

False Data Blamed In '68 Tet Surprise

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By George Lardner Jr.
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A former Central Intelligence Agency analyst charged yesterday that the Communists' 1968 Tet offensive in South Vietnam caught U.S. officials by surprise because enemy strength had been "deliberately downgraded" to mislead the American public.

"Although our aim was to fool the American press, the public and the Congress, we in intelligence succeeded best in fooling ourselves," former CIA intelligence expert Samuel A. Adams told the House intelligence committee.

Backing up some of his charges with what he described as notes based on still secret documents, Adams said the distortions were condoned by a number of high-ranking officials, including former U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker, for-

mer White House national security affairs adviser Walt W. Rostow, former CIA Director Richard Helms, and Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, Earle G. Wheeler and William C. Westmoreland.

He said they were among these "who knew there was an attempt going on to fool the press" and thus the American public.

Still battling with the White House over secret government documents relevant to its investigations, the committee went ahead with yesterday's hearing as part of an effort to make the impasse as painful as possible for the Ford administration.

"They're going to be awfully sorry before we're done," predicted a committee source. "Debating an empty

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chair can be very effective," said another. "That's what we're doing."

Angered by the committee's insistence on the right to declassify secret documents, President Ford last week demanded the return of all classified papers that House investigators have obtained so far and vowed to produce no more government witnesses or records unless the committee changes its position.

Chairman Otis Pike (D-N.Y.) said yesterday he was confident of winning a court fight on the issue and added that it would have to start "relatively soon" if the committee should choose that course. But he seemed content for the moment to rely on the pressure of public hearings.

The committee's ranking Republican, Rep. Robert McClory (Ill.) was reluctant to continue yesterday's session in public after Adams started recounting the contents of various "Secret Eyes Only" cables, but the committee voted 6 to 3 against going into executive session.

"I don't think anything the witness has revealed or is going to reveal is going to jeopardize our operations in Vietnam," Pike said caustically.

Chief analyst on the Vietnam conflict for seven of his 10 years with the CIA, Adams has been highly critical of the agency since he resigned in 1973, especially over his misgivings about the way it persuaded the intelligence community to accept more realistic estimates of enemy troop strength.

Adams said the U.S. intelligence community had been misled by the CIA's "deliberate" distortion of the enemy's strength.

fensive "stemmed in large measure from corruption in the intelligence process."

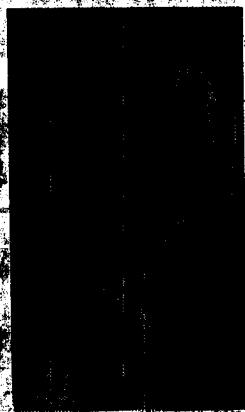
As the late President Johnson once wrote, the former CIA expert said, it was not the timing of the Tet offensive so much as its massive nature that caught U.S. officials by surprise, not only in Washington but in Saigon.

U.S. military officials were so unprepared, Adams said, that in the days following Tet some 1,200 American aircraft in Vietnam were destroyed or damaged, mostly by shrapnel from artillery shells.

"This was totally unexpected, probably because so few Vietcong artillery units were carried in the Order of Battle [the estimate of enemy strength]—evidence was abundant that there were many," Adams told the committee.

Military planners consequently had failed to provide for retreatments—protective mounds of earth—around U.S. aircraft before the Tet offensive began on Jan. 30, 1968, the committee was told.

"Thus it happened," Adams said, "that on the early morning of Jan. 30, 1968, most American airplanes in Vietnam were parked wingtip to wingtip—like the P-40s at



GEN. CREIGHTON ABRAMS sent 1967 cable.

Hickam Field at Pearl Harbor" in December, 1941.

Outlining his struggles with the bureaucracy at the CIA and other intelligence agencies, Adams said he was convinced that "American intelligence had so denigrated the Vietcong's capabilities that we simply could not have predicted the size of the Tet attack."

As the CIA's only full-time Vietcong analyst between the fall of 1965 and the fall of

1967, Adams said, he had come across documents at CIA headquarters indicating that the strength of the Communist forces in Vietnam—then officially estimated at just under 300,000—was actually twice that or close to 600,000.

By mid-1967, he told the committee, the evidence of a much bigger enemy army was so massive that "The CIA's position at this point was that we should increase the enemy strength."

However, the U.S. Army command in Vietnam, which was headed by Gen. Westmoreland, began lobbying to keep the estimate below 300,000. Adams charged, because it feared what the public reaction might be to higher numbers. Starting in July, 1967, he said, the command began to argue that certain categories of Vietcong soldiers should be dropped from official estimates altogether while the sizes of other units should be "scaled down."

To back up his assertions, Adams cited portions of a "Secret, Eyes Only" cable from Gen. Abrams in Saigon to Gen. Wheeler, then head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Aug. 20, 1967.

Abrams, the witness said, suggested dropping two cate-

gories of Vietcong from the strength estimate.

"We have been projecting an image of success over the recent months," Adams quoted Abrams as having said, and if the higher numbers were to become public, "all available caveats and explanations will not prevent the press from drawing an erroneous and gloomy conclusion. All those who have an incorrect view of the war will be reinforced and the task will be more difficult."

Westmoreland, the committee was told, "later signed off on (approval) the cable" and a copy was sent to then CIA Director Helms.

Twenty days later, an intelligence conference in Saigon hashed out the enemy numbers and concluded with the CIA "caving in," Adams testified. He said Westmoreland's public relations staff then prepared a "blatantly misleading" draft briefing for the press.

Adams said one CIA official who reviewed it, Paul V. Walsh of the deputy directorate of intelligence, called it "one of the greatest snow jobs since Potemkin constructed his village."