

# Introduction

**By Lloyd C. Gardner**

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## **The Vietnam Watch<sup>6</sup>**

The papers in this volume bring together intelligence Estimates and Memoranda covering the entire Vietnam war. Some have been declassified here for the first time. Although they are but a tiny fraction of CIA input into the Vietnam War deliberations and debate, they represent a fascinating, indeed indispensable, inside look into the efforts of the intelligence specialists to provide decisionmakers with a reasoned analysis of prospects for the success of American policy. One can read in them the convictions and doubts of the intelligence community as they change over time. They are often ahead of the curve and occasionally lag behind the pace of events. While there is always a desire for a “scoreboard” conclusion, intelligence assessments have to be evaluated in context. This introduction will attempt to provide the context within which the Vietnam analysts worked and how they viewed developments in South Vietnam until the fall of Saigon in 1975.

## **The First Indochina War, 1945-1954**

Beginning in 1948 Central Intelligence Agency analysts produced a series of papers for policymakers on dimming French prospects for winning the war in Indochina. The first of these, *The Break-Up of the Colonial Empires and its Implications for US Security*, was published on September 3, 1948. While the Cold War had not yet spread to Asia, the Estimate offered a sobering look at the incipient rivalry developing with the Soviet Union—and the already evident appearance of a “colonial bloc” in the United Nations. Unlike most later papers in the series, moreover, it directly criticized US policies. At risk, the paper said, were needed raw materials and access to military bases previously controlled by the colonial powers. “Unless the US itself adopts a more positive and sympathetic

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<sup>6</sup> I should like to express thanks to several people who prepared the documents for this volume and offered great help with my understanding of the process and personalities involved: John Allen, George Allen, Tom Elmore, Robert Layton, and John Carver.

attitude toward the national aspirations of these areas,” it warned, “and at least partially meets their demands for economic assistance, it will risk their becoming actively antagonistic toward the US.”<sup>7</sup>

Such criticisms reflected an ongoing debate within the US government over the “colonial issue,” one that continued to confront policymakers with unattractive alternatives. Before World War II Americans got little closer to the actual struggles in Asia than reading Pearl Buck’s best-selling novels about the poor peasants of China. All that changed with Pearl Harbor and its aftermath. Where tradition and sentiment had been the principal factors in the national outlook, now there were many things to consider about the crumbling colonial system and what would emerge out of its ruins. The Japanese had been driven out, but it was far from clear that the nationalists who rose up in their wake would be friendly to US interests, especially if Washington aligned itself with the colonial powers.

The colonial “question” thus burst forth with a new immediacy, but it still took second place to concerns about the crises of recovery and reconstruction in devastated Europe. How would France recover, for example, if not by restoring the pre-war trade patterns? The onset of the Cold War sharpened the dilemma, pitting the potential short-run costs of weakening the European colonial powers against the long-term matter of good relations with the new nations.

Indochina was a special problem from the outset. In that restive French colony American OSS (Office of Strategic Services, a precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency) officers attempting to rescue downed American fliers behind Japanese lines encountered Ho Chi Minh, a venerated leader of the nationalist rebellion. One of the OSS group, Archimedes Patti, had no illusions that Ho was anything but a dedicated Communist, but he also took very seriously the Vietnamese leader’s assertion he would not allow any other power to replace French rule. He desired American support, Ho told Patti, and conveyed a desire for American support in letters to President Truman. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, as the OSS group knew, had sometimes indicated—in pretty strong terms, actually—that France should not be allowed to return, at least not without a commitment to eventual independence.

But how FDR proposed to implement his avowed policy was far from clear. When Roosevelt’s successor did not challenge the French effort to re-occupy Indochina, Patti was left with a deep sense of foreboding:

It was for me a time of sober observation because I remained totally convinced that no amount of opposition would deflect the Vietnamese from pursuing their independence, whatever the cost or however long it might take. To me it was regrettable that our own nation was not coming to terms with that reality and charting a course which would serve our own best interests—perhaps just staying completely out of it and maintaining a truly neutral stance, both materially and in our planning concepts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> ORE 25-48, *The Break-Up of the Colonial Empires and Its Implications for US Security*, September 3, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Archimedes L.A. Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America’s Albatross* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980), p. 381.

By the time of the October 13, 1950 Estimate, *Consequences to the US of Communist Domination of Mainland Southeast Asia*, however, any lingering attraction for a “neutral stance” about the French war in Indochina had completely disappeared. Instead, Washington worried the French would fail and add to America’s woes. The post-war rush of events—the Russian atomic bomb, the triumph of the Communists in China’s civil war, and, above all, the Korean “conflict”—had swept the agenda clean of smudged “what ifs” and “on the other hands.” As America’s own Indochinese involvement deepened, nevertheless, the old debate surfaced here and there in rueful comments about “missed opportunities” to support Indochinese nationalism.

Given this tense atmosphere, it was surprising that the October 13, 1950 Estimate asserted that Communist domination of mainland Southeast Asia “would not be critical to US security interests but would have serious and immediate and direct consequences.” That statement did not go unchallenged. Both the Army and State Department entered caveats declaring that not enough attention had been paid to the long-term consequences of such a loss, whether considered in terms of America’s global position or repercussions in countries surrounding the areas of conflict. The Estimate focused on the narrower question of what such a loss would do to the ability to win a global war. It was all a matter of degree to the intelligence agencies preparing the Estimate, but the dissents presaged the emergence later of the “US credibility” issue and the “domino thesis.”<sup>9</sup>

The October 1950 Estimate contended that while the Soviet Union would gain “bargaining power” through control of rice supplies in Southeast Asia, the loss might be compensated for, relieved of the Indochina burden, France paid more attention to Europe’s defense. There could be no trade-off, however, if prospects for Japan’s reintegration in the world economy were damaged by the “loss” of Southeast Asia. Japan’s economic well-being had already become a worrisome matter for policymakers. At the 1945 Potsdam Conference President Truman and his advisors had made it clear they would not divide Japan into occupation zones, as had been done with Germany. Taking sole responsibility for Japan’s rehabilitation required finding trade outlets as well as implementing democratic reforms. “Exclusion of Japan from trade with Southeast Asia,” warned the October 13, 1950 paper, “would seriously frustrate Japanese prospects for economic recovery.” After a peace treaty was signed, it went on, and American soldiers came home, the need for alternate outlets would “impel an unoccupied Japan toward a course of accommodation with International Communism.”<sup>10</sup>

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles soon made “international communism” the cornerstone of his ideological foundation for American foreign policy. The term did not appear in the original Southeast Asia Treaty Organization protocol in 1954, but a year later at a Bangkok meeting it was included in the communiqué. “I called attention to the fact that it seemed rather extraordinary,” he told a press conference, “when we were making all this effort to combat something, that we couldn’t even give it a name. And so the words ‘international communism.’ I think that from now on it will be respectable in this circle to talk about international communism.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ORE 29-50, *Consequences to the US of Communist Domination of Mainland Southeast Asia*, October 13, 1950, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in, Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II Through Dienbienphu, 1941-1954* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), p. 347.

Once the term “international communism” became accepted usage, assertions of Ho Chi Minh’s independence from Moscow and Beijing seemed contradictory and intelligence Estimates that called attention to North Vietnamese resistance to Russian or Chinese domination at odds with Cold War orthodoxy. Occasional hints at treating Ho as an Asian Tito never matured into anything substantial. Why that was so is easy to understand: while it might be useful to have a Tito around to demonstrate how the Soviets treated the unorthodox as an enemy, two Titos would be one too many. The exception that proved the rule would then become a challenge to the reality of the frozen monolith of international communism.

However that may be, Estimates continued to assess a French defeat as likely. Paris could not really afford to continue the war in Indochina and yet meet its defense obligations in Europe, asserted a January 10, 1952 Memo prepared in the Office of National Estimates. “In the absence of either some form of internationalization of the Indochina problem or of substantial additional US aid, public sentiment for [French] withdrawal will gain steadily and perhaps accelerate.”<sup>12</sup> Hope that the French would agree to “internationalization” had spurred Dulles’s drive to create SEATO. Then the enemy could be called “international communism,” by far the best way to counter charges of neo-colonialism and put the conflict over emerging nationalism in Asia into a global context

Unfortunately for Dulles’s plan, the French saw a better avenue, one that might leave them with influence in Indochinese cultural and economic affairs. They placed their hopes for extricating themselves from the war on the 1954 Geneva Conference. No matter what arguments the Secretary of State posed, neither the French nor the British would agree to join in creating SEATO until after the Geneva Conference had met and explored ways to end the fighting. A Memorandum to the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) assessed that the Russians and the Communist Chinese—the latter making their debut as a world power—would seek to exploit such weaknesses in the “Western façade.” On the other hand, said the Memo, neither Communist power would back a play by Ho Chi Minh’s delegation to swallow Vietnam whole. The likely strategy of the Russian and Chinese Communists would be to negotiate a narrow truce, expecting to cash in later when a coalition government emerged to hold all-Vietnamese elections. The other side might even settle for a simple cease-fire with no other conditions but agreement on a future conference to settle political questions. A principal object of Communist policy was to avoid American military intervention.<sup>13</sup>

The Memorandum also drew attention to significant differences in Soviet and Chinese reasoning about a ceasefire. The Soviets wished to advance their post-Stalin peace campaigns, while the Chinese feared an American military presence in a neighboring country. Both were anxious for a truce. That left Ho Chi Minh either to continue waging war without blessings from his backers or to shift from “armed liberation” to political warfare. His prestige at a high point, the Memo concluded, Ho could feel confident about achieving a political victory.<sup>14</sup>

The Dienbienphu fortress fell as the Geneva Conference discussion of Vietnam began on May 7, 1954, ruining French plans for V-E Day celebrations. In one city where the parade had not been canceled, an honor guard marched under black crepe banners instead of its regimental colors.

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<sup>12</sup> Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, *Critical Developments in French Policy toward Indochina*, January 10, 1952, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, *Probable Communist Strategy and Tactics at Geneva*, April 19, 1954, pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

An Estimate held, however, that the defeat need not signal a total collapse, if only because non-Communist Indochinese themselves hoped “that the US might intervene in Indochina.” In new Estimates a shift was underway from talking about French prospects to possible American intervention. High-level gossip around Washington had increased even as French outposts around Dienbienphu surrendered to the Vietminh.<sup>15</sup>

Vice President Richard M. Nixon, for example, during a speech early in 1954 had launched a trial balloon of sorts (though perhaps not meaning to) about putting ground troops into Vietnam. It whooshed out over an audience of newspaper editors, spun around crazily for a few seconds, and dropped to the floor. But when President Eisenhower described the situation in Southeast Asia as a row of dominoes during a press conference on April 7, 1954, the image captivated the media. Ike’s successors were stuck with it for all time. One after another they were called upon to confirm its validity. Eisenhower had talked about losing raw materials and people as country after country toppled over behind the “Bamboo Curtain.” Like the intelligence Estimates noted above, Eisenhower stressed Japan’s still shaky economic place in the “free world.” Japan was the last domino; when the others fell, that vital Asian nation would also pitch over “toward the Communist areas in order to live.”<sup>16</sup>

The Geneva Conference concluded on July 21, 1954. Its final declaration established a “military demarcation line” at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The line “is provisional,” it said, “and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary.” Negotiations should begin for all-Vietnamese elections in 1956, read the declaration, in order to reunite the country. Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith told the conference that the United States was not prepared to sign off on the declaration; yet, in somewhat ambiguous terms, he added that the United States would not condone threats or the use of force to disturb the demarcation line. As for the proposed all-Vietnamese elections, Smith said the United States had an established policy for nations divided against their will: “We shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations to insure that they are conducted fairly.”<sup>17</sup>

Reporting on the Geneva Conference, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles mused on the “fundamental blunder” that had allowed the situation to come to this pass where a Communist political victory seemed imminent. “Originally,” Dulles wrote in a private memo, “President Roosevelt was against this [a French return to Indochina] on the ground that France did not have a good record as a colonial power and its return would not be accepted by the people.” But his successors failed to carry out his intentions to pressure the French to grant eventual independence, with the result that the Communists took charge of the resistance. Dulles determined to rectify the blunder by all-out support for a Vietnamese alternative to Ho, Ngo Dinh Diem.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, *Consequences Within Indochina of the Fall of Dien Bien Phu*, April 30, 1954, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> National Archives, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (Washington: G.P.O., 1960), pp. 381-90.

<sup>17</sup> Smith’s statement can be found in United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam*, 90<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess. (Washington: G.P.O., 1967), p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Memorandum, July 9, 1954, *The Papers of John Foster Dulles*, Seely Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

As the Geneva Conference delegates returned home, intelligence Estimates suggested that Ho's path to power still might come through elections, or, equally likely, when whatever regime the French and/or the Americans put in place began to falter. "Although it is possible that the French and Vietnamese, even with firm support from the US and other powers, may be able to establish a strong regime in South Vietnam," concluded the Estimate of August 3, 1954, "we believe that the chances for this development are poor and, moreover, that the situation is more likely to continue to deteriorate progressively over the next year."<sup>19</sup>

There was a loophole in the Geneva Declaration, however, that might at least gain some time. "There is no provision for forcing the parties to implement or adhere to the agreements." Even with pressure from the supervisory team from India, Canada and Poland, the elections could be put on hold indefinitely. With guidance and material aid the three states that once made up French Indochina—Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—"might" thus attain viability and permanence. The energy and resourcefulness required for "building national states" would not "arise spontaneously among the non-Communist Indochinese," it cautioned, "but will have to be sponsored and nurtured from without."<sup>20</sup>

### **Our Man in Saigon, 1954-1963**

Vietnam had been divided, of course, and that put it in a separate category. Still, there was something to work with here, especially since the new leader in Saigon, Ngo Dinh Diem, did not recognize the Geneva Declaration as binding upon his government. The intelligence analysts thus foresaw a small window for creating a viable South Vietnam in the two-year period before all-Vietnamese elections were supposed to reunite the country. It was a small window in physical terms as well, one that permitted only a few weapons and military replacements to squeeze through, not nearly enough to fight a big war. Until the deadline for elections passed, the analysts believed, there would not be a widespread resumption of guerrilla activities, much less an attempt at an all-out military assault. Communist bloc fears of bringing on a full-scale American intervention still ruled out such adventurism, but, equally important, the North Vietnamese Communist leadership needed time to consolidate their rule.<sup>21</sup>

During the Geneva Conference, Bao Dai, the puppet "emperor" of Indochina, had named Ngo Dinh Diem his Prime Minister. Although Diem was considered pro-American, the initial American reaction was one of wait and see. Besides being staunchly anti-Communist, he had a virtue Dulles could appreciate: he disliked and distrusted the French. Diem had only one program, writes historian David Anderson: obtaining "greater and more direct U.S. assistance."<sup>22</sup> Dulles felt he had little choice but to gamble on Diem. "Frankly, Collins," the Secretary of State confided to General J. Lawton Collins, who was being sent to Saigon as Chief of Mission, "I think our chances of saving the situation there are not more than one in ten."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> NIE 63-5-54, *Post-Geneva Outlook in Indochina*, August 3, 1954, p.1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 63.1-55, *Probable Developments in North Vietnam to July 1956*, July 19, 1955, p.2.

<sup>22</sup> David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-61* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 51-61.

<sup>23</sup> Oral History of J. Lawton Collins, Mudd Library, Princeton.

After a few months in Saigon the General became convinced that Diem would fail—sooner rather than later. By April 1955 when he returned home to report to President Eisenhower, Collins and the CIA were at odds over the capabilities of the Diem government. “Diem stinks,” summed up his view. “If chaos is to be averted, Diem must go.” For their part, intelligence agencies were hardly in love with Diem’s one-man (or one family) rule, but they thought the General overlooked some significant questions, and, even more importantly, exaggerated the likelihood that whoever or whatever replaced him would have a better chance of success in the volatile climate of Saigon politics, where criminal sects (in some cases guided by French interests) controlled the police.<sup>24</sup>

Estimates also pointed out that dismissing Diem might not be so easy, as he might well manage to set up an alternative power center leading to civil war inside South Vietnam. “We believe that the resolution of the present impasse and the implementation of the Diem solution [building a nationalist government] would to a critical degree depend upon firm and substantial US and French support.” The Estimate also suggested that if Diem thought he was about to be removed from office, he might precipitate a fight with the Binh Xuyen sect that controlled the police. If he won, thereby increasing his prestige, “He would be in a better position to proceed with proposed programs for strengthening South Vietnam.”<sup>25</sup>

In the event, that is exactly what happened. Diem initiated a “war” against the sects and effectively ended the debate in Washington.<sup>26</sup> Henceforth he would be “Our Man in Saigon”—for almost a decade until the Buddhist crisis. The episode was notable also for bringing out relatively strong and unambiguous views about alternatives, something that would not usually be the case in future papers. When the time for elections came and passed, a National Intelligence Estimate in July 1956 noted that the co-chairs of the Geneva Conference, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, had implicitly approved an indefinite postponement of the reunification issue.<sup>27</sup>

If there was a betrayal of Geneva, then, it might be argued, both London and Moscow were accessories after the fact. The outlook in Vietnam now was for a lull in the struggle as both sides strengthened their bases. In North Vietnam, the first priority was to develop more effective controls over the people and the economy. Violence and intimidation had been employed “selectively” but not on a scale comparable to what had occurred in China after the Communist triumph. Between 30,000 and 100,000 landlords had been put to death in North Vietnam, said another Estimate, and the backlash at these methods had caused the regime to lose popularity and forced reconsiderations that slowed down socialization of agriculture.<sup>28</sup> Rice production, a key measure of success, was

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<sup>24</sup> The “crisis” of April-May 1955 can be followed in a series of Memoranda to the Director of Central Intelligence and in National Intelligence Estimates, beginning with, *The Crisis in Saigon*, April 4, 1955; *Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence*, April 23, 1955; National Intelligence Estimate, 63.1-2-55, *Possible Developments in South Vietnam*, April 26, 1955; and Special National Intelligence Estimate, 63.1-2/1-55, *The Current Saigon Crisis*, May 2, 1955.

<sup>25</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 63.1-2-55, *Possible Developments in South Vietnam*, April 26, 1955.

<sup>26</sup> For the fullest account of Diem’s “strategy” and the likely involvement of CIA agent Edward G. Lansdale in prompting the beleaguered Vietnamese leader to act or lose power, see, Anderson, *Trapped By Success*, pp. 103-115. The documents printed here do not resolve the questions about Lansdale’s role. They are not action papers but they do suggest what the thinking was in opposition to General Collins’ efforts to change policy. The debate was the last significant turning point until the summer of 1963.

<sup>27</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, 63-56, *Probable Developments in North and South Vietnam Through Mid-1957*, July 17, 1956, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 63.2-57, *The Prospects for North Vietnam*, May 14, 1957, pp. 2-3.

slowly improving, but Hanoi had to rely on Soviet help in obtaining supplies from Burma. Politically there were signs that the Marxist bond with China had not eliminated traditional distrust and that Hanoi hoped to balance Beijing's influence with closer ties to Moscow. Here was yet another suggestion that North Vietnam was something of an independent actor, but with China making threatening gestures in the Taiwan Straits and Sputnik later orbiting the globe, such maneuvers by Hanoi made little impact on US policymakers.<sup>29</sup>

The North Vietnamese, said the July 1956 Estimate, were infiltrating the Saigon government and trying to promote sympathy for Hanoi's claim to be the only legitimate nationalist force in the belief that such combinations of soft power and subversion would undermine the Diem government. But absent a major guerrilla effort to disrupt South Vietnam, the immediate security picture was encouraging. Moreover, one objective of America's Vietnam policy seemed to be working well: Japanese trade was increasing at the expense of French imports. It remained to be seen whether the government would prove effective over the longer run in dealing with economic and social problems, and here the Estimates expressed serious reservations.<sup>30</sup>

By mid-1959 these reservations had hardened into outright alarm at South Vietnam's unwillingness or inability to lay a foundation for future economic progress, unlike the North Vietnamese, who, whatever their methods, now had "generally realistic" policies in place. So far, American foreign aid, in the form of dollar grants to pay for imports, an Estimate warned, had provided the South Vietnamese with a relatively high standard of living. But how long could that last? Diem refused to take any measures that might reduce that standard, code words for saying he would not tax his wealthy supporters or inquire too closely into what was being raked off by speculators. He hoped American investments and Japanese war reparations would make such tough decisions unnecessary. But he would listen to no advice about how to run his government or the South Vietnamese economy. "Diem has indicated that South Vietnam expects the maintenance of large US aid and special consideration from the US as a reward for its steadfast support. Failure to receive such special consideration could lead Diem to assume a stance of greater independence *vis-à-vis* the US." The analysis and judgment were both on the money. For the moment, however, the lull continued as the North Vietnamese appeared unlikely to go beyond propaganda, subversion, and paramilitary action, convinced it would "mean war with the US." Diem would not change, however, and therein lay the future predicament that would divide policymakers.<sup>31</sup>

American military assumptions at this time posited the real danger to South Vietnam as a Korean-like invasion from the North, which fit in well with Diem's desire to keep American attention diverted from internal domestic practices. In August 1960 a brief Special National Intelligence Estimate questioned those assumptions with a dire warning about the internal situation. Even within urban groups and government circles, it said, Diem's leadership was under mounting criticism, while out in the countryside the Viet Cong, supported and guided by Hanoi, had stepped up their guerrilla warfare. "These adverse trends are not irreversible, but if they remain unchecked, they will almost certainly in time cause the collapse of Diem's regime."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, 63-56, *Probable Developments in North and South Vietnam Through Mid-1957*, July 17, 1956, pp. 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 63-59, *Prospects for North and South Vietnam*, May 26, 1959, pp. 5-6, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 63.1-60, *Short-Term Trends in South Vietnam*, August 23, 1960, p. 1.

This was an especially bad time to hear such news. The Eisenhower Administration was looking very old and tired. First term successes in the Cold War were yesterday's news, and the headlines since the 1956 Suez Crisis were about disturbing trends. Above all there was Fidel Castro in Havana. Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy kept repeating at every whistle stop that the Republicans had allowed the Communists to take power only 90 miles from Florida.

Such rhetoric was sure to bring a challenge to JFK to prove he could do better. Eisenhower himself challenged JFK on the day before the inaugural. Laos was critical to American security, Ike lectured the former junior naval officer. He had to be prepared to intervene to stop the Communist threat. Kennedy sidestepped Laos, however, and chose a diplomatic path. The real trouble, he knew, was brewing in Saigon. Was Diem a friend any more, or was he just getting in the way? Inside CIA's Saigon station, as in Washington, opinions differed on that crucial question. When a disaffected South Vietnamese Air Force colonel launched a coup attempt, one CIA officer, George Carver, Jr., got caught in the middle while attempting to report events on the scene.

The episode had multiple consequences. Carver had to be recalled from Saigon and became a powerful voice against Diem, but then, after the 1963 coup, a powerful voice for staying the course. The Embassy's "neutrality" during the short-lived 1960 coup, wrote DCI William Colby in his memoirs, convinced Diem and his brother Nhu that they could not absolutely rely on the Americans and that they would have to deal with the United States as "yet another outside force" with a potential for help but also for opposition.<sup>33</sup>

The first months of the Kennedy Administration brought the Bay of Pigs debacle and the blustery atmosphere at the Vienna Summit. In Vienna, Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev agreed to try to neutralize Laos, and a conference followed in 1962. Laos was not the prelude to US involvement in Vietnam; instead, it was the Bay of Pigs far away in the Caribbean that had the greatest impact on Vietnam policy. In the aftermath of the failed landing and the subsequent humiliating capture of a Cuban exile brigade trained by the CIA with Kennedy's approval, Walt W. Rostow, then an assistant to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, wrote to several officials warning against involvement in Laos, urging immediate attention to Vietnam. The first thing to consider, he argued, was the need to dispel "any perception that we are up against a game we can't handle." Holding the line in Vietnam would demonstrate to the world that we could "deal with indirect aggression."<sup>34</sup>

This variation on the credibility theme placed great emphasis on a general issue—"a game we can't handle"—rather than support of any particular friend. The distinction is an important one, and it bespoke commitment to whoever occupied the Saigon presidential palace. In November 1961 the intelligence community responded to "hypothetical" questions about likely North Vietnamese reactions to a much stepped-up military presence and accompanying warnings that Hanoi must cease support for the Viet Cong (VC) or face air attacks. The Communist bloc would launch an intense international campaign to brand the US as an aggressor, it averred, but probably not much more would happen. Inside South Vietnam, however, one could expect attacks on American installations. The three Communist governments—Russia, China, and North Vietnam—would continue to feel confident the VC held the upper hand, but they would have to recognize such steps

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<sup>33</sup> William Colby, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 164-5.

<sup>34</sup> Rostow quoted in, Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), p. 44.

signaled Washington's determination to avoid defeat. When it came down to it, the reaction to American escalation would be counter-escalation. The paper thus skipped around an underlying issue: what use were signals in the kind of war being waged in Vietnam?<sup>35</sup>

Kennedy increased American forces in Vietnam and turned for advice to British counter-insurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson, whose methods had been credited with success in Malaya. These centered on programs at the village level and things like the Special Forces, or "Green Berets." Kennedy met Thompson the first time in early April 1963 and was pleased by his reports that the war was going well in Vietnam, the strategic hamlet program, in particular. Indeed, if things continued to go well, the President should announce he was reducing the number of American advisers by one thousand by the end of the year. This would demonstrate confidence in the Saigon government and weaken Communist propaganda.<sup>36</sup>

The upbeat attitude that spring engulfed as well the office of DCI John McCone out at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. The Office of National Estimates had been at work on a new Estimate since the previous fall, and as it went forward to interested parties, including those in the military who claimed to "know Vietnam best," it received heavy criticism for being too negative. At McCone's orders ONE revised its original paper so that the first sentence now read: "We believe that Communist progress has been blunted and that the situation is improving."

The story of McCone's dramatic intervention is told in detail by former senior CIA analyst Harold P. Ford, whose book, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes 1962-1968*, explores the fundamental issue present in all Estimate writing and analysis.<sup>37</sup> The analyst is the modern messenger whose penalty for bringing bad news might not be so severe as in ancient times, but who does risk "banishment" of sorts if his conclusions fail to serve a policymaker's need to appear in control of events. Once around that corner the analyst can qualify optimistic assessments with reference points that nudge the reader to reconsider assumptions. The danger is that no one reads beyond page one. And even after these analytic judgments become sharper, as they did in later years, policymakers could always extract paragraphs where the light at the end of the tunnel shined brightest.

In the specific case of NIE 53-63, published on April 17, 1963, the Estimate followed the first sentence affirming that Communist progress had been blunted with a judgment that while the North Vietnamese would not introduce regular military units in an effort to obtain a quick victory, the Communists hoped military pressure and political deterioration would in time create circumstances for a *coup de grâce* or a political settlement that favored their cause. The document proceeded down that path, observing along the way "some promise" in political and security matters and raising doubts here and there about the government's ability to translate military success into political stability. It was all there in the fine print.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate, 10-4-61, *Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US Actions in South Vietnam*, November 7, 1961.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes 1962-1968* (Washington: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), pp. 14-19.

<sup>38</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 53-63, *Prospects in South Vietnam*, April 17, 1963, p. 1ff.

Within weeks the political situation was literally set afire with the Buddhist protests and self-immolations on street corners in the middle of the day. The Kennedy Administration and American television audiences watched these scenes with horror, and ONE could now use straightforward language in assessing that unless Diem addressed the Buddhist issue, “disorders will probably flare again and the chances of a coup or assassination attempts against him will become better than even.” At the same time, the new paper added, Washington’s “firm line” had increased Diem’s uneasiness about US involvement in his country. “This attitude will almost certainly persist, and further pressure to reduce the US presence in the country is likely.”<sup>39</sup>

The story of the October coup and the divisions over its wisdom within the Kennedy Administration is a never ending controversy. An ONE memorandum on “South Vietnam’s Leaders” written in late August or early September, 1963, unfortunately has not been located. A pointed rebuttal to that memo dated September 4, 1963 argued that the Buddhist protest had been overblown, however, and that the war could still be won with Diem. The what-ifs in the aftermath of the coup and Kennedy’s assassination continue to swirl through Vietnam literature like October leaves in the wind, never settling for long on solid historical evidence.<sup>40</sup>

## Years of Escalation

In May 1964 a Special National Intelligence Estimate said it was impossible to set any meaningful odds about whether Hanoi’s leaders would prefer to lower their expectations rather than face “the destruction of their country.” Already bruited about in Washington were a variety of escalatory steps, including bombing attacks on North Vietnam. In response to an American escalation, ONE did not see a strong military reaction by China, and especially not by the Soviet Union, unless American troops actually crossed the so-called demilitarized zone. Two weeks later, in early June, Sherman Kent, chair of the Board of National Estimates, sent a memorandum to DCI McCone challenging the very premise of the “Domino Effect.” If one looked at these as a pair, the first describing the likely reactions of Beijing and Moscow and the second arguing the loss of Vietnam and Laos would not mean Communism’s inexorable spread across Southeast Asia, Vietnam’s fate shrank back to its territorial limits.<sup>41</sup>

But the domestic political implications of “losing” a country, any country, to “international communism” alarmed presidents and their West Wing advisers. Lyndon Johnson was especially nervous about Vietnam in an election year. “Using troops is the very last thing we want to do,” LBJ told David Lilienthal, “or getting stuck with a “sink-hole kind of ‘war’ . . . just before an election here.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, his “crisis managers,” National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, assured him that the best way to show his determination not to lose Vietnam was to send a signal. So LBJ sent planes to bomb North Vietnamese PT-boat bases on August 4 and submitted the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to a compliant Congress.

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<sup>39</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-63, *The Situation in South Vietnam*, July 10, 1963, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Memorandum to DCI, September 4, 1963.

<sup>41</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 50-2-64, *Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos*, May 25, 1964, and ONE Memorandum, *Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a “Domino Effect” in the Far East?*, June 9, 1964.

<sup>42</sup> Lilienthal, journal entry, June 16, 1964, *The Papers of David Lilienthal*, Mudd Library, Princeton, Box 208.

The signal could be seen in America, and that satisfied Johnson's immediate need, but it was too weak, apparently, to impress either North Vietnam or South Vietnam. In the post-Tonkin dawn, Johnson had to risk his footing on the slippery slope he could see before him or pull back to reconsider his next step. He could not stand still. In October ONE produced an Estimate on the continuing disarray of the Saigon government. One of the gloomiest in the entire series of NIE's during the war, it acknowledged that things were as bad as they had ever been, even before the November coup. "Indeed, we cannot presently see any likely source of real leadership."<sup>43</sup> By early 1965 the political situation had reached the point where only drastic measures would convince the South Vietnamese to remain loyal to Saigon. Out of that dark foreboding was launched the bombing campaign, Rolling Thunder, the albatross that strangled diplomatic options instead of bringing Hanoi to its knees.

The first air attacks in early February 1965 were said to be in retaliation for a VC strike against an American base, Pleiku, in the central highlands, killing eight Americans and wounding many more, but planning for a sustained offensive against North Vietnam had been in the works for some time. What put an exclamation point on the American attack was the presence of Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin in Hanoi. Kosygin had come to repair relations with the North Vietnamese leaders, who had criticized Moscow's supposedly inadequate aid program and cautionary political advice. An intelligence Memorandum drew another darker conclusion from the visit, however. The assessment, made on February 5, 1965, was that Kosygin was there, in effect, to be in on the kill when Vietnam fell and steal glory from the Chinese. "We accordingly believe that the Soviet leaders seek to share—and guide—what they believe to be a Communist bandwagon." As the Russians saw the situation, it argued, the United States was not going to intervene and a Communist victory was drawing near. They expected Washington was close to being ready to negotiate a face-saving exit.<sup>44</sup>

This Memorandum, which, in fact, could have served as a basic rationale for the bombing campaign that ensued, is something of an anomaly among Estimates not only for its portrayal of Russian policy towards Vietnam but for its suggestion that Kosygin's visit presaged a new Soviet forward attitude in Southeast Asia, and it may have reenergized a theoretical US concern with Soviet profit-taking from "wars of national liberation." But there was concern developing with the question of whether the bombing was suitable punishment for the "crime" of attacking Pleiku. An ONE Estimate went to the core of the problem. Hanoi had anticipated a "prolonged and grinding struggle." It was bolstered not simply by material support from Russia and China but by doctrinal belief in the inevitable success of a "people's war" and recent memories of victory over the French. "Our present Estimate is that the odds are against the postulated US attacks leading the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] to make conciliatory gestures to secure a respite from the bombing; rather, we believe that the DRV would persevere in supporting the insurgency in the South." Air Force Intelligence dissented from this Estimate, arguing not for the last time in the Vietnam war that the selective bombing since Rolling Thunder began "may well have led Hanoi seriously to underestimate the extent of US determination to exert the necessary power to force discontinuance of DRV support for the insurgency in the south."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-64, *The Situation in South Vietnam*, October 1, 1964, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Special Memorandum No. 7-65, *The Dimensions of Kosygin's Trip*, February 5, 1965, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-6-65, *Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US Actions*, June 2, 1965, pp. 3-4.

Thus the argument over the way the war should be fought and with what forces had already commenced even before the decision to send 100,000 troops at the end of July 1965. It was a bad omen. An ONE Estimate admitted the intelligence agencies had no real answer to questions about the impact of sending troops but feared the US might “acquire both the responsibility for the war and the stigma of an army with colonialist ambitions.” The outcome would depend not on military measures but on the total “effectiveness” of the US effort. As for the American belief that the new troops would smash the VC in a set battle, it was more likely the VC would adapt to American strategy and continue to seek victory through protracted conflict without ever “letting US/GVN forces engage them in decisive battle.”<sup>46</sup>

Here again the analysis was on target. In September 1965, however, the estimators sounded a bit more hopeful—and “hawkish.” In the past, a new National Intelligence Estimate said, Hanoi had reason to doubt that the United States was willing to undertake a protracted war, feelings strengthened by repeated “US soundings and overtures for negotiations.” Now with military successes and other tangible evidence that Washington was willing to increase its commitment, the Vietnamese *mise en scène* had changed. And it might result in the North Vietnamese moving toward political and diplomatic initiatives.<sup>47</sup>

The Estimate seemed to confirm the views of hardliners in Johnson’s war council. Curiously, moreover, it followed the resignation of John McCone as DCI, to be replaced first by Admiral William F. Raborn and then by Richard Helms a year later. McCone’s departure has long been a subject of some controversy. Clearly it was connected with differences with the President over Vietnam, but it had been assumed these extended only to the way LBJ was waging the war. McCone was a conservative Cold Warrior brought in by John Kennedy in the wake of the Bay of Pigs debacle to demonstrate that the Administration was not soft on Communism in the Caribbean or anywhere. But in retirement McCone revealed in a series of interviews that he had had doubts about Vietnam from the beginning and was unhappy when JFK took the first step up the escalation ladder.

Johnson’s decision to send 100,000 troops in July 1965 made McCone “desperately unhappy,” he said, and “That is when I parted company with them.” In those debates, McCone had argued sending troops in such numbers without unleashing America’s full power in air strikes was wrong. “I took the position that if you’re gonna be in a war, you’d better win it!” But it was the military and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara McCone blamed most for ignoring CIA Estimates that Vietnam promised only more escalation and huge numbers of casualties.

What do you do in such a situation, asked the interviewer? “You have to do your best to persuade those who are not willing to accept your analysis that they are wrong and ought to take a second look.” What, then, should Johnson have done differently in his conduct of the war? “In the first place, he should not have conducted it. You see Kennedy made a mistake when he accepted

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<sup>46</sup> Memorandum, *Reactions to a Further US Buildup in South Vietnam*, June 10, 1965, pp. 2-3; see also, Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-9-65, *Communist and Free World Reactions to a Possible US Course of Action*, July 23, 1965.

<sup>47</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-11-65, *Probable Communist Reactions to a US Course of Action*, September 22, 1965, pp. 2, 9.

the recommendations of Walt Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor to violate the 1954 agreement which restricted the military assistance group provided for the South Vietnamese. . . .”<sup>48</sup>

McCone’s dissent had been couched in super-hawk terms—no troops without massive air strikes—but he never expected the President would accept that recommendation, and it appears the DCI, “desperately unhappy,” had used a dramatic ploy, his resignation, to force consideration of the pitfalls of the policy LBJ had accepted from his other advisers. By early 1966 the brief moment of optimism within ONE had passed. On January 19, 1966, it assessed that the North Vietnamese had judged they could absorb “a great deal more bombing” and that they still had “political and military advantages” that promised ultimate success or at least a far more favorable settlement than the United States was willing to accept. A major finding was that the Soviet Union really did not have much influence over Hanoi’s decisions. Although Moscow would prefer that the war be de-escalated because of its own concerns with European issues, it could do little but persevere in supporting the North Vietnamese and wait for some opportunity for diplomacy. Another Estimate a few days later, one vigorously contested by the Air Force, concluded that even with bombing the ports and other attempts to interdict the movement of supplies into South Vietnam for the VC, Hanoi could still move “substantially greater amounts than in 1965.”<sup>49</sup>

The Air Force dissent complained that the Estimate had excluded consideration of what bombing would do to the “psychological fabric” of the enemy and thus to “North Vietnamese will to continue the war.”<sup>50</sup> In August the CIA corporately addressed the question of “will” directly in a 300-page “Memorandum.” The comprehensive study had been requested by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who would explain after the war that he had sought this intelligence study out of unhappiness about the analysis he received daily from his own Defense Intelligence Agency and other places. Chock full of tables and statistics—perhaps intended to impress the Pentagon “boss” in the language he knew best—the Memorandum covered every “measurable” aspect of the war conceivable.

The Memorandum detailed the ways the North Vietnamese coped with interdiction as no other paper had done before it, talking about the speed with which roads and bridges were repaired. In one section, for example, it discussed the imaginative ways the North Vietnamese dealt with bombed out railroad bridges by using large barges with tracks installed on the decks!<sup>51</sup> In contrast to the mobilization of civilian resources in the North, it pointed out, American military forces in the South required a supply and support system that required up to 80 percent of their manpower. And in another remarkable section, almost in passing, the Memorandum talked about VC taxation of GVN petroleum trucks in enemy-controlled territory.<sup>52</sup>

The Memorandum thus covered almost every aspect of the war, going back to the 1954 Geneva Conference. Indeed, the story of the French defeat had rarely been told so well as in these pages. With a sense of irony about current policy, this section noted that ambushes of American

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<sup>48</sup> Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley, Conversations with History, *John McCone Interview*, April 21, 1988, <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/McCone>, downloaded February 28, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Memorandum, *Reactions to Continuation or Termination of the Pause in Air Attacks on the DRV*, January 19, 1966, pp. 3-4; Special National Intelligence Estimate 10-1-66, *Possible Effects of a Proposed US Course of Action on DRV Capability to Support the Insurgency in South Vietnam*, February 4, 1966, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum, *Reactions to Continuation or Termination of the Pause in Air Attacks on the DRV*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum, *The Vietnamese Communists’ Will to Persist*, August 26, 1966, Appendix I, pp. 20-31.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix IV, p. 2; Appendix V, p. 17.

troops were taking place in exactly the same locations where the Vietminh had emerged out of hiding to attack the French.<sup>53</sup>

Eighteen months of bombing, it said, had not reduced North Vietnam's ability to send supplies to the south through alternative routes in Laos, and the number of enemy forces had very likely been underestimated. Destruction of North Vietnam's small industrial base would not mean much because Russia and China supplied the necessary war materials. It might, in fact, make it easier to divert manpower resources to other tasks in support of the war.

The Lao Dong (Communist) Party controlled the war in both parts of Vietnam, it went on, and while that might confirm Washington's insistence that the war had begun as an "invasion," it also suggested that the "will to persist" could not be localized and reduced to the leadership cadre in Hanoi. As it happened, North Vietnamese leaders were in Moscow at the same time McNamara was reading the report he had requested, and, while admitting their problems, refused to listen to Russian arguments that they should show more interest in negotiations. The Communists were no doubt disappointed by the failure to win the war when Saigon was in disarray but not so much as to force any revision in strategy. They were waiting also for pressures to build up in American domestic politics just as they had in France before the end of that war. Whether that was an invalid comparison—policymakers hated that analogy—there were ominous similarities. Just as in the first Vietnam war, the enemy had suffered horrendous casualties over the past year, and now as then there was no indication of a loss of will to continue.

However devastating to arguments that the war could be won with a little more or even a lot more bombing, the Memorandum also gave some comfort to those who believed that the other side was hurting and that morale had become a problem for the enemy. Like some other papers, *The Vietnamese Communists' Will to Persist* held out some hope that if American military successes continued the enemy might feel the need to reconsider its strategy in about a year's time, but it was presented in the final paragraph of the summary and not as a major theme. McNamara certainly found little in the paper to confirm the stream of optimistic reports from military headquarters in Saigon. In a conversation about the study with analyst George Allen, McNamara said he found it very interesting and asked "what we might be doing wrong in the war." The Memorandum had raised fundamental questions about whether any change of strategy or tactics would produce different results, however, and Allen's comments did not encourage new expectations. The Secretary of Defense had begun to reassess the entire situation, including his past confidence that quantitative measurements showed the war being won. It was a process that would take another year and culminate in a famous memorandum to President Johnson on November 1, 1967, advocating changes in the bombing policy and heavier emphasis upon seeking negotiations.<sup>54</sup>

Admiral Raborn's successor, Richard Helms, something of an old Vietnam "hand," ordered another Memorandum meanwhile that revisited the domino thesis one last time in the Johnson Administration. The burden of the paper suggested that, yes, an American withdrawal would be destabilizing in the Southeast Asia area, but the impact could be managed. The greatest concern would be how to avoid a US loss of self confidence, and that was a matter for skillful political

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix IX, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> George W. Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), pp. 212-7.

leadership. "I believe that you will find it interesting," the DCI wrote in his cover letter.<sup>55</sup> In his memoirs, Helms noted that he sent the memo, *Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam*, in a sealed envelope with a blunt warning, "The attached paper is sensitive, particularly if its *existence* [emphasis added by Helms] were to leak." He wanted LBJ to be responsible for any further dissemination of the document. "The mere rumor that such a document existed," he added in his memoirs, "would in itself have been political dynamite."<sup>56</sup>

Even so, Helms closed his covering letter with an ambivalent nod to Oval Office convictions about the war. "It has no bearing on whether the present political-military outlook within Vietnam makes acceptance of such an outcome advisable or inadvisable."<sup>57</sup> Helms maintained as well that the Memo was not an argument for or against getting out; "We are not defeatist out here" [at Langley]. But the author argued gradual withdrawal could be managed to minimize damage to the nation's position abroad and lessen the domestic political fall-out. And it ended, "If the analysis here advances the discussion at all, it is in the direction of suggesting that the risks [of an unfavorable outcome] are probably more limited and controllable than most previous argument has indicated."<sup>58</sup>

For Lyndon Johnson, however, it offered very little political help as the proposed timetable would work out "to Communist advantage within a relatively brief period, say, a year or so." The Memo conceded the impossibility of disentangling such a process from the "whole continuum of interacting forces." "The view forward is always both hazy and kaleidoscopic; those who have to act on such a view can have no certainties but must make choices on what appears [*sic*] at the moment to be the margin of advantage."<sup>59</sup> Helms's "secret" Memo to Johnson apparently remained a deep secret. Robert S. McNamara writes that he did not see it until after he left office and returned to the Johnson Presidential Library to do research for his memoirs. That is not surprising. It is hard to imagine Lyndon Johnson immersing himself for very long in the cloudy speculations the author had imposed on his conclusions.<sup>60</sup>

He had come to see the CIA, Johnson told a visitor, just like a problem the farmer had milking his cow. As the pail filled up, the cow kept swishing its muddy tail in the clean, warm milk.<sup>61</sup> Comments Johnson made to Australian journalists about the domino thesis, with the assistance of National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, might be seen as his response to the memo. Turning to the National Security Adviser, the President asked him to summarize the consequences of pulling out of Vietnam. Rostow gave the domino thesis a new spin by suggesting the first reaction would be "an immediate and profound political crisis," not in Vietnam, but in the United States. Out of this turmoil, he argued, the forces behind a "powerful isolationism" would emerge triumphant. Johnson then led him on to a further conclusion: "They would say our character had worn out?" Rostow replied, "Yes." And while we were divided and preoccupied by the debilitating debate, the USSR and China would seize dangerous initiatives. NATO "could never hold up" as America pursued its lost self-

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<sup>55</sup> Helms to Johnson, September 12, 1967, NSF, Country File, Vietnam, Box 259, *Johnson Papers*.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 314-5.

<sup>57</sup> Helms to Johnson, September 12, 1967.

<sup>58</sup> Memorandum, *Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam*, September 11, 1967, p. 33; Robert S. McNamara, with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1966), pp. 292-3.

<sup>59</sup> *Implications*, p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 293.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson's story was related to me by George Allen.

confidence. On and on he continued this litany of disasters, countering any and all arguments advanced in the Helms Memo.<sup>62</sup>

The hopeful conclusions of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) about enemy numbers in the 1967 Order of Battle (O/B) controversy with the CIA were even more speculative than the Helms memo or Rostow's dire predictions. Here, indeed, was a high stakes dispute. MACV had been under intense pressure to show real progress in the war. On September 12, 1967, as CIA estimators were meeting with MACV counterparts, the President turned to General Harold Johnson and made it plain what he wanted: "On balance we have not been losing, the President said, and we will change it a lot more. The President said we should say that the enemy cannot hold up under this pressure."<sup>63</sup> Given the attrition strategy associated with graduated escalation—there were eventually half a million American soldiers in Vietnam—the only way to demonstrate progress was through body-counts. If the enemy suffered as many casualties as MACV claimed, it was possible to imagine that the situation in Vietnam was approaching the long-promised "cross-over" point where American reinforcements outnumbered the ability of the North Vietnamese/Viet Cong to put new men into the field.<sup>64</sup>

Many CIA analysts doubted MACV's estimates about the enemy's O/B, even those like George Carver, who normally landed on the optimist's side of the Vietnamese fence. The dispute raged through September to November, 1967, and ever afterwards in books and lawsuits. CIA analysts even had some deeply worried allies in the military concerned that MACV had underestimated the size of enemy forces. There is no question but that the Oval Office was also involved in the pressures that forced a "compromise" during a meeting in Saigon, as Rostow cabled the President, "The danger is press will latch on to previous underestimate and revive credibility gap talk."<sup>65</sup>

It was becoming harder and harder to close the credibility gap, and everyone was expected to put a shoulder to the castle doors. Helms's role continued to be an ambiguous one. He had sent the "secret" Memorandum to Johnson telling the president it represented not the work of one man but a consensus, yet he also now agreed the CIA must "compromise" on a lower figure, 250,000, for the O/B estimate. The DCI's complicity in accepting MACV's stonewalling undercut the logic of the September Memorandum and left Helms exposed to harsh criticism by some of his best analysts.<sup>66</sup>

George Carver had led the intelligence community delegation to Saigon that accepted the compromise and now rejoined the group, walking down the sunny side of the street. In the works for 144 days, the "compromise" Estimate had gone through twenty-two drafts, "the hardest-fought in agency history." "Our information has improved substantially in the past year or two," it admitted in an opening paragraph, "but the unconventional nature of the war poses difficult intelligence

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<sup>62</sup> "Notes of the President's Meeting with Australian Broadcast Group," September 20, 1967, Meeting Notes File, Box 3, Johnson Library.

<sup>63</sup> "Weekly Luncheon with Secretaries Rusk and McNamara . . .," September 12, 1967, *ibid.*, Box 2.

<sup>64</sup> See Harold Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, pp. 86-7.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7; and see, Sam Adams, *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1994). In his memoirs, moreover, Helms places the memo in September 1968, months after the Tet offensive. This may be a simple mistake. *A Look Over My Shoulder*, p. 314.

problems, the more so in a social environment where basic data is incomplete and often untrustworthy.”<sup>67</sup>

From there on it was practically pure MACV orthodoxy, portraying a growing problem for the enemy of maintaining force levels and increasing recruitment. “Considering all the relevant factors, however, we believe there is a fairly good chance that the overall strength and effectiveness of the military forces and the political infrastructure will continue to decline.” According to a chart of the sort Rostow treasured, infiltration had fallen off dramatically in the first eight months of 1967, from a monthly average the previous year of between 7,000 and 8,000, to between 4,000 and 5,000.<sup>68</sup>

From such statistics it was possible to glimpse the cross-over point just beyond the next rice paddy. But Johnson never got there. The President even brought MACV commander General Westmoreland back to Washington to assure Congress and the public. The General made speeches, gave television interviews, and was guided along by Johnson at a Congressional briefing. “We feel that we are somewhat like the boxer in the ring,” Westmoreland told Congressional leaders, “where we have got our opponent almost on the ropes. And we hear murmurs to our rear as we look over the shoulder that the second wants to throw in the towel.”<sup>69</sup>

Johnson then urged the General to talk about what bad shape the enemy was in. “Tell them the story about the company that came down the other day and over 38 years of age and 20 of them didn’t make it.” Westmoreland was eager to oblige. “I talked to the President today about this, and made the point that North Vietnam is having manpower problems.” The General then related how *his* intelligence—not those 12,000 miles away from the scene—had learned from a captured prisoner about a company of 120 men who left North Vietnam to head south to battle. Twenty men fell out sick or deserted. Of the rest forty were over 38 years old. “And 38 for a Vietnamese is an old man, I can assure you . . . So, they are having to go now to the young group and to the old group.”<sup>70</sup>

Johnson and Rostow pinned their hopes on such microcosms even as the enemy assembled its uncounted forces outside the cities to prepare for a massive attack. On January 31, 1968, the Tet offensive began and with it a re-evaluation of the American role from the beginning. Helms continued to support Johnson loyally, but his memoirs echoed those of others who believed that the mistake was originally made by not exploring Ho Chi Minh’s overtures to President Truman. “Some of the Americans who dealt closely with Ho in those early days saw him as a nationalist and idealist, a person whom the United States might profitably have supported.”<sup>71</sup>

A week before the Tet attacks began, General Westmoreland sent the Pentagon his assessment of the enemy’s anticipated winter-spring offensive. He agreed with the CIA station in Saigon that the incipient offensive had already demonstrated increased urgency and tempo, but he thought that it was really a somewhat desperate attempt to force diplomatic negotiations for a coalition government. It would be short-lived because the enemy had problems maintaining force

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<sup>67</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate, 14.3-67, *Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam*, November 13, 1967, p. 1; Adams, *War of Numbers*, p. 129.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Congressional Briefing by General Westmoreland, President Johnson, and Mr. Rostow, November 16, 1967, *Johnson Papers*, Congressional Briefings, Box 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* (I have reversed the order of the last two sentences quoted from the minutes of the briefing.)

<sup>71</sup> *A Look Over My Shoulder*, p. 309.

levels.<sup>72</sup> George Carver had reached a similar conclusion, but when the offensive turned out to be a broad attack on cities across South Vietnam, he asserted Saigon had earlier sent “nothing which appeared to be very hard” that anticipated the upcoming attacks. But then this admission:

While we may be undergoing a major multiple harassment without lasting military significance, the ultimate import will depend on their degree of success on the ground and the impact on American and South Vietnamese willingness to rebound. The boost to VC/NVA morale is in any case certain to be substantial.<sup>73</sup>

Tet has been debated ever since. In an unsigned memorandum on February 9, 1968, probably also by Carver, the “revisionist” argument was already developed in embryonic form. The Communist effort to rally people to the VC cause had failed, it began. Tet could not be considered a “final allied ‘victory’ but certainly represents an initial Communist defeat.” No one had claimed the O/B conclusions were absolutely accurate, it went in a more uncertain tone. “The 250,000 figure is not our estimate of total enemy strength.” Whether the figure of 60,000 enemy casualties was also not absolutely accurate, it concluded, “Total enemy strength (as opposed to main force strength) has indeed declined.”<sup>74</sup>

“‘Victory’” is a slippery, normative word,” the memo said, “not a noun with solid content.” So it is with the argument over Tet. The North Vietnamese/VC did not win a military victory, and they suffered very high casualties, but the victory the United States had sought since 1954 was now much farther off than beyond the next rice paddy or the one after that. The financial and social costs of the struggle, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson of the famous council of “Wisemen” told Johnson on March 26, 1968, would be as hard for the United States to sustain as the force levels for the enemy. The Wisemen’s conclusion that the United States had to find a new way out of Vietnam rocked Johnson as nothing else had.<sup>75</sup>

The CIA briefer for the Wisemen was none other than George Carver. The landscape had changed rapidly since Tet. Martin Luther King had been assassinated, setting off riots in Washington, D.C., and other cities. Senator Eugene McCarthy had entered a Democratic primary in New Hampshire on a peace ticket and done amazingly well. Robert Kennedy was ready to join the race. However that might be, Carver later related that he had told the genro of American diplomacy, “You can’t tell the people in Keokuk, Iowa, you want to get out and tell the North Vietnamese you’re going to stick it out for two decades and make them believe you.” But Carver made two substantive points that went beyond wit and clever expressions: the pacification program was in shambles, and the enemy had been underestimated and undercounted by half.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Rostow to Johnson, January 22, 1968, encl. Westmoreland cable of same date, National Security Files, Country File, Vietnam, Box 127, *Johnson Papers*. For the Saigon station warning, see Adams, *War of Numbers*, pp. 133-4.

<sup>73</sup> Carver to Rostow, January 31, 1968, National Security File, NSC Histories, Box 48, *Johnson Papers*. On the failure of Saigon to provide a better estimate of the attacks on cities, see Allen, *None So Blind*, pp. 256-8.

<sup>74</sup> Helms to George Christian, enclosing unsigned memorandum, February 9, 1968, Files of George Christian, Box 12, *Johnson Papers*.

<sup>75</sup> The Wiseman included, among others, Arthur Goldberg, George Ball, Robert Murphy, Arthur Dean, Douglas Dillon, Henry Cabot Lodge, Matthew Ridgway, Mac Bundy, and Clark Clifford.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 192-3.

When Johnson heard of the defection brewing, he demanded Carver give him the same briefing. On March 26, after sitting through the whole thing for an hour and fifteen minutes, he got up and left the room without saying a word. Then he came back, shook Carver's hand, and again left the room without saying a word. Five days later he addressed the nation and said that he was stopping the bombing of the north except in the region of the demilitarized zone. He also announced that he would not seek a new term for the presidency. Escalation was over.

### **The Elusive Quest**

When the North Vietnamese agreed to come to Paris to open negotiations, it was no secret that their first purpose was to secure an unconditional end to all the bombing. After that was achieved they would move on to negotiations, but not with an eye to compromise. "The Communists see themselves more as revolutionaries opening a second front," read an ONE Memorandum on what to expect at Paris, "than as negotiators exploring the possibilities for compromise." They saw themselves as leading from strength, though realizing their position was not as strong as they had hoped it would be. The Americans should be prepared for the demand that the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF) be represented in a new coalition government.<sup>77</sup>

The question of NLF representation as an equal party to the negotiations was, of course, the hardest thing for the American delegation to accept. Secretary of State Dean Rusk had long ago vowed that the NLF or VC would not be allowed to shoot its way to the peace table. The intelligence Memorandum reminded policymakers that Hanoi's memory of the 1954 Geneva Conference and what happened when elections were not held two years later made Ho's heirs "chary" of negotiations that might fall short of its maximum goals. There was absolutely no chance they would back down from the demand to be an equal party at the negotiations.

The Memorandum also stated that the North Vietnamese would seek to manipulate the agenda in ways designed to exacerbate relations between Saigon and Washington. Over the long summer months of 1968, Johnson and his advisers wrestled with these conditions as the President attempted to find a safe exit out of the morass that had overtaken his administration and endangered his beloved Great Society programs. Finally, near the end of October in the election year, he thought he saw some light. In exchange for Hanoi's promise to initiate serious discussions and to stop the shelling of cities, the President declared a bombing halt over all North Vietnam.

Johnson had done so with the concurrence of General Creighton Abrams, who had replaced Westmoreland as commander of MACV. But that was only the first hurdle. South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu balked, holding out against the terms of any agreement that would place the NLF on an equal footing with his regime. His resistance no doubt helped to elect Richard Nixon, but the Democratic defeat cannot be said to have resulted from a Vietnam policy that seemed either too hawkish or too dovish. Nixon had neatly avoided talking specifics about what he would do to extricate the nation from the unpopular war that dragged on seemingly without end. Taking advantage of Lyndon Johnson's March 31 declaration that he would devote himself to finding a peaceful solution, Nixon promised not to criticize the President and said only that if LBJ failed he had a "plan."

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<sup>77</sup> Intelligence Memorandum, *Hanoi's Negotiating Position and Concept of Negotiations*, May 6, 1968, p. 1-2.

Beyond the bluff and bluster of the “madman” theory—a variation of the old story that Eisenhower planned to use nuclear weapons in the Korean War—the Nixon plan turned out to be a long and torturous road to a settlement that probably was worse than what Johnson could have obtained in 1968—but that also is speculative. In the summer of 1969 Nixon announced the first withdrawal of 25,000 troops, at the same time he was extending bombing into Cambodia. On July 17<sup>th</sup>, a Special National Intelligence Estimate asserted that despite the Communists’ ability to maintain the numerical strength of their forces, “the Communists are suffering an erosion of their position in South Vietnam.” The paper argued against itself at points, as had many other Estimates, asserting that enemy weaknesses had been revealed by the “alacrity with which the Communists responded to the March 1968 cutback in the bombing and the US offer to begin talks.” A few paragraphs later, however, the paper said that while an operation against the administrative structure of the NLF was underway, “despite some attrition and disruption, the infrastructure remains basically intact and capable of engaging in roughly the same magnitude of operations as it has during the past four years.”<sup>78</sup>

To prove the strength of the enemy was “eroding,” the paper gave huge estimates of casualties. If these were not exaggerated, at 170,000 men in 1967, nearly 300,000 in 1968, and continuing at the same level in 1969, what the Estimate was really saying was that the will to persist had not slackened since August 1966. It had grown stronger. But the Estimate insisted, as had Westmoreland two years earlier before Tet, that the quality of the enemy troops was in decline. Yet even at this point the Estimate twisted back again to acknowledge there were adequate human resources within North Vietnam to make up for looming deficiencies in the south and the logistical support system “along the infiltration pipeline” remained sufficient. The Air Force, as it had always done when earlier questions arose about interdiction, dissented from this judgment. Its view was that the bombing had cut tonnage by 25% from 80 tons to 60 tons per day, “a logistics shortfall that should result in a reduced level of enemy activities during the last half of 1969.”<sup>79</sup>

In the end, the Estimate mirrored positions in the debate over whether Nixon’s “plan” sought only a “decent interval” or whether “Vietnamization” envisioned long-term survival of an independent South Vietnam. Former policymakers and historians continue to argue the evidence.<sup>80</sup> The Air Force dissent could be seen as a rebuttal, therefore, to those who argued that at best the war was stalemated. Finessing Vietnam to deal directly with Russia and China was not going to be easy, as the Air Force view suggested to some that victory was still possible. Above all, Nixon feared he could not control the political situation if he admitted the war had been a mistake or a tragedy of missed signals. Little wonder he played his cards very close to his vest.

At the same time the July 1969 Estimate was being written, Nixon was speaking at an air base on the Island of Guam, announcing a new “doctrine” that muffled the sound of clacking dominos. “As far as our role is concerned,” he said of the future, “we must avoid the kind of policy that will make countries in Asia so dependent upon us that we are dragged into conflicts such as the one we have in Vietnam.” One can interpret this sentence in many ways and add in his promise that

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<sup>78</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-69, *Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam*, July 17, 1969, pp. 1,3-4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>80</sup> See Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), and Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1998), for an introduction to the opposing positions.

the United States would honor all its commitments, but the “Guam Doctrine” sent a shock wave through the SEATO area, particularly so in Thailand, where National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger attempted to draw a distinction between internal subversion, including guerrilla war, and an international conflict. “The general policy is that internal subversion has to be the primary responsibility of the threatened country.”<sup>81</sup>

Along with the emerging *détente* policies Nixon hoped to pursue, balancing the Soviet Union and China, the Guam Doctrine could certainly be interpreted as removing Vietnam from the Cold War battlefield. A lessening of Soviet and Chinese anxieties about American intentions, on the other hand, might also produce a situation where Hanoi felt stranded from its sources of supply. The intelligence community estimated in early 1970 that Hanoi was indeed worried about the success of Vietnamization, i.e., shifting the ground war to the South Vietnamese. The Estimate was probably the most upbeat assessment since those in 1965 after the decision to send large numbers of American troops into the war. Enemy casualties “still” exceeded infiltration and recruitment rates, it said, and their military tactics were conservationist, aimed at avoiding heavy losses. Looked at in terms of the effort to build up South Vietnam’s military forces, the paper seemed to be saying, indeed, that the “cross-over” point was in sight, ironically, not with American troop numbers going up but going down!<sup>82</sup>

But—and there was always a “but”—the North Vietnamese had other advantages. “The Communists attach considerable importance to controlling the adjacent Laotian and Cambodian border areas, which they probably believe can continue to serve as base areas and sanctuaries.” There is considerable evidence that Nixon had renewed hope early in 1970 that the measured pace of American withdrawal and a National Intelligence Estimate’s report of successes in regaining and pacifying areas previously under enemy control led him to think in bold terms about operations to clear out those sanctuaries and give Saigon a real chance beyond a decent interval.<sup>83</sup>

The Special Estimate put a positive spin on the Guam Doctrine, positing that Hanoi had been forced to revise its timetable after realizing that Nixon never intended to approach the Paris negotiations as a “face-saver” but only intended to leave gradually in pace with the GVN’s growing strength and ability to handle the situation with minimum outside support. Vietnamization had added to Hanoi’s fears that Nixon had outflanked antiwar sentiments, giving the President a great deal more flexibility with his timetable. The Nixon advantages kept mounting up. There was the Sino-Soviet split to factor into the equation. Indeed, the mood was close to self-congratulatory, if not giddy, about future prospects. “In these circumstances,” the paper summed up, “the North Vietnamese leaders might deem it prudent further to scale down the level of military operations in the South, or even to move toward a cease-fire.”<sup>84</sup>

For all the optimism, however, the mood in the Oval Office just before the Cambodian “incursion” at the end of April 1970 bordered on the desperate. Cambodian Prince Sihanouk’s government had been overturned by a rightist general, Lon Nol, whose regime came under

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<sup>81</sup> See, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, (vol. I. Washington: G.P.O., 2003), pp. 91-3.

<sup>82</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-70, *The Outlook from Hanoi: Factors Affecting North Vietnam’s Policy on the War in Vietnam*, February 5, 1970, pp. 1-6; and see Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, pp. 182-83.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-70, p. 17.

immediate pressure from Hanoi. A joint American/GVN move against the supposed headquarters of the NLF/North Vietnamese would serve two purposes, then: protect Lon Nol and demonstrate that Vietnamization really was working. Nixon expected trouble with the antiwar movement and “up on the Hill,” but the risks seemed worth it. On television, he told the nation that the operation would strike at the “heart of the trouble.” It “puts the leaders of North Vietnam on notice that . . . we will not be humiliated. We will not be defeated.”<sup>85</sup>

The explosion Nixon set off with the Cambodian “incursion” reverberated across the political landscape from Congress to Kent State University and back to the Lincoln Memorial, where Nixon tried to start a pre-dawn dialogue with college students from all parts of the country. Whatever time the incursion may have bought for Saigon, it did not do anything to improve Lon Nol’s chances for surviving. A special National Intelligence Estimate in early August 1970 reported that in the four months since Sihanouk’s ouster, half of Cambodia had been overrun by the Communists. Without outside support in the form of heavy military assistance, the outlook was grim. Lon Nol might survive until the end of the year, until the rainy season ended, but after that the Cambodians were in for it, with the prospect for heavy fighting against long odds.<sup>86</sup>

Hanoi would have to judge above all, concluded the paper, how the Cambodian situation would affect the will of the US to prosecute the struggle in Vietnam. The tone of this conclusion was very different from the pre-incursion Estimate as it reverted to the “test of wills” theme. Hanoi had never doubted the superior physical and material capabilities of the US, it asserted—without saying how those capabilities could have been used differently from Rolling Thunder to Cambodia—while North Vietnam’s hopes had lain in its ability to out-stay the US “in a prolonged politico-military contest carried on according to the principles of revolutionary struggle.” The public outcry against “the Cambodian adventure” might lead Hanoi to believe it had the upper hand now. Dean Rusk never said it better. “But it [Hanoi] must recognize that the contest in Indochina will continue for some time.”<sup>87</sup>

Calling the incursion, “the Cambodian adventure,” was something of a give-away, even if not precisely intended in that way by the August 1970 Special NIE. At the least it suggested Nixon’s rash effort to test Vietnamization had made things worse, politically at home and militarily in Cambodia. In April 1971 a new NIE foresaw little change in the “reasonably good” outlook for Vietnam for that year but thought an enemy offensive was likely the following year when the US election season opened and the troop drawdowns continued. South Vietnam would continue to require substantial US support. It took note of serious problems in ARVN morale, while Hanoi’s advantage was still the “apparent durability of the communist party apparatus.” Besides the communist threat, moreover, the GVN faced other internal problems that might well produce tensions, growing anti-Americanism, and a government relying solely on coercive powers. Should that happen, the outlook would change to one of increasing instability “risking political disintegration.”

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<sup>85</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s War*, p. 211.

<sup>86</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 57-70, *The Outlook for Cambodia*, August 6, 1970, pp. 1, 41.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Then there was this gloomy summary:

Thus, it is impossible at this time to offer a clear-cut estimate about South Vietnam's prospects through the mid-1970s. There are many formidable problems and no solid assurances over this period of time. In our view, the problems facing the GVN, the uncertainties in South Vietnam about the magnitude, nature and duration of future US support, doubts concerning the South Vietnamese will to persist, the resiliency of the communist apparatus in South Vietnam, and North Vietnam's demonstrated ability and willingness to pay the price of perseverance are such that the longer term survival of the GVN is by no means yet assured.<sup>88</sup>

No Vietnam Estimates were produced in 1972. This was a year of intense diplomacy with summits in both China and the Soviet Union. The spring offensive came, as predicted, and failed to bring down the Saigon government. Nixon could thus boast that his diplomacy had in fact isolated North Vietnam, at least in the sense that there were no threats from Beijing or Moscow when the US mined Haiphong harbor. In Paris the negotiations continued. Nixon and Kissinger had introduced the POW question into the negotiations in early 1969, perhaps seeking to gain both moral leverage and time for their Vietnamization policies to work. Now, however, the tables had turned, as the North Vietnamese used the POW issue as leverage in support of their demands that Washington agree to dismantle the political structure it had so carefully built in Saigon and allow it to be replaced with a coalition government. Eventually Hanoi dropped the demand that the Thieu government be replaced with a coalition, realizing that the United States would not insist upon a withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces from the South.

After a peace agreement had been negotiated in October, however, Nixon pulled back, partly because of South Vietnamese objections but also because he had little reason to fear losing the election. Infuriated, the North Vietnamese broke off negotiations. This gave Nixon the opportunity to say that the Christmas bombing forced them back to the table. The substance of the October draft agreement, however, was not changed by the bombing, as the final agreement in January 1973 still provided for the complete withdrawal of American troops and the continuing presence of North Vietnamese forces in the South. As one American diplomat, John Negroponte, quipped bitterly, "We bombed them into accepting our concessions."<sup>89</sup>

An October 1973 Estimate concluded that North Vietnam did not believe it could gain power through the political provisions of the Paris agreement and would launch a military offensive to try to reunite Vietnam. The Estimate did not predict success for Hanoi: ARVN's resolve had grown stronger, it insisted, and the US had not so far dissolved its commitment to Saigon. The ominous build-up of military supplies suggested it would not be longer than a year away. The unknown factor was the political situation in the United States and whether the President would have greater or lesser freedom of action. Obviously, Hanoi would take note of any changes in that regard.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 53-71, *South Vietnam: Problems and Prospects*, April 29, 1971p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, p. 240.

<sup>90</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 53/14.3-73, *Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam*, October 12, 1973, pp.1, 15.

As had always been the pattern, the darkest prospects were placed deep inside. Given the balance of forces within the south, the October 1973 Estimate said, “Preemptive offensive operations of any magnitude seem well beyond GVN capabilities.” The Communists would undoubtedly be aware of the preparations, as they had been in the past, and, in any case, such operations could not be sustained without “a significant expansion of US military aid.” And that was not likely to happen, the paper could have continued.<sup>91</sup>

With Watergate tides sloshing up against his desk in the Oval Office, Nixon’s ability to rejoin the battle in Vietnam—even if he had wanted to, a doubtful proposition at best—was close to zero or below. In May 1974 an NIE gave as its best judgment that, while the picture was not entirely clear, Hanoi would probably not undertake a major offensive that year or in the first part of 1975. The paper argued that eventually the North Vietnamese would have to do so or risk that South Vietnam would become strong enough to withstand such a blow. But once again the bad news was tucked away in the back pages. The South Vietnamese economy, it said, was in a serious slump and the outlook was for a worsening situation with unemployment and rapid inflation. The problems were caused by increasing prices of critical imports and declining amounts of US assistance. What the paper did not say, however, was that this problem had been identified as early as the late 1950s, when the new Diem government in South Vietnam essentially lived off American support rather than adopting policies designed to plant a solid foundation for the economy out of fear of alienating his supporters.<sup>92</sup>

In December an Estimate revised the judgment about a likely attack, observing that Saigon’s combat abilities had peaked in the first year or so following the ceasefire and were now in a gradual decline. “Without an immediate increase in US military assistance, the GVN’s military situation would be parlous, and Saigon might explore the possibility of new negotiations with the Communists.” In other words, the previous conclusion that North Vietnam could not come to power except by military means was now put in the questionable column, but the issue depended on Washington. The intelligence community still believed that an all-out offensive was not likely until 1976, when Hanoi could regard a US presidential year “as a particularly favorable time to launch an offensive.”<sup>93</sup>

The perennial concern inside and outside the intelligence community about the political climate in the US is reflected here, alongside the speculation that military victory was (or had been) within reach if the will had been there to continue the fight. Although ONE papers had raised questions about the war from the beginning, expressed skepticism about the domino thesis, and deflated assumptions that escalation and bombing would deter the North Vietnamese, as the death agonies of the American-installed government in Saigon began, these later National Intelligence Estimates touched more and more on supposed deficiencies in American domestic politics. In the postwar debate over the “Vietnam syndrome” such arguments became entangled in current events and later wars.

The final Special National Intelligence Estimate in this collection, *Assessment of the Situation in South Vietnam*, published on March 27, 1975, assessed that even if the ongoing North

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 53/14.3-1-74, *The Likelihood of a Major North Vietnamese Offensive Before June 30, 1975*, May 23, 1974, pp. 1,5.

<sup>93</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 53/14.3-2-74, *Short Term Prospects for Vietnam*, December 23, 1974, pp. 2, 6.

Vietnamese attack, which had come too soon according to previous assessments, were blunted, Thieu's government would find itself in control of little more than the delta and Saigon. The continuing debate in America on further aid to South Vietnam was an unsettling factor fueling defeatism. It foresaw final defeat by early 1976, an assessment still too generous as it turned out. Outright defeat could be avoided only if there were changes in Saigon that opened the way "to a new settlement on near-surrender terms."<sup>94</sup>

## Final Words

The papers in this collection generally reflect sound and realistic analysis and in some cases prescient commentary on likely outcomes, yet they also illustrate the bedeviling problems of reaching intelligence judgments. The first commandment for the analyst, as gleaned from the documents themselves, is (and has to be), "Thou Shalt Not Lose Thy Audience." National Intelligence Estimates, of course, constitute much less even than the tip of the iceberg of advice arriving in the Oval Office. To make an impact, the Estimate must conform at least in some way to the other information reaching the policymakers at the highest level. Presidential commitments usually do not wait upon the considered judgment of intelligence specialists, however much one might wish that were more the case. Dissents from policy assumptions appear, therefore, as in these documents, in later pages or within careful wording that sometimes seems to require a decoder ring.

The bane of clear thinking, the "a-little-of-this-and-a-little-of-that," is present in many of the papers, enabling the policymaker to take only what fits today's need to fill a gap. We know from Harold Ford's excellent study, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, that at least one crucial NIE was essentially turned upside down by DCI McCone and that in the 1967 Order of Battle controversy the CIA leadership knuckled under to the military and MACV. Yet, on occasion and at key turning points, the dissent and skepticism were plain to see, as in the 1964 Memorandum discussing the domino thesis, the August 1966 study of 300 pages on North Vietnam's will to persist, and the remarkable September 1967 "Memorandum" DCI Richard Helms sent in a sealed envelope to President Johnson, hoping he would find it "interesting."

The process of persuading a policymaker to reconsider assumptions is a long one. John McCone, perhaps recalling his own role in the 1963 Estimate, would say in retirement that Johnson (and Kennedy before him) had acted on flawed assumptions, but in the face of such determination intelligence analysts can only hope to set in motion a process of reconsideration. As the situation in Vietnam deteriorated, the analysis concentrated too much on the supposed weakening will in the US to stand up to the Communists. That was unfortunate but hardly surprising. Perhaps down deep at its core, the feeling was simply the reverse side of American hyper-optimism. That energy fueled insistence there were no limits to what American good will (and technology) could accomplish even in a place where the "best and brightest" had very little real knowledge about the history and dynamics of Vietnamese politics and life. The war became an endurance contest, but, it can be argued, the Estimates observed that energy alone could not sustain the effort against such odds. DCI William Colby, who succeeded Helms, wrote in his memoirs about "individual decisions" that might have changed history and where intelligence's ability to see past errors to help formulate

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<sup>94</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 53/14.3-75, *Assessment of the Situation in South Vietnam*, March 27, 1975, p. 3.

future policy was not properly respected. For Vietnam, he wrote, one would start the examination with “Truman’s turn away from Ho Chi Minh’s OSS-supported nationalism.”<sup>95</sup>

So Colby, who presided as DCI when those last estimates were written and who believed at the time that the war could still be won, joined with John Foster Dulles, and John McCone, and Richard Helms in seeing the origins of the war in clear hindsight. “I went to Vietnam with no reservations,” wrote a diplomat about his youthful confidence in the Kennedy Administration’s understanding of the need to win hearts and minds in an unconventional war. “Conveying the mind-set of the era was a Peanuts cartoon someone later stuck on the wall in our Saigon embassy showing Charlie Brown marching resolutely onto the baseball field with his bat over his shoulder and his glove slung over his bat. The caption read, ‘How can we lose when we’re so sincere?’”<sup>96</sup>

The intelligence community had reasons, and readers can find them here.

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<sup>95</sup> Colby, *Honorable Men*, p. 287.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Hopkins Miller, *Vietnam and Beyond: A Diplomat’s Cold War Education* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Univ. Press, 2002), p. 56.