
[Next](#)

[Previous](#)

[Contents](#)

Unpopular Pessimism

Why CIA Analysts Were So Doubtful About Vietnam

[Harold P. Ford \(1\)](#)

In traveling through Tonkin, every village flew the Viet Minh flag, and had armed soldiers, many with Japanese weapons taken in raids. The women and children were also organized, and all were enthusiastic in their support. The important thing is that all were cognizant of the fact that independence was not to be gained in a day, and were prepared to continue their struggle for years. In the rural areas, I found not one instance of opposition to the Viet Minh, even among former government officials.

OSS report, October 1945 [\(2\)](#)

It is well documented and well known that for decades CIA analysts were skeptical of official pronouncements about the Vietnam war and consistently fairly pessimistic about the outlook for "light at the end of the tunnel." Less well known is why the Agency's analysts were so doubtful, especially because CIA was all the while a central player in US operational efforts to create and strengthen South Vietnam. Thus, it is important to examine the sources of CIA analysts' doubts about successive administrations' repeated assurances and claims.

Not all CIA analysts thought alike, and at times there were substantial differences of view. Skepticism and pessimism about Vietnam were present chiefly among

those officers who produced finished intelligence in the form of National Intelligence Estimates and in Intelligence Directorate (then the DDI) publications: that is, analysts in the Office of National Estimates (ONE), the Office of [Economic] Research and Reports, and the South Vietnam Branch of the Office of Current Intelligence (OCI). Such views were generally a bit less evident among officers of the North Vietnam Branch of OCI, many of whom had been transferred there from previous Soviet and North Korean assignments. The situation among the Agency's operational offices at home and abroad was mixed: some enthusiastically shared official White House views, while others were remarkably caustic. In more than a few cases, the Intelligence Community's (IC) coordination processes and top CIA officers muted doubts about Vietnam expressed in CIA's analytic ranks, yet the finished intelligence produced by the DDI and ONE maintained definitely pessimistic, skeptical tones over the years.

The danger always existed that individual CIA analysts could get locked into constant dark points of view, reluctant to accept new evidence to the contrary. Also, at times some CIA analysts overreacted to certain assertive personalities from other offices who happened to be arguing wholly unsupportable optimism. And there were a few occasions where CIA judgments on Vietnam badly missed the boat, or where Agency judgments were too wishy-washy to serve the needs of policymaking or, in a handful of cases, where analytic officers caved in to pressures from above and produced mistakenly rosy judgments. Despite these hazards, and, as Robert McNamara's recent book *In Retrospect* maintains, the war's outcome justified many of the CIA analysts' doubts and warnings.

Officials in other entities, especially in the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, often came up with similar doubting judgments. At times, their doubts also were shared by certain officers in DIA and elsewhere in the Department of Defense and by certain junior and field grade intelligence officers in Vietnam. CIA's analysts had no special sources of data not available to other US Government offices, no unique analytic methodologies, no precomputer-age Window 95s. The Agency's analysts simply, if unscientifically, distilled their many sources of doubt into judgments that often did not square with official pronouncements--a record which the authors of *The Pentagon Papers* and numerous other historians have documented.

The following principal factors and forces are among the many reasons for the doubts exhibited by so many of CIA's Vietnam analysts:

CIA's cultural advantages. The fact that CIA judgments often were more candid than those of most other offices was due in important measure to the bureaucratic advantage the Agency's culture and purpose afforded. The job of CIA analysts was to tell it like it is, freer from the policy pressures with which their colleagues in Defense, the military intelligence agencies, and, to a lesser extent, the Department of State had to contend. (3) Many CIA Vietnam analysts had been working on Indochina problems for some time, often longer than most military intelligence officers. Those Agency officers were familiar with how intelligence reporting had been distorted during France's fight against the Communist-led Viet Minh (VM) and how such unfounded optimism had contributed to the French defeat. CIA analysts subsequently witnessed near-identical patterns in much of the US military and diplomatic reporting from Saigon. In addition, they were at times told confidentially by middle-grade US military and Mission officers of such practices. A few CIA analysts served in Vietnam and experienced firsthand such distortion by some senior US officials there. The resulting candor of CIA judgments flowed also from the fact that the reports Headquarters analysts received from CIA's Saigon station were much more factual and exacting in their demanded authenticity than was much of the other reporting from Vietnam.

Recognition of the Vietnamese Communists' (VC) enormous advantages. CIA's analysts were aware that the basic stimulus among the politically conscious Vietnamese was nationalism and that, following World War II, the VM had largely captured the nationalist movement. Ho Chi Minh's apparatus came to be better led, better organized, and more united than any other of the competing, divided nationalist Vietnamese parties. Through a combination of some reforms and ruthless elimination of political rivals, the VM/VC dominated the countryside. Local populations seldom volunteered intelligence to the French, the South Vietnamese, or the Americans about Communist-led forces in their midst.

Then, too, the VM's 1954 victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu and the end of French rule had been tremendous boosts to nationalist sentiment and Ho Chi Minh's status and popularity. At that time, most observers of Indochina affairs, including US intelligence agencies, judged that if nationwide elections were held, the VM would win by a large margin.

A similar view was even shared by DCI Allen Dulles, who, according to the record of a 1954 NSC meeting, told that senior group that "The most disheartening feature

of the news from Indochina . . . was the evidence that the majority of the people in Vietnam supported the Vietminh rebels." [\(4\)](#) South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem (with subtle US backing) subsequently proceeded to frustrate the holding of elections, and this strengthened the determination of VM forces to continue subverting all Vietnam in order to redress their grievance at being robbed of what they felt had been their victory in the field and at Geneva.

And one of the greatest advantages Ho's movement enjoyed, at times indicated in reporting from the field, were the subversive assets the VM and the VC had throughout South Vietnam. Thousands of their agents and sleepers existed throughout South Vietnam's Government, armed forces, and security/intelligence organizations. The dramatic extent of that advantage was not revealed until the fall of Saigon in 1975, when events disclosed how thoroughly the enemy had penetrated the society of South Vietnam--including some American offices there.

Recognition of VM/VC determination to try to meet South Vietnamese and US escalation, and willingness to suffer great damage, if necessary, in order to win eventual victory. CIA analysts widely appreciated the fact that the enemy saw its battle as a long-range conflict and was prepared to go the distance. To sustain VM/VC morale, Hanoi repeatedly invoked past victorious Vietnamese heroes, even ancient ones who for nearly a thousand years had fought Chinese pressures to dominate Indochina. Like those heroes, Hanoi was confident that its many advantages in the field and the power of its forces to endure would in time frustrate more powerful, less patient outside powers and cause them eventually to quit. For decades, CIA analysts again and again told policymakers that the enemy would doubtless persevere, counterescalate as best it could, and do so despite suffering heavy damage.

Such Agency analysts' doubts were especially marked during the months in 1964 and 1965, when President Johnson's administration was stumbling toward carrying the war to North Vietnam and committing US combat forces in the South. During that time, and in the face of pressures to "get on the team," CIA analysts (as well as intelligence officers from other agencies) repeatedly warned decisionmakers that such US military escalation would not in itself save South Vietnam unless it were accompanied by substantial political-social progress in Saigon and especially in the villages of South Vietnam, where virtually all CIA officers at all levels had long maintained that the war had to be won. Agency officers made this point to policymakers through clandestine service reports, DDI and ONE memos, National

Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), participation in JCS war games and in NSC-sanctioned working groups, and, in the end, warnings by DCI John McCone. But no one in the administration wanted to listen. It was not until about 1966 that frustrations in the field caused certain previous senior true believers to begin defecting in place, especially Secretary of Defense McNamara, whose *In Retrospect* now holds that CIA warnings had been correct all along and that he and his policymaking colleagues had been "wrong, terribly wrong."

Recognition of the great difficulties French and American military measures encountered in trying to combat VM/VC political-military warfare. Virtually all CIA Vietnam officers, in the field and in Washington, remained strongly influenced by the French defeat in Indochina. They recognized how ill-suited French military tactics had been for fighting the enemy; how the VM had chewed up elite French military units; and how the enemy had stunned the world by overwhelming the French forces at Dien Bien Phu. Because Agency officers were not burdened with the operational task of training and developing South Vietnamese armed forces, they were much freer of certain views more prevalent among US military personnel, such as disdaining the French experience, maintaining that US military know-how could prevail, and trying to impose upon Saigon governments US military tactics that were better suited to European battlefields. (5) Such appreciation by CIA officers found reflection both in the field and at Headquarters: in CIA counterinsurgency measures that lost their effectiveness when later taken over by the US military, and in numerous Headquarters analyses that judged that US military tactics were not substantially reducing the enemy's ability and determination to continue the war.

Moreover, many Agency analysts were sensitive to the geographic and terrain features in Indochina that shielded enemy supply lines from outer view and helped enemy guerrilla tactics but impeded US mechanized forces. CIA analysts long at Indochina assignments recalled how reluctant the JCS and the US Army had been in 1954 to try to bail out the French militarily at Dien Bien Phu, in part because US military studies had concluded that Indochina's location and terrain were not suited for ready supply or effective US military action. These analysts also recalled, as most policymakers by the early 1960s seemingly did not, how reluctant US Army leaders had been to become engaged in war in Indochina, and how at the time the JCS had held that "From the point of view of the United States, with reference to the Far East as a whole, Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives, and the allocation of more than token US armed forces to the area would be a serious

diversion of limited US capabilities." [\(6\)](#)

Similar views following US expansion of the war to the North in 1965, together with available positive evidence, led most CIA--and DIA--analysts to conclude that, despite US bombing efforts, the level of Hanoi's arms shipments to the VC were continuing to rise. Subsequent accounts by Johnson administration decisionmakers confirm that those reports had a definitely depressing influence upon their earlier certainties, and, in some cases, were instrumental in causing some of those policymakers to lower their previous enthusiasm about the war's prospects.

Rejection of official claims that Moscow and Beijing were directing the enemy war effort and that international Communism was a monolith. Many senior policymakers judged for years that the enemy's war effort in Vietnam was being run by "the Communist bloc." One such example: Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, at the time JCS Chairman, stated in 1962 that Vietnam's fall was "a planned phase in the Communist timetable for world domination" and that the adverse effects of Vietnam's fall would be felt as far away as Africa. [\(7\)](#) By contrast, virtually all CIA officers held that available evidence clearly indicated that, although the USSR and Communist China were giving Hanoi defense assistance, the Vietnam war was Hanoi's show and had been from the outset. Moreover, with the exception largely of one CIA office, Agency analysts had been way ahead of the rest of the IC in pointing out--for years without much impact--that the Sino-Soviet alliance was coming apart at the seams; that the USSR and China were competitive with respect to the Vietnam war; and that their developing estrangement offered US administrations an exploitable opportunity. The principal exceptions to these views within CIA were largely confined to certain counterintelligence officers who, even *after* the Sino-Soviet firefights that occurred along the Ussuri River border in 1969, continued to maintain that the Sino-Soviet estrangement was a plot to deceive the West. [\(8\)](#)

Those CIA analysts who rejected the official view that Moscow and Beijing were largely running the Vietnam war effort based their skepticism on several sources. One was appreciation of the degree of independence from outside Communist control Ho Chi Minh's movement and fledgling government had enjoyed all along. Another was the fact that, following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, Moscow and Beijing could have given Hanoi more support at 1954's Geneva Conference than they did. There also was evidence that all along the Soviets had less interest in promoting Communist aims in Indochina than in buttressing Communist Party

fortunes in France and Western Europe. Most CIA analysts held that the various Communist movements in Southeast Asia each contained conflicting nationalistic elements--as the later wars of Communist China versus Communist North Vietnam and Communist Cambodia versus Communist North Vietnam illustrated.

These judgments contributed to the doubts held by certain CIA analysts, especially within ONE, that the loss of Vietnam would inexorably lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia and the US defense position in the far Pacific. The doubts went unvoiced for years in the face of repeated embraces of the domino thesis by senior officials of the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations. Then, when finally asked by the White House in mid-1964 for its view of the domino thesis, ONE replied heretically that "We do not believe that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos would be followed by the rapid, successive communization of the other states of the Far East. . ." [\(9\)](#) The impact of those doubts on policymakers was nil.

Recognition of the fact that South Vietnam remained a fragile entity whose ability to cope effectively with the VC should not be overestimated. These views, held widely among CIA analysts, if less so among CIA operations officers, for years ran headlong into repeated assertions by successive US administrations that Saigon's military effectiveness was rising. Subsequent events validated such CIA judgments: former NSC staff officer Chester L. Cooper, for example, later recorded that, as of 1962, "The fact was that the war was *not* going well, the Vietnamese Army was *not* taking kindly to American advice, and Diem was *not* following through on his promises to liberalize his regime or increase its effectiveness." [\(10\)](#) In addition, over the years much field reporting underscored the fact that President Diem's government did not enjoy wide support in Vietnam's villages. His government was a minority Catholic one in a predominantly Buddhist country. [\(11\)](#) Diem was not a dynamic leader, and he could not compete with the widespread popularity Ho Chi Minh enjoyed. He was remote from the people, as attested even by Lyndon Johnson in early 1961 while still Vice President:

A final indication of the danger is the fact that the ordinary people of the cities [of South Vietnam] and probably even more of the rural areas are starved for leadership with understanding and warmth. There is an enormous popular enthusiasm and great popular power waiting to be brought forth by friendly personal political leadership. But it cannot be evoked by men in white linen suits whose contact with the ordinary people is

largely through the rolled-up windows of a Mercedes-Benz. [\(12\)](#)

Subsequently published documents indicate that MACV and Mission officers occasionally voiced despair at the Government of South Vietnam's (GVN) lack of military and political progress, but tended to confine their doubts to official, classified channels. Public official admission of serious GVN shortcomings was rare. Even more so, senior US military figures, at home and in the field, were almost always reluctant to admit that for years South Vietnamese military units (the ARVN), usually much better armed than the enemy, were no match for the VC. Criticisms of ARVN shortcomings were especially off limits, lest there be an implication that US military advisers were not doing a good job of converting the ARVN into an effective fighting force.

Such sensitivity was particularly registered in early 1963, when DCI McCone, the JCS, CINCPAC, MACV, the US Embassy in Saigon, and other policymakers took umbrage at a draft NIE which ONE and the IC's working-level officers had agreed upon. It held that among Vietnam's "very great weaknesses" were a lack of "aggressive and firm leadership at all levels of command, poor morale among the troops, lack of trust between peasant and soldier, poor tactical use of available forces, a very inadequate intelligence system, and obvious Communist penetration of the South Vietnamese military organization." [\(13\)](#)

Those criticisms by Community analysts raised a firestorm of protest among the policymaking officers. They brought such pressure on DCI McCone and ONE that the latter caved in and agreed to a rewritten, decidedly more rosy NIE (53-63), in which the earlier criticisms of the ARVN were muted and the tone of the Estimate changed: the first sentence of the revised NIE now read, "We believe that Communist progress has been blunted [in South Vietnam] and that the situation is improving." [\(14\)](#) This was not one of CIA's proudest moments. And less than four weeks later, serious riots began in Hue which introduced the chain of events that culminated in the self-immolation of Buddhist monks and the murder of President Diem.

Areas of Doubt

These, then, were the principal areas of doubt that for years lay behind so many CIA analyses of the outlook in Vietnam. Except for those occasions where Agency

officers produced flawed accounts or rosied up their judgments to meet pressures from above, the areas of doubt translated into the following fairly stark messages to successive policymakers:

1. Do not underestimate the enemy's strength, ruthlessness, nationalist appeal, and pervasive undercover assets throughout South Vietnam.
2. Do not underestimate the enemy's resilience and staying power. He is in for the long run and is confident that US morale will give way before his will. He will keep coming despite huge casualties. If we escalate, he will too.
3. Do not overestimate the degree to which airpower will disrupt North Vietnam's support of the VC or will cause Hanoi to back off from such support.
4. Do not overestimate the military and political potential of our South Vietnamese ally/creation.
5. The war is essentially a political war that cannot be won by military means alone. It will have to be won largely by the South Vietnamese in the villages of South Vietnam.
6. The war is essentially a civil war, run from Hanoi, not a Communist bloc plot to test the will of America to support its allies.
7. Winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese is a tough task. Most Vietnamese simply want to be left alone, and most do not identify with Saigon. And many are either too attracted to the VC or too afraid to volunteer much information about the VC presence in their midst.

What CIA Analyses Were Up Against

For years, CIA's messages did not find ready response downtown because they were up against fearful odds. Outweighing intelligence facts and judgments were many views, factors, and forces which for years obtained widely among the best and the brightest of our decisionmakers:

1. World Communism is essentially monolithic, and the Vietnam war is part of a world conspiracy run from Moscow and Beijing.
2. Khrushchev and the Russians are testing us: if the United States does not fulfill its stated commitments in Vietnam, our credibility among our allies elsewhere in the world will suffer seriously.
3. Vietnam is the first domino. If it goes, the rest of Southeast Asia, as well as America's strategic position in the far Pacific, will crumble.
4. Top policymakers were receptive to the views of progress given them for years by senior military and Mission officers, views that in many cases were distorted, optimistic versions of more candid appraisals initially registered by more-junior officers in the field who were closer to the scene.
5. There was a profound hubris among top policymakers. They believed their made-in-America schemes would work in Vietnam, where similar schemes by the French had not. We would succeed because of our superior firepower.
6. Top officials believed that sustained US bombing programs will disrupt North Vietnam's supply routes to the VC, and would cause Hanoi to back off for fear of losing such industrial development as it has achieved.
7. Many senior decisionmakers were confident that Vietnam's enormous complications could be reduced to systems analysis and statistical measures such as body counts--attitudes epitomized by Secretary of Defense McNamara's oft-cited assurance (1962) that "every quantitative measure we have shows we're winning this war."
8. Senior policymakers were too harassed and bogged down in their many day-to-day tactical responsibilities to give intelligence or the longer range consequences of US initiatives in Vietnam the careful attention those matters deserved.
9. There existed among senior policymakers what a US Army-sponsored history has since called "a massive and all-encompassing" American ignorance of Vietnamese history and society. [\(15\)](#)

10. Caught up by their commitments and operational enthusiasm, most senior policymakers did not want to hear doubts from below. They tended to ignore such views, especially those of more junior experts unknown to them. Witness McNamara's subsequently telling us that there were no experts on Vietnam. [\(16\)](#) And Gen. William E. DePuy (1988): "We did intervene on behalf of a very weak and dubious regime, albeit better than Communism, but very dubious in terms of political weight and meaning. But I don't remember anybody saying that. Do you? Nobody. Not even the experts, not even the scholastics and academics said that." [\(17\)](#) Or, at times, policymakers denounced dissenters for "not being on the team"; or froze out doubters, as President Johnson did with the dissenting DCI McCone; or sent doubters to new, Siberia-type assignments, as State did with Southeast Asia expert Paul Kattenburg.

11. Intelligence was only one of the many forces that crowded in upon policymakers. In addition, those decisionmakers were aware of dimensions of which intelligence officers were not. The record shows clearly that their chief concern was the US position in the world, not Vietnam per se, and that in their view Vietnam was so vital to broad US interests that we *had* to make a strong stand there.

12. Perhaps *the* most potent hurdle for intelligence, however, was the fact that the decisions on what to do in Vietnam were not taking place within a vacuum but in a highly charged political arena. For some years, the Democratic Party had been vulnerable for having "lost" China and having been "soft" in Korea. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson repeatedly stated that they were not going to be the US Presidents who "lost" Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

Classic Analytic Hazards

In short, the often pessimistic intelligence judgments that CIA and other analysts gave our Vietnam decisionmakers over the years did not have much impact, except on those occasions where senior consumers could use intelligence to buttress their own arguments, or where they had come to question the more optimistic reports they had been receiving from other sources, or where they had begun to doubt their own earlier enthusiasms. There has indeed seldom been a better example than Vietnam of the eternal occupational hazards intelligence analysts face: that the judgments they deliver do not necessarily enjoy careful, rational study, but

disappear into a highly politicized, sometimes chaotic process where forces other than intelligence judgments often carry the day.

This is what CIA and other analysts experienced during the long years of the war in Vietnam, breaking their lances in trying to penetrate policymakers' consciousness that the actual facts of life were more grim than those senior consumers generally appreciated. Even so, those analysts performed well in trying to produce candid appraisals--inasmuch as the principal calling for intelligence analysts at any one time is to try to tell it like it is, to remain a unique calling within a policymaking process overburdened with prior commitments, emotion, special pleading, and hubris. [\(18\)](#)

Yet analysts have to keep in mind that hubris is not a monopoly of policymakers. Vietnam analysts sometimes got locked into mindsets. This contributed to their being wrong on occasion. Sometimes very wrong--especially in not sounding clear alerts that the enemy was about to launch an unprecedented Tet offensive in early 1968, and in later underestimating the amount of North Vietnamese military support being funneled to the VC through Cambodia.

Not least, at all times analysts had a much easier time of it than did harried decisionmakers: analysts operated in a protected, quiet atmosphere, whereas policymakers were beset by a weak Vietnamese ally, a tough Vietnamese enemy, and a US public that could not stay the distance in what came to be regarded, correctly or not, as an unwinnable war.

Illustrative Quotations

[CIA Intelligence Memorandum, 1950]: The Vietnamese insurgents are predominantly nationalists rather than Communists, but Communist leadership of the movement is firmly established. . . . These insurgents have long controlled most of the interior of Vietnam. Before 1954, they will probably have gained control of most, if not all, of Indochina. [\(19\)](#)

[General Bruce Palmer, Jr.]: The first national estimate on Indochina, NIE 5, 29 December 1950, "*Indochina: Current Situation and Probably Developments*," . . . was a very pessimistic estimate. . . . [\(20\)](#)

[General Palmer]: During the period 1950-October 1964, ONE produced forty-eight (NIEs and SNIEs) . . . dealing with Vietnam In addition to estimates, ONE produced 51 Memorandums for the DCI concerning Vietnam over the same period. Indeed, ONE published more on Vietnam than any other single subject. [\(21\)](#)

[NIE 35/1, 1952]: Through mid-1952, the probable outlook in Indochina is one of gradual deterioration of the Franco-Vietnamese military position The longer term outlook is for continued improvement in the combat effectiveness of the Viet Minh and an increased Viet Minh pressure against the Franco-Vietnamese defenses. Unless present trends are reversed, this growing pressure, coupled with the difficulties which France may continue to face in supporting major military efforts in both Europe and Indochina, may lead to an eventual French withdrawal from Indochina. [\(22\)](#)

[NIE 91, 1953]: If present trends . . . continue through mid-1954, the French Union political and military position may subsequently deteriorate very rapidly. [\(23\)](#)

[(Senator) John F. Kennedy, 1954]: I am frankly of the belief that no amount of American military assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy which is everywhere and at the same time nowhere, "an enemy of the people" which has the sympathy and covert support of the people. . . . In November of 1951, I reported upon my return from the Far East as follows: "In Indochina we have allied ourselves to the desperate effort of a French regime to hang on to the remnants of empire. There is no broad, general support of the native Vietnam Government among the people of that area [To try to win military victory] apart from and in defiance of innately nationalistic aims spells foredoomed failure." [\(24\)](#)

[Former CIA officer Joseph Burkhalter Smith]: I was stationed in Singapore then [1954], and British intelligence officers told me that they thought the United States was mad to prop up South Vietnam. [\(25\)](#)

[Gen. Bruce Palmer]: Overall, the situation in Vietnam inherited by the United States from France in 1955 was disadvantageous, if not hopeless. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the United States in deliberately pushing the French out of the way and replacing them in Vietnam acted unwisely. [\(26\)](#)

[ONE Memorandum, 1960]: The catalog of public discontent [in South Vietnam]

includes a widespread dislike and distrust of Ngo family rule . . . Diem's tightly centralized control and his unwillingness to delegate authority . . . the growing evidence of corruption in high places; the harsh manner in which many persons, particularly the peasants, have been forced to contribute their labor to government programs . . . and the government's increasing resort to harsh measures as a means of stifling criticism. [\(27\)](#)

[Gen. William E. DePuy]: Well, there wasn't a Vietnamese government as such. There was a military junta that ran the country. Most of the senior Vietnamese officers, as you know, had served in the French Army. A lot of them had been sergeants. Politically, they were inept. The various efforts at pacification required a cohesive, efficient government which simply did not exist. Furthermore, corruption was rampant. There was coup after coup, and militarily, defeat after defeat. . . . The basic motivation of the ARVN seldom equaled the motivation of the VC and the NVA [North Vietnamese]. . . the ARVN was losing the war just the way the French had lost the war, and for many of the same reasons. [\(28\)](#)

[Former Director of the CORDS program in South Vietnam, Amb. Robert W. Komer]: In the first analysis, the US effort in Vietnam failed largely because it could not sufficiently revamp or adequately substitute for a South Vietnamese leadership, administration, and armed forces inadequate to the task. . . . As George Ball put it in his well-known 1964 memorandum on "Cutting Our Losses in South Vietnam," "Hanoi has a government and a purpose and a discipline. The 'government' in Saigon is a travesty. In a very real sense, South Vietnam is a country with an army and no government." [\(29\)](#)

[The authors of *The Pentagon Papers*]: In this instance, and as we will see, later, the Intelligence Community's estimates of the likely results of US moves are conspicuously more pessimistic (and more realistic) than the other staff papers presented to the President. This SNIE [October 1961] was based on the assumption that the SEATO force would total about 25,000 men. It is hard to imagine a more sharp contrast between this paper, which foresees no serious impact on the [VC] insurgency from proposed intervention, and Supplemental Note 2, to be quoted next . . . "the JCS estimate that 40,000 US forces will be needed to clean up the Viet Cong threat." [\(30\)](#)

[ONE Memorandum, 1962]: The real threat, and the heart of the battle, is in the

villages and jungles of Vietnam and Laos. That battle can be won only by the will, energy, and political acumen of the resisting governments themselves. US power can supplement and enlarge their power, but it cannot be substituted. Even if the US could defeat the Communists militarily by a massive injection of its own forces, the odds are that what it would win would be, not a political victory which created a stable and independent government, but an uneasy and costly colony. [\(31\)](#)

[Judgment by the intelligence panel of an NSC interagency working group, March 1964]: It is not likely that North Vietnam would (if it could) call off the war in the South even though US actions [systematically bombing North Vietnam] would in time have serious economic and political impact. Overt action against North Vietnam would be unlikely to produce reduction in VC activity sufficiently to make victory on the ground possible in South Vietnam unless accompanied by new US bolstering actions in South Vietnam and considerable improvement in the government there. [\(32\)](#)

[NSC Action Memorandum 288, 17 March 1964]: We seek an independent non-Communist South Vietnam. . . . Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam, almost all Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance . . . accommodate to Communism so as to remove effective US and anti-Communist influence . . . or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely then to become so Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India on the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased. [\(33\)](#)

[ONE Memorandum for the Director, June 1964]: We do not believe that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos would be followed by the rapid, successive communization of the other states of the Far East. . . . With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to Communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, a continuation of the spread of Communism in the area would not be inexorable, and any spread which did occur would take time--time in which the total situation might change in any of a number of ways unfavorable to the Communist cause. . . . [Moreover] the extent to which individual countries would move away from the US towards the Communists would be significantly affected by the substance and manner of US policy in the area following the loss of Laos and South Vietnam. [\(34\)](#)

[CIA officers' comment on JCS wargame, April 1964]: Widespread at the war games were facile assumptions that attacks against the North would weaken DRV capability to support the war in South Vietnam, and that such attacks would cause the DRV leadership to call off the VC. Both assumptions are highly dubious, given the nature of the VC war. . . . The impact of US public and Congressional [and world] opinion was seriously underestimated. . . . There would be widespread concern that the US was risking major war, in behalf of a society that did not seem anxious to save itself, and by means not at all certain to effect their desired ends in the South. In sum, we feel that US thinking should grind in more careful consideration than has taken place to date. This does not mean that the United States should not move against the DRV, but that . . . we do so only if it looks as if there is enough military-political potential in South Vietnam to make the whole Vietnam effort worthwhile. Otherwise, the United States would only be exercising its great, but irrelevant, armed strength. [\(35\)](#)

[The authors of *The Pentagon Papers*]: However, the intelligence panel [of an NSC interagency working group, November 1964] did not concede very strong chances for breaking the will of Hanoi [by instituting a program of sustained US bombing of North Vietnam]. They thought it quite likely that the DRV was willing to suffer damage "in the course of a test of wills with the United States over the course of events in South Vietnam." . . . The panel also viewed Hanoi as estimating that the United States' will to maintain resistance in Southeast Asia could in time be eroded--that the recent US election would provide the Johnson administration with "greater policy flexibility" than it previously felt it had. [\(36\)](#)

[ONE officer memorandum of April 1965, written shortly after President Johnson's decision to begin bombing North Vietnam and committing US troops to combat in the South]: This troubled essay proceeds from a deep concern that we are becoming progressively divorced from reality in Vietnam, that we are proceeding with far more courage than wisdom--toward unknown ends There seems to be a congenital American disposition to underestimate Asian enemies. We are doing so now. We cannot afford so precious a luxury. Earlier, dispassionate estimates, war games, and the like told us that the DRV/VC would persist in the face of such pressures as we are now exerting on them. Yet we now seem to expect them to come running to the conference table, ready to talk about our high terms. The chances are considerably better than even that the United States will in the end have to disengage in Vietnam, and do so considerably short of our present objectives. [\(37\)](#)

[Gen. Bruce Palmer]: [In late 1965] W. W. Rostow requested an analysis of the probable political and social effect of a postulated escalation of the US air offensive. CIA's somber reply was that even an escalation against all major economic targets in North Vietnam would not substantially affect Hanoi's ability to supply its forces in South Vietnam, nor would it be likely to persuade the Hanoi regime to negotiate. Similar judgments were to be repeated consistently by CIA for the next several years. [\(38\)](#)

[General Palmer]: With respect to Vietnam, the head of the CIA was up against a formidable array of senior policymakers . . . all strong personalities who knew how to exercise the clout of their respective offices . . . [But] McNamara was not entirely satisfied with his intelligence from the Defense Department and beginning in late 1965, relied more and more on the CIA for what he believed were more objective and accurate intelligence judgments. [\(39\)](#)

[Former NSC staff officer Chester L. Cooper]: It is revealing that President Johnson's memoirs, which are replete with references to and long quotations from documents which influenced his thinking and decisions on Vietnam, contain not a single reference to a National Intelligence Estimate or, indeed, to any other intelligence analysis. Except for Secretary McNamara, who became a frequent requester and an avid reader of Estimates dealing with Soviet military capabilities and with the Vietnam situation, and McGeorge Bundy, the ONE had a thin audience during the Johnson administration. [\(40\)](#)

[From a US Army-sponsored history (1985)]: Added to this propensity to try to make something out of nothing was an American ignorance of Vietnamese history and society so massive and all-encompassing that two decades of federally funded fellowships, crash language programs, television specials, and campus teach-ins made hardly a dent If there is any lesson to be drawn from the unhappy tale of American involvement in Vietnam it is that, before the United States sets out to make something out of nothing in some other corner of the world, American leaders might consider the historical and social factors involved. [\(41\)](#)

NOTES

(1) Editor's Note: The author of this study drafted his first National Intelligence Estimate on Indochina in 1952, and subsequently had Vietnam-related duties as staff chief of CIA's Office of National Estimates and as a CIA representative to certain interagency working bodies. Since retiring from CIA in 1986, when he was Acting Chairman of CIA's National Intelligence Council, he has prepared classified studies on Vietnam for CIA's History Staff.

(2) OSS (Secret Intelligence Branch), "Political Information [from Swift]," 17 October 1945; Appendix to *Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War*, Hearings Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, 9, 10, and 11 May 1972 (USGPO, 1973), p. 319.

(3) There were a few occasions where certain Directors of Central Intelligence (DCIs) brought pressure on Agency officers to make their Vietnam analyses more palatable to policymakers. In addition, numerous authorities attest that George A. Carver, who was CIA's Special Assistant for Vietnam Affairs (SAVA) for several years following 1966 and who enjoyed remarkable entree among the USG's top decisionmakers, fairly regularly gave them more optimistic judgments than CIA's analysts were holding at the time.

(4) Report of NSC meeting of 4 February 1954. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, Volume XIII, *Indochina*, Part I, p. 1,014. (Hereafter, *FRUS*.)

(5) As of 1959, for example, CIA's Saigon station officers were distraught because the US military advisory group was bent upon training the nascent South Vietnamese armed forces in corps maneuvers, rather than in effective small-unit counterinsurgency tactics. (This observation is from the author's personal experience.)

(6) JCS Chairman Adm. Arthur Radford, Memorandum to the Secretary of Defense, 20 May 1954. *FRUS, 1952-1954*, Volume XIII, *Indochina*, Part 2, p. 1,591.

(7) Lemnitzer, Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, 13 January 1962. US Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-67 (The Pentagon Papers)*, Book 12, "US Involvement in the War, Internal Documents, The Kennedy

Administration: January 1961-November 1963," Book II, pp. 449, 450.

(8) The author's personal experience. In holding their dissenting views, these counterintelligence officers and their boss, James Angleton, had been heavily influenced by the testimony of a defecting Soviet officer. By contrast, other offices of CIA's clandestine service had for a decade before 1969 been doing a superb job of reporting serious backstage rifts in the Sino-Soviet relationship.

(9) Memorandum to DCI John McCone, 9 June 1964. *FRUS, 1964-68*, Vol. I, p. 485. See fuller quotation in Illustrative Quotations section. Without quoting that part of this memorandum, Robert McNamara claimed that ONE *supported* the domino thesis. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), pp. 124-125.

(10) Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1970), p. 196. (Emphases in the original).

(11) "[Because most of the people of Vietnam were Buddhists, President Eisenhower] asked whether it was possible to find a good Buddhist leader to whip up some real fervor It was pointed out to the President that, unhappily, Buddha was a pacifist rather than a fighter (laughter)." Report of NSC meeting of 4 February 1954. *FRUS, 1952-54*, Volume XIII, *Indochina*, Part I, p. 1,014.

(12) Trip Report by the Vice President, May 1961. *FRUS, 1961-63*, Vol. I, p. 154.

(13) Harold P. Ford, "The US Decision to Go Big in Vietnam," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring 1985), p. 3. (Originally Secret, declassified 27 August 1986).

(14) CIA was not the only recipient of such policymaker wrath. Eight months after the above episode, INR issued a sharp critique of claimed ARVN military progress which "evoked a monumental outcry" from Secretary McNamara and Gen. Maxwell Taylor. McNamara phoned Secretary Rusk, denouncing INR for second-guessing military analysis; Rusk apologized to McNamara. Thomas L. Hughes (who had been INR's chief at the time), "Experiencing McNamara," *Foreign Policy*, No. 100 (Fall 1995), pp. 161-162.

(15) Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the United States Army in Vietnam, 1941-60*, rev. ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1985), pp. x, xi.

(16) *In Retrospect*, (*passim*).

(17) Statement made 1 August 1988, to William C. Gibbons, principal author of *The US Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part III, January-July 1965, prepared for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations by the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, (USGPO, 1988), p. 455. General DePuy had been J-3 of General Westmoreland's MACV, and later commanded the 1st Division in Vietnam.

(18) See the Illustrative Quotations section.

(19) Intelligence Memorandum No. 271: "Initial Alignments in the Event of War Before 1954," 24 March 1950. (Initially Secret, declassified 4 January 1978).

(20) "US Intelligence and Vietnam," *Studies in Intelligence* (special issue, 1984), p. 14. (Initially Secret, subsequently declassified). General Palmer had been General Westmoreland's Deputy in Vietnam and Army Vice Chief of Staff. After retiring, he was a member of the DCI's Senior Review Panel.

(21) "US Intelligence and Vietnam," p. 12.

(22) "Probable Developments in Indochina Through Mid-1952," 3 March 1952. *FRUS, 1952-54*, Vol. XIII, pp. 54, 55.

(23) "Probable Developments in Indochina Through Mid-1954," 4 June 1953. *FRUS, 1952-54*, Vol. XIII, p. 594.

(24) *Congressional Record - Senate*, 6 April 1954, p. 4,673.

(25) "Nation-Builders, Old Pros, Paramilitary Boys, and Misplaced Persons," *The Washington Monthly*, February 1978, p. 25.

(26) "US Intelligence and Vietnam," p. 23.

[\(27\)](#) Memorandum for the DCI, "Approaching Crisis in South Vietnam?," 28 July 1960. (Originally Secret; declassified 6 November 1980).

[\(28\)](#) Lt. Cols. Romie L. Brownlee and William J. Mullen III, *An Oral History of General William E. DePuy, USA, Retired* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: United States Military History Institute, n.d.), p. 123.

[\(29\)](#) Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: US Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Westview Press, 1986), p. 21.

[\(30\)](#) (Gov't ed.), Book II, pp. 82, 83.

[\(31\)](#) Memorandum for the Director, "The Communist Threat in Southeast Asia," 24 May 1962. (Originally Confidential; declassified 25 June 1980).

[\(32\)](#) As quoted in *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), Vol. III, p. 156. The author of this article was a CIA member of that working group.

[\(33\)](#) As quoted in *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam/New York Times, ed., 1971), pp. 283, 285. That portion of NSC 288 repeated, verbatim, a text which Secretary of Defense McNamara had written the day before. McNamara, Memorandum to the President, 16 March 1964. *FRUS, 1964-68, Vietnam*, Vol. I, p. 154.

[\(34\)](#) As quoted in *FRUS, 1964-68*, Vol. I, p. 485.

[\(35\)](#) Memorandum for the Record sent to the DCI [by an ONE analyst and an FE operations officer], "Comment on the Vietnam War Games, SIGMA I-64, 6-9 April, 1964," 16 April 1964. As quoted in Ford, "The US Decision to Go Big in Vietnam," pp. 7-8.

[\(36\)](#) Gravel, ed., Vol. III, p. 213. The author of this article chaired that intelligence panel.

[\(37\)](#) Memorandum sent to the DCI, "Into the Valley," 8 April 1965, as cited in

Ford, "The US Decision to Go Big in Vietnam," pp. 10, 11.

[\(38\)](#) "US Intelligence and Vietnam," p. 43.

[\(39\)](#) Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1984), p. 166.

[\(40\)](#) Cooper, "The CIA and Decision-Making," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1972, p. 227.

[\(41\)](#) Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the United States Army in Vietnam, 1941-60*, rev. ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1985), pp. x, xi.

[Next](#)

[Previous](#)

[Contents](#)