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8 September 1975 *LM*
HSC INTERVIEWS

Director of Central Intelligence
Central Intelligence Agency
Langley, Va.

REVIEW STAFF
75-2919

Attention: Congressional Liaison
Attention: Security Clearance for Manuscripts

STATINTL

Dear Sir:

Last Thursday I received a call from Mr. Greg Rushford of the House Select Committee on Intelligence asking me to have an informal chat with him on the Tet Offensive. He confirmed my guess that he had received my name from Mr. Samuel Adams.

I talked with him for about half an hour this noon and gave him a copy of the enclosed manuscript. He already knew about the Rostow cable, our answer to Rostow, and the names of [redacted] He plans to talk to both [redacted] and [redacted] before hearings resume this Thursday.

I forward a copy of my manuscript for your information -- our chat did not stray far from it except when Mr. Rushford volunteered a criticism of [redacted] personnel policies. STATSPEC

It may happen, in the course of events, that I might seek a publisher for the attached manuscript, in which case I would appreciate a security clearance for it.

Sincerely,

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[Redacted signature box]

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A STATEMENT PREPARED FOR THE USE OF THE HOUSE
INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE, 8 SEPTEMBER 1975,
CONCERNING THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE
CIA PREDICTION OF THE 1968 HET OFFENSIVE IN
VIETNAM ILLUSTRATING THE UPS AND DOWNS OF THE
INTELLIGENCE PROCESS AND THOSE ENGAGED IN IT

STATINTL



BACKGROUND

Herblock's cartoon shows an American officer hiding under a desk in a shattered office grinding out reports: "We now have the initiative... The enemy offensive has been foiled... Besides, we knew about it in advance." Perhaps I should take this opportunity to try, as so many have tried, to set the public record straight. We did know about it in advance. The enemy offensive was foiled. We did seize the initiative. Nobody will ever believe it. Because nothing is real.

I believe my name was given to the Committee by my friend and former colleague Sam Adams. I am flattered that he still remembers me and continues to hold me in such high regard. Unlike him, I have not previously sought any hearing outside the intelligence community. And while I admire Mr. Adams for his many contributions to intelligence and sincerely hope he will continue to regard me as a friend, I must say that I do not share his view of the intelligence community^{as} being divided up into "good guys" and "bad guys." Sometimes the conventional wisdom is wrong. Sometimes the rebels are right. But I have found^{that} a spirit of cooperation and compromise does underlie the adversary relationships which so often fuel the intelligence process. And in regard to the issue for which Mr. Adams has taken up his cross I believe he is wrong.

In brief, Mr. Adams has asserted that US estimates of the Vietnamese Communist Order of Battle were falsified to make it appear that the war in Vietnam was being won. In fact, the official Order of Battle estimates prepared by US military intelligence always struck me as accurate and well founded. The difference with Mr. Adams lay in the fact the the military estimates involved classical OB parameters -- men assigned to units which could be designated as such. Mr. Adams tried to extrapolate from the political and economic infrastructure of Communist controlled areas. It is as if Mr. Adams were to include in a US "Order of Battle" all civil servants and factory and transportation workers. ^{(And} ~~In regard to~~ Mr. Adams' assertion that the Tet Offensive proved that there were more men in the field than the official OB estimates allowed for is manifestly false. The average Communist soldier fought only one or two days per month. At any time, the effective Communist strength could have been increased 15 or 30 times simply by ordering all soldiers to fight on the same day. Something like this did happen at the time of the Tet Offensive.

I joined the Central Intelligence Agency in September 1956, selecting and translating information of intelligence value from journals and newspapers until June 1967 at which time I volunteered to go to Saigon. This new assignment was part of a unique experiment in putting analysts in the field close to the scene of action and the sources of information. It was a rewarding experience and I believe we proved the utility of such an exercise. I am not aware that it was ever tried again. On my return in February 1967 I served two years, on loan, in the Office of the Deputy Director for Intelligence. When my loan was finally terminated and I found myself back at my old job reading newspapers I began to suffer the career frustrations of middle age and when Agency morale began to crumble under the impact of the reductions

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in force of April 1973 I resigned.

I took with me no files or records of any sort. In reconstructing the events described below I have relied on two excellent books, already part of the public record, Robert Shaplen's Time Out of Hand and Don Oberdorfer's Tet. These books provide a detailed account of Communist planning for the Tet Offensive, of the offensive itself, and of the political aftermath on both sides. All I can add are certain personal anecdotes; an insider's view of how the reports already summarized in these books were written. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from such an account.

VIETNAM IN RETROSPECT

It is as easy and as true to say that the Vietnam war could never have been won as it is to say that victory was ^{(with-} in our grasp in 1968 -- after Tet.

It could never have been won because the North Vietnamese society and the Communist troops in the South (who rarely had contact with the local populace) were so structured as to carry out the orders of their leaders without question or hesitation until they were annihilated. The leaders in turn (i.e., the Politburo of the North Vietnamese Communist Party) were so constituted by training and experience and ideological commitment as to reject any compromise short of total victory.

Nevertheless, knowing this, there were those of us who cherished some hope. If the Communists could have been convinced that they could best attain their ends by political means (always mixed with some military effort) and if the United States could maintain a very high level of investment in economic and military aid (and sometimes blood), it might have been possible to buy time -- 5, 10, 15, 20 years (and always living with the possibility of total collapse at any moment) -- time in which leaders would die,

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philosophies change, the world evolve so that options would remain open in

Southeast Asia, options now closed.

In retrospect, the Johnson-McNamara strategy of inch by inch escalation was the least likely to succeed. The Communists could always go us one better on this road. The Nixon-Kissinger strategy of sudden violence combined with ostensible compromise might have been better suited to turning the Communist effort in the desired direction -- had the US commitment been maintained.

Two general observations regarding Vietnamese Communism should be made at this point. The war was fought on the basis of the secret annual resolutions of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong (North Vietnamese Communist) Party. These resolutions defined the strategy for the coming year and provided the basis for the propaganda campaigns which prepared the cadres and troops for each new phase of the "revolution." And the revolution was always viewed as following a unique Vietnamese path.

The Soviet revolutionary model involved the coming to power of workers' soviets in the cities which then forced Communism on an unwilling peasantry. The Chinese model involved a Communist peasantry surrounding the cities, forcing their capitulation. The Vietnamese model involved ever increasing pressure from an increasingly Communist countryside until the cities yielded to a dramatic "conversion" and the urban General Uprising signaled the end of the revolution.

THE TET OFFENSIVE

On Thanksgiving Day 1967, presidential adviser Walt Rostow cabled Saigon asking for an evaluation of the upcoming Communist Winter-Spring Campaign plans. It is my impression that the cable was directed to the Ambassador. In any case, it was passed to the CIA Chief of Station who

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passed it to the CIA Research and Analysis Branch of which I was a member.

This cable was the catalyst for one of those reversals of the conventional wisdom which illustrate the intelligence process at its most productive.

At that time, the conventional wisdom was that the Communists would have to revert to small unit guerrilla warfare. The optimists viewed this as proof that we were "winning." The pessimists viewed it as proof that the war would be long and indecisive. One of my colleagues, Joe, had just finished a paper in support of the conventional wisdom. But he was troubled. The raw material supporting his thesis represented an increasingly small part of the daily traffic. More and more, there was talk of increased violence, of a supreme struggle, of something that would happen "once in a thousand years." With years on the ground in Vietnam, he had seen nothing like it before.

I was trying to make sense of a quite different kind of evidence. It was increasingly apparent that the Communists were planning to create a new front organization, an urban, intellectual, middle-class front with an ostensibly neutralist ideology. It began to look to me ^{as if} that they were seriously considering negotiations to end the war.

There was never a "shortage" of intelligence in Vietnam. There was always too much, ^{Too} many low-level bits and pieces. As in all intellectual endeavors, if the bits and pieces didn't fit the puzzle you were working on you tended to ignore them. Joe and I had two new puzzles, but given the conventional wisdom it was unlikely that either one of them would sell. ^{(In addition, indeed,} they seemed mutually exclusive.

Called in to answer Mr. Rostow's cable, our immediate supervisor, Bob, asked Joe and me for quick summaries. Using a year old speech of General Nguyen Van Vinh on the doctrine of "negotiating while fighting" he put the two summaries together. The Winter-Spring Campaign, he hypothesized, would

involve increased levels of violence aimed at an improved Communist negotiating position. Our initial answer to Mr. Rostow was followed two weeks later by a 40 page cable which was the "prediction" of the Tet Offensive.

We regarded our final product as a reconstruction of the 13th Resolution of the Lao Dong Party, a reconstruction based on exhortations to the troops, on orders to units in the field, on instructions to political cadres in the South, and on the interrogations of a few high level prisoners who had exposed themselves in the initial attempts to set up the new urban front. It is still my impression, although I have never had personal contact with anyone who served in the White House, that when President Johnson ^S said a few days after Tet that he had "Ho Chi Minh's" ^P order "for the offensive in hand well before the fact he was referring to our cable two weeks after Thanksgiving.

I do not know to this day by what channels official CIA estimates were conveyed to President Johnson. But it seems to be true that our cable, using Embassy channels direct to Mr. Rostow, was considered by some to be a breach of etiquette. When CIA Headquarters finally published our cable as a CIA report it was with the cover sheet caveat that it did not represent an "official" CIA analysis. There may be those who would view this as a "suppression" of intelligence. I never considered it in this light. Our cable had already gone directly to the White House. It was distributed within the intelligence community. The cover sheet was a matter of no significance -- except in so far as it proved an embarrassment to its authors later.

It is also true, as Oberdorfer points out, that the senior intelligence analysts in the Military Assistance Command Vietnam "protested and dissented" --

on the grounds that what we hypothesized would be suicidal for the Communists. But MACV intelligence actually contributed an important element to our reevaluation. It was a MACV major who called our attention to the fact that the required level of readiness for such an attack could not be achieved until mid-January nor maintained beyond mid-February. Thus even the earliest version of the "prediction" gave the date of the attack plus or minus 15 days.

As the evidence mounted, our cables became more precise in regard to the timing of the attack. Three days before the attack the Saigon police captured a document giving the last possible moment for political cadres to be in place in Saigon -- midnight January thirtyfirst. I regarded this as the last piece in the puzzle and drafted a cable to that effect. This cable was never sent, however, for the petty bureaucratic reason that the translation of the captured document had not yet been assigned a combined document exploitation number and so did not pass the tests ^{set} made up to avoid double reporting.

In the weeks immediately before the attack, however, MACV had come around, the appropriate plans were made, and when the Communists made the error of starting 24 hours early in the northern provinces a full alert was ordered. The enemy offensive was foiled, the initiative was seized -- because we knew about it in advance.

And yet we didn't believe it ourselves. Because nothing was real.

I was not an expert on Southeast Asia. I was pretending to be an expert on Southeast Asia. And having admitted this and looking around me, I saw that it reflected a universal truth. Bunker was pretending to be an ambassador. Westmoreland was pretending to be a general. The young men were pretending to be Marines -- and some of them were dying at it.

We had predicted the Tet Offensive. It was all there, on paper, in the cables. But we didn't believe it. Bob left on leave January 30th. He called

us from the airport: "This may be it, they've hit Nha Trang." "This is it," we answered, "there are already infiltrators in the golf course between here and Tan Son Nhut!" But we didn't believe it.

We made no special preparations. I walked back to my hotel through the holiday crowds, children throwing firecrackers at me from a high wall. It was the first Tet in years that they had permitted firecrackers. I was awakened at 3 AM by mortars and small arms fire, only briefly mistaking them for fire crackers. There were screams in the night. The Armed Forces Network was playing a taped interview with Natalie Wood. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling until dawn. There was nothing I could do.

That night, most of us were unarmed. We were armed the next day and played cowboys and Indians for several weeks thereafter, until the Saigon police said they would arrest any American civilian seen carrying arms in public. (After that, if I went to an all night poker party away from my hotel I carried my carbine in a paper bag.) One hotel housing most of the CIA female employees was directly opposite a bridge used by the Communists to enter town. Several actions were fought there and the Communists briefly set up a machine gun nest at the intersection. Once during the night a Communist squad knocked on the wooden gate in the wall surrounding the hotel inviting the residents to come out and join the General Uprising. There was one armed man behind the gate, a civilian with a souvenir AK 47 and four rounds of ammunition. He didn't open the gate and the Communists went away.

By early afternoon we were back in our office, a one story wooden building next to the Embassy. It was riddled with bullet holes, there was a hole in the roof from a Communist rocket. There was blood all over the floor of the map room. For just a moment things were real. "Now we know what they approved, For Release 2004/11/03 : CIA-RDP89B00552R000100100042-2 meant what

they said."

AFTERMATH

The full scenario of the 13th Resolution was never acted out. The urban populace did not join the General Uprising. The US forces were not isolated in their camps. The Government of Vietnam forces did not defect. The new urban front did not open the negotiations for peace. The planeload of Russian correspondents waiting in Hanoi to fly to Saigon went back to their hotel.

The Tet Offensive was a catastrophic defeat for the Communists. They treated it publicly as a victory. The defeat of the Tet Offensive was a signal victory for the US and GVN forces. The American press treated it as a defeat.

Many in the intelligence community still maintain that the Communists did not really count on the success of the General Uprising. It is my conviction that they did. In the weeks and months that followed, they continued to act out the charade of creating an urban front, the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces, which was intended to form a "coalition" with the National Liberation Front. This ^oplay would have had meaning only if the General Uprising had achieved at least token success, which it did not. The majority of my reports throughout the rest of 1968 dealt with this effort. A detailed description of the Communist moves appears in Shaplen's Time Out of Hand.

Following Tet, for the first and only time in the war, Communist reports sent up from below spoke of defeat and of mistakes. In general, Communist reporting from below was tailored to the expectations of the leadership at

spoke only of victory and success. It was partly because of this that Communist decisions were so often wrong. They had no reliable feedback from the field -- for they severely punished "defeatism."

Did the Communists foresee whence their real victory would come, from the erosion of American will? I think not. In a lifetime of studying Communism, thinking it has been, my observation that while the Communists always play a strong public relations hand, exploiting the free political climate and free media of non-Communist nations, they never count on it. They don't really understand it. It is completely foreign to them. They do not believe in the reality of the power of public opinion. Reality, for them, is in political power and guns. It was only months after the Tet Offensive that the Communists finally realized what sort of victory they had really won, what sort of defeat the United States had really suffered.

EPILOGUE

Are there any general lessons in all this for the student of the intelligence process? Maybe. Maybe it is good to have analysts in the field. Maybe they can turn more quickly against the conventional wisdom and articulate new themes when the evidence begins to mount. For it is true in intelligence (as it is in physics and economics and cancer research) that the conventional wisdom will filter the facts, draw to it only the facts which support it and the new idea has to be articulated before it will draw facts and become the new conventional wisdom in its turn. Maybe a team of three people is the ideal size to discover and articulate the new. A single man becomes too enamored of his own discovery, is too likely to become a crackpot. And if you have more than three, you bog down in administration and housekeeping. And, finally, it's real neat to have a

Joe resigned within a year of his return to the US. Fully one quarter of the analysts assigned to the Saigon branch eventually resigned. For a while Joe worked as a dispatcher for a security guard service in California. He now works as an accountant at half his old CIA salary. When I finally returned I worked for four months as a bartender in a pizza parlor while I found out how little a CIA resume is worth. I now work for a computer company at half my old CIA salary.

Why did we resign? There are always personal reasons, of course. But in no case was it disillusionment with the US involvement in Southeast Asia. That can still be viewed as a great and altruistic adventure. And in no case was it disillusionment with CIA -- individuals in CIA, yes, but when the CIA is attacked as a whole, in the abstract, we rise to its defense. In every case, I think, there has been a strong element of existential malaise. Nothing was real. The peace movement which engulfed us on our return was even more divorced from reality than the men in Saigon. McGovern was divorced from reality. Nixon was divorced from reality. There was no reality.

I got drunk when Hue fell and I stayed drunk until the last ship had pulled away from the Vung Tau beach, until the last helicopter had lifted off the Embassy roof. I called Joe on the Coast (or he called me, we were both drunk) and I called some of my old colleagues at the Agency. We should get together, we said. We did not. Now I'm trying to sober up.

I remember one evening in the courtyard of the Xa Loi Pagoda. My room and I had attended a lecture by a Ceylonese monk on the nature of the Real. A tiny Vietnamese lady came up to us and forced a copy of the Dhammapada into our hands. She had copied it out herself in longhand, in English, as an act of piety, perhaps, as a statement of faith in the continuing American presence, perhaps. She had memorized only one spoken English phrase.

"Do not yield to temptation," she said.

I have yielded to temptation many times since. But I have returned the Dhammapada as often:

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought. It is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts....⁹ He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me' -- in those who harbor such thoughts hatred will never cease.... For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time. Hatred ceases by love -- this is an ancient. I sometimes wonder where she is today.