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INTELLIGENCE IN VIETNAM AND IRAQ: LESSONS UNLEARNED

BY

MR. ROY F. UNGER, JR.
Defense Intelligence Agency

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U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050

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Most aspects of U.S. strategic and operational difficulties in the present Iraq War can be traced in some measure to problems in understanding and using strategic and operational intelligence. The primary rationale for the war posited by the George W. Bush administration predicated on the possession by Saddam Hussein of weapons of mass destruction established an intelligence controversy immediately. Subsequent U.S. strategic and operational difficulties during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and the ensuing Iraqi counterinsurgency were, in part, due to manipulation and misuse of strategic intelligence and to inadequate intelligence support for the type of unconventional war being fought. This paper examines the last major unconventional war fought by the United States, Vietnam, and how use or misuse of strategic and operational intelligence affected the rationale and conduct of that conflict. Examined through the lens of three specific aspects of intelligence assessment of the operational area (rationale for war, nature of war and measuring war progress) it becomes clear that many of the same errors that complicated U.S. efforts in Vietnam were replicated during the Iraq operations.

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by

Mr. Roy F. Unger, Jr.
Defense Intelligence Agency

J. Boone Bartholomees
Project Adviser

U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

ABSTRACT

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INTELLIGENCE IN VIETNAM AND IRAQ: LESSONS UNLEARNED

> The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

—Carl von Clausewitz[1]

Introduction: The Semi-Permeable Membrane of Intelligence Support

To say that the 2003 Iraq War was and is controversial is an understatement. Indeed conventional wisdom holds that the war began with an inaccurate understanding of the stakes, was prosecuted in a manner that failed to consider the insurgency implications of toppling the Iraqi regime and may rightfully be considered a fiasco at best and a strategic blunder at worst. Intelligence has played a critical part in the Iraq War saga from providing the posited rationale for the war to informing subsequent operations attempting to deal with the resultant insurgency. There have been numerous analyses of the conventional military mistakes made in the U.S. approach to Iraq, from examination of Rumsfeld's controversial "Running Start" strategy, the impact of forced transformation focusing on lightness and speed, the upending of the Powell Doctrine of overwhelming force, and debate on the appropriate counterinsurgency strategy to defeat foreign fighters and Iraqi insurgents. However, there have been significantly fewer analyses written on how intelligence factored into these decisions. This is unfortunate since intelligence played a crucial role in almost every significant decision, whether right or wrong, made concerning the Iraq War.

It is natural to look to U.S. military history to find parallel conflicts for comparison to the current war in order to discern differences and similarities in operational and

strategic approaches. The conflict in Vietnam is a natural case study to turn to since it shared many of the same characteristics as the current war in Iraq: U.S. military involvement predicated on questionable assumptions, a misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict in which United States forces would be engaged and the largely unconventional nature of that protracted war. Conventional lessons learned from Vietnam applicable to Iraq include understanding the population as the center of gravity, the importance of U.S. domestic support for foreign conflict and the limits to hard military power in achieving desired strategic endstates. In both conflicts it became clear that intelligence support to policymakers and commanders played a role in the rationale and method in which the conflict was prosecuted.

Strategic and operational intelligence support to policymakers and commanders can be analyzed from three distinct yet blended phases. At one end of the spectrum of intelligence support one can examine the analysis and methodology used to arrive at intelligence estimates that inform policy and military decisions. At the opposite end of the spectrum one can analyze what intelligence customers do with the intelligence assessments provided, and this is where the issue of politicization of intelligence often rears its ugly head. The focus of this paper, however, will be on that gray area in between these two ends at the seam of intelligence support to policymakers and commanders. This is an ambiguous area most often portrayed doctrinally as a "semi-permeable membrane" where, in the ideal world, objective intelligence assessments are provided to customers (the membrane is porous in the direction of customers) while there is zero impact from the political or policymaking world on the Intelligence Community while it does its analytical work (*i.e.,* the membrane blocks flow from the

policy world to the Intelligence Community).[2] However, reality is a bit more complicated

and nuanced than the doctrine indicates. The seam where intelligence meets strategic

policy is a nebulous area, and the membrane cannot filter out all political influences on

the intelligence product. Intelligence producers naturally attempt to produce estimates

keyed to policymakers' priorities and needs, and there is therefore a natural give-and-

take between the top echelons of the policy and intelligence worlds. This seam also

exists in the military realm between providers of operational intelligence and senior

commanders including combatant commanders. This dynamic is now officially

recognized by the U.S. military in its relatively new campaign design doctrine. In a

nutshell, intelligence providers are to provide continuous feedback and interaction with

the commander during campaign design and joint operational planning.[3] To pretend

that intelligence cannot be influenced by the needs, desires, and biases of customers is

to ignore the reality and does a disservice to intelligence professionals and consumers

alike. It is in the interests for both intelligence providers and customers, whether

policymakers or senior military commanders, to understand the interaction at this seam

in order to be sensitive to how intelligence may be influenced by those it seeks to serve.

It is this dynamic in the contexts of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars that is the focus of this

paper.

    Carl von Clausewitz famously declared that the most important strategic

consideration when embarking on war was to understand the nature of the war being

entered and not to mistake it for something it is not.[4] It is clear that in many ways this

principle was violated in both the case of Vietnam and Iraq. Given that the role of

intelligence is to inform the policymaker and commander of the nature of the enemy and

conflict, it is clear that intelligence support played a key role in violating this principle. This paper will examine how intelligence contributed to the prosecution of Vietnam and Iraq in three main areas: providing accurate rationale for the war, providing an understanding of the nature of the war and providing meaningful metrics in order to gauge progress in the war. As will be shown, lapses in intelligence support in these three vital areas laid the groundwork for many of the difficulties U.S. armed forces encountered in both Vietnam and Iraq.

Rationale for War

Whenever strategic necessity compels the President of the United States to consider taking military action, the role of strategic intelligence undoubtedly should be to provide objective, accurate assessments of the threat or potential threat faced so that the Commander-in-Chief can make an informed decision on whether to take the country to war. Just war theory states that war is only justified as a last resort when the conditions of just cause, right intentions, proportionality and proper authority/public declaration exist and when there is a probability of success. International law has largely adhered to this interpretation while Article 51 of the United Nations Charter limits just cause to a right of self defense when attacked.[56] Given the internationally high level for justified war, intelligence assessments that address the conditions of just cause (*i.e.,* self-defense) are critical to not only the global legitimacy of the military action to be undertaken but also to accurately portray the threat being addressed to the President. As will be shown, the strategic intelligence provided to the U.S. President on rationale for war was ignored in one case (Vietnam) and likely distorted by policy preferences in the other (Iraq). Both led to disastrous conflicts that many view as unnecessary.

In the case of the Vietnam conflict, President Eisenhower first offered military assistance to South Vietnam predicated on the assumption on the prevailing "Domino Theory." This theory held that if one country, particularly in East or Southeast Asia, fell to the Communists, then more countries would also likely fall under the influence of Moscow and Beijing. President Kennedy, like many others in government, supported this view when he introduced the first U.S. combat troops to Vietnam. After Kennedy's assassination, President Johnson took the assumptions of the Domino Theory for granted and used it as a rationale for instigating a massive escalation of U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam conflict. While the Domino Theory was generally accepted by most within and without government, at least two intelligence assessments published before Johnson's troop surge cast real doubt on the validity of this critical rationale for increasing U.S. involvement in the war.

The first blow to the Domino Theory came on April 17, 1963 with the issuance of a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) titled *SNIE 53-63 Prospects in South Vietnam.*[7] The focus of this estimative product was on both the rationale for the war and the prospects for success. This paper will discuss the implications of the assessment on the probability of success in the next section that examines how intelligence was used to inform policymakers on the nature of the conflict being considered. As will be seen later the SNIE's assessment of U.S. progress was blatantly manipulated to serve policy preferences. As for analysis of the rationale for the conflict, the analysts at the Board of Estimates undermined the basic Domino Theory rationale for U.S. involvement by providing nuanced assessments of the motives of North Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union and highlighting differing objectives among these Communist

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governments. Based on this analysis, the SNIE argued that the Vietnam conflict was a civil insurgency and not the result of a master plan orchestrated by Moscow and Beijing and that there was no evidence that the fall of Vietnam would lead to the fall of other third-world nations to international Communism.[8]

A more damning blow to the Domino Theory occurred on June 9, 1964 when the Board of National Estimates, the precursor to today's National Intelligence Council, sent a memorandum to Director of National Intelligence John McCone entitled *Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a "Domino Effect" in the Far East?* The analysis in this memorandum questioned the validity of the Domino Theory, stating that

> We do not believe that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos would be followed by the rapid, successive communization of the other states of the Far East…With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to Communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam.[9]

This analysis obviously undercut the main rationale for the escalation of the war in Vietnam and was almost certainly seen by National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. It remains unclear who else in the Johnson Administration actually saw the memorandum, but the record indicates it was disregarded by whomever read it. To underscore the faulty assumption underlying increasing American involvement in the war, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Richard Helms ordered another review of the Domino Theory three years later. The result was a memorandum published September 11, 1967 titled *Memorandum Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam* that indicated that an American withdrawal from Vietnam, while temporarily destabilizing to the region, would have little long-term adverse effects on U.S. national security interests.[10] The declassified record is unclear on who precisely in the Johnson Administration read or disregarded this memorandum or why they discarded its

conclusions. Thus the strategic intelligence record of Vietnam indicates that policymakers ignored intelligence assessments that undercut the stated rationale for the war.

Turning now to the Iraq War, the main rationale for U.S. offensive actions against Iraq was the assertion that Saddam Hussein possessed a robust capability to produce, deploy and use weapons of mass destruction (WMD), particularly nuclear weapons. It became painfully clear a couple of years later that Saddam actually did not possess a robust WMD capability, and that fears of the Iraqi nuclear weapons program, unlike in 1991, were not justified. The role and failure of intelligence in the Iraqi WMD issue has been closely scrutinized and a report by the bipartisan Committee on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction (hereafter the Iraq WMD Commission Report) was sent to the President on March 31, 2005. Most of the report addresses intelligence tradecraft failures that contributed to an erroneous assessment that Saddam possessed WMD. Delving into the intelligence tradecraft errors is not in the scope of this paper. The report says little about how the strategic intelligence on Iraqi WMD was used or misused at the seam where intelligence meets policy other than stating that it could find no signs of overt political manipulation of the assessment similar to what occurred to SNIE 53-63 with regard to Vietnam.[11] Part of the reason the report skimmed over the political context was to avoid partisan debate, but the report still contains several pertinent clues on how strategic intelligence likely was influenced to suit policy preferences.

The main problem at the edge of intelligence support to Bush Administration policymakers appears to have been the environment or climate under which the

analysts worked, especially in drafting the key National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of October 1, 2002, suggestively titled *Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction*. Two aspects immediately stand out as problematic for true analytical integrity: first the fact that Congress, not the President, requested the NIE in 2002 and the title itself that prejudged the assessment. While the Iraq WMD Commission Report absolved the Bush Administration of outright politicization of the intelligence on Iraq's WMD programs, the report nevertheless observed that "it is hard to deny the conclusion that intelligence analysts worked in an environment that did not encourage skepticism about the conventional wisdom," and that analysis was also shaped by the sense that war with Iraq was a foregone conclusion.[12]

Contributing to this influence of policy preference for war with Iraq were statements by very senior Administration officials that undermined the Intelligence Community's attempts to produce objective analysis. Vice President Richard Cheney, on August 26, 2002, stated that there was "no doubt" that Iraq had WMD and President Bush followed with his own statement of certainty soon afterward and even before the October NIE had been issued.[13] How an objective analysis of the issue could have been undertaken given the statements by the top two senior officials in the United States is unclear at best.

Finally, there appear to have been lapses in the intelligence-consumer seam at the operational level as well. From November 2001 until March 2003 when the U.S. invasion of Iraq was launched, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Tommy Franks briefed Defense Secretary Rumsfeld on numerous occasions on how he planned to fight the upcoming war. However, there is no record that any

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discussion was held on the rationale for the war, the issue of Iraq WMD. While it may not be in accord with accepted standards of civil-military relations for the senior military commander to discuss reasons behind the decision to go to war, it remains odd that the issue was not raised in detailed briefings at this high level. One can only surmise that the reason was likely there was never any questioning at any senior level about the assumption that drove the Administration to engage in preemptive war – Iraq's WMD capability.[14]

When examining the role of strategic intelligence in the run up to both the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, the similarities are striking: policymakers either refused to accept assessments counter to the perceived policy options and/or strategic assessments were unduly influenced and constrained by White House preferences. In terms of the failure of intelligence to impact national decisions to wage unsuccessful wars, former Defense Secretary McNamara in 1995 admitted that decisions were made without dissenting views or contradictory intelligence, and that President Johnson had not sought these out. The same can be said of President Bush and Iraq in 2002.[15]

Intelligence on the Nature of the Conflict

In addition to the role strategic intelligence plays in determining the rationale for an executive decision to go to war, perhaps the second most important function of strategic intelligence for senior policymakers and commanders is to provide an accurate assessment as to what the nature of the ensuing conflict will be. In today's doctrinal parlance this would be labeled "framing the operational environment" and is crucial input in fashioning strategic and operational campaign design. While there were analytical tradecraft errors in both Vietnam and Iraq assessments as to the nature of the war, there was also sufficient accurate intelligence that should have forewarned senior

officials of the unconventional and protracted nature of both conflicts. As will be seen

below, in both cases such assessments were unwelcome as they did not fit into the

policy preference framework of intelligence consumers.

The April 1963 SNIE 53-63 *Prospects in South Vietnam* mentioned previously

contained the first official intelligence inkling of the unconventional nature of the

Vietnam conflict. The section above already demonstrated how the analysis in this

estimate undermined the monolithic Communist bloc view of Soviet, Chinese, and North

Vietnamese interests and objects in South Vietnam. In addition, the document clearly

sounded the tocsin that the war would hinge on civil conditions in South Vietnam and

that, given the corrupt government of Ngo Dinh Diem, U.S. involvement in the conflict

would be protracted, costly, and success not assured.[16] The assessment was

considered too negative by Administration officials and pressure was mounted on DCI

McCone to revise the tone. Accordingly, McCone intervened in a blatantly

unprecedented and political fashion to soften the assessment, changing the first

sentence to the following: "We believe that Communist progress has been blunted and

that the situation is improving."[17] This was the first blow to objective strategic

assessment of the nature of the war in Vietnam. However two subsequent official

estimates managed to return to the more pessimistic view that more U.S. troops

engaged in a conventional manner would not turn the tide against the Vietcong

insurgents.

In the early summer of 1965 as the Johnson Administration mulled over a

massive escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA) published SNIE 10-9-65 *Communist and Free World Reactions to a Possible US*

Course of Action on July 23, 1965. This estimate was remarkable in its clarity about the

nature of the war in the event of U.S. escalation. It noted that Vietcong (VC) insurgents

would avoid set-piece battles with the U.S. military and depend on protracted conflict for

victory. The document also strikingly assessed that the 44 additional battalions planned

for Vietnam would not be sufficient to break the back of the insurgency and, most

remarkably of all, assessed not only that the VC were not losing, but were, in fact,

winning.[18] As if this should not have been enough to cause President Johnson to

rethink escalation, the views of General Westmoreland should have when he told

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle Wheeler that the proposed troop surge would

not "provide reasonable assurance of attaining the objective."[19]

Following President Johnson's decision to escalate U.S. military involvement in

Vietnam the CIA began work on an assessment on the will to persist of the North

Vietnamese, a germane question given the ineffectiveness of Operation ROLLING

THUNDER to break the back of the insurgency. Accordingly, the CIA published a 300-

page Memorandum on August 26, 1966, titled *The Vietnamese Communists' Will to*

Persist. The assessment stated that the bombing campaign had not prevented Hanoi's

ability to resupply its forces in the south and had not had a significant impact on its will

to persist in the conflict. The report also suggested that the bombing campaign may

have freed up North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers to go south and face the

Americans, thus having the inverse effect of increasing NVA troop strength in the field.[20]

There appears to have been impact of this assessment on the Administration's plans to

continue the war at full throttle and may have contributed to DCI McCone's increasing

sense of alienation from the Administration that led to his resignation in April 1965.[21]

While the Intelligence Community had provided clear warning about the unconventional

nature of the conflict and the likely ineffectiveness of conventional tactics it was not until

General Creighton Abrams succeeded Westmoreland in March 1968 that U.S. forces

began to adopt the clear-and-hold strategy more suitable for counterinsurgency

operations than Westmoreland's conventional search-and-destroy approach. However

by this time public fatigue with the war led to President Nixon's adoption of the

Vietnamization policy, which provided cover for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. combat

forces from Vietnam.

A similar pattern of policymakers rejection of intelligence analysis warning of the

perils of conducting unconventional or counterinsurgency warfare was evident in the

aftermath of the quick U.S. conventional victory over Iraqi forces in Spring 2003. By the

summer of that year it was apparent to most observers, including the Intelligence

Community, that a significant insurgency was escalating in Iraq and that military

commanders did not have access to the types of intelligence needed to combat a civil

insurgency. The CIA warned of the mounting insurgency and lack of credibility of the

new Iraqi government, yet Secretary Rumsfeld and the Bush Administration were

reluctant to shed their view that the insurgents were simply disaffected Saddam loyalists

of minimal strategic significance.[22] An October 2004 briefing by a senior Defense

Intelligence Agency (DIA) analyst, Derek Harvey, for Rumsfeld during which the Harvey

underscored the growing threat of the insurgency and described its religious and social

roots perhaps best demonstrates the Administration's refusal to countenance strategic

intelligence that contradicted its preferred policy outcomes. Harvey clearly warned the

Defense Secretary that U.S. strategy was not addressing the root causes of the

insurgency and that the violence would continue to grow. Rumsfeld responded by characterizing the DIA's analysis as "opinion" and refusing to consider the insurgents more than disaffected thugs.[23]

On a sidebar topic relating to understanding the nature of the conflict and the joint operational environment, the case of Ahmed Chalabi is instructive. Senior Bush Administration officials, with the notable exception of Secretary of State Colin Powell, considered Chalabi a legitimate and connected Iraqi opposition leader who had significant numbers of Iraqi "freedom fighters" at his disposal and the most authoritative voice of Iraqi exiles. This was in direct contradiction to the Intelligence Community's and the State Department's view of Chalabi. Both agencies assessed that Chalabi was little better than a fraud, manipulator and financial crook with near zero constituency in Iraq.[24] However, senior Bush Administration officials, most notably Secretary Rumsfeld and neo-conservative Defense Science Board Chairman Richard Perle, thought highly of Chalabi as evidenced by their invitation to him to speak to top Pentagon officials in late 2001, even allowing him unescorted access to the Pentagon.[25] Subsequently, during combat operations in 2003, CENTCOM Commander General Tommy Franks planned on the addition of 1,000 Iraqi "freedom fighters" to help combat the Fedayeen. It soon became clear that what Chalabi had actually been able to provide was a motley mercenary force of fewer than 600 men, some of them Iranians, whom he had paid $5,000 each.[26] Needless to say Chalabi's "freedom fighters" proved militarily insignificant in Iraq, while Chalabi himself proved to be a prime factor in the adoption of policies harmful to long-term U.S. success in Iraq, such as his support for radical de-Baathification. Had the Administration heeded CIA and State Department assessments

on Chalabi, much time, money and probably lives could have been saved. The case study of Ahmed Chalabi is indicative of the problems that arise when objective analytical assessments pertaining to the nature of conflict and the operational environment are ignored due to policy biases.

As mentioned earlier, another lapse in the seam between intelligence and military strategy regarding the nature of the conflict occurred in the U.S. Army's lack of preparedness to conduct a protracted counterinsurgency campaign. Commanders on the ground in Iraq quickly discovered that intelligence assets available to them were inadequate, and that human intelligence (HUMINT) assets that would provide actionable insurgent information were lacking. U.S. forces were not prepared to conduct massive search and detention operations and were operating largely blindly, not understanding an operational environment where the center of gravity had shifted to the Iraqi population. As Lt. Gen. Anthony Jones stated in an official 2004 report "it became apparent that the intelligence structure was undermanned, under-equipped and inappropriately organized for counter-insurgency operations."[27] Thus the U.S. Army's intelligence infrastructure had not been designed to match the operational environment despite strategic assessments indicating the growing nature of the Iraqi insurgency.

Measuring War Progress

In addition to providing accurate assessments relating to the rationale for entering into military conflict and estimates informing policymakers and commanders on the nature of the war, another vital function of strategic intelligence is to provide a correct gauge of military progress during operations. The metrics used to determine operational success or failure will then drive the collection strategy implemented by intelligence resources to gather the needed information. If the nature of the conflict is

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inaccurately estimated during the campaign design or mission analysis phase, then typically the collection strategy, as well as the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) approach, will not provide meaningful input that presents a true picture of whether U.S. efforts are meeting the desired objectives or endstates. This becomes particularly apparent when the nature of the conflict is determined to be primarily conventional when, in fact, it is unconventional or a type of civil insurgency. Reliance on the wrong measure of success during a counterinsurgency campaign will likely result in distorted analysis and an overly optimistic view of war progress.

In the case of the Vietnam conflict, the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and the Johnson White House influenced the production of intelligence estimates that relied on inappropriate metrics: North Vietnamese Order of Battle (OB) and enemy body counts. The North Vietnamese OB issue is illustrative of how strategic intelligence was influenced and driven by senior policymakers' views that resulted in estimates that overestimated U.S. progress in defeated the VC insurgency. The issue began in 1966 when the Intelligence Community began work on a SNIE that was to accurately assess the military capabilities and order of battle for North Vietnamese forces. This estimate was critical to MACV, operating heretofore without a grand strategy from Washington, since President Johnson had recently ordered it to "Attrite, by year's end [the communist] forces at a rate as high as their ability to put men in the field."[28] If Westmoreland was directed to fight a war of attrition against the North Vietnamese, then intelligence assessments on the enemy's ability to field forces was crucial to meeting national strategic objectives in Vietnam. In working with MACV on the OB estimate, it became clear immediately that the CIA and MACV were in massive

disagreement on the enemy's OB and ability to put forces into the field. MACV

supported an estimate of no more than 100,000 troops while the CIA, based on analysis

of captured VC documents, posited that the accurate answer was triple or more that

amount. Led by Vietnam analyst Sam Adams, the agency argued that MACV was only

counting regular NVA troops and ignoring the large body of irregular VC, part-time

partisans, militias, reserve forces and other components of the total North Vietnamese

insurgency.[29] The conflict came to a head in September 1967 at a conference held in

Saigon between the CIA and MACV to resolve the numbers issue. During the

conference overt White House pressure on the CIA forced the agency to lower its

enemy force estimates. Today, the National Intelligence Council (NIC) admits in its

official history of Vietnam estimates that the Johnson Administration intervened to

manipulate the assessment of enemy forces:

> There is no question but that the Oval Office was also involved in the
> pressure that forced a "compromise" during a meeting in Saigon, as
> Rostow cabled the President, "The danger is press will latch on to
> previous underestimates and revive credibility gap talk." In the works for
> 144 days, the "compromise" Estimate had gone through twenty-two drafts,
> "the hardest fought in the agency history.[30]

The end result was SNIE 14.3-67 *Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for*

Fighting in South Vietnam published on November 13, 1967, that estimated total North

Vietnamese field strength at just over 240,000. Many in the CIA and in MACV felt the

true number may have been as high as double that amount or more.[31] If one examines

General Westmoreland's statement years later on this issue, it is clear that he did not

understand the operational environment of a counterinsurgency campaign where the

population is the center of gravity:

> He [Adams] was obviously including VC sympathizers and self-defense
> forces, including women and old men, who could in no sense be

considered combat troops. We did not include those people in figuring the government strength; why include them for the enemy?[32]

In addition to the political manipulation of strategic intelligence on the issue of enemy order of battle, MACV leaders and senior civilian policymakers also steered intelligence assets to focus on metrics inappropriate to gauging success in a counterinsurgency. Responding to policymakers' views that ignored the political, social, cultural, and nationalistic dimensions of the war, Westmoreland and MACV relied heavily on intelligence on enemy body counts as its primary gauge of progress in the conflict. Body counts became nearly the sole metric by which the Johnson Administration, particularly Defense Secretary McNamara, measured the effectiveness of U.S. combat operations in Vietnam. Of course body counts predicated on an inaccurate assessment of the enemy's total capability to field fighting forces are nearly useless, but the regimen of reporting body counts became institutionalized in MACV's Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update (WIEU). One result of the emphasis on body counts as nearly the sole measure of combat effectiveness was they had an adverse impact on professional integrity and engendered corruption. In a poll done after the war, 61 percent of Army generals who commanded in Vietnam said they believed the body count reports were "often inflated." In the survey according to Lewis Sorley, "typical comments by the respondents were that it was 'a fake – totally worthless'…and that 'they were grossly exaggerated by many units primarily because of the incredible interest shown by people like McNamara and Westmoreland.'"[33] The fetish on body counts began to change in 1968 when General Creighton Abrams took command of MACV from Westmoreland. While the WIEUs under Westmoreland had typically focused on weapons captured, equipment operational, replacements assigned,

ammunition expended, killed and wounded on both sides, Abrams expanded the

metrics to include pacification, expansion of territorial forces, manpower issues,

economic reform, elections, and refugee assistance. Abrams moved the focus and

intelligence emphasis onto gauging population security, especially security from

terrorism or coercion among villagers in South Vietnam's hamlets.[34] However, by this

time Richard Nixon had won the White House and had begun the policy of

Vietnamization with the goal of ending direct U.S. involvement in the war. Abrams'

refocusing of intelligence priorities to more appropriate metrics for a counterinsurgency

was not given time to succeed.

In the case of the Iraq War the problems encountered at the seam of

intelligence support to senior policymakers and commanders did not lay in a blatant

political manipulation of the metrics to gauge success as occurred in Vietnam in 1967.

Rather, due to in inaccurate framing of the operational environment, U.S. operational

and tactical intelligence assets, the primary collector for information relating to military

progress, were inadequate and ill-equipped to provide civilian and military leaders

meaningful metrics on progress against a persistent civil insurgency. The vast majority

of military intelligence assets in Iraq was designed to fight a conventional fight against

Saddam Hussein's forces and was therefore heavy on signals intelligence (SIGINT) and

imagery intelligence (IMINT) capabilities. Only approximately 25 percent of intelligence

assets in theater were focused on human intelligence (HUMINT), the critical intelligence

discipline in a counterinsurgency fight.[35] When the population is the center of gravity it

is imperative that commanders have the intelligence that only HUMINT can provide that

delineates where and when to attack in order to avoid alienating the native population.

Thus, commanders and senior policymakers tracking progress against the Iraqi insurgency starting in mid-2003 were blind from the start. To make matters worse, the rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces scenario based on dismissal of the insurgency as insignificant made this paucity of HUMINT assets worse. When the Coalition Land Forces Component Command (CFLCC) pulled out of Iraq in 2003 it left only one military intelligence (MI) brigade, the 205th, to manage all tactical intelligence requirements in theater. The brigade tried to compensate for the HUMINT shortfall by sending Tactical HUMINT Teams (THTs) to lower tactical levels, but the small composition of these teams, typically less than six soldiers, was inadequate to meet commanders' HUMINT needs. The end result was the same: insufficient HUMINT to effectively wage a counterinsurgency campaign.[36] This case clearly demonstrates how strategic framing of the operational environment has a direct impact on the ability of U.S. forces to conduct combat and intelligence operations at the tactical level.

Lessons Unlearned

The preceding analysis of how intelligence support at the seam where it met senior policymakers and commanders in the cases of Vietnam and Iraq present some clear conclusions on lessons unlearned. While not identical, there remain sufficient parallels between Vietnam and Iraq to assess that failures of a similar nature occurred in providing accurate analytical assessments on the rationale, nature of the conflict or measure of progress in the war in question. Some of the failures can be directly attributable to analytical tradecraft and methodological errors in the analysis itself. In the case of Iraq, these have been fully investigated and have formed the basis for the Intelligence Community organizational and tradecraft reforms instigated in 2004. More problematic are the failures when sufficient intelligence existed that may have provided

a more accurate frame for the joint operational environment but were manipulated for political reasons or ignored due to policy preferences.

In providing rationale for U.S. commitment to war, strategic intelligence fared much better in the Vietnam case than it did for Iraq. In Vietnam the Intelligence Community produced sufficient assessments that called into question the Domino Theory on which U.S. involvement was based. In this instance senior policymakers clearly ignored the estimates that contradicted their resolve to defend South Vietnam. In the case of Iraq, strategic intelligence relating to the primary war rational, Iraqi WMD, does not fare as well. The intelligence relating to Iraq's WMD program was ambiguous, as most strategic intelligence is, but was fashioned in a manner clearly designed to cater to policymaker views. The caveats and other indicators that the WMD program may not have been as robust as indicated in the Intelligence Community's key judgments were phrased such that they would only be noticed after careful scrutiny.[37]

In terms of informing senior leaders on the unconventional nature of the war in question, strategic intelligence fares basically well in both conflicts. CIA assessments warning of the political and social nature of the Vietnam civil war were clear as well as that agency's estimate of the North Vietnamese's will to persist in a protracted conflict. The same can be said of strategic intelligence briefings to senior leaders on the Iraqi insurgency: the Intelligence Community's view of the deep roots of the insurgency was dismissed by the Bush White House and Secretary Rumsfeld as opinions. The sidebar study of Ahmed Chalabi confirms this tendency of senior political officials to trust their own assessments of strategic factors rather than to rely on professional estimates from the intelligence agencies.

With regard to measuring war progress, strategic and operational intelligence fared poorly in Vietnam. The CIA's losing battle with the White House and MACV over the enemy's ability to field forces skewed the operational environment.[38] Despite the NIC's official admission that "at least one crucial NIE was essentially turned upside down by DCI McCone [NIE 53-63]" it maintains that "on occasion and at key turning points, the dissent and skepticism were plain to see."[39] While this may be true, the damage done by caving in to political pressure on the base OB did nothing to make senior leaders rethink their assumptions on enemy capabilities and led directly to a reliance on the wrong metrics (body counts) to gauge war progress. In the case of Iraq, while the Intelligence Community understood the true nature of the insurgency that developed in 2003 it was unable to provide effective intelligence assets to senior commanders in theater due to the original misconception of a quick, conventional war.

Upon reviewing the case studies of strategic intelligence support in the run-up and prosecution of the Vietnam and Iraq wars, several lessons learned can be distilled. While this is an area ripe for further research, the following list may provide a starting point for better understanding of intelligence support at the seam where it meets policy and military operational plans:

- Senior policymakers and commanders must be sensitive to the impact of the policy environment on intelligence assessments. Because intelligence providers always seek to maintain relevance to customers, leaders' views and the climate fostered will affect the analysis.

- Senior intelligence leaders also must keep in mind the direct and indirect influence from senior policymakers and commanders. Senior intelligence leaders must always strive for analytical honesty despite political pressure.

- Senior civilian and military leaders should avoid publicly prejudging the assessment as occurred in Iraq.

- Strategic intelligence needs to be a continuous participant in framing and reframing the joint operational environment. If and when strategic centers of gravity change, intelligence professionals must be clear about the implications for nature of war assessments and the impact on intelligence capabilities.

- Intelligence Campaign Planning (ICP) must be integrated into campaign design from the beginning in order to assess intelligence capability shortfalls and prepare for a shift in intelligence priorities.

- Senior intelligence leaders who interact with policymakers and commanders must not divorce themselves from policy and planning – policymakers and commanders must know the right questions to ask, and intelligence professionals must transmit current policy/planning thinking back to the Intelligence Community in order to provide optimum intelligence support.

- Every high level estimate that may affect policy or military decisions should contain alternative analysis. This analysis should not be buried inside the assessment but presented on the first page with the key judgments.

Strategic intelligence support to senior policymakers and military commanders responding to political realities at the seam where intelligence meets policy will never be a neat and tidy interaction. Intelligence providers ultimately cannot control how

intelligence consumers use, or choose not to use, the assessment provided. However,

adherence to the points outlined above and an understanding of where strategic

intelligence support failed in the cases of Vietnam and Iraq may serve to prevent

repetitions of the mistakes made in the past that ultimately cost American lives. It is

only in this way that the statesmen or commander will be able to fulfill Clausewitz's

supreme dictum of first and foremost understanding the nature of the war upon which

one's country is about to be engaged or is conducting.

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