

Dispute on Viet Infiltration

U.S., Saigon Tallies Often Are at Odds

By William Tuohy
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SAIGON—In Vietnam, enemy infiltration figures are something like American political polls: Differing totals are cited by the various intelligence gathering services.

Yet like the polls, the sometimes widely disparate infiltration figures cited may not necessarily reflect total error on one side or the other.

Like the polls, too, the infiltration figures have assumed an importance far outweighing simple statistical facts—for they are often used as a basis for major policy decisions.

Thus, President Johnson declared on July 31 that 30,000 North Vietnamese had infiltrated South Vietnam during the month of July.

This figure was calculated to show that Hanoi had not shown "restraint" or "reciprocity" in its aggression against South Vietnam, and, consequently, there was no reason for the United States to stop bombing North Vietnam, South of the 19th parallel.

President Johnson's figures came from the U.S. military
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headquarters of General Creighton W. Abrams in Saigon.

Meanwhile, at about the same time, official South Vietnamese military intelligence was collecting figures that showed a marked decrease in enemy infiltration during July—with the incoming troops in the first week of July being only about one-third the total of the last week in June.

The July figure, by this extrapolation, would come only to about 2500.

This glaring discrepancy may have been a mistake in the intelligence gathering techniques of the United States or South Vietnamese.

But it also may be accounted for by the way in which infiltration figures are collected and recorded.

The U.S. military estimates presented to President Johnson tend to represent the num-

ber of North Vietnamese soldiers who have left North Vietnam to move down the Ho Chi Minh trail toward South Vietnam.

These troops are assumed to join up with North Vietnamese or Vietcong forces in the South, and they represent what the U.S. military believes is the enemy's effective military capability.

The South Vietnamese, on the other hand, record only those enemy infiltrators who they believe have actually crossed the border from North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia into South Vietnam.

But often North Vietnamese divisions and Vietcong formations remain in across-the-border sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia and thus are not actually in South Vietnam.

During July, for instance, authoritative South Vietnamese intelligence reports show that several North Vietnamese army regiments had moved

north across the demilitarized zone, west into Laos—even as far as the Bolovens Plateau area—and west into Cambodia.

So, as far as the South Vietnamese intelligence was concerned, these units had not infiltrated into the country during July.

But U.S. military intelligence carried these "fillers" as a threat in being and therefore as part of the July infiltration total.

Whether these two sets of figures could be adjusted to indicated compatible information is difficult to determine.

In the summer of 1964, when the infiltration of North Vietnamese regulars first began, U.S. military officers at first totally rejected South Vietnamese intelligence reports of captured North Vietnamese prisoners.

This view of infiltrators was suddenly reversed early in 1965 when, to justify the

bombing of North Vietnam which was begun on a regular basis in March of 1965, the U.S. State Department produced a white paper declaring that there had been substantial North Vietnamese infiltration of South Vietnam.

In March, 1965, the first U.S. Marine combat troops arrived in South Vietnam.

Over the years, U.S. intelligence officers maintained that it took three to six months to sort out the evidence and come up with a hard judgment on the number of infiltrators in any given month.

More recently, General Abrams has asked for up-to-date weekly figures, and these are what President Johnson based his statements on.

By bringing troops down the trail, analysts here believe, while not actually entering South Vietnam, Hanoi may well be trying to get both sides of the bargain.

Hanoi can replenish its units in Laos and Cambodia for a possible offensive, if it decides to attack. Meanwhile it can discreetly point to the lack of offensive activity or infiltration of South Vietnam proper as a measure of its "restraint" in an effort to pressure the U.S. into stopping the bombing to get the peace talks moving.

Some analysts believe that the enemy units would be hard pressed to assimilate the 30,000 infiltrators that the U.S. says infiltrated in July—coming on top of May and June, during which a reported 20,000 new troops infiltrated each month.

But if 30,000 enemy were able to infiltrate in July, these analysts say, it constitutes a strong indictment of the effectiveness of the U.S. bombing campaign to choke off men and supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail.