

Chapter 7 – (U) A Springtime of Trumpets: SIGINT and the Tet Offensive

(U) In the history of the Indochina War, the communist Tet Offensive, which began on 31 January 1968 has dominated American popular imagination as no other event of the war. And rightly so. The fury and extent of the attacks were unexpected. Nearly every very major city and military base in South Vietnam was attacked by commando teams and main force units of the National Liberation Front and the People's Army of Vietnam which, themselves, seemed to spring from an earth sown with the mythic crop of dragon's teeth. The Tet Offensive changed the course and nature of the Indochina War in ways unimaginable just a few days earlier. The unvarnished images from this event – the execution of a Viet Cong suspect by Vietnamese National Police General Loan, the dead communist guerrillas sprinkled about the grounds of the U.S. embassy, and U.S. Marines fighting to recapture the rubble of Hue – brought home to Americans and their leaders in a compelling fashion just how much their conceptions and attitudes about the war were mistaken. Most of all, Tet would force President Johnson finally to make a strategic choice for the course of the war; the option he finally chose defined the American effort thereafter. For the communists, the bloodbath they suffered grievously wounded the indigenous National Liberation Front's effectiveness; from now on, North Vietnamese forces would totally dominate the fighting.

(U) In the aftermath of Tet, two central, and seemingly simple, questions were asked of the



(U) Pictures from Tet: top, General Loan executing a Viet Cong suspect, and bottom, U.S. military police fighting on the grounds of the U.S. embassy.

U.S. intelligence community: Just what was known about Tet and when would it occur? Yet the answers to the simple interrogatives of "what" and "when" were disputed heavily in the post-Tet assessments. As we shall see, the "what" of Tet was known, but in a variety of guises. The all important knowledge of when Tet would hit was just as significant as the nature of the attack. But the knowledge of the "when" was studded with nettles of uncertainty as well. Intelligence derives most of its special justification by supplying commanders with that certain foreknowledge of enemy intentions and capabilities. "Forewarned is forearmed" is the time-honored cliché from warfare. For the intelligence community, and the cryptologic one is included here, the controversy surrounding Tet would seriously call into question its methods of providing timely and useful warning to the American command.

(U) Some judgments of the intelligence effort prior to Tet have been harsh. A West Point textbook compared the intelligence failure of Tet with those of Pearl Harbor and the Second Ardennes Offensive in December 1944.¹ Former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, who replaced Robert McNamara, insisted that not one word of warning had been received by General Westmoreland or the American ambassador in Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker.² Claims to the contrary have been made by participants and observers. One of the most knowledgeable participants at the time suggests that there was no strategic surprise, but that several tactical aspects of the offensive were a surprise to the command in Saigon and the Johnson administration in Washington.³

~~(TS//SI)~~ From the cryptologic perspective, resolving the controversy about the "what" and "when" of pre-Tet SIGINT reporting will not be easy. This is so for a number of reasons. For one, various assertions have been put forward in official reports, and by some former cryptologists who might be considered to have direct knowledge, that SIGINT did indeed "predict" when the Tet attacks were to occur. One NSA senior did

claim that SIGINT reporting went down to the wire, that it "went out hours before the attack, and told when, where, how, and locations, and timing."⁴ Other NSA analysts, veterans of the war, also made similar claims for SIGINT predicting the Tet attacks.⁵ Similar refrains of this chorus can be found in other histories and assessments of the SIGINT community's performance. An unclassified CIA history concluded that, except for the National Security Agency, no other elements in the intelligence community did better than provide a "muted warning."⁶ The same history added:

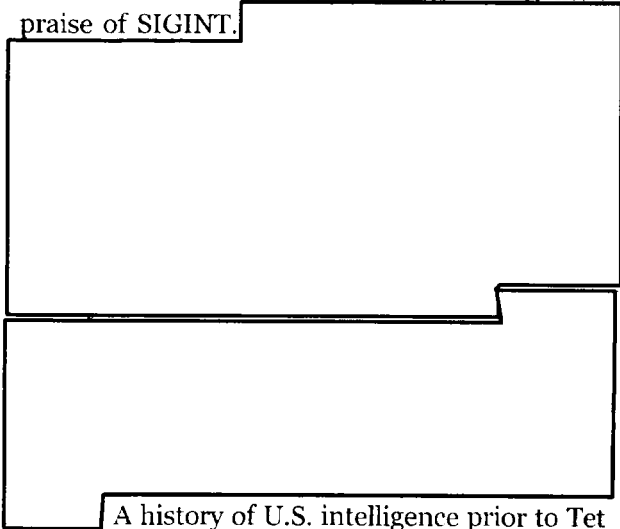
The National Security Agency stood alone in issuing the kinds of warnings the U.S. Intelligence Community was designed to provide. The first SIGINT indicators of impending major activity began to appear in the second week of January 1968. In the following days NSA issued a number of alerts, culminating in a major warning it disseminated widely in communications intelligence channels on 25 January, titled 'Coordinated Vietnamese Communist Offensive Evidenced in South Vietnam'.⁷

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(U) Even public histories of Tet have echoed this assessment. One stated that the NSA analysis of communist communications "confronted MACV analysts and officers with indications that attacks throughout South Vietnam were imminent. At least six days before the offensive, the NSA provided a specific and accurate warning of when the offensive would materialize and an accurate prediction about the location of the attacks."⁹

~~(S//SI)~~ Yet there exists a large body of analyses, reports, and histories which heavily criticize

the performance of the SIGINT community in reporting the approach of the Tet offensive. Surprisingly, many of the sources quoted earlier themselves contain conditional qualifiers to their praise of SIGINT.



A history of U.S. intelligence prior to Tet added this interesting point about SIGINT's role:

It appears, however, that U.S. analysts did fall victim to the "Ultra" syndrome, the tendency to rely on sources of information that have a reputation for accurate and timely information. In early 1968, SIGINT revealed the movement of NVA units as they massed along the DMZ . . . especially near Khe Sanh. In contrast, VC units that were surrounding and infiltrating southern cities remained relatively quiet . . . as U.S. intelligence agencies became mesmerized by the electronic image . . . they tended to downplay . . . reports that indicated a VC attack against the cities of the south.¹²

~~(S//SI)~~ Obviously, such different opinions, even within the same documents and monographs, suggest that, despite the confident pronouncements of some NSA high officials, there remains much controversy about SIGINT's role prior to Tet. Some of this may derive from the imprecision of the claims. Exactly what is meant by "predict"? A dictionary definition states simply that it means to "foretell in advance." Yet, how much needs to be foretold to be effective, especially in a military context? Is merely saying

"something" may happen sufficient? Do the commanders of armies need more to act upon? Or does the word "predict" accurately portray the SIGINT process prior to Tet? Could another term describe what SIGINT actually was attempting to do and, at the same time, allow for a precise evaluation of its performance.

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~~(S//SI)~~ In order to arrive at some determination of SIGINT's role and its effectiveness prior to the attacks, we need to understand the complex and numerous factors that influenced how American officials received intelligence from SIGINT sources. So in the ensuing narrative, we will try to answer the following questions: What was the military situation in early 1968? How did SIGINT fare in a battlefield support role? How did both sides perceive their respective positions vis-a-vis the other in 1968? What were the aims of the North Vietnamese during the Tet offensive? Exactly what did SIGINT observe of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong preparations for the offensive? What was the effect of the siege of Khe Sanh on American military intelligence? How was this intelligence disseminated and to whom? How was it received? And what effect did it have?

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~~(S//SI)~~ In reviewing the chronology leading up to Tet, we will be concerned primarily with SIGINT's role prior to the attack. This is important, since the reporting by SIGINT before 31 January is what the various customers in Washington and Saigon used to make their assessments of the situation, as well as their subsequent preparations (or inaction). Although we will consider the post-Tet assessments and evaluations, these documents, by their very nature, tend to correlate post-event understanding with a search for "indicators" that were reported earlier. This tendency distorts our understanding of what happened prior to Tet. By emphasizing a handful of details that "predicted" Tet, as these evaluations did, the rest of the background "noise," that is, other intelligence, influences, biases, all of which shaped the American attitude prior to the offensive, were ignored, or down played in signif-

icance. This is not a useful approach for understanding the setting before Tet.

(U) To comprehend what happened, we need to see how both sides had arrived at the situation that existed in South Vietnam by the end of 1967. We can begin by reviewing the course of the war and the role that SIGINT played.

~~(S//SI)~~ The Ground War and the Development of SIGINT Indicators, 1965-1967

(U) The North Vietnamese leadership had been surprised by the American intervention in the South beginning in March 1965. Also, Hanoi had not counted on the size and rate of the buildup of U.S. ground forces. Le Duan, secretary general of the Lao Dong Party, admitted later in 1965 that the "situation had developed more rapidly than we had anticipated."¹³ Hanoi's leaders had been surprised, but they had already instigated a reinforcement of the southern insurgency's forces with regular PAVN formations. In September 1964, the 808th Battalion was on its way south. By the beginning of 1965, two regiments of the PAVN's 325C Division were already moving into camps along the Laotian-South Vietnamese border.

(U) The strategic problem for Hanoi's leaders was how to deal with the new military situation created by Washington's intervention. The decision the communist leadership finally made was an extension of an earlier choice to strike a decisive blow at the South. Prior to the American arrival, the NLF military units, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), although having mauled ARVN units in several battles, had failed to destroy Saigon's military. To beat the ARVN and the newly arriving American forces required the formation of main force units in the south and the use of regular PAVN units from the north. Key to this strategy was the appointment of Nguyen Chi Thanh as the military commander in the south. Thanh was a southern returnee and

known as a charismatic leader. He was a general-of-the-army in the PAVN; the only other holding this rank was Vo Nguyen Giap. Thanh was an ardent believer in Vietnamese unification, but unlike Giap, opposed any negotiations with Saigon or Washington, preferring a militant policy.¹⁴ He had pressed for an aggressive campaign of conventional, large formation attacks against the ARVN. Beginning in early January 1965, PLAF units had scored a series of impressive victories against large ARVN forces near Ben Gia, Song Be, and in Quang Ngai Province. By summer, Saigon's military was on the ropes.

~~(S//SI)~~ As for the newly arrived Americans, Thanh ordered his units to stand and fight with the Americans, despite the latter's overwhelming advantage in firepower and mobility. The first opportunity to take on the Americans was not long in coming. In early August 1965, ASA elements at Ben Hoa, using ARDF techniques, had located the First VC Regiment on the Van Tuong Peninsula (known also as the Batangan



(U) PAVN Senior General Nguyen Chi Thanh

Peninsula) near the Marine base at Chu Lai. The information was brought to the attention of Westmoreland's chief of intelligence, Major General Joseph McChristian, by an NSA representative to the MACV staff, [REDACTED]. General McChristian informed Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, commander of the marines in Vietnam, who planned a trap for the VC regiment.

~~(S//SI)~~ The marine plan, known as Operation Starlight, involved closing off the base of the peninsula with a marine battalion. Offshore naval gunfire, combined with air strikes and land-based marine artillery would pound the isolated communist troops. Then, another marine battalion would land on the beach and sweep up the survivors. On 18 August, Starlight began. Eventually 6,000 marines pressed the defenders into pockets which, in turn, were hammered by aircraft and naval gunfire. It was all over in three days. The marines claimed over 700 communist dead and prisoners and 127 weapons captured. General McChristian saw Starlight as an example of how intelligence can drive operations.¹⁵ Cryptologists in Vietnam also saw this experience as heralding a new and significant role for ARDF and SIGINT in Vietnam.¹⁶

~~(TS//SI)~~ However, in the euphoria that followed Starlight, there were indications that the operation was not quite as effective as claimed. Thanh would claim that most of the regiment had escaped the trap and that the battle had proved that PLAF troops could stand and fight with the Americans. Over 200 American had been killed and wounded in the battle.¹⁷ But more disturbing than Thanh's claims was what SIGINT revealed. Within two days of the battle, the First Regiment's radio network was back on the air. On 25 August, the regimental headquarters had moved thirty kilometers to the west of the Van Tuong Peninsula and was again communicating with its battalions. By 1 September, the net was back to normal operations. Also, there were indications that elements of the regiment were

involved in an attack at the nearby village of An Hoa.¹⁸ In fact, the region would never be pacified; American and ARVN sweeps never rooted out the communist presence in Van Tuong.¹⁹

(U) The first large-scale test for Thanh's PAVN regulars occurred in late October 1965. During the late summer and into early fall, three PAVN regiments, from three separate divisions, moved into position around the Special Forces camp at Plei Me located about twenty-five miles south of Pleiku. It seemed to American planners that these maneuvers were meant to cut South Vietnam in half. The communists may have been doing just that. Rear support construction units were busy extending supply lines eastward from the Ho Chi Minh Trail into the Central Highlands, a move that typically presaged extended operations.²⁰

(U) On 19 October Plei Me was attacked by the PAVN 33rd Regiment of the 325th Division. The initial assault failed and the communist troops fell back and began shelling the base. A relief column of some 1,200 ARVN troops, supported by tanks and armored personnel carriers, headed south from Pleiku towards Plei Me. Seven miles from the base it was ambushed by another PAVN regiment and pinned down. The column finally was rescued by elements of the 1st U.S. Cavalry Division, which literally rode to the rescue in its helicopters.

~~(TS//SI)~~ After the column safely reached the camp, the 1st Air Cavalry turned to pursue the PAVN regiment located in the nearby Ia Drang Valley. For the next three weeks, in a pair of operations known as Long Reach and Silver Bayonet, the cavalrymen chased the PAVN units. The Americans used their mobility and firepower to effect, in the process reducing two PAVN regiments to tatters. Particularly devastating were air strikes, including the first use of B-52s in a tactical support role. It seemed to the Vietnamese, that each time one of their units settled in, an air strike would hit them. Discussing the American

ability to pin point their locations, a 33rd Regiment staff conference held after the battle concluded that they had spies in their midst.²¹

~~(TS//SI)~~ Of course, it had not been spies which had given away their positions; rather, it was airborne direction finding that had flagged the NVA units for the air strikes. But it was an ARDF capability with a difference: no longer were the results held up until the aircraft landed. Instead, the aircraft passed their results directly to the ASA unit in support of the tactical commander. Secure air-to-ground communications were achieved with the use of a one-time pad for passing the D/F results. The DSU, in this case the 371st RRC, had modified an intercept position into a controller for the ARDF mission aircraft. For Ia Drang, five mission aircraft were allocated. Fixes could be passed from a plane to the commander in under thirty minutes.²²

~~(TS//SI)~~ Ia Drang had been the first significant test for tactical SIGINT in an ongoing operation. Initially, it had demonstrated its value by alerting MACV to the moves of the PAVN regiments around Plei Me. The D/F proved to be useful as a targeting tool for tactical air strikes, allowing for B-52s, in particular, to be utilized. Still, Ia Drang was not a totally unmitigated success for SIGINT. At least four times during the struggle, ARVN and American units had been ambushed by large communist units – twice during helicopter landings – and SIGINT had been unable to detect the traps. In all cases, firepower, in the form of air strikes and artillery support, had been essential in retrieving dangerous tactical situations for the Americans. The Air Force had to mount almost five times the number of air sorties than it had originally planned in order to support the 1st Air Cavalry.²³

~~(S//SI)~~ This trend of beating the communist forces to the draw continued into early and mid-1966. For example, during March in the western Central Highlands, SIGINT had picked up the movement of PAVN command and intelligence

units eastward towards Pleiku and Kontum. A tactical command element was isolated which appeared to have assumed control of operations.²⁴ Before the movements could be consolidated, General Westmoreland dispatched troops from the U.S. 25th Infantry Division. For the next two months, the division's units maneuvered across the region forcing the communist troops to fight or withdraw. They also cleared the major north-south road, Route 14, connecting the provincial capitals. In June, the 101st Airborne Division launched Operation Hawthorne to clear the area near Dak To. By the end of July 1966, the communist command and intelligence elements had withdrawn, their plans apparently frustrated.

(U) For all of the head-on fighting with the Americans, Hanoi's troops had little positive to show for the heavy casualties it had sustained. Westmoreland's forces had broken up every major communist military initiative before they could be effective. In the summer of 1966, Westmoreland had completed the buildup of U.S. forces to the point he now felt he could conduct large-scale operations which he termed "search and destroy." This approach, while not always bagging the PAVN and PLAF units, had the important by-product of denying the communist planners the element they needed the most – time. Time always was the necessary ingredient for the planning and preparations of communist military operations. Unlike the Americans, who extended their lines of supply and communications to facilitate offensives, the communist approach required the preparation of a battlefield before an assault. This meant the prepositioning of supplies and the rehearsal of unit roles. The sweeps by the big U.S. units compelled the communist troops to abandon the supply stockpiles and prepared positions. The communists no longer had the luxury of an uninterrupted period leading up to an attack.²⁵

(U) General Thanh came under political attack in Hanoi for his bloody strategy. The main critique was his emphasis of main force opera-

tions to the neglect of guerrilla or the People's War approach: Thanh had failed to coordinate operations with the revolutionary elements – the guerrillas and local political functionaries. His critics favored a protracted revolutionary struggle and advocated a return to a “defensive” posture of small-unit strikes. Thanh, in a speech before COSVN in mid-1966, contemptuously dismissed this approach. “If we want to take defensive positions, we should withdraw to India.”²⁶

(U) Despite Thanh's bravado, he did relent and accepted some limits to his earlier strategy. He was willing to admit that adaptations had to be made in tactics when fighting the Americans. He allowed for additional forms of political struggle to supplement the military actions. He limited large unit operations to the northern part of South Vietnam, near the DMZ. Regular PAVN units and large PLAF formations engaged U.S. Army and Marine units near places like Con Thien, Camp Carroll, and Khe Sanh. Other fights started outside Danang and Hue. In the Central Highlands, isolated special forces bases were hit. North of Saigon, communist units battled numerous Allied battalions that were trying to clear out the communists' complexes in sanctuaries along the Cambodian border.

(U) Thanh had not abandoned his big-unit strategy. He just changed the way the main force units engaged the Americans, which was referred to as the way “a tiger leaps at his prey.”²⁷ Communist units would attack isolated bases and units and then disappear into the bush when the large American units arrived on the scene. Despite this change in tactics, by the middle of 1967, the communists again had taken horrific casualties and had little to show for it. Their units were still in the field, but nothing had been denied the Americans.

~~(S//SI)~~ A major factor in the string of communist military failures was the growing capabilities of the American SIGINT effort in South Vietnam. In the three years of direct U.S. combat

involvement, American SIGINT developed in pace with the growth of the Vietnamese communist communications.

~~(S//SI)~~ Prior to 1965, Vietnamese communist operations could be characterized as “guerilla” in that the final planning was left to lower echelon units, which, in turn, seldom used radios to conduct military operations. D/F and analysis in this period was effective in locating units in their enclaves or bases, seldom on the move. After 1965, as larger regular PAVN formations took the field, the communications profile of communist military operations changed. Certain C3 patterns of behavior appeared that tipped off their actions. These patterns, recovered by SIGINT analysts, allowed them to determine with a great degree of accuracy, the operational intentions of communist units. So effective was this analysis that, after 1965, probably no major communist military operations went undetected.

~~(S//SI)~~ These patterns were termed “SIGINT indicator” by the cryptologists in Vietnam and NSA, and were used to warn Allied commanders in Saigon and the field of communist moves. By late 1967, analysts had developed five major categories of SIGINT indicators that tipped off communist military activity. These were:

1. Changes to Signal Operating Instructions (SOI). These features included introduction of new tactical callsigns, procedural signals, increased communications scheduling, unscheduled changes to the SOI, and a failure to implement a regularly scheduled SOI change. Of particular interest was the appearance of so-called “watch nets” in communist communications. Watch nets basically acted as a 24-hour “call up” by which units could contact and set up transmission schedules. This technique provided flexibility for units on the move that might encounter unexpected difficulties.

2. Communications Network Structural Changes. These entailed the activation of unit for-

ward elements, such as tactical operations commander, communications centers, and observation posts. Many of these modifications were forced by the changing tactical situation.

3. ARDF (and other D/F) results such as the concentration of communications terminals, unusual movements (of more than 10 kilometers), and (in cases of reaction to Allied operations) dispersal of communications facilities serving headquarters elements.

4. Communications activity changes which included high or substantially increased activity levels, the appearance of sustained levels of high-precedence messages with attendant requirement for receipt, and unusual operator reaction to this type of message.

5. Cryptographic changes. The introduction of tactical cryptosystems,

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_____ were often exploitable and provided a lode of information about attack plans. One unique variation of this was the appearance of teams from a communist unit's Military Intelligence Section (MIS), whose reporting carried current information on target status or on occasion included exploitable operational traffic.

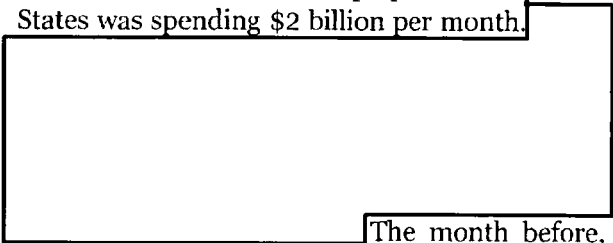
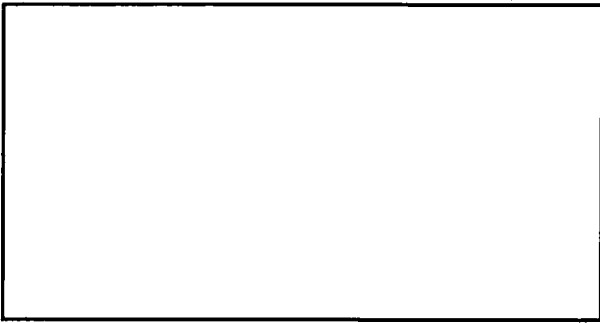
~~(TS//SI)~~ It should be pointed out that SIGINT analysts did not approach the indicators in a lock-step manner, checking them off as they were observed, until they arrived at some magic percentile predicting an attack. Instead, the analysts had developed a much more nuanced appreciation of their meaning and relationship to military operations. The analysts understood that not all the indicators would occur before any communist military operation; in fact, there never had been an instance prior to Tet where all indicators had occurred.²⁸ Rather, the analysts usually saw the appearance of one or more of the indicators, not at once, but in a modulated crescendo. This upsurge was accompanied by a concomitant

increase in the tempo of communications leading up to the attack.

~~(TS//SI)~~ This process of "making the connection" amongst the indicators was important for another reason: the analyst had to be able to judge whether or not the indicator(s) was a clue to an upcoming military operation or was a singular reflection of some benign (nonoperations-related) change to the current communications network or SOI. The thought process exhibited, then, was not the compilation of indicators, but the recognition of the entire phenomenon as a valid tip-off to a military activity. Furthermore, this analytic process implied that the analyst had a knowledge of the history of the target communications structure's tendencies. This "benchmarking" based on prior activity levels was an important element in understanding what the indicators might be showing the analysts.

(U) One apparent result of an increased SIGINT capability was the concurrent development and use of an intelligence methodology called "pattern analysis" by MACV's intelligence command, the Combined Intelligence Center. Essentially, pattern analysis was the correlation of all information from all intelligence sources so as to determine the communist intentions. Visually, pattern analysis was demonstrable through the use of maps with multiple overlays. Each overlay would signify a particular type of information about the enemy, say the location of radio transmitters, known logistics centers, ambush sites, etc. The resulting visual patterns could suggest a variety of possible activities in an area. To arrive at a reasonable determination of what the enemy was planning usually required the ability to correlate a number of items of intelligence. At times, this process, especially its sources, would be criticized.²⁹ Still, Westmoreland conceded that pattern analysis could drive the tempo, nature, and location of American operations.³⁰

~~(S)~~ By the end of the 1966-1967 dry season campaign in May, the strategic situation in Vietnam could have been called a stalemate. Although the communist efforts to strengthen their position south of the DMZ had failed, efforts by MACV to drive them out of their strongholds north of Saigon and along the Laos and Cambodia border regions similarly had failed. The American presence had climbed to 450,000 troops, while Hanoi's infiltration had kept pace. The United States was spending \$2 billion per month.



The month before, General Westmoreland had told President Johnson that, unless the communist structure fell apart, the war could go on for five more years.³² The "limited war" Washington had bargained for may have seemed unending. But for Hanoi, the time seemed right for a roll of the die.

(U) Hanoi and Washington Plan for Victory

(U) To the communist leaders in Hanoi, the military-political situation in South Vietnam was not as encouraging as it could have been. The previous campaign, that is, the 1966-67 Winter-Spring Campaign (October 1966 to May 1967), had produced nothing more than a continuation of the previous military standoff. However, even in the midst of the campaign season, changes were being contemplated. In January 1967, the 13th Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party had called for the adoption of a new strategy combining political/diplomatic and military methods. Ho Chi Minh praised this new approach, termed "fighting while negotiating," and appealed for party unity so as to implement it.³³



(U) General Thanh returned to Hanoi and presented his plans to break the stalemate and force the United States out of the war. His argument was simple: the only way that Hanoi could force Washington out of the war was to convince it that the costs of continuing the struggle would far outweigh anything that it could realize by remaining committed to Saigon's support.³⁵ If Johnson wanted to escalate the war, it would seriously threaten America's global strategic position and seriously undermine his domestic social and economic programs.³⁶ Hanoi wanted to exploit the "internal contradiction" of Washington's position.

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(U) Hanoi's problem was how to exploit this contradiction in Washington's stance. The solution, according to Thanh and other planners, was to hit the Americans where they were weakest - the South Vietnamese political and military structure. The communists would strike at the ARVN and Saigon's governmental apparatus in a countrywide assault. At the same time, an appeal would be made by the NLF to the nationalist sentiment of the South Vietnamese population to rise up against the regime in Saigon and thereby isolate the Americans. Bereft of popular support, the United States would have no choice but to exit Vietnam. The DRV knew it could not defeat the United States in a direct military confrontation; the terms for beating the U.S. could be found in destroying the weakest element of its policy - South Vietnam's government and its forces. In a way, this thinking reflected the Vietnamese historical fascination with the success of its rural-urban revolution of 1945 when handfuls of Viet

Minh units and cadre had overthrown a moribund Japanese administration and the puppet government of Bao Dai. However, the leadership in Hanoi was less sanguine and did not expect the U.S. to roll over and be supine; they hoped to bypass the Americans with a nationalist uprising.³⁷

(U) On 6 July 1967, General Thanh died of a heart attack while in Hanoi. The responsibility for carrying out the new strategy fell to General Giap.³⁸ Giap had been skeptical of Thanh's reliance on PLAF units and cadre to carry off the offensive. Furthermore, he was loathe to expose regular PAVN formations to the certain high losses from such an attack.³⁹ Other high-ranking Vietnamese disagreed with the strategy itself. These individuals, who might be termed "doves" in Hanoi, favored an emphasis on negotiations, and their resistance presented the politburo in Hanoi with a problem. In September 1967, a purge of these individuals occurred, maybe as many as 200, whose ranks included the deputy chairman of the State Science Commission and the chief of a military intelligence directorate.⁴⁰

(U) However, planning for the Tet Offensive (*Tet Mau Than*), more accurately referred to as Operation TCK/TCN (*Tong Cong Kich/Tong Khoi Ngia*, or the General Offensive/Uprising), had already begun. At planning sessions in mid-1967, Ho Chi Minh had made emotional appeals for a united effort to bring victory in the next phase of the war. Hanoi's military planners set the strategy for a three-phase winter/spring campaign to start in late 1967.

(U) During Phase I of the campaign, the Communists planned to mass and carry out coordinated conventional force operations along the border of South Vietnam, in the highlands, and around the DMZ. When the U.S. forces responded to these moves, and, in the process, denuded the cities of their shielding presence, the Viet Cong units would be free to infiltrate South Vietnam's urban centers and prepare for the next

phase, the General Uprising. This first phase has caused much controversy among historians of the war. In the battles initiated by the North Vietnamese, especially at Khe Sanh, in which they fixed the strategic attention of MACV, the PAVN suffered enormous losses: at Khe Sanh somewhere between 8,000 to 10,000 troops were estimated to have been killed during a nine-week span. If it was merely an effort to fix U.S. attention, the butcher bill was terribly high. General Giap and other North Vietnamese military leaders insisted that it was just that – a lure. No matter what Hanoi's intention, it did work: General Westmoreland saw the siege at Khe Sanh as the curtain raiser for a larger scheme to seize the entire region around the DMZ.⁴¹

(U) Some commentators have suggested that Giap had to assure himself that a large operation in the South would not lead to a U.S. invasion of the North – an option which was always on Hanoi's mind.⁴² Actually, Giap's fears were not groundless. Since 1966, the U.S. had considered the invasion option in some detail. Walt Rostow, the presidential advisor for foreign affairs, had claimed such a move could seriously disrupt Hanoi's plans. Eventually, three invasion scenarios were secretly drawn up. All of them called for a joint ground-airborne-amphibious assault, one in the region around Vinh – one of the major northern terminals for the southern infiltration – and the other two closer towards the DMZ. The trouble was that any of the plans required about three divisions of troops. Some would stage from the U.S. via Okinawa or the Philippines, but the rest would have to come from U.S. forces in South Vietnam; Westmoreland told General Wheeler, the chairman of the JCS, that he would be hard-pressed to spare any of his troops for an attack on the North.⁴³

(U) During the considerations to carry out the invasion, which Westmoreland told President Johnson would have to wait until spring 1968 when decent weather arrived, the U.S. ran into the same problem that would afflict it after Tet –

where to get the troops so that their removal would neither cause internal political turmoil nor upset America's strategic worldwide posture.⁴⁴ Tet would put off the invasion plans for good, but the decision about reinforcements for Westmoreland would return and add to the Johnson administration's post-Tet woes.

(U) Hanoi intended phase II of the campaign to run from January to March 1968. This was the central part of the TCK/TCN - the "classic" portion of Tet, whose dimensions would surprise the commands in Saigon and Washington. It called for coordinated guerrilla and commando assaults within the South Vietnamese cities and the ARVN military installations that would be combined with second echelon attacks by PAVN regular units from outside urban centers where they had been massing. During the attacks a nationwide appeal would go out for the southern Vietnamese to join in a general uprising. As a Vietnamese document spelled out this phase:

Destroy and disintegrate the main body of the puppet army to such an extent that it ceases to be a force on which the U.S. imperialists can rely. . . . Wreck . . . the puppet army to the point it can no longer maintain the reactionary regime . . . arouse the masses in the cities and rural areas. . . .⁴⁵

(U) In Phase III, after the general uprising had begun, PAVN units would cross the DMZ and assault or besiege American units now suddenly lost in a wave of popular revolts by the southern Vietnamese masses. These attacks would isolate the Americans and, at the same time, create the conditions for the "decisive victory" in which Hanoi would hold all trump and negotiate the Americans out of Vietnam.

(U) Ambitious as this campaign was, and as carefully crafted as any of Giap's previous efforts, it was flawed in two important respects. First of all, the strategic assumption of a popular or general uprising in reaction to the envisioned defeat

of the Americans was a misreading of the popular climate in South Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese population could hardly be counted as adherents to the Saigon regime, neither were they ripe for a popular uprising against it. Hanoi's belief in the certainty of an uprising reeked of ideological fantasy more than the cold calculation of the popular pulse.

~~(S//SI)~~ The second flaw was in the plan itself. The necessary ingredients for a successful second phase were secrecy and coordination. Unfortunately for Giap, but not for Westmoreland, these conditions conflicted. The deepest secrecy necessary to safeguard surprise jeopardized the coordination needed to pull the attacks off.

[REDACTED] This move, more than anything, doomed the Tet attacks to military failure. It remains unclear whether the attacks on the 30th were premature or if the attack had been delayed by Hanoi and those VC units missed the message. There is a suggestion that possibly the date of the main attack, or the premature attack itself, had been pushed up from a previous date.⁴⁶ However, as we shall see, there is some SIGINT that may point to a solution to this debate.

~~(C)~~ Throughout the summer and fall of 1967, a number of articles discussing a change in strategy by senior North Vietnamese leaders appeared in various party and military publications.⁴⁷ In July, an article appeared in the army daily newspaper castigating those who preferred to negotiate a settlement to the war. In September, the most famous of these was Giap's "Big Victory, Difficult Task," which warned its readers against expectations of an easy victory. However, Giap reminded his readers of the virtues of protracted revolutionary war.⁴⁸ This article was also broadcast over Radio Hanoi's domestic service. In November, Le Duan wrote of the necessity of building up forces in towns to force the struggle there, as well as in the countryside. Finally, in December, high party and government officials,

OGA

foreign diplomats, and leading citizens throughout Hanoi received an envelope in which there was a pink piece of paper with this poem reputedly written by Ho Chi Minh (and broadcast over Radio Hanoi on 1 January 1968):

This spring will be far better than any spring
past,
As truth of triumph spreads with trumpet
blast
North and South, rushing heroically together,
smite the American invaders.
Go forward!
Certain victory is ours at last.⁴⁹

(U) Meanwhile, in the command centers in Washington and Saigon, the reaction to the apparent stalemate in 1967 was a curious mixture of optimism and unease about the course of the war. In certain intelligence circles, in the State Department, and in the person of Secretary of Defense McNamara, there was a belief that the war could not be won as it was currently being waged. Despite the bloodletting, the communists were still fielding fighting units while the Viet Cong political structure could not be permanently eradicated from the countryside. Rolling Thunder, after more than two years, simply was not stopping the supply flow, nor was it pushing Hanoi to the conference table. Surveying the situation, these officials, advisors, and analysts believed that an escalation of the fighting would not work, either. For some, the only way out seemed to be negotiations.⁵⁰

(U) On the other hand, most of the high members of the Johnson administration seemed convinced that the war was being won. For them, the problem was the slow erosion of public support for the war. Mostly, this was seen as a public relations problem: how to counter the poor attitude of some government officials and the negativity of the press dispatches from South Vietnam. The Johnson White House staff dreamed up an activist program pushing an optimistic theme. A "Success Offensive" was started by presidential

advisor Walt Rostow, whose Psychological Strategy Committee monitored press stories from around the country, seeding friendly press with information on items such as progress in hamlet pacification and increased communist casualties.⁵¹

(U) The order from this group was to get out the message that "we are winning" the war. From the middle of 1967 to the end of the year, a crescendo of optimistic statements from various high-ranking civilians and military washed over the critics of the administration's policy. In August 1967, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle Wheeler, stated that the air war was "going well and . . . that he did not agree with the [negative] conclusion of the Intelligence Community." In September, Walt Rostow commented that he was "outraged at the intellectual prudishness of the Intelligence Community [concerning its evaluation of the lack of progress in pacification]." ⁵²

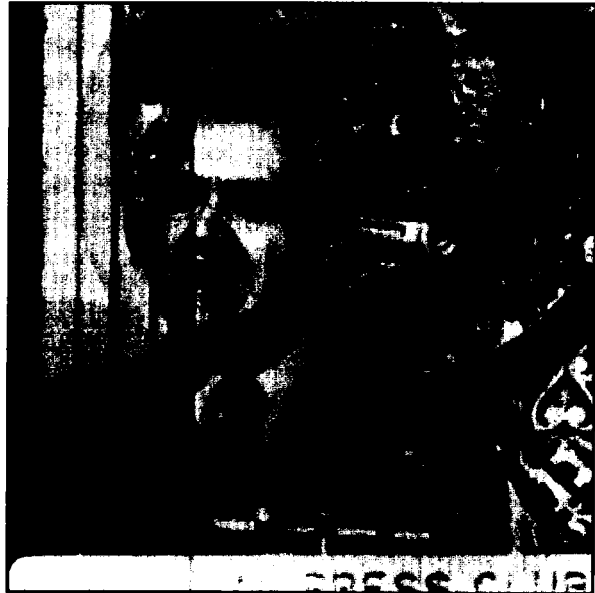
(U) Into the fall, the administration kept up the public relations pressure. In November, General Bruce Palmer, deputy commander of the U.S. Army, Vietnam, told a reporter that "The Viet Cong has been defeated from Da Nang all the way down in the populated areas [sic]. He can't get food and he can't recruit. He has been forced to change his strategy from trying to control the people on the coast to trying to survive in the mountains." Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, returning from a trip to Vietnam told a television interviewer that "We are beginning to win this struggle. We are on the offensive. Territory is being gained. We are making steady progress." ⁵³ In Saigon, spokesman for the head of the pacification effort, Robert Komer, briefed reporters that, based on results of the Hamlet Evaluation Survey, 67 percent of the population lived in areas now controlled by the Vietnamese government.⁵⁴

(U) Of course the big gun in this offensive was General Westmoreland. Despite some misgiv-

ings, Westmoreland cooperated with the administration and added his opinion. On 21 November, he addressed the National Press Club. Among his remarks he said that "We have reached an important point when the end comes into view." He added that the transition to the final phase "lies within our grasp." During questioning he stated that the United States could begin to turn the war over to South Vietnam in two years.⁵⁵ To some journalists, Westmoreland's comments seemed to portend victory and reassure people with doubts about the war. Those discouraging or alarming reports tended to be discounted by those in charge at both ends of the Saigon-Washington command chain.⁵⁶

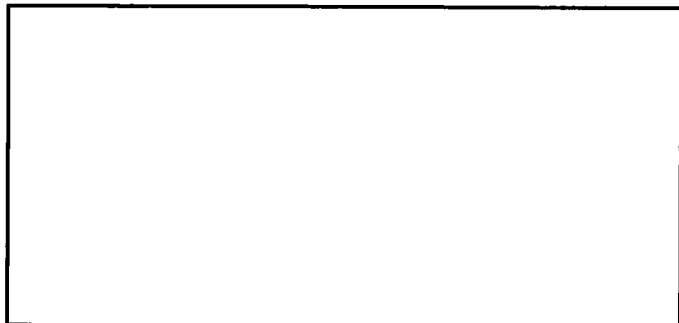
(U) The rationale for the optimism of Westmoreland and others lay in their view of the progress in the war which, in turn, was based on official reports from a variety of statistical sources: the pacification programs, estimates of order of battle, and numerical strength of communist forces in Vietnam. On the civilian side, the pacification program finally seemed to be working. Robert Komer, who held the rank of ambassador (just below Ellsworth Bunker in the civilian hierarchy), had reorganized all of the previous, disparate rural pacification efforts underCORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) with himself at the apex. Using highly talented people like John Paul Vann (the former military advisor) and Daniel Ellsberg, Komer planned to contest the NLF's control of the villages using their own tactics and techniques against the communists - a call for an American-supervised "revolution" in South Vietnam.⁵⁷ By the fall of 1967, Komer could claim, based on the Hamlet Evaluation Survey, that nearly 75 percent of South Vietnamese villages were pacified. This percentage translated into about twelve million people.

(U) Allied with the pacification program was the infamous *Phung Hoang*, or the Phoenix Program, which aimed at physically eliminating the Viet Cong infrastructure. The Phoenix



(U) General Westmoreland addresses the National Press Club in November 1967

Program was run by Komer's CIA assistant, William Colby, formerly the COS, Saigon, who had organized the predecessor efforts to OPLAN 34A. In later years, the Phoenix Program would come under severe criticism. Left largely to the South Vietnamese intelligence services to implement, it became a means for settling blood feuds and outright blackmail. Certainly, Phoenix hurt the communists; they admitted as much after the war. However, the extravagant claims for success were measured by the numbers of suspects "neutralized" in some fashion or another. No one could be certain if the numbers bandied about the offices in Saigon and Washington represented real communists or innocents swept up in its talons.



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~~TOP SECRET//COMINT//X1~~

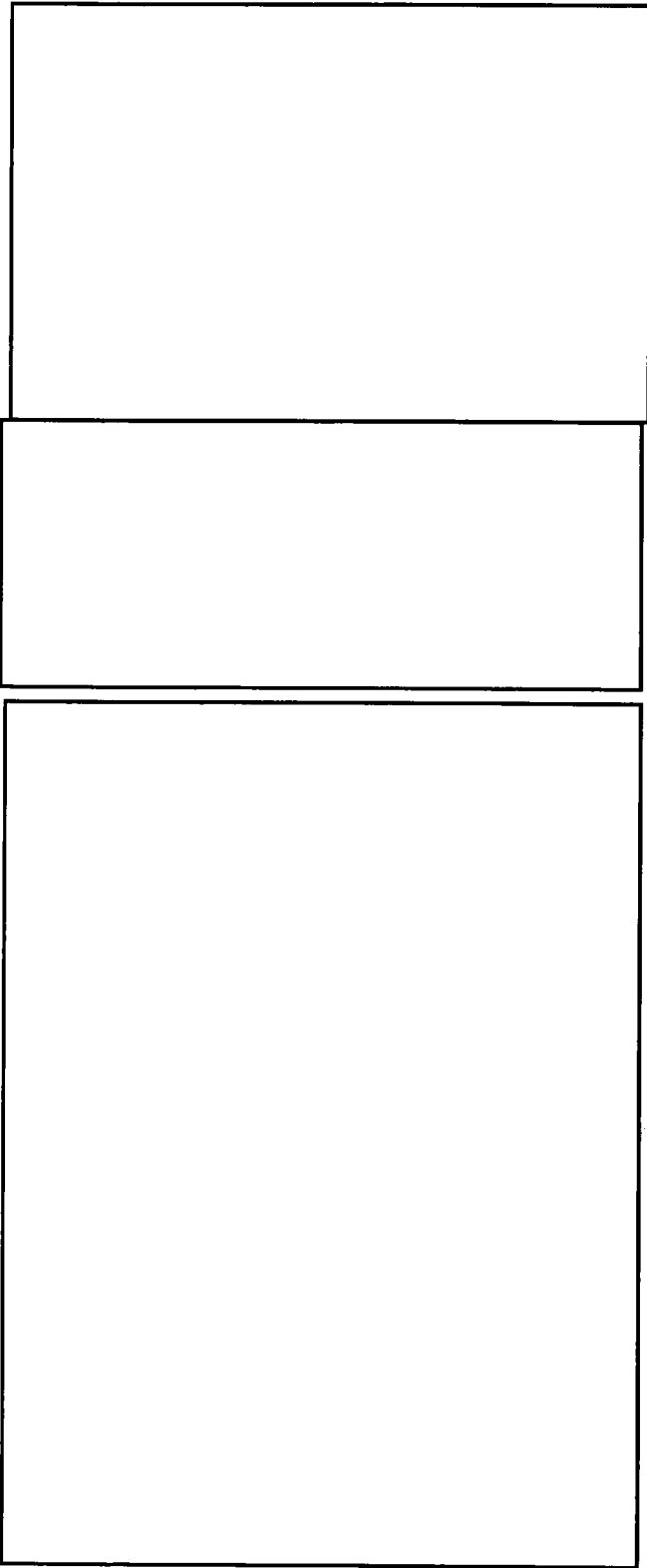
Adams' documentary proof, which, despite its paucity, was far more persuasive than the Pentagon's empty folders. As one military intelligence officer later admitted to Adams, "You know, there's a lot more of these little bastards out there than we thought."⁶¹ Adams returned to Langley convinced that the army had accepted his figures.

(U) Sam Adams, a distant relative of the famous presidential line of Adamases, was a CIA analyst charged with developing communist order of battle information in South Vietnam. Beginning in December 1966, Adams saw that there was little documentation to support the then current figures used by MACV or the CIA. Numbers agreed to in earlier years just kept being recirculated. Others were based on unreliable ARVN intelligence. Adams soon understood that if MACV's casualty and desertion figures were correct, then the communists were close to running out of men. However, the communists always seemed to be able to make good their losses.⁵⁹

(U) Wanting a more comprehensive order of battle, Adams cast his analytic net wider to include all sources of communist strength. He factored in estimates of support personnel, political cadre, and the part-time forces from local communist militia units, just the categories which the Pentagon had dismissed as "low grade," "part-time," and "weaponless."⁶⁰ What he found led him to conclude that the VC and PAVN forces numbered close to 600,000 personnel - better than twice MACV's figures. In mid-January 1967, George Carver, the DCI's Special Assistant for Vietnam Affairs (SAVA), dispatched Sam Adams to an order-of-battle conference in Honolulu which had been convened by General Wheeler, the chairman of the JCS. The MACV intelligence representatives provisionally agreed to a new figure, something near 500,000, as a concession to



(U) George Carver



(U) On the other hand, the Pentagon's approach centered solely on the organized, military forces of the PIAF and the PAVN. This approach reduced the war to a simple military confrontation between military units and minimized the sustaining nonmilitary infrastructure. The MACV staff, led by the G-2, Brigadier General Philip Davidson, and supported by civilians like Ambassador Komer, considered the other non-main force categories not significant to the enemy's order of battle.⁶⁶ Besides ignoring as much as one-half to two-thirds of the enemy's strength, this narrow approach also subverted the military's own macabre measure of progress – the infamous body count. The U.S. military counted all enemy casualty claims against only regular combat units, rather than applying them to all of the participating enemy's forces. The result was a casualty count skewed solely against the regular military units: casualties from one column were credited to another.⁶⁷ To the MACV order of battle specialists, then, the casualty figures told it that the "cross-over point" indeed had been crossed and that Hanoi could no longer sustain its war effort. Hence, MACV's optimism about the war.

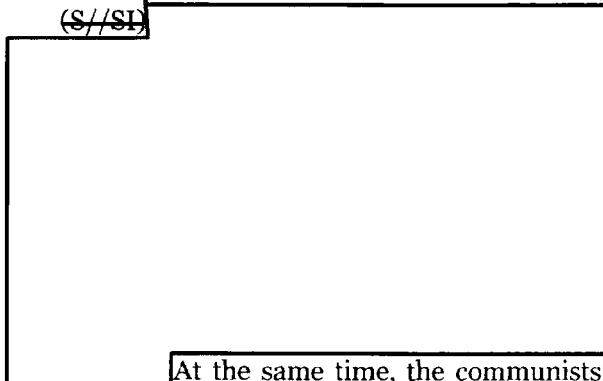
(U) Although Westmoreland and the Pentagon had won the bureaucratic numbers game, after Tet, their position would be revealed as self-delusion. And the administration's "Success Offensive" would run into the minefield of its own making.

(U) U.S. Intelligence and the Start of the Winter/Spring Offensive

(U) On 1 September 1967, the communists began their winter/spring offensive with a series of major assaults against Allied border positions extending from Con Thien in the north down through the Central Highlands to Loc Ninh and Song Be in the III CTZ north of Saigon. Rising to the challenge, Westmoreland committed more and more American units to counter the communists' thrusts. Unhindered by population centers,

and therefore free to use their overwhelming firepower, the Americans inflicted heavy losses on the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regular formations.

(S//SI)



At the same time, the communists hit the helicopter base at Phu Bai and destroyed or damaged eighteen choppers and caused over one hundred casualties amongst South Vietnamese forces.

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(S//SI) After the communist troops left, an American team, made up of soldiers from Phu Bai personnel, inspected the damage. The remaining classified material and salvageable equipment were removed. The investigators later determined that the VC had gained access to the entire complex and that the SIGINT site had been compromised. The apparent thoroughness of the communist attack caused the director, NSA, to send a message to his military cryptologic component commanders (ASA, AFSS, and NSG) to reconsider security arrangements at all of their sites, since it seemed that the Viet Cong had a good idea of the layout of the site and the nature of its operations.⁶⁸

(U) The first of the Phase I attacks took place at Con Thien, which was a series of

hills located south of the DMZ in Quang Tri Province. Marines from the Third Marine Division had occupied these positions as part of the effort to interrupt PAVN infiltration across the DMZ. On 1 September, artillery units of the PAVN 324B and 324C Divisions started shelling the marine bunkers. Westmoreland, seeing an opportunity to thrash regular PAVN units, launched operation Neutralize. Over the next month the communist units were pulverized by over 4,000 air sorties, including strikes by B-52s. By the first week of October, the PAVN units, having suffered an estimated 2,000 dead, pulled out, and the "siege" was broken, although it should be noted that the communist troops never tried to overrun the marine base.⁶⁹

(U) At the end of October, the 88th PAVN Regiment attacked the ARVN 9th Regiment at Song Be in Phuoc Long Province about fifty miles north of Saigon. The North Vietnamese troops assaulted the ARVN position four times, but were repulsed each time with heavy losses. Two days later, the provincial capital of Loc Ninh near the Cambodian border was attacked. Here the veteran 273rd Viet Cong regiment assaulted a number of local South Vietnamese defense units. Soon,



(U) Marine position at Con Thien

troops from the U.S. First Infantry Division reinforced the South Vietnamese. For ten days the communists kept up their assaults; one bayonet charge was beaten off using artillery pieces firing special antipersonnel rounds known as "beehives." The communists abandoned the attacks; almost 900 North Vietnamese were killed.

~~(S//SI)~~ The biggest border fight, which occurred in the Central Highlands, started at about the same time. Since the beginning of October, there were SIGINT indications of communist forces concentrating in Kontum Province.⁷⁰ On 21 October, analysts at the 330th Radio Research Company at Pleiku intercepted the short messages that were the signature of a communist intelligence unit moving in the hills west of Dak To in Kontum Province. Within the next week, the analysts were marking up their maps with the movements of four Main Force PAVN regiments, the 32th, 66th, 174th, and the 24th, as they took up positions in Western Kontum Province.⁷¹ Westmoreland had only one U.S. battalion in the area. Eventually, as the battle was joined, nine more U.S. battalions from the 4th

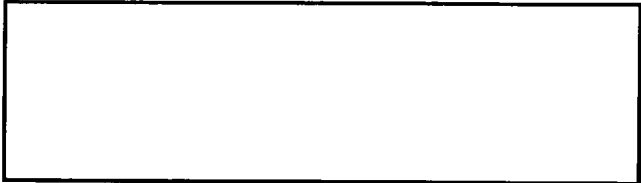
Infantry Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade, along with six ARVN battalions, were committed.

~~(S//SI)~~ By mid-November, the battle centered on Hill 875, where over 2,000 air sorties, including 300 by B-52s, flattened communist positions before being overrun by a U.S. ground assault. By Thanksgiving it was over. Communist casualties numbered about 1,600, while almost 300 Americans died. The SIGINT tip-off had proved important: communist prisoners had claimed that their plans to engage American units individually had been upset by their rapid arrival in the battlefield. Everyone was pleased with the SIGINT support.⁷



(U) The border battles were military failures for the North Vietnamese, at least according to conventional military criteria of casualties suffered and failure to achieve tactical objectives.⁷⁴ But more was lost by the communists. During the fighting, American troops had captured a cache of documents near Dak To containing orders and directives from the PAVN B-3 Front Command (Central Highlands) concerning the 1967 Winter-Spring Campaign. Four objectives for the fighting were listed:

- To annihilate a major U.S. unit in order to force the enemy to deploy more troops . . .
- To improve [PAVN] troop combat techniques . . .
- To destroy an enemy unit and liberate an area and strengthen the base area . . .
- To effect close coordination of battles throughout South Vietnam. . . .⁷⁵

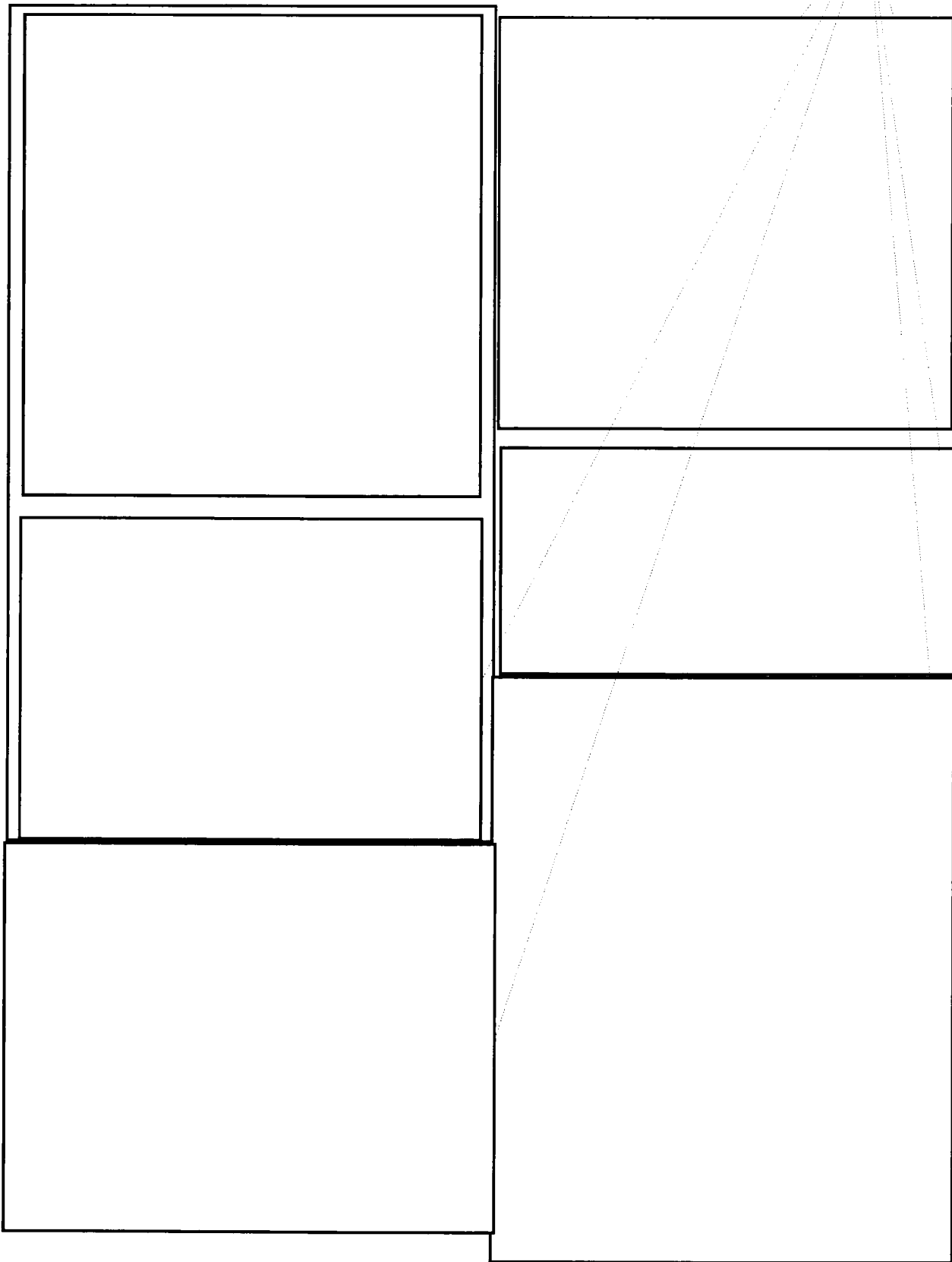


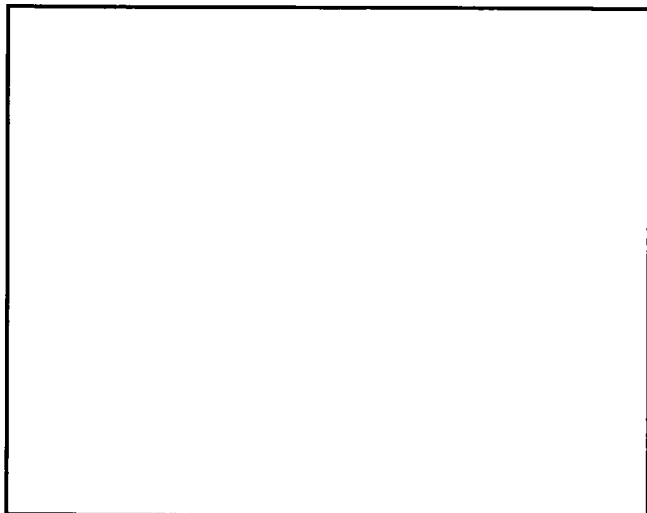
(U) A trooper of the 173rd Airborne Brigade near Dak To

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unprepared stance when the Tet attacks began at the end of January.⁸³

(U) Of course, not everyone discounted the evidence of a nationwide attack. The problem for MACV was how to reconcile the obvious references to a nationwide offensive with the observed limited PAVN maneuvers in the I Corps area near the DMZ. Some MACV staff officers ridiculed the claims and expectations in the captured documents as unrealistic. The very boldness of the plan militated against its believability. The communist claims of impending victory seemed outlandish, especially in the face of the casualty



PRESS RELEASE

141. NGUYEN-HUE SAIGON
Tel: 92.026 - 92.031

United States Mission in Vietnam

January 5, 1968

CAPTURED DOCUMENT INDICATES FINAL PHASE OF REVOLUTION AT HAND

Subordinate level Communist party activists of the National Liberation Front forces are being told that the final phase of the revolutionary war in

(U) 5
January
press
release

- 11 -

Action to be taken: Use very strong military attacks in coordination with the uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities. Troops should flood the lowlands. They should move toward liberating the capital city /Saigon/, take power and try to rally enemy brigades and regiments to our side one by one. Propaganda should be broadly disseminated among the population in general, and leaflets should be used to reach enemy officers and enlisted personnel. The above subject should be fully understood by cadre and troops; however, our brothers should not say that this order comes from the Party and Uncle /Ho Chi Minh/, but to say it comes from the /Liberation/ Front. Also, do not specify times for implementation.

Evolution: From 1 December on, all units should take the initiative to

figures from the previous two months. As one intelligence officer said, "If we had gotten the whole battle plan, it would have not been believed. It would not have been credible to us."

⁸⁴ On 5 January, the Joint United States Public Affairs Office released part of the captured plan. One reporter, looking at it, could only mutter "moonshine."⁸⁵

~~(S//SI)~~ All of this is not to suggest that Westmoreland and the others were oblivious to the intelligence piling up on their desks. However, the military situation that developed in the northern part of South Vietnam, especially near the DMZ, soon held the attention of the Americans. A 23 December NSA report suggested that PAVN unit movements into the provinces near and south of Danang indicated that a possible offensive activity would start there soon.⁸⁶

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A State Department assessment from 6 January carried the same conclusion that the communists were preparing a major offensive in the northern region of the country.⁸⁸

(U) By January, the communist military activity along the borders seemed to have spent itself. However, ominous new movements were detected in Quang Tri Province. PAVN units seemed to be concentrating around a small marine base near Route 9 just under twenty-five kilometers from the border with Laos. Soon everyone's attention would be riveted to that base to the exclusion of everything else. Its name was Khe Sanh.

(U) The Fulcrum of Our Vision: The Siege of Khe Sanh and Its Effect on American Intelligence

(U) Khe Sanh, in western Quang Tri Province, sits astride the old French Colonial Route 9 which

connects the Vietnamese coast with the trading centers of Laos and the central Mekong region. In 1962, the U.S. Special Forces had set up a base in the area and trained local irregular forces for forays into the nearby eastern portions of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The marines' first experience at Khe Sanh occurred in April 1967. Ever since the marines had taken over responsibility for security in the I CTZ, they had been steadily expanding westward along Route 9 towards Laos. By early 1967, they had arrived at the town of Khe Sanh and began to build a military base and airfield just to the north of it. In late April a regiment from the PAVN 325C Division sent in advance units to seize the hills northwest of the marine airfield. The 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, with heavy artillery and air support, drove out the Vietnamese after two weeks of close fighting, blasting them from bunkers and other prepared positions in combat that was reminiscent of the Pacific island campaign in World War II.

~~(S//SI)~~ Beginning in late October and throughout the rest of 1967, SIGINT detected elements of another communist buildup in the eastern portion of Laos across from Khe Sanh. Two regiments of the PAVN 304th Division were heard in communications as they massed along Route 9 in Laos. The 304th had been steadily moving south from its base in the southern DRV. By mid-December, the divisional headquarters was located near Tchepone, Laos.⁸⁹ At the same time, just north of these two regiments, other elements of the 304th and another PAVN division, the 320th, were located through D/F. Along with the divisions, there existed a new headquarters unit controlling them. This "High Command" seemed to now be responsible for activity west of Quang Tri Province.⁹⁰

~~(S//SI)~~ If the presence of elements from two divisions was not ominous enough, in early January 1968 two regiments from the PAVN 325C Division, the division the marines had scrapped with in April, were detected by D/F in regions north and west of Khe Sanh. Meanwhile,

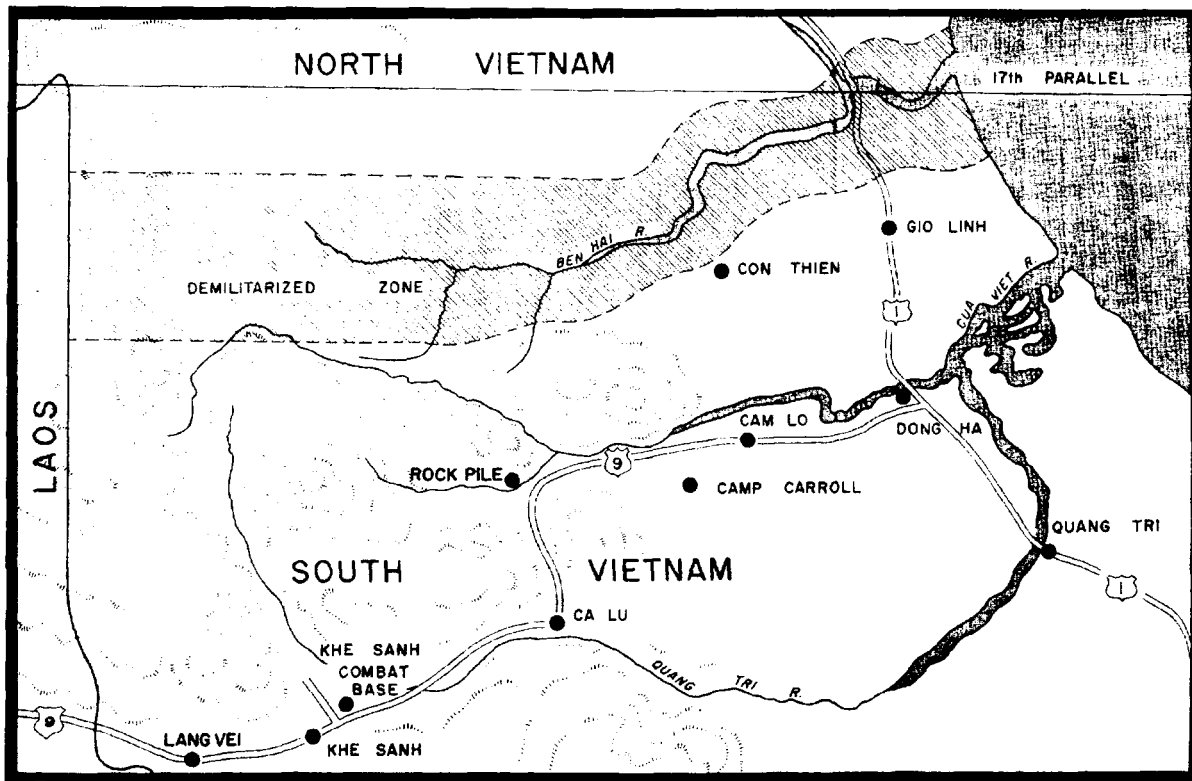
elements of the other two divisions had moved to the south and east of Khe Sanh. To MACV, there was no doubt that the North Vietnamese had set up a major military effort in Quang Tri Province, and Khe Sanh seemed to be the linchpin. By late January, the communist front command element, known to the Americans as the Khe Sanh Area Front (KSAF), now controlled all three divisions. In late January, it was rumored that Vo Nguyen Giap visited the frontal command post. This led to later rumors of a B-52 raid intended to take out the post with him in it.⁹¹ Actually, there was a B-52 raid on the KSAF command post on 30 January. However, there never has been any indication that Giap was at Khe Sanh, just some suggestive circumstantial evidence.⁹² In fact, the commander of the new PAVN Front, known as the "Route 9 Front," was Major General Tran Qui Hai, who previously had been the assistant chief of staff of the PAVN.⁹³

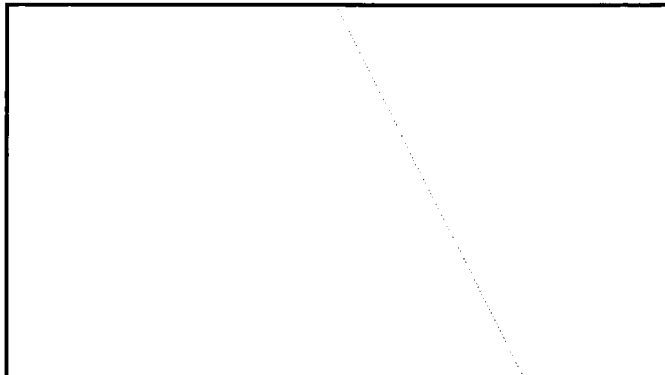
Vietnamese caused

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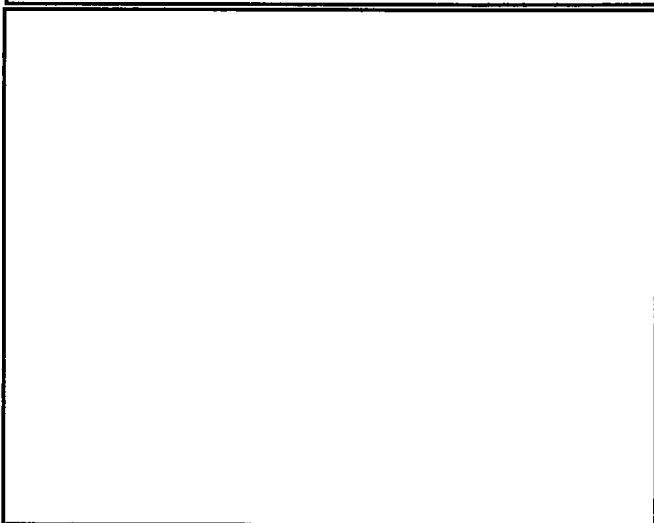
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~~(S//SI)~~ All of this movement into the northern part of Quang Tri Province by the North





January, he ordered the next phase of its defense, Niagara II, the all-out air assault on the communist positions around the base, to begin. The 7th Air Force commander, Major General George Keegan, formed his own intelligence center, similar to Niagara I, but with an added twist that pre-saged later thinking about the siege: he invited eight French field officers, all survivors of the siege at Dien Bien Phu, to advise his command on communist siege tactics.⁹⁸



(U) For the next two weeks, the marines at the base could see more signs that the communists were slowly closing the ring around them. A number of patrols outside the perimeter came under fire, one being ambushed on 14 January. Other patrols found bunkers being built and signs of movement on the trails in the hills around the base. That week, two extra marine battalions were flown in to reinforce the garrison. On 20 January, General Davidson and the G-2, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF), who was responsible for operations in the northern provinces of South Vietnam, visited Khe Sanh. During discussions with the base commander, Colonel David Lownds, and his staff, Davidson was told that, despite the intelligence, the marines did not believe that there was a large

(U) In Saigon, General Westmoreland was convinced of the threat to the marine base. On 6

(U) View of the bunker housing the Marine cryptologic detachment at Khe Sanh



force surrounding them.⁹⁹ Whether this was marine bravado or Colonel Lownds truly missed the significance of the intelligence, especially the SIGINT, is unclear. However, that same day, the marines picked up a rallier from the PAVN forces who told them that he was from the 325C Division and that they were going to attack that night.¹⁰⁰

(U) Early in the morning of 21 January, battalions from the 95th Regiment of the PAVN 325C Division attacked Hills 861 and 881 northwest of the marine base. After heavy fighting, the Vietnamese were driven off. To the south, another PAVN battalion overran Khe Sanh village, severing Route 9 to the west of the base. The main ammunition and fuel dumps on the marine base were detonated by PAVN artillery rounds. Suddenly, the marines were in a fight and short of supplies.

(U) In reaction to Davidson's earlier report of the critical situation at Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland ordered the formation of a special command post, MACV-FWD, under the command of his deputy, Lieutenant General Creighton W. Abrams.¹⁰¹ Another marine battalion was flown in to reinforce the garrison which now numbered nearly 6,000 marines, U.S. Special Forces, and ARVN rangers. An airlift was started to resupply the marines. Air Force cargo planes flew in 130 tons of supplies, often under mortar and machine gun fire. Also arriving with the supplies were SIGINT reinforcements.

~~(S//SI)~~ There had been a small SIGINT support detachment (USN-414J4) at Khe Sanh since August 1967. A team of Morse intercept operators and analysts had supported the marines ever since. Usually numbering anywhere between fourteen and twenty-five personnel, they manned three Morse intercept positions, one COMSEC monitoring post, and an ARDF liaison position. The team had supported two extra SRDF positions on hills to the south of the base, but after the

initial skirmishes in early January, these teams had been withdrawn to the main base.¹⁰²

~~(S//SI)~~ Just before the siege began in earnest on 21 January, the detachment had monitored tactical voice communications among the communist units surrounding Khe Sanh. At first, the marines in the base taped the transmissions and shipped them to its headquarters unit at Danang (USN-414J) for processing. But once the fighting started, this procedure proved to be tactically useless to Colonel Lownds' command. So, on 22 January Danang flew in a Vietnamese language voice exploitation team. The next day an NSA civilian Vietnamese linguist, [redacted] arrived along with extra intercept equipment and tape recorders for the voice effort.¹⁰³

P. L. 86-36

~~(S//SI)~~ Shortly after voice intercept operations started, Colonel Lownds informed the marines that he was receiving basically the same intercept from a South Vietnamese detachment of six voice intercept operators under a Captain Phat supporting the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion also defending Khe Sanh. The marine voice intercept team moved into the ARVN bunker and divided up the functions with the Vietnamese. The ARVN would intercept the PAVN voice transmissions and transcribe them. The marines would translate the scripts into English and pass important intelligence to the marine commander.

~~(S//SI)~~ The voice intercept team concentrated on the communist artillery nets which provided information on their general firing plans and, occasionally, the actual order to fire on the base. The combined team was able to tip off the command bunker which, in turn, could warn the marines to take cover. Later on in the siege, the team monitored plans for night probes against various positions for purposes of reconnaissance and assaults in force. It has been reported that upwards of 90 percent of these probes were tipped off in advance thanks to the voice intercepts.¹⁰⁴ This figure is difficult to evaluate because the marines utilized a number of other

sources of tactical intelligence, among them seismic, acoustic, and infrared sensors, agent reports, and the exotic XM-3 airborne personnel detector, otherwise known as the "people sniffer." The effect of all of these sources, including the SIGINT, was to give the marines as current and complete a picture as possible of communist troop activity around Khe Sanh.¹⁰⁵

~~(S//SI)~~ Still, the SIGINT from the radio battalion detachment was of special significance, especially to Colonel Lownds. During the siege, Lownds would visit the detachment's bunker, sometimes several times during the day, asking for the latest intelligence. Lownds told the marines there that if anything significant was received they were to contact him at once, no matter the time.¹⁰⁶

~~(S//SI)~~ The marines at Khe Sanh also benefited from a number of outside SIGINT resources which provided additional collection, processing, and D/F assets. The ASA site at Phu Bai provided overall management of the SIGINT assets assigned to support Khe Sanh. It also processed voice intercept from the team inside the base. Phu Bai worked closely with the marine SIGINT element at Danang which coordinated all SIGINT support to the overall marine command in the region, the III MAF. Airborne collection assets came from the AFSS' Sentinel Sara platform (EC-47) which specialized in intercept of low power, tactical manual morse communications that even the marines inside Khe Sanh could not hear due to the local hilly terrain. ARDF support came from the Air Force Security Service's Compass



(U) All of the SIGINT support reflected the great importance attached to Khe Sanh by General Westmoreland. When he had seen the buildup of communist forces in the region, the question before his command was whether or not to defend or abandon Khe Sanh. The weather in the region at that time of the year was rainy and prone to low-level clouds and fog which blanketed the area. Supporting the base would be difficult; air supply would be the only way to keep the garrison going. There were few mobile forces free to counter the PAVN divisions moving into the area. However, Westmoreland was confident that the base could hold. He could mass air and artillery support from a variety of sources which could compensate for the outnumbered marines.¹⁰⁸

(U) In Washington, though, there was a real concern about Khe Sanh. On 11 January, General Earle G. Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent a message to Westmoreland outlining the concerns in Washington. There were two differing views on the battle. The first was that Khe Sanh was an opportunity to use the



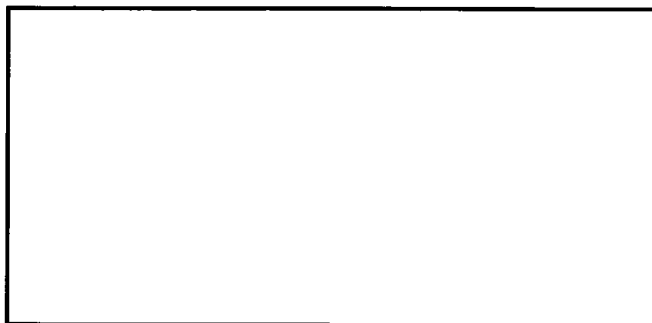
(U) Army P-2V airborne intercept and direction finding aircraft

overwhelming American firepower to smash several large PAVN units. The other view saw Khe Sanh as a chance for Hanoi to inflict a defeat on Washington not unlike Dien Bien Phu.¹⁰⁹

(U) The introduction of the Dien Bien Phu parallel probably was unfortunate for the commands in Washington and Saigon. There were some superficial similarities – the communist troops surrounded both garrisons with superior numbers of troops, they held high ground from which they could shell the bases, and both besieged bases relied totally on aerial resupply. However, the differences between the two situations were far more significant. For one thing, Khe Sanh was not at the end of an tenuous aerial supply line; it was mere minutes from Allied air fields. Moreover, the marines could rely on enormous amounts of outside firepower. Some estimates put the ordnance dropped from Allied aircraft, including B-52s, at around 100,000 tons. Air support was so heavy that it has been described as a “beehive,” with aircraft stacking up in a holding pattern up to 35,000 feet awaiting clearance to make their bombing runs. Artillery support, some of it from army batteries at Camp Carroll, some twenty miles away, added another 150,000 rounds.¹¹⁰ Relief units, principally from the 101st Airmobile Division and the 3rd Marine Division were only an hour away by helicopter.

(U) However, the Dien Bien Phu image took hold in the minds of the administration and MACV. The press headlined the story about the “doomed garrison” and how the fate of the earlier French disaster was “casting a long shadow of gloom over Washington.”¹¹¹ And the administration did act as if

Khe Sanh as a possible replay of Dien Bien Phu. In the basement of the White House, President Johnson had a terrain model of the base set up which he would consult daily for updates. It has already been noted how the 7th AF commander consulted former French officers who had survived the battle. General Westmoreland ordered his command historian to prepare a study on Dien Bien Phu and other sieges to see how Khe Sanh fit into historical precedents. After seeing the presentation, Westmoreland would confide in his diary that the entire briefing was “fraught with gloom.”¹¹² The feelings in Washington could be summed up in the words of President Johnson to General Wheeler, “I don’t want no damn Dinbinphoo.”¹¹³



OGA



(U) President Johnson and his advisors study the Khe Sanh map in the basement of the White House.

[redacted] that Hue and Danang areas may be a[tac]k[e]d. En[tire] action against either or both might be attempted as *a diversionary measure to tie down US and ARVN tr[oo]ps in 1 CTZ to preclude their use if Khe Sanh is at[tac]k[e]d*" (my italics).¹¹⁵ Finally, on 29 January, Westmoreland sent a message to General Wheeler highlighting his determination that planned communist attacks in the rest of the country had been delayed, but that these attacks, when launched, were intended to "deter reinforcement of Northern I Corps" where Khe Sanh was.¹¹⁶

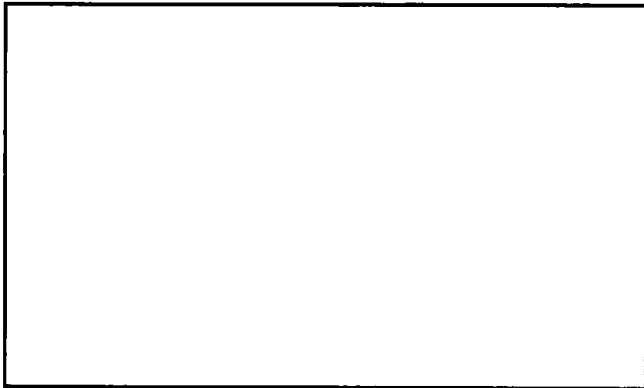
(U) Yet, for all of the American concern over Khe Sanh, the Vietnamese never seriously tried to capture the base. There were battalion-sized assaults on 21 January against positions in the hills northwest of the garrison, and three battalion assaults on marine and ARVN positions to the south and west in February. On 7 February (where the PAVN used tanks for the first time), the Special Forces base at Lang Vei was taken. These attacks resembled somewhat the Vietnamese approach at Dien Bien Phu in which separate parts of the outer defenses were taken to further seal off the base. However, there were no large-scale attacks to take the base itself. The PAVN never massed artillery or antiaircraft guns in order to overwhelm the base's defenses or deny the use of aerial resupply as had been done against the French fourteen years earlier. In fact, during the second week of February, the PAVN command shifted units away from Khe Sanh. So what was Hanoi's intention?

(U) The answer will probably never be known for certain. Giap and other Vietnamese leaders have vacillated from claiming that it was meant to pin down American forces to an assertion that they actually intended to take the base.¹¹⁷ Another theory has it that Hanoi had to determine if the Americans would invade the DRV if the DMZ was used to mount a multidivision assault.¹¹⁸ Perhaps, Khe Sanh was not meant to be taken until the second phase of the TCK/TCN plan had succeeded.

This position coincides with communist maneuvering around the base. By mid-February, when it was apparent that the second phase had failed completely, the North Vietnamese began to disengage from around Khe Sanh.¹¹⁹ Whatever Hanoi's ultimate aim, the siege at Khe Sanh, as will be seen, distorted Washington's (and MACV's) view of Hanoi's approaching military offensive.

(U) Countdown to Tet: SIGINT Reporting during January 1968

~~(S//SI)~~ During the month of January, while attention in Washington and MACV in Saigon was fixed on the marine garrison surrounded by two PAVN divisions, SIGINT picked up signs of communist military activity in other parts of South Vietnam. These indications came from a variety of communist communications intercepted throughout the country. The most important appeared to be in the Central Highlands, or the B-3 Front. There two clusters of activity were of interest. The first was near the tri-border region of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam where the Headquarters B-3 front, the PAVN 1st Division, its Military Intelligence Section, and three regiments were concentrated. The second was at the Kontum-Pleiku border area. A separate headquarters element was active there and communicated with B-3 Front suggesting some coordinated actions.¹²⁰ To the east of the highlands, there were indications that the PAVN 2nd Division and associated elements were deploying to the coastal regions of Quang Ngai, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, and other provinces. By 21 January, a forward headquarters element of another frontal command, which was communicating with three PAVN regiments, was located just ten kilometers from Hue.¹²¹



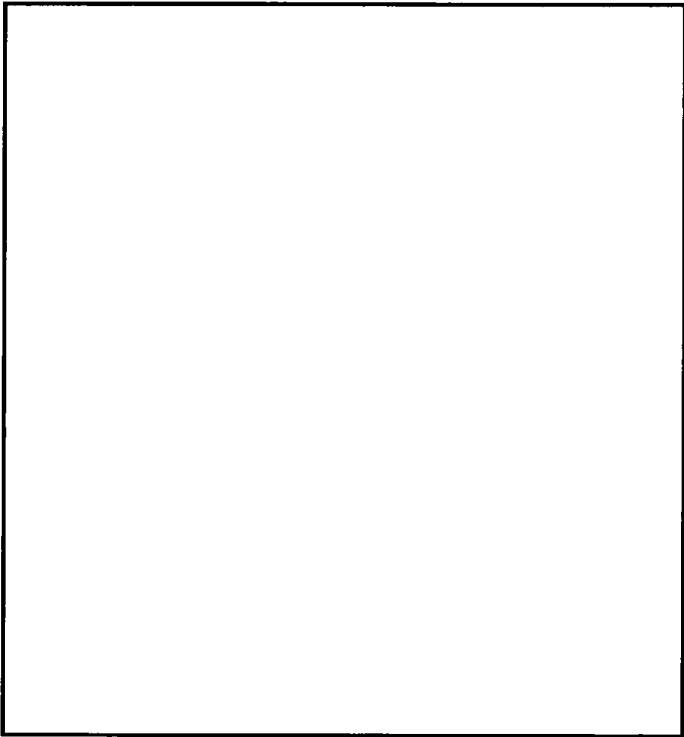
sage sent after Tet, as early as 16 January SIGINT had information of an offensive in Pleiku Province which would start soon. By 25 January, the "accumulation of SIGINT data" indicated that a "coordinated offensive" would be conducted throughout several areas in South Vietnam.¹²⁵ NSA initiated a report series to accommodate the intercept that appeared related to the apparent communist offensive. The series was titled, "Coordinated Vietnamese Communist Offensive Evidenced in South Vietnam," and was meant to "present details relating to the impending attacks in each of these [endangered] areas."¹²⁶ Eventually, the series would include forty-four follow-up reports. Of relevant interest for this discussion are the ten follow-ups and the original report that preceded the beginning of the Tet offensive before and up to 30 January (Saigon time). At the same time, other reports were issued which either repeated portions of the NSA series or complemented it. In all, twenty-six reports can be identified which relate to the period beginning on 25 January and leading up to Tet.¹²⁷

OGA

~~(S//SI)~~ General Weyand had been unenthusiastic about Westmoreland's policy of pursuit and engagement along the border regions of South Vietnam. As early as 9 January he had requested Westmoreland to allow some of his units to be repositioned back near Saigon. Weyand had been briefed on the analysis of the communist radio traffic in his command area and felt that MACV was underestimating the threat posed by the local Viet Cong forces. Eventually, Westmoreland conceded Weyand's argument and allowed some American maneuver battalions to redeploy to Saigon.¹²³

~~(S//SI)~~ Throughout the rest of January, American and Allied field sites intercepted messages that revealed communist battle preparations, Allied units being targeted, and position reports that pinpointed many of the units as they moved into new positions. Documents captured by ARVN units on 20 January outlined attacks on the cities of Qui Nhon and Ban Me Thout. Reconnaissance elements of the U.S. 199th Brigade, scouting the countryside around Saigon, could not find the enemy, but discovered newly constructed bunkers and heavily used trails that indicated extensive troop usage.¹²⁴ By the last week of January, the SIGINT and other intelligence sources were pointing towards something big – the question was what and to what extent were the movements related, if at all?

~~(S//SI)~~ On 25 January, NSA trumped the SIGINT reporting coming out of Vietnam and assumed control of it. According to an NSA mes-



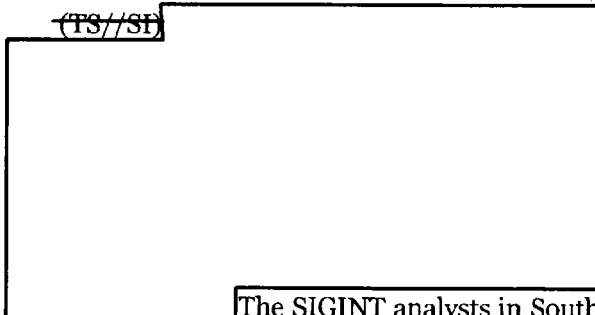
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~~(S//SI)~~ In considering the NSA reporting series, two questions need to be answered: Exactly what was reported in terms of indicators, especially those related to the Tet Offensive; and did the reporting have an impact on the posture and planning both in Saigon and in Washington? In other words, did the NSA reporting actually "predict" Tet as claimed, and did the reporting influence MACV preparations for it?

~~(S//SI)~~ As we have seen earlier, throughout January (and even before), SIGINT reporting had highlighted the indicators of communist preparations for offensive operations around the country. SIGINT had reported on the formation of new command structures near the DMZ and the Central Highlands. The movement of various units near the DMZ and on the Laotian and Cambodian borders had been tracked through the efforts of land-based and airborne direction finding elements. Communications profiles had changed. Message levels were at new highs, and the new signal operating instructions proliferated in communist radio nets throughout South Vietnam. PAVN military intelligence sections in several military regions had sent out reconnaissance teams to report on the status of targets and Allied units.

~~(S//SI)~~ The analytic problem facing cryptologists in January was not one of accumulating or even recognizing the SIGINT indicators. The issue was recognizing them for what they were: indications of a general offensive throughout South Vietnam. Yet, to make the analytic leap of logic required that the indicators be interpreted in a way that could tie together all of the apparently geographically widespread and disparate combat preparations then suggested by the SIGINT. Not to do so would leave SIGINT customers free to interpret the offensive as a series of separate attacks; local commanders could just as easily see the preparations in their zones as signifying only regional strikes.

~~(TS//SI)~~



The SIGINT analysts in South Vietnam and at Fort Meade had to base their reports on tactical communications – essentially regimental-level and below. They were exploiting the messages of communist units from all around the country. The indicators they saw implied that those units were readying for attacks. But were they getting ready for the same operation or were these local attacks?

~~(TS//SI)~~ What the SIGINT analysts, both at NSA and in the various field analytic and reporting centers throughout South Vietnam, needed to do was to tie together all the activity. They had to come up with a set of indicators that went the one extra step and connected the dots of the separate pieces of communications intelligence that were flowing into their hands. And it was not sufficient merely to "pile on" more examples of already-established COMINT indicators. The trick was to recover the unique indicator, or indicators, that would bundle up all of the other intelligence into a single and coherent reading of the enemy's intent and operational plan.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The problem with Tet, as opposed to all of the previous military operations that had been discovered through reading the SIGINT indicators, was that it was an operation unlike any other before. Just the audacious scope and goals of Tet were unique enough to render it difficult to retrieve the whole picture of the offensive from the hundreds of tidbits of SIGINT that threatened to swamp the intelligence analysts in Vietnam. Tet was, in a fashion, a series of connected major attacks throughout South Vietnam. But what were the common threads – what characteristics made Tet a single plan?

~~(TS//SI)~~ There were six major characteristics or indicators unique to the 1968 Tet offensive for which SIGINT could, and did, provide some amount of information. In order of importance, from least to most characteristic, they were

- the widespread distribution of newer, more powerful weaponry to Viet Cong and NVA units, to include, among others the AK-47 automatic rifle (the Chinese version of the Soviet-made Kalishnikov automatic rifle) and RPG-7 rocket launcher

- special command prescriptions to subordinates which were meant to reinforce security practices and instill confidence in the outcome of the offensive (propaganda)

- the delineation of specific roles for special Viet Cong units as the first echelon or primary strike units with regular units of the PAVN and Viet Cong Main Force units as second echelon or reinforcements

- South Vietnamese cities and population centers as the main targets of the attacks

- attacks in all but six provinces of South Vietnam

- and, last, and perhaps the most critical element – the one which could be defined as the single indicator which connected all the preparations and plans – the existence of the so-called “N-Day” or the Vietnamese version of “D-Day” (“N” or *ngay*, the Vietnamese word for day; so “N-Day” literally means “D-Day.”)

~~(TS//SI)~~ The first two indicators, the improved weaponry and the command directives for increased security and propaganda efforts, probably would not stand by themselves. They would have to be combined with the other four to act as a distinct warning for a general offensive. The other four were unique enough that any single one, especially the “N-Day” indicator, could

have connected all the other indicators thereby alerting SIGINT and intelligence analysts to the special nature of Tet. The “N-Day” indicator, by itself, might have been enough; what could not be a better indicator than the specific date (and time) of the Tet attack? However, as we shall see, what should have been a clear set of indicators of an attack were, in reality, not so convincing.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The reports that NSA issued between January 25 and the beginning of Tet, have virtually nothing to say about the appearance of new weaponry, nor their wide distribution. In the special series that began on 25 January, there are some scattered references to weapons. In Follow-up 1, there is mention of an unidentified element with three recoilless rifles and sixty rounds of ammunition. In another part of the same report, a second unit is cautioned not to use B-40 rockets (known as RPG-2) against vehicles.¹²⁸ In Follow-up 3, there is a reference to a unit of the PAVN 1st Division having difficulty moving its cumbersome artillery into position during 26 January.¹²⁹

~~(TS//SI)~~ In fact, we have to look outside the series to find anything approaching a weapons inventory. In the Southeast Asia SIGINT Summary for 19 January, there is an inventory of weapons shipments by the PAVN Rear Services organization to seven locations, all located in the DMZ or I Corps areas. Although there are listings of sizable shipments of almost 400 AK-47 automatic rifles, there is also a mix of other small arms, including bolt action carbines, and 60-millimeter mortars. Furthermore, from the listing it is not clear if the weapons were intended for distribution to troops or were to remain in storage.¹³⁰ Obviously, the pre-Tet SIGINT reporting offered little in the way of indications of new and widespread weaponry among the communist forces.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The next indicator, what can be labeled as command prescriptions concerning security of attack preparations and indoctrination

of troops, is probably not unique enough as a tip-off to the offensive. In fact, as we have seen earlier, intelligence officers and newsmen who were aware of the operational plan viewed it skeptically as one propaganda ploy. The skepticism within U.S. command and intelligence circles in Saigon probably diluted any effect this information ever could have had.

~~(TS//SI)~~ There were command cautions about increased security scattered throughout the NSA report series. They mostly dealt with units exercising caution when moving near Allied units or establishing bivouacs. There were also a reference to a "communications plan," but this concerned a single unit, probably a regiment, and could not be applied to all the communist units in South Vietnam.¹³¹ Another message, this time to a PAVN 1st Division unit, suggested that security was paramount to ability to launch an attack en masse on "N-Day."¹³² Again, this applied to only a single unit.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Propaganda or troop indoctrination was a common feature before all attacks. Appeals to the offensive "molding character" the emphasis to the leadership role of the Lao Dong Party, directives to develop combat plans in a "democratic" manner, and exhortations to continued strength, all appear in the reporting prior to Tet. Apparently one unit thrived on the problems of preparation, stating that "The problems continually nourish us and give us additional strength with which to confidently carry out the mission."¹³³ Yet, these instances remain singular and do not gen-

erally appear in communications of units in other areas of South Vietnam.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Similarly, SIGINT did not reveal the next indicator, the use of special Viet Cong assault units as first echelon strike forces with regular PAVN units and Viet Cong Main Force units as the second echelon elements. There is only one mention of any of these units in the series, and it is a very tentative one at that – the Hue Municipal Unit.¹³⁴ In Follow-up 8, there is a single reference to an unidentified team infiltrating the village of Chu Kram (possibly in the southern Central Highlands).¹³⁵ All the other units named in the series, and this includes all of the reports, are Main Force Viet Cong and PAVN formations.

~~(TS//SI)~~ We have the same problem with the next indicator – South Vietnamese cities as the main targets of the Tet offensive. Very few cities are mentioned at all in the pre-Tet reporting. Those that are mentioned serve as reference points for troop movement, bivouac location, or suspected concentrations of communist troops. Major cities, like Da Nang, Pleiku, and Hue, are mentioned only in passing. Only a handful of small towns are listed as targets. In the initial

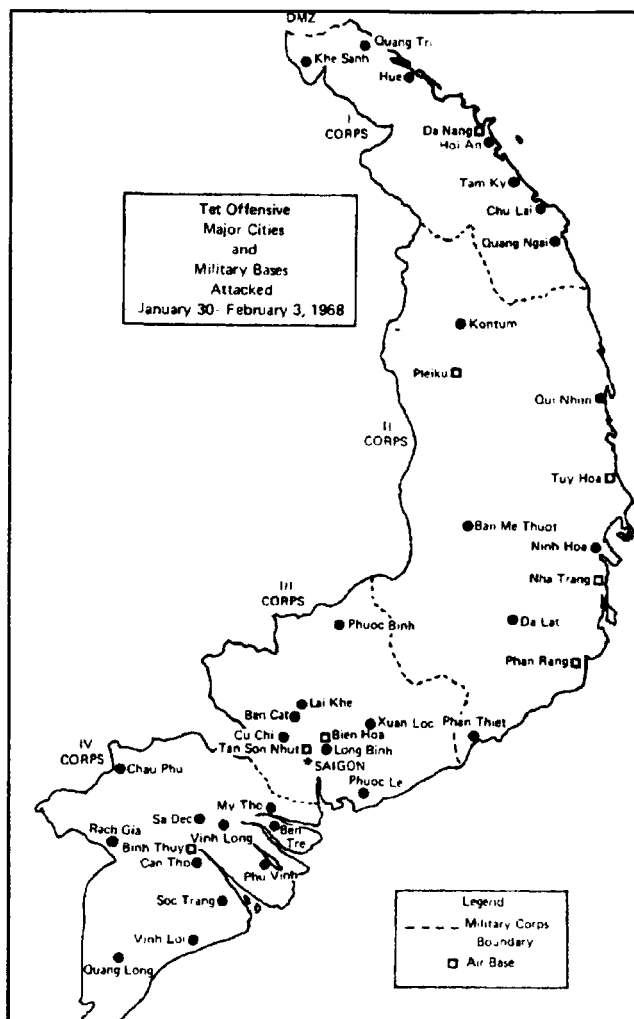


(U) Viet Cong unit armed with AK-47s and captured U.S. field radios.

report of the NSA series, three towns in Pleiku province – Le Thanh, Duc Co, and Tan Lap – are listed as targets that must be taken. However, the reports mention other objectives near other urban centers, which suggests that the latter were only reference points. For example, Follow-up 4 states the ARVN 51st Regiment near Danang is to be attacked, while Follow-up 6 informs us that the bridge at Dien Binh is to be covered by a unit. At other cities, like Chu Ba and La Thanh, ambushes were to be set up by units to attack American or ARVN units which may move to counter the assaults.¹³⁶ The number of cities and villages listed in the pre-Tet reporting was minuscule: perhaps a dozen, compared to the number actually attacked – almost ninety in the period from 30 January to 7 February.

~~(TS//SI)~~ If we look at the number of provinces in which the attacks are to occur, the picture that emerges suggests less than a country-wide offensive. When the information from the reports is tallied, there are only eight provinces mentioned in the NSA report series for which attacks are planned. They are concentrated in two regions: northern part of CTZ 1, which includes the Demilitarized Zone, Khe Sanh, Hue, and Danang, as well as the western Central Highlands, in particular Pleiku and Kontum. Viet Cong activity reported in two further provinces in the Nam Bo – Bien Hoa and Phuc Long – was regarded as only “possibly related” in the NSA report. Even if we include these latter provinces, we still can count only ten provinces. The provinces around Saigon and in the Mekong Delta region are never mentioned in any of the reports. Yet, attacks occurred in thirty-eight of forty-four South Vietnamese provinces during the initial period of the Tet attacks.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The only indicator remaining is the “N-Day” reference. As mentioned earlier, this indicator should be the one which defines the Tet



(U) Major attacks in South Vietnam during Tet

reporting. The other five could be tentative, fragmentary, or conflicting; SIGINT could be getting only nibbles around the “big picture.” On the other hand, the mention of a starting day (and possibly time) should be unambiguous, especially if widely separated units refer to it. However, when we look at all the reports, even the nature of the “N-Day” indicator becomes contentious. First of all, more than one possible “N-Day” is mentioned; as many as three could be construed from the report series. The first report itself leaves open the possibility of “N-Day” occurring on the night of 25-26 January.¹³⁷ Follow-up 2, issued on 28 January, only suggests that the attack would

start on 29 January or "shortly thereafter." The most concrete example was carried in Follow-up 5 (and repeated in Follow-up 7), which reported on January 28 that an element of the PAVN 1st Division in western Pleiku Province had informed another unidentified subordinate unit that the attack was to begin "as soon as possible but no later than 0030 hours (Golf) on 30 January."¹³⁸

~~(S//SI)~~ Another important aspect of this reporting concerning "N-Day," but never highlighted in any reports, that all but one reference to it occur only in the communications of the communist B-3 Front. The B-3 Front was responsible for military operations in Pleiku and Kontum Provinces within the communist Military Region 5, which extended from Quang Nam Province south to Darlac Province. Furthermore, these communications are all from regular PAVN formations in Military Region 5: the 1st, 2nd, 3rd Divisions, and the GDRS element. The only unit outside the B-3 Front, but still within MR 5, that referred to "N-Day" was located very tentatively near Danang.¹³⁹ And recall that Danang was attacked on 30 January.

(S//SI) It should be pointed out that the general Tet attacks began on the morning of 31 January (Saigon). Therefore, in these reports what NSA really is reporting is the starting time for the so-called "premature" attacks of 30 January (29th in Washington). These attacks have been subjected to much discussion as to whether or not they were planned or the product of a misunderstanding by the units in the Central Highlands and Coastal regions of MR 5. This question will be covered in the next section. Suffice it to say that the "N-Day" reference in the communist messages may have referred to something else than the start of Tet, and the multitude of possible dates could only impair the utility of this piece of intelligence. There is a suggestion of this confusion when, on 25 January, General Westmoreland cabled General Wheeler that the 25th was "shaping up as a D-Day for widespread pre-Tet offensive action" by the communist

forces.¹⁴⁰ Note that 25 January was mentioned in the NSA series as a possible "N-Day."

~~(S//SI)~~ This last point leads into the second question of whether the NSA report series, and the other SIGINT reporting, made any sort of impact on the command centers in Saigon and Washington. It has to be stated up front that there is little evidence that the SIGINT reporting made an impact, or influenced either command about the nature of the Tet offensive or its timing. The first mention in the President's Daily Brief of a possible general offensive was on 20 January prior to the NSA series. The next reference does not appear in the brief until 29 January when a small item is included about communist forces in the western Central Highlands completing their battle preparations.¹⁴¹

(U) However, the White House's Current Intelligence Bulletin (CIB) carried far more information on the communist buildup. The CIB was distributed to a much wider audience than the Presidential Brief. On both 27 and 28 January, the CIB carried items from NSA's 25 January report. However, in the same 28 January Bulletin, it was stated that the communists intended to launch large-scale attacks on one or more fronts soon *after* the Tet holiday, and that it was not certain if an all-out offensive was in the works.¹⁴²

OGA

~~TOP SECRET//COMINT//X1~~

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~~(S//SI)~~ As a barometer of the sense of urgency, the case of the positioning and intercept tasking of the two technical research ships in Indochinese waters further illustrates the lack of an alert posture by the SIGINT elements. It should be remembered that one of the purposes for the stationing of the TRS's in Southeast Asia was the provision for contingency collection or emergency evacuation of coastal SIGINT sites such as Danang. It has been implied in other cryptologic historical writings that the vessels were to be redeployed to the waters near the DMZ as contingency collection platforms for the ASA site at Phu Bai and the navy site at Danang. This move supposedly was prompted by the signs of increased communist activity throughout South Vietnam in late January.¹⁴⁸ However, the truth was that the ships remained in the southern part of the country, stationed off the Mekong Delta. There they continued to receive routine tasking for communications search and development of new Viet Cong radio nets (notated "VCX").¹⁴⁹ The ships stayed in the area until mid-February 1968, taking on additional tasking for the communications of the 7th and 9th Viet Cong divisions.

The USS *Oxford* finally redeployed to the north, but not until 19 February

~~(S//SI)~~ Throughout January, NSA and field sites in Vietnam issued a number of reports which indicated that the Vietnamese Communists were preparing for a possible general offensive in South Vietnam. However, the reports failed to shake the commands in Washington and Saigon from their perception of the communist main threat centered in the north, especially at Khe Sanh, and in the Central Highlands. We will discuss further this failure when the subject of the Tet postmortems is taken up.

(U) American military forces were not alerted to the approaching offensive until the morning of 30 January. It was several hours after the seemingly "premature" attacks in the southern part of

(U) Westmoreland's military preparations reflected this emphasis on the threat to the north. By the time that the Tet attacks started on 31 January, a large percentage of available U.S. maneuver battalions had been dispatched to the I and II CTZ to support Khe Sanh, the DMZ, and the cities in Quang Nam and Thua Thien Provinces. As of 30 January, elements of the 101st Airborne Division were in transit to the region.¹⁴⁵

~~(S//SI)~~ Surprisingly, for all of the reporting about a general offensive in South Vietnam, NSA's own actions on the eve of the attack appear curiously restrained. There is no evidence that any type of warning or alert message was transmitted from NSA to any of the SIGINT authorities in South Vietnam, the NRV or the 509th ASA Group, any operational centers, such as the SSGs for MACV, MACV Forward, or 7th Air Force, or to any of the field sites. There are no entries in the NOG Summaries leading up to Tet to indicate that NSA elements in the Pacific were alerted to the approaching attack.¹⁴⁶

~~(S//SI)~~ A warning from NSA headquarters did not have to be a formal SIGINT Alert, such as was done in the wake of the first Gulf of Tonkin attack. Such an alert even could have been a less formal message. However, nothing was sent. As one NSA civilian, assigned to the Watch Office for I Corps at Phu Bai, noted, no warning of an attack was received from NSA or the NRV prior to the attacks. There were analysts at the SSG for MACV Forward who, individually, anticipated an attack, but their opinion was informal and limited to the site.¹⁴⁷

~~TOP SECRET//COMINT//X1~~

the Central Highlands, when Westmoreland, after being briefed on that morning's fighting and the prediction that more could come the next day, finally warned his field commanders to the danger. Only then were American units placed on alert. Westmoreland also advised the South Vietnamese military to recall their troops who were on leave for Tet. The thirty-six-hour cease-fire with the communists was then cancelled.¹⁵²

(U) It is this "premature" attack that we will discuss next, for there is some indication from SIGINT that it may have actually been planned all along.

(U) The Mystery of the 30 January "Premature" Attacks

~~(S)~~ On the morning of 30 January (the 29th in Washington), between 0100 and 0500 hours, a number of communist units attacked points in the provincial capitals in Pleiku, Quang Tri, Darlac, and Khanh Hoa. Communist sapper teams struck at the U.S. installations at Danang, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh Bay. The attacks of the 30th, which tipped Hanoi's hand to MACV and thereby doomed the major assaults on 31 January, have been the subject of much speculation, and several theories have been floated to explain them. One suggestion is that the units which attacked on the 30th in Pleiku Province and on the coast at Nha Trang were confused about the actual start of operations. Another theory holds that the units involved acted independently, perhaps reacting to a possible compromise of operations.¹⁵³

(U) What appears to have happened is that the original timetable for TCK/TCN was planned to coincide with a Tet holiday truce proposed by Hanoi that extended from 27 January to 3 February. This week-long period would allow the communists a cushion in which all final preparations for the assaults could be completed. At the same time, this extended truce permitted NLF

cadre to organize demonstrations in Saigon itself which would complement the military assault.¹⁵⁴

(U) However, General Westmoreland changed his mind on the length of the Tet truce. As early as 16 January, he and General Vien, the chief of staff of the South Vietnamese Army, approached President Thieu with the suggested change. Although Thieu initially hesitated, he agreed to the change. The communist intelligence apparatus got wind of the shortened truce period. On 28 January, Westmoreland informed his commanders that the truce would run only from 1800 hours on 29 January to 0600 hours on 31 January. This thirty-six-hour window forced the communist command to radically change its own timetable by moving up the start date even though many units would not be fully prepared.¹⁵⁵

(U) Hanoi settled for a new attack date, which appears to have been 31 January. But there is some confusion over how this date was selected in the first place. According to communist sources, Hanoi had ordered another MR command, the Tri Thien-Hue Military Region to begin the attack on the Lunar New Year or 31 January. However, South Vietnam was using a revised calendar in which the new year began on 30 January. According to these same sources, the Tri Thien-Hue Military Region used the revised calendar and set the attacks for 30 January.¹⁵⁶ The problem with this explanation is that the attacks on 30 January occurred solely in Military Region 5 and not in the Tri Thien-Hue Military Region, which consisted of the provinces immediately to the north.

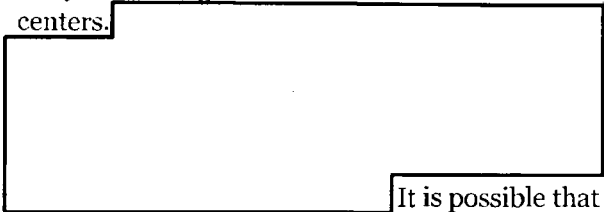
~~(S//SI)~~ The evidence for a change in the attack date exists in both SIGINT and collateral intelligence sources. [redacted] OGA [redacted] briefing in the middle of February carried the information that a document captured on 9 February indicated that the date of the initiation of the offensive had been postponed shortly

before it began, but no date is specified.¹⁵⁷ SIGINT's contribution, which contradicted the captured material, was a translation issued by the ASA site at Pleiku on 25 January, that quoted a message to an unidentified PAVN 1st Division element that "Preparations for the night of the battle (1 GRP) be withdrawn immediately. N-Day could be moved to an *earlier* [my italics] date than previously established. It will be reported later."¹⁵⁸

~~(S//SI)~~ Both reports suggested a previous attack date had been moved up. A later SIGINT report contained a new date and time (no later than 0030 on 30 January) The sources of the information for both reports were from the same region, western Pleiku and Kontum Provinces, and involved the PAVN 1st Division. Recall, too, that, with one exception, all references to "N-Day" were intercepted only in B-3 Front communications. From this evidence, it seems likely that the changed date applied only to the set of attacks that occurred on 30 January. Furthermore, the NSA report series suggests strongly that the attack date had been decided as far back as 27 January, but no later than 28 January.¹⁵⁹ Follow-up 16, issued late on 1 February, the day after the general Tet attacks had started, would refer to "N-Day" as being on either 29 or 30 January.¹⁶⁰

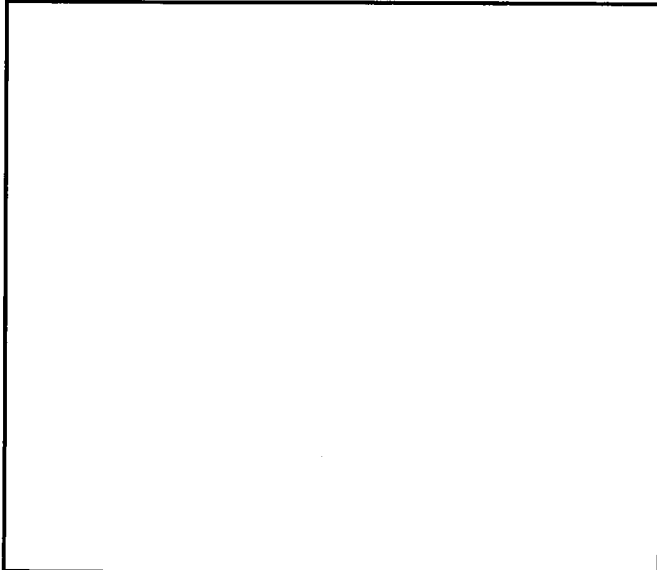
~~(S//SI)~~ The same NSA report series also provides a possible explanation regarding the purpose of the 30 January attacks. Follow-up 11, issued late on 31 January, reported that communist units in western Pleiku Province were ordered to create diversions for enemy units by lighting fires and attacking any responding units. Although the diversion activity occurred a day after the 30 January attacks had begun, it is possible that it may have been a continuation of the same "premature" strikes whose purpose was to further distract American attention from the buildup and subsequent strikes in the urban centers of South Vietnam.

~~(S//SI)~~ The SIGINT report of the persistence of the diversion activity in the B-3 Front area suggests a possible, new interpretation for the 30 January attack: that the preparations and the compromise of the "N-Day" attacks may have been intentional, and, in fact, were a purposeful deception designed to further fix Allied attention away from the general attack on the other urban centers.

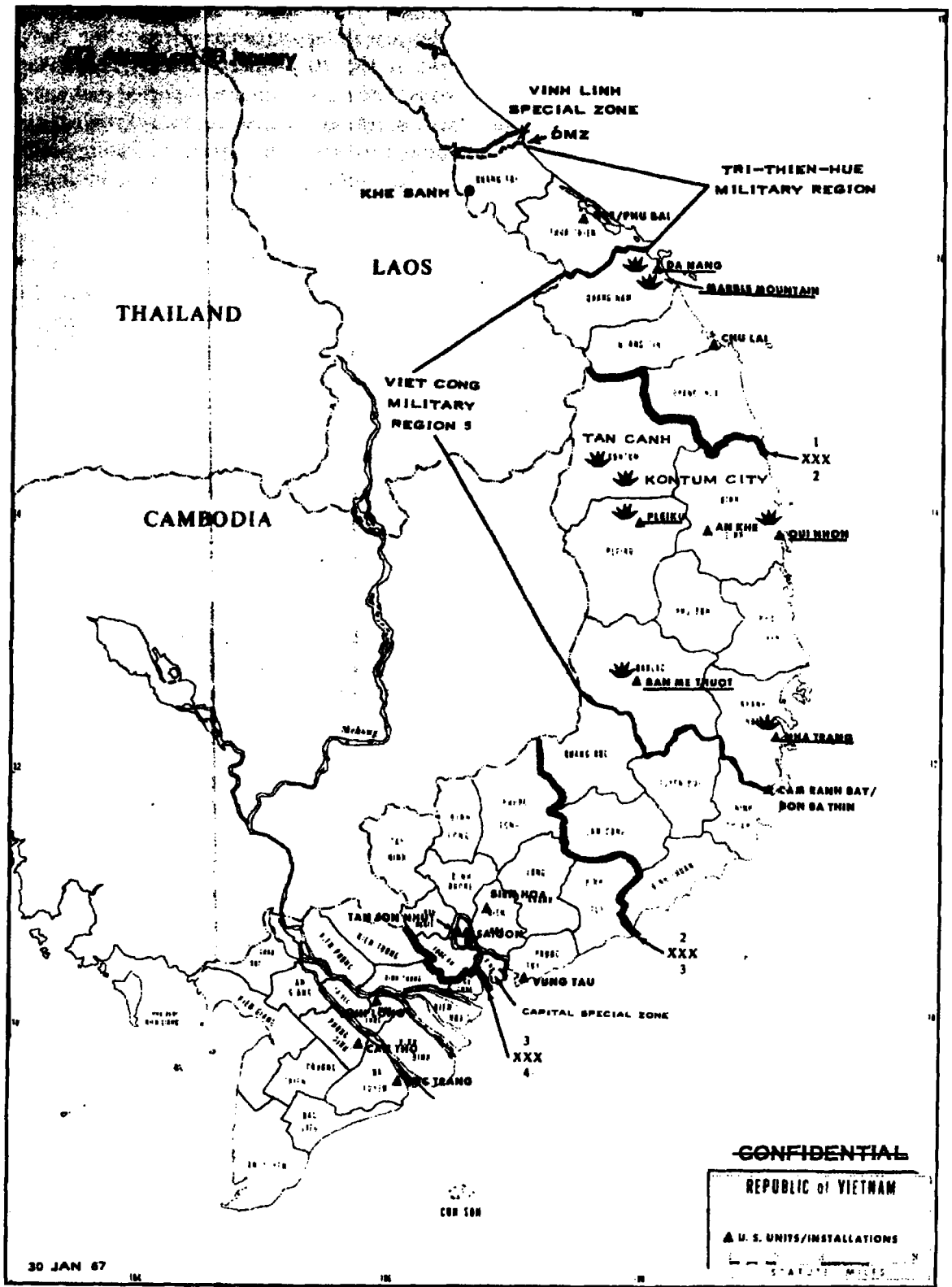


It is possible that Hanoi, realizing the traditional strategic concern over the region, may have wanted to give the Allied command a further distraction from the buildup in the urban areas. The preparations for Tet included many deception and denial measures, such as those for radio traffic, some of which were suggested by Soviet advisors.¹⁶² The "noise" created by the communications and movement of the communist units in the B-3 Front was meant to blanket the buildup of troops in and around the urban areas. The fact that the "N-Day" references, with one weak exception, were intercepted only on the B-3 Front networks, raises the possibility of deception by Hanoi.

~~(S//SI)~~ However, if the activity in the B-3 Front was intended to distract Allied attention



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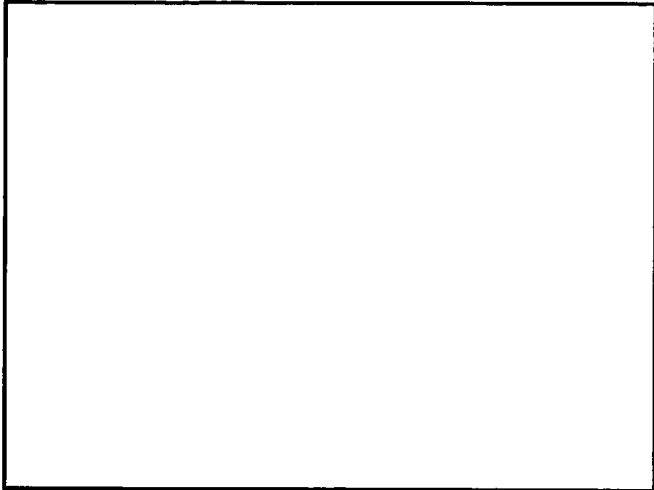


~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

▲ U.S. UNITS/INSTALLATIONS

50 STATUTE MILES



peasants or ARVN soldiers. There they picked up weapons from pre-positioned caches, many of them buried in the city's cemeteries during an earlier virtual parade of phony burials in the preceding weeks.¹⁶³ Assault teams met and went over plans one more time. A central command post and hospital were set up at the Phu To race-track in Cholon, the Chinese quarter of the city.

(U) One of the interesting rumors about Tet to surface was the claim that the ASA intercept site at Phu Bai had intercepted information about communist troop movements towards Hue just before the fighting started on the morning of 31 January. The claim adds that the information was sent to Danang for analysis before it was passed along to Hue, but, due to Army "bureaucratic procedures," the warning arrived after the attack. This assertion has appeared in several publications and seems to have originated in Don Oberdorfer's *Tet*, first published in 1971. Oberdorfer's reference to the incident lacks a source. A variation of it is in Westmoreland's memoirs, *A Soldier Reports*. He claims that this was merely "information" sent to Danang, specifically, the III Marine Amphibious Force's intelligence staff prior to the fighting. Other histories of Tet and the war have repeated the story.¹⁶⁴

~~(S//SI)~~ If the activity in the B-3 Front was not intended as a deception, then it can be interpreted as a failure in Operations Security (OPSEC) planning. Hanoi did disguise successfully its main intention and concealed the urban area buildup. However, all of this was compromised by the failure by the PAVN units in the B-3 area to control their communications security. By revealing the expression "N-Day," a significant indicator of the offensive was exposed to Allied intercept operators. This indicator, even if not interpreted correctly by the SIGINT analysts, was enough to reinforce MACV's view that Hanoi was running something big.

~~(S//SI)~~ Whatever explanation is chosen to account for the B-3 Front attacks, we cannot get away from the fact that the NSA reporting indicated that the last of the three dates for "N-Day" listed for the beginning of the Tet offensive is most likely the date for the 30 January assaults.

(U) The Storm Breaks: Tet and the American Reaction

(U) While the Allied command worried about Khe Sanh and enemy troop movements in the Central Highlands, some 84,000 communist soldiers were quietly moving into their jump-off positions in and around South Vietnam's cities and towns. Five battalions of VC troops infiltrated Saigon in small groups or singly disguised as

~~(S//SI)~~ On the surface, the story has a certain authentic "ring" to it. The ASA had a field station at Phu Bai, and Danang was home to intelligence staffs from various commands, including the III MAF G-2, which was primarily concerned with the situation at Khe Sanh. There was a great deal of intelligence exchange among the various commands. But can a single warning be pinpointed? The answer is no. However, recall that as part of the buildup around Khe Sanh, there was a concurrent appreciation that some communist troop movements threatened Hue.¹⁶⁵ Also, the first report in the NSA series recapitulated the month-long buildup of PAVN units, specifically the 6th Regiment, to the south and southwest of the city.¹⁶⁶

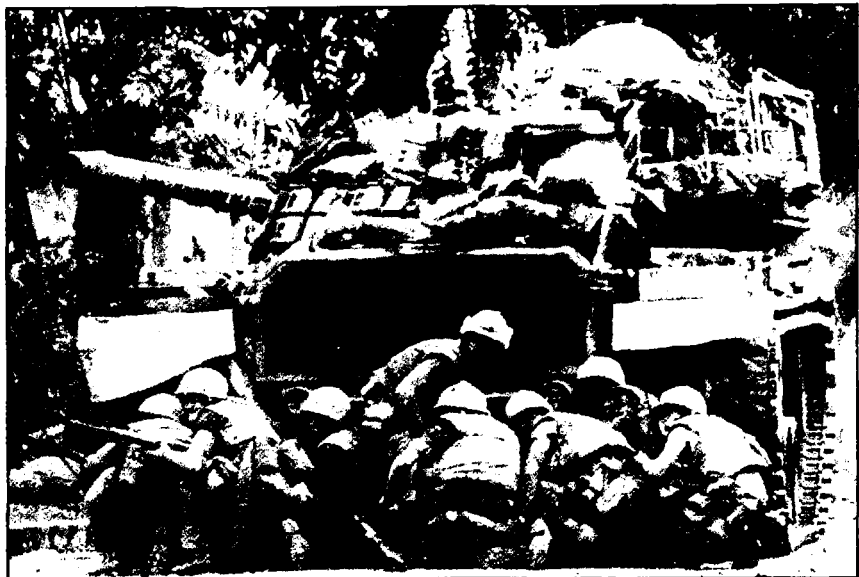
(U) So the fact that Hue was considered a target of the buildup – whether a diversion to Khe Sanh or as a main objective – was not new to intelligence analysts. It is possible that analysts from Phu Bai, which was nearby, unilaterally could have warned any number of posts and units in the area. It was mentioned earlier that individual SIGINT analysts believed an attack was imminent. There were enough intelligence support groups in the north – I Corps Watch Office, SSG MACV Forward (Niagra I), III MAF G-2 – that such an exchange could have occurred. In the confusion that followed, it might have been easy to have recalled an informal warning or “heads up” phone call or exchange over an OPSCOMM printer.

(U) The full offensive began early in the morning of 31 January. The wave of coordinated attacks lit up the South Vietnamese map like a pinball machine. All but four of South Vietnam’s provincial capitals were attacked. The seaside enclaves of Hoi An, Da Nang, and Qui Nhon were hit. The huge American complex at Cam Ranh Bay was rocketed. The mountain resort town of Dalat, so long spared by a tacit agreement of both sides, was struck. Sixteen provincial capitals in the Mekong Delta came under fire, while scores of district seats were overrun, ruining much of Saigon’s fragile efforts at pacification. However, in many cases, after their initial successes, the communist troops found themselves isolated and surrounded as second echelon units, mostly PAVN, failed to reinforce them. The isolated communists fought with a stubborn courage and carried on attacks almost blindly, often abandoning

the flexibility that had marked earlier operations and had so impressed American observers.

(U) The most vicious combat occurred in Hue where, for weeks, U.S. Marines were locked in a virtual face-to-face match with enemy troops in the old imperial citadel. In fighting reminiscent of World War II assaults on Japanese-held islands, the marines relied on flamethrowers, bayonets, and grenades to finally reclaim the old, imperial citadel, or the pile of rubble that it had become. Troops of the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division took three weeks of fighting through enemy blocking positions and poor weather to completely encircle the city.

(U) In Saigon, the communists managed their boldest, if most hopeless, attacks. Four thousand men, organized into small platoon or squad-sized teams, spread out through the city in the earliest hours of 31 January. One of their main objectives was the American embassy, the nexus of American power and prestige. Nineteen men, rolled up to the embassy, blew a hole through the surrounding wall, and raced onto the grounds, their guns blazing away. The commandos man-



(U) Marines fighting in Hue near the old imperial citadel take cover behind a tank.

aged to seize the first floor of the embassy. It took American security forces six and a half hours of fighting before the embassy grounds and building finally were secured. In a statement typical of official shortsightedness, an American officer referred to the attack on the embassy as a "piddling platoon action."¹⁶⁷

~~(S//SI)~~ The first critic on the attacks was issued by the CIA contingent at the embassy within 45 minutes of the attack (301959Z/310359G). They reported that the building had been attacked by a team of sappers. There were 4 Americans, not counting guards, in the embassy at the time. The first SIGINT-based critic was not issued until early afternoon of 31 January (310847Z/31154G) [redacted]

[redacted] The army had intercepted Cambodian General Staff communications that gave an outline of the situation in Saigon and along the common border.¹⁶⁸

(U) A new fury and brutality came with the Tet attacks. In various urban centers, government officials, functionaries, and employees only remotely associated with the Saigon regime were slaughtered. In Hue, many foreigners, including doctors, missionaries, and newsmen from the United States, Germany, France, Belgium, Korea, and the Philippines were murdered by teams of communist security troops. After the city had been retaken, Allied forces would uncover mass graves of the victims.

(U) In Washington, the initial reports of the attacks were greeted with the same tunnel vision that had restricted its earlier appreciation of Hanoi's plan. Khe Sanh remained the center of attention. In the White House, the Tuesday lunch on 30 January (Washington time) began with a discussion of the status of the besieged base. In the middle of the meeting, Walt Rostow was called out of the room. When he returned, he had in his hand a flash message from the Pentagon's National Military Command Center: we are being shelled by mortars in Saigon. Several build-

ings were under fire, including the American embassy and the Presidential Palace. Secretary of Defense McNamara said that "The answer to these mortar attacks is success at Khe Sanh."¹⁶⁹ The next day, General Wheeler briefed the president on the attacks. He repeated Westmoreland's evaluation that they were not successful and were diversionary efforts in preparation for an assault on Khe Sanh or the DMZ.¹⁷⁰ The same day, the CIA's wrap-up issued by the deputy director of intelligence characterized the attacks as harassments, and concluded the enemy's operations so far might be preparatory to or meant to support further attacks in the Khe Sanh, DMZ, or northern Quang Tri Province areas.¹⁷¹ A DIA Special Intelligence Summary issued the day of the attacks put this spin on the countrywide assaults:

This concerted operation may have been undertaken to: Prevent any Allied reinforcement of the Khe Sanh area, where a large-scale enemy attack is expected; present a show of strength in the continuing psychological war; and bolster morale.¹⁷²

(U) In Saigon, General Westmoreland briefed correspondents on the afternoon of 31 January. The enemy campaign, he reported, was in three phases:

1. Attacks in the highlands, the Cambodian border and the Mekong Delta, designed to lure Allied forces from the cities;
2. The current attacks in the urban areas; and
3. The main effort at Khe Sanh and the northern region of I Corps *was still to come* (my italics).¹⁷³

~~(S//SI)~~ However, Khe Sanh and the rest of the northern region near the DMZ were never seriously threatened by the PAVN. Except for one fruitless attack on the ARVN Ranger positions in the complex in late February that had been detected by the marine intercept site and ground-

based acoustic and seismic sensors, Khe Sanh was harassed by artillery fire and patrol probes around its perimeter. Throughout March, SIGINT, mostly in the form of D/F from Phu Bai and voice intercept from the marines inside the perimeter, detected the disengagement of the two primary PAVN divisions committed to the siege: the 304th and 325C. In April, the first elements of the relief force from Operation Pegasus arrived at Khe Sanh. The siege that had so obsessed President Johnson and General Westmoreland and had consumed so many intelligence resources, ended rather meekly. Within a month, the base, that had meant so much as an example of national military will, was abandoned and destroyed by MACV in favor of another position about ten miles to the east.

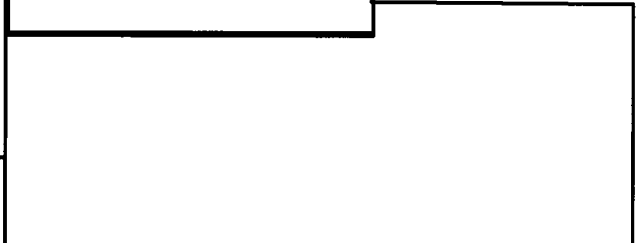
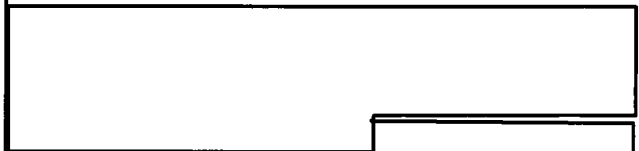
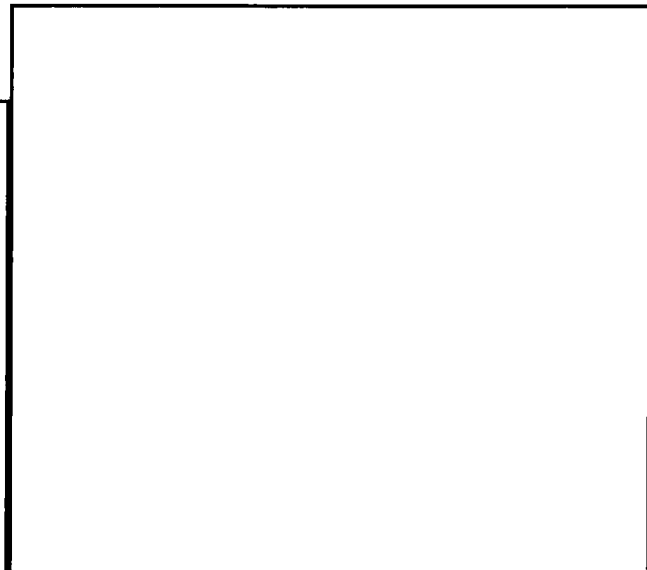
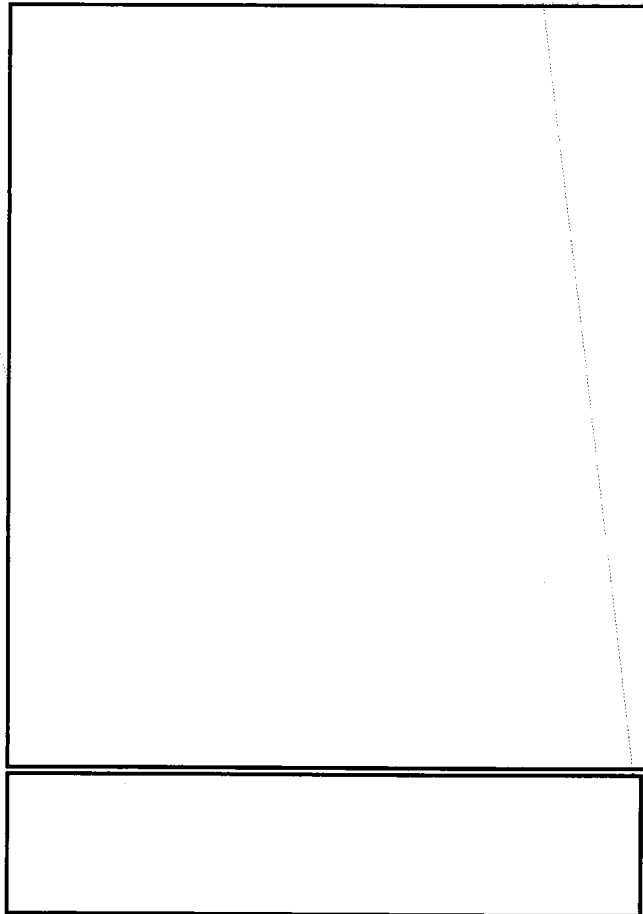


(U) DCI
Richard Helms

**(U) After Tet:
Cryptologic Postmortem**

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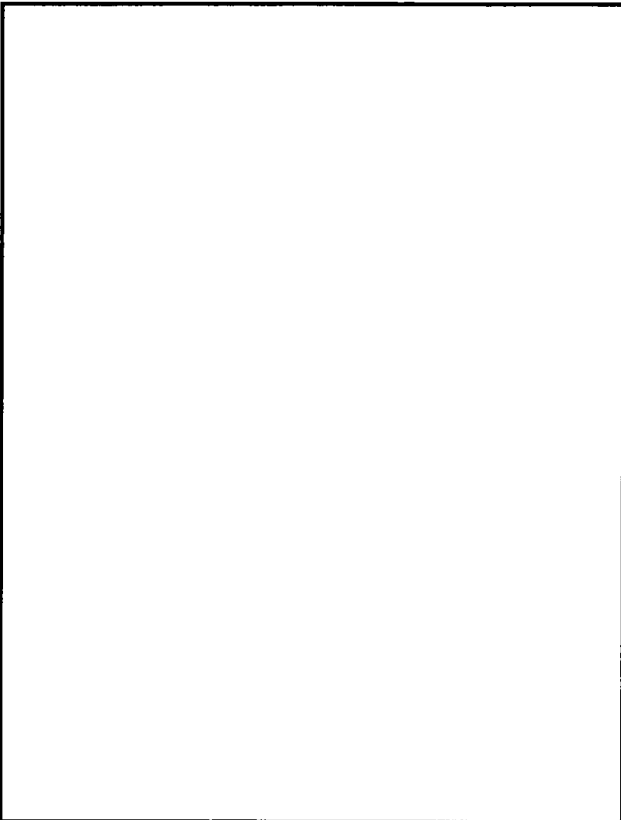
This was in keeping with the

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group's desire not to add to the problems MACV already had in just fighting the war. This low-key approach was agreed to by the then DCI, Richard Helms.¹⁷⁵ However, later evaluations of the report would argue that it did not go far enough in its criticisms, that the U.S. intelligence community was a victim of its own flawed techniques and inflexible attitude towards Hanoi's strategy.¹⁷⁶

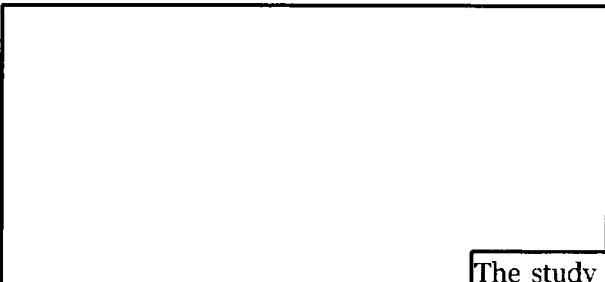
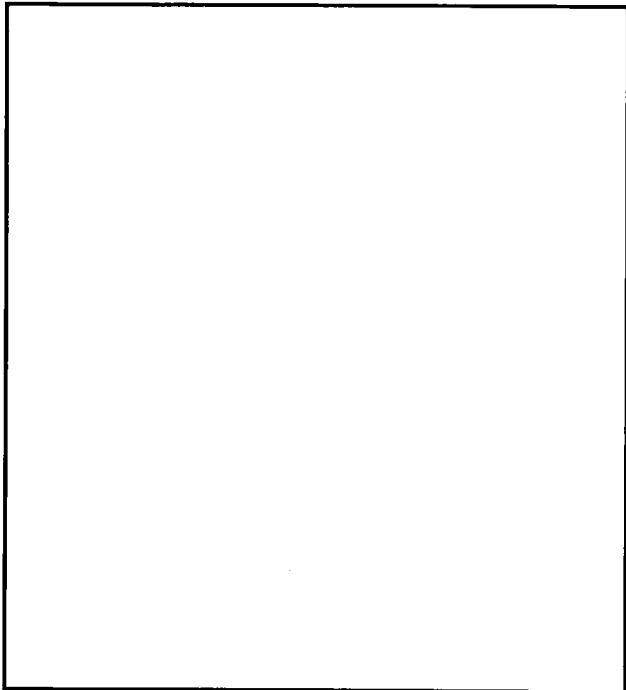


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~~(S)~~ Overall, the committee reported that a general warning, without any specific time or targets, indeed had been given to the various commands in South Vietnam, and that this warning was sufficient for U.S. commanders to take precautionary actions. However, the report noted that there were differences in the amount and type of information made available to commanders, especially in each of the four Corps Tactical Zones. Also, the timing varied; for example, General Weyand had much more advanced information than the commanders in the other three zones. Furthermore, there had been a lack of general information about the intensity, scope, and especially the timing of the attacks. The bottom line of the report was this:



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The study also recommended that an all-source indications center be formed in the U.S. embassy. However, this center was never formed.¹⁸³ This need echoed similar concerns over the absence of a centralized SIGINT processing and reporting center in Vietnam which has been discussed earlier.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Except for some suggestive allusions to "reports," SIGINT was notably absent from this

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final version of the [redacted] report. An earlier, and more highly classified version, known as the Interim Report, which had been released in April by the Working Group, carried many more details and spelled out the SIGINT role in pre-Tet reporting. It is worthwhile to include the entire statement:

6. Despite enemy security measures, communications intelligence was able to provide clear warning that attacks, probably on a larger scale than ever before, were in the offing. Considerable numbers of [redacted]

[redacted] enemy messages were read. These messages appeared in many areas of South Vietnam. They included references to impending attacks, more wide-spread and numerous than seen before. Moreover they indicated a sense of urgency, along with an emphasis on thorough planning and secrecy not previously seen in such communications. These messages, taken with such nontextual indicators as increased message volumes and radio direction finding, served both to validate information from other sources in the hands of local authorities and to provide warnings to senior officials. The indicators, however, were not sufficient to predict the exact timing of the attack.¹⁸⁴

~~(TS//SI)~~ According to the interim version, communications intelligence seems to have been the only element producing information of value to the puzzling pre-Tet picture. This initial assessment has been accepted in later histories, monographs, and symposia as an accurate statement of what SIGINT was reporting prior to Tet.¹⁸⁵

~~(C//SI)~~ For the cryptologic community, Tet was an important event because of its implications for how effectively SIGINT could discern the "big picture," as well as in how well it informed the rest of the intelligence community, and, by extension, its most important users in Saigon and Washington of what was going to happen. It also provided an insight into how the customers of

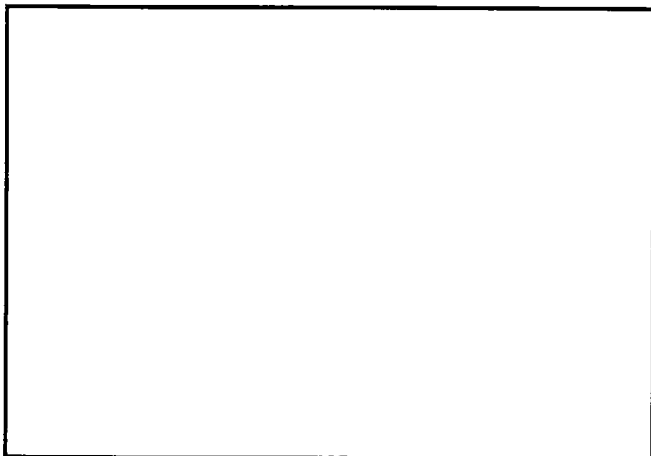
SIGINT regarded the information and how much they understand SIGINT process and its limitations.

~~(S//SI)~~ At the same time, this contention of SIGINT's prescience is a reflection of the position NSA staked out shortly after Tet began. On 8 February 1968, while fighting raged in Hue and other beleaguered South Vietnamese centers, NSA sent a message to [redacted] recounting all of its reports which pointed to the Tet attacks. The wording in the NSA message was less dramatic and precise than in later claims. In the message the Agency stated that "The accumulation of SIGINT provided evidence that a coordinated offensive would be conducted in several areas throughout South Vietnam. The timing of these coordinated communist operations which were alluded to in SIGINT correlates with the general offensive which started on 29/30 January."¹⁸⁶ The message went on to reiterate the substance of fourteen reports illustrating its main contention that SIGINT forewarned of the offensive. Some of the referenced reports, like the series about the "evidenced" general offensive, were relevant. Others were not. These latter seemed to have been included since they fell within a pre-Tet time frame of 15 to 30 January.

~~(S//SI)~~ However, it is difficult to square the later claim that NSA predicted Tet with the thrust of the PFLAB's final report, which mentions Washington's ignorance of Saigon's forebodings, as well as the failure by the intelligence organizations to nail down the scope and nature of the communist attacks. As was discussed earlier, there were general problems with the SIGINT reports, especially the NSA series. However, there were other problems with the reports. Besides confusing the meaning of the "N-Day" indicator, NSA was slow to report the actual start of the attacks. Hostilities, which began on the 30th and climaxed on 31 January, were absent from the report series until Follow-up 15 issued late on 1 February, better than a day after the attacks start-

ed!¹⁸⁷ It is difficult to explain why this happened; that a major change in the status of a target's activity should go unreported for such a long time suggests an inflexibility in the reporting series and those who were managing it. It also points to the technical difficulty in reporting current events when the primary analytic center was half a world away.

~~(TS//SI)~~ In the Interim Report, it had been said of the NSA reporting that it alone conveyed a "sense of urgency" in the communist troops' preparations prior to Tet. However, it is difficult to find much evidence of this "urgency" in the series just discussed. In one example, on 24 January, a subordinate of the Military Intelligence section of the PAVN 1st Division, preparing to go on a six-day march to its position, is told to get there because the situation is "very urgent."¹⁸⁸ However, two days later, this unit was virtually in the same place.¹⁸⁹



~~(S//SI)~~ As for making an impact in Saigon, it previously has been pointed out that General Westmoreland had allowed the repositioning of American combat units away from the countryside and back to Saigon well before any significant SIGINT reporting about a general offensive had emerged. Also, Westmoreland's alert to American forces of 30 January, according to his G-2 chief, was sent after the attacks that morning

in Pleiku and Kontum Provinces and at points along the coast.¹⁹¹

(U) Here, in a sort of circular fashion, we return to Giap's intent with the battles around Khe Sanh and the DMZ region, as well as the attacks in the Central Highlands during the early phase of the offensive – to nail the American command's attention to the fighting in those locations while the next phase of the TCN/TCK was being prepared. Westmoreland considered the military activity around Khe Sanh (and the DMZ) as the centerpiece of Hanoi's plan. As such, it follows that he would interpret intelligence within the context of the struggle for the base. As we have seen, Westmoreland had realized the threat building near Saigon in early January. Yet he still considered the northern provinces in CTZ I, and, to a lesser degree, the Central Highlands, the critical theater of battle. None of the intelligence he received, including the SIGINT, could persuade him otherwise.

~~(S//SI)~~ That the SIGINT gathered by the Americans was never strong enough to convince Westmoreland of the true nature and purpose of Tet, and that many of the important indicators of Tet eluded the analysts, was probably due, in part, to an increasingly effective security regimen in communist communications and operations. Communist concern about security was one of the most common themes in the NSA pre-Tet reporting series. Units were constantly reminded of the need to maintain security (and secrecy) in order to ensure the success of "N-Day" attacks. Units on the march were urged to avoid contact, while those in place were reminded to take sufficient camouflage precautions to avoid discovery by patrols and airborne observation. In the cryptographic arena, prior to Tet, the PAVN command in Hanoi had directed a stepped-up training program and had increased such support in terms of new systems and personnel.¹⁹²

~~(S//SI)~~ This is not to say that the communist security measures were totally effective: the very

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fact that the most important indicator, "N-Day," was discussed openly could be seen as a major failure. Effective security programs, and related denial and deception plans, have to identify such potential indicators and work towards hiding them or confusing the enemy as to their exact nature. However, this was not the case for Vietnamese plans for Tet. From as early as the second week of January, cryptologists knew about the significance of "N-Day." But, as we have seen, the exact date remained unknown, and the other indicators were never fully realized in the NSA reporting. Then, again, the "N-Day" references were confined almost exclusively to PAVN units in the the B-3 Front, and could have been part of a deception effort.

~~(S//SI)~~ In another sense, SIGINT may have been a victim of its own success against PAVN communications. In the months before Tet, and especially in January, the overwhelming bulk of the radio communications intercepted came from PAVN units operating in the DMZ and the Central Highlands. Viet Cong units moving into positions in and around South Vietnam's urban centers and military installations generated hardly any communications. The ensuing reporting, especially that in the NSA series on the general offensive, reflected this emphasis on the PAVN's activities, while the VC efforts were almost entirely missed. This picture of communist preparations coincided with Westmoreland's view; in fact, it may have stimulated his thinking about the communist plans.¹⁹³

(U) In fact, this is a variation of the classic "Ultra syndrome," in which commanders come to rely almost exclusively on signals intelligence. Since the only SIGINT came from the intercept of PAVN communications, then its activity became the focus of MACV's attention. Last minute intelligence from South Vietnamese sources – the capture of enemy soldiers who gave away the attack plan – was too little and too late to influence

thinking away from the seeming PAVN threat to Khe Sanh and the Central Highlands.¹⁹⁴

~~(S//SI)~~ Another reason has been put forward to explain the inability of American SIGINT to report completely the scope, intensity, and specific targets of the Tet attacks: the arrangement of American intercept sites in South Vietnam precluded coverage of communist communications in the southern part of the country. This explanation maintains that, since the major U.S. SIGINT sites were clustered in the northern part of the country, and their missions were concentrated on those regions, the preponderance of their intercept was therefore on the communist preparations in the Central Highlands and the northern provinces. This bias led to the conclusion that the main thrust of the communist forces would be in those two regions.¹⁹⁵

~~(S//SI)~~ Actually, this argument's presumption of an exclusive configuration of U.S. SIGINT sites in the northern and eastern parts of South Vietnam is not correct. First of all, [redacted] five ASA intercept sites located in the III CTZ, which includes the region around and to the north of Saigon.¹⁹⁶ The ASA sites were tactical SIGINT units attached to U.S. combat formations based throughout the area. All of these sites [redacted] were intercepting communications from Viet Cong combat units and military intelligence elements in and around the Saigon region. Another unit, the ASA 146th Aviation Company, also performed intercept and ARDF missions in support of these sites. Additionally, another station, the ASA site at Bien Hoa, took the intercept from the other seven sites and was issuing reports and translations on the activities by Main Force Viet Cong units such as the 9th and 5th Light Infantry Divisions and their subordinate units in Bien Hoa and Phuc Long provinces. This reporting by the ASA site at Bien Hoa continued in its own series and was repeated in the Southeast Asia SIGINT

EO 1.4.(c)
EO 1.4.(d)

Summaries through to the beginning of the Tet attacks.¹⁹⁷

~~(S//SI)~~ It was this reporting from the III CTZ around Saigon by Bien Hoa which was featured in initial report of NSA's series on Tet in the section titled "Possibly Related Activity in the Nam Bo." However, something happened to Bien Hoa's subsequent reporting. Although the ASA station continued to publish translations and reports on the activities of the Viet Cong divisions and their subordinate units - including the reporting by the communist military intelligence sections on the status and locations of American and ARVN formations, the movement of communist headquarters, and the higher levels of message activity - this information was not carried in any of the subsequent follow-up reports to the NSA series. Why this happened is not clear. Though not all of the product from Bien Hoa was relevant to the approaching offensive, most of it reported the same types of activities as were occurring in the Central Highlands and the northern provinces. This absence of reporting from the southern provinces, especially the provinces adjacent to Saigon, most likely reinforced the impression in MACV that the communist offensive would concentrate against the Central Highlands, Khe Sanh, and the DMZ.

~~(S//SI)~~ The NSA reports regarding the offensive were, at heart, tentative. The title - "Coordinated Vietnamese Communist Offensive Evidenced in South Vietnam" - seemed to suggest a country-wide assault. Yet, in the very first paragraph of the first report in the series, NSA undermined its own theme of a general offensive by suggesting that the major attacks were concentrated against the northern provinces of the country. It stated that "... the bulk of the SIGINT evidence indicates the most critical areas to be in the northern half of the country." It added that there was "some additional evidence that Communist units in the Nam Bo may also be involved."¹⁹⁸ The subsequent reports in the series itemized the PAVN moves and preparations near Khe Sanh,

Hue, and the highland region, while they carried nothing further about similar activities in the southern part of the country. The follow-up reports carried nothing to dissuade the reader that the attacks were primarily in the north and the Central Highlands; the inclusion in the series of all reporting of Vietnamese communist activities in the south ceased after the first report, despite the information that Bien Hoa was supplying from the other field sites in the region.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The report series also blurred significant conventional indicators. Instead of highlighting the SIGINT indicators pointing towards a general offensive, the series tended to obscure them in a blizzard of detail concerning units marching here and there. Such nuanced indicators as highly unusual long-range moves by PAVN and VC formations, new command relationships, the extensive references to security concerns, morale and propaganda messages, and the concentration of combat units lost their significance in the welter of other information contained in the reports.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Here, too, another old technical problem continued to hamper SIGINT analysts.

traffic analysts and linguists had to deduce Hanoi's intent from the results of direction finding and the bits and pieces intercepted from battalions moving through the forests and hills of South Vietnam. It proved too difficult to get a fundamental grasp on

EO 1.4.(c)

Hanoi's plan. [REDACTED]

~~(S//SI)~~ In the last week of January 1968, when NSA had taken over the reporting of communist preparations for a large-scale offensive in South Vietnam, it had intended to unify all the disparate SIGINT field reporting under the single theme of the approaching offensive. It had intended that, by centralizing the SIGINT reporting and thereby focusing it more on the apparent nationwide communist offensive, as a consequence, the reporting would alert MACV to the threat. However, neither result materialized to the degree NSA later claimed. The problems with the NSA reporting derived from the context of the difficulties of overall Allied intelligence, and the shortcomings within the SIGINT reporting effort.

~~(S//SI)~~ First of all, SIGINT can make no claim to have been the first intelligence element to have detected the Tet offensive. It has been shown that MACV, in late November, and CIA, by early December, had already determined that Hanoi was planning a large-scale offensive. While details remained unknown, the administration had already been warned by these reports. However, it downplayed the significance of the CIA warnings in December. Ironically, after the attacks, President Johnson and others in his administration would use the same CIA reports to illustrate they had been warned. NSA reporting, on the other hand, detected signs of the attacks by only mid-January. The value of the NSA reporting was in details of the impending attacks. However, even this advantage would be fumbled and misused.

~~(S//SI)~~ Secondly, NSA reporting, like that of MACV, would be influenced heavily by the siege at Khe Sanh. It has been demonstrated that the

plight of the surrounded marine garrison exerted a hold on MACV Headquarters and the White House almost to the point of a fixation. Khe Sanh was imbued with a significance out of proportion to actual communist plans. However, both the leadership and the American media compared the siege to the French debacle fourteen years earlier. This focus on Khe Sanh was reflected in the text of both SIGINT and other intelligence reports. Even more important, much of the information contained in SIGINT reports, especially the series started prior to Tet, was interpreted in light of Khe Sanh.

~~(S//SI)~~ Finally, the SIGINT reporting itself was never sufficient in alerting the command in Saigon and Washington to focus upon the countrywide preparations. Much of the reporting was a recitation of numerous details of the preparations. Significant indicators, such as long distance moves and target selection, were lost in the noise of unit movement reports. The importance of the "N-Day" reference was subverted by the multiple start dates; while it is possible the reference to itself was a deliberate deception tied into the possible initial diversionary attacks in the B-3 Front on 30 January. Much of the reporting pointed to preparations in northern South Vietnam, which was interpreted as related to the siege of the marines at Khe Sanh. The initial inclusion of information from the southern region of the country was dropped from subsequent reports, even though the information continued to be carried in field site product. This imbalance served only to skew the interpretation of the SIGINT by MACV. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Analysts were forced to rely on a mountain of tactical information from which to determine a general outline of the communist plans. Finally, NSA itself never reacted to the import of its own reporting. If a general offensive was in the works, then why did it not alert its own sites, commands, and liaison elements in South Vietnam?

**(U) Trapped in the Looking Glass:
The Post-Tet Reality Hits Washington**

(U) The Communists slavishly held to their TCK/TCN campaign, even after the failure of the January attacks. In March and, again in August, new offensives saw communist troops hurl themselves against American and ARVN bases, only to fail just as miserably as the first time. In February, General Westmoreland had proclaimed a military victory after Tet. Strictly speaking, he was right. The Viet Cong military units and political cadre were decimated by the offensive. The Americans estimated 40,000 communist soldiers were killed as compared to an Allied total of about 4,000. Although the Allied estimates would later be shown to be, at best, contentious, there was no doubt that the communists, especially the NLF political cadre and the regular PLAF formations, had been hurt seriously. From this point, the war was fought on the communist side by the conventional units of the People's Army of Vietnam.

(U) If the communists lost so heavily, then why was Tet considered a strategic defeat for the

United States? Part of the answer lay in the perception of the battle itself. The Johnson administration had been stating for a long time that the communist forces had been losing manpower due to Westmoreland's "attrition" strategy. Suddenly, all of South Vietnam was attacked by forces which supposedly had been destroyed earlier by the American and ARVN forces. Many politicians and journalists saw the contradiction between the administration claims and the sudden appearance of large communist forces, and they questioned the rosy statements which had preceded the offensive. The Democratic Party's fissures over the war widened as various senators openly questioned Johnson's leadership. Normally conservative newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal* wondered if America's effort was doomed.

(U) Actually, these stories about the press and its influence are mostly anecdotal. Opinion polls before and after Tet scarcely changed: they reported that the majority of Americans, about 60 percent, were critical of the president's handling of the war. However, this criticism is often portrayed as exclusively liberal, antiwar senti-



(U) The Wise Men meet with President Johnson and other members of his administration.

ment. In fact, it was not this simple. Many of the opponents of the war were criticizing the president for not prosecuting the war intensely enough.²⁰⁰ In a survey of Democrats voting for Eugene McCarthy in the primary in New Hampshire on March 12, anti-Johnson "hawks" outnumbered anti-Johnson "doves" by a factor of three to two.²⁰¹

(U) The problem for the administration wasn't public opinion; it lay in the fact that the offensive forced President Johnson into a strategic dilemma about the course of the war, the one he had hoped to avoid from the very beginning of the American involvement. On 9 February, barely more than a week after Tet began, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earl Wheeler, cabled Westmoreland in Saigon with the suggestion that since the United States was not prepared to accept defeat then he should ask for more troops.²⁰² Westmoreland obliged and cabled Washington with a request for 206,000 more troops. He also asked that the reserves be mobilized and that he be permitted to invade Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam with ground troops! This request would be the realization of his strategic plan to cut off the Viet Cong insurgency from Hanoi's troops and supplies by physically occupying a line across the DMZ into Laos and into Cambodia with American troops. All of this was part of his planned "Operation Total Victory."

(U) To meet these demands, President Johnson realized that the United States would have to go to a complete war footing by calling up the reserves and activating National Guard units. It would spell the end to his beloved Great Society social programs. The costs of an expanded war threatened the fiscal condition of the United States. Besides that, these actions would be tantamount to political suicide: He would have to publicly admit that the end of the war was not in sight, after all. It could go on for many more years. There was no guarantee that the Congress or the public would accept the proposal.

On 10 March, the troop request was published in the *New York Times*. More calls came from Congress to reevaluate America's policy.

(U) Looking for some advice (or consensus) President Johnson, taking a suggestion of his new secretary of defense, Clark Clifford, convened a group of notable Americans known as the "Wise Men." This group, which included, among others, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and General Omar Bradley, was to review the current course of the war.²⁰³

(U) This was not the first time that President Johnson had sought the opinion of this group. In early November 1967, when Johnson was wrestling with the first signs of large public dissent with the war's progress, he had charged this same group to review the situation. They gathered in the Old Executive Office Building across from the White House and were briefed by government experts on the military, diplomatic, and intelligence aspects of the war. Given this singular source, their first findings were hardly unexpected: that U.S. policy was on the right track, but that American public opinion was the problem.²⁰⁴

(U) In late March, the Wise Men again met and listened to another cavalcade of administration briefings. This time their reaction was far different. A surprising number had admitted that their prior support of the war had changed. Under relentless, harsh questioning by the Wise Men, the administration's optimistic demands, outlooks and reports on the war withered: the 206,000 reinforcements grew to a half million; the war's end grew from "around the corner" to five to ten more years; and the bombing campaign was demonstrated to have not disrupted supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail nor to have broken the North Vietnamese will to resist. Even the Pentagon's communist casualty claims were shown to be ludicrous.²⁰⁵ Just as important to their decision were a series of briefings by the CIA and State Department which

painted a grim picture of the situation in Indochina.



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(U) On 26 March, when the group reported to President Johnson, they recommended against Westmoreland's troop increase. Furthermore, they suggested it was time to begin disengaging from Vietnam. Their recommendations were seconded by a special Department of Defense study which saw no end to the conflict, even with all of the reinforcements demanded by Westmoreland. It is likely that the assessment from the Wise Men heavily influenced President Johnson's decision to seek to negotiate a way out of the war.²⁰⁶

(U) On 31 March, President Johnson announced a partial cessation to the bombing of North Vietnam and his desire to open negotiations with Hanoi. He also shocked the nation by announcing his refusal to seek reelection. In a way, the course of the war had turned a corner; but getting out would be a long and bloody affair.

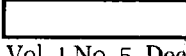
(U) Notes

1. (U) Lt. Col. Dave Richard Palmer (USA), *Readings in Current Military History* (West Point, NY: Department of Military Art and Engineering, USMA, 1969), 103-104.

2. (U) Harold Ford, 105.

3. (U) Davidson, 480.

4. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Oral History Interview with Milt Zaslow, conducted by Thomas Johnson and Charles Baker, OH-17-93 14, September 1993, 34.

5. ~~(S//SI)~~  "Uncertain Origins," *Dragon Seeds*, Vol. 1 No. 5, December 1972, 13.

6. (U) Harold Ford, 113.

7. (U) Ibid., 116.

8. ~~(TS//SI-NF)~~ Interim Report, "Intelligence Warning of the Tet offensive in South Vietnam," SC-09340-68, 5 April 1968, CCH Series VIII, Box 19.

9. (U) James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 259.



11. (U) Harold Ford, 116.

12. (U) Wirtz, 274.

13. (U) Ibid., 28.

14. (U) Capt. Ronnie Ford, USA, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 33.

15. (U) Major General Joseph A. McChristian, *The Role of Intelligence, 1965-1967*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1994), 9.

16. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Johnson, Vol. II, 530.

17. (U) William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 74.

18. ~~(TS//SI)~~ 2/O/VNG/R52-65, 012143 September 1965; 3/G10/VNG/R209-65, 021845Z September 1965.

19. (U) Turley, 75; Young, 161.

20. (U) Turley, 75.

21. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Unpublished Manuscript, "The Ground Story: USASA Buildup and Support to Tactical Units, 1965-1966," Chapter 3, 11, CCH Series VI.HH.15.1.

22. ~~(S//SI)~~ Ibid., 15.

23. (U) John Schlight, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia. The War in South Vietnam: the Years of the Offensive, 1965-1968* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, Department of the Air Force, 1988), 105-106.

24. A number of SIGINT product cover these operations. The most notable are 2/O/VCM/R48-66, 25 March 1966, 2215Z, "Concentration of Communications Facilities in Northern Darlac Province; 2/O/VCM/R74-66, 31 May 1966, 2310Z, "Viet Cong 630th Front and Associates Assemble West of Pleiku City; 2/O/VCM/R83-66, Spot Report, 6 June 1966, 2309Z, "Viet Cong Assume Attack Communications Posture in Military Regions 5 and 7."

25. (U) Wirtz, 43; Ronnie Ford, 33.

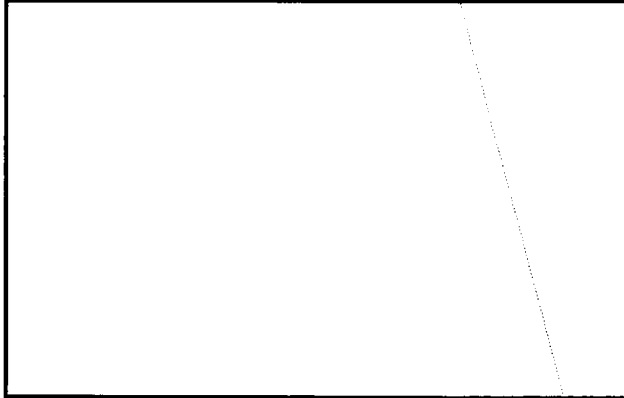
26. (U) Turley, 76.

27. (U) Ronnie Ford, 53.

28. ~~(TS//SI)~~ B62 COMINT Technical Report 33-67, "SIGINT Indicators of Communist Tet Offensive, 1968," Supplement 1, 26 July 1968, 1.

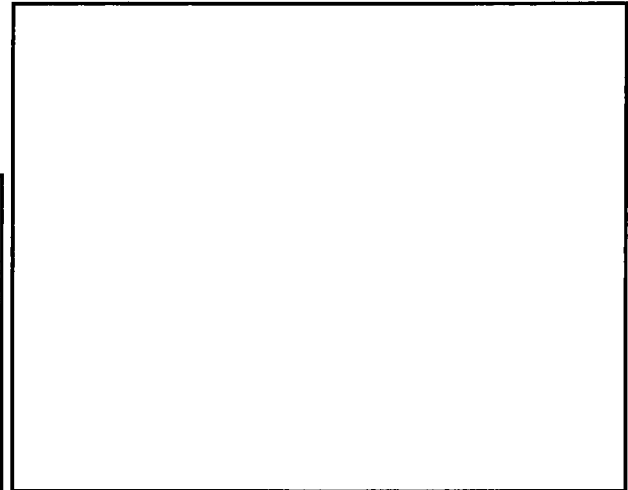
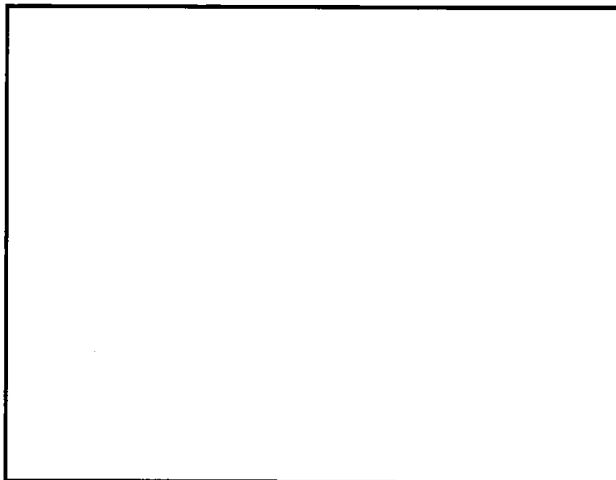
29. (U) McChristian, 63-64; Gibson, 153.

30. (U) General William Westmoreland, USA, *Report on the War (As of June 1968): Section II, Report on Operations in South Vietnam, January 1964-June 1968* (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1968), 145.



32. (U) Gibson, 156. (U) American projections on how long the war would last were tied to the U.S. troop ceilings. In April 1967, General Westmoreland came to Washington and met with President Johnson and the Chairman, JCS, General Earle Wheeler. Westmoreland outlined his belief that at current levels (470,000) the war would last for five years. If the ceiling was raised to 565,000 troops, then the communists could be beaten in three years. If he could have 665,000 troops, another four and a half divisions, then the war might be ended in two years. These projections presumed that the North Vietnamese would not increase their troop strength. They also hinged on the attrition rates suffered by the PAVN and NLF formations that Westmoreland was claiming. See *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, 82-84.

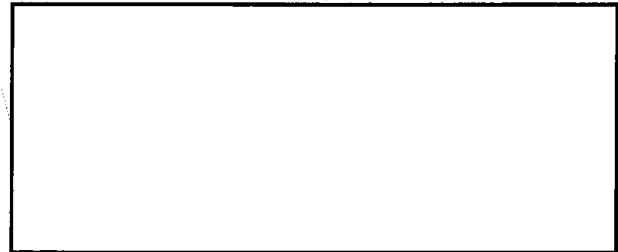
33. (U) Ronnie Ford, 55.



35. (U) Ronnie Ford, 57.

36. (U) Karnow, 536.

37. (U) Turley, 99; For descriptions of the August 1945 Viet Minh takeover, see Robert Hanyok, "Guerrillas in the Mist: COMINT and the Formation and Evolution of the Viet Minh, 1941-1945," *Cryptologic Quarterly*, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 1996, 108-110, and Schulzinger, 17-19.



39. (U) Turley, 100. (U) Not that Giap was overly worried about troop losses. His formulation of the *dau tranh* ("struggle") strategy guaranteed high losses; but Giap was objective-oriented, and such losses were sustainable only if victory was certain. For a critique of Giap's Tet strategy see Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 226-7.

40. (C) CIA 0487/70, 29; Wirtz, 69.

41. (U) General William C. Westmoreland, USA, "What Did the North Vietnamese Hope to Gain with Their 1968 Tet Offensive," *Vietnam*, February 1992, 62.

42. (U) Captain Ronnie Ford, USA, "Hanoi's Intent: Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive," *American Intelligence Journal*, Vol 16, Nos. 2/3, Autumn/Winter 1995, 67.

43. (U) Oberdorfer, 79. (U) During the force level discussions of mid-1967, the possible use of American troops "outside" of South Vietnam was discussed. The invasion of the DRV was considered and discarded. It was argued that an invasion of the North, beyond the actual difficulties in the invasion itself, might stir up heavy domestic political opposition. The invasion also could prompt a more active intervention by the Chinese or Soviets. See *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Book 5 of 12, Section IV.c.6.(b), 76-83, 176-77.

44. (U) Ibid., 80.

45. (U) Wirtz, 68.

46. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2X/G12/VCM/T009-68, 25 January 1968, 0525Z.

47. ~~(C)~~ CIA 0487/70, 28.

48. (U) Ronnie Ford, "Hanoi's Intent," 74.

49. (U) As quoted in Gibson, 164.

50. (U) Ronnie Ford, *Tet*, 109-110; Young 207-208.

51. (U) Oberdorfer, 100.

52. (U) Ronnie Ford, *Tet*, 106.

53. (U) Oberdorfer, 102.

54. (U) Young, 216.

55. (U) Oberdorfer, 104.

56. (U) Ronnie Ford, 108; Gibson, 162; Schulzinger, 258.

57. (U) Young, 212.

59. (U) Sam Adams, "Vietnam Cover-up: Playing War with Numbers," *Harper's*, May 1975, 48.

60. (U) Gibson, 160.

61. (U) Ibid., 159.

62. ~~(S)~~ Palmer, 50.

63. (U) Harold Ford, 95.

64. ~~(S)~~ Palmer 50; (U) Gibson, 161.

sible for a *CBS Reports*: "The Uncounted Enemy - A Vietnam Deception," which aired in 1982. This program repeated Adams' claims and triggered a lawsuit by William Westmoreland that was settled out of court.

66. (U) Gibson, 160-161; Harold Ford, 94.

67. ~~(S)~~ Palmer, 50.

68. ~~(S//SI)~~ DIRNSA 091556Z September 1967, AGO 090341, CCH Series VI.HH.6.5.

69. (U) Olson and Roberts, 177.

70. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R183-67, 6 October 1967 2228Z.

71. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R218-67, 1 November 1967, 2053Z.

72. ~~(S//SI)~~ Glenn, "Uncertain Origins," *Dragon Seeds*, December 1972, 12.

73. (U) Oberdorfer, 108-109.

74. (U) Davidson, 469.

75. (U) Oberdorfer, 108.

76. (C) MACV Translation Report, "Ho Chi Minh's Order for the Implementation of General Counter Offensive and General Uprising During the 1967 Winter and 1968 Spring and Summer." MACJ261, 15 December 1967.

77. ~~(S)~~ Palmer, 55.

78. (U) Harold Ford, 119-120.

79. ~~(S)~~ Palmer 55; Harold Ford, 120. (U) The 8 December report was received by the National Security Council staff with much skepticism. A 13 December assessment of the report passed to Walt Rostow, LBJ's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, stated that "it exudes an excessively pessimistic interpretation of the facts." It added that the "Agency [CIA] is overreacting to what it feels is undue optimism at the top levels of government." See Memo to W. Rostow, 13 December 1967, Barret, *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 467-8.

80. (U) Harold Ford, 121.

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81. (U) Andrews, 342; Ronnie Ford, 182; Harold Ford, 122. (TS//SI) What these materials might have been has been a matter of some speculation. (1) Christopher Andrew suggests that it was SIGINT to which Carver was alluding. ~~(S//SI)~~ The preponderance of SIGINT reports from the period were tactical military in nature and pointed to a number of operations along the borders and DMZ. (2) [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (U) Prior to Tet, the North Vietnamese and NLF engaged in a series of clandestine diplomatic maneuvers, the most noteworthy being the "Buttercup" affair in which an NLF functionary claimed to be authorized to open a negotiations channel with the U.S. using a proposed POW release as a sort of goodwill gesture. This affair has been labeled by Ted Wirtz as a piece of deception or propaganda (*dich van*). See Wirtz, 70. [REDACTED]

83. ~~(S)~~ Palmer, 55; ironically, after Tet, both Rostow and President Johnson would cite Layton's 8 December report as specific evidence that they knew all along about the nationwide attacks during Tet. See Johnson, 371-372, and Walt Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York: MacMillan, 1972), 464-465.

84. (U) Oberdorfer, 121.

85. (U) *Ibid.*, 120.

86. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R275-67, 23 December 1967, 2023Z.

87. ~~(S//SI)~~ Westmoreland, "Estimate of Current Enemy Strategy," 071318Z January 1968, SC-NLJ-016/87 B.

88. ~~(S//SI)~~ DOS/INR Intelligence Notes, January 6, 1968, SC-NLJ-019/87 B.

89. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R267-67, 18 December 1967, 1934Z.

90. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R250-67, 7 December 1967, 2212Z.

91. (U) Karnow, 541.

92. ~~(S//SI)~~ Lukacs, 72-73; Davidson, 563-564.

93. (U) Ronnie Ford, 105. ~~(S//SI)~~ For more on the effort to determine the identity of the North Vietnamese commander at Khe Sanh and the subsequent attacks, see Robert Hanyok, "Plight of the Generals: The Use of COMINT to Target Enemy Commanders During the Vietnam War" (P1). *NSA Communicator*, Vol. 9, no. 11, 7 May 2001, 2-5.

94. (S//SI) Lukacs, 22.

95. ~~(S//SI)~~ Message: J2 MACV to G2 III MAF, et alia, 290312Z December 1967, "Khe Sanh Indicators," CCH Series XII.NN.V.A.2.

96. ~~(S//SI)~~ CG Third MARDIV to USN-414J, 061749Z, "Khe Sanh Indicators."

97. ~~(S//SI)~~ USN-414J to CG III MAF, "Possible Offensive Action in DMZ Area." 160801Z January 1968, "Khe Sanh Indicators."

98. (U) Jack Shulimson, Lt. Col. Leonard Blasoil, USMC, Charles R. Smith, and Capt. David A. Dawson, USMC, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: the Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), 65.

99. (U) Davidson, 554.

100. (U) Shulimson, 70.

101. (U) This move antagonized the Marine command structure in Vietnam and in Washington. There are claims that, privately, Westmoreland had lost confidence in the MAF commander, Lt. Gen. Robert Cushman, especially after hearing from General Davidson of the marines' general unpreparedness for a siege. Westmoreland found himself in another administrative battle when he tried to establish a single authority for the air assets supporting Khe Sanh. In this case, the Air Force and Westmoreland battled the Navy and Marines. The issue was not resolved until 8 March some seven weeks after the siege had begun. See Bernard D. Cole, "A Noglowl in Vietnam, 1968: Air Power at the Battle of Khe Sanh," *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 64, No. 1, January 2000, 144.

102. ~~(S//SI)~~ Lukacs, 22.

103. (U) [REDACTED] was ordered out on 31 January by the D/DIR, Dr. Louis Tordella. E-mail, [REDACTED] to author, 13 September 2000.

104. (U) Lukacs, 66.

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105. (U) Shulimson, 65; Under Project Dump Truck, the Air Force dropped hundreds of acoustic and seismic sensors from helicopters during the siege. Staavoren, 290-292.

106. ~~(S//SI)~~ Lukacs, 59. (S//SI) Interview with Colonel David F. Lownds UMSC, January 1969, USASA Interview, 146-47.

107. ~~(S//SI)~~ Ibid., 13, 15. Interestingly, in early December 1967, General Westmoreland had ordered that the P2V Ceflien Lion aircraft be prepared to conduct active communications jamming of communist units surrounding Khe Sanh. The planes, which had the capability, were reconfigured for the ECM mission, but were never used. Interview conducted by [redacted]

[redacted] with Colonel William T. Riley, Jr., Commander 509th ASA Group, 13 March 1973, NSA Southeast Asia History Project.

108. (U) Westmoreland, 162-163.

109. (U) Shulimson, 65; Karnow, 541.

110. (U) Captain Moyers S. Shore II, UMSC, *The Battle for Khe Sanh* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, HQ USMC, 1969), 90, 145.

111. (U) Davidson, 552; Karnow, 541.

112. (U) Shulimson, 66; A further indication of the seriousness in which the American command viewed Khe Sanh can be seen in some of the options considered for its defense. Shortly after Khe Sanh was invested by the communist forces, General Westmoreland ordered a secret MACV study to consider the use of atomic weapons in the defense of the base. Since the region was lightly populated, civilian casualties would be light. Therefore, the use of a tactical nuclear weapon might just send a message to Hanoi. Later, in early February, President Johnson had considered the use of such weapons in Vietnam. He asked General Wheeler if he believed that the situation in Vietnam would ever warrant the use of such weapons. Wheeler thought that the need would never arise, but he asked Westmoreland, who surprised both the president and the chairman with his reply that either nuclear or chemical weapons might have to be used at Khe Sanh. This situation recalls to mind similar considerations for Operation Vulture during the siege of Dien Bien Phu. See Davidson, 564-565 and Chapter 1, 39-40. (U) See [redacted] 581-2.

113. (U) Karnow, 541.

114. ~~(S//SI)~~ Lukacs, 57.

115. ~~(S)~~ Lukacs, 58, as quoted from DIA OIS, 23 January 1968.

116. ~~(S//SI)~~ Gen. Wheeler INFO White House, FM Gen Westmoreland, 291044Z, LBJ Library, SC-NLJ-012/87 B.

117. (U) Shulimson, 67.

118. (U) Ronnie Ford, 106.

119. (U) Ibid., 108.

120. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Draft "Tet Offensive," CCH Series VIII.19 Folder 3, undated, 9.

121. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 10.

122. (U) Sheehan, 707.

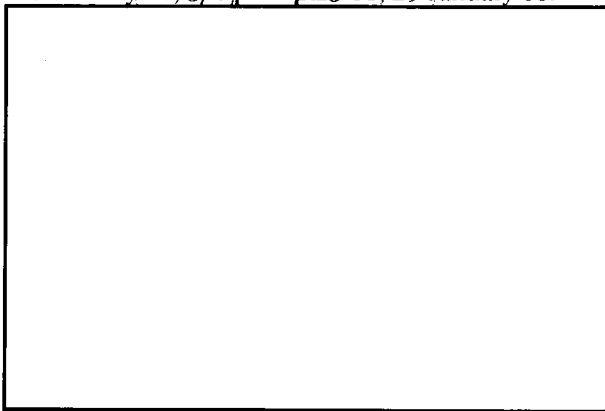
123. (U) Harold Ford, 115; Wirtz, 137.

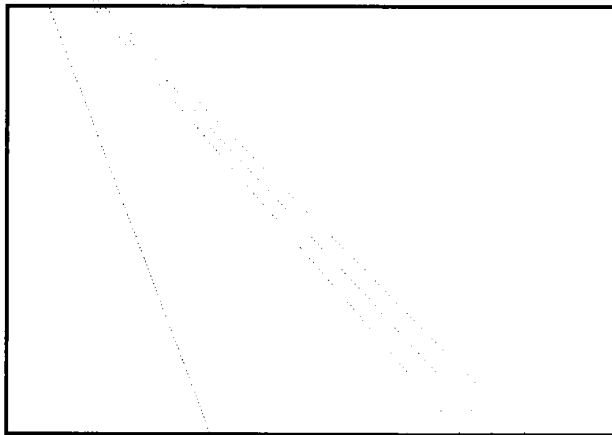
124. (U) Wirtz, 202.

125. ~~(S//SI)~~ 082301Z Feb 1968, DIRNSA to SSO DIA, B6-61, "Reflections of Forewarning of Vietnamese Communist Offensive Initiated 29 January," CCH Series VIII. 19 Folder 8.

126. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R32-68, 25 January 1968 2332Z.

127. ~~(S//SI)~~ For those interested, these reports are (Serial and DTG): 2/O/VCM/R32-68, 25 January 68 2332Z and Follow ups 1-10, Last Follow-up Dated 30 January 68 2155Z; 3/O/[redacted] R16-68, 18 January 2120Z; 3/O/[redacted] R17-68, 19 January 2100Z; 2/O/VCM/R13-68, 17 January 68, 2014Z; 2/O/VCM/R14-68, 17 January 68, 2144Z; 2/O/VCM/R19-68, 1623Z; 2/O/VCM/R20-68, 19 January 68, 2151Z; 2/O/VCM/R25-68, 19 January 68, 2148Z; 2/O/VCM/R27-68, 24 January 68, 1714Z; 2/O/VCM/R28-68, 24 January 68, 1828Z; 2/O/VCM/R29-68, 24 January 68, 2159Z; 3/O/[redacted] R23-68, 26 January 68; 3/O/[redacted] R24-68, 28 January 68; 3/O/[redacted] R25-68, 29 January 68.





128. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R36-68, 272009Z January 1968; Follow-up 1 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.
129. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R38-68, 281902Z January 1968; Follow-up 3 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.
130. ~~(TS//SI)~~ 3/O/ [redacted] R17-68, 19 January 1968 SEA SIGSUM, 17-68.
131. ~~(TS//SI)~~ B62 CTR 33-67 Supplement 1, Appendix, 8.
132. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R32-68, 252332Z January 1968.
133. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R44-68, Follow-up 9 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68, 300726Z January 1968.
134. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R32-68.
135. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R43-68, 292320Z January 1968; Follow-up 8 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.
136. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R41-68, 290532Z January 1968; Follow-up 6 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.
137. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R32-68, 25 January 1968 2332Z; (U) MACV was split over when the communist Tet offensive would begin. General Davidson thought it would start before the Tet holiday; General Westmoreland believed it would start after the holiday. One of the "surprises" was the timing of the attacks during Tet. See Davidson, 479 and (S) Palmer, 55.
138. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R40-68, 28 January 1968 0028Z, Follow-up 5 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.
139. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R39-68, 28 January 1968 2120Z, Follow-up 4 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.
140. (U) Harold Ford, 115, 115n.
141. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Interim Report, "Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam," SC-09340-68, 5 April 1968, 3.
142. (U) Harold Ford, 117.

143. ~~(S//SI)~~ General Westmoreland to General Wheeler, 291044Z January 1968.

144. ~~(S//SI)~~ Lukacs, 58. (S//SI) An earlier message of 27 January from MACV "The Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update," No. 04-68, 270230Z January 1968, carried a long review of communist preparations in all four CTZs. The final evaluation contained this sentence: "N-Day" is the designator used to refer to the date for commencement of offensive activities. These activities may be coordinated with the planned offensive in the Northern 1 CTZ."

145. (U) Wirtz, 223.

146. ~~(TS//SI)~~ DIRNSA Messages, 1965-1968, CCH Series VI.HH.6.5-6.8; NOG Summaries, [redacted] (NSAPAC), November 1967 through February 1968, CCH Series VI.HH.6.114.

147. ~~(S//SI)~~ Oral History Interview, [redacted] conducted by Sharon Maneki and Robert Hanyok, OH 1999-105, 28 December 1999.

148. ~~(S//SI)~~ George Howe, *Technical Research Ships*, 25; George Howe, draft manuscript, Vietnam, ASA and NSG Operations, 1965-1967, Chapter, "Technical Research Ships," undated, circa 1971, CCH Series XII.HH.V.B.1.

149. ~~(S//SI)~~ DIRNSA to [redacted] 24 January 1968, 1807Z, CCH Series VI.HH.6.110.

150. ~~(S//SI)~~ DIRNSA to [redacted] 13 February 1968, 2305Z, CCH Series VI.HH.6.110.

151. ~~(S//SI)~~ DIRNSA to [redacted] 19 February 1968, 1751Z, CCH Series VI.HH.6.110.

152. (U) Davidson, 474-475.

153. ~~(S)~~ Palmer, 55.

154. (U) Ronnie Ford, *Tet*, 126.

155. (U) *Ibid.*, 127.

156. (U) *Ibid.*, 128.

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[redacted]

158. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2X/G12/VCM/T009-68, 25 January 1968, 0940Z.

159. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R37-68, 28 January 1968, 1615Z, Follow-up 2, and 2/O/VCM/R40-68, 28 January 1968 0028Z, Follow up 5 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.

160. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R55-68, 01 February 1968, 2117Z, Follow-up 16 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.

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161. ~~(S//SI)~~ [redacted] 2006, 200655Z March 1968, CCH Series VIII.19, "The Tet Offensive," folder 8.

162. (U) General Oleg Sarin and Colonel Lev Dvoretzky, *Alien Wars: The Soviet Union's Aggressions Against the World, 1919 to 1989* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1996), 105.

163. (U) Westmoreland, 158.

164. (U) Wirtz, 98; also, Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981), 205.

165. ~~(S//SI)~~ Lukacs, 58.

166. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R32-68, 25 January 1968 2332Z.

167. (U) Karnow, 525.

168. ~~(S//SI)~~ CIA Critic No 1-68, 301959Z and follow-ups; [redacted] Critic No 1-68, 310847Z and follow-ups. NCS Accession #48770, Critic reports 1968..

169. (U) Andrew, 340.

170. (U) Oberdorfer, 162.

171. (U) Ford, 118, quoting DDI Intelligence Memorandum, "The Communist Tet Offensive," 31 January 1968.

173. (U) Oberdorfer, 163.

174. [redacted]

VIII, Box 19.

175. (S) Palmer, 58.

176. (U) Harold Ford, 130.

177. ~~(S)~~ 29 July 1968, PFIAB to White House, "Intelligence During Tet," CCH Series VIII, Box 19.

178. ~~(S)~~ Ibid., 4.

179. ~~(S)~~ Palmer, 58.

180. ~~(S)~~ PFIAB to White House, 3.

181. ~~(S//SI)~~ For example, see JCS 291044Z January 1968, SC-NLJ-012/87 B, and JCS 071710Z January 1968, SC-NLJ-016/87 B.

182. ~~(S)~~ PFIAB to White House, 4.

183. ~~(S)~~ Palmer, 58.

184. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Interim Report, "Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam," 3 April 1968, 3, CCH Series VIII, Box 19.

185. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Johnson, Vol II, 564. ~~(TS//SI)~~ NSA Oral History, 17-93, Milt Zaslow, 14 September 1993; (U) and Wirtz, 257.

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[redacted] 187. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R54-68, 01 February 1968. 2022Z, Follow-up 15 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.

188. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R38-68, 28 January 1968. 1902Z, Follow-up 3 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.

189. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R42-68, 29 January 1968. 2147Z, Follow-up 7 to 2/O/VCM/R32-68.

190. MAC 00967, Walt Rostow to President Johnson, 22 January 1968, SC-NLJ-014/87 B.

191. (U) Davidson, 474.

192. (U) Gaddy, 128-129.

193. (U) Wirtz, 274.

194. (U) Harold Ford, 113; Wirtz, 214.

195. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Johnson, Vol. II, 564.

196. ~~(S//SI)~~ These stations were USM-633 at Cu Chi. the 372nd ASA Co. supporting the U.S. 25th Infantry Division; USM-614 at Long Binh, the 303rd ASA Battalion; USM-629 at Di An, the 337th ASA Co. supporting the U.S. 1st Infantry Division; USM-636 at Xuan Loc; USM-615 at Phu My; USM-624C at Long Thanh North, the 146th Aviation Co.(Radio Reconnaissance):

[redacted] This list does not include the USS *Oxford*, which was on station off the Mekong Delta.

197. ~~(S//SI)~~ See Ben Hoa reporting series 2/G10/VCM/T160 through 200-68.

198. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R32-68, 25 January 1968 2332Z.

199. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Johnson, Vol. II, 455-458.

200. (U) Karnow, 546.

201. (U) Peter Braestrup, "A Comment on the Vietnam Crisis in America: Tet 1968." James Titus, editor, *The Home Front and War in the Twentieth Century: The American Experience in Comparative Perspective*, Proceedings of the Tenth Military History Symposium, 20-22 October 1982 (Washington. D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1984), 200.

202. (U) Olson and Roberts, 188. (U) Also see George Herring's *America's Longest War*, 211-213.

203. (U) Full list: Dean Acheson, George Ball, General Omar Bradley, McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Dean, Douglas Dillon, Abe Fortas, Robert Murphy, General Matthew Ridgeway, and Cyrus Vance. Henry Cabot Lodge and General Maxwell Taylor, both former ambassadors to South Vietnam, were included. Government

EO 1.4.(c)

EO 1.4.(d)

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officials present at the briefings were Dean Rusk, Clark Clifford, Richard Helms, Walt Rostow, Nicholas Katzenbach, Paul Nitze, Averell Harriman, Arthur Goldberg, William Bundy, and General John McConnell of the U.S. Air Force representing the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

204. (U) Oberdorfer, 98.

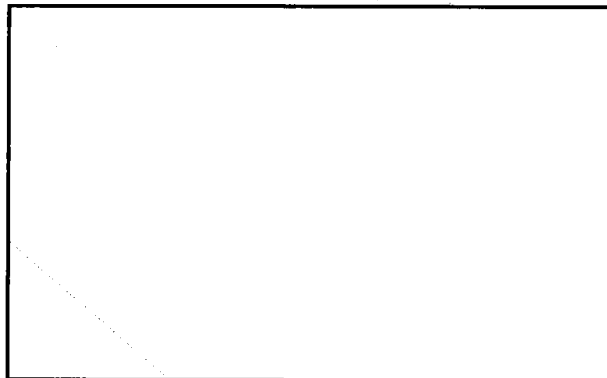
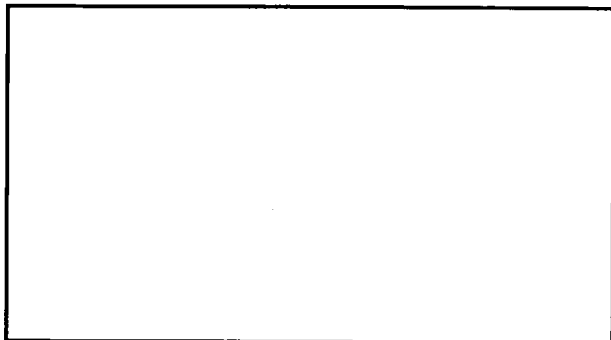
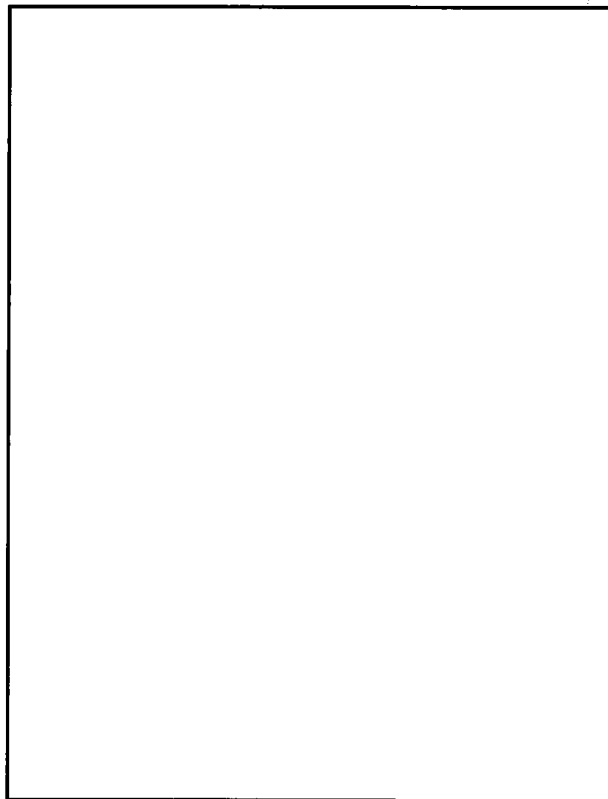
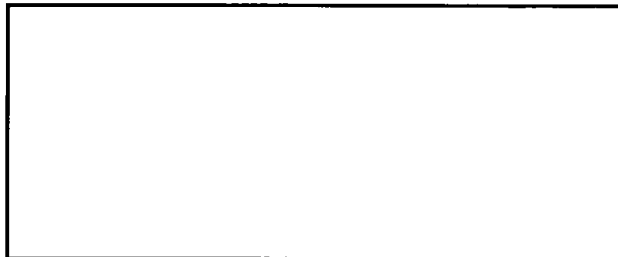
205. (U) Gibson, 166.

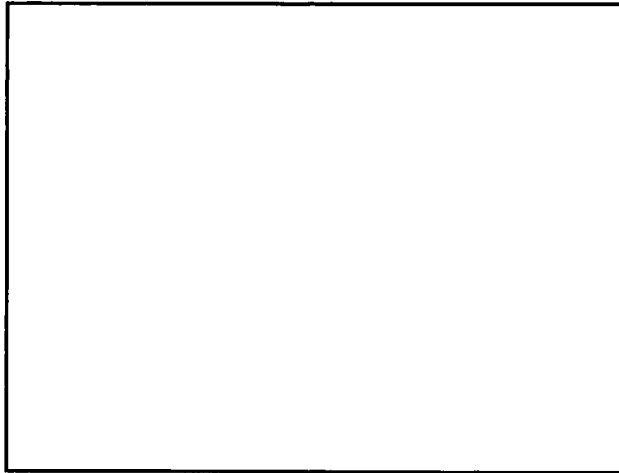
206. ~~(S)~~ Palmer, 61; (U) Harold Ford, 137-138; Schulzinger, 266; Olson and Roberts, 193.

(U) Fourth Interlude: Grasping at the Straws of Victory, 1968-1970

(U) After Tet, the political landscape of the war changed dramatically. Robert McNamara resigned as secretary of defense. On March 22, General Westmoreland was relieved as commander in Vietnam and named Army chief of staff. Nine days later, President Johnson, in a nationwide TV address, announced that there would be an unilateral, partial bombing halt for most of North Vietnam. He ended this speech by announcing his refusal to run for president. The ensuing U.S. domestic political scene descended into chaos.

(U) On 10 May, American and North Vietnamese negotiators sat down to begin formal talks in Paris. At first, both countries agreed to exclude the National Liberation Front and Saigon from the discussions. From the beginning, little in the way of progress on ending the war was achieved. American and North Vietnamese positions hardened around the intensification of the bombing in the north and Hanoi's continued aggressive prosecution of the war. Both Saigon and the NLF refused to meet anywhere where the other was present. Some of Saigon's politicians wanted just North and South Vietnam to meet and exclude the U.S. and the NLF. Washington's policy of backing Saigon militarily only aggravated Hanoi. In truth, no progress was ever made at Paris in the first set of talks. Neither side was willing to concede anything.





(U) In the spring of 1969, U.S. and PAVN troops fought in the much-contested A Shau Valley. During this campaign, popular interest centered on a particular battle known popularly as "Hamburger Hill." After a week's worth of fighting, the U.S. forces secured the position only to abandon it. The public reaction to the bloody futility of the fighting led to a quiet change in doctrine by the commander of forces in Vietnam, General Creighton Abrams, who had replaced General Westmoreland shortly after Tet. Large unit actions were deemphasized in favor of smaller, more mobile strikes.

(U) On 31 December 1968, one of the most terrifying years in American history – dominated by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, the riotous Democratic Convention in Chicago, the seizure of the *Pueblo*, the crushing of the "Prague Spring," and the Tet Offensive – finally came to an end with a new president, Richard M. Nixon, in the White House.

(U) Nixon had been elected promising a "secret plan" to end the war. Whatever the plan entailed, and speculation was that it included using Soviet political pressure on Hanoi, it never amounted to anything. Upon entering office, Nixon had his new national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, conduct yet another study of the war. The result, National Security Study Memorandum 1, reached the same conclusion as had Johnson's "Wise Men" – that the war could not be continued militarily as it had been all these years.⁵

(U) Realizing his "secret" diplomatic venture and conventional military approach were dead-ends, Nixon opted for a two-pronged approach that included the "carrot" of peace talks at Paris while, at the same time, expanding the war in both overt and covert actions. Thus, he approved the secret bombing of Cambodia and expanded the aerial attacks against communist positions in Laos.



(U) General Creighton W. Abrams Jr.

(U) General Abrams' approach to operations meshed well with Nixon's desire to withdraw American troops. In June 1969, President Nixon announced the first withdrawal of U.S. troops – 25,000 men. By year's end, about 60,000 GIs had left Vietnam. Once started, the process would be hard to stop. Yet, the decreasing American presence did not mean a concurrent drawdown in fighting.

(U) Ironically, even as Nixon promised more troop withdrawals, he was expanding the scope of the war. In March 1969, he authorized the bombing of Cambodia, Operation Menu, the knowledge

of which was kept from most of Congress and the American people. Later, in that same year, the U.S. stepped up the bombing campaign in Laos in the region of the Plain of Jars, supporting the Royal Laotian Army's attempt to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By February 1970, PAVN regular units reinforced the local Pathet Lao forces and drove the RLA units and their Hmong allies completely out of the area.

(U) What the American commanders really wanted was an invasion of eastern Cambodia. There, near the border region the communists kept their supply dumps, training centers, and headquarters for the Vietnamese communist forces in the south, known as the Central Office South Vietnam (*Truong Wong Cuc Mien Nam*) of COSVN. The sites were spread in the various border points with such colorful names as the Parrot's Beak, the Fishhook, the Angel's Way, and Dog's Head. However, when this plan was brought up in a meeting in Saigon in February 1970, the secretary of defense, Melvin Laird, had refused Abrams' plea for permission to invade Cambodia.

(U) In the next few months, though, events took control of the players. Increasing political pressure was put on Cambodia's leader Prince

Norodom Sihanouk. Sihanouk had long stayed neutral in the war. But his neutrality was based on an acquiescence to the simple fact that he could hardly prevent military action within Cambodian territory by the belligerents in Vietnam. So he tolerated the presence of Vietnamese communist troops and their enclaves in the eastern border region. At the same time, he turned a blind eye to the bombing, and muted his complaints to a whisper.

~~(TS//SI)~~ However, Sihanouk was riding too many tigers to ever hope to dismount without a bloodletting. On 18 March, while away from the country on an extended vacation, purchasing clothes and undergoing treatment for his obesity, he was ousted from the government by General Lon Nol, who was both defense minister and premier of Cambodia. For weeks, Lon Nol had been preparing his move by organizing anticommunist and anti-Vietnamese demonstrations. The next day, Lon Nol declared a national emergency and suspended several articles of the Cambodian constitution. SIGINT reported that Nol's security forces clamped down on all activity, while all the facilities of the DRV and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRGSVN) were closed down.⁶ He doubled the size of the Cambodian army and appealed to Nixon for arms, which the latter willingly supplied.

(U) For the American leaders in Washington and Saigon, the practical effect of Lon Nol's coup was to ease the way for cross-border military operations. Ten days after Sihanouk was removed from power, a few battalions of ARVN troops had crossed over into Cambodia during a military operation. Washing-



(U) Prince Norodom Sihanouk, center, meeting with Chinese leaders in Beijing in 1965

ton and Saigon denied that it had happened. However, on 28 March, the White House announced that, if warranted in the judgment of local U.S. commanders, American troops could cross the border into Cambodia. Spokesmen for the White House denied that an attack was pending; this announcement only confirmed standing U.S. policy.

(U) In April, fighting along the border intensified, while communist troops in Cambodia drove Nol's regular Cambodian army units out of several provinces. By the middle of April, Phnom Penh estimated that half the country was under communist control. In Beijing, Sihanouk attended a conference with other communist leaders, notably Chou En Lai from the People's Republic, Pham Van Dong from North Vietnam, Souphanna Vong of the Pathet Lao, and Nguyen Huu Tho of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (as the National Liberation Front was now known) to announce joint action to expel the United States and its allies from Indochina.

(U) On 28 April, Nixon gave his approval to the invasion of Cambodia. Ostensibly, his reason for the invasion was to cover the American withdrawal by destroying the communists' ability to conduct operations. On 30 April, as 80,000 troops from U.S. and ARVN units entered Cambodia, Nixon announced the invasion to a nationwide TV audience. In his speech, he said it was necessary to attack Cambodia in order to eliminate communist sanctuaries and staging areas on the border, and to attack "the headquarters for the entire communist military operation in South Vietnam." He may have not quite meant COSVN – technically, military operations were handled by the HQ of the South Vietnam National Liberation Army which was subordinate to COSVN – but the popular understanding was that a major target of the invasion was the ever-elusive communist headquarters. In an almost symbolic manner, this objective would come to reveal the

limits of SIGINT and underscore the frustration American cryptologists felt during the war.

~~(S//SI)~~ **Hunting the Elusive COSVN: A Case Study of the Limits of SIGINT, 1970**

(U) In attacking the southern communist headquarters, the problem for the U.S. command in Saigon was twofold: envisioning what COSVN looked like, and then pinning it down for the knockout blow. Mired in their own understanding of command and control centers, which were realized in the huge and sprawling compounds in Saigon and Tan Son Nhut airport, manned by a small army of staff officers, specialists, and clerks, the American planners seemed to project this image onto the Vietnamese COSVN.

~~(S//SI)~~ Based on the estimates of American intelligence concerning the size, scope, and functions of COSVN, it was easy for Washington and Saigon to infer a sort of jungle Pentagon hidden away in the recesses of the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. Intelligence reports issued during the war spoke of political and military staffs numbering in the thousands – in 1967 about 5,500 personnel were attributed to COSVN – along with the Liberation News Agency and a variety of training schools, supply depots, and base camps.⁷ A later CIA report placed the numbers even higher – approaching 8,000 military and civilian staff.⁸

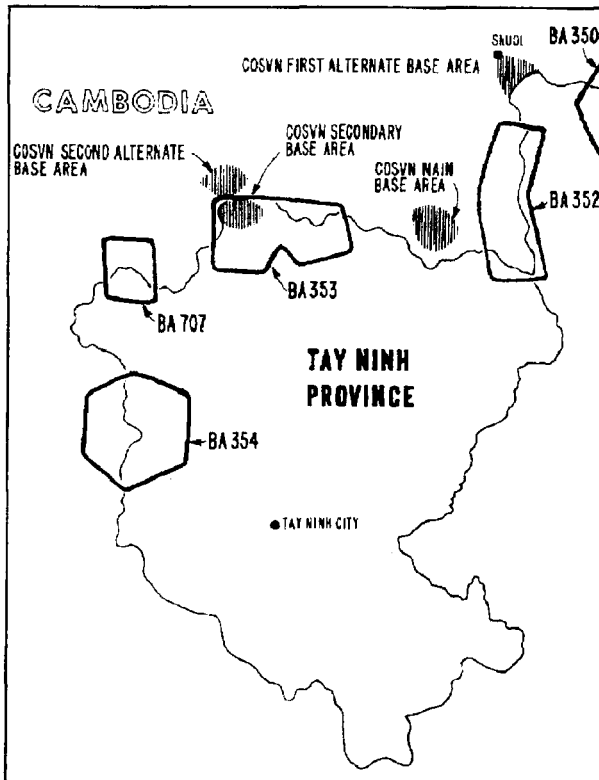
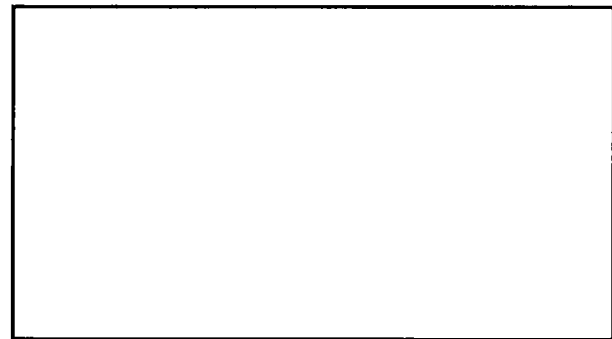
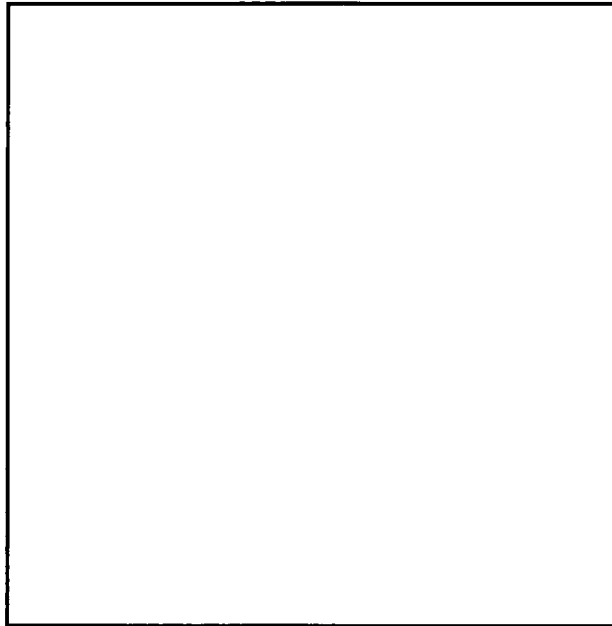
(U) The reality, of course, was much different. COSVN was mostly a collection of detached, distant staffs that lived a liquid existence, flowing from one set of thatched huts to another whenever the American attacks got too close. In 1964, the deputy commander of the South Vietnam Liberation Army described the COSVN "complex" this way:

We slept in hammocks in small thatched bamboo huts, and we held our meetings in underground tunnels, which also served as shelter

against air raids. Informers from Saigon passed us intelligence, so we were able to decamp whenever the Americans or their South Vietnamese puppets planned operations in the area. . . . Still, we had some close shaves. Once, soon after I arrived, American warplanes dropped thousands of tons of bombs around us, but we weren't even scratched.⁹

and Bin Long Provinces, they were like a set of well-known animal runs, and the hunters in Saigon were ready to strike at them.

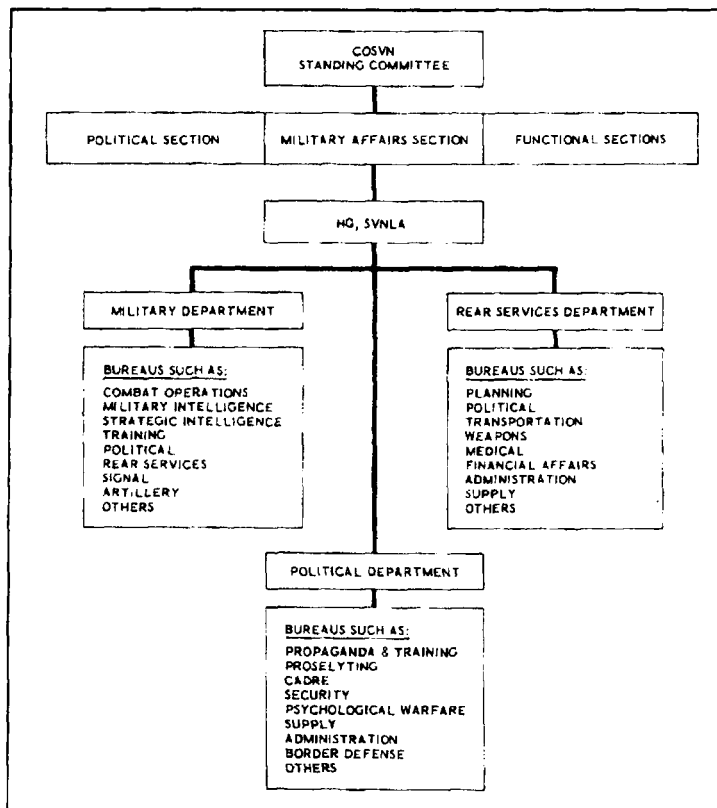
~~(S//SI)~~ Where COSVN was located remained the main problem for the U.S. intelligence community, especially the cryptologists supporting MACV. Such a large organization as COSVN presupposed sites that could be fixed by D/F or aerial reconnaissance. After about ten years of tracking COSVN, U.S. intelligence had developed a sort of profile for the communist headquarters; that is, it knew the location of communist Base Areas (BA) where COSVN was likely to appear after successive moves. Clustered along the Vietnam-Cambodia border region of Tay Ninh



~~(S//SI)~~ COSVN Base Area map along the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border

~~(TS//SI)~~ In 1961, the Executive Committee's plan was to send some of its designated members to the South to reestablish the central office (*trung wong*) in South Vietnam.¹¹ Under the direction of the CEC, COSVN assumed the role as provisional revolutionary government for the Nam Bo region and the adjacent Cambodian border region. The subordinate echelons of COSVN were similar to those in Hanoi, with staff sections and beneath them operational departments for political, military and rear services functions.

~~(TS//SI)~~ All through 1961, American cryptologists marked the gradual expansion of COSVN



~~(S//SI)~~ COSVN and its subordinate elements including the South Vietnam Liberation Army

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just across the border from Binh Long.¹⁴ The communist command had moved there for security reasons: there was evidence that COSVN was aware of ARVN plans for major sweeps through Phuoc Long Province where it had been located earlier.¹⁵ For the next eight years, the COSVN would remain near Snoul, although a series of secondary and alternate base areas were established along the border of Tay Ninh Province which it could retreat to if threatened.

(U) At least twice prior to 1970, MACV tried to reduce the COSVN base areas that were in northern Tay Ninh province, designated War Zone C. In October 1966, nearly 20,000 Allied troops engaged elements of the Viet Cong's 9th Division and the PAVN 101st Regiment during Operation Attleboro. In a month's worth of fighting, over 1,100 communist troops were reported to have been killed and a major bunker complex destroyed.

through its centralizing of the communist communications networks in the south. At first, COSVN utilized the Nam Bo Regional Committee's (NRC) radio system. By late 1961, interregional and interprovincial communications, which included Hanoi as a correspondent, were made subsidiary to the NRC, which assumed the bulk of message activity with the CEC.¹² Even the Liberation News Agency (INA) dropped its separate contacts with Hanoi and physically colocated with COSVN.¹³

~~(TS//SI)~~ Sometime in early December COSVN relocated from its site in Phuoc Long province to a new location in northern Binh Long Province. By early 1962, special army ARDF missions had located the COSVN transmitter to within a kilometer in an area near Snoul, Cambodia,

(U) It seems that the State Department's evaluation was closer to the truth. Less than three months after the apparently successful Attleboro, an even larger Allied force numbering 25,000 troops was back in War Zone C to try again to eliminate the resurgent communist presence.

This operation, named Junction City, involved thirty-four U.S. and two ARVN battalions, and lasted from February to May 1967. A reported 2,700 communist troops were killed in a series of ferocious battles involving some of the heaviest fighting of the war. Massive air support proved vital in at least three separate actions which accounted for many of the communist losses.

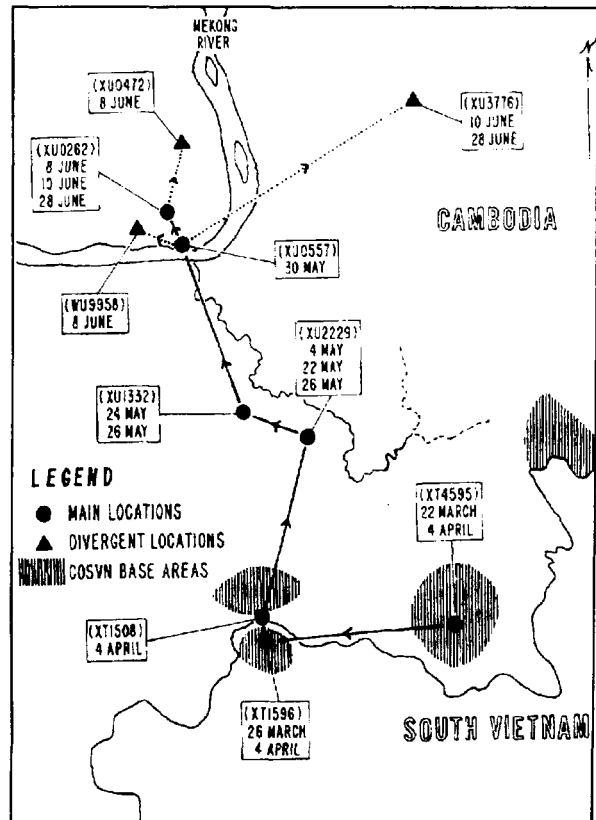
~~(S//SI)~~ Despite these major field operations, COSVN remained a vibrant command and was in control of the region along the Cambodian border. With Nixon's approval of the assault into Cambodia, the U.S. command's interest again centered on COSVN. Spearheading the attack – known as Operation Toan Thang ("Complete Victory") 45 – against COSVN and the headquarters SVNIA were the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the ARVN 1st Infantry Regiment, and the 3rd

Airborne Brigade. On 5 May, this combat force crossed the border in search of COSVN. Supporting this assault were the 371st Radio Research Company, which was the direct support unit for the 1st Air Cavalry Division, and the 409th Radio Research Detachment. The highlight of this operation was the seizure of "The City" – the main COSVN logistics center.

~~(TS//SI)~~ However, the operation failed to bag the COSVN organization. From SIGINT, it was discovered that COSVN had been on the move since 4 April, when D/F located it west at its secondary base area. From then on, the cryptologists could plot COSVN's movements as it slowly drew deeper north and west into Cambodia. By 4 May, it had already reached a point twenty-five kilometers northeast of its 4 April position, which placed it one kilometer past the thirty kilometer zone of operations established by President Nixon. In

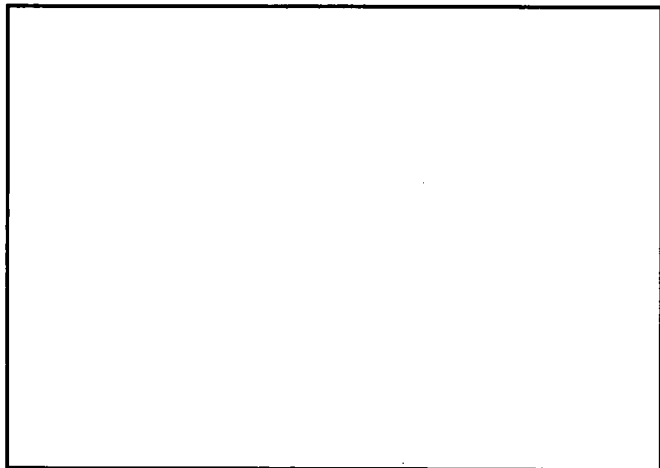


(U) Men of the 409th Radio Research Detachment aboard an M-113 armored personnel carrier during the 1970 Cambodian invasion



~~(S//SI)~~ COSVN movements during the U.S.-ARVN incursion into Cambodia

fact, elements of COSVN continued their odyssey until late June when they finally settled into a position another forty-five kilometers farther northeast into Cambodia.¹⁸



located anywhere, even on the perimeter. Also, the communist antenna complexes were, in many cases, a series of antenna "farms," situated in a pattern around COSVN's actual location. For COMSEC purposes, these antennas could be used sequentially or randomly. So, what the ARDF missions really located were the individual antenna "farms" as they were activated by the VC communicators. The resulting D/F plots of the separate "farms," with overlapping boxes and perimeter fixes, appeared haphazard and imprecise to non-cryptologists and led them to discount many results and ignore them when planning air strikes.²⁰

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~~(TS//SI)~~ However, there were several problems which undercut the effectiveness of this union. For one, there was distinct gap in understanding what SIGINT could deliver in terms of precise targeting information for the bombers. The communists remotely operated their antenna fields from their actual transmitting complexes; sometimes they were as far away as five kilometers. Such an arrangement usually negated the B-52 strikes which tended to blast just the antenna fields. At the same time, the B-52 bombing patterns, with their very small circular error probabilities (CEP), were good for precise targeting of specific topographic features or man-made structures. Direction finding fixes, even with the precision that the ARDF capability brought into the calculations, produced a kind of target box in which the objective could be

~~(TS//SI)~~ The COSVN also had an annoying habit of constantly moving, often shortly in advance of the Arc Light missions. Quick retargeting of the B-52s in reaction to the moves proved impossible; the command and control of the Arc Light missions always was inherently clumsy and echelon-dependent. Often, the Air Force would refuse to divert an Arc Light mission on the basis of a single new ARDF fix.²¹ Still, one communist rear services group was hit on 11 May during a tardy shift to a new position. Reportedly about 150 personnel were killed by the raid as they were waiting on the surface to move.²²

~~(S)~~ The main reason that COSVN was able to avoid Arc Light strikes was that, historically, the



(U) Typical damaged landscape after an Arc Light strike in South Vietnam

bombing mission's profile had too many indicators which gave it away. Communist intelligence, by utilizing all sources, such as COMINT, HUMINT, and simple observation of increased aerial reconnaissance or ARDF missions, was able to predict with a great degree of accuracy when and where the strikes would occur. Efforts at eliminating these indicators, sponsored under the Purple Dragon Operations Security (OPSEC) program, proved to be less than totally effective or permanent. No matter what OPSEC leaks were sealed, communist intelligence seemed to always find new indicators of the B-52 missions.²³ It is likely that virtually all of the B-52 strikes during the Cambodian invasion against suspected COSVN locations were ineffective.²⁴

~~(S//SI)~~ By the end of June, American forces pulled out of Cambodia and returned to their bases in South Vietnam. A few ARVN units remained in the border regions occupying some of the old communist base areas. However, COSVN never really lost control of the units under its command. A temporary HQ South Vietnam Front, Cambodia, had been established by COSVN to handle the fight in Cambodia. This headquarters entity assumed control of military, intelligence, logistics, and rear services while the

various COSVN sections and staffs reorganized themselves.²⁵

~~(S//SI)~~ By September 1970, the new command entity ceased operating since the reorganization of the new military regions under COSVN was completed. In December, at least half of the communist regiments had returned to their original base camps along the border with Vietnam.²⁶ Sporadic attempts by ARVN units in October and November failed to drive out the communists. Although hampered by the supply losses, the communist units in the Mekong delta and around Saigon continued to strike at government bases.

(U) Militarily, the invasion caused little grief to Hanoi; combat operations in the central Highlands and near the DMZ continued. American weekly losses spiraled down to 1966 levels. The truly damaging fallout from the invasion of Cambodia came in the U.S. domestic scene. The tragic shootings at Kent State in Ohio and Jackson State in Mississippi were the opening notes of the growing criticism of Nixon's policy. Now, however, the criticism was coming from usually conservative sources: business leaders, like the CEO of IBM, newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*, and commentators like Paul

Harvey publicly questioned the war. Demonstrations over the shooting at Kent State erupted in over 1,300 campuses across the United States with an estimated four million people taking part. Congressional opposition finally coalesced and produced legislation to avoid any more expansions of the war: the Cooper-Church amendment, a bipartisan effort, prohibited any more U.S. direct military involvement in Cambodia without prior congressional approval. Despite heavy Nixon administration opposition, the amendment passed fifty-eight to thirty-seven.



(U) Cache of arms and supplies captured by Allied troops in Cambodia

(U) The real loser of the campaign was Cambodia, which was drawn into a war it was never ready to fight. As if to make up for having been neutral all of the early years of the war, Cambodia erupted in a flash of fighting from one border to another. Spurred on and supplied by the Vietnamese communist troops moving westward, the local communist guerrillas, known as the Khmer Rouge, quickly grew from a small irritant to a major force which would ultimately overthrow Lon Nol's pro-American regime in Phnom Penh and usher in the gruesome slaughter called the "killing fields."

(U) Washington justified much of the expanded fighting as necessary to cover the American withdrawal. A new strategy for prosecuting the war soon dominated the thinking in the Nixon administration. As spelled out in the "Nixon Doctrine," it was a simple one: the U.S. would supply arms and material, but, from now on, the fighting had to be done by the Vietnamese.

(U) This strategy was not a completely new one. The previous year, a Pentagon study group had suggested a similar course: American forces should be relegated to population center and military facility security while the ARVN troops would assume a stronger role in the war. (Ironically, this was the major role intended for the first U.S. ground combat forces when they were introduced into South Vietnam in 1965.) Buried in the Pentagon report was a term that would become the goal of all future American policy (including that of cryptologists) in South Vietnam: Vietnamization.

(U) Notes

1. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Master File Sheet North Vietnamese

NCA ACC# 44927.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

4.

[Redacted]

(U) Also see Herring, *America's Longest War*, 238-240 and Hersh, *The Price of Power*, 15-22, especially on the role of Henry Kissinger and Anna Chenault as the intermediaries between the South Vietnamese and Richard Nixon.

5. (U) Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 561.

6. ~~(TS//SI)~~ [Redacted] *Focus on Cambodia* (Fort George G. Meade: Cryptologic History Series, 1974), 25.

7. ~~(S)~~ Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam, ST67-023 "COSVN" 29 April 1967

[Redacted]

9. (U) Karnow, 401.

[Redacted]

11. ~~(TS//SI)~~ 3/O/VNG/T95-62, 29 August 1819Z 1962.

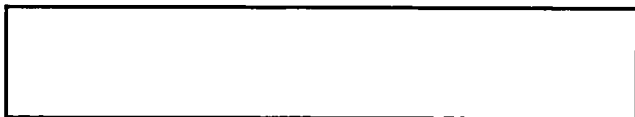
12. ~~(TS//SI)~~ 3/O/VNG/R15-62, 23 March 1962.

13. ~~(TS//SI)~~ [Redacted] 16.

14. ~~(TS//SI)~~ 3/O/VNG/R15-62, 23 March 1962; DIRNSA MSG to SSO DIA, 310152Z March 1962, 03002/31, CCH Series XII.B, Box 10.

15. ~~(S//SI)~~ Department of State, "Viet Cong Command Post," 28 March 1962, 3, CCH Series XII.NN.IV.A.7.

[Redacted]



18. ~~(TS//SI)~~ [redacted] 101.
19. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 150.
20. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 156.
21. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 155.
22. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 151; (S//SI) CIA Intelligence Memorandum, July 1970, 11.
23. ~~(S//SI)~~ Stephen J. Kelley, *Purple Dragon: The Origin and Development of the United States OPSEC Program* (Fort George G. Meade: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 1993), 52.
24. ~~(TS//SI)~~ [redacted] 151.
25. ~~(S//SI)~~ 2/O/VCM/R341-70, 26036%. June 1970 and FLWPS.
26. ~~(S//SI)~~ DOS/INR, 18 December 1970, "Cambodia/South Vietnam: COSVN Tackles its Logistics Problems."

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