



NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY
FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, MARYLAND 20755-6000

Case No. 52331/Appeal No. 3300
13 May 2008

Dear

This replies to your letter, dated 27 December 2007, appealing NSA's decision to withhold certain information in the Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1975 under the Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) process. Your original request, the document at issue, the Deputy Associate Director for Policy's response to you, and your appeal letter have been reviewed. It should be noted that NSA received referral responses from two Other Government Agencies (OGAs) after the Deputy Associate Director of Policy issued her decision to withhold OGA information since NSA cannot make that releasability determination. Those agencies have determined that certain information can be released. I further note that the Deputy Associate Director of Policy recently declassified certain information about Vietnam. Overall, ninety (90) pages are now being released to you. Otherwise, I have determined that the remaining information that is the subject of your appeal was properly withheld as detailed below.

The remaining information continues to meet the standards for classification set forth in subparagraph (a) of Section 1.1 of Executive Order 12958, as amended, and falls under the classification categories contained in Section 1.4(c) and (d) of the Order. Furthermore, the information remains currently and properly classified at the TOP SECRET, SECRET, and CONFIDENTIAL levels in accordance with the criteria of Section 1.2 of Executive Order 12958, as amended. Furthermore, another government agency has determined that their information is exempt from declassification in accordance with Section 3.3(b)(1), (b)(4) and (b)(6) of the Order.

The remaining information is also exempt from disclosure pursuant to Section 6.2(c) of Executive Order 12958, as amended, which allows for the protection afforded to information under the provisions of law. Specifically, Section 6, Public Law 86-36 (50 U.S.C. § 402 note) protects the names of NSA/CSS employees and NSA/CSS functions and activities from disclosure. The information you seek on appeal pertains to such information and, therefore, it is protected from disclosure by this statute.

You may consider this final Agency decision to be a denial of your appeal. You are hereby advised that under the MDR process, you may appeal a final agency decision in writing, within 60 days from the date of this letter, to the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP) at the following address:

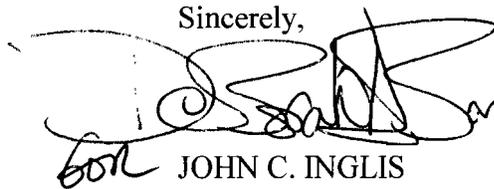
Executive Secretary
Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel
ATTN: Classification Challenge Appeals
c/o Information Security Oversight Office
National Archives and Records Administration
7th and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Room 500
Washington, DC 20408

Additional information regarding the ISCAP's appeal process can be found at:
<http://www.archives.gov> by typing "ISCAP" in the search field.

Please be advised that we are still waiting on a releasability determination from one OGA regarding their information. We will respond separately when the consultation with that other agency has been completed.

Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1975 is a product of the National Security Agency history program. As set forth in the attached disclaimer, the contents and conclusions of this publication are those of the author, based on original research, and do not necessarily represent the official views of the National Security Agency.

Sincerely,


601 JOHN C. INGLIS
Mandatory Declassification Review
Appeals Authority
NSA
man in Chief of
Staff

2 Encls:
a/s

This publication is a product of the National Security Agency history program. Its contents and conclusions are those of the author, based on original research, and do not necessarily represent the official views of the National Security Agency. Please address divergent opinion or additional detail to the Center for Cryptologic History (EC).

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(U) Preface

"And even I can remember a day when historians left blanks in their writings: I mean for things they didn't know. But that time seems to be passing."

Canto XIII, Ezra Pound

(U) The Vietnam War, or more accurately, the Indochina War, perhaps was the momentous event of American history in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Besides the casualty count – 58,000 dead and another half million wounded – it devoured the resources of the United States, weakened its economy, turned generations against one another, and hurt its international image. Opposition to the war coalesced with the strong currents of the 1960s' domestic social change – the nascent women's push for equality, the youth "rebellion," and the surge in the civil rights movement – and charged them with even more fervor. And the failure of various administrations to reliably define the war's purpose, and truthfully report its course, ground down the relationship between citizen and government to a razor-thin bond.

(U) After the war, there were several concurrent efforts to arrive at some meaning about it. Attempts were made to define it as a crusade against communism; others called the war a failure in strategic policy or a tragedy born out of the arrogance of power. Some observers called attention to the war's effect in later American foreign policy – the "Vietnam syndrome," a reluctance to get involved in long-term ventures. Finally, others pointed to the deeper social costs of the war, how veterans and nonveterans tried to come to grips with their attitudes towards the war.

(U) Ironically, the American cryptologic community, especially the National Security Agency, appeared to remove itself from any examination of its role in the war. This distancing was meas-

ured in the paucity of histories, studies, and articles about the war. How could such a war, which SIGINT had covered since 1950, that, at its peak, involved as many as ten thousand cryptologists from a number of allied nations, not be worth a serious historical consideration? By ignoring its past, how much had the American SIGINT community impoverished its sense of historical continuity? What stories and what truths were buried under the silence? What could American cryptologists learn about themselves and their performance during the war? And what lessons could we carry into the future?

(U) The immediate origins of *Spartans in Darkness* lay in a conversation I had some years ago with a retired NSA senior who had an extensive personal knowledge of the war in Indochina. In passing, I had mentioned my scheme for writing a complete, multivolume history of American SIGINT during the Indochina War, beginning with World War II, into the French phase, and finally coming to the American involvement. Rather abruptly, he strongly suggested that I get out a single volume on the war before "those who were there are gone." This approach, of course, was correct; inasmuch as the Vietnam-era population of the National Security Agency (and the associated cryptologic elements of the four armed services) was beginning to retire in ever-increasing numbers, there was a need to produce a history to which they could contribute, as well as one with which they could identify. There also was a growing interest in the war by the younger generation of Agency personnel within the cryptologic community – who had no direct experience and little memory of the war – as evidenced by their attendance in various classes and seminars on cryptologic history. That situation made final my decision to produce this overview volume.

~~(C//SI)~~ The major historiographical problem was the dimension of the SIGINT effort during the American phase of the war. Just the numbers alone suggested the size of the problem. At the height of the American involvement, upwards of 10,000 American and allied cryptologists were supporting the war in South Vietnam, mostly in sites throughout Southeast Asia. A smaller group at Fort Meade worked the SIGINT from NSA headquarters at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland.

[redacted] The corresponding records available for my research, despite rumors of a massive destruction of paper records from the early 1980s (which may have been partially true), were staggering: over 150,000 pages in the Center for Cryptologic History's various collections, and about 400,000 pages from the NSA Archives, Records Center, and other collections (on-line and hard copy). Happy is the historian with such a bounty, but cursed is he in deciding what exactly to write about without getting mired in the bog of so much available detail, that, due to the nature of intelligence, often was conflicting.

~~(C//SI)~~ I decided that the best way to avoid being buried under this material was to write an overview of American SIGINT during the Indochina War. However, it would be one with a difference: I would concentrate on various topics and critical incidents of the war, making them the narrative framework for this cryptologic history. The topics and incidents I included were an eclectic collection, and required individual treatment. Hence, this history is not the usual linear, chronological narrative. Rather, I approached each episode in a somewhat different manner, tailoring the historical treatment to the issue at hand. For example, the chapters on the SIGINT during the air war, the Franco-Vietnamese phase of the war, and the South Vietnamese SIGINT organization probably come closest to resembling a classic historical narrative.

~~(C//SI)~~ On the other hand, the Gulf of Tonkin incidents and the Tet Offensive will be treated almost like case studies. The performance of the SIGINT system will be looked at critically: it will be illustrated in both cases how critical information was mishandled, misinterpreted, lost, or ignored. At the same time, the nature of the SIGINT material, especially its effect on decision-makers in Saigon and Washington, required a detailed analysis of individual reports. This approach, at times, may seem to some readers like an excruciating turn at scriptural exegesis. Yet, the payoff is in the revelation of what was really contained in the reports.

(U) Not all topics of interest could be covered in this history. This was a decision based on several factors. One was the realization that other cryptologic organizations were producing histories of their participation in the war. One example is the Army's Intelligence and Security Command, which is working on a history of ASA participation that emphasizes tactical SIGINT units. Also, I did not want to repeat what previous histories have covered. In this case, I knew that three volumes had been written about communications security (COMSEC) during the war. Although much more can be written on this effort, it requires a volume of its own. A final reason was that the impact of a topic fell out of the time frame of the war. A good example of this is the Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) controversy. No other subject affected Americans as passionately as this one. Although there had been interest in the fate of POWs and MIAs during and shortly after the war, the peak of public attention did not occur until the 1980s and 1990s. This sad story, and the SIGINT aspect of it, deserves its own telling.

~~(C//SI)~~ *Spartans* is something of a departure from the previous histories of SIGINT in the Indochina War. For the most part, those histories, written between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, were detailed descriptions of technical SIGINT collection and processing systems, and

officially recognized Ho's Democratic Republic of Vietnam, settling, once and for all, the issue of which side Washington would support. On 7 February 1950, Washington recognized Bao Dai's government of Vietnam. Nine days later, the French requested military aid from the Americans.

(U) Meanwhile, the Viet Minh military commander, Vo Nguyen Giap, had husbanded his main front combat units until he had over a hundred battalions ready for the next phase of the struggle against the French. The year 1950 would be the beginning of the end for the French Empire in the Indochina peninsula. It would also mark the beginning of a full-fledged SIGINT effort on the Indochina problem by the United States.

(U) Notes

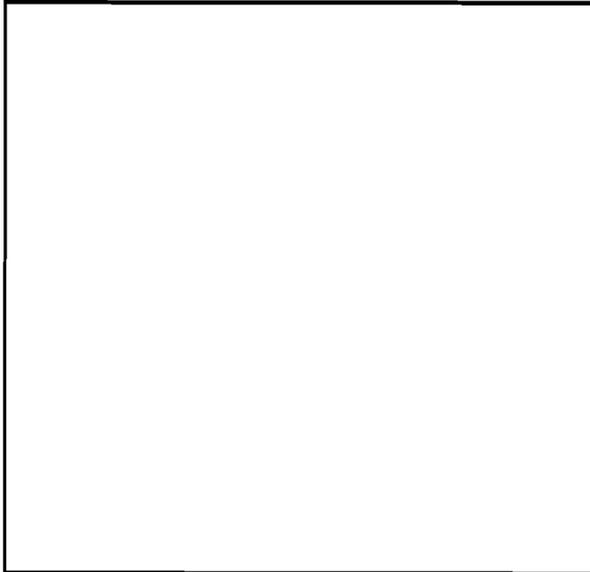
1. (U) Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 39.
2. (U) James S. Olson, and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam 1945 to 1990* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1991), 2.
3. (U) *Ibid.*, 26.
4. (U) Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam[:] A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 76.
5. (U) Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin are Western terms applied to the standard territorial division in Vietnam under the French. The Vietnamese objected to the word "Annam," a Chinese word meaning "pacified south." They refer traditionally, to the three regions as Nam Viet, Trung Viet, and Bac Viet, or South Vietnam, Central Vietnam, and North Vietnam, respectively.
6. (U) Ronald Spector, *United States Army in Vietnam. Advice and Support: the Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1983), 11.
7. (U) H.P. Wilmott, *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 15.
8. (U) Ho Chi Minh would eventually adopt as many as twenty cryptonyms during his career before finally settling on Ho Chi Minh. Many of these aliases, which include Chinese and Russian names, reflected his extensive (and apparently highly successful) work as a COMINTERN agent in France, Russia, China, Thailand, Malaya, and the British crown colony of Hong Kong. The American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) knew Ho as "Agent 19," a.k.a. "Lucius." For a summary of Ho Ch Minh's Comintern career, see Sophie Quinn Judge "Ho Chi Min: New Perspectives From the Comintern Files." unpublished manuscript, December 1993.
9. (U) Tokyo to Washington, 13 February 1939; see also Paris to Tokyo, #677, 13 November 1937, and Tokyo to Paris, 783-B 9 September 1937, inter alia. NARA RG 457. Multinational Diplomatic Translations, boxes CBKH34 and CBK137.
10. (U) David Marr, *Vietnam, 1945* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 25.
11. (U) Gaddis Smith, *American Diplomacy During the Second World War, 1941-1945* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1965), 12.
12. (U) Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13.
13. (U) *Ibid.*, 17.
14. (U) Paris to Chungking, 24 May 1945. H-186840 RG 457.
15. (U) For a more detailed history of the Viet Minh's activities during World War II, see this author's "Guerrillas in the Mist" in the *Cryptologic Quarterly* Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 1996, 95-114.
16. (U) Tokyo to Saigon, 9 November 1944, # H-150249; Tokyo to Circular, 17 February 1945, # H-167814; Saigon to Tokyo, 10 March 1945, # H-171978; and Tokyo to Circular, 10 March 1945, # H-174043, inter alia, Multinational Diplomatic Translations, RG 457.
17. (TS//SI) Saigon to Paris, [redacted] 21 November 1946. NSA/CSS Archives (NCA). Box CBLJ52; LA657.
18. (TS//SI) No. 174, 12 May 1947 and No. 183, 21 May 1947, inter alia. NCA, ACC# 5289, WDGS G-2 [redacted]
19. (TS//SI) *Ibid.* Summary No. 298, 3 November 1947 and No. 109, 6 February 1947, inter alia.
20. (TS//SI) *Ibid.* Summary No. 370, 17 February 1948.
21. (TS//SI) *Ibid.* Summary No. 407, 9 April 1948

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Chapter 1 – (U) Le Grand Nombre Des Rues Sans Joie: American COMINT and the Franco-Vietnamese War, 1950-1954

~~(S//SI)~~ The first sustained and organized American communications intelligence effort against the Viet Minh started in 1950. It wasn't a complete start-up from scratch as had happened with the Korean problem, which began at almost the same time.¹ As will soon be shown, ever since 1945 there had been some sort of effort,

[redacted]
and military communications.



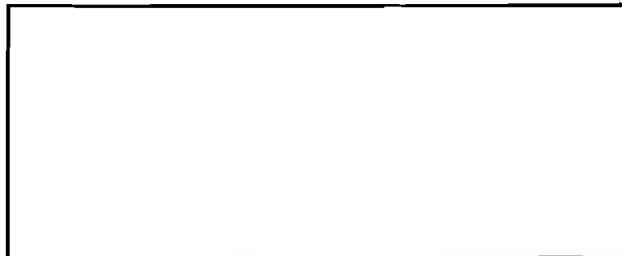
~~(S//SI)~~ America's Postwar COMINT Predicament

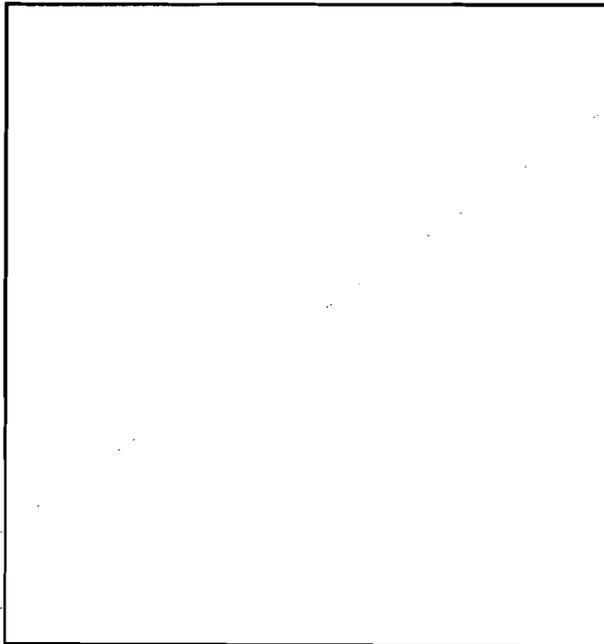
~~(S//SI)~~ The United States emerged from the Second World War with a COMINT system still split along service lines. Many of its leaders saw the need for some sort of merger, whether it be a complete organizational union or simply a method of more official coordination between the two service cryptologic organizations. Additionally, the postwar reduction in personnel and resources provided a further impetus for coordination. In April 1946, the two major

COMINT organizations, the Army Security Agency (ASA) and Navy's Communications Supplementary Activity Washington (CSAW) were "merged" under a Joint Operating Plan (JOP) controlled by a Coordinator of Joint Operations (CJO). More importantly, the agreement, reminiscent of the World War II arrangement, divided the COMINT problem between the Army and Navy. Targets and processes were allocated between the two services. Furthermore, the 1946 Joint Operations Plan of the Joint Processing Allocations Group (JPAG) established three countries of "high interest" – the USSR, China (still the Nationalist regime of Jiang Jeishi at this point, but with some emphasis on intercept from northern China where the struggle between communists and nationalists was centered), [redacted]²

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(U) France was considered a critical element in the formulation of America's postwar policy, especially as it related to the "containment" of the USSR. France was the largest European continental military power (Germany was still a demilitarized country). Yet, at the same time, France was weak politically. It was a major concern to U.S. planners: caretaker coalition governments that came and went in the wake of Charles de Gaulle's 1946 resignation were failing at alarming rates; in the wings was the French Communist Party, which American policymakers feared would take power and undermine Western Europe's defense against the USSR.



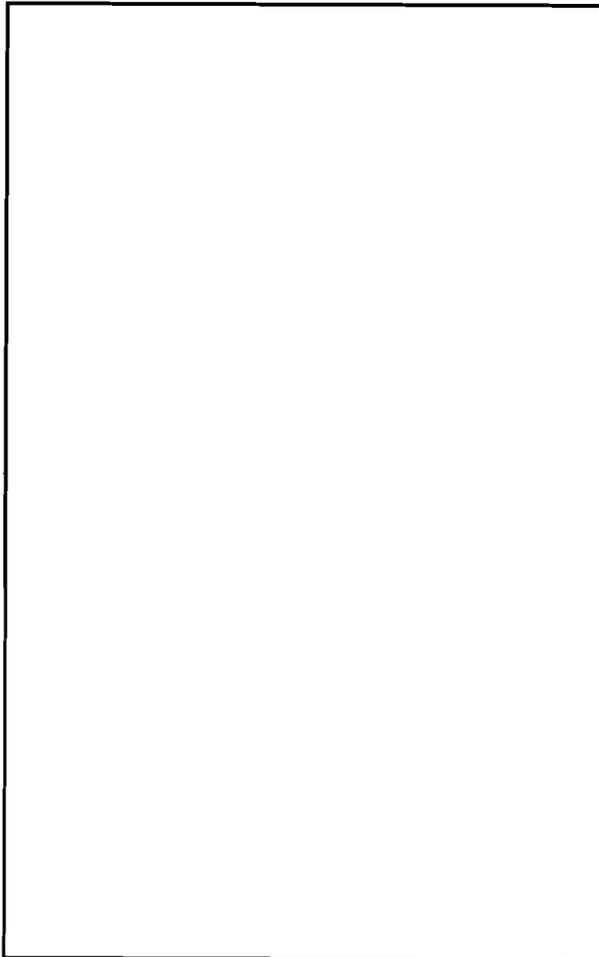


(U) The Early COMINT Effort against Viet Minh Communications, 1945-1950

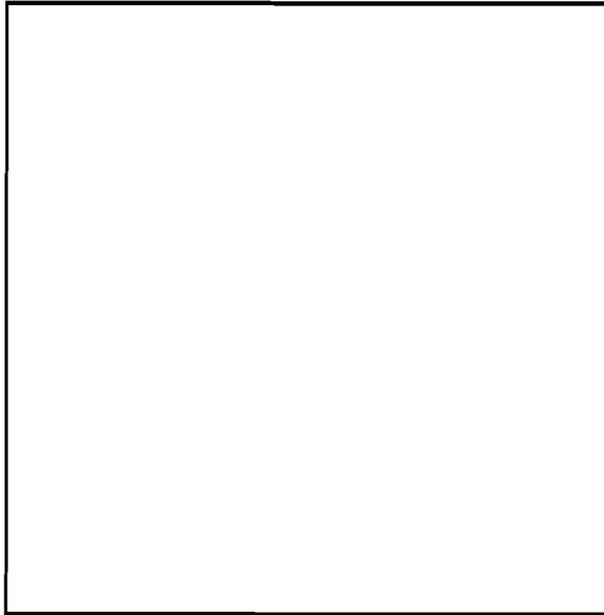
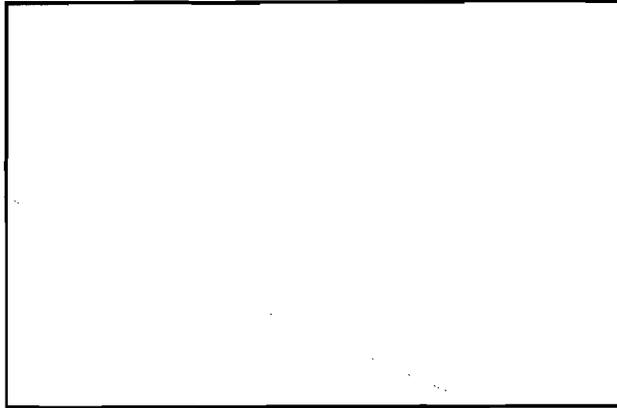
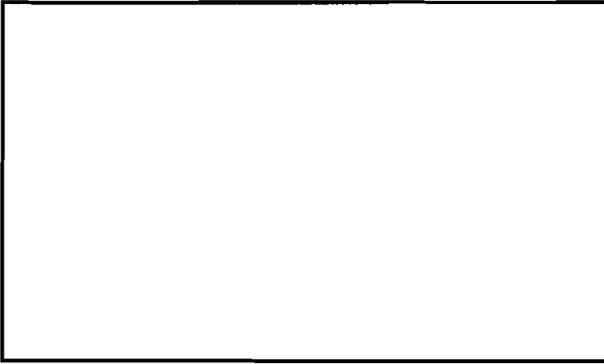
~~(S//SI)~~

 the Viet Minh problem was minuscule for the first few years after the fighting began 1945 in Indochina. Viet Minh diplomatic communications, like those which supported their delegation in Paris in 1946, had disappeared when the Vietnamese communists abandoned Hanoi and the other large urban centers to the returning French. Viet Minh communications during the early part of the war were mostly tactical; what little there was remained difficult to intercept because of its low power and the poor propagation characteristics of the upper Tonkin region. Viet Minh equipment was limited and numbers and quality - leftover Japanese and American radios and whatever French equipment the Viet Minh could steal, capture or buy.

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~~(TS//SI)~~ Ironically, the first intercept and reporting of Viet Minh communications occurred on 23 September 1945, the very day the Indochina war began when fighting broke out in Saigon between Viet Minh soldiers and the recently released French colonial forces. On that day, the intercept site at Arlington Hall, MS-1, intercepted a message transmitted by the French colonial radio station in Hanoi (C/S: FYJ) to the French embassy in Moscow (C/S: RKB3). The message, unencrypted and in English, was from Ho Chi Minh to Joseph Stalin, and contained the announcement the formation of the Provisional Government of the Viet Nam Republic, as well as a plea for aid for flood victims in Tonkin.⁸ However ominous this message may seem, at least in terms of Ho's connection with a Moscow-controlled international communist conspiracy, it really was the first of many messages that Ho sent

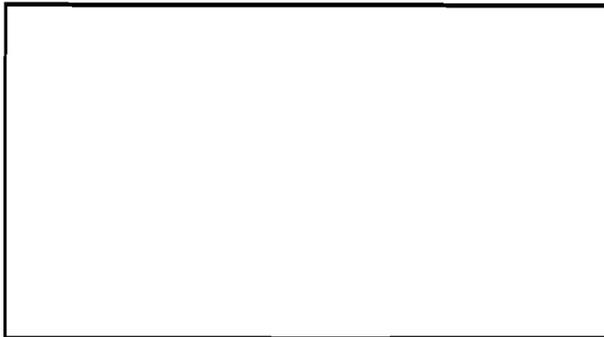


~~(S//SI)~~ **The Asian Crucible:
American COMINT Commits to the
Indochina War, 1950**

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(U) The impetus for the stepped-up COMINT effort against the Viet Minh was part of the U.S. reaction to the radically altered general political and military situation found in Asia in 1950. Just months earlier, in October 1949, Mao Zedong's communist troops had driven Jiang Jeishi's rag-tag Nationalist forces off the Chinese mainland onto the island of Formosa. With the Communist Chinese now in power on the mainland, major communist forces were now sitting across from the northern border of Indochina. On 25 June 1950, North Korean troops attacked across the thirty-eighth parallel and drove south in an effort to unify the Korean peninsula under the Kim Il Sung's communist regime. U.S. troops, committed to battle straight from comfortable peacetime occupation duties in Japan, were fighting for their lives. Suddenly, with Taiwan endangered, the French struggling in Indochina, and UN forces penned up in the precarious toehold in Pusan, Korea, it seemed to Washington that all of Asia had become one massive Cold War battleground.

~~(S//SI)~~ In May 1949, the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA) was founded. The two military work centers, WDGAS-93 in the ASA and NY-4 in the CSAW, both which once had handled the Far East COMINT problem, and included the comatose Viet Minh problem, were consolidated into AFSA-23, the General Processing Division.

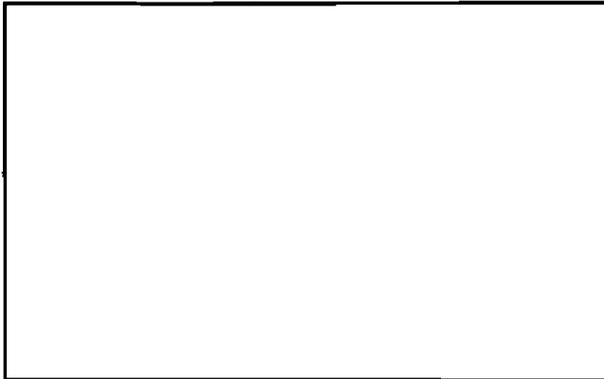


(U) Aid plans for the French in Indochina, which had been drawn up earlier in the year as part of a larger military aid package to Europe, known as the Mutual Defense Assistance Pact, were hurried up and finalized. Within three days of the Korean invasion, President Truman authorized the first transfers of military equip-

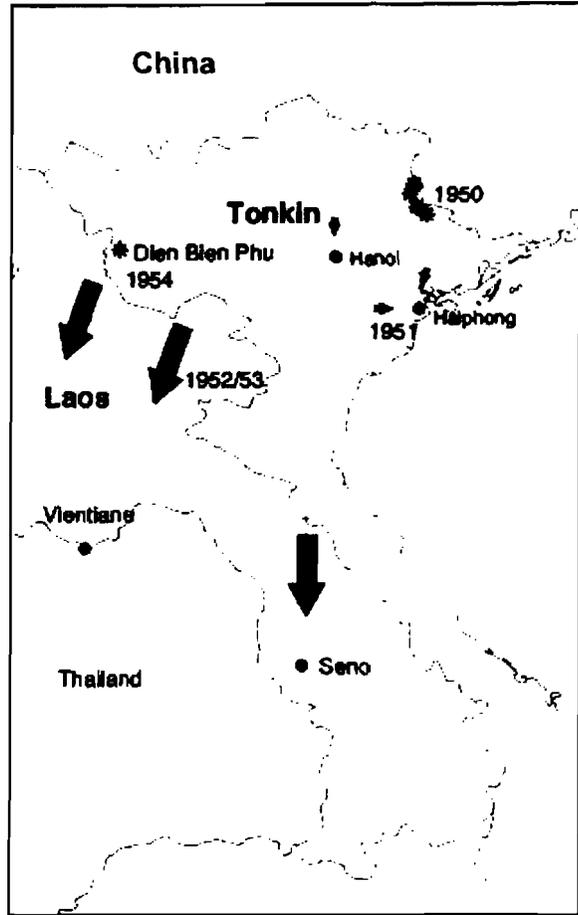
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French forces exhausted and stretched out all over northern Indochina. Perceiving themselves to be especially vulnerable in northwest Tonkin, the French command in Hanoi looked for a way to retrieve the military situation.

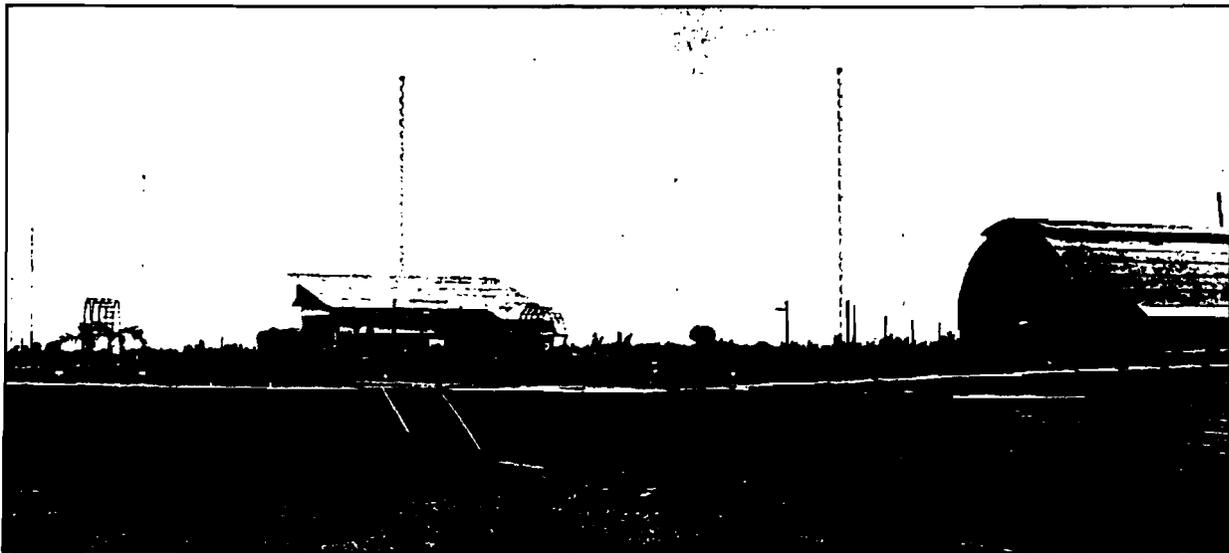
~~(TS//SI)~~ Meanwhile, AFSA's COMINT coverage of Indochina expanded with the start of the



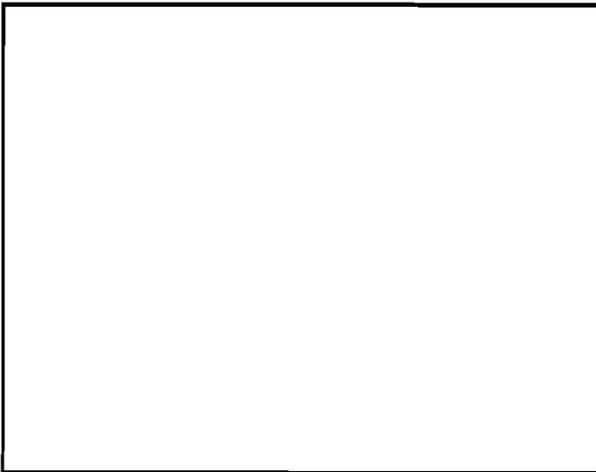
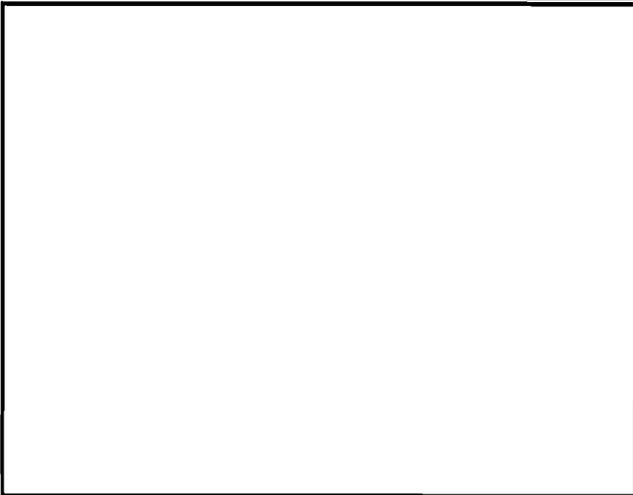
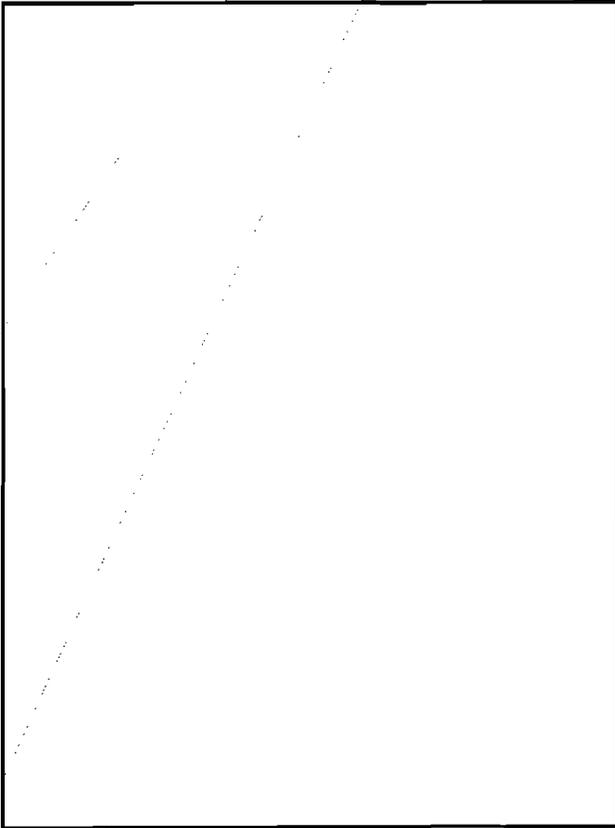
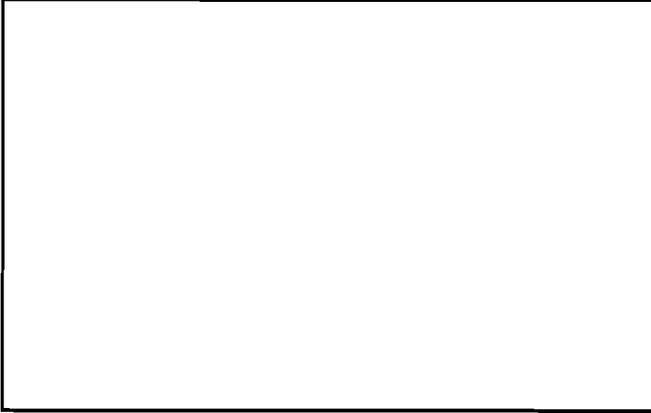
~~(TS//SI)~~ Within a few months, in October to be exact, the traffic analytic branch had managed to recover something of the skeleton of Viet Minh radio networks. What those analysts found was rather surprising – at least to the Americans who had only recently begun collection and analysis of the communist communications.



(U) Major Indochina military campaigns, 1950-1954



(U) Antenna arrangement of the U.S. Army Security Agency field station, Las Pinas, Philippines, 1946



~~(S//SI)~~ **The State of the Viet Minh
COMINT Problem, 1950-1954**

~~(S//SI)~~ With all of these cryptologic assets focused on the Viet Minh problem, the question naturally arises whether or not the intelligence derived from COMINT was effective or useful. To approach an answer to this question, it is neces-

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

sary to consider various aspects of COMINT mission against the Viet Minh.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The COMINT-derived information on Indochina was distributed throughout the U.S. government, with the CIA, State Department (through its Special Projects Staff), and Defense Department, being the largest customers. From as early as 1950, COMINT was used to brief the president on the situation in Indochina. Usually, the information was filtered through the CIA, which in turn provided summary reports which included strategic analyses, order of battle information, and status of ongoing [redacted]

[redacted] This distribution system remained in effect through the end of the war in 1954. Whether or not COMINT played any role in any U.S. policy decisions, [redacted]

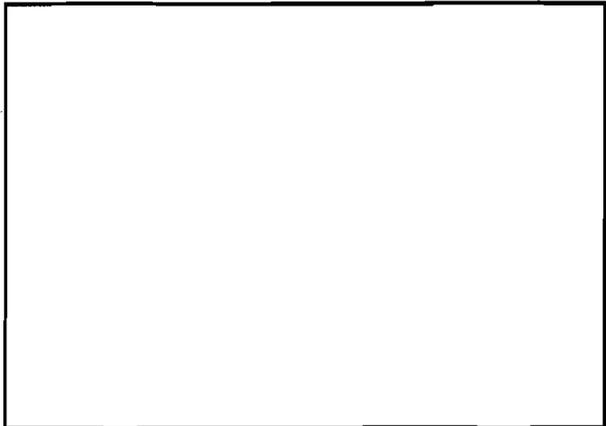
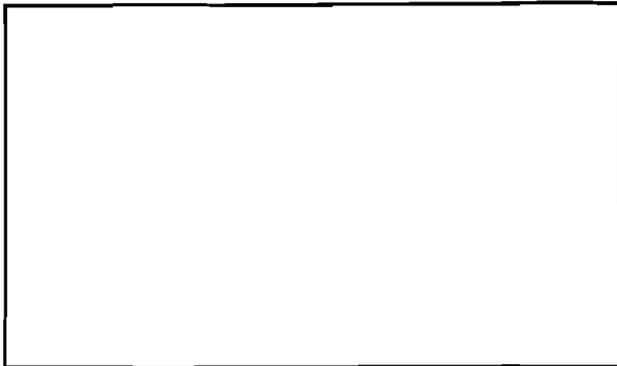
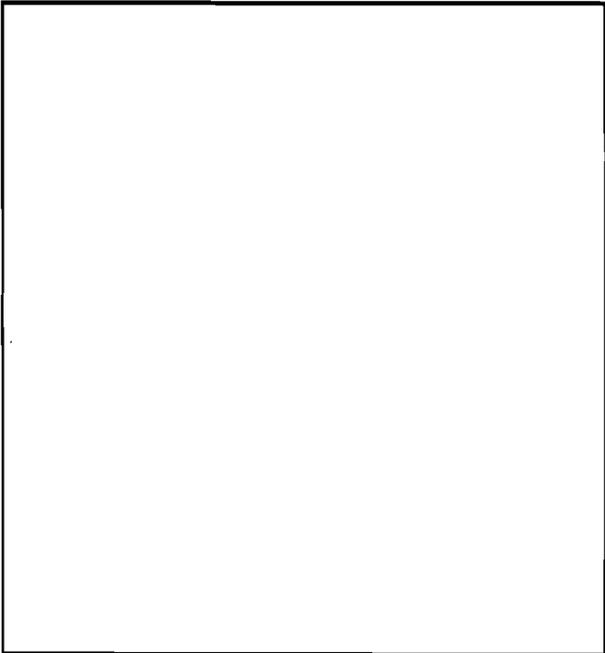
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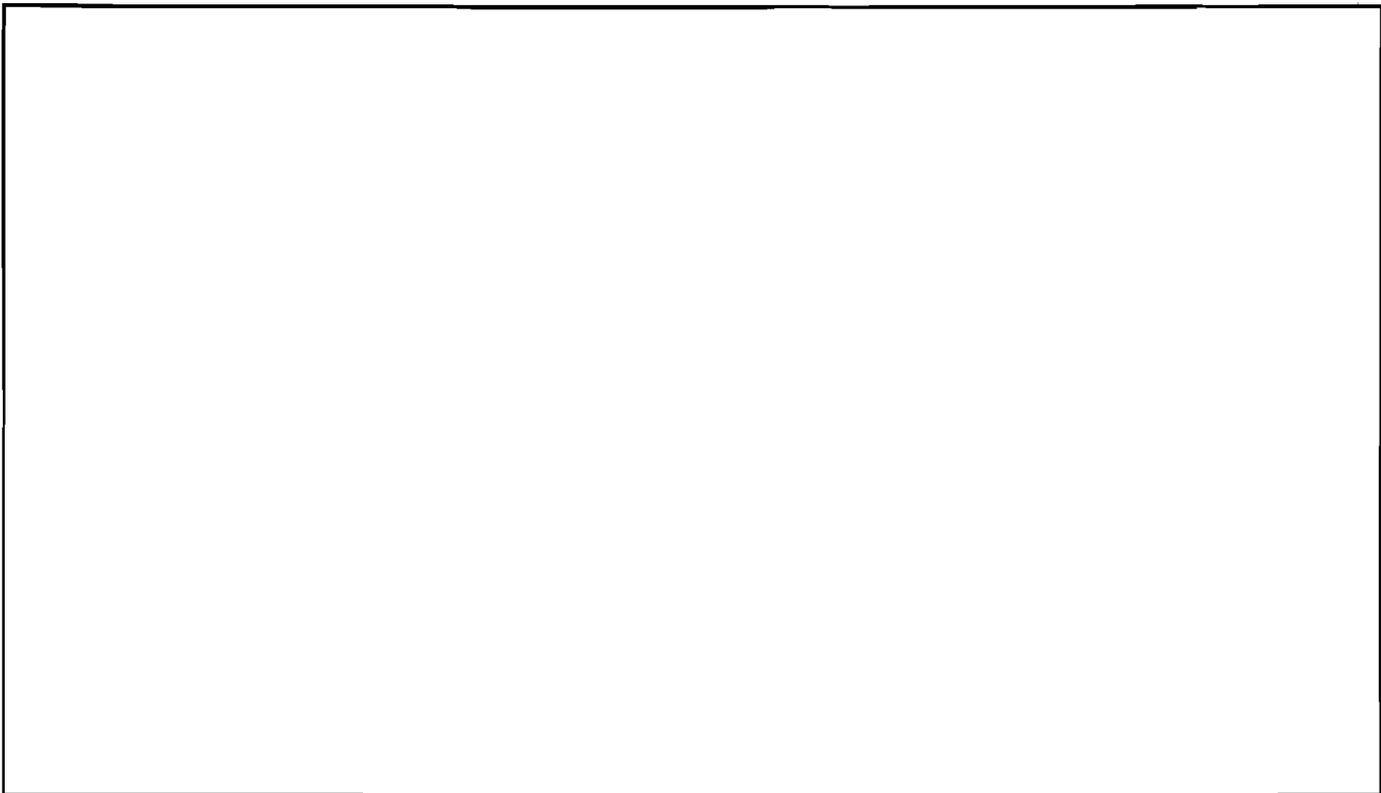
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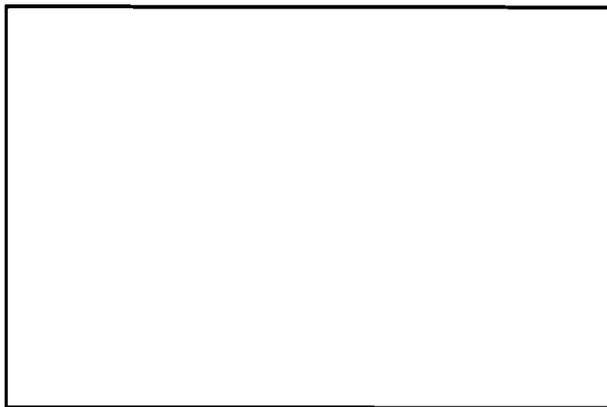
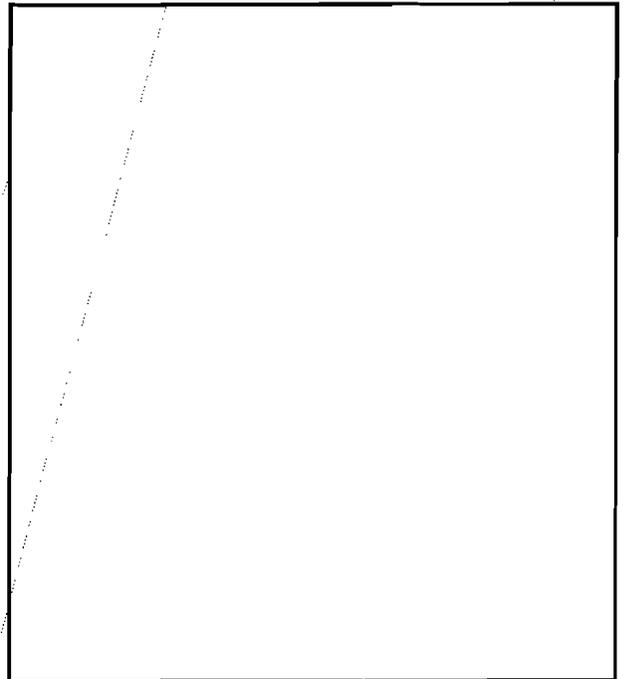
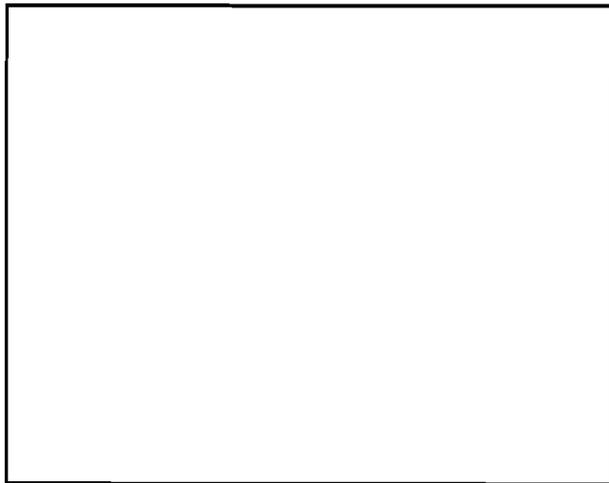
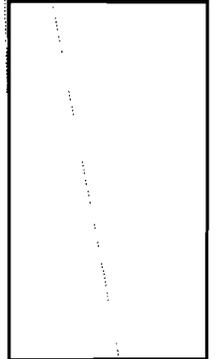
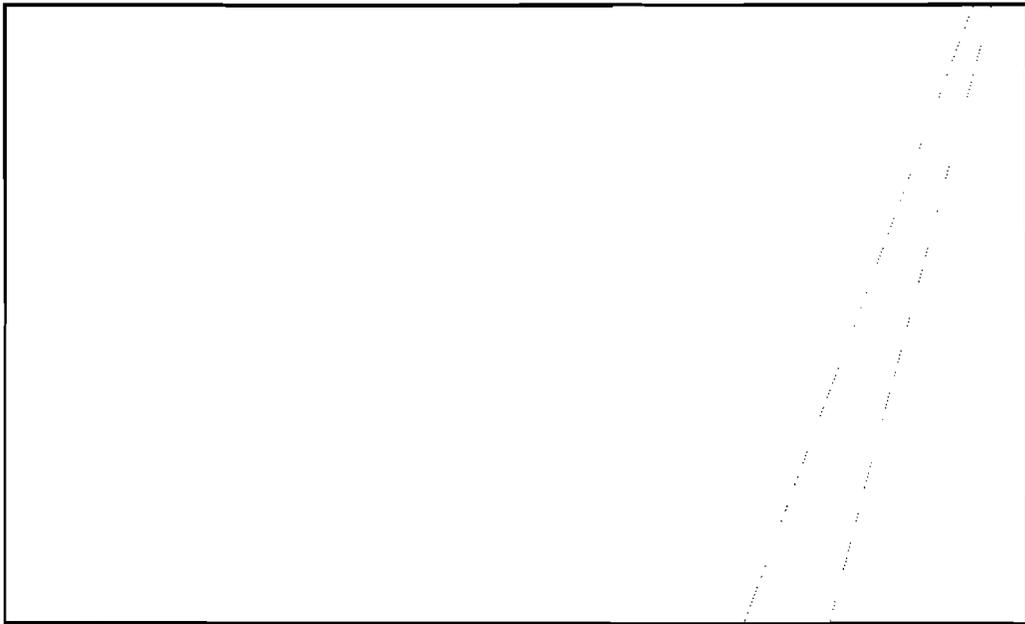
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depth and exploitation; for T/A, analysis of trends and development of indicators and warnings of future Viet Minh military activity were bettered by the additional intercept available.



EO 1.4.(c)





(U) However, even under the best of circumstances, any COMINT edge meant little if the strategic and tactical military situation was lost. For France, despite all the aid it was receiving, the war was continuing to turn against them. A last

desperate measure was made to retrieve the situation. It became one of history's most decisive battles, Dien Bien Phu.

~~(S//SI)~~ **Eavesdropping on Hell:
COMINT and the Battle of
Dien Bien Phu**

(U) In late 1953, the French, hoping to retrieve their declining military and political situation in northern Indochina, conceived of a plan to build an "impregnable" position in the rugged terrain of northwest Tonkin near a village known as Dien Bien Phu. It was a strategic gamble on the part of the French high command, as well as part of larger, ambitious strategy to bring the war to the Viet Minh strongholds, especially in Tonkin and central Annam, through a series of hard-hitting military operations known as the Navarre Plan.

(U) This was not the first time that Dien Bien Phu had been used as a major point in French strategic military planning for Indochina. In the abortive French scheming against the Japanese occupation forces within Indochina in late 1944 to early 1945, Dien Bien Phu was selected as a rallying point for French forces withdrawing from the cities and positions on the Indochinese littoral. The town promised easy access to a then friendly China, as well as allowing for possible Allied air supply of French and Laotian guerrilla teams operating in northern Laos. However, the French were caught off guard by the swiftness and thoroughness of the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945, in large part made possible by the Japanese monitoring of French colonial communications. A few thousand French and Vietnamese colonial troops along with some civilians, managed barely to escape Japanese forces as they retreated northwest to Dien Bien Phu and then into China.

(U) The French rationale for seeking a decisive battle there remains controversial. The French themselves often point to the previous

year's debacle in Laos and the subsequent need to protect the region from Viet Minh encroachments. The area was home to several mountain tribes whose continued loyalty the French felt was critical to their holding Indochina.⁷⁰ The French also wanted to use the tribes, especially the T'ai, as partisan units to harass the Viet Minh "rear" in western Tonkin. Dien Bien Phu would act as a *mole d'ammarrage* ("mooring point") for these operations in the Tonkin and Laotian interiors.

(U) Other observers have suggested that the French, impressed with the American tactic of so-called "killer" operations in Korea – whereby overwhelming firepower was brought down on Communist troop concentrations – were seeking a similar situation in which they could win a "climactic battle." The French hoped to lure a large Viet Minh force into terrain of France's choosing and then eliminate it through the application of superior firepower, which, in this case, included artillery, tactical air support (some of it flying from an airstrip within the base), and armor. Dien Bien Phu would be the bait. This multitude of explanations probably reflected the confusion in the French command at the time as to what was the purpose of the battle. In a sense, all the explanations could be correct; it has been illustrated elsewhere that the French commanders in Indochina were split over what role Dien Bien Phu was to play.⁷¹

~~(TS//SI)~~ Giap, the Viet Minh military chief, fully and immediately grasped the larger implications of the French buildup at Dien Bien Phu. Even before the battle, Viet Minh commanders were expecting the decisive battle to happen during the winter of 1953-54.⁷² Once the French paratroops landed in force, Giap and his staff fully appreciated the strategic French weakness – that they now were unable to commit to a single strategy of dispersion or consolidation of their forces; that the French could not hope to fight at the same time on the Red River Delta and in the hills of Tonkin.⁷³

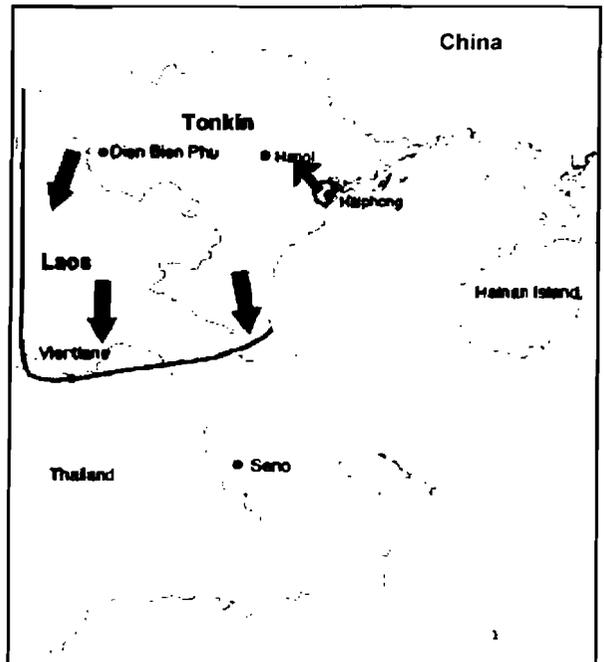
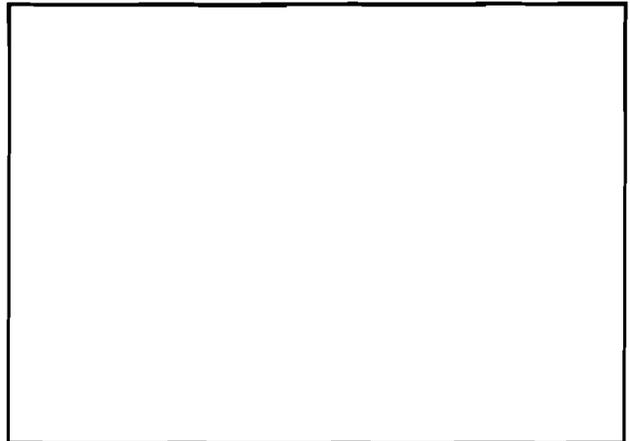
Communism, and Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Formosa, and Japan would all be gravely threatened." A week later, Vice-President Nixon told a convention of newspaper editors that the U.S. may be "putting our own boys in [Indochina] . . . regardless of allied support." 96 This idea of direct involvement, though, had not sprung up overnight. Much thought had already been given to what might happen in Indochina.

The Allied planners figured to use that port as the springboard for its counterattack. When the Allied forces were at full strength, a force of about eight divisions would strike northwest up the Red River back to Hanoi and beyond to Yen Bai, where, it was expected, the supply lines for the forward Chinese forces would be so endangered as to potentially isolate them. At that point, the situation would be stabilized. 99

~~(S//SI)~~ **The NSA Emergency Plan for Southeast Asia**

~~(TS)~~ Surprisingly, while Dien Bien Phu was being squeezed by Giap's troops, a series of Five-Power (U.S., U.K., Australia, France, and New Zealand) military planning conferences held since the beginning of the year already had envisioned the worst case scenario - that is, a large-scale intervention by Communist Chinese forces, sometime around the summer of 1954 - regardless of the outcome at Dien Bien Phu. The early planning conferences had presumed a certain equilibrium between the French and Viet Minh; perhaps even a sort of impasse. To break this stalemate, the planners predicted that the Chinese Communists were ready to commit up to 300,000 troops to an assault of Indochina. 97 The attack would be supported by aircraft and small naval units moving along the coast. It was expected by the Pentagon planners that the Chinese would sweep Allied, in this case mainly French Union, forces ahead of them. Within fifty-five days of the initial attacks, it was expected that the Chinese would occupy a line roughly along the 19th parallel, from Vinh in Vietnam to Takhet and Vientaine in Laos. Hanoi would be occupied, while it was hoped that a small Allied redoubt would hold on in the Red River delta, anchored on the port city of Haiphong. 98

~~(TS)~~ The Allied riposte would take some time to organize. A special effort would be made to hold Hanoi - its military and political significance was paramount. Failing that, the Haiphong toehold would have to be maintained at all costs.



(U) Projected military situation in Indochina after a Chinese Communist assault into Laos and Tonkin. The Allied riposte would stage from Haiphong.

was not then prepared to do.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, the U.S. was unable to stir up support from its allies, principally the British. The British viewed intervention as counterproductive to the start of talks in Geneva which they, along with the Soviets, were co-chairing. When the idea of intervention was presented to the prime minister, Winston Churchill, he told the visiting U.S. secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, that a military operation of the type the Americans proposed would be "ineffective" and "might well bring the world to the verge of a major war."¹⁰⁶

(U) The lack of any allies who were interested in participating in the Indochina intervention left the U.S. with the prospect of unilateral action, which did not sit well with congressional leaders. At a meeting in early April with a congressional delegation, Secretary of State Dulles had been told by Senators Richard Russell and Lyndon Johnson that they would not support any project without British and other Allied participation.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the congressmen and senators in the delegation were skeptical of the outcome of Operation Vulture. They asked the hardest question of all: What if the bombing failed? What,

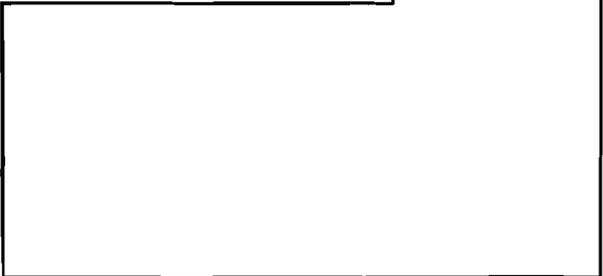


(U) French casualty being treated at Dien Bien Phu

then, was the next step? The next step, of course, was intervention by the U.S. ground forces.

(U) The clinching argument against intervention came from the U.S. Army's chief of staff, General Matthew Ridgeway. Ridgeway, who had come to his JCS position straight from his command of UN forces in Korea, was well aware of the difficulties of a conventional land war fought in a backward Asian country. He was less than dazzled with the claims by the air force and navy regarding the effectiveness of air power against the Viet Minh positions around Dien Bien Phu. Ridgeway understood how difficult it would be just to establish any type of support base during the invasion. Port facilities that existed in Haiphong were inadequate for the size of the force expected to go in. The transportation system would be unable to support movement or supply without a major engineering effort. His assistant chief of staff for plans, Lieutenant General James Gavin, called the plans to invade "utter folly."¹⁰⁸ Ridgeway reported to Eisenhower that it would take anywhere from seven to eleven army divisions about ten years to eradicate the Viet Minh, depending upon the response of the Chinese Communists. President Eisenhower, hardly a foe to intervention, but realistic in what could be accomplished in a land war, realized the costs of getting into Indochina, and on 29 April 1954 announced that there were no plans for U.S. intervention of any kind.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The French were now left on their own. American COMINT would record the prolonged, lonely agony of their defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Day by day, the Viet Minh nibbled away at the French fortified positions.



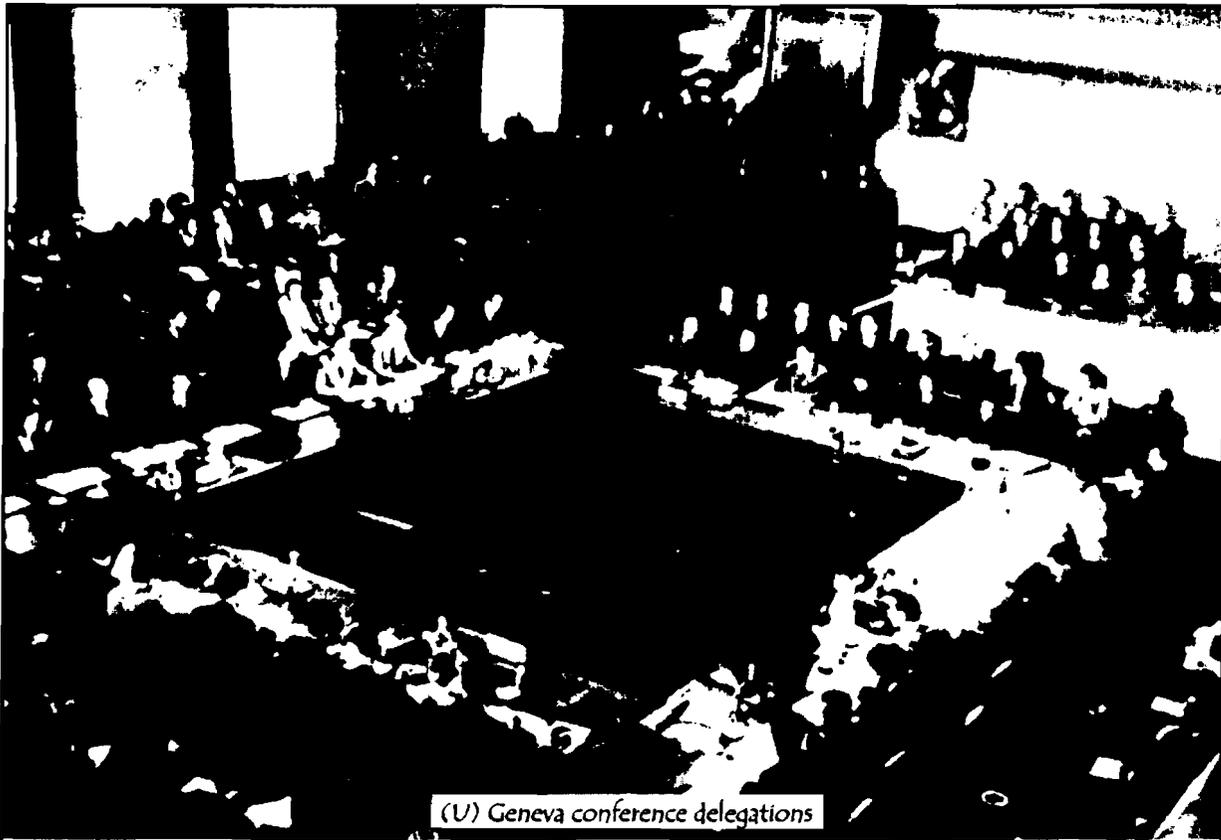
~~(S//SI)~~ **First Interlude: The Geneva Settlement and
SIGINT Drawdown, 1954-1955**

(U) Even as French Union and Viet Minh troops grappled in the battleground of Dien Bien Phu, delegations from France, the Viet Minh, the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, the United States, the Republic of Vietnam, and the Kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia, were meeting at the Far Eastern Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, to settle both the Korean Conflict and Indochina War. The Korean War phase began on 26 April. On 8 May, the day after the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu, the Indochina phase of the conference started.

(U) If ever a conference was begun with all its main participants determined not to compro-

mise, Geneva was it. The French, militarily humiliated at Dien Bien Phu, publicly refused to entertain any suggestion for a possible partition of Vietnam. They argued along the American line, espoused mainly by United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and echoed by the government of Vietnam, that only "free" countries could defend themselves against communist aggression. The Viet Minh, on the other hand, were aiming for a complete political settlement with the French leaving all of Vietnam.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Meanwhile, the chief Viet Minh delegate, Pham Van Dong, snubbed Bao Dai's representative. The Laotian and Cambodian delegates, certain that they were Ho's next targets, refused



(U) Geneva conference delegations

to talk to the Viet Minh delegation. Secretary of State Dulles did not want the U.S. even to be involved at all; his ideological inflexibility had let him entertain the possibility of refusing to acknowledge the very existence of the Viet Minh as a "state" and therefore exclude them from the conference.¹ He had further infuriated the Chinese by refusing to shake Zhou Enlai's hand, considering even this gesture as a form of legitimizing another government he did not want to recognize. Bao Dai's delegation took its cue from the Americans and tried to undercut any compromise.² This inflexible, yet almost detached, attitude bothered some southern Vietnamese who felt that the American position at Geneva subverted the chances for a military intervention; nor did it seem to them that the U.S. was prepared to make concessions at the table.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

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(U) For the French, the collapse of Dien Bien Phu left them in a perilous military position, especially in the Tonkin region. Fearful of a Viet Minh onslaught in the Red River valley, Generals Navarre and Cogy rearranged their remaining troops around Hanoi and along an escape corridor down Colonial Highways 5 and 18 to the port of Haiphong. Whether Giap intended to assault the Hanoi-Haiphong area along the Red River is debatable. At Dien Bien Phu he had sustained almost 23,000 casualties and had captured 10,000 French prisoners. Giap still had sizable French forces in Laos and Cochin to deal with. A campaign eastward into the Red River valley towards Hanoi might have undone the recent and

costly victory at Dien Bien Phu. There is some evidence that he was prepared to move into the region, but what he ultimately would have done if there was no sign of a settlement at Geneva, is unknown.⁴

(U) However, it was pressure from internal politics in France that proved decisive for the conference. On 12 June the government of Prime Minister Joseph Laniel resigned and Pierre Mendes-France, a supporter of De Gaulle but also something of a maverick leftist, took over. Aware of the public disenchantment with the seemingly endless "*la sale guerre*" (the "dirty war"), he stunned the French nation and Chamber of Deputies with the announcement that he would have a settlement by 20 July or resign. Under the raised hammer of this deadline, the French moved to draw up a compromise partition, originally aiming to have it established at the eighteenth parallel.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The Viet Minh, certain of their military position, soon would learn the true nature of socialist "solidarity," and see their gains evaporate at the conference table.

[Redacted]

However, rather quickly into the conference, the Chinese and Russians began to pressure Pham Van Dong and the rest of the Viet Minh delegation to accept a partition plan. The Chinese, mostly out of historic geopolitical considerations, preferred a partitioned Vietnam on their southern border - always concerned with the French presence, they now could not brook an independent and unified Vietnam.⁶

[Redacted]

The Russians, anxious not to wreck the conference, further squeezed the Viet Minh. Pham Van Dong, realizing how little leverage the Viet Minh had without Chinese and Soviet support, relented and agreed to the partition idea. Eventually, the

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seventeenth parallel was picked as the point of division.

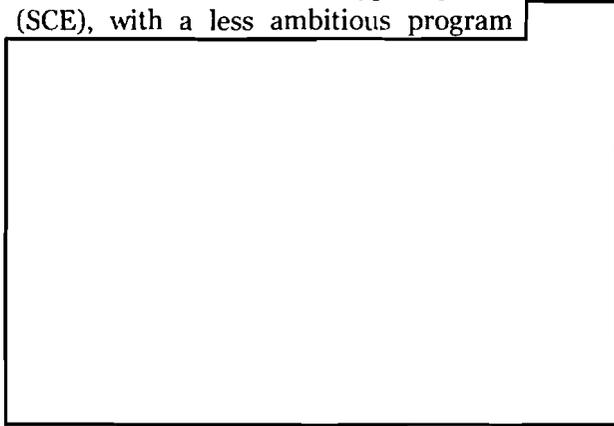
(U) On July 21, the cease fire "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet Nam" was signed by the Viet Minh and French. A further protocol was agreed to by seven of the nine attendees - the United States and the Republic of Vietnam refused to even agree to its provisions, which were (1) Vietnam was provisionally divided at the seventeenth parallel into North and South Vietnam, pending a permanent solution through nationwide elections; (2) for a period of three hundred days all persons could pass freely from the northern to southern zone; (3) limits were imposed on foreign military bases in both the North and South, on military personnel movement, and rearmament; (4) nationwide elections were scheduled for 20 July 1956; and (5) an International Control Commission made up of representatives of India, Canada, and Poland was established to supervise the detailed implementation of these agreements.

(U) The Americans, along with the South Vietnamese, who had abstained from participating in the negotiations, further refused to sign the agreement. At the time of the signing of the accords, the U.S. stated that it would refrain from using force to disturb the agreements. Washington also stated that it viewed any renewal of aggression as a violation of the agreements, and supported the idea of unification through the supervised elections. However, the Americans knew that the North would win a plebiscite: Ho's popularity with nationalists in the southern areas and the population edge in the North virtually assured that. So Secretary Dulles scrambled to make the best of the situation.

(U) Within two months of the Geneva Accords, he got the Manila Treaty signed, which formed the basis for the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The treaty obligated its eight signatories, the United States, Great Britain, France, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand,

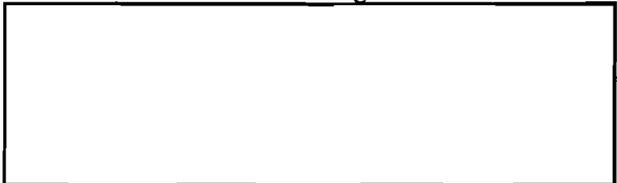
Australia, and New Zealand, to defense commitments, though these were not as stringent as NATO's provisions. Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, which would have been the expected targets of any communist aggression, were excluded from SEATO because of the provisions of the Geneva accords; still, they were included in the territorial jurisdiction of the treaty. Already the battle lines were being drawn for the next phase of the Indochina War.

~~(TS//SI)~~ With the accords, NSA's emergency plan for expanding its COMINT posture to support hostilities in the region fizzled out. In mid-August, NSA admitted that the War Plan was "obsolete" and opted for an augmentation of the U.S. COMINT posture in Southeast Asia. NSA tasked the cryptologic elements of the three services, known as Service Cryptologic Elements (SCE), with a less ambitious program



EO 1.4.(c)

~~(TS//SI)~~ Throughout the fall of 1954 and into the spring of 1955, the three services moved to implement the provisions of the NSA plan. However, crises in other parts of Asia and the world would intrude, eroding the program's effectiveness for COMINT coverage of Southeast Asia.



Chapter 2 – (U) The Struggle for Heaven’s Mandate: SIGINT and the Internal Crisis in South Vietnam, 1956-1962

(U) The post-Geneva settlement left the states of Indochina in political chaos. The French, like most other European colonial powers, had done little to prepare the indigenous populations in the new countries for the difficult job of self-governing and the even harder job of administering the clashing interests of the various ethnic, nationalist, political, religious, and neocolonial interest groups that populated the region. Just reining in these groups so that they did not pose a threat to the new states was enough of a daunting task. The two Vietnams – the communist-dominated Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), known popularly to Americans as North Vietnam, and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), known as South Vietnam – went their separate ways, afflicted with their own internal problems.

(U) In North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh cadre embarked on a program of agricultural reform. However, the effort soon degenerated into a program of retribution against landlords and rich peasants as Agricultural Reform Tribunals, acting more like flying execution squads, devastated the farming districts of Tonkin and northern Annam already seriously damaged by the many years of revolutionary war and prior French exploitation. By the summer of 1956 Ho Chi Minh ended the tribunals, publicly apologizing for its excesses.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Residual opposition to Hanoi’s regime continued to flare up into revolt, and regular Viet Minh military units would have to be called in to suppress what was referred to by Hanoi as “counter-revolutionary activity.” In one of the most notable examples, in November 1956 peasants in the mostly Catholic Nghe An province, where Ho had been born, rebelled against the communist regime in Hanoi. The causes for the revolt stemmed from the above-

mentioned poorly administered land reform program which fell prey to overzealous and ignorant party cadre, as well as religious persecution of the Catholic population.¹

[REDACTED] EO 1.4.(c)
[REDACTED] It would be months before the area was pacified sufficiently so that the regular military could turn over the maintenance of order to the local militia.

(U) Beginning in 1955, aid from communist states, principally the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, in the forms of grants, loans, and advisors, began to flow into North Vietnam. Within ten years, Hanoi’s economic modernization program allowed it to surpass the South in many industrial and commercial sectors.

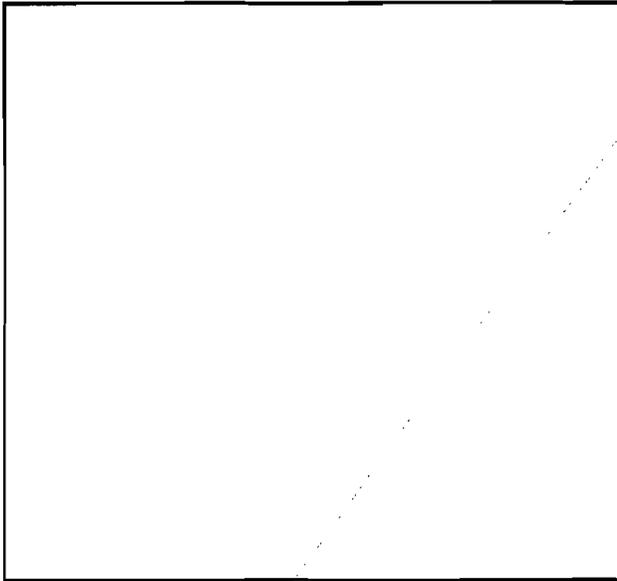
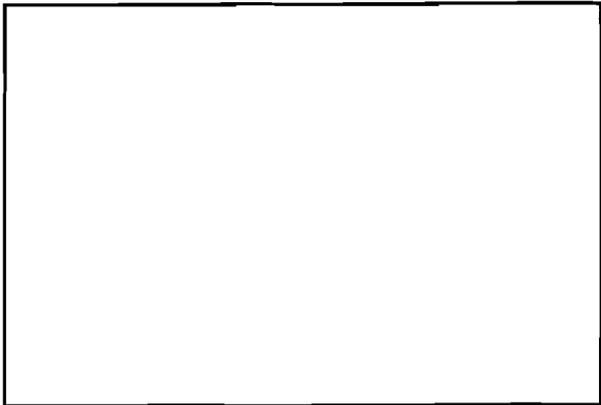
(U) While Ho had problems in the DRV, his grip on the reins of power was certain; the Lao Dong Party assured him and his immediate cadre of followers the ability to execute their plan to remake the DRV into a communist state. A well-developed internal security apparatus, which included militia, police, and intelligence forces, enabled the DRV to suppress the remnants of internal opposition, as well as external threats from sabotage and intelligence-gathering teams dispatched by the Republic of Vietnam.

(U) On the other hand, Ho’s opposite in Saigon, President Ngo Dinh Diem, had a plethora of problems facing him: a residual French administration suspicious of Diem’s nationalist platform, an unsettled tide of Catholic refugees from the north which demanded resettlement and integration into the south, and a multitude of independent political and religious power centers which were potential contenders for control of Saigon and the RVN, as well as a personal threat

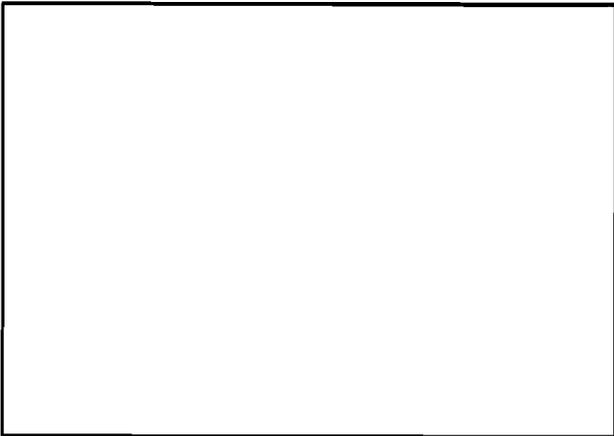
the communists also forged political contacts outside of South Vietnam with exiled leaders from those groups that Diem had destroyed in the years 1954 to 1955.³¹

(U) Acts of political terrorism and armed attacks on ARVN outposts and units increased steadily from 1957 to 1959. Most of the activity was in the region to the northwest and southwest of Saigon – traditional communist strongholds in the Mekong Delta and the Plain of Reeds on the Cambodian border. Much of the violence was directed at vulnerable targets: isolated government teams would be wiped out, and village and provincial officials appointed by Diem would be assassinated. Some spectacular military actions occurred in mid-1958 at the Michelin and Minh Thanh Rubber Plantations which demonstrated ARVN's inability to match the communist's combat effectiveness.³² In July 1958, the American embassy observed that "in many remote areas, the central government has no effective control."³³

(U) With the implementation of Hanoi's new policy in May 1959, communist activity in the south increased exponentially. Assassinations of officials and leading citizens doubled in the last half of 1959 compared to the first half. Kidnapping went up by 50 percent, while Viet Cong-initiated attacks and ambushes on government troops averaged over one hundred a month in the closing months of 1959.³⁴



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(U) Strangely, both Diem and the United States Military Advisory and Assistance Group (USMAAG) viewed the late 1959 upswing in Viet Cong activity as a sort of "last gasp," a desperate effort to retrieve the political and military situation in the face of Diem's counterinsurgency program. In September 1959, Diem would tell General Samuel Williams, chief of the USMAAG, that the "strategic battle against the VC has been won; now remains the tactical battle."³⁸ As we have seen earlier, there was some validity to this impression; Diem's measures had made their mark on the membership of the Viet Cong. Yet, the true measure of this policy lay in the growing disaffection throughout the country for Diem's leadership. The communists were not the only

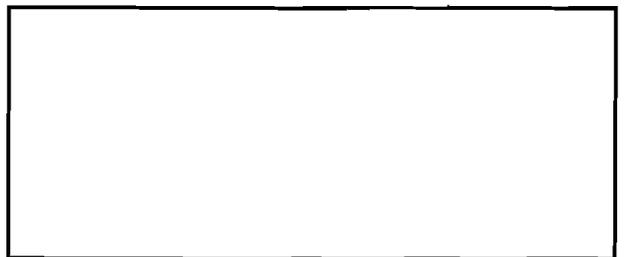
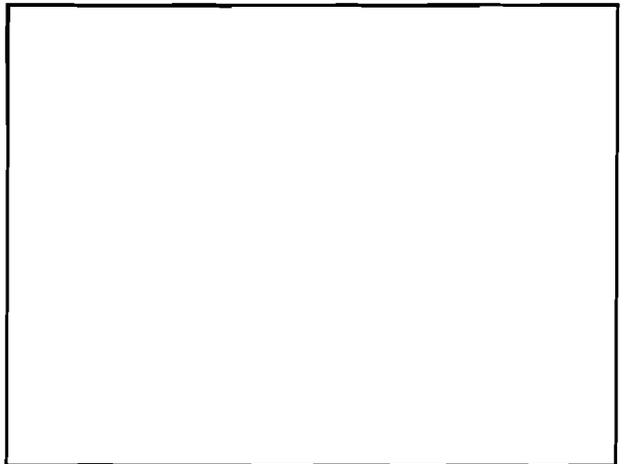
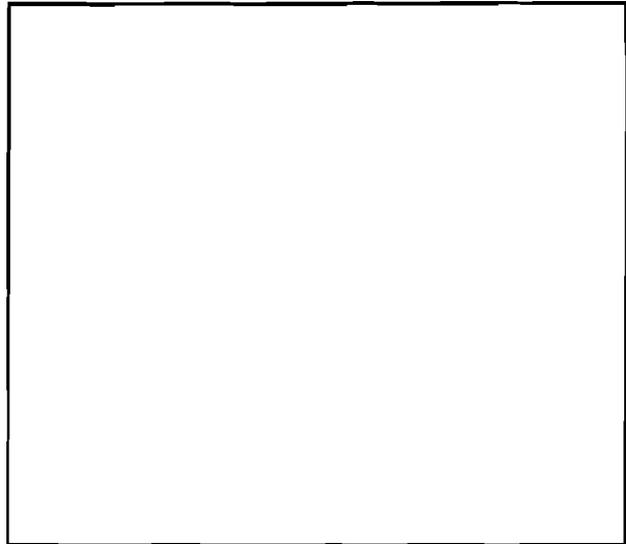
focus of opposition, and the next year would be one of revelation for Diem's American advisors.

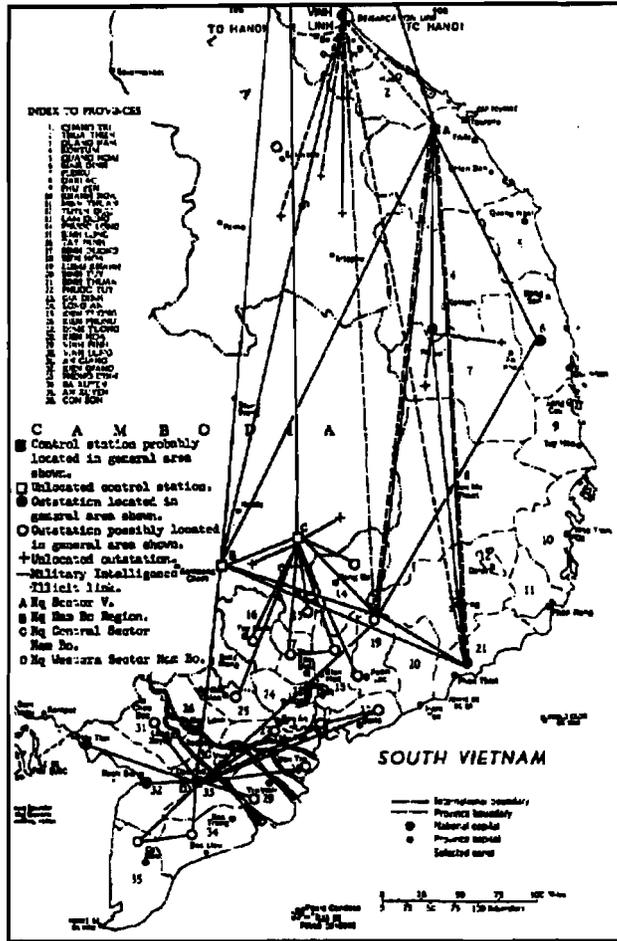
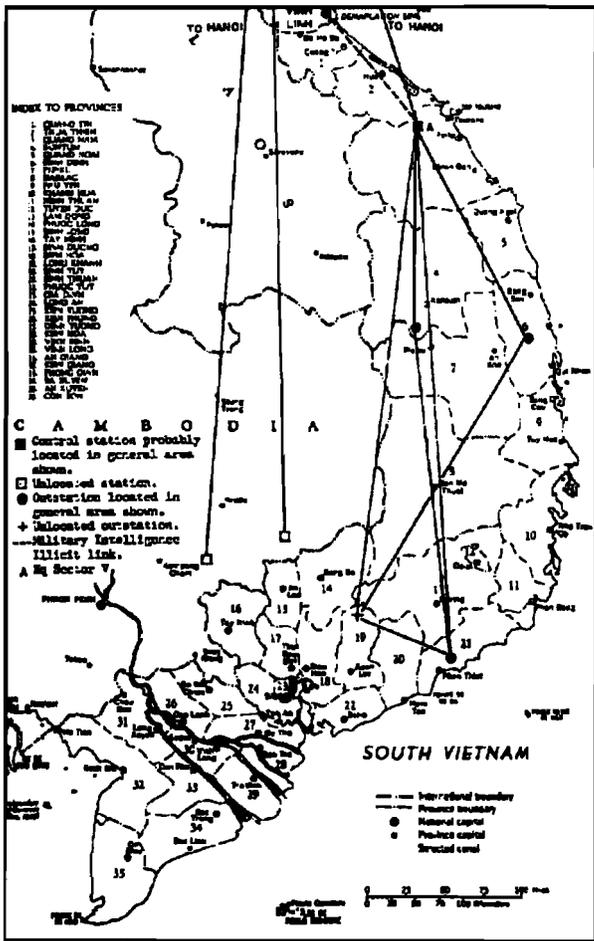
(U) Nineteen sixty opened with a disaster for the South Vietnamese military. On 26 January 1960, in Tay Ninh Province near the Cambodian border, four companies of VC troops overran the HQ of the ARVN's 32nd Regiment. Besides destroying barracks and headquarters buildings and inflicting sixty-six casualties on the South Vietnamese, the VC made off with enough weapons to arm a battalion. At the same time, a general uprising by the peasants in Ben Tre, the capital of Kien Hoa Province on the Mekong delta, was in full swing.

(U) The litany of disasters followed throughout the early part of the year. In March, three ARVN battalions, engaged in separate sweep operations near the Cambodian border, were ambushed by VC units and forced to retreat. Another ARVN unit which was defending a small hamlet, this time in Kien Giang Province in the extreme southwest of South Vietnam on the Gulf of Thailand, and which had been forewarned of an attack, literally was frightened out of its fortified positions by unarmed civilians advancing on them along with a VC force. The VC then leisurely picked through the deserted village for abandoned weapons and equipment.³⁹

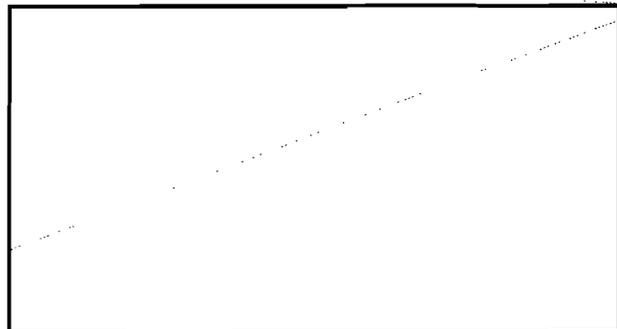
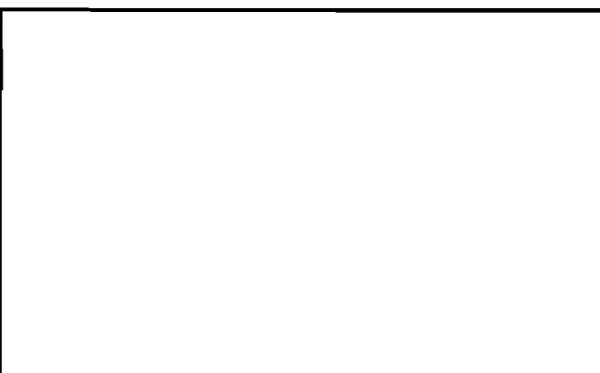
~~(TS//SI)~~ To SIGINT analysts at NSA, the increase in VC activity throughout 1960 was reflected in the continued growth of the communist radio network throughout South Vietnam. New stations on the network seemed to pop up as quickly as toadstools after a spring rain. By the end of that year, NSA estimated that the number of VC radio stations and links in South Vietnam had quadrupled from late 1959.⁴⁰ In the Nam Bo region, the area encompassing Saigon and the area of the Mekong River, the numbers were even more striking - a six- and sevenfold increase in stations and links over those counted in 1959! In addition, the communications procedures of the VC operators were noticeably more open, with

daytime operating schedules, and the use of Vietnamese language chatter instead of the French previously utilized to further disguise their identity.⁴¹ The report of this virtual explosion in VC communications was so alarming to the U.S. intelligence community, that Allen Dulles reputedly went to see President Kennedy in late January to personally brief him on it.⁴²



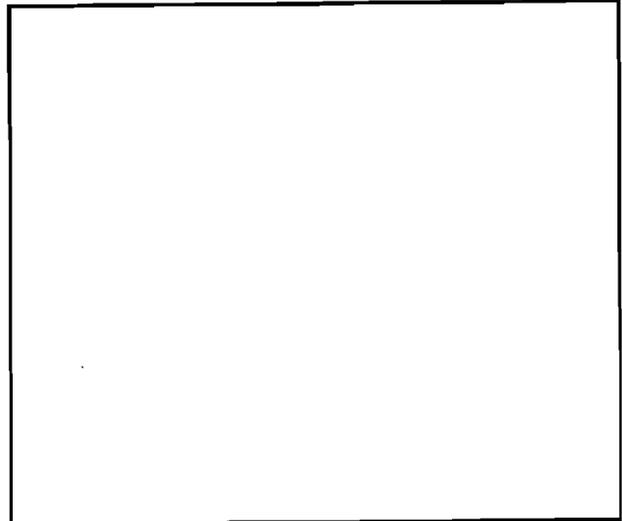


(TS//SI) VC radio networks from December 1959 and January 1961

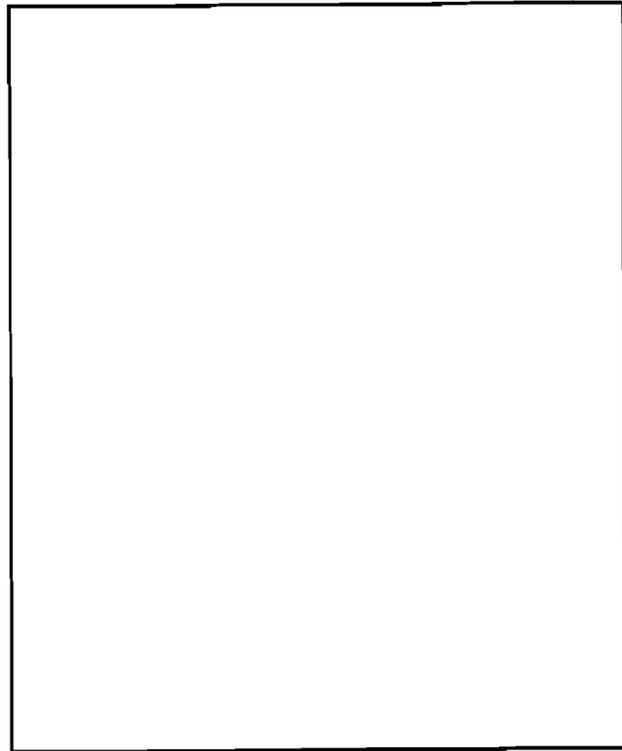


EO 1.4.(c)

nist, but staunchly nationalist, issued a respectful, but nonetheless devastating critique of Diem's regime: his elections were undemocratic, the National Assembly was a farce, the army incompetent, the economy was corrupt, and public opinion and the press had been gagged into silence. The signatories, which included Huu, appealed to Diem to institute reforms. Otherwise, they contended, the tide would turn and Diem could be swept away.⁷⁴



(U) Diem's response had been to label the Caravelle petitioners as communists. He used the NLF's declaration as an excuse for another wave of newspaper closings and ordered the arrests of more students, journalists, intellectuals, and opposition politicians. For all practical purposes, by late 1960 legitimate political opposition to Diem in South Vietnam, outside of the NLF and the soon-to-explode Buddhists, was finished. In prison, in exile, or allied to the communists, there were no more alternatives to the Ngo family's control of the country. From now on, opposition would center around three axes: the communist NLF, the South Vietnamese military, and the increasingly restive Buddhist majority.

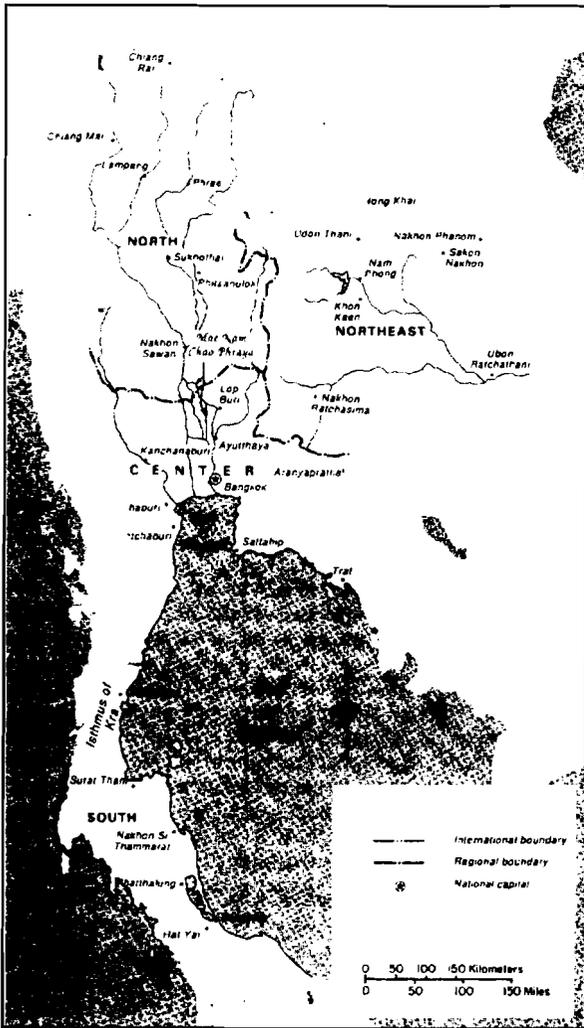


~~(S//SI)~~ For the Americans, the situation in Indochina was heating up. The increasing internal tensions in South Vietnam, with the communist participation in them, and the communist advances in Laos, all pointed to the possibility of American involvement. The SIGINT community saw the necessity of an increased capability to cover the region. The handful of assets available outside Southeast Asia simply were not adequate to meet the needs for intelligence. Already, though, moves were afoot to meet the challenge.

(U) America Plans the Mainland SIGINT Buildup, 1959-1961

~~(TS//SI)~~ In 1959, the problem for American cryptology in Southeast Asia could be seen just by glancing at a map of SIGINT sites in the larger Asian region. 





(U) Thailand

with the United States. Relations between Thailand and its immediate neighbors, Laos and Cambodia, traditionally were tense and involved historic claims over disputed border regions north along the Mekong River and Cambodia's western Battambang and Siemreab Provinces. At the same time, Thailand's internal political situation was far from stable. A struggle for political supremacy between two contending Thai army generals, Thanarat Sarit and Phibun Songkram, led to a coup in 1957. In October 1958, Sarit, now in control, had instituted a crackdown on all political parties and critics. However, all of these obstacles to a U.S. SIGINT site would yield in the face of the Laotian crisis of mid-1959.

(U) In May 1959, the Western-leaning Royal Laotian Government (RLG) had tried to wipe out the Pathet Lao movement. (See Chapter 3, pages 89-94, for more details on the Laotian situation and the overall SIGINT response to it.) Several Pathet Lao leaders, including Souphanouvong, the "Red Prince," were arrested and tossed in jail. One of two Pathet Lao combat battalions was surrounded. The other one escaped and headed north where it joined up with military units from the DRV sent by Hanoi to intervene. By July, the joint communist forces had driven RLG units from several outposts in Sam Neua (Xam Nua) Province.

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[Redacted]

(TS//SI) In light of the potential offered by the two sites, NSA planned for a big intercept mission in Thailand, looking to set up as many as fifty-two positions manned by 800 personnel.

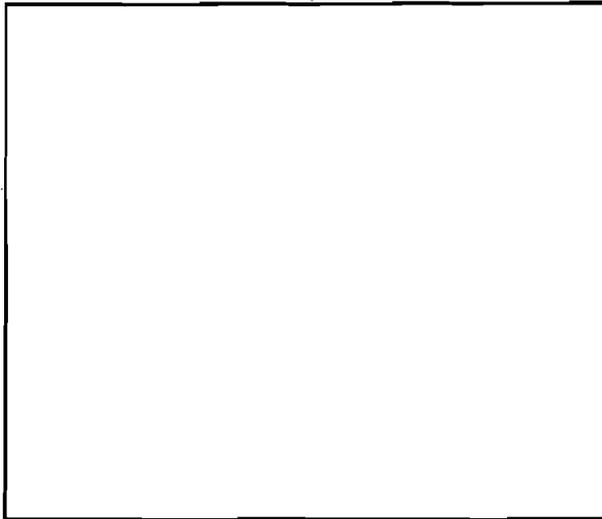
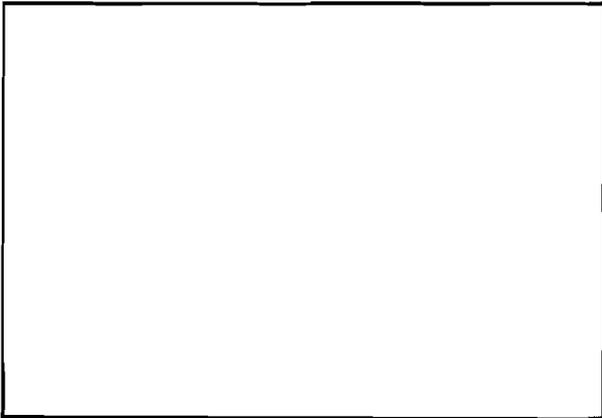
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For their part, the Thai government remained skittish about identifying too closely

(TS) In response to the fighting in Laos, the United States developed an intervention plan, OPLAN 32-59, which called for the insertion of Marine ground forces and air support into Laos supported by a naval task force, Joint Task Force (JTF) 116, stationed in the Gulf of Siam. Along with this planning, the U.S. ambassador to Thailand, Alexis Johnson, approached Prime Minister Sarit,

[Redacted]

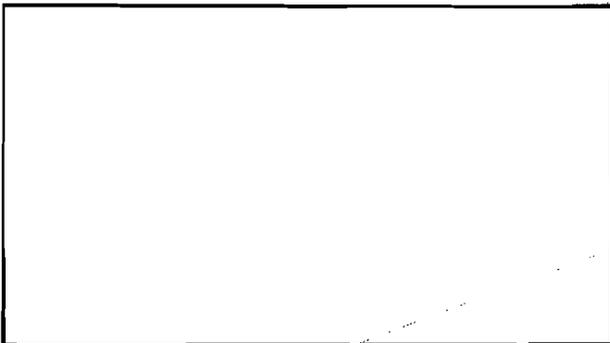
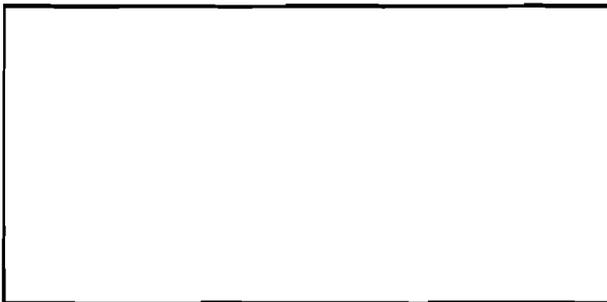
Johnson agreed that any information that the unit obtained which was relevant to the security situation for Thailand would be



~~(TS//SI)~~ In the fall of 1960, Laos heated up again with the revolt of the RLG's paratroop battalion in Vientiane commanded by Captain Kong Le, a French-trained officer. There was more fighting between the forces of the neutralist Souvanna Phouma government and the American-backed General Phoumi. When Kong Le and Phouma were ousted from Vientiane by Phoumi, they asked for material help from the communists. By December, American SIGINT analysts had isolated communications supporting a Soviet and North Vietnamese supply airlift to communist forces in northern Laos.⁹⁷ American SIGINT stepped up the amount of coverage of the communications supporting the airlift and the general situation in Laos. A SIGINT Readiness Condition BRAVO, a situation calling for increased SIGINT coverage being mobilized to cover the crisis, was instituted as fears in Washington increased over the possibility of outside, overt intervention, maybe even a large-scale invasion, by Soviet, Chinese, or North Vietnamese forces.

~~(TS//SI)~~ However, the feared invasion of Laos never materialized. Laos calmed down. Concerned by the political instability of the region, the United States again approached the Thailand on the issue of a permanent station in their country. Much of the substance of the earlier December 1960 talks between Ambassador Johnson and Marshal Sarit was repeated in this latest version of the plan.

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



Chapter 3 – (U) “To Die in the South”: SIGINT, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the Infiltration Problem, 1959-1968

⊕ Sometime in 1971, a Special Forces team, possibly part of the JCS's Shining Brass project to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and probably made up of a mix of local tribesmen with an American or Vietnamese commander, settled in at some unidentified point along the trail in Laos. Hiding in the forest, they photographed a North Vietnamese truck convoy that was moving along the roadway. They took a remarkable series of pictures, one of which is included below. In the photo, the trucks are carefully nosing around a huge bomb crater filled with water and debris from nearby shattered trees. What trees that are left standing are nothing more than bare, scarred, darkened trunks. Off to the side of the dirt track is an expended metal casing from a U.S. aircraft; whether it is a jettisoned fuel pod or a piece of an ordnance package like napalm is unknown — not that this is important. The entire landscape, with its haphazard debris and chaos of shadows and light seemingly struggling with one another, is eerily reminiscent of the set from the classic German surrealist film *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. At the same time, the picture says a lot about the nature of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the communist infiltration of troops and supplies to the south, as well as the American response to cut this flow, mostly in terms of a campaign of air interdiction that dwarfed anything before or since in twentieth century military history.

(U) First of all, there is a misconception regarding the scope and nature of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Often, the trail is popularly (and, on occasion, romantically) portrayed as a single track or dirt road running south like an arrow from western North Vietnam south along the

Laotian border with the two Vietnams to finally emerge at various points in the Central Highlands or just north of Saigon. Actually, it is easy to arrive at this image. Most maps carried in standard histories of the Indochina War display a simplified trail, reduced to a series of a few lines snaking along the borders of the two Vietnams, Laos, and Cambodia. Consider the map on the next page from Robert Schulzinger's excellent single-volume history *A Time for War*.

(U) The true size and nature of the Ho Chi Minh Trail¹ were quite different, of course; it had to be in order for it to withstand the onslaught of American and Allied air power thrown against it starting in 1964 and continuing into 1972. During this time, the trail's operation also was under constant pressure from forays by U.S. and ARVN special forces commanding teams of irregular troops recruited from local tribes. In early 1971,



⊕ Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1971



(U) Simplified representation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail

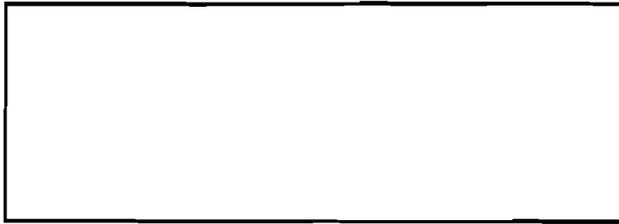
21,000 ARVN troops staged a cross-border invasion into Laos, known as Lam Son 719, to try to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail at one of its major transportation axes, the town of Tchepone (Muang Xepon) in Laos. The ARVN campaign, despite its near fiasco of a retreat, did manage to disrupt some supply movement for a short while. The large reaction by the North Vietnamese regular forces indicated just how vital the trail was and to what extent Hanoi would defend it.

(U) Historically, there had been a crude communications route in use since the early 1940s.

Then, it had been used by anti-French Vietnamese guerrillas to facilitate travel from Tonkin to the regions of Annam and Cochin in the south. This route was probably selected to take advantage of the colonial road system constructed by the French administration which had been trying for years to improve communications within Indochina and especially to the interior of Laos. Such roads as Route Coloniale (RC) Nombres 12, and 8 west from northern Annam through the Mu Gia and Nape Passes to the intersecting routes running north and south in southeastern Laos would figure prominently in later years as the backbone of the communist supply and infiltration system.

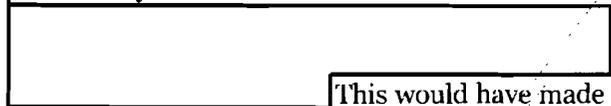
~~(TS//SI)~~ During the war with the French, General Vo Nguyen Giap used the trail system to move troops and supplies to the Cochin and Annam regions. For the most part, the trail remained a set of simple pathways, and travel time on foot from Tonkin to points south, such as Saigon, could take as long as three

months. In 1954, with the Geneva settlement, the trails were used by the Viet Minh troops and political cadre who headed north of the seventeenth parallel as part of the military disengagement. The trail system was also used by civilian refugees fleeing between the two Vietnams. In the years between the French and American phases of the war, SIGINT intercept indicated that the trail continued to serve as a highway of sorts for Viet Minh personnel traveling between north and south. At various times, the South Vietnamese military operated near portions of the trail, occupying spurs, destroying paths and setting up



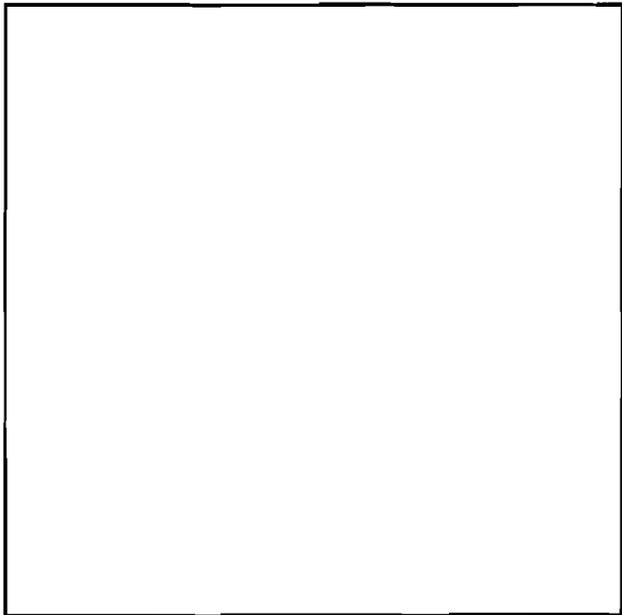
(U) However, the Laotian coalition agreement barely made it out of the conference room before it expired. The Eisenhower administration was increasingly dissatisfied with Souvanna Phouma's coalition-building efforts with the communists, and switched its backing to an anticommunist nationalist group. This faction displaced Phouma and began openly courting the anticommunist governments of Taipei and Saigon. Washington, which was bankrolling the entire cost of the RLA, hinted at a possible loss of aid if the PL personnel were admitted into the army without being subject to "reindoctrination."

~~(TS//SI)~~ In May 1959, the Royal Lao Government put the leaders of the Pathet Lao political party, the Neo Lao Hak Xat, (Lao Patriotic Front) including Prince Souphanouvong, under house arrest and disarmed one of the PL battalions. The other battalion slipped away into the jungles of northern Laos. Fighting in the northern region broke out almost immediately as the PL carried out a series of hit-and-run raids on RLA outposts bordering the DRV. By mid-1959, the shape of the DRV's support to the Pathet Lao began to emerge from SIGINT. A new military radio network was established, which was controlled from the DRV, but with many of its stations located inside Laos.



This would have made sense, since there was a large Vietnamese population made up of refugees and expatriates living in northeast Thailand. The ethnic population in Thailand had been a source of supplies and political support to the Viet Minh since the late 1940s.

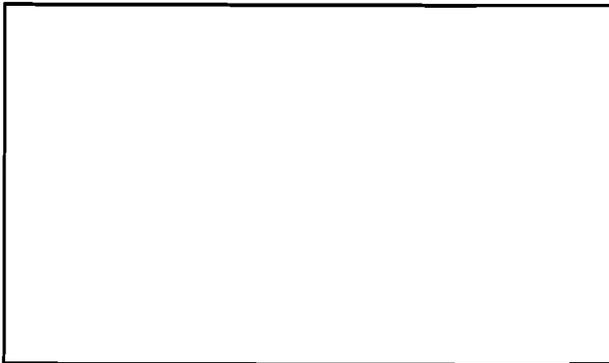
(U) During the French phase of the Indochina War, about 70,000 Vietnamese fled their homelands and settled in northeast Thailand. Their presence in a region of Thailand known for its economic problems and political restiveness caused Bangkok considerable concern. The Thais were anxious to get rid of the Vietnamese. In the late 1950s, Hanoi, perhaps anxious for political recognition after the political debacle at Geneva, offered to have the refugees repatriated. Originally, Thailand wanted the International Red Cross to oversee the repatriation so as to avoid recognizing the communist regime in Hanoi by negotiating directly with the DRV. However, Bangkok ultimately was forced to deal with Hanoi. In 1959, an agreement between Thailand's and the DRV's Red Cross Societies allowed for the repatriation process to begin the next year. By 1963, about 36,000 refugees had returned to the DRV. The remaining Vietnamese slowly adapted to Thailand, but not always completely. By the mid-1960s it was still not unusual to find portraits of Ho Chi Minh next to the Thai king on the walls of the huts of the ethnic Vietnamese.





EO 1.4.(c)

(U) Complex in Mu Gia Pass



~~(TS//SI)~~ The infiltration and supply system began at various points in North Vietnam. Two major supply-heads, Vinh Linh and Dong Hoi, were the northern terminals from which munitions and other supplies were carried south. From 1959 until late 1963, these two sites also served as so-called intermediate headquarters for the infiltration-associated radio nets.⁴⁴ In September 1963, these intermediate HQs disappeared, probably relocating to Hanoi within the facilities of the GDRS headquarters. Vinh Linh remained, but in

a somewhat changed capacity, serving as the HQ for the 559th Transportation Group.⁴⁵

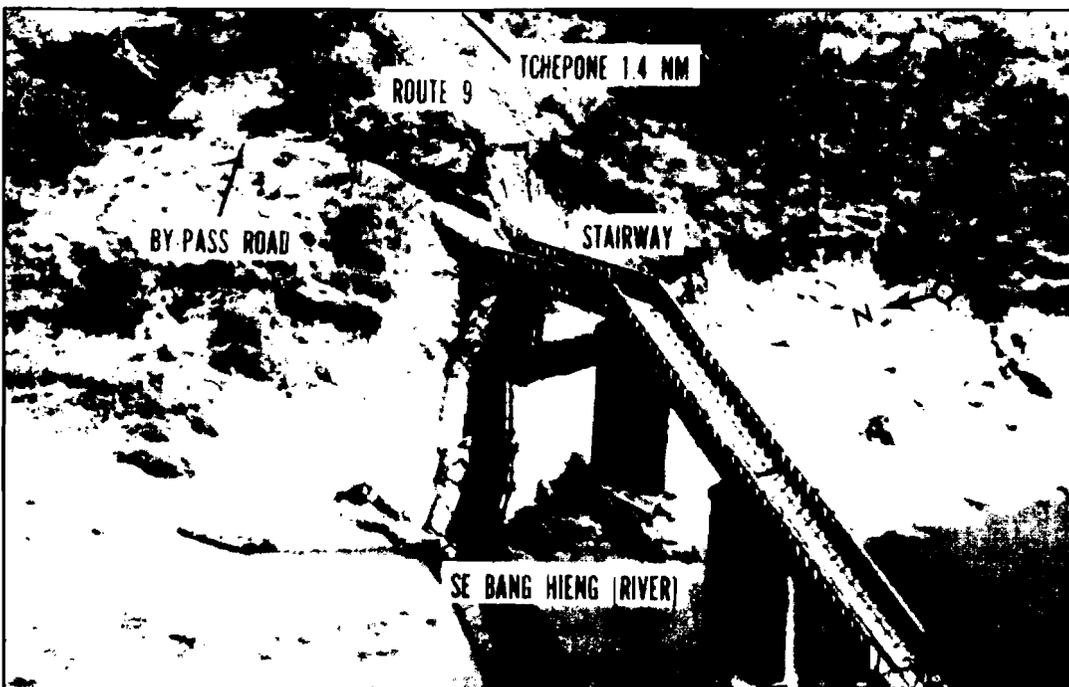
~~(C)~~ Located throughout North Vietnam was a series of complexes used to support the infiltration of cadre and troops to South Vietnam. For the lack of a better description, these facilities could be labeled as training centers. In the early years of the infiltration effort, these training centers served mostly to sharpen skills of the southern "returnees," most of whom were experienced party cadre or military personnel who had fought in the Viet Minh war against the French. The major training school was located at Xuan Mai Training Center just south of Hanoi which specialized in refresher training for the returnees. Another dozen or so schools existed for training various technical specialists. For example, there was the "C57 School," near Son Tay, which trained ordnance specialists; the 10th Military Hospital, which provided training for intermediate-level medical technicians; and at least two sites in Hanoi for training military intelligence

specialists.⁴⁶ As the war progressed and the DRV began sending full PAVN formations south, the number of training schools increased to accommodate the influx of draftees being trained for combat.⁴⁷

~~(TS//SI)~~ Movement from the DRV to the south was accomplished by a variety of methods. Most troops moved by foot on roads westward towards the Laotian border. Others headed south to cross the DMZ. In the early years, both directions were taken. This duality reflected the early concern by Hanoi that use of Laotian (and Cambodian) territory would necessarily be limited to the movement of small groups because of the uncertainty of an available, sustaining supply capability. The southern route seemed more conducive to infiltrating large numbers of men.⁴⁸ At the same time, the southern route obviated the need for disguising the infiltrators.⁴⁹ Of course, as the Laotian situation turned to Hanoi's favor, that alternative to infiltration was preferred to the DMZ crossover.

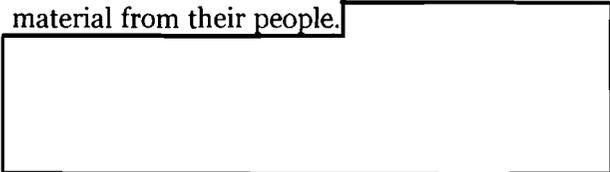
~~(C)~~ Departing from two major terminals in the DRV, the supplies and men moved mostly by truck through two potential bottlenecks. The first was west along Route #8 through the Nape Pass from Vinh Linh, which turned south to the Laotian crossroads town of Mahaxai. From there, the troops and cadre would move to the major town of Tchepone in the Laotian panhandle. The second major route into Laos was west-northwest along Route #12 through the Mu Gia Pass from Dong Hoi. From there, the travelers, mostly by truck, would turn south near the Laotian towns of Ban Muangsen or Muang Phin towards Tchepone. The distances in this first leg of the journey were from about 250 to 400 kilometers. Travel time could vary from four to seven days.

(U) Both passes, but the Mu Gia Pass in particular, would earn the special attention of the American bombing campaign to stop the southern infiltration. To air force planners, both passes appeared to be ideal "chokepoints," that, if reduced, could seriously impede the infiltration of troops and supplies to the south. So, a special effort was made to close them. Even the Strategic



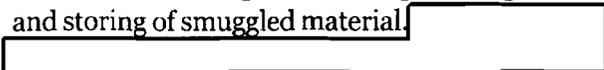
(U)
Dropped span of the Route 9 bridge at Tchepone (Note stairway and by-pass road)

al effects, such as pictures and letters. Not that this always worked. Many times, the local Viet Cong committees had to remind their subordinate elements to remove all such incriminating material from their people.



and possibly intelligence operatives along the coast.

(TS//SI) The infiltration of men and supplies by sea required the buildup from scratch of an organization, a logistics and maintenance base, workable and secure procedures, and the recruitment of personnel to run it. The Vietnamese communists had been smuggling supplies into Vietnam as far back as the French phase of the war from 1945 to 1954, which in turn was an outgrowth of a long history of illegal maritime activities along the coast of Tonkin.⁵⁹ Also, an organization in the south had to be recruited and trained in handling the boats, providing cover, and storing of smuggled material.



(U) Group 759 and Maritime Infiltration, 1959-1963

(U) The second leg of the infiltration system set up by Hanoi was the maritime infiltration program. The combined North and South Vietnamese coastline is more than 3,000 kilometers, while the South's alone is almost 2,000. The coastline itself varies greatly, with stretches of sandy beachline interrupted by a number of stream mouths and bays, the largest concentration being the maze on the seaward edge of the Mekong Delta. All of this difficult geography had the makings of an intractable problem for Saigon to solve. An added difficulty was the large private fleet of fishing boats which worked the coastline along the South China Sea. The hundreds of boats and junks operated with little control and were almost impossible to track.

(TS//SI) However, this part of Hanoi's infiltration plan appears to have been the slowest to get started, at least judging from what we know from various intelligence sources. In July 1959, the Group 759 had been organized under the command of Rear Admiral Tran Van Giang.⁵⁸ At first, actual operations was assigned to the 603rd Special Battalion located at Haiphong, which moved military personnel and supplies down the southern coastline. A second organization, the Communications Section of the Lao Dong Party's Research Office, was concerned with the transport of party agents



(TS//SI) Maritime infiltration routes

[redacted] Schedules had to be established, as well as a method for warning of Saigon's (and later American) naval and aerial surveillance patrols.

~~(C)~~ When exactly the initial infiltration by sea occurred is not known, but the activity was first discovered by the South Vietnamese in late January 1960 when a sailboat with six personnel from the 603rd Special Battalion on a supply mission was blown ashore on Ly Son island (Quang Ngai Province). A handful of automatic weapons and some ammunition were seized.⁶¹

[redacted]

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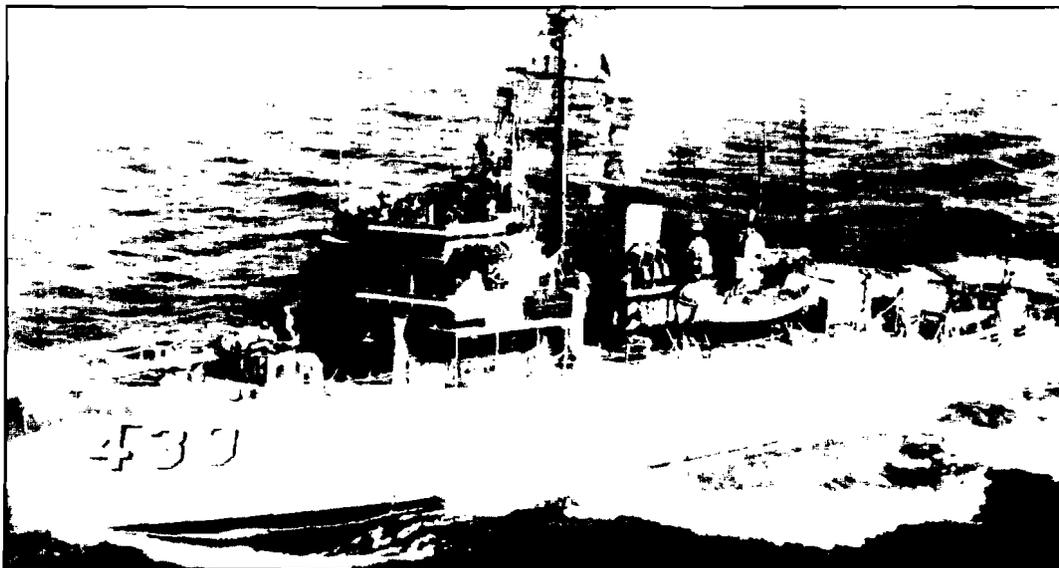
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(U) Surprisingly, in spite of the SIGINT and other intelligence – mostly captured enemy crews and papers from captured or abandoned vessels – the scope and intensity of the communist maritime infiltration system were difficult to quantify. In December 1961, the U.S. navy began interdicting suspected communist sea traffic. A patrol line was established along the seventeenth parallel and was manned by five ocean-going minesweepers supplemented by army and navy reconnaissance aircraft. The first interdiction efforts were meant both to infuse the South Vietnamese Navy with a positive spirit and to allow the Americans to determine the extent and nature of the seaborne infiltration from the North Vietnam.⁶⁶

[redacted]

(U) Ironically, the Navy brass was skeptical of the size of the infiltration from the north. Admiral Harry Felt, Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT), and other officers felt that only small-scale, cross-border movement by sampans was actually taking place and that the current interdiction effort was not really useful.⁶⁷ At this stage, the impetus for continued patrols came

EO 1.4.(c)



(U) U.S. navy ocean-going minesweeper, EXCEL, in interdiction role

from Secretary of Defense McNamara, who believed that the effort was paying off.

(U) The navy's skepticism over the scope and size of maritime infiltration carried over to the problem of smuggling from Cambodia. In early 1962, the U.S. Navy reluctantly assumed responsibility for patrolling the route from Cambodia through Phu Quoc island. By March, after "thousands" of junk searches, the navy again concluded that the effort was not productive:

From results attained to date it must be concluded that the patrols have not been effective in capturing infiltrators if significant infiltration is taking place, although the patrol's presence may have discouraged attempts.⁶⁸

~~(S)~~ The U.S. navy's judgment that the maritime infiltration was rather small up through 1963 is somewhat substantiated by the available intelligence. It has been estimated that probably less than two dozen supply ships attempted to infiltrate into South Vietnam from 1961 through 1964.⁶⁹

~~(S)~~ It was not until 1964 that a fleet of as many as twenty-six large trawler- and steamer-sized ships, displacing over sixty tons, was utilized in a

large number of infiltration missions by Group 125. In reaction to this increased maritime effort by Hanoi, the U.S. and South Vietnamese navies instituted operation Market Time designed to stem the maritime flow of weapons and supplies. In 1965, it was estimated that the communists received nearly 70 percent of their supplies by sea and 30 percent by land. At the same time, the Allied interdiction effort would improve, and by mid-1968, after a series of supply voyages that ended in disaster, the North Vietnamese would halt the maritime mission. It would not resume until the end of 1969.⁷⁰

~~(S//SI)~~ The Rest of the Story, Part 1: SIGINT and Infiltration, 1963-1967

~~(TS//SI)~~ For the American intelligence effort in Indochina – and the signals intelligence portion is included in this observation – the main objective regarding communist infiltration had been to gather enough information to answer these important questions posed by Washington and Saigon. How many communist troops and cadre were infiltrating south? What kind of personnel were moving south, i.e., military, political, technical specialist, etc? Where were they going, that is, into what regions of South Vietnam were they moving? What kinds of material and what

then, the threat was enough to cause a degradation to high-altitude imagery.

(U) Another source of intelligence was the insertion of so-called "road watch" teams, known later under various covernames as Shining Brass and Prairie Fire, which were controlled by the Pentagon, and Gypsyweed, which was run by the CIA. The problem with these teams was their limited observation and reporting capabilities. The extensive scope and nature of the trail system often precluded the teams from being able to gather useful information on infiltration rates. The difficulties in training also limited the number of teams available. The first teams were inserted into Laos northeast of Tchepone. None was placed south of this important terminal, mostly due to the numerous communist units protecting the complex there. All along the trail, the teams often were prevented from approaching the individual trails and roads by active Pathet Lao or PAVN security patrols.⁸⁰

~~(C)~~ The best early source of information was South Vietnamese intelligence. MACV intelligence, which produced the estimates on the infiltration, relied almost exclusively on POW interrogations and captured documents supplied by Saigon's intelligence organs. Washington remained highly skeptical of the Vietnamese sources and methods. Saigon's methods of obtaining intelligence from POWs (or ralliers, or defectors) left much to be desired. The delay in processing and verifying intelligence often meant that MACV's analysts were processing information that was several months old. One study estimated that "about nine months must elapse before MACV detects about 85 percent of the infiltrators into South Vietnam."⁸¹ In addition, the POW sources constituted a small sample of the total number of infiltrators. The estimates for the 1960 to 1963 infiltration rates were based on debriefs of a total of ninety-eight communist prisoners. Estimates of the communist infiltration up

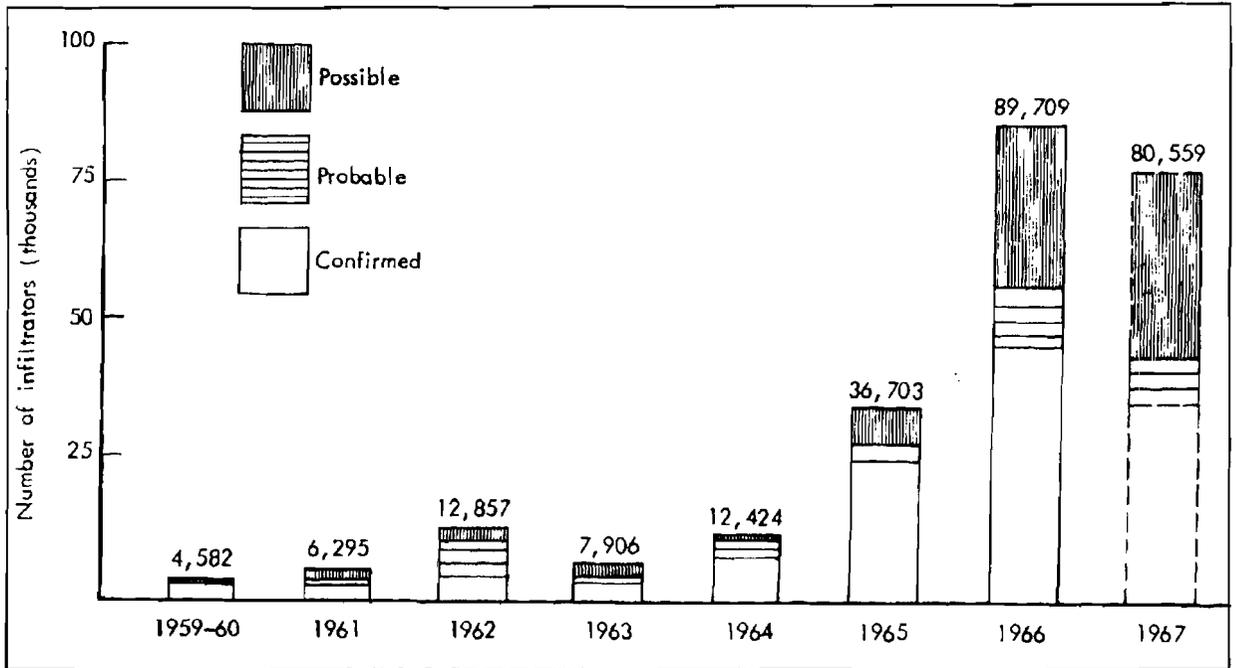
through 1967 were based on interrogations of just over 300 POWs.⁸²

~~(C)~~ The paucity and relative unreliability of the intelligence on the infiltration made for a dilemma: how to estimate the rate of infiltration with some degree of reliability? To get around this problem, MACV came up with a rather strained epistemology. It developed a three-tier method of evaluating whether or not a North Vietnamese unit, element, or group had infiltrated: "confirmed," "probable," or "possible." A unit was "confirmed" if information about it came from a minimum of two or more POWs or captured documents. A unit was "probable" if only one prisoner and/or one document attested to it. A unit fell into the "possible" category if there was no direct information on it, but was suspected or inferred.⁸³

~~(C)~~ The result of this imprecision led to an interesting situation for MACV when it tried to tabulate any statistics for the infiltration from the DRV up through 1967. For example, figure 1 shows the annual rate of communist infiltration from 1959 to 1967, though the last year is mostly an estimate since "complete" numbers were not yet available.

~~(C)~~ As one can see, the discrepancy between the number of "confirmed" and "probable" and/or "possible" infiltrators could vary by almost as much as 40 percent in 1966 to over 60 percent in 1962. Although the trend for increased annual communist infiltration is clearly seen, the problem is in the reliability of each year's figures. When the annual figures are put into a perspective of cumulative numbers (figure 2), the figures begin to diverge even more.

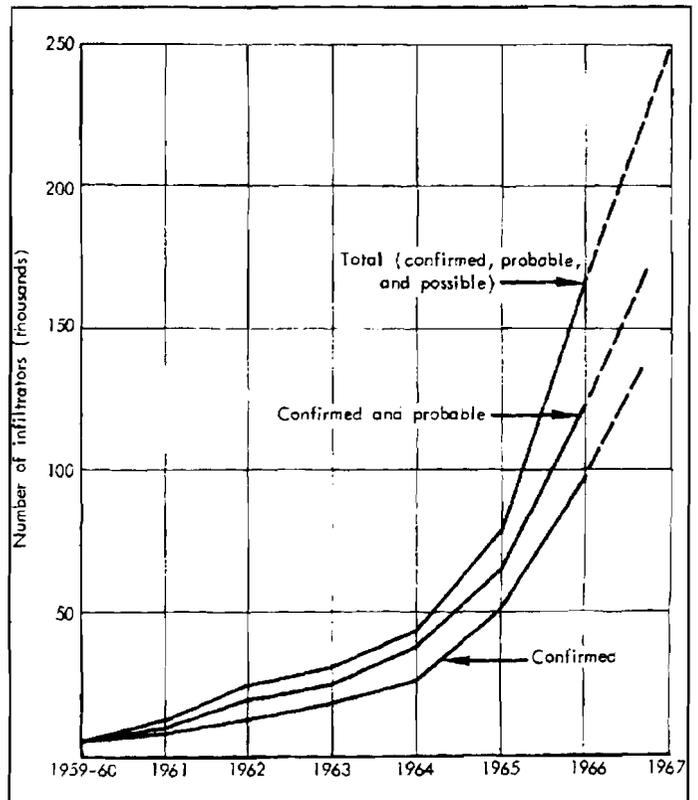
~~(C)~~ The resulting figures for total infiltration had a large, built-in discrepancy. If we pick a point, say 1966, the *difference* between the total possible infiltrators and those confirmed for that year is about 70,000 men. An eight-year infiltration total, including "possibles," is about 250,000



↔ Fig. 1. Annual infiltration

North Vietnamese and returning southerners. However, the "confirmed" total is about 140,000. Such a divergence led to MACV adopting another category called "accepted" which combined "probable" and "confirmed" to produce a new figure of about 175,000.

(U) Although all of these categories may seem academic, the Allied intelligence agencies in Vietnam took them seriously and, depending upon their institutional bias or political pressure exerted from command authorities, would espouse whatever count(s) in their order of battle (OB) estimates that suited them. The practical result of such "soft" infiltration figures was that Westmoreland's intelligence office, MACV J-2, the CIA, and other intelligence organs could not determine the overall communist troop strength; not knowing how many troops were coming



↔ Fig. 2. Cumulative number of infiltrators

[Redacted]

- 24. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 22.
- 25. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 20.

[Redacted]

- 27. (U) William J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 30.
- 28. (U) Orrin Schwab, *Defending the Free World: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and the Vietnam War, 1961-1965* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), 6.
- 29. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 20.
- 30. (U) Rust, 55.
- 31. (U) Edward J. Marolda, and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict. Vol II: From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1986), 69.
- 32. (U) Ibid., 73.

[Redacted]

- 35. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 22.
- 36. (U) Olson and Roberts, 239.

37. (U) Jacob Van Staavern, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1960-1968* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 287.

38. (U) Schulzinger, 185.

39. ~~(S)~~ M.G. Weiner, J.R. Brom, and R.F. Koon, *Infiltration of Personnel from North Vietnam: 1959-1967* (Santa Monica, California: The Rand Corporation. Memorandum RM-5760-PR, prepared for the United States Air Force Project Rand, October 1968), 59.

40. (U) Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 676-679.

[Redacted]

42. ~~(S)~~ Weiner, 36.

[Redacted]

44. ~~(TS//SI)~~ B61 WA #23-67, "History of the North Vietnamese Communist Overland Infiltration Network (559th Transportation Group) 1958 to May 1967," 7 November 1967.

45. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid.

46. ~~(C)~~ United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), "Special Study on PAVN/Viet Cong Infiltration," 11-0724-65, undated.

47. ~~(S)~~ Weiner, 25-26.

[Redacted]

- 49. ~~(S)~~ Weiner, 29-30.
- 50. (U) Van Staavern, 136.
- 51. (U) Ibid., 137.
- 52. ~~(S)~~ Weiner, 13.
- 53. ~~(TS//SI)~~ B61 Working Aid #23-67.
- 54. ~~(C)~~ USMACV Annex [Redacted]

[Redacted]

55. ~~(S)~~ Weiner 42; USMACV, para 43.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

58. (U) Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, California: Da Capo Press, 1986), 46.

[Redacted]

- 60. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid.
- 61. ~~(S)~~ MACV, para. 53.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

- 65. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid.
- 66. (U) Marolda and Fitzgerald, 166.
- 67. (U) Ibid., 171.
- 68. (U) Ibid., 175.
- 69. ~~(S)~~ USMACV, para. 53.

70. (U) Edward Marolda, *By Land, Sea, and Air: An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1994), 151; also Olson and Roberts, 153.

[Redacted]

- 71. (U) Gaddy, 92-99.
- 72. (U) Ibid., 98.
- 73. ~~(TS//SI)~~ B61 Working Aid #23-67.
- 74. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 2.

[Redacted]

Despite an apparent mobility brought about by wheeled and tracked vehicles, as well as the beginnings of a heliborne capability, the ARVN units still were sluggish and confined to the road network. Viet Cong units, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] utilizing flexible tactics that emphasized mobility and concentration of organic weaponry, proved to be too much for Saigon's forces. Besides using tactics ill-suited to counterinsurgency, the ARVN forces were commanded largely by officers who were political appointees, mostly Catholics like Diem, and whose main mission was to preserve their units so they could support Diem in case of a coup. Loyalty to Diem and the Ngo family was paramount to the continued promotion of these officers.

(U) Defining the Struggle: The Counterinsurgency Plan, 1960-1961

(U) In early 1960, a sense of crisis pervaded U.S. thinking about South Vietnam as well as the concurrent situation in Laos. In April, the CINCPAC sponsored a conference in Okinawa which studied the problems in those two countries. The completed study, "Counterinsurgency Operations in South Vietnam and Laos," emphasized the need to remedy the problems in South Vietnam with military aid and administrative changes to Diem's government. This approach largely ignored the importance of the systemic political, economic, nationalist, and ethnic pressures which were pulling South Vietnam apart and which the communists were so adept at exploiting for their own advancement. In the same study, the problems Diem was having with the peasants and the ethnic minorities were downplayed; these groups were portrayed as little more than pliant herds, willing to follow any superior authority.² This attitude towards the internal opposition groups also ignored, or was ignorant of, the evidence from U.S. COMINT reports which had been detailing Saigon's internal problems for the

years leading up to 1960.³ (Also see Chapter 2, pages 58-62.)

(U) The CINCPAC, Admiral Harry Felt, forwarded the insurgency plan to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in June 1960 with the recommendation that it be the basis for any instructions developed by the State and Defense Departments for the American "country team," that is, the U.S. ambassador and Commander USMAAG, Saigon, and their staffs.⁴

(U) The response from Saigon to the counterinsurgency plan merely reflected the debate in Washington over which course of action to follow to defeat the growing communist insurgency threat. The commander of the MAAG, Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr, came down in favor of increased military aid, which included the enlarging of South Vietnam's military by 20,000 troops, transferring the Civil Guard to Saigon's Ministry of Defense, improving its intelligence capability, beefing up border and coastal surveillance operations, and improving the army's civil affairs and civil action programs. In addition, it advocated

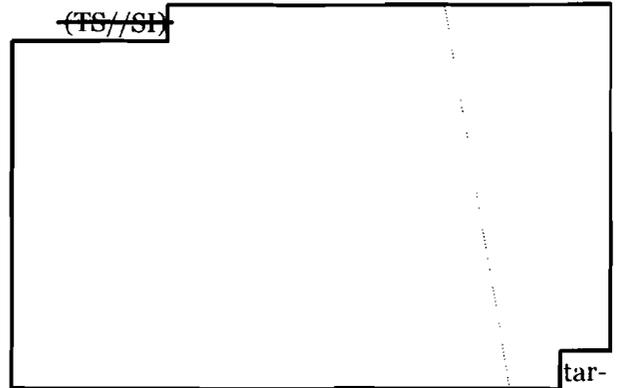


(U) Ambassador Eldridge Durbrow

[redacted] were nonexistent, and temporary substitutes were used.²² Within two days, the unit had set up intercept vans and organized an analytic and operations section in two hangars in the corner of the air base. The first intercept mission, outlined by NSA, was to develop eighteen Viet Cong illicit, guerrilla, and communist party communications links, that is, single station-to-station communications paths. Aside from developing a picture of the communist communications network, or the next level of more complex communications operations, Tan Son Nhut also was charged with providing usable tip-offs of radio activity for the associated Whitebirch D/F mission.²³

~~(S//SI)~~ For the first time since the U.S. SIGINT had systematically targeted Vietnamese communist communications back in 1950 under AFSA, there now existed a conventional

American site actually located in South Vietnam. However, the soldiers at Tan Son Nhut were not the first American SIGINT personnel in South Vietnam.

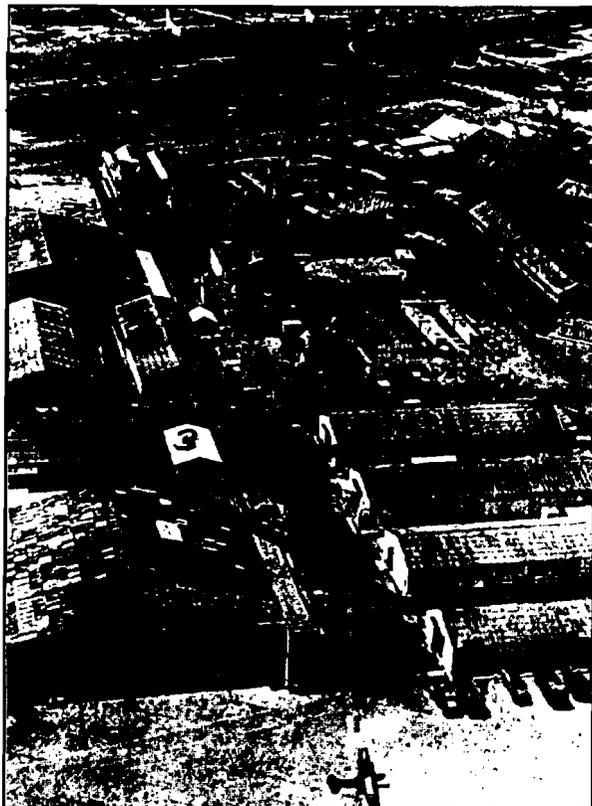


targeted the communications of the various governmental and military organizations of the established, host government – mostly intelligence, internal security organizations, political, and armed forces commands. However, the extreme conditions within both Laos and South Vietnam forced both sites to expand their missions to include communist insurgent communications. But, neither site could provide D/F support, which was exactly what South Vietnamese military needed.

~~(S//SI)~~ From the start, however, there was a wide divergence between NSA and ASA in the approach to the Southeast Asian communication intelligence task as compared with other mission requirements in the Far East targeting [redacted]



[redacted] NSA emphasized the development and improvement of its cryptanalytic posture. But, in February 1961, when the various committees, boards, and staffs were considering their recommendations for SIGINT requirements in Vietnam, NSA took the opposite tack and insisted that an increased cryptanalytic effort in Southeast Asia was not worth the effort.²⁴ Ironically, this position had been taken in response to the army's plea for an increased cryptanalytic effort. The NSA office responsible for Asian communist com-



(U) 3d RRU Operations area

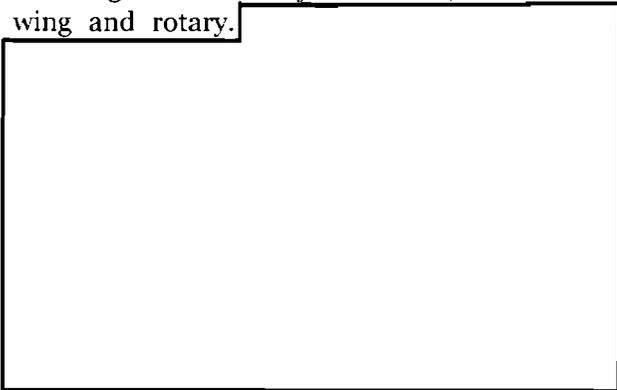
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was realized that the VC probably now were aware in detail of U.S. and ARVN D/F capabilities.³⁶

(U) The Beginnings of the ASA Airborne Radio Direction Finding Mission, 1961-1963

~~(S//SI)~~ It was clear to the ASA brass that the current ground-based direction finding in South Vietnam was inadequate to the task before it. The Whitebirch network could hear only about an estimated 5 percent of Viet Cong transmitters, and this was because they were within the ground wave footprint of any one of the D/F stations.³⁷ The SRDF effort, which the ASA planners had pinned their hopes on as a complementary system, had failed to fill the gap, and, as we have seen from the fatal attack on Specialist Davis, was dangerous, to boot, for the operators.

~~(TS//SI)~~ To overcome this problem, the Army sponsored a research program to improve its general D/F capability. In late November 1961, the ASA started to develop an Airborne (or Aerial) Radio Direction Finding (ARDF) program, experimenting with a variety of aircraft, both fixed-wing and rotary.



(U) Prior to the Indochina War, direction finding techniques along the radio frequency spectrum that carried communications had been greatly refined. The one exception to this trend was ARDF. Aircraft had used forms of direction finding for navigational purposes for many years. But these systems utilized signals in the low-to-

medium (LF/MF) and very high frequency (VHF) ranges. The reason for their use was simple: LF and MF frequencies had ground wave elements which were strong enough to be differentiated from the complementary, reflected sky wave. VHF sky waves passed through the atmosphere and did not have this problem; aircraft could take bearings on the waves radiating directly from the ground stations. It was the high frequency (HF) waves that posed the problem for ARDF. The reflected sky wave could not be discriminated from the important ground wave element which was used to locate the transmitter. Furthermore, the metal skin of the aircraft would act like a huge antenna and get electrically excited by the reflected sky wave. The irradiated metal skin would interfere with the ability of the D/F antenna housed in the aircraft to cleanly register the ground wave. The trick was to somehow decouple or isolate the D/F antenna on the aircraft from its electrically charged airframe.

~~(S//SI)~~ In the early fall of 1961, the 3rd RRU turned to HQ United States Army Security Agency, Arlington Hall, Virginia, to come up with a solution to its D/F problems in South Vietnam. The request wound up on the desk of an electrical engineer from ASA's Development Office by the name of [redacted]. Surprisingly, ARDF was not the immediate solution tried out; in fact, the ASA approach was to look at a comprehensive upgrade to the army's entire D/F capability. Four approaches were adopted by Arlington Hall: improve the PRD-1, replace the TRD-4/4A system, develop a small man-pack direction finding apparatus for Special Forces-type operations, and investigate the possibility of an airborne system.³⁹

~~(S//SI)~~ That ARDF would be viewed as a potential solution to ASA's problem in Vietnam is indicative of the desperate situation that existed.



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was already carrying the brunt of the cryptologic load in Vietnam. Another potential difficulty was that the JSA threatened to swallow up the already thin layer of available target expertise from the intercept sites.¹⁰⁷

~~(TS//SI)~~ In fact, the opposition to the JSA plan was quite vigorous and came principally from the army. At the end of April, Secretary of the Army Zuckart mailed a scathing letter to Assistant Secretary of Defense John Rubel protesting the planned JSA. In a long indictment of the proposal, Zuckart stated:

This action, [he stated], would result in removing these SIGINT resources from the control of military commanders in the area. Intelligence and operations staffs responsible for planning and executing military actions would be placed in the position of having to rely upon an activity outside of normal military channels for important intelligence information. Generally, responsiveness to intelligence requirements of CINCPAC and COMUSMACV would be dependent upon the decisions of a national level agency, far removed from their areas of responsibility. Finally, the establishment of this activity [JSA] by NSA under the conditions prevalent in Southeast Asia would set a precedent for that Agency's intrusion into an area that must be considered primarily a military responsibility.¹⁰⁸

~~(TS//SI)~~ Zuckart's letter continued with the counterproposal that all SIGINT resources in the region be subordinated to COMUSMACV and that the local senior ASA commander be Saigon's executive agent.¹⁰⁹ The fact that Secretary Zuckart had been tipped off to the JSA plan by the commander, USAFSS, suggests that the Air Force was not pleased with the JSA plan either.¹¹⁰

~~(TS//SI)~~ The trouble was that no one seemed to want the responsibility of running the entire SIGINT program in Southeast Asia. In April and May, the incumbent DIRNSA, Vice Admiral

Laurence H. Frost, traveled throughout the Far East on a tour of sites and supported commands. He attempted to enlist either CINCPAC (Admiral Felt) or COMUSMACV (General Harkins) to take operational control of the SIGINT units in the region, but both demurred, preferring that the units improve their performance rather than reorganize their structure.¹¹¹

~~(TS//SI)~~ In the end, the road taken reflected a desire to please all of the participants. Rather than name a central authority for all SIGINT activities in Southeast Asia, a compromise was reached in which authority was divided up amongst the principals. The commander USASA was appointed executive agent for second echelon reporting on all communist communications in the region with the Philippines site acting as the senior reporting center. The Philippines also absorbed first echelon reporting responsibilities from all the sites subordinate to it. The ASA commander also was to be the host service for all co-located SIGINT facilities in the region.

The USAFSS and NAVSECGRU sites would perform their own first echelon reporting, but would accept tasking from NSA. Meanwhile, the role of NRV would be to coordinate and support the military sites and reporting centers, while acting as a technical base for reporting from the ASA mission in the Philippines.¹¹²

~~(S)~~ Ultimately, this solution never solved the lingering need for centralized control, while, at the same time, the experience with the JSA plan left many military commanders suspicious of the desire by NSA to control all SIGINT resources in the region. The struggle for control of SIGINT assets would continue throughout the war and surface again in 1970 when the JCS would try to redefine the doctrine and mission of certain tactical SIGINT assets to get them away from NSA's control.¹¹³

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~~(S//SI)~~ **The Communists' Big Communications Change, April 1962**

~~(TS//SI)~~ On 13 April 1962, representatives from MACV had presented Brigadier General Khanh, President Diem's representative on sensitive intelligence matters, with a copy of a COMUSMACV SIGINT-based plan for locating, identifying, and systematically destroying VC communications nets. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Still included in the plan, among other things, was a listing of the locations of a number of VC transmitters.¹¹⁴

~~(TS//SI)~~ The next night the roof fell in on Allied SIGINT operations in South Vietnam when the Viet Cong executed a major, nearly total communications and cryptographic change on their military and political-military networks. The changes effected by the communists were deep and pervasive. As a DIRNSA-directed report issued two weeks later would state:

Recent changes in Viet Cong Communications procedures have resulted in increased transmission security by [the] introduction of ten-day changing call signs, frequencies, and schedules coupled with [a] standardization of traffic format so that not only do Viet Cong messages throughout all of South Vietnam resemble each other but they also resemble those of the DRV.¹¹⁵

~~(TS//SI)~~ The correlation between the two events – the sharing of MACV's SIGINT Plan with General Khanh and the VC SOI change – did not go unnoticed in Washington. The NSA leadership looked at the ARVN command staff, specifically its intelligence and COMINT organizations, and claimed that it was their lax security that allowed the leaks which had alerted the VC to the

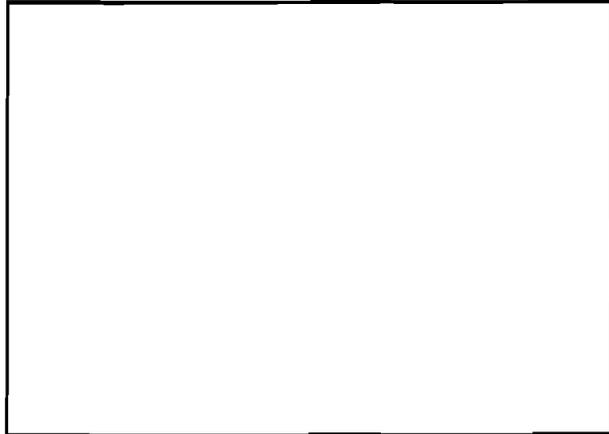
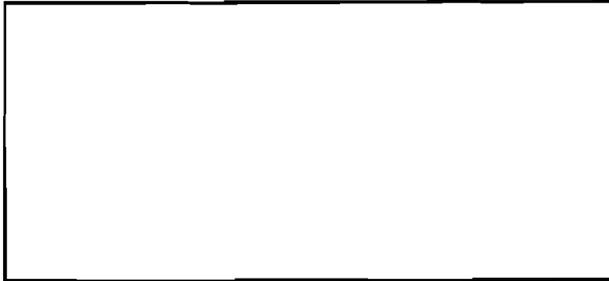
American capabilities against their communications. Realizing just how vulnerable their communications were caused the VC to make the changes. NSA also charged that this problem of compromising SIGINT information by the South Vietnamese was historic and endemic: The Americans could cite specific instances in the previous six months in which the government in Saigon had deliberately leaked SIGINT information for political purposes. [REDACTED]

~~(TS//SI)~~ On April 20, the news of the VC SOI change was reported to the secretary of defense, the United States Intelligence Board, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and the assistant chief of staff for intelligence of the JCS. The USIB was briefed personally by Admiral Frost on the situation. The board was asked to consider more stringent rules covering the release of technical SIGINT information to the ARVN, as well as the urgent need to establish a U.S.-only, or no foreign national (NOFORN) site. The USIB, in turn, asked its SIGINT Committee, chaired by the former DIRNSA, General Samford, to study NSA's recommendations.

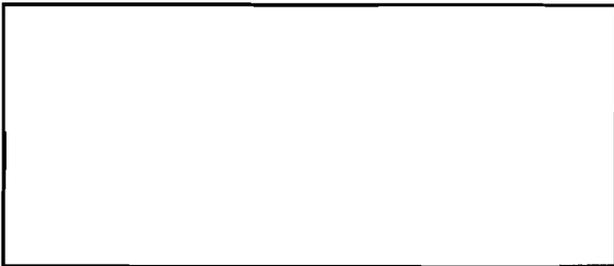
~~(TS//SI)~~ On 16 May, the SIGINT Committee agreed with NSA's recommendations for a technical exchange freeze at the current level with the ARVN and the need to build a U.S.-only intercept site (later located at Phu Bai). (See Chapter 8, pages 377-379, on effect of the SOI change on U.S.-ARVN COMINT exchanges and relations.) But it could not conclude conclusively that the VC changes were to be blamed on the lax security by ARVN intelligence and COMINT personnel.¹¹⁷

~~(S//SI)~~ That NSA, in the first place, would think that the VC could work out such a complete changeover within a day of the supposed "leak" of the report strains all logic. This is especially so when one considers the requirements for such a

HQ, "Big" Minh had convened a meeting of virtually all of the ARVN's senior officers. When the men had finally seated themselves, Minh stood up and informed them of the coup's start. Immediately, submachine-gun-toting military police arrived and put the officers under house arrest. Fighting broke out in several sections of the city as rebel and loyalists troops clashed. At first, Nhu thought that this was the beginning of his planned countercoup, but soon realized that his supporters had changed sides. By that afternoon he and Diem had fled the Presidential Palace through a secret tunnel.

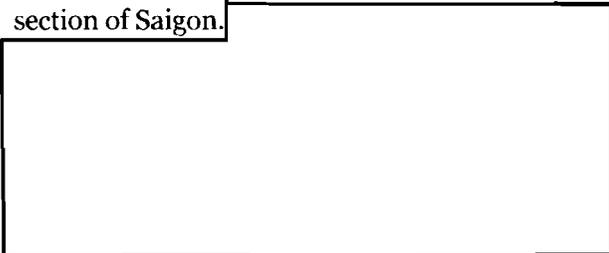


~~(S)~~ A little more than a half hour after Minh's meeting, SSO MACV issued a Critic on the coup. It was based on a phone conversation in which General Don told General Richard Stilwell, the MACV chief of operations, that the coup was on.¹⁸⁸ Fighting had spread throughout Saigon. Troops belonging to the coup, identified by their red neckerchiefs, had already seized the PTT exchange and the central police station, and had cut the road from Saigon to Tan Son Nhut Airport.



~~(TS//SI)~~ SIGINT also provided a strange anticlimax to the affair. In a report issued shortly after the coup to the National Indications Center, NSA noted that, besides the expected increase in post-coup communications activity out of Hanoi, it discovered something else quite curious: three days before the coup, on 29 October, Hanoi had sent a higher than normal volume of messages to the COSVN located just across the border in Cambodia.¹⁹³ The next day, COSVN, in turn, transmitted an "unusually high volume of messages" to its subordinates throughout South Vietnam. A similar spike in message volume was registered on 26 October, the original date of the general's coup. NSA could not equate the two peaks in the communist message levels with the coup activity, but it noted that such a pattern before the coup was "interesting."¹⁹⁴

~~(TS//SI)~~ By the end of 1 November, the fighting was pretty much over. The major problem remaining for the coup leaders was running down the fugitives, Diem and Nhu, who were moving from hideout to hideout in Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon.

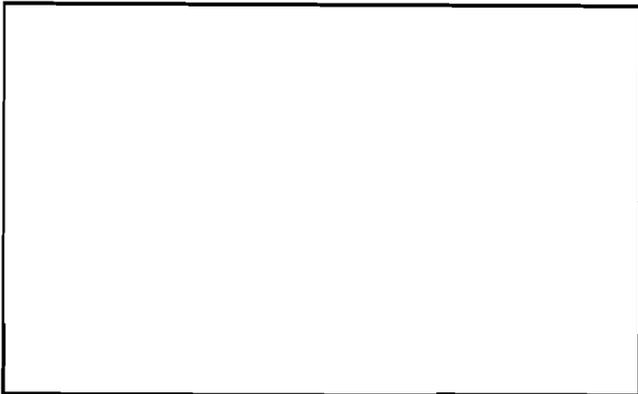


~~(TS//SI)~~ A further NSA analysis of the communications suggested that the Viet Cong were "undoubtedly aware that a coup was in the making."¹⁹⁵ There certainly were several reasonable explanations to account for a possible communist

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- 24. ~~(S//SI)~~ USIB-C-29.22/7 16 Feb 1961, CCH Series XII.B, Box 10.
- 25. ~~(S//SI)~~ Ibid.
- 26. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 32.
- 27. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 33.
- 28. ~~(TS//SI)~~ George Howe, "Historical Study of U.S. Cryptologic Activities in Southeast Asia, 1960-1963," unpublished manuscript, XII.NN.
- 29. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 59.
- 30. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 60.
- 31. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Johnson, 504.
- 32. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 61.
- 33. ~~(TS//SI)~~ James Gilbert, *History of Army Airborne Radio Direction Finding Operations* (Arlington, VA: Historical Division, Army Security Agency, 1974), 15.
- 34. (U) Dan Perkes, ed., *The Eyewitness History of the Vietnamese Conflict* (New York: Associated Press, 1983) 2.
- 35. ~~(S//SI)~~ [redacted] "History of the South Vietnamese Directorate for Technical Security," *Cryptologic Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 1994) 157.
- 36. ~~(TS//SI)~~ NSA Pre-Watch Committee Material, B2, 2 January 1962, Series VI.HH.6.79.
- 37. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gilbert, 13.



- 39. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gilbert, 16.
- 40. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 21-22.
- 41. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid., 25.
- 42. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 66.
- 43. (U) Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Office of Air Force History, 1981), 138.
- 44. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Howe, 73.
- 45. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Hanyok, 24.

- 46. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 66.
- 47. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Howe, 70.
- 48. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Howe, 72. The control over ARDF assets would reemerge in 1966. Realizing how valuable the aircraft had become, General Westmoreland wanted all of them resubordinated as MACV assets. In mid-1966, he struggled with the 7th Air Force and managed to get their ARDF aircraft under his wing. Later that year, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance ruled that all ARDF aircraft were electronic warfare assets and therefore controlled by J2 MACV, specifically in the ARDF Coordination Center. Two years later, the decision would be reviewed during the NSA struggle for control of cryptologic-related activities under the CCP. See Johnson, Book 2, 475-6, and 533-534 for additional details.
- 49. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Howe, 73.
- 50. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 66; (U) Futrell, 138.
- 51. (U) Futrell, 139.
- 52. ~~(TS//SI)~~ DIRNSA 111806Z July 1962, 1.4.(d) 07062/11, CCH Series IV.A.20.
- 53. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gilbert, 29.
- 54. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Howe, 73.
- 55. ~~(TS//SI)~~ "US-ARVN ARDF Agreement," 6 July 1963, NCA ACC# 39325.
- 56. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 70.
- 57. ~~(S//SI)~~ Gerhard, 68.
- 58. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gilbert, 32.
- 59. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Johnson, 509.
- 60. ~~(TS//SI)~~ SSO SAIGON, 120900Z October 1961, AGI 44611, NCA ACC# 30039.
- 61. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid.



- 64. (U) Olson and Roberts, 98-99.
- 65. (U) Capt. Ronnie Ford, USA. Tet 1968: *Understanding the Surprise* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 20.



- 67. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 68.
- 68. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Gerhard, 69.



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**(U) Second Interlude: The Center Does Not Hold --
Post-Diem South Vietnam, 1964**

~~(S//SI)~~ With the deaths of Kennedy and Diem, the struggle in the South entered a period of enormous flux and instability. A plan developed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, under guidance from the Kennedy administration, to reduce American forces in Vietnam by the end of 1965 to one-quarter the 1963 level (25,000), was quietly scrapped. This plan, known as the COMUSMACV Model Plan, and approved by Secretary of Defense McNamara in October 1963, would have scaled back U.S. forces over a two-year period, beginning with a one-thousand-man reduction on 25 November 1963. Surprisingly, because American SIGINT personnel were not considered part of the military assistance program, but belonged under CINCPAC's general support program, they would undergo minor cuts in 1963. They would remain at the then current manning level through 1965.¹

~~(S//SI)~~ In real numbers, the U.S. advisory and assistance presence would be reduced by 1,000 men by the end of November 1963. Beginning in late 1964, the troops were to be further reduced by 50 percent. By 31 December 1965, [redacted] would be down to about 6,000 personnel. On the other hand, the [redacted] presence would not change. The 3rd RRU's strength was to remain at 498 men through at least 1968! (my italics) The 7th RRU, the COMSEC support group, was to stay at fifteen through the same period. The air force presence, that is, the 6925th Security Squadron at Danang, and the marine detachment at Phu Bai, were to remain at current manning only if their respective services wanted those units to stay in South Vietnam.²

(U) However, all of these projected reductions had been predicated on the Kennedy administration's perceptions of the course of the war. Militarily, McNamara and the JCS were opti-

mistic that the war was being won. Politically, though, the administration had been disenchanted with Diem and his government. During the early years of the insurgency, it was these frustrations with Saigon's politics that had led the American president to consider some sort of withdrawal as a form of pressure on Diem. However, President Kennedy's call to stop communist aggression was more than just rhetoric: Vietnam was the battleground chosen to stop the Vietnamese communists. Despite his musings to a few aides, in which he contemplated carrying out a complete withdrawal, he was committed to the struggle.³

(U) In the meantime, the communist leadership in Hanoi had concluded that the Viet Cong movement, although it had been successful in harassing Saigon, was not in a position to overthrow the regime by itself.⁴ The struggle would require a much more sophisticated and powerful strategy, both militarily and politically, and this meant that the North would have to intervene more heavily. It was from this point that the real upgrade to the logistics and infiltration capacity of the Ho Chi Minh Trail began. Soon, PAVN construction battalions with heavy equipment were deployed to the task. More ominously for the planners in Washington, this period also marked the juncture at which Hanoi decided to commit regular PAVN combat formations to the struggle in the South.

(U) In late 1963 into early 1964, the communists stepped up the tempo of their attacks. Larger-scale actions against the ARVN became more common, and Saigon's troops were taking it on the chin. At the same time, the Viet Cong struck more at American installations and specifically targeted U.S. personnel in acts of terrorism in Saigon and other places. One of the most

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would be going up against an air defense system which had barely come into being a few years earlier. Yet, by war's end, the North Vietnamese air defense system evolved into a sophisticated structure which required the United States to develop extensive and steadily enhanced efforts in intelligence and countermeasures to neutralize it. Even then, each side would have to struggle to regain a superiority that often would be fleeting.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The DRV's air defense network's communications were first heard in January 1955. It was composed of about forty or so visual observation posts scattered throughout the country whose job was to report aerial activity. Their reports went to a so-called filter center in Hanoi, which in turn would send the tracking information to a sector headquarters which controlled antiaircraft artillery (AAA) units.⁸ Hanoi's inventory of antiaircraft artillery included typical communist hardware such as 12.7mm, 37mm flak and, interestingly, the famous German 88mm antiaircraft guns with a Wurzburg targeting radar obtained from China in late 1954.⁹

~~(S//SI)~~ Messages carrying information on aircraft were sent via high-frequency manual morse communications. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] They took the form of what is known as a pro-forma message, that is, a single line of digits or letters representing categories of information on the flight: direction, altitude, speed, identity, and type of aircraft. Tracking messages of individual flights could take as long as thirty minutes to pass through the system from initial observation to the point where the filter center would issue orders for continued tracking. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Interestingly, the basic framework of the DRV air defense network and its communications would remain fundamentally in place through all of the various upgrades and additions during the years of the air war. This would allow American cryptologists to

exploit Hanoi's communications for tactical applications during the years of the air war.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The expansion of the DRV's air defense system continued into the early 1960s. As a result of an increase in the number of radar stations, the North Vietnamese increased their filter centers, adding one for the southern regions at Vinh, and another to the northwest at Na San. The number of AAA battalions had increased to ten, although communications serving these units had not been recovered by late 1962. No fighter aircraft were in the North Vietnamese inventory. Two airfields were determined to be able to support jet aircraft. In this case, it was assumed that jet fighters from the PRC would actually use the strips.¹¹

~~(S//SI)~~ Functionally, the DRV's air defense command and control communications were composed of four main capabilities. First, there was an air warning (AW) capability which employed radar and, to a limited degree, the old visual surveillance system which gave Hanoi early warning information on air strikes. Secondly, there was an air surveillance capability which provided preflight and in-flight information on

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

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

buildup of these latter forces. For example, pilot training for the PAVN Air Force (PAVNAF) began with the organization of the Air Sports Club at Haiphong in May 1959. Vietnamese flight training during this time probably corresponded with similar U.S. and European civilian air patrol units, paramilitary schools, and semiprivate flying clubs. Most of the training was fairly basic: takeoff and landing, local area flying, and basic air navigation. In July 1960, six Yak-18 (MAX) Soviet single-engine propeller trainers were added to the program and provided some additional experience. The Air Sports Club probably served as a center for selecting high-potential candidates for advanced training outside of Vietnam, most likely in the Soviet Union and other select Warsaw Pact countries.²⁴ North Vietnamese aviation continued its slow expansion through 1960. A number of new aircraft were acquired and four new airfields were opened. The DRV military air arm further expanded during the Laotian airlift of 1961-62. A number of IL-14 transports and MI-4 helicopters were delivered or turned over by Moscow to Hanoi.

(S//SI) Beginning in early summer 1962 and continuing into the next year, SIGINT analysts had been receiving reports and intercepting communications which indicated that there was substantial joint activity between the Vietnamese and Chinese along their common border.

Throughout 1963 and into 1964, a number of high-level conferences involving political and military delegations of the two countries were held.

(S//SI) In late 1963, when a regiment of Chinese MiG-17s arrived at the Chinese base at Mengtzu, near the border of the two countries, it seemed that the arrival of jet fighters into Hanoi's inventory was imminent. In May 1964, it was learned that a high-level North Vietnamese delegation was preparing to meet with Chinese Communist leaders at Mengtzu.

(S//SI) In August 1964, the first reaction by the cryptologic community to the Gulf of Tonkin crisis was to reorganize the collection coverage of the communist air and air defense systems. Not surprisingly, up to August, collection and reporting of the North Vietnamese

air missions were done separately. In the field, the USAFSS site at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines (USA-57) was processing the intercept of Hanoi's air communications,

At NSA, the DRV air problem was handled in the same office as the military and naval entities.

(S//SI) Within days of the crisis, the first MiG jets arrived in North Vietnam. Shortly after their arrival, proposed that the processing of the Vietnamese air and air defense communications be transferred from Clark Air Base

Over the next few months, NSA, the AFSS, discussed the various possibilities and outcomes of the proposed merger. The arguments from the cryptologic viewpoint against the merger were persuasive - the interrelationship of the DRV air SOI and cryptography with the other elements of Hanoi's forces. However, the continuing evidence of the liaison and cooperation between the air forces of the two countries proved too much to ignore. By January 1965, NSA approved merging the processing of the North Vietnamese

while intercept control was given specifically to the J-3 section. By late January the order for the transfer of the Vietnamese air analysts from Clark was approved. By April had assumed duties as the second-echelon processor of North Vietnamese air defense

last bombing operation of Linebacker II in December 1972.

~~(S//SI)~~ **Flying for Uncle Ho:
Foreign Communist Pilots during
the Vietnam War, 1964-1972**

~~(S//SI)~~ During the air war, there were reports of pilots from other countries flying missions against American aircraft. To SIGINT personnel, these reports reflected a well-known fact. From the very beginning of the air war in North Vietnam, there was foreign communist support to the Hanoi's air force.

~~(S//SI)~~

Immediately following the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, thirty-six of the MiGs from the training unit redeployed from Mengtzu to the newly extended and upgraded airfield at Phuc Yen in the DRV. Chinese pilots stayed on at Phuc Yen as instructors from late 1964 into early 1965. During this time, North Vietnamese pilots practiced a variety of maneuvers to develop proficiency in take-off and landings, climb exercises, cloud piercing, and some occasional aerial intercept. Vietnamese trainee pilots were taught using Chinese flight terminology. By December 1964, another set of MiGs arrived from China to bring the total to fifty-three.

~~(S//SI)~~ Still, the Chinese pilots performed solely as instructors as their Vietnamese charges extended their proficiency into nighttime intercept and gunnery exercises.⁷⁴ At no time did the Chinese pilots ever engage in combat missions. In fact, their role faded by mid-1965 when newer aircraft, notably the Soviet-supplied MiG-21, were added to Hanoi's inventory by the Soviets. The Chinese maintained a sizable contingent in North

Vietnam, which was estimated at about 180,000 personnel at its height. Chinese troops mostly provided logistical and engineering support and manned AAA units around air bases and key transportation sites such as bridges and railroads. The Chinese forces stationed in North Vietnam never included any ground combat or air force units.⁷⁵

(U) Between 1965 and 1973, about 320,000 Chinese technicians and soldiers would serve in the DRV. Over 5,000 Chinese would be killed or wounded, almost all casualties from U.S. air attacks. Interestingly, the Chinese took few security precautions and operated openly, aware that U.S. photographic and signals intelligence sources were observing them. Some scholars have suggested that by this rather open presence, the Chinese were sending Washington a warning of their intention to support the Vietnamese.⁷⁶

(U) Later, after 1968, the Chinese would supply the DRV air force with nearly three dozen of a Chinese variant of the Soviet MiG-19, known as the F-6, a highly potent air-to-air fighter. This fighter would supplement the DRV's inventory of jet fighters, but the Soviets eventually would supply almost ten times more aircraft.⁷⁷

~~(S//SI)~~ As mentioned above, in early 1965 the Chinese instructors were supplanted by their Soviet counterparts. Soviet pilots were known to have been in the DRV as early as January 1961.⁷⁸ By May 1965, they were heard for the first time in Vietnamese Air Force communications. Some Vietnamese pilots were also heard using Russian terms, while others appeared to be bilingual.

~~(S//SI)~~ Actually, Vietnamese pilots had been going to the USSR since 1959 at a rate of about forty per annum. They had been sent to Krasnodar to participate in a five-year training program in either the MiG-17, single-engine fighter or the IL-28 (BEAGLE) light bomber aircraft. The Soviet fighter training program emphasized basic flight and engineering up to complex

Thunder in a "real time" fashion.²¹ Eventually, the Pacific Air Force (PACAF) commander would have to resort to establishing another center to meet its needs for the air war in Southeast Asia, known as the Pacific Air Defense Analysis Facility (PADAF).

~~(TS//SI)~~ Although it tried, MACV would never get a centralized SIGINT processing and reporting center to support its mission. In 1965, when MACV learned of the establishment of the NOG, it complained to NSA that it wanted a NOG of its own. The NSA and its representative in the Pacific considered the already existing SIGINT Support Group for MACV as a kind of "Super NOG." It had more personnel, by 50 percent, than the NOG in Hawaii. It also had the capability for collection management and intercept control which the NOG lacked. The only problem, at least in NSA's eyes, was that MACV's SSG was not collocated with MACV headquarters.²²

~~(TS//SI)~~ However, MACV's fear about lack of control over SIGINT went deeper than physical separation. In a May 1965 message to DIRNSA, MACV specifically voiced its fear that an earlier proposal to establish a direct OPSCOMM link from the NOG to the NRV could allow for intelligence reporting from Vietnam to be done without its knowledge. It demanded, instead, that the NOG circuit terminate at MACV headquarters with a patch to the NRV.²³

~~(TS//SI)~~ It seemed that MACV's fears were never settled. Two years later, in August 1967, MACV requested that NSA do a survey of SIGINT activities supporting its command. A seven-man NSA survey team traveled throughout South Vietnam interviewing personnel and assessing the effort. At one meeting, the MACV J-2 personnel asked for the setup of a Central Processing Center in-country. The J-2 people told the survey team that there was no single in-country SIGINT element which was capable of putting all the disparate field reporting into a single, coherent pic-

ture for MACV.²⁴ As far as the MACV people were concerned, the NSA reporting, although detailed, was not timely for tactical applications. At the same time, the reporting from the field sites and the direct support units was uncoordinated and seldom reflected similar activities from other parts of the country.²⁵

~~(S//SI)~~ The team considered the MACV request and then decided that it could not support it. The members, aware of the concerns from the ASA 509th Group over additional manpower constraints if the CPC was formed, found that there were elements already in place that conceivably could handle MACV's requirements. The survey team recommended that the current reporting setup, with the single collection management authority overseeing the processing and reporting of Hanoi's communications, adequately covered the problem. Besides, the team also pointed out, there was the SSG for MACV, which could be the means for "pulling together" all related activities reflected in communist communications.²⁶ However, implicit in MACV's complaints was the criticism that the SSG was not performing its function.

~~(S//SI)~~ These recommendations, though, remained just that. They would not be implemented, and there never would be a central processing or reporting authority established in Vietnam. MACV continued to rely on NSA for consolidated reporting of the war. The SSG remained beyond Saigon's control. Although Washington was capable of nearly instant communications with Saigon, this technical connection did not mean that their perspectives on the war were the same. The gulf between the two was more than just the several thousand miles separating the two capitals. Each held altogether different outlooks on what was happening in Vietnam. And, in a few months, it would be this difference that would make a telling change in the outcome of the war.

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

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

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

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

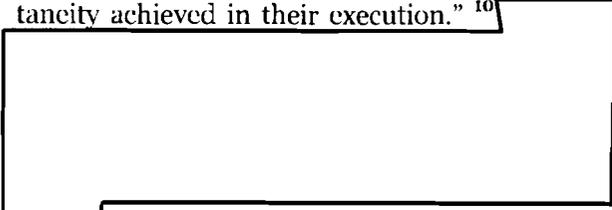
The National Security Agency stood alone in issuing the kinds of warnings the U.S. Intelligence Community was designed to provide. The first SIGINT indicators of impending major activity began to appear in the second week of January 1968. In the following days NSA issued a number of alerts, culminating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

Finally, after Tet, a postmortem study initiated by the Presidential Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFLAB) concluded that the exploitation of communist radio traffic had been able to "provide warning to senior officials."⁸

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

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

the performance of the SIGINT community in reporting the approach of the Tet offensive. Surprisingly, many of the sources quoted earlier themselves contain conditional qualifiers to their praise of SIGINT. The PFIAB, which had found admirable details about the SIGINT reporting prior to the attacks of 31 January, also noted in a memorandum to the president that "While some reports suggested the possibility of simultaneous attacks in certain areas, the Board found *none* [my italics] predicting the extent of the attacks which actually occurred or the degree of simultaneity achieved in their execution."¹⁰



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

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

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

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

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

OGA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ The second flaw was in the plan itself. The necessary ingredients for a successful second phase were secrecy and coordination. Unfortunately for Giap, but not for Westmoreland, these conditions conflicted. The deepest secrecy necessary to safeguard surprise jeopardized the coordination needed to pull the attacks off. The so-called premature attacks of 30 January convinced Westmoreland to alert all the American units and bases. This move, more than anything, doomed the Tet attacks to military failure. It remains unclear whether the attacks on the 30th were premature or if the attack had been delayed by Hanoi and those VC units missed the message. There is a suggestion that possibly the date of the main attack, or the premature attack itself, had been pushed up from a previous date.⁴⁶ However, as we shall see, there is some SIGINT that may point to a solution to this debate.

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

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

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

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



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

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

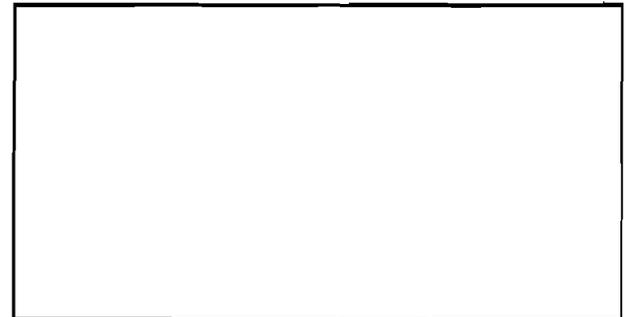
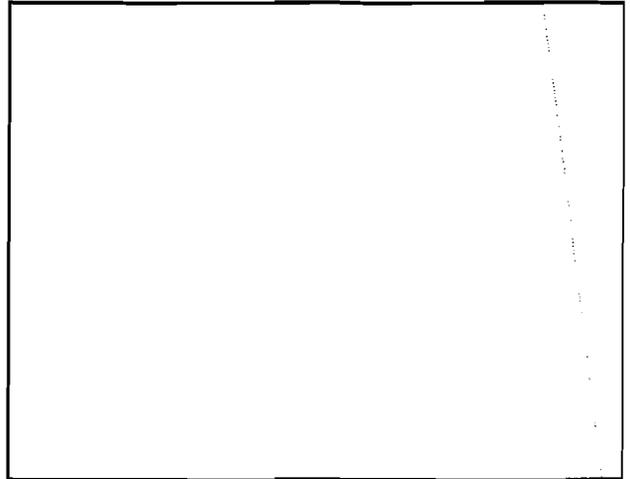
(S) For Westmoreland, his conclusion that the war was turning in the favor of the U.S. was based on a statistical calculation known as the "cross-over point." Simply put, it meant that U.S. and Allied troops were killing the enemy faster than they could be replaced by infiltration from the North or recruitment in the South. According to MACV, enemy strength at the end of 1967 was

between 250,000 and 299,000 troops, with 271,000 to 284,000 being the optimal range figure. Since late 1965, the ever-mounting casualty rates suffered by the communists had imperiled their ability to continue fighting.⁵⁸ However, Westmoreland's order of battle numbers were not agreed to by everyone. Beneath a tranquil surface of official claims, the CIA contested Westmoreland's statistics. This was the background to what became known as the Sam Adams controversy.

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

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

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



(U) George Carver

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

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ By mid-November, the battle centered on Hill 875, where over 2,000 air sorties, including 300 by B-52s, flattened communist positions before being overrun by a U.S. ground assault. By Thanksgiving it was over. Communist casualties numbered about 1,600, while almost 300 Americans died. The SIGINT tip-off had proved important: communist prisoners had claimed that their plans to engage American units individually had been upset by their rapid arrival in the battlefield. Everyone was pleased with the SIGINT support.⁷² Westmoreland called the battles in Kontum Province the "beginning of a great defeat of the enemy."⁷³

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

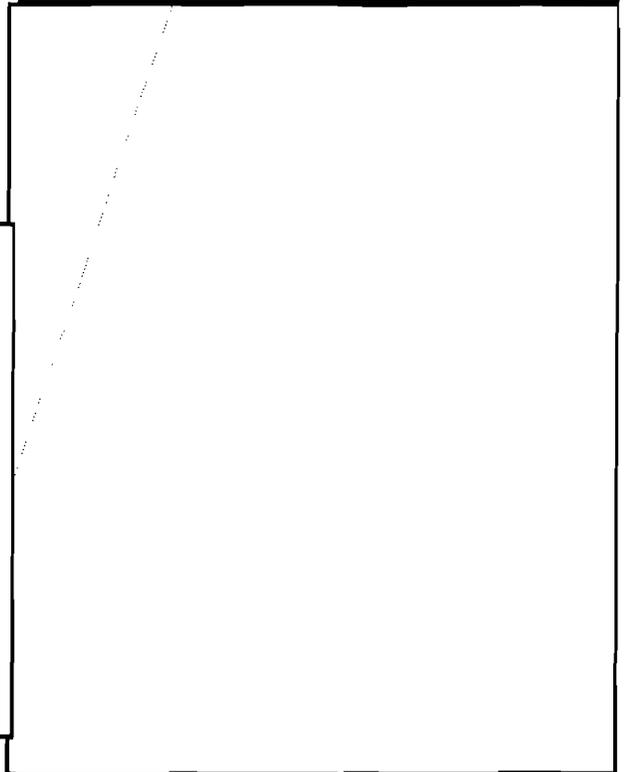
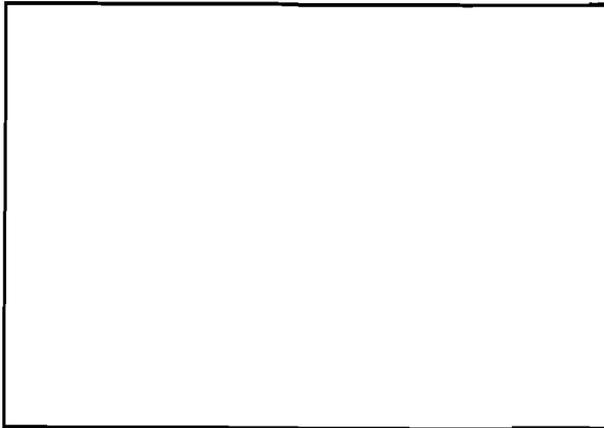
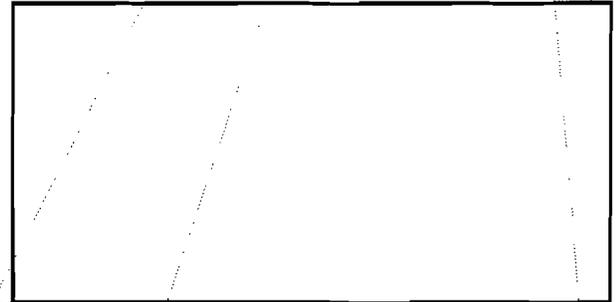
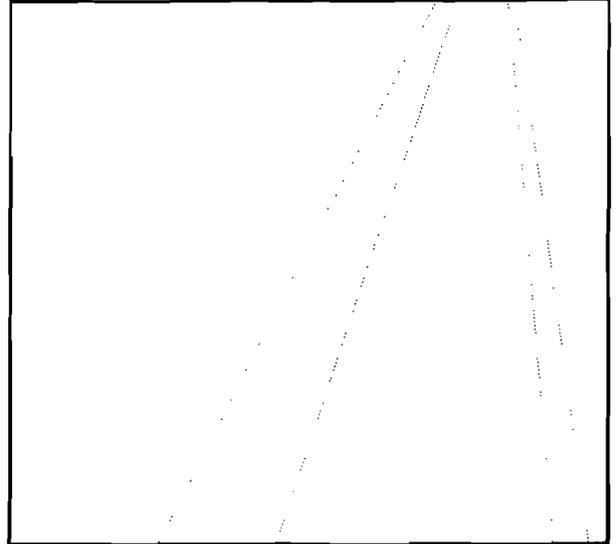
- To annihilate a major U.S. unit in order to force the enemy to deploy more troops . . .
- To improve [PAVN] troop combat techniques . . .
- To destroy an enemy unit and liberate an area and strengthen the base area . . .
- To effect close coordination of battles throughout South Vietnam. . . .⁷⁵



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

~~(C)~~ On 19 November, a more important document was found by troops of the 101st Airborne Division. It was a notebook containing information from newscasts and briefings attended by a

PAVN official. The notes contained some interesting entries. Among them was a recap of the U.S. domestic situation: a discussion of the African-American civil rights movement and statements by administration officials such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and former ambassador Maxwell Taylor complaining about the course of the war. It also contained a discussion of the previous two months' fighting. The notebook then went on to describe some of the salient aspects of the TCN/TCK offensive, emphasizing the coordination between military attacks and a general uprising by the population against the Saigon regime. It stated that "The Central Headquarters concludes that the direct revolution has come and that the opportunity for a general offensive and general uprising is within reach." 76



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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ All of this is not to suggest that Westmoreland and the others were oblivious to the intelligence piling up on their desks. However, the military situation that developed in the northern part of South Vietnam, especially near the DMZ, soon held the attention of the Americans. A 23 December NSA report suggested that PAVN unit movements into the provinces near and south of Danang indicated that a possible offensive activity would start there soon.⁸⁶ A 7 January 1968 message from General Westmoreland to the White House claimed, despite referring to aspects of the winter-spring campaign, that "the enemy's current dispositions indicate that his main effort will be made in northern I CTZ."⁸⁷ A State Department assessment from 6 January carried the same conclusion that the communists were preparing a major offensive in the northern region of the country.⁸⁸

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

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

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

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

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

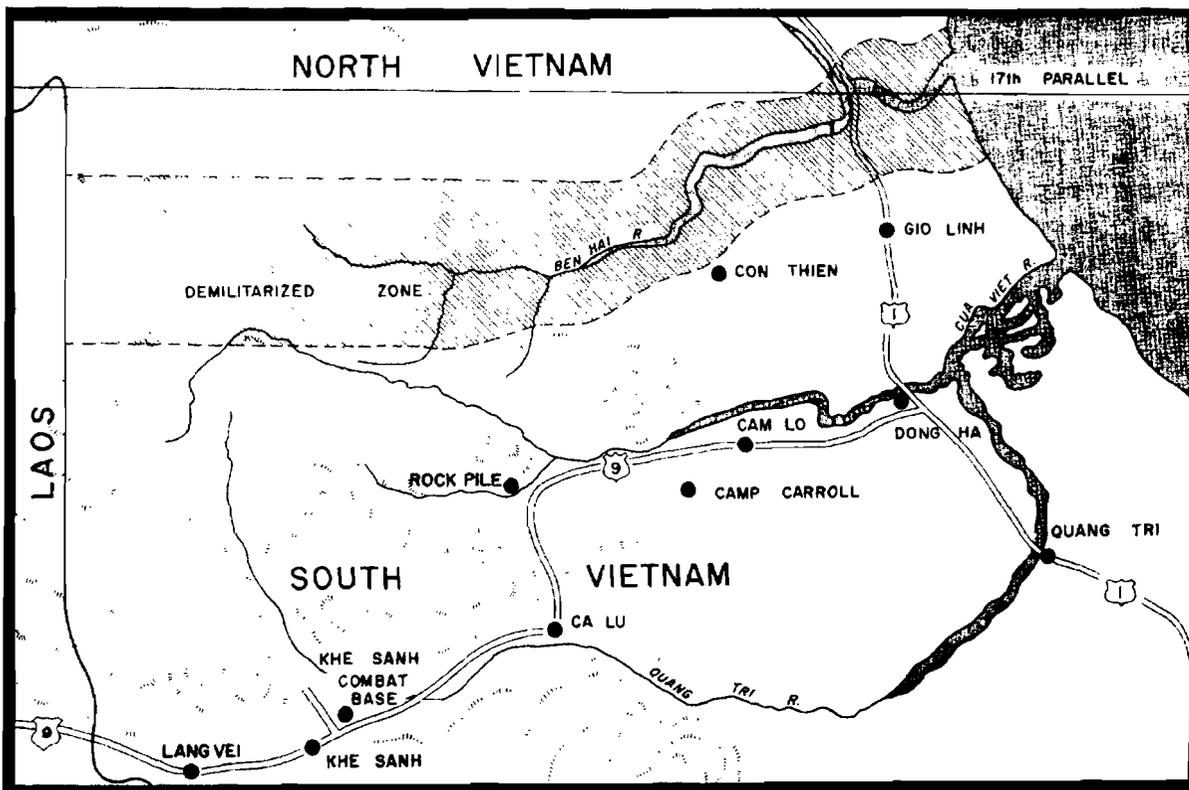
~~(S//SI)~~ If the presence of elements from two divisions was not ominous enough, in early January 1968 two regiments from the PAVN 325C Division, the division the marines had scrapped with in April, were detected by D/F in regions north and west of Khe Sanh. Meanwhile,

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

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

Vietnamese caused the MACV intelligence chief, Brigadier General Davidson, to convince General Westmoreland to approve the establishment of an all-source intelligence center for the region known as Niagra I. The Niagra center was headed up by an officer from MACV J-2 and incorporated all sources from all military commands in the region, including the marines. By mid-December 1967, the Niagra center was up and running. Eventually it would be staffed by over 200 men from all services and commands.⁹⁴

~~(S//SI)~~ Surprisingly, even with the formation of Niagra, problems persisted in making sense of the intelligence pouring in from all sources. The problem for the Americans was determining exactly what the North Vietnamese intentions were. Was Khe Sanh the ultimate target of the PAVN units moving through the hills; or was this a more general effort, seeking perhaps to attack several positions, such as the Rockpile and Camp Carroll, throughout the province? Another problem, especially for General Davidson, was



developing a coherent picture of the PAVN order of battle. He complained that the SIGINT was producing unit locations, but that identities were lacking – these units could be companies or even regiments; no one seemed to know. On 31 December he convened a meeting at Phu Bai to straighten out the mess. He invited representatives from marine intelligence, the Special Forces, the SOG, and the 509th RRU for a working conference.⁹⁵

~~(S//SI)~~ Whether or not this conference cleared up the problems General Davidson saw in the intelligence picture around Khe Sanh is unclear. Disputes continued within the intelligence elements supporting the Khe Sanh area. As of 6 January 1968, the 3rd Marine Division G-2 remained unconvinced by the evidence from the Phu Bai Field Station that the PAVN 101st Regiment was near the marine base.⁹⁶ Ten days later, the marine SIGINT unit at Phu Bai reported that the PAVN units seemed poised for “a large scale coordinated offensive in the DMZ area.” However, Khe Sanh was not mentioned as a target.⁹⁷

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

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

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

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



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

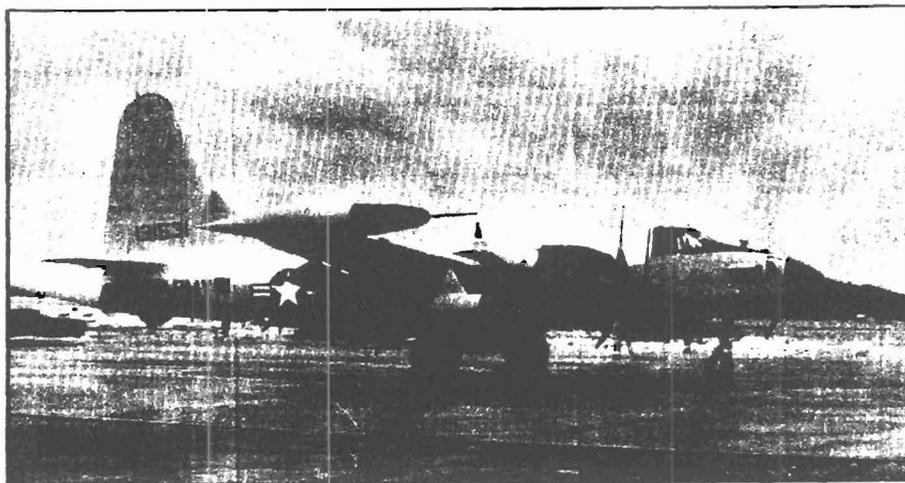
~~(S//SI)~~ Still, the SIGINT from the radio battalion detachment was of special significance, especially to Colonel Lownds. During the siege, Lownds would visit the detachment's bunker, sometimes several times during the day, asking for the latest intelligence. Lownds told the marines there that if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

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

Dart and the ASA's Ceflien Lion ACRP platform (P-2V), the latter of which had been ordered in by the MACV J-2.¹⁰⁷

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ Farther to the south, in the III Corps zone along the border with Cambodia, three communist divisions, the Viet Cong 5th and 9th and the PAVN 9th Division, were massing in Tay Ninh, Phouc Long, and Binh Long Provinces. The

American commander of the zone, General Frederick Weyand, watched the communist buildup warily. The ARDF flights from the 3rd RRU from Bien Hoa had been tracking the movement of the units and their headquarters. Two regiments of the PLAF's 5th Division had moved to within twelve kilometers northwest of Saigon. Weyand's political advisor, John P. Vann, described the location of these communist units as "daggers."¹²²

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

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

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ The NSA report series, itself, is important for two reasons. First of all, it marked the first time that NSA analysts considered that there was enough information from SIGINT which pointed to a general offensive and that all of the indicators of offensive operations that they had developed were related or connected. Secondly, the fact that NSA took the initiative indicates that the SIGINT structure in South Vietnam – the NRV, the 509th ASA Group, the SSG MACV, etc. – was unable to perform the inclusive analysis of the intercept from the entire country. The fears that MACV had held about the lack of centralized SIGINT processing and reporting entity, and would continue to hold, were, in the end, partially justified by NSA's action. No single SIGINT authority in South Vietnam could take the lead; it remained for NSA, nearly halfway around the world, to recognize the meaning of the SIGINT information.

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

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

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

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

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ As for MACV, there is little evidence to suggest that the NSA reporting influenced the former's view of the fundamental purpose of the Tet Offensive. In fact, both MACV and General Westmoreland seemed strongly wedded to the idea that the major threat remained in the northern part of South Vietnam where the Khe Sanh garrison was surrounded. All other communist preparations were viewed as efforts to divert Allied resources and attention away from Khe Sanh. It has already been pointed out that, as late as 29 January, Westmoreland was telling the JCS that the other attacks were intended to "deter

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reinforcement of the Northern I Corps." ¹⁴³ Also, this opinion was held in other intelligence centers. As was quoted earlier, both the USIB Watch Report and the DIA believed that all of the other communist movements and preparations were intended to support the attacks in the north and the Central Highlands. ¹⁴⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ One final bit of evidence can be offered in favor of an intentional attack on 30 January. On 20 March, the NSA representative in Vietnam notified NSA that an interrogation of a Viet Cong prisoner indicated the following: The VC command had ordered their cadre to listen to the NLF's radio station every night at a certain time for the order to attack. It would be announced by the transmission of a series of modulated signals which indicated that the attack would take place the next day. The number of signals would give the time. This prisoner told his interrogators that on the morning of 29 January, he heard the signal which told him the attack would begin the next morning at 0300 local.¹⁶¹

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

~~(S//SI)~~ The SIGINT report of the persistence of the diversion activity in the B-3 Front area suggests a possible, new interpretation for the 30 January attack: that the preparations and the compromise of the "N-Day" attacks may have been intentional, and, in fact, were a purposeful deception designed to further fix Allied attention away from the general attack on the other urban centers. It should be remembered that, as far back as the mid-1950s, the Central Highlands had been a strategic consideration to both Saigon and Washington, the loss of which would cut South Vietnam in half. (And this view would be realized with the final offensive in 1975.) It is possible that Hanoi, realizing the traditional strategic concern over the region, may have wanted to give the Allied command a further distraction from the buildup in the urban areas. The preparations for Tet included many deception and denial measures, such as those for radio traffic, some of which were suggested by Soviet advisors.¹⁶² The "noise" created by the communications and movement of the communist units in the B-3 Front was meant to blanket the buildup of troops in and around the urban areas. The fact that the "N-Day" references, with one weak exception, were intercepted only on the B-3 Front networks, raises the possibility of deception by Hanoi.

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

from the attacks on the other cities, it failed. The attacks in the front were not enough to divert Allied attention or resources to defeat them. MACV interpreted the 30 January attacks as a preview for an assault throughout all of South Vietnam. That morning, the reaction by MACV to the attacks across the Central Highlands and the coastal cities to the east was to alert all American forces and to urge that the South Vietnamese do the same. Furthermore, the truce was cancelled. The Americans expected more attacks the next morning, and when they occurred their units were at a heightened readiness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

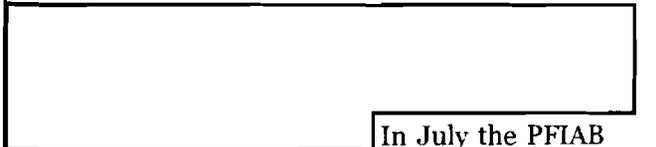
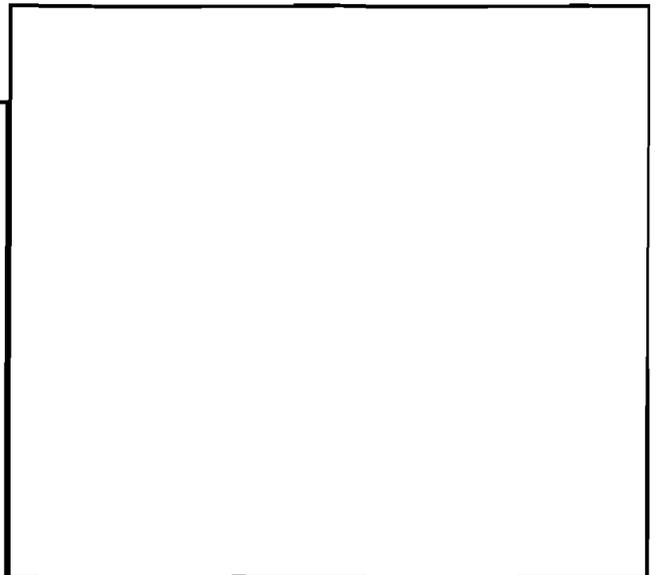
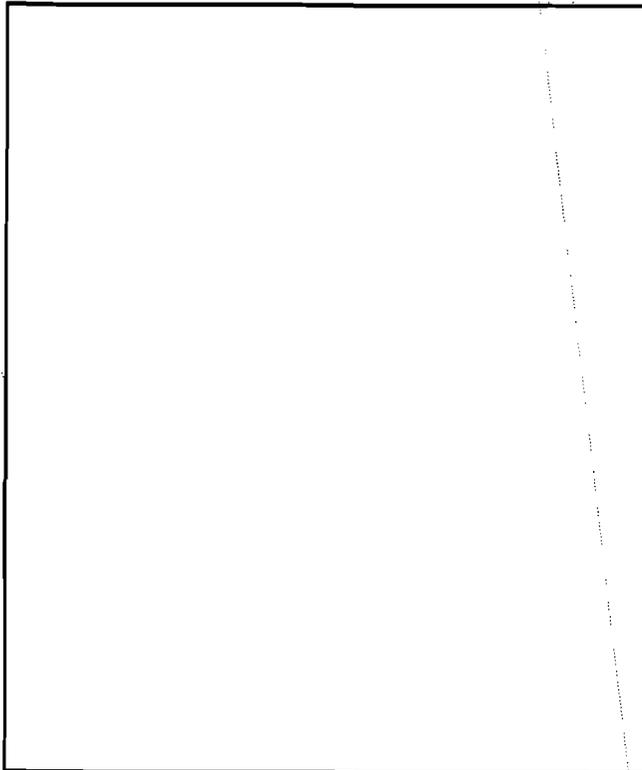


(U) DCI
Richard Helms

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

OGA

OGA



In July the PFIAB released a final report which considered the nature of the "warning" issued by U.S. intelligence and the limiting nature of what information was conveyed as part of the same warning. It was somewhat restrained in its tone and avoided pointing an accusatory finger at any particular agency or individual. This was in keeping with the

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

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

While some reports suggested the possibility of simultaneous attacks in certain areas, the Board [PFIAB] found none predicting the extent of the attacks which actually occurred or the degree of simultaneity achieved in their execution.¹⁷⁷

~~(S)~~ What the report singled out for criticism was the intelligence process. When confronted with the evidence of a general offensive, many commanders and intelligence officers could not imagine the communists capable of such a attack, especially country-wide, coordinated attacks at scores of targets.¹⁷⁸ This was as much a result of the inability of military commanders and civilian officials to accept the possibility of a completely unique situation – in this case, a country-wide assault against a new target set, i.e., urban centers – as it was their previous reliance on MACV's

“bookkeeping” methods which had so lowered the appreciation of the communist's military capability.¹⁷⁹

~~(S)~~ There was, as well, a dichotomy in the sense of urgency detected in communist preparations between analytic elements in Saigon and Washington. Washington's removal from the immediate scene created a sort of “emotional distancing” that may have inhibited its realization of the imminent threat of an attack. At the same time, Washington was being blitzed with more information than Saigon, creating a somewhat murkier view of what the communists were planning. Important highlights had trouble receiving the same attention in the Pentagon as they did in Saigon.¹⁸⁰ However, it was difficult to determine what impact the reports had in Washington. Westmoreland sent daily updates to the JCS that were relayed to President Johnson. Yet, in these messages the MACV commander's attitude towards the urgency of the situation seemed ambiguous, especially regarding the expected start of the general offensive. Westmoreland sometimes hinted at imminent attacks, and, at other times, suggested that the attack would start after the Tet holiday.¹⁸¹

~~(S)~~ Another serious criticism which the report leveled at the intelligence community by the report was the delay in getting intelligence to senior decision-makers. The process of reworking reports through various intermediate agencies before they reached their audience put officials in the difficult position of making decisions without the necessary original information.¹⁸² The study also recommended that an all-source indications center be formed in the U.S. embassy. However, this center was never formed.¹⁸³ This need echoed similar concerns over the absence of a centralized SIGINT processing and reporting center in Vietnam which has been discussed earlier.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ In fact, the "sense" of urgency had been known to Washington for some time prior to the SIGINT reports. On 22 January, a MAC intelligence summary sent to President Johnson noted that, from captured enemy documents, the communist command was "displaying a very unusual sense of urgency." Besides the documents, the report added that the most obvious signs of this urgency were the poorly prepared attacks in the Central Highlands and the rapid movement southward of the PAVN 304th Division.¹⁹⁰

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

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

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

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

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

painted a grim picture of the situation in Indochina.

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

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

(U) Notes

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

2. (U) Harold Ford, 105.

3. (U) Davidson, 480.

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

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

6. (U) Harold Ford, 113.

7. (U) Ibid., 116.

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

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

10. ~~(S)~~ Memorandum to President, "Evaluation of the Quality of U.S. Intelligence Bearing on the TET

Offensive, January 1968," PFIAB, June 7, 1968, CCH Series VIII, Box 19.

11. (U) Harold Ford, 116.

12. (U) Wirtz, 274.

13. (U) Ibid., 28.

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

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

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

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

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

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

20. (U) Turley, 75.

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

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

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

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

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

26. (U) Turley, 76.

27. (U) Ronnie Ford, 53.

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

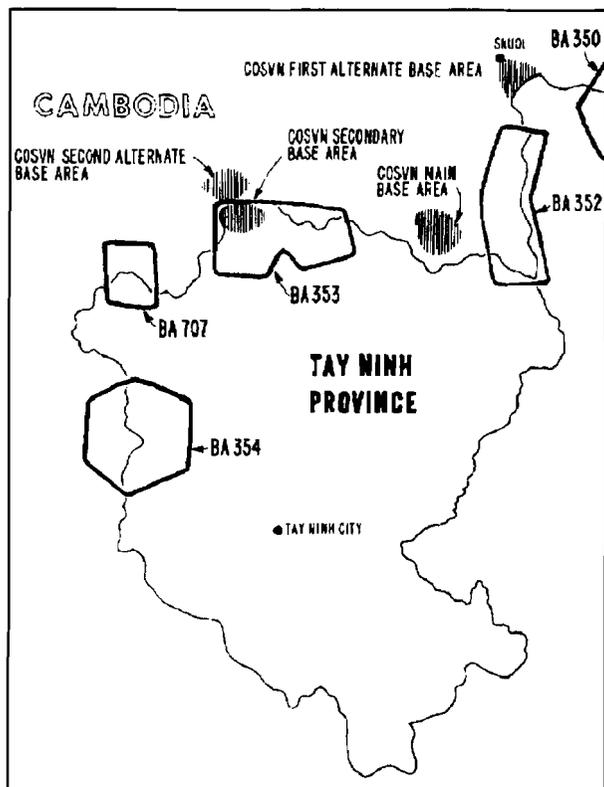
29. (U) McChristian, 63-64; Gibson, 153.

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

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

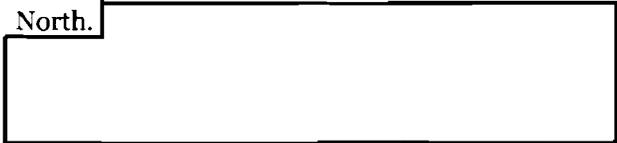
and Bin Long Provinces, they were like a set of well-known animal runs, and the hunters in Saigon were ready to strike at them.

(TS//SI) For a long time, dating back to the French war, COSVN had been an integral part of the southern communist movement. As far back as 1951, COSVN had existed as an extension of the Lao Dong Party's organization, under the direction of the CEC, located in the communist stronghold of Tai Nguyen in central Tonkin. The COSVN remained the Lao Dong Party's supreme authority in south until January 1955 when the National Reunification Committee assumed control of the party's activities in the newly formed Republic of Vietnam during the post-Geneva settlement.¹⁰ These actions consisted mostly of propaganda against the Saigon government of President Diem, and the organization of the disaffected local, ethnic populations to carry out anti-Diem activities.



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

(TS//SI) At the time of the Geneva-mandated referendum in 1956, some members of the central office returned to the DRV. For the next few years, many of the members of the defunct COSVN travelled between the South and the North.



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

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

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

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

~~(S//SI)~~ With COSVN like a fugitive on the run, MACV adapted a different approach, and looked to use B-52 Arc Light strikes to hammer COSVN when it rested. If the communist headquarters could be crippled by the big bombers, then Allied troops would move in and finish it off. For the NSA office in Saigon, pinning down COSVN's location became its number one task.¹⁹ On paper, at least, the marriage of ARDF and Arc Light seemed to be a perfect match between apparently precise targeting and an equally precise high-level bombing capability.

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

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

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

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



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

(U) By 1969, though, the issue of Vietnamization was no longer a policy luxury for the United States; nor could it continue to be projected into some rosy future when a military equilibrium between Hanoi and Saigon had been achieved. President Nixon's pre-election "secret" peace plan had come to naught. The only strategy left which could justify the withdrawal of American troops was Vietnamization.

(U) Vietnamization called for increasing both the size and capabilities of the ARVN to prosecute the war on their own with minimal American participation. The United States transferred everything from M-16 rifles to F-5 jets to the South Vietnamese; up to 2.5 billion dollars worth of equipment was passed to the ARVN. At the same time, South Vietnam's regular armed forces, security, and paramilitary units underwent a dramatic increase in size and capability.

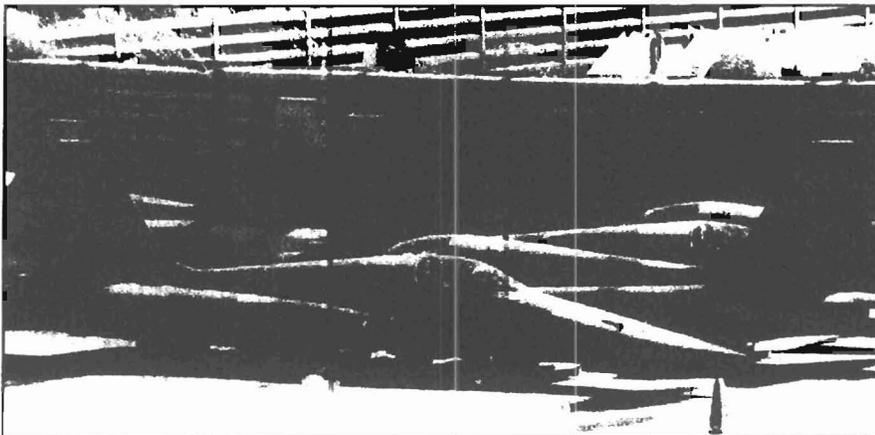
~~(S//SI)~~ All of this was carried out under a plan known in the Pentagon as JCSM 42-70. The JCS memorandum contained a codicil which called for a similar expansion of the ARVN cryptologic organization known then as the Special Security and Technical Branch, or SSTB. At NSA, the plan for the expansion of the SSTB was referred to as the Vietnamization Improvement and Modernization Plan, or VIMP for short. It called for a threefold mission: improve and modernize

the South Vietnamese SIGINT capability to the point where it could support its armed forces; provide selected COMINT support to South Vietnam between the time it assumed its total combat responsibility and its ability to supply its own cryptologic support; and provide adequate SIGINT to the U.S. command and meet national intelligence requirements during and after the drawdown of American forces, including the previously mentioned support to the South Vietnamese cryptologic effort.³

~~(TS//SI)~~ The NSA VIMP was an ambitious program: it called for nearly tripling the manpower of the SSTB, adding a number of major new field sites, and installing an effective and secure communications system that could connect the smallest intercept team with headquarters in Saigon. In chapter 4, we had briefly discussed the effort in 1961 to improve and modernize the South Vietnamese SIGINT organization. It might be asked: What had happened in the intervening eight years? Or, more accurately, what had not happened during that time that warranted such a large-scale effort to build up the South Vietnamese SIGINT organization? To answer this, we need to go back to the beginnings of the Vietnamese cryptologic effort, back to the days of the French phase of the Indochina War.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Early Days of Vietnamese COMINT

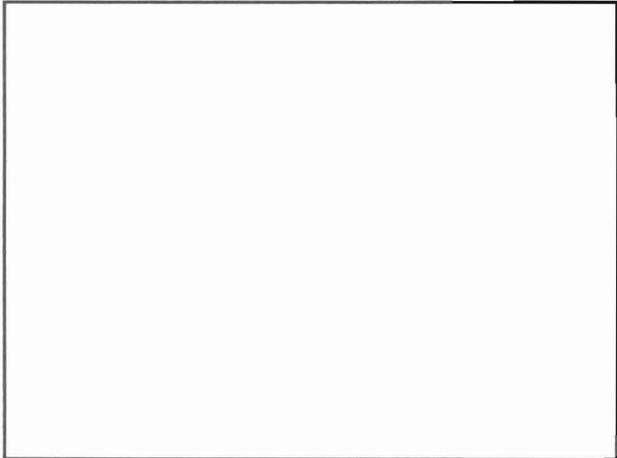
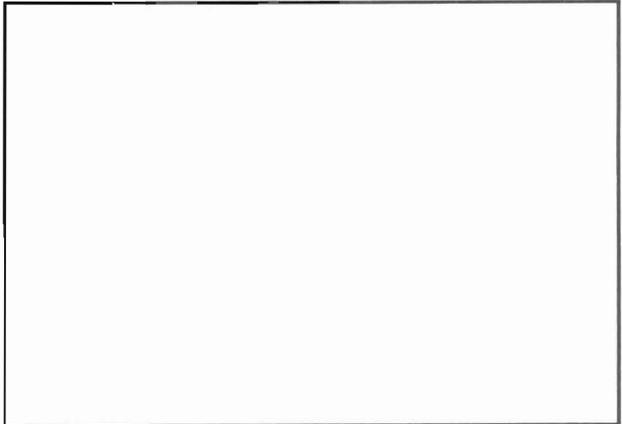
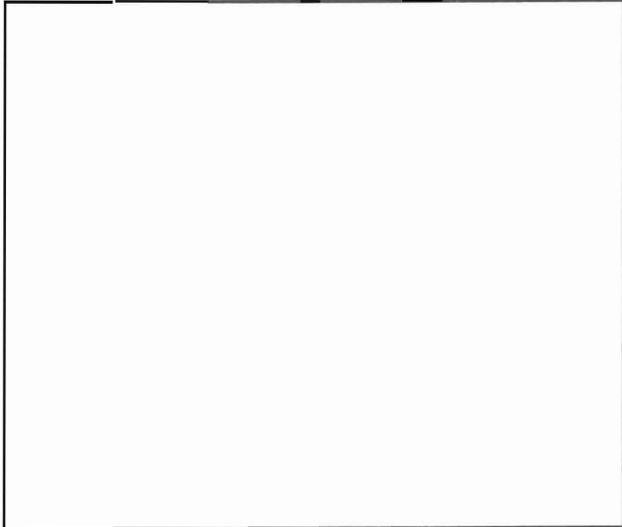
(U) Being part of the French Empire, Vietnamese nationals could not participate in any aspect of cryptology (or cryptography) until their French colonial masters decided to allow them. Through World War II, there is no evidence that any native Vietnamese was



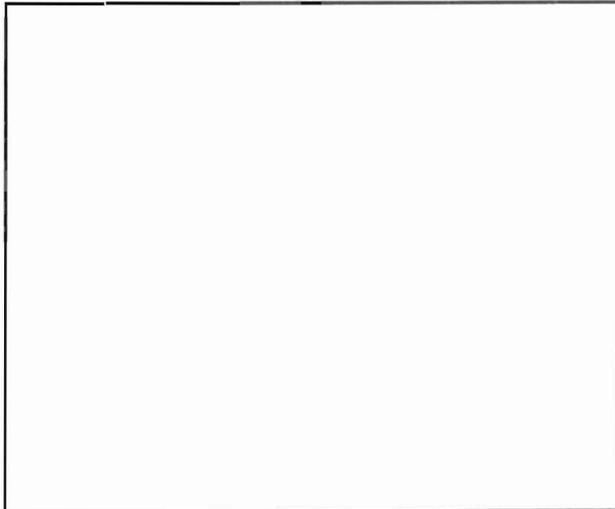
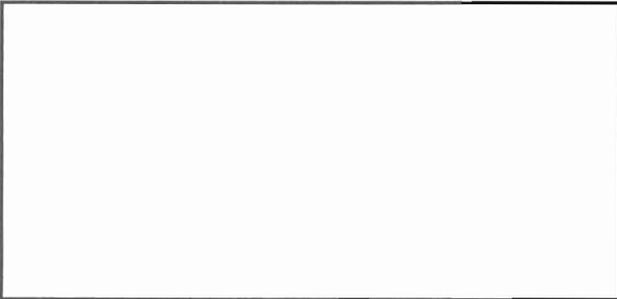
(U) F-5 jets intended for South Vietnam



(U) President Eisenhower and U.S. secretary of state John Foster Dulles greet President Ngo Dinh Diem in Washington, D.C., May 1957.

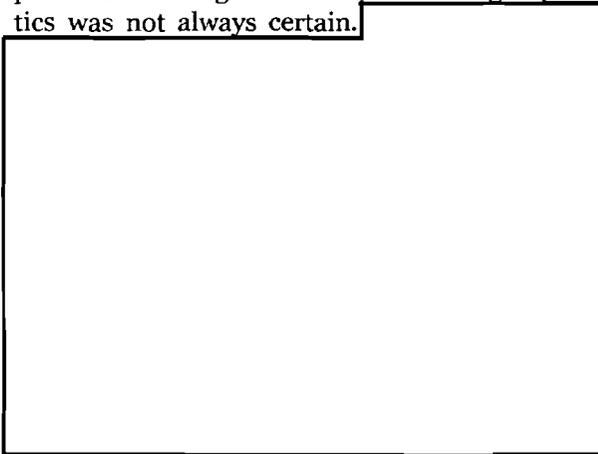


~~(S//SI)~~ NSA Looks for a New SIGINT Partner in Southeast Asia, 1958-1961



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

political advantage in the morass of Saigon politics was not always certain.



~~(TS//SI)~~ A more critical incident appeared in late March 1962. The U.S. intercepted a message sent by the headquarters of the Vietnamese military intelligence organization in Saigon to an outpost in Hue which listed the locations of various Viet Cong transmitters throughout South Vietnam.



It was suspected that, based on knowledge of earlier communist cryptologic successes, the information in this message was probably compromised.

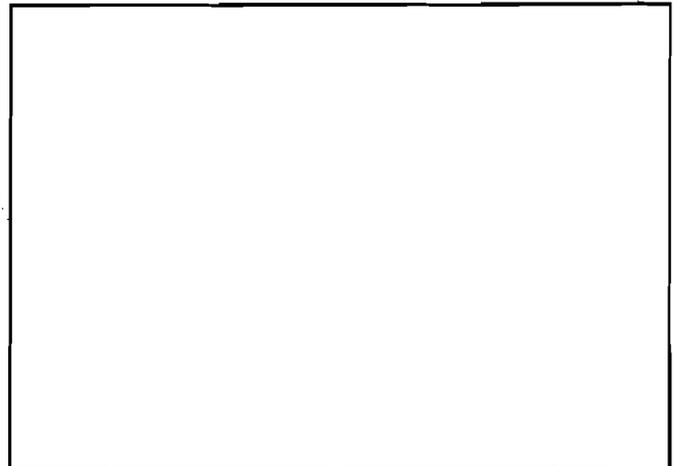


~~(TS//SI)~~ This incident, along with the suspicion that the South Vietnamese had compromised the USMACV SIGINT Plan on 13 April, convinced many in American SIGINT leadership that the South Vietnamese leaks were responsible for the subsequent major communist communications change. However, the USIB was unable to prove this. At the time there was compelling SIGINT evidence that the communist changes had been under way well before the two compromises occurred. For example, two reports from the ASA site at Tan Son Nhut indicated that the communications change occurred in stages, with western Nam Bo (the area northwest of Saigon) initiating its changes on 6 April, and Military Region 5

starting its changes on 10 April.⁵⁵ Furthermore, in a report done six weeks later, it was shown that in October 1961 certain Viet Cong nets in the Nam Bo region had switched [redacted] systems, and that the interregional communications net had changed its cryptography by January 1962.⁵⁶

~~(TS//SI)~~ Aside from the cryptologic challenge imposed by the change – and it was considerable, as the VC communications now broadly resembled that of Hanoi's regular military, [redacted]

[redacted] there now was the difficulty, at least in American eyes, of how to proceed with the relationship with the J7 organization. Suspicion's worm, in the form of the compromise, had entered the minds of the Americans; from then on, they would view the J7 organization with an unease that would affect all future considerations.



~~(TS//SI)~~ In line with instructions from Washington, the ASA site at Tan Son Nhut began deleting radio arbitrary designators (RADs) and net diagrams from the database it shared with the Vietnamese. The reaction by the Vietnamese was predictable: bewilderment and confusion. More serious, though, was the prospect of a serious deterioration of the Vietnamese D/F effort because of a likely inability to maintain continuous identity of target transmitters. This problem was recognized by General Harkins, COMUS-

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

MACV, who sent a message to CINCPAC and DIRNSA asking for a reconsideration of the decision. Both CINCPAC and the CIA chief in Saigon supported Harkins' objection, adding that this move could seriously jeopardize NSA's effort at setting up a U.S.-only SIGINT site at Phu Bai.⁵⁸

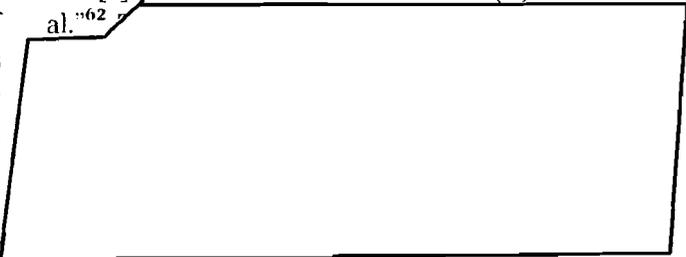
~~(TS//SI)~~ Oddly, all this concern over the security of the Vietnamese cryptologic organization followed an NSA evaluation of its performance as a COMINT producer, which rated it as poor. In June 1962, an evaluation from DIRNSA's staff to the CIA office handling foreign intelligence relationships stated that the expanded American effort reduced the need for the Vietnamese intercept. The latter's overall product was considered "not essential." Though, it was pointed out, that if intercept of communist voice communications ever materialized, then there would be use for the Vietnamese COMINT personnel for intercept and transcription.⁵⁹

~~(TS//SI)~~ In September of 1962, this theme was repeated in a message from the NSA representative in Vietnam to the director, NSA, Admiral Frost. He reported that, except for monitoring the communist Liberation News Agency broadcasts, the ARVN COMINT effort was virtually a duplication of all other intercept sources, primarily American [redacted]. The bottom line assessment was put in a clipped style: "Good for back-up, and occasionally unique traffic, and excellent for LNA cover." Continue with the liberation radio broadcast copy, the NSA representative in Saigon suggested, but the other material "could be dispensed with."⁶⁰

~~(TS//SI)~~ In July 1962, Admiral Frost, probably reacting to pleas from the American missions in Saigon, relented on his draconian measures against sharing with the Vietnamese. He pointed out that the prohibition was not intended to deny all steerable information. In a message to Saigon, he limited the steerable data to D/F information not higher than the secret classification which would not compromise sophisticated techniques

and technical material necessary for later planned plaintext voice intercept operations.⁶¹

~~(TS//SI)~~ Although this exchange crisis had been defused, the American concerns about the security in the ARVN J7 organization remained. Earlier in May, Admiral Frost had advised the deputy director, NSA, Dr. Louis Tordella, who was preparing to brief the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, about the implications of the communist communications change. He said that, "I do not accept the idea of joint U.S.-ARVN SIGINT operations and further promotion of this concept must be discouraged. Please advise CIA. Our job is training and assistance in technical field[s] and need not exceed CAT II (X) material."⁶²



~~(TS//SI)~~ Ultimately, it is difficult to make a clear judgment whether the security problems within the J7 organization and its successors were ever fixed to NSA's final satisfaction. Throughout the war, there were tidbits of evidence sprinkled through reports and messages from NSA representatives that indicated that the South Vietnamese had not eradicated completely the problem of infiltrators and lax security. For example, in 1964, it was discovered in SIGINT that the Viet Cong had an agent within an ARVN "radio monitoring center," though it was unclear what he was providing to the communists.⁶⁴ In a September 1968 incident, J7 communicators were discovered by American COMSEC monitors to be passing COMINT information to its customers over insecure communications channels.⁶⁵

~~(S//SI)~~ The South Vietnamese themselves could barely keep their mouths shut when it came to cryptologic secrets. The 5 May 1964 edition of

language assistance if and when the VC and North Vietnamese voice intercept missions could be developed.⁷¹

~~(TS//SI)~~ This low regard for the J7 competence continued into late 1966. During discussions with the USMACV J-2 chief, Major General Joseph McChristian, concerning direct discussions with the Vietnamese, DIRNSA questioned the ARVN COMINT organization's technical competence, susceptibility to political pressures, internal security, and whether there was any hope for long-term potential for J7 satisfying NSA requirements. The NSA representative had been even more bleak in his assessment:

I am convinced that the ARVN COMINT effort is of small value to the production of SIGINT in support of U.S. intelligence requirements, and even of *less value to the GVN* (my italics) [Government of Vietnam]. It is not my intention . . . to ascribe blame. However, if the statement is accepted; if it is in the interest of the U.S. to develop or nurture available ARVN SIGINT effort in support of the GVN, and if the Sabertooth program was intended to achieve these ends, we have failed.⁷²

~~(TS//SI)~~ Another outcome of this separation was that the ARVN SIGINT organization, its people, and capabilities, remained largely a mystery to the Americans. To be sure, there were liaison people, and the later head of Vietnamese SIGINT, [redacted] was a constant visitor to American facilities in Vietnam and to NSA headquarters; but, when assessments were performed, especially in preparation for the VIMP in 1970, there was much confusion and ignorance about the Vietnamese, their technical abilities and shortcomings, at least to the detail needed to implement the upgrades later outlined in the VIMP.

~~(TS//SI)~~ When asked about how good the Vietnamese were, vague or conditional adjectives often were used, such as DIRNSA's 1970 overall

evaluation of "fairly effective."⁷³ Such statements reveal only how uncertain the Americans were about their Vietnamese SIGINT counterparts and stand in stark contradistinction to the detailed inventory of problems and shortcomings found in official and many personal reports, accounts, and messages. One example of this was the recollection by an NSA advisor of his 1973 experiences at the South Vietnamese Danang Processing Center. During an inspection trip of the outlying LLVI team, he found:

~~(S//SI)~~ LLVI team operation could have been far more productive if the lieutenants and senior NCOs had been more professional. Most of these teams were located in forward areas and I was unable to visit many of them. Those I did visit invariably needed basic improvement. Antennas were often oriented in wrong directions or were found to be grounded; radios and generators were rarely properly grounded; bunkers were not secured with perimeter wire and the men had not been counseled in document and equipment destruction in case of overwhelming enemy attack.⁷⁴

~~(TS//SI)~~ For the Vietnamese SIGINT organization, these eight years were marked by grudging American allowances for intercept and processing efforts within extremely tight security restrictions. Even a project with as much promise as the Dancer program, originally started in early 1965 to handle the exponential growth of the intercept of North Vietnamese voice communications that was overwhelming the U.S. SIGINT system, would be inhibited from achieving its full potential. Eventually three DANCER sites – the ASA site at Phu Bai, the AFSS mission at Danang, and the ASA 509th Group in Saigon – were established to transcribe the avalanche of communist voice intercept.

1.4.(d)

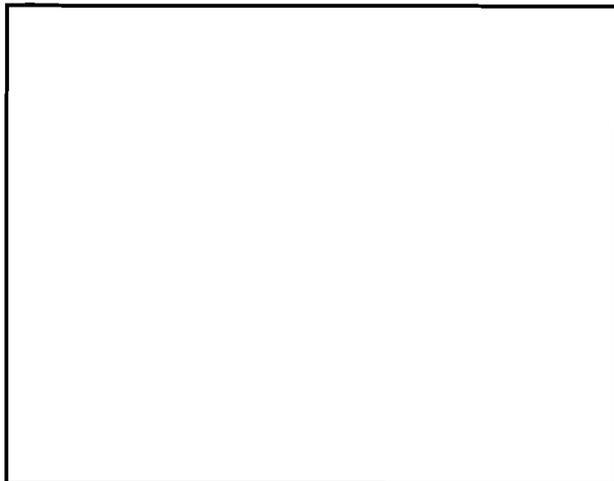
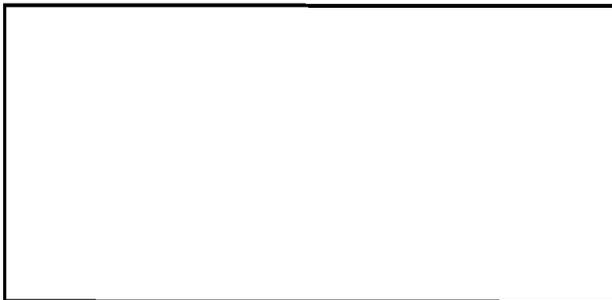
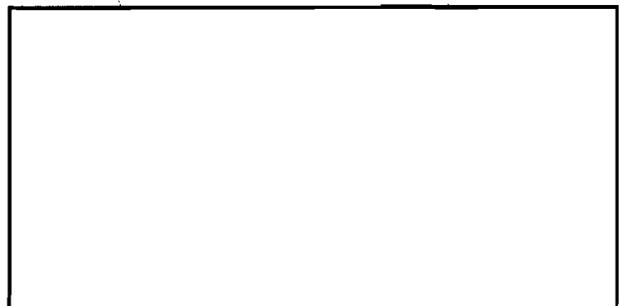
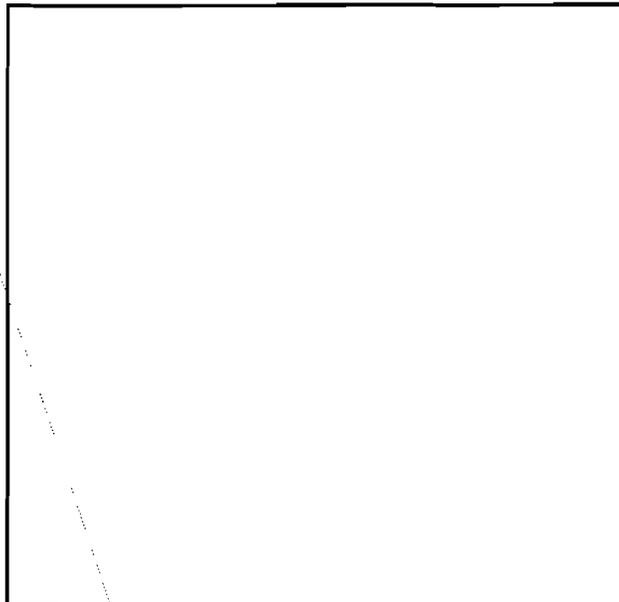
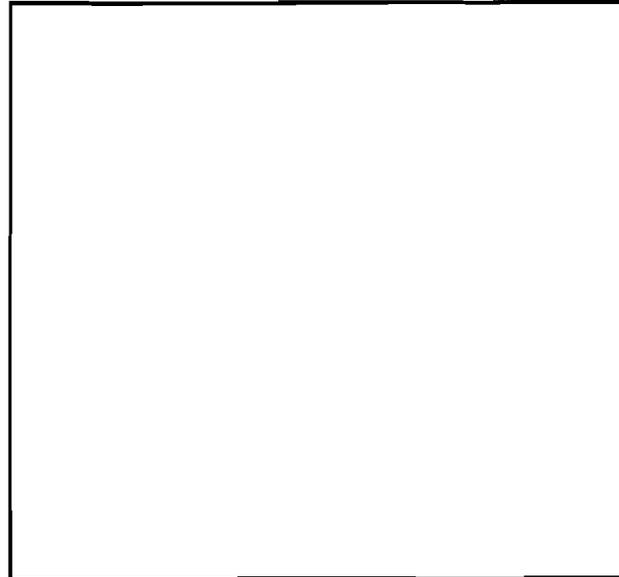
~~(TS//SI)~~ Yet Dancer was a program plagued with problems for almost three years before its projected impact at last was realized. Initially Dancer personnel were stationed at the three

voice intercept capability which, in turn, would aid the American SIGINT effort.⁷⁷

~~(TS//SI)~~ **Counterpoint: Vietnamese Communist COMINT, 1954-1970**

~~(C//SI)~~ While the J7 organization expanded slowly and remained on a short leash of limited exchange and cooperation with the American cryptologic organizations, to the north a radically different approach to the practice and organization of communications intelligence was developed by Hanoi.

(U) Earlier, we described how the Viet Minh had developed their own COMINT organization to support the military effort against the French and that it was successful in supplying intelligence on French tactical operations and, to a lesser but not insignificant degree, the French High Command's strategy.



TIME OF INTERCEPT	U.S. COMMUNICATORS (callsign & suffix)		MESSAGE	DATE	VOICE KEY
D66	Fire 90		At 559368 found bunker and tunnel will check in the area tomorrow morning+	D2/28 2	
				22-11-1969	3/1
0935	Train 11	Stroy 11	Request urgent dustoff for 3 U.S. wounded (2 w-b, 1 litter) by bit booby trap at coord. 778344 contact on the ground D81 + We have 6 RP out at this time + Lead cv is at cpt 78, tail cv is at cpt x + Reference from Flame at coord. 6937 he spotted base camp and movement, he wants Night Hawk took up 1 Lima size from Train element search area +		
1040	Paicher 11 Action 11 Stroy 11	" " Stroy 66		13-12-1969	D2/28 2
0905	Sluch 14	Fire 90	Come up on your post, give me location for put A/S at 1030 hour+ +Roger wait+ Location put A/S at 573408+ You have friendly near at that location A/S+ +We have F at 2 to 5 clicks to the W area+ My 54 element AP broken for coordinat- ion Stroy A element sweep+ Road sweep team sp return your location yet?+ +Affirmative, road sweep to EC return D54 location+ Request dustoff for 1 VN female at my location+ location+ At coord 557367 we found 1 tunnel 130M bunker+ My A element sp my location at this time+ Your 54 element will working into SE, also your CP, 46 and 62 element return my location+ +Roger, Walco+		
0910	Fire 82 Sluch 14	Sluch 14 Fire 90			
0930	Fire 90	Stroy A80			
0935	Race 6	Fire 90			
0950	Fire D66	90			
1005	90	C66S			
	90	C66S			

← Typewritten VC intercept of
U.S. plaintext communications

insecurities of all types were rampant in American (and ARVN) communications. Surely, they must have asked themselves, could the communists benefit from those compromises? The answer was yes; and, in many cases, the communists were able successfully to exploit what they had through an active imitative communications deception program.⁹⁶

(TS//SI) However, despite all of the monitoring, education and training, and advisory efforts, the COMSEC situation for both the U.S. military and particularly the forces of South Vietnam, remained frustrating to security personnel in

Vietnam. Even as late as mid-1964, NSA reported to the JCS that, after three years of effort, the RVNAF still committed security breaches, like broadcasting tactical plans in such an insecure fashion that the Viet Cong must have been exploiting them. At that time, American knowledge of the communist ability to exploit Allied communications remained spotty; as a corollary, the case for communist exploitation remained unconvincing to military commanders. The best DIRNSA could say was that "it is assumed that the Viet Cong were privy to this information and in time to take counter measures."⁹⁷ At this point, the only evidence that NSA could point to consisted of SIGINT product from 1959, 1963, and a translated 1961 Viet Cong radio log referring to the intercept of ARVN communications.⁹⁸

(S//SI) American knowledge of VC and PAVN COMINT grew substantially with the buildup of American and North Vietnamese combat forces in South Vietnam after 1965. Proximity in the battlefield led to a much deeper awareness of the Vietnamese capabilities. As the Allied SIGINT coverage expanded, more and more intelligence was accumulated about the communist communications intelligence effort and organization. At the same time, the ASA HUMINT exploitation and reporting of captured communist COMINT personnel, documents, and equipment revealed a mountain of information. By the late 1960s, it was possible to piece together the structure and operations of the communist COMINT endeavor in the south.

(TS//SI) In the early 1960s, the Viet Cong had organized small strategic intelligence cells which

intercepted South Vietnamese military communications. In 1963, COSVN began to assert control over these units. First, the cells were organized into the 47th Technical Reconnaissance Battalion which worked under the auspices of the Military Intelligence Section of COSVN's military staff.⁹⁹

[REDACTED]

At this point, ARVN communications remained easily exploitable, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

English language communications seem to have remained mostly untouched by the VC since they lacked intercept operators with a sufficient grasp of the language.¹⁰¹ This shortage would disappear by 1965, driven by the increasing American involvement in Indochina, especially after the start of the Rolling Thunder air campaign in the spring.

~~(S//SI)~~ By 1965, the southern communist command, realizing the importance of its communications intelligence effort, and anxious to retain its lucrative intelligence sources, convened a special conference of its COMINT and other intelligence personnel. At this meeting, it was decided to reform the technical reconnaissance effort into a joint strategic and tactical organization which would reach down into the provincial and regimental levels in both the political and military structures. Tactical combat units would continue to be supported by special units, while the COSVN and military region headquarters would retain their own units for higher-level analysis and training.¹⁰² In 1966, the communists had completed the reorganization of their COMINT effort in the south. The Central Research Directorate (CRD), Hanoi's headquarters for military intelligence, took operational and administrative control of all COMINT activity in the DRV, as well as the northern province of South Vietnam (MR 5), and the Central

Highlands (B3 Front). COSVN, located just across the border in Cambodia, took command of all the other elements in the remaining regions to the south.

~~(S)~~ Both the CRD and COSVN seem to have exercised nearly complete control of their separate commands, which included operations, staffing, recruiting, training, and technical capabilities. Both maintained central facilities wherein resided what could be termed as "high-level" cryptanalytic, traffic analytic, and language capabilities, as well as intercept operations. Training in all of the cryptologic skills were done in schools located at both sites. Intercept operator training lasted anywhere from six months for morse code to a year for English language personnel who had an extra six-month period of on-the-job-training (OJT).

~~(C)~~ The basic element of communist communications intelligence in the south was the so-called Technical Reconnaissance Unit, or the *Don Vi Trinh Sat Ky Thua*. These small detachments were allocated to the headquarters staffs of all North Vietnamese combat units down to the battalion level, and to the regional and subregional Viet Cong command structure. The TRUs carried a complement of intercept operators, analytic personnel and communicators. The size of the TRU could vary from as high as 100 down to about a dozen personnel, men and women. The units operated near their headquarters and provided direct support intelligence information derived from intercept and initial analytic efforts. Normally, information was couriered or transmitted by field telephone. Only in critical situations would the TRUs pass their information by radio.¹⁰³

~~(S)~~ The TRU's main objective was twofold: give their host unit intelligence that provided a tactical advantage during combat operations and the means of avoiding combat in disadvantageous situations.¹⁰⁴ TRUs concentrated on communications targets which offered both the path of least

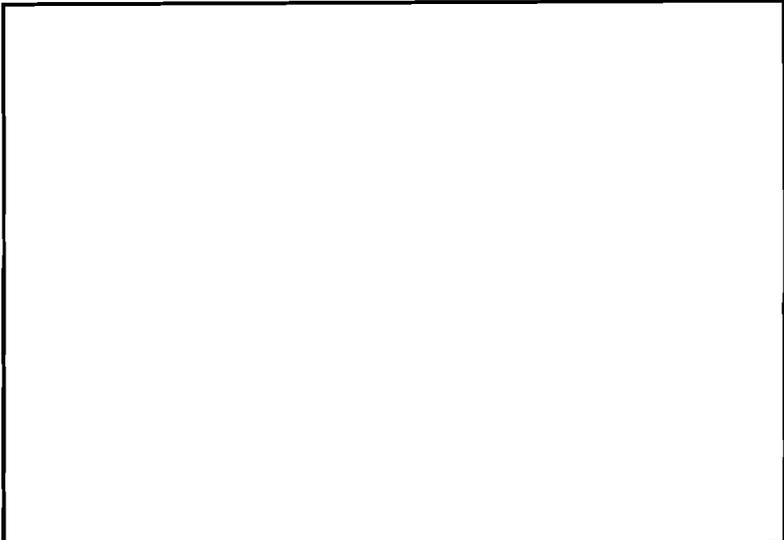
Representative in Saigon assured him that a "sanitized" tour could be accomplished, as long as [redacted] was not aware of the restrictions to what he could see.)¹²³ The Americans told [redacted] that for a variety of reasons – among others, J7's limited resources, capabilities, and budget problems – the plan was unrealistic. NSA suggested that if he was insistent on doing this that he should try to implement the plan in a series of phases beginning with the tactical units and ending with a transition to a national cryptologic organization.¹²⁴ Of course, what [redacted] was not informed of was that the United States, for some time, had considered the idea of such an organization as "inimical" to its cryptologic interests, that the development of a Vietnamese national cryptologic capability would seriously affect U.S. SIGINT and COMSEC positions in Vietnam.¹²⁵

~~(TS//SI)~~ [redacted] did go ahead with one part of his plan, which was to provide direct division-level COMINT support to the ARVN. These support units would be known as ARVN Special Technical Detachments, or ASTDs. Each ARVN division was to have one of these support companies. Actually, the formation of these units was not a new idea. Back in 1961, one part of the USASA OPLAN 8-61 called for the formation of a COMINT support company made up of five support platoons which were to have the capability of search, intercept, translation, D/F, and reporting of plaintext, tactical communist communications. These units were to be self-sufficient and able to accompany their ARVN host units anywhere.¹²⁶

~~(TS//SI)~~ The ASTDs were modeled after the highly successful ASA direct support units which were attached to each U.S. Army division and brigade in Vietnam, such as the 1st Infantry Division's 337th Radio Research Company. The

Vietnamese ASTDs had the dual mission of providing direct SIGINT support to its host division, as well as supporting J7's efforts in Saigon. In November 1968, [redacted] received approval from the Vietnamese General Staff to begin forming the ASTDs. His plan called for setting up ten of these detachments, each manned by four officers and fifty-six enlisted personnel. In turn, these ASTDs were further broken down into low-level intercept teams of four enlisted personnel and NCOs. Each ASTD would support their host division's COMINT needs through intercept, D/F, processing, and reporting of intelligence derived from communist communications.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Like everything else with Vietnamese communications intelligence, too few experienced and trained personnel, as well as a lack of equipment, hampered the ASTD start-up. The first detachment, assigned the ARVN's best combat division, the 1st, did not arrive until July of 1969. Even at that, the ASTD was not considered ready for operations. In January 1970, the 509th Group was tasked by MACV to get the Vietnamese detachments ready for deployment. Surprisingly, the personnel assigned to the 1st ASTD were considered "inexperienced" by Saigon and would require "greater than normal technical



(U) Some of the personnel of the 1st ARVN Special Technical Detachment intercept team

advice and assistance" if it was to be ready. This additional training also would be a test of the new ASA support plan for these units.¹²⁷

~~(S//SI)~~ Full deployment of the ten ASTDs was not finished until late 1970. It took intensive training by ASA advisors, similar to that for the 1st ASTD, to raise the ability of the detachments to perform even basic skills such as effective intercept of tactically useful Vietcong communications.¹²⁸ And even then, certain communist communications, such as those nets which operated exclusively on the VHF range, were excluded from ASTD coverage.¹²⁹

~~(S//SI)~~ By 1969, the Americans were planning their withdrawal from Vietnam; Vietnamization, as mentioned earlier, was no longer a luxury, but a requirement. The Vietnamese communications intelligence organization, starved for personnel, training, equipment, and integration with the U.S. SIGINT System for the past eight years, would soon find itself awash in everything it had ever wanted. But was it in time? And was it enough? Or was it even what the Vietnamese needed? And could the Vietnamese get ready in time to go it alone? For by 1969, along with the combat troop withdrawal from Vietnam, the American cryptologic structure had begun its own drawdown.

~~(S//SI)~~ The Great Cryptologic "Bugout," 1970-1973

(U) President Nixon did not allow for the results of Vietnamization to determine the rate of the American withdrawal; whether Saigon's armed forces were ready or not to deal unilaterally with Hanoi's military formations mattered little to Washington. Driven by internal political considerations, which pressed for a reasonable, but also a quick as possible, disengagement, Nixon accelerated the American departure. In 1969 about 50,000 G.I.s had gone home. In early 1970, he announced a further decrease of 150,000 troops which included four army divi-

sions and one Marine regiment. The next year, another 100,000 troops were slated to head home. By early 1972, about 95,000 American servicemen remained in Vietnam, of whom around 6,000 were combat troops.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The American SIGINT presence underwent a similar dramatic drop-off. The earlier 1970 Vietnamization plan submitted by NSA had based its projections for a putative competent ARVN SIGINT capability largely on a controlled reduction of the American cryptologic presence from about 8,500 billets in 1970 to 6,654 in 1973 (or 6,000 depending upon what plan would be followed).¹³⁰ Defense Department critics of the plan pointed out how NSA was way behind what was actually happening in Vietnam.¹³¹ For example, the Army and Air Force cryptologic agencies had accelerated the pullout of their units. Yet, even revised figures for the drawdown were unrealistic in view of the political forces driving the overall American withdrawal. A draft 1971 NSA program still called for over 2,000 U.S. military and civilian cryptologists to remain in Vietnam for the fiscal years from 1974 to 1977!¹³² The truth was that the Americans were leaving Vietnam as fast as they could in order to meet the provisions of the approaching peace settlement. The rapid phaseout of American cryptologists made a shambles of the original VIMP's timetables, and subverted any chance to be effective.

~~(S//SI)~~ There had been an ongoing reduction in the American SIGINT presence in South Vietnam for sometime before Nixon's announced withdrawals had started. Mostly, this involved the redeployment of some military cryptologic elements from Vietnam to bases elsewhere in the region. The Air Force, for example, had started to reduce its presence at Danang in 1967 and subsequently by late 1970 had moved most of its assets to bases in Udorn Thailand. These moves provided better support to the 7th Air Force which, by this time, staged most of its missions from several air bases located throughout that country. The navy's monitor-

undeserved connotation of unreliability. Still, for an interesting set of recollections, it is suggested that the special Vietnam issue of *Cryptolog* be read for its trio of stories recounting the experiences of four NSA technical advisors during the last period of the DGTS existence.

75. (TS//SI) 143rd SIGINT Committee Meeting, March 1968, "Request by the Government of Vietnam for Assistance in Establishing a Central Cryptologic Organization." - USIB-SC-29.23/11, 13 February 1968.

76. (S//SI) DIRNSA to NSAPAC REP (VIETNAM), 182322Z March 1968, D33-451.

77. (S//SI) DIRNSA to NSAPAC REP (VIETNAM), 290017Z March 1968, D33-536.

[Redacted]

79. (TS//SI) Ibid., 3.

80. (TS//SI) Ibid.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

85. (TS//SI) Ibid., 32-34.

86. (TS//SI) Ibid., 13.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

91. (U) Gaddy, 94.

92. (S//SI) Donzel E. Betts, Hiram M. Wolfe, Raymond P. Schmidt, Thomas N. Thompson, *Deadly Transmissions: (COMSEC Monitoring and Analysis)*, Cryptologic History Series, Southeast Asia (Fort George G. Meade, Maryland: National Security Agency, December 1970), 4.

93. (S//SI) TTIR RVN 18-71, MACV J2, 17 April 1971.

94. (S//SI) Betts et al., 4-8; This is more than an impressionistic or anecdotal opinion. A review of official publications concerning U.S. Communications/Operations/Signal Security concerns shows that they cite almost exclusively collateral reports issued by

MACV J-2, USASA TAREX, and ARVN. For example, in the chapter on VC/PAVN signals intelligence in the history of the Purple Dragon program. *Purple Dragon* (CCH-E32-93-04, 1993), there are 41 citations, none of which are individual SIGINT reports, and only four of these are classified at or higher than SECRET Codeword, meaning SIGINT was used in the citation itself. (S//SI) For further information on Project Touchdown see Project Touchdown accessions 32802 and 37377, NCA. (S//SI) For further information on Project Touchdown see Project Touchdown accessions 32802 and 37377, NCA.

95. (TS//SI) Donzel E. Betts, [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Working Against the Tide: COMSEC Monitoring and Analysis. Part One. Cryptologic History Series, Southeast Asia (Fort George G. Meade, Maryland: National Security Agency, June 1970), 22. This work was the original study produced by a joint effort of the various history offices of the cryptologic community. It reflects a higher classification and the use of extensive SIGINT and SIGINT-related information which were excluded from the later version. *Deadly Transmissions.*

96. Ibid., 8-10.

97. (TS//SI) DIRNSA Message 062025Z May 1964.

98. (TS//SI) Ibid. [Redacted]

3/O [Redacted] 04-62/VNG for specific examples.

99. (U) Bergen, 404.

[Redacted]

101. (TS//SI) Betts et al., *Working Against the Tide*, 3.

102. (U) Bergen, 404-405.

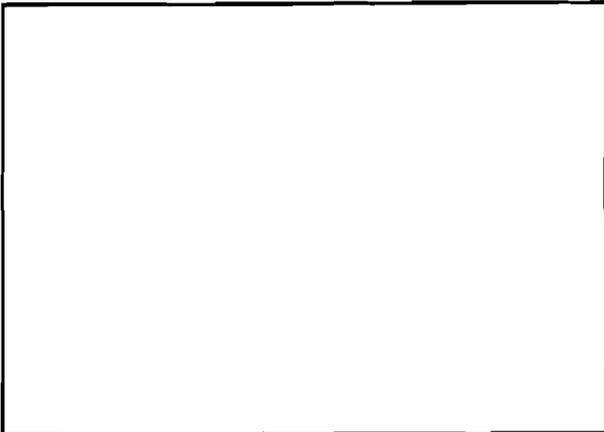
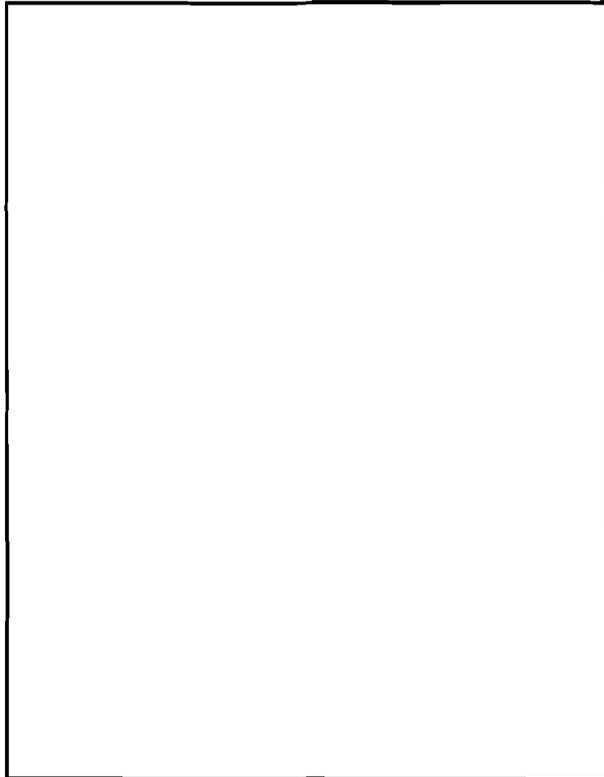
103. (S) TTIR RVN 18-71, MACV J2 17 April 1971.

104. (S) "VC/NVA COMINT Effort," USASAPAC TAREX Technical COMINT Special Report (TCSR) 04-71, 8 March 1971.

105. (TS//SI) [Redacted] *Purple Dragon: The Origin and Development of the United States OPSEC Program* (Fort George G. Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 1993), 68.

106. (S) TCSR PAC-15-69, 18 November 1969, CCH XII.NN.I.F.

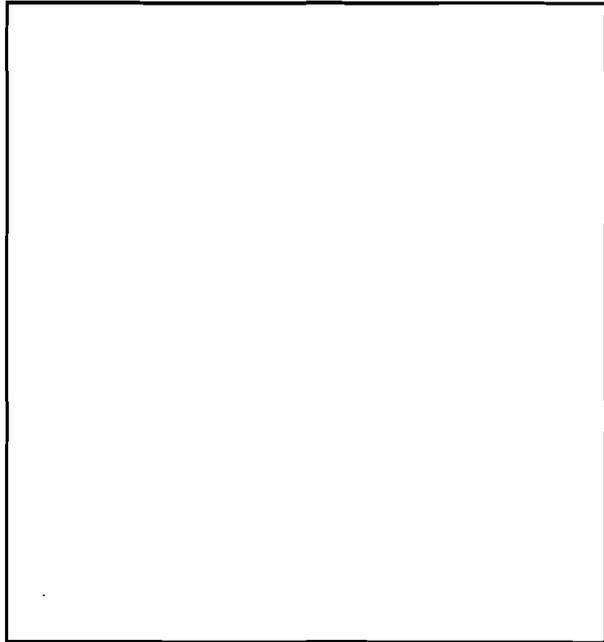
107. (S) Betts et al., *Deadly Transmissions*, 11.



~~(S//SI)~~ **Organization:** The sprawling, regional, multiservice, multinational SIGINT undertaking during the war was never centralized by the American SIGINT leadership. This may not have mattered in the 1950s when the American interest

Yet, by 1962 significant numbers of cryptologists served all over Southeast Asia. These included personnel from all four services (the Marine Corps was still part of the Navy Department) and the COMINT efforts of other countries. A plan had been developed that year for a Joint SIGINT Authority to corral these disparate elements under one control, who, in turn, was to be subordinate to MACV. However, bureaucratic impediments emerged in the form of Army and Air Force objections to outside control of its service cryptologic elements. At the same time, neither MACV nor CINCPAC was willing to assume command responsibility for a consolidated SIGINT effort. The ensuing solution never really addressed the problems inherent in the arrangements without a central authority.

~~(S//SI)~~ The logical figure to assume control of all SIGINT in the region, the NSA/CSS Representative, Vietnam, defined his position in nebulous terms such as "facilitator" or "coordinator." His command structure was under the existing NSA Representative hierarchy in the Pacific region - subordinate to the representatives in Hawaii and, for a while, the Philippines. Locally, the NRV had enough authority to mix it up with



field sites over the control of certain intercept positions, but he never had enough to leverage complete missions or to organize a response to a crisis. That authority was split among NSA, the 509th ASA Group, and the headquarters of the Service Cryptologic Elements. Many SIGINT resources, especially collection and ARDF aircraft, in the region remained beyond his effective control. A few early attempts at centralizing some SIGINT functions – processing and reporting at the SEAPIC – failed to take hold. In spite of later, repeated MACV calls to create some sort of centralized processing or reporting center, similar to its own Joint Intelligence Center, SIGINT continued to operate as a set of loosely associated entities.

~~(S//SI)~~ Like many other problems in Vietnam, this lack of centralization came home to roost when the Tet Offensive erupted in late January 1968. We saw how NSA was dissatisfied with the lack of centralized and coordinated reporting from the various SIGINT sites in Vietnam. Fort Meade stepped over the NRV and the intermediate NSA Pacific representatives, assumed control, and issued a single series designed to report on the “possible general offensive” in Vietnam. However, despite a limited, initial success, the reports failed to provide adequate warning of Tet. The report series suffered from a diluted central theme; information contained in it tended to confirm MACV’s belief that the attacks being prepared in South Vietnam were intended to distract attention from Khe Sanh. But more to the point, by being removed physically from Vietnam, NSA could not take the actions appropriate in meeting the threat of a general offensive. For example, we saw the NSA series was not current, often a full day behind events. Nor was it as broadly inclusive as it might have been; many reports from stations in the southern part of Vietnam were not cited in the report series after the first report was issued. NSA never alerted the elements of the SIGINT system – the NRV, 509th ASA Group, the field sites – to the impending assaults. NSA, situated half a world away at Fort

Meade, simply could not substitute for a centralized SIGINT authority in Vietnam.

~~(S//SI)~~ **Policy towards South Vietnamese COMINT:** From the earliest days of the intervention in the region, the American attitude and approach to the national COMINT agency of South Vietnam can be portrayed, at best, as “at arm’s distance.” The overriding attitude, the one that defined this circumspect relationship, was the concern about the poor security program in the Vietnamese COMINT organization. This was an opinion held by people at all levels of the hierarchies of the American cryptologic and intelligence communities. There had always been a suspicion going back to the 1950s about the integrity of South Vietnamese security. Whether the anecdotes about the security failures signified a general trend of communist infiltration or just a series of security incidents cannot be determined completely.

~~(S//SI)~~ However, it was this historic concern in Washington that fed the misconceptions about the origins and nature of the great communist communications and cryptographic change in 1962. These apprehensions held, despite the considerable SIGINT evidence to the contrary that Hanoi’s changes had been occurring for some time. As a result, the American distrust was set in stone. In many ways this fear over security hobbled the relationship between the American and Vietnamese cryptologists for the rest of the war. For thirteen years, the two organizations cooperated and collaborated in a most restricted manner. Exchanges were conducted under the most rigorous terms. Joint operations, were, in large part, never truly “joint”; the Vietnamese were more like an adjunct entity, quarantined from any contact with the Americans, except for their specific mission. This distrust destroyed early joint efforts of the 3rd RRU at Tan Son Nhut. It increased the impetus for U.S.-only operations at Phu Bai and other sites. American SIGINT operations generally were isolated from those of the ARVN.

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

front-end, often seen in the sharpest relief in the individual combatant. Intelligence, and SIGINT is part of this mix, plays an important but still secondary role. It offers insight into the enemy's plans and capabilities. It can be a force multiplier. Yet it is no substitute.³²

~~(S//SI)~~ Unlike World War II, in which Allied COMINT could provide insight into the Axis' strategic plans and capabilities, and had something of a role in Allied strategic planning, SIGINT in Indochina played a largely secondary role.

[redacted] American SIGINT could not provide direct information on Hanoi's strategic military, political, [redacted] activities. The only help SIGINT could provide was on the infiltration rates of Hanoi's troops after 1968. For the most part, though, SIGINT was confined to support of Allied military operations. This role was hardly insignificant, and SIGINT did contribute to a string of American military successes starting in 1965. However, Allied military operations were such – that is, largely a reaction to communist military initiatives in South Vietnam – that they could not achieve the elusive “victory” sought by Washington.

~~(S//SI)~~ Yet, if SIGINT could not contribute to Washington's strategy for winning the war, it was not without an impact, for better or worse, on two of the most critical events of the war: the incidents in the Tonkin Gulf and the Tet Offensive. Earlier, it was illustrated how SIGINT failed the Johnson administration, when, in 1964, it did not report all of the information that it held concerning the actual activities of Hanoi's navy on 4 August. Instead, only certain reports that substantiated the Navy's claim that the two destroyers had been attacked were provided the administration. Other SIGINT was manipulated, or misrepresented as relevant, while contrary information was withheld, and access to all of the nearly sixty translations and reports was denied. Without all of the SIGINT information, a decision by Washington to respond to Hanoi depended on

the flimsy evidence from the handful of SIGINT reports that loosely supported the notion of a second attack. Over the years, NSA refused to release the entire record to either the secretary of defense or the foreign relations and intelligence committees of Congress. On those occasions when NSA was requested to supply information, it offered only the “official” version contained in the 1964 chronology. For thirty-seven years, the scope and nature of NSA's failure remained unknown.

~~(S//SI)~~ As for the Tet Offensive, despite official and personal claims, SIGINT did not deliver an adequate warning in January 1968. When NSA Headquarters assumed responsibility for the pre-offensive reporting, it believed that the ensuing report series would warn MACV of the general attacks. However, as was demonstrated, the SIGINT reporting did not have this desired effect on Westmoreland and his staff. After Tet, a senior NSA official asked General Westmoreland why he had never acted on the information in the reports. Westmoreland's response led this official to believe that the general had his own preconceptions as to what the communists were up to and ignored the SIGINT.³³ The more likely explanation, based on the sources analyzed earlier, is that the information in the SIGINT reports actually coincided with MACV's own assessment – that Khe Sanh was the real target of Hanoi's plans and that the offensive preparations elsewhere remained, at best, a diversion. The report series remained NSA's only response to the communist preparations. Curiously, it never alerted the field sites or the SIGINT command structure to the approaching attacks.

~~(S//SI)~~ In large measure, these two failures by the American SIGINT community were the natural result of the technical and organizational shortcomings that historically plagued the American SIGINT effort from its very first days in the Indochina War. It is easy to see how the cramped analytic capability, especially in cryptanalysis, and the lack of sufficient qualified linguists affected NSA reporting in both instances.

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

(U) Sources

1. (U) Primary Sources (Document Collections)

A. (U) *National Archives*. Records Group 457, the Records of National Security Agency, and Records Group 226, the Records of the Office of Strategic Services.

B. (U) *Records Collections at the National Security Agency*. A number of primary source holdings are located at the National Security Agency, Fort George G. Meade, MD.

- NSA/CSS Archives (NCA, Accession Number and Location)

- NSA/CSS Records Center (Box Number)

- Center For Cryptologic History Holdings (Series and Box Number)

- National Defense University Vietnam Holdings (Box Number)

- Anchory electronic database (Serialized SIGINT Product, 1965 to Present)

C. (U) *Other Collections of Documents*.

- (U) House Committee on Armed Services. *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*. Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, 12 Volumes. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. This is the unclassified version of the collection popularly known as the "Pentagon Papers." The House version does not include the documents from the peace negotiations attempted by various intermediaries between 1965 and 1967. Volume 12, *Peace Negotiations*, is the affected volume.

- ~~(TS)~~ Vietnam Task Force, Office of the Secretary of Defense. *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*. Washington, D.C., 15 January 1969 (47 volumes).

- (U) Other editions of the *Pentagon Papers* are much less useful for research, though they still retain a utility for review. These versions include the four-volume Senator Gravel edition, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), and the single-volume edition published by the *New York Times* in 1971.

- United States Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUSA)*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. There are many relevant volumes in this series which apply to the war in Indochina going back to the French war in 1952.

2. (U) Unpublished Internal Manuscripts

- ~~(S//SI)~~ Several histories which included sections on the Indochina War, or specifically dealt with the conflict, were started but never completed. Many of these were associated with the joint effort of NSA and the three Service Cryptologic Agencies begun in 1967. Perhaps the largest of these was the Army Security Agency's effort under its history advisory group. Beginning in 1968, a multivolume effort was produced which covered ASA's activities through 1967. However, it was never completed.

- ~~(TS//SI)~~ 509th Radio Research Group, *When the Tiger Stalks No More...The Vietnamization of SIGINT, May 1961-June 1970*. 1971.