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Episodes, 1962-1965

## THE US DECISION TO GO BIG IN VIETNAM

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*Studies in Intelligence* devoted a special issue in 1984 (Volume 28, Number 5) to "US Intelligence and Vietnam," by General Bruce Palmer, Jr. Mr. Ford prepared this article as a supplement to that study. The Editorial Board of *Studies in Intelligence* encourages other intelligence officers to draw upon their own experiences—collection, operations, communications, logistics, analysis or whatever—and contribute to the discussion of Vietnam intelligence in this journal.

This article expands on certain aspects of General Palmer's study in an effort (1) to provide a fuller context of the situation in which national intelligence found itself in 1962-1965, a period of major decision for the US Government concerning Vietnam; and (2) to illustrate certain problems then encountered which influenced the contribution which national intelligence made—or did not make—to the US decision to go big in Vietnam. The intent of this article is not to take issue with General Palmer's judgments, but to afford a feel for the times and for some of the difficulties national intelligence met in dealing with a seriously deteriorating situation abroad and with increasingly committed Washington policymakers—difficulties which two decades later still beset the estimating business on occasion, different only in particular settings and persona. The article's examination of several episodes\* illustrates certain of these still-applicable difficulties in the intelligence-policy-making relationship.

Before, during, and since Vietnam the incidence and intensity of consumer apathy toward or resistance to uncongenial national intelligence has sometimes risen in direct proportion to the degree to which US policy has become heavily committed in some crisis situation where a particular ally is in sore straits, and where a basic US decision must be made either to rescue that ally (possibly at high cost and risk) or to cut our losses as gracefully as we can (again possibly at high cost and risk). This was quintessentially the case with respect to Vietnam, 1962-1965, where the central lesson to be learned about national estimates was the *impact* which they did or did not have on senior consumers. It is not so much what those estimates said as it was the particular concepts—myth or reality—which remained dominant in the minds of the chief policymakers, in a setting where deteriorating fortunes abroad were generating substantial policy momentum and commitment.

That certainly was the situation in which the intelligence and policymaking communities found themselves in 1962-1965, the period bounded by the decline and fall of President Diem, the subsequent further weakening of suc-

\* This article does not seek to present any kind of full account of the Vietnam role of national intelligence, 1962-1965, but confines itself to certain episodes where the author had direct contact. During that period he was Chief, Far East Staff, and then Chief, Estimates Staff, Office of National Estimates (ONE), and was also the DCI's representative to a number of the Vietnam policy interagency working groups of that time.

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cessor regimes in Saigon, President Kennedy's assassination and the advent of President Johnson, LBJ's Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the beginnings of US armed action in Vietnam, and finally the commitment to de facto war against North Vietnam. The problems posed for intelligence in cases of deepening US involvement have of course not been unique to the Vietnam experience: as late as the fall of 1983, for example, national estimates seriously doubting the chances for stability in Lebanon encountered much more flack than flattery from senior consumers. Contrary to General Palmer's view (in speaking of Vietnam estimates prior to 1963), Lebanon was not a case wherein "US intelligence officials failed to articulate their views in a manner convincing enough to make US policymakers understand the harsh realities of the . . . problem."<sup>1</sup> The language of those agreed Lebanon estimates could not have been more straightforward, stark, and forceful.<sup>2</sup> So too, as indicated below, was the language of certain of the estimative judgments made two decades ago concerning Vietnam. Then as now the problem is less the particular language of the estimates than the competing estimates, already implanted in the minds of committed policymakers, which those messages encounter.<sup>3</sup>

A quick look at several Vietnam episodes, 1962-1965, illustrates the tough sledding the business of making national intelligence judgments experienced on several scores: (1) the pressure upon estimating created by a setting in which senior policymakers were not only heavily engaged in contingency planning for action against North Vietnam but, behind the scenes and as the situation further deteriorated seriously in Saigon, were progressively moving the Executive machinery toward bombing the DRV (North Vietnam) out of conviction that their plans offered the only hope of preventing the collapse of morale in South Vietnam; (2) the ignoring by policymakers of certain estimative judgments and war games' outcomes which did not necessarily support their enthusiasm that bombing of the North would turn the trick; and, finally, (3) an outcome where, in retrospect, the estimates don't look too bad to historians, but at the time no one had been listening.

#### Episode I: The Sad Fate of NIE 53-63

The first illustrative episode is the fate of NIE 53-63, "Prospects in South Vietnam" (of 17 April 1963), whose significance deserves more attention than the three sentences General Palmer's broad survey is able to give it.<sup>4</sup> In brief, this Estimate was initiated by ONE in October 1962 out of concern that, back of an outwardly fairly rosy situation in South Vietnam, the military and political fortunes of President Diem's government were in definite decline. The

<sup>1</sup> "US Intelligence and Vietnam," *Studies in Intelligence* (Special Issue 1984, Volume 28, Number 5), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> For example, SNIE 36.4-83, *Prospects for Lebanon*, of 11 October 1983: The prospects for a lasting political reconciliation among Lebanon's confessional factions "are extremely bleak;" the prospects of achieving a sovereign and politically stable state free from foreign occupation "are virtually nonexistent."

<sup>3</sup> The list of such cases is of course not confined to Vietnam and Lebanon. For that matter, Athenian advisors doubtless had a tough time making much impact on the preconceptions of generals Alcibiades and Nicias, when in 415 B.C. one was hot to bail out a beleaguered, weak ally across the sea in Sicily, while the other was equally dead certain that the Athenians greatly underestimated the enemy there and were about to go off half-cocked. (Book VI, Thucydides.)

<sup>4</sup> *Op cit.*, p. 25.

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initial draft of that NIE took a fairly dark view, calling attention to South Vietnam's "very great weaknesses," among which the draft listed a lack of

aggressive and firm leadership at all levels of command, poor morale among the troops, lack of trust between peasant and soldier, poor tactical use of available forces, a very inadequate intelligence system, and obvious communist penetration of the South Vietnamese military organization.

That draft judged that the struggle in South Vietnam "at best will be protracted and costly," and that "substantial progress toward Vietnamese self-dependence cannot occur unless there are radical changes in the methods and personnel of the South Vietnamese Government." This somber tone was modified—but only slightly—in subsequent coordination with the ONE Board (of seniors) and then with the representatives of the intelligence community: the finished, agreed representatives' draft which went to the USIB (the then NFIB) was clearly still an alert to policymakers that all was not well with the South Vietnam ally.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, at the USIB the then DCI remanded the NIE draft, instructing ONE to check with those experts "who really know the Vietnam scene," and then to submit a revised draft. The experts the DCI named happened to come from among the ranks of policymaking officials who bore responsibility for directing operations in Vietnam and who, like those Senator Mansfield had encountered, were optimistic over the prospects of success. In short, these Washington officials (State, military, and NSC staff) assured ONE that the situation in South Vietnam was not as worrisome as the intelligence community representatives had judged in their text. The Board thereupon watered down the text (over the objections of the ONE Staff), and the NIE was finally born in April 1963. One need cite only its first conclusion to get the new drift: "We believe that communist progress has been blunted [in South Vietnam] and that the situation is improving."<sup>6</sup> Less than four weeks later there occurred the riots in Hue—which introduced the chain of tragic subsequent events that culminated in the self-immolation of Buddhist monks and the murder of President Diem.

<sup>5</sup> The intelligence community was not alone in its concern at this time. In December 1962 Senator Mike Mansfield, following a just completed first visit to South Vietnam since 1955, wrote William Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that "It would be a disservice to my country not to voice a deep concern over the trend of events in Viet Nam in the 7 years which have elapsed since my last visit. . . . All of the current difficulties existed in 1955, along with hope and energy to meet them. But it is 7 years later and \$2 billion of US aid later. Yet, substantially the same difficulties remain if, indeed, they have not been compounded. . . . Those who bear responsibility for directing operations are optimistic over the prospects for success. . . . [But] experience in Viet Nam going back at least a decade recommends caution in predicting its rapid achievement." US Congress, Senate, Ctee on For. Rels, 88th Cong, 1st Session, 1963, *Vietnam and Southeast Asia Report of Senator Mike Mansfield et al* (Wash., D.C.; Government Printing Office, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> To his credit, the DCI subsequently "openly expressed regret for his own part in weakening what had been 'right the first time.'" Willard C. Matthias (who had been the ONE Board Chairman of the NIE), "How Three Estimates Went Wrong," *Studies in Intelligence*, Volume 12, Number 1 (Winter 1968), p. 35.

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## Episode II: The Rostow Plan

By late 1963–early 1964 events in Vietnam had caused the policymakers to reverse their previous views that things were rocking along fairly well in South Vietnam. The shock effect of the fall of President Diem, his murder, and the fecklessness of his successors now moved senior policymakers to sudden realization that, as the intelligence community's analysts had tried unsuccessfully to warn earlier in 1963, South Vietnam was in deep trouble. Much worse trouble, for that matter. Examples:

- (Saigon) Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, August 1963: "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government . . . there is no turning back because there is no possibility, in my view, that the war can be won under a Diem administration. . . ."<sup>7</sup>
- Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, December 1963: "The situation is very disturbing. Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely to a communist-controlled state."<sup>8</sup>

In early 1964 enter Walt Rostow, at the time Director of State's Policy Planning Council and a principal theorist of counterinsurgency. In a sensitive memorandum to Secretary Rusk, 13 February 1963, Rostow proposed that US policy would do well to shift its attention to North Vietnam—in the terms of the Joint Chiefs, "the root of the problem." Specifically, Rostow held that a credible threat to bomb DRV industrial targets would cause Hanoi's leaders to order the Vietcong to cut back their activities in South Vietnam, because Ho Chi Minh "has an industrial complex to protect: he is no longer a guerrilla fighter with nothing to lose."<sup>9</sup>

Initially ordered in early 1964, examination of Rostow's plan had languished for a while and then was suddenly speeded up to coincide with the return of Secretary McNamara from another fact-finding mission in Vietnam. As described by David Halberstam, "There was enormous pressure for an answer to the question: would the bombing (of North Vietnam) work?"<sup>10</sup> This hot potato was given to Robert Johnson of State's Policy Planning Council, who formed a small, special inter-agency working group of intelligence officers from State, Defense, and CIA (ONE), whose views fairly closely mirrored then recent national estimates. This team worked long hours and weekends, and after two weeks or so produced a sizable, agreed report which examined

<sup>7</sup> Cable of 29 August. Text given in *The Pentagon Papers* (Bantam/New York Times, 1971), p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Report to the President, 21 December 1963, following an inspection trip to Vietnam. Text in *ibid.*, pp. 271, 274. This was an especially quick turn-about on the subject for Secretary McNamara, now dismayed to learn that trends in South Vietnam were even more troubling following Diem than they had been before. As recently as September (prior to Diem's fall) the Secretary had joined General Maxwell Taylor in reporting to an NSC meeting that "the major part of the US military task can be completed by the end of 1965, although there may be a continuing requirement for a limited number of US training personnel." (Emphasis added.) *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, John F. Kennedy, 1963 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964), pp. 759-760.

<sup>9</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>10</sup> *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 355-356.

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numerous broad facets of the likely efficacy of bombing and of its likely consequences.

With some qualifications the group's essential answer was no, the bombing would not work. Their report held that contrary to one of Walt Rostow's central beliefs, the greatest interest of the DRV did not lie in preserving such industrial development as it had achieved, but instead in extending its control to all of Vietnam. This being so, the DRV would hang tough and persevere: the posited bombing would not bring Hanoi to the conference table or cause it to relax its pressures on the South. To the contrary, US escalation would be met by North Vietnamese escalation. Nor, the report held, would the bombing campaign basically improve South Vietnamese morale or effectiveness, and it might cause Saigon to become even more dependent on the United States. Not least, the report held that beginning a campaign of bombing would place added pressures on the United States itself, greatly increasing the problems of de-escalation. From the Johnson group's report:

[The US commitment] will require much US will to carry through the proposed actions, the US must consider in advance the upper limits of the costs and commitments it is prepared to bear. Potential political costs include costs of possible failure. . . .

Militarily we need to decide in advance how far we are prepared to carry action under the concept; beyond the concept if actions under it fail to produce results; and in responding to possible communist escalation.

If the US action should not produce the desired effects upon DRV behavior and if we are not prepared to escalate further, we would face the problem of finding a graceful way out of the action which would not involve serious loss of US prestige or undermine further the US position in South Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

In any event, the impact of the Johnson report was nil. Its views contradicted those of Rostow on countless scores. According to Halberstam, the report was thereafter very closely held; only later in the year was it bootlegged to a few other senior officials, among them Undersecretary of State Ball: "one part of . . . [the Johnson report] played a major role in confirming the doubts of George Ball and provided much of the raw material for his [later] dissenting papers."<sup>12</sup> In sum, nothing much came from this episode except that the views of the intelligence community made little impact—and a succession of plans not too

<sup>11</sup> "Alternatives for Imposition of Measured Pressures Against North Vietnam," Report, Robert H. Johnson, S/P State, to William Sullivan, S/VN State, 19 March 1964, Summary of Key Problems, pp. i, ii.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 358, 497. Six months after the 1964 Johnson group's work, Undersecretary Ball prepared a searching 67-page critique of the idea of bombing. A former member of the Strategic Survey team which had studied the (limited) effects of allied bombing on Hitler's Germany, Ball now in October 1964 prepared "a challenge to the assumptions of our current Vietnam policy." Two of its chief conclusions: "Once on the tiger's back we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount;" and the United States "cannot substitute its presence for an effective South Vietnamese government . . . over a sustained period of time." According to Stanley Karnow, McNamara was shocked by Ball's rashness in putting such heretical thoughts on paper; while Rusk and McGeorge Bundy "as Ball recalled, dismissed the critique as 'merely an idiosyncratic diversion' from the basic question of 'how to win the war.'" *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), p. 405.

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different from that of Rostow's ensued throughout the rest of 1964 and up to February-March 1965, when the United States at last committed itself to sustained military action against North Vietnam.

### Episode III: The Joint Chiefs' War Game

The Joint Chiefs of Staff political-military Vietnam war game, SIGMA I-64, was played 6-9 April 1964. By then substantial fears had grown among senior policymakers that the upstart government of General Khanh in Saigon was incapable of competing politically with the communists; some attention had begun to be given (at State) to the problem of getting a congressional resolution to back a greater US commitment in Vietnam; a program of substantial clandestine military action had begun (including Thai-piloted strikes against communist targets in Laos); the President had directed<sup>13</sup> that planning "proceed energetically" so that forces could be in a position on 30 days' notice to initiate a program of "graduated overt military pressure" against North Vietnam—one including strikes by B-57 jet bombers; and official US policy had become based on this fateful premise:

We seek an independent non-communist South Vietnam. . . . Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam, almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), accommodate to communism so as to remove effective US and anti-communist influence (Burma), or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly communist but likely then to become so (Indonesia taking over Malaysia). Thailand might hold for a period without help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India on the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile the Joint Chiefs' gaming agency (SAGA) had been planning a sensitive military-political war game whose focus was the feasibility of trying to keep South Vietnam afloat by conducting a program of US air strikes against North Vietnam. This was a working level game (lieutenant colonels through brigadier generals), the Blue Team containing some true believers in victory through airpower. The intelligence community (including DDP(DDO) and ONE officers) was well represented among the game's various teams.

The point of the episode was its outcome: contrary to Blue Team's enthusiasms, the game wound up in a situation of no-decision. Hostilities had been greatly escalated; the DRV had taken lots of punishment from the air, but was still effectively persisting in its efforts to do in the South through increasing military pressures. US policy was rather hung up: US options had more or less narrowed to either seeking a military decision by significantly expanding hostilities against the DRV, at a believed risk of bringing China to Hanoi's rescue; or beginning the process of de-escalation, at the cost of loss of

<sup>13</sup> National Security Action Memorandum 288, of 17 March 1964. *Pentagon Papers, op. cit.*, pp. 283-285.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

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US credibility and prestige. A notable sidelight outcome of the game was the frustrated reaction by one of the seniors who critiqued the game on its last day: General Curtis LeMay, then Air Force Chief of Staff, furiously charged that the game had been rigged.<sup>15</sup>

This author has no knowledge of what effect, if any, SIGMA I's outcome had on contingency planning. Apparently none. Suffice it to say subsequent planning and the actual later employment of US air power somewhat resembled the Blue Team's theoretical course. To some degree, too, the outcome.

General Palmer writes several times in his study of certain personal views which George Carver (then an ONE staffer) gave the DCI in 1963 regarding events in South Vietnam. Carver was not the only CIA officer who passed on personal Vietnam thoughts to the DCI during that time. Disturbed by what they thought had been a lack of reality in many aspects of the just-completed SIGMA I-64, two CIA officers who had participated in the game (one DDP, one ONE) prepared a private memo sent to the DCI in April, which included the following estimative judgments:

Widespread at the war games were facile assumptions that attacks against the North would weaken the DRV capability to support the war in South Vietnam, and that such attacks would cause the DRV leadership to call off the VC. Both assumptions are highly dubious, given the nature of the VC war. The principal sources of VC strength and support in SVN are indigenous, and even if present DRV direction and support of the VC could be cut off, these would not assure victory in the South. Action against the DRV should be considered as a supplementary course of action and not a cure-all, and such action can be effective only if considerable GVN political-military improvement also takes place.

The impact and influence of US public and congressional opinion was seriously underestimated. . . . The impact and influence of world opinion was seriously underestimated. . . . There would be widespread concern that the US was risking major war, in behalf of a society that did not seem anxious to save itself, and by means not at all certain to effect their desired ends in the South.

*In sum*, we feel that US thinking should grind in more careful consideration than has taken place to date. This does not mean that the US should not move against the DRV, but only that, if we do:

- a. We do not do so blithely, but know beforehand what we may be getting into, militarily and politically, and are prepared to deal with it wisely.
- b. We do so only if it looks as if there is enough military-political potential in South Vietnam to make the whole Vietnam effort worth-

<sup>15</sup> The author was present. A repeat version of this war game, SIGMA II, was subsequently conducted in September, this time played by principals rather than by working-level officials. The outcome was similar to that of SIGMA I: depressing. Karnow, *op. cit.*, pp. 399-400; Halberstam, *op. cit.*, pp. 461-463.

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while. Otherwise, the US would only be exercising its great, but irrelevant, armed strength.<sup>16</sup>

To this author's knowledge there was never any reaction to these views.

#### Episode IV: Oh Yes, What About the Domino Thesis?

The idea of bombing the DRV had, since April's war game, gathered still more momentum by June. The intervening weeks had brought approval by the Joint Chiefs of an OpPlan 37-64 which provided for the contingency of retaliatory US air strikes within 72 hours and a full scale air offensive within 30 days; the communist Pathet Lao had mounted an offensive in the Plaine des Jarres that threatened to collapse the neutralist Laotian government of Premier Souvanna Phouma; in Saigon, General Khanh had asked the United States to declare war on the DRV and send 10,000 US Special Forces; and a top level strategy meeting had been held at Honolulu (McNamara, General Westmoreland, General Maxwell Taylor, DCI McCone, CINCPAC, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy), 1-2 June, during which session Mr. Lodge had been reported as predicting that a "selective bombing campaign" against military targets in the North would "bolster morale and give the population in the South a feeling of unity."<sup>17</sup>

At that same time—finally—the President asked for intelligence's view of the domino thesis. The Board of National Estimates prepared the response, 9 June. Its answer was a qualified, polite no to this then-prevalent thesis. While acknowledging that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos to the communists would of course be "profoundly damaging to the US position in the Far East," the Board held:

We do not believe that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos would be followed by the rapid, successive communization of the other states of the Far East. Instead of a shock wave passing from one nation to the next, there would be a simultaneous, direct effect on all Far Eastern countries. With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, a continuation of the spread of communism in the area would not be inexorable, and any spread which did occur would take time—time in which the total situation might change in any of a number of ways unfavorable to the communist cause.

US military strength in the Far East is based on the chain of islands from the Philippines to Japan, not on the Asian mainland. As long as the US can effectively operate from these bases, it will probably still be able to deter Peiping and Hanoi from overt military aggression.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Memorandum for the Record (sent to DCI), "Comment on the Vietnam War Games, SIGMA I-64, 6-9 April 1964," of 16 April 1964.

<sup>17</sup> According to CINCPAC Admiral Felt's notes, *Pentagon Papers*, *op. cit.*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>18</sup> Memorandum for the Director, "Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a 'Domino Effect' in the Far East?" 9 June 1964.

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The point of this episode is not only that the Board of National Estimates seriously questioned one of the basic premises upon which US policy and military planning were being based and were by then moving briskly ahead, but that intelligence had been asked for its view on this key question some 10 weeks or so *after* the NSC had already made its own estimate on this score, and had imbedded it in formal US policy.<sup>19</sup>

#### Episode V: Intelligence and the Decision to Bomb the North

By November 1964 events had moved even closer to a US decision to try to save the South by bombing the North on a sustained basis. In early August the "attacks" against the USS Maddox and Turner Joy had occurred in the Tonkin Gulf; within 72 hours US Navy aircraft had carried out reprisal attacks against certain targets in the DRV; the Tonkin Resolution had passed the Congress 7 August (88-2 in the Senate, 416-0 in the House), empowering the President to take "all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression;" strong injunctions had twice been given DRV Premier Pham Van Dong, through Canadian diplomatic intercession, to knock off North Vietnam's military pressures against the South; the Joint Chiefs had endorsed a judgment of General Maxwell Taylor's (by now Ambassador in Saigon) that an air war was "essential to prevent a complete collapse of the US position in Southeast Asia;"<sup>20</sup> at a top level White House meeting, 7 September, consensus had been reached that air attacks were "inevitable" and would probably have to be launched beginning "early in the new year;"<sup>21</sup> the Viet Cong had carried out a devastating raid on the airfield at Bien Hoa (near Saigon), 1 November, destroying five B-57 jet bombers, damaging eight, killing four Americans, and wounding many; Lyndon Johnson had won the presidency, 3 November, decisively defeating the "war candidate," Barry Goldwater; and the Joint Chiefs had recommended that "a prompt and strong response," including air strikes on the DRV, be taken in retaliation for the Bien Hoa attack.<sup>22</sup>

Instead of accepting the Joint Chiefs' recommendation, the President on the eve of the election appointed a special interagency working group under William P. Bundy, an ex-ONE officer then Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Affairs, to draw up various political and military options for direct action against North Vietnam. That group held its first meeting on election day, 3 November, with representatives from the NSC Staff, State, Defense, Joint Chiefs, and CIA (ONE).<sup>23</sup>

This group came up with options for three varying types of air action against the DRV: reprisal strikes; a "fast squeeze" program of sudden, severe, and intensive bombing; and a "slow squeeze" option of graduated air strikes. The point of this episode for national estimating was the views expressed by the Bundy group's intelligence panel. That panel—chaired by the CIA mem-

<sup>19</sup> The National Security Action Memorandum of 17 March 1964, *supra*, p. 6 above.

<sup>20</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 308, 320-321.

<sup>23</sup> The workings of the Bundy group are described in some detail in *ibid.*, pp. 323-332, 365-370.

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ber, its views reflective of NIEs of the time, and concurred in by all the intelligence community members of the panel—took a fairly skeptical view of the likely efficacy of US air strikes, holding that:

The course of actions the communists have pursued in South Vietnam over the past few years implies a fundamental estimate on their part that the difficulties facing the US are so great that US will and ability to maintain resistance in that area can be gradually eroded—without running high risks that this would wreak heavy destruction on the DRV or Communist China.

We have many indications that the Hanoi leadership is acutely and nervously aware of the extent to which North Vietnam's transportation system and industrial plant is vulnerable to attack. On the other hand, North Vietnam's economy is overwhelmingly agricultural and, to a large extent, decentralized in a myriad of more or less economically self-sufficient villages. Interdiction of imports and extensive destruction of transportation facilities and industrial plants would cripple DRV industry. These actions would also seriously restrict DRV military capabilities, and would degrade, though to a lesser extent, Hanoi's capabilities to support guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam and Laos. We do not believe that such actions would have a crucial effect on the daily lives of the overwhelming majority of the North Vietnam population. We do not believe that attacks on industrial targets would so greatly exacerbate current economic difficulties as to create unmanageable control problems. It is reasonable to infer that the DRV leaders have a psychological investment in the work of reconstruction they have accomplished over the last decade. Nevertheless, they would probably be willing to suffer some damage to the country in the course of a test of wills with the US over the course of events in South Vietnam.<sup>24</sup>

#### Episode VI: One Last Private Memo to the DCI

By March-April of 1965, further DRV/Viet Cong atrocities had sparked the commitment of US air and ground forces to de facto war in Vietnam. One last small entry from an ONE officer reflected certain estimative themes which had been sounded for better than two years—though in this case these were not necessarily ONE judgments, just those of one of its officers:

This troubled essay proceeds from a deep concern that we are becoming progressively divorced from reality in Vietnam, that we are proceeding with far more courage than wisdom—toward unknown ends, and that we are perhaps about to compound our already difficult predicament if we indeed commit several divisions of US ground troops to combat in South Vietnam.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332. As the authors of these later *Pentagon Papers* put it, there were "doubts at two poles": not only the intelligence panel's doubts about the results to be expected from bombing, but strong views expressed by the representative of the Joint Chiefs that (1) to be effective, US actions would have to hit the DRV hard (the second of the Bundy group's options), and (2) the United States should take whatever measures are necessary and not worry too much about how the world might view those measures.

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We do not have the capability to achieve the goals we have set for ourselves in Vietnam, yet we think and act as if we do.

In view of the enemy's power in the Vietnam countryside and of the narrow and fragile political base we have in the GVN, we are asking a steep price indeed of the enemy in asking him to call off the VC and to cease DRV support and direction of it.

There seems to be a congenital American disposition to underestimate Asian enemies. We are doing so now. We cannot afford so precious a luxury. Earlier, dispassionate estimates, war games, and the like, told us that the DRV/VC would persist in the face of such pressures as we are now exerting on them. Yet we now seem to expect them to come running to the conference table, ready to talk about our high terms.

The chances are considerably better than even that the US will in the end have to disengage in Vietnam, and do so considerably short of our present objectives.<sup>25</sup>

To this author's knowledge there was no reaction to this memo. It is not surprising. Those views were now very much after the fact, and the name of the game had become how to help US policy succeed.

#### Post-Mortem: Why had National Intelligence Made So Slight an Impact?

In a technical sense the estimates machinery had functioned well. There had been few if any dissents along the way within the intelligence community; the estimative judgments were agreed ones for the most part. Policymakers had repeatedly asked the intelligence community for its views: for example, from June 1964-June 1965 some 12 NIEs/SNIEs had been prepared on Vietnam, eight of them on probable reactions to various possible US courses of action (supplied to the intelligence community for the purpose of making the estimates).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, between 1963-early 1965, ONE and other CIA officers had prepared numerous other estimative products (Staff memos, and special, sensitive "what-if?" estimates, and private think pieces), many of which the DCI distributed to policymaking consumers; and ONE and other CIA officers had participated in various interagency policy working groups. Overall, the intelligence community's judgments had reflected in general a good understanding of Vietnam's complexities and of DRV/VC goals, tactics, ruthlessness, and resilience—an understanding perhaps deserving of the kind of compliment General Palmer gives US intelligence (up to 1963):

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum (sent to the DCI), "Into the Valley," 8 April 1964.

<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the intelligence community had commented on the policy decision (JCSM 982-64, of 23 November 1964) to adopt the Bundy group's "slow squeeze" Option C (*supra*, pp. 9-10)—the community holding that in response to these US measures, neither the DRV nor China would react in an extreme manner; the DRV would be "unlikely" to yield or take any significant steps in that direction; and "the most likely DRV course would be to hold firm."

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American intelligence had a good feel for the true situation and certainly a far better grasp than US policymakers and leaders who tended to deceive themselves in their desire to make their chosen policies succeed.<sup>27</sup>

Yet the impact of national intelligence on Vietnam policymaking, 1962-1965, was slight. Why? And can any lessons be drawn from that experience?

First, some fairly immediate causes of the lack of influence on policymaking:

— Certainly, as General Palmer terms it, the senior policymakers' own self-deception:

- A more certain assurance on their part than was justified that their particular solutions for the Vietnam dilemma would succeed where previous French ones had not, accompanied by a remarkable inability to learn from the French experience.<sup>28</sup>
- Undue enchantment with the vision of victory through air power, in preference to the much more difficult course of employing multifaceted political/military means over the long term.
- A chronic tendency to water down bad news, in the field and in Washington, as mentioned by General Palmer.<sup>29</sup>
- Hence the deaf ear to the intelligence community's pessimism, and a preference on the part of senior policymakers for their own, personal estimates of the situation.

— The presence of some significant fault lines in those personal estimates of the situation:

- A fairly general lack of acquaintance among principal policymakers with the complex historical and social forces at work in Vietnam.
- A general underestimation of the enemy and overestimation of the ally.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.28.

<sup>28</sup> Note this assessment, years later, by Ambassador Robert W. Komer (another ex-ONE officer), following his tour as Director of the CORDS program in Vietnam: "Especially significant has been institutional inertia—the built-in reluctance of organizations to change preferred ways of functioning except slowly and incrementally. Another such factor has been the shocking lack of institutional memory, largely because of short tours for US personnel. Skewed incentive patterns also increased the pressures for conformity and tended to penalize adaptive response. And there was a notable dearth of systematic analysis of performance, again mainly because of the inherent reluctance of organizations to indulge in self-examination." *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (RAND Corporation, report for ARPA, 1972), p. viii.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>30</sup> Ambassador Komer (1972): "Particularly constraining was the sharp contrast between the adversary we faced and the ally we were supporting—a highly motivated and ideologically disciplined regime in Hanoi and revolutionary Viet Cong apparatus versus a weak, half-formed, traditionalist regime in Saigon." *Op. cit.*, p. v.

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- Widespread beliefs on the part of certain key policymakers that Peking (not Hanoi) was running the show in Vietnam, that China (whose aggressive stance was confined to rhetoric) was about to surge into Southeast Asia, and consequently that in taking a strong stance in Vietnam the United States would be containing Chinese expansionism.
- Undue certainty in the domino thesis: that, as embodied in the March 1964 NSC policy decision, the loss of Vietnam would “greatly increase” the threat to India, Japan, and everything in between.<sup>31</sup>
- The heavy concentration of senior policymakers on day-to-day tactics and “solutions,” rather than on the longer-range consequences of US initiatives—or with what might happen if the more pessimistic appraisals of the intelligence community proved correct.
- A situation where there simply was too little direct, meaningful impact by intelligence producers on consumers on a sustained basis. As has often happened in developing crises, intelligence tended to trot along behind policymaking momentum, after the fact—and as momentum grew for direct US military action against the North, increasingly out of the act. By the spring of 1965, this situation pertained not only to intelligence community staff levels, but to the DCI himself.
- From memo of DCI John A. McCone, 2 April 1965: “Therefore I think what we are doing in starting on a track which involves ground force operations which, in all probability, will have limited effectiveness against guerrillas, although admittedly will restrain some VC advances. However, we can expect requirements for an ever-increasing commitment of US personnel without materially improving the chances of victory. I support and agree with this decision but I must point out that in my judgment, forcing submission of the VC can only be brought about by a decision in Hanoi. Since the contemplated actions against the North are modest in scale, they will not impose unacceptable damage on it, nor will they threaten the DRV’s vital interests. Hence, they will not present them with a situation with which they cannot live, though such actions will cause the DRV pain and inconvenience.”<sup>32</sup>
- According to David Halberstam, Mr. McCone argued unsuccessfully against the policy decision reached 20 April 1965, at a Honolulu conference, to put US combat troops into Vietnam: “The next morning John McCone, informed of their decision, told the NSC that it simply meant that Hanoi would increase its infiltration and step up

<sup>31</sup> *Supra.*, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum to the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor. Mr. McCone sent a similar memo to the President, 28 April 1965, enclosing the above memo of 2 April. The author is indebted to Walt Elder, former Special Assistant to DCI McCone, for making these memos available. Mr. Elder confirms that throughout late 1964–early 1965 the DCI held that if the United States were to bomb the DRV, it should do so on a sudden large scale, for the shock effect, rather than incrementally—per the planning of that time. To author, December 1984.

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the war. Thus more Americans. Thus more North Vietnamese. Thus a higher level of violence."<sup>33</sup>

- Again, according to Halberstam, "If he [LBJ] took sustenance from those around him who urged escalation, then similarly, as if almost by chance, he just managed to see less of those who had doubts or seemed to have doubts; he gave signals of what he wanted to hear and what he did not. (One reason why he did not seem to like McCone—they did not get on very well and McCone would make a quick exit—was that McCone, even though he was more hawkish than Johnson, more hardlined in his attitudes, had insisted in those days in February, March, and April [1965] on telling the President the very blunt truth.)"<sup>34</sup>
- According to Ray S. Cline, an ex-ONE officer then the DDI, "The frustration of the men around Lyndon Johnson with Vietnam and the lessening interest in objective intelligence, which was often distasteful to them because it promised no easy way out, made CIA an increasingly painful place for senior officers to work. . . . [There was] less and less sense of engagement and appreciation at the top. This feeling got to John McCone and he eventually left CIA at the end of April 1965."<sup>35</sup>

In a deeper sense, however, there was far more at stake in the US decision to go to war in Vietnam than just whether US intelligence was right or wrong, or was or was not making a major impact on policymaking. Beyond such concerns, these Vietnam experiences illustrated a number of complex problems:

- Policymakers do not enjoy the luxury of simply assessing a situation; they must act. In Vietnam the hard, basic fact was that the non-communist cause in the South was deteriorating rapidly, especially following the fall and murder of President Diem.<sup>36</sup>
- There was not much US policymaking leverage to be had on the very soft political/military base in the South. Hence it was understandable that planners considered whether the situation might be remedied by bringing new pressures to bear on the North.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 579.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 588. Other critics at the time, registering what they believed to be the blunt truth, included Peer de Silva, CIA's Chief of Station in Saigon (*ibid.*, p. 485), George Ball (*supra*), and Chester L. Cooper, another ex-ONE officer then the holder of the Vietnam portfolio in McGeorge Bundy's NSC staff (*The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1970), pp. 258-259).

<sup>35</sup> *Secrets, Spies and Scholars: Blueprint of the Essential CIA* (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1976), pp. 210-211. Cline's statement is not wholly correct. Walt Elder confirms that DCI McCone had considerable contact with President Johnson on Vietnam questions during those months—though not necessarily impact; and that Mr. McCone had decided months before, on the basis of many considerations extraneous to Vietnam, to leave the DCI post. To author, December 1984.

<sup>36</sup> During 1964 there were seven successive governments in Saigon. Meanwhile Vietcong strength there was doubling, and increasing numbers of DRV cadres were being infiltrated into the South to bolster VC leadership ranks.

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- Intelligence is only one input among many to policymaking decisions. Countless other considerations worked on the President—not excluding the fact that LBJ was not about to permit himself to be seen as shirking his duty to contain the spread of communist power, and especially so in a presidential election year, 1964.
- Policymakers were aware of dimensions of which intelligence officers were not. To the latter, the focal problem tended to be the situation in Vietnam and, secondarily, the surrounding region. To the policymakers, the record shows clearly that their chief concern was the US position in the world, not concern for Vietnam per se. In their view, rightly or wrongly, broad US interests dictated that Vietnam was vital to US interests, and consequently that we *had* to make a strong stand there.

Finally, these Vietnam episodes suggest that if national intelligence is to be of maximum utility, it must:

- Not confine itself to assessing this and that situation or to telling the President how depressing certain situations look, but better appreciate the wide responsibilities which face policymakers, and help them to find elements in the situation which may offer opportunities for remedial initiative.
- Find ways and means of strengthening the producer-consumer relationship on a more systematic basis. That relationship is in far better shape now than it was in the Vietnam case of 20 years ago, but there is still room for much improvement.
- Become thus a personal, known commodity: that is, not confined to sending policymakers outputs, remote-control, from sometimes unknown, faceless intelligence officers—but instead, develop situations where the impact of national intelligence is enhanced by the senior policymakers' personal knowledge of and respect for its producers. Where this does not exist, and especially where the particular intelligence message may be uncongenial, policymakers will continue to go with their own private images and assessments.
- Not skew estimative judgments to fit known or suspected policymakers' predilections, but go where intelligence evidence takes the judgments—and then if necessary get the DCI to campaign for those views at the highest level.

For in any administration the impact of intelligence hangs ultimately on the personal relationship between the DCI and the President. In the Vietnam case, Mr. McCone had been President Kennedy's choice; President Johnson inherited him. The influence of national intelligence on Vietnam policymaking might have been more substantial at that time had the personal equation at the top been different. Even so, given the many potent forces at work in the situation, such greater influence would at best have probably been of degree, not of kind.

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