



Grupo de Investigación  
**Historia Militar**



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## The Intelligence Community's Struggle to Paint a Clear Picture in Vietnam

### *Introduction*

More than three decades after helping guide the US into a largely disastrous war in Southeast Asia, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara remarked that, “We saw Vietnam as an element of the Cold War, not what they saw it as, a civil war!”<sup>1</sup> The revelation of faulty key assumptions used by US decision makers to take the US to war halfway across the world seem to parallel the 2003 war in Iraq. In both cases the yawning gap between reality and assumption cost a tremendous amount of *blood and treasure* and left the US weaker as a result. In both cases the US Intelligence Community (IC) was left living the adage that, “there are only policy successes and intelligence failures.” But to what extent did leadership fail to ask the right questions? To what extent was the IC aware of these faulty assumptions? The key role of the IC is to warn and inform the key decision makers, did they succeed? Did they fail? Were their inputs valued by the decision-makers that decided to deepen American involvement in Vietnam? Drawing on scholarly articles and declassified Intelligence reports, this paper looks briefly at the big forces that shaped the conflict and reflects on the IC's role of warning and informing to try and highlight some valuable lessons about escaping future quagmires.

### *The Narratives Diverge*

While March 8, 1965, was the first day that US combat troops began to arrive in Vietnam, but US involvement there dated back to 1954 when the French gave up their colonial

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<sup>1</sup> McNamara, Robert in 'Fog of War – Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamara' a film by Erroll Morris, 2003.

claims to the country and left it partitioned as a North and South Vietnam. The 1954 Geneva Accords called for unification of Vietnam by 1956 through nationwide elections. However, but Ho Chi Minh began to solidify his communist following known as the Viet Minh in North Vietnam, the US reflexively backed Ngo Dinh Diem in the south based on his fervent anti-communist sentiments. Diem, with US backing, declared the Republic of Vietnam in December 1955, in clear violation of the Geneva Convention, sending a clear message that the South would not submit to reunification. It was clear that the US feared a clear electoral victory by Ho, as evidenced by a secret telegram sent by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles saying, "Since undoubtedly true that elections might eventually mean unification [of] Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, this makes it all the more important that they should be held as long after cease-fire agreement as possible and in conditions free from intimidation to give democratic elements a chance."<sup>2</sup> Then President Eisenhower put it more bluntly, stating that, "if the elections had been held in 1956, Ho Chi Minh would have won 80 percent of the vote."<sup>3</sup>

Narratives began to crystalize in the minds of both the US and the North Vietnamese during this critical time, however those narratives diverged wildly from one another. Brutal violence in North Vietnam due to collectivization and land reforms signaled to the South and to the US that Ho would rule as an ardent communist. Chinese and Russian support for communism writ large consolidated in the minds of American leaders that South Vietnamese independence must be ensured as a bulwark against coordinated communist expansion. This commitment to South Vietnam comes despite warnings from the CIA, diplomatic corps, and

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<sup>2</sup> "Elections Balked," *New York Times*, July 5, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> "Vietnam War Reference Library." Encyclopedia.com. 25 Aug. 2022 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

military leadership that Diem was not committed to a democratic transition and showed clear signs of authoritarian tendencies.

From the North Vietnamese perspective, the US backed South had reneged on its pledge to hold a national referendum on unification. To many Vietnamese, the US had simply replaced the French as colonial occupiers through supporting Diem, whose regime was becoming more and more repressive. Communism's appeal spread through the South and so too did the desire to unify the country under Ho. These sentiments were met with brutality from Diem's government, pushing larger and larger swathes of South Vietnamese into the arms of 'Uncle Ho,' as he became widely known. The North began assembling new supply and logistics trails through neighboring Laos and taking advantage of the discontent in the South by sending operatives to infiltrate towns and villages. Renewed US support under Kennedy and a ramping up of military support of the South, despite Diem's tenuous hold on power was interpreted as imperial overreach by the North and by its supporters across the divided country. Unwittingly, through brutal police violence, village relocations, and the suppression of political adversaries, the Diem regime and to an extent, the US, had sown the seeds of an insurgency.

### *Competing Interpretations*

Two main schools of thought emerged in the wake of the defeat in Vietnam. Harry G. Summers Jr. took what he claimed was a Clausewitzian view of the war. In his analysis the war was a political struggle with Washington and by default Saigon, engaged in a battle of wills with Hanoi.<sup>4</sup> To defeat the insurgency in the South, strategy demanded a defeat of North

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<sup>4</sup> Summers, Harry G. (Col. US Army Ret.) *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. (Random House, New York, 1982), p. 66-67

Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces. Summers argues that it was NVA and not the Viet Cong guerrillas (VC) that would eventually take Saigon in 1975, so it was the NVA that was able to use the VC as an extension of itself for tactical purposes.<sup>5</sup> This camp argues that inability to strike important NVA targets due to a limited scope of warfare, prevented a strategic defeat of the North Vietnamese regime. This being the case, the North was able to keep the insurgency raging in the South, but the real center of gravity was in Hanoi.<sup>6</sup>

The other camp believed that the insurgency in the south was the center of gravity and not Hanoi. They argued that the conditions grievances that give rise to insurgencies needed to be addressed and that the North was able to take advantage of the insurgency more obliquely.<sup>7</sup> Andrew Krepinevich argued that the US Army was trying to fit its attrition or 'body count' strategy into a war that would be better addressed in counterinsurgency. The result, according one VC leader was that the US had turned a mouse into an elephant.<sup>8</sup> Scholars and practitioners like David Kilcullen and David Petraeus would revive these concepts during the insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan emphasizing the role that foreign intervention can play in fomenting and cementing an insurgent response.<sup>9</sup>

Winning large battles while losing the peace is the curse of fighting a counterinsurgency war. Dale Andrade suggests that even though the fight in South Vietnam should have focused

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<sup>5</sup> Summers, p. 84

<sup>6</sup> Andrade, Dale. *Westmorland was right: Learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War*. Taylor & Francis Online, 2008. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310802061349>>

<sup>7</sup> Krepinevich, Andrew F. *The Army and Vietnam*. (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore Maryland, 1986), p. 4

<sup>8</sup> Race, Jeffrey, *War Came to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Kilcullen, David, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. (New York, Oxford Press, 2009) p. 34

on the counterinsurgency, it is also true that NVA forces still posed a significant threat.<sup>10</sup> In fact, across US administrations (Kennedy to Johnson), the US ran counterinsurgency programs as well as focused on combined land, air, and naval power to deal with main NVA forces. But as Andrade points out, Hanoi began mixing its regular forces into the VC, supporting it not only in a material sense but in a manpower sense as well.<sup>11</sup> It soon becomes clear that any simple picture painted of the war in Vietnam is incomplete. Politicians, practitioners, and scholars all had and continue to have differing opinions about the nature of the war, but this is a place where the IC could and should be able to help the policy maker. The question is why the policy remained so stubborn and confused for as long as it did.

### *Warning and Informing*

The IC serves many roles and produces many products from tactical to strategic, but the role of giving warning to and informing policymakers of the consequences of action or inaction is among its most sacred. A comprehensive review of now declassified Intelligence products including estimative products, begins to paint a picture of how the IC understood the situation and later the war in Vietnam. In the process of warning, it must be pointed out that views from within the CIA itself were nuanced if not downright skeptical of the chances for success in Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup> As a clearer picture emerges, it reveals an IC that was often bullied into drawing conclusions it was uncomfortable with in the early stages of the war, and then an IC that struggled to make sense of the dynamics of the conflict as it escalated.

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<sup>10</sup> Andrade, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ford, Harold P. "Why CIA Analysts Were So Doubtful About Vietnam," in *Studies in Intelligence*, Volume 40, No. 5, Semiannual Edition, 1997, No. 1, p. 87

Declassified national intelligence estimates (NIE) reveal a CIA that is more pessimistic than the White House or the Pentagon about the prospects for success in Vietnam. NIEs are meant to serve as the analytical line from the IC that helps to guide Executive Branch thinking and action. The gaps between assessments and policy are noteworthy in this case. Even in the early stages of US involvement Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles was convinced that the Viet Minh's victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and Ho Chi Minh's leadership gave the North a clear advantage in unification. Agreeing with his brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, he concluded that if nationwide elections were held Ho's Viet Minh would win by a large margin.<sup>13</sup> The CIA repeatedly warned decisionmakers that 'US military escalation would not in itself save South Vietnam unless it were accompanied by substantial political and social progress in Saigon and especially in the villages.'<sup>14</sup> The CIA also warned that Diem himself was a barrier to making the inroads in the countryside and the generating the reforms necessary to counter Ho's narrative.<sup>15</sup>

As detailed above the US narrative of the war was firmly ensconced to the broader context of the Cold War and containment. But here too the CIA takes a different line. In a 1964 memo to DCI John McCone, the Agency wrote 'We do not believe that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos would be followed by a rapid, successive communization of the other states of the Far East...'<sup>16</sup> The CIA assessed that the Communist movements in Southeast Asia were highly nationalistic and that the struggle in Vietnam had more of a nationalist component, thus

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<sup>13</sup> Ford, p. 86

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 87

<sup>15</sup> Trip Report by the Vice President, May 1961, FRUS, 1961-63, Vol. I, p. 154 in Ford, p. 89

<sup>16</sup> Memorandum to DCI John McCone, June 9, 1964 Vol, I p. 485

necessitating the need for a Vietnam based counter-narrative, not a counter communist narrative.<sup>17</sup> It seems that the CIA was at least aware of the Viet Minh's narrative, but that the warnings were not absorbed by decisionmakers, but as Harold P. Ford argued 'perhaps the most potent hurdle for intelligence... was the fact that the decisions on what to do in Vietnam were not taking place within a vacuum, but in a highly charged political arena.'<sup>18</sup>

In the end, US decisionmakers overvalued the US ability to achieve objectives through military means and they underestimated the tenacity of the Vietnamese resistance and the narratives to which they clung.<sup>19</sup> DCI John McCone clashed regularly with the White House and the Pentagon over policy, especially the gradual escalation of conflict. McCone's main bureaucratic opponent Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara believed that an incrementally escalated conflict would weaken Hanoi, McCone believed it would strengthen Ho's narrative.<sup>20</sup> April 28, 1965, was McCone's last day at CIA. One of his final acts was to write a Top Secret farewell letter to Lyndon B. Johnson in which he warned the President that now the US had committed to fighting a war in Vietnam, the US would have to use swift and overwhelming force to break Hanoi as fast as they could.<sup>21</sup> Implicit in this warning was the belief that giving Hanoi time meant allowing the North to control the narrative in the countryside.

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<sup>17</sup> Ford. P. 86-87

<sup>18</sup> Ford, p. 90

<sup>19</sup> Record, Jeffrey, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam*, (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis Maryland, 1998), p. 29

<sup>20</sup> Moore, John Norton and Robert F. Turner "William Colby and the 'Lost Victory' in Vietnam," in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War: Reflections Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of Saigon*, Edited by John Norton Moore and Robert F. Turner (Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2002)

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Director of Central Intelligence John A. McCone to President Lyndon B. Johnson, April 28, 1965, declassified from Top Secret pursuant to FOIA request, declassified October 11, 1985



In the process of informing, especially as military operations escalated, the CIA itself found shortcomings in its own work. In 1969, the CIA conducted a self-study of 'intelligence failures' in Vietnam and concluded that the IC misunderstood the North Vietnamese and VC order of battle, a neglect of the Communist Party and its bureaucracies, and a general inability to predict.<sup>22</sup> Order of Battle estimates are used by commanders and officers in the field to keep track of enemy units and track their numbers, readiness, and unit quality. In Vietnam, Secretary McNamara stressed the importance of these reports as a part of his larger emphasis on utilizing quantitative data to fight wars.<sup>23</sup>

General William Westmorland routinely complained about the veracity of the Monthly Order of Battle Report. The 1969 CIA self-assessment shows that the IC did indeed fail to gauge the scope of the war, which in their estimate was always larger than the Agency perceived.<sup>24</sup> One outcome of these miscalculations was a more gradual increase in troop strength and the occurrence of more under-strength units in the field. This is ironic as it was the determination of the CIA that the gradualist approach of the Pentagon was counter-productive and gave North Vietnam the time it desperately needed.

The second key failure found in the 1969 self-assessment was a lack of insight into the Communist party and its bureaucracy in North Vietnam. The blind spot extended so far that even in 1967 the CIA was barely aware of the Viet Cong Security Service that functioned as the VC's Intelligence service.<sup>25</sup> The result was an inability to gauge the VC's true strength and to

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<sup>22</sup> Intelligence Failures in Vietnam: Suggestions for Reform. CIA, 1969, Declassified.

<sup>23</sup> Wirtz, James J. 'Intelligence to Please? The Order of Battle Controversy during the Vietnam war' in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (Summer 1991), p. 242

<sup>24</sup> Intelligence Failures in Vietnam: Suggestions for Reform. CIA, 1969, Declassified.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

assess the level of cooperation between the VC and the North. As Andrade pointed out above, the North Vietnamese were mixing NVA into the ranks of the VC. By the time this practice had become common the debate over where the center of gravity in the war lay became overtaken by events. This failure also contains a hint of irony. If only CIA warnings about the nature of the conflict had been heeded early on, perhaps this linkage could have been targeted much earlier. But as this the relationship between the VC and NVA had time to flourish, they made changing the narrative in the Vietnamese countryside nearly impossible by 1968-69.

The final key Intelligence failure identified by the CIA was the inability to predict. This was probably most clearly seen in the surprise Tet offensive, launched in January 1968. Often considered one of the most visible examples of strategic surprise, the Tet offensive was a major turning point in the war. The offensive combined VC and PAVN forces and represented a serious push to the west that resulted in battles in Huế and Khe Sanh and resulted in months of brutal fighting. While the offensive was eventually a failure, the perception that the US was succeeding in Vietnam was no in doubt not just in South Vietnam where the narrative was critical, but also in the US where critical popular support was waning and threatening to split American society.

The CIA self-assessment faulted a lack of good sources on the ground, including Vietnamese speakers. Most of the case officers and analysts working in Vietnam were not forward deployed. They missed the extent of infiltration into the South by PAVN forces. The CIA also seemed to fall victim, at least in some cases, to the sunny projections from the Pentagon and South Vietnamese government. Sam Adams, a CIA analyst attempting to gauge enemy

strength in 1967, produced an estimate that topped 600,000 enemy combatants.<sup>26</sup> The NIE produced on enemy strength did not come close these numbers, however. Objections from Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and officials in the Pentagon, nearly all estimates of VC units were dropped from the estimate. The thinking for the South Vietnamese and the White House was that such a large estimate would produce a public relations disaster, so they made the number smaller.<sup>27</sup>

*Conclusion: A War of Policy, not Reality*

In a 1996 interview, reflecting on the choice that faced President Kennedy in the early 1960s, as to whether to escalate or withdraw from Vietnam, Secretary McNamara said '[if] faced with the loss of Vietnam, he would withdraw – but I believe that had he faced that choice, he would have withdrawn rather than substitute US combat troops for Vietnamese forces to save South Vietnam.'<sup>28</sup> Johnson ultimately made the opposite choice, believing that if the dominoes in Southeast Asia then India, Japan, and South Korea would not be far behind. Adherence to the policy of containment would trump any timely warnings from the IC and cause the White House and the Pentagon to set off down a path of gradual escalation that fed into the colonialist narrative used by the North to generate and sustain resistance.

Regardless of the prescient warnings about prospects in Vietnam or how most effectively to fight the war from the IC, it too struggled to see clearly as the conflict grew. In failure we always try to learn the critical lessons. Perhaps the most important lesson was that

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<sup>26</sup> Wirtz, p. 247

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 250

<sup>28</sup> McNamara, Robert S. from CNN interview, 1996 <https://alphahistory.com/coldwar/robert-mcnamara-domino-theory-vietnam/>

policy must reflect reality. Military superiority does not guarantee political success. While the conflicts were different, many of these lessons had to be relearned during the US Global War on Terror. After another ignominious withdrawal from a far-off land, let us hope that these lessons are learned this time.

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