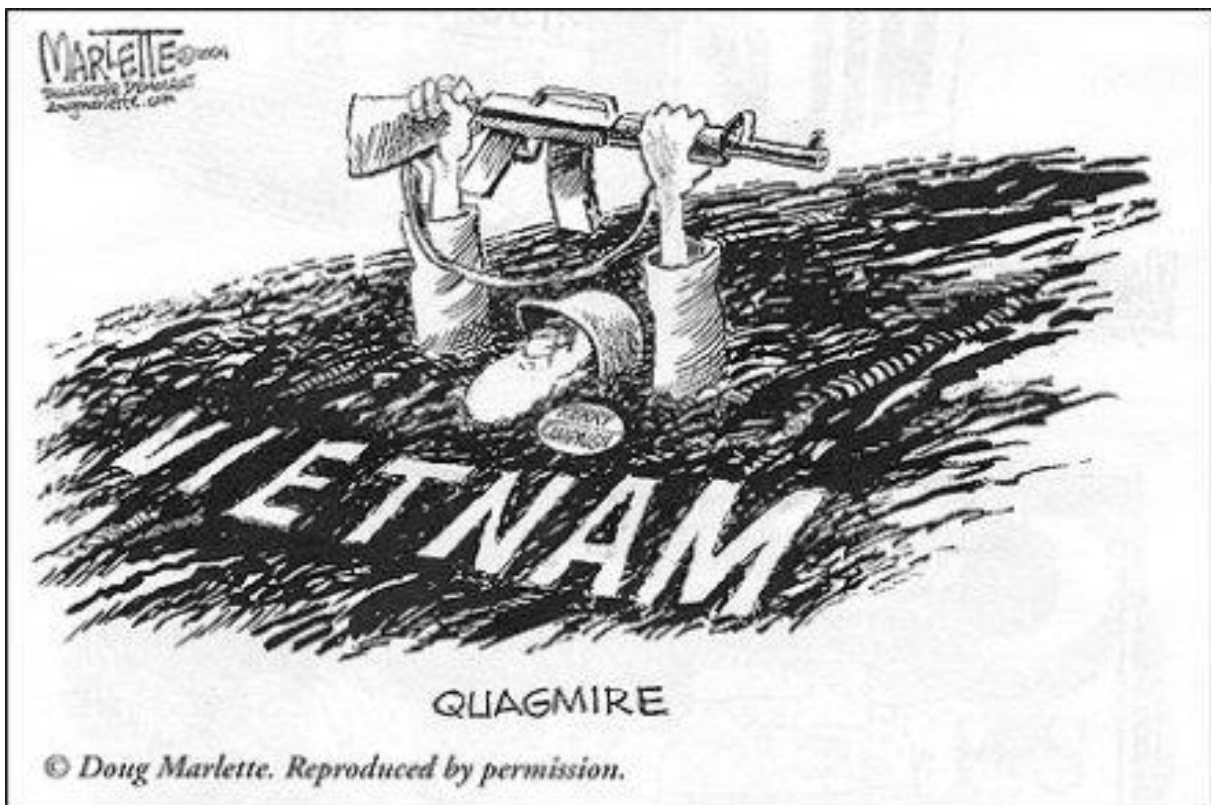


The performance of the CIA during the Tonkin-incident and Tet-offensive.



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List of abbreviations

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

JCF – The Joint Chiefs of Staff

LBJ – Lyndon B. (Baines) Johnson, the 36th president of the United States of America.

MACV - Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

NVA – North Vietnamese Army

SVA – South Vietnamese Army

PDB – President’s Daily Briefs

PICL – Presidents Intelligence Checklist

PIR - Presidents Intelligence Reviews

1. Introduction

1-4 August 1964: *'The attacks on the Maddox on Sunday and again on Tuesday were planned and directed by Vietnamese naval authorities ashore. Both attacks took place well outside of Vietnamese territorial waters'.*¹

US involvement in Vietnam started during the last months of World War II. Indochina (Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia) was occupied by the Japanese. The US opposed the return of the French as a colonial ruler of Indochina. The US suggestion for an international supervised trusteeship was aborted before its conception. Meanwhile, someone had to occupy the area of Indochina after the Japanese had surrendered. During the 1945 Potsdam conference it was agreed upon that the Chinese Nationalists would occupy Vietnam above the 16th parallel. Indian troops under British command would take up the area south of this parallel. This was a provisional measure until a more permanent agreement for Vietnam was made. The British were glad to hand over the control of the area south of the 16th parallel to the Free French under De Gaulle in October 1945. A small detachment of US troops under command of Major Patti arrived in Hanoi in August 1945. Their secret mission was to gather intelligence in the area. While the French were mostly unwilling to work with the US, a relatively small nationalist movement that fought against the Japanese gained support from Patti. This movement was the Viet Minh, and their leader was Ho Chi Minh. In August 1945 the Viet Minh declared all of Vietnam the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. At the end of 1945, The Chinese silently allowed the Viet Minh to effectively gain control of most of Vietnam above the 16th parallel.²

After World War II, The US observed Soviet actions in Eastern Europe and defined their actions as communist expansionist aggression. In 1947 the US introduced the Truman Doctrine. Its main goal was to stop the spread of (Soviet) communism and to incorporate the Western world in an anti-communist alliance. The Marshall Plan (1947) and creation of NATO (1949) were in line with the Truman Doctrine. A Marshall mission was also sent to the Chinese Nationalists, but failed to make an agreement. The Chinese Nationalists eventually lost the ongoing civil war against the Chinese Communists in 1949. In 1950 the Soviet Union and China signed a treaty of friendship. For a long time the US viewed both

¹ The Presidents Intelligence Review, 1-4 August 1964. PDBs available at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/PDBs> (visited 8-11-2015).

² General Bruce Palmer Jr. *US Intelligence and Vietnam* (1984) 1-4.

communist countries as one hostile entity which it had to contain. The Korean War and Vietnam War were observed from this mindset.³

The Tonkin-Incident and Tet-offensive were defining moments that pulled and pushed President Lyndon B. Johnson in and out of the Vietnam War. Over the years several authors have discussed the role of the intelligence community in providing information and analysis before, during and after these crucial events. In general, authors call these events intelligence failures. Of this criticism, most is directed towards the CIA. Intelligence agencies have various functions, such as special operations, intelligence gathering and analysis.⁴ In this project the focus will be on the intelligence gathering and analysis.

During the Gulf of Tonkin Incident on August 2, 1964, the United States claimed that their destroyer USS Maddox was attacked by North Vietnamese vessels outside Vietnamese territorial waters. A second skirmish on August 4 was also reported. These incidents became the justification of the United States to officially declare war on North Vietnam.⁵

The Tet-offensive was a North Vietnamese military and Viet Cong offensive on January 30, 1968. It was possibly the biggest offensive of the war. It completely surprised the United States and its allies. Scholars disagree on when the plans for the offensive were created, and how the offensive was phased. The goal of the offensive was to overwhelm South Vietnamese cities, military targets, destroy capabilities of the enemy and thereby break the will of South Vietnam and the U.S. forces. The North Vietnamese hoped to incite a revolt among sympathizers in the south. This could have stopped the bombing of North Vietnam and started negotiations to end the war. While a military failure, it unintentionally changed the public opinion of the American public against the war. The Tet-offensive is part of a much longer period according to the Vietnamese planners, which began on May 5 1967 and ended September 23, 1968. Most (Western) historians discuss a much shorter period.⁶ In this research project the focus will be on the start of the offensive round January 30, 1968, and the planning of the offensive in the period before.

This research project analyses the intelligence briefings that the CIA has given Lyndon B. Johnson with their Presidential Intelligence Briefings regarding the Tonkin-Incident and the

³ Palmer Jr. *US Intelligence*, 5, 6.

⁴ Adam Roberts. 'The CIA. Reform is not enough.' *Millennium: Journal of International studies*, vol 6, No 1 (1977). 64-70.

⁵ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Errol Morris, 2003).

⁶ Palmer Jr. *US Intelligence*, 11-13.

Tet-offensive. These briefings were composed of, among others documents, the President Intelligence Checklists (PICLs), the President's Daily Briefs (PDBs) and the Presidents Intelligence Reviews (PIRs), which were summaries of several days of PDBs.⁷ The presidential briefings were supposed to contain factual statements only, no advices. The historiography shows a troublesome relationship between Johnson and the CIA, which tried to advise the president on several occasions. The effectiveness of intelligence was always an important question and still is under constant review.⁸ This research project will look at the quality of the intelligence given in CIA briefings during the Tonkin Incident and Tet-Offensive.

These declassified intelligence briefings span over ten years, but this project will restrict itself to CIA intelligence given during the Tonkin Incident and the Tet-offensive. These were mayor events that happened during the Vietnam War and the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, and provide insights into intelligence and its quality during the Vietnam War.

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http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/PDB%20CM%20Final%20Kennedy%20and%20Johnson_public%208%20Sep%202015_2.pdf (visited 9-10-2015).

⁸ Michael Douglas Smith, 'CIA publications: Serving the president with daily intelligence'. *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* (1999) 201, 204, 205.

2. Research question

The main research question is: Did the CIA provide good and adequate information and analysis regarding the Tonkin Incident and the Tet-offensive? For assessing the quality analysis of information some sub-questions need to be answered first. Firstly the Tonkin incident and secondly the Tet-offensive will be discussed. How and what information did the CIA gather regarding the Tonkin Incident and the Tet-offensive prior to analysis? What was the response of Johnson and the White House? How timely were the Presidential Briefings? How comprehensive and readable are these? Were probability statements included in the briefings? Were the briefings objective? Was effective action possible as a result of these briefings? What was the quality of CIA briefings compared to MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) briefings?

2.1 Theoretical concepts

Loch K. Johnson, a political scientist at the University of Georgia with several publications on intelligence affairs, among other intelligence-related employments, has been staff director of the House Subcommittee on Intelligence oversight between 1977 and 1999.⁹ He made a checklist to assess the quality of analyzing intelligence information. This checklist is used as a suggestion for further research. This checklist takes accuracy, relevance, timeliness, comprehensiveness, readability, probability, objectivity and actionability into account. Loch K. Johnson gives clear examples of intelligence and its failures for each of these aspects, and argues that such a checklist can evaluate performance. Other authors writing about intelligence, use similar criteria to assess the quality of intelligence reports, which Loch K. Johnson has combined. He admits that humans are prone to error and intelligence failures have and will occur, but the expectations for qualitative intelligence are a serious matter. According to Johnson, adequate intelligence analysis could have prevented Pearl Harbor, 9/11, accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Serbia in 1999, and also the misjudgment of the Tet Offensive.¹⁰

⁹ http://spia.uga.edu/directory/faculty_staff/johnson-loch-k (visited 1-1-2016).

¹⁰ Loch K. Johnson, 'National Security Intelligence in the United States: A Performance Checklist.' *Intelligence and National Security* 26.5 (2011) 607, 610, 611, 615.

2.2 Innovative aspects

The question whether the CIA provided good intelligence during the Tonkin Incident and Tet-offensive, and the reasons for possible failures, is still an ongoing debate. Insights given by authors on Vietnam, intelligence reports, and Lyndon B. Johnson show disagreements on several topics that further literature research can clarify or even rectify. This thesis will further contribute to the academic debate, by using newly available primary sources. Other authors mention or indirectly refer to this source, but were not given access at the time. This primary source was highly classified and offers a new insight into what intelligence briefings the American president got from the CIA.

2.3 Sources

Intelligence reports are shrouded in secrecy and are often inaccessible for researchers. These reports usually stay secret for a long period to hide policy preferences and errors, and to protect the people involved. Several authors have already ventured into the world of secret services, and were able to write histories despite restrictions of primary material. The Presidential Briefing Products, President's Intelligence Checklists (PICLs), President's Daily Briefs (PDBs) and Presidents Intelligence Reviews (PIRs) between 1961 and 1969 are a yet to be researched source that were of the highest level of secrecy. The briefings gave the United States day-to-day intelligence and analysis of current and potential threats. Included are annexes and other documents of interests, such as The Special Daily Report on North Vietnam, starting from September 1967. Other intelligence reports, such as National Intelligence Estimates, memo's, transcripts and other sources have also been used. Only the president and a select group of people of his choice were allowed to read these briefings. They were declassified and published by the CIA on September 16, 2015. A brief viewing shows that these are between five and fourteen pages on average. Although some documents are edited, they still present a day-to-day view of how the CIA perceived threats on US interests, and how this information was presented to the US president and his advisors.¹¹ Kennedy called for a combined short intelligence report after the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. From then on, the PDB became a standard. The new presidential briefings were usually more timely and concisely than other intelligence reports. The formats and mediums in which these briefings took place differed between the different presidents, and also the relations between presidents

¹¹ <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/PDBs> (visited 8-10-2015).

and the different intelligence agents. Over time, the briefings became a standard. Reagan for instance, wanted them on legal paper, being a former lawyer. Obama reportedly receives his briefings on an iPad. The highly classified briefings were only meant for a select few, and the president decided who had access. While Johnson was still vice-president under Kennedy, he was excluded from reading the briefings.¹² The highly classified presidential briefings were only supposed to contain factual statements, no advices.¹³ Challenges in using declassified material include that some information has been edited, left out, or possibly has been altered. In short, do not believe everything you read. Earlier authors were able to cross this hurdle and have written comprehensible stories of added value while using limited primary sources.

2.4 Methods

In this research paper a qualitative approach will be used. Primary and secondary sources will tell the story of the CIA in Vietnam and its effectiveness. Besides that, the intelligence checklist of Loch K. Johnson will be one of the tools in assessing the performance of the CIA and its Presidential Intelligence Briefings. The quality of the CIA briefings will be assessed by comparing the briefings with other intelligence sources, notable the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam).

¹²

http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/PDB%20CM%20Final%20Kennedy%20and%20Johnson_public%208%20Sep%202015_2.pdf (visited 9-10-2015).

¹³ Smith, *Serving the president*, 201, 204, 205.

3. The CIA intelligence in general

Gerald Hughes, a historian, and Lenn Scott, Professor in International History and Intelligence Studies, both at the University of Aberystwyth, discuss the research of intelligence information itself. Exploring intelligence archives is a collection of case-studies made by historians, political scientist and former intelligence officers together. According to Scott, historians who are not specialized in intelligence tend to ignore it as a factor in (inter)national politics. This is partly because access to intelligence documents is a recent development. Scott believes that the combination of former intelligence officers, political scientists and specialized historians gives the best analytical and interpretive analysis of intelligence material. In research this combination is not often achieved.

The CIA archives are relatively accessible to researchers. Intelligence methods and sources are normally not revealed. Ingenuity and human error have also given insight in (formerly) classified material. Some ministers and civil servants mishandled documents, or their dairies, memories or interviews gave away crucial information. But governments also successfully convinced or coerced historians to exclude classified information in their writings, or gave away selective or misleading information. Some historians see selected materials as an equivalent of truth. When researching intelligence, do not believe everything you read. The more influential or controversial the secret, the more likely the event of it becoming public knowledge. Nonetheless, a full understanding of any past events will remain unlikely.¹⁴

Ray Garthoff, the former U.S. ambassador of Bulgaria, advisor on missile treaties for the State Department and current senior fellow with Foreign Policy at Brookings,¹⁵ agrees that intelligence is an important part of the political and historical process, and an under-researched topic. Garthoff thinks that the quality of intelligence analysis is more important than the quality of intelligence information, although he believes that most policymakers want to make their own judgment.¹⁶ Garthoff also emphasizes in his article that using intelligence material can be quite problematic for a historian. Unraveling the analysis policymakers made out of intelligence information can especially be difficult to determine.¹⁷

¹⁴ Gerald R. Hughes, Peter. Jackson, and L. V. Scott. *Exploring Intelligence Archives: Enquiries into the Secret State*. (Abingdon, Oxon, England 2008) 3, 13 - 16.

¹⁵ <http://www.brookings.edu/experts/garthoffr> (visited 25-1-2016)

¹⁷ Raymond L Garthoff, 'Foreign Intelligence and the Historiography of the Cold War.' *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6.2 (2004) 31-33, 37

During the Cold War, CIA efforts to focus on key local aspects of Third World conflict situations were often ignored. In general, Garthoff thinks of a tendency for policymakers to encourage and use intelligence that supports their views, and to discount or disregard intelligence that challenges them. The availability of information and assessments to policymakers, and how these policymakers used this information needs to be taken into account when looking at the quality of intelligence reports. Researchers will probably find problems in determining precisely how intelligence was used.¹⁸

The reliability of histories written about intelligence reports poses some inherent problems. Several important books written about the CIA have former employees as authors, making them part of the history they have written. Jeffreys-Jones, professor of American history emeritus who has lectured on both Harvard and Cambridge, has written a historiography about the CIA in 1980, and claims that most works by former CIA employees are apologetic and to a certain extent defend the CIA.¹⁹

Specialist, including people speaking foreign languages, are often missing. Other government agencies with less funding, such as the State Department, were able to include such specialists in their own department. Russel is of the opinion that the CIA should be able to compete with top faculties and think tanks, which he believes it cannot. Russel gives examples in which he tries to prove the CIA's contempt for intellectuals, and why so many intellectuals shy away from intelligence work. He also argues that the CIA work ethos rewards quantity over quality and that curiosity and thinking out of the box are discouraged. Russel's writing shows a personal grudge against the CIA, and a preference for intellectuals, to which he includes himself. This should be taken into consideration when reading his book.²⁰

Several authors including Loch K. Johnson discuss errors made by the CIA, policymakers misusing information, the intelligence community as a scapegoat for presidential errors, and the usefulness of intelligence reports for creating policy. Loch K. Johnson believes that errors are created by a complex combination of all these factors, but the intelligence reports are clearly useful and necessary for a country such as the United States.²¹ According to the author

¹⁸ Garthoff, *Historiography of the Cold War* 55, 56.

¹⁹ R. Jeffreys-Jones, 'The historiography of the CIA.' *The Historical Journal* 23 (2) (1980) 489-90

²⁰ Smith, *Serving the president*, 123, 125, 126, 129, 140

²¹ Loch K. Johnson, 'Glimpses into the Gems of American Intelligence: The President's Daily Brief and the National Intelligence Estimate.' *Intelligence and National Security* 23.3 (2008) 335, 363.

both policymakers and intelligence officers are prone to shortcomings, simply because they are human.²² Not every author defends the CIA. Of these authors, Adam Roberts is one of the most negative about the CIA and its performance. Roberts believes there is too little control on the CIA, so policymakers have little insight into the actions and consequent results of the agency. Adam Roberts sees Vietnam as an example of the CIA disrespecting US and foreign laws and using special operations to provoke an armed conflict. Roberts believes the CIA had too much power. The CIA should focus on either intelligence gathering or covert operations. Roberts believes these tasks should be kept separated.²³

²¹ Loch K. Johnson, *A Performance Checklist*, 607, 608.

²¹ Roberts, *'The CIA: Reform Is Not Enough'*, 64, 66, 67, 71.

4. The CIA and the US intelligence community in Vietnam

Before the French withdrawal out of Vietnam in April 1956, the US mostly relied on French intelligence. During the Vietnam War, there were over ten US agencies and several foreign agencies collection and analyzing intelligence. The CIA and the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) were the most important US intelligence agencies.²⁴ The most important question for intelligence agencies in Vietnam was: how do we measure progress, and what are the actual political and military goals in Vietnam?²⁵ Poor communication existed between the various intelligence agencies. In August 1965 CIA director McCone created SAVA (The Office of the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs). SAVA's goal was to create oversight over all intelligence sources regarding Vietnam. Although SAVA is being praised for its role, full oversight was never achieved in the period 1964-1968.²⁶ Agencies were reluctant with sharing information, which gave them their power, budget and prestige. This created rivalries between the intelligence agencies.²⁷

Between 1964 and 1965 the CIA was mostly used for economic assessments. Part of these assessments were estimates of the economic effects of blockades and bombardments on infrastructure against North Vietnam. The CIA also gave military, political and strategic advice.²⁸ Between 1964 and 1968, their reports were mostly accurate in hindsight, timely (in the form of daily briefings such as the Presidents Daily Briefs) and objective, since they gave pessimistic views that could hurt their own position. Especially after 1966 the CIA made reports that have proven to be most useful for policymakers.²⁹

Created on February 8, 1962, the MACV was mainly responsible for military intelligence. Compared to the CIA, the MACV analysis department was limited and the bureaucracy was unwieldy. In the early days of the Vietnam War the MACV was inadequate in its role. The reports were one-sided, untimely, and often simplistic. Partly this was because of a lack of employees. The MACV was part of the military, which made it biased. Part of its function was to measure the performance of the military. Eventually, around the summer of 1967, the

²⁴ Palmer Jr. *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, 9-13.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 228.

²⁶ Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 229.

²⁷ Hughes, *Intelligence Blunders*, 166.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 38.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 44, 47.

MACV became a professional military intelligence organization with several thousand employees. The amount of work was also ever-increasing.³⁰ It is debatable whether the MACV was well-functioning. Most scholars agree that the MACV had increasing problems in processing the ever larger amount of data. The MACV mostly made quantitative reports with statistics. General Westmoreland complained that the MACV reports had their imperfection. Both the data and the analysis of these reports were often scrutinized and criticized. Henry Kissinger believed the MACV to be serving as scorecard, rather than being useful for policy. The MACV also created very meaningful reports. The new measurements to evaluate the progress of counterinsurgency were seen as successful. Still, as the war progressed their ability to create reports that could be used for policy diminished. Their conclusions did not concur with the data they themselves delivered. Furthermore, the MACV did not develop a way to measure progress in the war as a whole.³¹

In the years before the Tonkin Incident, president John F. Kennedy tried to reinforce the South Vietnamese government. Stopping the inflow of communist forces was a main objective. McNamara told the US media in May 1962 that every quantitative indicator showed that the US was winning the war. Despite the ever increasing amount of military equipment, trainers and advisors, there was no improvement. In November 1963, Kennedy authorized or at least allowed a coup d'état on the South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, who was subsequently murdered by the leaders of the coup. Diem is considered a controversial leader. Some considered him as US puppet, others as a capable and independent leader. Either way, the US came to see him as a liability. The CIA opposed a coup. Nonetheless, the CIA believed a new government would be beneficial for the war effort. The White House fruitlessly hoped on a more workable, stable government in Diem's place.³² In June 1963, National Intelligence Estimate 52-2-63 warned that the effects of a new regime are unpredictable and at least initially would disrupt the efforts against the Viet Cong and North

³⁰ Hughes, *Intelligence Blunders*, 41, 42.

³¹ Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory. Measuring US Army effectiveness and progress in the Vietnam War.* (Oxford 2011) 223-225.

³² Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes 1962-1968, Episode 1.* This volume has no page numbers.

Vietnamese.³³ Unstable governments and subsequently nine power changes occurred in the ten months after disposing Diem.³⁴

Asides from the influx of communist forces, there already were Viet Cong guerilla's in South Vietnam who opposed Western forces. On the Honolulu conference in July 1962, the MACV believed that the Viet Cong could be rendered harmless within 3 years. According to the MACV this was a save and conservative estimate. The retreat of the roughly 10,000 US trainers and advisors in Vietnam was planned. Senior policymakers had this optimism throughout 1963, even when the South Vietnamese Army, supported with US equipment, failed to win their first pitched battle. In December 1963 there were still signs of the US deescalating the conflict and a 1000 trainers and advisors were pulled out. Both the French and the US were largely uninformed on the Vietnamese. Both underestimated the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in their ingenuity, perseverance, and political and military power.³⁵ A CIA report on November 1967 underscored the problem of unreliable intelligence: *'Our information has improved substantially in the past year or two, but the unconventional nature of the war poses difficult intelligence problems, the more so in a social environment where basic data is incomplete and often untrustworthy. Manpower, for example, is a key element for the Communist but we lack precise basic data (...).*³⁶

Most CIA assessments of Vietnam were already pessimistic when the French were trying to maintain their colony. Joint intelligence reports as early as 1955 believed it to be extremely difficult to maintain a non-communist South-Vietnam.³⁷ The CIA under McCone saw an increasingly deteriorating situation in Vietnam. McCone and LBJ disagreed on this matter. If the relation between McCone and Johnson had a major influence on the future role of the CIA is up for debate. Anyhow, the CIA's role for creating policy was diminished under Johnson. During the Vietnam conflict, the CIA was mostly used for secret operations and checking and implementing policy.³⁸ But not all CIA intelligence was pessimistic. Estimate 53-63, approved by McCone himself, did give policy advise and was one of the reasons why

³³ SNIE 53-2-63, The Situation in South Vietnam. http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166414.pdf (visited 6-6-2016).

³⁴ Palmer, Jr. *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, 31.

³⁵ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*

³⁶ Central Intelligence Agency. Top Secret. Issue Date Nov 13, 1967. Date Declassified May 07, 1984. 1

³⁷ NIE 63.1-2-55. Possible Developments in Vietnam. 3.

³⁸ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*

McCone and Johnson had a bad relationship. The estimate concluded that the communist were being contained and that the situation was improving. The Viet Cong could be pushed back and the area under South Vietnamese government control could be expanded, although the current situation was still dire. It also argued that the improvement was thanks to US involvement. However, there was an explicit warning that it was impossible to give any confident advise about the future course of the Vietnam War. The rest of the report is less optimistic than the conclusions.³⁹ Estimate 53-63 was one of many intelligence reports provided by the various intelligence agencies, but the White House embraced it as prove that the war was winnable. McCone protested that the estimate was misinterpreted and the situation in Vietnam since then had rapidly changed for the worse. As early as 1951 and as late as 1975 there were voices from all levels of government that believed that intelligence reports on Vietnam were misused, and that information was deliberately censored, restricted and manipulated.⁴⁰ CIA analyst Sam Adams even argues that the MACV deliberately falsified intelligence reports to give signs of progress.⁴¹

Former CIA Inspector General John Helgerson is one of several authors who believes that intelligence information is flawed, but also essential to policymakers. Helgerson argues that intelligence is an under-researched aspect of international relations. Helgerson states that 60 percent of the reports in the PDB have never appeared in the press, even if unclassified. According to Helgerson most presidential candidates are unexperienced with intelligence information. Helgerson argues that for good intelligence support, the intelligence community needs direct access to the president.⁴² During most of his presidency, the CIA lacked direct contact to President Johnson. Although Johnson had access to some intelligence information before he became president, as vice-president he was unaware of the existence of the Presidents Daily Briefs (PDB). Some authors believe that Johnson disliked the CIA because he felt left out when he discovered the existence of such briefings. Johnson was interested in the PDB in his first weeks in office, but lost interest around March 1964. On December 1,

³⁹ National Intelligence Estimate 53-63. 17-4-1963, 1-2. (http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166413.pdf) (visited 3-2-2016).

⁴⁰ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*

⁴¹ James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive. A Concise history*, (Colombia University Press, 2006) 95.

⁴² John L. Helgerson, *CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates : Getting to Know the President : 1952-1992*. (Washington 1995), ix, x.

⁴² Helgerson, 6, 70, 74-77.

⁴² Daniel Ellsberg. *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*. (New York 2002). This volume has no page numbers. The page numbers of the pdf version have been used. 42-44.

1964, a renewed PDB was introduced and January 9, 1965, the semiweekly Presidents Intelligence Review. Johnson liked both from the start. Johnson envisioned an America without segregation, with civil rights, better public services and less poverty. He wanted to do so with several domestic programs, together called the Great Society. Johnson originally wanted to focus on these domestic policies, but got increasingly occupied with the situation in Vietnam. Johnson's interest in the briefings also originated from his greater involvement in foreign policy, and Vietnam in particular. In April 1965 McCone resigned. The PDB remained mostly unchanged throughout Johnsons' presidency.⁴³

John Prados is an analyst of national security and head of the Archive's documentation projects for Vietnam and for the CIA. Prados gives examples where the CIA director John McCone gave President Johnson analysis and direct policy advice, and rejected arguments of McNamara and the army. The CIA preferred more subtle and qualitative ways to look at the Vietnam conflict. McNamara believed that numbers and a quantitative approach were the answer to understanding and the war, not qualitative arguments or 'instinct and feeling'. Prados believes that covert actions of the CIA were of little value, and names a list of covert actions that have failed. Many who criticize the CIA do not separate covert actions and intelligence gathering as distinctly different activities.⁴⁴

Ellsberg recalls that the daily amount of new top secret intelligence papers regarding Vietnam were unfeasible to read for one person. Most papers were of a high level of secrecy, even relatively unimportant notes, and few people had access. However, in reality more relaxed standards were applied and sometimes 'for the president's eyes only' papers passed Ellsberg's desk. One knew what he was allowed to read and not, and crossing this line would mean being sacked. Intimate knowledge of hierarchy, responsibility, relevance and context were needed to filter out the important pieces.⁴⁵ This recollection shows that the stream of intelligence was overwhelming, getting the information you wanted was difficult, and official guidelines were often dismissed. Nonetheless, he argues that the majority of secrets did not leak, and that cover stories often hid the reality. Several secrets were known by thousands

⁴⁴ Prados, 257, 258.

⁴⁴ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 2, 47, 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 2, 51, 22.

of insiders, but were still withheld from the public and US congress.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, a selected few filtered out what information was used for decision-making. While working 70-hour weeks most of the staff of Johnson believed to do the best work available and to be impossible to replace. But Ellsberg believes that too much information about too many subjects reached to little people, which meant to shallow understanding and too many challenges for too few people to handle.⁴⁷ Several declassified documents, including the *Review intelligence Tet-Offensive*, conclude that dual intelligence systems, both inside the US and Vietnam, created a complex system of intelligence reports. Although parts are sanitized, the document reveals that at least 800 reports a day were received by the CIA and MACV combined. Next to that, the South-Vietnamese and several allies fighting together with the US also had their own, separate, intelligence systems.⁴⁸

Christopher Andrew, historian at the University of Cambridge, England, states that president Johnson did not dislike the PDB, but the CIA and its director McCone, whom he distrusted. McCone was more pessimistic than Johnson and his main Vietnam advisor McNamara, who preferred the more optimistic military intelligence reports from the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Afterwards, McCone's intelligence reports proved to be more reliable. Johnson and McNamara wanted the CIA to focus on covert operations, and McCone correctly predicted that these were of little effect. Andrew names several key actors, including McNamara, who in hindsight agreed that the Johnson administrations focused on certain statistics that gave an incorrect image of the war. Andrew believes the CIA understood Vietnam better than other intelligence agencies, the Johnson administration, or the military.⁴⁹ The CIA under director William Raborn was curtailed according to Andrew, and provided evidence to justify claims Johnson already made.⁵⁰ Raborn had little previous intelligence experience and is generally seen as somebody who did the bidding of the president.⁵¹

Andrew names several occasions when McNamara chose the more positive picture when choosing several information sources, which proved too optimistic. An example of such handpicking is a memo of March 3, 1965, which Bob McNamara calls a useful document on

⁴⁸ Bc No. 07250/68, *Review Intelligence Tet-Offensive*, 26-5-1976, 4, 5.

⁴⁹ Christopher Andrew. *For the President's Eyes Only : Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York 1995) 309, 315-317.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 324, 325.

⁵¹ Palmer, Jr. *US Intelligence and Vietnam* 31.

December 12. The memo states, without further substantiation, that on a long term enough forces would wear down Viet Cong and North Vietnamese war efforts. This memo does not explain what long term and enough forces actually mean.⁵² Other sources of information had since then told a completely different story. Other authors are also negative of the role that McNamara had in gathering and analyzing data and the consequent advises he gave president Johnson. Andrew argues that not a failure or lack of intelligence, but misunderstanding the situation in Vietnam led to major errors. McCone resigned in April 1965, because he felt left out, and correctly predicted that the North-Vietnamese counted on public opinion forcing the US out of the war. McCone believed that escalating the conflict was necessary for victory. Nonetheless, further escalation was near impossible because of foreign and domestic public opinion and political considerations. Therefore, McCone opposed escalation.⁵³

Richard L. Russel, professor of National Security at the National Defense University, believes that the CIA gave a pessimistic, more realistic view of the Vietnam War than either the military or other intelligence agencies provided. Far from apologetic, Russel also criticizes the CIA. In most cases it failed to get policy level intelligence. Russel believes that CIA agents gathering intelligence both during and after the Cold War were often incompetent.⁵⁴ The CIA included political, economic and social factors in their analysis. The army wanted a more positive analysis, partly because they were responsible for executing most of the U.S. policy in Vietnam.⁵⁵ The PDB, the most important intelligence product the CIA delivered, however lacked analysis according to high-level policymakers.⁵⁶

Ahern believes that the CIA was assigned objectives that it could not complete and was used as one of the scapegoats for losing the war afterwards. The CIA could not recognize that the Viet Cong had support in the countryside and did not only rely on coercion, which was only complementary in gaining support. This misconception dominated policymakers, intelligence agencies and the US army. Ahern sees the CIA as the first US agency that also looked at the Vietnam conflict as a political event, not only part of a larger struggle in the Cold War. Most

⁵² Memo 21-3-1965, Reactions to a US course of action in Vietnam.
http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166746.pdf (visited 6-7-2016).

⁵³ Andrew, *Secret Intelligence*, 321, 322.

⁵⁴ Richard L. Russel, *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence : Why the CIA Gets It Wrong and What Needs to Be Done to Get It Right* (New York 2007). 97, 98.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 34, 36.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 120.

other US intelligence agencies and policymakers failed to understand that the Viet Cong was an integral part of Vietnam's rural society.⁵⁷ Ahern thinks that many low-level intelligence employees did see the reality of the situation, but their superiors did not.⁵⁸ The CIA consistently tried to report truthful reports to policymakers, even if this yielded resistance with policymakers.⁵⁹ John Prados, analyst of national security and head of the Archive's documentation projects for Vietnam and for the CIA, shows examples where the CIA director John McCone gave President Johnson analysis and direct policy advice. In several cases Johnson rejected arguments of McNamara and the army. The CIA preferred more subtle and qualitative ways to look at the Vietnam conflict, in contrast to the quantified analysis of McNamara. McNamara believed numbers were the answer to understanding and the war, not qualitative arguments or 'instinct and feeling'.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Russel, *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence*, 357, 358, 360.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 363.

⁵⁹ Benjamin Baker and Nicholas Horton. 'Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency.' *Journal of Intelligence History* 14.1 (2014) 154, 155.

⁶⁰ Andrew, *Secret Intelligence*, 257, 258.

5. The response of Johnson and the White House on the Tonkin Incident

5.1 Casus Belli

The Presidents Daily Briefs (PDB) in the months before the Tonkin Incident tell of growing unrest in South Vietnam. The PDB of 15-17 April reports that Viet Cong attacks resulted in heavy losses for the South Vietnamese army. Furthermore, the political situation in South Vietnam became increasingly unstable.⁶¹ Although the US believed Vietnam itself was relatively insignificant, the president and his policymakers were preoccupied with the domino theory and Truman doctrine when making decisions. Formally the US and North Vietnam were not at war. But the tensions were rising. Although many still hoped for a nonviolent solution, the outbreak of war was very likely.

There were several incidents that could have led to war. Before the Tonkin Incident there already was a possible attack in the in the Gulf of Tonkin, which also involved the destroyer Maddox. While on a secret mission with the destroyer Turner Joy, the Maddox claimed to be attacked and therefore retaliated by hitting and sinking several ships, presumably North Vietnamese. After some confusion it was McNamara who questioned the set of events admiral Sharp presented. On January 1, 1964, McNamara asked: *'There isn't any possibility there was no attack, is there?'*⁶² Ultimately, both the attack and the sinking of enemy ships were put into question. Subsequently the incident was dismissed.⁶³ The Maddox and Turner Joy were on secret DeSoto patrols, gathering intelligence and deliberately crossing the line of what North Vietnam claimed to be their territorial waters.⁶⁴

Eight months later McNamara and admiral Sharp had a similar conversation. On August 2, 1964, admiral Sharp reported attacks on the destroyer Maddox, while being in international waters. On August 3 the president responded: *'There have been some covert operations in that area that we have been carrying on – blowing up bridges and things of that kind, roads and so forth. So I imagine they wanted to put a stop to that.'* Johnson and McNamara planned

⁶¹ Presidents Intelligence Review, 15-17 April 1964.

⁶¹ Robert McNamara and Admiral Sharp, Tonkin 1-1-1964 DDRS.

⁶¹ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 1, 16, 17.

retaliatory action when reports sighting North Vietnamese ships came in. Both men somewhat expected that other incidents would take place. Then again, on August 4, Sharp reported another attack.⁶⁵ 1-4 August 1964: *'The attacks on the Maddox on Sunday and again on Tuesday were planned and directed by Vietnamese naval authorities ashore. Both attacks took place well outside of Vietnamese territorial waters'*.⁶⁶ To emphasize the significance of these events; if any attacks occurred, it would be the first time since World War II that an US marine vessel was attacked.⁶⁷ A memorandum of September 21, 1964, shows that the president felt pressured to act immediately. Johnson wanted to act before other US officials made remarks on the incidents. Furthermore, he wanted to be sure that Barry Goldwater, his rival in the coming elections, would not benefit politically. Goldwater often pictured Johnson as a weak and indecisive leader, incapable to effectively lead the US in a war.⁶⁸

The hastily decision was based on incomplete information. During the second incident sightings of North Vietnamese were actually radar sightings, which later were dismissed as incorrect. Afterwards, planes and ships were unable to find any enemy ships or trails. Partly because information of the first incident were repeated, president Johnson believed in a second attack. Several authors, including Edmund Moise, convincingly proved that no second attack had taken place.⁶⁹ Some policymakers and military staff were skeptical of the evidence that the events took place, and called the captain of the Maddox 'trigger happy'. General Carter disagreed with the set of events as presented by McNamara.⁷⁰

North Vietnamese generals and high ranking officials, such as general Phung the Tai in 1981, argue that the US deliberately fabricated both attacks.⁷¹ Admiral Moore believed that freak weather effects resulted in false sightings on radar and sonar. In 2003, McNamara himself admitted that there was no second attack, and that because of the fog of war the US wrongly assumed so. McNamara says the first attack did happen, although it was disputed at the time. President Johnson believed that two attacks were a conscious decision of the North

⁶⁵ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 494-500.

⁶⁶ Presidents Intelligence Review, 1-4 August 1964.

⁶⁷ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 1, 10.

⁶⁸ Memorandum for the record. Continuation of Meeting with the president and senior officials on Saturday, 19 September. 21 September 1964. http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/5829/CIA-RDP80B01676R001400050040-0.pdf (visited 5-7-2016).

⁶⁹ David Kaiser, *An American Tragedy. Kennedy, Johnson and the origins of the Vietnam War* (Harvard 2000) 333

⁷⁰ Memorandum for the record: Discussion with Mr. Bundy. 21 September 1964.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01676R001400050039-2.pdf>

⁷¹ Interview with North Vietnamese general Phung The Tai (recorded 1981).

<https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth-oai:sx61f736g> (visited 20-4-2016)

Vietnamese to escalate the conflict, and were not afraid to militarily confront the South-Vietnamese and US. McNamara confesses that both he and Johnson were wrong in their conviction, and were looking for arguments to confirm that their mindset at that time was correct. But at that moment, Johnson had little choice. Because of the Cold War context, the already rising tensions in Vietnam, his political image at home and the intelligence given in the first instance, the president took the decision to go to war.⁷²

Sir Adam Roberts gives compelling proof that it was McNamara who interpreted the information and assured the president that the North-Vietnamese did attack US ships. He did so without consulting the CIA on this interpretation. After Johnson already ordered airstrikes on North Vietnam, McCone responded that the North-Vietnamese were most likely attacked and the North-Vietnamese responded out of pride and self-defense after the US penetrated their territorial waters and attacked them. Andrew demonstrates that it is highly unlikely that the North-Vietnamese initiated an attack. Possibly the North-Vietnamese never attacked any American ships.⁷³

5.2 The road to war

Even without the events in August, war would probably have broken out. After the Tonkin Incident, there were other moments which could also have triggered escalation and could have been used as a casus belli for war. An American DeSoto patrol was warned for a possible new attack on 18 September 1964, but the CIA concluded from intercepted messages that the North Vietnamese merely took defensive measures and feared an US attack. The North Vietnamese and Chinese highlighted this incident, claiming that the US was seeking a pretext for attacking North Vietnam.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the Joint Chiefs recommended extensive retaliatory strikes. McNamara and Rusk wanted a milder response, to prevent escalation. On September 21 that year the president gave a press conference in which he told that he overruled his advisors who wanted extensive retaliation on North Vietnam, and expressed his doubts on the previous events in the Gulf of Tonkin, including the earlier incidents on August 2 and 4. In private, Johnson also made clear he was not sure what actually happened in the

⁷² The fog of war: Eleven lessons from the life of Robert S. McNamara (Errol Morris 2003)

⁷³ Adam Roberts, 'The CIA: Reform Is Not Enough.' *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 6.1 (1977) 64-70.

⁷⁴ *The Presidents Intelligence Checklist* (21 September 1964)

Gulf of Tonkin, and the rest of Vietnam.⁷⁵ In public, Johnson kept emphasizing that the policy towards Vietnam had not changed. Johnson tried to keep publicity on Vietnam to a minimum. Although it was planned early on to increase the number of US troops, it was seen as problematic if the public, the Chinese and Soviets, and to some extent the US senate would find out. Johnson tried to carefully choreograph any information given to the public or senate.⁷⁶ McNamara and most other subordinates followed the presidents' example.⁷⁷

Paul Y. Hammond believes that Lyndon B. Johnson was not deaf to critics and talked with dissenters and people warning about the possible pitfalls of a war in Vietnam. Johnson also questioned his direct advisors, including McNamara, and often sought advice elsewhere.⁷⁸ An important pillar of American foreign policy and its involvement in Vietnam was to contain the spread of communism, and to show commitment to their allies. A sudden withdrawal would undermine this policy.⁷⁹ Critical Incident Report No. 7, confirms that the US wanted to display its commitment to allies. The US needed to display that it was not afraid to escalate. It was believed that this display would positively affect the image both allies and enemies had of the US. Not showing the willingness to escalate would result in future provocations of communists worldwide.⁸⁰ The US unilaterally used their military and economic power against Vietnam without support of their major allies. While trying to assert their commitment towards their allies, the US eventually reached the opposite result, and estranged many by sustaining the war in Vietnam.⁸¹ A CIA memo warned that NATO allies such as West-Germany and Great-Britain would at least publicly support the US, but would oppose further escalation and would push for peace talks. Allies such as France could publicly denounce the US.⁸²

Johnson wanted to oblige to the commitments towards US allies, but with minimal efforts. Johnson also tried to minimize publicity regarding Vietnam until the presidential elections of November 1964.⁸³ Hammond blames Johnson for being indecisive in choosing between

⁷⁵ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 346.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 412, 413.

⁷⁷ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 9, 150.

⁷⁸ Paul Y. Hammond, *LBJ and the presidential management of foreign relations* (Texas 1992) 183.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 185.

⁸⁰ Critical Incident Report No. 7, Command and Control of the Tonkin Gulf Incident, 4, 5.

⁸¹ Hammond, '*LBJ and foreign relations*,' 170, 171, 173.

⁸² Memo on reactions to a US course of action in Vietnam, March 3, 1965.

http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166746.pdf

⁸³ Hammond, '*LBJ and foreign relations*,' 166, 170, 177.

domestic and foreign policy, therefore not choosing either of these. He held back implementing his idea of a Great Society, a domestic social welfare plan, and the decision to escalate the Vietnam War. This could explain the short-term solutions and caution that Johnson often displayed.⁸⁴ When presented two options to retaliate against North Vietnam in December 1964, Johnson chose the in-between option, operation *Barrel Roll*, limited bombings of North Vietnamese targets, while forbidding to bomb specific targets such as Hanoi and the mining of North Vietnamese harbors. This campaign would later continue under the name of *Rolling Thunder*. The US restrained their response, because it was feared that too much pressure could also pull the Chinese or Russians into the conflict. This limited retaliation failed to slow the advance of the North-Vietnamese and Viet Cong in South-Vietnam, or threatened their war effort. The US plans also lacked a plan of withdrawal. Hammond argues that withdrawal was not an option for Johnson in December 1964, because this would attract unwanted domestic attention, and drain political power from his domestic agenda. Johnson believed the bombings to be a short-term solution. When given the choice between negotiation and a possible retreat or power politics and escalation he chose the latter. The president intensified US bombings. Although several negotiations with North Vietnam took place, it is questionable if Johnson really believed in a satisfactory outcome. The North Vietnamese would not compromise on their goal of a unified Vietnam, and Johnson wanted an independent, non-communist and secure South Vietnam.⁸⁵

Unlike Hammond, a majority of authors believe that Johnson rarely listened to deviating opinions. Only at the beginning and very end of his presidency there was room for open discussions regarding Vietnam. Most authors even believe that deviating opinions were irrelevant to Johnson, because on a decision level he only wanted people who had the same ideas and goals. Daniel Ellsberg was a whistleblower of what later became known as the Pentagon Papers. Ellsberg is a former Rand Corporation analyst, and personal assistant of John McNaughton, McNamara's closest advisor. Ellsberg writes in his memoirs that as early as 1961 it was clear to most intelligence officers visiting Vietnam that US success was unlikely. Low-level intelligence officers there convinced him of the complexity of the conflict and likelihood of North Vietnamese victory.⁸⁶ Ellsberg started working as a personal assistant of McNaughton on August 3, 1964, when the Tonkin Incident unfolded. After several years of

⁸⁴ Hammond, *'LBJ and foreign relations*, 208-209.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 170, 171, 173.

⁸⁶ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, prologue.

working for the US government, Ellsberg decided to copy the top secret Pentagon Papers. This study ordered by McNamara analyzed U.S. decision making before and during the Vietnam War. With these Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg wanted to demonstrate that the senate had been falsely informed. The papers also proved that the White House conducted criminal acts and silenced dissenters. When several security advisors and senators showed their disinterest in the documents, Ellsberg decided to contact the New York Times, which published parts of the documents.⁸⁷ President Johnson could and did lie about his policies, in order to push his political agenda. He could only do so as long as his subordinates were willing to cooperate. Johnson used career prospects, the use of security clearances and secrecy oaths to coerce his subordinates to keep quiet.⁸⁸ Because he distrusted most of his subordinates, and feared to be embarrassed by failures or leaks, Johnson increasingly punished dissent during his presidency. On the other hand, Ellsberg believes the military increasingly became aware how to manipulate the president. If the president was pressured or made to feel weak, he often (partially) complied with requests in secret, just to keep people and on his side. This created an atmosphere of secrecy and fear of dissent that surrounded decision makers in Washington.⁸⁹ Johnson gave McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara the authority to filter out what documents or advisors reached his desk. This further decreased the change of reports that were negative of current policy reached the president. Johnsons staff, in particular McNamara, handpicked staff, and used blackmail and political bribes to do so. McNamara tried to micromanage every facet of warfare, although not being a soldier, and used quantitate analysis even though warfare cannot be reduced to numbers.⁹⁰

Johnson also resisted and manipulated the public opinion, until he announced not to run for another term as president in March 1968. Christopher Andrews goes as far as claiming that this was because Johnson believed that the large anti-war movement was created by a communist conspiracy. This claim is not definitely proven, but during the Vietnam War many protestors and leftwing activist were monitored.⁹¹ Johnson did not want a war in Vietnam, especially not before the elections in December 1964, but believed it was necessary as part of the wider struggle against the Soviet-Union and communism. For Johnson war in Vietnam became the only option. The domino theory argued that if one country in South-East Asia

⁸⁷ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, preface.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 13, 214.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 13, 214.

⁹⁰ Hughes, *Intelligence Blunders*, 192, 195, 196.

⁹¹ Andrew, *Secret Intelligence*, 348.

would turn communist, others would follow soon. Both Bundy and McNamara believed that failure in Vietnam would result in uncertainty in all of South-East Asia, and influence the confidence of US allies worldwide. In December 1964 McNamara believed there was a lack of detailed information on both the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, but he concurred that the capabilities of the enemy were increasing.⁹² On December 20, 1964, McNamara was pessimistic about the situation in South Vietnam and believed that a communist controlled state could be a reality within a few months. McNamara blamed optimistic reports from the South Vietnamese and the incompetence of US ambassador Lodge. McNamara's advice was military action and using the military reports of the relatively new and untested MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) as a primary source for intelligence from then on. McNamara was confident the MACV would become a capable tool for intelligence on Vietnam. Meanwhile, the CIA prepared several plans of action of different intensity to increase US involvement in Vietnam. Johnson wanted '*maximum pressure and minimal risk*'.⁹³

On April 25, 1965 a leftish coup d'état took place in the Dominican Republic. Johnson ordered troops, first to protect US citizens, then to restore order and to prevent a communist takeover. Johnson deployed troops without consulting neighboring states and talked little with his advisors. This created a precedent for Johnson. For the president, this event proved the spread of communism and the need to intervene. Johnson was willing to do so without consent or consult. This created some doubt on Johnson's leadership. The president increasingly relied on his own judgement, which he did not share even with his closest advisors. Johnson relied less on his advisors and listened even less to dissents. He also regularly instructed his subordinates not to debate. In May 1966 McGeorge Bundy was not allowed to debate political scientist Hans Morgenthau, because Johnson believed this to '(...) dignify the opposition by debating'.⁹⁴ This climate of no dissent increasingly existed during the presidency of Johnson.

⁹² Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 288-290.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 292.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 436, 437.

5.3 Escalation

Early 1964 McNamara requested the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCF) to present plans to achieve US goals in Vietnam, but without escalation of the conflict or the involvement of the Chinese or Soviets. Just like most policymakers, the US military viewed most events in a Cold War context. Ignoring McNamara's actual request, plans were submitted that suggested strikes on Chinese targets and the use of nuclear weapons to deter Chinese involvement in Vietnam. Several plans somewhat assumed that increased intervention in Vietnam would mean war with China. It is noteworthy that on October 16, 1964, China successfully tested its first nuclear weapon. The US was right to believe that China would come to the defense of North-Vietnam. Just as it did in Korea, China warned the US by several diplomatic channels of the consequences US actions in Vietnam. China viewed these actions as imperialist aggression. The Chinese told that even the use of nuclear weapons would not stop China defending its own backyard. China stated that it would not provoke a war with the US, but that a potential war would be worldwide. China became involved in the defense of North Vietnam. The PDB of 8-11 August 1964 mentions 56 presumable Chinese MIG 15/17 jet fighters near Hanoi, protected by AA guns, but refutes major Chinese ground deployments.⁹⁵ On September 9, 1964, the CIA warned of Chinese involvement in Vietnam. They believed that the Chinese were willing to accept considerable losses in defending North Vietnam.⁹⁶ In 1966 as many as 300.000 Chinese were in North Vietnam, building infrastructure, defending the skies, flying planes, giving advice, and actively waging war. Although Chinese involvement was well-known,⁹⁷ intelligence estimates of the time seen unaware such large number of Chinese involved in Vietnam.⁹⁸

Since 1955 there also was the Viet Cong insurgency in South Vietnam. It was associated and supported by NVA (North Vietnamese Army). It is a matter of debate if the Viet Cong was led by independent and homegrown South Vietnamese, or was directly led by the North Vietnamese leadership. The Viet Cong seemed less dangerous in 1964 than in the years before, although their number of attacks increased.⁹⁹ The actual strength of the Viet Cong

⁹⁵ The Presidents Intelligence Review, 8-11-August 1964.

⁹⁶ Misc Re Question and Answer, 9 September 1964.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001403424.pdf (visited 4-7-2016).

⁹⁷ SNIE 13-9-70. Chinese reactions to possible developments in Indochina. 28 May 1970.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001166445.pdf (visited 4-7-2016).

⁹⁸ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 439, 440.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 294-295.

insurgency in South Vietnam was also often dismissed or ignored in intelligence estimates of the time. When McNamara asked the JCF again about the Viet Cong in March 1964, they responded that while the Viet Cong was being helped from third countries: ‘(...) *Their elimination will be a most difficult, if not impossible, task.*’ Nonetheless, the JCF believed that eliminating their supply by bombing targets in North Vietnam, Laos and China could eradicate the insurgency. This however assumed that the insurgents were unable to live off the local population, either by support or coercion.¹⁰⁰

CIA director McCone had a pessimistic view compared to the JCF and disagreed with their conclusions. McCone remarked in a preliminary report that he did not support their findings. However, in the final report, his remarks were scrapped. Several generals attending the NSC (National Security Council) were infuriated when they discovered that McCone’s critique was left out.¹⁰¹ During one of the NSC meetings, Michael Forrestal, an aide to McBundy, mentioned the translated work of Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*. This book described the French experiences on guerilla warfare in Algeria and Indochina, and suggested how to wage a successful counterinsurgency. Trinquier argues that soldiers without uniform are terrorist and torture is allowed on them. This and other illegal tactics were seen as a necessary evil. Forrestal suggested a change of tactics regarding Vietnam, without specifying this change. McBundy agreed that without an identifiable enemy, conventional warfare and measurable success would be problematic.¹⁰² Lorenzo Zambernardi’s trilemma of counterinsurgency argues that any counterinsurgency has three goals: force protection, distinguish between combatants and civilians, and eliminate enemy combatants. A country can only effectively accomplish two of these goals simultaneous. Protecting your own forces and distinguishing between combatants and civilians means that enemy combatants remain able to operate. Indiscriminate killing is a way to disable enemy combatants, but means no distinction can be made between civilians and enemy. Lastly, one can put its own forces at risk to simultaneously distinguish and disable the enemy. On various moments and places during the Vietnam War the US has applied a combination of these options.¹⁰³

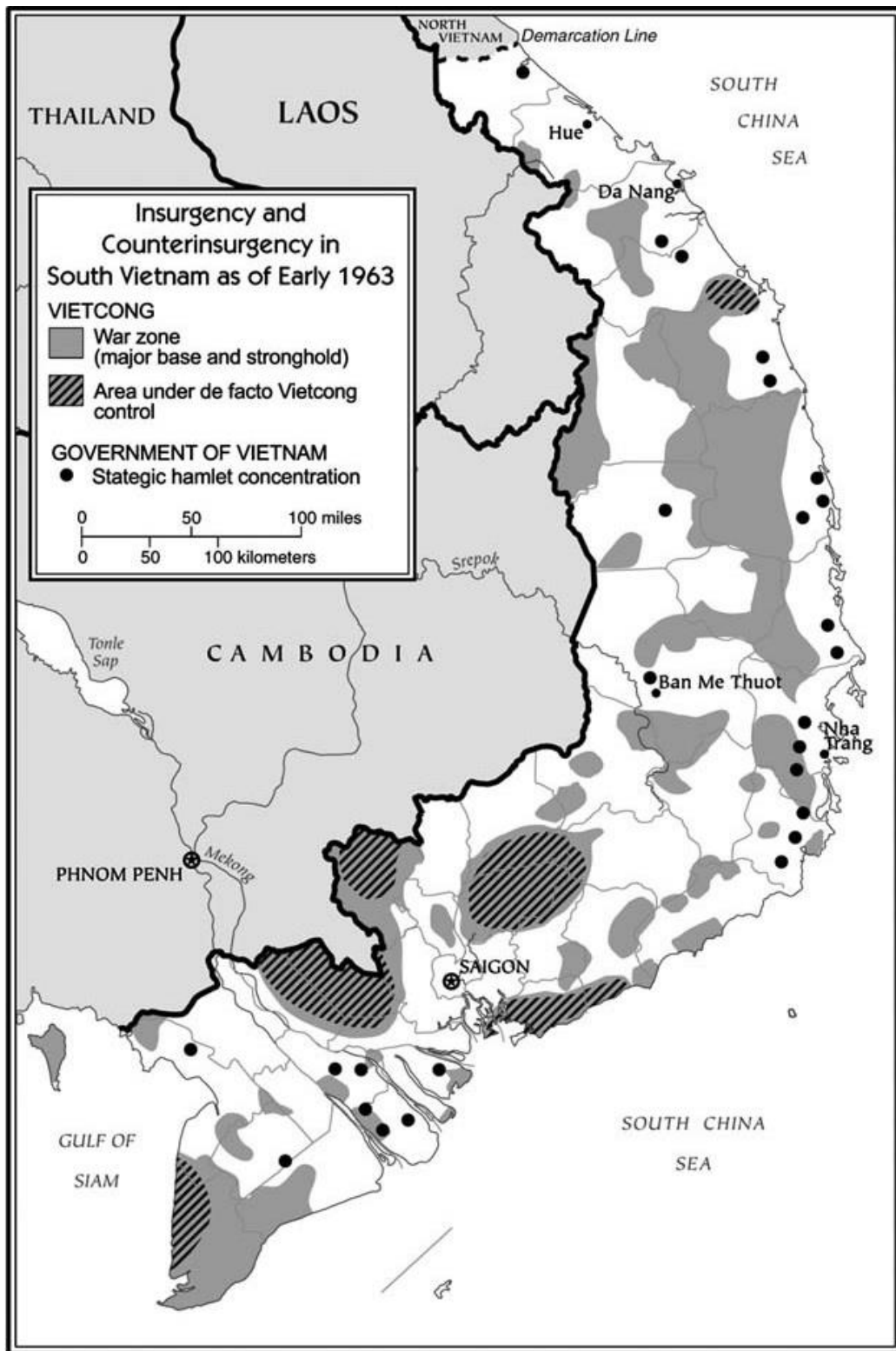
¹⁰⁰ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 300-302.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 306

¹⁰² Ibid, 308, 309.

¹⁰³ Lorenzo Zambernardi, ‘Counterinsurgency’s impossible trilemma.’ *The Washington Quarterly*. (July 2010) 21-24.

Image 1. Areas controlled by the Viet Cong and counterinsurgency attempts, early 1963.



This map is approximate. Depending on the exact dates, sources and definitions used, this map will vary. The map shows that the government has little control outside of the mayor cities. Source: Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency*. (Kentucky 2010) 94.

Image 2.



From left to right: General William Childs Westmoreland, Robert S. McNamara and president Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House. Date and author unknown.

Source: <http://i0.wp.com/www.cienciahistorica.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Westmoreland-McNamara-y-Johnson-en-1967.jpg> (visited 13-7-2016).

Image 3.



John McCone and Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House. 11-30-1963. Source:

<http://transition.lbjlibrary.org/items/show/67494> (visited 13-7-2016).

December 1964 was a critical month for the escalation of the Vietnam War. After Johnson won the elections in December 1964, the official planning of a military campaign started. Before the election Johnson did not want to implement important decisions regarding Vietnam, in fear of potential negative results at the elections. During the 1964 elections, Johnson defeated his opponent Barry Goldwater with a landslide victory. On December 24, the Viet Cong bombed the Brinks Hotel in Saigon, which was used by the US military. US ambassador Taylor requested the start of a bombing campaign on North Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ As suspected earlier, US intelligence also proved that individual NVA (North Vietnamese Army) troops were crossing the South Vietnamese border in support of the Viet Cong. Early 1965 it was concluded that organized NVA battalions were sent through Laos and Cambodia to infiltrate South Vietnam.¹⁰⁵ Late 1964 the US goal was laid out: An independent South Vietnam, protected from both the Viet Cong and North Vietnam. It was believed this could be achieved by bombing North Vietnam and a large scale deployment of ground forces. From March 1965 this policy was largely implemented, but it was delayed by the lack of infrastructure in Vietnam.¹⁰⁶

5.4 Negotiations

After the Tonkin incident, the chances of a negotiated peace were small. Several Washington officials tried to seek an exit strategy for the potential war. In December 1964 John McNaughton, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, believed limited bombing and deployment of troops would give the US an acceptable way out of Vietnam, by accepting the partition of South and North Vietnam. McNaughton believed that Vietnam was 70% about avoiding a humiliating defeat, and only 20% about keeping South Vietnam and other territories out of communist hands. A mere 10% was about the well-being of the people of South Vietnam. However, the Joint Chiefs decided at March 15, 1965 that negotiations were out of the question before a convincing military advantage was secured.¹⁰⁷ During a televised speech on April 7, 1964 the president reconfirmed his commitment towards South Vietnam and his belief in the domino theory. Johnson thought he also showed the North Vietnamese a willingness to negotiate, by proposing an

¹⁰⁴ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 374-375

¹⁰⁵ Palmer Jr, *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, 32, 35.

¹⁰⁶ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 443.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 421, 422.

unconditional discussion. Several advisors dismissed this view, believing the only thing being offered was unconditional surrender by North Vietnam. North Vietnam, The Soviet-Union and China did indeed reject the misleading offer and Ho Chi Minh actually saw the speech as a confirmation that the US was not willing to negotiate. Before the speech Ho Chi Minh hoped that the bombing were a prelude to negotiations.¹⁰⁸ During 1964 the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong did not pressure South Vietnam sufficiently to overtake the government. At the same time, Ho Chi Minh did not send large amounts of North Vietnamese troops south of the border. He feared the US and felt a lack of Soviet support, and still hoped to negotiate an early US withdrawal.

George Ball, the Under Secretary of State for Economic and Agricultural Affairs believed negotiations and peace would be the best course of action in Vietnam. Ball believed that South Vietnam would eventually lose from the Viet Cong and North Vietnam, and that only an unpopular and prolonged war could change this fate. On several occasions, Ball tries to persuade the administration to initiate peace talks. On April 21, 1965, president Johnson gives Ball 24 hours to come with a proposal. Ball believes that a peace plan with a divided Vietnam could work. The plan, involved a halt to US military operations in exchange for demilitarization of the Viet Cong. Free elections and amnesty would follow. After a 5 day bombing break during the birthday of Buddha on May 12, it seemed that the plan had little support from US policymakers or the South Vietnamese government. The tentative idea of early negotiations with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese seemed to lack political support during 1965. Most important, the president rejected Balls idea.¹⁰⁹

5.5 Bombing campaigns and the possible use of nuclear weapons.

President Johnson was warned on several occasions that his advisors were giving wrong advises. In May 1964 a proposal for an U.N. peacekeeping mission failed. The White House expected it to fail. On April 20, 1965, Johnson meets in Honolulu to discuss Vietnam with his most important subordinates. During this meeting Johnson expressed his fears of a new Korea, and the believed there was nothing to win in Vietnam. However, the domino theory, which was a pillar of American policy, argued that losing Vietnam to the communists would

¹⁰⁸ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 425, 426.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 434, 435.

have worldwide repercussions. Senator Russel, the former mentor of Johnson and a Senate veteran, warned Johnson for a guerilla war. He himself was relieved when Kennedy voted against intervention in 1961. In a long conversation Russel dismissed bombing as a method to stop an insurgency and believed Vietnam would be worse than Korea, because of its geography, culture and history. Although Russel believed Johnsons staff was capable, he also believed their overestimation of knowledge on the country. Although Johnson shared Russel's view that Vietnam itself was not worthwhile, Johnsons argument for intervention was based on the domino theory.¹¹⁰ After the conference the Senate decided that direct intervention was not required.¹¹¹ McNaughton, Sharp, William Bundy and general William C. Westmoreland, commander of US troops in Vietnam also agreed at the conference in Honolulu that limited bombing alone would not defeat North Vietnam. Limited bombing combined with ground forces could deny North Vietnamese a victory. This was an implied alternative for an all-out bombing campaign and the possible use of nuclear weapons.¹¹²

Some advices given to Johnson were outright dangerous. The US military was planning for a military intervention. Several plans were developed before and during May 1964. OPLAN 37-64 would rely on South-Vietnamese and Laotian forces, and US forces in Thailand, that would be held back to respond to possible retaliation of China or the Soviet-Union. OPLAN 99-64 would rely on large-scale bombing of North-Vietnam and naval blockades. OPLAN 32-64 anticipated a Chinese response and would prepare an overall defense of South-East Asia. The Chiefs of Staff believed that destruction as necessary would be able to win a war in Vietnam and Laos, and that limited military action would not achieve victory in either country. As mentioned before, if conventional weapons would fail, nuclear weapons would do. Especially general Lemay (who was responsible for terror bombing campaigns on Japan during the Second World War, including firebombing civilian targets and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) believed in destruction as necessary.¹¹³ The CIA believed the use nuclear weapons in Vietnam would be '*One of the most important events of modern history.*' The CIA viewed the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam as adverse and warned for extreme negative consequences. The CIA also believed that both the North Vietnamese and Chinese would not be deterred by the use of nuclear weapons, but that

¹¹⁰ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 318-320.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 321.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 429.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 322

nuclear retaliation would remain unlikely.¹¹⁴ A memorandum of February 19, 1968, showed that McNamara also rejected the use of nuclear weapons.¹¹⁵ The US did use nuclear bluff as a strategy. During interviews, McNamara explicitly refused to rule out the restrictions on nuclear weapons in Vietnam. According to him, the use of nuclear weapons had no current strategic use, but this could change in the foreseeable future.¹¹⁶

President Johnson increasingly doubted his advisors. Nonetheless, the Chiefs of Staff gained support from the president. Meanwhile McGeorge Bundy and McNamara became increasingly worried. On 6 March 1965 Bundy wrote that McNamara finally told the uncomfortable truth to the president: the military was planning a conventional war against guerrillas, even though they should concentrate on a police mission to control the civilians and to defeat the insurgents. Although some generals expressed their doubts, the main US strategy was focused on conventional war. The Chiefs of Staff argued that the war would be won by pacification: *'Find the enemy. Fix the enemy in place (...) Fight and finish the enemy'*. General Westmoreland also believed this to be the correct method to defeat the insurgents. He did not believe bombing North Vietnam alone could win the war. On April 2 1965 McCone wanted the restrictions on bombings lifted, to avoid a longer conflict with ground forces.¹¹⁷

McCone believed that bombing could force North Vietnam to negotiations, but only if vital targets and supplies were hit. Forestalling negotiations would increase problems for US ground forces and result in the requirement of even more ground forces.¹¹⁸ Most intelligence officers, policymakers and military staff believed and correctly predicted that the planned bombing campaigns would be mostly unsuccessful. Some potential vital targets were not approved, such as certain areas of Hanoi and the harbor of Haiphong. The approved targets were sometimes difficult enough to destroy, being covered and protected by jungle. On several occasions there was great uncertainty of the actual location of potential targets. Furthermore, the bombs used at the time were mostly unguided and inaccurate. On April 8, 1965, despite dropping 432 bombs at a North Vietnamese bridge, the bridge remained operable. The North Vietnamese were also notorious for the speed in which they restored

¹¹⁴ Memo 3-16-1966, The use of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War.

http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166479.pdf.

¹¹⁵ Memorandum for the president. 19 February 1968. <http://www103.pair.com/adsd/khe-sanh/nukes/j021968a.jpg> (visited 4-7-2016).

¹¹⁶ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 432.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 414, 418.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 430.

damaged infrastructure.¹¹⁹ The costs of bombing and destroying a bridge was many times higher than to repair one.¹²⁰ The President's Daily Briefs of January 11, 1968, mentions the ingenuity of the North Vietnamese in which they keep their railways functioning.¹²¹

Between 1965 and 1975 around 7, 5 million tons of bombs were dropped on Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam). As a comparison; during World War II all fighting parties dropped a total of around 2 million tons of bombs.¹²² In the beginning of the conflict the US lost little planes. Effective air defenses were lacking in 1964. Supported by the Soviet-Union and China the North Vietnamese eventually built solid air defenses, which became more effective. US planes were increasingly shot down.¹²³ The US lost 1737 airplanes to hostile actions in Indochina.¹²⁴ Several histories of strategic bombing, and the US Strategic Bombing Survey concluded after World War II that bombing alone did little in shortening the duration of a war. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of bombing in general is still a matter of debate. Nonetheless, jungle and an elusive enemy made effective bombing particularly difficult. Most scholars do agree that bombing without proper ground support and the exclusion of important strategic targets were major constraints for the US military during the Vietnam War. Attacking non-military targets, indiscriminate bombings and the use of chemicals during the war could all be seen as war crimes committed by the US military. Some officials saw such actions as a necessary evil if the US wanted to defeat the communists.¹²⁵

It was not a matter if, but a matter of how many troops were sent to Vietnam. In July 1965, after heated debates, McNamara agreed with Westmoreland's request for roughly 175,000 soldiers.¹²⁶ Ellsberg, who visited Vietnam on several occasions, witnessed the ineffectiveness of US troops. US troops often received casualties without ever finding enemy soldiers, spend much time waiting on reinforcements, and often accidentally killed civilians. A controversial tactic was to shoot first, and check afterwards if buildings were occupied by civilians or enemies. US officers were often uninformed and unprofessional. In general, officers were careful not to push their soldiers, most of whom were there for a short tour and had little combat

¹¹⁹ Kaiser, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 420.

¹²⁰ Palmer Jr, *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, 43.

¹²¹ The Presidents Daily Brief, 11 January 1968.

¹²² Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 14, 231.

¹²³ Palmer Jr, *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, 33.

¹²⁴ John Schlight. *A War too Long: The USAF in Southeast Asia 1961–1975*, (Washington 1996) 103.

¹²⁵ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 2, 26.

¹²⁶ Kaiser, *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, 36.

experience. South Vietnamese officers who accompanied them ignored US advise, and sometimes even openly defied the US.¹²⁷ It is common believe that most US soldiers in Vietnam were drafted. Yet, only one third of the US soldiers serving in Vietnam were drafted, and many who were not selected in the draft volunteered to serve.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, the drafted soldiers amounted for around 70% of the troops killed. The death of drafted soldiers had a more profound negative effect on public opinion than the death of career soldiers.¹²⁹

5.6 Actual and effective power

After the Vietnam War, US general Harold Johnson told that both the military and the civilian leaders of the US were convinced that US power and prestige was so overwhelming that the North Vietnamese and possible supporters had no other choice than to give up.¹³⁰ The concept of *power hubris* and *knowledge hubris* are introduced by Hammond. According to him, the US during the Johnson administration arrogantly overestimated its own knowledge and (will to use) power regarding Vietnam. Fighting a war roughly 13.000 kilometers away created logistic problems and required vast resources. Getting people and weapons on the ground was a major undertaking on its own. Hammond argues that Johnson and his advisors were not unaware of overly optimistic reports and military limitations, but in hindsight failed to respond appropriately to these concerns.

The Americans did not fully understand the motives of their enemy. The Vietnam War was mostly seen as a Cold War proxy, not a civil war. Thus the US underestimated the actual strength and willpower of the North Vietnamese and especially the strength of the Viet Cong. On the other hand, the statistics counting the number of enemy combatants killed were highly optimistic. Although capable of literally destroying the North Vietnamese, the US overestimated their military power invested in the conflict, the limitations of their actual powers and the possibility of using more power to end it. This helped the false believe that victory was imminent. Some US generals opted for nuclear bombing and the removal of any limitations on targets. For the Chinese and Soviets this could be seen as a direct declaration of

¹²⁷ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 151-165.

¹²⁸ Speech by General William C. Westmoreland before the Third Annual Reunion of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) at the Washington, DC Hilton Hotel on July 5th, 1986

¹²⁹ Speech by Lt. Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey, (reproduced in the Pentagram, June 4, 1993) assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Vietnam veterans and visitors gathered at "The Wall", Memorial Day 1993.

¹³⁰ Kaiser, *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, 416.

war and the start of a Third World War with mutual annihilation as a result, or at least result in the normalization of the use of nuclear weapons. Eventually, US policymakers did not give this option serious consideration. This does however show the limitations of the actual use of power.¹³¹ In a broader sense, it can be argued that the US had a relatively poor understanding of its own effective military power and its effect on the long-term security of countries. Since Vietnam, it is questionable if military power alone is still effectively capable of changing the outcome of a conflict. The questionability of effective military power is enhanced by the increasing hostile public opinion towards warfare, which partly originated from the protest culture that emerged during the Vietnam War. Vietnam was the first war to be televised, and for the first time people could see the horrors of war from their couch, thousands of kilometers away from the battlefield.

5.7 Cold War assumptions

Johnson made an analogue between the 1930s and the Vietnam War. In the 1930s Western powers failed to respond to German and Japanese grabbing of territories. What if the communists were doing the same thing in Vietnam as the Axis did thirty years earlier? In this mindset, negotiations were seen as a weakness and a change for communists to increase their territory and strength. Secretary of State Dean Rusk later admitted that it was wrong to assume that history would repeat itself. Ironically, in 2016 the US is seeking rapprochement with Vietnam, now in an attempt to contain China.¹³² In 2003, McNamara admitted that the US misunderstood the Soviet-Union and China, whom both believed that the US was trying to replace the French as a colonial ruler of Vietnam, while the US saw Vietnam as part of the wider Cold War struggle. The Vietnamese saw the struggle as a civil war. In 1995 McNamara met the former North Vietnam Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap in Vietnam. Giap told McNamara that they fought for freedom, and against US colonialism. Giap criticized the Americans knowledge of Vietnamese history, and told that the Vietnamese resisted the Chinese for over a millennium, just like they resisted the French and the US. The main Vietnamese objective was absolute independence, and the Soviets and Chinese were only used to achieve this goal. Therefore, the idea of the Vietnamese as Chinese pawns was

¹³¹ Hammond, '*LBJ and foreign relations*', 194, 196, 200, 201.

¹³² <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/stop-comparing-every-angry-dictator-hitler-16780> (visited 1-7-2016.)

ridiculous in the eyes of Giap.¹³³ An intelligence briefing on November 25, 1964, already warned that the Vietnamese fought for independence, not for a new colonial power to take charge.¹³⁴ Vietnamese people have resisted centralized governments for centuries and had little loyalty towards foreign officials. Most were simply interested in peace, security and prosperity.¹³⁵ Not only the US and French were viewed suspiciously. A joint intelligence report on May 3, 1963, reported that the North Vietnamese remained politically independent from both China and the Soviet-Union.¹³⁶ The Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979 is further prove that the communist countries were not a united front.

The idea that the Soviet-Union and China were an united communist front was already controversial before 1963. The already fragile Sino-Soviet relations further deteriorated between 1964 and 1968. The PDBs of 14-16 October¹³⁷ and 17-20 October 1964 tell of a troubled relationship between the two countries, which was not expected to improve any time soon.¹³⁸ The PDB of February 9, 1965, argues that both communist countries were trying to gain influence in North Vietnam, at the expense of each other.¹³⁹ The PDB of January 28, 1967, calls the relationship of China and the Soviet-Union bitter and complicated.¹⁴⁰ On February 2, 1967, Soviet embassy officers in Hanoi were detained by the Chinese.¹⁴¹ In March 1967 the Chinese and Soviet privately and publicly accused each other of espionage. Trade between both countries declined, and was limited to non-strategic and non-military goods.¹⁴²

A CIA briefing of September 5, 1950, does support the idea of the domino theory. Indochina would probably be the first area to fall from communist aggression. Indochina was seen as a potential staging area for other conquests. It would deal a moral blow to the US and would

¹³³ The fog of war: Eleven lessons from the life of Robert S. McNamara (Errol Morris 2003)

¹³⁴ Option A Plus. November 25, 1964.

http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001403411.pdf (visited 11-7-2016).

¹³⁵ NIE 53-63. Prospects in South Vietnam. 17-4-1963. 3-4.

http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166413.pdf (visited 4-7-2016).

¹³⁶ SNIE 14-3-63. The Impact of the Sino-Soviet Dispute on North Vietnam and its Policies, 1-2.

<http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/0001166425> (visited 10-7-2016).

¹³⁷ The Presidents Intelligence Review, 14-16 October 1964.

¹³⁸ The Presidents Intelligence Review, 15-20 October 1964.

¹³⁹ The Presidents Daily Brief, 9 February 1965.

¹⁴⁰ The Presidents Daily Brief, 28 January 1967.

¹⁴¹ The Presidents Daily Brief, 2 February 1967.

¹⁴² The Presidents Daily Brief, 30 March 1967.

weaken its ability to win a global war. These briefings argues that losing Vietnam could seriously hurt US strength on the middle and long term. In these rapports there is already dissent from three high-ranking intelligence officers that dismiss the conclusions of the rapport. These officers did not believe the domino theory. Instead, these men argued that the actual consequences of a communist Indochina were limited and controllable. At the same time, this briefing is an example that different opinion can co-exist within government circles.
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In CIA briefings between 1960 and 1968, the domino theory was dismissed. If South Vietnam and Laos would turn communist, it would not affect the political affiliation of nearby countries. It would boost communist confidence, but would not lead to significant changes. Still, the loss of South Vietnam was believed to be damaging for the position of the US in South East Asia and the world. Countries such as Indonesia would potentially grow bolder and become more aggressive. Still, the CIA argued that the US would be able to project military power throughout Asia from bases in South Korea and Japan to intervene if necessary.¹⁴⁴ A memo of August 1, 1967, concludes that although there are many unknown factors, the risks of losing the war in Vietnam are probably limited and controllable.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ ORE 29-50. Consequences to the US communist domination of mainland southeast Asia. September 5, 1950. 6-13. http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166368.pdf (visited 11-7-2016).

¹⁴⁴ Memo 6-9-1964. Would the loss of South Vietnam and Laos precipitate a 'domino effect'. http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166427.pdf (visited 4-7-2016).

¹⁴⁵ Implications of an unfavorable outcome in Vietnam, August 1, 1967. 31-33. http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166443.pdf (visired 6-7-2016).

6. The Tet Offensive

The party of a group of MACV intelligence officers was roughly disrupted when an attack took place. Nobody in the room understood what was happening. On January 30, 1968, Vietnamese New Year, (Tet Holiday) a major offensive erupted. The Viet Cong, supported by the North Vietnamese army (NVA), attacked most major cities throughout South Vietnam. Fireworks and expected festivities on the streets made it harder to realize that an offensive was underway. As many as 80,000 Viet Cong and NVA troops were fielded. The attackers shortly captured symbolic sites such as the US embassy in Saigon. The Tet Offensive came as a complete surprise. Just months before Tet, on November 22 1967, the American commander in Vietnam, William Childs Westmoreland, called the enemy 'bankrupt'.¹⁴⁶ The CIA and other intelligence agencies believed a large offensive was being planned around Khe Sahn, although fighting was reported around several major cities.¹⁴⁷ The main goal of the offensive was to break support for the South Vietnamese government and to create a rebellion against the U.S troops. Among other reasons, the US was unprepared for the Tet-Offensive because the main operations started during the sacred Tet Holiday. Most businesses, including the military, were on leave.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Viet Cong had called for a truce around the holiday, just like in the years before. On January 15, the Viet Cong repeated their intention of a ceasefire and threatened to punish any violators.¹⁴⁹ In the previous years, cease-fires were also in effect during Tet.^{150, 151, 152}

Nonetheless, there were signals indication a large offensive. An intelligence review report on May 5th, 1968, concluded that in late 1967 there was ample evidence of an impending large scale enemy attack that would be bigger than any attack so far. Policymakers in both Washington and Saigon were subsequently warned to be on guard. On January 9, 1968, the Presidential Daily Brief (PDB) mentioned a large buildup of enemy forces in several areas. The biggest threat was reported around Khe Sanh. In reality, this was a diversion to lure the US

¹⁴⁶ excerpts from talk by Westmoreland. New York Times 22 Nov 1967 (1923-Current File) Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/117419199?accountid=13598>.

¹⁴⁷ The Presidents Daily Brief, 30 January 1968.

¹⁴⁸ James H Willbanks. *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York 2007) Prelude, 10, 11.

¹⁴⁹ The Presidents Daily Brief, 15 January 1968.

¹⁵⁰ The Presidents Daily Brief, 1 February 1965.

¹⁵¹ The Presidents Daily Brief, 29 January 1966.

¹⁵² The Presidents Daily Brief, 27 January 1967.

towards the North Vietnamese border, away from the big cities.¹⁵³ On January 20, 1968, the CIA found another buildup of enemy forces, this time around the Western Highlands.¹⁵⁴ The warnings of a possible attack had also reached several generals, and some of them subsequently put their troops on higher alert. Most of these alerts were not taken seriously. This was partly because most intelligence did not indicate where and when the attack would take place, or anticipated the actual size of a possible offensive. The actual size of the Tet Offensive was much larger than any intelligence report had anticipated. Apart from mistakes made on the US side, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong should get credit for the high level of secrecy that made the offensive such a surprise. At any time, the intelligence community, policymakers and military alike saw the Vietnamese New Year as an unlikely venue for attack. For most Vietnamese, the New Year is the most important period of the year. The period has several religious, cultural and social aspects, which according to many scholars are more important to Vietnamese society than any Western holiday combined. Not respecting this period accordingly, could be seen as sacrilege. If acted upon the several warnings for an offensive, there would have been sufficient time to take effective counter measures. Because of the uncertainty of when, how and if an offensive would take place, most units did not take too effective counter measures. The review still concludes that even as a result there were limited counter measures taken, the intelligence given at the time did considerably reduce the impact of the enemy offensive.¹⁵⁵

Khe Sanh seemed to be the target. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were able to maintain a high level of secrecy, therefore not giving away their plans. They were able to lure away troops towards the border of North Vietnam, away from the urban areas that they actually targeted.¹⁵⁶ The Americans policymakers and generals expected, and wanted an attack on a base such as Khe Sanh. Defending the base would mean a conventional pitched battle, in which the Americans excelled. Westmoreland for a long time believed the actual Tet-offensive was a diversion for an attack on Khe Sanh, while Khe Sanh was the actual diversion.¹⁵⁷ On January 31, 1968, the PDB also suggests that Khe Sanh is the main

¹⁵³ The Presidents Daily Brief, 9 January 1968.

¹⁵⁴ The Presidents Daily Brief, 20 January 1968.

¹⁵⁵ Bc No. 07250/68, *Review Intelligence Tet-Offensive*, 26-5-1976, 1-4.

¹⁵⁶ Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*. 93-94.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 198, 201, 202.

objective.¹⁵⁸ The PDB of February 2,¹⁵⁹ 5,¹⁶⁰ and 7, again suggest Khe Sahn as at least one of the main objectives, although the situation there was relatively quiet.¹⁶¹ The PDB of February 8 mentions the actual objectives of the offensive: creating support for the Viet Cong in large cities and starting an uprising against the US troops and South Vietnamese government. But few believed this could actually be a main objective.¹⁶² Earlier PDBs mentioned NVA and Viet Cong radio broadcasts and leaflets with the purpose to create an uprising. These briefings see these actions as relatively insignificant and not a main objective. The PDBs between 9 and 15 February again mention Khe Sanh as a main objective. Later PDBs also sporadically mention Khe Sanh. Nonetheless, enemy activity in the area remained unusually quiet.¹⁶³ The PDB February 14 1968 states: 'The major Communist threat now appears to be centered in northern Vietnam.'¹⁶⁴ The US fell for the diversion.

John Hughes Wilson names Joseph Hovey as an example of a low-level employee who believed the North Vietnamese were about to launch an offensive. On November 23, 1967, Hovey gave an accurate analysis of the oncoming Tet-offensive. Confessions of prisoners, combined with large movements of troops and weapons, were his evidence. Christopher Andrew believes that the information given by Hovey contradicted many assumptions of both the CIA and White House, and his intelligence was therefore rejected. The US correctly predicted that a large North Vietnamese or Viet Cong offensive on mayor cities would be easily repelled, and would inflict mayor casualties on the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong side. Few understood that the North Vietnamese were willing to accept such casualties. Ho Chi Minh already warned the French in 1946 that he was willing to lose ten for every single imperialist killed.¹⁶⁵ Because too many contradictory information and analysis was given and there was no consensus or complete oversight in the intelligence community, nobody would listen to Hovey, or several other low-level intelligence officers who gave ample warning.

¹⁵⁸ The Presidents Daily Brief, 31 January 1968.

¹⁵⁹ The Presidents Daily Brief, 2 February 1968.

¹⁶⁰ The Presidents Daily Brief, 5 February 1968.

¹⁶¹ The Presidents Daily Brief, 7 February 1968.

¹⁶² The Presidents Daily Brief, 8 February 1968.

¹⁶³ The Presidents Daily Briefs between 9-15 February 1968.

¹⁶⁴ The Presidents Daily Brief, 14 February 1968.

¹⁶⁵ Andrew, *Secret Intelligence*, 342, 343.

Image 4. Map of the Tet Offensive.



Most important cities that were targeted during the Tet-Offensive. Khe Sanh is circled in red.

Source: Joel D. Meyerson, Images of a Lengthy War. Washington DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1986.

Although most historians believe that the Tet Offensive was a defeat for the US, James H. Willbanks argues that answering the question who won the offensive is a complex question. Militarily the offensive was a complete failure for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. All planned objectives completely failed, and with an estimated 45,000 killed they lost more than half of their engaging forces. Even the US and its allies were completely surprised, most attacks were easily repelled by US forces. Almost all areas that were occupied were subsequently reconquered by US forces in a matter of weeks. Both as a fighting machine and as a political unit the Viet Cong never fully recovered from these losses. The military failure on the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong side has several main reasons. First, US power was underestimated. Also, many of the attackers used antiquated tactics and weapons against well-trained and equipped US soldiers. Second, the plans were too complicated to coordinate and the need for secrecy further prevented good coordination. Third, the Tet Offensive planned for too many attacks spread throughout South Vietnam, which meant that forces were spread thinly. Nowhere there were enough troops to actually create a breakthrough or to hold territory. Finally, the US was mostly engaged in several pitched battles, in which the US excelled. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were far more successful in hit and run attacks. Several American commanders believed that the offensive could have turned into a major military success for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, if they had chosen to concentrate their offensive towards several key objectives.¹⁶⁶

Politically and psychologically the US was shaken. As an unintended consequence, Tet became a major PR and political loss for the US. Just before the offensive, the military and government publicly claimed to be winning the war. The way in which South Vietnamese and US forces responded on the offensive, including atrocities committed by South Vietnamese and US soldiers, further shook public opinion. The surprise of such a large scale offensive and the continued willingness of the North-Vietnamese and Viet Cong completely changed the view of the both American public and politicians, which until then still mostly believed in winning the war. Some authors claim that the most political and psychological damage was actually done by US media and politicians, who exaggerated the results of the offensive and downplayed the major military victory the US actually achieved. The North Vietnamese General Giap believed the offensive showed the US that even their power has its limits, and it could no longer win the war. Before Tet, the US believed the opposite. As a result the

¹⁶⁶ Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*. 79, 80.

credibility of US policymakers, army and intelligence community was lost. But this is a one-sided story. Some authors leave out the fact that the North Vietnam suffered in similar ways, and it lost moral and political authority in South Vietnam because of their heavy losses. Some North Vietnamese and Viet Cong admitted afterwards that they lost some of their best men during the offensive. As a result of the successful defense against the North, the number of recruits and the morale of the South Vietnamese army was higher than before the Tet Offensive ¹⁶⁷

Image 5. The execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém.



On February 1, 1968, Nguyễn Văn Lém, a suspected Viet Cong officer, was publicly executed without trial by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. This picture and moving images of the execution became world famous. Photographer Eddy Adams later apologized for the photo. Adams believed that the photo, for which he won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize, did not show the complexity of the situation. Adams defended Loans action. Lem was caught near a mass grave filled with civilian bodies, and admitted killing innocent civilians, including children. The picture had a devastation effect on US public opinion. This picture is copyrighted. The use of this image qualifies as fair use. Source: Eddy Adams. Wide World Photos. 1968.

¹⁶⁷ Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 83.

6.1 Selective use of intelligence

According to James Blood, a retired career intelligence officer with the United States Air Force, the intelligence community was not objective and used favorable statistics concerning the enemy's number of combatants. The number of new enemy troops and number of killed enemy troops was seen as the main measurement in assessing if the US was winning the war. Most of the intelligence community agreed on this point. This distorted view of reality was also presented to the American public. After Tet, US public opinion quickly changed against the Vietnam War.¹⁶⁸ Westmoreland's statements before the Tet-offensive told the public that the US was winning the war. Johnson encouraged Westmoreland and others to make such statements. The impact of the Tet-offensive towards the US public was multiplied because of the White House's press offensive in the months before that claimed the US was winning. But now the public believed that the White House was uninformed or, even worse, lying.¹⁶⁹

James Blood believes that Johnson and McNamara failed to anticipate the Tet Offensive, partly because the right intelligence had not reached them.¹⁷⁰ Blood is particularly negative about the role of the intelligence community and the MACV in particular, even calling Tet an intelligence drama and the main reason for both the surprise and the success of the Offensive.¹⁷¹ Presidential advisor Walt Rostow believed that not foreseeing the offensive was the biggest intelligence failure of the entire Vietnam War.¹⁷² The MACV gets most of the blame, according to Blood. The MACV was slow with information, did not have the capability or understanding the enemy, and was unable to accurately count the enemy. At first the CIA used a different, more pessimistic method in counting enemy forces, which added 50,000 to 100,000 irregular forces to the Viet Cong. This count went against the narrative that the Viet Cong's manpower was decreasing and thus losing the war. After an intelligence conference and critique from Westmoreland, the CIA reluctantly agreed that the MACV would be responsible for the new, lower, statistics for combatant count. The Johnson administration was happy with a unification of information and also sought to unify its own opinion. Dissent became increasingly frowned upon. Blood makes a convincing argument that

¹⁶⁸ James Blood, *The Tet effect: Intelligence and the public perception of war*. (London 2005) 7.

¹⁶⁹ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 208

¹⁷⁰ Blood, *The Tet effect* 341.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 105, 106.

¹⁷² David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 84

because only the unified and positive story reached the White House, many policymakers were self-assured that the enemy was indeed bankrupt.¹⁷³ Nonetheless, the CIA was still asked for assessing the enemies' strength afterwards.¹⁷⁴ The CIA started including the irregular forces in estimates during the aftermath of the Tet Offensive. The MACW estimated 225.00 to 260.000 enemy combatants. With irregulars included the CIA estimated the enemy strength to be 450.000 to 600.000. This proved to be more correct.¹⁷⁵

Thomas L. Ahern Jr. was a CIA operations officer and wrote a history on the CIA's role in Vietnam. Ahern agrees with Blood that for the Viet Cong, the Tet-offensive was a military failure, but does not believe it could ever have been a victory. However, politically Tet was a landslide victory. Ahern believes most attackers consisted of guerilla support networks, and local units. These were part of the units that the CIA wanted to add in the total enemy troop count, and the MACW did not want to include.¹⁷⁶ Ahern also complies with other authors that Tet was an intelligence failure, and the use of a quantitative counting was short-sighted. Basically, the number of new enemy troops, deducted by the number of enemies killed, was the main benchmark in measuring success. The quantitative approach did not offer a correct display of the situation in Vietnam. Ahern does however believe the CIA was the least worse of all intelligence agencies and says that the CIA unsuccessfully tried to convey a more realistic situation report to the policymakers. However, during the Tet-offensive the North-Vietnamese deployed 80.000 soldiers largely without being noticed. Some CIA officers doubtlessly assumed the Tet-holiday would largely stay a cease-fire. Little warnings were ignored or did not reach the right place in the right time.¹⁷⁷ Signals pointing to an offensive were missed or misinterpreted.¹⁷⁸ After the Tet-Offensive the CIA argued that they were right in adding the irregular soldiers in their statistics. The CIA also predicted that in six months after the Tet-Offensive the enemy troop strength would be considerably larger than before.¹⁷⁹

Wilson agrees with most authors that policymakers and intelligence analysts had a troubled relationship, and that most intelligence agencies wanted to or were coerced to give the policymakers the intelligence they *wanted*, not necessarily the reality. Wilson gives most

¹⁷³ Blood, *The Tet Effect*, 20, 22, 23, 25, 46.

¹⁷⁴ Palmer Jr, *US Intelligence and Vietnam*, 46.

¹⁷⁵ Andrew, *Secret Intelligence*, 347.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency*. (Kentucky 2010) 283.

¹⁷⁷ Ahern Jr, *Vietnam Declassified*, 288.

¹⁷⁸ Andrew, *Secret Intelligence*, 341, 342.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 343, 344.

blame to McNamara, who had some good and innovative ideas, whom he believes to be mostly incapable of planning such a war. McNamara sacked people who disagreed, blocked peoples access to the president and told President Johnson what he wanted to hear. He threatened others not to politically embarrass the president, or to cause any trouble. Wilson argues that McNamara did not want the honest truth to reach the president.¹⁸⁰ But also the military had its reasons to report more positively on the situation. Westmoreland wanted additional troops to broaden the war effort to Indochina. These troops would only be granted if he could convince both the White House and the public that the enemy had been driven back to the frontiers of South Vietnam, the Viet Cong insurgency was under control, and the number of US casualties remained within acceptable limits. These limits were mostly decided by public opinion.¹⁸¹

An important reason for the intelligence failures surrounding the Tet-offensive was that the several intelligence agencies in the US, together the best equipped and most sophisticated in the world, were fighting each other for power, prestige and budget.¹⁸² Wilson verifies other authors on the ongoing struggle between the different intelligence agencies, which could not agree upon the troop count in Vietnam. Wilson shows proof that the agencies were put under pressure not to embarrass the White House with pessimistic numbers.¹⁸³ The CIA estimated 120.000 more Viet Cong troops than the MACV estimates. The MACV eventually won the bureaucratic battle, became in charge of the enemy troop count and largely decided the method how to count.¹⁸⁴ As a consequence, the North Vietnamese were able to surprise the US and its allies with the scale of the Tet-offensive. According to Wilson, the North Vietnamese general Giap, responsible for the Tet-offensive, understood the American political motives and the shortsightedness of the people in charge. Giap understood that for the Americans Vietnam was part of the Cold War policy, and that even though the Americans were more than capable of destroying them (with nuclear weapons), they would not dare so because of political constraints. An important reason why the North Vietnamese were not successful militarily was that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) greatly overestimated their own power and underestimated the enemy. On a tactical level many units also made errors. Poorly trained and equipped, NVA soldiers stormed US bases with the goal to overrun them.

¹⁸⁰ John Hughes-Wilson, *Military Intelligence Blunders* (London 1999) 183 -185, 187, 188, 192.

¹⁸¹ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 13, 217, 218.

¹⁸² Hughes, *Intelligence Blunders*, 166.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 189-191.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 197.

Few succeeded. It was expected that NVA troops would overwhelm the enemy and would cause the US and South Vietnamese troops to surrender on a large scale. Eventually, the US and its allies had little difficulty in repelling the attacks.¹⁸⁵

Giap believed the Americans wanted an enemy that was being defeated, and the Americans wanted a battle that showed they were winning the war. Also because of this, the North Vietnamese announced a seven day ceasefire surrounding the Tet-holiday. Although ceasefires around Tet were common, this one was unusual long. Combined with North Vietnamese diplomatic efforts that seemingly looked for peace talks this reinforced the American idea that the enemy was being beaten. Tet was a sacred holiday and an offensive would be deeply insulting to the Vietnamese people.¹⁸⁶ Wilson believes the Americans were stuck in historical analogies such as the Battle of the Bulge, where in World War II the Germans tried and failed to achieve a military victory in a last large scale offensive. More importantly, Dien Bien Phu also came to mind. In 1954 a French garrison was attacked there in a large pitched battle (and the French subsequently lost). Another lesson that the US could have been learned from Dien Bien Phu was that their enemy was much more capable, doing the seemingly impossible by getting large pieces of artillery and anti-aircraft guns through jungle by hand. Another possible lesson was that the Viet Cong and NVA had much more willpower than was generally assumed.

A large pitched battle could in American eyes decide who won or lost the war. The US wanted such a battle and thought of a possible North Vietnamese offensive as a last desperate attempt. The US probably correctly assumed that a pitched battle against the North Vietnamese would end in an overwhelming US victory. The North Vietnamese knew their own weakness and mostly avoided pitched battles throughout the war. Some US generals even hoped that the North Vietnamese would plan a large offensive. Wilson tries to convey that the Americans failed to see the political dimension of the Battle of the Bulge, Dien Bien Phu, and the oncoming Tet-offensive. Militarily, the French were not defeated after Dien Bien Phu, but the political willpower was gone. As a result of Dien Bien Phu, the French government resigned. The Battle of the Bulge gave the Germans the idea they were not yet defeated.¹⁸⁷ In January 1968 signs of an imminent offensive were clear, but false signs

¹⁸⁵ Hughes, *Intelligence Blunders*, 174-177.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 178.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 180.

pointed to Khe Sanh, a base with similarities to Dien Bien Phu. An overload, not a shortage of intelligence fooled intelligence agencies, and the various agencies disagreed to what the intelligence meant. Hughes shows that a lot of low-level intelligence officers were well-aware of troubles and had compelling evidence. The slow command system in Vietnam with various allies and militaries also complicated the spread of information, which lengthened the time for the military to respond.¹⁸⁸ Hughes main advice is that intelligence should not about quantity, but mostly about quality, timeliness and objectivity.¹⁸⁹

6.2 De-escalation and the end of the presidency of Johnson

In March 1968 there were several important events. Just days before, on February 29, Robert McNamara resigned as Secretary of Defense.¹⁹⁰ The request of Westmoreland for a total of 206.000 soldiers became problematic when the public became informed. On March 10, 1968, someone leaked Westmoreland's request. Earlier request mostly went unnoticed by most of the US public. While shrouded in secrecy, the White House could (unauthorized) escalate the war effort without attracting much attention. The request created a large opposition of both public and politicians. Such earlier requests mostly went unopposed, because few knew of their existence.¹⁹¹ A CIA briefing on March 25 estimated that with more than the 206,000 requested soldiers it would take between five and ten years to eliminate the communist in South Vietnam.¹⁹² On March 27, 1968, George Alexander Carver Jr, a CIA Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs, gave the president and several advisors an unusual long briefing, which lasted over an hour. Carver argued that the statistics which indicated the US was winning, were not a reflection of reality, and that only further escalation and a military commitment for decades could win the conflict. Carver suggested de-escalation. The vice-president and others advisors in the room expressed their support for Carver, but only after the president angrily stormed out of the room. On March 31, Johnson announced de-escalation and a partial pause in bombing. A bigger surprise was that he declared not to seek another term as president. He felt a lack of support from his advisors, his own Democratic party and the US public. Afterwards, Johnson stated that he left his plan of a Great Society for a war he

¹⁸⁸ Hughes, *Intelligence Blunders*, 203, 204.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 210.

¹⁹⁰ The fog of war: Eleven lessons from the life of Robert S. McNamara (Errol Morris 2003). After his resignation, McNamara did not discuss Vietnam in public until 1981. It is unclear if McNamara was sacked by Johnson, or if he resigned voluntarily.

¹⁹¹ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 13, 211- 213.

¹⁹² Willbanks, *The Tet offensive*, 75.

did not want, but he felt he had to fight. The US remained involved in the Vietnam War until the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ Andrew, *Secret Intelligence* 345.

7. Performance checklist

The intelligence performance checklist of Loch K. Johnson can be used by policymakers and intelligence officers to establish the required quality of intelligence in the future. Depending on particular intelligence requests, various requirements can be asked of intelligence reports. Furthermore, the intelligence checklist can be an useful tool to compare the quality of intelligence. It must be noted that the intelligence checklist is not a definitive or absolute way of measurement in assessing the quality of the CIA reports. The attributes of this checklist and actual performance are a matter of debate. Depending on the particular situation various agreements on what constitutes qualitative intelligence can be made. Some attributes are more important than others. Reports have to be relevant. Reports should address relevant problems; intelligence officers and policymakers disagreed on several occasions on what these relevant problems were. Comprehensiveness and readability are essential for actual understanding of intelligence reports. They must not only be written in an understandable way, but also be summarized and concise enough for policymakers to read in a short amount of time. Probability scales how likely a threat or opportunity could occur, and actionability gives (several) clear course(s) of action to follow. The intelligence checklist is subjective. As a proposition, three additional variables have been added: Quality of analyzed intelligence, cost-efficiency and responsibility. Responsibility is added because not all intelligence agencies are asked the same reports. The CIA, for example, was mainly responsible for economic intelligence during parts of the Vietnam War.¹⁹⁴

As an example, the rating can compare the CIA reports with the MACV. It can be used for qualitative analysis. The rating that will be used is: much worse, worse, average, better, much better. Cost-efficiency and responsibility have their own rating. A quantitative approach could also be used.

¹⁹⁴ Loch K. Johnson. A Performance Checklist, 607-612.

Table 1: Performance Checklist. The CIA performance compared with the MACV

| | Tonkin Incident | Tet-Offensive |
|---|------------------------|----------------------|
| Quality of analyzed intelligence | Much better | Better |
| Relevance | Better | Average |
| Timeliness | Better | Average |
| Comprehensiveness | Much better | Better |
| Readability | Much better | Better |
| Probability | Better | Average |
| Objectivity | Much better | Better |
| Actionability | Better | Better |
| Cost-effectiveness | Unknown | Unknown |
| Responsibility | Unknown | Unknown |

Qualitative approach of the performance checklist. With help of the performance checklist, this table has been created. Quality of analyzed intelligence, cost-effectiveness and responsibility have been added to the checklist. The rating is not of Loch K. Johnson; it is opinion of the author of this research project. Source: Loch K. Johnson. A Performance Checklist (2011).¹⁹⁵

7.1 Tonkin incident

The intelligence collection used to analyze the Tonkin Incident was diverse and of high quality; interviews with eyewitnesses, radar images, inspection of the destroyers' involved and other sources were used and gave a full picture. Although false reports were initially given, the CIA double-checked the events of August 1964 and revised its intelligence and created an accurate account of the events. Within a few days these reports reached the president. These highly relevant reports were however too late. The president had already acted upon other information. The comprehensiveness and readability of CIA reports on Tonkin were excellent, as were most other reports. The objectivity of the CIA has been outstanding throughout 1964-1968. The actionability was also excellent, since the CIA gave

¹⁹⁵ Loch K. Johnson. A Performance Checklist, 610.

several scenarios and options to choose from. In hindsight these scenarios and subsequent options were very accurate.

7.2 Tet-Offensive

The quality of intelligence was not necessarily bad. Massive amounts of data were processed, and in hindsight the indicators for an offensive were available. The large amounts of data was part of the reason why some warnings were overlooked. This hampered the readability of such warnings. Although some warnings were given by low-level employees, they were mostly ignored. Independent of the question if intelligence community or policymakers were responsible for asking relevant questions, the lack of clear, ample warnings makes that the CIA did poor in creating relevant report. It did however, create important and relevant reports in hindsight. The entire intelligence community was surprised by the scale, location and timing of the offensive. Because the US military correctly believed such offensive would be a completely military failure for the North Vietnamese, and actually hoped on the possibility of pitched battles, most intelligence pointing towards such an event were dismissed. It was given a very low probability. Like others, the CIA misjudged the true goals and nature of the offensive. Still, some US troops were put on warning and most attacks were eventually repelled with relative ease. Although in a non-timely manner, the CIA subsequently created rapports with clear advises on course of action. Among others, these rapports were the basis for the de-escalation of the Vietnam conflict.

8. Conclusion

The most important factor that influenced US policymakers and military during the Vietnam War was the Cold War. All foreign politics were viewed with the Cold War in mind. As a consequence, too little value was given to the specific historical, cultural and economic background of Vietnam. Vietnam was seen a small part of the larger Cold War struggle. Intelligence requests were often shallow and dismissed the complex reality of Vietnam. The CIA warned that US knowledge of Vietnam was limited and uncertain. A minority of policymakers, intelligence officers and military personnel warned for a possible catastrophe in Vietnam. In their eyes, there was little to achieve and much to lose. The Truman Doctrine, containment politics, and the domino theory told otherwise. At first Johnson tried to avoid a conflict in Vietnam and wanted to focus on domestic politics. Nonetheless, the president, along with many others, believed these doctrines and eventually saw intervention as necessary. The escalation of the Vietnam conflict by the US were mostly to show determination towards its allies and to deter China and the Soviet-Union. In reality, the US alienated its allies and weakened its own geopolitical position. As the war dragged on, a large domestic anti-war movement was being established. To be fair, it is unable to know what would have happened if the US decided not to intervene.

After the Tonkin Incident, most of the US population supported military intervention in Vietnam. Discussing alternative views was increasingly disliked by president Johnson. Policymakers, intelligence officers and military personal alike were discouraged by the president and his advisors to give alternative views. Earlier intelligence reports of the 1950s show that dissent was common and not unusual. Nonetheless, Johnson became increasingly distrusting during his presidency, and tried to control all information. Press releases were also carefully choreographed. To a certain extent, this was done to keep public support for the Vietnam War. Pessimistic news would hurt the public opinion. Internally, information was also controlled. Johnsons advisors acted as gatekeepers that controlled who and what reached the president's desk. As a response, some gave the information the White House wanted to hear. The interaction between the president and his closest advisors progressively became a vicious circle of self-confirmation. Others, such as the CIA, gave the pessimistic reality. It is debatable if the public would have still supported intervention if this pessimistic rappers came out.

On an individual level, the struggle between optimistic and realistic reports also existed. Bearers of bad news were often promoted away, sacked, or discouraged in other ways. Much of the intelligence was given high security clearances, which meant few were allowed to read them. Nonetheless, many low-level bureaucrats, military commanders, and intelligence officers read and wrote accurate reports which disproved the private and public narrative of the Johnson administration. Among others, the Pentagon Papers proved that Johnson and his aids lied to the public and congress.

The tight control of information and narrative had unintended consequences. Too much information reached too little people, and when information finally reached policymakers important voices of dissent were filtered out. The CIA mostly opposed escalation in Vietnam. CIA director McCone, among other dissenters, warned early on that the goals set by the US were unattainable without escalation, and that this escalation would likely lead to an extended conflict with China and Soviet-Union. In this scenario nuclear escalation was seen as probable. Only a selected few were allowed to make the decisions. The amount of information to process was enormous, but nonetheless few were given access to all and they had to make quick decisions what to keep. Often this meant a one-sided story at the end of the command chain. Johnson mistrusted most of his subordinated, and put most tasks in the hands of few. This meant a one-sided narrative by people who presumably had little time to decide on many important matters. This magnified the lack of important nuances and deep understanding of subjects.

The intelligence community was in the middle of this struggle. It can be assumed that the CIA had difficulty in directly informing the president. CIA director McCone was also mistrusted by the president. Many CIA reports were filtered and cherry-picked before being presented to the president. Correct information was often available, but not used. The intelligence community was also subject of rivalry, for attaining prestige, power and budget. This rivalry could be found in most levels of bureaucracy and in most US government agencies. As a result, self-censorship and selective use of facts were used in reports. The agencies argued over enemy number of combatants, their number of casualties, which areas were contested, the effectiveness of bombing, and many other data. The biggest intelligence rival of the CIA during the Vietnam War, the MACV, was to a certain extent confirming the good work of its direct employer, the military. The US military assumed to be superior in Vietnam. Limitations of actual and effective power were overestimated, and the effective power and perseverance

of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were underestimated. If one compares the CIA with the MACV, the CIA outperformed the MACV at almost any aspect.

The CIA was right in many occasions. It challenged the dogmatic Cold War view of US foreign relations. The CIA refuted the idea that all communist acted as an unified front, and tried to create deeper understanding of the unique situation of Vietnam. Furthermore, it rejected the domino theory. The CIA also believed limited bombing proved ineffective in Vietnam, and even full-scale bombing alone could not decide or decisively shorten the conflict. Many targets, tactics and weapons used and proposed would be short of committing war crimes. Still, many propagated bombing the North Vietnamese, some even opted for nuclear weapons if conventional bombs would not prove effective enough. The CIA was against the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

The CIA also made errors. Surrounding the Tet Offensive, also the CIA was inadequate. In the months before the offensive, US officials presented a bright picture that the war would soon be won. Westmoreland famously called the enemy 'bankrupt'. While public support for the Vietnam War was already declining, the Tet Offensive decimated US public support. To be fair, even at the Tet Offensive the CIA did gave valuable information The PDBs in the months before the Tet Offensive gave ample warnings of a possible attack. Because of the many rappsorts and the long timespan over which these warnings were given, the perceived level of threat was low. Nobody, including the CIA, expected a large offensive on the holiday of Tet. At first the CIA misjudged the actual goals of offensive. The CIA and policymakers alike could not believe that the main objective was to create an uprising, and therefore sought for other answers.

What was the performance of the CIA and the briefings they gave during the Tonkin Incident and Tet-Offensive? Because accurate figures are missing and parts of budgets remain classified, cost-efficiency is not taken into account. Excluding this, the CIA performed better than other intelligence agencies during the Vietnam War. While acknowledging their shortcomings, the CIA rappsorts often gave useful advise. The CIA performed remarkably better during the Tonkin Incident than during the Tet-offensive. The departure of director McCone, and the increasing hostile environment for dissent played an important role. Whether measured with an intelligence checklist such as that of Lock K. Johnson, or with

other methods, the CIA reports were useful for military and policymakers. The CIA cannot be fully held responsible for the (mis)use of their reports.

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