts do not articulate arguments. Rather, they express judgments based on the available evidence and then use probabilistic language to explain differing levels of certainty associated with each. Intelligence analysis pioneer and chair of the CIA's Office of National Estimates (ONE) Sherman Kent explained the practice in a 1964 essay: "To the extent that [the enemy's] security measures work ... your knowledge must be imperfect and your statements accordingly qualified by designators of your uncertainty."¹⁶ The set of terms Kent used along with accepted variants to those terms and the corresponding probabilities is as follows:

¹⁵ See Jim Marchio, "Analytic Tradecraft and the Intelligence Community: Enduring Value, Intermittent Emphasis" *Intelligence and National Security* 29(2) (2014): 169-72 for a historical overview of analytic tradecraft in finished intelligence.

¹⁶ Sherman Kent, "Words of Estimative Probability," in Steury, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, 128. ONE was responsible for coordinating National Intelligence Estimates, which represent the IC's consensus view on a given problem, event, or trend. It also produced its own intelligence memoranda. ONE later became the National Intelligence Council. See Kent, "The Law and Custom of the National Intelligence Estimate, Part II: The Making of an NIE" in Steury, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates*, 62-116; and Loch K. Johnson, *Strategic Intelligence: Understanding the Hidden Side of Government* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 323.

TABLE 1. Sherman Kent's Odds Table		
Percentage of probability	Term	Variants
100%	Certainty	N/A
93%, give or take 6%	Almost certain	Virtually certain All but certain Highly probable Highly likely Odds (or chances) overwhelming
75%, give or take 12%	Probable	Likely We believe We estimate
50%, give or take about 10%	Chances about even	50-50 Chances a little better (or less) than even Improbable Unlikely
30%, give or take about 10%	Probably not	We believe that ... not We estimate that ... not We doubt Doubtful
7%, give or take about 5%	Almost certainly not	Virtually impossible Almost impossible Some slight chance Highly doubtful
0%	Impossibility	N/A
<i>Source:</i> Kent, "Words of Estimative Probability," 133-37.		

The basic philosophy remains the same in analytic tradecraft today, though the terms have changed. This practice is also why many intelligence products are called “estimates.” For as Kent put it, “Estimating is what you do when you do not know.”¹⁷ But many analyses on the Vietnam War used subjective terms that expressed no probability at all, such as “might,” “could,” and “it is possible.”¹⁸ Use of such language diluted analysts’ impact within policy circles by making their conclusions appear ambiguous. As the infamous CIA counterintelligence chief James Jesus Angleton once stated, “It only takes a ‘maybe’ [and] you don’t get the direct attention of the recipient.”¹⁹ Vietnam-era analyses were awash in words like “maybe,” to the IC’s detriment.

The dysfunctional intelligence-policy relationship as well as the IC’s poor source base had several grievous consequences for the war effort. First, Hanoi’s strategy was often opaque both for intelligence analysts and their customers. Intelligence analysts aim to reduce uncertainty in order to provide a “decision advantage” that can prevent strategic surprise and improve understanding of known and emerging threats.²⁰ But because intelligence in Vietnam was frequently reactive instead of anticipatory, analysts could

¹⁷ Kent, “Estimates and Influence,” 35.

¹⁸ Modern intelligence tradecraft discourages or forbids the use of all of these terms. See Intelligence Community Directive 203, Jan. 2, 2015, “Analytic Standards,” p. 3: <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD%20203%20Analytic%20Standards.pdf> (accessed Apr. 17, 2018).

¹⁹ Robert M. Hathaway and Russell Jack Smith, *Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence, 1966-1973* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993), 144.

²⁰ *Statutory Authorities of the Director of National Intelligence: Hearing Before the Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, 110th Cong., 2nd Session* (Feb. 14, 2008) (statement of J. Michael McConnell, Director of National Intelligence), pp. 5-7.

only track an enemy strategic shift once it had already happened. No amount of accurate tactical intelligence could compensate for an inability to understand what the enemy would do at the strategic level.²¹ As we will see, one result of that limitation was that the best U.S. forces could achieve on the battlefield was to fight the enemy to a draw. While tactical intelligence helped U.S. forces counter enemy blows and even occasionally seize the military initiative, strategic intelligence would have been necessary to maintain that initiative long enough to win. The lack of accurate strategic intelligence also left MACV vulnerable to surprise attack. Hanoi took advantage of that weakness in the 1968 Tet Offensive.

Another consequence was that Kennedy, Johnson, and their top advisors committed numerous mistakes in prosecuting the war effort. Policymakers and military officials ignored accurate intelligence based on reliable sources just as often as they disregarded analyses based on thin, incomplete evidence. Guided by their preconceptions instead of intelligence, both presidents and their inner circles went to war against an enemy they refused to understand. Intelligence analysts repeatedly assessed different strategies' probability of success as low only to be vindicated when those strategies failed. The result was muddled, ineffective policy in Vietnam.

Finally, Kennedy and Johnson's informal national security decision-making apparatus prevented the IC from becoming a cohesive entity that could inform policy on a

²¹ Tactical intelligence refers to intelligence used for short-term, narrow questions such as enemy positions and day-to-day battlefield movements. Strategic intelligence determines long-term enemy planning and the intentions of enemy leadership. See Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 3-10; and Erik J. Dahl, *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 22.

reliable basis. Because individual relationships were the coin of the realm in both administrations in terms of maintaining access to policy circles, personal dysfunction between intelligence analysts and their customers all but ensured that the IC could not consistently influence policy. JFK's and LBJ's disregard for the divide between intelligence and policy also contributed to the IC's dysfunction, as many intelligence officers and their agencies cared more about pushing their preferred policies than working together to inform sound policy. During the Vietnam War, the IC was a loose-knit confederation rather than a tight-knit community. Bureaucratic politics ran rampant.

The Intelligence Community in Vietnam

In addition to Kennedy, Johnson, and their key advisors, I examine analysts and senior intelligence officers from across the IC in this dissertation, with a particular focus on the CIA. I have adopted that focus because the CIA is America's primary civilian intelligence agency that deals with national security. During the 1960s, its Directorate of Intelligence (the agency's analytic arm, which in 2015 was renamed the Directorate of Analysis) produced thousands of analyses, reports, and briefings on all facets of the war. In addition, the Director of the CIA (DCIA) also served as the head of the IC (DCI).²² The CIA reports to the president and the National Security Council (NSC), making it the most critical member of the IC for national security-related decision-making. The CIA

²² The reforms of 2004 established the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which now manages the IC's constituent members. See Richard H. Immerman, *The Hidden Hand: A Brief History of the CIA* (Boston and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 195.

was widely considered the IC's foremost member during the 1960s, and the same is true today. Therefore, CIA analysts and executive officers are primary actors in this study.

Other actors include the analysts of the intelligence arm of the U.S. military mission to Vietnam (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV), INR, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Security Agency (NSA), and the armed service intelligence branches. (McNamara established the DIA in 1961 for the purpose of integrating the individual military service's intelligence. Each nevertheless continued to produce its own reports). These agencies, along with the CIA, produced nearly all the analysis that policymakers needed for Vietnam.²³ During the war the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) was both underutilized and under CIA control.²⁴ I do not examine those IC agencies with little or no responsibilities for Vietnam—with the exception of NSA. NSA, which collects SIGINT, lacked a charter to perform analysis during the 1960s.²⁵ Yet the agency had a major ground presence in Vietnam through the Army Security Agency. SIGINT was also a vital part of tactical intelligence support to American troops, especially during the latter years of the Johnson administration. Therefore, I have included the NSA as an actor in this study, albeit a secondary one.

²³ INR reports to the Secretary of State, while DIA reports to the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs.

²⁴ Established during the Eisenhower administration, in 1996 NPIC became the independent National Imaging and Mapping Agency (NIMA). It was renamed the National Geo-spatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) in 2003.

²⁵ Stephen Budiansky, *Code Warriors: NSA's Codebreakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 247-48.

I benefited from timely declassification of critical documents while writing this dissertation. In the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Libraries, I collected a host of intelligence products that had been declassified within the past five to fifteen years. In several cases, meeting notes and memoranda available to researchers since the 1980s explicitly referenced these analyses. But the documents themselves, many of which dealt with sensitive topics like the DRV's military capabilities, remained restricted until recently. Both libraries also processed my many mandatory review requests. So did the Naval Heritage and Historical Command, at which I discovered a large cache of Vietnam-era DIA reports. And on September 16, 2015, the CIA released approximately 2,500 Presidential Daily Briefs (PDBs) from the Kennedy and Johnson administration. PDBs are highly sensitive synopses of current intelligence that the president and his chief national security advisors receive each day.²⁶ I had previously encountered the odd PDB in various archives, but these documents were almost always suffused with so many redactions as to render them useless. Having access to thousands of PDBs, most of which were not heavily redacted, was a boon for my research.

Online databases were likewise critical to this project. For years, the CIA's archives were only accessible through the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) – four computer terminals on the third floor of the National Archives and Records Administration's Archives II facility in College Park, MD. Research at CREST was often difficult owing to its interface – one never knew which sources would not turn up for lack

²⁶ See Tom Blanton and Lauren Harper, "President's Daily Briefs From Kennedy and Johnson Finally Released" *Digital National Security Archive*, Sept. 16, 2015: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB530-Presidents-Daily-Briefs-from-Kennedy-and-Johnson-Finally-Released/> (accessed May 6, 2018).

of a search term. And though printing documents off of CREST was free, traveling to College Park was not. But in January 2017, the CIA placed its archives online. The capability to access the documents remotely gave me far more time to explore the agency's holdings than I had had before. I found numerous internal memoranda, estimates, and briefings that I had never encountered during my visits to National Archives II in College Park. The Digital National Security Archive, United States Declassified Documents Online, and Texas Tech University's Virtual Vietnam Archive likewise provided access to sources – primarily policymaker correspondence and intelligence reports – that I had not found elsewhere. Intelligence historians frequently struggle to determine what sources related to a given topic even exist, much less where they are located and if they are declassified. The Internet eases, but does not eliminate, that challenge.

Historiography

This project intervenes in multiple historiographical conversations. First, it explores the role of intelligence in policymaking. Historians of U.S. intelligence have primarily focused on how different presidents have used intelligence agencies in policy implementation, in particular by examining the exploits of the CIA's clandestine arm. The Directorate of Operations (DO—originally called the Directorate of Plans [DP], renamed the DO in 1973, the National Clandestine Service [NCS] in 2005, then back to the DO again in 2015) recruits foreign agents, steals secrets, and engages in covert actions. The latter is best defined as secret operations designed to influence the political,

economic, or social conditions in target countries.²⁷ Notwithstanding the continuing classification of many relevant archives, the DO's history, along with the history of American covert action efforts more broadly, has given scholars of U.S. foreign relations and intelligence much to work with.²⁸

²⁷ Eric Rosenbach and Aki Peretz, "Covert Action." Memorandum, "Confrontation or Collaboration? Congress and the Intelligence Community," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, July 2009: <http://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/covert-action.pdf> (accessed May 30, 2017).

²⁸ See for example, Stephen Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned: Covert Operations and the American Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sarah-Jane Corke, *U.S. Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare, and the CIA, 1945-1953* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards: U.S. Covert Action and Counterintelligence* (New York: Routledge, 2000), and John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2006). For important studies of covert operations during the Eisenhower administration, see Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982); Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2003) and Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013). For the attempted overthrow of Fidel Castro in 1961 at the Bay of Pigs, see Peter Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980); Trumbull Higgins, *The Perfect Failure: Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs* (New York: WW Norton, 1989); Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Jim Rasenberger, *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs* (New York: Scribner, 2011). For CIA involvement in Chile, see James Petras and Morris Morley, *The United States and Chile: Imperialism and the Overthrow of the Allende Government* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); Kristian Gustafson, *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964-1974* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007); and Tanya Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). For CIA operations in Europe, see Peter Grose, *Operation Rollback: America's Secret War Behind the Iron Curtain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000); Stephen Long, *The CIA and the Soviet Bloc: Political Warfare, the Origins of the CIA and Countering Communism in Europe* (New York and London: IB Tauris, 2014); and Kaeten Mistry, *The United States, Italy, and the Origins of the Cold War: Waging Political Warfare, 1945-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

This scholarship, while valuable, pays short shrift to intelligence analysis, which is of one of the IC's most important roles and the CIA's seminal responsibility.²⁹ Spies and other operations officers collect raw intelligence, but those efforts are for naught without analysts to sift through and interpret that data in order to provide insight for policymakers.³⁰ In this study, I explore the individual and collective roles of a constellation of intelligence agencies during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In so doing I also add to our understanding of why intelligence failures occur.

Some scholars have argued that intelligence normatively exercises minimal influence on policy. People, politicians in particular, tend to ignore evidence that does not conform to their preconceptions. Thus, policymakers set on a certain course of action may not need politicized intelligence to help them justify their position, and conflicting intelligence may not dissuade them.³¹ Even when intelligence is objective, policymakers may ignore it if it does not give them the answers they want to hear. Policymakers may also ignore intelligence because they consider themselves better informed than analysts.³²

²⁹ Tim Weiner's mammoth *Legacy of Ashes: This History of the CIA* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007) is an exemplar. Some 700-pages long, it barely mentions the CIA's analytic mission.

³⁰ Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty*, 33-49. See also Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 41.

³¹ Richard H. Immerman, "Intelligence and Strategy: Historicizing Psychology, Policy and Politics," *Diplomatic History* 32(1) (January 2008), 1-23. See also Loch K. Johnson, *America's Secret Power: The CIA in a Democratic Society* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 63; Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (NY: Harper Collins, 1995), 307-350; and Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

³² Stephen Marrin, "Why strategic intelligence analysis has limited influence on American foreign policy," *Intelligence and National Security* 32(6): 725-42.

These factors all applied during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. As a result, accurate intelligence frequently went ignored.

Not all intelligence failures occur as a result of overt politicization or policymaker neglect. Scholars have shown that a variety of human cognitive biases unrelated to politicization can lead to failures. In his 2007 work *Enemies of Intelligence*, Richard K. Betts argues that most efforts to repair the intelligence process after major failures occur are wrongheaded. Failures, according to Betts, are the natural byproducts of organizational dysfunction, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and cognitive biases such as overcompensating for previous mistakes, creating patterns in data where none exist, and failing to think in a versatile, contingent manner. In short, Betts underscores the difficulty of intelligence analysis.³³ But in concert with these inherent shortcomings, politicization can make failures more likely. Kennedy and Johnson's informal decision-making apparatus accentuated the impact of the cognitive biases that Betts and others identify on the Vietnam-era intelligence-policy nexus.

This dissertation examines one of America's most well studied conflicts. Called "the war that never ends" in a 2007 collection of essays, the Vietnam War dominates our

³³ Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007). See also Immerman, "Intelligence and Strategy;" Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, FBI, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons From the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2010); Paul R. Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2011) and Michael A. Turner, *Why Secret Intelligence Fails* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005). Betts, Jervis, and Pillar agree that while reform can be useful for the intelligence process, it cannot ensure that failures will never happen. Turner argues that failures arise from specific problems within the intelligence cycle, which future reform efforts must take into account.

understanding of modern U.S. history.³⁴ Practically no scholarly monograph dealing with Vietnam fails to reference the vastness of the war's historiography. As of this writing, the war is even more popular among historians due to the many Vietnam-related 50th anniversaries over the past few years. Those anniversaries will go on until the semi-centennial of the Fall of Saigon on April 30th, 2025. America's most prominent historical documentary filmmakers, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, got in on the act with an eighteen hour, ten-part series released in the fall of 2017.³⁵

Though I add to our understanding of the Vietnam War in this study, I do not confront one of the war's most fiercely debated questions: whether the U.S. could have won. The scholarship surrounding this debate breaks down into two schools. Orthodox scholars claim that the war was unwinnable from the outset or that the cost of any potential victory was too high for the U.S. to involve itself in Vietnam in the first place.³⁶

³⁴ David L. Anderson and John Ernst, eds. *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

³⁵ *The Vietnam War*. Directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service, 2017.

³⁶ See David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Modern Library, 2002); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1988); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987); and John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009) for examples of the orthodox school.

Revisionist historians argue that the war was winnable.³⁷ I align with orthodox interpretations that judge the war a tragic blunder. But the purpose of this dissertation is not to examine whether the U.S. should have intervened in the first place or whether it could have won. I examine the role and influence of intelligence in policy decisions – what happened and why rather than what could have happened.

Nor does this dissertation participate in the most recent trend for the war's historiography. Postrevisionist scholars use documents from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to bring the Vietnamese perspective to the forefront.³⁸ Though I consider this trend highly valuable, I do not examine the Vietnamese side of the intelligence wars. To focus on decision-making either in Hanoi or Saigon as well as Washington would be to tell two different stories, beyond what is possible for a doctoral dissertation. Though Vietnamese political leaders, bureaucrats, soldiers and monks appear in my study, the focus remains on American policymakers, military officials, and intelligence officers.

³⁷ See Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 1982); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999); and Michael Lind, *Vietnam The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

³⁸ See Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2002); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Lien T. Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Studies on the Vietnam War have largely omitted examining the role of intelligence analysis in American policy formation during the conflict. Instead, the scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on covert action. Scholars have, for example, examined the CIA's covert support of Laotian guerillas against the DRV and Communist Pathet Lao.³⁹ So too have they examined the Phoenix Program, a controversial effort to eliminate Communist agents from RVN villages.⁴⁰ CIA historian Thomas Ahern has studied the agency's participation in covert action and pacification operations in the RVN.⁴¹ And no biography of legendary intelligence operatives William E. Colby and Edward Lansdale is complete without examination of their time in Vietnam.⁴² These works are valuable studies of intelligence operations in Southeast Asia. But by omitting

³⁹ See Joshua Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016); Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy and Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Timothy Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: US Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); David Corn, *Blond Ghost: Ted Shackley and the CIA's Crusades* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 120-70; and Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1998)

⁴⁰ See Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990); and Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2000).

⁴¹ See Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the Generals: Covert Support To Military Government In South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998); *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000) and *CIA and Rural Pacification* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001).

⁴² Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1988); John Prados, *William Colby and the CIA: The Secret Wars of a Controversial Spymaster* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); Randall Woods, *Shadow Warrior: William Egan Colby and the CIA* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); and Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and America's Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).

mention of intelligence analysis they leave our knowledge of policy formation during the war incomplete.

The scholarship that has examined the intersection of intelligence analysis and policy during the war has taken too narrow a perspective on that relationship. Harold P. Ford's *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers* and Joshua Rovner's *Fixing the Facts* are both limited to case studies.⁴³ These works provide excellent analysis of the specific incidents they cover. But their limited focus prevents a full understanding of how the relationship between intelligence and policy changed over the course of the war. Further, both books only focus on the CIA and MACV J-2. Examining how Vietnam-era policymakers used intelligence analysis in their decisions, and how intelligence officers from across the IC related to policymakers and responded to policymaker pressure, represents an important untold story from the Vietnam War even as it illuminates what scholars have labeled the "missing dimension" of the history of U.S. foreign relations.⁴⁴

Scholars of the Kennedy administration have devoted scant attention to how intelligence analysis influenced policy during that stage of the war. H.R. McMaster's study *Dereliction of Duty* argues that Kennedy's *ad hoc* national security policy formation system played an important role in rendering the Joint Chiefs ineffective

⁴³ Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998) and Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 49-88. See also Yukiko Ochiai, "U.S. Intelligence and the Origins of the Vietnam War, 1962-1965" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2010). Like Ford and Rovner, Ochiai examines several case studies.

⁴⁴ Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, eds. *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

during the Vietnam-related policy formation process.⁴⁵ In *Strategies of Containment*, John Lewis Gaddis argues that Kennedy's system was so disorganized that in the case of Vietnam, it produced "not coordination but disproportion, not strategic precision, but, in the end, a strategic vacuum."⁴⁶ *Shaping and Signaling Presidential Policy* by Meena Bose argues that Kennedy's system overloaded him with too many options and too much detail.⁴⁷ Though all valuable, these works leave the intelligence agencies out of the policy formation picture.

Similarly, Johnson's path to war after he took office in November 1963 has attracted vast scholarly attention, but the intelligence community's role in that decision remains a black hole. Indeed, Johnson's decision to "go big" in 1964 and 1965 has long been one of the most closely studied periods of his administration.⁴⁸ But only a few scholars have included the intelligence community as important actors in that decision-

⁴⁵ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 1-41.

⁴⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 271.

⁴⁷ Meena Bose, *Shaping and Signaling Presidential Policy: The National Security Decision Making of Eisenhower and Kennedy* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ See Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*; Logevall, *Choosing War*, David M. Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and his Vietnam Advisers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 129-235; David Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 131-157; McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

making process. In *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, Ford concludes that Johnson and his advisors ignored pessimistic intelligence assessments because their conclusions were “not what these decision-makers wanted to hear at the time.”⁴⁹ Rovner’s *Fixing the Facts* argues that domestic politics drove Johnson’s disregard for intelligence.⁵⁰ While valuable, both scholars portray the relationship between intelligence and policy in 1964 and 1965 as a simple matter of hardheaded policymakers and military officials ignoring prescient intelligence analysis. This interpretation, while accurate as far as it goes, elides any larger study of the system within which policymakers and military officials formed decisions.

The study of intelligence analysis and policy in Vietnam becomes lopsided after Johnson’s decision to escalate. No study has focused on how policymakers and military officials used intelligence to form decisions in the latter half of 1965 or the entirety of 1966. While on the one hand some scholars of this time period mention intelligence, it often remains far in the background.⁵¹ On the other hand, 1967 is one of the most well studied years of the war in part due to the Order of Battle dispute, in which the CIA and MACV debated enemy troop numbers for months before reaching a one-sided compromise toward the end of that year. CIA counted irregular forces while MACV did not. CIA’s figures were higher, but the agency’s analysts endorsed MACV’s findings. Scholars disagree on if, how, and when the intelligence-policy nexus became politicized

⁴⁹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 82.

⁵⁰ Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 49-88.

⁵¹ See James Hershberg, *Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

during the controversy.⁵² But the extant scholarship treats the incident as a discrete event. By folding the O/B debate into a larger study of the wartime intelligence-policy relationship, I show how issues that changed over time such as personal relationships between policymakers and intelligence analysts and the larger debate within Johnson's cabinet over whether the war was winnable factored into the controversy.

The 1968 Tet Offensive is also one of the most well studied events of the war. Scholars have primarily focused on why the offensive came as a surprise to U.S. forces, despite analysis indicating that a major enemy offensive was in the works. In his 1982 work *Surprise Attack*, Betts argues that political disbelief, rather than intelligence warning, is the primary reason why surprise attacks happen. Intelligence gathering and analysis may be sound, but if policymakers' preconceptions prevent them from accepting the intelligence, the attack will remain a surprise.⁵³ This argument characterizes the dominant understanding of why MACV failed to anticipate Tet. Scholars have argued

⁵² CIA analyst Sam Adams alleged that senior military officials conspired to conceal the higher troop numbers. See Sam Adams, "Vietnam Coverup: Playing War With Numbers" *Harper's*, May 1975, 41-73; and *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (Steerforth Press, 1994). James J. Wirtz argues that no conspiracy existed. Rather, he contends that military intelligence analysts altered troop estimates in a bid to please their superiors. See Wirtz, "Intelligence to Please? The Order of Battle Controversy During the Vietnam War" *Political Science Quarterly*, 106(2) (Summer 1991): 239-263. Leaning toward Wirtz is Brian D. Blankenship, "A Deceptive Estimate?: The Politics of Irregular Troop Numbers in Vietnam," *Journal of Intelligence History* 12(2) (2012): 93-112. Betts and Rovner both argue that the incident was a clear case of intelligence politicization. See Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 82-85, and Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 65-88.

⁵³ Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons For Defense Planning* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1982), 17-19. See also Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962). This seminal work established the "signal to noise ratio" as a factor in preventing surprise attacks. Analysts must sift through noise (irrelevant information) to find signal (genuine indicators). This debate relates to intelligence politicization because policymakers' preconceptions may cause them to ignore signal in favor of noise.

that the failure to anticipate the offensive stemmed from civilian policymakers and military officials distorting sound intelligence to fit their preconceptions about the war effort.⁵⁴ In particular, many military officials believed that any enemy offensive would center on a Marine firebase at Khe Sanh, near the border with the DRV.⁵⁵ I agree with this interpretation. But I build on these works by fitting the run-up to the Tet Offensive into a larger exploration of how the relationship between intelligence and policy changed over the war to show how long-running trends affected the IC and MACV's inability to foresee the attack.

Finally, the scholarship on events following the Tet Offensive either ignore intelligence's contribution to policy entirely or treat the IC as a minor player in policy decisions. The immediate post-Tet period has been well covered.⁵⁶ But with the exception

⁵⁴ See James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Larry Cable, "Don't Bother Me With The Facts, I've Made Up My Mind: The Tet Offensive in the Context of US Intelligence and Strategy," in *The Tet Offensive*, eds. Marc Gilbert and Jason Head (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 167-80; John Prados, "The Warning That Left Something To Chance: Intelligence at Tet" in Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*, 142-65; and Edwin Moïse, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017). See also Ronnie Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (Milton and New York: Frank Cass and Co., 1995) for an examination of how inter-agency rivalries added to the failure to predict the offensive.

⁵⁵ Moïse, *The Myths of Tet*, 131; Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, 119-20.

⁵⁶ See Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, 528-81; Prados, *Vietnam*, 223-255; James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 66-78; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 233-76; Richard H. Immerman, "A Time in the Tide of Men's Affairs: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam" in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968* eds. Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57-98; and Larry Berman, "The Tet Offensive" in Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*, 17-44. Ronald Spector's *After Tet* examines the battles that followed the January offensive in detail, but does not focus on intelligence's role in policy discussions during that time period. See Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993). Likewise, Gregory A.

of Ford's *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, no scholars have studied in detail how intelligence influenced Lyndon Johnson's decision to call a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and seek a negotiated settlement.⁵⁷ Nor have they examined how intelligence factored into MACV Commander William Westmoreland's request for an additional 206,000 troops.⁵⁸ The period spanning Johnson's March 31 speech announcing his withdrawal from the presidential race to the end of his administration later that year is in itself understudied. Intelligence's role in policy formation during that time period, especially concerning the peace talks that dominated the rest of 1968, has gone all but ignored.⁵⁹

Daddis' 2017 *Withdrawal* begins in 1968 after the Tet Offensive, but focuses on Creighton Abrams' replacement of William Westmoreland as MACV Commander rather than intelligence's influence on policy. See Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17-44.

⁵⁷ See Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 104-142.

⁵⁸ Scholars who study the 206,000 request focus on the request's political ramifications and whose idea it was. See Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 189-197; Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 142-43; and Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam At War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 504-512.

⁵⁹ See Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1978); *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964-1968*, eds. Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2004). See also Kent Sieg, "The 1968 Presidential Election and Peace in Vietnam," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26(4) (Fall 1996), 1062-1080; Immerman, "A Time In The Tide of Men's Affairs"; and David Milne, "The 1968 Paris peace negotiations: a two-level game?" *Review of International Studies* 37(2) (April 2011), 577-99 for the 1968 peace talks.

Organization

I have organized the dissertation chronologically. Chapter one examines how John F. Kennedy's efforts to create his informal national security decision-making system went hand-in-hand with several major reforms of the IC. Kennedy sought to avoid a repeat of the catastrophic 1961 Bay of Pigs operation, in which CIA-trained guerillas landed on Cuban shores with the intention of overthrowing Fidel Castro only to suffer immediate encirclement and capture by Cuban security forces. JFK's reforms entailed limiting the CIA's previously unchecked ability to conduct covert action while placing the DCI in charge of coordinating the rest of the IC. Doing so elevated DCI John McCone into Kennedy's inner circle of advisors. But JFK's efforts were flawed because the intelligence-policy nexus in his administration only remained healthy so long as the relationship between him and McCone was strong. That relationship dissolved after the Cuban Missile Crisis due to McCone's bluster and self-confidence, which even Kennedy's "Best and Brightest" deemed too arrogant.

That Kennedy's relationship with McCone fell apart in late 1962 is significant because the president's attention had shifted to Vietnam several months prior. When he took office, crises in Berlin, Cuba, and Laos occupied most of his attention. Laos in particular was his major concern throughout 1961. But in July 1962, diplomat Averell Harriman negotiated a political solution to the Laos Crisis, and Kennedy's attention shifted to Vietnam. The bulk of my study therefore begins that month. Once McCone no longer commanded Kennedy's confidence, the CIA lost much of its ability to inform

policy on Vietnam. The result was muddled, confused decision-making that culminated with the assassination of RVN President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963.

Beginning my dissertation by focusing on the latter stages of the Kennedy administration also allows me to examine a critical example of intelligence politicization. McCone damaged his standing as DCI in early 1963 when he actively manipulated a National Intelligence Estimate on Vietnam in a futile attempt to restore his place in Kennedy's inner circle. This instance of intelligence politicization marked an important turning point in the war because McCone lost the confidence of many senior CIA officers in addition to his president. Further, it opened the door for future politicization.

Chapter two examines how Lyndon Johnson used intelligence to form decisions during the first year and a half of his administration. This period saw LBJ and his advisors Americanize the Vietnam War by sending more than 200,000 ground troops in July 1965. Intelligence played almost no role in most of the critical debates regarding intervention. Johnson and most of his key advisors were convinced that the RVN could not be allowed to fall, and filtered out any reports or analyses that suggested the U.S. could afford not to get involved. LBJ maintained his predecessor's informal decision-making system. Doing so made it easier for him to reject judgments with which he disagreed. What is more, the mercurial president cut John McCone out of most policy meetings within months of taking office over the latter's increasing pessimism on the war effort's prospects and brash briefing style. McCone left the CIA in April 1965. His replacement, William Raborn, had even less influence with Johnson than had McCone. The CIA, along with the rest of the IC, was sidelined during the critical debates regarding whether Johnson should Americanize the war.

In chapter three, I explore how the intelligence community supported the war effort from July 1965 through December 1966. That period saw MACV expand its intelligence collection and processing apparatus in Vietnam to keep pace with the war effort. But I will show that while the U.S. built a robust intelligence network in the RVN, Hanoi's strategy remained off-limits due to the persistent lack of high-level SIGINT and HUMINT from the DRV. That limitation was a key reason why U.S. forces did not achieve lasting gains over the enemy during the first year and a half of their military presence in Vietnam. Additionally, the lack of sustained progress led several top Johnson advisors to begin to doubt the war effort. In particular, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who resolutely supported the bombing of the DRV when it began in March 1965, had lost all faith in the operation's ability to achieve its goals by September 1966. A steady drumbeat of intelligence analyses that were pessimistic on the bombing's achievements played an important role in McNamara changing his mind. But I will also show that even after McNamara gave up on the bombing, he continued to use intelligence as a tool to bolster his arguments rather than as an impartial guide to form sound policy. He had previously cherry picked intelligence to support the bombing. After September 1966 he cherry picked to argue against escalating it further.

Chapter three also covers several critical personnel changes at the CIA. Raborn left the office of DCI at the end of June once he realized that he had failed to gain either Johnson's or the CIA's confidence. His replacement was Richard Helms, an intelligence lifer who had served as a deputy to both Raborn and McCone. And as DCI, Helms elevated George A. Carver to serve as the CIA's Special Assistant for Vietnam Affairs (SAVA). Carver was an ambitious analyst with a history of ignoring the boundary

between intelligence and policy. During the Kennedy administration, he recommended deposing Diem long before the coup took place. I will show that prior to his promotion to SAVA, Carver made a series of policy recommendations regarding how LBJ should respond to widespread civil unrest in the RVN during the late spring and early summer of 1966. Yet the erosion of the intelligence-policy divide meant that Carver was never censured or reprimanded for recommending policy. As SAVA, he continued to do so to gain access to policy circles.

Chapter four examines how several inter-related forces converged during 1967 to break down the intelligence-policy nexus even further. Controversy within the Johnson administration over the best path forward led to scathing debates among LBJ's advisors. Policymakers who favored escalation continued cherry picking intelligence. So did those who favored withdrawal. In some case intelligence officers helped them do so. George Carver's ambition led him to aid National Security Advisor and unapologetic hawk Walt Whitman Rostow in bolstering his pro-escalation arguments. Carver was more optimistic on the war effort than many CIA analysts. He gave Rostow intelligence in support of that position, and in return Rostow gave Carver more access to policy circles. Richard Helms gained Johnson's confidence after CIA analysis proved prescient during the 1967 Six-Day War. We will see that while Helms did not actively manipulate intelligence on Vietnam, he reinforced Johnson's preconceptions in more subtle ways to avoid being cut out of Johnson's inner circle as McCone and Raborn had been. Helms downplayed analyses that contravened Johnson's beliefs while emphasizing other products that confirmed the president's priors.

This controversy over the war created a politicized atmosphere within the intelligence community. In November, Johnson ousted McNamara, who by that time had evolved into an ardent dissenter against the official White House line that the war was going well. By the end of the year, many analysts had become wary of publishing reports that conflicted with the optimistic line. This atmosphere also led George Carver and Richard Helms to accede to the military's enemy troop numbers in the Order of Battle dispute. Neither Carver nor Helms agreed with the military's figures. But senior military officers were determined to show progress in the war effort and feared that accepting the higher enemy force levels that resulted from CIA's methodology would lead the public to believe that the war was a lost cause. Consequently, MACV officials including Westmoreland pressured Carver to adopt their order of battle figures during a conference in September. Carver did so after Helms instructed him not to return until he reached an agreement. Because Carver lacked leverage against MACV, he acceded to the military's numbers.

This politicized atmosphere, when combined with the IC's inability to gain reliable SIGINT and HUMINT from the DRV, also played an important role during the run-up to the Tet Offensive. Analysts had no idea that Hanoi began planning the offensive in the summer of 1967 due to their inadequate source base. Months later, when the CIA's Saigon Station picked up increasingly credible indicators of an upcoming massive offensive, Carver sought to discredit them in part out of a desire to preserve his relationship with Rostow. Policymaker preconceptions once again dominated the Johnson administration intelligence-policy nexus. But instead of continued stalemate, the result of

many senior officials' self-delusion in 1967 would be a surprise attack that changed the course of the war.

Chapter five examines the Tet Offensive and its immediate aftermath. The offensive's shock belied military officials' confidence that the war would be over soon. At the same time, American troops turned enemy forces back across the RVN in the weeks following the offensive's start on January 31. Both sides sustained massive casualties. Westmoreland, along with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earle Wheeler, urged Johnson to send an additional 206,000 troops immediately. Doing so, they assured him, would be enough to win a decisive victory since the enemy forces were so badly weakened. They also warned him that any delay in sending reinforcements would allow Hanoi to replenish its forces and overwhelm MACV. But Johnson listened to the CIA, which concluded that future combat would likely end in stalemate whether or not he sent the troops. New Defense Secretary and Johnson confidant Clark Clifford used that intelligence to urge LBJ to reject the troop increase request. The president took that advice. And in late March, LBJ's group of "Wise Men," or informal foreign policy advisors, told him that they thought withdrawal from Vietnam was the most prudent course. CIA briefings made a vital contribution towards the Wise Men reaching that conclusion. LBJ responded by announcing his withdrawal from the presidential race on March 31 so that he could focus all his attention on bringing the war to a close.

But a new day had not dawned. In chapter six, I show how the CIA's victory after Tet was short lived because the problems with the intelligence-policy nexus remained. MACV continued to refuse to adopt CIA's methodology for measuring enemy troops. An extensive postmortem analysis of the IC's performance leading up to the offensive failed

to hold anyone accountable or identify any of the problems with intelligence consumption in the Johnson administration. And Johnson soon returned to ignoring all intelligence that did not confirm his preconceptions. Chief among those was that he could coerce Hanoi into a favorable peace agreement despite intelligence concluding otherwise. Johnson also consistently believed that the DRV was not negotiating in good faith. As a result, the talks languished for months before falling apart in November.

Former Deputy Director of National Intelligence Tom Fingar claims, “It would be an exaggeration to describe intelligence analysts as the Rodney Dangerfields of the Intelligence Community,” but that comparison is apt from this historian’s standpoint.⁶⁰ Analysts’ operational brothers and sisters receive the lion’s share of attention from scholars, whether that attention is kudos or scorn. Yet analysts are integral to policy formation. In the pages that follow, I explore analysts’ contributions to decision-making during the Vietnam War in order to make analysts pivotal actors in how we talk about that war, and more broadly, American foreign policy.

⁶⁰ Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty*, 33.

CHAPTER 2

**ON THE FORCE OF PERSONALITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES:
INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS, POLICY, AND THE DEBATE OVER
VIETNAM DURING THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION**

John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency intent on shaping the office to suit his leadership style, which was far different from his predecessor's. Eisenhower had a mind for bureaucracy. The former general thought in terms of structure and organization and sought to make policy formation systematic and hierarchical. For national security-related policymaking, he relied on regular National Security Council meetings and a rigorous system of policy review. Kennedy did not possess Eisenhower's experience with managing a bureaucracy, and he judged such a highly structured system overly complex and cumbersome, thereby stifling creativity and producing passivity. He dismantled much of Eisenhower's machinery in favor of small, *ad hoc* meetings of trusted advisors.¹

Further, JFK sought to strike a balance between forcefulness and deference in potential advisors. His subordinates would be leaders in their own right who could help Kennedy navigate the treacherous Cold War waters he had inherited. Finding the right man for every job (and as JFK biographer Robert Dallek has observed, Kennedy's

¹ Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "Effective National Security Advising: Recovering the Eisenhower Legacy," *Political Science Quarterly* 115(3) (Fall 2000): 335-45; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Effective National Security Advising: A Most Dubious President," *Political Science Quarterly* 115(3) (Fall 2000): 347-51.

masculine New Frontier rhetoric ensured that his appointees were always men) was thus of paramount importance during the presidential transition.²

Kennedy's system led to a redefinition of the intersection between intelligence and policy during his administration. By design, intelligence analysts and their leadership do not make policy recommendations. Intelligence analysts must serve policymakers' needs and goals, which do not always coincide with their desires.³ But Kennedy's informal approach to structure meant that this "red line" between intelligence and policy was porous if it did not entirely dissolve. Many intelligence officers began thinking of themselves as policy advisors. In some cases Kennedy encouraged such behavior. Encouraged by Kennedy, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) John McCone and Director of the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) Roger Hilsman both advocated for their preferred policies. Each also grew comfortable contradicting his own agency when presenting his conclusions to Kennedy. The tendency of intelligence officers to make policy recommendations spread to mid-level analysts at the CIA as events in Vietnam grew increasingly chaotic during 1963. And it contributed to a troubled intelligence community, as intelligence officers like Hilsman sought to make policy rather than inform it.

Kennedy's system likewise made it easier for policymakers, including the president, to ignore intelligence with which they disagreed. JFK read intelligence reports

² Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston, New York, and London: Little Brown and Company, 2003), 305-306.

³ Mark Lowenthal, "The Policymaker-Intelligence Relationship" in *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence*, ed. Loch K. Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 437-51.

on a regular basis. But an intelligence officer's access to and personal relationship with the president or his top advisors were often the critical factors in determining whether that officer or his agency would inform policy. Personal disputes could lead to important officials being excluded from pivotal policy-related meetings for any reason.

Poor tradecraft was another important problem. Because intelligence analysts frequently omitted sources from their reports, members of the Kennedy administration could not properly evaluate those reports' conclusions. As a result, civilian and military officials who favored U.S. intervention in the RVN could easily ignore pessimistic reports in favor of more optimistic analyses. And Kennedy's daily intelligence briefings (the President's Intelligence Checklist, known today as the President's Daily Brief), often only examined the background of important events or issues without providing context. That tradecraft gap left JFK reliant on intelligence officers to make up for structural flaws and fill in gaps in reporting during briefings. Thus, when Kennedy's relationship with Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) John McCone dissolved, the intelligence-policy nexus in his administration did too.

“A Hell of a Way to Learn Things”

Kennedy's razor-thin margin of victory over Richard Nixon left him without the political capital to totally remake his advisory circle. While he brought in his inner circle of Ted Sorensen, Kenneth O'Donnell, Lawrence O'Brien, Pierre Salinger, and David Powers as White House aides, along with his brother Bobby as Attorney General, he had to account for potential Republican resistance when filling other spots. That dynamic explains JFK's decision to make Republican businessmen C. Douglas Dillon and Robert

McNamara Secretaries of Treasury and Defense, respectively, along with appointing Republican academic McGeorge Bundy as Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. All three men possessed impressive credentials, and the perception of bipartisanship was a bonus for Kennedy.⁴

This bipartisanship extended to the CIA. Two days after the election, Kennedy announced that he would retain Allen Dulles, Eisenhower's Director of Central Intelligence since 1953. The president also directed Richard Bissell, the agency's Deputy Director for Plans under Eisenhower and Dulles' heir apparent as DCI, to remain. Dulles and Bissell were entrenched in their jobs and suitably experienced. But Kennedy also thought that by keeping both men he could show his commitment to fighting the Cold War without heed to partisan considerations. Still, Kennedy's early relationship with the CIA was rocky.

The first point of contention between JFK and the CIA concerned the president's intelligence briefings. Dulles had grown accustomed to providing Eisenhower with verbal briefings, both at NSC meetings and in private. Eisenhower's White House Staff Secretary Colonel (later General) Andrew Goodpaster had also provided him with private briefings.⁵ Kennedy came into office impressed with the CIA's abilities, and asked to receive the same kinds of briefings that Eisenhower had. But Kennedy thought Dulles' presentations to the NSC were superficial. And because JFK refused to hold regular NSC

⁴ McNamara was the new President of the Ford Motor Company, while Dillon had amassed an impressive career as a Wall Street banker and Bundy had become the youngest dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences in the university's history. See Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 310-314.

⁵ John Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President: Intelligence Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952-2004* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2012), 21.

meetings, Dulles often encountered scheduling difficulties when seeking to present his agency's findings to the president. McGeorge Bundy, who took Goodpaster as his model, fared little better in terms of briefing the president on intelligence matters. Dulles settled for delivering written memoranda to Kennedy, summarizing topics that he thought important.⁶ But a new crisis interrupted Dulles' efforts.

The Bay of Pigs debacle undermined Kennedy's relationship with the CIA. Inherited from Eisenhower, the plan called for a battalion of CIA-supported Cuban exiles to land on Playa Girón on Cuba's southern coastline, where they would establish beachheads, build strength, and provoke an uprising to overthrow even as Fidel Castro's forces defected. But Cuban forces surrounded the paramilitary invaders shortly after their landing on April 17. The result was a humiliating defeat. Dulles and Bissell had been two of the operation's most aggressive backers, and Kennedy was furious that they had been wrong. "This is a hell of a way to learn things," Kennedy said after the operation. "You always assume intelligence people have some skill not available to ordinary mortals ... but we will have to deal with the CIA."⁷

Some Kennedy administration officials recommended a top-to-bottom reorganization of the CIA following the Bay of Pigs. Special Assistant to the President Arthur Schlesinger argued that any intelligence agency could "afford damn few visible errors," of which the CIA had "about used up its quota." Schlesinger proposed cutting

⁶ Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President*, 47.

⁷ David Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence, 1961-1965* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 27.

back the agency's autonomy, possibly by making it subordinate to the State Department.⁸ McGeorge Bundy believed that the CIA should be split into two agencies, one responsible for overt work like intelligence analysis and the other responsible for covert activities under State Department control.⁹ JFK did not accept such radical recommendations, though he may have considered doing so in the immediate aftermath of the Bay of Pigs.¹⁰ He did, however, implement more targeted changes.

The first change was reducing the agency's ability to conduct paramilitary covert operations. In June 1961 Kennedy spread the responsibility for paramilitary covert actions among the State Department, Defense Department, and CIA. While the CIA would still have primary responsibility over all operations designed to be "wholly covert or disavowable," any operation exceeding the agency's normal capabilities would go to Defense. Both would coordinate with State on "large" operations if necessary.¹¹

⁸ Schlesinger to Kennedy, "CIA Reorganization," June 30, 1961, p. 1. National Security Files, Box 271, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (JFKL), University of Massachusetts at Boston, Boston, MA.

⁹ Memo from Roger Hilsman, Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, to Dean Rusk, June 30, 1961, p. 1. Roger Hilsman Personal Papers, Box 5, JFKL.

¹⁰ In 1966 the *New York Times* quoted Kennedy as having remarked to an unnamed colleague that he wanted to "splinter the CIA to a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds" after the Bay of Pigs. Historians have found no corroborating evidence for this quote. See "C.I.A.: Maker of Policy, or Tool? Survey Finds Widely Feared Agency Is Tightly Controlled," *New York Times*, Apr. 25, 1966, A20.

¹¹ National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 57, June 28, 1961. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1961-1963, Volume VIII, National Security Policy*, ed. David W. Mabon (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), Doc. 34, pp. 112-113. Despite Kennedy's order, Defense Department covert action capabilities remained dysfunctional until U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) was established in 1987. SOCOM's founding came after years of reform efforts following the failure of the Iran hostage rescue in 1980. See United States Special Operations Command, "US

Kennedy also remained unsatisfied with his intelligence briefings. Dulles had improvised his system of written memoranda due to Kennedy's discontent with his verbal briefings. But that system proved inadequate during the Vienna summit of June 1961. Meant to resolve whether West Berlin would continue to exist as a NATO outpost in the middle of East Germany, the summit degenerated into a rout. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev dominated the negotiations so thoroughly that JFK later remarked, he "beat the hell out of me."¹² Kennedy blamed Dulles's briefing system for causing him to miss critical message traffic before the summit, thus leaving him unprepared to deal with Khrushchev.¹³ Dulles managed to salvage some of the agency's reputation (along with his own) by keeping Kennedy informed on intelligence from the Soviet military officer and CIA spy Oleg Penkovsky. That insight helped JFK manage the Berlin crisis.¹⁴ Still, the need for a better daily briefing system remained.

JFK's complaints about his early intelligence briefings stemmed from their improvised, non-systematic nature. They were often duplicative, and in other cases they lacked information that JFK thought crucial. Further, because there was no system in place for determining what the president should see, the White House became overwhelmed with reports. Many were covered in official language related to

SOCOM: History 1987-2007," 5-28:

<https://fas.org/irp/agency/dod/socom/2007history.pdf> (accessed Oct. 13, 2017).

¹² Nathan Thrall and Jesse James Wilkins, "Kennedy Talked; Khrushchev Triumphed." *The New York Times*, May 22, 2008, A31.

¹³ Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President*, 48.

¹⁴ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 55.

classification and sources. Kennedy found such language confusing and time-consuming to read.¹⁵ Kennedy preferred simple, clear language like that found in a newspaper.¹⁶

The solution to this problem came from Richard Lehman, a mid-level CIA officer who drafted the first copy of what would be known as the “President’s Intelligence Checklist” (PICL, or “pickle”). Concise and designed to fit in a breast pocket, Lehman later described the PICL as “a single publication, no sources barred, covering the whole ground, and written as much as possible in the President’s language rather than in officialese.”¹⁷ In mid-June at Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) Director Huntington Sheldon’s prompting, Lehman wrote a draft PICL. This initial attempt met with Kennedy’s approval, and the first official PICL was published on June 17, 1961.¹⁸ Clifton reported later that JFK read the report in detail. The president even requested additional information on several of the first checklist’s bullet points.¹⁹ The CIA immediately began regular production of the PICL.

¹⁵ Richard Kovar, “Mr. Current Intelligence: An Interview with Richard Lehman” *Studies in Intelligence* 9 (Summer 2000), 55.

¹⁶ David Priess, *The President’s Book of Secrets: The Untold Story of Intelligence Briefings From Kennedy to Obama* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 16.

¹⁷ Kovar, “Mr. Current Intelligence” 55.

¹⁸ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The President’s Intelligence Checklist” Jun. 17, 1961: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005958911.pdf (accessed on August 8, 2016).

¹⁹ Chester V. Clifton, Memorandum for the Record, June 17, 1961. Chester V. Clifton Files, National Security Files, Box 349, JFKL. The bullet points JFK was interested in related to Soviet arms shipments to Cuba and a special meeting of the Soviet Party Central Committee.

The PICL was written specifically with Kennedy in mind, which created new problems even as it solved old ones. To meet his first customer's lack of sophistication with regard to intelligence compared to Eisenhower and preference for brevity, Lehman designed the PICL to be as brief and simple as possible.²⁰ But Lehman thought JFK well informed enough to not need background for events or issues in the PICL: "You assumed that he knew everything that had gone before, so it was just the newest developments and what they might mean."²¹ Yet largely because of space constraints, PICL authors still often omitted "what [events] might mean" for U.S. policy. This bare-bones style required JFK to request further clarification on checklist entries that introduced events or problems without examining their implications for U.S. policy. On June 19, for example, he instructed Clifton to obtain a report on American economic aid to Pakistan and India after reading a PICL entry that cryptically reported Pakistani dissatisfaction with U.S. India policy:

Pakistan's belief that the US favors India over Pakistan leads it to encourage press criticism of the US. The meetings recently held by the World Bank to coordinate aid to the two countries are said to have reinforced [Pakistani President] Ayub's dissatisfaction.²²

²⁰ Good tradecraft requires analysts to write with their customer's expertise, needs, and goals in mind, as well as how their customer prefers to receive intelligence. See Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 43.

²¹ Kovar, "Mr. Current Intelligence," 56.

²² See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Intelligence Checklist," June 19, 1961, item 8, CIA Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005958912.pdf (Oct. 16, 2017); and Chester V. Clifton, Memorandum for the Record, June 19, 1961, Chester V. Clifton Files, Box 349, JFKL.

Kennedy's request was evidence of a healthy intelligence-policy nexus. But that nexus was only healthy so long as Kennedy listened to and trusted the CIA. The importance of personal relationships in the Kennedy White House meant that JFK's future relationship with CIA leadership would be critical for that agency's role in policy formation.

Exit Dulles, Enter McCone

Kennedy's most high profile change to the CIA was to shake up its top leadership. Dulles resigned in autumn 1961 at Kennedy's prompting. Bissell aspired to being appointed DCI, but the Bay of Pigs put that promotion out of the question.²³ He retired in February 1962. JFK's choice to replace Dulles was John McCone.²⁴ A Republican, career businessman, and Atomic Energy Commission head under Eisenhower, McCone was a novice when it came to intelligence. Yet his inexperience was, for Kennedy, a positive. According to the journalist David Halberstam, Kennedy later admitted that he felt intimidated in the presence of such a "legendary figure" as Dulles. Preferable was a manager like McCone who would give Kennedy "the exact pitch."²⁵

Although Kennedy wanted to restrict the CIA's ability to conduct covert action after the Bay of Pigs, he also gave the agency more influence over the intelligence community following McCone's confirmation as DCI. In October 1961, Clark Clifford, then a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB),

²³ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 55.

²⁴ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 27.

²⁵ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 27.

recommended to Kennedy that he redefine the role of the DCI.²⁶ Dulles had interpreted his main responsibility as DCI to accord with his preference to manage covert actions. Clifford recommended that the DCI become America's "chief intelligence officer" by coordinating the other members of the intelligence community.²⁷ McCone would also oversee preparations of national intelligence estimates (NIEs), prepare all daily intelligence briefings, and most of all, assure "the timely flow of intelligence to the White House."²⁸ The CIA's deputy director would handle day-to-day agency operations.

Kennedy approved these recommendations. In a January 1962 memorandum, he instructed McCone to coordinate and "guide" the U.S. intelligence community by ensuring the "efficiency and effectiveness" of all U.S. agencies engaged in foreign intelligence activities, whether related to collection, analysis, or covert operations. McCone would also "assure the proper coordination, correlation, and evaluation of intelligence from all sources and its prompt dissemination to me and to other recipients as

²⁶ The PFIAB (now PIAB) is an executive advisory council that oversees the U.S. intelligence community and makes recommendations to the president regarding its performance and use. It began under Eisenhower in 1956 as the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities. See Kenneth Absher, Michael Desch, and Roman Popadiuk, *Privileged and Confidential: The Secret History of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012).

²⁷ Clark Clifford to Kennedy, "Memorandum on Central Intelligence Agency," Oct. 25, 1961, p. 1. President's Office Files, Departments and Agencies, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 1961: August-December. JFKL Digitized Collections: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-072-004.aspx> (accessed July 11, 2018).

²⁸ Clifford to Kennedy, "Memorandum on Central Intelligence Agency," p. 2. NIEs represent the collective opinion of the intelligence community on a given question or topic.

appropriate.”²⁹ Analysis, not operations, would be the CIA’s primary focus. To that end, Kennedy agreed with Clifford that giving the DCI more influence over the intelligence community was appropriate if doing so meant avoiding another Bay of Pigs.³⁰

Delegating so much authority over the intelligence community to McCone also transformed the DCI into one of Kennedy’s most prominent advisors, even though intelligence officers are supposed to inform rather than advise. DCI McCone met with Kennedy so frequently during his first year that the president encouraged him to think of himself as a policy advisor as well as an intelligence officer. The self-confident, opinionated McCone embraced his hybrid role even though it distorted the traditional divide between intelligence and policy. He was aware of the dangers that this trespassing posed, remarking, “[Y]ou have to be very, very careful ... [that] your views on the policy are not affecting the purity of your intelligence ... and you have to be awfully sure that nobody suspects that it is.”³¹ Yet he frequently did not follow his own advice. Thomas Hughes, Deputy Director and later Director of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), recalled that McCone’s “many-hatted” nature as

²⁹ Draft Memorandum from Kennedy to McCone, Jan. 1962. National Security Files, Box 271, JFKL. No date is given on the memo itself, but National Security Advisor for Internal Security J. Patrick Coyne forwarded it to Bundy on Jan. 15, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy approved it the following day. See Memorandum from Coyne to Bundy, Jan. 15, 1962, National Security Files, Box 271, JFKL. See also Douglas F. Garthoff, *Directors of Central Intelligence as Leaders of the U.S. Intelligence Community, 1946 – 2005* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 41-48.

³⁰ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 70-71.

³¹ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 71.

intelligence officer and policy advisor often aggravated inter-agency disputes and led to confusion regarding his place in the intelligence hierarchy.³²

McCone's proximity to Kennedy also made him comfortable challenging estimates with which he disagreed in communication with the president. A September 19, 1962, Special National Intelligence Estimate is famously illustrative. SNIE 85-3-62 concluded that while the Soviets were strengthening their military presence in Cuba, this buildup was "primarily" defensive in nature and that the Soviets would almost certainly not send nuclear weapons to Cuba.³³ Office of National Estimates (ONE) chairman Sherman Kent defended this argument several times during the fall of 1962.³⁴ McCone disagreed. Though he was honeymooning in Paris during the SNIE's publication, he sent a classified telegram to CIA Deputy Director Marshall "Pat" Carter the next day arguing that the Soviets "might take an unexpected risk" by establishing an offensive position in Cuba.³⁵ McCone had warned of such a possibility during three consecutive meetings with Kennedy in August. Kent and other analysts based their conclusions on years' worth of experience and collected intelligence. McCone, on the other hand, relied on his instinct and firm distrust of communists. But the complexity of human agency can render even

³² Thomas L. Hughes, "The Power to Speak and the Power to Listen: Reflections on Bureaucratic Politics and a Recommendation on Information Flows" in *Secrecy and Foreign Policy*, eds. Thomas M. Franck and Edward Weisband, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974): 13-41.

³³ Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62, Sep. 19, 1962, "The Military Buildup in Cuba," in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1992), 91-92.

³⁴ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 72.

³⁵ Telegram, McCone to Carter, Sep. 20 1962, in McAuliffe, *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 95.

the best analytical tradecraft inaccurate. Aerial photography revealing six Soviet SS-4 ballistic missiles at San Cristóbal on October 14 vindicated McCone's suspicions and began the Cuban Missile Crisis.³⁶ This victory reinforced McCone's self-confidence (some would substitute arrogance) and his tendency to express his disagreement with CIA or other intelligence community products in his meetings with the president.

Bureau of Intelligence and Research

The State Department's intelligence service also took on new leadership under Kennedy. INR was (and remains to this day) a small intelligence agency, with only a few hundred employees. INR's primary responsibilities are to provide intelligence in support of diplomacy -- its chief customer is the Secretary of State -- and to act as a liaison between the State Department and the intelligence community. Because of INR's small size, with the exception of its foreign embassies it lacked its own pool of intelligence sources, most notably human intelligence (HUMINT). Therefore, it relied on the CIA's assets. Kennedy's choice for INR Director was Roger Hilsman, a friend from his time as a Senator.

As INR Director and ardent New Frontiersman, Hilsman waged a battle with the CIA over access to the president. During World War II, Hilsman was one of "Merrill's Marauders" in Burma, and he saw service with the OSS in China. After the war, he earned a PhD in international relations at Yale. As William Rust has noted, this record of accomplishments endowed him with brashness almost

³⁶ Michael B. Petersen, "Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire: The Origins of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Cuban Missile Crisis Crucible" *Defense Intelligence Historical Perspectives* 1 (2011), 17-18; Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 107.

unmatched even among Kennedy's notoriously strong-willed "Best and Brightest."³⁷ In 1970, Hilsman explained his philosophy toward how to do well as INR Director:

[Y]ou've got to kick the CIA; you've got to tread on their toes; you've got to make them toe the mark. You've got to fight with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You have to do hard, political things. You have to get out in Congress, and you've got to make some enemies.³⁸

Hilsman also criticized his predecessor, Hugh Cumming, as insufficiently committed to "controlling" the CIA. As a result, Hilsman claimed, the CIA "[ran] the foreign policy of the United States" under Eisenhower.³⁹ This criticism had nothing to do with the traditional divide between intelligence and policy. Put simply, Hilsman wanted more influence regarding policy formation than the CIA. Hence as INR Director, he immediately set to assert his influence in the government.

One of Hilsman's first steps to gain more access to White House policy circles was his attempt to provide Kennedy with an alternative to the PICL. Because the CIA produced the PICL without input from any other intelligence agency, Hilsman saw it as a means by which the CIA gained exclusive access to Kennedy.⁴⁰ Moreover, Hilsman did

³⁷ William J. Rust, *So Much To Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Foreign Policy in Laos* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 105.

³⁸ Roger Hilsman, interview with Dennis J. O'Brien, Aug. 14, 1970, p. 4. John F. Kennedy Library Digital Collections, <http://archive1.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Hilsman,%20Roger/JFKOH-RH-01/JFKOH-RH-01-TR.pdf>. Accessed Sep. 22, 2016.

³⁹ Hilsman Interview, Aug. 14, 1970, p. 4.

⁴⁰ The same was true with the PICL's successor, the PDB, until the post-9/11 intelligence reform legislation. The CIA considers the president its "First Customer."

not judge the PICL useful. He later characterized it as “low-level stuff ... hardly worth it.”⁴¹ Hilsman’s riposte to the PICL was to order INR analysts to begin producing what he called Intelligence Notes. These were short analyses of any world event that might affect U.S. foreign relations, published within six hours of the event in question. Hilsman wanted this tight turnaround because “[H]e who gets the first interpretation out, commands the field.”⁴²

Hilsman also liked butting heads with other Kennedy administration officials to amplify INR’s influence. In early November of 1961, he responded to being excluded from a meeting by complaining that the slight “amount[ed] to a public announcement to White House, Defense, and CIA that they need not concern themselves with the head of State Department intelligence.”⁴³ Hilsman followed this accusation by threatening to accept a recent offer to chair Yale’s International Relations program. Kennedy had to meet with Hilsman in private to convince him to stay at his post.⁴⁴

Hilsman committed a more serious protocol breach when he began making trips to the Oval Office to read the *Marine Corps Gazette* with Kennedy. Though the start date of these meetings is unknown, correspondence between Kennedy and Hilsman suggests that they occurred as early as January 1962.⁴⁵ Hilsman deputy Thomas Hughes claims

⁴¹ Hilsman Interview, Aug. 14, 1970, p. 9.

⁴² Hilsman Interview, Aug. 14, 1970, p. 10.

⁴³ Memo from Hilsman to U. Alexis Johnson, Nov. 4, 1961, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 5, JFKL.

⁴⁴ Letter from Hilsman to Kennedy, Jan. 12, 1962. Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 5, JFKL.

⁴⁵ See Memorandum from Hilsman to Kennedy, Jan. 13, 1962. Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 5, JFKL.

that these meetings made Rusk “furious” because they allowed INR to report to the White House directly instead of through the secretary of state.⁴⁶ But Rusk could do little about the meetings given the president’s sanction of them.

Hilsman acted as he did to establish himself as a policy advisor as well as an intelligence officer. Like McCone, he succeeded. Over the two years following his appointment as INR Director, Hilsman forged a close working relationship with McGeorge Bundy and NSC staffer Michael Forrestal. Both men were close to Kennedy. By 1963 they had assumed a large share of responsibility over Vietnam-related decision-making.⁴⁷ But while Hilsman could count JFK, Bundy, and Forrestal as allies, his brashness created many enemies. Hilsman’s worst feuds were with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who brought a similarly brash approach to his job as Hilsman did to his.

Hilsman and McNamara’s feuds often concerned strategy toward Vietnam. Hilsman derided McNamara as a manager who liked “to concentrate on what could be quantified – money, men, guns, and ammunition.”⁴⁸ For his part, McNamara was frequently dismissive of Hilsman, calling him “abrasive” in his 1995 memoir *In Retrospect* and noting that he often circumvented chains of command to defend his

⁴⁶ Thomas L. Hughes, interview with author, September 19, 2015.

⁴⁷ Gerald J. Protheroe, “Limiting America’s Engagement: Roger Hilsman’s Vietnam War, 1961-1963” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 19(2): 267-68.

⁴⁸ Lawrence S. Kaplan, Ronald D. Landa, and Edward J. Drea, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vol. V: The McNamara Ascendancy, 1961-1965* (Washington, DC: Historical Office of the Office of Secretary of Defense, 2006), 22.

views.⁴⁹ Another point of contention between the two men was McNamara's tendency to disregard the findings of INR and other State Department officials from an early point in the Kennedy administration. Both Hilsman and Hughes challenged McNamara's postwar claim that the U.S. government lacked experts on Southeast Asia during the lead-up to escalation. They had a point. State Department officials like Paul Kattenburg, as well as INR analysts Allan Whiting and Louis Sarris, were familiar with Vietnamese history and culture. All three wrote numerous memos that were pessimistic on the prospects of success in Vietnam if the U.S. introduced ground troops, which McNamara favored doing. Hilsman and Hughes sent McNamara these analyses; he ignored them all.⁵⁰

Creation of the Defense Intelligence Agency

Upon taking office McNamara began reforming the Pentagon to rid it of waste and duplicative effort. McNamara prized centralization and efficiency. That focus stemmed from his days as a statistical researcher during World War II and executive for Ford afterward. Yet while his desire to centralize the military's operations may have been unsurprising, it is unlikely that many military figures anticipated his compulsive micromanagement. McNamara quickly became famous within the Pentagon for assembling long lists of questions that covered topics such as individual base closings

⁴⁹ Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (Vintage, 1995), 52, 55.

⁵⁰ Roger Hilsman, "McNamara's War – Against the Truth: A Review Essay," *Political Science Quarterly*, 111(1) (Spring 1996), 151-63; Thomas L. Hughes, "Experiencing McNamara," *Foreign Policy* 100, 25th anniversary issue (Autumn, 1995): 154-71; and John Prados, "The Mouse That Roared: State Department Intelligence in the Vietnam War," Digital National Security Archive, May 4, 2004: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB121/prados.htm> (accessed Apr. 14, 2017).

and in-depth budgetary information for specific weapons platforms. He also hired a group of civilian statisticians, nicknamed the “Whiz Kids,” from think tanks like the RAND Corporation to overhaul the Pentagon’s budget. McNamara’s broad and rapid reforms engendered fierce resistance from many at the Pentagon, but he was unfazed.⁵¹ Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay characterized dealing with McNamara as “like talking to a brick wall.”⁵² McNamara also made a deep mark on military intelligence.

McNamara entered the Defense Department distrustful of the service intelligence branches. This distrust concerned incidents like the missile gap controversy of the late 1950s, when Air Force analysts argued that the Soviets were on track to produce hundreds more operational ICBMs than the Army and Navy estimated.⁵³ McNamara interpreted this discord as evidence of inefficiency and parochialism among the service branches. Both interpretations had merit. Scholars have shown that the disagreement stemmed in large measure from intelligence analysts’ provincial thinking. That was particularly true for Air Force analysts, who were inclined to believe the worst because they thought their service’s survival depended on it.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Kaplan, Landa, and Drea, *The McNamara Ascendancy*, 11-15.

⁵² Dale R. Herspring, *Civil-Military Relations and Shared Responsibility: A Four-Nation Study* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 18.

⁵³ Petersen, “Legacy of Ashes,” 2–3.

⁵⁴ See John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Soviet Strategic Forces* (Princeton University Press, 2012); and Christopher Preble, “Who Ever Believed in the ‘Missile Gap’?: John F. Kennedy and the Politics of National Security,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33(4) (Dec. 2003): 801-826; Preble, *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).

McNamara sought to fix this problem by centralizing military intelligence collection and analysis. On February 8, 1961, McNamara wrote to the Joint Chiefs, requesting that within 30 days, they produce a plan for establishing a Defense Intelligence Agency. McNamara's plans for this new agency were sweeping. He wanted it to subsume the National Security Agency's functions with the intelligence and counter-intelligence roles of the military branches and his office's special operations capabilities.⁵⁵

The Joint Chiefs' response highlighted their bureaucratic turf war with McNamara. Their plan envisioned placing this agency under JCS control and calling it the "Military Intelligence Agency" (MIA) to remove any ambiguity as to where the authority lay.⁵⁶ Although the Chiefs did not mention reassigning the service branches' capabilities to MIA as McNamara preferred, they did insist on controlling NSA.⁵⁷ Doing so, they claimed, would

[I]nherently strengthen relationships between the Service cryptologic agencies and the unified and specific commands, insure a smoother transition from peace to wartime operations in support of the commands, and strengthen the control and technical direction of the Director, NSA, to support adequately the strategic mission of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Robert McNamara to Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Establishment of a Defense Intelligence Agency," Feb. 8, 1961, in *At The Creation 1961-1965: Origination Documents of the Defense Intelligence Agency*, eds. Deane J. Allen and Brian G. Shellum (Washington DC: DIA History Office, 2002), 22.

⁵⁶ JCSM 117-61, "Establishment of a Defense Intelligence Agency," Mar. 2, 1961, National Security Files, Box 280, JFKL.

⁵⁷ JCSM 117-61, 2-3.

⁵⁸ JCSM 117-61, p. 6.

Work on DIA stalled during the uproar that followed the Bay of Pigs, but by late summer McNamara was ready to move forward on the agency's founding.

The Defense Secretary pushed back against the service chiefs when he established DIA. In an August 1 directive, he created DIA as a Defense Department agency under the control of the Secretary of Defense rather than the chiefs.⁵⁹ The agency's functions and capabilities would be tightly organized under the authority of McNamara's office, and most of the service intelligence branches' capabilities would transfer to the DIA.⁶⁰

McNamara likewise rejected the JCS's proposal to have the NSA reporting directly to it. And as McNamara wished, DIA took over the special operations capabilities Kennedy had assigned his office following the Bay of Pigs debacle.⁶¹ DIA would also be responsible for briefing the President and the service chiefs on most matters related to military intelligence.⁶²

The service branches resented DIA almost immediately. Having an independent agency in charge of military intelligence analysis meant a loss of authority, personnel,

⁵⁹ Department of Defense Directive 5105, "Defense Intelligence Agency," Aug. 1, 1961, National Security Files, Box 280, JFKL.

⁶⁰ Memo from Roswell Gilpatric to DIA Director Designate Joseph Carroll, "Specific Responsibilities of the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency," Aug. 12, 1961, Allen and Shellum, *At the Creation*, 59.

⁶¹ Memorandum from Roswell Gilpatric to the Secretaries of the Military Departments, the Director of Defense Research and Engineering, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Assistant Secretaries of Defense, the General Counsel, the Special Assistant and the Assistants to the Secretary of Defense, the Director, DIA, and the Director, NSA, "Disestablishment of the Office of the Assistant to the Secretary for Special Operations," Oct. 2, 1961, National Security Files, Box 280, JFKL.

⁶² "Plan for the Activation of the Defense Intelligence Agency," Sep. 29, 1961, p. 20. National Security Files, Box 280, JFKL.

and funding for the service intelligence branches. The branch chiefs also feared that a centralized intelligence agency would not adequately serve their individual needs, especially if their needs ran counter to the Secretary of Defense's preferences. Many high-ranking military officers began criticizing DIA almost immediately after its creation, resulting in a Congressional inquiry into DIA's performance as early as February 1962, a mere five months after its creation. DIA officials managed to allay Congress' concerns, but the bad blood with the service branches remained.⁶³ What was more, predictably the agency also had trouble attracting personnel. Intelligence analyst George Allen, who worked with the DIA during its formative years, noted that only Air Force officials were inclined to work at DIA, and they did so because they thought it would give their fledging service more bureaucratic sway.⁶⁴

McNamara's pick to head DIA was Air Force Lieutenant General Joseph Carroll, who brought an eclectic background to the job. A former seminarian, steamfitter's assistant, and meat salesman, he became an FBI agent in 1940. He rose through the ranks quickly, becoming the FBI's kidnapping and bank robbery investigations chief in 1942. In 1947, Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington requested that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover send his brand new service a counterintelligence and investigation specialist to advise the Air Force on security. Hoover sent Carroll to the Air Force for a temporary tour. But Carroll's recommendations were so complex that Symington convinced Hoover, Congress, and President Truman to allow Carroll to join his service

⁶³ Kaplan, Landa, and Drea, *The McNamara Ascendancy*, 23; Petersen, "Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire," 14-15.

⁶⁴ George Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 101.

permanently as a Brigadier General in charge of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations.⁶⁵ By 1960 he had become a Lieutenant General responsible for all Air Force security policy. McNamara insisted that Carroll head the DIA due to his discretion, integrity, and skill at preventing leaks.⁶⁶ It is also likely that McNamara thought Carroll's scant military background was an asset. He would be less biased toward his pre-DIA armed service.

Carroll's leadership posed problems for DIA. As he had never served a day in uniform prior to becoming a Brigadier General, he inspired minimal respect among other flag officers. Many referred to him as "that cop."⁶⁷ Further, Carroll favored a conciliatory approach to negotiating. This style did not serve him well when dealing with military officials who were not interested in cooperating with DIA. Thomas Hughes claimed, "[I]t was as though no one had told him he was supposed to be controlling the other military intelligence agencies, so they were very fractured."⁶⁸ DIA historian Michael Petersen explains that the "glacial" pace of the agency's establishment frequently left it incapable of producing intelligence products in 1961 and 1962.⁶⁹ And unlike McCone or Hilsman,

⁶⁵ Carroll began his Air Force career in reserve status. Because Symington's request was without precedent, Congress later had to pass special legislation for Carroll to transfer to the Regular Air Force. See Petersen, "Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire," 7-8; James Carroll, *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War That Came Between Us* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 40-41, and *Appointing Joseph F. Carroll as a Permanent Colonel in the Regular Air Force*, H.R. 809, 82nd Congress, 1st Session (Aug. 8, 1951).

⁶⁶ Petersen, "Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire," 8.

⁶⁷ Petersen, "Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire," 8-9.

⁶⁸ Thomas L. Hughes, interview with author, September 19, 2015.

⁶⁹ Petersen, "Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire," 13.

Carroll never established himself as a member of Kennedy's inner circle. Its impact on wartime policy formation was therefore small, especially during its first year.

From Laos to Vietnam

When Kennedy took office in January 1961, Laos, not Vietnam, was at the top of his foreign policy concerns. Laos was struggling under the weight of a three-way civil war between the Communist Pathet Lao, the U.S.-backed royalist government, and an armed neutralist faction. This conflict grew out of a political crisis between the three groups that had festered throughout the Eisenhower administration.⁷⁰ When Kennedy met with Eisenhower on January 19 for a final briefing before the inauguration, most of the conversation focused on Laos. Eisenhower's exact recommendations to Kennedy regarding Laos remain unclear. Some who were present at the meeting later recalled that Eisenhower recommended intervening unilaterally if necessary to prevent a Communist takeover, while others recalled no such statement. Despite this dissonance, all present at the meeting agreed that the Laotian Crisis posed a major threat for stability in Southeast Asia and therefore confronted the new administration with a challenge of the first order.⁷¹

This was not the case with neighboring Vietnam, or so it seemed in January 1961. In retrospect this perception is counterintuitive. RVN President Ngo Dinh Diem

⁷⁰ See William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos 1954-1961* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012); and Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012) for background on the Laos Crisis.

⁷¹ See Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy About Indochina? The Politics of Misperception" *Journal of American History* 79(2) (Sep. 1992): 568-87.

consolidated his hold on power in the mid-1950s through a series of authoritarian measures that led to many civilian deaths.⁷² Diem's repression caused a backlash among many RVN civilians that coalesced into a Communist insurgency in 1959. The insurgency, which many of its supporters called "the Front" and American officials called "Viet Cong" enjoyed a swell of support among disaffected RVN citizens throughout 1959 and 1960. In August 1960, Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 63.1-60 reported that if "adverse trends" such as that high rate of support continued, "they will almost certainly in time cause the collapse of Diem's regime."⁷³ Hanoi supported the revolt beginning in 1959, and on December 20, 1960 proclaimed it the National Liberation Front (NLF).⁷⁴ But when Kennedy took office the insurgency had not yet blossomed into full-scale war as it had in Laos. Further, SNIE 63.1-60 contended that Diem's current position was stable and that he still had time to avert catastrophe by

⁷² See Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem And The Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham, Maryland, 2006), 70-80; Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude To America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 9-11; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 87-123; Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron Of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 86-116.

⁷³ Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 63.1-60, "Short-Term Trends in South Vietnam," in *Estimative Products on Vietnam*, eds. John K. Allen Jr., John Carver, and Tom Elmore, (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2005), 1. An NIE is labeled "Special" when any aspect of its production or distribution differs from the normal process. See Sherman Kent, "The Law and Custom of the National Intelligence Estimate, Part II: The Making of an NIE" in *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), 103-04.

⁷⁴ See David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 27-26; and David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975, Concise Edition* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 111-36.

reducing his regime's corruption and excesses.⁷⁵ With an agenda so crowded when he took office, Kennedy concentrated on those hotspots that were already in crisis, not those that might emerge as crises. Consequently, Laos consumed much more of his energy during his first year than the RVN did.

Kennedy was determined not to send U.S. ground forces into Laos. The landlocked state presented numerous logistical difficulties, such as an almost total lack of a transportation infrastructure capable of keeping large numbers of U.S. ground troops supplied beyond the capital, Vientiane. Nor did Kennedy consider non-Communist Laotian leaders reliable allies. Upon meeting right-wing Lao general Phoumi Nosavan in 1961, Kennedy remarked, "If he's our strongman, we're in trouble."⁷⁶ Neutralist leader Souvanna Phouma seemed untrustworthy due to his willingness to work with the Pathet Lao. In May 1961, Kennedy placed diplomat Averell Harriman in charge of negotiating a political solution. Harriman managed to forge a settlement at Geneva by June 1962. That agreement left the royalists, neutralists, and Pathet Lao in a power-sharing arrangement.⁷⁷ Kennedy thought that the U.S. had to make a stand against Communism in Southeast Asia. But Laos' logistical gaps and shaky leadership made it the wrong place.

For this reason, with a settlement in place in Laos, however tenuous, the administration's attention shifted to Vietnam. With its deep-draft harbors, large airports, and firmly anti-communist strongman heading the government, the RVN seemed a better

⁷⁵ SNIE 63.1-60, 4.

⁷⁶ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 87.

⁷⁷ Edmund F. Wehrle, "A Good, Bad Deal?: John F. Kennedy, Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962" *Pacific Historical Review* 67(3): 371.

place to fight Communism than Laos.⁷⁸ While the NLF continued to enjoy bountiful recruitment among RVN civilians and military successes against the ARVN during 1961, defeating it still seemed a surmountable challenge. In November 1961, General Maxwell Taylor and State Department Policy Planning Council Chairman Walt Rostow visited the RVN. Taylor later reported to JFK that developments there were “extremely positive in character” and that “[t]here is no need for fatalism that Southeast Asia will inevitably fall into Communist hands.”⁷⁹ On December 14, 1961, Kennedy sent Diem a memo announcing increased U.S. support.⁸⁰

Optimism among military officials on the situation in Vietnam persisted during 1962. In May McNamara remarked to journalist Neil Sheehan that “every quantitative metric we have shows we’re winning this war.”⁸¹ At a July 1962 conference in Honolulu, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) commander General Paul Harkins reported that there was “no doubt that we are on the winning side.”⁸² Taylor returned to Vietnam in October and wrote a report based entirely on his personal impressions of the situation there arguing that “much progress” had been made since his last visit. Taylor

⁷⁸ Timothy N. Castle, *At War In The Shadow of Vietnam: US Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 136; Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling*, 269-70.

⁷⁹ “Report on General Taylor’s Mission to South Vietnam,” Nov. 3, 1961, p. 3. National Security Files, Box 203, JFKL.

⁸⁰ Editorial Note, *FRUS Vietnam 1961*, Doc. 322, p. 737.

⁸¹ Harold Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 4.

⁸² Record of the Sixth Secretary of Defense Conference, Camp Smith, Hawaii, July 23, 1962. *FRUS Vietnam 1962*, Doc. 248, p. 546.

allowed that enemy infiltration of men and materiel remained a serious problem for which no solution yet existed. But he remained so confident in an eventual U.S. victory that he listed “How to lift the [RVN] in an enthusiastic victory drive when the preparations are ready?” at the end of his report.⁸³

Flawed intelligence helped bolster this perspective. Limited American resources in Vietnam during the early Kennedy administration left the IC reliant on field reporting from U.S. and ARVN military and diplomatic officers for human intelligence (HUMINT) on the war effort’s progress. Much of this reporting was distorted in favor of showing U.S. and ARVN forces making progress against the NLF and PAVN (People’s Army of Vietnam, or the DRV’s military, sometimes referred to as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA). Senior U.S. officers were especially eager to demonstrate that the war was turning against the communist forces. To be sure, allied forces registered some gains against the NLF and PAVN during the latter half of 1962. Most of this intelligence emphasized high enemy casualty figures to argue that the U.S. could prevail on the battlefield no matter how quickly the NLF and PAVN reinforced. Officers who pushed this overly optimistic intelligence often did so to protect their careers by showing that they were committed to their mission. In many cases, this flawed intelligence came from RVN officials who

⁸³ Paper Prepared by the President’s Military Representative (Taylor), “Impressions of South Vietnam,” Sep. 20, 1962. *FRUS Vietnam 1962*, Doc. 288, 660-63. The other questions listed in this section were: 1. “How best to organize the U.S. military command in Southeast Asia?” 2. “How to improve the reporting system on progress?” and 3. How to accelerate the socio-political program in support of Diem’s Government?” in that order. The question cited above was listed fourth and last.

wanted to put the best possible spin on the situation. And ignorant of Vietnamese culture and society, many Americans stationed in Vietnam underestimated Hanoi and the NLF.⁸⁴

Though human intelligence (HUMINT) from Vietnam was flawed, Americans in Vietnam had little else to go on at the start of the Kennedy administration. Limited signals intelligence (SIGINT) was a notable problem. From 1959 until early 1961, NSA analysts could only monitor DRV communications from three outposts in the Philippines. These sites were too small to intercept more than a fraction of DRV messages. No U.S. SIGINT post would be established in the RVN until April of 1961. That month, the Third Radio Research Unit of the Army Security Agency (ASA) arrived in Saigon.⁸⁵ ASA worked with NSA, but the Army analysts' primary mission was to monitor enemy tactical movements. The NSA office in charge of Asian communist communications had lost interest in Vietnam by early 1961, arguing that any further investment there was pointless unless the situation worsened.⁸⁶ But after the ASA post was established, U.S. SIGINT agencies devoted more resources to Vietnam as the Kennedy administration poured funding and manpower into reinforcing Diem's regime. Superior enemy operational security, however, constrained what American intelligence officers could accomplish.

By enhancing its signals security, Hanoi rendered its high-level communications unreadable by American cryptanalysts shortly after Kennedy took office. Within a year of the ASA post's establishment, the Marines, Air Force, and NSA had all set up their own

⁸⁴ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 8-11.

⁸⁵ Robert Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1975* (Fort Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, 2002), 73-78; 123-25.

⁸⁶ Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness*, 124-25.

posts to monitor the NLF. Hanoi responded by increasing its support of the NLF. Part of that increase included heightened communications security. From 1959 through mid-1962, local NLF commanders used their own ciphers. This decentralized method of communications ended in April 1962. That month, Hanoi completed a two-year effort to institute a uniform cipher system for the PAVN and NLF, with regular replacements of one cipher with another. Hanoi completed this project with substantial funding, equipment, and instruction from the Soviet KGB.⁸⁷ Though some American cryptologists had noticed that individual NLF communication posts were converting to more complex codes as early as October 1961, the NSA did not anticipate that Hanoi was upgrading its communications security until enemy communications suddenly became unreadable across the RVN in April 1962.⁸⁸ A SNIE published in July of the following year on the Sino-Soviet split's impact on Hanoi's relations with Moscow and Beijing showed the limits of intelligence collection in the DRV. When assessing how the leadership in Hanoi would react to the split, the analysts could only extrapolate from public statements and recent history of DRV actions.⁸⁹ Reliance on such evidence left analysts with limited ability to estimate Hanoi's future actions.

⁸⁷ While the USSR did not begin officially supporting Hanoi's war effort until 1964, the KGB established ties with the Ministry for Public Security (Hanoi's intelligence service) in 1955. The DRV used that relationship as part of its effort to build secure communications. See Merle Pribbenow, "The Soviet-Vietnamese Intelligence Relationship During the Vietnam War: Cooperation and Conflict," Wilson Center Cold War International History Project, Working Paper 73 (Dec. 2014), 4-5.

⁸⁸ Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness*, 146-48.

⁸⁹ Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-63, "The Impact of the Sino-Soviet Dispute on North Vietnam and its Policies" June 26, 1963, p. 4. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

Several Kennedy advisors remained optimistic on the war in spite of unreliable intelligence. NSC staffer Michael Forrestal argued in a September 1962 memo to Kennedy that the U.S. had started to make progress in the RVN. He used enemy casualty figures that U.S. embassy personnel provided to argue that after months of frustrating stalemate, “it does appear that we have finally developed a series of techniques which, if properly applied, do seem to produce results.”⁹⁰ Forrestal warned Kennedy that he did “not believe that one can rely entirely on [the casualty] figures” despite “considerable improvements” in their accuracy.⁹¹ But Forrestal thought any inaccuracies were small and did not affect the overall casualty ratio, which he judged to be “almost a 4-1” in favor of the RVN government (GVN). He provided no evidence for why he considered the ratio accurate, although he hedged by noting that he had asked the State Department to recheck the figures in order to obtain “their most pessimistic estimate.” But he also recounted a conversation that he had had with Diem’s Secretary of State, Nguyen Dinh Thuan, to contend that a recent drop in the price of rice was evidence of increased security in the Mekong Delta. Forrestal thus remained bullish on the war effort notwithstanding his recognition that some intelligence was flawed. Maxwell Taylor agreed. Taylor’s October report mentioned that although the quality of battlefield intelligence had improved over the last ten months, much more remained to be done. Taylor was also skeptical of the casualty statistics, but thought they painted a positive picture overall:

“[T]he statistics – for what they are worth – indicate an improvement in comparative casualties, in the reduced loss of weapons to the enemy, and

⁹⁰ Memorandum from Forrestal to Kennedy, “Situation in South Vietnam,” Sep. 18, 1962. *FRUS Vietnam 1962*, Doc. 283, 651.

⁹¹ “Situation in South Vietnam,” 650, 651.

in the freeing of a larger segment of the population and of the national territory from VC domination.”⁹²

Like Forrestal, Taylor believed that the field reporting was accurate enough to draw positive conclusions about the war effort.

Forrestal and Taylor’s preconceptions outweighed their reservations on the quality of battlefield intelligence. Convinced that the war had to be won through building popular support for the GVN, Forrestal did not favor sending large numbers of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam.⁹³ Taylor was far more hawkish. Following their visit to Vietnam in late 1961, Taylor and Policy Planning Council Chairman Walt Rostow had published a report that recommended increasing the size of the RVN’s armed forces by 30,000 men, as well as sending more U.S. advisors to train them in counter-guerilla and jungle warfare techniques.⁹⁴ Both were predisposed to overlook flaws in U.S. intelligence collection in Vietnam. ONE, however, was not. In a 1963 postmortem of a 1961 NIE, ONE noted that most field reporting was slanted in favor of the most positive picture possible.⁹⁵ This criticism fit with the office’s long-standing pessimism on the American war effort.

ONE had been skeptical of American prospects in Vietnam for years due to the GVN’s inability to attract widespread popular support. During the late 1950s, the office

⁹² Taylor, “Impressions of South Vietnam,” 662.

⁹³ Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 106-10.

⁹⁴ Taylor-Rostow Report, Appendix, “MAAG and Military Aid,” National Security Files, Box 203, JFKL.

⁹⁵ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 10.

questioned both the stability and loyalty of the ARVN to the Saigon government and the ability of the U.S to build a viable society in the RVN.⁹⁶ This pessimism persisted into the Kennedy administration. In December 1961, ONE published a memorandum on the Diem regime's prospects. The memo mentioned reports of rampant dissent among "important" GVN officials in Saigon to support its contention that the regime's heavy-handed anticommunist efforts had worsened dissatisfaction with Diem among RVN civilians. Though political reform was necessary to reverse this trend, the memo also used Diem's past megalomaniacal behavior as evidence that he was "highly likely" to kill any potential reform:

He is confident that he knows better than anyone else how to run the country ... Diem does not lack the courage of his convictions and we believe that he will alter neither his convictions nor his methods in the face of U.S. pressure. At most, he may pay lip service to certain U.S. suggestions.⁹⁷

The memo concluded that the internal security situation within the RVN would "deteriorate considerably over the next few months." Conditions would be ripe for a coup-de-état by ambitious ARVN generals.⁹⁸ The estimate did not specify the reports it used, but during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the CIA's Saigon

⁹⁶ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 12-14.

⁹⁷ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Kent to McCone, "The Diem Regime and Its Prospects," Dec. 5, 1961, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A000800010008-7.pdf> (accessed Jul. 15, 2017).

⁹⁸ "The Diem Regime and Its Prospects," pp. 3-4.

station recruited multiple clandestine sources within the GVN.⁹⁹ And as the U.S. commitment to the RVN deepened, many American officials developed close relationships with their GVN counterparts. These relationships proved valuable for keeping abreast of GVN political turmoil.¹⁰⁰

DCI John McCone and INR Director Roger Hilsman were also skeptical about the war effort, although for starkly different reasons. In June 1962, McCone traveled to Vietnam on a fact-finding mission. During a meeting with McNamara shortly after his return, he reported that in his opinion, the U.S. was “merely chipping away at the toe of the glacier from the North.”¹⁰¹ Hilsman’s skepticism drew from his disagreement over proper strategy with McNamara and several other Kennedy officials. In particular, Hilsman thought Taylor and Rostow’s suggestion to send ground troops was misguided.

By advocating an increased focus on counterinsurgency, Hilsman crossed the boundary that distinguished an intelligence officer from a policy advisor. In February 1962, he published an INR paper that argued for adapting a plan that the British had used

⁹⁹ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 168; Thomas Ahern, *The CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-1963* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), 133, 134, 167.

¹⁰⁰ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Coup Rumors in South Vietnam,” Aug. 14, 1963, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00429A001200020010-4.pdf> (accessed Nov. 13, 2017); Cable from Lodge to Rusk, Aug. 24, 1963, National Security Files, Box 198A, JFKL; CIA Information Report, “Involvement of the Commanding Officer of the Eighth Regiment, Fifth Infantry Division, in Dang Duc Khoi’s Coup D’Etat Plan,” Sep. 23, 1963, National Security Files, Box 200, JFKL. See also John Prados, *William Colby and the CIA: The Secret Wars of a Controversial Spymaster* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 124-25.

¹⁰¹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 6.

with some success against a Communist insurgency in Malaya after World War II.¹⁰²

Civilians living in rural areas would resettle in fortified villages called Strategic Hamlets and thereby be protected from the NLF. U.S. and ARVN forces could use the hamlets as bases from which they could slowly expand their control over the countryside. They could also use the hamlets as opportunities to develop close relationships with civilians, therefore strengthening the bond between RVN civilians and the Saigon government. Despite the inappropriateness of an INR Director making such an explicit policy recommendation, Kennedy set the program into action shortly after the memo's publication without censoring Hilsman.

Hilsman supported the program despite his appreciation of its shortcomings. Many peasants resented being forcibly relocated from their ancestral lands without compensation. And most hamlets provided poor security against NLF infiltration and attack due in part to this widespread resentment, as well as poor construction.¹⁰³ In June 1962, INR reported that province chiefs were imposing "unrealistically high quotas" for

¹⁰² Roger Hilsman Personal Papers. Countries Files, 1961-1964. Vietnam: "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam," Feb. 2, 1962, p. 15. JFK Library Digital Collections: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RHPP-003-006.aspx> (accessed Jul. 15, 2017). The Strategic Hamlet Program also had a recent historical precedent in Vietnam in the agrovillage program of 1959. But that program had been so ineffective that for Hilsman to mention it in his memo would have hurt his case. He therefore did not do so. See Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, 105-07 for an analysis of how civilian discontent with the agrovilles bolstered the NLF. See also Miller, *Misalliance*, 234-38 for an analysis of how Diem's brother and chief advisor Ngo Dinh Nhu thought the program would encourage self-sufficiency among peasants, and applied French counterinsurgency theory in his interpretation of how to carry it out.

¹⁰³ See Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1967); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1988); Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 117-40; and Miller, *Misalliance*, for more on the Strategic Hamlet Program's failures.

population resettlement. It further concluded that the NLF continued to build strength and erode government control throughout the countryside.¹⁰⁴ But after traveling to Vietnam in December of 1962 and January of 1963, Hilsman contradicted his own bureau by describing the plan as “basically sound” in a letter to Rusk.¹⁰⁵ As evidence, Hilsman cited a United States Information Agency (USIA) survey of Long An province as evidence that the program was providing RVN civilians with enough security against NLF attacks that their loyalty toward the Saigon government was improving.¹⁰⁶

Forrestal, along with senior Kennedy military advisor and Marine General Victor Krulak, agreed with Hilsman. Krulak served as the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Tactics, and he was a staunch defender of counterinsurgency’s prospects in Vietnam. In November, Taylor’s aide, Commander Worth Bagley, noted in a memo to his boss that Krulak was attempting to allay concerns about the program by sending “basic information” about the program to skeptics like Harriman.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ W. Dean Howells, Dorothy Avery, and Fred Greene, *Vietnam 1961-1968 as Interpreted in INR’s Production* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 1969), Part A-II, “Looking for Progress: February 1961-May 1963,” 5.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Hilsman to Rusk, “South Viet-Nam,” no date, p. 1. Roger Hilsman Personal Papers, Box 3, JFKL.

¹⁰⁶ Hilsman to Rusk, “South Viet-Nam,” p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ While I have not been able to locate the specific message Krulak sent to strategic hamlet skeptics, Bagley mentioned that Krulak used information found in a draft memorandum to McNamara. The finished memo used Department of Defense statistics to update McNamara on the program’s status. Although the finished memo stated that the program’s “real strength” was “still more in prospect than reality,” it argued that an increasing wave of NLF attacks against hamlets served as proof that the enemy recognized the program as a serious threat, and that its long-term potential remained

Forrestal was another strong supporter of the program, since it fit with his belief that the U.S. had to fight Communism in the RVN by building support for the GVN.¹⁰⁸ The program experienced serious problems such as the hamlets possessing insufficient resources to guard against NLF attacks. But Hilsman, Forrestal, and Krulak commanded enough influence in the Kennedy administration to keep the program in place.

Hilsman and Forrestal became close friends and political allies due to the cautious optimism they shared about the war. Forrestal accompanied Hilsman on his December 1962 trip to Vietnam. Their final report was based on a combination of interviews that they conducted with Diem and U.S. military officials as well as statistics on the war effort that military and U.S. embassy officials in Saigon provided. In a January 2 memo, Hilsman noted that the embassy reported high morale among U.S. and GVN officials despite statistics from CINCPAC showing that NLF troop levels had increased from 18,000 to 23,000 over 1962. He concluded that it was “hard to see exactly what specific basis there is for the embassy’s optimism.”¹⁰⁹ But Hilsman also thought that ARVN counterinsurgency missions showed great promise.¹¹⁰ The final report split the difference:

strong. See Memo from Taylor to McNamara, CM-117-62, “Viet Cong Attacks on Strategic Hamlets,” Nov. 17, 1962, *FRUS Vietnam 1962*, Doc. 319, pp. 736-38.

¹⁰⁸ Preston, *The War Council*, 108-09.

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum for the Record by Hilsman, Jan. 2, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1963*, Doc. 3, p. 5. I have been unable to locate the CINCPAC report that Hilsman referenced in this meeting, but a DIA Intelligence Summary from late December 1962 noted a similar jump in NLF troop levels that year (from 16,500 to between 22,00 and 24,000), due to steady recruitment. The report did not cite sources. See DIA Intelligence Summary, Dec. 28, 1962, p. 2. Chester V. Clifton Files, Box 358, JFKL.

¹¹⁰ Memorandum for the Record by Hilsman, “Conversation with Major General Edward L. Rowny,” Jan. 2, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1963*, Doc. 4, p. 9.

The U.S. was “probably winning, but certainly more slowly than we had hoped.”¹¹¹ It recommended a greater emphasis on counterinsurgency as well as forcing Diem to liberalize.

The two men became even more influential in the Kennedy White House by early 1963. Kennedy liked their report so much he asked Forrestal, “Why the hell can’t I get this kind of report from regular government people instead of you two amateurs?”¹¹² Though the report identified serious problems in the RVN, it also portrayed these problems as surmountable. Kennedy therefore saw no need to consider major changes to U.S. policy in Vietnam.¹¹³ Then in April, Hilsman became the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. This position meant that he was now officially in the policy prescription business after years of inappropriately recommending policy as an intelligence officer. Hughes took over as INR Director.

Crises of Confidence

John McCone’s influence with Kennedy peaked during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Sherman Kent’s ONE published two SNIEs during the crisis that helped Excomm assess

¹¹¹ Roger Hilsman Personal Papers. Countries Files, 1961-1964. Vietnam: Hilsman trip, December 1962-January 1963: Basic report and "Eyes Only" annex, p. 6. JFKL Digitized Collections: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RHPP-003-009.aspx> (accessed Jul. 11, 2018).

¹¹² Preston, *The War Council*, 116-17. By “regular government people” Kennedy meant career civil servants. Neither Forrestal nor Hilsman had spent their careers in government prior to joining the Kennedy administration, although Forrestal had served as a naval officer and attaché for several years under Truman, and his father James had served as Secretary of the Navy and the first Secretary of Defense.

¹¹³ Robert McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia Since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 111.

Soviet reactions to possible U.S. actions. Kennedy considered the CIA's aerial photography analysis critical to the crisis' peaceful outcome. The NSA provided Excomm with valuable SIGINT. DIA kept the Joint Chiefs updated on target information in the event of a U.S. invasion.¹¹⁴ Kennedy praised the intelligence community's work to McCone after Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles. For that McCone himself received much of the credit.¹¹⁵

Despite this good work, the crisis had adverse consequences for the relationship between Kennedy and McCone. McCone was proud of his warning to Kennedy, as well as his agency's and the IC's performance during the crisis. But the PFIAB, along with the White House, Congress, and some members of the media, criticized the CIA for its pre-crisis failures. McCone reacted by never letting anyone in the White House forget that he had been correct regarding Soviet intentions. Kennedy and his advisory circle gave McCone credit for his prescience. But they grew tired of listening to his boasting. McNamara even came to believe that McCone was trying to cover for his agency's analytical lapses through his self-congratulation. The documentary record does not reveal whether JFK concurred with his Secretary of Defense. But he unambiguously began to grow cool toward his DCI.¹¹⁶

ONE's skepticism on Vietnam intensified as 1962 wore on, and in September the office requested that the U.S. Intelligence Board commission a new NIE on the situation

¹¹⁴ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 74-75. See Petersen, "Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire," 20-22 for an analysis of the DIA's performance during the crisis.

¹¹⁵ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 75.

¹¹⁶ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 129; Helgeson, *Getting to Know the President*, 50.

in the RVN.¹¹⁷ Though the USIB was reluctant as first, it eventually agreed. ONE released its initial draft in February 1963. It reflected the office's deep pessimism on the war. The draft concluded that initiatives like the Strategic Hamlet Program showed promise. But a pervasive lack of morale among ARVN troops, civilian distrust of the GVN, and widespread Communist infiltration of the ARVN were problems that would be "difficult to surmount" and threatened to undercut whatever progress the U.S. had made. Radical changes to the RVN military and government would be necessary to head off Communist gains. These changes would require time and effort.¹¹⁸ The Board of National Estimates – senior ONE staff that coordinated and supervised NIEs within that office – softened this negativity by shifting blame for these problems from the overall ineffectiveness of the Saigon government to a specific indictment of Diem.¹¹⁹ The change was not enough for John McCone.

The DCI was furious upon reading the draft NIE. In a dramatic reversal from his previous position, he thought the NIE was too negative on the war effort's prospects. He demanded to know why Kent had not sought the opinions of administration officials

¹¹⁷ The USIB was composed of the directors of each U.S. intelligence agency and was responsible for commissioning and approving NIEs. See Memo from McCone to Kennedy, "Reorganization of the United States Intelligence Board," Jan. 7, 1962, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01676R000600170005-5.pdf> (accessed Oct. 15, 2017); and Petersen, "Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire," 4.

¹¹⁸ Willard C. Matthias, "How Three Estimates Went Wrong," *Studies in Intelligence* 12 (Winter 1968): 32.

¹¹⁹ Matthias, "How Three Estimates Went Wrong," 33. For the roles of the ONE and Board of National Estimates within the NIE drafting and approval process, see Sherman Kent, "The Law and Custom of the National Intelligence Estimate, Part II: The Making of an NIE" in Steury, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, 62-116.

“who know Vietnam best.” These officials included Hilsman, Forrestal, Krulak, and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Earle “Bus” Wheeler. All had visited Vietnam recently and returned with sunny prognoses of the situation there. McCone also thought that Harkins, Nolting, and Pacific Fleet Commander-in-Chief (CINCPAC) Adm. Harry Felt should have input on the NIE. These three were likewise optimistic on the situation in Vietnam.¹²⁰ McCone’s actions represented the politicization of intelligence.

The consensus among those who McCone thought “knew Vietnam best” was in accord with the DCI’s judgment: The estimate was overly negative. The military members of McCone’s group argued that the draft did not credit the ARVN for their successes against NLF forces in recent months. This criticism was misplaced. In January 1963, the ARVN suffered a defeat in a battle with the NLF at Ap Bac, a hamlet in Dinh Tuong Province near Saigon. This engagement was the first time the NLF defeated ARVN forces in an open battle rather than an ambush or other guerilla warfare-style skirmish. The ARVN outnumbered the NLF forces fivefold, making their defeat even more embarrassing.¹²¹ But no critic of the estimate accounted for Ap Bac. Krulak argued that the Saigon government had steadily built up its forces while the NLF’s capabilities had “probably not increased correspondingly.”¹²² He did not give evidence for that

¹²⁰ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 14.

¹²¹ See Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 201-66.

¹²² Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 15.

conclusion. The CIA had stated in January that intelligence collection on Hanoi's infiltration capability was too poor to estimate NLF strength.¹²³

Kent and his staff could not stop McCone from skewing the estimate's findings. According to SNIE 53-63 contributor Willard Matthias, he and the estimate's other drafters distorted its conclusions "slightly" for fear of McCone and the USIB making even more substantive changes if ONE refused to budge.¹²⁴ The Board of National Estimates approved a final version of National Intelligence Estimate 53-63 on April 17, 1963, that began "We believe that the Communist progress has been blunted and that the situation is improving."¹²⁵ The estimate's optimism was tepid. NIE 53-63's final draft still reported major instability throughout the RVN and a strong NLF. But the estimate gave its readers an impression of progress in the U.S. war effort that its first draft had not.

McCone politicized intelligence during NIE 53-63's drafting process in part due to a combination of several important personal relationships. McCone trusted Krulak's judgment, since the two were close friends. McCone's close relationship with Dwight Eisenhower was another likely reason for his interference in the estimative process. Eisenhower spoke frequently to McCone about the importance of maintaining the RVN as an anti-Communist bastion. And McCone's degraded relationship with Kennedy was another important factor. By spring 1963, McCone had ceased to be a valued member of

¹²³ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "North Vietnamese Support to the Viet Cong through Laos," Jan. 23, 1963, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t00429a001100010023-9> (accessed Jul. 16, 2017).

¹²⁴ Matthias, "How Three Estimates Went Wrong," 34.

¹²⁵ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 15; Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 81.

Kennedy's inner circle.¹²⁶ But McCone's decision to politicize intelligence should not be interpreted as trying to confirm his chief customer's preconceptions.

McCone's prior experience with Kent, particularly but not exclusively relating to the Cuban Missile Crisis, left him reluctant to accept ONE's findings. In all likelihood, he was more wary of signing off on an estimate from an office that had been so wrong in the past than he was intent on telling his chief customer what he thought JFK wanted to hear.¹²⁷ Indeed, McCone had burnished his relationship with Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis by pushing back against Kent's ONE. That he did so again suggests that he was trying to rebuild his relationship with the president by distancing himself from Kent. McCone's list of editors for the estimate included Hilsman and Krulak. Both commanded influence in the Kennedy White House. By siding with people that Kennedy trusted, McCone hoped to return to Kennedy's good graces. But McCone never regained his past influence with JFK.

NIE 53-63 helped reinforce the long-standing belief of McNamara, the Joint Chiefs, and MACV Commander Harkins that that the American war effort was making progress. At a conference in Honolulu held in early May, Harkins reported that a series of "indicators" such as the weapon loss ratio, number of strategic hamlets constructed, and amount of naval and air resources dedicated to the RVN as evidence that the U.S. was winning.¹²⁸ At the Honolulu Conference, McNamara stated that the war effort was going

¹²⁶ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 131-36.

¹²⁷ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 81.

¹²⁸ Proceedings of Eighth Secretary of Defense Conference on Vietnam, HQ CINCPAC, May 8, 1963, Virtual Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, pp. 76-77:

well enough for the U.S. to draft a contingency plan for withdrawing American advisors from Vietnam.¹²⁹ NIE 53-63 contributed to this optimistic atmosphere. As the *Pentagon Papers* later observed, “Honest and trained men in Vietnam looking at the problems were reporting what they believed reality to be ... Washington decision-makers could not help but be guided by these continued reports of progress.”¹³⁰

Civil unrest throughout the RVN soon belied NIE 53-63’s optimism. For years many Buddhists had perceived Diem’s government as corrupt and anti-Buddhist. Conflicting interpretations of how to modernize the RVN deepened tensions between the Buddhists and GVN.¹³¹ On May 8, a large group of Buddhists in Hue protested a GVN policy that prevented temples from flying the Buddhist flag. The protest turned into a riot after RVN police fired their weapons into the crowd and killed several people. Yet the Board of National Estimates continued to defend the estimate’s conclusions for another two months. On July 10, the Board and McCone approved an update to the estimate arguing that chances of the crisis toppling Diem’s government were “better than even.”¹³²

<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=1320101002> (accessed Oct. 15, 2017).

¹²⁹ See Memorandum for the Record of the Secretary of Defense Conference, “Notes and Necessary Actions Resulting from SecDef Honolulu Conference on Vietnam, 6 May 1963,” May 6, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1963*, Doc. 107, p. 270.

¹³⁰ See Vietnam Task Force, *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967* (Pentagon Papers), Book IV.4, “Phased Withdrawal of U.S. Forces in Vietnam,” vii.

¹³¹ See Edward Miller, “Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 ‘Buddhist crisis’ in South Vietnam” *Modern Asian Studies* 49(6) (2015), 1903-62 for an appraisal of the extant scholarship on the crisis and a convincing interpretation of conflict over nation building in the RVN as its root cause.

¹³² Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-63, Jul. 10, 1963, “The Situation in South Vietnam,” p. 1, Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

Harkins, Felt, and Krulak, however, continued to insist that the U.S. was winning the war even as the crisis worsened.¹³³

The Buddhist Crisis and Diem Coup

As the Buddhist Crisis grew from a series of local riots to RVN-wide protests, Kennedy administration officials differed on the root causes of the crisis and potential solutions for it. Hilsman, Forrestal, and Harriman blamed Diem and Nhu for the crisis, recommending that both brothers be ejected from power. Recently appointed ambassador to the RVN Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. agreed. Robert McNamara, along with most high-level military officials, thought that the situation in the RVN was still salvageable with Diem and Nhu in charge. Kennedy took neither side. The president's relationship with Diem had, however, grown tense over American aid to the RVN. Kennedy wanted Diem to accept more American guidance, particularly in terms of his draconian anti-communist policies. But Diem and Nhu were convinced that the U.S. would continue to support them even if they used repressive measures against the Buddhists. Nhu went so far as to threaten to reach an accommodation with Hanoi if Washington wavered.¹³⁴

The CIA and INR judged Diem's policies to be driving the Buddhist Crisis. An OCI report released on June 3 blamed "inept government handling" for the crisis escalating from local discontent to nationwide civil unrest. OCI used public statements

¹³³ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 19-20.

¹³⁴ Miller, *Misalliance*, 277-78.

and reports from unnamed sources in the RVN as evidence.¹³⁵ Diem promised to accommodate the Buddhists' demands in a June 16 agreement. But a PICL published two days later noted that most Buddhists "remain[ed] skeptical" of Diem's willingness to carry out his government's promises.¹³⁶ Hughes sent a long research memorandum to Rusk on June 21 analyzing the crisis. Like CIA, INR reported that the crisis spread across the RVN so quickly because Diem "misread the seriousness of the Buddhist movement and attributed it to political and even Communist inspiration."¹³⁷ INR also found that the June 16 agreement would do little to resolve tensions if the regime was "conspicuously dilatory, inept, or insincere in handling Buddhist matters" which would in turn "almost certainly" lead to a coup. INR concluded that disgruntled army commanders or Saigon bureaucrats would be the most likely coup plotters. The NLF would not be involved beyond trying to take advantage of the chaos that followed any revolt against Diem.¹³⁸

The CIA began picking up rumors of coup plotting shortly after the June 16 meeting. A July 1 PICL mentioned rumors of the military plotting against Diem but

¹³⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Buddhist Demonstrations in South Vietnam," Jun. 3, 1963, p. 3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00429A001100050001-9.pdf> (accessed Dec. 15, 2016).

¹³⁶ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Intelligence Checklist," June 18, 1963, p. 3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005996403.pdf (accessed Mar. 3, 2017). The PICL cited no sources.

¹³⁷ INR Research Memorandum RFE-55, "Implications of the Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam," June 21, 1963. *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1963*, Doc. 183, p. 405.

¹³⁸ RFE-55, pp. 405-6.

included no detail on sources, possible participants, or when the coup might take place.¹³⁹ On July 9, McCone reported to Kennedy that ARVN General Tran Van Don had mentioned that he was involved in a plot during a conversation with CIA officer Lucien Conein. Don did not report the coup's timing or his co-conspirators. McCone considered this conversation "substantial" evidence that a coup attempt was "increasingly likely," as Don was a respected senior ARVN officer. McCone also noted that Diem, "presumably reinforced by the known opposition of his brother [Ngo Dinh] Nhu to any appeasement of the Buddhists," had stated that he had no intention of acceding to Buddhist demands. Diem had also stated that he believed that the entire Buddhist movement was under NLF control without saying why he believed that. McCone closed by stating that there was no evidence that the NLF had managed to infiltrate the movement.¹⁴⁰ He made no recommendations about what Kennedy should do. That was appropriate for an intelligence officer, if uncharacteristic for McCone.

During July, the CIA reported that Nhu bore equal or greater responsibility for the deepening instability as Diem. In a June 28 analysis of the Buddhist movement, OCI analysts singled out Nhu and his wife, Madame Nhu, as particularly invested in discrediting the Buddhist movement as subversive.¹⁴¹ And a July 13 PICL reported that

¹³⁹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Intelligence Checklist" July 1, 1963, p. 2. CIA Electronic FOIA Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005996429.pdf (accessed Mar. 1, 2017). All information potentially relating to sources has been redacted from the document.

¹⁴⁰ DCI Briefing July 9, 1963. Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB101/vn01.pdf> (accessed Mar. 9, 2017).

¹⁴¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Office of Current Intelligence, "The Buddhists in South Vietnam," June 28, 1963, p. 4. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room:

Nhu had “been making noises of late which suggest he has come to see himself as the savior of his country” and that “the odds are somewhat better than even ... that [a coup] will be tried ... soon.”¹⁴² The PICL did not specify how soon a coup attempt might happen or who would be involved, although a CIA cable published five days earlier identified several top ARVN officers as coup plotters.¹⁴³ The documentary record does not reveal whether Kennedy asked for further clarification.

These findings, along with a July SNIE, reinforced Michael Forrestal’s anti-Diem preconceptions. SNIE 53-2-63 – the updated version of NIE 53-63, released on July 10 – reported that the ambitious Nhu was “virtually certain” to attempt a power grab if Diem was deposed.¹⁴⁴ The estimate also stated that if Diem failed to carry out the promises he had made to the Buddhists, civil unrest would worsen and the odds of a coup or assassination would become “better than even.”¹⁴⁵ SNIE 53-2-63 was not sourced, leaving its high confidence levels impossible for policymakers to evaluate. But on August 9, Forrestal used nearly identical language in a memo to Kennedy: “[I]t is now the estimate of the intelligence community that the possibilities of a successful coup in the

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00927A004100030002-4.pdf> (accessed Apr. 7, 2017).

¹⁴² CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The President’s Intelligence Checklist,” July 13, 1963, pp. 2-3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005996451.pdf (accessed Oct. 17, 2017).

¹⁴³ See Central Intelligence Agency Information Report TDCS 3/552,770, Jul. 8, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1963*, Doc. 212, p. 474.

¹⁴⁴ Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-63, “The Situation in South Vietnam,” June 10, 1963, p. 1. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

¹⁴⁵ SNIE 53-2-63, p. 5.

next three months are about even.”¹⁴⁶ Forrestal did not encourage Kennedy to approve such a coup. But his use of the IC’s conclusions followed several criticisms of Diem and Nhu’s policies as antithetical to American principles of religious freedom as well as a recommendation to “take into consideration a growing body of domestic and international opinion which is becoming more and more critical of our intimate association with Diem.”¹⁴⁷ And as Diem and Nhu’s policies became increasingly authoritarian, Forrestal supported ousting both of them.

Hilsman, Harriman, and Forrestal argued for deposing Diem and Nhu in late August. On August 21, Nhu authorized police raids on Buddhist pagodas throughout Saigon as well as several more elsewhere in the RVN. All had been hotbeds of anti-Diem protest. The police arrested hundreds of Buddhists and caused widespread damage to the pagodas.¹⁴⁸ Nhu also declared martial law. Three days later, Hilsman sent a cable to Lodge, who had recently taken over from Frederick (Fritz) Nolting as U.S. Ambassador to the RVN. Harriman and Forrestal both read Hilsman’s draft of the cable after Hilsman and urged him to send it. The now-infamous Cable 243 blamed Nhu for the raids, stating that he had “maneuvered himself into command position.” It urged removing Diem from power unless he would “rid himself of Nhu and his coterie and replace them with best military and political personalities available.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Memorandum from Forrestal to Kennedy, “South Vietnam,” Aug. 9, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1963*, Doc. 249, p. 560.

¹⁴⁷ Memorandum from Forrestal to Kennedy, Aug. 9, 1963, p. 560.

¹⁴⁸ Miller, “South Vietnam’s 1963 ‘Buddhist crisis,’” 1957-58.

¹⁴⁹ DEPTTEL 243 from Hilsman to Henry Cabot Lodge, Aug. 24, 1963. Roger Hilsman Papers, Countries Files 1961-1964, Vietnam, August 1963: 22-26, JFKL Digitized

The CIA had no substantive involvement in Cable 243's production apart from one agency telegram that served as part of the cable's evidentiary base. The cable cited a telegram from the Saigon CIA station that summarized a conversation that Tran Van Don had had with an unnamed American official. Don worried that Nhu had accumulated too much power, and that if given the choice between Diem and Nhu in charge, he would pick Diem. The report contained a section that summarized the opinion of the American official to whom Don had spoken: "[A]lthough [Diem] is still in the saddle what is going on now is being controlled by Nhu."¹⁵⁰ But that was the extent of the CIA's involvement in the cable. McCone and Carter were both unavailable on August 24. Hilsman sent the memo to the CIA's duty officer, Deputy Director for Plans Richard Helms, prior to sending it to Saigon. Helms later recalled this gesture as perfunctory: "This was just sort of tipping their hat to the Agency, that they'd called everybody."¹⁵¹ Kennedy was angry about the breakdown in process, but declined to discipline Hilsman, Forrestal, or Harriman.¹⁵²

Several CIA and DIA reports from late August stated that despite Nhu's best efforts, he and Diem were losing control of the RVN. The PICL for August 21 reported

Collections: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RHPP-003-016.aspx> (accessed July 11, 2018).

¹⁵⁰ CIA TDCS Information Report No. [redacted], "Major General Tran Van Don Details the Present Situation in South Vietnam; The Plan to Establish Martial Law; and, his Views on South Vietnam's Future," Aug. 24, 1963, Roger Hilsman Papers, JFKL Digitized Collections: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RHPP-003-016.aspx> (accessed Jul. 11, 2018).

¹⁵¹ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 182.

¹⁵² Preston, *The War Council*, 123.

the pagoda raids and imposition of martial law to Kennedy. Unlike most PICLs, which reported events to the president without giving much context or assessing the events' implications for U.S. policy, the August 21 checklist stated that the raids "may only serve to further alienate the Vietnamese public and will further damage Diem's image throughout the world."¹⁵³ An August 21 DIA report from Director Carroll to McNamara and the Joint Chiefs used nearly identical language without citing sources: "The declaration of martial law and repression of Buddhist agitation in Viet-Nam are likely to further alienate the public from the Diem Government and will have serious repercussions throughout the country."¹⁵⁴ The PICL for August 23 noted that Cambodia had broken diplomatic relations with the RVN, and that the Buddhist crisis was "probably an important factor in this decision."¹⁵⁵ Handwritten notes on the cover pages of these PICLs indicate that Kennedy read both documents. An August 24 DIA cable from Saigon quoted the U.S. air attaché in the RVN as stating that the imposition of martial law had quieted the RVN public. But "there are signs of growing resentment at the severity of the government's repression of Buddhists ... this resentment may be turned against the U.S., which has been closely identified with the Diem regime."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ CIA Intelligence Report, "The President's Intelligence Checklist," Aug. 21, 1963, p. 4. National Security Files, Chester Clifton Papers, Box 360, JFKL.

¹⁵⁴ Memorandum from Carroll to McNamara, "Martial Law in South Viet-Nam," Aug. 21, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1963*, Doc. 264, p. 600. A handwritten note on the cover indicates that McNamara read the document.

¹⁵⁵ CIA Intelligence Report, "The President's Intelligence Checklist," Aug. 23, 1963, p. 2. National Security Files, Chester Clifton Papers, Box 360, JFKL.

¹⁵⁶ DIA Intelligence Summary, Aug. 24, 1963, p. 2. National Security Files, Chester Clifton Papers, Box 360, JFKL.

McCone, along with Far East Division head and former Saigon station chief William E. Colby, opposed removing Diem from power. Throughout September, McCone urged caution on removing Diem from power due to the potential for leaving increased political instability in a coup's wake and the likelihood that whoever replaced Diem would not be an improvement from any standpoint.¹⁵⁷ Colby agreed. Though he recognized Diem's flaws, he also thought that there was no one better to replace him.¹⁵⁸ But McCone and Colby's warnings went unheeded. Kennedy's anger about the manner in which Cable 243 had been transmitted faded quickly, and regime change in the RVN took on substantial momentum as a policy option within the Kennedy White House.¹⁵⁹

Several mid-level CIA officers favored overthrowing Diem and Nhu. In April 1963, ONE staffer Chester Cooper recommended pushing Diem and Nhu out of power, albeit not until Diem's term of office ended in mid-1966. Cooper thought that waiting that long would allow the U.S. to install Diem's replacement with a minimum of controversy, as he expected the military phase of the conflict to be over by then.¹⁶⁰ And ONE staffer George A. Carver had wanted to eject Diem from power for years. Prior to joining ONE, Carver served as a case officer in Saigon under Colby. In 1960, Carver established contact with a group of dissident generals intent on deposing Diem and Nhu. That coup attempt collapsed shortly after it began in November 1960. After the coup

¹⁵⁷ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 34-36.

¹⁵⁸ Randall Woods, *Shadow Warrior: William Egan Colby and the CIA* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 189.

¹⁵⁹ Preston, *The War Council*, 123-24.

¹⁶⁰ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 29.

failed, Saigon newspapers revealed Carver's identity and the CIA transferred him to ONE. He quickly became a key member of the ONE's Far East staff.¹⁶¹

Carver recommended getting rid of the entire Ngo family in response to the Buddhist Crisis. In an August 28 memo, Carver argued that because of the August 21 pagoda raids, the Ngo family's public image had plummeted so precipitously among the RVN populace that no member of the family could now "provide the kind of unifying national leadership necessary to win the counterinsurgency struggle and reduce the Viet Cong threat to manageable proportions." Carver noted that while a spontaneous uprising could happen soon, the Communists would "be likely to benefit" from the chaos that such an uprising would produce. Instead, Carver recommended that the U.S. manage and guide an ARVN coup to oust the Ngo family. He wanted the U.S. to take the lead in managing the coup to ensure that the coup plotters not create a military junta after ousting Diem.¹⁶² A handwritten note on the cover page indicates that Carver wrote the memo at Deputy DCI Marshall Carter's request, and that McGeorge Bundy gave a copy to Kennedy. Several other high-ranking CIA officers, including Huntington Sheldon and Colby, also received copies. There is no record of the latter two officials' responses.

¹⁶¹ Woods, *Shadow Warrior*, 139; Richard H. Immerman with Kathryn Olmsted, John Prados, and Athan G. Theoharis, "Biographies of Important CIA Administrators" in *The Central Intelligence Agency: Security Under Scrutiny* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 248.

¹⁶² Memo from George A. Carver to Acting DCI Marshall S. Carter, "Alternatives to the Ngo Family Regime in South Vietnam," Aug. 28, 1963, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A001000010007-5.pdf> (accessed Feb. 28, 2017). All of Carver's proposed candidates were Buddhists from Southern Vietnam. Carver believed both qualities essential towards holding the RVN together, unlike the Catholic Diem who had stocked his government with family members and Northern refugees.

At the very least, Carver's memo influenced policy by confirming Bundy's pre-existing beliefs. Though originally ambivalent about a coup, Bundy moved to favor an American-supported coup in which both Diem and Nhu would be overthrown after Cable 243's publication.¹⁶³ Carver's recommendations provided support for that argument. But Bundy did not raise Carver's proposed succession plan with Kennedy. Indeed, Colby recalled later that he could not remember one serious discussion during the entire summer of 1963 about who might succeed Diem after a coup.¹⁶⁴ The confusion pervading the Kennedy White House by late August of 1963 all but precluded long-term thinking about the political structure of a post-Diem GVN. And Carver was not a member of Kennedy's inner circle. When Carter passed the essay to Bundy, he included a handwritten note on the cover describing Carver as "one of our good analysts" who nevertheless was "not witting of current U.S. Govt actions" in the RVN.¹⁶⁵ Being on the outside limited Carver's potential influence.

Bundy's use of Carver's memo to confirm his preconceptions showed how the boundary between intelligence and policy had become practically non-existent by late August of 1963. The memo had been a clear breach of Carver's role as an intelligence analyst. Yet Bundy rewarded him with access to the President because his memo supported Bundy's position. Forrestal used intelligence products in a similar manner. On August 26, Forrestal sent Bundy an OCI report that he called "balanced and accurate."

¹⁶³ Preston, *The War Council*, 124.

¹⁶⁴ Prados, *William Colby and the CIA*, 119.

¹⁶⁵ See handwritten note by Marshall Carter to McGeorge Bundy, cover of George A. Carver to Carter, "Alternatives to the Ngo Family Regime in South Vietnam" Aug. 28, 1963, National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 198A, JFKL.

The report's first line supported Forrestal's argument that Nhu was too dangerous to stay in power even as it did not make that judgment explicit: "Ngo Dinh Nhu is the key to the situation in Saigon and appears to be the controlling figure, possibly without President Diem's assent."¹⁶⁶ Yet McCone and Colby's concerns about deposing Diem had no effect on the policy formation process. Intelligence analyses on the situation in the RVN were only useful as tools for pro-coup Kennedy administration officials.

This perversion of the relationship between intelligence and policy left policy formation paralyzed in the fall of 1963. During that time period, Nhu expanded his power so rapidly that INR warned many reports from human sources within the GVN could no longer be considered reliable.¹⁶⁷ Kennedy continued to read the PICL as the Buddhist Crisis intensified. But the disintegration of his relationship with McCone meant that JFK began relying on fact-finding missions by trusted advisors to keep track of the unpredictable political and military situation in the RVN and contextualize his bare-bones PICLs. These missions often produced contradictory reports. Krulak and the State Department's Joseph Mendenhall traveled to Saigon in September. When they returned, Krulak reported that the NLF remained strong but that the war could still be won with Diem and Nhu in charge. Mendenhall reported that RVN state authority had broken down

¹⁶⁶ Forrestal to Bundy, cover memo for CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Review of Recent Developments in South Vietnam," Aug. 26, 1963, p. 1. National Security Files, Box 198A, JFKL.

¹⁶⁷ Howells, Avery, and Greene, *Vietnam 1961-1968*, Part A-III, "The Trouble With Diem," 5.

throughout much of the RVN due to widespread dissatisfaction with Diem's government. Kennedy notoriously replied, "The two of you did visit the same country, didn't you?"¹⁶⁸

McNamara disregarded CIA products even as he agreed with John McCone that a coup should be averted. In September, the Defense Secretary accompanied Maxwell Taylor to the RVN on a fact-finding mission. Their final report argued that the military campaign had made "great progress" which Diem and Nhu's abuses threatened to erode. The two men also concluded that chances for improvement under different leadership were "about 50-50."¹⁶⁹ Representatives from both the State Department and CIA accompanied McNamara and Taylor on their trip. But they cited no assessments from either organization in their report. Rather, they based their conclusions on their personal visits to Saigon and several military installations throughout the RVN. Regarding a potential coup, the report stated, "[W]e lack a clear picture of what acceptable individuals might be brought to the point of action, or what kind of government might emerge."¹⁷⁰ This statement ignored Carver's August 28 memo. OCI had also provided a detailed list of different military and civilian officials for an August 28 meeting at which McNamara was present.¹⁷¹ McNamara used the OCI document as a notepad during the meeting.

¹⁶⁸ Memorandum of a Conversation, White House, Sept. 10, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Doc. 83, p. 162.

¹⁶⁹ Memorandum from Taylor and McNamara to Kennedy, "Report of McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam," Oct. 2, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Doc. 167, pp. 337, 344.

¹⁷⁰ McNamara-Taylor Report, p. 344.

¹⁷¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Cast of Characters in South Vietnam," Aug. 28, 1963, Digital National Security Archive: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB444/docs/diem18.pdf> (accessed Apr. 17, 2017).

McNamara likewise discounted INR's findings. On October 22, the bureau published RFE-90, a research memorandum arguing that the NLF had built enough strength in the RVN to place the U.S. war effort and Diem regime in deep peril even without the Buddhist Crisis.¹⁷² McNamara and Maxwell Taylor accused INR of having interfered in military matters without consulting DIA or any of the service intelligence branches. McNamara even sent Rusk a note stating, "Dean . . . if you were to tell me that it is not the policy of the State Department to issue military appraisals without seeking the views of the Defense Department, the matter will die."¹⁷³ McNamara's criticism baffled Hughes, Rusk, and Lou Sarris (RFE-90's author) because the memorandum used statistics that DIA had compiled from MACV field reports.¹⁷⁴

Though Rusk managed to assuage all parties, the dispute surrounding RFE-90 overshadowed the report itself. Rusk promised McNamara that INR would always consult with Defense on military issues. Satisfied, the Defense Secretary dropped his complaint. Hughes wrote later that Rusk's defense of INR protected the bureau's analytical independence from policymaker pressure "for six more years of war."¹⁷⁵ Yet Rusk did not placate the military until November 8. By that time, the coup against Diem

¹⁷² INR Research Memorandum RFE-90, Oct. 22, 1963, "Statistics on the War Effort in South Vietnam Show Unfavorable Trends," in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam, the Senator Gravel Edition, Vol. II* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), 770-80.

¹⁷³ Note from McNamara to Rusk, Nov. 7, 1963. Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 5, JFKL. The note also bears a handwritten response from Hughes reading, "Mr. Secretary – You may certainly say this."

¹⁷⁴ Hughes, "Experiencing McNamara," 161.

¹⁷⁵ Hughes, "Experiencing McNamara," 162-63. See also Memorandum from Hilsman to Rusk, Nov. 8, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Doc. 306.

and Nhu had gone forward and both leaders had been assassinated. When dealing with fast-paced events such as the Buddhist Crisis, intelligence reports are most valuable for policy formation if policymakers read them immediately following their publication. That RFE-90 became hung up in controversy for over two weeks rendered it ineffective for informing policy.

McNamara rejected RFE-90 due to the report's contravention of most military intelligence reporting and his low regard for INR products. Indeed, military intelligence remained optimistic about the situation in the RVN even as the Buddhist Crisis tore Diem's government apart. An August 17 CINCPAC appraisal of the security situation in the Mekong Delta region argued that while the delta remained a difficult area in which to fight the NLF, the RVN's position there had improved since the previous year.¹⁷⁶ In an October cable to Maxwell Taylor, Gen. Paul Harkins repeated several times that the military situation was improving: "On balance we are gaining with the VC ... the general trend continues to be favorable."¹⁷⁷ Such optimistic reporting reinforced McNamara's belief, or perhaps more accurately wishful thinking, that the military situation was improving even if the political situation was becoming chaotic. Further, McNamara's note to Rusk shows that he saw INR commenting on military matters as the bureau overstepping its prerogative. Nor had he attempted to mend fences with INR after

¹⁷⁶ Appraisal of Military Situation in Mekong Delta Region. CINCPAC, Telegram No. 08252, to JCS. Aug. 17, 1963, NSF, Vietnam, Vol. XIII. Department Of Defense, 17 Aug. 1963. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/52wix3 (accessed Jul. 15, 2017).

¹⁷⁷ Memo from General Harkins to General Taylor evaluating the situation in Vietnam. Department Of Defense, 30 Oct. 1963. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/52wo26 (accessed Jul. 15, 2017).

Hilsman left. In a 1999 oral history, Hughes recalled that McNamara never used INR products for policy formation. The controversy over RFE-90 was his only substantive interaction with the bureau.¹⁷⁸

Kennedy snubbed McCone throughout October. The McNamara-Taylor report recommended that Kennedy withdraw 1,000 advisors and cut off some economic aid to the RVN to convince Diem to accede to U.S. demands. McCone disagreed, but Kennedy approved the recommendations. Lodge convinced Kennedy to fire the CIA's Saigon Station Chief John Richardson, a strong supporter of Diem, in early October. Lodge also banned American officials in Vietnam from engaging in covert or overt contact with any GVN figure, including Diem and Nhu. McCone warned Kennedy that banning such contact deprived the CIA of valuable sources and risked a major intelligence failure. But during their meeting, Kennedy was preoccupied with an upcoming report from the House Foreign Affairs Committee that he feared would be overly sympathetic to the Saigon government and interfere with the reform efforts. Thus, JFK did nothing about McCone's concerns.¹⁷⁹

Months of confusion culminated in a string of assassinations in November. Hilsman, Harriman, Forrestal, and Lodge never convinced Kennedy to give the coup plotters explicit permission to go forward. But he never explicitly expressed his disapproval of a coup, either. And regardless, the president, along with his top advisors,

¹⁷⁸ Association for Diplomatic Affairs and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Thomas L. Hughes, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, July 7, 1999, pp. 104-05: <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Hughes,%20Thomas%20L.toc.pdf> (accessed Nov. 8, 2017).

¹⁷⁹ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, pp. 184-189.

underestimated the degree of control they exercised over the ARVN generals who planned the coup with Lodge's complicity.¹⁸⁰ McCone's estrangement from Kennedy's inner circle meant that the president would not pay heed to his warning that a coup might precipitate a long period of political unrest, even though McNamara also agreed with that judgment. The coup began on November 1. Diem and Nhu were executed the following day. Kennedy's assassination followed on November 22. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson took the oath of office that same day. The PICL survived the transition and became the President's Daily Brief. But before the transition, the PICL's authors paid tribute to their fallen first customer by quoting a short verse that Kennedy had quoted to a group of journalists upon learning of the Soviet missiles in Cuba:

Bullfight critics ranked in rows
Crowd the enormous plaza full;
But only one is there who knows
And he's the man who fights the bull.¹⁸¹

The verse fit well with the New Frontier's masculine character. But it also described well the challenge that Johnson would face as chief decision-maker in stabilizing the situation in Vietnam.

True to McCone's forecasts, the situation in the RVN worsened after Diem and Nhu's ouster. On December 13, DIA sent McNamara a report whose findings were nearly identical to RFE-90: the NLF had "steadily increased" its strength and war effort despite

¹⁸⁰ John Prados, "JFK and the Diem Coup," Nov. 5, 2003, Digital National Security Archive: <http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB101/> (accessed Oct. 18, 2017).

¹⁸¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Intelligence Checklist," Nov. 22, 1963, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005996680.pdf (accessed Jul. 15, 2017).

the RVN's best efforts otherwise.¹⁸² One week later, McNamara visited Vietnam. His report to Johnson stated, "Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely to a Communist-controlled state."¹⁸³

McNamara later stated that his visit to Saigon "reinforced [the DIA report's] new and gloomy assessment."¹⁸⁴ He did not admit that the CIA and INR's equally pessimistic reports on the situation had gone ignored for months, including by himself. On December 23, McCone sent Johnson a letter stating that no organized government existed in the RVN. The junta that ousted Diem and Nhu had not proven itself capable of reasserting control and providing effective leadership.¹⁸⁵

Kennedy's policymaking system combined with his attempts at intelligence reform to produce a loose-knit intelligence confederation rather than a community. The intelligence agencies distinguished themselves during the Cuban Missile Crisis. But the troubled relationship between Kennedy and John McCone, along with poor rapport between policymaking and intelligence communities, all but ensured that the IC's success during the missile crisis would not be repeated. Kennedy's indifference to the boundary that separated intelligence and policy also contributed to the community's disarray. Many

¹⁸² Memo from Carroll to McNamara, "The Viet Cong Improved Combat Effectiveness and Insurgency Posture," Dec. 13, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Doc. 366.

¹⁸³ Memo from McNamara to Johnson, "Vietnam Situation," Dec. 21, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Doc. 374. See also Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 443-57.

¹⁸⁴ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 104.

¹⁸⁵ Letter from McCone to Johnson, Dec. 23, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Doc. 375.

intelligence officers cared more about pushing policy recommendations than collaborating to inform policy.

The focus on maintaining positive personal relationships with Kennedy and his top advisors as the guarantor of access to policy circles had negative consequences for the policy process. Kennedy relied on intelligence officers like McCone and Hilsman to help him make sense of complicated situations. Doing so was especially important given that many intelligence products described a given event without analyzing its implications for U.S. policy. To be sure, senior intelligence officers are responsible for keeping their customers – including the president, their first customer – informed on breaking events. Yet because Kennedy's system was mostly *ad hoc* with little structure or process, any official could be made irrelevant for any reason, or none at all. That danger both led and enabled John McCone to politicize intelligence in early 1963. It also precipitated his expulsion from Kennedy's inner circle during the latter half of 1963, which was one of the most consequential periods of American involvement in Vietnam. That decision would have grievous consequences in 1964 and 1965.

CHAPTER 3

**NO MORE DIVISIONS OF OPINION: INTELLIGENCE AND THE DEBATE
OVER AMERICANIZING THE VIETNAM WAR,
JANUARY 1964 – JULY 1965**

Lyndon Johnson entered office intent on preserving the RVN as an anti-Communist bastion. In 1961, he warned that failure to stop Communism in Vietnam would leave the Pacific “a Red Sea.”¹ As Senate Majority Leader and candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960, LBJ had developed a rivalry with both John and Bobby Kennedy. That continued and even intensified throughout the Kennedy administration, and Johnson exercised almost no influence over wartime policy as Vice President. But now that he had become President, he was determined not only to maintain Kennedy’s commitment to the RVN but also to expand it if necessary. “I will not lose in Vietnam,” Johnson declared to Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. shortly after taking office.² Johnson feared fatal damage to American credibility against Communist aggression overseas, to his domestic agenda, and to his personal reputation if the RVN fell to Communism.³ By the summer of 1965, Johnson had Americanized the Vietnam War, with over 100,000 U.S. troops in the RVN and regular bombing strikes against the DRV.

¹ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 76.

² Logevall, *Choosing War*, 77.

³ See Logevall, *Choosing War*; Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982); and David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

The redefinition of the relationship between intelligence and policy that Kennedy enacted with his reform efforts meant that the process by which Johnson and his advisors debated going to war was fundamentally flawed. Johnson retained his predecessor's *ad hoc* decision-making system. But his intolerance for most forms of dissent meant that he was a poor match for that system. Johnson prized agreement on his preferred policies above all. Disagreement over established policy was tantamount to disloyalty in Lyndon Johnson's White House. JFK's system played to Johnson's worst tendencies by allowing him to exclude any official or agency that became a persistent source of pessimism on the war.

Poor analytical tradecraft and troubled relationships between policymakers and intelligence officers also continued to interfere with effective policy formation in the Johnson administration. Intelligence analysts continued to resist citing sources in most of their reports under Johnson, which made it easier for policymakers to ignore them. And many of the problems with intelligence collection in Vietnam that the community had encountered under Kennedy remained, thus requiring liberal use of vague language in reports that lessened their impact even further. Finally, because Johnson's system allowed any influential policymaker to exclude any intelligence officer at his (or in theory her, though Johnson also retained Kennedy's all-male cabinet) discretion, personal feuds and bureaucratic disputes often had an outsized – and negative -- impact on the policy formation process.

Under Lyndon Johnson, policymakers and military officials interacted with intelligence through a combination of neglect and selective reading, or “cherry-picking,” to reinforce their preconceptions on the war effort. Johnson administration figures

ignored reports that contravened their predispositions. They also frequently lifted sections from reports that supported their arguments while ignoring sections that did not. Many of these officials also mustered arguments drawing on history, especially their personal experiences in World War II and Korea, to argue for or against further involvement in Vietnam.

In the end, two preconceptions proved decisive in shaping policy. The first was that while a U.S. victory in Vietnam would be difficult to achieve, a defeat there was unthinkable and unacceptable. The second was that the U.S. had to wage war in Vietnam through a strategy of “graduated pressure” on Hanoi to avoid provoking China as well as domestic opposition. The president and his inner circle deployed intelligence in service to those preconceptions again and again in 1964 and 1965.

McCone and Johnson

As part of his refusal to “lose in Vietnam,” neither Johnson nor his top advisors would consider neutralizing the RVN as Kennedy had done to Laos. By the beginning of 1964, the 1962 Geneva Accords had collapsed, plunging Laos back into crisis. Johnson feared a similar outcome for any neutralization scheme for the RVN.⁴ McGeorge Bundy warned the president in January that neutralizing the RVN would mean the collapse of anti-communist forces in Vietnam. Such a disaster, Bundy continued, could damage

⁴ See Editorial Note, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. I, Vietnam 1964*, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Charles Sampson (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992), Doc. 31, p. 57.

Johnson's presidential campaign due to a loss of American international credibility. McNamara and Bundy agreed.⁵

LBJ entered office with an expansive domestic agenda and deep familiarity with the legislative process, but he lacked substantive experience in foreign relations. Consequently, Johnson kept nearly all Kennedy personnel on the premise they would help bridge that gap. He also sought to maintain a sense of continuity in the government after JFK's assassination.⁶ The only high-level official to leave the government was Roger Hilsman. Hilsman's abrasiveness rankled many powerful White House officials, but his relationship with Kennedy protected him. That protection disappeared when Kennedy died, and Undersecretary of State George Ball fired him in March 1964.⁷ William J. Bundy, who was a former CIA analyst as well as brother to McGeorge Bundy, took over as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.

Johnson also maintained Kennedy's national security decision-making system. His desire to maintain continuity during the chaotic transition ensured that in making foreign policy decisions he relied not only on the same advisors but also the same *ad hoc* system. Like Kennedy, moreover, Johnson disdained Eisenhower's structured,

⁵ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 92.

⁶ Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 126.

⁷ William Rust, *So Much To Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Foreign Policy in Laos* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 242.

bureaucratic system.⁸ That similarity ensured that the new president would continue to form foreign policy as his predecessor had after the chaos from the transition subsided.

A critical difference between Johnson and Kennedy's personalities emerged in late November 1963. John McCone began regular meetings with Johnson on November 24 to brief LBJ on the President's Daily Brief, still known at the time as the PICL, with which the president had no familiarity. Kennedy had restricted the checklist to his inner circle, which did not include Johnson.⁹ During this first meeting with Johnson, at which McGeorge Bundy, McNamara, Lodge, and Ball were also present, LBJ declared that he wanted "no more divisions of opinion, no more bickering, and any person that did not conform to policy should be removed."¹⁰ As we saw in the previous chapter, Kennedy welcomed dissent from his advisors. His relationship with McCone deteriorated due to the latter's perceived arrogance rather than his judgments on Vietnam. But Johnson saw dissent on established policy as disloyalty.

Johnson's strong aversion to dissent among his cabinet led him to establish an inner circle of foreign policy advisors with membership based on fidelity to him. Robert McNamara harbored doubts on the war effort's prospects from the beginning of the Johnson presidency. Yet the Defense Secretary did not voice his concerns to LBJ due to

⁸ John P. Burke, Fred I. Greenstein, Larry Berman, and Richard Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation: 1989), 256-273.

⁹ John Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President: Intelligence Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952-2004* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2012), 51; David Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence, 1961-1965* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 351.

¹⁰ Memorandum for the Record of Meeting, "South Vietnam Situation," Nov. 24, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Doc. 330

what Fredrik Logevall has characterized as a “slavish” sense of loyalty toward his president.¹¹ That loyalty allowed McNamara to become Johnson’s most integral foreign policy advisors—until he began to express his reservations. The resolute hawk Dean Rusk never shared McNamara’s doubts, and strove to be deferential in his relationship with Johnson (and for that matter, with McNamara). Johnson later lamented that early on he did not place more faith in Rusk than he did in McNamara. And McGeorge Bundy urged Johnson to maintain the American commitment to Vietnam from the beginning of LBJ’s presidency. Doing so earned Bundy a place in Johnson’s inner circle until he left the administration.

Like Kennedy, Johnson also encouraged McCone to become a policy advisor as well as an intelligence officer. McCone avoided making policy recommendations in the week following Kennedy’s assassination. But on November 29, LBJ encouraged McCone to articulate suggestions on policy “from time to time.”¹² Johnson told McCone that he welcomed his opinions on Vietnam and other foreign policy hotspots such as Cuba and the Eastern bloc. But Vietnam consumed much of McCone and Johnson’s attention from the beginning of LBJ’s presidency.

Unreliable field reporting plagued U.S. intelligence collection in Vietnam at the beginning of 1964. On January 7, McCone reported to Rusk that most MACV and U.S. Embassy field reporting regarding ARVN progress was “incorrect” due to province and

¹¹ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 127.

¹² Memorandum for the Record, Meeting Between McCone and President Johnson, Nov. 29, 1963, p. 1. Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, John McCone Memoranda, Meetings with the President, Box. 1, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (LBJL), University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX.

local chiefs providing a rosy view of the war in hopes of advancing their careers under Diem. McCone thought it “quite probable” that these practices would continue under the new government, regardless of who headed it.¹³ Forrestal agreed, remarking to McGeorge Bundy that “the great difficulties we had to live through last August and September resulted from a nearly complete breakdown of the Government’s ability to get accurate assessments of the situation in the Vietnamese country-side.”¹⁴ In response, McCone increased CIA covert collection in the RVN.

The military soon pushed back against McCone’s action. McNamara shared many of McCone’s concerns about field reporting in the RVN. But in his memo to Bundy, Forrestal understood that McNamara would interpret McCone’s proposed increase of CIA agents in the RVN countryside as “an implied criticism of the Saigon command and its uniformed counterpart in Washington.”¹⁵ Here, Forrestal referred to MACV officers who reported to headquarters in Saigon and McNamara’s office on conditions in the field, as DIA’s collection apparatus was not fully in place until August 1964.¹⁶ Forrestal concluded the memo by stating that McCone should rely more heavily on existing CIA clandestine agents with track records of accurate reporting. Rusk and Bundy sent McCone a revised proposal for improving field reporting reflecting Forrestal’s concerns

¹³ Letter from McCone to Rusk, Jan. 7, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 5, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ Forrestal to Bundy, “Reporting on the Situation in South Vietnam,” Jan. 8, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 7, p. 7.

¹⁵ Forrestal to Bundy, “Reporting on the Situation in South Vietnam,” p. 8.

¹⁶ Michael B. Petersen, “The Vietnam Cauldron: Defense Intelligence in the War for Southeast Asia,” *Defense Intelligence Historical Perspectives 2* (2012): 3.

on January 9.¹⁷ Nevertheless, McCone followed through on his original plan. True to Forrestal's prediction, McNamara saw the plan as an unacceptable intrusion on Defense Department turf. He insisted that CIA officers in Vietnam partner with Defense officials. McCone agreed to that stipulation. But the team's CIA officers published a separate report on February 18. MACV Commander Paul Harkins criticized it as overly pessimistic.¹⁸

Agreeing on how to collect intelligence in the DRV proved easier for the CIA and Defense Department. Enemy operational security continued to hamper American intelligence collection in the DRV under LBJ. In response both to that problem and Hanoi's infiltration of men and war materiel into the RVN, the CIA and Defense Department proposed a covert action program named Operational Plan (OPLAN) 34A. Since DIA's collection abilities were not fully implemented in January 1964, McNamara's office and MACV were the primary Defense agencies involved in developing OPLAN 34A.¹⁹ The program consisted of monitoring DRV activities through U-2 flights as well as SIGINT and ELINT (electronic intelligence, or monitoring of enemy signals like radar) from naval vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin codenamed Desoto patrols, which would in turn send that intelligence to NSA analysts.²⁰ The plan also

¹⁷ See Forrestal to Bundy, "Reporting on the Situation in South Vietnam" fn. 3.

¹⁸ Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 45.

¹⁹ Lawrence S. Kaplan, Ronald D. Landa, Edward J. Drea, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vol. V: The McNamara Ascendancy, 1961-1965* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, 2006), 500-01.

²⁰ Robert Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1975* (Fort Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, 2002), 178.

involved psychological warfare operations such as leaflet drops and sabotage operations in the DRV, to be carried out by ARVN personnel.²¹ McCone thought OPLAN 34A's operational aspects too modest to convince Hanoi to stop fighting. But he agreed to the plan because he saw no harm in doing so and because McNamara and Rusk were enthusiastic about it.²²

McCone's skepticism on OPLAN 34A stemmed from his pessimistic assessment of the war effort's prospects. On January 30, ARVN Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh overthrew the junta that had overthrown Diem. On February 29, McCone told McNamara that if the Khanh government did not provide effective leadership, the U.S. should expect "perhaps fatal deterioration" in the war effort.²³ His doubts about American intelligence collection in Vietnam reinforced his pessimism. In a February 24 meeting with McGeorge Bundy, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance, and Policy Planning Councilmember Robert Johnson, McCone reacted to a proposal that the IC estimate NLF build-up through aerial photography by stating that aerial photography had not captured evidence of NLF movement for five years outside of truck convoys.²⁴ Combined with his doubts about field reporting, this dismissal of aerial photography revealed that he held strong doubts on the IC's ability to collect reliable information in Vietnam.

²¹ Memo from McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, Jan. 7, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 4, pp. 4-5.

²² Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 46-47.

²³ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 53.

²⁴ Memorandum for the Record, Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Special Group, Feb. 24, 1964, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP67B00558R000100060044-6.pdf> (accessed Oct. 27, 2017).

Several intelligence assessments from February buttressed McCone's pessimism. SNIE 50-64, released on February 12, concluded "[T]he situation in South Vietnam is very serious, and prospects uncertain" due to increased NLF recruitment amid prolonged GVN instability.²⁵ Numerous CIA officers in Vietnam also reported bleak prospects for the war effort. Saigon Station Chief Peer de Silva reported a mostly "apathetic" rural population whose only incentive to cooperate with the GVN was fear of the NLF. CIA Executive Director-Comptroller Lyman B. Kirkpatrick traveled to Vietnam in early February and concurred with de Silva's conclusion. He added that he was "shocked by the number of our people and of the military, even those whose jobs is always to say we are winning, who feel that the tide is against us."²⁶ A CIA mission to Saigon reported that an increasing number of NLF attacks against ARVN units and hamlets across the RVN had produced a widespread collapse in morale among many GVN officials and hamlet chiefs.²⁷ One week later, the mission reported that the "tide of insurgency in all four corps areas appears to be going against GVN. In many provinces team finds VC-

²⁵ Vietnam Task Force, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* (Pentagon Papers), Part IV.C.1, "U.S. Programs in South Vietnam, November 1963 – April 1965: NSAM 273 – NSAM 288 – Honolulu," pp. 33-34.

²⁶ Vietnam Task Force, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* (Pentagon Papers), Part IV.C.1, "U.S. Programs in South Vietnam, November 1963 – April 1965: NSAM 273 – NSAM 288 – Honolulu," pp. 33-34.

²⁷ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Further Comments [redacted] on the Situation in South Vietnam, Feb. 10, 1964. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5PfgxX (accessed Oct. 27, 2017).

controlled areas to comprise better than 50 to 60 percent of total area.”²⁸ But these reports all made little to no reference to sources, which limited their effectiveness.

The February reports’ poor tradecraft made it easier for hawkish officials to ignore them. SNIE 50-64 cited no sources. Kirkpatrick drew his gloomy conclusions from a “limited” number of conversations with unnamed U.S. officials in Saigon.²⁹ The field assessments did not explain their methodology for assessing NLF control of rural areas. In a February 20 meeting with the president, Forrestal, Rusk, Bundy, McCone, and several military officials, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor ignored SNIE 50-64’s conclusions by stating that he “did not share” the estimate’s “pessimism” without explaining why. Taylor argued that by stabilizing the GVN, pacifying the countryside, and bombing the DRV, the U.S. could “return to the situation of [October 1963], when we were winning in the countryside despite the difficulties in the cities.”³⁰ Here, Taylor disregarded intelligence analyses released in the fall of 1963 that had shown steady NLF progress throughout the countryside. And he ignored the struggles of the strategic hamlet program. The Diem government never addressed widespread corruption among hamlet chiefs or the resentment among many hamlet residents that stemmed from being forced to move without compensation. Both contributed to low morale among civilians, and left hamlets vulnerable to NLF infiltration and attack. By the end of 1963,

²⁸ CIA Field Appraisal of the Situation in South Vietnam, Feb. 18, 1964, p. 1. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5PfY67](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5PfY67) (accessed Oct. 27, 2017).

²⁹ Pentagon Papers Part IV.C.1, p. 34.

³⁰ Memorandum for the Record, Presidential Meeting on Vietnam, 20 Feb. 1964, p. 1. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5PgTL2](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5PgTL2) (accessed Oct. 27, 2017).

many hamlets stood deserted.³¹ Yet LBJ did not respond to SNIE 50-64 in the meeting, and agreed to include Taylor's suggestion of bombing the DRV in an upcoming review of U.S. strategy in Vietnam.

McCone's growing pessimism led him to support either withdrawal from Vietnam or a rapid escalation in the war effort. On March 3, 1964, McCone wrote that the war's outlook was bleaker than it had been the previous December. The Khanh government remained ineffective. Large amounts of captured Chinese and Soviet military equipment showed that the NLF had "heavier equipment than they possessed a year ago." And the strategic hamlet program's failure showed the effectiveness of the NLF's political action and terrorism campaigns.³² McCone cited no specific evidence for the latter point, but a December 1963 memo to McCone from NSC staffer and CIA officer Chester Cooper used U.S. diplomatic and military field reporting to note that the NLF had rendered the hamlet program "ineffective" in Long An province through intensified guerilla warfare.³³ McCone often disregarded field reporting as overly optimistic. But Cooper's memo used reporting that reinforced McCone's pre-existing pessimism. Therefore the DCI was predisposed to accept its findings. McCone closed his March 3 draft memo by crossing

³¹ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, Penguin Books, 1983), 323.

³² Memorandum Prepared by McCone, "Memorandum on Vietnam," Mar. 3, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc 68, p. 123.

³³ Memorandum from Cooper to McCone, "Conditions in Long An Province," Dec. 11, 1963, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00429A001400020006-4.pdf> (accessed Oct. 30, 2017).

the boundary between the intelligence and policymaking communities to state that the U.S. should either “greatly increase” its commitment to Vietnam or withdraw.³⁴

Johnson believed otherwise. Domestic politics incentivized the president to stick with his preferred middle course on the war. LBJ closed the February 20 meeting by stating that he “believed it essential to carry the fight to the enemy and that this be beyond pin-pricking” to avoid the appearance of a “defeatist approach” toward confronting Communist aggression.³⁵ At the same time, he did not want to appear a warmonger in advance of the 1964 presidential election. Republican nominee Senator Barry Goldwater had staked out an aggressive position on the war effort. Johnson responded by casting himself as the peace candidate. LBJ wanted the U.S. to commit enough resources and military force to prevent a Communist victory, but not so much that the war became front-page news at home.³⁶ That desire ran counter to McCone’s backing of rapid escalation or withdrawal.

McCone’s views on the war isolated him among Johnson’s advisors. In March, he accompanied McNamara and Taylor to Vietnam on a fact-finding mission. McNamara wrote the final trip report, which he based on his first-hand experiences in Saigon.³⁷ The report recommended strengthening the GVN, expanding ARVN manpower, and

³⁴ McCone Draft Memorandum, Mar. 3, 1964, p. 125.

³⁵ Presidential Meeting on Vietnam, Feb. 20, 1964, p. 3.

³⁶ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 122.

³⁷ Kaplan, Landa, and Drea, *The McNamara Ascendancy*, 506.

providing the RVN with increased weaponry.³⁸ At a March 13 meeting McCone called McNamara's recommendations "too little too late."³⁹ In a series of dissenting footnotes within the report, McCone recommended a drastic increase in the American commitment to the RVN that included strict controls along the Cambodian border and even stationing Chinese Nationalist troops from Taiwan in the Mekong Delta.⁴⁰ McNamara rejected these proposals. Johnson stated that he hoped McNamara and McCone could "get together and settle [their] differences so we could have a common policy." McNamara thought a rapprochement with McCone impossible due to how divergent their views were. Taylor, Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy were present at the meeting, and all agreed with McNamara's proposed strategy over McCone's.⁴¹

Johnson's relationship with McCone and the CIA suffered as a result of this controversy. The DCI responded to his isolation at the March 13 meeting by declaring that he would no longer give advice on Vietnam-related policy in the future.⁴² Four days later, Johnson approved McNamara's recommendations. McGeorge Bundy made LBJ's approval official U.S. policy toward the RVN in National Security Action Memorandum

³⁸ Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, "South Vietnam," Mar. 16, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 84, p. 166.

³⁹ Memorandum for the Record, Meeting with the President to discuss South Vietnam report, Mar. 13, 1964. Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson, John McCone Memoranda, Meetings with the President Box 1, LBJL.

⁴⁰ Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, 363.

⁴¹ Memorandum for the Record, Mar. 13 1964 meeting, pp. 1-2.

⁴² Robarge, *McCone as DCI*, p. 363.

(NSAM) 288.⁴³ McCone did not endorse this course of action, which Johnson considered tantamount to treason. He soon grew tired of McCone's gloomy assessments of the war effort. By the end of the month most of LBJ's initial confidence in McCone was gone. McCone continued to attend NSC meetings, but his regular briefings with Johnson ended. As in the Kennedy administration, McCone's estrangement from the Oval Office reduced the CIA's ability to inform policy. McCone had met regularly with Johnson to brief him on the PICL, but once the meetings ended LBJ showed little interest in his daily checklists.⁴⁴

Bombing, the Domino Theory, and Infiltration

At the same time that McCone and Johnson's relationship dissolved, the debate over bombing the DRV gathered steam. In February, State Department Policy Planning Council Chairman Walt Rostow urged that the U.S. apply "limited, graduated military actions, reinforced by political and economic pressures" on the DRV to convince Hanoi to end its support of the NLF.⁴⁵ Rostow's bombing thesis generated immediate controversy. Forrestal and Krulak wanted a redoubled focus on counterinsurgency. The Joint Chiefs favored a massive aerial bombardment of the DRV rather than Rostow's limited escalation. But Forrestal and Krulak were marginalized soon after Hilsman's mid-

⁴³ National Security Action Memorandum 288, Mar. 17, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 87, p. 172; Preston, *The War Council*, 141.

⁴⁴ Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President*, 56.

⁴⁵ David J. Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 135.

March ouster. And the Chiefs' bombing plan was too extreme for Johnson, given his desire to keep the war limited.

The intelligence community also pushed back against Rostow's thesis. Rostow argued that the destruction of the DRV's "politically important industrial development" would force Hanoi to choose between defeat and accepting aid from Vietnam's ancient enemy, China. Rostow thought that the Hanoi Politburo would choose the former over the latter.⁴⁶ Rostow did not provide evidence for these assertions, but he was predisposed to consider industrial development overwhelmingly important for any nation. His 1960 book *Stages of Economic Growth* argued that all societies pass through the same stages of development, with industry driving economic and societal growth.⁴⁷ The Interagency Task Force on Vietnam, which State Department Policy Planning Councilmember Robert Johnson set up in February to review U.S. strategy there and included representatives from INR, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of State for International Security Affairs (ISA), the Joint Chiefs, the U.S. Information Agency, and the CIA, published a report on bombing in March. It concluded that Rostow's plan was "not likely" to convince Hanoi to stop supporting the NLF.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See Rostow to Rusk, "Contingency Planning for Southeast Asia," Feb. 14, 1964, U.S. Declassified Documents Online: [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5QzP90](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5QzP90) (accessed Oct. 31, 2017).

⁴⁷ Rostow wrote *The Stages of Economic Growth* as a counter-argument to Marxism. He argued that all societies pass through the same five stages: traditional society, preconditions for take-off, take-off, drive to maturity, and high mass consumption. Rostow considered industrial development central to societal progress through these stages. See Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 62.

⁴⁸ Robert Johnson to William Sullivan, Mar. 1, 1964, "Alternatives for the Imposition of Measured Pressures Against North Vietnam," Digital National Security Archive:

The Johnson report went ignored at least in part because of policymakers' preconceptions and the limits of American intelligence collection. The report was published under the auspices of the State Department Policy Planning Council. As Council Chairman, bombing-enthusiast Rostow buried it.⁴⁹ Additionally, while the report concluded that the bombing was unlikely to end Hanoi's support of the NLF, the limits of American intelligence collection in Hanoi rendered that conclusion difficult to support. A March 4 SNIE that summarized what the IC knew about the DRV began, "Firm information about North Vietnam is extremely sparse."⁵⁰ The estimate relied on DRV press and radio broadcasts, published DRV economic figures, and limited human intelligence, mostly from Western journalists in the DRV.⁵¹ The IC could not collect intelligence on developments in the Hanoi Politburo or the PAVN. The estimate's post-mortem characterized U.S. intelligence collection on the DRV military as "especially weak."⁵² Johnson's summary report cited no sources, and the inability of the IC to understand Hanoi's decision-making process rendered the report even less likely to overcome policymaker preconceptions.

<https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679126332?accountid=14270> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018).

⁴⁹ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 356-58.

⁵⁰ Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-64, Mar. 4, 1964, "The Outlook for North Vietnam," p. 1. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁵¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Post-Mortem on SNIE 14.3-64," Apr. 8, 1964, pp. 1-2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R01012A025500040007-0.pdf> (accessed Nov. 2, 2017).

⁵² "Post-Mortem on SNIE 14.3-64," p. 2.

The report's flawed production process also contributed to its exclusion from policy circles. The Johnson task force only had several weeks to produce a report.⁵³ As a result of this rushed timeframe, the task force produced an interim report that its cover note conceded did not "necessarily represent the views of the agencies and offices represented in our group."⁵⁴ The full study, which included reports from the task force's constituent agencies, was "about a foot high," according to David Halberstam.⁵⁵ ONE Far East Division chief and task force member Harold P. Ford admitted to McCone that the final product was "wordy."⁵⁶ But LBJ's desire to strike a middle course in Vietnam led him to put off deciding whether to start bombing the DRV. Policymakers and military officials thus had little incentive to read such a long study on a topic that was not urgent; it went disregarded.⁵⁷

As the crisis worsened, McCone and McNamara both agreed that the RVN was unraveling rapidly but disagreed on potential solutions. McNamara made another visit to Vietnam in early May. After returning, he stated in a May 15 NSC meeting that the

⁵³ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 49.

⁵⁴ Robert Johnson to Sullivan, "Alternatives for the Imposition of Measured Pressures Against North Vietnam," p. 1.

⁵⁵ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 356.

⁵⁶ Memorandum from ONE Far East Division Head to McCone, "Completion of Interim Report by (North) Vietnam Planning Sub-Committee of Sullivan Task Force," Mar. 2, 1964, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A001000050024-2.pdf> (accessed Nov. 2, 2017). The author's name has been redacted from the memo, but in *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, Ford identifies himself as having been ONE's Far East Division Chief and a member of the task force in early 1964. See Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, p. 49 fn. 91.

⁵⁷ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 357.

situation had worsened due to increased NLF activity and Khanh's persistent ineffectiveness at attracting support from the RVN citizenry. McNamara argued that increased U.S. aid to the ARVN was vital towards improving the situation.⁵⁸ He gave no evidence for this argument. McCone, on the other hand, concluded the May 15 meeting by stating that he was "more pessimistic concerning the situation," and was unsure that improvement was possible even with great effort.⁵⁹ Immediately prior to another NSC meeting the following day, McCone cornered Johnson and reviewed with him a CIA analysis entitled "The Viability of South Vietnam." According to McCone's notes of the meeting, Johnson read the report. It concluded that the political and military situation would "likely become untenable" by the end of the year unless the U.S. could halt the RVN's deterioration.⁶⁰ McCone made no policy recommendation in either meeting. But in meetings on May 18 and 24 he stated that the U.S. would have to intensify bombing of the DRV for the situation to improve.⁶¹ As with his warning to Kennedy about Soviet intentions in Cuba two years earlier, he based his judgment on bombing the DRV on intuition instead of sources and analysis.

⁵⁸ Summary Record of the 538th Meeting of the National Security Council, May 15, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 156, p. 329.

⁵⁹ Memorandum for the Record, "NSC Meeting on Friday, 15 May at noon," May 16, 1964, p. 2. McCone Meetings with the President, Box 1, LBJL.

⁶⁰ See Memorandum for the Record, "National Security Council Meeting – 16 May 1964," May 16, 1964, p. 1. McCone Meetings with the President, Box 1, LBJL; CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Viability of South Vietnam," May 15, 1964, p. 1. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5SGJ59](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5SGJ59) (accessed Nov. 3, 2017).

⁶¹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 61.

Several analyses from the spring of 1964 were pessimistic on the prospects of further U.S. escalation. In April, the Joint Chiefs hosted a war game code named SIGMA I-64, meant to explore whether bombing the DRV would convince Hanoi to end its support of the NLF. The game's final report concluded that the DRV would increase its commitment to the war effort in response to escalated American military action.⁶² In May, the intelligence community released SNIE 50-2-64, which examined the potential effects of sending more U.S. military aid to the GVN and increasing U.S. military assets in the South China Sea. The estimate concluded that Hanoi would probably cease its attacks in the RVN while pressing for a diplomatic conference in response to such pressure. But the estimate also assessed Hanoi's long-term intention as preserving their gains in the RVN in order to resume the war effort "at a later date."⁶³ Further, the estimate judged that that intensified attacks against Hanoi could lead the PAVN and NLF to fight harder. The IC's lack of clandestine sources within the DRV rendered the analysts "unable to set any meaningful odds for the course North Vietnam's leaders would adopt" in the event of large-scale attacks against the DRV.⁶⁴ Despite this intelligence gap, McGeorge Bundy called SNIE 50-2-64 "the most important paper

⁶² McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 156.

⁶³ Special National Intelligence Estimate 50-2-64, May 25, 1964, "Probable Consequences of US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos," p. 2. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁶⁴ SNIE 50-2-64, p. 3.

before the President”⁶⁵ in a meeting on the evening of May 24. But the estimate influenced policy for perverse reasons.

Bundy used SNIE 50-2-64 to justify gradual escalation in Vietnam, and Johnson followed that advice. According to McCone’s notes of the meeting, Bundy summarized the estimate as concluding that a limited strike “might cause a hesitation on the part of the North Vietnamese” in their support of the NLF, while “a large-scale attack might just have the opposite effect” of an intensified southern insurgency.⁶⁶ That interpretation supported the policy of gradual escalation in Vietnam that Bundy had favored for months and LBJ found intrinsically appealing.⁶⁷ McCone repeated his view – which he stated in his notes was “strictly non-professional and not based on any studies” – that bombing the DRV would be more effective. Johnson decided to “do all possible” in Vietnam by sending more aid to the GVN, increasing U.S. diplomatic pressure on the DRV, and soliciting aid from the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) nations, with bombing carefully selected targets as a last resort.⁶⁸ That decision fit with SNIE 50-2-64’s conclusions. But it also fit Johnson’s preference for a middle course in Vietnam.

Johnson’s predisposition toward a graduated and limited escalated war effort in Vietnam did not come without doubts. He expressed ambivalence about the war in two phone conversations on May 27. During the first call, between Johnson and his Senate

⁶⁵ Memorandum for the Record, May 24, 1964, “Discussion at Dinner at the White House on Sunday night, May 24th,” p. 2. McCone Meetings with Johnson, Box 1, LBJL.

⁶⁶ “Discussion at Dinner at the White House on Sunday night, May 24th,” p. 2.

⁶⁷ Preston, *The War Council*, 143-49.

⁶⁸ Both quotes are from “Discussion at Dinner at the White House on Sunday night, May 24th,” p. 3.

mentor Richard Russell, LBJ admitted that he had thought the war was “a mess” ever since he had taken office. Johnson and Russell agreed that intervening in Vietnam could lead to a costly guerilla war and Chinese intervention against U.S. and ARVN forces similar to Korea, only “on a much bigger scale.”⁶⁹ That same morning, Johnson spoke with McGeorge Bundy, and notoriously asked, “What in the hell is Vietnam worth to me? What is Laos worth to me? What is it worth to this country?” The president, who had been the Democrats’ leader in the Senate when Eisenhower articulated the so-called “domino theory” in 1954, answered his own question by referring to that theory: “Of course, if you start running from the Communists, they may just chase you into your own kitchen.”⁷⁰

The domino theory held that if the RVN fell to communism, neighboring Southeast Asian states would soon follow, and subsequently so would nations from Japan to the Middle East—and potentially beyond. It had declined in importance under Kennedy. McNamara’s March 16 report, however, stated that if the RVN fell,

[A]most all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), accommodate to Communism so as to remove effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence (Burma), or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely then to become so (Indonesia taking over Malaysia). Thailand might hold for a period with our help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to

⁶⁹ Telephone Conversation between President Johnson and Senator Richard Russell, May 27, 1964, 10:55 am. *FRUS 1964-1968, Vol. XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia, Regional Affairs*, ed. Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2000), Doc. 52, pp. 125-34.

⁷⁰ Telephone Conversation between President Johnson and McGeorge Bundy, May 27, 1964, 11:24 am. *FRUS Mainland SE Asia, Regional Affairs*, Doc. 53, p. 135.

India to the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased.⁷¹

As had been the case for a decade, McNamara did not cite any evidence for this argument. Nor did Johnson ask for any before he made McNamara's recommendations official U.S. policy the following day by signing NSAM 288. But Johnson requested an analysis of the likely consequences of an enemy victory in Vietnam from the CIA. McCone instructed ONE chief Sherman Kent to prepare it; Kent completed the report on June 9.

Kent's analysis refuted the domino theory, but Johnson ignored it. The report stated that ONE "[Did] not believe that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos would be followed by the rapid, successive communization of the other states of the Far East." Even if the U.S. lost its mainland Southeast Asian allies to Communism, it could still deter China and the USSR using its robust military presence "on the chain of islands from the Philippines to Japan." An RVN defeat would damage American credibility with its allies, Kent wrote, but that damage could be repaired: "[T]he extent to which individual countries would move away from the US towards the Communists would be significantly affected by the substance and manner of US policy" following Hanoi's victory. Yet Kent cited no sources for his analysis. And there is no evidence that Johnson used the memo to craft his policy, even though he had requested it.⁷²

⁷¹ McNamara Report, Mar. 16, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, p. 154.

⁷² See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, June 9, 1964, "Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a 'Domino Effect' in the Far East?" Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*; and Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 55-58.

Nor did Johnson use a pessimistic analysis by ONE staffer Willard Matthias published at the same time as the domino theory report. Matthias entitled his report “Trends in the World Situation.” It examined how the strategic balance in the world had changed due to nuclear deterrence and disunity between the USSR and China as well as between those powers and the rest of the Communist world. Competing communist doctrines like Castroism in Latin America and Titoism in Yugoslavia lessened Moscow and Beijing’s influence to the point that “[T]he Communist world may come to be as diverse and undisciplined as the non-Communist world.”⁷³ Proponents of the domino theory held that Communism would spread due to Soviet or Chinese influence, but Matthias contended that both powers would in fact lose influence in the developing world going forward due to this ideological diversity.⁷⁴ Like Kent, Matthias cited no sources for his analysis. His paper was based on his personal expertise and intuition. And like Kent’s report, there is no evidence to show that Johnson used Matthias’ essay in policy deliberations.

LBJ’s preconceptions, combined with the ONE report’s shaky tradecraft, led Johnson to disregard Kent’s analysis. Kent opened the essay by stating, “With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to communism as a result of the fall of South Vietnam.”⁷⁵ Yet he did not source

⁷³ Willard C. Matthias, “Trends in the World Situation,” Jun. 9, 1964, p. 13. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00967A000900050001-7.pdf> (accessed Nov. 15, 2017). See also Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 56.

⁷⁴ “Trends in the World Situation,” 42-43.

⁷⁵ “Loss of South Vietnam,” p. 1.

this claim. Kent's argument that the United States could still repel Soviet and Chinese aggression from its bases in the Western Pacific relied only on logic, as he did not provide sources for that assertion either. Johnson's preconceptions and tendency to follow his preferences on policy made any attempt to change his mind difficult. By not using sources, Kent undermined his own position by making it easier for Johnson to ignore. Johnson's doubts about the war did not override his abhorrence of dissent. Further, McNamara had shown such loyalty to Johnson since LBJ was sworn in that Johnson was predisposed to side with his Defense Secretary over the CIA.

Like Kent, Matthias's tradecraft impeded his work from influencing policy. "Trends in the World Situation" was nearly 48 pages long. Matthias's argument did not begin to take shape until roughly halfway through the paper. Good analytical tradecraft calls for any intelligence product to list its findings in concise sentences at the beginning so that policymakers can absorb them immediately. Matthias's work was most useful as an intellectual exercise for other analysts instead of a formal intelligence product for policymakers. To that end, CIA Deputy Director Ray S. Cline had the paper declassified and sent fifty copies in circulation throughout the intelligence community.⁷⁶ But there is no evidence to show that LBJ ever engaged with Matthias's work. And the situation in Vietnam worsened throughout the summer, further decreasing the odds of an American withdrawal.

⁷⁶ Several of these copies were leaked to the press, which caused a minor controversy. See Memorandum from R.L. Bannerman to CIA Director of Security, "Publication of Paper Written By Willard Matthias, Board of National Estimates," Aug. 26, 1964, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84-00780R000600210017-7.pdf> (accessed Nov. 15, 2017).

Southward infiltration of PAVN units and war materiel increased in June and July. The 1954 Geneva Accords prohibited the DRV's military forces from remaining in Vietnam south of the 17th parallel. Yet a June 24 U.S. Intelligence Board report used interrogations of enemy prisoners and defectors to estimate that Hanoi had infiltrated between 15,000 and 20,000 PAVN soldiers southward between 1960 and 1964.⁷⁷ Once in the RVN these infiltrators became part of NLF units. But in July, the Pentagon's National Indications Center published a report concluding that enemy infiltration had increased to include the introduction of PAVN regular units.⁷⁸ Prisoner interrogations revealed that Hanoi sent two PAVN divisions south between February and May. Aerial photography showing large numbers of enemy troops moving southward between the DRV cities of Dong Hoi and Vinh substantiated those findings. Spy planes and road watch teams also spotted increased PAVN truck movement along the DRV's Route 12, which Hanoi used for infiltration into the RVN and Laos. Finally, SIGINT from NSA showed that the NLF had expanded their network of communication facilities along infiltration routes. The report's author, Frank J. Denny, concluded that all of this intelligence suggested a rapid

⁷⁷ U.S. Intelligence Board Memorandum, "North Vietnamese Violations of the Geneva Agreements On Vietnam," Jun. 24, 1964, pp. ii, 12. National Security File, Country File Vietnam, Box 48, LBJL.

⁷⁸ The National Indications Center supported the Pentagon's Watch Committee, which kept senior U.S. policymakers up to date on possibly imminent threats from foreign adversaries. The NIC was created in 1954; both it and the Watch Committee were disbanded in 1975. See John A. Gentry and Joseph S. Gordon, "U.S. Strategic Warning Intelligence: Situation and Prospects," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 31(1) (2018): 20-25.

increase in enemy infiltration.⁷⁹ On July 27, Forrestal sent a copy of the memo to McGeorge Bundy.⁸⁰ The following week, a series of incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin escalated tensions even further.

Tonkin Gulf

Controversy off the DRV coastline commanded Johnson's attention that summer. On August 2, the *U.S.S. Maddox*, a destroyer conducting a Desoto patrol, detected three DRV torpedo boats approaching on radar. The ships exchanged fire with no casualties on either side. No ship involved in the attack sustained significant damage, although a 14.5mm bullet hole in the *Maddox* showed that the attack had taken place. Two nights later, the *Maddox*, along with another Desoto destroyer, the *U.S.S. C. Turner Joy*, again picked up radar signals that appeared to be approaching enemy attack craft. Enemy message traffic intercepted earlier that day had indicated that another attack might be forthcoming, and tension ran high among both ships' crews. The *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* fired at the new radar contacts. Some crewmen reported seeing enemy torpedoes pass their ships, but neither the *Maddox* nor the *Turner Joy* sustained any damage.⁸¹ The incidents led to calls in Washington for an armed response.

⁷⁹ Frank J. Denny, Pentagon National Indications Center, Memorandum for the Watch Committee, "Recent Infiltration of PAVN Personnel into Northern South Vietnam," Jul. 24, 1964, National Security File, Country File Vietnam, Box 48, LBJL.

⁸⁰ Cover note to "Recent Infiltration of PAVN Personnel into Northern South Vietnam" Jul 27, 1964, National Security File, Country File Vietnam, Box 48, LBJL.

⁸¹ See Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 73-92, 106-142 for a detailed account of the August 2 and 4 incidents.

The available evidence strongly suggests that no attack occurred on August 4. The *Maddox's* sonar operator reported torpedo launches, but a more experienced sonar man along with the *Maddox's* captain later determined that the supposed launches were actually sounds of the *Maddox's* propeller operating at high speed. The multiple torpedo sightings were in all likelihood the product of nervous sailors' imaginations due to rough seas. Those same rough seas would have produced radar signals nearly indistinguishable from enemy vessels even to experienced radar operators. Both the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*, along with other U.S. SIGINT collection sites in the area, intercepted a large amount of low-level enemy message traffic. American cryptologists decoded most of this traffic that night, but the messages were mostly fragmented and confusing. And the stressful, fast-paced atmosphere interfered with analysts' ability to report on the situation, as policymakers and senior intelligence officials did not want to wait for analysis. According to Ray Cline, "Everyone was demanding the SIGINT; they wanted it quick; they didn't want anybody to take any time to analyze it."⁸² Finally, NSA analysts withheld evidence that no attack had occurred. In particular, had the DRV torpedo boats attacked the *Maddox* or *Turner Joy*, Hanoi's coastal radar stations would have tracked both ships to support the assault. Indeed, U.S. SIGINT stations detected extensive enemy coastal radar tracking in support of the August 2 attack. These enemy radar sites did not track either ship on August 4, but the analysts did not report that omission. We do not know why the analysts did so; as NSA historian Robert Hanyok has concluded, "They

⁸² Moise, *Tonkin Gulf*, p. 197.

walked alone in their counsels.” But their actions reinforced the notion that the second attack had occurred.⁸³

A politicized atmosphere in the IC also played an important role in silencing doubts about the second attack among many intelligence analysts and military officials. Neither LBJ nor any senior official in his administration pressured analysts to alter conclusions. But potential retaliation from the White House created indirect politicization, when policymakers prevail on analysts to change estimates’ conclusions through subtle, unspoken cues.⁸⁴ CIA officer Patrick McGarvey later quoted a fellow analyst as stating that many analysts thought the intelligence on the second attack was “bum dope,” but their superiors ordered them to report only what the Navy had told them for fear of White House reprisal if their reporting was ambiguous or contradicted the conclusion that the attack had occurred. U.S. Army Deputy Chief for military operations Gen. Bruce Palmer thought the available intelligence was so fragmented that it could not support the conclusion that a second attack had occurred. He later claimed that many mid-level Joint Chiefs of Staff officials came to a similar conclusion.⁸⁵ There is no evidence to show that Palmer or any other JCS official brought their doubts to their superiors. But the Chiefs had been fervent supporters of increased attacks against the

⁸³ See Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf*, pp. 143-203, and Robert J. Hanyok, “Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964,” *Cryptologic Quarterly* 19(4)/20(1) (Winter 2000/Spring 2001): 1-53 for convincing arguments against the notion that an attack took place on August 4.

⁸⁴ See Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 5 for further exploration of how indirect politicization works.

⁸⁵ See Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf*, 242-43 for more on CIA, Defense, and State Department doubts regarding the second attack.

DRV since July, and were quick to provide Johnson with a list of enemy targets for a retaliatory airstrike on August 4.⁸⁶ They would not have embraced doubts from Palmer or any other subordinate official.

Notwithstanding inadequate evidence, analyses published immediately unequivocally judged that the second attack had occurred. On August 5, McCone ordered the CIA to begin daily summaries of the crisis' development. The first summary, published on August 6, recounted, "Details on the [August 4] battle are confused" but concluded that the battle had taken place.⁸⁷ In multiple contemporary analyses and a 1967 study, INR concluded that the DRV had deliberately initiated both attacks.⁸⁸ The bureau reached that conclusion by relying on "circumstantial evidence" from August 4 that we now know to be faulty, namely the erroneous sonar reports of torpedo launches and the radar track of DRV vessels. INR Director Thomas Hughes later blamed overly restrictive compartmentalization of sensitive intelligence for his bureau's inability to fully comprehend what had happened on August 4.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Graham A. Cosmas, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, Part II: 1960-1968* (Washington, DC: Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2012), 106.

⁸⁷ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Aug. 6, 1964, "The North Vietnamese Crisis," Annex p. 2. National Security File, Country File Vietnam, Special Intelligence Material II, Box 48, LBJL.

⁸⁸ Howells, Avery, and Greene, *Vietnam 1961-1968*, "Time of Decision," pp. 34-36 and Special Annex II, "The Tonkin Gulf."

⁸⁹ Association for Diplomatic Affairs and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Thomas L. Hughes, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, July 7, 1999, p. 61: <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Hughes,%20Thomas%20L.toc.pdf> (accessed Nov. 8, 2017).

Rusk thought the benefits of swift retaliation outweighed any costs. On August 4, INR reported to Rusk that public statements from Hanoi, Moscow, and Beijing showed that the DRV, USSR, and China would all “take vigorous measures of unpredictable intensity” to deter the U.S. from further military action if the U.S. retaliated against the DRV.⁹⁰ Despite this report, the hawkish Rusk called for “an immediate and direct” American reaction in an NSC meeting that evening. Rusk argued that Hanoi’s decision to order a second attack showed that its intentions were “more serious” than if it had only carried out one attack.⁹¹ Here, Rusk had support from McCone. The DCI agreed that Hanoi was “raising the ante,” even as he disagreed with Rusk by claiming that the Desoto patrol had provoked the attacks. McCone also presented Johnson with a CIA analysis concluding that U.S. retaliation would probably lead to a “sharp” DRV military response, but not a major escalation of the war.⁹² But per his vow from March, McCone made no recommendation on what Johnson should do.

McNamara considered retaliatory strikes a foregone conclusion. He exhibited no doubt that the second attack had happened when he opened the August 4 meeting. He continued by stating that the Defense Department had “agreed” to strike the Joint Chiefs’ preferred targets and also that he planned to send U.S. reinforcements into the area

⁹⁰ INR Intelligence Memorandum, “Probable Foreign Reaction to the U.S. Strike,” Aug. 4, 1964, p. 1. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5To7J0 (accessed Nov. 8, 2017).

⁹¹ Summary Notes of the 538th Meeting of the National Security Council, Aug. 4, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 278, p. 611.

⁹² Summary Notes of the 538th NSC Meeting, p. 611. I have not located the report McCone used, but he summarized it in the meeting.

afterward.⁹³ His only use of intelligence was to state that unspecified “highly classified information” confirmed the second attack after U.S. Information Agency head Carl Rowan asked McNamara if the DRV vessels had attacked without provocation. McNamara assured him “We will know definitely in the morning” what had happened, since less restricted reporting was due to come in then.⁹⁴ But he insisted that LBJ carry out retaliatory air strikes before that. Johnson ordered the strikes, codenamed Operation Pierce Arrow, later that evening.

LBJ did not escalate American military action against the DRV further in the months following the August incidents despite reports of a similar attack in September. Public opinion polls showed broad support for Johnson’s handling of the crisis after he announced Pierce Arrow. On August 7, Johnson secured passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution through the Senate by a vote of 98 to 2. The resolution allowed him to “take all necessary measures” to prevent enemy attacks against U.S. forces in Southeast Asia. But he chose not to use these new powers when another Desoto ship in the Gulf reported an unprovoked attack by DRV vessels on September 18. In a meeting the next morning, CIA Deputy Director Marshall Carter briefed the president that while the CIA could confirm increased enemy activity in the Gulf the previous day, the agency could not confirm that an attack had happened. According to Carter’s notes of the meeting, Johnson was more thoughtful and less aggressive than he had been in early August. LBJ refused to order a retaliatory strike without confirmation of an attack. He also ordered that the Navy

⁹³ Summary Notes of the 538th NSC Meeting, p. 612.

⁹⁴ Summary Notes of the 538th NSC Meeting, p. 612.

temporarily halt Desoto patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin until the IC could review whether the danger of increased DRV attacks justified discontinuing the patrols permanently.⁹⁵

The September incident shows that intelligence was only valuable to Johnson and his inner circle as an impartial guide to policymaking when Johnson's reputation was not at risk of losing credibility. Johnson's use of intelligence after the September incident was measured and appropriate. He listened to Carter's briefing, asked probing questions, and then incorporated Carter's reporting into his decisions. But the September incident followed LBJ receiving public praise and congressional sanction of his aggressive response to the August incident. Declining to retaliate carried no political penalty for Johnson in September. Carter's briefing contained significant uncertainty in that the CIA could neither confirm nor disprove that an attack had happened on September 18. But because the political environment was less stressful for Johnson, the penalty to the CIA for delivering such uncertainty was lower too.

The Tonkin Gulf incident reveals how badly Johnson's need for certainty and loyalty had compromised the intelligence-policy nexus. Intelligence is supposed to reduce uncertainty for policymakers, but the first week of August 1964 defied any effort to do so due to the tight timeframe, incomplete evidentiary base, and the inconclusive nature of the evidence that analysts in Washington did have. Further, Johnson's capriciousness and intolerance for dissent prevented analysts from emphasizing what they did not know along with what they knew, as is required in a healthy intelligence-policy

⁹⁵ Marshall S. Carter, Memorandum for the Record, Meeting in the Cabinet Room, the White House, Sep. 19, 1964. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01676R001400050041-9.pdf> (accessed Nov. 8, 1964).

nexus.⁹⁶ Even if analysts had had more time and a less chaotic environment in which to work, they may not have been able to reach an answer that satisfied Johnson. LBJ sought consensus above all. Yet ambiguity characterized the August Tonkin Gulf incident. Analysts suppressed evidence and debate to resolve that ambiguity.

The August incident shows how Johnson's personality was a poor fit for the national security decision-making apparatus that he had inherited and maintained. Ambiguity of evidence is a natural, permanent "enemy of intelligence." As Richard Betts explains:

When the problem is an environment that lacks clarity, an overload of conflicting data, and lack of time for rigorous assessment of sources and validity, ambiguity abets instinct and allows intuition to drive analysis. Intelligence can fail because the data is too permissive for policy judgment rather than too constraining. When a welter of fragmentary evidence offers support to various interpretations, ambiguity is exploited by wishfulness. The greater the ambiguity, the greater the impact of preconceptions.⁹⁷

All of these factors applied to Vietnam-related decision-making in the Johnson White House during the first week of August 1964. But the ease with which Johnson could exclude any official or agency that did not tell him what he wanted to hear from policy circles worsened the situation. As McGarvey recalled later, "Everyone knew how volatile LBJ was. He didn't like to deal in uncertainties."⁹⁸ Johnson's dislike of ambiguity compromised the intelligence-policy nexus during the August incident as officials

⁹⁶ Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 36.

⁹⁷ Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 31.

⁹⁸ Moise, *Tonkin Gulf*, 242.

throughout the intelligence community presented an overly simplified and inaccurate report of the incident.

Breaking Hanoi's Will

The political and military situation in the RVN deteriorated further into the fall of 1964. Khanh never succeeded in unifying the RVN populace under his rule. In particular, the RVN's Buddhists continued to organize large demonstrations seeking greater religious freedom and influence within the GVN. And the IC, along with U.S. diplomats in Saigon, continued to produce pessimistic analyses of the situation in the RVN throughout August, September, and October of 1964. During a conference on September 9, McCone reported that the CIA was "very gravely concerned" about the situation in Vietnam, and two weeks later Carter reported the same conclusion to Rusk and McNamara.⁹⁹ On September 24, a cable from Maxwell Taylor stated that Khanh's ineffectiveness as a leader contributed to an "atmosphere of weakness" that was rendering the GVN ineffective at basic governance over the RVN.¹⁰⁰ SNIE 52-2-64, published on October 1, concluded that the RVN was so destabilized that a coup against Khanh "could occur at any time." The NLF, which was still too weak to seize power by force, would wait "for the emergence of a neutralist coalition government which they can dominate." And as the political situation worsened in the RVN, the estimate contended that both ARVN and GVN officials would call for a settlement due to rampant poor

⁹⁹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 65.

¹⁰⁰ Cable from Taylor to Rusk, Sep. 24, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 359, pp. 787-89.

morale.¹⁰¹ Rostow's thesis remained a central policy option in the Johnson administration throughout this chaos.

Assessments of bombing's prospects ranged from pessimistic to tepidly optimistic. In September 1964, the Pentagon conducted war game SIGMA II-64 to evaluate the Rostow thesis. Participants included McGeorge Bundy and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton. Maxwell Taylor, who had recently replaced Lodge as U.S. Ambassador to the RVN, also participated, along with his replacement as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Army Gen. Earle "Bus" Wheeler. The results of the sequel were similar to SIGMA I's: no matter how intense the bombing became, the DRV's resolve only deepened. SNIE 10-3-64, published on October 9, estimated that bombing could work as a coercive tool against Hanoi, but thought that outcome unlikely:

Hanoi's leaders would have to ask themselves whether it was not better to suspend their support of Viet Cong military action rather than suffer the destruction of their major military facilities and the industrial sector of their economy. In the belief that the tide has set almost irreversibly in their favor in South Vietnam, they might calculate that the Viet Cong could stop its military attacks for the time being and renew the insurrection successfully at a later date.¹⁰²

The estimate showed the limits of U.S. intelligence collection by incorporating caveats and qualifiers such as "would have to" and "might," along with not citing sources. And it stated there was "substantial danger" that Hanoi would send reinforcements to the RVN

¹⁰¹ Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-64, Oct. 1, 1964, "The Situation in South Vietnam," pp. 1-2. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

¹⁰² Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-3-64, "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US/GVN Courses of Action," Oct. 9, 1964, p. 9. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

in response to bombing.¹⁰³ But it concluded, “On balance, we incline to the [former] course” that bombing would work.¹⁰⁴ INR dissented: The bombing would provide “optimum provocation” for Hanoi to fight harder as well as international sympathy for the DRV that the NLF would use as leverage in future peace talks. Like the rest of the estimate, INR cited no sources in its dissent. Still, as Bruce Palmer has concluded, events to come showed “the SNIE was dead wrong while INR was right on the money.”¹⁰⁵

The Joint Chiefs cherry-picked from IC products to justify increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam. On October 27, they began a memo to McNamara with, “The agreed judgments expressed by the intelligence community in SNIE 53-2-64 have implications which are particularly grave.”¹⁰⁶ The Chiefs proposed bombing the DRV while expanding counterinsurgency efforts in the RVN. They also cited SNIE 10-3-64, but only as evidence that China would not intervene in response to increased U.S. pressure against the DRV unless American troops approached the Chinese border.¹⁰⁷ To be sure, SNIE 10-3-64 stated that Beijing “would be very reluctant” to become directly involved in the war unless the fighting threatened China.¹⁰⁸ But the Chiefs did not comment on the estimate’s judgments on bombing’s effectiveness or INR’s dissent to

¹⁰³ SNIE 10-3-64, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ SNIE 10-3-64, p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Bruce Palmer, “US Intelligence and Vietnam” *Studies in Intelligence* 28 (Special Edition) (1984): 33-34; Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 66.

¹⁰⁶ JCSM-902-64, Memo from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to McNamara, Oct. 27, 1964, “Courses of Action, Southeast Asia,” *FRUS Vietnam 1964* Doc. 388, p. 847.

¹⁰⁷ JCSM-902-64, p. 848.

¹⁰⁸ SNIE 10-3-64, p. 11.

those judgments. Both directly preceded the estimate's findings on Chinese intervention, suggesting that the Chiefs engaged in selective reading when they used the estimate's findings to justify their preferred policy. The documentary record does not reflect whether they used military intelligence in a similar fashion, but DIA's persistent ineffectiveness during this period precluded that agency from contributing to the policy debate.

DIA's growing pains continued to hamper its effectiveness at producing and contributing to intelligence products throughout 1964. In December, CIA Deputy Director for Science and Technology Alfred Whelon gave DIA a mixed evaluation for contributions in his field, arguing that while its research and collection capabilities were good, the DIA Directorate of Science and Technology had "little or no in-house production or estimative capability" due to a lack of staff trained for those tasks.¹⁰⁹ That same month, Lyman Kirkpatrick produced a similarly mixed assessment for McCone. According to Kirkpatrick, DIA still lacked analysts experienced in contributing to military intelligence estimates.¹¹⁰ For DIA to lack such officers was more evidence of the service branches' continuing obstruction, to which Kirkpatrick alluded: "It is recognized that this is hard to achieve in a new agency dependent on the services and we are well

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum from Alfred Whelon to Lyman Kirkpatrick, "Evaluation of DIA," Dec. 6, 1964, Digital National Security Archive: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB534-DIA-Declassified-Sourcebook/documents/DIA-09.pdf> (accessed Feb. 18, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Memorandum from Lyman Kirkpatrick to John McCone, "CIA/DIA Relations," Dec. 21, 1964, p. 2. Digital National Security Archive: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB534-DIA-Declassified-Sourcebook/documents/DIA-10.pdf>. Accessed Feb. 18, 2015.

aware of General Carroll's intensive efforts in this matter."¹¹¹ Indeed, by 1964 only the Air Force had begun sending officers to work at DIA, though that was in part because senior Air Force officers thought cooperating with DIA might give their own fledgling service more bureaucratic sway. The other service branches still viewed it as an imposition on their prerogatives.¹¹² This disarray prevented DIA from gaining influence in policy circles during 1964.

Several key Johnson administration officials used intelligence as a tool to justify escalation in late 1964. On November 1, the NLF raided a U.S. air base and destroyed several American bombers. LBJ declined to retaliate with the presidential election just days away.¹¹³ Instead he commissioned an NSC working group to recommend potential next steps. Even after he won a landslide victory over Barry Goldwater on November 3, Johnson decided to wait for the group's recommendations before making any further decisions. Chaired by Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy, the working group included representatives from policy circles, the intelligence community, and the military. Although the working group was supposed to recommend policies, the three potential U.S. courses of action in Vietnam that the group examined show that its mandate was, in the words of CIA representative Harold P. Ford, "[N]ot to determine whether the United States should expand its participation in the war, but to determine how to do it."¹¹⁴ Option A proposed continuing the current policy of limited

¹¹¹ Kirkpatrick to McCone, Dec. 21, 1964, p. 2.

¹¹² Petersen, "The Vietnam Cauldron," 1.

¹¹³ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 68.

¹¹⁴ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 68.

military actions against the NLF and Hanoi in the event of enemy attacks on U.S. assets. Option B was an escalated military campaign that included intensified bombing of the DRV. Option C called for an escalation of the war effort that fell between B and A in terms of intensity. The option of withdrawal was left unexamined.¹¹⁵

Neutralization's unpopularity among policymakers and intelligence officers contributed to this decision. In an April 3 NSC meeting, McNamara called neutralizing the RVN "permitting it to fall into Communist hands."¹¹⁶ On July 28, McCone sent Johnson a CIA memo reporting that the NLF's goal was to precipitate a peace conference that would neutralize the RVN and give the Front an opportunity to seize political power.¹¹⁷ SNIE 10-3-64 and 53-2-64 both reported the NLF's goal to be domination of a neutralized GVN.¹¹⁸ The intelligence officers on the NSC working group used those SNIEs to contend that Hanoi's goal was to wait until the GVN collapsed, then fill the resulting political vacuum with a Communist-dominated neutralist coalition.¹¹⁹ Yet they were equally pessimistic on escalation's chances.

¹¹⁵ *United States – Vietnam Relations*, Book IV.C.2.c, "Military Pressures Against NVN, November – December 1964," pp. i-v.

¹¹⁶ Summary Record of the 526th Meeting of the National Security Council, Apr. 3, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 107, p. 223.

¹¹⁷ Memorandum from McCone to Johnson, "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US or US-Sponsored Courses of Action in Vietnam and Laos," Jul. 28, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964* Doc. 253, p. 587.

¹¹⁸ SNIE 10-3-64, p. 4; SNIE 53-2-64, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ NSC Working Group on Vietnam – Section I: Intelligence Assessment – "The Political Situation in South Vietnam," Nov. 24, 1964, p. 8. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5XvfV0](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5XvfV0) (accessed Nov. 20, 2017).

The NSC Working Group's intelligence panel concluded that both neutralization and escalation's chances of success in leaving the RVN a non-Communist redoubt were low due to the depth of enemy persistence. Indeed, though the working group included neutralizing the RVN as part of Option A during early deliberations, they quickly discarded it. The panel used SNIEs 10-3-64, 53-2-64, and 50-2-64 as sources. Their report contended that bombing the DRV risked playing into Hanoi's hands, since Hanoi's actions "implied" a belief that bombing would lead to international pressure on the U.S. to agree to a settlement that the NLF could use to gain power.¹²⁰ Nor could the U.S. break Hanoi's will to support the NLF by destroying its capability to do so: "[Bombing] would almost certainly not destroy DRV capability to continued (sic) supporting the insurrection in the South, although at a lessened level, should Hanoi so wish."¹²¹ Breaking Hanoi's will to continue the war would require the U.S. to convince Hanoi that the U.S. was willing to make the cost of supporting the NLF intolerable. But the report did not state what specific measures would be necessary to accomplish this goal.

The working group's final recommendations favored escalation and elided the intelligence panel's doubts. Working group JCS representative Adm. Lloyd Mustin argued against the IC's conclusion that attacking Hanoi's capability to supply the NLF would not hurt Hanoi's will to continue doing so: "The actual U.S. requirement with respect to the DRV is reduction of the rate of delivery or support to the VC." Mustin stated that he did not know "the precise level of measures which will be required ... This is the reason for designing a program of progressively increasing squeeze" by which he

¹²⁰ "The Situation in South Vietnam," Nov. 24, 1964, p. 10.

¹²¹ "The Situation in South Vietnam," Nov. 24, 1964, p. 8.

meant Option C.¹²² Mustin cited no evidence for his points. But his arguments helped sway several members of the working group.¹²³ Even Bundy, who previously served in the CIA, did not mention the intelligence panel's doubts during a November 19 meeting with Johnson.¹²⁴ And while the working group's final report included the panel's conclusion that the war effort rested on breaking Hanoi's will, it omitted the panel's judgments on the difficulty of achieving that end. The report recommended Option C, which called for U.S. air attacks against the DRV's infiltration infrastructure as well as deploying U.S. combat troops to the RVN.¹²⁵

The intelligence panel's doubts went ignored because policymakers chose what they saw as the best of a series of bad options for preserving a non-Communist RVN. The panel concluded that neither escalation nor neutralization were likely to achieve that end. Appropriately for a group of intelligence officers, the panel made no recommendation on what the U.S. should do next. But escalation was a foregone conclusion for most policymakers and military officials, including those on the working group. Mustin spoke for many Johnson administration figures when he responded to a different section of the working group report that asked policymakers to consider "just what degree of risk or loss we should be prepared to make and accept to hold South Vietnam" as bluntly as he

¹²² All quotes from *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Book IV.C.2.c, "Military Pressures Against NVN, November – December 1964," p. 9.

¹²³ *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Book IV.C.2.c, "Military Pressures Against NVN, November – December 1964," p. 10.

¹²⁴ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 70.

¹²⁵ See Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Working Group, Nov. 21, 1964, *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 418, pp. 916-28.

could: “The paragraph also implies there is some alternative to our holding South Vietnam. There is none.”¹²⁶ The panel report’s omission of any sources other than SNIEs that policymakers and military officials had already ignored or distorted made it easier for those same Johnson administration figures to do so again. Indeed, on November 23, Rostow sent Rusk a memo quoting the section of SNIE 10-3-64 that concluded bombing would probably break Hanoi’s will while omitting INR’s dissent.¹²⁷

Johnson and his key advisors chose Option C because it allowed them to maintain the gradual escalation that characterized U.S. policy toward Vietnam in 1964. The working group report presented Option A as the status quo. But for most of the year, Johnson had been steadily increasing support to the RVN. For that support to hit a plateau, as Option A called for, would have represented a more sudden policy change than keeping with the steady escalation to which Johnson had grown accustomed. When faced with difficult, uncertain situations, policymakers tend toward maintaining the status quo.¹²⁸ Option C allowed Johnson to do that.

Ironically, Johnson began consuming intelligence more regularly after deciding to escalate even as he disregarded many of the IC’s findings, a phenomenon that led to the establishment of the President’s Daily Brief (PDB). LBJ only read the PICL when he met

¹²⁶ NSC Working Group Project – Courses of Action, Southeast Asia, “Comments on Draft Section II – U.S. Objectives and Stakes in South Vietnam and Southeast Asia,” Nov. 10, 1964, pp. 3-4. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5Xod96 (accessed Nov. 20, 2017).

¹²⁷ Memo from Rostow to Rusk, “Some Observations As We Come to the Crunch in Southeast Asia,” Nov. 23, 1964, U.S. Declassified Documents Online: tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5b8Vn2 (accessed Nov. 30, 2017).

¹²⁸ William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser, “Status Quo Bias in Decision-Making,” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 1 (1988): 7-59.

with McCone for regular intelligence briefings. After those briefings stopped and McCone's interactions with Johnson became limited to NSC meetings at which the PICL was rarely discussed, the president stopped reading his daily checklists. The PICL's appearance and scheduling were a major reason why. Kennedy had preferred a small checklist that he received each morning and was small enough to fit into his jacket pocket between meetings. Johnson, on the other hand, liked to read at night in bed. Many of his advisors still read the PICL during his first year, and the CIA also produced a twice-weekly summary named the *Intelligence Review*, which Johnson considered a useful supplement to briefings. In November, Director of Current Intelligence R. Jack Smith suggested simplifying the situation by replacing the PICL and the *Review* with a daily briefing document that would better conform to LBJ's preferences. On December 1, the CIA inaugurated the PDB. Unlike the PICL, the PDB was a full-page document that Johnson received each evening with his night reading. Johnson liked the new brief, and read it regularly.¹²⁹ But Kennedy-era problems persisted through this transition.

Tradecraft flaws from Kennedy's PICLs carried over to Johnson's PDBs. Most of the CIA's changes to the daily presidential intelligence briefing from Kennedy to Johnson were superficial: the analysts changed the brief's title, formatting, and scheduling. But the tendency for analysts to focus on the background of problems or events without including implications for U.S. policy remained the same. Johnson's first PDB described Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang's political maneuvers against RVN Prime Minister Tran Van Huong, who had taken over from Khanh in November:

¹²⁹ See Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President*, 56-59.

Tri Quang, in central Vietnam, is now joining Buddhist leaders in Saigon in pressing for the ouster of the Saigon government. With Tri Quang's power and political shrewdness in the scales against him, Huong's position is becoming increasingly difficult.¹³⁰

Not all Johnson-era PDB sections were this terse. Replacing Kennedy's compact booklet with a full-page document gave analysts more room for detail. But they frequently used that room for more detail on the background of events as opposed to context or policy opportunities. Analysts also continued to resist citing sources in the PDB, just as they had done in the PICL.¹³¹

Several months after the PDB's creation, LBJ also began reading daily updates from the CIA's Office of Current Intelligence on the situation in the RVN, but the tradecraft in these reports was no better than that in the PDB.¹³² As David Priess argues, the updates meant that the PDB no longer needed to "cover every detail on [Vietnam]."¹³³ Yet most of them gave great detail on the background of a particular incident or problem

¹³⁰ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Daily Brief," Dec. 1, 1964, p. 5. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005967398.pdf (accessed Dec. 6, 2017).

¹³¹ See for example CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Daily Brief," Feb. 9, 1965, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005967512.pdf (accessed Dec. 7, 2017).

¹³² Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President*, 58-59.

¹³³ David Priess, *The President's Book of Secrets: The Untold Story of Intelligence Briefings to America's Presidents from Kennedy to Obama* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 51.

facing the RVN without providing context or implications for U.S. policy. They also rarely referenced their sources.¹³⁴

As with Kennedy's PICLs, the cryptic nature of many PDBs and daily RVN situation reports limited their usefulness for policy formation. After several months of reading the PDB at night, Johnson switched to reading it at 6:30 each morning, with the RVN update following at 8:00.¹³⁵ But he preferred to read both by himself rather than receive briefings from an analyst. As a result, Johnson had to ask the CIA for additional briefings or products if he wanted clarification on a certain topic that a PDB covered. LBJ's decision to freeze McCone out from policy circles in March thus made it easier for Johnson to rely on his preconceptions during the decision-making process. Because his PDBs and daily updates only included detail on the background of problems or ongoing events, Johnson could fill in the gaps himself.

Operation Rolling Thunder and the Honolulu Conference

Bombing the RVN soon grew into a military operation surpassing the NSC working group's recommendations. On February 7, the NLF attacked a U.S. military installation at Pleiku, killing eight Americans. McGeorge Bundy happened to be visiting the RVN at the same time as the attack. The National Security Advisor interpreted the attack as a direct response to his visit even though the CIA found no evidence for that

¹³⁴ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Situation in South Vietnam (As of 1400 EST)," Jan. 26, 1965, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00472A000700010009-2.pdf> (accessed Jun. 25, 2018).

¹³⁵ Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President*, 59.

argument. The NLF had “thrown down the gauntlet,” Bundy claimed in a phone call to Washington. Bombing the DRV, he continued, was the only appropriate response. Johnson agreed, and began a two-week air campaign targeted at DRV military bases, codenamed Flaming Dart.¹³⁶ Within days, a larger bombing campaign intended to pressure Hanoi into peace talks, bolster GVN morale, and stop enemy infiltration of reinforcements and materiel took shape. Operation Rolling Thunder began on March 2, 1965.

Initial intelligence evaluations of the bombing campaign’s prospects were mixed. SNIE 10-3-65, released on February 11, concluded that the US would have to display “a consistent determination to persevere” for it to have any effect on Hanoi.¹³⁷ The estimate also concluded that any bombing campaign was likely to increase USSR and Chinese support of the DRV. Such support, according to the estimate, would probably consist of vociferous denunciations of America’s actions, as well as diplomatic and political pressures. Perhaps more worrisome was the community’s view that the odds of the USSR sending anti-air weaponry to the DRV were “about even,” and a “fair chance” that China might send limited numbers of “volunteer” ground troops.¹³⁸ INR was particularly strident in warning against provoking Chinese intervention.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Ronald B. Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam, 1964-1975* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 17.

¹³⁷ Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-3-65, “Communist Reactions to Possible US Actions,” Feb. 11, 1965, p. 4. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

¹³⁸ SNIE 10-3-65, pp. 4-8, 10.

¹³⁹ SNIE 10-3-65, pp. 10, 11 fn2.

SNIE 10-3/1-65, published a week later, stated that while bombing alone would likely not convince Hanoi's leaders to abandon their support of the NLF, a sustained campaign could lead to Hanoi "[M]ak[ing] some effort to secure a respite from US air attack, especially if the US had indicated that such a respite would follow a sharp reduction in Viet Cong activity."¹⁴⁰ But the analysts' confidence in that judgment was low, and they cited no evidence to support it. Moreover, INR dissented again, although the bureau undercut its dissent's potential effectiveness by not citing sources. INR contended that Hanoi would likely not try for a respite from bombing for fear of "[Losing] momentum at a time when victory appeared near."¹⁴¹ Yet despite the lack of evidence in the dissent, Vice President Hubert Humphrey agreed with INR.

Humphrey relied on his personal experiences during the Korean War to argue against escalation in general and bombing in particular. On February 17, Humphrey sent Johnson a long memo urging the president not to escalate in Vietnam. Understanding how seriously Johnson took domestic politics, Humphrey spent several pages examining the negative political consequences of sending American troops to fight a land war in Asia with no clear goal or exit strategy. He also appealed to his experience as a senator during the Korean War, noting that American support for that war effort melted away

¹⁴⁰ Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-3/1-65, "Communist Reactions to Possible US Courses of Action Against North Vietnam," Feb. 18, 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. II, Vietnam January-June 1965*, eds. David C. Humphrey, Ronald D. Landa, and Louis J. Smith (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996) Doc. 139, p. 322.

¹⁴¹ SNIE 10-3/1-65, *FRUS Vietnam January-June 1965*, p. 322.

once it turned into a stalemate.¹⁴² Johnson had also been a senator during that war, so he was equally familiar with Humphrey's experience.

INR's pessimism reinforced Humphrey's memo. In the summer of 1964, Rusk ordered Hughes to serve as Humphrey's briefer on Vietnam, since Hughes had worked for Humphrey while the latter was a senator and the two had remained close afterward. The nature of their relationship presented a potential conflict for Hughes. While close relationships between intelligence analysts and policymakers can help build the sort of trust that is so vital for a healthy intelligence-policy nexus, such relationships can also lead to politicization of intelligence if analysts change their findings to match policymaker preconceptions out of a sense of affection or obligation.

But Hughes obeyed Rusk because, as he recalled later, "In those days we thought we could compartmentalize."¹⁴³ That he thought so is evidence of how well entrenched Johnson's *ad hoc* system was by 1964. After months of detailed briefings and conversations with Hughes, Humphrey agreed with INR's conclusions that the war effort stood little chance of success due to GVN instability as well as Hanoi's persistence and the lack of enough targets in the DRV to make a bombing campaign effective in pressuring Hanoi to quit its war effort. Humphrey's memo did not mention intelligence. But INR's findings underlay his arguments since, as Hughes put it, the "assessments led to some pretty obvious political conclusions."¹⁴⁴ INR contended that Americanization of

¹⁴² Memo from Humphrey to Johnson, Feb. 17, 1965

¹⁴³ Hughes ADST Oral History, p. 103.

¹⁴⁴ Hughes ADST Oral History, p. 109.

the war would lead to a frustrating quagmire. Such a development would hurt Johnson's public approval rating and imperil his agenda.

Undersecretary of State George W. Ball based his doubts about the war effort's prospects in large part on multiple intelligence products. Though the Robert Johnson bombing report had not influenced policy in the spring, Ball obtained and read a copy by October of 1964. Ball had participated in the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey after World War II, which concluded that the Allied bombing campaigns had not broken the German or Japanese population's morale. That left him predisposed to question bombing's effectiveness in Vietnam. After reading the Johnson report, Ball wrote a long memo arguing that the Saigon government was corrupt and ineffective, while bombing would not shake Hanoi's support of the NLF. He referenced multiple intelligence analyses in the memo, including SNIEs 53-2-64 and 10-3-64. He sent the memo to Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy on October 5, 1964, but all three disregarded it. According to Ball, McNamara treated the memo like a "poisonous snake" due to its contravention of policy.¹⁴⁵

Ball's use of intelligence in the October 1964 memo reflected his preconceptions. In citing the SNIEs, Ball did not mention that neither document substantiated its claims with sources. Instead, he implied that the estimates were authoritative due to their mere status as National Estimates. SNIE 53-2-64 was the "clearest appraisal of present conditions" in the GVN, and should be considered reliable since it was "unanimously

¹⁴⁵ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 25; Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 52. For the text of Ball's memo see George W. Ball, "Top Secret: The Prophecy the President Rejected" *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jul. 1972, 33-49. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000200160019-9.pdf> (accessed Nov. 29, 2017).

approved by the United States Intelligence Board.” And when SNIE 10-3-64 contravened his preconception that rapid escalation would bring China into the war by calling such an intervention “unlikely,” Ball disregarded that judgment by using his own personal experiences: “We made a contrary assumption in Korea in October of 1950 with highly unfortunate consequences.”¹⁴⁶ Nor did he engage with the sections of the estimates that officials like Rostow and the Chiefs did to substantiate their arguments. In the Johnson administration, intelligence was useful as a tool to reinforce both hawkish and dovish preconceptions.

Ball’s pessimism persisted into 1965. In a memo to Johnson dated February 13, he and Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson agreed that Hanoi was unlikely to abandon its war effort short of “a crushing military defeat.” Ball and Thompson also pointed out that China “would be extremely reluctant” to allow Hanoi to surrender given the depths of Chinese support for the DRV. That reluctance meant a substantial risk of China intervening in the war with ground troops. The latter judgment reflected INR findings. China expert and INR analyst Allan Whiting helped Ball with his memos.¹⁴⁷ Whiting and other INR analysts had long warned that rapid escalation could draw China into the war.¹⁴⁸ Both Ball and Thompson stated that they supported gradual escalation, which was a necessary agreement with policy to avoid being cast aside. But neither

¹⁴⁶ All quotes from Ball, “Top Secret: The Prophecy the President Rejected,” 37, 40.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas L. Hughes, interview with author, September 19, 2015.

¹⁴⁸ See David L. Di Leo, *George Ball, Vietnam, and the Rethinking of Containment* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 81.

believed that the U.S. could “avoid a humiliating defeat” in Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁹ And on February 24, LBJ received a copy of Ball’s October 1964 memo.¹⁵⁰

Johnson disregarded Humphrey’s pessimism when considering escalation of the war in the spring of 1965. Humphrey’s use of history in his memo had no effect on Johnson because the president had his own historical examples to draw on as evidence for why escalation was warranted. LBJ feared that allowing Communism to triumph in Vietnam would be a tragedy akin to Neville Chamberlain’s decision to cooperate with Hitler in 1938 or Harry Truman’s “loss” of China in 1949. He made explicit the lessons he drew from history in a 1970 interview:

[E]verything I knew about history told me that if I got out of Vietnam and let Ho Chi Minh run through the streets of Saigon, then I’d be doing exactly what Chamberlain did in World War II. I’d be giving a big fat reward to aggression . . . I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that these problems, taken together, were chicken shit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.¹⁵¹

Similar historical comparisons to justify escalation were popular among Johnson’s key advisors.¹⁵² And Humphrey’s memo followed months’ worth of verbal dissent against the administration’s policies throughout 1964. But Johnson had wanted Humphrey to remain

¹⁴⁹ Memorandum from Ball to Johnson, “Viet-Nam,” Feb. 13, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam January-June 1965*, Doc. 113, pp. 258-59.

¹⁵⁰ Burke, Greenstein, Berman, and Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 171.

¹⁵¹ Doris Kearns, “LBJ Remembers Vietnam: 1970” in *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism 1959 – 1975* (New York: The Library of America, 2000), 476.

¹⁵² See Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 75-90; and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

silent as he had as Vice President under Kennedy.¹⁵³ Humphrey's continued refusal to do so enraged LBJ, who answered his Vice President's doubts by replying, "Hubert, we don't need all these memos." He also banned Humphrey from Vietnam-related meetings for a year.¹⁵⁴

Nor did Johnson heed most of Ball's concerns, although LBJ permitted Ball to remain in policy discussions. That distinction occurred because Ball refrained from discussing his doubts on the war in meetings unless Johnson asked for his opinion or brought up a memo he had written. Indeed, Ball knew that "Whatever influence I had with the President depended on maintaining a confidence that even though I opposed much of what we were doing I would not desert and attack him."¹⁵⁵ Remaining deferential helped Ball stay in LBJ's good graces. At the same time, Johnson often treated Ball as a "devil's advocate" against whom he and other hawkish officials could burnish their arguments.¹⁵⁶ As a result, Ball changed no minds despite his prominent place in Johnson's inner circle. Indeed, Johnson ordered Rolling Thunder to begin less than a week after receiving Ball's October memo. LBJ did so because Rostow had convinced him that bombing the DRV could force Hanoi to negotiate without having to send U.S. ground troops.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 18-19.

¹⁵⁴ Fredrik Logevall, *The Origins of the Vietnam War* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 77.

¹⁵⁵ George W. Ball, draft excerpt from *The Past Has Another Pattern*. George W. Ball Papers, Box 68, Folder 20, Seeley J. Mudd Library, Princeton, NJ.

¹⁵⁶ See DiLeo, *George Ball, Vietnam, and the Rethinking of Containment*.

¹⁵⁷ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 537.

Pessimistic intelligence helped keep Rolling Thunder limited at its inception by reinforcing concerns about Chinese intervention within the Johnson administration. Most Johnson administration members – not just Humphrey – still bore the scars of the Korean War and feared provoking China. McCone was an exception. In April 1965, he recommended that LBJ remove the restrictions and “strike hard and deep” against the DRV.¹⁵⁸ But fearing provoking the Chinese, LBJ ignored McCone again. Rusk concurred. INR analysts like Allan Whiting had warned Rusk for months that rapid escalation of bombing would likely draw China into the war. Rusk favored escalation, but he also took Whiting’s concerns seriously. He began many briefings with Hughes by asking if there had been “any sign of Chinese movement.” Consequently, Rusk helped keep the escalation limited enough to avoid antagonizing the DRV’s northern neighbor.¹⁵⁹ But after the DRV absorbed several rounds of air strikes, LBJ and his advisors began considering more aggressive moves.

Sending ground troops to Vietnam became a more viable policy option in April 1965. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, who took over as MACV Commander in 1964, had asked for additional troops for months. Because Johnson hoped that bombing the DRV would be enough to win, he refused to grant Westmoreland’s requests. But on March 8, Johnson sent 3,500 Marines to Danang, on the coast just south of the DMZ to serve as air base security. That initial contingent soon led to over 30,000 men in Vietnam

¹⁵⁸ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 77.

¹⁵⁹ John Prados, “The Mouse That Roared: State Department Intelligence in the Vietnam War,” May 2, 2004, Digital National Security Archive: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB121/prados.htm> (accessed Nov. 30, 2017).

by mid-April. And Hanoi showed no signs of backing down after weeks of bombing. On April 20, McNamara, Taylor, Wheeler, Westmoreland, and Pacific Fleet Commander in Chief Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp met in Honolulu and agreed that fighting the war would require winning on the ground in the South as well as bombing the North.¹⁶⁰

Overconfidence on the part of the Honolulu conference participants signaled that intelligence played no role in their decision. The conferees agreed that the present tempo of bombing strikes was “about right,” but that it would be necessary for Johnson to increase U.S. troop levels in Vietnam. Westmoreland had requested that Johnson raise U.S. force levels to 100,000 men; after some debate, the conference participants compromised on 82,000 total. The minutes do not show any conference participant referencing intelligence to inform or bolster their conclusions. Indeed, Taylor, Sharp, Wheeler and Westmoreland all agreed that the U.S. could break Hanoi’s will by sending enough troops to avoid a major enemy victory over the RVN and buy the GVN enough time to stabilize and attract popular support. That strategy reflected an understanding that victory would require a concerted effort to build an effective GVN as well as triumphing on the battlefield.¹⁶¹ But it also disregarded multiple intelligence analyses released over the past year and a half that emphasized Hanoi’s deep determination to outlast the U.S. in any conflict.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 174.

¹⁶¹ See Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 65-90 for an analysis of U.S. military strategy at the outset of the Vietnam War’s Americanization.

¹⁶² See United States Department of Defense Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, *Minutes of April 20, 1965, Honolulu Meeting Includes Appendices*, 1965, Digital National Security Archive: <https://search-proquest->

Analysts outside the U.S. government were also pessimistic on America's chances in Vietnam in spring 1965. In April 1964, RAND (Research and Development) Corporation President Frank Collbohm lobbied the government to give the think tank a research project in Vietnam so that it could contribute to the war effort.¹⁶³ Interagency Task Force on Vietnam – the task force which had produced the Robert Johnson bombing report – head William Sullivan agreed to a meeting with Collbohm and several RAND analysts. Sullivan presented the RAND group with a list of potential research topics, and they picked, “Who are the Viet Cong? What makes them tick?” which had come from McNamara.¹⁶⁴ Normally the IC would have handled that question. But the task force approved farming out research to RAND in this instance. That they did so was an exemplar of how *ad hoc* the Johnson administration's national security policy formation system was even when LBJ himself was removed from the picture. The result of Collbohm's meeting with Sullivan was the RAND Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Study, which began when researchers Joe Zasloff, John Donnell, and Guy Pauker traveled to Saigon to interview NLF defectors and prisoners in mid-1964. The team's first report, published in March 1965, portrayed the NLF as resilient and dedicated. Defections, it argued, were rare and occurred as a result of personal factors such as inability to cope with living in the jungle. It concluded that overall NLF morale was

com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679080836?accountid=14270 (accessed Dec. 9, 2017).

¹⁶³ Duong Van Mai Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2010), 48.

¹⁶⁴ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 49.

strong.¹⁶⁵ These findings led John McNaughton to agree with Zasloff during a briefing that the latter gave in January, “I think we’ve signed up with the wrong side – the side that’s going to lose this war.”¹⁶⁶

Despite his doubts, McNaughton never sent the report to McNamara.¹⁶⁷ The documentary record does not reveal why, but McNaughton was well known throughout the Johnson administration for being a private dove and public hawk. Though he doubted American prospects for success in Vietnam, his loyalty to McNamara and fear of being excluded from policy circles meant that while he occasionally expressed doubts to colleagues in private, he did not act on them.¹⁶⁸ And Zasloff soon found himself sidelined in favor of a more optimistic researcher.

Increased American involvement in Vietnam soon led to new leadership for the Motivation and Morale Study. In late 1964, RAND sent several prominent researchers to Vietnam to look for other research projects in order to help the U.S. war effort. One of these researchers was Leon Goure, who proposed studying the effect of military operations on the NLF, with a particular focus on bombing raids. Collbohm replaced Zasloff, Donnell, and Pauker with Goure as director of the Motivation and Morale Study

¹⁶⁵ RAND Corporation Report RM-4507/3-ISA, John C. Donnell, Guy J. Pauker, and Joseph J. Zasloff, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale in 1964: A Preliminary Report*, pp. 38-45. RAND Corporation Archives, Santa Monica, CA.

¹⁶⁶ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 73-74.

¹⁶⁷ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 75-78.

¹⁶⁸ Benjamin T. Harrison and Christopher L. Mosher, “John T. McNaughton and Vietnam: The Early Years as Assistant Secretary of Defense, 1964-1965,” *History* 92(308) (Oct. 2007): 503.

in early 1965. Indeed, by the time the original team published their findings in March, Goure had already taken over the project.

Goure took over the project because his proposal appealed to the Johnson administration. Whereas the original team had examined the enemy's strengths, Goure proposed to examine the NLF's weaknesses. Like many intelligence reports, the Zasloff/Donnell/Pauker study had not included the implications of their findings for U.S. policy. That omission led to complaints from many military officers that the report was not actionable.¹⁶⁹ Goure promised to provide the military with guidance on how to demoralize the NLF through firepower, which played into their preconceptions that American military strength could prove decisive in Vietnam. Collbohm placed Goure in charge of the project to keep his clients in the U.S. military happy.¹⁷⁰

Goure's background predisposed him toward escalating the war. Born in Moscow to dissident parents who opposed the Bolsheviks, Goure fled to Paris with his family in 1923. The Goures stayed in France until the Nazis invaded in 1940, when they fled to New Jersey. Having had to flee persecution twice, Goure later stated that he felt deep gratitude toward the U.S. for providing his family with refuge. That gratitude, combined with a deep hatred of Communism, prejudiced him in favor of defending American wartime policy rather than criticizing it.¹⁷¹

These preconceptions also won him powerful allies in the Johnson administration, which helped him take over the project. While researching Soviet civil defense policy at

¹⁶⁹ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 89.

¹⁷⁰ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 89-90.

¹⁷¹ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 1-2, 91.

RAND in the early 1960s, Goure concluded that the USSR's civil defense network could survive an American nuclear strike. The Air Force used this finding to justify more funding and more nuclear missiles. Goure thus won several high-ranking allies in the Air Force who favored increased bombing in Vietnam, including Air Force Intelligence chief Gen. Jack Thomas. RAND was founded after World War II to conduct long-range strategic planning for the Air Force. While the organization had become an independent think tank in the intervening years, Air Force officers still commanded outsized influence at RAND in the mid-1960s. Having such influential friends helped Goure obtain the necessary support to take over the Motivation and Morale Study.¹⁷²

In addition to farming assessments to an outside think tank partially on the basis of personal relationships, debate over sending troops in April 1965 shows how degraded the intelligence-policy nexus in the Johnson administration had become by then. On April 21, the Board of National Estimates, with assistance from INR and DIA, produced an Intelligence Memorandum concluding that sending ground troops to the RVN was unlikely to break the enemy's will to fight even if coupled with bombing of the DRV. McCone briefed the NSC on the analysis the following day. His notes of the meeting record no reaction to the report from Johnson. Rusk challenged a section contending that Hanoi probably thought world opinion was in its favor by arguing that world opinion was sympathetic to the U.S. Rusk cited no evidence, but neither had the Intelligence Memorandum. That tradecraft gap made it easier for Rusk to ignore the analysis in favor of his preconceptions. McNamara cherry-picked two separate paragraphs in the report. The first concluded that the DRV was determined to "ride out" the American bombing.

¹⁷² Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 91-104.

But the second found that by stationing a large ground force in Vietnam and winning enough victories to “seriously worsen” the NLF’s prospects, the U.S. would have a “somewhat better than even” chance of forcing the DRV into a temporary political settlement. McNamara was cherry-picking intelligence to justify escalation, and McCone knew it. The DCI pointed out that the analysis also concluded that the enemy would likely react to American escalation “by stepping up the insurgency, reinforcing the Viet Cong with the men and equipment necessary.”¹⁷³ McNamara did not respond.¹⁷⁴ And on April 28, Rear Admiral William F. Raborn replaced McCone as DCI.

Like McCone, Raborn was a novice concerning intelligence. His primary professional accomplishment had been implementing the Navy’s Polaris missile program. Johnson’s inner circle recommended that the president appoint Deputy Director Richard Helms as DCI, but Raborn was friendly with Johnson and had campaigned for him in 1964. Johnson saw Raborn as a loyalist he could control, unlike the headstrong McCone. According to Lawrence K. White, CIA Executive Director from 1965 through 1972, Johnson told Raborn that he had “grown tired of John McCone tugging at [my] coat tails.” He continued, “If I want to talk to you, I’ll call you.”¹⁷⁵ But Raborn’s tenure was

¹⁷³ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Apr. 21, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam January-June 1965*, Doc. 268, pp. 592-97. Though Intelligence Memoranda are collaborative efforts among different intelligence agencies, they do not necessarily represent the consensus views of the IC as NIEs and SNIEs do because not every intelligence agency is required to participate in their production.

¹⁷⁴ See Memorandum for the Record, Meeting of the NSC Executive Committee, Apr. 22, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam January-June 1965*, Doc. 269, pp. 597-600 for McCone’s minutes of the meeting.

¹⁷⁵ James Hanrahan, “An Interview With Former Executive Director Lawrence K. “Red” White” *Studies in Intelligence* (Winter 1999-2000): <https://www.cia.gov/library/center->

troubled from the beginning, which crippled the CIA's ability to inform policy during the spring and early summer of 1965.

The Dominican Crisis poisoned Raborn's relationship with LBJ. In late April, dissident Dominican Army troops mounted a coup against the American-aligned strongman Donald Reid Cabral. An April 29 PDB assessed that "a high-ranking member" of the Dominican Communist Party controlled the rebels.¹⁷⁶ We now know that the coup plotters were attempting to restore the democratically elected president Juan Bosch, who Cabral had overthrown several years prior.¹⁷⁷ But Raborn stated that Castro controlled the rebellion in a phone call with Johnson the same day.¹⁷⁸ Johnson accepted that conclusion because it fit with his preconceptions. He noted to McGeorge Bundy later that morning: "I sure don't want to wake up there a few hours later ... and find out Castro's in charge."¹⁷⁹ But the press revealed the lack of any substantive connection between the

[for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art3.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art3.html) (accessed Dec. 1, 2017).

¹⁷⁶ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Daily Brief," Apr. 29, 1965, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005967651.pdf (accessed Dec. 13, 2017).

¹⁷⁷ See Piero Gleijeses, *The Dominican Crisis: The 1965 Constitutionalist Revolt* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); "Hope Denied: The US Defeat of the 1965 Revolt in the Dominican Republic," Wilson Center Cold War International History Project Working Paper 72 (Nov. 2014).

¹⁷⁸ Telephone conversation between DCI Raborn and Johnson, Apr. 29, 1965, 8:47am. Digital National Security Archive: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB513/docs/Tape%2003%20transcript.pdf>? (accessed Dec. 13, 2017).

¹⁷⁹ Telephone conversation between Johnson and Bundy, Apr. 29, 1965, 9:48am. Digital National Security Archive:

rebels and Havana in late May, which left Johnson embarrassed and Raborn in the policy wilderness.¹⁸⁰

The 44 Battalion Request and July Debates

Johnson finally decided to Americanize the war by sending hundreds of thousands of ground troops in July 1965, by which time the intelligence-policy nexus in his administration was all but nonexistent. Westmoreland prompted LBJ and his cabinet to debate Americanization when the general increased his troop requests from 50,000 on June 7 to nearly double that number on June 24. Westmoreland relied on opinion-based, intelligence-free justifications for why he needed so many troops such as, “I am becoming more convinced every day that US forces in appropriate numbers must be deployed to permit the Vietnamese with our help to carry the war to the enemy.”¹⁸¹ Allan Whiting criticized this lack of evidence in a June 24 message to Ball:

We seem unwittingly to have drifted into a situation wherein U.S. force levels in South Vietnam increase by the tens of thousands within weeks with virtually no agreed definable plan of operations and little credible justification. A peculiar kind of numerology fixes on 50,000 – then 75,000 – and most recently 100,000 as the ‘absolute minimum number for security.’¹⁸²

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB513/docs/Tape%2004%20transcript.pdf> (accessed Dec. 13, 2017).

¹⁸⁰ Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 298-90.

¹⁸¹ Telegram from Westmoreland to Wheeler, Jun. 24, 1965. *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 17, pp. 42-43.

¹⁸² INR Memo from Whiting to Ball, June 24, 1965, “Where Do We Go From Here?” p. 1. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Records of Undersecretary of State George Ball, 1961-1966, Lot 74D272, Box 20, National Archives and Records Administration, Archives II, College Park MD (NARA II).

Less than a week later, Westmoreland's troop requests increased to 44 battalions, or nearly 200,000 men in total.¹⁸³ This time, Westmoreland did not use intelligence at all to justify his request. That he failed to do so did not hurt his position within Johnson's inner circle.

McNamara continued to justify escalation through selective reading of intelligence. On July 1, McGeorge Bundy forwarded four papers to Johnson that all made different arguments regarding escalation. McNamara's, which William Bundy later called the "lead paper," proposed both an increase in the number of US troops stationed in Vietnam to total 175,000 as well as an increase in bombing.¹⁸⁴ As part of his argument, McNamara quoted a recent CIA report that concluded Hanoi would continue its current strategy

[U]nless and until two conditions prevail: (1) they are forced to accept a situation in the war in the South which offers them no prospect of an early victory and no grounds for hope that they can simply outlast the US and (2) North Vietnam itself is under continuing and increasingly damaging punitive attack.¹⁸⁵

McNamara considered increased bombing the best way to reach the second goal, with large numbers of US ground troops necessary for the first. CIA analysts concluded that

¹⁸³ Telegram from Westmoreland to Wheeler, Jun. 30, 1965. *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 31, pp. 75-77; John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 128.

¹⁸⁴ Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 69; Burke, Greenstein, Berman, and Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 205.

¹⁸⁵ Memorandum From McNamara to Johnson, "Program of expanded military and political moves with respect to Vietnam," Jul. 1, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam, June-December 1965*, Doc. 38. A covering note on this memorandum indicates that John McNaughton drafted it on June 26. I have as yet been unable to locate the original CIA report McNamara used.

his plan was “probably broader than necessary” and would not cause enough damage to compensate for the international criticism that it would incur.¹⁸⁶ The analysts included this assessment in their final draft of the report that McNamara quoted, but the Defense Secretary only quoted the section that supported his argument.

George Ball’s contribution restated his dovish arguments, but without appealing to intelligence. On June 28, Ball wrote a long paper with the provocative title “A Plan for Cutting Our Losses in South Viet-Nam.” In addition to his experiences on the Strategic Bombing Survey, Ball had served as an attaché to the French during the First Indochina War, which contributed to his pessimism on U.S. prospects in Vietnam.¹⁸⁷ He referenced that experience in his July 28 memo: “[The RVN] is clearly what General de Gaulle described to me as a ‘rotten country’ Politically, South Vietnam is a lost cause.”¹⁸⁸ Such strong language prompted the rest of Johnson’s cabinet – though not LBJ, who never saw it – to criticize the memo as too extreme. In response, Ball shifted toward encouraging negotiations. But his re-tooled memo, also published on July 1, began no less provocatively: “No one can assure you that we can beat the Viet Cong . . . no matter how many white foreign (US) troops we deploy.”¹⁸⁹ Ball concluded that LBJ should

¹⁸⁶ Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, Comments on the Secretary of Defense’s 26 June 1965 Memorandum, “Program of Expanded Military and Political Moves with Respect to Vietnam” June 30, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam, June-December 1965*, Doc. 34.

¹⁸⁷ Burke, Greenstein, Berman, and Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 170

¹⁸⁸ Burke, Greenstein, Berman, and Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 205.

¹⁸⁹ Ball to Johnson, Jul. 1, 1965, “A Compromise Solution for Vietnam,” p. 1. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Records of Undersecretary of State George W. Ball, 1961 – 1966, Lot 74D272, Box 20, NARA II.

freeze U.S. troop levels at 72,000 and avoid bombing Hanoi, Haiphong, and targets near the Chinese border while seeking a diplomatic compromise. Yet outside of brief references to diplomatic reporting in sections discussing reactions of allied nations to a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, Ball did not cite intelligence in his July 1 memo.¹⁹⁰

William Bundy advocated for a middle course between Ball and McNamara's recommendations, but like both of them did not use intelligence. Bundy argued against Ball's position as overly defeatist on the grounds that the war in the RVN was not "going all that badly."¹⁹¹ He cited no evidence for this point. His argument against McNamara's position was that increased military pressures against Hanoi like the Defense Secretary encouraged would not work since "As long as Hanoi thinks it is winning in the South, such pressures will not affect their determination."¹⁹² He therefore concluded that U.S. forces in the RVN should be capped at 100,000. While the final report of the NSC Working Group that he had chaired supported that conclusion, Bundy made no mention of it in his memo.

Rusk's paper, which was the last and briefest, confirmed all of Johnson's preconceptions without referencing intelligence. The Secretary of State admitted that the war would be long and difficult. But he emphasized that the RVN could not be allowed to fall to Communism: "The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world

¹⁹⁰ See Ball to Johnson, "A Compromise Solution for Vietnam," Attachment A.

¹⁹¹ William Bundy to Johnson, Jul. 1, 1965, "Holding On in South Vietnam," p. 1. Records of George W. Ball, Lot 74D272, Box 20, NARA II.

¹⁹² Bundy to Johnson, "Holding On in South Vietnam," pp. 2-3.

would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war.”¹⁹³ By organizing his paper around both the domino theory and the salience of US credibility, Rusk fortified Johnson’s preconceptions without appealing to intelligence. Rusk did caution Johnson against bombing targets in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas for fear of provoking China. That caution fit with his previous concern about Chinese intervention, which INR analyses had helped reinforce. But otherwise his paper did not rely on intelligence.

The absence of intelligence support in all four of the papers did not bother Johnson, who used them to draw assignments for their respective authors rather than to debate escalation. On July 2, LBJ met with his cabinet to discuss the memos. No record of the meeting exists, but the extant evidence suggests that no debate over escalation or the papers’ arguments took place. Instead, Johnson instructed McNamara to discuss Westmoreland’s strategy with the general and Lodge while Ball would explore what opportunities existed for discussions with Hanoi.¹⁹⁴ Johnson’s preconception that the U.S. could not abandon the RVN was so strong that he did not bother to hold a debate even among advisors he trusted. He continued to believe that no matter what difficulties the U.S. encountered in Vietnam, the RVN could not be allowed to fall.

The domino theory again proved more critical than intelligence during a meeting of Johnson’s informal foreign policy advisors, or “Wise Men” on July 8. Only five of fifteen total Wise Men were present on July 8: General Omar Bradley, former Deputy

¹⁹³ Paper by Secretary of State Rusk, Jul. 1, 1965, “Viet-Nam.” *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 39, p. 105.

¹⁹⁴ Burke, Greenstein, Berman, and Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 235; Editorial Note, *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 44, pp. 118-19.

Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, Eisenhower advisors George Kistiakowsky and Arthur Larson, and veteran security man John McCloy. William Bundy led the meeting. He opened by stating that the administration's view was that were the RVN to go Communist, Thailand would soon follow, along with possibly Japan and India. All of the Wise Men concurred. Neither Bundy nor the Wise Men referenced any evidence to support this use of the domino theory. According to Bundy's notes of the meeting, the group "generally felt that there should be no question of making whatever combat force increases were required" although Larson favored a greater emphasis on diplomacy.¹⁹⁵ This near-consensus among the Wise Men surprised Johnson, who did not expect such strong support among the group for escalation. Bundy concluded later that this support helped reinforce Johnson's conviction that escalation was warranted.¹⁹⁶

 Policymaker preconceptions overwhelmed intelligence in importance during a critical meeting on July 21 in which Johnson met with his cabinet to discuss Westmoreland's request. LBJ displayed some reluctance to send troops, but also stated that he "[felt] we have very little alternative to what we are doing."¹⁹⁷ Ball's doubts persisted: "We can't win. Long protracted. The most we can hope for is messy conclusion."¹⁹⁸ Henry Cabot Lodge, who favored fulfilling the troop request, appealed to Johnson's fears of going down in history as another Neville Chamberlain: "There is a

¹⁹⁵ Notes of Meeting, "Vietnam Panel," Jul. 8, 1965. *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 55, pp. 138-39.

¹⁹⁶ Burke, Greenstein, Berman, and Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 212-13.

¹⁹⁷ Notes of meeting, Jul. 21, 1965. *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 71, p. 192.

¹⁹⁸ Notes of meeting, Jul. 21, 1965, p. 194.

greater threat to World War III if we don't go in. Similar to our indolence at Munich.”¹⁹⁹

Wheeler mentioned intelligence only in the context of needing to improve “combat” intelligence, or the sort of intelligence that would help American troops fight the PAVN and NLF.²⁰⁰ Discussing intelligence in this manner meant that Wheeler was more concerned with how intelligence could help the U.S. win in Vietnam than help senior policymakers and military officials determine whether or not to send troops there.

DCI Raborn played no substantive role in the July 21 meeting. His only interaction with the president occurred when Johnson asked him if he had “people” in the DRV. After Raborn replied “Not enough. We think [intelligence out of the DRV] is reliable,” Johnson followed up with “Can't we improve intelligence in North Vietnam?” Raborn explained that the CIA had a task force working on this matter. Apparently satisfied, Johnson changed the subject.²⁰¹ Intelligence therefore remained a minor consideration for Johnson while he considered major escalation. He cared about intelligence only in terms of how it could help the U.S. achieve its goals in Vietnam as opposed to using it to determine whether those goals were achievable. And Raborn's lack of importance within the administration post-Dominican Crisis rendered the agency he ran a bit player in policy discussions.

Johnson and his inner circle continued to rely on their preconceptions instead of intelligence in meetings following July 21. On July 22, Chief of Naval Operations David McDonald opened a meeting by assuring Johnson that fulfilling Westmoreland's request

¹⁹⁹ Notes of meeting, Jul. 21, 1965, p. 196.

²⁰⁰ Notes of meeting, Jul. 21, 1965, p. 192.

²⁰¹ Notes of meeting, Jul. 21, 1965. *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, p. 193.

would “turn the tide” in Vietnam. He did not provide evidence for that point. LBJ shot back that McDonald could not know if 100,000 men would be enough. But Johnson also refused to stop at maintaining present force levels, as he thought that doing so would only allow the U.S. to “lose slowly.” U.S. Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson maintained that escalation represented the best of a series of bad options: “Least desirable alternative is getting out. Second least is doing what we are doing. Best to get in and get the job done.”²⁰² Johnson showed some reluctance to follow that advice when he likened it to jumping off a tall building.²⁰³ But in an NSC meeting on July 27, Johnson rejected withdrawal on the grounds that “Most feel that our national honor is at stake and that we must keep our commitments there.”²⁰⁴

The plan that Johnson eventually chose illustrates the ineffectiveness of his policy formation apparatus and how badly the intelligence-policy nexus in his administration had deteriorated by July 1965. In the July 27 NSC meeting LBJ rejected unrestricted bombing of the DRV, maintaining troop levels where they were, and going on a “war footing” by calling up the reserves and asking for “great sums of money” from Congress. The only acceptable alternative was a plan that McNamara had proposed several days prior: to send troops without mobilizing the reserves or requesting funding from Congress. The plan did not rely on intelligence and had never even come up in the July debates. But LBJ selected it because it enabled him to escalate the war without subjecting

²⁰² Notes of Meeting, Jul. 22, 1965, noon – 2:15pm. *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 76, p. 213.

²⁰³ Notes of Meeting, Jul. 22, 1965, noon – 2:15 pm. p. 216.

²⁰⁴ Summary Notes of the 553d Meeting of the National Security Council, Jul. 27, 1965, 5:40 pm – 6:20 pm. *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 93, p. 262.

that decision to a public Congressional debate that might have undermined public support for his administration.²⁰⁵ Hence, his goal throughout the July discussions was the same as it had been when the NSC Working Group met: not to debate whether escalation was warranted, but to determine how to escalate. On July 28, the president delivered a televised address in which he informed the American people of his decision to fulfill Westmoreland's troop request.²⁰⁶ The Vietnam War was now fully Americanized.

Johnson sent American troops to Vietnam under a cloud of uncertainty. LBJ's need for consensus and disdain for ambiguity led him to disregard numerous pessimistic intelligence reports in favor of his preconception that an American defeat in Vietnam was unacceptable. Many key debates, including the critical July 1965 debate over Westmoreland's troop request, took place without intelligence supporting any side. Those policymakers and military officials seeking to remain in his favor reinforced that preconception by cherry-picking intelligence that seemed to confirm their arguments while ignoring intelligence that did not. But his decision to commit American blood and treasure to safeguarding the RVN placed an even bigger burden on the intelligence community. Americanization of the war now forced the IC to provide even more assessments of a conflict that several of its constituent agencies had long regarded as nearly unwinnable. Toxic personal relationships between Johnson's advisors and intelligence officers, critical intelligence gaps, and the power of policymaker preconceptions had all combined to make the IC's job of reducing uncertainty for

²⁰⁵ Burke, Greenstein, Berman, and Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 224-28.

²⁰⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, News Conference of Jul. 28, 1965, *The American Presidency Project*: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27116> (accessed Dec. 7, 1965).

Johnson all but impossible. These factors would continue to hinder the community as American involvement in Vietnam deepened.

CHAPTER 4

ESCALATING STALEMATE: INTELLIGENCE AND POLICY IN VIETNAM AFTER AMERICANIZATION, JULY 1965 – DECEMBER 1966

Lyndon Johnson was uncertain about what victory in Vietnam would look like or when it might be achieved upon sending thousands of American troops there in 1965. Events following his decision did little to clear things up. By the end of the year, Johnson had committed 184,000 troops to Vietnam. That number would more than double by the end of 1966. But by December 1965, the only sure thing about the war was that it would be long. The bombing failed to restrict infiltration or pressure Hanoi into peace talks. At the same time, the best American and ARVN ground forces could do during 1965 and 1966 was to fight the enemy to a draw.

Between July 1965 and December 1966, multiple problems that had long plagued the intelligence-policy nexus as well as decision-making in LBJ's White House converged to impair the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. MACV gained excellent collection capabilities on enemy positions and movements soon after Johnson Americanized the conflict. But this rapid improvement in tactical intelligence was not matched by a corresponding improvement in strategic intelligence. Hanoi's strong operational security continued to frustrate American efforts to access high-level enemy decision-making, thus restricting analysts' ability to understand whether American military strategy was working. Intelligence analyses on Hanoi's actions often relied on extrapolating from its previous behavior as opposed to using direct evidence to forecast what the leadership would do next. Many analysts also continued to focus on enemy tactical gains or losses

with no mention of the strategic context or implications for U.S. policy. And intelligence analysts' tendency to omit mention of sources from their reports persisted. So did Johnson's penchant for relying on his preconceptions and his inner circle. As a result, negative personal relationships and careerism remained key factors in determining how policy formation proceeded. Cherry picking and ignoring or disregarding pessimistic intelligence was just as common after Americanization as it had been before.

This convergence of negative trends produced muddled Vietnam-related policy. Policymakers and military officials continually advocated various policies that they believed might help the war effort without using intelligence to back up their arguments. Those same officials invariably ignored pessimistic intelligence that contradicted their preconceptions or excluded intelligence officers from briefings entirely. Many intelligence analyses' poor tradecraft made them easier to ignore, as did dissension within the intelligence community. Johnson's and his top advisors' propensity to make decisions based on their preconception that the RVN could not be allowed to fall led them to embrace ideas for expanding or otherwise changing the war effort without adequate debate.

Debate over the conduct of Rolling Thunder is an exemplar. Johnson exercised tight control over the operation by approving individual targets during luncheons every Tuesday afternoon with his inner circle.¹ No notes exist from these Tuesday Lunches during 1965 and 1966, thus restricting our ability to understand how Johnson used them

¹ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 85.

to form decisions.² But Johnson's reliance on them meant that debate over Rolling Thunder's next moves almost always started and ended in the West Wing. Johnson and his top advisors frequently demanded intelligence to analyze the operation's effects. But they just as frequently ignored that intelligence when it contravened their preconceptions on bombing's value for the war effort.

In the end, no hasty maneuvering or reliance on preconceptions could break the stalemate that lasted from July 1965 through December 1966. Pessimistic intelligence reports were ignored, disregarded, or used selectively in order to provide particular policymakers or military officials with another tool to defend their preferred course of action. Intelligence officers who became bearers of bad news were excluded from critically important policy circles. The problems with intelligence collection, analysis, dissemination, and use in the Johnson White House that had characterized much of 1964 and 1965 remained. But after July 1965, many more lives were on the line as a result of the decisions that resulted from that flawed process.

Improvements, Expansion, Motivation, and Morale

American intervention in Vietnam placed greater pressure on the intelligence community to improve intelligence collection and reporting in Vietnam and in Washington. Policymakers and analysts were desperate to improve collection in the DRV, which remained denied territory for high-level SIGINT and HUMINT in mid-

² See David C. Humphreys, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment," *Diplomatic History* 8(1) (January 1984): 81-101; David M. Barrett, "Doing 'Tuesday Lunch' at Lyndon Johnson's White House: New Archival Evidence on Vietnam Decision-Making," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24(4) (December 1991): 676-79.

1965. But with hundreds of thousands of American troops arriving in Vietnam, the U.S. needed a robust collection network in the RVN as well. The war's Americanization also required more resources and staffing for Vietnam-related intelligence in Washington.

DCI Raborn addressed the latter concern by creating a new office within CIA. On July 16 he assigned Peer de Silva to serve as the agency's first Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs (SAVA). De Silva was a career intelligence officer who had served as the CIA's Saigon station chief until an NLF car bomb severely wounded him in March 1965. As part of his recuperation, the agency rotated him back to Langley, where Raborn assigned him the SAVA job.³ The DCI instructed de Silva to coordinate all Vietnam-related intelligence analysis and operations in order to "anticipate problems or questions." Raborn intended SAVA to "keep me at least one step ahead on matters related to Vietnam."⁴

CIA operational support to the war effort increased as well. In addition to search-and-destroy, Westmoreland emphasized building support for the GVN and U.S. among RVN civilians through rural pacification. American troops and civilian officials moved into many RVN villages to construct infrastructure such as schools and bridges while also providing education, vaccinations, and protection against NLF attacks. The CIA Saigon

³ Richard H. Immerman, *The Hidden Hand: A Brief History of the CIA* (Boston and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 86.

⁴ Memo from Raborn to Peer de Silva, "Your Duties as my Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs," Jul. 16, 1965, p. 3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-04794A000100080060-4.pdf> (accessed Dec. 14, 2017).

Station took the lead in carrying out many pacification programs from January 1966 forward.⁵

McNamara favored the findings of the RAND Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Study during 1965 due to the optimism of director Leon Goure. McNamara had not read the study's initial, pessimistic report. But after a briefing in the spring of 1965 in which Goure argued that the interviews revealed demoralization among NLF cadres due to the bombing, McNamara became one of his most avid supporters and requested multiple briefings throughout 1965.⁶ Goure's optimism was clear from his team's first report, published in August:

In its present stages, the study seems to confirm the value of many current or planned programs and objectives. The currently available interviews indicate that the Viet Cong are rather vulnerable to various harassing actions, especially from the air, which can have a significant adverse effect on them. This tentative conclusion suggests that harassment should be a major objective of air and ground operations in Vietnam.⁷

This argument directly contradicted the Zasloff/Donnell/Pauker report, which had concluded that air operations against RVN villages were likely to help rather than hurt the NLF because bombing villages often engendered sympathy for the NLF among

⁵ See Thomas Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001).

⁶ Duong Van Mai Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), 125-27.

⁷ Leon Goure, *Some Impressions of the Effects of Military Operations on Viet Cong Behavior*, RAND Memorandum RM-4517-1, p. ix. RAND Archives, Santa Monica, CA. See also Leon Goure and C.A.H. Thomson, *Some Impressions of Viet Cong Vulnerabilities: An Interim Report*, RAND Memorandum RM-4699-1-ISA/ARPA (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, Aug. 1965).

villagers.⁸ But by late summer 1965, Goure's optimism had won him so much support from policymakers and military officials in Vietnam that MACV Intelligence (MACV J-2) head Gen. Joseph A. McChristian thought his research into NLF morale had become an unacceptable intrusion on MACV J-2's turf. As a result, McChristian attempted to take over the Motivation and Morale Project. McNamara stopped him.⁹

McChristian took charge of MACV J-2 in July 1965, and his primary goal was to improve the MACV intelligence apparatus, most notably its tactical intelligence.¹⁰ As COMUSMACV, Westmoreland emphasized a concept widely known as "search-and-destroy," which called for American troops to seek out enemy units in the RVN countryside and destroy them. This annihilation, Westmoreland maintained, would attrite enemy forces until the "crossover point" when Hanoi could no longer provide enough reinforcements to compensate for its losses. This strategy required MACV to have precise knowledge of enemy positions and movements. Thus, McNamara and DIA Director Carroll supported McChristian's efforts from the start of his selection as MACV J-2 head.¹¹

Improving MACV J-2's relationship with its ARVN equivalent was also high on McChristian's priority list. This relationship was originally limited to an advisory role. American military intelligence officers in Vietnam could provide guidance to their

⁸ Zasloff, Donnell, and Pauker, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale in 1964*, 46.

⁹ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 126-27.

¹⁰ Edwin Moïse, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 20.

¹¹ George Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 208-09.

Vietnamese counterparts, and the two sides could share intelligence with each other. But McChristian found the relationship inefficient because it did not allow the U.S. to share manpower, equipment, and funding with the ARVN. It also prevented the ARVN from providing MACV with translators.¹²

McChristian's solution to this problem was to collaborate with the ARVN. The Combined Military Interrogation Center was his initial innovation.¹³ Established in July 1965, CMIC was responsible for debriefing prisoners of war and defectors who entered the *Chieu Hoi* (loosely translated as "Open Arms" or "Return") program.¹⁴ Then in September McChristian opened the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV), which was responsible for enemy order of battle analysis as well as reporting on enemy psychology, tactics, and politics.¹⁵ CIA officers in Vietnam also worked to improve their relationships with ARVN intelligence. By November, de Silva reported that such efforts

¹² Joseph A. McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence, 1965-1967* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), 21.

¹³ McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence*, 26-31.

¹⁴ *Chieu Hoi* was a program aimed at convincing NLF troops to defect to the RVN. Commonly called "ralliers" or *Hoi Chanhs*, controversy exists over whether most of these troops were front-line troops or laborers and part-time guerillas. See James O. Whittaker, "Psychological Warfare in Viet-Nam," *Political Psychology* 18(1) (Mar. 1997): 176. See also Tal Tov, "Learning From the Past for Present Counter-insurgency Conflicts: The *Chieu Hoi* Program as a Case Study" *Armed Forces & Society* 38(1) (2012): 142-163; and J.A. Koch, *The Chieu Hoi Program in South Vietnam, 1963-1971* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1973).

¹⁵ Historical Report, Intelligence – History of the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam, Record of MACV Part I, no date. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/F0158/F015800180833.pdf> (accessed Jan. 7, 2018).

had led to “an extensive product considered by our military authorities as essential to their effort.”¹⁶

Improved tactical intelligence was vital during the first major ground engagement between conventional US and PAVN forces. On November 14, units of the U.S. Army’s 7th Cavalry Regiment on a search-and-destroy mission encountered a large concentration of PAVN regulars in the Ia Drang Valley region of the Central Highlands.¹⁷ Both sides claimed victory after three days of intense fighting. MACV J-2 used captured documents, intercepted low-level communications, prisoner interrogations, and aerial reconnaissance to identify the enemy units involved, their positions and their movements during the battle. That tactical intelligence allowed the Americans to stave off the numerically superior PAVN force through precise air and artillery strikes. In the after-action report, McChristian concluded that the campaign “illustrates the value of a coordinated, timely intelligence effort” and praised aerial reconnaissance as “particularly valuable.”¹⁸ By November 1965, McChristian had succeeded in obtaining dozens of short-range reconnaissance planes capable of spotting enemy troops with advanced cameras, infrared sensors, and radar. McChristian recommended all American units use that technology “to

¹⁶ De Silva to Raborn, “Intelligence Collection in South Vietnam,” Nov. 2, 1965, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01580R001603420023-3.pdf> (accessed Dec. 15, 2017).

¹⁷ See Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore (Ret.) and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once ... And Young* (New York, Random House, 1992) for a firsthand account of the Battle of Ia Drang.

¹⁸ Gen. Joseph A. McChristian, “Intelligence Aspect of Plei Mei/Chu Pong Campaign, 20 October – 20 November 1965,” p. 67. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2499/24990309001.pdf> (accessed Dec. 18, 2017).

its maximum” after Ia Drang.¹⁹ But the battle also showed that improvements in intelligence collection were limited to the tactical level.

Most of the DRV remained denied territory for American intelligence collectors even after the massive influx of resources that came with Johnson’s decision to escalate. CIA analysts had to rely on circumstantial evidence to explain Hanoi’s motives due to a persistent lack of high-level HUMINT. Hanoi’s encryption remained so strong that the NSA abandoned efforts to crack the high-level enemy codes soon after the Communists adopted their new security posture. Instead, American cryptologists focused on low- and medium-level codes that the PAVN and NLF used for tactical communications.²⁰

An agency analysis of the Battle of Ia Drang illustrates how weak analysts’ source base often was as a result of Hanoi’s robust operational security. The report concluded that while the DRV still saw the war as “a protracted war of attrition,” the PAVN’s willingness to fight a pitched battle on open ground showed that the Communists now favored conventional warfare if the ground was strategically important to them or they thought they could inflict high casualties upon U.S. forces. But the analysts cited no supporting evidence for that conclusion beyond enemy propaganda extolling the PAVN and NLF for their actions at Ia Drang and several other skirmishes in the same region. And the analysts’ only evidence that Hanoi continued to see the war as a conflict of attrition was a September issue of “an authoritative Hanoi party journal.”²¹

¹⁹ McChristian, “Intelligence Aspect of Plei Mei/Chu Pong Campaign,” p. 72.

²⁰ Stephen Budiansky, *Code Warriors: NSA’s Codebreakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 262.

²¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Possible Changes in Vietnamese Communist Military Doctrine and Leadership,” Nov. 22, 1965, pp. 1-4. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room:

The IC's disadvantages in intelligence collection also rendered it blind to important leadership changes in Hanoi. The November 22 CIA analysis of Ia Drang concluded, "So far as we can determine, General [Vo Nguyen] Giap and his henchmen are still firmly in control of the Vietnamese military establishment."²² Yet we now know that Giap faced serious internal competition in 1965. Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) First Secretary Le Duan and PAVN General Nguyen Chi Thanh had gained preponderant power and influence over the DRV's political and military decision-making by late 1965.²³ In October 1964, Thanh took command of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), or the DRV's political and military headquarters in the RVN. From the fall of 1964 through the end of 1965, he waged large-unit warfare against the ARVN and U.S. forces with Le Duan's support. Giap, who Le Duan and Thanh disdained as insufficiently aggressive, progressively lost power and influence.²⁴

Johnson would not learn of Le Duan's ascent to power until January 1966. On the 17th, McNamara reported during a phone conversation with the president that Vietnamese language expert and historian P.J. Honey from London University's School of Oriental and African Studies had told him,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00472A000600040008-4.pdf> (accessed Dec. 18, 2017).

²² "Possible Changes in Vietnamese Communist Military Doctrine and Leadership," p. 4.

²³ The VWP was the DRV's ruling party. Today it is known as the Communist Party of Vietnam.

²⁴ See Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 48-86 for an account of Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh's rise to power at Giap's expense.

[T]he balance of power in Hanoi and among the Politburo there is such that it's in the hands of what I'd call hard-liners. And particularly it's in the hands of the First Secretary of the Communist Party, a man named Le Duan ... who always felt that Ho Chi Minh made a serious tactical error [in 1954]. He had the war won. He let himself be negotiated out of it at Geneva. And who today, therefore, is putting considerable pressure on Ho Chi Minh and others to ensure continuing a war that he thinks they either are winning or can win.²⁵

Honey did not explain what his sources were, but his analysis was correct. By early 1966 Le Duan, along with allies such as senior VWP official Le Duc Tho, had built even more power over political and military decision-making in Hanoi. But the lack of corroborating information left McNamara “not prepared” to accept Honey’s interpretation.

This poor intelligence on Hanoi’s leadership made it easier for policymakers and military officials in Washington to rely on their preconceptions. Because intelligence analysts relied on secondary evidence such as Hanoi’s historical actions, their findings were less certain than they would have been with more reliable evidence. As a result, policymakers could more easily ignore pessimistic intelligence reports if those reports’ conclusions appeared vague or poorly sourced. This tendency was especially clear in debates over bombing, which dominated the remainder of 1965.

“That’s Baloney”

As the summer of 1965 turned into fall, the IC released a SNIE with tepidly optimistic findings on bombing’s potential. SNIE 10-11-65, released on September 22, reported that bombing industrial targets located in the DRV’s populous northeast region stood a slightly better than even chance of forcing them to give up unification of Vietnam

²⁵ Telephone Conversation between McNamara and Johnson, Jan. 17, 1966. *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 26, p. 76.

by military means. The SNIE did not cite sources. Instead it based this argument on logic. Aggressive enemy battlefield actions in early 1965 showed that Hanoi had been confident of a quick victory then. “We think, however, that recently this general confidence has been weakened both by US/GVN military successes and by tangible evidence that the US is willing to increase its commitment.”²⁶

INR dissented from the entire estimate. In an eight-page footnote, Hughes argued that any increase in bombing would not only fail to achieve the desired objectives, but it also would likely antagonize China.²⁷ Like the rest of the SNIE, the dissent cited no sources. But INR’s findings in SNIE 10-11-65 were consistent with its dissents in NIEs and SNIEs throughout 1964 and 1965. Rusk had found those compelling enough to reduce the rate of American escalation for fear of provoking Beijing. Rusk had also long defended INR’s independence even though he often disagreed with the bureau’s findings.²⁸ According to Hughes, that defense protected the bureau from being “called on the carpet” over such a long and forceful dissent.²⁹ The footnote pointed out that further escalation would show Hanoi, Beijing, and Moscow “that we had decided to forsake further efforts to project a judicious combination of political-military pressures against

²⁶ Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-11-65, Sept. 22, 1965, “Probable Communist Reactions to a US Course of Action,” p. 2 in *Estimative Products on Vietnam 1948-1975* eds. John K. Allen, Jr., John Carver, and Tom Elmore (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2005).

²⁷ SNIE 10-11-65, pp. 10-18, Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*. See also John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), 127-128.

²⁸ Thomas L. Hughes, “Experiencing McNamara,” *Foreign Policy* 100, 25th anniversary issue (Autumn 1995): 163.

²⁹ Thomas L. Hughes, interview with author, Sept. 19, 2015.

the infiltration network” in favor of “a broad military assault.”³⁰ As a result, Hanoi would be less likely to engage in negotiations, rather than more likely as the estimate had claimed. Events to come would vindicate this conclusion.

McNamara ignored both this dissent and the rest of the SNIE. He summarized the estimate as concluding that “Hanoi’s attitude was hardening, largely because we were not rough enough in our bombing.”³¹ McNamara also claimed that the estimate was flawed because it was not produced with the input of “experts” such as Llewellyn Thompson and Maxwell Taylor, who had recently become a special consultant on Vietnam for the President with Lodge resuming his old post as Ambassador to the RVN. McNamara commissioned a study of Hanoi’s attitude from Thompson and Taylor. He therefore both ignored INR’s conclusions and discredited the rest of the estimate.

McNamara’s rejection of SNIE 10-11-65’s principal findings stemmed from an aggressive desire to win the argument over bombing. While the estimate noted that Hanoi might simply absorb whatever damage increased bombing caused, it ultimately concluded that stepping up the bombing was somewhat more likely to “convince them that the US intended to escalate the air war indefinitely, if necessary.” This in turn would cause the regime to move toward negotiations while its position in the south remained strong.³² That finding, however, came with an important qualification. The estimate

³⁰ SNIE 10-11-65, p. 11. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

³¹ Memorandum for the Record, Sept. 29, 1965. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968 Vol. III, Vietnam, June-December 1965*, eds. David C. Humphrey, Edward C. Keefer, and Louis J. Smith (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996) Doc. 155, pp. 419-21.

³² SNIE 10-11-65, p. 8.

stated that even if the DRV moved toward negotiation in response to increased bombing, it would probably only do so after reverting to hit and run tactics for an undefined period of time. McNamara could have used this caveat as a means to argue against intensified bombing. But he instead took the offensive by discrediting the entire estimate and commissioning a special report featuring the analysis of “experts” with whom he agreed. Both Thompson and Taylor opposed the sort of rapid escalation that the estimate claimed might push Hanoi toward negotiations.³³ McNamara believed that he needed more ammunition for his preferred policy on bombing to counter the Joint Chiefs, who had been pushing for intensifying the bombing in the weeks leading up to SNIE 10-11-65’s release.

SNIE 10-11-65’s poor evidence base also limited its ability to inform policy. The estimate contained very few references to its sources, whether in the main body of the estimate or in Hughes’ dissent. That shortcoming made it easier for McNamara to ignore the intelligence community’s conclusions that his preferred strategy would not work. And although his stance shared some common ground with INR, McNamara ignored the bureau’s dissent. He did so because his long-running feud with the bureau continued through 1965.

Indeed, by then McNamara’s tendency to dismiss INR analyses had caught on among his subordinates. John McNaughton’s private doubts about the war persisted after Johnson sent ground troops to Vietnam. But McNaughton also continued to repress those doubts and vilify pessimistic analysts during meetings. He once insulted Hughes on the

³³ Edward Drea, *Secretaries of Defense Historical Series Vol. VI: McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965-1969* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), 63.

presentation of an INR analysis to a group of Pentagon officials in 1965 by saying, “Spoken like a true member of the Red Team.”³⁴ In this instance, McNaughton referenced the practice of “red teaming” or using a group of analysts to assign probabilities to alternative conclusions. But Hughes resented McNaughton’s attempt at a joke because “[T]he uniformed brass in the room didn’t get it.”³⁵

McNamara’s disdain for INR products led him to rely more heavily on CIA and DIA collaborative analysis. On June 29, INR produced an analysis of Rolling Thunder that used DIA statistics on bombing damage, letters from DRV citizens to relatives living abroad, observations of foreign journalists in the DRV, and Hanoi’s public statements to conclude that the bombing had caused marginal damage to Hanoi’s war-making ability at best and had not harmed popular morale.³⁶ McNamara read the report. But rather than give credit to a bureau with which he had feuded repeatedly, he sent the analysis to DIA Director Joseph Carroll with instructions to produce “a similar one each month” on August 9.³⁷ His only further orders were for DIA to collaborate with CIA in a phone call two days later, although he did not state what he expected from either agency. By

³⁴ Hughes, “Experiencing McNamara,” 165. See also Benjamin T. Harrison and Christopher R. Mosher, “The Secret Diary of McNamara’s Dove: The Long-Lost Story of John T. McNaughton’s Opposition to the Vietnam War,” *Diplomatic History* 35(3) (June 2011): 505–34.

³⁵ Hughes, “Experiencing McNamara,” 165.

³⁶ INR Intelligence Note, Thomas L. Hughes to Rusk, “The Effects of the Bombings of North Vietnam,” Jun. 29, 1965, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78S02149R000100070033-7.pdf> (accessed Dec. 8, 2017).

³⁷ Memo from McNamara to Carroll, Aug. 9, 1965, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78S02149R000100070032-8.pdf> (accessed Dec. 8, 2017).

September 7, Carroll had worked out an arrangement on the shared workload: DIA would be in charge of analyzing the bombing's military effects, while CIA would examine political, economic, and sociological aspects of the operation.³⁸ The *ad hoc* nature of this effort is indicative of how the 1960s IC was "constantly in motion" in which "few models of interagency relations stayed put," according to Thomas Hughes in a 1974 essay.³⁹ Outside of working on NIEs, inter-agency analytical collaboration remained largely improvisational during the Vietnam era.

McNamara never explained to Carroll or Raborn why he wanted the joint bombing analyses, but his use of intelligence in the late summer and early fall of 1965 suggests that he wanted more intelligence products to use as leverage against the Joint Chiefs. The Chiefs continued to push for rapid escalation of bombing by recommending that Johnson remove restrictions on attacking surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries in protected areas like cities and dike networks as well as order strikes on petroleum, oil, and lubricant (POL) storage sites in Haiphong. McNamara rejected these suggestions as too aggressive. In a September 15 memo, McNamara stated,

[I]ntelligence estimates have been that US strikes may well lead to a more vigorous effort by the DRV in support of the VC in South Vietnam. And the estimates have been that strikes of the kind proposed by the Joint Chiefs would not at this time significantly injure the VC ability to

³⁸ See Memo from Carroll to Raborn, "Overall Effects of US/GVN Airstrikes in North Vietnam" Sep. 7, 1965, and Memo from Helms to Carroll, "Joint CIA-DIA Analysis of US/GVN Air Strikes in North Vietnam," Sep. 16, 1965, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01580R001603420024-2.pdf> (accessed Dec. 8, 2017).

³⁹ Thomas L. Hughes, "The Power to Speak and the Power to Listen: Reflections on Bureaucratic Politics and a Recommendation on Information Flows" in *Secrecy and Foreign Policy*, eds. Thomas M. Franck and Edward Weisband (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 21.

persevere in the South or persuade the Hanoi Government that the price of persisting was unacceptably high.⁴⁰

This statement shows that McNamara was cherry picking intelligence to fit his argument. McNamara had ignored SNIEs that made similar conclusions when he recommended escalating the war effort during the spring and early summer of 1965. He only decided to use them when they became useful to him in his rivalry with the Joint Chiefs. And McNamara, who could be just as mercurial as Johnson, soon withdrew his support of DIA when he realized that the very agency he had created would not be useful to him in that rivalry.

Mere months after McNamara requested that DIA and CIA analysts collaborate on joint bombing analyses, a debate between the two agencies led him to accuse DIA of politicizing intelligence. Throughout September and October, CIA and DIA analysts disputed how many bridges had been destroyed in bombing raids thus far. DIA claimed that American aviators had 755 “bridge kills,” while CIA’s finding was 121. The disparity stemmed from different methodologies. While CIA used aerial photography, DIA relied on the observations of the pilots who carried out the raids. But CIA analysts argued that many pilots could not accurately assess strike results due to their high rate of speed. DIA eventually adopted CIA’s methodology and the report was completed in March 1966.⁴¹ But DIA reported to the Chiefs as well as McNamara, and he began to

⁴⁰ Memo from McNamara to Wheeler, “Air Strikes Against North Vietnam,” Sept. 15, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 142, p. 390.

⁴¹ See Kenneth C. Fuller, Bruce Smith, and Merle Atkins, “‘Rolling Thunder’ and Bomb Damage to Bridges,” *Studies in Intelligence* 13(4) (1969): 1-9; Memo [author and addressee redacted], “Bomb Damage Assessment of Bridges in North Vietnam Through 1966,” May 1, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room:

think that the initial inflation of bridge kills was emblematic of DIA telling the Chiefs what they wanted to hear. That DIA adopted CIA methodology did not dissuade McNamara of this theory. He explained years later that while he did not think DIA was trying to “deceive” him, he did think the agency was viewing the war through “rose colored glasses” in hopes of pleasing the Chiefs.⁴² Though he did not discontinue the collaborative bombing appraisals, he asked CIA to produce its own separate analyses of Rolling Thunder.⁴³

DIA’s analytical dispute with CIA stemmed from the agency’s dysfunctional wartime reporting structure, which McNamara elided his central role in creating. To be sure, allegations of politicization dogged DIA during its early years.⁴⁴ And many DIA wartime reports simply reported on conditions within the RVN or DRV rather than risk controversy by assessing whether a proposed strategy would work.⁴⁵ Other DIA reports, however, came to conclusions that were equally as pessimistic or controversial as the

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78S02149R000100070004-9.pdf> (accessed Jan. 28, 2018).

⁴² Robert S. McNamara Deposition, *Westmoreland v. CBS* (1984), pp. 87-88. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/025/0250904001c.pdf> (accessed Jan. 28, 2018).

⁴³ Bruce Palmer, “US Intelligence and Vietnam,” *Studies in Intelligence* 28 (Special Edition) (1984): 43-44.

⁴⁴ See Patrick McGarvey, “DIA: Intelligence to Please,” *Washington Monthly* 11 (1970): 68-75.

⁴⁵ This tendency was particularly strong in reports that DIA co-authored with JCS analysts. See DIA-JCS Intelligence Report, Oct. 1966, “Southeast Asia Military Fact Book.” Vietnam Command File, Box 29, Archives Branch, Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC), Washington, DC. See also DIA Intelligence Report, Mar. 1966, “Southeast Asia Route Survey.” Vietnam Command File, Box 31, NHHC.

CIA's or INR's.⁴⁶ Therefore, rather than being politicized, DIA was mired in an untenable position from its inception. Because the fledgling agency reported to two customers with opposing views on the war, its findings were guaranteed to invite criticism from one of them. McNamara was responsible for creating that dysfunctional reporting structure. But rather than insist that DIA remain independent in its judgments, as Rusk did with INR, McNamara disregarded his creation once he realized that it would not provide him with the ammunition he wanted to confront the Chiefs. Instead, he relied on the CIA. Richard Helms and George Carver both concluded later that the CIA's independent bombing analyses were among the agency's best work of the war.⁴⁷

McNamara received two differing assessments of the bombing in October. On October 11, Thompson produced the report on Hanoi's recalcitrance that McNamara had requested in September.⁴⁸ The study recommended maintaining the bombing at its current level rather than expanding it, mainly because "our present activities, while not destroying the military and economic capacity of North Viet-Nam, are causing great stress ... [T]he effects of our present attacks are to some extent cumulative and are

⁴⁶ Petersen, "The Vietnam Cauldron," 13.

⁴⁷ See George Carver to Helms, "The Bombing Decisions: 31 March and 1 November 1968," Apr. 1, 1970, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T01629R000300070055-5.pdf> (accessed Jan. 28, 2018), and Richard Helms, interview with R. Jack Smith, Apr. 21, 1982, p. 13. *A Life in Intelligence – The Richard Helms Collection*, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/4_21_oral.pdf (accessed Jan. 28, 2018).

⁴⁸ See Paper by the Ambassador at Large (Thompson), Oct. 11, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 164. A covering note indicates that McNamara saw the study on October 26. While Thompson wrote the study, Taylor, McNaughton, William Bundy, and Bundy's deputy Leonard Unger reviewed it prior to publication.

bringing a steady increase of pressure on Hanoi.” Thompson also recommended a bombing pause as a prerequisite to successfully initiating negotiations with Hanoi. He published his study at the same time as the first CIA/DIA bombing assessment. That assessment concluded that the bombing had done little damage to Hanoi’s warmaking capabilities because much of the DRV’s economic and transportation infrastructure lay within restricted areas.⁴⁹

McNamara favored Thompson’s report. He continued to recommend new bombing targets and also, starting with a memo to LBJ on November 30, became the foremost proponent of a bombing pause.⁵⁰ This seemingly contradictory approach represented McNamara’s attempts to show that American resolve was limitless while at the same time giving the DRV a way out. Hanoi had previously made clear that it would not negotiate until the bombing stopped. McNamara’s perspective was that increased bombing could bolster US leverage, while a bombing pause would be necessary as an overture to negotiations.

Neither McNamara nor Thompson drew on intelligence to support their advocacy of a bombing pause. An October 8 INR report concluded that the regime’s prior behavior showed a reluctance to enter any negotiations for fear of appearing weak. Only if the U.S. stipulated that it was willing to enter unconditional negotiations and avoided presenting

⁴⁹ CIA/DIA Intelligence Memorandum, “An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam,” Oct. 27, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 184, pp. 500-04.

⁵⁰ Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, Nov. 30, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 212.

an ultimatum would the gambit have “a fair chance” of working.⁵¹ Thompson ignored that conclusion by arguing that for a pause to work, the U.S. should deliver an ultimatum by “[C]onvey[ing] our intent to reinstitute bombing if the North Viet-Nameese refused to negotiate.”⁵² McNamara agreed. There is no evidence to indicate that McNamara read the INR report, and his feud with the bureau would have precluded him from using it to form policy even if he had. Nor does the record reflect any additional attempt by the IC to analyze Hanoi’s willingness to negotiate in response to a pause in the fall of 1965.

Though McNamara did not use intelligence as part of his argument for a pause, pessimistic analyses combined with enemy battlefield actions lay behind his growing doubt on the war effort. On November 28, McNamara attended a MACV J-2 briefing in Saigon, where General McChristian reported that Hanoi could now infiltrate 9 battalion equivalents (approximately 4,500 men) per month and would have 155 battalion equivalents stationed in the RVN by the end of 1966.⁵³ Westmoreland used that estimate to request an additional 243,000 troops for 1966.⁵⁴ McChristian made only passing

⁵¹ W. Dean Howells, Dorothy Avery, and Fred Greene, *Vietnam 1961-1968 as Interpreted in INR’s Production* (Washington, DC: State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 1969), Part A-V, “Trial By Force: March 1965 – February 1966,” 24-25.

⁵² Paper by the Ambassador at Large, Oct. 11, 1965, p. 445.

⁵³ See Briefing by Brig. Gen. Joseph A. McChristian, AC of S, J2, HQ MACV, 28 Nov. 1965, Saigon, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78S02149R000200100027-9.pdf> (accessed Jan. 3, 2018); and Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, Dec. 7, 1965, “Military and Political Actions Recommended for South Vietnam,” *FRUS Vietnam July-December 1965*, Doc. 222, p. 616.

⁵⁴ Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam*, 119; Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 98.

references to captured documents and prisoner interrogations as sources in his briefing. But that tradecraft did not matter to the Defense Secretary. According to McNamara's 1995 memoir *In Retrospect*, the Battle of Ia Drang alone convinced him that the bombing had failed to curtail infiltration.⁵⁵

Relying on aerial photography, pilot reports, and Hanoi's public statements, the CIA/DIA bombing appraisal manifested a level of tradecraft uncommon throughout the Vietnam War. It concluded that the restrictions limited the bombing's effectiveness; McNamara, nevertheless, refused to consider lifting them or even intensifying the bombing without first attempting a pause.⁵⁶ And on November 8 the CIA published its first independent assessment of Rolling Thunder. Another exemplar of good tradecraft, the 50-page study used every available source of intelligence to provide an exhaustive look at the bombing's economic and military damage. It also provided a detailed methodology for calculating DRV civilian casualties.⁵⁷ The analysis found that while civilian casualties were low, as LBJ had intended, the bombing's economic and military damage had failed to break Hanoi's will.

These products appeared to influence McNamara. By December, he had become convinced that bombing could not appreciably interdict supplies and reinforcements

⁵⁵ Robert McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), 221-22.

⁵⁶ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 219-20; Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 89-90.

⁵⁷ CIA Intelligence Report, "An Evaluation of Allied (US and GVN) Air Attacks Against North Vietnam," Nov. 8, 1965, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000900070009-0.pdf> (accessed Jan. 29, 2018). The report relied on aerial photography, pilot reports, and Hanoi's public statements most heavily.

down the Ho Chi Minh Trail or pressure Hanoi into negotiations.⁵⁸ In a December 18 meeting, he characterized the chances of a military victory in Vietnam as “one out of three or one in two.” During the same meeting, he admitted that there was, at best, a “bare chance” that the pause would lead to negotiations.⁵⁹ Yet he became the foremost proponent of a pause in the Johnson administration.

The discrepancy between McNamara’s use of intelligence to conclude that Rolling Thunder was failing and ignoring intelligence when it contravened his preferred course of action stemmed from his tendency toward policy analysis instead of policy innovation. McNamara was a brilliant quantitative analyst, but he struggled with the kind of contingent thinking required to create new policies.⁶⁰ He thus preferred to have policies proposed to him. The Thompson Report provided him with an actionable policy recommendation. While he knew that policy was risky, he preferred it to pessimistic intelligence from INR, a bureau with which he had often feuded.

Additionally, McNamara continued cherry-picking intelligence because his chief priority was to push his preferred agenda at all times. Like Johnson, McNamara abhorred admitting fault. Ia Drang had left him predisposed to believe that the bombing was not working, and the CIA/DIA bombing appraisal and independent CIA analysis had provided him with more evidence toward that conclusion. But McNamara reacted by

⁵⁸ Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 345.

⁵⁹ Notes of Meeting, “Possible bombing pause in North Vietnam,” Dec. 18, 1965, *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc. 235, p. 662.

⁶⁰ David Milne, *America’s Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 148.

cherry picking intelligence to support a new course of action that he thought would prove him right. While he may have changed his mind on the bombing, his self-confidence – or perhaps arrogance – remained undiminished.

McNamara also had support from McGeorge Bundy, who aided in pushing for a bombing pause due to a combination of his own doubts and McNamara's relentlessness. Like McNamara, Bundy lost faith in the bombing in part due to pessimistic intelligence. The bombing's failure to pressure Hanoi into negotiations by the fall of 1965 left Bundy skeptical about its further prospects. After reading the October CIA/DIA bombing appraisal, he concluded that the bombing had been so ineffective that pausing it would not harm the American military position.⁶¹ McNamara and McNaughton pressed Bundy for aid until, by the end of November, he had become convinced that a pause made sense.⁶² His arguments in favor of a pause, which he presented to Johnson on November 27, made no mention of intelligence. Rather, Bundy argued that a pause would gain the U.S. sympathy at home and abroad. He also mentioned that Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly Dobrynin had promised to apply pressure on Hanoi if Johnson paused the bombing. While the INR report had concluded that such pressure would be necessary during a pause, Bundy made no mention of it.⁶³

Rostow used tradecraft flaws in a December SNIE to argue not just against a bombing pause but also for sharp escalation. SNIE 10-12-65, published on December 10,

⁶¹ Preston, *The War Council*, 221.

⁶² Preston, *The War Council*, 219-22.

⁶³ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, "Once more on the pause," Nov. 27, 1965. *FRUS Vietnam June-December 1965*, Doc 208, pp. 582-84.

warned that intensified bombing would likely fail, and ran a serious risk of antagonizing China.⁶⁴ But every military intelligence agency dissented from that point, concurring that that sustained bombing would eventually cause the DRV to “reconsider its position” if given enough time.⁶⁵ The estimate’s poor tradecraft provided Rostow with ammunition if it didn’t tip the balance in favor of the military: “We *believe* Hanoi’s leaders would not decide to quit ... sustained damage inflicted on North Vietnam *might* impose significant limitations on PAVN and VC main force units ... It is *possible* that the DRV has contingency plans to attack Americans bases in the South.”⁶⁶ Nor did the estimate cite sources. Rostow took advantage of these weaknesses. On December 23, he dismissed SNIE 10-12-65 as evidence of “widespread confusion at lower levels” and urged increased bombing of the DRV’s POL supplies.⁶⁷ And Rostow ignored INR’s conclusions by pronouncing that targeted bombing would not provoke Russia or China without offering any evidence for that point.⁶⁸

Rostow relied less on the intelligence estimates than on his experience as a military intelligence analyst who picked bombing targets during World War II. He insisted that the bombing campaigns against Germany and Japan demonstrated that bombing could work in Vietnam as well. Rostow noted that he had “long felt” strikes on

⁶⁴ Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-12-65, p. 4. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁶⁵ SNIE 10-12-65, p. 4, fn 4.

⁶⁶ SNIE 10-12-65, pp. 4-5.

⁶⁷ Memorandum From Rostow to Johnson, Dec. 23, 1965. *FRUS Vietnam July-December 1965*, Doc. 243.

⁶⁸ Rostow to Johnson, *FRUS, Vietnam July-December 1965*, Doc. 243.

POL supplies to be the best path forward due to the apparent effectiveness of such attacks against Germany.⁶⁹ He contended that those who did not live through World War II could never understand how effective precision bombing of German oil supplies and air bases, as well as the Seine-Loire bridges in France, had been in that war.⁷⁰

George Ball relied his experience in the World War II strategic bombing survey to draw an opposite conclusion to Rostow's. In a December 17 meeting with Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy, Ball insisted that Hanoi would only become more resistant to negotiating if Rolling Thunder continued or escalated. He elaborated by stating that an officer on the Strategic Bombing Survey, he could attest that "bombing never wins a war." And to Ball, a bombing pause was insufficient. "The one hope we have is to stop bombing and seize every opportunity not to resume."⁷¹ While Rostow focused on precision bombing of industrial sites, Ball referenced the massive terror bombing raids that had destroyed so many German and Japanese cities.⁷²

⁶⁹ Rostow to Johnson, *FRUS, Vietnam July-December 1965*, Doc. 243.

⁷⁰ Rostow to Johnson, *FRUS, Vietnam July-December 1965*, Doc. 243. Scholars of World War II agree that the strategic bombing campaign over Germany was ineffective at breaking the will of the enemy's population. See Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and Mark Clodfelter, "Aiming to Break Will: America's World War II Bombing of German Morale and its Ramifications" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33(3), (June 2010): 401-435. The targeted strikes that Rostow defended were effective during the last year of the war, after the Allies seized Hungary and Romania's oil fields and crippled Germany's resupply efforts. See Robert A. Pape, *Bombing To Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 282.

⁷¹ Notes of Meeting, Dec. 17, 1965, *FRUS, Vietnam July-December 1965*, Doc. 231.

⁷² The Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that while Allied bombing had weakened German and Japanese morale, Axis governments maintained control over their respective home fronts until the war ended. See United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Summary Report (European War), Sept. 30, 1945, p. 12:

McNamara continued to cherry pick intelligence in defense of a pause. On December 14, the CIA published a report concluding that Rolling Thunder and the intervention of U.S. ground forces had stymied the DRV's hope of a quick victory. Nevertheless, Hanoi "apparently believes that present US and GVN programs have not brought about any decisive change in the military situation." The enemy regime still thought it had favorable long-term prospects in the war. Negotiations were "a very unpalatable alternative" to Hanoi. As evidence, the analysts noted that the DRV had increased infiltration into the RVN while bolstering its anti-air network. Hanoi had also rebuffed several efforts to start negotiations from third-party countries, including the USSR.⁷³ Yet McNamara disregarded both reports by stating, "We just don't know if we are hurting the North Vietnamese" and continuing to advocate for a bombing pause.⁷⁴

McNamara disregarded this pessimistic intelligence because currying favor with Johnson while winning the argument over the bombing pause remained his primary motivation. In the December 17 meeting, he mentioned that the chiefs would be completely opposed to a bombing pause, but then said "We decide what we want and impose it on them ... nothing will change their views," before adding that he could

aupress.maxwell.af.mil/digital/pdf/book/b_0020_spangrud_strategic_bombing_surveys.pdf; and US Strategic Bombing Survey Summary Report (Pacific War), Jun. 1, 1946, p. 21: <https://ia601405.us.archive.org/12/items/summaryreportpac00unit/summaryreportpac00unit.pdf> (both accessed Dec. 5, 2017).

⁷³ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Dec. 14, 1965, "Hanoi's View of the War." National Security File, Country File Vietnam, Box 86, LBJL.

⁷⁴ Notes of Meeting, Dec. 17, 1965, *FRUS, Vietnam, July-December 1965*, Doc. 231, p. 645.

“deliver the Chiefs” if Johnson agreed to the pause.⁷⁵ In another meeting with the President the following day, McNamara responded to the military’s objection that Hanoi would take advantage of a pause to rebuild damaged infrastructure by exclaiming, “That’s baloney – and I can prove it.”⁷⁶ Although Johnson shared the military’s concerns, he did not ask McNamara to prove anything. Rather, he grudgingly agreed to the bombing pause. It went into effect on Christmas Eve 1965.

Failure of the Bombing Pause

JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler strongly opposed the pause even after it had started. In a memorandum to McNamara on January 8, he characterized bombing as an essential part of US military strategy in Vietnam and criticized the pause for allowing the DRV to rebuild destroyed lines of communication (LOC) and obtain weaponry from China.⁷⁷ While Wheeler admitted that intelligence was “lacking,” like Rostow he relied on his preconceived notions about the war. He was convinced that the DRV strategy depended on an “increased flow of personnel and war materiel ... moving to SVN,” and US bombing was the only deterrent to its succeeding.⁷⁸ For the US to expect Hanoi to agree to negotiate was wishful thinking.

⁷⁵ Notes of Meeting, Dec. 17, 1965, p. 646.

⁷⁶ Notes of Meeting, Dec. 18, 1965, *FRUS, Vietnam, July-December 1965*, Doc. 235, p. 658.

⁷⁷ JCSM-16-66, “Air Operations Against North Vietnam,” Jan. 8, 1966. Digital National Security Archive: <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679081586?accountid=14270> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018).

⁷⁸ JCSM-16-66, p. 1.

Intelligence supported Wheeler's concerns. A CIA analysis from January 5 used the NLF's program and a recent speech from DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong to conclude that the NLF and Hanoi were pursuing "total North Vietnamese victory and the eradication of everything U.S. policy has been framed to support and achieve in South Vietnam."⁷⁹ In a January 17 phone call with Johnson, McNamara admitted, "[T]he intelligence information that we get back doesn't indicate that they're even thinking of moving [toward negotiations] at this point."⁸⁰ McNamara did not specify which intelligence he had read, but an ONE estimate published two days later concluded that prolonging the pause would "almost certainly" encourage the DRV to continue fighting.⁸¹ The report's authors did not cite sources beyond introducing the judgments with the claim that the "great bulk of present evidence indicates that Hanoi is not prepared to make significant concessions in order to negotiate a settlement in Vietnam or to gain a prolonged cessation of US air attacks."⁸² Good tradecraft requires specifying what the

⁷⁹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Jan. 5, 1966, "The Five-Point Program of the National Liberation Front, The Four-Point Proposal of Pham Van Dong and Their Relationship to the Geneva Accords," p. 16. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 86, LBJL. CIA Deputy Director Richard Helms later used this report to argue that Hanoi and the NLF both shared the same inflexible negotiating line in a February 4 memo to McNamara. See Memo from Helms to McNamara, Feb. 4, 1966, "The Managing Hierarchy of the NLF and the Current Political Goals of the Viet Cong." *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 65, pp. 205-10.

⁸⁰ Conversation Between Johnson and McNamara, Jan. 17, 1966, p. 75. McNamara did not explain what intelligence he used in this conversation.

⁸¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Jan. 19, 1966, "Reactions to Continuation or Termination of the Pause in Air Attacks on the DRV," p. 5. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁸² "Reactions to Continuation or Termination of the Pause in Air Attacks on the DRV," p. 1.

“present evidence” was. But CIA reports from late January reflected better tradecraft. They used aerial photography to conclude that the DRV had indeed taken advantage of the bombing pause to refit.⁸³ There was no denying that the pause had failed.

Johnson resumed Rolling Thunder in response to the enemy buildup. On January 25, George Ball sent Johnson a memorandum arguing against any resumption of bombing. He again cited his experiences with the Strategic Bombing Survey to argue that bombing would never break the will of any police state’s population.⁸⁴ But on January 12, Ambassador Lodge had sent Johnson a telegram that began, “The change in the situation here since your decision to commit U.S. troops has been spectacular.” Whereas the war effort had been slipping away from the GVN prior to July 1965, Johnson’s infusion of ground troops had reinvigorated the ARVN and demoralized the NLF.⁸⁵ Hanoi had met the American buildup by increasing PAVN infiltration into the RVN, but Lodge was confident that “while this can delay success, it cannot prevent it.”⁸⁶ And Bundy and McNamara, who had argued in favor of the pause, now argued against prolonging it by pointing to the January 19 CIA analysis concluding that any continuation

⁸³ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Jan. 26, 1966, “Sea Shipment of Soviet Military Cargoes: The Vietnamese Case”; CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Jan. 24, 1966, “Evidence of Continuing Vietnamese Communist War Preparations – Supplement”; and CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Jan. 18, 1966, “Hanoi’s Reaction to the Bombing Lull.” National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Special Intelligence Material, Box 51, LBJL.

⁸⁴ Ball to Johnson, Jan. 25, 1966, “Should We Resume Bombing?” p. 3. Princeton University, Seeley J. Mudd Library, George W. Ball Personal Papers, Box 97, Folder 9.

⁸⁵ Lodge to Johnson, Jan. 12, 1966. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. IV, Vietnam 1966*, ed. David C. Humphrey (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1998), Doc. 18, pp. 53-55.

⁸⁶ Lodge to Johnson, Jan. 12, 1966. *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, p. 53.

of the pause would incite Hanoi to fight harder.⁸⁷ LBJ ordered the bombing resumed on January 29.

McNamara did not object. Indeed, although he had become doubtful of American prospects in Vietnam by early 1966, he continued to push for more bombing. During his January 17 phone conversation with Johnson, McNamara mentioned that Goure's most recent study of NLF motivation and morale showed a five-fold increase in defections from 1964 to 1965 due to American military pressure and rampant disease. McNamara used this report as evidence that the bombing campaign and ground offensives were both beginning to show results.⁸⁸

McNamara also pushed for elevating troop levels. On January 24, he proposed increasing bombing from 3,125 sorties per month to 4,000, conducting day-and-night armed reconnaissance of road and rail lines (except those near cities and the Chinese border), and committing "perhaps 600,000 men or more" until the cumulative effect forced Hanoi to submit.⁸⁹ McNamara warned that even with this escalation the odds were "about even" that the US would find itself in a stalemate by the following year. But unwilling to side with Ball and recommend withdrawal, he could identify no alternative. For McNamara, U.S. intelligence was of no help.

Indeed, his plan still stood apart from the intelligence community's findings. A January 19 memo and SNIE 10-1-66, released on February 4 concluded that even

⁸⁷ Notes of Meeting, "Resumption of Bombing," Jan. 27, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 50, p. 167.

⁸⁸ Conversation between McNamara and Johnson, Jan. 17, 1966. *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, p. 77.

⁸⁹ Memo from McNamara to Johnson, Jan. 24, 1966. *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 36.

drastically increased bombing would have little effect on infiltration.⁹⁰ And a February 11 CIA memo warned that to do lasting damage to the DRV's POL supplies, any potential strike program would have to include continuous sorties near cities, which McNamara had argued should remain off-limits.⁹¹ To underscore the chasm between the Secretary of Defense and the Intelligence Community, none of these products evaluated the plan that McNamara sent to Johnson on January 24. Further, there is no evidence that the community was aware of his plan at all.

McNamara's bombing plan emerged as a response to Rolling Thunder's failure. The embattled Defense Secretary remained committed to not losing in Vietnam after the pause failed. But his brash, self-assured nature meant that he would never admit having been wrong about the pause. And his long-running feud with the service chiefs meant that he refused to agree with them that the bombing should be increased. McNamara remained, in his own estimation, the "Whiz Kid" who had played a central role in shaping U.S. national security for years. He would not give up that status by adopting a plan that he could not present as his own. But nor could he urge Johnson against resuming bombing when the pause had failed. He therefore split the difference between continuing the pause and escalating the bombing.

⁹⁰ Sherman Kent, Jan. 19, 1966, "Reactions to Continuation or Termination of the Pause in Air Attacks on the DRV," p. 14, Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*; Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-1-66, Feb. 4, 1966, Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁹¹ Sherman Kent, "Possible Effects of Various Programs of Air Attack Against the DRV," Feb. 11, 1966, pp. 10-11. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

Increased Troop Levels and Rostow Ascendant

Controversy over bombing did not extend to troop levels and military strategy within the Johnson White House in early 1966. For many policymakers and military officials, the high enemy casualty count at Ia Drang vindicated search-and-destroy as an integral part of American strategy in Vietnam. And Johnson refused to consider withdrawal since Hanoi had rejected his peace overture. In February, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman J. William Fulbright (D-AR) held a series of televised hearings to debate the troop level increase. Fulbright, who had introduced the Tonkin Gulf Resolution into the Senate in August 1964, had become skeptical of the war effort's prospects. He wanted to scrutinize Westmoreland's proposed augmentation and American goals in Vietnam. But LBJ considered the hearings "a very, very disastrous break" with U.S. policy.⁹² The hearings, which lasted for most of February, featured critiques of the war from U.S. foreign policy luminaries such as George F. Kennan. Though the hearings did not stop the troop increase, Senator Joseph Clark (D-PA) concluded that they helped make anti-war arguments "respectable" by exposing flaws in the official justifications for U.S. intervention.⁹³ After a conference in Honolulu that lasted from February 7 through the 10th, Johnson approved most of Westmoreland's

⁹² Telephone conversation between Johnson and Larry O'Brien, Feb. 5, 1966. Miller Center for Presidential Studies, Presidential Recordings Program, WH6602-02-9623.

⁹³ Joseph A. Fry, *Debating Vietnam: Fulbright, Stennis, and their Senate Hearings* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 46.

post-Ia Drang troop request, bringing American force levels in Vietnam to 429,000 by the end of 1966.⁹⁴

Johnson's expansion of the war effort at Honolulu was a foregone conclusion. The conferees examined three options (denoted as "cases" in the conference record) for expanding the war, ranging from granting Westmoreland's entire request to only fulfilling a fraction of what the general had requested.⁹⁵ Thus, like the 1964 NSC Working Group, the 1966 Honolulu Conference examined how much Johnson should escalate the conflict rather than the wisdom of further escalation. Commander in Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp's office evaluated Cases 2 and 3, both of which fell short of Westmoreland's total request, as inadequate for achieving American military objectives in the RVN.⁹⁶ Several days after fulfilling the troop request, Johnson told Westmoreland he wanted to see progress in Vietnam, or "coon skins nailed to the wall."⁹⁷

Intelligence played no direct role in LBJ's decision. The Honolulu conferees were limited to high-level military and diplomatic officials.⁹⁸ Despite his ostensible status as

⁹⁴ Paper Prepared by McNamara and McNaughton, "1966 Program to Increase the Effectiveness of Military Operations and Anticipated Results Thereof," Feb. 10, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 70, p. 217.

⁹⁵ *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967*, Part IV.C, "Evolution of the War," Vol. 6.a, pp. 28-34.

⁹⁶ *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967*, Part IV.C, "Evolution of the War," Vol. 6.a, pp. 35-37.

⁹⁷ Moise, *The Myths of Tet*, 13.

⁹⁸ American participants included LBJ, Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, McNamara, Harriman, Lodge, Wheeler, and Westmoreland. The Secretaries of Agriculture and Education also

head of the intelligence community, DCI Raborn was not invited. Nor did any other high-level intelligence officers attend. Westmoreland had based his request on a MACV estimate of enemy infiltration into the RVN. But the record indicates that the intelligence community did not assess the possible consequences of Westmoreland's troop request as it had in SNIE 10-9-65. Extant reporting did suggest, however, that troop increases would be necessary to make progress against the NLF and PAVN. Whether these reports were optimistic or pessimistic, of course, depended on the interpreter.

Less open to interpretation were the majority of intelligence products in early 1966 reporting that the ground campaign was stalemated despite regular U.S. and ARVN tactical victories. After Ia Drang, top military officials in Hanoi ordered their troops to get as close as possible to U.S. and ARVN forces, or "grab their belts" during battles to neutralize American air and artillery.⁹⁹ Hence "big-unit" conventional warfare continued throughout 1966. Results of battles were included in the PDB, but the brief's authors continued to focus on the background of engagements without providing context. A January 31 PDB, for example, reported that Operation Masher, a combined U.S./ARVN/South Korean offensive, had resulted in over 800 enemy casualties. But it did not assess its implications for further U.S. policy or strategy.¹⁰⁰ The CIA also

attended, as well as AID Administrator David Bell. See Editorial Note, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 69, pp. 215-16.

⁹⁹ Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 98; Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big-Unit War Against the U.S., 1965-1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁰ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Daily Brief," Jan. 31, 1966, p. 4. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005968127.pdf (accessed Jan. 3,

continued to publish daily and weekly updates on the situation in the RVN, but these were no more illustrative than PDBs. Ground operations, as reported in the updates, almost always ended with a body count higher for the enemy than for the U.S. or ARVN with little reference to broader implications for U.S. policy or strategy. The result was a narrative that catalogued steady U.S. victories but showed no strategic progress.¹⁰¹

Enemy order of battle (O/B) reporting likewise suggested that both sides were locked in stalemate. MACV and DIA analysts classified groups or units whose presence in the RVN had been noted in at least two independent sources as confirmed, while those that had only appeared in one source were deemed probable. The Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam that McChristian had established upon becoming MACV J-2 head determined enemy order of battle by adding up the reported strengths of confirmed units while adjusting for enemy casualties.¹⁰² The center published its first such report in January 1966. Monthly reports that followed showed a steady increase in NLF and PAVN troop numbers due to strong NLF recruitment as well as infiltration.¹⁰³

Notwithstanding inadequate sources, MACV J-2, DIA, and CIA reporting showed that enemy infiltration had risen despite the bombing. Analysts relied on captured

2018). Operation Masher was a combined effort between U.S., ARVN, and South Korean troops.

¹⁰¹ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The Situation in South Vietnam,” Mar. 2, 1966, pp. 6-9. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000508557.pdf (accessed Jan. 8, 2018);

¹⁰² Howells, Avery, and Greene, *Vietnam 1961-1968*, Special Annex I – “Infiltration,” p. 2.

¹⁰³ See Moise, *The Myths of Tet*, 27 for a compilation of enemy O/B data from Jan. 1966 through Sept. 1967.

documents, prisoner interrogations, road watch team reports, and aerial photography to track infiltration.¹⁰⁴ These sources allowed analysts to identify specific enemy units that infiltrated southward. But they were less helpful for determining numbers such as the monthly average of infiltrates into the RVN. The IC settled on the same estimate that McChristian had given McNamara on November 28, 1965: Hanoi could infiltrate at least 4,500 men into the RVN per month. Analysts derived that number from simple arithmetic. Each PAVN division consisted of 1,500 men, and enemy documents and interrogations showed that at least 3 divisions could infiltrate southward per month.¹⁰⁵ Despite this uncertainty, analysts across the IC agreed that the bombing had little effect on infiltration. In mid-February during a briefing at CIA headquarters, MACV intelligence analysts stated that captured documents and prisoner interrogations showed that infiltration of men and materiel down the Ho Chi Minh Trail remained strong despite Rolling Thunder's devastating effects.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Howells, Avery, and Greene, *Vietnam 1961-1968*, Special Annex I – “Infiltration,” p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Apr. 9, 1966, “The Current Status of PAVN Infiltration to South Vietnam,” p. 6. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 51, LBJL. For DIA figures, see CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Infiltration into South Vietnam, 1966,” Jan. 1, 1966, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP69B00369R000100190137-4.pdf> (accessed Jan. 13, 2018).

¹⁰⁶ See Memorandum for the Record, “MACV J-2 Briefing on the Military Situation in South Vietnam, Feb. 15, 1966,” Feb. 18, 1966, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00967A001000010026-2.pdf> (accessed Jan. 3, 2018). The analyst who wrote this memorandum criticized MACV's 4,500 infiltrates per month estimate as “based, in large part, on papers produced in Washington (which in turn reflected MACV's November briefing of Secretary McNamara, thus constituting a kind of circular confirmation and leaving the validity of the figures in considerable doubt)” on page 2. But since several other agency analyses

Bombing also remained contentious between the CIA and top military officials after the December-January pause. On February 21, JCS representatives briefed McNamara and the CIA on their bombing proposals for the coming year. The meeting's minutes, written by an unidentified CIA officer, indicate that the chiefs expected American airpower to impose significant hardships on Hanoi after about six months. Further, the JCS expected that by destroying the DRV's POL stocks, power supply, and storage facilities through carefully targeted strikes, the US could ratchet up the pressure until Hanoi could no longer supply the NLF. They expected to reach this goal sometime in 1967.¹⁰⁷ This argument was nearly identical to their initial assessment at Rolling Thunder's inception. JCS preconceptions on bombing's potential efficacy had only hardened despite the operation's lack of success over the past year.

As they had done at Rolling Thunder's inception, the Chiefs cherry picked intelligence to reinforce their preconceptions on bombing. During the meeting, they agreed that the NLF and PAVN forces had required a minimum of 12 tons of supplies per day during 1965, which they referred to as the "going intelligence figure." They did not cite specific reports. But the CIA concluded that the NLF and PAVN forces in the RVN required 12 tons per day of supplies.¹⁰⁸ Yet they also argued that the enemy forces were

accepted the 4,500 per month figure, there is no evidence to indicate that this criticism was reflective of broader CIA attitudes.

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum For The Record, "JCS Briefing of Board of National Estimates on US Plans for Air Attacks in North Vietnam, Laos, and South Vietnam," Feb. 21, 1966, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00967A001000010024-4.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2017).

¹⁰⁸ CIA Intelligence Report, "Buildup of Vietnamese Communist Forces Continues After Resumption of Air Attacks," Feb. 21, 1966, p. 3. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 51, LBJL; CIA Intelligence Report, "Communist Combat Strength and

building strength, and now needed at least 100 tons of supplies per day and would need 150 tons per day by the end of the year. This conclusion lacked any basis in civilian or military intelligence. To be sure, CIA road watch teams and aerial photography had detected an increase in infiltrated supplies over the Laotian border in late 1965 and early 1966.¹⁰⁹ But there is no evidence to indicate that any intelligence agency had concluded that 100 tons per day from external sources were necessary in early 1966 or that 150 tons would be required by the end of the year. Indeed, an NIE released in June reported that enemy forces needed “about 20 to 30 tons per day” of supplies from outside the RVN.¹¹⁰ Yet the Chiefs believed that increased bombing would “hurt,” since 100 to 150 tons of supplies per day would be easy for U.S. aviators to interdict.¹¹¹

Though Johnson did not fulfill the Chiefs’ requests, he elevated one of escalation’s staunchest supporters into his inner circle. LBJ ordered targeted strikes against several bridges, infiltration routes, seven POL facilities, and a cement plant.¹¹² In

Logistical Requirements by VC Military Region Under the Current Scale of Combat,” Mar. 11, 1966, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78S02149R000200100019-8.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2017)

¹⁰⁹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Buildup of Vietnamese Communist Forces Continues After Resumption of Air Attacks,” Feb. 21, 1966, p. 2. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/041/0410466005.pdf> (accessed Jul. 4, 2018).

¹¹⁰ National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-66, Jul. 7, 1966, “North Vietnamese Military Potential for Fighting in South Vietnam,” p. 9. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

¹¹¹ Memorandum for the Record, Feb. 21, 1966, p. 3.

¹¹² Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 95.

doing so he maintained Rolling Thunder's limited, gradual nature. But in February, McGeorge Bundy left the administration to become the president of the Ford Foundation. After a six-week interim period in which NSC staffer (and later chief of pacification in Vietnam) Robert Komer substituted for Bundy, on April 1 Johnson appointed Walt Rostow his new national security advisor. Rostow combined fierce support of escalation with absolute loyalty toward his president. Johnson prized both qualities, and Rostow soon became one of Johnson's closest confidants.

“Something Approaching Genuine Political Stability”

In the late spring of 1966, debate over bombing and troop levels took a backseat to the civil unrest gripping the RVN. The Diem coup had done little to diminish tensions between the Buddhist community and the GVN. In 1964, Buddhist leaders formed the United Buddhist Church (UBC) to improve their movement's organization. Of these leaders, the CIA quickly identified the firebrand Thich Tri Quang as particularly important due to his fervent and well-organized following. In September 1964, Carver concluded that Tri Quang's importance to RVN politics was such that he “will have to be placated and, to whatever extent possible, used by any anti-Communist regime in South Vietnam that is to stand a chance of surviving.”¹¹³ Nine months later, Air Marshal

¹¹³ See George Carver to John McCone, “The Motivations, Objectives, and Influence of Thich Tri Quang,” Sept. 11, 1964, pp. 7-8. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000500010012-9.pdf> (accessed Mar. 1, 2018). Tri Quang's goals, along with those of many other Buddhist leaders, remain contentious among historians. Mark Moyar argues that Tri Quang was either a communist plant or an unwitting NLF accomplice. See Moyar, “Political Monks: The Militant Buddhist Movement During the Vietnam War” *Modern Asian Studies*, 38(4) (2004): 749-84. In *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace*

Nguyen Cao Ky seized power in Saigon and established a military junta with the support of ARVN General Nguyen Van Thieu. Neither sought cooperation with the UBC or Tri Quang. In March 1966 Ky ousted Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi from the GVN, which precipitated RVN-wide demonstrations due to the latter's popularity among Buddhists. Tri Quang was involved in the protests from their inception.¹¹⁴

The CIA considered Tri Quang a centrally important figure during the crisis. An April 9 CIA report identified Tri Quang as the probable "mastermind" behind a political movement known as the Struggle Force, which soon emerged as the best-organized opposition to the GVN.¹¹⁵ The April 9 report recognized that the clerics Thich Thien Minh and Thich Ho Giac led the Struggle Force outright. But Tri Quang's status as the

Movement in South Vietnam (University Press of Kentucky, 2006), Robert Topmiller argues that the Buddhists, including Tri Quang, were neutralists who sought to end U.S. involvement in the RVN and replace Ky's junta with a neutral government. George McTurnan Kahin echoes this argument in his survey history *Intervention*, and contends that Buddhist leaders thought they could negotiate with the NLF because they viewed the Front as "predominantly nationalist" rather than communist. See Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 414-16. Finally, James McAllister argues that Tri Quang was a strong anti-Communist, and favored many aspects of the US intervention in Vietnam (including the bombing) for that reason. See McAllister, "'Only Religions Count in Vietnam': Thich Tri Quang and the Vietnam War" *Modern Asian Studies*, 42(4) (July 2008): 751-82. See also Eugene Ford, *Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America's Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 214.

¹¹⁴ Thi commanded widespread respect among RVN Buddhists due to his deep ties with that community and his prominent role in the 1960 coup against Diem. By ejecting him, Ky hoped to consolidate power, but the move backfired. See Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 33-37.

¹¹⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum OCI-1264/66, "The Political Situation in South Vietnam as of 10:30 am," Apr. 9, 1966, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A000500010061-3.pdf> (accessed Mar. 1, 2018). See also Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 38; McAllister, "Only Religions Count in Vietnam," 752.

putative prime mover behind the Struggle Force meant that the CIA devoted the lion's share of attention to him in the coming months.

The CIA and INR both assessed the Struggle Force as potentially destabilizing to the GVN in the weeks following Thi's firing. On March 19, Hughes sent an Intelligence Note to Rusk concluding that a failure of the two sides to compromise would "raise serious dangers of increasingly widespread and possible violent demonstrations in the days ahead."¹¹⁶ A PDB from March 22 warned that the demonstrations "may soon put Ky where he will have to make fundamental-and dangerous-decisions" such as deciding whether to crack down on the movement and risk precipitating a larger crisis.¹¹⁷ A March 25 CIA Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) Weekly Summary characterized Ky's strategy toward the Buddhists as "apparently ... hop[ing] that public agitation will soon lose its momentum." The report did not advance a judgment as to whether that strategy would work, but repeated the March 22 PDB's conclusion that if Ky took harsh measures against the protesters, there was "some danger" that those measures would lead to greater resistance.¹¹⁸ Ky was unwilling to negotiate. As protests intensified, Ky accused Tri Quang of harboring Communist sympathies.

¹¹⁶ INR Intelligence Note 174 from Hughes to Rusk, "GVN-Buddhist Confrontation Hardening But Compromise Seems Possible," Mar. 19, 1966. *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 99, pp. 292-95.

¹¹⁷ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Daily Brief," Mar. 22, 1966, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005968217.pdf (accessed May 26, 2017).

¹¹⁸ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Office of Current Intelligence, "Weekly Summary," Mar. 25, 1966, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00927A005200070001-9.pdf> (accessed May 26, 2017).

Multiple CIA officers who had identified Tri Quang as a strong anti-communist disagreed. CIA analysts in April 1965 reported that according to the U.S. Consul in Hue, Tri Quang had instructed his followers in Quang Nam province to “defend [Buddhism] against increasing Viet Cong oppression.”¹¹⁹ Helms even recommended that the U.S. provide covert support to the Buddhists in late March 1965. Nothing came of this recommendation because of Tri Quang’s virulent anti-Catholicism. He identified Catholicism as un-Vietnamese and fundamentally threatening to Buddhism. As a result, he demanded that all Catholics be purged from the GVN, even though he was not a government official. No American policymaker would accede to that demand, and it prevented the U.S. from establishing a close relationship with Tri Quang.¹²⁰ At the same time, he was so strongly in favor of Rolling Thunder that he recommended rapid escalation of bombing strikes against the DRV.¹²¹ In an April 11, 1966 memo to Bundy, Rostow, Ball, McNaughton, and Komer, George Carver reported that Tri Quang’s recommendations on the bombing campaign were aggressive enough to “go considerably beyond those of the most strident American hawks” and that an allegation that he harbored Communist sympathies was “simply not convincing to one who has personally discussed such subjects with him.”¹²²

¹¹⁹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The Situation in South Vietnam,” Apr. 7, 1965, p. 3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00472A001700040002-8.pdf> (accessed Sep. 11, 2017).

¹²⁰ McAllister, “Only Religions Count in Vietnam,” pp. 775-76.

¹²¹ McAllister, “Only Religions Count in Vietnam,” p. 773.

¹²² CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Consequences of a Buddhist Political Victory in South Vietnam,” Apr. 11, 1966, p. 3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room:

Carver soon emerged as the foremost analyst of Tri Quang and the Struggle Force's motivations within the IC. No IC agency covered the Buddhist Crisis as closely as the CIA in general and Carver in particular.¹²³ Because Carver had analyzed Tri Quang's motivations since 1964, he was in an excellent position to assume this responsibility. His reports played a central role in high-level discussions on the crisis.

Carver thought Tri Quang unreliable as a potential U.S. partner due to flaws in his leadership style. Two CIA reports from April 1 and 2 reported that outside of establishing a civilian government, Tri Quang's goals were unclear. Carver wrote the April 2 report, and characterized Tri Quang's stance as follows:

No one has ever been able to divine exactly what Tri Quang wants, and he himself would almost certainly be unwilling, if not unable, to spell out his goals with any degree of precision. He apparently does not want the responsibilities of office. He does want a veto power over GVN policies and personnel choices and appears determined to topple any government he cannot control.¹²⁴

The April 1 report, which OCI published, gave no assessment of the Struggle Force's goals apart from characterizing the movement as "antigovernment."¹²⁵ Both reports

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000100100016-9.pdf> (accessed May 31, 2017). Carver cited no sources in the memo.

¹²³ INR touched on the crisis briefly in March, but not in the months thereafter when the unrest was even worse. See Howells, Avery, and Greene, *Vietnam 1961-1968*, Part VI, "A Massive Effort to Turn the Tide," p. 9.

¹²⁴ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Apr. 2, 1966, "The Political Situation in South Vietnam: The Current Crisis, Possible Future Developments, U.S. Options," p. 6. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP68B00432R000500010033-4.pdf> (accessed May 27, 2017).

¹²⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Struggle Groups in I Corps," Apr. 1, 1966, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A000500010036-1.pdf> (accessed May 27, 2017).

categorized Tri Quang's supporters as the best organized among the wider Buddhist movement. But in his April 11 memo, Carver wrote that Tri Quang's management skills were limited to organizing protests, and that he did not work well with others. These limitations meant that Carver recognized Tri Quang as a factor to "reckon with" rather than a partner to work with.¹²⁶

In his April 2 paper, Carver made several policy recommendations aimed at stabilizing the RVN while working around Tri Quang's weaknesses. The most extensive urged the RVN to announce a constitutional convention in order to transition to civilian democratic rule "within the next few days." Carver assessed that Ky would "probably" have to resign as part of that transition.¹²⁷ Carver thought installing a civilian government would be necessary to establish a stronger popular foundation for the GVN. But Carver framed this recommendation in terms of "pre-empt[ing]" Tri Quang, not working with him.¹²⁸ Carver's other recommendations were to regain control over I Corps and prevent unrest from spreading any further. He claimed the GVN could accomplish the former through "a judicious mixture of firmness and restraint." Appointing a commander for I Corps who was popular with RVN Buddhists could accomplish the latter.¹²⁹

Johnson rejected Carver's recommendations. Carver's expertise and familiarity with Tri Quang meant that members of Johnson's cabinet who would not have ordinarily

¹²⁶ "Consequences of a Buddhist Political Victory in South Vietnam," Apr. 11, 1966, p. 4.

¹²⁷ "The Political Situation in South Vietnam," Apr. 2, 1966, p. 8.

¹²⁸ "The Political Situation in South Vietnam," Apr. 2, 1966, p. 10.

¹²⁹ Carver memo, Apr. 2, 1966, pp. 10, 1, 9. See also McAllister, "Only Religions Count in Vietnam," 780-81.

been Carver's customers read his reports during the crisis. None of them were concerned with Carver having breached the boundary between intelligence and policy. Dean Rusk even implicitly endorsed Carver's actions by passing the ambitious analyst's recommendations to Johnson on April 2.¹³⁰ But in a March 28 phone conversation about the crisis with Rusk, LBJ had stated, "[I]t's going to be so much more difficult to rebuild a government than it is to hold the one we've got."¹³¹ Carver's recommendations did not change his mind. In a meeting on April 2, LBJ expressed his desire to preserve Ky "if possible." He expressed willingness to negotiate with the Buddhists as a fallback solution. But he closed the meeting by ordering Lodge to "get tough" with Tri Quang.¹³²

Carver continued to argue that the political situation in the RVN would not stabilize without Buddhist support for the GVN. Carver wanted to keep militant Buddhists like Tri Quang out of power. But he also thought that even a Buddhist victory in which Tri Quang became "at least temporarily the most powerful figure in South Vietnam" would lend the GVN more legitimacy and "could ultimately lead to something approaching genuine political stability."¹³³ His use of the word "could" showed a low level of confidence in the judgment that incorporating more Buddhists into the GVN would stabilize the political situation. In Vietnam-era analytic tradecraft, "could" was a

¹³⁰ Memorandum from Rusk to Johnson, "Political Situation in South Viet-Nam," Apr. 2, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966* Doc. 108, pp. 314-15.

¹³¹ Phone conversation between Johnson and Rusk, Mar. 28, 1966, WH6603-09-9918. Miller Center for Presidential Studies.

¹³² Notes of Meeting, Apr. 2, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 109, p. 315.

¹³³ Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 104; "Consequences of a Buddhist Political Victory in South Vietnam," Apr. 11, 1966, p. 10.

synonym for “possible.” According to Sherman Kent, “possible” described situations for which “no numerical probability could be assigned.”¹³⁴ After all, anything is possible. Yet Carver also pointed out that the Buddhists had greater popular support than any other non-Communist group in the RVN, and that if the Buddhists did take power, the U.S. would have “virtually no chance” of forcing them out.¹³⁵ He likewise pointed out that a Buddhist dominated GVN would have a better chance of defeating the NLF with U.S. guidance.¹³⁶

Obliterating the boundary between the intelligence and policymaking communities, Carver also recommended that Johnson escalate the war. On April 16, he wrote a proposal for potential U.S. actions prior to a meeting with Johnson. Carver’s “Option A” recommended that Johnson maintain current troop levels while striking POL sites and mining Haiphong Harbor.¹³⁷ In a contemporaneous memo entitled “How We Should Move,” Carver recommended that Johnson make clear to Ky and Thieu that the U.S. commitment to the RVN was subject to them providing “a reasonably effective government with which we can work.”¹³⁸ While Johnson had ejected McCone from his

¹³⁴ Sherman Kent, “Words of Estimative Probability” in *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), 138. Modern intelligence tradecraft forbids using the word “possible” entirely.

¹³⁵ “Consequences of a Buddhist Political Victory in South Vietnam,” p. 11.

¹³⁶ McAllister, “Only Religions Count in Vietnam,” pp. 780-81.

¹³⁷ Vietnam Task Force, *U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, part IV-C-7-a, “The Air War In The North,” p. 94.

¹³⁸ *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, part IV-C-7-a, 104.

inner circle in part for making policy recommendations, Carver's recommendations reinforced LBJ's preconceptions. Predictably, the president did not censor Carver.

Two other proposals were more dovish. Option B, which McNaughton and diplomat Leonard Unger wrote, recommended building a coalition GVN with NLF participation. McNaughton and Unger agreed with Carver that the GVN lacked popular legitimacy, and saw bringing the NLF into the government as a method of broadening the GVN's base while winding down hostilities. McNaughton's longstanding skepticism of the war effort's prospects had not abated, but his tendency to keep his doubts to himself had. He encouraged Johnson to "Recognize that we are on a losing wicket in Vietnam ... the military situation is not going badly, [but] the political situation is in 'terminal sickness' and even the military prognosis is of an escalating stalemate."¹³⁹ McNaughton's grim outlook on both the political and military situations stemmed from the GVN's well-known corruption and malfeasance; he cited no intelligence. Direct U.S. military intervention had prevented a GVN collapse, but McNaughton doubted that American troops could fix the GVN's problems.¹⁴⁰ George Ball agreed. The outspoken dove wrote Option C. Echoing his "cut our losses" memorandum from the prior year, it recommended that the U.S. withdraw because GVN incompetence left no other choice: "It is the South Vietnamese people who have failed, not us."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Quoted in William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part IV: July 1965 – January 1968* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 292.

¹⁴⁰ Harrison and Mosher, "The Long-Lost Diary of McNamara's Dove," pp. 522-23.

¹⁴¹ Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 106-08; *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* Part IV-C-7-a, p. 102.

Rostow favored a course of action similar to Carver's, but placed a greater emphasis on stabilizing the GVN through whatever means necessary, including military force. Rostow recommended that the Directory be preserved even as he also urged the creation of a constituent assembly for the RVN on April 9.¹⁴² He reiterated his support for the RVN moving toward constitutional democratic government on April 14.¹⁴³ This recommendation was congruent with Carver's desire for an effective GVN. Rostow equated a constitutional democratic government with stability. But unlike Carver, Rostow thought a stable GVN was more important than a popular and truly representative one. His April 9 memo – bluntly entitled “Breaking Tri Quang's Momentum” – began by admitting that the U.S. could not “shoot people apparently demanding a constitution and free elections.” He only wanted Buddhist participation in a constitutional convention to give the Directory and the U.S. “a credible basis for suppressing disorder” through force if necessary.¹⁴⁴

Rostow played to his preconceptions by using his own interpretation of history as the foundation for his paper. He argued that the Buddhist Crisis was similar to the Russian Revolution because of the combination of a citizenry tired of war, a government that could not claim popular legitimacy, and an ineffective army. Tri Quang, he contended, was the South Vietnamese Alexander Kerensky. Rostow claimed that Tri Quang's ascension to power would lead to an NLF victory just as Lenin had seized power

¹⁴² Memorandum from Rostow to Rusk and McNamara, “Breaking Tri Quang's Momentum,” Apr. 9, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 118, p. 338.

¹⁴³ Paper Prepared by Rostow, “Headings For Decision and Action: Vietnam, April 14, 1966,” Apr. 14, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 121, p. 347.

¹⁴⁴ “Breaking Tri Quang's Momentum,” p. 338.

in the face of Kerensky's weakness. And he argued that the only way to avoid a repeat of 1917 in the RVN was to "bring into play the factor that was not present ... U.S. force."¹⁴⁵ In this instance, Rostow sought to fix a past mistake, much as Lodge had when he referenced American "indolence" at the 1938 Munich Conference in July 1965, or Humphrey had when he based his February 1965 memo to Johnson in his experience as a Senator during the Korean War.¹⁴⁶ The only major difference was that Rostow was one year old during the Russian Revolution. But this kind of analogical thinking on Rostow's part reinforced his preconceptions while also leading him to disregard intelligence analysis. Of course, Carver's violation of the intelligence-policy barrier meant that his contributions were much closer to policy papers in form and content than intelligence analyses. But Rostow ignored any paper with which he disagreed.

Once again, LBJ considered historical analogies that reinforced his preconceptions more persuasive than any intelligence product. LBJ refused to consider withdrawal. He also maintained the U.S. military commitment to Vietnam even as the crisis worsened throughout May and June. Ky agreed to hold elections for a constituent assembly in the fall. But he also vowed to exclude neutralists from balloting. And in mid-May, the ARVN mounted a series of violent raids against Buddhist temples in Danang in which nearly one hundred Buddhists died. When the U.S. did not respond, Ky's forces attacked Buddhist temples in Hue and Quang Tri, occupying both cities by June 22 and

¹⁴⁵ "Breaking Tri Quang's Momentum," p. 339.

¹⁴⁶ See also Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton University Press, 1992); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 1976); and Richard E. Neustadt with Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 75-90.

sending many Buddhists to prison camps. Ky also placed Tri Quang under house arrest. Again, Johnson did nothing.¹⁴⁷

POL Strikes, Helms, and Carver

The debate over bombing the DRV's POL supplies began to heat up in June. Rostow and the service chiefs remained strongly in favor, with McNamara, Rusk, and Ball in opposition. Rostow remained wedded to the belief that striking POL stocks would produce the same effects in Vietnam that, he contended, it had in World War II. In May, Rostow again argued that bombing German fuel depots had dealt a crippling blow to the *Luftwaffe*. Rostow added that the Germans had felt this effect far more quickly than he had originally anticipated in 1944.¹⁴⁸ Rostow used this "lesson in history" to argue that bombing DRV POL would drastically limit Hanoi's ability to support the NLF or prosecute the war effort at all. Although he qualified his support by stating, "[S]imple analogies are dangerous," he still asserted that because oil moves in "various logistical channels from central sources," destruction of the DRV's central reservoir at Haiphong would cause its overall supply to dry up.¹⁴⁹ McNamara, Rusk, and Ball opposed bombing POL because they feared a potential international and domestic backlash from civilian casualties.

¹⁴⁷ See Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 121-33 for an account of Ky's repression of Buddhist strongholds in May and June 1966.

¹⁴⁸ Memo from Rostow to McNamara and Rusk, May 6, 1966. National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 7, LBJL.

¹⁴⁹ *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* Part IV-C-7-a, p. 119.

By mid-June, McNamara's opposition to POL attacks had faded. In an NSC meeting on June 17, he stated, "Strikes on POL targets have been opposed by me for months. The situation is now changing ... The military utilization of these targets has been greatly increased. The North Vietnamese dispersal of their POL is lessening our chance of ever destroying their POL supplies." McNamara went on to say that bombing POL would limit infiltration.¹⁵⁰ This argument was McNamara's way of trying to re-establish his credibility with Johnson. The bombing pause's failure had caused Johnson to lose faith in McNamara.¹⁵¹ Rostow's strong support of Rolling Thunder allowed him to supplant McNamara in LBJ's estimation. The Defense Secretary thus urged escalated bombing out of desperation to recover his standing with Johnson.

During the debate over bombing POL, several intelligence reports used aerial photography to conclude that Hanoi's POL network was flexible enough to withstand strikes. A CIA report from the spring of 1966 had specified that the DRV would likely meet POL strikes with dispersal of POL supplies, increased focus on rebuilding damaged infrastructure, and methods of transporting POL that were less vulnerable to air strikes, such as coastal shipping.¹⁵² CIA/DIA bombing appraisals from April, May, and June all reported that despite heavy losses, Hanoi's ability to continue the war effort remained

¹⁵⁰ Summary Record of the 559th Meeting of the National Security Council, June 17, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 159, p. 439.

¹⁵¹ Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 159.

¹⁵² CIA Memorandum, "Probable Reactions to a Postulated US Course of Action," Mar. 23, 1966, pp. 17-18. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00967A001000010004-6.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2017).

unchanged.¹⁵³ An exhaustive June 1 CIA/DIA appraisal of the bombing from March 2 through December 31, 1965 came to the same conclusion.¹⁵⁴ And on June 8, 1966, the CIA and DIA released a joint report concluding that the DRV's oil network could cushion U.S. bombing raids. The DRV held a 60-day supply of oil in tanks and drums dispersed throughout the country, and had enough trucks to move its oil reserves wherever necessary until Russia and China sent more oil south.¹⁵⁵

Despite their reliable sources, these reports barely registered with policymakers. As is almost always the case, estimating enemy military capabilities proved easier than enemy political intentions and morale. Aerial photography allowed U.S. intelligence analysts to assess the strengths and vulnerabilities of Hanoi's POL distribution network. But reliable intelligence was no panacea against hawkish policymakers' tendencies to disregard analyses with which they disagreed. Rostow in particular continued to cling to

¹⁵³ See Intelligence Memorandum: An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam, 22 April 1966, pp. 8-9. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/041/04109132011.pdf>; Intelligence Memorandum: An Appraisal of the Bombings of North Vietnam (Through 14 May), 21 May 1966, Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/041/0410328001.pdf>; and Intelligence Memorandum: An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam (Through 14 June), 20 June 1966, p. 6. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/041/0410227010.pdf> (all accessed Jul. 4, 2018)

¹⁵⁴ CIA/DIA Intelligence Memorandum, "An Appraisal of the First Year of Bombing in North Vietnam," June 1, 1966, National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 83, LBJL.

¹⁵⁵ CIA/DIA Report: "Effect of Destruction of North Vietnamese Petroleum Storage Facilities on the War in South Vietnam," June 8, 1966, pp. 11-13. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 83, LBJL.

his World War II experience as proof that the POL strikes would cripple Hanoi even though the CIA/DIA report emphasized the enemy POL network's flexibility.

In the event, POL attacks did not accomplish any of their proponents' objectives. The strikes began on June 29. True to the CIA and DIA's judgments, Hanoi responded by dispersing its POL into 55-gallon drums placed along roads and throughout the countryside.¹⁵⁶ Such massive decentralization meant that US aviators could not destroy even a small fraction of DRV POL. Indeed, an August DIA analysis used aerial photography to show that the PAVN had begun using "sacrosanct areas [such] as graveyards and shrines" as well as "building POL installations in populated areas to reduce the possibility of discovery and to enhance the value of propaganda if subjected to U.S. attacks."¹⁵⁷ The border between the DRV and China remained open, as did the major ports, allowing Russia and China to replace the POL that Hanoi lost in the strikes of summer 1966.

By the end of June, Johnson could no longer deny that his choice of William Raborn as DCI had been an error. He actually recognized that his choice had been a mistake as early as February 22, when he complained to McGeorge Bundy that Raborn was "totally oblivious to the fact that he is not highly regarded and is not doing a good job."¹⁵⁸ At that time the Rear Admiral may not have understood that neither the White

¹⁵⁶ John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 162.

¹⁵⁷ DIA Special Report, Aug. 1966, "POL Distribution, North Vietnam" p. 21. Box 28, Vietnam Command File, NHHC.

¹⁵⁸ Editorial Note, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Vol. XXXIII, Organization and Management of Foreign Policy, United Nations*, eds. James C.

House nor the agency he led had confidence in him. But he had certainly come to appreciate both problems by June 8, when he resigned. His deputy, Richard M. Helms, replaced him as DCI on June 30.¹⁵⁹

Helms' deep intelligence experience helped him start off on a stronger footing with LBJ than either McCone or Raborn. Helms was an intelligence lifer, having served in the OSS during World War II and in the CIA since the agency's inception in 1947. Johnson chose him out of a lack of time or inclination for a personnel search.¹⁶⁰ But Helms soon proved an able, and politically savvy, DCI. In particular, he understood that providing policy advice on Vietnam as McCone had would lead to his exclusion from policy circles. Helms thus adopted a briefing style that omitted McCone's brashness or subjectivity. Johnson rewarded that decision by inviting Helms to Tuesday Lunches soon after Helms became DCI.¹⁶¹ Johnson continued to ignore analyses with which he disagreed. Helms stated later that the CIA's pessimism on the war effort ensured that the agency was "not a popular instrument" in the Johnson White House.¹⁶² But he was able to maintain a degree of access to Johnson that his predecessors had not even if LBJ did not

Humphrey and James E. Miller (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), Doc. 252, p. 543.

¹⁵⁹ Editorial Note, *FRUS Organization and Management of Foreign Policy, United Nations*, Doc. 252, p. 543.

¹⁶⁰ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 85.

¹⁶¹ Richard Helms and William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House: 2003), 294.

¹⁶² Richard Helms, interview with John Bross, 14 Dec. 1982, p. 18. *A Life in Intelligence – The Richard Helms Collection*, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/12_14_oral.pdf (accessed Jan. 6, 2018).

always listen to him. Indeed, Helms would later remember serving Johnson nostalgically.¹⁶³ Helms also delegated much of the responsibility for Vietnam-related analysis to George Carver, who replaced Peer de Silva as SAVA in September.

Carver's propensity to make policy recommendations did not concern Helms due to the former's sterling reputation and the latter's demanding schedule. The young analyst was renowned in the CIA for his strong work ethic, his deep familiarity with the analytical process, his political savvy, and his loyalty to the CIA. Helms considered those attributes essential.¹⁶⁴ "I can worry about Indochina or I can worry about the rest of the world," Helms told Carver. "I want you to worry about Indochina."¹⁶⁵

The Will to Persist Study and McNamara Line

The CIA's lack of reliable sources continued to weaken their reports on Hanoi's intentions after Helms replaced Raborn. On May 4, McNamara asked then Deputy Director Helms to have his agency produce an "extremely thorough" report on the NLF's morale and ability to continue the war.¹⁶⁶ The CIA completed the project on August 26: a

¹⁶³ Waldo Heinrichs, "Lyndon Johnson: Change and Continuity," in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968*, eds. Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 23.

¹⁶⁴ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 85; Helms and Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 324.

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Random House, 1979), 172.

¹⁶⁶ Memo from Carver to R. Jack Smith, "Origin and Genesis of McNamara Project," Sep. 6, 1966, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000500040088-3.pdf> (accessed Oct. 25, 2017).

315-page study examining the enemy's "will to persist."¹⁶⁷ Like most of the CIA's products from the previous fifteen months, this study concluded that while American military pressure had complicated the DRV war effort, it could only slow, not stop, Hanoi's progress. But the study also displayed the limits of intelligence collection within the DRV. When assessing morale within the DRV government, the study contended, "The Communists must be disappointed in comparing the present situation with that which existed in the spring of 1965 ...the Communists may be disappointed, but they do not yet seem to be discouraged."¹⁶⁸ This argument by inference stemmed from the CIA lacking sources other than public statements and the enemy's military actions, both of which the report used as evidence, to assess Hanoi's morale.

The Will to Persist study's influence on policy was limited. There is no evidence that Johnson read the report. And according to an August 16 column by Carl Rowan, who by that time had transitioned from government service to journalism, the president favored an optimistic August 1 appraisal from Leon Goure concluding that enemy forces were "increasingly doubtful of a Viet Cong victory" due to U.S. military pressure.¹⁶⁹ Rostow dismissed the CIA's conclusions about Hanoi's morale outright in a memo to Johnson on September 19. The national security advisor maintained that pressures on the regime "may be greater than most of us realize" and that U.S. military pressure was imposing cumulative damage on Hanoi that would eventually prove too much for them to

¹⁶⁷ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Aug. 26, 1966, "The Vietnamese Communists' Will To Persist." Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

¹⁶⁸ "The Vietnamese Communists' Will to Persist," p. 27.

¹⁶⁹ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 171.

withstand.¹⁷⁰ Rostow claimed to have read the full text of the CIA's Will to Persist study. Perhaps. But his preconceptions drove his interpretations of the report's findings. In arguing for the importance of cumulative damage, Rostow pivoted away from his prior theory that targeted strikes could wreck the DRV's warmaking capability. Now, he asserted that general strikes could, over time, degrade Hanoi's capabilities until they were forced to negotiate.

On August 30, McNamara met with CIA analyst and Carver deputy George Allen to discuss its conclusions. In his memoir *None So Blind*, Allen states that McNamara called the CIA's conclusions "very interesting" and pressed him for policy recommendations several times during the meeting.¹⁷¹ Allen demurred, arguing that as an analyst, it was not his place to offer such counsel. McNamara assured Allen that he was only asking for his personal views rather than the CIA's official stance. Allen found that assurance satisfactory enough to recommend that the US halt the escalation immediately, as well as negotiate a cease-fire. The two men argued for an hour and a half, with McNamara unwilling to break the US commitment to the RVN even in the face of clear policy failure. The meeting ended without either Allen or McNamara conceding ground, and Allen never met with McNamara again.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, Sept. 19, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, 648.

¹⁷¹ See George W. Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 213-217, for the account of this meeting, which Allen also notes was the only meeting he had with a cabinet official during his career with the CIA.

¹⁷² Allen, *None So Blind*, 215-216.

On the same day as McNamara and Allen's meeting, an intelligence-oriented Washington, DC think tank published a report that all but convinced McNamara to give up on Rolling Thunder. In early 1966, Roger Fisher of Harvard Law School wrote to John McNaughton – the two were old friends – to propose that a barrier of mines and sensors could interdict infiltration more effectively than bombing. McNamara requested that the JASON division of the Institute for Defense Analyses, a private organization that regularly contracted with the government, examine Fisher's proposal over the summer of 1966.¹⁷³ On August 30, the JASON scientists (or JASONS) published a report arguing that the barrier concept would be more effective against infiltration than any further expansion of Rolling Thunder. They based this conclusion on previous American classified intelligence, to which they had access because civilian academics of the 1960s could receive top-secret security clearances, as they can today. The report also argued that U.S. forces could use advanced technology to take advantage of the rough Indochinese terrain. The JASONS recommended that the barrier be a field of mines and sensors that would both hinder infiltration and alert U.S. military personnel stationed in bases along the barrier to enemy movement in real time.¹⁷⁴ On September 15, McNamara

¹⁷³ *United States- Vietnam Relations*, Part IV-C-7-a, pp. 145-148. IDA's JASON division is a research group established in 1958 to bring university physicists into defense research. See Ron Theodore Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Industrial Complex* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 53-54. The term "JASON" is not an acronym, but instead a reference to the character Jason of Greek mythology.

¹⁷⁴ See S. Deitchman, V. Fitch, M. Gell-Mann, H. Kendall, L. Lederman, H. Mayer, W. Nierenberg, F. Zachariasen, and G. Sweig, *JASON Study S-255: Air Supported Anti-Infiltration Barrier*, p. 10. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 74, LBJL.

instructed Lt. General Alfred Starbird of the Defense Communications Agency to begin planning for the barrier's construction.¹⁷⁵

From McNamara's perspective, the JASON report had several advantages that set it apart from most traditional intelligence products, including the Will to Persist study. First, JASON was permitted to make clear policy recommendations. Second, these recommendations allowed McNamara to break from pro-bombing policymakers without recommending that the war effort be abandoned. The JASON report gave McNamara a new strategy to embrace. That the barrier idea came courtesy of well-respected civilian academics that could access whatever classified evidence they required rather than the military almost certainly made it easier for McNamara to accept the concept.

McNamara's plans for the barrier show that while he may have lost hope in the bombing as it had been conducted up until late 1966, he had not yet lost hope in the war effort. He argued in an October memo to Johnson that the barrier take precedence over Rolling Thunder, which, he reasoned, needed to be stabilized at its present levels and eventually terminated as part of peace negotiations. He also no longer believed that 600,000 men would be necessary. Now, he argued, no more than 470,000 would be needed to finish the war, since the barrier would allow for more efficient uses of friendly troops. Indeed, McNamara's faith in the barrier was such that he believed "even the threat of its becoming effective" would damage DRV morale.¹⁷⁶ His steadfast support of the

¹⁷⁵ Memorandum from McNamara to Starbird, "Infiltration Interdiction System for Vietnam," *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 233, pp. 635-37.

¹⁷⁶ Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, "Actions recommended for Vietnam," Oct. 14, 1966, *FRUS Vietnam 1966*, Doc. 268, pp. 729-733.

barrier also soon led to many U.S. officials in Washington and Vietnam calling it the “McNamara Line.”

McNamara used intelligence to bolster his arguments, but in doing so he betrayed his judgment at intelligence estimates were tools to be used when convenient and disregarded otherwise. In an October 14 memo stressing the importance of the barrier for winning the war, McNamara noted that the intelligence community had found that Rolling Thunder had not cracked Hanoi’s morale or significantly affected infiltration. Indeed, McNamara stated that there was “agreement in the intelligence community on these facts.”¹⁷⁷ As evidence, McNamara attached excerpts from the JASON study and the most recent CIA/DIA analysis.¹⁷⁸ Describing the community’s findings as “facts” ignored the probabilistic language that the intelligence community used. In disregarding this methodology, McNamara showed that he cared more about winning the argument over escalation and currying favor with Johnson than using intelligence to inform sound policy.

“The Talks Are Already Over”

The IC’s inadequate source base continued to hamper its ability to analyze Hanoi’s motivations through the end of 1966. Indeed, though General McChristian continued to improve intelligence processing and dissemination, his improvements did not compensate for the lack of high-level SIGINT and HUMINT. In October, MACV J-2 opened the Combined Document Exploitation Center and the Combined Materiel

¹⁷⁷ McNamara to Johnson, “Actions recommended for Vietnam,” p. 728.

¹⁷⁸ McNamara to Johnson, “Actions recommended for Vietnam,” p. 738.

Exploitation Center. CDEC processed all captured enemy documents while CMEC processed everything else that U.S. and ARVN troops encountered in the field, such as enemy equipment and weaponry.¹⁷⁹ CDEC improved the rate at which captured documents were translated and disseminated to American intelligence analysts. But it could not improve the overall quality of those sources. Though captured documents were vital to the U.S. war effort, much of the information they provided was “fragmentary and often out of date” according to a July 1968 SNIE.¹⁸⁰ Analysts used them for tasks such as estimating enemy infiltration, understanding the enemy logistical and advisory systems, and determining where Hanoi stationed troops and support personnel.¹⁸¹ Their piecemeal nature made them unreliable as direct evidence of the Hanoi Politburo’s intentions.¹⁸² For that, analysts would have needed access to high-level SIGINT or HUMINT.

This lack of high-level sources often led analysts to focus on tactical developments rather than enemy strategic shifts. A major search-and-destroy operation

¹⁷⁹ McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence*, 32-44.

¹⁸⁰ Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-68, Jul. 25, 1968, “Detection of Infiltration During a Cease-Fire in Vietnam,” p. 6. National Security Files, Intelligence File, Box 14, LBJL.

¹⁸¹ See SNIE 14.3-68, pp. 5-7; Memorandum for the United States Intelligence Board, “Status of North Vietnam Infiltration Into South Vietnam,” Feb. 2, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82M00097R000800160003-4.pdf> (accessed Apr. 2, 2018); and CIA Intelligence Report, “The President’s Daily Brief,” May 2, 1966, p. 1, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005968288.pdf (accessed Apr. 2, 2018) for illustrative uses of captured documents. See also C. Michael Hiam, *Who The Hell Are We Fighting?: The Story of Sam Adams and the Vietnam Intelligence Wars* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2006), 165.

¹⁸² See James P. Sterba, “Captured Documents in Vietnam Offer an Uncertain View of Foe,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1969, p. 12.

underway at the same time as CDEC's establishment provides an example. Operation Attleboro aimed to destroy the NLF's 9th Division in Tay Ninh Province to safeguard pacification operations in that region. On October 31, elements of the Army's 196th Brigade captured several enemy documents that identified the location of COSVN supply complexes in the area.¹⁸³ Brig. Gen. Edward H. de Saussure used that intelligence to send four battalions into contact with lead elements of the 9th Division. The ensuing combat lasted until the NLF retreated on November 24. Intelligence analyses of Attleboro both during and after the operation were overly optimistic about its implications for U.S. policy and strategy due to an excessive focus on the operation's tactical results. An 18 November analysis reported that by exposing COSVN supply bases the operation represented a possible turning point in the war:

If the Communists are unable to defend this headquarters successfully and are forced even temporarily to move this command complex out of its base area, the overwhelming superiority of US military strength and the great effectiveness of US-conducted search and destroy operations will have been brought home more dramatically than ever before to the Communist leadership.¹⁸⁴

The report did not back up this speculative language with sources. Neither did a December 14 analysis that reported Attleboro "may well force"¹⁸⁵ the Communist

¹⁸³ Cpt. G.L. Jennings, Apr. 24, 1967, "Combat Operations After-Action Report, Operation Attleboro," p. 7. U.S. Army Center for Military History: https://history.army.mil/news/2015/images/gal_Atteleboro/AAR_Atteleboro.pdf (accessed Jan. 8, 2018).

¹⁸⁴ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Operation Attleboro – Its Significance," Nov. 18, 1966, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A001400010050-5.pdf> (accessed Jan. 8, 2018).

¹⁸⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Impact of Operation Attleboro," Dec. 14, 1966, p. 7. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room:

leadership to re-evaluate the wisdom of maintaining a large support complex in the area. This vague analysis proved incorrect, as the NLF returned to Tay Ninh Province as soon as the American units withdrew.¹⁸⁶

At the same time, post-Attleboro analysis shows that analysts who did examine Hanoi's strategy often missed critical aspects of enemy decision-making due to their poor source base. Attleboro coincided with Operation Paul Revere IV, in which four U.S. Army divisions inflicted heavy casualties on three PAVN regiments in the Central Highlands. U.S. Marines undertook Operations Hastings and Prairie in the summer and fall of 1966, which ended with similar results.¹⁸⁷ In November, several influential party officials concluded that these and dozens of other inconclusive engagements showed the ineffectiveness of "grabbing the enemy by the belt." They began calling for an increased use of guerilla warfare in state radio broadcasts.¹⁸⁸ CIA analysts used those broadcasts as evidence that "[T]he Communists apparently now view guerilla warfare as the least costly, and perhaps the main way still open to them, in confronting the expanded military presence in South Vietnam."¹⁸⁹ That analysis was correct in the short term. Proponents of guerilla warfare in Hanoi managed to convince the Politburo to place a heavier emphasis

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A001500010027-0.pdf> (accessed Jan. 9, 2018).

¹⁸⁶ Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 7.

¹⁸⁷ Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, 202; George J. MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive: Combat Operations October 1966 – October 1967* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1998), 69-76.

¹⁸⁸ Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, 202-03.

¹⁸⁹ "The Impact of Operation Attleboro," p. 7.

on avoiding engagements with American ground troops in the months to come. But Le Duan and his close ally Le Duc Tho maintained considerable power in Hanoi. Both continued to favor a quick victory through an escalated ground campaign. Yet agency analysts were unaware of both men's continued influence.

Over-classification and restricted information sharing also interfered with CIA efforts to analyze Hanoi's intentions during an attempt at peace talks at the end of the year. On December 5, Rostow forwarded a CIA memo to Johnson entitled "The View From Hanoi."¹⁹⁰ The memo reported that what had once looked like an easy victory for the DRV had turned into a costly war of attrition, which Hanoi probably found "fairly discouraging."¹⁹¹ The authors were frank about their lack of visibility into Hanoi: "[O]ne could hardly expect [Hanoi's leaders] to engage in a frank debate with either the President of Rumania or an AFP correspondent."¹⁹² But the analysis maintained that the many setbacks that it had encountered meant that there was now a real chance for "a serious political move" from the Communists in 1967.¹⁹³ This speculation was correct. At the time of the memo's publication, Lodge and several other U.S. diplomats were beginning to negotiate with DRV representatives through Polish and Italian intermediaries in top-secret peace talks codenamed Operation Marigold. But Rostow noted in his cover memo that the analysts behind "The View From Hanoi," Sherman

¹⁹⁰ Memorandum from Rostow to Johnson, Dec. 5, 1966, National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 11, LBJL.

¹⁹¹ Memo from Sherman Kent to Helms, "The View From Hanoi" Nov. 30, 1966, p. 2. National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 11, LBJL.

¹⁹² "The View From Hanoi," p. 8.

¹⁹³ "The View From Hanoi," 16.

Kent among them, were unaware of Marigold.¹⁹⁴ For the CIA's top analyst to be unaware of peace talks that were happening while his office was analyzing enemy intentions rendered that analysis only partially useful. Ongoing peace talks, even highly sensitive ones, would have been relevant to any analysis of Hanoi's attitude toward diplomacy, especially one written contemporaneously with the talks.

Yet even if Kent had known of Marigold, the CIA's lack of reliable sources on the DRV leadership rendered analysts unable to understand the implications of the leadership divide within the Politburo toward any talks. Marigold was always contentious within Hanoi due to a fierce divide between hardliners like Le Duan and more conciliatory officials like DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. The CIA's historical analysis of previous summits did allow the agency to recognize that in any talks, Hanoi would likely adopt the "fight-talk" strategy that Mao Zedong had used during the Chinese Civil War. This strategy called for maximizing diplomatic leverage by continuing to fight hard during talks.¹⁹⁵ By December, the Politburo had approved its use for future summits. But extrapolation from previous actions could not help the CIA understand the current leadership divide in Hanoi.

Inadequate sources combined with Johnson's distrust of Hanoi to provoke several bombing raids that undermined Marigold. On December 2, American aviators carried out bombing raids 5 miles from Hanoi. These raids had been previously approved, but delayed due to poor weather conditions. Johnson refused to call them off because he

¹⁹⁴ Rostow to Johnson, Dec. 5, 1966.

¹⁹⁵ "The Vietnamese Communists' Will to Persist," Annex XII.

continued to believe that Hanoi would only negotiate if it were “hurtin.”¹⁹⁶ An October 3 CIA report contravened that belief by concluding, “It is almost certain that [Hanoi] will not agree to any negotiations until the US stops bombing North Vietnam and promises not to resume the air attacks.”¹⁹⁷ But the absence of high-level SIGINT and HUMINT forced analysts to rely only on the regime’s public statements. This weak evidentiary base made it easier for Johnson to ignore the analysts’ conclusions. Indeed, LBJ’s distrust of Hanoi’s intentions had remained high since the bombing pause failed. He would have been predisposed to doubt the validity of their public statements in the absence of corroborating evidence. Several more air strikes near Hanoi followed on December 13 and 14. Johnson allowed those strikes to proceed out of skepticism towards the negotiations combined with frustration toward Hanoi.¹⁹⁸ On December 28, Hanoi released a statement characterizing American diplomatic outreach as “piratical” and withdrawing from Marigold: “The talks are already over.”¹⁹⁹

The year 1966 ended as it had begun: with both sides locked in stalemate. Dozens of American search-and-destroy missions had crippled individual NLF and PAVN units. But Hanoi could still replenish its losses through infiltration. The bombing campaign showed no signs of success in restricting infiltration or of pressuring Hanoi to negotiate.

¹⁹⁶ Hershberg, *Marigold*, 257.

¹⁹⁷ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Vietnamese Communist Views on the US Negotiating Position,” Oct. 3, 1966, p. 4. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A001300010018-2.pdf> (accessed Apr. 4, 2018).

¹⁹⁸ Hershberg, *Marigold*, 359.

¹⁹⁹ Hershberg, *Marigold*, 461.

Indeed, bombing Hanoi had helped drive the DRV away from Marigold. And enemy guerillas continued to harass U.S. and ARVN troops in the field, including officials engaged in pacification operations. The IC's continued inability to understand developments in Hanoi left intelligence reports reliant on circumstantial evidence and speculation. At the same time, Johnson and his top advisors mostly relied on their preconceptions above any pessimistic intelligence after the war's Americanization. Both of these problems worsened in 1967. And despite Carver and Helms' expertise, their efforts to retain access to policy circles would only damage the Johnson administration's intelligence-policy nexus further.

CHAPTER 5

HIT THEM EVERY DAY: CONTROVERSY, POLITICIZATION, AND INTELLIGENCE FAILURE, JANUARY 1967 – JANUARY 1968

During the entire year of 1967, most intelligence analyses, particularly those of the CIA, remained pessimistic about American prospects in Vietnam. But three inter-related forces besieged the intelligence community, compromising its independence and undermining its utility. These forces combined to politicize intelligence – and the intelligence community itself – and ultimately contributed to a catastrophe that changed the course of the war and of the presidency of Lyndon Johnson.

The first force confronting the intelligence community was the emergence of sharp, and increasingly venomous, divisions within the government over American chances for success in Vietnam. Robert McNamara, an architect of the war and a formerly persuasive advocate of its expansion, now began arguing, ever more assertively, against prolonging the war. On the other side, Walt Rostow and the military leadership had lost none of their optimism and continued to press for more troops and an escalated bombing campaign. And the decider, President Johnson, came to recognize that a conventional battlefield victory was illusory but placed ever-increasing faith in bombing the DRV. Despite Rolling Thunder's strategic ineffectiveness, Johnson held to his preconception that the bombing would force Hanoi eventually to negotiate.

To strengthen their competing positions in this contentious debate, policymakers politicized intelligence in several different ways. McNamara continued to cherry pick

intelligence to fortify his position. The Defense Secretary used CIA analyses several times during the latter half of 1967 to argue for an American withdrawal from Vietnam. Although that represented a major shift in his thinking on the war, it was not a shift in his use of intelligence. To McNamara, the quality of those products had not changed; they were simply congruent with his beliefs.

Other senior officials politicized intelligence more openly. As we have seen, optimistic policymakers had mostly disregarded pessimistic intelligence analysis from 1964 through 1966. But in 1967, some hawkish officials instructed analysts to change their conclusions to fit their established policies. In other cases, they simply communicated strong disapproval towards analysts who were consistent bearers of bad news. Walt Rostow in particular was fond of telling analysts to “get on the team.”

This pressure, along with perverse incentives stemming from Johnson’s *ad hoc* national security decision-making structure, led to the second force – a politicized atmosphere within the intelligence agencies. By the end of the year, many analysts had become wary of publishing reports that conflicted with the official White House line that the war was going well. This politicized atmosphere was reinforced by a driving characteristic of the Johnson administration – that personal relationships were the coin of the realm in gaining and keeping access to policy circles. Intelligence officers who gained the confidence of senior policymakers often had to choose between keeping that confidence by confirming that policymaker’s preconceptions, or risking banishment to the wilderness by contravening them.

Two personal relationships were particularly critical during 1967. Richard Helms gained Johnson’s trust after CIA analysis of Israeli and Arab military capabilities proved

prescient during the Six-Day War in June. Helms became a regular attendee of Johnson's Tuesday Lunches as a reward for helping LBJ navigate that crisis. But that access made Helms less likely to challenge his first customer's preconceptions for fear of his losing Johnson's approval, resulting in his relegation to the sidelines as had happened to John McCone. And George Carver, who returned from a spring trip to Vietnam more optimistic about the U.S. war effort than many CIA analysts, developed a close and mutually beneficial relationship with Walt Rostow over the course of the year. Rostow gave Carver the access to policy circles that the ambitious analyst had long craved. In return, Carver provided Rostow with intelligence to justify his arguments and used his position as the CIA's head Vietnam analyst to bury war-related agency products with which he and Rostow disagreed.

The third negative force that added to the IC's struggles during 1967 was the persistent and seemingly intractable barrier that prevented accurate, comprehensive intelligence collection and confident analyses. The DRV remained impenetrable to high-level SIGINT and HUMINT collection. Many daily or weekly reports on events in Vietnam simply reported the background behind those events rather than adding context or implications for U.S. policy. And most analysts did not provide sources in their reports. The apparent weaknesses in these reports enabled hawkish policymakers and military officials to discount or ignore pessimistic intelligence, while Hanoi's strong operational security rendered the IC blind to critical developments in the DRV over the course of the year.

These three forces converged during several major controversies that dominate our discussion of intelligence and policy in Vietnam during 1967. The order of battle

debate saw MACV J-2 reject CIA analysis that judged enemy troop numbers to be nearly double what MACV had claimed out of political considerations. Though Carver did not agree with most of the military's conclusions, he capitulated when faced with MACV's intransigence, his inability to defend the CIA estimates with certainty and Helms's failure to give him any support. In the summer, when Hanoi began planning an RVN-wide offensive to take place starting on Tet – Vietnamese Lunar New Year – of 1968, the IC's poor collection in the DRV meant that analysts in Saigon and Washington had no idea of Hanoi's plans. Months later, when the CIA's Saigon Station picked up increasingly credible indicators of an upcoming massive offensive, Carver sought to discredit them in part out of a desire to preserve his relationship with Rostow. And when Robert McNamara asserted, consistently with CIA intelligence, that the bombing was not achieving its goals and argued that a withdrawal from Vietnam was preferable to further escalation, Johnson fired him. Policymaker preconceptions once again dominated the Johnson administration intelligence-policy nexus. But instead of continued stalemate, the result of many senior officials' self-delusion in 1967 would be a surprise attack that changed the course of the war.

“The End of the Beginning”

As 1967 began, CIA analysts continued to characterize the situation in Vietnam as stalemated despite continued tactical success against PAVN and NLF ground troops. A detailed January 9 analysis of the war began with the confident statement, “In the course of the past year and a half the chances that the Communists would win in South Vietnam

by military victory have vanished.”¹ But the rest of the memo was more sobering. The GVN’s stability remained “precarious” despite some improvement over the past year, pacification had made “spotty” progress at best, the ARVN’s fighting abilities were “generally poor,” and the bombing had still caused no significant diminution in infiltration or the Communists’ will to continue fighting. The final version of this memo was even more pessimistic than previous drafts. A draft from December 29, 1966 stated that that year’s battlefield success against the PAVN and NLF notwithstanding, “[I]t may be more nearly the ‘end of the beginning’ rather than the beginning of the end in Vietnam.”² Yet even this phrase was excised from the final draft lest consumers interpret it as hopeful.

Many officials, however, did not share CIA’s pessimism. Johnson special assistant and pacification chief Robert Komer, nicknamed “Blowtorch Bob” by Lodge to acknowledge the force of Komer’s personality, entered 1967 ebullient on the war effort’s prospects even as he admitted that there was little evidentiary support for his optimism.³ In a memo to McNamara from late November 1966, Komer pronounced that U.S. forces had reached the crossover point of killing more NLF and PAVN troops than the Communists could replace. He admitted, “I can’t prove it,” but he did the best he could

¹ Sherman Kent to Helms, “The War in Vietnam,” Jan. 9, 1967, p. 1, in John K. Allen Jr, John Carver, and Tom Elmore, eds. *Estimative Products on Vietnam 1948-1975* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2005).

² Kent to Helms (draft), “The War in Vietnam,” Dec. 29, 1966, p. 3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A001200060001-4.pdf> (accessed Jan. 18, 2018).

³ Frank Leith Jones, *Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 104.

by citing kill ratios, weapon loss ratios, a decline in enemy-initiated attacks, and CICV's order of battle statistics.⁴ His optimism persisted after he traveled to Vietnam at the beginning of 1967. "Though few were as foolhardy as I in predicting it," Komer opened a January 23 memo to Johnson, "more and more people now tend to agree that we are doing a lot better in Vietnam ... [T]he trend line is up on the military, political evolution, and economic fronts."⁵

Westmoreland was also optimistic, which in his case manifested in his decision to escalate ground operations against the NLF and PAVN in January. Operation Cedar Falls targeted enemy forces in Binh Duong Province. Westmoreland predicted that the operation would draw out the troops defending an NLF logistics center in an area north of Saigon known as the "Iron Triangle." The result would be the destruction of both those troops and the base they defended. The operation lasted from January 8 through 26. It culminated with over 700 enemy dead and several thousand tons of rice captured.

Westmoreland took heart from the operation's outcome even as he understood the limits of tactical victories like Cedar Falls. Such victories often proved ephemeral because U.S. forces withdrew from battlefields after combat concluded, which allowed the NLF and PAVN to re-occupy territory from which they had been evicted. In addition, Gregory Daddis has shown that the GVN's prolonged corruption and unpopularity allowed the Communists to keep the political initiative even when U.S. forces

⁴ Memo from Komer to McNamara, "Vietnam Prognoses for 1967-1968," Nov. 28-29, 1966, U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5ohTh9> (accessed Jan. 20, 2018).

⁵ Memo from Komer to Johnson, Jan. 23, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 24, p. 58.

occasionally seized the military initiative.⁶ Nevertheless, Westmoreland proclaimed that Cedar Falls and the previous search-and-destroy missions were victories and promised more of the same for 1967. In a January 24 memo providing command guidance for the coming year, Westmoreland stated that the battles of 1966 had “created a new climate in South Vietnam” in which the Communists “no longer [had] the capability of achieving a military victory.” He allowed that stabilizing the GVN and providing security for villages was “equally important.” But the memo focused on tactical matters such as interdicting enemy supply lines.⁷

Senior officials were as divided over the effectiveness of air operations as they were over those on the ground. After Marigold collapsed, many of Johnson’s military and civilian advisors, without intelligence support, urged the president to bomb industrial sites and electric plants. The December 13 and 14 raids had been part of a strike package codenamed Rolling Thunder 52 that focused on destroying DRV power plants and factories. There is no evidence that the intelligence community evaluated Rolling Thunder 52’s prospects for success, or was instructed to evaluate its prospects, before Johnson approved it in November 1966. Johnson postponed most of the Rolling Thunder 52 strikes – with the exception of the December 13 and 14 attacks – due to the negotiations. But Marigold’s failure, along with the collapse of another attempt at talks in late January, led Johnson to resume the bombing on February 13. He did so despite a January 16, 1967 memo from Helms that read in part, “The bombings appear to be

⁶ Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 92-119.

⁷ Memo from Gen. William Westmoreland, Jan. 24, 1967, “Command Guidance.” National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 10, LBJL.

having some deleterious effects on public morale ... There is no good evidence, however, that the leadership's resolve to continue the war has been weakened."⁸ Moreover, an agency analysis from February 6 concluded that Hanoi was "more likely" to continue the war despite the strikes.⁹

Because of Johnson's firm conviction that Rolling Thunder could force Hanoi to the bargaining table, he ignored the CIA's judgment and charged ahead. In a February 8 NSC meeting, he declared, "We will keep on [bombing] until we get something from the North Vietnamese."¹⁰ To be sure, tradecraft flaws in intelligence reports lessened their influence. The February 6 memo included no sources and was filled with vague language such as "we cannot say with much confidence" and "might."¹¹ But the consequences of these analytic shortcomings should not be exaggerated because LBJ also ignored reports that used reliable sources. A February 16 CIA/DIA bombing appraisal used post-strike reconnaissance to report that despite heavy damage, "[T]he North Vietnamese still retain the capability to support activities in South Vietnam or Laos at present or increased

⁸ Memo from Helms to Johnson, "Bombing Casualties in North Vietnam," Jan. 16, 1967, Tab A. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 84, LBJL.

⁹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Communist Reactions to Certain U.S. Courses of Action," Feb. 6, 1967, p. 5. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

¹⁰ Summary Notes of the 568th Meeting of the National Security Council, Feb. 8, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 43, p. 99.

¹¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Communist Reactions to Certain U.S. Courses of Action," Feb. 6, 1967, p. 5. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

combat levels and force structures.”¹² LBJ did not find these reports any more credible than unsourced ones.¹³

Walt Rostow reinforced this dynamic through relentless cherry picking. Although Rostow once vowed to “rarely send [Johnson] raw intelligence,” doing so bolstered his pro-bombing arguments.¹⁴ On February 20 he sent Johnson a table of enemy order of battle statistics for 1966 with the cover note, “[O]fficial statistics now show for the first time a net decline in both VC main force and North Viet Nam army units for the fourth quarter of 1966.”¹⁵ Rostow, whose responsibility as national security advisor was to ensure Johnson’s exposure to the full spectrum of advice and information, did not forward a February 9 CIA judgment that this decline likely happened because Hanoi had achieved its force structure goals in the RVN rather than because of anything the U.S. had done.¹⁶ Instead, he sent a seven-point memo dated March 8 that drew from unidentified top-secret sources to summarize the damage the bombing had caused to the

¹² Most of the strikes had targeted roads and bridges. See CIA/DIA Intelligence Report, “An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam,” Feb. 16, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A001600010036-9.pdf> (accessed Jan. 21, 2018).

¹³ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 106.

¹⁴ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, Jan. 20, 1967, National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 13, LBJL.

¹⁵ Memo from Rostow to Johnson and attached Order of Battle spreadsheet, Feb. 20, 1967, National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 13.

¹⁶ CIA Intelligence Report, “The Status of North Vietnamese Infiltration into South Vietnam,” Feb. 9 1967, p. 3. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5oDxQX> (accessed Jan. 18, 2018).

DRV economy.¹⁷ Later that day he sent another CIA report quoting several villagers in the southern DRV who expressed low support for the war effort due to the bombing.¹⁸ In both cases he omitted a primary finding from the CIA/DIA bombing appraisals and independent CIA analyses that had remained consistent since late 1965: no matter how much damage Rolling Thunder caused, it was not enough to break the regime's will or capability to continue fighting.

Even as Johnson followed Rostow's advice he tightened his circle of advisors. On March 9, Robert McNamara – whose faith in the war effort was dropping daily by that point – endorsed curtailing the bombing around Hanoi. Rostow commented, “He honestly believes – without independent evidence – that our bombing around Hanoi stiffens the resistance of the people in authority there and makes it harder for them to negotiate an end to the war.”¹⁹ Stating that McNamara lacked “independent evidence” was the height of hypocrisy in light of Rostow's own practices. Johnson followed Rostow's advice and shrunk his circle of advisors. On March 22, he authorized all remaining Rolling Thunder 52 strikes, many of which hit targets close to Hanoi and Haiphong.²⁰ McNamara's attempts to regain influence lost throughout 1966 came to naught.

¹⁷ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, Mar. 8, 1967, National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 14, LBJL.

¹⁸ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, Mar. 8, 1967 and attached CIA Intelligence Report, “North Vietnamese Civilian Reaction to U.S. Air Strikes,” Mar. 8, 1967, National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 14, LBJL. The method by which the CIA interviewed these villagers has been redacted from the declassified version of the report.

¹⁹ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, Mar. 10, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 105,

²⁰ David Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York, Hill and Wang, 2008), 188-89.

Carver, Rostow, Helms, and the Six-Day War

George Carver returned from a visit to the RVN in early February with his optimism on the war effort undiminished. Rostow encouraged him to write a trip summary. The resulting memo was based on a series of meetings with Lodge, Westmoreland, and a large number of high-ranking GVN officials, as well as visits to all four tactical corps areas and thirteen provinces. “My overall impression,” wrote Carver, “is one of progress and achievement.” He added a caveat, however: It “would obviously be wrong to suggest that everything is going well in all areas or that success is in any way imminent.”²¹

But success was somewhere down the road. Carver compared the RVN’s condition in early 1967 to the spring of 1965, which was the last time he had visited. Carver agreed with Westmoreland that the conventional military situation was more favorable to the U.S. He even used similar phrasing as Westmoreland had in his January 24 command guidance memo: “The prospect of major success ... which must have heartened the Communists in the spring of 1965 no longer exists.”²² He also noted that the GVN was far more stable under Ky and Thieu than previous leaders, notwithstanding the many “stresses, weak spots, and areas of potentially disastrous conflict within the Vietnamese body politic.”²³ Carter gave his lowest marks to the pacification campaign,

²¹ George A. Carver, “Comments on Vietnam,” Mar, 2, 1967, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000500060112-3.pdf> (accessed Jan. 24, 2018).

²² Carver, “Comments on Vietnam,” pp. 2-3.

²³ Carver, “Comments on Vietnam,” pp. 4-7.

which he thought had achieved uneven results due to insufficient commitment to pacification among some ARVN commanders.²⁴ But he concluded that if the positive trends he had observed continued, “there is a considerably better than even chance” that within eighteen months U.S. success in the RVN would be obvious “to all but the willfully obtuse.”²⁵ Carver explicitly emphasized in his cover letter that the memo was not a formal CIA product but for Rostow’s eyes only.

Rostow was not so circumspect. He cited Carver’s observations in telling Komer that the U.S. was winning. Komer immediately asked Carver for a copy, which Carver provided with Helms’ permission.²⁶ And on March 6, Rostow sent a copy to Johnson, calling Carver “one of the three or four most perceptive people in the government on Viet-Nam.”²⁷ Rostow also sent Johnson an attachment to the March 2 memo that Carver had written separately, again specifying that it was meant for no one but Rostow. It warned that American willingness to adopt a cease-fire as part of potential negotiations would irreparably damage GVN and MACV leadership morale.

The attachment’s contents made Rostow’s decision to send to Johnson particularly fraught for Carver. Carver wrote that the attachment was sensitive because it involved “a policy area which is outside the bounds of my professional responsibility as

²⁴ Carver, “Comments on Vietnam,” p. 11.

²⁵ Carver, “Comments on Vietnam,” p. 15.

²⁶ Carver to Komer, “Vietnam Observations,” Mar. 3, 1967, in “Comments on Vietnam” pdf.

²⁷ Rostow to Johnson, Mar. 6, 1967, National Security Files, Memos to the President, Box 14, LBJL.

an intelligence officer.”²⁸ Carver had rarely respected that boundary in the past, and a separate note shows that he chose to do so this time because Helms told him to.²⁹

Carver’s eighteen-month forecast of success was already a professional breach because he included no supporting evidence. For him to include a policy recommendation would have been even more inappropriate, especially because Carver admitted that recommendation was partially based on statements Westmoreland had made to him in strict confidence.³⁰ Further, Helms’ positive relationship with Johnson was based on his not prescribing policy. Indifferent to these concerns, Rostow zealously sent both documents to LBJ.

Johnson ignored Carver’s memos because his pessimism on the ground war had grown by spring 1967. LBJ continued to support escalated bombing strikes as a means of extracting concessions from Hanoi. But in late April he had rejected a proposal from Rostow, Westmoreland, and the Joint Chiefs to deploy an additional 200,000 troops to Vietnam. Rostow and Westmoreland explained in an April 27 meeting that MACV could use those troops to block infiltration routes and even invade the southern regions of the DRV. While Johnson had consistently granted Westmoreland’s troop requests in the past, this plan was too aggressive. LBJ justifiably feared that invading the DRV after years of promising otherwise would prompt massive protests at home. Even adding that many men to MACV’s operations in the RVN seemed pointless to LBJ due to Hanoi’s infiltration network. He did not reference intelligence, but asked Westmoreland, “When

²⁸ Carver to Rostow, Mar. 2, 1967, in “Comments on Vietnam” pdf.

²⁹ Carver to Helms, Mar. 3, 1967, in “Comments on Vietnam” pdf.

³⁰ Carver to Rostow, Mar. 2, 1967.

we add divisions, can't the enemy add divisions? If so, where does it all end?"

Westmoreland answered that Hanoi would not be able to supply so many troops. In response, Johnson asked if Hanoi could ask for "volunteers" from the Soviet Union and China, to which Westmoreland had no reply. Johnson refused to approve the plan after several weeks of deliberation.³¹

The bombing was no less controversial. By late April and early May, Rolling Thunder had accomplished so little strategically that Johnson and his advisors argued not only over what targets the bombing campaign should hit but also over what goals it could even achieve. The Joint Chiefs still thought unrestricted bombing could break Hanoi's will. Rostow agreed with the Chiefs, but most of Johnson's civilian advisors no longer did. Rusk feared striking too close to Hanoi and Haiphong would cause an international backlash, William Bundy saw bombing as useful only as a means to interdict infiltration, and McNamara saw little value in the air campaign at all.³²

McNamara's opposition to Rolling Thunder centered on its inability to accomplish the primary strategic objective of damaging enemy morale. To be sure, part of his negativity stemmed from his faith in the barrier project, which he defended for much of 1967 even as it encountered numerous construction delays.³³ But in a long May 19 memo to Johnson, McNamara was blunt:

³¹ John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2000), 210.

³² Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 108; Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 191.

³³ Edward Drea, *Secretaries of Defense Historical Series Vol. VI: McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965-1969* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), 177-79; Memo from McNamara to Johnson, Sept. 11, 1967, National Security File, Country File Vietnam, Box 74, LBJL.

The Hanoi leadership has apparently decided that it has no choice but to submit to the increased bombing. There continues to be no sign that the bombing has reduced Hanoi's will to resist or her ability to ship the necessary supplies south.³⁴

McNamara did not cite intelligence for this conclusion, but it reflected months' worth of CIA findings that the Secretary of Defense certainly read.

Numerous contemporaneous intelligence analyses supported McNamara's conclusion that the bombing would not erode Hanoi's will to continue the war. A May 12 CIA Intelligence Memorandum relying on a "substantial" base of sources including prisoner interrogations, intercepted letters from DRV civilians to relatives living abroad, and accounts from Western diplomats serving in Hanoi concluded that popular morale remained strong.³⁵ On May 23, the CIA released a paper entitled "The Vietnam Situation: An Analysis and Estimate," which took an expansive look at the war effort. It included a section on the bombing campaign that used statements from non-Communist visitors to Hanoi as well as discussions with diplomats posted to Hanoi to conclude that "twenty-seven months of US bombing of North Vietnam" had only "heightened" Hanoi's refusal to consider negotiating without a full bombing cessation.³⁶ Two agency analyses of the

³⁴ Memo from McNamara to Johnson, "Future Actions in Vietnam," May 19, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 177, p. 426.

³⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Current State of Morale in North Vietnam," May 12, 1967, p. 2. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 85, LBJL.

³⁶ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Vietnam Situation: An Analysis and Estimate," May 23, 1967, pp. 109-11. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP70S00385R000100340001-3.pdf> (accessed Apr. 30, 2017).

bombing released the same day came to the same conclusion.³⁷ But the Defense Secretary did not use these analyses in advising Johnson. Instead, he closed his memo with the recommendation that the bombing should be concentrated south of the 20th parallel in order to focus on disrupting infiltration. That idea had been McNaughton's – indeed, McNaughton wrote most of the May 19 memo – which was not based on intelligence.³⁸

McNamara's ignoring the May CIA reports was consistent with his strong preference for policy analysis rather than policy innovation. The reports dovetailed with his belief that the bombing had not affected enemy morale or will to fight, but they did not recommend alternative policies. That omission was appropriate for a set of intelligence analyses. However, as we have seen, McNamara preferred to have policies proposed to him. Rather than invent a new policy on his own, McNamara reviewed McNaughton's plan to make sure he agreed with it before passing it on to Johnson. That McNaughton had been one of McNamara's trusted advisors for years would have made the Defense Secretary more willing to accept his proposal despite its lack of intelligence support.³⁹

³⁷ CIA Intelligence Memorandums, May 23 1967, "The Effectiveness of the Rolling Thunder Program" and "The Reaction of the North Vietnamese to the Stepped Up Air Attacks." National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 180, LBJL.

³⁸ Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam*, 208-09.

³⁹ Two months after McNamara recommended McNaughton's plan to Johnson, the latter died in a plane crash along with his wife and son. See Benjamin T. Harrison and Christopher L. Mosher, "The Secret Diary of McNamara's Dove: The Long-Lost Story of John T. McNaughton's Opposition to the Vietnam War" *Diplomatic History* 35(3) (June 2011): 507.

McNamara did, however, ask Helms to evaluate McNaughton's plan. That McNamara did so was a mark of how his relationship with the CIA had improved at DIA's expense. McNamara and Helms were never personally close. But their working relationship improved when McNamara began using CIA products more regularly. The Secretary of Defense preferred using Helms as his point of contact when he wanted a product on Vietnam even before Helms' promotion to DCI. The Will to Persist study, for example, began after McNamara asked Helms for an extensive analysis on enemy ability to continue fighting.⁴⁰ At the same time, McNamara never wavered from his decision in late 1965 to disregard DIA analyses because he suspected that the agency was altering its findings to please the Joint Chiefs. His use of CIA analyses increased not because he became a more sophisticated consumer of intelligence, but instead because they became congruent with his beliefs on the war.

Helms's response, published three days later in a memo to Johnson, split the difference between McNamara's preference for ending the bombing and more aggressive strategies. Helms opened by stating that he had relied on his "dozen most experienced, knowledgeable officers who work on the Vietnam problem." These officers went unnamed, but Carver's position as the CIA's top Vietnam analyst meant that he was surely one of them. They concluded that Hanoi would view a cessation of the bombing or a restriction of the bombing to below the 20th parallel as a victory. A more effective strategy would be to focus on bombing below the 20th parallel and continue sporadic

⁴⁰ Memo from Carver to R. Jack Smith, "Origin and Genesis of McNamara Project," Sep. 6, 1966, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000500040088-3.pdf> (accessed Oct. 25, 2017).

attacks on critical infrastructure elsewhere in the DRV, along with re-strikes of any infrastructure that the Communists repaired.⁴¹

Johnson postponed his final decision on bombing on account of a crisis that emerged far from Vietnam. On June 5, the Israeli Defense Forces mounted a pre-emptive attack against the militaries of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, all of which had been building strength near Israel for months. Over the following six days, the Israelis humiliated the Arab states with a series of assaults that ended with all three armies badly crippled and Israel in possession of the Jordan River's West Bank, the Golan Heights along the Syrian border, and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula.⁴²

The Six-Day War still stands as one of the CIA's greatest analytical successes in the agency's history, and Helms benefited directly from that success. The agency stood alone among the other IC members in forecasting a quick and decisive Israeli victory. The CIA's high confidence in that finding prompted Rusk to quip, "Dick, there is only one thing I want to say – as Fiorello LaGuardia once remarked, if this is a mistake, it's a beaut!" It was. From the moment that fighting began on June 5, the war unfolded almost exactly as the CIA had assessed that it would, down to its timespan. This accuracy allowed Johnson to support the Israelis without making a public stand, and Helms later recalled that the president was "enormously relieved to be let off that hook." Helms had

⁴¹ Memo from Helms to Johnson, "North Vietnam Bombing," May 22, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 180, p. 442.

⁴² See Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2002); Candace Karp, *Missed Opportunities: US Diplomatic Failures and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1967* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 2005); and William B. Quandt, *Decade of Decision: American Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1977* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

always had a stronger rapport with his first customer than either of his last two predecessors. But by providing such accurate analysis, the DCI made LBJ realize “that intelligence had a role in his life, and an important role at that.” After the Six Day War, Helms became one of Johnson’s closest confidants.⁴³

The Order of Battle Dispute

Beginning in late 1966, a bitter debate raged within the government over the measurement of enemy troop figures in the RVN, and this debate fueled the administration’s internal dissensions and LBJ’s insecurities. Since the war’s Americanization, CICV had presided over the official O/B statistics, with little to no input from the CIA. To the extent that the CIA weighed in on infiltration and O/B, it tended to confirm MACV’s figures. NIE 14.3-66, published in July 1966, found the intelligence community in agreement with MACV’s findings on the enemy O/B.⁴⁴ But in August CIA analyst Sam Adams used the RAND Corporation’s prisoner interrogations as well as captured documents to conclude that MACV was undercounting enemy forces by approximately 300,000.⁴⁵ Adams’ missing troops were not the regular PAVN soldiers, full-time guerillas, and administrative staff that MACV measured. Rather, they were part-

⁴³ Hathaway and Smith, *Helms as DCI*, 131-154; Helms and Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 292-305.

⁴⁴ National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-66, Jul. 7, 1966, “North Vietnamese Military Potential for Fighting in South Vietnam.” Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁴⁵ Brian D. Blankenship, “A Deceptive Estimate?: The politics of irregular troop numbers in Vietnam” *Journal of Intelligence History* 12:2 (2013), 98-99; Sam Adams, *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1994), 41-91.

time guerillas, self-defense and secret self-defense forces, and political cadres.⁴⁶

MACV's estimate held that there were slightly fewer than 300,000 troops in the RVN, so Adams' part-time troops doubled that number.⁴⁷

The military's pushback was immediate. MACV officials protested that Adams was counting troops who did not deserve inclusion in a military order of battle because they hardly fought. Adams countered that even part-time guerillas that merely "stuck a pungi stick in the ground" and then returned to their villages were responsible for taking numerous American lives. MACV's critique was more valid when it questioned Adams' choice of source material. Helms later called the prisoner interrogations "notoriously unreliable."⁴⁸ But CICV analysts used the interrogations merely to establish which enemy units were present in the RVN rather than, as Adams did, to estimate the number of men in those units. In any event, the controversy became so heated not because of differences in methodology but on account of the political implication of Adams' estimates. Military

⁴⁶ Part-time guerillas were NLF troops who fought for only part of the year before returning to their villages. Self-defense and secret self-defense forces were part-time NLF village militia; the former were in NLF-controlled areas, while the latter were in GVN-controlled areas. Political cadres were NLF officials who maintained what American military officials referred to as the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI): local administration such as tax collecting and security forces in NLF-controlled regions. See Edwin Moïse, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2017), 21.

⁴⁷ Richard H. Immerman, *The Hidden Hand: A Brief History of the CIA* (Malden and Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 86.

⁴⁸ Richard Helms and William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003), 327.

officials feared an estimate showing enemy O/B rising two-fold could signal that America was losing the war and consequently jolt public opinion and erode support.⁴⁹

When Adams tried to publish a memo arguing that MACV's estimates needed to be doubled in the autumn of 1966, his bosses, Dean Moor and R. Jack Smith, placed the memo on indefinite hold. While Moor and Smith would not allow the memo to be officially published, they did allow Adams to send it to analysts outside the CIA. Adams had acquiesced because the restricted distribution list included Col. Gains Hawkins, MACV's O/B chief with a reputation for honesty. Of greater significance, Adams secured support from ONE. A January 9, 1967 ONE memo to Helms reported,

[T]here is now documentary evidence which strongly suggests that at the beginning of 1965, irregular strength was about 200,000 and that the goal for the end of 1965 was 250,000 – 300,000. More recent documentary evidence suggests that this goal was probably reached, at least during 1966.⁵⁰

The memo did not specify what evidence it used. But the numbers it cited matched Adams' findings. George Carver also accepted Adams' findings. On January 11 Carver wrote to the CIA's Deputy Director for Intelligence to contend that the MACV O/B "is far too low and should be raised, perhaps doubled."⁵¹ Adams was transferred to the SAVA office that month.⁵²

⁴⁹ Blankenship, "A Deceptive Estimate?" 98-102.

⁵⁰ Memo from Sherman Kent to Helms, "The War in Vietnam," Jan. 9, 1967, p. 9. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁵¹ Carver to CIA Deputy Director of Intelligence, "Revisiting the Viet Cong Order of Battle," Jan. 11, 1967, p. 1. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/024/0240719019.pdf> (accessed Jul. 6, 1967).

⁵² Adams, *War of Numbers*, 71-4.

MACV's resistance to changing the O/B estimates continued through early 1967. In response to the controversy, Wheeler convened a conference at Honolulu from February 6 through 12 at which representatives of the intelligence agencies that dealt with O/B explained their methodology. MACV representatives agreed to revise their O/B estimates upward to account for irregular enemy troops and political personnel so long as they retained sole custodianship of O/B reporting.⁵³ MACV representatives at the February conference stated that updating their methodology to confront this challenge was "a matter of high priority."⁵⁴ But MACV's numerical estimates were not revised upward after the conference.⁵⁵

MACV intelligence officer Lt. Col. Daniel O. Graham insisted not only that Adams' findings were incorrect, but also that enemy strength was actually declining. Graham used what he termed an "input-output model" to argue that U.S. and ARVN forces had reached the "crossover point" where enemy casualties were exceeding their replacements. Graham's model was simple: he subtracted the number of enemy casualties and defectors (output) from the number of replacements gained through infiltration and

⁵³ Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), 30.

⁵⁴ See Report of the Conference to Standardize Methods for Developing and Presenting Statistics on Order of Battle Infiltration Trends and Estimates, Feb. 6 – 11, 1967, p. 11. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/024/0240604014A.pdf> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018)

⁵⁵ See MACV Order of Battle Reference Manual – Strength, Feb. 12 1967, pp. 3, 9. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive.

recruitment (input).⁵⁶ MACV command did not officially accept Graham's conclusions, but it did not reject them either. Graham's staff was convinced that U.S. forces had reached the crossover point. He remained a relentless defender of MACV's numbers. Adams was undaunted. Carver's support bolstered him, as did the presence of Col. Hawkins as MACV's O/B chief. In several private conversations, with Adams, the colonel agreed with many of his conclusions. But Hawkins was unable to convince his superiors.⁵⁷

“Fourteen Three” and the September Saigon Conference

By April 1967, McNamara's faith in the military's O/B estimates had plummeted. The documentary record does not reflect why McNamara lost faith in those specific estimates. But as we saw in the previous chapter, a combination of increasing pessimism on the war and his rivalry with the Chiefs had led him to gravitate away from military estimates and toward CIA findings starting in late 1965. His loss of faith in military intelligence estimates thus had nothing to do with those estimates' quality or source base. Rather, McNamara continued to seek intelligence that confirmed his pre-determined conclusions and gave him ammunition in his many personal rivalries within the Johnson White House. On April 21, McNamara requested O/B estimates from the CIA.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Petersen, “The Vietnam Cauldron,” 16-17; Deposition of Daniel O. Graham, Aug. 27, 1984, *Westmoreland v. CBS*, 550-54; 567. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/025/0250802001a.pdf> (accessed Apr. 4, 2018).

⁵⁷ Blankenship, “A Deceptive Estimate?” p. 104.

⁵⁸ Memo from Helms to McNamara, “Servicing of Vietnam Assessment Requests,” Apr. 27, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room:

McNamara's request aggravated inter-agency rivalries and prompted Helms to seek a quick resolution to the O/B debate. Never before had a Secretary of Defense relied on a civilian intelligence agency for the basic military question of how many enemy troops did the U.S. confront during a war. Former CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence R. Jack Smith later emphasized the request's emotional impact on CIA-MACV J-2 relations:

[H]ere were a bunch of civilians telling not only the Pentagon but also the forces in the field that the number they were facing was far higher. That created a very difficult position: it was their war. They were the ones getting killed. There was a lot of emotion involved in that.⁵⁹

The dispute also placed Helms in a difficult position. As DCI, keeping the IC running smoothly was one of his primary responsibilities. To defuse the controversy, Helms commissioned a SNIE on the enemy order of battle. Doing so, he thought, would force all parties involved to agree on one definitive figure for enemy troop numbers.

Helms' plan was flawed because it did not confront the political considerations behind the O/B. McNamara's defection and inter-agency rivalries had helped precipitate the controversy. But most senior military officers' primary goal was keeping the O/B as low as possible to demonstrate progress in the war effort. To that end, military leadership wasted no opportunity to quash any possible increase in enemy strength estimates, no

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000500060052-0.pdf> (accessed Apr. 24, 2017).

⁵⁹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 92.

matter how small.⁶⁰ Military leadership thus refused to accede to Adams' figures or even reach a compromise.

The release in mid-June of the first draft of Helms' SNIE brought the O/B debate to a head. Designated SNIE 14.3-67, and nicknamed "Fourteen Three," the draft used Adams' troop figures.⁶¹ Gen. Phillip B. Davidson had replaced McChristian at MACV J-2 on June 1. But the change in leadership did not affect the debate; MACV J-2 continued to argue that Adams' irregular guerillas and political staff had no business in a military order of battle. In July, Col. Hawkins confided to Carver aide and Adams supporter George Allen that he thought MACV's figures were far too low. But Hawkins added, "our hands are tied; this is a command position; we have to stay within a total figure of 300,000; I personally share your 500,000 estimate, but we cannot accept it."⁶² On the other hand, Komer claimed that the NLF was suffering such heavy casualties that the O/B figures should be lowered. Komer based this assertion on a conversation that he had had with Davidson in which Westmoreland's new J-2 admitted that MACV's estimated NLF recruitment rate of 7,000 per month was "a best guess" and could be off by as much as 15 percent. MACV O/B reports had shown an increasing number of PAVN units in the

⁶⁰ Edwin Moïse, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 39; Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 87.

⁶¹ Blankenship, "A Deceptive Estimate?" 102; Moïse, *The Myths of Tet*, 58-60.

⁶² Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 91.

RVN, leading Komer to believe that “this is becoming increasingly an NVA war” and therefore “VC strength must be going down.”⁶³

INR’s position on enemy O/B aligned with the CIA’s during the controversy. From 1964 through 1966, INR accepted the MACV position on O/B apart from several instances in which the bureau concluded that certain PAVN regiments had moved into the RVN without appearing in MACV reporting. But in late 1966, using the same sources as CIA and MACV, INR began contending that MACV’s infiltration estimates were too low. INR analysts re-examined the available raw intelligence and concluded that enemy infiltration had expanded beyond what MACV’s O/B numbers suggested. INR did not formally accept Adams’ methodology. But, according to a recently declassified study on INR’s performance during the war, the bureau’s conclusion that MACV had underestimated PAVN infiltration meant that it “leaned toward the CIA position”.⁶⁴

DIA took a position midway between MACV and Adams. According to DIA analyst John Barrie Williams, the agency used a trove of enemy documents captured during several large-scale offensives in 1966 and 1967 to argue for an enemy O/B between 450,000 and 500,000.⁶⁵ Carroll defended his agency’s methodology to MACV. But his conciliatory approach left him outmatched in disputes with Lt. Col. Graham in

⁶³ Komer to Westmoreland, “How To Get Our Case Across To McNamara,” June 19, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 208, pp. 524-25.

⁶⁴ Howells, Avery, and Greene, *Vietnam 1961-1968*, part E-1, “Infiltration.”

⁶⁵ Deposition of J. Barrie Williams, Sept. 27, 1983, *Westmoreland v. CBS*, 19-20. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/025/0251015001a.pdf> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018).

June and July of 1967.⁶⁶ Williams later characterized Graham as pushing DIA to accept MACV's numbers on the grounds that "We (MACV) are the soldier in the field. You are enjoined to support us. You are a military voice with CIA."⁶⁷ This resistance to changing methodology left Carroll unable to make headway with MACV on his conclusion that their numbers were inaccurate. DIA also faced pressure from the CIA to accede to the agency's higher numbers. DIA official George Fowler later characterized his agency as having been caught in a no-win scenario as the two more powerful and influential agencies each pressured DIA for support.⁶⁸

By the end of August Helms was desperate for an end to the debate. He recognized the importance of providing an answer to the basic question of how large was the enemy. But he was reluctant to confront the debate's political overtones despite having been aware of them since January.⁶⁹ Instead he urged CIA analysts to reach an agreement – any agreement – with MACV. After Carver copied Helms on a memo to Komer in late April that emphasized the importance of "portray[ing] the enemy's organization as he envisages it," Helms' response was "Good – but let's try to simplify the suggestions, tighten up the language, and move to get agreement from the military."⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Petersen, "The Vietnam Cauldron," 17.

⁶⁷ Williams Deposition, 25.

⁶⁸ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 91.

⁶⁹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 92.

⁷⁰ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Order of Battle Concept for Vietnam" Apr. 28, 1967, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T01719R000300070002-3.pdf> (accessed Apr. 21, 2017) and Carver to Helms, "Order of Battle Concept Note" May 1, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room:

According to Thomas Powers, Helms said that the O/B dispute was “the most important disagreement on the war” and urged senior CIA officers, including Kent, to “go back and work this out” with the military during a June meeting.⁷¹ Yet the dispute raged throughout the summer with no end in sight.

Helms sought to tamp down the controversy to avoid losing access to Johnson. As Deputy Director for Plans under McCone and Deputy Director under Raborn, Helms had witnessed firsthand how quickly LBJ banished DCIs who caused controversy. And contrary to Adams’ later claims that the military kept Johnson in the dark about the dispute, the president was aware of the controversy from January 1967 onward.⁷² Knowing that the president was up to date on the controversy only hastened the need for compromise in Helms’ mind. He had gained entrée into Johnson’s inner circle as a result of the CIA’s excellent performance during the Six-Day War. But Johnson revoked favor as quickly as he gave it. So in hopes of finally forging a compromise, Helms ordered Carver to gather the relevant analysts for another conference in Saigon, starting on September 9.

Carver and his team encountered united resistance from MACV officials in Saigon. A frustrated Carver cabled to Helms on September 11 that “MACV [was] stonewalling, obviously under orders.” Carver knew that MACV’s continued resistance

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T01719R000300070001-4.pdf> (accessed Mar. 15, 2018). There is no record of Komer responding to Carver’s memo.

⁷¹ Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 187.

⁷² Blankenship, “A Deceptive Estimate?” p. 111

to including irregular troops in the order of battle was motivated much more by political considerations than differences in methodology: “Root problems, as we all recognize, lie much more in political public relations realm than in substantive difference.” Carver went on to report that MACV refused to include any enemy troops other than PAVN regulars, full-time guerillas, political cadre, and a small administrative support staff. “By strange coincidence,” Carver noted scornfully, these forces totaled 298,000, barely under the 300,000 limit. Adams argued for including the part-time guerillas on September 10. “Though to discomfiture of our hosts this case patently stronger than MACV’s, [it was] waved aside by General Davidson,” Carver continued.⁷³

Carver considered MACV the primary obstacle to consensus even as his own team was divided. ONE officer William Hyland frequently disputed specific O/B numbers with Sam Adams. DIA representative George Fowler followed his agency’s previous tactic of taking a position midway between CIA and MACV.⁷⁴ Yet Carver closed his September 11 cable to Helms by stating that he would meet with Westmoreland and Komer the next day to “attempt to loosen this straightjacket ... If I can budge Westmoreland, this whole matter can be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction in a few hours of serious discussion. If I cannot, no agreement is possible.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Carver to Helms, Cable Saigon 1826, Sept. 11, 1967, in package “SNIE 14.3.1-67,” CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000200180001-8.pdf> (accessed Apr. 19, 2017).

⁷⁴ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 95.

⁷⁵ Carver to Helms, Sept. 11, 1967, Cable Saigon 1826.

The DCI responded to Carver's tirade later on September 11. This cable was classified for many years following the war. In its absence, scholars have advanced educated guesses as to its contents. Some, like Joshua Rovner, have argued that Helms politicized intelligence by ordering Carver to cave and accept the MACV position.⁷⁶ But we now know that Helms gave Carver few specific instructions. Helms' recently declassified cable to Carver read:

Agree you should remain until you have had session with both Westmoreland and Komer. Please let me know outcome, and please clear with me your departure from Saigon. In other words, team should not repeat not leave for Washington until we give approval.⁷⁷

No record of a second cable exists. Nor do records exist of Helms communicating with Carver by any other means.

Although further evidence may surface in the future, what is now available reveals that Carver reversed his position without Helms having explicitly ordered him to do so. On September 12 and 13, he cabled Helms to report that he had reached a deal with MACV that left the enemy troop numbers even lower than the military's opening position. The total O/B estimate would be 249,000. Irregular troops would not be included. Richard Teare from INR and George Fowler also agreed on these figures. "Circle now squared," Carver wrote in his September 13 cable to Helms.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 71. Writer Thomas Powers made similar claims in *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*. See Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 98.

⁷⁷ Helms to Carver, Cable 1553Z, re: Saigon 1826, Sept. 11, 1967, in package "SNIE 14.3.1-67" CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

⁷⁸ Cable Saigon 1983 from Carver to Helms, Sept. 13, 1967, p. 1. "SNIE 14.3.1-67," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

The deal left Adams and Allen furious. “My hero,” Adams wrote later, “had taken a dive.”⁷⁹ Allen was angry enough to consider resigning in protest, and later called Carver’s decision “a prostitution of intelligence” for “political expediency.” Adams called the enemy troop numbers that Carver agreed to “a monument to deceit.” And when Sherman Kent later asked Adams if the CIA had “gone beyond the bounds of reasonable dishonesty,” Adams replied that the agency had “passed them in August.”⁸⁰

Carver reached this lopsided deal in large measure because he lacked leverage against the united front that Westmoreland, Komer, and Davidson presented. The dispute over enemy administrative service troops provides an example. CICV had long reported that the enemy needed between 20,000 and 40,000 administrative service troops – support personnel such as medics and engineers – while Adams thought the real number was at least 75,000. Neither side had a strong case. Adams based his argument on two captured documents as well as logical reasoning that because the U.S. required multiple service troops per combat soldier, the enemy would need many more than MACV contended. Military analysts scoffed at this weak evidence when Adams presented it at the conference.⁸¹ In response, the CIA dropped their estimate of administrative troops to 50,000.⁸² But CICV based its argument on only one captured document, which Carver

⁷⁹ Adams, *War of Numbers*, 117.

⁸⁰ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 100; Blankenship, “A Deceptive Estimate?” 93.

⁸¹ C. Michael Hiam, *Who The Hell Are We Fighting?: The Story of Sam Adams and the Vietnam Intelligence Wars* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2006), 117.

⁸² See Blankenship, “A Deceptive Estimate?” 103; Hiam, *Who The Hell Are We Fighting?*, 117.

later noticed contained a paragraph that supported Adams' conclusion.⁸³ Davidson told Carver that MACV's final offer on administrative troops was 25,000 to 35,000. Carver countered with 35,000 to 45,000, which he told Helms represented giving "all the ground we can without violating our professional integrity."⁸⁴ His final compromise after a series of private meetings the next day was 35,000 to 40,000. Despite CICV's weak source base, Davidson's obstinacy rendered Carver unable to push past the upper value for the center's original range. But the military's intransigence does not mean that Carver was intimidated or browbeaten into changing his position.

Carver's cables to Helms suggest that Westmoreland, Komer, and Davidson persuaded him to adopt the MACV position on the irregular forces. A private dinner with Westmoreland and Komer, which Carver described as "most useful," played an important role in that decision.⁸⁵ In a cable to Helms after the dinner, Carver stated that the irregular forces had "unquestionably suffered attrition" since 1966. Further, Carver now called the self-defense forces "largely unarmed and only partially trained" with duties such as maintaining law and order and defending their hamlets from U.S. and ARVN forces. But

⁸³ Hiam, *Who The Hell Are We Fighting?*, 117; Deposition of J. Barrie Williams, *Westmoreland v. CBS* (1984), p. 22. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/025/0251015001a.pdf> (accessed Feb. 5, 2018); Cable Saigon 1926 from Carver to Helms, "Joint CIA-DIA-INR Representatives' Position on Viet Cong Strength Estimates," Sept. 12, 1967, p. 2. "SNIE 14.3.1-67," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

⁸⁴ Cable Saigon 1926 from Carver to Helms, p. 6; Cable Saigon 1925 from Carver to Helms, "Joint CIA-DIA-INR Representatives' Position on Viet Cong Strength Estimates," Sept. 12, 1967, p. 4. "SNIE 14.3.1-67," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

⁸⁵ Cable Saigon 1983 from Carver to Helms. "SNIE 14.3.1-67," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

they were not used in offensive military operations. Carver left his meeting convinced that they did not belong in an enemy order of battle for that reason.⁸⁶ To be sure, Carver noted that leaving out the irregular forces was “a major concession.” But he also admitted that the CIA’s measurements of the irregulars “were not all that firm.”⁸⁷ And his description of them as focused on tasks that had nothing to do with offensive military operations shows that he accepted MACV’s reasoning as to why they should be excluded. His final compromise with MACV held that enemy main and local forces totaled 119,000, with 70,000 to 90,000 guerillas and 35,000 to 40,000 administrative staff.⁸⁸

Helms’ position in Johnson’s orbit precluded him from overruling the military in Adams’ favor. During the Six-Day War, the CIA’s findings had allowed Johnson to support Israel without making a public commitment. In that instance, Helms was able to confirm that Johnson could do something he already wanted to do. Reporting that enemy troops were twice as numerous as the military claimed would have told the embattled president the last thing that he wanted to hear. Moreover, although the military’s criticism of Adams’ figures centered on the political problems they would produce if disseminated in the news media, Adams’ methodology was controversial even within the CIA. For Helms to push back against the military would have been to risk his recently acquired influence on the basis of questionable reasoning.

⁸⁶ Cable Saigon 1925, Sept. 12, 1967, pp. 5-7.

⁸⁷ Cable Saigon 1926 from Carver to Helms, Sept. 12, 1967, p. 6. “SNIE 14.3.1-67,” CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

⁸⁸ Cable Saigon 1983, Sept. 13, 1967, p. 3.

Helms did not need to instruct Carver to cave because he knew that Carver had such a weak negotiating position. Helms' admonition to not come back to Washington without express permission would have reinforced Carver's need to reach an agreement soon. Helms later remarked,

I have no recollection of having cabled George in Saigon, ordering him to strike a bargain. He already knew my basic views: that because of broader considerations we had to come up with agreed figures, that we had to get this O/B question off the board, and that it didn't matter a damn what particular figures we agreed to.⁸⁹

Helms' and Carver's need to get the O/B problem "off the board" with a minimum of controversy decreased the CIA's already weak leverage in the dispute. Komer said later, "Why did George Carver cave in and compromise with MACV on the O/B question? Because that's what Helms told him to do."⁹⁰ In this case, Komer – perhaps fittingly for someone aggressive enough to be nicknamed "Blowtorch Bob" – exaggerated what Helms did. But his statement is not entirely inaccurate. Helms knew that Carver would have to make major concessions to MACV to reach an agreement, yet he left Carver with no other choice. And in the end, Carver knew that the military's concerns were valid. Acceptance of Adams' estimate would have suggested that victory was farther off than military leadership had promised.⁹¹ In addition to potentially undermining the war effort, that revelation would also have undermined Carver and Helms' reputation in Washington.

⁸⁹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 98-99.

⁹⁰ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 98.

⁹¹ Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 87.

“Cooking the Books”

Helms and Carver understood that LBJ and his top advisors shared the military’s desire to show progress in Vietnam. In August, the Johnson administration established the Vietnam Information Group (VIG) to promote its stance on the war to the press. Carver typically represented CIA at weekly VIG meetings, but Allen occasionally filled in for him. The latter called the group’s meetings “immoral” because “the truth was grotesquely and deliberately distorted in order to make a point.”⁹²

Rostow exacerbated this distortion. In the late summer and early fall of 1967, the national security advisor’s zealous defense of the war led him to politicize intelligence even more brazenly than he had in the past. According to Allen, Rostow confronted him several times to ask “Didn’t I want to win the war? Whose side was I on, anyway? Didn’t I want to join the team?”⁹³ Nor did Rostow confine this attitude solely to his relationship with Allen. Adding insult to injury, Rostow, asserting that he was acting under LBJ’s instructions, asked Allen to prepare “some useful intelligence on Vietnam for a change.” Specifically, Rostow wanted a study that showed progress in the pacification program without mentioning any negative trends. When Allen replied that he would not be a party to “cooking the books,” Rostow contacted the Office of Current Intelligence. OCI gave him a report that showed mixed progress in pacification. Rostow cut out the negative

⁹² George Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 235. See also George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 143.

⁹³ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 111.

parts and sent the rest to Johnson with the cover note “At last, Mr. President, a useful assessment from the CIA.”⁹⁴

A politicized atmosphere set in at the agency despite Allen and other CIA officers’ resistance. Helms’s position was one of studied ambiguity. In his memoir, Allen writes that Helms offered to resign if Rostow succeeded in pressuring SAVA to write the distorted report on pacification he wanted.⁹⁵ Helms did not actively distort intelligence, but he confirmed Johnson’s pre-conceived opinions in more subtle ways. When Johnson asked Helms for a list of American accomplishments in Vietnam on September 6, Helms provided it three days later.⁹⁶ This September 9 report did not falsify intelligence by claiming that the American record in Vietnam consisted only of positive accomplishments. Indeed, it reached no conclusion at all. It was instead a long list of bullet points and short paragraphs describing U.S. achievements since July 1965, all of which had been discussed in greater detail in previous reports and memos. Helms played to Johnson’s worst qualities by providing him with a list of only good news on established policy.

Helms also understood how to downplay pessimistic analyses to protect himself from his first customer’s explosive temper. On September 11, Helms sent Johnson a 33-page CIA analysis entitled “Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam.” Thirty senior CIA officers had contributed to the paper. It concluded that while a U.S.

⁹⁴ Allen, *None So Blind*, 236-37; Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 111

⁹⁵ Allen, *None So Blind*, 236.

⁹⁶ Helms to Johnson, “A Record of Achievements in Vietnam,” Sep. 9, 1967, U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5rXVA1> (accessed Jan. 29, 2018); Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 74.

defeat in Vietnam would have “repercussions worldwide,” it would also be a temporary “setback for a very great power whose essential strength would remain unimpaired.”⁹⁷ Like Willard Matthias’ essay on the domino theory in 1964, this paper was an intellectual exercise or “think piece” based on the knowledge and experiences of its authors. Helms knew that Johnson often equated pessimism on the war effort with cowardice and would be furious if an intelligence analysis expressing such an attitude leaked to the press. Thus, Helms specified in his cover letter that the paper was for LBJ’s eyes only and that “the paper was not intended as an argument for ending the war now. We are not defeatist out here.”⁹⁸ Johnson read the paper but ultimately ignored it.⁹⁹ LBJ did not, however, eject Helms from his inner circle.

Helms wrote the September 9 report for the same reason that he told Carver not to return from Saigon without first disposing of the O/B problem: to retain his position in Johnson’s inner circle. But his willingness to resign in response to Rostow’s attempt to manipulate SAVA’s work, as well as his sending the September 11 analysis to Johnson, shows that Helms was unwilling to actively distort intelligence as John McCone had done with NIE 53-63. Helms therefore walked a fine line between confirming Johnson’s preconceptions enough to retain influence in policy circles and not risking damage to his reputation or relationship to the CIA.

⁹⁷ CIA Intelligence Report, “Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam,” Sept. 11, 1967, pp. 5, 7. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6DvSR0> (accessed Mar. 30, 2018).

⁹⁸ Helms to Johnson, re: “Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam,” Sept. 12, 1967, U.S. Declassified Documents Online, in “Implications” pdf.

⁹⁹ See Mark Atwood Lawrence, “Was The Vietnam War Necessary?” *The New York Times* Opinion Page, Mar. 30, 2018.

The continued debate over whether or not to continue the bombing campaign in the north, and whether or not to escalate it, reinforced Helms's appreciation of how fine that line was by making it more difficult for him to walk it. Throughout the summer of 1967, CIA reports remained pessimistic on the bombing's ability to harm the enemy's will to fight even as U.S. aviators began striking targets in the Hanoi area. An agency analysis of the bombing's effects for the first five months of 1967 found that despite higher damage from intensified strikes, there had been no "meaningful degradation" in Hanoi's capability or will.¹⁰⁰ The monthly CIA/DIA bombing analyses likewise remained consistently pessimistic on the bombing's chances of shattering the enemy war effort.¹⁰¹ And in July, another agency analysis found that another six months of bombing had not crushed enemy morale: "The attacks have caused significant disruptions to normal life in Hanoi. There has been, however, no sign of a change in Hanoi's determination to continue the war."¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "An Assessment of the Rolling Thunder Program Through 31 May 1967," Jun. 20, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000900070026-0.pdf> (accessed Jan. 31, 2018).

¹⁰¹ See CIA/DIA Intelligence Memorandum, Apr. 14, 1967, "An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam," p. 3; CIA/DIA Intelligence Memorandum, May 17, 1967, "An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam," p. 4; CIA/DIA Intelligence Memorandum, Jun. 19, 1967, "An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam," p. 4; CIA/DIA Intelligence Memorandum, Jul. 16, 1967, "An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam," p. 2; and CIA/DIA Intelligence Memorandum, Aug. 22, 1967, "An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam," pp. 2-3, all in National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 84, LBJL.

¹⁰² CIA Intelligence Report, "The Situation in Hanoi," Jul. 8, 1967, p. 1. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 85, LBJL.

By the late summer of 1967, the fundamental difference in the debate over Rolling Thunder was that McNamara no longer supported it. In August, McNamara testified before a Congressional committee chaired by Senator John C. Stennis (D-MS) on the bombing's efficacy. Though McNamara called the bombing useful for achieving limited tactical objectives, he argued against any escalation. He used multiple CIA analyses of the bombing as evidence, and had Helms review his statement before testifying in August.¹⁰³ That testimony conflicted with the Joint Chiefs, who recommended to the Stennis committee that the president remove restrictions on bombing within 10 miles of Hanoi and near the Chinese border.¹⁰⁴ Johnson remained supportive of intensified bombing, and approved strikes on most of the Chiefs' proposed targets in August 1967. Only when Chinese fighters shot down two U.S. jets that strayed across the border did Johnson re-impose the restrictions.¹⁰⁵ But the debate over bombing was so intense that Helms biographer Thomas Powers concluded it led Helms to compromise with MACV in September because "he just did not want to fight about the O/B like everything else."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam*, 215. See also Draft Report, author unknown, "Highlights of Secretary McNamara's Testimony to the Stennis Committee, 25 August 1967," Sept. 11, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000700020004-0.pdf> (accessed Jan. 31, 2018).

¹⁰⁴ Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 109.

¹⁰⁵ Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 109.

¹⁰⁶ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 99.

The Publication of Fourteen Three

Westmoreland, Komer, and Davidson politicized intelligence at the Saigon conference. That the three military officers' methodological arguments were strong enough to help change Carver's mind does not mean that they acted in good faith. All three men sought to show progress in the war effort, and feared that the O/B increasing two fold would show that victory in Vietnam was much farther off than they had promised for months. These political concerns animated Westmoreland, Komer, and Davidson to insist on the estimate's preordained conclusions. The enemy O/B was under 300,000, and the strength of the CIA's arguments did not matter. Faced with this implacable position, Carver and Helms acceded to MACV's numbers.

If anything, MACV's manipulation of intelligence became more brazen after Carver's Saigon compromise. In October, its press officer Philip Goulding circulated a draft briefing contending that enemy guerilla strength was down even though Carver had not agreed to that finding in Saigon. Acting Director of the CIA's Office of Economic Research Paul Walsh called that conclusion "one of the greatest snow jobs since Potemkin constructed his village." Walsh also noted that while Carver and MACV had agreed that there were between 70,000 and 90,000 guerillas, the briefing stated that the true number was likely close to 70,000. Walsh considered that "pouring salt in the wound." But worst of all, from Walsh's perspective, was that MACV now considered militia and self-defense forces mere NLF sympathizers instead of fighters: "This is not just a violation of the Saigon agreement, it is a complete and wanton scuttling of the

whole exercise.”¹⁰⁷ Carver agreed and refused to concur with MACV’s findings in a memo to the Pentagon press office two days later. Since the press briefing was not a formal intelligence product, however, Carver admitted that he had no ability to prevent its dissemination to the public: “Whether or not any briefing is given and the precise language to be used remains, of course, matters outside our purview.”¹⁰⁸

MACV gave the briefing to bolster its optimistic narrative about the war. Previous O/B reports had estimated enemy forces at 285,000. The press briefing, which MACV released on November 12, claimed that U.S. forces had killed 43,000 enemy guerillas in recent combat even though Carver had agreed to no such thing. Nor did any intelligence substantiate that statement. But 43,000 represented the difference between MACV’s pre-compromise figure and the figure that Carver agreed to in Saigon. Thus, MACV could use the briefing to claim a high enemy body count as evidence that the U.S. was making progress in Vietnam. The briefing also cited hundreds of captured documents to conclude that while morale among enemy leadership remained high, morale among the enemy rank-and-file had declined to the point that “enemy troops were being forced into battle with machine guns at their backs.”¹⁰⁹ That contention elided a central conclusion of

¹⁰⁷ Paul Walsh to Carver, “MACV Press Briefing on Enemy Order of Battle,” Oct. 11, 1967, Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/024/0240804006.pdf> (accessed Feb. 3, 1967).

¹⁰⁸ Carver to Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Philip Goulding, “Proposed MACV Enemy Order of Battle,” Oct. 13, 1967, p. 3. In pdf “MACV Press Briefing and OB Problems” CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000200190001-7.pdf> (accessed Feb. 3, 2018).

¹⁰⁹ See Tom Buckley, “U.S. Aides Say Foe’s Strength and Morale Are Declining Fast,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1967, 4.

months' worth of intelligence reporting: none of the military pressures designed to coerce Hanoi into negotiations had succeeded. Fourteen Three was published the next day.

The estimate's final version represented a triumph for MACV's rosy narrative. After twenty-two drafts, the U.S. Intelligence Board published Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-67 on November 13. It concluded that the enemy main and local forces were 118,000 strong, with 70,000 to 90,000 guerillas and 35,000 to 40,000 administrative staff.¹¹⁰ Harold Ford's claim in *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers* that the final O/B estimate in SNIE 14.3-67 was "substantially less" than Carver's compromise is therefore inaccurate.¹¹¹ Rather, the final estimate held to the figures that Carver agreed to after his dinner with Westmoreland and Komer, minus 1,000 regular troops. The estimate contained language qualifying its numbers, such as allowing that "the Communist military and political organization is complex, and its aggregate numerical size cannot be estimated with confidence."¹¹² But as Ford notes, such language "could not compete ... with ostensibly hard numbers" or further language in the estimate concluding that U.S. military strength had seriously degraded the enemy's effectiveness.¹¹³ And unlike previous SNIE's, Fourteen Three did not include a dissenting footnote to register CIA's findings.

¹¹⁰ Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-67, "Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam," Nov. 13, 1967, p. 16. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

¹¹¹ See Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 102. Ford's claim is based on omitting the administrative service troops from the O/B, but the estimate did not do so and neither did MACV or CIA analysts.

¹¹² SNIE 14.3-67, p. 16.

¹¹³ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 102-3.

That the estimate went without a footnote was another consequence of the CIA's lack of leverage in the O/B dispute. In his 2011 work *Fixing the Facts*, Joshua Rovner argues that the lack of a footnote registering CIA's alternate view was "extremely surprising ... It was one thing to accept MACV's bottom line, but quite another to do so without recording the alternative view."¹¹⁴ Yet while footnotes acted as a convenient pressure valve for contentious debates, their impact on policy formation was often negligible or even negative due to the strength of policymaker preconceptions. When INR dissented from the entirety of SNIE 10-11-65's conclusions on the efficacy of Operation Rolling Thunder, Robert McNamara ignored their eight-page footnote. SNIE 10-12-65 was so filled with footnotes identifying dissents (as opposed to sources) that Walt Rostow pronounced it evidence of "confusion at lower levels" and dismissed its conclusions. Further, the continued deadlock on the basic question of enemy troop strength was a source of great tension for Helms. As we have seen, the director urged CIA and MACV analysts to reach a compromise on the O/B question for months leading up to the Saigon conference. Including a dissenting footnote with CIA's objections to MACV would have been a tacit admission on Helms's part that he had failed to reach that compromise. Such an admission could have jeopardized his standing with Johnson. But the result was a politicized estimate that served mainly to perpetuate an optimistic narrative about the war.

¹¹⁴ Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 71.

Pennsylvania, the Wise Men, and McNamara's Ouster

During the summer and fall of 1967, another attempt at peace talks led to a temporary bombing restriction. Throughout July and August, Harvard University Professor of Government and Republican foreign policy advisor Dr. Henry A. Kissinger discussed setting up peace talks with several DRV contacts in Paris. On August 25, Johnson dispatched Kissinger to Paris to continue these discussions, codenamed Operation Pennsylvania. He also imposed a temporary cessation on bombing within a 10-mile radius around Hanoi to avoid a diplomatic collapse as had happened in Operation Marigold. But DRV representatives failed to respond to American outreach for several days following the bombing pause. In a September 7 memo to Johnson, Helms stated that the CIA could not explain why the DRV remained silent. But Helms also saw no indication that the DRV would compromise on its insistence that the bombing end as a precondition to peace talks, and that any settlement must be based on the NLF's "four points" framework.¹¹⁵ At the same time, INR had reported in late August that in a conversation with Norwegian diplomats, DRV Ambassador to China Ngo Minh Loan expressed some willingness to commit to talks with only a bombing halt as a

¹¹⁵ Helms to Johnson, "The Kissinger Project," Sept. 7, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 308, pp. 759-61. DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong first introduced the four-points framework in April 1965. It was based on fulfilling the terms of the 1954 Geneva agreement: the U.S. had to withdraw from the RVN and not re-introduce troops, hold a popular referendum to determine future leadership of the RVN, and could not interfere with that referendum's results. See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "North Vietnam's Four Points," Sept. 26, 1966, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A001200010059-8.pdf> (accessed Feb. 1, 2018).

precondition. INR conceded, however, that it could not determine whether Loan spoke for the Hanoi Politburo.¹¹⁶

The talks soon began to founder. On September 29, Johnson gave a speech in San Antonio that formed the backbone of the American negotiating position from then on. Johnson's "San Antonio formula" was that he would stop the bombing if Hanoi would agree to negotiations. But the Politburo wanted a bombing cessation before it would consider negotiating. Johnson refused to do so, and the back-channel talks bogged down.¹¹⁷

Rostow encouraged Johnson's impatience with Hanoi. A September CIA report used aerial photography to conclude that the DRV was using alternative routes and foreign assistance to compensate for severe bombing damage to its transportation infrastructure. As a result, Hanoi's logistic capabilities had stayed the same.¹¹⁸ In an October 3 meeting, McNamara used the report, which he noted came to the same conclusion as many CIA/DIA bombing appraisals, to make the case that the bombing had been ineffective.¹¹⁹ Rostow replied that the report showed the bombing had done serious damage to the DRV and should be continued since "[n]o bombing means less strain and

¹¹⁶ INR Intelligence Report, "The Loan-Algard Dialogue," Aug. 26, 1967, U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5sY5J6> (accessed Feb. 1, 1967).

¹¹⁷ Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 251.

¹¹⁸ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Rolling Thunder: The 1967 Campaign Against LOCs," Sept. 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000300170001-8.pdf> (accessed Feb. 1, 1967).

¹¹⁹ Notes of Meeting, Oct. 3, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967* Doc. 341, p. 843.

less cost.” McNamara replied that he did not agree, but Rostow brushed his objections aside.¹²⁰

Rostow’s support for Johnson’s preferences once again won out over McNamara’s skepticism. The National Security Advisor also sent Johnson a long memo on the evening of the next day listing bombing damage statistics picked from the CIA report. Though Rostow admitted that the report showed Rolling Thunder could not interdict infiltration completely, the operation should not be halted because it had led to “[v]ery extensive consequences” for Hanoi.¹²¹ In a meeting held thirty minutes after Rostow sent that memo, Johnson declared, “I know this bombing must be hurting them. Despite all reports to the contrary, I can feel it in my bones ... We need to pour the steel on. Let’s hit them every day and go every place except Hanoi.”¹²² Strikes on targets in Haiphong followed on October 6. Additional raids took place near Hanoi and on a major DRV air base at Phuc Yen later in the month.¹²³

While Rostow and Johnson disregarded or distorted intelligence that did not conform to their faith in bombing, they both soon accepted intelligence that confirmed their skepticism of Hanoi’s motives. On October 4, Rostow instructed Helms to assess what Hanoi would do in the event of a bombing pause. The CIA completed an

¹²⁰ Notes of Meeting, Oct. 3, 1967, p. 843.

¹²¹ Rostow to Johnson, Oct. 4, 1967, 6:35pm. *FRUS Vietnam 1967* Doc. 345, p. 855.

¹²² Notes of Meeting, Oct. 4, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967* Doc. 346, p. 857.

¹²³ Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 110.

Intelligence Memorandum on that topic on October 9.¹²⁴ It concluded that Hanoi would “probably” enter peace talks after a total bombing cessation. But distrust of the United States and a continuing desire to not repeat the negotiations of 1954, when “the great powers ... deprive[d] them of the fruits of victory,” meant that Hanoi would not enter talks until the bombing had stopped for at least a month. Further, these talks would be “exploratory.” Hanoi would refrain from formal peace negotiations unless its diplomats were convinced they had enough leverage to gain “significant concessions.”¹²⁵ A week of silence from DRV diplomats followed this gloomy analysis. In an October 16 meeting, Helms remarked, “I do not think anything will come out of the Pennsylvania channel.”¹²⁶ That pessimism reinforced Johnson’s, who declared “[W]e may lose if we have a pause” at the same meeting. Hanoi also refused to budge. Johnson’s air strikes had reinforced the conviction of many DRV hard-liners that he was not serious about peace talks. Pennsylvania collapsed as a result.¹²⁷

McNamara’s approach to the use of intelligence during Pennsylvania, when he considered the war effort as a failure, was no different than the approach he had taken in 1965 and 1966, when he supported military escalation. As we have seen, even after

¹²⁴ Cover notes from Helms to Rostow, Oct. 9, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79B01737A001800180001-6.pdf> (accessed Feb. 1, 2018).

¹²⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The Consequences of a Halt in the Bombardment of North Vietnam,” Oct. 9, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T01629R000300080011-2.pdf> (accessed Feb. 1, 1967).

¹²⁶ Notes of Meeting, Oct. 16, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 353, p. 880.

¹²⁷ Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 252; Robert K. Brigham, “A Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam.” *The New York Times* Opinion Page, Jun. 16, 2017.

McNamara grew skeptical on the war effort, he continued to use intelligence reports as tools to bolster his arguments rather than as impartial guides to forming policy. In the October 3 meeting, he stated, “It is important that we know the facts about the bombing” before using the September CIA report and recent CIA/DIA appraisals to argue that the bombing was having little effect. By once again describing the IC’s findings as “facts” McNamara continued to disregard Sherman Kent’s probabilistic methodology.

McNamara’s negativity became so profound that he even began to ignore Leon Goure, thereby fatally undermining the Motivation and Morale Project. By 1967 nearly every RAND researcher in Saigon apart from Goure viewed the war effort as a lost cause. RAND analyst Konrad Kellen, who joined the team in mid-1966, was particularly strident in his criticism of Goure. While this pressure convinced Goure to tone down his optimism beginning in January 1967, he continued to believe the U.S. could win. McNamara had defended Goure in 1965 and 1966. But he now disregarded Goure’s reports and briefings. In turn, RAND reduced Goure’s funding. Well before Goure’s project ended outright in 1969, it had largely ceased to influence policy.¹²⁸

McNamara now argued as forcefully against the war as he had originally argued for it. On November 1, 1967, he wrote a fifteen-page memo that urged an immediate bombing halt and handing over most of the responsibility for the war to the RVN. Though he did not cite intelligence in the memo, his conclusions reflected months’ worth of CIA findings, many of which McNamara had read or explicitly referenced in meetings. In particular, he reiterated that the bombing had not interrupted infiltration and had not

¹²⁸ See Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 173-204, for a detailed account of Goure’s fall from grace.

broken Hanoi's will to continue fighting, nor was there any reason to expect that it would do so.¹²⁹

On the same day that McNamara's memo reached Johnson's desk, the president's group of unofficial foreign policy advisors and close confidants known as the "Wise Men" met at the White House. The group included former Johnson administration figures such as McGeorge Bundy and George Ball, who had left in September of the previous year, and foreign policy legends Dean Acheson and John McCloy.

Johnson opened the meeting by asking Acheson for his opinion on all facets of the war. Perceiving Vietnam through the lens of Korea, Acheson counseled staying the course. He had favored American intervention in Vietnam from the beginning, and his reasons for doing so had not changed. In response McNamara quoted the CIA's analysis that the bombing was not accomplishing its strategic goals. All of the Wise Men agreed. But none of them, not even George Ball, advised curtailing it. Instead they recommended using the bombing "as a negotiating chip against pressure across the DMZ."¹³⁰ Acheson elaborated by referring to his Korean experiences: "[W]e must understand that we are not going to have negotiations. The bombing has no effect on negotiations. When these

¹²⁹ Draft Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, Nov. 1, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 375, p. 946.

¹³⁰ Rostow to Johnson, "Summary of Cabinet Meeting," Nov. 2, 1967, p. 2. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5szGK0> (accessed Feb. 2, 2018).

fellows decide they can't defeat the South, they will give up. This is the way it was in Korea. This is how the Communists operate.”¹³¹

A briefing from George Carver helped support Acheson and his fellow Wise Men, at McNamara's expense. His notes do not appear in the record, but Rostow reported that Carver, “hit just the right balance between the progress we have made and the problems we still confront.”¹³² Acheson said that he was “very impressed” by Carver's briefing, and continued: “I am encouraged by the ground fighting in the South and that we are taking the initiative. I got the impression this is a matter we can and will win.”¹³³ Abe Fortas thought Carver's briefing was “remarkable ... the nation is totally unaware of this side of the Vietnam conflict.”¹³⁴ The Wise Men told Johnson what he wanted to hear. He never responded to McNamara's November 1 memo. And at the end of the month, he ridded his administration of his cabinet officer most identified with Vietnam by nominating McNamara to be the director of the World Bank.

The Road to Tet

Planning for the 1968 Tet Offensive began in the summer of 1967. Throughout the year Le Duan and Le Duc Tho were convinced that Hanoi could win the war with an RVN-wide general offensive-general uprising, in which PAVN and NLF cadres would

¹³¹ Memo from the President's Assistant (Jones) to Johnson, “Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors, Thursday, November 2, 1967,” Nov. 2, 1967, *FRUS Vietnam 1967*, Doc. 377, p. 956.

¹³² Rostow to Johnson, “Summary of Cabinet Meeting,” Nov. 2, 1967, p. 1.

¹³³ Jones to Johnson, “Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors,” Nov. 2, 1967, p. 956.

¹³⁴ Jones to Johnson, “Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors,” Nov. 2, 1967, p. 964.

attack U.S. and ARVN positions throughout the RVN with mass civilian participation. In mid-1967 both men used their prominent positions within the Hanoi Politburo to purge many officials who disagreed. The purges occurred in three waves that began in late July and ended in early 1968.¹³⁵ As with so many leadership developments in Hanoi throughout the Vietnam War, the U.S. intelligence community was taken off guard by the purge when it took place.

The intelligence collection vacuum inside the DRV left the IC unable to identify specific changes in enemy policy or strategy. Helms lamented in his memoir,

[W]e tried every operational approach in the book, and committed our most experienced field operatives to get inside the government in Hanoi. What had worked successfully against the USSR and its Eastern European cohort failed in North Vietnam ... The prisoners of war and the deserters from the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military were of some military value but offered little of strategic interest.¹³⁶

While the U.S. recruited some clandestine agents in the DRV, a SNIE from July 1968 called clandestine agent reporting only useful for “providing general indications of Communist intentions.”¹³⁷ Thus, the IC continued to rely on public statements, historical studies, captured documents, and enemy military actions in the RVN to determine enemy strategy.¹³⁸ None of those sources revealed the purge or planning of the Tet Offensive.

¹³⁵ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 90-94.

¹³⁶ Helms and Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 317-18.

¹³⁷ Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-68, “Detection of Infiltration During a Cease-Fire in Vietnam,” July 25, 1968, p. 7. National Security Files, Intelligence File, Box 14, LBJL.

¹³⁸ See for example INR Research Memorandum REA-46, “Giap Reviews War and Prescribes Future Tactics,” Oct. 20, 1967; Intelligence Information Cable 181932Z, “Comments of Mai Van Bo on the North Vietnamese Situation,” Oct. 18, 1967; and

The aftermath of PAVN General Nguyen Chi Thanh's death shows the limits of American intelligence collection in the DRV. Thanh had been head of COSVN for nearly two and a half years when he died under questionable circumstances on July 6, 1967.¹³⁹ On July 11, the CIA released an Intelligence Memorandum intended to examine Thanh's possible replacements as well as how Hanoi would have to adjust its military planning to cope with his loss. The memorandum did not cite sources outside of several references to official DRV publications. But it correctly described Thanh as a popular general who was allied with Le Duan and the other "militant" members of the Politburo who favored aggressive military action. The CIA also correctly noted that Le Duan had appointed Thanh as part of his plan to achieve a quick victory through concerted attacks in 1965. But the CIA's analysts did not know that Le Duan was planning to appoint Thanh the executor of the Tet Offensive.¹⁴⁰

Cable Saigon 10383, U.S. Embassy in Saigon to Washington, "Le Duan's Moscow Speech and Nhan Dan Article," Nov. 7, 1967, all in National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 86, LBJL.

¹³⁹ Hanoi's official explanation of Thanh's death was a sudden heart attack. That was the cause listed in both the July 11 memo, a July 8 PDB, and a July 26 DIA report. See CIA Intelligence Report, "The President's Daily Brief," July 8, 1967, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005973896.pdf (accessed Feb. 7, 2018); and DIA Intelligence Summary, "Implications of Communist Military Commander's Death in South Vietnam," Jul. 26, 1967, p. S-1. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/58MLg7 (accessed Aug. 20, 2017). But other alleged causes include poisoning by enemies in the Politburo and B-52 strikes. See Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 97; and Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 154-55.

¹⁴⁰ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Problems Posed for North Vietnam by the Death of Politburo Member Nguyen Chi Thanh" Jul. 11, 1967, National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 180, LBJL. See Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 97-100 for an analysis of the implications of Thanh's death on the planning of the Tet Offensive.

Improvements in intelligence collection did occur, but they often happened in areas where the U.S. was already strong. One such area was aerial photography. The IC had sought a replacement for the U-2 ever since the Soviets shot one down over Sverdlovsk in 1960.¹⁴¹ In 1962, Lockheed Martin began testing prototypes of the A-12 Oxcart, which had a smaller radar cross-section, greater speed, a higher maximum altitude, and better cameras than the U-2. After over two thousand test flights, the A-12 began flying missions over the DRV, codenamed Operation Black Shield, in late May 1967.¹⁴² Black Shield missions provided clear, easily interpretable imagery that rivaled the U-2's. The plane was also much safer for pilots. During Operation Black Shield's 26 missions over the DRV, PAVN anti-air emplacements only fired on A-12s three times. The closest an A-12 came to being shot down over the DRV was on October 30, 1967, when a surface-to-air missile (SAM) caused minor damage to an Oxcart flying a mission near Hanoi and Haiphong.¹⁴³

Tactical SIGINT also underwent improvement beginning in May 1967. Hanoi's operational security for high-level communication codes remained impenetrable. But enemy ground forces also adopted new systems of voice communication. These systems remained unencrypted for the sake of quick, easy communication. Doing so, however, left those communications vulnerable to American SIGINT stations monitoring the

¹⁴¹ See Michael Beschloss, *Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev, and the U-2 Affair* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); and Philip Taubman, *Secret Empire: Eisenhower, the CIA, and the Hidden Story of American Space Espionage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

¹⁴² David Robarge, *Archangel: CIA's Supersonic A-12 Reconnaissance Aircraft* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2012), 1, 33.

¹⁴³ Robarge, *Archangel*, 35-36.

infiltration effort. In May 1967, one such station detected an enemy support unit using unencrypted communications in the A Shau Valley. The Communists did not know they had been detected and continued to use the same frequency. That allowed American analysts to eavesdrop on enemy communications. The effort yielded so much intelligence that it required its own program, codenamed Project Dancer.¹⁴⁴

Black Shield and Dancer were both highly productive tactically but not strategically. Dancer provided American cryptologists with an important look into enemy communication networks, but most of the intelligence that the program gathered related only to Hanoi's air defense network rather than infiltration as analysts hoped it would.¹⁴⁵ And it provided no window on DRV strategy or policy. Likewise, Black Shield missions revealed useful tactical information such as the location of 70 out of 190 total SAM sites in the DRV. Johnson approved A-12 flights in late May out of a concern that the DRV had begun installing surface-to-surface missiles (SSM) near the DMZ. The flights revealed that Hanoi had no such emplacements.¹⁴⁶ The A-12 was so effective as an intelligence collection platform that when Johnson considered retiring it in favor of the Air Force SR-71 Blackbird to cut costs, Helms pleaded to retain control over the Oxcart.¹⁴⁷ Yet even the best aerial photography could not reveal Hanoi's war plans. A

¹⁴⁴ Robert M. Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1975* (Fort Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, 2002), 110-11, 381-82.

¹⁴⁵ Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness*, 111.

¹⁴⁶ Robarge, *Archangel*, 40.

¹⁴⁷ See Helms to the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, "Central Intelligence Agency Operation of the OXCART," Feb. 19, 1968, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP75B00159R000100070014-9.pdf> (accessed Feb. 7, 2018). Helms was unsuccessful,

CIA working paper published shortly after the Oxcart's retirement noted that aerial photography was "limited almost exclusively to tactical and operational intelligence."¹⁴⁸ Strategists in Hanoi thus began planning the offensive in July and August 1967 with the IC none the wiser.

Hanoi's communications security meant that SIGINT could only provide evidence of upcoming offensives through monitoring the movements and communication patterns of enemy troops within the RVN. By late 1967, American cryptologists had developed a series of "SIGINT indicators" that they used to forecast enemy attacks. These indicators included monitoring for changes in enemy call-signs and communications scheduling, as well as an increased rate of communications and movements of communication posts.¹⁴⁹ Monitoring for these changes allowed MACV to react to enemy troop movements quickly. But as Stephen Budiansky has observed, determining where an enemy unit was moving was far easier than determining why it was moving there. For direct evidence of enemy goals, analysts would have had to decrypt high-level communications or access reliable HUMINT.¹⁵⁰

Compounding the problem of accurate intelligence collection on DRV intentions was the widespread optimism that pervaded much of the Johnson administration's senior

and Johnson replaced the Oxcart with the Blackbird in June 1968. See Robarge, *Archangel*, 50.

¹⁴⁸ CIA Working Paper, "Vehicles for Overhead Reconnaissance," p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP74J00828R000100200016-2.pdf> (accessed Mar. 14, 2017).

¹⁴⁹ Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness*, 308.

¹⁵⁰ Stephen Budiansky, *Code Warriors: NSA's Codebreakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 2016), 267.

civilian and military circles in late 1967. With McNamara on his way out and the Wise Men backing the war effort, Rostow and like-minded advisors felt emboldened. Both Rostow and Wheeler openly criticized IC products throughout the fall of 1967 for their pessimism, and Westmoreland notoriously remarked during a November 21 speech, “whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing.”¹⁵¹

Faced with the combination of poor intelligence collection and widespread hostility toward analysis contravening the belief that victory was within reach, CIA analysts joined in the politicization of intelligence by refraining from making controversial judgments. By late 1967, the agency had begun appending a daily special report on developments in the DRV to each PDB. Like the PDBs, these special reports tended to emphasize the background of certain events without giving much context or assessing the implications for U.S. policy.¹⁵² And weekly updates on the situation in the RVN during late 1967 were often preoccupied with reporting on GVN stability after the 1967 presidential election. Thieu emerged victorious with Ky as his running mate after a highly contentious election cycle dogged by allegations of corruption and vote-rigging.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 104-06.

¹⁵² For example, Australian leftist writer Wilfred Burchett traveled to Hanoi in October and interviewed several unidentified Americans in Hanoi, who all thought that the DRV would agree to peace talks if Johnson stopped the bombing. Several reports simply repeated Burchett’s conclusions verbatim without analyzing them. See CIA Intelligence Reports, “Special Daily Report on North Vietnam for the President’s Eyes Only,” Oct. 19 and 20, 1967, National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, “President’s Daily CIA Reports on North Vietnam, 9/67-10/67,” Box 223, LBJL.

¹⁵³ See CIA Intelligence Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam,” Nov. 6, 1967, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A002900020001-2.pdf> (accessed Feb. 8, 2018). For the 1967 election, see Sean Fear, “Saigon Goes Global: South Vietnam’s Quest for International Legitimacy in the Age of Détente” *Diplomatic History* 42(3) (June 2018): 446-48.

The repressive atmosphere in which the analysts functioned also made them cautious about reporting on an increase in infiltration despite improved SIGINT. In October, a U.S. RC-130 cargo plane equipped for SIGINT collection intercepted exploitable enemy voice communication in the southern DRV. Enemy forces used the channel to help coordinate the infiltration effort, and American cryptologists were able to identify dozens of infiltration groups heading south during the remainder of 1967. Cryptologists used this intelligence to establish a baseline infiltration rate, a goal that had long eluded them.¹⁵⁴ But many MACV analysts were wary of calling attention to a spike in infiltration toward the end of 1967 lest they alienate their superiors.¹⁵⁵

The intelligence community detected other signs of an impending offensive, but analysts were too distracted by contemporaneous crises to appreciate them. A November 21 INR memorandum cited news coverage of “a huge supply effort down the Ho Chi Minh Trail ... bigger than ever before.”¹⁵⁶ In particular, truck sightings on the Trail shot up from 480 to 1,116 per month. Yet throughout October and November, intelligence analysts in Washington did not reassess their appraisals of Hanoi’s plans.¹⁵⁷ The raging controversies over enemy O/B and Rolling Thunder left many analysts too preoccupied to focus on DRV activities. Further, as Ronnie Ford has shown, residual interagency

¹⁵⁴ Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness*, 112.

¹⁵⁵ Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, 119.

¹⁵⁶ INR Memorandum from Fred Green to Benjamin H. Read, “November 16 Daily Telegraph Article on Movement of Supplies in Laos,” Nov. 21, 1967, p. 1. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/58MHq7> (accessed Aug. 20, 2017).

¹⁵⁷ Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, 152-57.

bitterness left over from the O/B controversy heightened pre-existing rivalries. Effective coordination of intelligence collection and analysis efforts became more difficult—and less common.¹⁵⁸

For example, a captured high-level document provided further evidence of the upcoming offensive, but a critical mistranslation interfered with accurate analysis. In the summer of 1967, U.S. and ARVN forces captured copies of the DRV's Resolution 13, which the Vietnamese Communist Party had passed in January. Post-war translations of the resolution differ, but the two most commonly cited translations claim that the document called for either a “spontaneous uprising” or an “all out effort [sic] ... to win a decisive victory in a relatively short period of time.”¹⁵⁹ Neither phrase appears in the version of the document that CDEC translated. Instead, the CDEC translation contained a more ambiguous statement:

The immediate missions of our army and people, at present, are to concentrate our efforts to overcome difficulties and to defeat approximately one million American troops and consequently achieve many striking military victories.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ronnie Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London and New York: Frank Cass and Co., 1995), 164-67; 178-79.

¹⁵⁹ See Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 90; Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big Unit War Against the U.S., 1965-1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 203; Merle Pribbenow, “General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3(2) (Summer 2008): 10; James Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 10, 182.

¹⁶⁰ Captured Documents Exploitation Center (CDEC) Translation Report Log Number 08-0501-67, p. 26. Capture date: Aug. 18, 1967, processing date: Aug 19, 1967. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images_cdec.php?img=/images/F0346/0251-0445-000.pdf (accessed Feb. 9, 2018). Resolution 13 was designed to appeal to both the militants and moderates within the Politburo. It therefore contained appeals to aggressive

Both the CIA and MACV J-2 interpreted the resolution as encouraging PAVN and NLF forces to continue fighting a guerilla war at least until the 1968 election out of the belief that LBJ would lose to a “dove candidate.”¹⁶¹

Other documents captured in late 1967 and early 1968 were not so cryptic about the coming offensive, and better collaboration among agencies may have produced valuable insight. But such collaboration did not occur, and opportunities were missed. CIA Saigon Station officer Joseph Hovey, along with several colleagues, used captured documents to contend in a series of reports from late November into early December that the Communists had begun a major campaign that they believed would lead to a “decisive victory.”¹⁶² An NLF document that MACV captured in January 1968 exhorted cadres to undertake “very strong military attacks in coordination with the uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities.”¹⁶³ And an NLF soldier’s notebook that U.S. forces captured on January 14, which was the subject of a CDEC summary,

military action and protracted guerilla warfare combined with negotiations. See Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, 203.

¹⁶¹ See CIA Intelligence Report, “The President’s Daily Brief,” Oct. 9, 1967, p. 4. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005974054.pdf (accessed Feb. 9, 2018); Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, 153.

¹⁶² Alexander Ovodenko, “Visions of the Enemy from the Field and From Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34(1) (February 2011): 125.

¹⁶³ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 114.

contained an entry stating that the NLF was “in a very favorable position to implement the general counter offensive and general uprising.”¹⁶⁴

Neither George Carver nor George Allen accepted Hovey’s findings. Both believed that the Communists would continue to fight a protracted guerilla conflict. The enemy strategy had remained the same for so long, Allen claimed, and captured documents were so replete with phrases such as “decisive victory” to describe campaigns that U.S. forces had easily turned back in years past, that Hovey’s reports were not credible. Further, Allen explained later that he and many other CIA analysts understood that the RVN citizenry would likely not rise up against the U.S. and ARVN in a general uprising as the enemy hoped. Therefore, they thought the Communists did not believe their own words.¹⁶⁵

Saigon Station’s warnings became more insistent in November and December 1967. Three reports published between November 21 and December 19 using captured documents and prisoner interrogations concluded that the enemy was preparing imminently to launch a major offensive. The second of these, published on December 8, contended that this offensive “would in all likelihood determine the future direction of the war.” The station’s analysts found that Hanoi had decided the time was right for a RVN-wide offensive that would target urban areas, as well as U.S. and ARVN military installations. The reports further concluded that Hanoi’s goal was “to place maximum

¹⁶⁴ CDEC Document Log Number 01-1860-68, Summary Report p. 1. Capture date: Jan. 14, 1968, processing date: Jan. 16, 1968. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images_cdec.php?img=/images/F0346/0291-2289-000.pdf (accessed Feb. 9, 2018).

¹⁶⁵ Ovodenko, “Visions of the Enemy,” 125, 142.

pressure” on the U.S. and GVN by inflicting irreparable political damage on Johnson during an election year, and that the Communists were prepared to accept high casualties to accomplish that goal. As Bruce Palmer wrote later, these reports turned out to be highly accurate.¹⁶⁶ But they did not raise any alarms at SAVA.¹⁶⁷

Once again, Carver disregarded the Saigon Station’s forecasts. Carver had spent much of 1967 building a strong working relationship with Rostow, and on December 15 he sent the National Security Advisor a strongly worded rebuttal of the Station’s papers, which he attached to his correspondence. “The attached [Saigon Station] papers,” Carver opened his memo, “should not be read as the considered opinion of this Agency.”¹⁶⁸ The Saigon Station had relied too heavily on unreliable captured documents full of “doctrinal jargon whose wording cannot always be taken literally” or “handwritten notes taken by students at low-level political indoctrination courses.”¹⁶⁹ Carver relied on diplomatic reports – which he admitted were likely unavailable to Saigon Station due to their high sensitivity – to conclude that Hanoi’s real plan entailed increasing the level of combat to force negotiations with the end goal of a coalition GVN.¹⁷⁰ While Carver expected an offensive to occur, he thought it would be smaller than Saigon Station’s analyses anticipated and intended to force a diplomatic agreement rather than achieve an outright

¹⁶⁶ Bruce Palmer, “US Intelligence and Vietnam” *Studies in Intelligence* 28 (Special Edition) (1984): 55.

¹⁶⁷ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 119-21; Ovodenko, “Visions of the Enemy,” 126-27.

¹⁶⁸ Carver to Rostow, “Papers on Viet Cong Strategy,” Dec. 15, 1967, p. 1. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/024/0241804006.pdf> (accessed Feb. 11, 1967).

¹⁶⁹ Carver to Rostow, “Papers on Viet Cong Strategy,” p. 2.

¹⁷⁰ Carver to Rostow, “Papers on Viet Cong Strategy,” p. 2.

military victory. Yet whereas the field reports provided specific citations to the captured documents they used, Carver did not cite the diplomatic reports he claimed contradicted the Saigon Station's findings.

Because of the poor analytic tradecraft standards then in use and the authority of his position, Carver could reject Saigon Station's findings unilaterally. In the Vietnam-era CIA "red teaming" – assigning a team of analysts to consider alternative scenarios with probabilities for each – was not mandated for finished intelligence.¹⁷¹ Carver's refusal to accept the warnings in Saigon Station's field reports thus did not raise red flags for other senior agency officers. And as the CIA's Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs, Carver had vast authority over much of the agency's Vietnam-related analysis. SAVA was, in the words of C. Michael Hiam, "its own little empire, separate from, and above, the other agency entities that were working on Vietnam."¹⁷² Carver answered only to Helms, who allowed Carver wide latitude in running SAVA. Carver could therefore dismiss Saigon Station's evidence as boilerplate Communist agitprop without fear of contradiction.

Moreover, Carver could have accepted the Saigon Station conclusions only at the personal cost of discounting his long-held and fixed opinion on the course of the war. He and many senior CIA analysts in Langley had relied on circumstantial evidence to assess Hanoi's intentions for years. Reports detailing changes in strategy were almost always reactive rather than anticipatory, since analysts lacked the kind of direct evidence that

¹⁷¹ The 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 made red teaming a requirement for all finished intelligence analysis. See Immerman, *The Hidden Hand*, 193-94.

¹⁷² Hiam, *Who The Hell Are We Fighting?*, 74.

would allow them to forecast a strategic shift with high confidence. Thus, when enemy forces began engaging U.S. and ARVN troops in engagements such as Ia Drang, CIA analysts used the battle itself as primary evidence that Hanoi would continue to fight set-piece battles. Likewise, when Hanoi began relying more heavily on guerilla warfare after experiencing high battlefield casualties throughout 1966, CIA analysts only reported that shift after a pronounced decline in contact with enemy ground forces. And none of Hanoi's strategic shifts had been as dramatic as what Saigon Station was assessing. For Carver, it was unthinkable that Hanoi would make such a major change in strategy – because they had never done so before.

In this instance, Carver's manipulation of intelligence helped cement his relationship with Rostow. His ambition and desire to gain access to policy circles remained strong after his promotion to SAVA. Rostow, who continually sought support for his uncompromisingly hawkish views, eagerly provided Carver with the access he sought in return for favorable intelligence. Thomas Hughes later described Carver as one of Rostow's "courtiers" whose "collaboration" with Rostow was "a classic case in point" of how hawkish policymakers listened to briefers who fed them optimistic information while ignoring intelligence officers who brought bad news.¹⁷³ Carver had no incentive to jeopardize his access to policymakers by bringing pessimistic intelligence to Rostow.

¹⁷³ See Association for Diplomatic Affairs and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Thomas L. Hughes, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, July 7, 1999, p. 44: <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Hughes,%20Thomas%20L.toc.pdf> (accessed Nov. 8, 2017); and Thomas L. Hughes, "INR's Vietnam Study in Context: A Retrospective Preface Thirty-Five Years Later," Digital National Security Archive: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB121/hughes.htm> (accessed Feb. 12, 2018).

Enemy preparations to attack an American firebase near the DMZ reinforced Carver's predilections. PAVN and NLF forces had targeted the Marine outpost at Khe Sanh since the fall of 1967. But in mid-January, tens of thousands of Communist troops laid siege to the base. A January 10 joint SAVA/OCI report that used aerial photography to map where the enemy forces had gathered around the base characterized the attack as a possible prelude for an enemy offensive to take place after the Tet holiday. The analysts concluded that the enemy wanted to force the Marines from the base and inflict heavy casualties in the process.¹⁷⁴ This conclusion was consistent with Carver's belief that the Communists were gearing up for an offensive designed to weaken American public support for the war in preparation for a diplomatic settlement on Communist terms. In fact, the siege was intended to tie down American forces in preparation for an offensive that would be much larger than Carver expected.¹⁷⁵ It succeeded.

Superficial similarities between the Communist sieges of Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu led Johnson and Westmoreland to assume that the Communists intended their attack on the former to be a *coup de grace* as they had achieved at the latter. By the time PAVN forces began a sustained attack on Khe Sanh on January 21, intercepted communications and captured documents had convinced Westmoreland that an offensive was in the offing. Though he was unsure of what form it might take and when it might start, he canceled a traditional Tet cease-fire in I Corps. He also, nevertheless, opined that

¹⁷⁴ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh," Jan. 10, 1968, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00875R001100070001-8.pdf> (accessed Feb. 14, 2018). See also Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy," p. 133.

¹⁷⁵ Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, 81; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 110-11.

the battle at Khe Sanh “may well be the decisive phase of the war.”¹⁷⁶ Johnson agreed. “I don’t want any damn Dien Bien Phu,” he had instructed Westmoreland in late 1967.¹⁷⁷ As a result, MACV poured resources into preventing a Communist takeover of Khe Sanh rather than prepare for an RVN-wide offensive. The heightened combat also masked indicators of the general offensive. An enemy document captured on January 27 revealed that the NLF was moving large amounts of weaponry into Saigon. But the threat that nearly 20,000 enemy ground troops posed to 6,000 cornered Marines appeared far greater than widespread NLF terrorism.¹⁷⁸

Last-minute SIGINT warnings stopped the offensive from becoming a complete surprise to individual American military units. NSA analysts published weeks’ worth of reports starting in early January, warning that enemy troop movements portended a major, coordinated offensive. In the week immediately prior to the offensive’s start on January 30, the NSA issued several more warnings. In late January these were reported in several issues of the CIA’s Current Intelligence Briefing (a daily briefing to lower-level White House officials). The January 28 CIB, however, weakened their effect by anticipating that the enemy attacks would come soon after Tet.¹⁷⁹ Still, some MACV officers, including III Corps commander Maj. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand took the NSA’s warnings and other indicators seriously enough to prepare for an enemy attack. Weyand,

¹⁷⁶ Moïse, *The Myths of Tet*, 131. See also Ovodenko, “Visions of the Enemy,” 141.

¹⁷⁷ Gregg Jones, *Last Stand At Khe Sanh: The U.S. Marines’ Finest Hour in Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2014), xvii.

¹⁷⁸ Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, 82.

¹⁷⁹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 117.

whose command included the area around Saigon, reinforced units there on January 27, a decision that Harold Ford has observed, “doubtless saved Saigon and the U.S. presence there from disaster.”¹⁸⁰

But as we shall see in the next chapter, averting total collapse would be the best that U.S. and ARVN forces could do in the days immediately following the offensive’s start. For while the NSA’s warnings convinced Weyand that an enemy offensive was imminent, they could not break the widespread optimism that now pervaded senior policy circles in Washington. That optimism lasted right up until the early morning hours of January 31, 1968, when Hanoi gave the attack order to its troops arrayed across the RVN. After that, Johnson’s world came crashing down.

¹⁸⁰ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 115-16; Moïse, *The Myths of Tet*, 132.

CHAPTER 6
POISONING THE WELL: THE CIA AFTER THE TET OFFENSIVE,
FEBRUARY – MARCH 1968

February and March 1968 were critical months for Lyndon Johnson and his administration. The Tet Offensive, which when it began on January 30 surprised LBJ, his advisors, and most high-ranking military leaders, touched off a firestorm of controversy. Although U.S. and Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN) forces turned the enemy back and the massive popular uprisings that Hanoi sought to provoke never materialized, for the United States the offensive was a strategic defeat. Westmoreland and Johnson had both declared during the latter half of 1967 that the end of the war was in sight. Tet belied that claim and led many Americans to question whether the war was winnable. The antiwar movement, which had been steadily expanded and intensified before the offensive began, suddenly exploded. And Johnson's own advisors were increasingly torn over the American war effort's prospects.

Johnson was adrift between two different camps. Wheeler and Westmoreland insisted that friendly forces had blunted the enemy attack and exposed the Communist forces' vulnerability. Therefore, U.S. and ARVN forces could score a decisive victory if they reinforced quickly enough to carry the fight to the enemy. But they balanced this optimism with alarmism. U.S. and ARVN casualties had been so heavy that a second enemy wave could produce disastrous consequences. Both men were convinced that such an attack was coming soon. Westmoreland, with Wheeler's support, pressed Johnson to

send an additional 206,000 troops starting in February in order to both replenish losses and gain the upper hand over the Communists. But if Johnson decided against filling the troop request, the two generals warned, the enemy could overwhelm U.S. and ARVN forces.

Neither Wheeler nor Westmoreland based this conclusion on intelligence. Instead they favored their long-held preconception that the U.S. could triumph against the PAVN and NLF if the war shifted to a conventional conflict. The two generals argued that because the January offensive had led to massive casualties on both sides, whichever side reinforced faster could overwhelm the other.

Even as Wheeler and Westmoreland recommended going for broke, many advisors who had previously encouraged LBJ to stay the course changed their minds. These included his new Defense Secretary, Clark Clifford, Johnson's long-time confidante who replaced McNamara on March 1. Johnson's group of "Wise Men," who had previously bolstered his resolve, now lost theirs. They surprised Johnson almost as much as the enemy by counseling him to withdraw. CIA analysis supported this bleak prognosis. Most agency analysts stressed that as opposed to Wheeler and Westmoreland's predictions of either imminent victory or catastrophe, stalemate was the offensive's most likely outcome. CIA analysts also found that the changes in strategy that Wheeler and Westmoreland proposed, especially augmenting the U.S. troop presence by 206,000, would likely prove unsuccessful for the war effort.

February's turmoil began to subside in March. Against the strenuous objections of Wheeler and Westmoreland, Johnson elected to follow Clifford's advice and deny Westmoreland's augmentation request. On March 25, the Wise Men advised Johnson to

withdraw from Vietnam after they sat through a series of pessimistic briefings from military, diplomatic, and intelligence officials. Johnson heard from the briefers himself two days later. On March 31, Johnson announced that he would not run for re-election, and would instead seek to bring a swift end to the war through negotiations.

The CIA's judgments played a critical role in Johnson's decision to leave the 1968 race and move toward negotiations with Hanoi. Numerous studies and memoirs have shown that intelligence analysis was a critical influence on the Wise Men meetings of late March.¹ But the CIA's pessimistic conclusions underlay most of Johnson's decisions in February and March, along with recommendations that he received from his advisors. And CIA briefings were pivotal to convincing the Wise Men that the American war effort's prospects were dim. To the president, it was these briefings, the CIA's, that "poisoned the well." And for Johnson, who until this point refused to accept that the war was lost, this poison proved fatal.²

LBJ's shift toward the CIA's conclusions did not happen immediately, but it had a profound impact on policy once it did. Johnson was so preoccupied with staving off the RVN's collapse during the first two weeks of February that he ignored most analyses of the enemy's motives. Instead, he favored military prescriptions for how to blunt the enemy's progress. But Johnson favored Wheeler's analyses of the situation only in the turbulent aftermath of the offensive. Johnson gravitated toward the CIA's analyses as the

¹ See Harold Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 134.

² Richard H. Immerman, "A Time in the Tide of Men's Affairs: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam" in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963-1968*, Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 79.

fighting subsided and Westmoreland's augmentation request forced him to choose between further escalation or withdrawal. Wheeler's estimates were grim, but so were the CIA's. Further, Wheeler used his judgments to argue for an increased American commitment to Vietnam, which Johnson rejected.

The CIA gained more influence over policy formation in early 1968 because Johnson's preconceptions on the war shifted in line with the agency's pessimism in the offensive's wake. The lack of sources cited in CIA reports had previously allowed policymakers to ignore CIA estimates in favor of other reporting that better confirmed their preconceptions. But the offensive made the CIA appear prescient. Johnson, along with many of his top advisors, became predisposed to accepting the agency's conclusions. Some CIA analysts practiced good tradecraft by identifying sources and intelligence gaps in their reports, which made Johnson and his advisors more likely to use their work. But customer preconceptions remained the dominant factor in whether intelligence mattered for policy formation in February and March 1968.

Johnson's relationships with key intelligence and military officials also played an important role in the CIA's post-Tet influence on policy. The assessments of George Carver sharply turned negative in March 1968, and they played vital roles in LBJ's key decisions at the end of the month. Equally important was Johnson's new Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford. Johnson selected Clifford to succeed McNamara in part because he had been consistently hawkish prior to Tet. On March 4, a task force Clifford chaired to review U.S. policy in Vietnam published its findings, which were very pessimistic on the prospects of further escalation. The CIA's work formed much of the report's source base. And DCI Richard Helms used his status as a regular member of Johnson's Tuesday

Lunch group to defend his agency's conclusions face-to-face with the president. Helms often had to fight to make his arguments count, particularly with General Wheeler. The JCS Chairman proved adept at dominating meetings, as well as Johnson's attention, by emphasizing the precarious nature of the America war effort during the first two weeks of February 1968. But Helms could capitalize on Johnson's displeasure with the military. Thus, his agency enjoyed greater influence than it previously had.

Initial Responses to the Offensive

The scale of the attacks on January 30 and 31 took Westmoreland, his command staff, and everyone in Washington by surprise. The PAVN and NLF hit 39 of the RVN's 44 provincial capitals, five out of six major cities, 71 of 242 district capitals, almost every American or ARVN airfield, and numerous targets within Saigon itself, including the Presidential Palace and U.S. Embassy.³ Despite the initial shock, the intelligence community provided sober assessments of Communist goals. Most initial reports assessed the tactical situation. As early as January 31, nevertheless, the CIA accurately noted that the offensive was "designed for maximum psychological impact." Hanoi was probably not "making a final desperate bid before suing for peace."⁴

The situation became so dire that on February 2nd the CIA's George Carver, William Colby, and fellow Vietnam expert John Hart sent Helms a paper with detailed recommendations on how to best reorganize the GVN to recover from the serious

³ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 123.

⁴ Intelligence Memorandum, "The Communist Tet Offensive," Jan. 31, 1968, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. VI, Vietnam January-August 1968*, ed. Kent Sieg (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), Doc. 41, p. 92.

security breaches that the offensive revealed. The memo, entitled “Operation Shock,” argued that American support had led GVN leaders to become complacent. Because the leadership in Saigon believed that the U.S. would prop up the RVN government indefinitely, it had never tried to broaden its support among the population. The Tet Offensive revealed that the government lacked “some of the principal aspects of sovereignty,” such as the ability to defend its borders on its own. The authors recommended the elevation to leadership positions of specific GVN officials to replace ineffective bureaucrats. They also recommended a total bombing freeze and initiation of talks with the DRV.⁵

Although Helms forwarded the memo to Rostow, Wheeler, Nitze, and Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, there is no evidence that any of them followed up on the CIA officers’ recommendations. This neglect was probably due to the sense of urgency gripping Washington at the time. Battles were still raging throughout the RVN on February 2nd, and the press coverage was extensive. Fixing the GVN would have to wait for a more stable day.

INR’s immediate post-offensive assessment of the situation paralleled the CIA’s. On February 3, Hughes sent Rusk an Intelligence Note expressing INR judgment that Hanoi’s primary objective was to create a “revolutionary situation” in towns and cities throughout the RVN in order to destroy whatever legitimacy the GVN still held for the general population. INR also estimated that the Communists were likely prepared to accept heavy casualties if that meant causing major strains on the US and RVN.

⁵ Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, “Vietnam – Operation Shock,” Feb. 2, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 44, pp. 98-101.

Particularly important was the GVN political presence in the countryside, which was now even more vulnerable to NLF harassment.⁶ INR understood that the Tet Offensive was as much a political offensive intended to turn RVN citizens against their government as a military offensive. That interpretation, which subsequently proved accurate, stood in sharp contrast to the military's version of events.

While Westmoreland, Wheeler, and other military officials in the Johnson administration were furious that the enemy had managed to mount such a massive surprise attack, they thought they were prepared to deal with this turn of events. For a generation of officers trained in the Second World War and Korea, the Tet Offensive seemed easier to understand than the previous three years of frustrating guerilla war had been. Fierce urban fighting in Saigon and Hue failed to disabuse them of the notion that the enemy offensive was akin to the Battle of the Bulge or China's 1951 cross-border attack in Korea.

Rather than focus on the RVN's urban areas, Westmoreland believed that the main brunt of the attack would come in the northwest area, near the DMZ. In a February 1 cable to Wheeler and Sharp, the COMUSMACV declared that the enemy's intentions were to draw American troops away from what he identified as the real target.

Westmoreland's only evidence for this hypothesis was that the enemy attacks throughout

⁶ INR Intelligence Note No. 97 from Hughes to Rusk, "Vietnam: Estimated Communist Strategy in the Coming Months" Feb. 3, 1968. *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 48, 108-111.

the countryside had been conducted with insufficient force to continue over a long period. He inferred they had to have been a diversion.⁷

This use of negative evidence (the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, to borrow Donald Rumsfeld's notorious formulation⁸) shows how deeply Westmoreland was relying on his preconceptions. Yet he continued to assume that Hanoi was focused on the RVN's northeast, especially the Marine firebase at Khe Sanh, in hopes of achieving a knockout blow like the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Even when the PAVN and NLF launched the general offensive on January 31, Westmoreland called the attacks on the cities "diversionary."⁹ That the PAVN had earmarked some of its most elite units for the assault on the firebase seemed additional evidence that Khe Sanh was Hanoi's primary target.¹⁰

While Westmoreland acknowledged that the DRV was counting on widespread support from the RVN's civilian population, he underappreciated the salience of that support to Hanoi's strategy. Westmoreland characterized the offensive as a potential "show of strength" to win back civilian support in contested areas.¹¹ Military force was an important aspect of Hanoi's strategy in showing the Saigon regime's ineffectiveness.

⁷ Cable from Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, Feb. 1, 1968, p. 2. Digital National Security Archive: <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679080026?accountid=14270> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018).

⁸ Donald Rumsfeld, Press Conference at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium, Jun. 6, 2002: <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020606g.htm> (accessed Oct. 12, 2017).

⁹ Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 56.

¹⁰ Prados, *Vietnam*, 228.

¹¹ Cable from Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, Feb. 1, 1968, 3.

But Westmoreland made no mention of the political organization that would have to accompany such an effort on the part of the NLF. His list was organized hierarchically, and that possibility was second to last on his list of potential factors. By contrast, INR's February 3 Intelligence Note judged turning the RVN's civilian population against their government to be the offensive's primary goal.¹² Westmoreland showed no interest in reading any of the bureau's conclusions, much less that report.

The Tet Offensive presented Wheeler with an opportunity to cement his status in Johnson's inner circle. Despite having been the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff since 1964, he did not become a regular member of Johnson's Tuesday Lunch group until late 1967. But Hanoi's decision to launch the offensive was good for Wheeler's standing in Johnson's administration, since he was so comfortable with conventional warfare. After years of discussing such inchoate concepts as the will of the Hanoi regime or the ever-elusive "crossover point," Johnson now focused on information more befitting a general with Wheeler's experience in conventional warfare. That information included day-to-day enemy tactics and calculating the number of friendly divisions that remained combat effective. On February 7, the general summarized the military situation as "serious" but still found encouraging signs in the large number of RVN citizens calling ARVN headquarters to inform on hidden NLF positions as and the high PAVN and NLF casualty count. McNamara assured Johnson that a "true military defeat" at Khe Sanh was unlikely. Since the Defense Secretary was days away from leaving that position, Wheeler felt comfortable contradicting him with a warning that the situation at the firebase was

¹² Intelligence Note No. 97, Hughes to Rusk, 108.

dire and of great concern to the military. Johnson immediately pledged to give Westmoreland “everything he wants.” McNamara had no response.¹³

An intelligence collection breakthrough in February improved the NSA’s ability to track infiltration. As we saw in the previous chapter, several SIGINT posts discovered the radio frequencies Hanoi used for communicating with infiltration groups headed south in 1967. This discovery enabled the NSA to begin tracking those groups, each of which had a three-digit code number. In February 1968, Hanoi added a fourth digit to each code number. NSA analysts deduced that this new number referred to the group’s destination. Analysts nicknamed the windfall of intelligence that resulted from these breakthroughs the “Vinh Window,” after the DRV city of Vinh, a crucial stop on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. When combined with pre-existing intelligence collecting methods, the Vinh Window gave American and RVN analysts a better understanding of the enemy infiltration effort’s scope than what they had been able to determine before.¹⁴

Wheeler relied on Vinh Window intelligence during a February 9 briefing with Johnson and the service chiefs. Wheeler explained that “a very complete intelligence analysis” based on contact with enemy units, intercepted communications, and interviews with prisoners of war showed a buildup of approximately 15,000 new PAVN troops in the RVN. These reinforcements brought the approximate level of enemy troops to

¹³ Notes of the President’s Meeting With the National Security Council, Feb. 7, 1968, pp. 1-4. National Security Files, Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, Box 2, LBJL.

¹⁴ Robert J. Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1975* (Washington, DC: Center for Cryptologic History, 2002), 110-13: (https://www.nsa.gov/news-features/declassified-documents/cryptologic-histories/assets/files/spartans_in_darkness.pdf, accessed Jun. 11, 2017).

between 16,000 and 25,000, with 15,000 around Khe Sanh alone.¹⁵ The evidence suggests that Wheeler used a MACV J-2 intelligence report that relied on Vinh Window SIGINT during the February 9 meeting. According to DIA analyst J. Barrie Williams, by late 1967 and early 1968 DIA was almost entirely dependent on MACV for intelligence related to enemy infiltration.¹⁶ Further, lingering hostility toward DIA from the service branches meant that military leadership was often predisposed toward favoring MACV over DIA even though DIA reported to the Joint Chiefs.¹⁷ MACV frequently did not use signals intelligence in its reports.¹⁸ But after the Vinh Window breakthrough, the command immediately began using SIGINT in its analyses.¹⁹

Wheeler's use of Vinh Window SIGINT during the February 9 meeting helped persuade LBJ of the military's explanations for the enemy's motives immediately following the offensive. The 15,000 new enemy troops served as evidence that Johnson needed to send reinforcements to prevent Hanoi from gaining the upper hand against U.S. and ARVN forces in the northern regions of the RVN. Johnson concluded that the report showed the enemy had "changed its tactics" and were "putting all of their stack in now ... Our front structure is based on estimates of their front structure. Our intelligence shows

¹⁵ Notes of the President's Meeting With the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Feb. 9, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 64, pp. 162-163.

¹⁶ Deposition of J. Barrie Williams, *Westmoreland v. CBS* (1984), 46-47, Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/025/0251015001a.pdf> (accessed Jan. 6, 2017).

¹⁷ Petersen, "The Vietnam Cauldron," 19.

¹⁸ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 87.

¹⁹ Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness*, 110-13.

that they have changed and added about 15,000 men. In response to that, we must do likewise.”²⁰ He authorized several reserve call-ups to give Westmoreland the men he needed to withstand the enemy’s attacks; these call-ups were small and had support from Johnson’s cabinet. Even McNamara recommended calling up between 40,000 and 130,000 troops. The latter number was dependent on Johnson’s willingness to ask Congress for that many reinforcements.²¹

Westmoreland continued to request reinforcements. On February 12, he asked Johnson to send an additional 25,000 troops. This request represented an accelerated call-up, since those troops had been slated to arrive later in the year. Johnson immediately ordered Wheeler to send one brigade from the 82nd Airborne, along with a Marine landing team. Although that order only sent 9,200 men to Vietnam, it signaled that Johnson was doing his best to follow through on his pledge to give Westmoreland everything he needed.²² The US and ARVN made progress in clearing out much of the enemy resistance in Saigon, with the battle raging around Khe Sanh beginning to stabilize by mid-month.²³

²⁰ Notes of the President’s Meeting With the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Feb. 9, 1968, p. 13.

²¹ Notes of the President’s Tuesday Luncheon, Feb. 13, 1968, pp. 5-6. National Security Files, Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, Box 2, LBJL.

²² United States Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Secretariat, Historical Division. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960-1968, Part III Includes Maps and Charts*, pp. 49-6, 49-8. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679062529?accountid=14270>.

²³ United States Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Telephone Conversation with General Westmoreland Attached to Cover Note from Walt Rostow*. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679081261?accountid=14270>. Rostow forwarded this memo to Johnson with a handwritten note explaining that Westmoreland also appreciated Johnson’s prompt sending of reinforcements.

Westmoreland's Augmentation Request

After U.S. and ARVN forces began to turn the enemy back across the RVN, Westmoreland thought that the time was right to press his advantage. MACV's commander interpreted the Tet offensive as Hanoi's decision, as he put it in a February 12 message to Wheeler and Sharp, to "throw in all of his military chips to go for broke."²⁴ The decisiveness and discipline that the enemy had shown in the days following January 30 suggested that Hanoi had permanently forsaken limited guerilla war in favor of conventional war. Westmoreland's initial instinct lay with reinforcing the ARVN rather than U.S. forces. But Wheeler encouraged Westmoreland to ask Johnson to mobilize an additional 206,000 American troops, mostly drawn from the reserves. Johnson had refused to mobilize the reserves since 1965 despite urging from many of his top military officials. Wheeler thought the uncertain and chaotic post-Tet period posed an excellent opportunity for Westmoreland to convince the president to rethink that stance.²⁵

The logic behind requesting so many additional men, besides needing reinforcements to replace battlefield losses, was based on Westmoreland and Wheeler's belief that the offensive was born of desperation. If Hanoi's forces could be turned back over the remainder of 1968, the light at the end of the tunnel would finally become visible. As Westmoreland articulated in a February 9 memo to Wheeler and Sharp, "it would seem" the offensive had occurred because Hanoi had decided that a protracted war

²⁴ Telegram from Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, Feb. 12, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 68, p. 184.

²⁵ Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 142-43.

was unwinnable. As such, the enemy had had to adopt an alternate, three-phase strategy “to bring the war to an early conclusion.” That strategy began with seizing strategically important areas to prepare for the January offensive, then the January attempt to provoke a general uprising, and ended with attacks across the DMZ to control the northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Doing so, Westmoreland claimed, would effectively establish “a de facto partition of the country” and give the enemy more leverage in peace talks. Westmoreland’s forces had beaten the enemy back during the first and second phases and could emerge victorious if Johnson sent sufficient reinforcements for a U.S. counter-offensive. But U.S. and ARVN gains could prove ephemeral if the enemy reinforced quickly enough to overwhelm the U.S. and ARVN during the third phase.²⁶ Westmoreland cited no intelligence reports or other evidence for this conclusion. He summarized it as simply his “view” of the matter.²⁷

To be sure, Westmoreland was familiar with the basic strategy of Maoist People’s War that Hanoi had adapted for its war effort. Maoist theory became a popular field of study within the U.S. Army after Mao Tse-tung’s 1949 victory in the Chinese Civil War. Many officers at the Army War College explored Maoism and unconventional warfare in their theses, and Westmoreland mandated the study of counterinsurgency as part of West Point’s core curriculum during his time as the Academy’s superintendent from 1960 through 1963.²⁸ As such he knew that Maoist People’s War consists of three stages and

²⁶ Memorandum from Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, Feb. 9, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 63, 154-58.

²⁷ Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, Feb. 9, 1968, 154.

²⁸ Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, 27-28.

culminates with a general offensive-general uprising. Yet, he interpreted the Tet Offensive as Hanoi changing its strategy.

There is no evidence to show that Westmoreland revised his assumption at any point in the coming weeks. Three days later, Westmoreland reported in a cable to Wheeler and Sharp that the third phase had just begun. In any event, there was no third phase. Hanoi's main effort had been the assault on the cities and attempt to provoke a general uprising, or what Westmoreland characterized as the second phase. Attacks on U.S. and ARVN forces in the northern areas of the RVN were a result of PAVN and NLF forces remaining in combat with the U.S. and ARVN. The entire offensive had been Hanoi's attempt at a general offensive-general uprising.²⁹

Wheeler advised Johnson to send the 206,000 troops. In a private correspondence with Johnson on February 27, he repeated his opinion that 1968 would be a decisive year. He had formed this conclusion after speaking with unnamed "responsible commanders."³⁰ Although Wheeler had relied on MACV intelligence to lay out how Hanoi had failed to achieve its strategic goals during the initial offensive, he was on less firm ground in arguing that the DRV planned to continue trying to overwhelm the U.S. and ARVN in the coming weeks. A COSVN document that American forces captured in late February set no firm date for any future second wave of attack, and urged the Communist forces to only strike in areas where US and ARVN forces were minimal.

²⁹ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 87-109.

³⁰ Memorandum from Wheeler to Johnson, "Military Situation and Requirements in South Vietnam," Feb. 17, 1968, p. 3. National Security Files, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Box 2, LBJL.

Westmoreland, however, interpreted this document as showing that whichever side reinforced faster would “win the next round.”³¹

A February CIA report used good tradecraft to paint a different picture. The report contended that the majority of enemy casualties from January 30 through February 13 were new guerillas that the NLF had recruited shortly prior to the offensive, and that these new troops had not been counted in MACV’s O/B reports. The report concluded that because the enemy force had been larger than MACV estimated, the NLF and PAVN’s losses “were not as high as previously believed.”³² This estimate relied on field assessments from MACV, CIA, and State Department officers. Ambitious officials hoping to help their careers by filing overly optimistic reports had compromised the accuracy of military field reporting earlier in the war. The CIA report did not mention if the authors attempted to control for such inaccuracy. But by using reporting from three different agencies, the analysts reduced the likelihood that inaccurate reporting skewed their findings. The analysts also noted that their sources were largely “fragmentary and obviously incomplete,” but that they had attempted to identify as many enemy units as

³¹ For a summary of the document and Westmoreland’s interpretation of it, see Cable MAC 02701 from Westmoreland to Sharp, Wheeler, Harold K. Johnson, Ellsworth Bunker, and Creighton Abrams, Feb. 26, 1968, Digital National Security Archive: <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679080440?accountid=14270> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018). There is no evidence to indicate whether MACV shared this document with CIA or INR.

³² CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Communist Units Participating in Attacks During the Tet Offensive, 30 January through 13 February 1968,” Feb. 1968, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000800070005-9.pdf> (accessed Oct. 12, 2017).

possible without double counting.³³ Identifying intelligence gaps in this fashion is also good tradecraft.

Several other reports published contemporaneously were uneven in quality. An ONE report published on February 26 estimated that while Hanoi would likely keep up a high level of combat for the next few months in hopes of scoring a decisive victory, it would almost certainly not launch more mass attacks similar to those of January 31 for the indefinite future.³⁴ But this report did not mention sources. Another report, published the following day, concluded that while the DRV had indeed moved to a new phase of the war, that shift had occurred primarily because Hanoi believed that its protracted war strategy had been a success, not a failure as Westmoreland believed, and January had been the right time to score decisive victories against U.S. and ARVN forces. While the report did not judge that Hanoi was likely to mount another offensive soon, it did estimate that the regime's confidence would likely persist even in the face of serious setbacks. Therefore, it was unlikely that Hanoi would do anything desperate such as attempt immediate attacks without reinforcing first. This report was based on captured enemy documents, including one identified as having been culled from the findings of a "high-level" party committee in Hanoi.³⁵ It did not, however, go into more detail on the

³³ "Communist Units Participating in Attacks During the Tet Offensive," p. 25.

³⁴ Abbot Smith to Helms, "The Outlook in Vietnam," Feb. 16, 1968, in John K. Allen Jr., John Carver, and Tom Elmore, eds., *Estimative Products on Vietnam, 1948-1975* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2005).

³⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum: "Hanoi's Appraisal of its Strategic Position Prior to the Current Offensive," Feb. 17, 1968, p. 1. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 86, LBJL. The "high-level" document was not further identified.

content or origin of these documents, thus leaving their value as source material uncertain.

Helms presented this estimate to Johnson and his top advisors. In a February 28 meeting, the DCI reported that while the Communist forces had been blunted, the offensive would continue for several months, albeit at a lower intensity. Rather than mount more attacks immediately, the PAVN and NLF would likely seek to maintain the initiative while also recouping their losses through reinforcements from the North. Helms noted that because the enemy had treated rural civilians “decently,” he was concerned that the NLF and PAVN would attract more support even though there had been no general uprising. And while the Communist forces would keep up a high level of combat in the hopes of winning a decisive victory, Helms judged that the NLF and PAVN could “ruin themselves” were they to “go flat out.”³⁶ Rather, he thus estimated, they would conserve some of their resources in case the present offensive continued to fall short. A stalemate would ensue, with no decisive gains likely for either side during the remainder of 1968. That analysis supported neither side of Westmoreland and Wheeler’s arguments.

But Helms’ presentation was flawed because he used vague language to express his key judgments. He “doubt[ed]” the GVN would collapse, did not “think” the offensive would lead to a decisive victory for either side, and ended with “The longer this thing is drawn out, the less likely I think negotiations are.” Other sections of his briefing rested on firmer ground: Helms noted that desertions from the ARVN were a potential problem because the NLF and PAVN’s primary objective was to destroy the ARVN and

³⁶ Notes of the President’s Meeting to Discuss General Wheeler’s Trip to Vietnam, Feb. 18, 1968, p. 2. National Security Files, Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, Box 2, LBJL.

the ARVN was “in worse shape today than before Tet.” But he still failed to provide supporting evidence, which left him open to a counter-attack from Wheeler.

Indeed, as if Helms had not even spoken, Wheeler followed immediately by making a case for fulfilling Westmoreland’s augmentation request. He began by reciting a long list of victories that the enemy had won with the benefit of surprise, giving the impression of an American military effort forced back on its heels. But Wheeler also underscored the silver lining: Hanoi had failed to achieve its strategic goals. He produced a captured enemy document summarizing Hanoi’s key aims as inspiring a nation-wide uprising among the civilian population and toppling the GVN.³⁷ Neither had happened. Wheeler did not acknowledge that the document contradicted his and Westmoreland’s assertions that Hanoi’s goal was to mount a conventional offensive. Instead, he continued by quoting sections of the document that indicated serious personnel and morale problems within the enemy forces. In doing so he used the document to support his argument that Johnson should immediately send reinforcements so Westmoreland could score a knockout blow against a demoralized and weakened foe. Wheeler also reiterated his contention that 1968 would be “a critical year in the war.”³⁸

To Wheeler, the American war effort was teetering on the razor’s edge. If Johnson did not fulfill Westmoreland’s request, everything would collapse. Conversely, if the president sent the 206,000 troops, Westmoreland could both replenish his losses

³⁷ Notes of the President’s Meeting to Discuss General Wheeler’s Trip to Vietnam, Feb. 28, 1968, 4. The meeting notes do not indicate whether any of the other participants were concerned about Wheeler carrying sensitive documents around with him.

³⁸ Notes of the President’s Meeting to Discuss General Wheeler’s Trip to Vietnam, Feb. 28, 1968, 6.

and gain the upper hand over the enemy. By presenting the troop request in this way, Wheeler made it the crux of the war effort. When Johnson pressed him for alternatives to sending so many men, Wheeler could only come up with ceding land to the enemy.³⁹ Helms had no reply. Nor did he reply when Wheeler responded to his characterization of enemy order of battle figures as possibly inaccurate with a curt “They are the best we have.”⁴⁰ Johnson ended the meeting without announcing any decision on whether to grant Westmoreland’s request, but Clifford recalled later that Wheeler had presented his arguments well. He called Wheeler’s presentation “so somber, so discouraging, to the point where it was really shocking,” adding that “We took [Wheeler] very seriously, for it looked as though the war could get away from us if they hit us again. President Johnson was as worried as I have ever seen him.”⁴¹

The CIA did not share this view. An ONE analysis released on March 1 rejected Wheeler and Westmoreland’s theories on the offensive and its aftermath. The report began by citing captured documents as showing “some backing away” from the protracted war strategy and that “the intensity of the Tet offensive and exertions being made confirms that Hanoi is now engaged in a major effort to achieve early and decisive results.” Yet it continued, “the Communists probably have no rigid timetable. They apparently have high hopes of achieving their objectives this year, but will maintain considerable tactical flexibility.” In this instance, while the report used the vague adverb

³⁹ Notes of the President’s Meeting to Discuss General Wheeler’s Trip to Vietnam, Feb. 28, 1968, 8.

⁴⁰ Notes of the President’s Meeting to Discuss General Wheeler’s Trip to Vietnam, Feb. 28, 1968, 9.

⁴¹ John B. Henry, “February 1968,” *Foreign Policy* 4 (Autumn, 1971), 23.

“apparently,” it also emphasized that in terms of its next move Hanoi prioritized remaining adaptable to any possible U.S. action. It did not, however, identify the document, thus missing an opportunity to provide a firmer basis for its judgment. The analysts thought that while Wheeler’s forecast of a looming enemy offensive was “conceivable,” it was “far more likely that they probably will not use their resources in such a reckless manner as to deny themselves the possibility of continuing the struggle well beyond the next several months.” And the analysts rejected Wheeler and Westmoreland’s argument that the offensive was based in desperation: “[Hanoi’s leaders] certainly were not desperate or fearful of early collapse” in exploring why the offensive began when it did.⁴²

Poor tradecraft undercut these high confidence levels. The report did not identify the captured documents that it used to contend that Hanoi would prioritize flexibility in its war effort for the remainder of 1968 and was not fearful of early collapse. Identifying sources in intelligence reports is especially important when analysts reach high confidence levels. According to a 1964 essay by Sherman Kent, CIA analysts of the Vietnam era used the phrase “almost certainly” for judgments about which they were “93% confident, give or take about 6%.” For these analysts to use the adverb “certainly” on its own thus showed 100% confidence in the conclusion that Hanoi did not act out of desperation in launching the offensive.⁴³ Yet the analysts did not explain the basis for

⁴² CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Questions Concerning the Situation in Vietnam” Mar. 1, 1968, pp. 1-2. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁴³ Sherman Kent, “Words of Estimative Probability” in *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), 133.

their certainty for either contention by citing sources. Therefore they failed to fully justify such high confidence.

Unlike Wheeler and Westmoreland, the analysts conceded that they were on less firm ground in explaining why the DRV had kicked off the offensive on the Tet holiday.

The analysts did not, however, explain why they lacked certainty in this instance:

A reconsideration of their capabilities to succeed in a long war may have been a contributing factor. And they probably regarded the balance of forces as sufficiently favorable to warrant a major and widespread offensive. The fact of Presidential elections in the U.S. may have influenced their decision, and, of course, the tactical advantage of the Tet truce played a role in the immediate timing.⁴⁴

The analysts' use of such vague language as "may have been" suggests that the CIA's lack of reliable high-level SIGINT and HUMINT continued to render them unable to draw firm judgments regarding Hanoi's motives. Therefore, while the analysts rejected Wheeler and Westmoreland's theory, they could not advance one of their own beyond mere speculation.

As had long been the case, the CIA report assessed Hanoi's capabilities more easily than the regime's motives. It expressed a high level of confidence in its conclusion that the PAVN and NLF's accumulation of resources during the lead-up to the offensive and their ability to retain the initiative left Hanoi able to "sustain a relatively high level of combat and occasionally to intensify it over the next several months."⁴⁵ The report's main evidence for that conclusion was that the NLF and PAVN forces still controlled vast areas of the RVN countryside, along with several urban areas. That control allowed the

⁴⁴ "Questions Concerning the Situation in Vietnam," 2.

⁴⁵ "Questions Concerning the Situation in Vietnam," 4.

enemy to keep U.S. and ARVN forces dispersed and bogged down in defense of static positions.

The report concluded that the offensive's size and Hanoi's historical behavior meant that the DRV was unlikely to negotiate soon. Hanoi was "not likely" to consider negotiations until the military campaign had "progressed far enough for its results to be fairly clear," given the resources the enemy had poured into the offensive and that Hanoi hoped the campaign would be decisive in bringing down the Saigon government. Such an inference was logical, since the January offensive was larger than any military campaign Hanoi had previously mounted. Further, CIA analysts had previously concluded that a primary lesson that Hanoi took from the 1954 Geneva Accords was to maximize their leverage by any means necessary before and during talks. Agreeing to commit to negotiations before knowing the results of their largest military offensive to date would not fit with such a strategy. The report's authors did not mention 1954 in the March 1 report. But prior analysts had used this conclusion repeatedly, including in the 1966 "Will to Persist" report. Good intelligence tradecraft mandates not relying on past finished intelligence to avoid repeating mistakes.⁴⁶ At the same time, the analysts lacked new sources to contravene the existing estimate that Hanoi would not agree to negotiate unless the DRV Politburo believed they possessed maximum leverage.

⁴⁶ CIA analysts relying on finished intelligence regarding Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program was a key reason for why the 2002 NIE on Iraqi WMD erroneously concluded that the program was active and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was attempting to build a nuclear weapon. See Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 123-55.

The report also judged that the enemy would only agree to commence peace talks after a bombing cessation. The analysts used Hanoi's public statements and past behavior as evidence, lacking any other sources with which to corroborate their findings.⁴⁷ But Hanoi had consistently stated that it would not consider beginning negotiations without a total bombing cessation, and had refused to commit to talks even during several bombing pauses. Therefore intelligence analysts had no reason to believe that the DRV would back down on that point.

INR concurred with the CIA's positions. In a report also published on March 1, the bureau concluded that China would send support troops to the DRV to fill whatever gaps Hanoi's reinforcement of its soldiers in the RVN created. Doing so would make matching the 206,000 proposed U.S. troops much easier.⁴⁸ Both agencies agreed that the U.S. and ARVN counterattacks had inflicted such heavy casualties upon the enemy that Hanoi would likely not act so aggressively any time soon. Neither report evaluated the prospects for an American victory if Johnson fulfilled Westmoreland's request. Yet neither report was sourced, leaving their findings less credible. There is no evidence that Wheeler or Westmoreland responded to either report.

INR also concluded in a report published the next day that despite the heavy losses, the Communists still thought they were operating from a position of strength in the countryside. The bureau also contended that the NLF would "probably attempt" to replace their casualties in part through an accelerated recruitment drive. Their evidence for this judgment was that since the Front controlled much of the RVN countryside in the

⁴⁷ "Questions Concerning the Situation in Vietnam," 5-6.

⁴⁸ "A Massive Effort to Turn the Tide," 45.

wake of the offensive, reaching civilians would be easier. But because the bureau had no sources that showed what the enemy's intentions were, their analysts relied on logic for this finding. They therefore used "probably" to show that while an accelerated recruitment effort was the most logical enemy action, they lacked firm supporting evidence. INR also assessed that the offensive "suggests confidence on their part that they have achieved the overall tactical flexibility and logistical capability to mount and sustain an urban-oriented offensive" which was important because the Communist war effort had previously struggled in the cities. The report did not examine the prospects for negotiations, but warned that their "immediate outlook" was of "a flexible and coordinated Communist effort on all fronts" to prepare for a protracted conflict.⁴⁹

Johnson faced a dilemma at the beginning of March. Wheeler and Westmoreland could point to heavy enemy casualties as evidence that the NLF and PAVN had failed to achieve their objectives and were vulnerable to a U.S. and ARVN counterattack. But the offensive had belied their optimism of late 1967 while vindicating the CIA's pessimistic judgments. Further, the CIA and INR's assessments contradicted a critical aspect of Wheeler and Westmoreland's argument. As we have seen, analysts concluded that Hanoi's infiltration infrastructure was sufficiently advanced to allow the enemy to match any American troop increase. But the assessments advancing that conclusion did not cite sources. And for Johnson to use CIA or INR analysis to justify rejecting Westmoreland's request would be a major change in his approach to the war. LBJ had refused

Westmoreland's April 1967 request for nearly the same number of men largely because

⁴⁹ Hughes to Rusk, INR Intelligence Note, "VIETNAM: Communist Strategy in Prospect and Retrospect," Mar. 2, 1968, pp. 11-12. Record Group 59, State Department 1967-1969 Subject Numeric File POL 27 VIET S, NARA II.

Johnson thought the COMUSMACV's plan to invade the southern reaches of the DRV too aggressive rather than pessimistic intelligence. But Wheeler and Westmoreland presented the 206,000-man request as the last one Johnson would have to approve for U.S. forces to win the war. That argument, along with its corollary -- failure to approve the request would spell disaster for the war effort -- spoke to Johnson's desire to not be the first American president to lose a war. So Johnson decided to wait for incoming Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford to complete what Johnson called an "A to Z" review of U.S. policy in Vietnam before reaching a decision.

Clifford came to Washington with a reputation as a hawk and ardent LBJ supporter, but his preconceptions changed after the task force that he chaired to conduct the review came to some sobering conclusions regarding the troop augmentation.⁵⁰ The task force, which included DCI Helms, met from March 1, when Clifford formally assumed the duties of Defense Secretary, through March 4, when Clifford presented his findings to Johnson. The task force's meetings were daylong affairs, and were also, as Clifford put it, "vigorous, ruthlessly frank ... and exhausting."⁵¹ The task force examined hundreds of documents over these three days. Among these were three CIA reports that Helms presented on March 2 and 3.⁵² The first was the February 26 ONE analysis

⁵⁰ Clark M. Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal: The Personal History of One Man's View and How It Evolved" *Foreign Affairs* 47(4) (July 1969): 610-611. See also Clark M. Clifford and Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 474-524.

⁵¹ Clifford, "A Viet-Nam Reappraisal," 609-610.

⁵² See Memo from Carver to Helms, "The Bombing Decisions -- 31 March and 1 November 1968," Mar. 31, 1970, pp. 4-5, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T01629R000300070055-](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T01629R000300070055-329)

arguing that Hanoi would likely not mount another surprise offensive for the foreseeable future. The second was a report dated February 29 claiming that the enemy's position was strong enough to allow either for an increased tempo in fighting or a return to protracted warfare. The report assessed the likelihood of another offensive like January's as low, since Hanoi would "probably" deem such a plan "far too risky."⁵³ The third was the March 1 ONE report estimating that the enemy would almost certainly be able to match an extra 206,000 American troops, that neither side was likely to win a decisive victory over the next 10 months, and that Hanoi would not come to a peace table absent a bombing cessation.⁵⁴

Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy agreed with the CIA that the chances for negotiations were slim. In a summary of options dated March 3, he noted that the immediate prospects for negotiations were slim to none. One must recall that in a September 1967 speech in San Antonio, Johnson had stated that he would be willing to cease the bombing if Hanoi would agree to negotiations. Bundy used that formula as the starting point in his analysis. The former CIA officer agreed with his old agency that the GVN would be "highly sensitive" to any change in that formula, although he did claim

5.pdf (accessed Feb. 23, 2018) for a summary of the task force meetings from Carver's perspective.

⁵³ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Communist Alternatives in Vietnam," Feb. 29, 1968, Digital National Security Archive: <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679081525?accountid=14270> (accessed Jul. 5, 2018).

⁵⁴ "Questions Concerning the Situation in Vietnam" *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, pp. 289-290. The agency had also concluded that it would take the communists roughly six months to recoup their losses from the January 30-31 offensive. See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Communists' Ability to Recoup Their Tet Military Losses," Mar. 1, 1968. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6ir3G3> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018).

that GVN officials were receptive to the idea of engaging in some form of negotiations. Still, any attempt to “modify the San Antonio formula downward” by agreeing to terms more favorable to the enemy “would be extremely disturbing in South Vietnam.” Bundy concluded that the San Antonio formula should function as the starting point for U.S. and RVN talks with Hanoi and the NLF. Though his interpretation of Hanoi’s stance on negotiations aligned with the CIA’s, Bundy did not cite any agency products in his report.⁵⁵

Task force participants Paul Nitze and Paul Warnke (the “two Pauls”) drew directly from the CIA’s findings. On February 29 Warnke’s office requested that the CIA examine topics like the course of events over the rest of 1968, the enemy’s military strategy, how the enemy, Russia, and China might respond to Westmoreland’s troop request being filled, and what Hanoi might do if the administration at a minimum paused Rolling Thunder. On the same day, a group of senior advisers that included Nitze asked the agency to prepare reports covering a set of similar questions. The CIA covered these matters in several of the March 1 and 2 reports used at the meeting.⁵⁶ During the task force’s first meeting day, Nitze told Clifford that the bombing should be halted completely, with only a maximum of 50,000 additional troops earmarked for General Westmoreland. Warnke argued that whether the U.S. had succeeded on the battlefield

⁵⁵ William Bundy, “Negotiating Posture Options, and Possible Diplomatic Actions,” Mar. 3, 1968, U.S. Declassified Documents Online, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/4YE7Y0](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/4YE7Y0) (accessed Mar. 17, 2017).

⁵⁶ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 126-27.

made little difference, since winning battles would never bring political stability to the RVN.⁵⁷

Nitze and Warnke adopted the CIA's pessimism because the agency's findings squared with their preconceptions on the war. Warnke in particular had been dovish for many months leading up to the task force meetings. In October 1967 Warnke collaborated with Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Morton Halperin, Carver, and Richard Lehman on a study that recommended curtailing the bombing and opening negotiations. Carver later noted that the final report "was much more Warnke and Halperin's paper than it was mine."⁵⁸ At first blush, Nitze's pessimism is at odds with his record. As Policy Planning Council Chairman under President Truman, he was one of the key drafters of National Security Council Paper 68, which established aggressive "rollback" of Communist gains worldwide as an integral part of American Cold War strategy. But Nitze considered the USSR to be America's foremost enemy. Intervention in Vietnam distracted from dealing with the Soviets. He never opposed the war outright, and even offered tepid support of escalation in a meeting with Johnson in July 1965. But he also never believed the optimistic assessments of the war from Rostow and other

⁵⁷ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 126.

⁵⁸ Carver to Helms, "The Bombing Decisions: 31 March and 1 November 1968," Mar. 31, 1970, p. 2. In October 1967, Carver was much more skeptical than Warnke that stopping the bombing would lead to negotiations. In a memo to Rostow that month, Carver pointed out that multiple bombing pauses had not led to peace talks, and that this point needed "to be hammered home to the world at large." See memo from Carver to Rostow, "Comments on Draft Presidential Statement," Oct. 26 1967, p. 2. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/4XrCM0](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/4XrCM0) (accessed Mar. 16, 2017).

hawks, and once threatened to resign rather than defend the administration's policies before Sen. J. William Fulbright's Armed Services Committee.⁵⁹

Nitze and Warnke's close relationships with Clark Clifford enabled them to use the CIA's findings to inform policy. Harold Ford contends that Nitze's and Warnke's arguments were more influential over policy than the CIA's findings, but this argument misunderstands the relationship between the CIA and the two Pauls.⁶⁰ Nitze and Warnke were policymakers; the CIA was not. Therefore, the CIA's job was to inform their thinking and deliberations, not compete with them for influence. Nitze's and Warnke's influence with Clifford helped ensure that the CIA's findings would influence his decision-making. Warnke was particularly influential, since Clifford gave him review authority over the task force's final report.⁶¹

The skepticism regarding the augmentation request won out over Westmoreland and Wheeler's belligerence. Clifford concluded that Westmoreland should receive only 22,000 additional personnel, which would only be enough to deal with any emergencies that might arise over the next few months.⁶² Clifford presented his conclusion to Johnson by remarking that the US was now at a watershed. LBJ had a choice to no longer conduct

⁵⁹ See David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2015), 319-26.

⁶⁰ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 137.

⁶¹ *US-Vietnam Relations*, Book IV.C.6.c, pp. 17-18. Warnke, along with his assistants Alain Enthoven, Morton Halperin, and Richard Steadman acted as a policy review board for the task force's report before Johnson received it. See also Immerman, "A Time in the Tide of Men's Affairs," 71-75.

⁶² Notes of Meeting, Mar. 4, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 104, p. 318.

the war by continually sending more and more men to kill enemy troops that could be continually replenished.⁶³ This conclusion was in line with the CIA's judgments. Johnson agreed with Clifford. He approved sending 22,000 troops, but no more.

Johnson's rejection of Westmoreland's troop request reflected his shifting preconceptions on the war effort. As we have seen, LBJ had been pessimistic on further escalation of the ground war since he turned down Westmoreland, Rostow, and the Chiefs' request for an additional 200,000 troops in April 1967. Though Johnson was intent on not losing in Vietnam at the beginning of 1968, he was already skeptical of major troop increases even before Tet. The shock of the offensive only deepened that skepticism. Clifford's close relationship with LBJ provided him with membership in Johnson's inner circle from the first day of his tenure as Secretary of Defense. Thus, he was in a prime position to use the CIA's findings to reinforce Johnson's pessimism on the ability of troop increases to achieve any positive result in Vietnam. And because Johnson's preconceptions had shifted in line with the CIA's conclusions, the mediocre or poor analytical tradecraft in many CIA analyses no longer weakened the agency's ability to inform policy.

But Johnson's shift did not make him a more sophisticated consumer of intelligence. As had McNamara, he continued to cherry pick analyses that were congruent with his beliefs after his beliefs changed. Johnson did not follow Clifford's advice because he found the CIA's post-offensive analysis uncommonly persuasive. As we have seen, LBJ had ignored CIA analyses that manifested excellent analytic tradecraft in the past, such as the agency's Rolling Thunder appraisals. Rather, the offensive vindicated

⁶³ Notes of Meeting, Mar. 4, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, p. 318.

much of the CIA's pre-offensive pessimism and made Johnson more receptive to the agency's conclusions. Additionally, Clifford's close relationship with LBJ increased his receptivity to the CIA's findings when Clifford used them to underpin his recommendations.

Wheeler informed Westmoreland of Johnson's decision and sought to protect himself in the process. On March 8 the JCS Chair cabled the COMUSMACV to report that Clifford, who Wheeler described as "astute, intelligent, and able," had recommended against the request due to widespread doubts among the American public and business community regarding the war. Johnson had refused to call up the reserves when the war was popular in 1965. He would not use those troops when public support for his administration had cratered. Additionally, a sudden economic crisis caused by a sharp contraction in the global gold supply made the cost of calling up so many troops prohibitive.⁶⁴ Wheeler did not mention that Clifford, with the support of the CIA, had become profoundly skeptical of any claims that fulfilling the augmentation request would help the US and ARVN finish off the enemy forces. Instead he blamed everything on a gloomy public and news media. He also recommended that Westmoreland adopt a "conservative" approach to describing the war, eschewing all predictions of victory in the short term, while holding the line against any further enemy attacks.⁶⁵ In doing so, Wheeler protected his bureaucratic flank. Wheeler had been present during the meetings in which Johnson decided not to fulfill the augmentation request, while Westmoreland

⁶⁴ See Robert M. Collins, "The Economic Crisis of 1968 and the Waning of the 'American Century'" *The American Historical Review* 101(2) (Apr. 1996), 396-422.

⁶⁵ Cable from Wheeler to Westmoreland and Sharp, Mar. 8, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 112, pp. 351-353.

had not. Wheeler thus understood how outnumbered he and Westmoreland were better than the MACV commander did. The public and news media served as a convenient scapegoat, since Wheeler knew that Johnson's decision was final and Westmoreland was unlikely to change the president's mind.

But Westmoreland did not understand how dead set against fulfilling the augmentation request Johnson and Clifford were and lacked Wheeler's savvy. He replied to Wheeler's cable by stating that although another 22,000 men were welcome, he still needed the 206,000. Wheeler delivered this news to Clifford delicately, noting that "there has been no change in [Westmoreland's] appraisal of the situation ... and thus there has been no change in his requirements as initially proposed."⁶⁶ Wheeler was far less guarded with Westmoreland, bluntly warning him that the reserve call-up necessary to fill his request would raise "unshirted hell" and that he should not count on receiving any more than 30,000 troops at the most.⁶⁷

Political and economic developments over the next few days diminished the probability of Johnson changing his mind. Westmoreland's augmentation request leaked to the media on March 10. The leak coincided with the gold crisis' peak.⁶⁸ That crisis had already damaged Johnson's approval ratings, and the shock of the Tet Offensive buttressed many Americans's reservations about further escalation of the war. Johnson's approval tumbled in advance of the New Hampshire primary on March 12. While

⁶⁶ Memorandum from Wheeler to Clifford, "COMUSMACV Force Requirements," Mar. 8, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 114, p. 356.

⁶⁷ Telegram JCS 2767, Wheeler to Westmoreland, Mar. 9, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 115, p. 358.

⁶⁸ Collins, "The Economic Crisis of 1968," 414.

Johnson did not lose the primary, insurgent challenger and dove Senator Eugene McCarthy came within several hundred votes of winning. Two days after New Hampshire exposed Johnson's electoral weakness, Bobby Kennedy declared his intention to run for president, also as an antiwar candidate.⁶⁹

Westmoreland's request continued to complicate matters for Johnson in the following weeks. Polling taken several weeks prior to the April 2 Wisconsin primary indicated that Johnson might lose to McCarthy by a wide margin there. One Democratic delegate stated that the troop request had "finished" Johnson: "He could get away with that piecemeal escalation, but no more. People around here are just sick and tired of the war."⁷⁰ On March 26, both Wheeler and General Creighton Abrams, who would soon succeed Westmoreland as COMUSMACV, tried to lift Johnson's spirits with sunny assessments. Neither general mentioned prospects for knocking out the PAVN and NLF. But Abrams argued that the ARVN was in good shape, that the enemy had taken far too much punishment at Khe Sanh and Hue to consider attacking either position again in the near future, and that the Tet Offensive, driven by desperation rather than confidence, represented a permanent shift away from guerilla warfare.⁷¹ But Johnson would have none of it: "I will have overwhelming disapproval in the polls and elections. I will go

⁶⁹ Prados, *Vietnam*, 248.

⁷⁰ Steven V. Roberts, "McCarthy Appeal Wide In Wisconsin: Political Experts Give Him A Good Chance In Primary" *The New York Times*, Mar. 24, 1968, 31.

⁷¹ See Notes of Meeting, Mar. 26, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 156, pp. 459-465; Notes of Meeting, Mar. 26, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 157, pp. 466-470.

down the drain ... We have no support for the war. This is caused by the 206,000 troop request, leaks, Ted Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy.”⁷²

The Wise Men Meeting and March 31 Speech

Johnson received other bad news in late March besides a lack of public support for the war. His group of “Wise Men” met on March 25 to discuss the war effort. Their previous meeting of November 1, 1967, ended with a recommendation to stay the course in Vietnam. But after a series of lengthy briefings by military, intelligence, and diplomatic officials, they arrived at different conclusions this time. In an update on the military situation, Army General William DePuy claimed that the enemy had lost 80,000 dead with a dead-to-wounded ratio of 1:3 (putting Hanoi’s total casualties at 320,000). Longtime Johnson confidant Arthur Goldberg. Immediately challenged his numbers. Goldberg pointed out that the pre-offensive order of battle information assessed Hanoi’s full strength at 240,000. He stumped DePuy by asking, “Who are we fighting?”⁷³

Carver’s briefing showed that he no longer held to his pre-offensive optimism. He warned the Wise Men that while the enemy’s primary objective of destroying the GVN in a massive uprising had failed, the offensive was not over and the enemy would continue to erode the GVN and U.S. will to continue fighting while also recruiting RVN

⁷² Notes of Meeting, Mar. 26, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 156, p. 463.

⁷³ Arthur J. Goldberg Oral History, Interview I with Ted Gittenger, Mar. 23, 1983, LBJL, p. 11: http://web2.millercenter.org/lbj/oralhistory/goldberg_arthur_1983_0323.pdf (accessed May 3, 2016).

civilians.⁷⁴ Carver also advised the Wise Men that progress in pacification would be slower than the Wise Men had thought at their last meeting. Clifford later noted that this latter view was “hardly a controversial conclusion by late March.”⁷⁵

The most negative briefing came from the State Department’s Philip Habib. Habib had recently returned from a fact-finding trip to Vietnam. In a 1984 oral history, he stated that he gave his report immediately after returning from Saigon and based his conclusions on what he learned: “I spoke from an outline on a yellow pad. I never kept any papers, I don’t know what the hell I said.”⁷⁶ The lack of any supporting documentation for Habib’s presentation suggests that he indeed based his report on his firsthand observations in Saigon. He asserted that the Tet Offensive had caused massive damage to the GVN administrative structure in the countryside and crippled the pacification and rural development programs.⁷⁷ INR’s assessment aligned with Habib’s. The bureau had published an Intelligence Note the previous day detailing how Communist guerillas had taken advantage of U.S. and ARVN movements into urban areas by establishing general control of rural regions throughout the RVN, thus setting

⁷⁴ See “Notes for Establishment Briefing II – 25 March 1968” in Carver to Helms, “The Bombing Decisions.”

⁷⁵ Clifford with Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President*, 512.

⁷⁶ Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Philip Habib, interview with Edward Mulcahy, May 24, 1984: <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Habib,%20Philip%20C.toc.pdf> (accessed Dec. 4, 2015).

⁷⁷ See Habib ADST interview, May 24, 1984, pp. 43, 45.

back pacification significantly.⁷⁸ There is no evidence that the Wise Men saw INR's findings. But Habib did not need additional support to convey the gravity of the situation. Clifford later recalled that Habib's briefing stood out the most due to its comprehensiveness and grim tone, referring to it as "full of hard facts and honest opinions."⁷⁹

The briefings influenced a sufficient number of the Wise Men to tip the balance of opinion in favor of withdrawal from Vietnam. Dean Acheson, the former secretary of state who had fervently defended Americanization of the conflict, summed up the majority point of view: Because the United States could not accomplish its goals, disengagement was the best course. On March 26, the Wise Men met with Johnson and recommended that he disengage.⁸⁰ After Johnson listened to their recommendations, he joked that the first thing he would do once all of them left was "to get those briefers last night."⁸¹ And upon leaving the room, the president famously grouched that the CIA had "poisoned the well."⁸²

LBJ found no relief in his own assessment of the situation. After meeting with the Wise Men, Johnson demanded to receive the same set of briefings that they had. Except

⁷⁸ Hughes to Rusk, INR Intelligence Note 161, Feb. 29, 1968, "The Countryside in the Wake of the VC Urban Offensive," pp. 2, 8. POL 27 VIET S, Box 2804, NARA II.

⁷⁹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 134.

⁸⁰ Notes of Meeting, Mar. 26, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 158, pp. 471-474; Prados, *Vietnam*, 249; Clifford with Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President*, 513.

⁸¹ Notes of Meeting, Mar. 26, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 158, pp. 471, 473.

⁸² Immerman, "A Time in the Tide of Men's Affairs," 79.

for Habib, who was out of town, the briefers met with the President, Helms, and several other officials on March 27. Carver began by delivering the same briefing that he had given the Wise Men. From there he transitioned to the rate at which Hanoi was replenishing its forces. Johnson had previously requested that Carver's office take a fresh look at this matter, and the resulting study came out the day before Carver met with LBJ. Carver's work showed that while plenty had gone wrong for Hanoi in the January offensive, recent Communist reinforcements more than made up for the casualties that the PAVN had sustained. Carver mentioned that the "usual indicators of infiltration" (meaning intercepted signals, contact with enemy units, aerial surveillance, and road watch team reports) showed a "significant increase" in infiltration during February and March. Most of these new troops went toward reinforcing PAVN units, the relative strength of which increased from 50% on November 1, 1967, to 63% by March 25, 1968. According to Carver, the total relative strength of the PAVN and NLF forces in the south was 164,000, which was 22,000 more than the CIA estimated were stationed in the RVN on November 1, 1967. Two thirds of those enemy troops were PAVN. Reinforcements from the DRV had "been more than adequate to maintain [PAVN] force levels at their pre-Tet level of some 100,000 troops."⁸³

While these new troops were probably less well trained than the battle-hardened cadres they replaced, the principal problem was clear: Hanoi's supply of manpower still appeared almost endless. Further, Carver argued that most of the Communist casualties had been NLF, whether main force or irregular units. The DRV was the primary source

⁸³ Memo from Carver to Rostow, "The Growing Strength of North Vietnamese Forces in South Vietnam," Mar. 26, 1968, National Security Files, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Box 2, LBJL.

of reinforcements for both PAVN and NLF losses, showing that despite U.S. aviators' best efforts, infiltration had risen. Indeed, Carver noted that unspecified "unusually good evidence" indicated that at least 20 battalion-size infiltration groups had moved southward through the central area of the DRV during March, and that the infiltration network was under heavy pressure to deploy even more troops into the RVN soon.⁸⁴ Carver's assessment showed that Wheeler and Westmoreland were correct that the enemy had suffered grievous casualties, but their argument that the DRV was near defeat failed to account for Hanoi's adaptability and near-bottomless manpower stores. Carver's work also captured how Hanoi would rely on the PAVN going forward, due to the crippling casualties that the NLF suffered.

Carver, who had long breached the traditional barrier between intelligence and policy by making policy recommendations, spent his concluding remarks encouraging Johnson to place his emphasis on negotiations. Carver argued that a tough US attitude could make an important difference on the diplomatic front, and that the next 2-4 months would be decisive. He also argued that Hanoi could "always accept [the San Antonio formula]" and so LBJ had to persevere in that regard. Carver had first merged his responsibilities as an intelligence officer with the behavior of a policy advisor when he recommended in August 1963 that Kennedy eject Ngo Dinh Diem's entire family from power. He continued prescribing policy throughout the conflict, such as when he recommended to Dean Rusk and Johnson that the United States accede to Thich Tri Quang's demands as a means of solving the 1966 Buddhist Crisis. Rather than discipline

⁸⁴ Carver to Rostow, Mar. 26, 1968, 3. The specific source of this information has been redacted from the text of the document.

Carver for violating the line between intelligence and policy, Kennedy, Johnson, and their top advisors rewarded him with increased access to policy circles.

Once again, Carver's violation of the barrier between intelligence and policy did not bother Johnson. After Carver's briefing concluded, LBJ began to storm out, causing Carver to fear for his career. But the President turned around and walked across the meeting room, where he slapped Carver on the back, gave him a vigorous handshake, and congratulated him on a job well done.⁸⁵ Carver reported to Helms' office shortly thereafter. Exhausted, he sank into a large armchair, looking, as Helms put it, "like the bedraggled sparrow that had taken the shortcut across a badminton court."⁸⁶

Another intelligence community product gave more evidence of the enemy's nearly bottomless supply of manpower. On March 30, the CIA and DIA released a joint report projecting enemy attrition rates during 1968 and 1969. This report's purpose was to list every enemy force and extrapolate from that data how Hanoi might withstand attrition under a worst-case scenario for the DRV. The analysts' fundamental assumption was that combat for the rest of 1968 would be at a higher level than 1967 (but without another conventional offensive), with no decrease in bombing.⁸⁷ The agencies concluded that Hanoi might run low on well-trained officers due to attrition.⁸⁸ But the regime would

⁸⁵ Carver to Helms, "The Bombing Decisions," p. 6.

⁸⁶ See Notes of Meeting, Mar. 27, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 162, pp. 481-483; and Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 332 for an account of the March 27 meeting.

⁸⁷ CIA/DIA Intelligence Report, "The Attrition of Vietnamese Communist Forces, 1968-1969," Mar. 30, 1968, 1-2. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6ir457> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018).

⁸⁸ "The Attrition of Communist Forces, 1968-1969," 9.

still be able to meet all its manpower requirements. The report estimated that Hanoi could draft 500,000 workers from the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors with only a “slight” negative economic impact.⁸⁹

The report used sound tradecraft. The assumption that combat would remain higher in 1968 than 1967 was not the analysts’ judgment of what would happen, but rather a working hypothesis that would ultimately lead to a judgment.⁹⁰ As evidence, the report used pre-existing CIA estimates of enemy strength and recruitment rate, along with U.S. Census Department estimates of the DRV population. Using this methodology allowed the analysts to take a more holistic view of the enemy forces than the politicized Order of Battle debate allowed. Official O/B numbers only included enemy troops stationed in the RVN. But the report’s premise allowed the CIA and DIA analysts to include PAVN troops stationed in the DRV and Laos, as well as the “insurgency base” of part-time guerillas and other NLF supporters that MACV had fought to keep out of the O/B calculation in 1967. Doing so enabled them to show that the enemy could draw on enough reinforcements to prolong the war even if the fighting continued at its 1968 peak.

Wheeler interpreted the study’s findings as positively as he could. In a cover memo to Clifford, he argued that the study showed that the US needed to, at a minimum, continue the bombing and ground campaign at high levels. But since doing so was unlikely to win the war, increased pressure was necessary. Wheeler requested intensified bombing, arguing that doing so would lead to huge manpower losses through “dislocation

⁸⁹ “The Attrition of Communist Forces, 1968-1969,” 21-22.

⁹⁰ Because sources are invariably incomplete or ambiguous, intelligence analysts must begin with assumptions. Good tradecraft requires the analysts explicitly state those assumptions and correlate them with confidence levels.

and disruption” as well as “increases in population control problems.”⁹¹ This argument was in line with Wheeler’s long-held preconception that escalated bombing was critical to forcing Hanoi to capitulate. Wheeler also mentioned that invading the DRV would surely cause higher attrition rates. Clifford, unpersuaded, did not forward Wheeler’s analysis to Johnson.

Johnson responded to the deluge of bleak prognoses by delivering a nationally televised address on the war on March 31. His speechwriters, along with Clifford, worked on the speech for several days. LBJ himself made a few edits at the last minute, and famously instructed his speechwriters to let him write the conclusion. As part of the speech, Johnson adopted McNamara’s plan from May 1967 for cutting back the bombing to the area between the 20th parallel and the DMZ as a prelude to negotiations. Clifford had resurrected the idea in a March 22 meeting.⁹² Dean Rusk and speechwriter Harry McPherson also supported the plan in separate memoranda to LBJ. Johnson approved it after meeting with the Wise Men.⁹³ His lack of control over events in Vietnam combined with a 36 percent approval rating left him little choice otherwise.⁹⁴ On March 31, Johnson announced the plan in a speech that McPherson wrote. At the last minute, Johnson

⁹¹ Wheeler to Clifford, “The Attrition Study,” Mar. 30, 1968, p. 2. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/62JLy8>. (accessed Feb. 23, 2018).

⁹² Notes of Meeting, Mar. 22, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 149, p. 446.

⁹³ Edward J. Drea, *Secretaries of Defense Historical Series Vol. VI: McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), 224-25.

⁹⁴ Immerman, “A Time in the Tide of Men’s Affairs,” 76-81.

changed the phrase “north of the 20th parallel” to “north of the Demilitarized Zone, where the continuing enemy buildup directly threatens allied forward positions.”⁹⁵

Johnson’s speech attempted to balance firmness with magnanimity. He began by framing the speech as a means “to speak of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.” He spoke of the Tet Offensive, and noted that the enemy had tried to make 1968 a decisive year. He focused on promoting negotiations between the US and DRV, as well as projecting what LBJ likely thought was the correct attitude. Johnson had placed a premium on projecting toughness and resolve as war leader, and he continued to do so in the March 31 speech, stating that “our common resolve is unshakeable, and our common strength is invincible.” He announced the cutback in bombing, and reiterated that the United States stood ready to negotiate. He closed with the Shermansesque statement that, for many, would define his final year in office: “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”⁹⁶

George Carver’s Shift in Opinion and Use of Policy Prescription

Representing the CIA, George Carver was one of the most important figures in informing policy over the two months following the Tet Offensive. On March 27, he gave the longest briefing of his career, based partly on evidence produced by his office indicating how badly the American war effort was faring. That briefing was pivotal to Johnson’s decision to focus on negotiations, and was a reflection not only of his own conclusions but also the extent to which Carver had managed to gain influence over

⁹⁵ Immerman, “A Time in the Tide of Men’s Affairs,” 81.

⁹⁶ See Editorial Note, *FRUS, Vietnam, January-August 1968*, 494-495.

several policymakers in Johnson's inner circle since his appointment as SAVA. Carver acquired such influence in part because of his optimistic views on the war effort. David Halberstam wrote later that "savvy Washington circles" recognized that Carver's reporting to senior policymakers, particularly Rostow, was frequently more optimistic than the bulk of the agency's findings.⁹⁷ That optimism had manifested several weeks before Tet, when Carver rejected Saigon Station's warnings of an imminent offensive in correspondence with Rostow.⁹⁸

Carver changed his mind because the shock of the offensive, combined with the avalanche of post-Tet intelligence analysis, convinced him that his pre-offensive optimism had been wrong. On February 12, he called a Defense Department claim that the ARVN had returned to its pre-offensive strength "a hard statement to credit."⁹⁹ On February 22, he admitted that "[w]e all greatly underestimated the VC logistical buildup" in the Mekong Delta region, which he thought was "going to the VC by default" due to poor American preparation.¹⁰⁰ His own office's March 26 estimate of enemy strength showed that despite heavy casualties, Hanoi still maintained a strong presence in the RVN. Though Carver was more hopeful about the war effort than the rest of the CIA

⁹⁷ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 638.

⁹⁸ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 136.

⁹⁹ Memo from Carver to McNamara, "RVNAF Tet Leave Arrangements and Strength," Feb. 12, 1968, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000500090067-1.pdf> (accessed Jun. 14, 2017).

¹⁰⁰ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Carver to [redacted], "Situation Report in IV Corps, 22 February 1968," Feb. 22, 1968, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp80r01720r000500090053-6> (accessed Jun. 14, 2017).

during 1966 and 1967, the weight of the post-Tet evidence forced him to change course in February and March 1968.

Ironically, and a critical piece of the intelligence-policymaking puzzle, Carver's ability to inform Johnson's decision-making hinged on his eagerness to overstep his role as an intelligence officer by recommending policy. Carver's goal in making assessments of the war that contravened other CIA analyses was not to confirm the beliefs of his customers, although he frequently did. Rather, it was to push his preferred policies. Carver's skill at policy advocacy led him to develop close working relationships with many influential Johnson administration officials. As we have seen, Carver's previous interventions into policymaking met with praise from his customers — not censorship. Thus, Carver was in a prime position to inform Johnson's decision-making after the Tet Offensive. But that position came at the cost of a basic boundary between intelligence and policy.

Carver was again rewarded for recommending policy after his March 27 briefing. Vice President Hubert Humphrey sent him a note on April 19, 1968 to “congratulate you on the superb job you did in briefing the President and his senior advisers ... it was a brutally frank and forthright analysis. The President's speech of March 31 indicated that your briefings had a profound effect on the course of U.S. policy in Vietnam.”¹⁰¹ Humphrey left out that only by violating the divide between intelligence and policy could Carver have such influence on Vietnam-related policy. Carver kept the note on display in

¹⁰¹ Humphrey to Carver, Apr. 19, 1968, in “Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam.” CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000100070001-9.pdf> (accessed Jun. 14, 2017).

his Washington, DC office for many years after the war ended.¹⁰² Clearly, he never regretted changing his mind. Nor did he regret violating one of the basic precepts of intelligence analysis to express that shift in opinion. Carver's subversion of the intelligence-policy nexus was beneficial in the short-term in that his recommendations were critical towards Johnson's decision to de-escalate the war. But his actions also showed how badly damaged that nexus was by the final year of Johnson's administration.

After over three years of being mostly disregarded, the CIA's judgments took center stage in policy decisions for the two months immediately following the Tet Offensive. When combined with INR and DIA, they helped convince Johnson that he could no longer escalate the war. LBJ had mostly ignored gloomy intelligence reports concerning escalation from 1964 through 1967. But the Tet Offensive and growing political instability at home forced LBJ to accept that the war had become an intractable stalemate. Indeed, Johnson began paying attention to pessimistic intelligence reporting instead of the more optimistic military intelligence in part because of his lack of domestic support.

Yet as negotiations between the United States and the DRV began following the March 31 speech, Johnson reverted to many of his pre-Tet preconceptions. Though his political career was nearly over, he was still obsessed with not being the first American president to lose a war. He regarded the Hanoi government as fundamentally untrustworthy after Tet, and did not think they would negotiate in good faith. DCI Helms thus found himself in a delicate position. Relegated to the periphery of Johnson's

¹⁰² Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 137.

policymaking architecture for the initial years of his tenure, he had succeeded in gaining access to the inner circle. He would encounter great difficulty remaining there.

CHAPTER 7

NO GAINS BY WEAKNESS: INTELLIGENCE AND VIETNAM AFTER THE MARCH 31 SPEECH, APRIL – NOVEMBER 1968

Johnson's demeanor during his March 31 speech made him seem a changed man. Gone was the confident president who had won a landslide victory in 1964. In his place was a humbled, soft-spoken (or as soft-spoken as LBJ could ever be) man who chose to end his political career for fear that if he did not, Bobby Kennedy or Eugene McCarthy would end it for him. And as we have seen, the speech reflected Johnson's loss of faith that the U.S. could still achieve its strategic goals in Vietnam after the Tet Offensive broke out. His use of intelligence in February and March 1968 also reflected that loss of faith.

But Johnson's chastened appearance was deceiving, as the speech represented an aberration rather than a permanent shift in terms of how he fought the Vietnam War or managed his administration. The order of battle controversy flared up once more in April 1968, but MACV remained unwilling to compromise out of concern that raising the enemy O/B would hurt public opinion on the war effort. Efforts to change the O/B formula failed once again in the face of MACV's obstinacy. The IC undertook a postmortem of its performance in the run-up to Tet, but the study was too narrowly focused to identify the root causes of the problems that lay behind the failure to predict the offensive. And Johnson continued to bend intelligence analyses to his preconceptions. The president sought to end hostilities and to induce Hanoi to respect the RVN's

sovereignty after the March 31 speech. But he repeatedly defaulted to two preconceptions throughout the negotiations that consumed the rest of the year. The first was that military aggressiveness could safeguard his legacy by securing a strong peace agreement. The second was that Hanoi could not be trusted during talks. He filtered out all analyses inconsistent with these priorities.

Johnson's cabinet remained divided on the war effort. Walt Rostow, Earle Wheeler, and Dean Rusk all remained unabashed hawks. But Clark Clifford's newfound skepticism on the war frequently led him to advise patience rather than belligerence. Clifford's friendship with Johnson continued to grant him a secure spot in LBJ's inner circle despite his dovishness. That relationship meant that the new Defense Secretary was occasionally successful in persuading Johnson to take the less aggressive course of action.

Throughout the remainder of 1968, the CIA maintained its policy relevance chiefly due to reports that bolstered Johnson's preconceived notions on the war. Particularly important was a series of weekly reports monitoring DRV activity immediately north of the demilitarized zone. The agency began publishing these reports soon after the March 31 speech. Like the PDBs and Vietnam situation updates, these products often reported events without including much context or analysis of their implications for U.S. policy. Johnson could therefore interpret their findings however he liked.

Johnson encountered no resistance from Helms. The DCI remained in Johnson's inner circle after the March 31 speech, but the CIA's failure to anticipate the Tet Offensive left Helms eager to prevent a similar surprise later that year. As in 1967, Helms

did not pressure analysts to change their conclusions or otherwise actively manipulate intelligence. In his zeal to prevent another surprise attack, however, he focused on enemy troop and logistical movements during meetings, which helped distort Johnson's perception of Hanoi's intentions. The CIA and INR both estimated that the DRV's negotiating strategy called for maintaining a high level of combat to have as much leverage as possible at the peace table. This strategy, which analysts variously called "fight-talk," "talk-fight," or "talk, fight, talk," had been documented in assessments of Hanoi's intentions dating back to the 1966 Will to Persist study. Yet Helms studiously kept Johnson up to date on enemy military actions while avoiding mention of the peace talks except to express pessimism on their potential outcome. Doing so helped reinforce Johnson's conviction that Hanoi was not negotiating in good faith. Rather than see DRV military aggression as part of a larger negotiation strategy, Johnson interpreted it as stalling for time. Helms did nothing to correct this belief.

Helms' actions had major ramifications because he was often the IC's only representative in meetings where LBJ reached decisions regarding the talks. Despite the influence that he had accumulated over the years and his critical role in the Wise Men meetings of March 25 and 27, George Carver never became a regular attendee of Johnson's Tuesday Lunches. That lack of access reduced any influence he might have had over the peace talks. No notes exist for the Tuesday Lunches of 1965 and 1966. But beginning in 1967 and continuing throughout 1968, White House secretary Thomas Johnson (no relation to LBJ) kept detailed notes of each meeting. These notes reveal that LBJ made most of his decisions about the talks during Tuesday Lunches. Thus, despite his status as SAVA, Carver played no direct role in the decision-making regarding the

1968 talks due to Johnson's informal policymaking apparatus. And because Helms was so focused on preventing another offensive, intelligence analyses on the negotiations often fell by the wayside.

The American diplomatic team in Paris thus had little guidance from Washington until October. That month, the diplomats achieved a breakthrough with their DRV counterparts that led to a full bombing halt and the commencement of formal talks several weeks later. But the breakthrough came too late. RVN President Nguyen Van Thieu consistently distrusted Johnson's intentions. Republican fundraiser Anna Chennault met with RVN Ambassador to the U.S. Bui Diem to urge the GVN to hold out past the presidential election starting in late October. Thieu cast his lot with Richard Nixon, as he thought the Republican presidential candidate would protect his position more assiduously than Johnson. His refusal to take part in the talks sank any chance for peace.

“You Boggle At Our Numbers; I Boggle At Yours”

In spring 1968 the CIA reopened the Order of Battle dispute. MACV estimated that 77,000 enemy troops had been involved in the offensive. A CIA March 1 report examining the rate at which the enemy could replenish its losses noted that figure was “exceedingly difficult to accept” since the enemy death count was 38,600, and yet the high level of combat after the offensive did not suggest that Hanoi had lost 50% of its troops. Including even a conservative estimate of enemy troops who were permanently disabled or died later brought the total number of enemy casualties to over 51,600. That

figure rendered MACV's estimate "even more unacceptable."¹ Nor was Arthur Goldberg the first to figure out that MACV's enemy casualty estimates were higher than its O/B estimates. Several CIA analysts made that observation throughout March before the Wise Men meetings.² Yet MACV J-2 refused to alter its findings.

MACV's continued intransigence again prevented any compromise during a mid-April conference on the O/B question. An anecdote from the conference's first day illustrates how the negotiations proceeded. Helms made a brief opening appeal for the conference attendees to approach the problem in good faith. Then he left the room, and MACV representative Col. Daniel Graham stood up. According to U.S. Army Major Don Blascak, who was on a temporary assignment to SAVA at the time, Graham exclaimed, "I don't care what the fuck Mr. Helms says. The MACV position is going to prevail."³

Throughout the six-day conference, CIA and MACV's arguments both remained unchanged from the debates of the previous year. The CIA refused to back down from its preferred methodology of including part-time guerillas and other members of "the insurgency base" in the enemy O/B count along with main force PAVN troops. Graham spoke next. According to the conference minutes, he opened his statement with "You boggle at our numbers; I boggle at yours." MACV stuck with its argument that the

¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Communists' Ability to Recoup Their Tet Military Losses," Mar. 1, 1968, p. 3-4. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6BC924> (accessed Mar. 22, 2018). The CIA defined "conservative" as 35% of all enemy troops who were not killed immediately. The agency did not specify how it arrived at that methodology.

² Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 139.

³ C. Michael Hiam, *Who The Hell Are We Fighting?: The Story of Sam Adams and the Vietnam Intelligence Wars* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2006), 144.

insurgency base should not be counted in the O/B because many of its members were poorly armed or not armed at all. CIA representative Paul V. Walsh responded that the agency was focusing on units that played a direct role in the fighting, and “not talking about tax collectors.”⁴ Its criteria for determining membership in the insurgency base required that persons included in this measurement both sustain and inflict casualties.

Graham remained isolated as the conference continued. Later that day, CIA and MACV representatives also argued over whether to include full-time, non-combat personnel in the estimates concerning the enemy political infrastructure in the RVN. Sam Adams argued that all full time enemy personnel should be counted. But Graham refused to change his mind even after several pleas from non-CIA personnel, including the DIA’s General Grover Brown, to convince him to broaden his definition of the enemy political infrastructure.⁵

Graham refused to give any ground throughout the conference despite lacking evidence to support many of his arguments. During the morning session of the next day, Graham, Walsh, and Brown began arguing about the usefulness of quantifying the enemy insurgency base. Brown and Walsh agreed that the insurgency base was less important than main force troops, but it still had to be quantified and broken down into categories. Though Brown did not support including the insurgency base in the military O/B, he still supported CIA’s methodology for calculating its overall size. Graham, on the other hand, thought CIA’s estimate of a 500,000-person strong insurgency base was too large.

⁴ “Minutes of the OB Conference, meeting of April 10, 1968” p. 3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000100030020-3.pdf> (accessed Mar. 6, 2018).

⁵ “Minutes of the O/B Conference, morning meeting of April 12, 1968,” p. 4.

According to the conference minutes, he stated that he “didn’t believe it, [and] didn’t accept CIA’s evidence.”⁶ He gave no explanation for either statement. Brown attempted to mediate by suggesting that MACV deliver alternate methodologies for categorizing the insurgency base. Graham did not reply. The conference ended with no progress having been made.

An April 22 memo from Wheeler to Clifford shows that the military continued to press for a low enemy O/B out of political concerns. Wheeler was surprisingly blunt when he argued that including part time guerillas in the O/B figures would be disastrous. The public “recognize[d] no qualification in semantics between ‘military’ and ‘insurgency base,’” he explained. Therefore, including the latter in the enemy O/B would be catastrophic for the war effort and would hand the enemy a “psychological tool of incalculable value in any subsequent negotiations.”⁷ Evidently, Wheeler had learned from the public uproar that greeted the January offensive after months of assurances that the enemy was on his last legs. According to the JCS chair, the CIA’s methodology, whether legitimate or not, was contrary to America’s national interest. The general shared his feelings with Helms by copying him on the April 22 memo, with a cover note stressing that “airing these greatly increased strength figures at this time would be detrimental to our effort in the long run.”⁸ Conveniently, MACV’s rationale placed the total number of

⁶ “Minutes of the O/B Conference, morning meeting of April 13, 1968,” p. 3.

⁷ Memo from Wheeler to Clifford, “VC/NVA Order of Battle,” Apr. 22, 1968, *FRUS, Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 202,583.

⁸ Memo from Wheeler to Clifford, Apr. 22, 1968, 582.

enemy personnel in the RVN at roughly half of the CIA's estimates during the month of April.⁹

The dispute raged on with no end in sight. On May 2 Helms sent the White House a memo complaining of the persistent disparity in enemy force estimates.¹⁰ The next day, Helms met with Wheeler and DIA Director Carroll to hash out their disagreements. The participants agreed that much of the estimation process for determining enemy Order of Battle figures was overdue for a basic overhaul. Those present also granted that publishing O/B reports monthly played an important role in the "confusion and problems" that had thus far characterized the estimation process. The meeting concluded with a unanimous decision to return to the drawing board and begin determining better methods for assessing enemy strength.¹¹

Helms, Wheeler, and Carroll's conclusion indicates how monthly O/B reporting had aggravated interagency rivalries and damaged the IC. The meeting notes do not specify why the intelligence officials thought monthly reporting so damaging. But by May 1968, the intense rivalries that resulted from the many arguments over the O/B process were obvious. Most intelligence officers, especially Helms, felt trapped by the monthly reporting requirement. Solving major methodological problems while continuing

⁹ Memo from Wheeler to Clifford, Apr. 22, 1968, 82-83; MACV Combined Intelligence Center Report, "Order of Battle Summary – 1 April through 30 April 1968," I-1. Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University: <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2500110004> (accessed Dec. 14, 2015).

¹⁰ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 140.

¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, May 5, 1968, Doc. 220, 629-30.

to produce reports suffering from those problems was no easy task. MACV's consistent refusal to change its approach only exacerbated the situation.

Despite the agreement between Helms, Wheeler, and Carroll, no further conferences or meetings regarding the Order of Battle dispute took place that year. Rather than the dispute over how to best quantify enemy strength and organization ending with a dramatic confrontation like that over SNIE 14.3-67, the intelligence agencies simply continued arguing. In the absence of external pressure to resolve the disagreement, most of the primary figures involved decided that they had better things to do in the face of mutually intractable opposition. And others involved in the controversy had done their jobs by holding their agency's line. DIA officer J. Barrie Williams noted ruefully that Graham's career took off after he successfully "[kept] the numbers down" at the April conference in defense of his boss, Gen. Davidson. "One star, two stars, three stars, Davidson took care of his boy."¹²

The Tet Offensive Postmortem

At the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board's prompting, the intelligence community also conducted a postmortem analysis of the failure to anticipate the January offensive beginning in February. After a meeting in which Helms gave a briefing on the community's failure, PFIAB chairman Maxwell Taylor wrote to Helms and requested a deeper look. CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence R. Jack Smith chaired the commission charged with conducting the investigation. The group also included INR analyst Fred Green, NSA representative Milton Zaslow, and Generals William DePuy

¹² Hiam, *Who The Hell Are We Fighting?*, 145.

and Robert Glass, who represented the Joint Chiefs and DIA respectively. In his letter to Helms, Taylor requested that the inquiry examine two questions:

Did our intelligence collection agencies obtain all or most of the pertinent intelligence which was available in the circumstances?

Was the evaluation of the available intelligence sound and did that evaluation reach the decision-makers in time to assist them in taking appropriate action?¹³

Another delegation including Glass and observers from CIA, the JCS, and CINCPAC traveled to Saigon to interview intelligence officials there.¹⁴

The inquiry concluded that intelligence analysts in Vietnam had succeeded in providing adequate warning to stave off disaster. It noted that NSA's reports had been especially accurate in showing large enemy troop movements corresponding with a conventional offensive. The magnitude of the offensive still caught the NSA off guard because the many irregular guerilla forces that took part alongside main force enemy units rarely used radios.¹⁵ But the warning that NSA and other intelligence agencies provided led some commanders to take precautionary measures that reduced the offensive's impact. The report also concluded that no communist officer below leadership level in COSVN, the NLF, or military region was aware of the offensive's scope. That restriction probably impaired coordination among PAVN and NLF forces during the

¹³ Letter from Taylor to Helms, Feb. 23, 1968, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82M00097R000300040001-4.pdf> (accessed Mar. 27, 2018).

¹⁴ CIA Intelligence Report, "Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam (Interim Report)," Apr. 8, 1968, p. 1. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP89B00552R000800080014-9.pdf> (accessed Mar. 22, 2018)

¹⁵ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 116.

offensive. But such tight security, when coupled with an effective misinformation campaign, allowed Hanoi to retain the element of surprise.¹⁶ In the end, the postmortem concluded that the IC's lack of "high-level clandestine penetrations of the Communist hierarchy" rendered the IC so bereft of actionable intelligence that the warning analysts had provided was "no small achievement."¹⁷

Despite these analysts' good work, the postmortem concluded that field commanders in Vietnam varied in their preparation for the offensive. All were aware that attacks were imminent, but only a few thought that attacks would happen during Tet. As a result, friendly casualties were much worse in some areas than in others. IV Corps suffered especially badly under the enemy onslaught. The commanding general received no warning until January 30 and had no U.S. maneuver battalions or mobilized ARVN units ready to respond. And as with most other urban centers throughout the RVN, the large presence of NLF forces within urban areas in IV Corps went unnoticed due to the holiday festivities. But the enemy notched impressive battlefield successes even in well-prepared areas. I Corps, encompassing most of the northern reaches of the RVN, was better prepared for the offensive than any other tactical zone, according to the report. Most ARVN units were fully mobilized and all friendly units were on alert. Because the enemy appeared to be focusing on Khe Sanh and targets in Quang Tri province, no field

¹⁶ See CIA Intelligence Report, "Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam," June 1968, pp. 2-3. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R000100080001-8.pdf> (accessed Mar. 27, 2018).

¹⁷ "Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam (Interim Report)," p. 2.

commander prepared for coordinated attacks on the cities. That included the city of Hue, which enemy forces occupied for a month.¹⁸

Though it recognized analysts in Vietnam for their timely and accurate reports, the postmortem papered over George Carver's doubts of Saigon Station's warnings. As we saw in the previous chapter, in order to protect his relationship with Walt Rostow, Carver had sought to discredit multiple reports from Saigon Station that concluded an enemy offensive was imminent. The report credited Saigon analysts with providing Washington with credible warnings. But it also elided criticism of analysts like Carver by blaming their failure to act on a lack of an urgent "atmosphere" at CIA Headquarters. Such a deficit of urgency helped explain why the feeling of surprise in Saigon was much lower than in Washington. In short, the commission concluded, "We do not believe [the failure to heed Saigon Station's warning] represents a failure on anyone's part."¹⁹

That the postmortem reached this conclusion reveals how its narrow focus led it to identify a symptom of politicization without recognizing the cause. The report made no effort to ascertain the reason for the pre-offensive lack of urgency among Washington analysts apart from the statement "Atmosphere is not readily passed over a teletype circuit."²⁰ But the lack of urgency in the run-up to Tet occurred because the intelligence-policy nexus in the Johnson administration had degraded so badly by late 1967 that any intelligence officer, policymaker, or military official risked irreparable career damage if he or she questioned the administration's line that the war effort was finally bearing fruit.

¹⁸ "Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive," 11-13.

¹⁹ "Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive," 10.

²⁰ "Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive," 6.

Taylor had, of course, not asked Helms to examine the Johnson administration's policy formation system. The inquiry's bailiwick lay within carefully prescribed grounds of examining intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination rather than the system within which those activities took place. Therefore the postmortem could not be, in Harold Ford's words, "complete or fully candid."²¹

The PFIAB largely agreed with the postmortem's conclusions. On June 7, Taylor sent the Board's official response to the postmortem to Johnson. He called the postmortem's conclusion that Washington analysts did not feel the same sense of urgency that Saigon analysts did "frank and revealing." Its only criticism of that conclusion was to add that the postmortem had not considered additional supporting factors:

(a) [T]he appearance of intelligence indicators against a background clutter of conflicting or confusing reports ... (b) the difficulty of framing synthesized reports accurately portraying a distant situation; (c) the effect of the reworking of reports in intermediate intelligence agencies between the field and the senior Washington officials; and (d) the difficulty at the Washington level of sorting out and properly emphasizing the important in the mass of intelligence flowing to Washington from the field.²²

Like the postmortem itself, these additional factors focused on intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination to the exclusion of LBJ's flawed policy formation apparatus.

The postmortem's limited scope meant that no consequences followed from it. There was no reason to discipline anyone based on its findings since the report did not find anyone at fault for the failure to predict the offensive. Taylor concluded his June 7

²¹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, 129.

²² Taylor to President Johnson, "Evaluation of the Quality of U.S. Intelligence Bearing on the TET Offensive, January 1968," Jun. 7, 1968, p. 4. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79B01737A000400020002-4.pdf> (accessed Mar. 27, 1968).

letter to Johnson by recommending that Helms undertake “a careful study ... to determine whether the normal process can be improved to remedy the defects noted in this report.”²³ There is no evidence that Johnson ordered Helms to undertake any such effort. As we shall see, by June Johnson was preoccupied with prospective negotiations with Hanoi and had no time for reforms to the intelligence community. Therefore, much like John Hart, George Carver, and William Colby’s “Operation Shock” memo of February 2, current events overshadowed the postmortem’s recommendations.

The most consequential outcome of the postmortem was that Helms was hyper vigilant on enemy actions and zealously sought to avoid a repeat of Tet. To be sure, there is no direct evidence in the documentary record of his reaction to the postmortem. But going forward, Helms often interpreted DRV reinforcements or military movements as evidence of another offensive, even if his agency had little evidence to substantiate that conclusion. As negotiations with Hanoi began in earnest, Helms remained skeptical of the DRV’s intentions.

Beginning Of Negotiations With Hanoi

Johnson faced an uphill battle in launching peace talks with Hanoi. The talks did not begin immediately, even after Johnson agreed to halt most of the bombing. Most intelligence assessments of Hanoi’s negotiating position prior to 1968 had emphasized that the regime was hardly desperate to begin peace talks. The 1966 Will to Persist study had found that Hanoi could potentially use a “talk, fight, talk” strategy to prolong the

²³ Taylor to Johnson, June 7, 1968, p. 5. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

fighting for long enough to secure a more advantageous negotiating position.²⁴ Hanoi could also seek to gain a momentary respite from fighting by demanding a concession such as a full bombing halt, with the intention of using the negotiations to refit and launch new attacks.²⁵ And Hanoi's stipulation that there would be no official diplomatic contact without a total bombing cessation was the rock upon which previous initiatives such as Marigold had foundered.

Johnson did not think that he could halt the bombing completely, but a critical change in Hanoi's tactics meant that he did not have to. Johnson considered bombing between the 20th parallel and DMZ necessary due to what he saw as the clear and present danger posed by Hanoi's infiltration network, which was highly active near the DMZ. As he put it in a conversation with Montana Senator Mike Mansfield on April 2, below the 20th parallel was where Hanoi "unload[ed] their trucks to send steel to put in the butts of your Montana boys and mine."²⁶ But while Hanoi stated that formal talks could not begin without a full bombing halt, the government also expressed willingness to establish diplomatic contact before that cessation.²⁷ That willingness had no antecedent in years' worth of refusals to discuss talks without a total halt to Rolling Thunder. On April 3, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach noted that it was "further than Hanoi ha[d]

²⁴ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The Vietnamese Communists' Will To Persist" Aug. 26, 1966, in John K. Allen, John Carver, and Tom Elmore, eds. *Estimative Products on Vietnam, 1948-1975*, (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2005).

²⁵ "The Vietnamese Communists' Will to Persist," IX-6-IX-7.

²⁶ Telephone Conversation Among Johnson, Mansfield, and Clifford, Apr. 2, 1968, *FRUS, Vietnam, January-August 1968*, Doc. 173, 504.

²⁷ Editorial Note, *FRUS, Vietnam, January-August 1968*, Doc. 175, 510-11.

ever gone” while Johnson, fresh from a bruising debate with J. William Fulbright, complained that it was easier to satisfy Ho Chi Minh than the antiwar Arkansas Democrat.²⁸

The intelligence community’s analyses of Hanoi’s reasons for such a sudden shift were disheartening. ONE published two Intelligence Memoranda examining Hanoi’s decision over the week following the announcement that featured the combined judgments of CIA, INR, and DIA analysts.²⁹ The former made only one firm judgment: the likelihood that enemy casualties sustained during the Tet Offensive had reduced Hanoi’s ability to carry out the war effort was so low as to be “virtually rule[d] out.”³⁰ The second, longer memo compared three different scenarios for Hanoi’s outlook on the military and diplomatic situations, ranging from optimistic, to uncertain, to pessimistic. The analysts concluded that Hanoi’s mood likely lay somewhere between optimistic and uncertain regarding their war effort, and that their announcement was probably part of a predetermined course rather than a sudden shift in strategy. LBJ’s speech happened to provide Hanoi with an “unexpectedly hopeful opportunity” to put this plan into action, and there was little chance that Hanoi would seek pretexts to back away from talks with

²⁸ Notes of Meeting, Apr. 3, 1968, *FRUS, Vietnam, January-August 1968*, Doc. 177, 524; Notes of Meeting, Apr. 3, 1968, *FRUS, Vietnam, January-August 1968*, Doc. 178, 526.

²⁹ See CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Hanoi’s Motives” Apr. 3, 1968, Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*, and CIA Intelligence Memorandum from Abbot Smith to Richard Helms, “Speculation on Hanoi’s Motives” Apr. 8, 1968, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A001400020027-8.pdf> (accessed Mar. 29, 2018).

³⁰ “Hanoi’s Motives,” 1.

the U.S.³¹ But the analysts also concluded that because Hanoi was probably optimistic about the military situation, both short- and long-term, its leadership would adopt a hard line in any negotiations. These analyses relied on extrapolation from Hanoi's past actions.

Johnson ignored both memoranda. His desire to maintain a tough stance toward Hanoi meant no further bombing cessations for the time being. Doing so also meant maintaining a strong military posture against the enemy forces in the RVN. Indeed, LBJ made his stance clear in an April 9 meeting at Camp David: "The stronger we are offensively, the better our position on negotiations will be." Johnson also asked if the DRV would have come forward with their proposal had he not made his speech, with William Bundy replying that "they may have had something in mind, but probably not what resulted."³² The second report's distribution list shows that Helms sent copies to both Johnson and Rostow.³³ Yet the April 9 exchange reveals that Johnson had not read the second ONE report, as it answered his question. Nor did Rostow, whose job as National Security Advisor entailed keeping Johnson informed of the full range of policy options, mention the report at the meeting. Johnson ignored ONE's analyses due to their fundamental uncertainty regarding Hanoi's intentions and negotiating strategy. Neither report estimated what Hanoi might propose in peace talks. That uncertainty resulted from how unexpected this latest move was, as well as ONE's lack of actionable intelligence on Hanoi's thinking.

³¹ "Speculation on Hanoi's Motives," 7-8.

³² Notes of Meeting, Apr. 9, 1968, *FRUS, Vietnam, January-August 1968*, Doc. 189, 561.

³³ "Speculation on Hanoi's Motives," final page of pdf. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

Further intelligence analyses were similarly unhelpful from LBJ's perspective. In an April 12 report that Rostow forwarded to Johnson, CIA analysts estimated that although Hanoi would almost certainly take a hard line during negotiations, further specifics were difficult to divine. The analysts concluded that Hanoi retained the capability for another major offensive "in the coming weeks or months" and also took LBJ's decision to not run for re-election as a sign of weakness. But they made no further arguments about how Hanoi might behave as a result. Only the "actual progress of negotiations" would show what Hanoi's true intentions were, they concluded.³⁴

The CIA also warned Johnson that the Saigon government would be apprehensive about entering into peace talks with Hanoi. The April 12 analysis mentioned to keep Thieu's government from becoming fractious as a result of peace talks with the DRV, Saigon must be kept closely informed from the beginning and consulted regarding any prospective concessions.³⁵ Likewise, a PDB from the previous day noted that there was "still a good deal of apprehension ... that the US will not adequately protect Saigon's interests."³⁶

Johnson ignored both of the CIA's products because other intelligence led him to worry far more about controlling infiltration and checking a potential enemy attack than the state of the talks. On April 16, Johnson attended a conference at CINCPAC in

³⁴ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Some Factors Bearing on US/NVN Talks" Apr. 12, 1968, pp. 7-8. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6iqkZ0> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018). A handwritten note on the cover page indicates that Rostow sent this report to Johnson.

³⁵ "Some Factors Bearing on US/NVN Talks," 6.

³⁶ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "The President's Daily Brief," Apr. 11, 1968, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed Dec. 10, 2015.

Honolulu. Early that morning, Rostow forwarded him a White House Situation Room report that used aerial photography to report increased movement of enemy troops and supplies into northeastern Quang Tri Province. In a handwritten note on the margin, Rostow called the report “evidence that enemy will shift focus of attack and supply lines from Laos to eastern end of DMZ.”³⁷ Johnson took that concern to heart. During the conference, he focused entirely on the military situation in the RVN and gave no thought to peace talks.³⁸ And the president made his feelings toward the usefulness of intelligence assessments of Hanoi’s attitude clear during an April 23 Tuesday Luncheon: “Somebody asked me how I read accurate accounts of what Hanoi is doing. I tell them I read leaks from the State Department in the *New York Times*.”³⁹

Initial negotiations were contentious from the start. During April and early May, the U.S. and Hanoi primarily discussed aspects of the negotiations such as the preferred location for talks, as well as whether the NLF would be represented. Johnson thought that backing down to Hanoi on the meeting place would set a terrible precedent for the rest of the talks. Therefore, when Hanoi proposed that the talks be held in Warsaw, Johnson proudly told Averell Harriman that he “rejected it outright, flat, all the way.”⁴⁰ He could not agree to Hanoi’s first offer regardless of the merits. Having ended much of the

³⁷ White House Situation Room Report, “Operational Intelligence Brief for April 16, 1968,” p. 1. National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 166, LBJL.

³⁸ Notes of the President’s Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors in Honolulu, Apr. 16, 1968. Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, LBJL, Box 3.

³⁹ Notes of Meeting, Apr. 23, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 205, p. 590.

⁴⁰ Telephone Conversation between Johnson and Averell Harriman, Apr. 11, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 191, p. 594.

bombing and withdrawn from the presidential race, Johnson was not about to back down any further.

LBJ placed Harriman in charge of the negotiations with Hanoi. A seasoned diplomat, Harriman had enjoyed a spot in John F. Kennedy's inner circle. Most notably, Harriman had negotiated the 1962 Geneva Accords that "neutralized" Laos. Although the Accords fell apart shortly after being ratified, JFK nonetheless used them as an excuse not to send ground troops to Laos. Johnson, however, chose not to rely on Harriman from 1964 through 1967 due to the latter's skepticism about escalation in Vietnam. But while Johnson doubted Harriman's loyalty, his administration lacked any other statesmen with equally impressive diplomatic credentials. For his part, Harriman was happy to step back into the spotlight and assume the responsibility of negotiating with Hanoi. His co-delegate was Cyrus Vance, who had been Deputy Secretary of Defense until his opposition to the war led him to resign in June 1967.

The negotiating team was not completely dovish. Rostow placed William J. Jordan, an NSC staffer and rock-solid hawk, on the team as well. Jordan later recalled that Rostow instructed him "to keep an eye on those bastards [Harriman and Vance] and make sure that they didn't give away the family jewels." LBJ approved. Not only was Johnson concerned that Harriman was too eager to make peace at an unacceptable political cost, he also worried that Harriman was not sympathetic enough to Saigon's desires.⁴¹

LBJ's fears were overblown. Harriman stated in a letter to Wheeler on April 26 that as far as he was concerned, a cease-fire was impractical "at this time" and that the

⁴¹ Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 225.

U.S. “should prepare for a fight-and-negotiate situation.” And although the ambassador also asked Wheeler to conduct a study examining whether certain American de-escalatory actions might lead to Communist stand-downs, he made clear that the principal value of doing so would be to enable the GVN to build more support in the countryside.⁴² But Johnson and Rostow’s preconceptions regarding Harriman’s motives were strong enough that both felt it necessary to place Jorden on the team as an insurance policy. But even as Johnson was preparing to send this diplomatic team to negotiate, the CIA was forecasting another enemy offensive.

By the end of April, the CIA had collected sufficient evidence to conclude that enemy forces were preparing for another coordinated strike against U.S. and ARVN positions. A CIA report from April 27 warned that increased enemy reinforcements, troop movements, captured documents, and interviews with enemy prisoners all pointed to an upcoming offensive. Johnson’s PDB for April 29 concluded that infiltration was reaching levels seen only before the January 30-31 offensive.⁴³ But these reports did not estimate the offensive’s size or timing. Several major enemy troop movements seemed to indicate that Hanoi intended to strike within days. Some defectors pointed out a few individual attacks that were to take place early, but none knew when the main strike would happen.

⁴² Letter from Harriman to Wheeler, Apr. 26, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 210, 602-603.

⁴³ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The President’s Daily Brief (Special Daily Report on North Vietnam),” Apr. 29, 1968, p. 2. CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

Captured documents were little better. Most mentioned a “summer campaign” without giving precise dates.⁴⁴

Intelligence also suggested that Hanoi was taking advantage of the bombing cessation to reinforce throughout the DRV. Johnson had limited bombing raids to south of the 19th parallel following the March 31 speech. A CIA evaluation of the bombing that Johnson had requested showed high levels of activity in Haiphong Harbor, large enemy troop movements, and widespread repair of infrastructure everywhere else in the DRV. Based on aerial reconnaissance and reports from road watch teams, the analysis also concluded that a “substantially heavier” movement of men and materiel had taken place south of the 19th parallel despite April’s thousands of bombing sorties.⁴⁵ At the same time, the analysis also concluded that no “major target opportunities” existed between the 19th and 20th parallels because Hanoi was not yet using storage complexes already located in that area for infiltration.⁴⁶

These reports led Johnson to remain skeptical of Hanoi’s willingness to negotiate during the discussions regarding the site for talks. During an April 30 luncheon he brought up potentially conducting bombing raids between the 19th and 20th parallels to counter increasing infiltration. While the CIA had not judged that any targets in the area

⁴⁴ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Indications of Forthcoming Enemy Offensive Activity in South Vietnam,” Apr. 27, 1968. National Security Files, Intelligence File, Box 13, LBJL.

⁴⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Evaluation of the Rolling Thunder Campaign as Presently Restricted,” Apr. 30, 1968, pp. 1-2. National Security Files, Intelligence File, Box 13, LBJL.

⁴⁶ “Evaluation of the Rolling Thunder Campaign as Presently Restricted,” Apr. 30, 1968, p. 4.

between the 19th and 20th parallel were of military value, Wheeler and Clifford disagreed. Both argued that a series of locks, along with an airfield, represented valuable targets for U.S. aviators. Clifford also mentioned that all signs pointed away from an “enemy moving toward peace.”⁴⁷ Clifford nevertheless counseled patience. He was worried that bombing raids could ruin what fragile progress had already been achieved just as easily as they could convince Hanoi to return to the bargaining table.

Johnson was reluctant to take Clifford’s advice in part due to anger with the slow pace of the negotiations. In a phone conversation with Fulbright on May 2, Johnson complained at length about Hanoi’s refusal to consider anywhere else other than Warsaw as a site to hold the talks. The Poles, according to Johnson, had “done more to propagandize and bust things up than they’ve done to settle them.” Hanoi proposed Paris as a negotiating site on May 3, but that did not mollify the President. He viewed Paris as being almost as bad as Warsaw, due to the depth of sympathy for the DRV among many French citizens.⁴⁸

By early May, LBJ was beginning to think that Hanoi’s willingness to enter talks was merely a smokescreen for their military buildup in the RVN. During the same phone conversation he noted that the DRV had “brought down between thirty and forty thousand men since March 31st” while “we haven’t brought in any.”⁴⁹ Johnson took these

⁴⁷ Notes of Meeting, Apr. 30, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 216, pp. 614-615.

⁴⁸ See Telephone conversation between Johnson and Rostow, May 3, 1968. Miller Center for Presidential Studies Presidential Recordings Program, tape no. WH6805-01-13004.

⁴⁹ Telephone conversation between Johnson and Fulbright, May 2, 1968. Miller Center for Presidential Studies Presidential Recordings Program, tape no. WH6805-01-13001-13002-13003.

figures from a CIA analysis on infiltration that Helms presented at the April 30 meeting.⁵⁰ The specific paper Helms presented is not identified by name or publication date in the meeting's minutes. But the CIA reports published shortly prior to the April 30 meeting confirm a sharp increase in enemy troop infiltration into the RVN.⁵¹ Johnson was not using MACV's estimates. The April MACV J-2 O/B report held that 6,946 enemy troops had infiltrated southward at most.⁵²

More SIGINT soon reinforced Johnson's concerns about the possibility of an impending offensive. On May 4, during a telephone conversation with Clifford, LBJ read at length from his PDB for that day. The report cited a communications intercept to find that infiltration had increased by 90 to 100 men per infiltration group on average since January 1. The increase meant a new total of 650 men per group. March of 1968 had set a monthly record for infiltrated troops at 28,000, but April's total bested that number by 7,000. Altogether, the CIA estimated that Hanoi had infiltrated more than 80,000 troops over the first four months of 1968.⁵³ That was a preliminary finding based on an

⁵⁰ See Notes of Meeting, Apr. 30, 1968, p. 616.

⁵¹ See "Indications of Forthcoming Communist Offensive Activity in South Vietnam," Apr. 27, 1968; and "Evaluation of the Rolling Thunder Program as Presently Restricted," Apr. 29, 1968. Specific enemy troop data has been redacted from the unclassified versions of these documents.

⁵² See MACV J-2 Combined Intelligence Center Report, "Order of Battle Summary April 1 Thru April 30," Apr. 30, 1968. Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive.

⁵³ The manner in which Johnson referenced the report to Clifford ("here's my intelligence report this morning") shows that it was likely his daily intelligence brief. All information regarding infiltration has been redacted from the publicly available PDB for May 4, 1968. See CIA Intelligence Report, "The President's Daily Brief," May 4, 1968, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005975730.pdf (accessed Mar. 26, 2018).

incomplete sources base and thus likely to increase, to which Johnson alluded: “Based on signal intelligence alone, it’s what they do get, not what they miss.” LBJ also complained,

Now I’m telling the Fulbrights that you goddamn chuckle-heads got to be aware of this while you’re saying stop the bombing, quit everything, go to Paris, bullshit around for a few years ... I think we’ve got to let these doves know that we have men right there that are about to get run over or could get run over damned easy. And I honestly believe if you pull your bombers down for very long, with the situation as it is today, I honestly believe they would get run over.⁵⁴

Johnson believed that American air power was still suppressing a potential DRV offensive. And he reacted to the possibility of another offensive by tending toward aggressiveness in dealing with Hanoi. LBJ did not consider that de-escalation might lead to reciprocal action on the Communist side, as Harriman had suggested to Wheeler.

The May Offensive and Opening of Talks

Johnson’s fears of another offensive were soon realized. At midnight Saigon time on May 4, the PAVN and NLF launched a series of attacks against American positions. Johnson learned about the new offensive during a meeting at 4:30 pm Washington, DC time. His advisors counseled against a hasty U.S. response. Rusk mentioned that attacks would likely increase in pace as the two sides moved into peace talks. Clifford doubted that it was a prelude to a wider offensive, and advised Johnson against any major retaliation. Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas also thought it was too early to retaliate.

The most bellicose advice Johnson received was Rostow’s recommendation to hit a few

⁵⁴ Telephone conversation between Johnson and Clifford, May 4, 1968. Miller Center for Presidential Studies Presidential Recordings Program, tape no. WH6805-01-13006-13007.

targets between the 19th and 20th parallels. Johnson elected not to strike Communist forces. But he noted that the DRV had infiltrated 35,000 troops that month alone. He interpreted this move, combined with the airfield strikes, as signaling that Hanoi was not serious about peace talks.⁵⁵

CIA reports showed that the attacks were congruent with the DRV's "talk, fight, talk" attitude toward peace talks. According to a report from May 6, the DRV viewed the Paris conference as another extension of the battlefield. Further, the report concluded that due to the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Conferences, which had ended with Vietnam divided in two and Laos placed under a shaky coalition government respectively, Hanoi's negotiators would hesitate to compromise with Western diplomats. Here, the CIA's judgment had changed little from the 1966 Will to Persist study. That report had characterized the Hanoi government as against entering into any negotiations in which the DRV did not hold an overwhelming advantage. The CIA analysis concluded that although Hanoi's position was not as strong as it might like, the negotiators would proceed with high confidence. Their opening demand would almost certainly be for a full bombing halt. Hanoi would also likely not de-escalate their military effort on the ground in return for any cessation of bombing.⁵⁶

A contemporaneous CIA report documented an enemy buildup. On May 14, the CIA published a weekly update on DRV logistical buildup in the area between the 19th and 20th parallels from May 6th through the 10th. The report used aerial photography to

⁵⁵ Notes of Meeting, May 4, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 222, pp. 634-636.

⁵⁶ CIA Intelligence Report, "Hanoi's Negotiating Position and Concept of Negotiations," May 6, 1968, pp. 6-7. Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

conclude that the enemy was now “taking full advantage” of the bombing restrictions to move, on average, 733 tons of supplies per day from a storage complex at Thanh Hoa, between the 19th and 20th parallels. From January through April, the DRV sent an average of 230 tons of supplies southward per day. The report concluded that Hanoi had undertaken this effort “apparently in expectation that the bombing will be resumed,” although it provided no evidence for that conclusion.⁵⁷ The report also reported that Hanoi had begun building an airfield at Bai Thuong, just south of the 20th parallel. Doing so, the report concluded, “[C]learly reflects their belief that Bai Thuong lies within a sanctuary, prohibited to US aircraft even in pursuit of MIGs.”⁵⁸ Despite the high confidence implied by the use of the adverb “clearly,” the report again cited no evidence for that conclusion. While aerial photography could document the enemy buildup, it could not determine why Hanoi was undertaking the buildup. The analysts’ high confidence in assessing enemy intentions therefore represented poor tradecraft.

Despite its tradecraft flaws, the May 14 report helped reinforce Johnson’s preconceptions. At a Tuesday Lunch held that same day, Johnson expressed concern that “we kill some of our people” by limiting the bombing to south of the 19th parallel, even as he made clear that he also did not want to hinder negotiations by acting too aggressively.⁵⁹ He also thought the airfield at Bai Thuong concerning enough to order his

⁵⁷ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Recent North Vietnamese Activities Between the 19th and 20th Parallels,” May 14, 1968, p. 1. U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6BK9h9> (accessed Mar. 22, 2018).

⁵⁸ “Recent North Vietnamese Activities,” May 14, 1968, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Notes of Tuesday Luncheon, 1:10 pm – 2:30 pm, May 14, 1968, p. 3. Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, Box 3, LBJL.

inner circle to read the CIA report carefully before another meeting scheduled for the following day.

On May 14, Clifford told Johnson that, “Psychologically, it would be a bad time to expand our bombings.”⁶⁰ He answered Johnson’s concerns about the buildup and the Bai Thuong airfield in the meeting the next day. Clifford’s arguments at that meeting were derived from two memoranda Warnke had sent him on the 14th and 15th in which Warnke concluded that a pre-emptive attack would derail the talks, which were going well thus far. Warnke also argued that the airfield was of low strategic importance, and used a CIA analysis separate from the May 14 weekly update as evidence.⁶¹ Clifford presented all three arguments to Johnson on May 15 as reasons to delay the strikes for a week. Additionally, Helms backed up his agency’s finding on the Bai Thuong airfield by stating at the May 15 meeting that the DRV had not used the airfield for the previous three days, nor had their fighters made any “forays” south of the 20th parallel.⁶²

Rostow brushed Clifford’s concerns aside. In the May 14 meeting, he exhorted Johnson to “get down” infiltration before the talks started. Johnson responded by asking for the latest infiltration figures, which Helms replied were 100,000 total sent into the RVN since January 1.⁶³ The following day, Rostow argued that the DRV was “taking our temperature” by positioning units so close to the 19th parallel, and Johnson had to show

⁶⁰ Notes of Tuesday Lunch, May 14, 1968, p. 3.

⁶¹ Notes of Meeting, May 15, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 233, p. 667.

⁶² Notes of Meeting, May 15, 1968, p. 667.

⁶³ Notes of Tuesday Lunch, May 14, 1968, p. 4.

Hanoi that they would not be allowed “to push us back.” He also dismissed Clifford’s contention that a pre-emptive strike would break up the talks.⁶⁴ Hanoi’s provocation amounted to an obvious signal, in Rostow’s mind, that they were not interested in serious negotiations.

Johnson split the difference between Clifford and Rostow’s advice. He agreed to wait a week before responding, “as Clark suggests.” But he also complained that he had already been overly generous by taking Hanoi and Haiphong off of the target list, and that he did not favor such a gradual approach. He closed by making his attitude toward the talks as clear as possible: “You do not get any gains at a peace table by weakness.” He also agreed with Rostow that if American retaliation broke up the negotiations, Hanoi probably was not interested in conducting peace talks anyway.⁶⁵

INR concluded that Hanoi was serious about participating in the Paris talks. On May 24, the bureau estimated that recent press speculation of Hanoi’s desire to break off the talks in the event that early negotiations failed to make progress was likely overstated. The bureau concluded that the most Hanoi would do was put pressure on the U.S. by hinting at the possibility of a break-off without actually following through on the threat.⁶⁶ A week later, INR analysts examined whether Hanoi might de-escalate its forces in the DMZ in return for reciprocal American actions. It concluded that while immediate de-escalation was unlikely, so was further escalation, and also that Hanoi might make some

⁶⁴ Notes of Meeting, May 15, 1968, p. 670.

⁶⁵ Notes of Meeting, May 15, 1968, 670.

⁶⁶ INR Intelligence Note 395, “Would Hanoi Break Off Peace Talks?” May 24, 1968. POL 27 VIET S, Box 2810, NARA II.

de-escalatory moves later in the year. Hanoi would almost certainly keep these moves as small as possible so as to avoid jeopardizing its military position. But INR judged that the regime would probably realize it would have to make some steps in this direction if it hoped to obtain a full bombing halt from the U.S.⁶⁷ Overall, the bureau maintained that while Hanoi was likely to drive a hard bargain at Paris, it was still serious about negotiating and was unlikely to break off the talks in the event of a negotiation deadlock.

The other intelligence agencies concurred with INR's findings. SNIE 53-68, published on June 6, began with the premise that the negotiations would not be broken off over the next six months, and that the U.S. would not resume full-scale bombing in that same time period. The SNIE concluded that the recent attacks against Saigon were likely the first of several thrusts against RVN targets of political and psychological importance. But the estimate specified that these attacks were part of Hanoi's negotiating strategy rather than evidence of Hanoi's disdain for the negotiation process. The authors concluded that as part of the "fight-talk" strategy, Hanoi was likely to keep up a high level of attacks to gain leverage in the negotiations even as the Politburo took the talks seriously. The estimate also concluded that while the enemy attacks might result in "great disruption and turmoil," heavy losses and the failure to provoke a general uprising in the January attacks still represented serious setbacks for the DRV's strategy. Despite their ability to wreak havoc, a decisive military victory in the RVN during 1968 was likely still

⁶⁷ INR Intelligence Note 413, "Prospects for Hanoi De-Escalation in the DMZ," May 31, 1968. POL 27 VIET S, Box 2810, NARA II.

out of reach for the Communists. That made the Paris talks especially important for Hanoi and decreased the likelihood that they would withdraw.⁶⁸

Yet the IC's conclusion that Hanoi would likely not withdraw from the talks did not lead Helms to offer a sanguine estimate of the negotiations' outcome. The DCI rarely spoke during meetings in late May and early June. But when he gave a briefing or interjected during a Tuesday Lunch, his prognosis was rarely positive. On May 25 he noted, "We believe the objectives of fight and talk are to bring down the South Vietnamese government. I don't see any give in the North Vietnam position for some time."⁶⁹ He repeated this assessment in a meeting on May 28 with the rest of Johnson's cabinet. Helms ended that briefing by warning all assembled that "intelligence shows they intend to go all out."⁷⁰ He did not mention sources or otherwise explain what "intelligence" the CIA had used to reach that judgment. But Johnson did not care, because Helms' warning reinforced his distrust of Hanoi. The president grimly responded, "Enemy wants to bring out divisions between Allies and show we were a country divided" and ended the meeting.⁷¹

Both of Helms' blunt presentations omitted critical nuance. SNIE 53-68 indeed concluded that the DRV sought to "disintegrate the fabric of the GVN" and that the IC

⁶⁸ Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-68, "The Vietnam Situation," Jun. 6, 1968, Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

⁶⁹ Notes of Meeting, May 25, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 249, p. 718.

⁷⁰ Notes of Meeting, May 28, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 254, p. 733.

⁷¹ Notes of Meeting, May 28, 1968, p. 733.

“expect[ed] no early shift in strategy.”⁷² Those judgments were likewise congruent with the CIA’s May 6 analysis of Hanoi’s negotiating position.⁷³ But the SNIE also judged, as INR and the May 6 CIA estimate had, that if the military stalemate lasted until the end of the year Hanoi would likely reconsider whether to moderate its position.⁷⁴ None of these IC products judged that Hanoi was willing to make major concessions, especially in the short term. But the analysts also judged that Hanoi was ultimately negotiating in good faith. The May 6 analysis also concluded that because Hanoi considered its military and diplomatic efforts linked, its position in Paris was vulnerable if its military position in the RVN “seemed likely to deteriorate.”⁷⁵ But Helms never mentioned either point in his laconic briefings. The resulting impression was of an enemy inflexibly committed to its war effort.

Rostow used SNIE 53-68’s findings for his own purposes. On June 10, he forwarded Johnson a copy of the estimate, calling it “well-balanced.”⁷⁶ The next day, Rostow “reluctantly” recommended that Johnson adopt a much tougher stance even at the risk of breaking up the talks. Hanoi, Rostow claimed, had concluded that the March 31 speech stemmed from domestic political weakness, and that the U.S. wanted to avoid disrupting the talks at all costs. Therefore, the Communist leaders “are laughing at us and

⁷² SNIE 53-68, pp. 1-2.

⁷³ “Hanoi’s Negotiating Position and Concept of Negotiations,” pp. 1-2.

⁷⁴ SNIE 53-68, p. 2.

⁷⁵ “Hanoi’s Negotiating Position and Concept of Negotiations,” 11.

⁷⁶ SNIE 53-68, 755.

playing us for suckers in the short run.”⁷⁷ In the long run, he contended, Hanoi needed to force some sort of agreement at the talks lest the casualty rate prove unsustainable. That latter conclusion was in line with SNIE 53-68’s findings. But while the estimate had noted that Hanoi would probably have to re-evaluate its position after another six months of costly stalemate, it did not specify what the Communists might do next. That question lay outside the estimate’s focus. Rostow was therefore free to speculate, and he did so by appealing to his preconception that military aggression could force Hanoi to negotiate in good faith. He recommended that Johnson resume bombing targets between the 19th and 20th parallel, as well as conduct reciprocal strikes on Hanoi every time enemy forces attacked Saigon. Johnson, he claimed, could “preserve the talks ... at the risk of breaking them up.”⁷⁸

Johnson reacted to this onslaught of advice maintaining the status quo. The president kept the bombing restricted to south of the 19th parallel.⁷⁹ Yet he also spent so much time dwelling on the impending end of his political career that he made no other major decisions. Indeed, throughout the summer, Johnson became so dejected that he often did not provide effective leadership on the talks. Rusk and Clifford were left to keep negotiations afloat. Rusk later stated that only scotch, aspirin, and cigarettes enabled

⁷⁷ Information Memorandum from Rostow to Johnson, June 11, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 268, 780-81.

⁷⁸ Information Memorandum from Rostow to Johnson, 780.

⁷⁹ Immerman, “A Time in the Tide of Men’s Affairs,” 86.

him to survive this period, while Clifford described it as the most difficult year of his career.⁸⁰

Clifford remained cautious as the negotiations progressed at a slow pace. By mid-June he had become wary of potential attempts to sabotage the talks. In a June 21 telephone conversation with Harriman, Clifford worried that Johnson was beginning to crack under a near-constant stream of bad news regarding enemy attacks on Saigon. Clifford also mentioned, “an effort on the part of some to indicate that perhaps nothing at all will ever come out of Paris.”⁸¹ Here, Clifford was doubtless referring to Rostow, as well as the service chiefs and U.S. Ambassador to the RVN Ellsworth Bunker. All of them remained skeptical of Hanoi’s willingness to negotiate in good faith. Meanwhile, the Paris talks continued to stagnate as Hanoi steadfastly refused to officially acknowledge that they even had troops stationed in the RVN at all.⁸²

CIA analysis concluded that enemy infiltration remained strong despite the bombing. A June 1968 CIA Intelligence Memorandum concluded that enemy forces were suffering in excess of 32,000 casualties per month.⁸³ Though high, that number still ran under the 35,000 that the CIA and DIA had previously estimated as the worst-case scenario for Hanoi within which they could still replenish their losses. Sure enough, the

⁸⁰ Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 231.

⁸¹ Notes on Telephone Conversation Between Clifford and Harriman, June 21, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 278, p. 800.

⁸² This refusal was a major sticking point in the negotiations for weeks. See for instance Telegram from Rostow to Johnson, June 17, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 275, pp. 794-95.

⁸³ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “North Vietnam’s Ability to Resist Manpower Attrition,” June 1968, p. 2. National Security Files, Intelligence File, Box 13, LBJL.

CIA concluded that Hanoi had mounted an “unprecedented” infiltration effort to complement NLF recruiting, which the agency estimated at roughly 7,000 to 10,000 per month.⁸⁴ The result of these twin efforts was almost no net change in the number of enemy troops in the RVN since January 1 despite the high casualty rate.⁸⁵ The agency also cited DIA estimates indicating that the DRV’s manpower reserves would likely remain deep during 1968 and 1969, even with heavy losses.⁸⁶ In short, the “fight” aspect of Hanoi’s “talk-fight” strategy seemed to be going according to plan. Though they had not won any decisive victories, they were successfully prolonging the fighting in hopes of gaining more leverage in Paris.

Rostow interpreted the CIA’s June Intelligence Memorandum as good news for the American war effort. He argued that the DRV’s annual draft call of 120,000 men as cited in the report would not be nearly enough to cover their losses at present rates. Therefore Hanoi would have to rely on “spectacular attacks” to create the image of short-term success and “hopelessness on our side.”⁸⁷ Rostow did not, however, confront the

⁸⁴ CIA analysts stressed that this estimate was conservative. See “North Vietnam’s Ability to Resist Manpower Attrition,” 28.

⁸⁵ “North Vietnam’s Ability to Resist Manpower Attrition,” 2-3.

⁸⁶ DIA estimated that at least 120,000 males in the DRV would reach military age during 1968 and 1969. Because Hanoi only excluded people with serious health conditions such as acute tuberculosis and heart disease from military service, it was likely that the actual number of new recruits was substantially higher. This estimate did not include males of military age who had yet to be conscripted. See “North Vietnam’s Ability to Resist Manpower Attrition,” 24.

⁸⁷ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, June 14, 1968, p. 2. National Security Files, Intelligence File, Box 13, LBJL.

report's conclusion that Hanoi could probably conscript at least 500,000 members of the civilian labor force without serious damage to the DRV's economy.⁸⁸

Even as the fighting's tempo began to subside in early July, Rostow frequently sought to reinforce Johnson's reluctance to make concessions. On July 8, Rostow described a possible agreement for mutual military de-escalation as dangerous since the U.S. was "flying blind" as to what Hanoi really hoped to gain in Paris.⁸⁹ Rostow thus dismissed SNIE 53-68 mere weeks after he had used it to reinforce one of his arguments. Four days later he said that a proposed Russian intercession in the talks constituted "high-risk poker." Despite the lull, he forecast without evidence, another offensive was imminent.⁹⁰ And on July 26, Rostow sent LBJ a memo theorizing that while Hanoi was "serious in Paris," the Communist leadership would not negotiate in good faith at least until the Democratic presidential primary had concluded, and perhaps even longer than that: "If [Sen. Eugene] McCarthy is nominated, I would assume they would await the election in November."⁹¹ That assumption ignored an INR judgment that U.S. domestic politics were at most a secondary factor in the Hanoi leadership's thinking. The bureau concluded that the Politburo's primary goals were establishing a strong presence in the

⁸⁸ "North Vietnam's Ability to Resist Manpower Attrition," 7.

⁸⁹ Memorandum from Rostow to Johnson, July 8, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 293, 846.

⁹⁰ Memorandum from Rostow to Johnson, July 12, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam January-August 1968*, Doc. 295, 850.

⁹¹ Memorandum from Rostow to Johnson, Jul. 26, 1968, U.S. Declassified Documents Online: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6CMVxX> (accessed Mar. 26, 2018).

RVN while also demanding a total bombing cessation. They could do both regardless of whoever occupied the White House.⁹²

Though he had not expanded bombing, LBJ refused to consider a bombing halt for the rest of the summer despite a drop in infiltration and repeated entreaties from Harriman to end Rolling Thunder. SIGINT captured a clear drop in infiltration during mid-summer 1968. 41 groups infiltrated southward in June, and only 34 did so in July, versus 59 in April and 62 in May.⁹³ Yet on July 30, Johnson stated infiltration was the “highest it’s ever been” in a phone conversation with Rusk.⁹⁴ In a meeting with Richard Nixon on July 26, Johnson wondered why stopping the bombing now would work, when the U.S. had instituted multiple pauses with no effect.⁹⁵ Harriman and Vance continually asked Johnson to consider a full bombing halt, but the president refused. Often referring to Harriman’s telegrams from Paris as “mush,” Johnson complained that DRV negotiators were taking advantage of his people.⁹⁶ Humphrey privately backed a bombing halt, and Johnson went “through the roof” when he learned of that support. At a July 24

⁹² W. Dean Howells, Dorothy Avery, and Fred Greene, *Vietnam 1961–1968 as Interpreted in INR’s Production* (Washington, DC: State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 1969), part A-VII, “The Search for Peace,” 10. See also INR Intelligence Note 448, “Le Duc Tho Varies Bombing Halt Theme,” June 11, 1968. POL 27 VIET S, Box 2811, NARA II.

⁹³ DIA Intelligence Supplement, “Status of Infiltration Groups, 1 Nov – 31 Aug 1968,” Sept. 11, 1968, p. 2. National Security File, Country File Vietnam, Box 79, LBJL.

⁹⁴ Phone conversation between Johnson and Rusk, July 30, 1968. Miller Center for Public Affairs Presidential Recording Program, tape no. WH6807-02-13220.

⁹⁵ Handwritten notes from Johnson’s meeting with Richard Nixon, Jul. 26, 1968, p. 4. Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, Box 3, LBJL.

⁹⁶ Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 232.

meeting he vented that the Republicans had been more useful than the Democrats in prosecuting the war.⁹⁷

CIA analyses chronicling the enemy buildup between the 19th and 20th parallels reinforced Johnson's pessimism. A June 25 report showed that that DRV military activity between the 19th and 20th parallels continued with "no abatement." In particular, the enemy was focusing on repairing damaged infrastructure related to infiltration and improvement of their air defense system.⁹⁸ A July report showed a massive DRV logistical buildup between the 19th and 20th parallels.⁹⁹ On August 10, Helms warned Johnson that Hanoi was reinforcing PAVN and NLF units in the RVN and a new attack, which would likely target the RVN's urban centers, could come at any time.¹⁰⁰ A weekly CIA analysis of DRV activity south of the 20th parallel reported that the rate of repairs to damaged industrial facilities and railroad tracks had increased, implying that Hanoi would soon send even more men and supplies southward.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 232; Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 268.

⁹⁸ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Recent Communist Military Activity Between the 19th and 20th Parallels," Jun. 25, 1968, p. 1. National Security Files, Intelligence File, Box 13, LBJL.

⁹⁹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Recent Activities in North Vietnam South of the 20th Parallel," Jul. 16, 1968. National Security Files, Intelligence File, Box 13, LBJL.

¹⁰⁰ Notes on Briefing of Former Vice President Nixon and Governor Agnew, Aug. 10, 1968, p. 2. Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Box 3, LBJL.

¹⁰¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Recent Activities in North Vietnam: 29 July – 4 August 1968," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82S00205R000200040009-0.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2018).

The Third Enemy Wave

August 1968 was a stressful month for Johnson. In Vietnam, a third offensive seemed to grow more likely by the day. At a meeting on August 20, Helms warned Johnson that although he was unsure of the date on which the offensive might start, the enemy was in position and would likely “come out like measles” sometime in the next 10 to 14 days.¹⁰² What the enemy hoped to accomplish by launching such an offensive was less clear. Westmoreland, by this time Army Chief of Staff, again believed that the attack would be diversionary, although he did not specify what action that diversion might support. Rostow noted that the enemy might keep his forces in place for now due to low infiltration during August. But in an uncharacteristic move, the prone-to-grandstanding Rostow now stated that he did not know what the enemy’s plans were.¹⁰³ And none of Johnson’s advisors thought the enemy was likely to negotiate seriously before the presidential nominating conventions were over. Rusk was particularly firm in this belief, based on a recent communication with Vance in which the diplomat indicated that he thought Hanoi was engaged in a holding action.¹⁰⁴

Other events added to Johnson’s stress. On August 21, Soviet and other Warsaw Pact forces invaded Czechoslovakia to crush a wave of political liberalization under reformist leader Alexander Dubček. At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, which began five days later, Humphrey officially won the party’s nomination for

¹⁰² Notes of Tuesday Lunch, Aug. 20, 1968, p. 3. Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, Box 3, LBJL.

¹⁰³ Notes of Tuesday Lunch Aug. 20, 1968, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Notes of Tuesday Lunch Aug. 20, 1968, p. 3. None of INR’s recent products had evaluated the peace talks’ progress.

president amidst riotous crowds of antiwar protesters who engaged in bloody clashes with police for days. The resulting television coverage embarrassed Humphrey's campaign even as LBJ warned Humphrey not to deviate from supporting his Vietnam policies. Meanwhile, Nixon drew support by criticizing Johnson's policies as having led to stalemate.¹⁰⁵ And enemy attacks throughout the RVN doubled over the second two weeks of August.¹⁰⁶ Initially uncertain in its judgments, not until September 16 did the CIA confirm that the "much heralded" third wave had come. But it was far less intense than its predecessors.¹⁰⁷

The third wave, notwithstanding its size and scope, helped reinforce Johnson's preconceptions that a bombing halt would be unwise. On September 16, Rostow forwarded Johnson a CIA report showing that both Ky and Thieu were deeply anxious about the possibility that Johnson might either sponsor a coup in Saigon or institute a sudden bombing halt to obtain peace quickly. Rostow called the report "absolutely firm intelligence [that] reflects our major problem with a bombing cessation."¹⁰⁸ On September 25, Johnson and Rusk both expressed serious concerns about a bombing halt, noting that "nobody knows" whether enemy attacks on the cities would end, the RVN

¹⁰⁵ Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 270.

¹⁰⁶ Notes on President's Meeting with House Leadership on Monday, Sept. 9, 1968, p. 5. Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Box 4, LBJL.

¹⁰⁷ ONE Memo for Helms, "The Coming Political Struggle for South Vietnam," p. 1, Allen, Carver, and Elmore, *Estimative Products on Vietnam*.

¹⁰⁸ CIA Intelligence Report, "Discussion between Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky to discuss coup rumors and the general Vietnamese situation," Sept. 16, 1968, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968 Vol. VII, Vietnam, September 1968 – January 1969*, ed. Kent Sieg (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2003), Doc. 17, pp. 43-44.

would be able to negotiate, and also whether Hanoi would launch attacks across the DMZ. Wheeler added that a halt would damage friendly troop morale.¹⁰⁹

Johnson also still considered Harriman untrustworthy, which helped contribute to his negative attitude toward a bombing halt. In an effort to give his flagging campaign a boost, Humphrey endorsed a bombing pause in a September 30 speech in Salt Lake City. Harriman commented positively on Humphrey's position to the press several days later. In response, Johnson called the diplomat a "damned fool" and briefly considered removing Harriman from the Paris team.¹¹⁰ Though he decided against doing so, he still refused to stop the bombing.

The Diplomatic Breakthrough and Chennault Affair

On October 11, Harriman and Vance achieved a breakthrough with their DRV counterparts, Xuan Thuy and Le Duc Tho. After long and complex negotiations, both DRV diplomats explicitly agreed to commence formal talks that included the GVN as soon as Johnson ended Rolling Thunder. The DRV diplomats also stipulated that the NLF would have to be included in the talks. Such a sudden breakthrough surprised everyone in LBJ's administration. Even Rostow confessed to Johnson, "I told you the chances were 1 in 3 or 1 in 4 that we would get the kind of exchange we did in Paris today. I was wrong."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Notes on the National Security Council Meeting, Sept. 25, 1968, p. 4. Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Box 4, LBJL.

¹¹⁰ See Telephone Conversations between Johnson and Rusk, Oct. 3 and Oct. 6, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam September 1968 – January 1969*, Docs. 50 and 51, pp. 130-144.

¹¹¹ Immerman, "A Time In The Tide of Men's Affairs," 88.

Several major obstacles remained. LBJ remained concerned about attacks across the DMZ and on the cities, as well as Hanoi's willingness to participate in any negotiations that also included representatives of the Saigon government. Helms and Rusk were similarly skeptical of Hanoi's willingness to include the GVN in talks. But Wheeler now supported the proposed October halt. According to the hawkish general, the pause of December 1965 through January 1966 was based on "pious hope." This pause, on the other hand, was based on three specific preconditions, and the U.S. could easily restart bombing if Hanoi violated any of them.¹¹²

Progress in the negotiations moved quickly. During a meeting three days after the breakthrough in Paris, Ambassador Bunker noted that 1968 had been a "devastating" year for Hanoi. He thought the high casualty rate the DRV had suffered explained at least part of the DRV's sudden shift in attitudes. Clifford thought the time was right to test Hanoi's intentions, since it did appear that they were now negotiating in good faith.¹¹³ On October 22, Wheeler reported that he now thought a bombing halt would not be too dangerous for friendly morale, since bombing could start again quickly if Hanoi violated any of the specific agreements underpinning the pause.¹¹⁴ And despite tensions between the U.S. and USSR stemming from the Czech crisis, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin pledged to do all he could to pressure Hanoi into including GVN negotiators at the Paris talks.

¹¹² Notes of Meeting, Oct. 14, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam September 1968 – January 1969*, Doc. 68, p. 178.

¹¹³ Notes of Meeting, Oct. 14, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam September 1968 – January 1969*, Doc. 69

¹¹⁴ See Notes of Meeting, Oct. 22, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam September 1968 – January 1969*, Doc. 103, pp. 282-286.

At the same time, CIA reports showed that Ky and Thieu were reluctant to negotiate on what they perceived as Hanoi's or Washington's terms. Neither wanted to participate in any negotiations where the NLF would also be featured. CIA analysts paid especially close attention to Ky's motivations in an October 18 memo to Rostow and Rusk. This report portrayed the GVN leader as distrustful of Johnson, yet accepting of the bombing halt. According to the CIA, Ky was unsure if Johnson was now pursuing a bombing halt out of a desire for a truly honorable peace or political gain. He also encouraged Thieu not to agree to the bombing halt if the NLF would be present at the talks.¹¹⁵ Ky and Thieu both thought that including the NLF would grant the Front political legitimacy. RVN Ambassador Bui Diem confirmed that he felt the same way in communication with Rostow that same day.¹¹⁶

Both the CIA and INR also agreed that the U.S. retained leverage over Hanoi due to how ruinous 1968 had been in terms of enemy casualties. In a meeting with LBJ on October 15, Helms summarized a recent agency report arguing that the third wave had led to crippling enemy casualties and that Hanoi had to institute a "forced lull" in response.¹¹⁷ Three days later, INR published an Intelligence Note arguing that a "principal reason" behind Hanoi's decision to seek negotiations was that the regime

¹¹⁵ CIA Intelligence Memorandum from Saigon to Rostow and Rusk, "Reactions of the GVN and Vice President Ky Concerning the Proposed Bombing Halt," Oct. 18, 1968, p. 2. Digital National Security Archive: <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679063540?accountid=14270> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018).

¹¹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation between Bui Diem and Rostow, Oct. 18, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam September 1968 – January 1969*, Doc. 89, pp. 243-245.

¹¹⁷ Notes on the President's Meeting with the Tuesday Lunch Group, Oct. 15, 1968, p. 6. Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Box 4, LBJL.

desired an end to the intense military activity that had marked 1968.¹¹⁸ While the note also stated that Hanoi would try to force the GVN to negotiate directly with the NLF in Paris, its overall message was that Hanoi was acting in good faith.

Thieu remained the major obstacle during the last few weeks of October. Johnson and Rusk were confident that they could “sell” the presence of the NLF at the talks to Thieu.¹¹⁹ But the RVN leader was reluctant to participate in talks if the DRV did not recognize his government as legitimate. He also thought providing the NLF a seat at the table represented a challenge to his authority. That refusal posed a serious problem for Johnson and the U.S. diplomatic team at Paris, who understood that the DRV would not negotiate without the NLF. There is no evidence showing that Johnson or Rusk consulted Helms or the intelligence community regarding Thieu’s recalcitrance. Both preferred receiving updates on the situation from Ellsworth Bunker. The RVN Ambassador was one of the few confirmed hawks still left in the Johnson administration.

Bunker portrayed Ky and Thieu’s recalcitrance as a surmountable obstacle, which conflicted with the CIA’s judgments. In an October 28 cable, Bunker stated that after many rounds of discussion, he had convinced Ky and Thieu to accede to the NLF’s presence in Paris. In a memo the next day, the CIA confirmed that while Thieu had agreed to negotiate with the NLF, he would still refuse to participate in the talks if the

¹¹⁸ INR Intelligence Note 875, George Denney to Rusk, “What Will Hanoi Do Now?” Oct. 19, 1968, POL 27 VIET S, Box 2815; and “The Search For Peace,” pp. 18-19.

¹¹⁹ See Telephone Conversation between Johnson and Rusk, Oct. 26, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam September 1968 – January 1969*, Doc. 123, p. 347.

DRV wanted the NLF to participate in a coalition GVN.¹²⁰ Bunker's October 28 cable mentioned neither of the latter two points. And Bunker was also given to loading his memos with proclamations meant to burnish his star with Johnson as well as express his frustration with Ky and Thieu.¹²¹

By balking, Thieu presented an opening for Richard Nixon. The Republican candidate had long promised not to interfere with the peace negotiations, but in late October, his campaign reneged on that pledge. Anna Chennault, campaign fundraiser and head of the group Republican Women For Nixon, began meeting with Bui Diem at the RVN Embassy in late October to assure the ambassador that Nixon would be more supportive of the GVN than Johnson. On October 29, one week before Election Day, Lehman Brothers economist and World War II intelligence veteran Alexander Sachs told LBJ that he had heard of the secret meetings from several Wall Street colleagues. NSA intercepts of cables between Diem and Thieu, as well as a CIA wiretap of Thieu's Saigon office, showed the president that Diem had indeed been meeting with someone from the Nixon campaign. Johnson suspected that it might be Chennault, and ordered the FBI to surveil her.¹²²

¹²⁰ CIA Memorandum to Rostow and Rusk, "Presidential Views Concerning the Bombing Halt and Paris Talks," Oct. 29, 1968, p. 2. Digital National Security Archive: <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679063714?accountid=14270> (accessed Jul. 6, 2018).

¹²¹ Telegram from Bunker to the Department of State, Joint Meeting October 28, Oct. 28, 1968, *FRUS Vietnam September 1968 – January 1969*, Doc. 136, p. 391.

¹²² See Ken Hughes, *Chasing Shadows: The Nixon Tapes, the Chennault Affair, and the Origins of Watergate* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

Thieu's hesitation rankled other members of Johnson's cabinet as October drew to a close. Despite Bunker's assurances on October 28, Thieu delayed again the following day. Bunker sent an emergency cable to Washington requesting that the bombing pause be postponed 24 hours to give him more time to bring Thieu around. Most of Johnson's advisors were irritated but willing to accede to that request. Wheeler mentioned that from a purely military perspective, delaying the pause would not make much difference; he would "swallow [his] disgust for practical reasons." Clifford, who was normally placid during even the tensest meetings, now exploded with frustration. Complaining, "[T]heir whole approach is delay," he called the message "thoroughly insulting" and "horseshit."¹²³ But Johnson granted the request.

Thieu's stonewalling killed the peace talks. In response to Chennault's prompting, the RVN leader refused to take part in the peace talks shortly after Richard Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey by a razor-thin margin on Election Day. Johnson and the diplomatic team attempted to keep the talks alive, but without Thieu and Ky's participation there was no hope of a settlement. Eight months of frustrating negotiations had ended in an even more frustrating misfire. So had Johnson's presidency.

¹²³ Notes on Foreign Policy Meeting, Oct. 30, 1968, p. 6. Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Box 4, LBJL.

CHAPTER 8

COW TAILS AND BUCKETS OF MILK:

INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS IN WAR

[Intelligence officers] are trained to be contrarians. I'm the only guy in the room who gets paid to tell you that you're not as smart and handsome as you think you are. I'm the one who looks the boss in the eye and says, "Your plan is all fucked up."

-Maj. Gen. James Marks (ret.)¹

I hear the voices and I read the front page and I hear the speculation. But I'm the decider, and I decide what's best.

-George W. Bush, April 2006²

We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong.

-Robert McNamara, 1995³

President Richard Nixon's distrust of the CIA caused even more damage to the intelligence-policy nexus during his administration. Nixon accepted briefings from Helms during the 1968 campaign season. But he always suspected that in failing to correct JFK's inaccurate public statements about the "missile gap" between the U.S. and USSR, the CIA had cost him the 1960 presidential election.⁴ Once he became president, Nixon centralized all decision-making with himself and National Security Advisor Henry

¹ Nicholas Schmidle, "General Chaos" *The New Yorker* 93(2) (Feb. 27, 2017): 44.

² Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "The Decider" *The New York Times*, Dec. 24, 2006, p. WK4.

³ Robert McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), xvi.

⁴ John Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President: Intelligence Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952-2004* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2012), 61, 74-75.

Kissinger.⁵ PDBs to the president frequently came back unread. In 1970 he famously asked, “What the hell do those clowns do out there at Langley?” after the CIA failed to anticipate Cambodian military leader Lon Nol’s successful *coup-de-etat* against Prince Norodom Sihanouk.⁶ Unlike FBI Director L. Patrick Gray, Helms refused to participate in the cover-up that followed the 1972 Watergate burglary. Thomas Powers later concluded that this repudiation led Nixon to replace Helms as DCI with James Schlesinger in February 1973.⁷

As a result of this mistrust, Helms never had the same sort of close relationship with Nixon that he had enjoyed with Johnson. Helms wrote in his memoir that Nixon did not even allow him to remain at NSC meetings for policy discussions, instead expecting him to merely deliver an intelligence briefing and leave immediately thereafter.⁸ Helms concluded that Nixon’s distrust of the CIA stemmed not only from the missile gap controversy, but also from a “deep suspicion” of CIA officers as “uppity Ivy Leaguers ... [who] spent every evening gossiping about him at cocktail parties. The explanation for

⁵ See Richard A. Moss, *Nixon’s Back Channel to Moscow: Confidential Diplomacy and Détente* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2017); Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007); and Stephen P. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) for studies on Nixon’s centralized decision-making process.

⁶ David Priess, *The President’s Book of Secrets: The Untold Story of Intelligence Briefings to America’s Presidents from Kennedy to Obama* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 74.

⁷ Thomas Powers, “The Rise and Fall of Richard Helms,” *Rolling Stone*, Dec. 16, 1976: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/the-rise-and-fall-of-richard-helms-19761216> (accessed Apr. 30, 2018).

⁸ Richard Helms and William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York, Random House, 2003), 382.

these attitudes, which in some cases seemed to blind his judgment, is best left to board-certified medical specialists.”⁹ Helms’ fond reminiscence of serving under Johnson should therefore come as no surprise.

At the same time, Helms understood from the first day of his tenure as DCI that Johnson’s attitude toward intelligence was mercurial at best. Johnson himself made his feelings clear at a private dinner with Helms in attendance:

Let me tell you about these intelligence guys. When I was growing up in Texas, we had a cow named Bessie. I’d go out early and milk her. I’d get her in the stanchion, seat myself and squeeze out a fresh pail of milk. One day I’d worked hard and gotten a full pail of milk, but I wasn’t paying attention, and old Bessie swung her shit-smear tail through the bucket of milk. Now, you know, that’s what these intelligence guys do. You work hard and get a good program or policy going, and they swing a shit-smear tail through it.¹⁰

Johnson’s quotation is a favorite of intelligence historians due to his description of the dilemma that many analysts face when presenting intelligence to their customers.¹¹ Policymakers often claim to value intelligence. Yet they are just as often quick to reject it when it contravenes their preconceived notions or is pessimistic on whether their preferred courses of action will work. Intelligence is thus, in the words of a former CIA

⁹ Helms and Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 382.

¹⁰ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons From the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 156.

¹¹ See Robert Jervis, “Why Policymakers and Intelligence Clash,” *Political Science Quarterly* 125(2) (Summer 2010): 185-204; and Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 24.

officer as quoted by Robert Jervis, like the “guest at a dinner party in that although it is valued, if it spills the wine and insults the host, it will not be invited back.”¹²

Johnson’s phrasing also points to a specific problem with the intelligence-policy nexus during his administration. LBJ’s statement casts intelligence analysis as essentially reactive in its final sentence. In Johnson’s telling, analysts only enter the picture after policy has already been enacted. Analysts certainly do assess policies after implementation to determine if those policies are achieving their goals. But in a healthy intelligence-policy relationship, policymakers also consult intelligence before making decisions to ensure that they are fully informed. As we have seen, Johnson often refused to use intelligence before making critical decisions related to Vietnam. And because Johnson considered disagreement on established policy tantamount to disloyalty, he was predisposed to disregard analyses that cast doubt on the war effort from the beginning of his administration.

Kennedy’s use of intelligence laid the groundwork for LBJ’s abuses while also leading to ineffective policymaking during his own administration. JFK’s *ad hoc* decision-making apparatus was a good fit for the 35th president given his appreciation of debate and inability to think in a bureaucratic fashion like Eisenhower did. But that system was fragile due to the importance it placed on personal relationships with the president. Only by remaining friendly with JFK could DCI John McCone, and by extension the CIA, inform policy. When the relationship between the two men dissolved, the CIA’s influence went with it. And while Kennedy often encouraged debate between his advisors, Johnson actively discouraged dissent. LBJ’s decision to maintain JFK’s

¹² Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 157.

informal system thus cast a pall over the intelligence-policy nexus from the first day of his administration.

Johnson either ignored or refused to consult intelligence before making critical war-related decisions because he often began with inflexible goals in mind and worked backward to figure out how to achieve them. Intelligence analyses showing that his goals were likely unattainable did not sway the president. Nor did dissent from his most trusted advisors. Officials who retained Johnson's esteem, such as Walt Rostow and Dean Rusk, did so by remaining loyal to the president and his agenda without regard to outside criticism, pessimistic intelligence, or policy outcomes. Kennedy's decision-making system thus appealed to LBJ because it allowed him to reinforce his own preconceptions during the policy formation process.

Dissent from senior intelligence officers was also often ineffective in making LBJ change course. As we have seen, Helms became even more careful about not upsetting his volatile first customer after LBJ granted him regular admission to Tuesday Lunches. In an effort to keep the access to policy circles that had eluded his predecessors, Helms emphasized analyses reinforcing Johnson's preconceptions or justifying what Johnson already wanted to do while downplaying analyses that did neither.

That Helms treaded so lightly around Johnson showed how compromised the intelligence-policy nexus was during his time as DCI. For that nexus to work, analysts and their superiors must not fear reprisal for presenting unpopular conclusions. But analysts concealed intelligence that cast doubt on LBJ's policy preferences as early as the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Incident to avoid retaliation from the White House. Helms thus faced a difficult choice. He could be blunt like McCone and risk exile, or he could maintain his

access through being guarded in his relationship with Johnson. In *Reducing Uncertainty*, Thomas Fingar writes that intelligence analysts must follow one of the “first rules of customer support: Know your customer. Know what your customer knows, what he or she wants to know, and what he or she doesn’t seem to know that the analyst thinks that customer should understand.”¹³ In the Johnson White House, “knowing your customer,” meant understanding LBJ’s capriciousness, insecurity, and hatred of dissent against established policy. In such an atmosphere, maintaining a healthy relationship between intelligence and policy over the long term would have been nearly impossible for anyone, even a seasoned CIA veteran like Helms.

Persistent collection gaps and poor analytic tradecraft made this problem worse. Because the DRV remained denied territory in terms of high-level SIGINT and HUMINT, the IC could not estimate enemy intentions with much accuracy. This weakness hurt most in terms of the IC’s ability to provide actionable intelligence on enemy strategic shifts. Analytic successes often only happened when analysts needed to forecast whether Hanoi would likely do something, and not when they would do it. For example, the 1966 Will to Persist report accurately assessed that the DRV would use the “talk, fight, talk” strategy in peace talks based partially on the DRV’s historical behavior. But analyses examining when Hanoi would change its strategy were often vague and imprecise for lack of reliable sources. Thus, what Johnson most wanted the IC to tell him – whether American strategy would convince Hanoi to give up its war effort – was the very thing that analysts were least able to determine. As a result, it was easier for LBJ

¹³ Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 43.

and his advisors to simply assume that their preferred strategies would carry the day in Vietnam. Because many intelligence reports on Hanoi's intentions relied on an incomplete source base and vague language, officials who disagreed with their findings had no compelling reason to use those products and could substitute their own reasoning.

Yet LBJ's relationship to intelligence analysis shows that even a stronger collection posture in the DRV would not have saved the IC from policy irrelevance. Hawkish officials throughout the Johnson administration also ignored intelligence analyses that relied on credible sources and used strong, definitive language to express their findings. Johnson encouraged and often partook in this behavior himself. The informal foreign policy apparatus he inherited from Kennedy and then continued during his own administration only enabled it further.

That reliable sourcing for intelligence analyses was no panacea against being ignored illustrates the importance of individual personalities and relationships in the Kennedy and Johnson White Houses. As chief "deciders," Kennedy and Johnson could form policy based on whatever justification they pleased. Their informal decision-making system reinforced many of their worst tendencies. As we have seen, decision-making on Vietnam throughout 1963 was frequently disorganized, with JFK and his inner circle struggling to keep up with the pace of events. Banning John McCone from that inner circle for personal reasons worsened that disarray. Mistrust between policymakers, military officials, and intelligence officers became even more important when Johnson moved into the Oval Office. Johnson was a deeply insecure leader who interpreted policy decisions though what the result would mean for his personal credibility and legacy. Nor did Johnson allow those in his inner circle to tell him things he did not want to hear.

Upon elevating Walt Rostow to National Security Advisor in 1966, LBJ remarked, “He’s my goddamn intellectual and I’m going to have him by the short hairs.”¹⁴ Johnson considered Rostow’s job to be reinforcing his preconceptions. Rostow did so for the rest of LBJ’s term. Doing so left him one of the only advisors who consistently remained in Johnson’s good graces.

Kennedy and Johnson’s system also elevated any official willing to tell them what they wanted to hear, and George A. Carver exemplified that problem. By late 1967, Carver had become a de facto policy advisor in addition to a senior intelligence officer. These roles are at odds with each other according to the traditional boundary between policy and intelligence. But because neither Kennedy nor Johnson cared about maintaining a well-structured policy formation process, Carver could offer policy proposals even as he served as the CIA’s chief Vietnam analyst. That latter position gave him authority over nearly all Vietnam-related analysis that the CIA produced. Thus, even when the CIA produced accurate analysis, Carver could quash it if he thought it would hurt his relationships with policymakers in the Johnson White House. He did so in the run-up to the Tet Offensive.

Carver’s importance to policy in the Johnson administration means that his decision to change course in March 1968 must be considered one of the most important events of the war. By changing his mind, Carver played a critical role in Johnson’s momentous decision to de-escalate the bombing, leave the presidential race, and seek negotiations. He was perhaps the only intelligence officer capable of having such

¹⁴ David Milne, *America’s Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 167.

influence. Helms had built his relationship with Johnson on neither recommending policy nor telling LBJ what he did not want to hear. But Carver had spent years building good will in the West Wing by recommending policies that played to the preconceived notions of hawkish officials like Rostow. He used that accumulated capital to recommend de-escalation when Johnson was most receptive to doing so.

Yet like Helms' actions as DCI, Carver's influence also shows how badly broken the intelligence-policy nexus was during Johnson's administration. Carver accumulated his store of good will through repeated violations of the boundary between intelligence and policy. His recommendations to Johnson on March 27, 1968 represented yet another violation of that boundary. And because Johnson never invited Carver to his Tuesday Lunches, the CIA's top Vietnam analyst still found himself on the outside of significant decisions regarding Vietnam during the remainder of 1968. From April through November of 1968 Carver had no direct influence over policy since Helms was the only intelligence officer who regularly attended Tuesday Lunches. Theoretically Carver could have informed policy through making recommendations to Helms. But Helms' decision to stay silent during critical Tuesday Lunches lessened Carver's influence even further. Carver built substantial influence within Johnson's decision-making apparatus by taking advantage of a critical flaw in that system: LBJ's disregard for the boundary between intelligence and policy. But another flaw in the system – Johnson's reliance on an inner circle to which Carver never gained entrée – drastically reduced the SAVA's influence over policy no matter how many friends he made in the Johnson White House.

The importance of preconceptions and personal relationships to both JFK and LBJ left the United States' war effort badly handicapped from the beginning of American

involvement in the RVN. Kennedy and Johnson's decision-making apparatus sanctioned what they already wanted to do. Both presidents and their advisors therefore approved policies based on inappropriate rationales such as "lessons from history" that did not apply to Vietnam, personal insecurity, and feuds with intelligence officers. When the resulting policies failed, Kennedy and Johnson rarely sought to learn from their mistakes or admit having been wrong. The IC's collection woes and analytic tradecraft flaws accentuated that flaw in the system. But neither better intelligence collection nor tradecraft would have solved the key problem that under JFK and LBJ, intelligence was most useful as a tool to bolster arguments instead of an impartial guide to forming policy.

Kennedy's intelligence reforms reinforced that dynamic by creating a loose intelligence confederation rather than a tight-knit intelligence community. JFK sought to reduce the DCI's control over covert action by making analysis the CIA's primary focus along with coordinating the rest of the IC. But by placing so much authority over the IC in the DCI's hands, Kennedy inadvertently increased the likelihood of a dysfunctional intelligence-policy nexus. Whether or not Kennedy or Johnson used analyses from any IC agency, even in an intellectually dishonest fashion, depended heavily on the relationship between the president and his DCI. Both presidents' disregard for the boundary between intelligence and policy also contributed to the IC's dysfunction, as many intelligence officers cared more about pushing their preferred policies rather than working together to inform policy.

The result of this broken relationship between intelligence and policy was a military intervention against an enemy whose motivations policymakers and military officials refused to understand. INR Director Thomas L. Hughes later recalled that the

enemy's seemingly unbreakable will to continue fighting perplexed his customers more than any other aspect of the war: "The persistence of North Vietnam ... policymakers couldn't believe that they could persist as they did."¹⁵ The IC's poor collection posture in the DRV added to the opacity of Hanoi's strategy for many Johnson administration officials. But better collection would not have been a cure-all against policymakers and military officials' willingness to ignore intelligence with which they disagreed.

This failure to understand Hanoi's will to persist lies at the heart of America's defeat in Vietnam. No matter how many bombs American aviators dropped, how many PAVN and NLF troops died in combat or were captured, or how many villages the U.S. and ARVN attempted to pacify, Hanoi refused to back down. Yet policymakers and military officials continually reasoned that more pressure on Hanoi would eventually work. It never did. In war, the enemy always gets a vote. Intelligence analysis exists to help policymakers and military officials understand how the enemy intends to use that vote. Neither Kennedy, nor Johnson, nor most of their advisors understood that.

Fifty years on from the Tet Offensive, it is worth asking whether their successors do, or ever will. In Washington, the axiom "personnel is policy" originated to describe the importance of lower-level executive branch jobs.¹⁶ But it is just as accurate when applied to the president and the advisors that he (one day she) selects. The IC responds and adapts to the president's preferences and agenda instead of the other way around. As this dissertation has shown, negative personal relationships, bureaucratic rivalries, and policymaker preconceptions can all corrupt the intelligence-policy nexus. But were the

¹⁵ Thomas L. Hughes, interview with author, Sept. 19, 2015.

¹⁶ See Steven F. Hayward, "Is The Age of Reagan Over?" in *The Enduring Reagan*, ed. Charles W. Dunn (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 151.

problems that afflicted JFK's and LBJ's administrations *sui generis*, or indicative of broader trends? How has the IC's expansion during the Cold War and post-September 11, 2001 changed the intelligence-policy relationship? Have changes in analytic tradecraft since Vietnam improved intelligence analysis' chances of influencing policy? And how have other individual presidents' pre-existing attitudes toward the IC influenced their use of intelligence?

In short, historians of U.S. foreign policy-related decision-making must consider the vital role that intelligence analysis should play in that process. Doing so would not only improve our understanding of U.S. foreign policy decisions, but could also lead to better uses of history and intelligence by contemporary policymakers. And more broadly, the American public must also understand how intelligence analysts contribute to decision-making. The potential consequences of ignoring intelligence analysis are, if anything, worse today than they were during the Vietnam War. And if we are to prevent this nation from sliding into controversial foreign entanglements, then we must demand accountability from policymakers who repeat Kennedy and Johnson's mistakes.

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