

How the Data Was Shaped To Back Claims of Victory

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By Norman Kempster
Washington Star Staff Writer

You could almost hear Sen. Howard Baker at the Senate Watergate hearings two years ago intone: "What did the President know and when did he know it?"

Only this time the president about whom the question could be asked was Lyndon B. Johnson and the subject was an intelligence breakdown that left U.S. forces unprepared for the Communist Tet offensive in Vietnam.

Samuel A. Adams, a former CIA analyst, told the House Intelligence Committee yesterday that estimates of Viet Cong troop strength were intentionally cut in half to support optimistic claims that the allies were winning the war.

SO WHEN the Communists launched their offensive on Jan. 30, 1968, Adams said, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were battered by troops and artillery which official estimates indicated the enemy did not possess.

"Although our aim was to fool the American press, the public and Congress, we in intelligence succeeded best in fooling ourselves," Adams said.

Adams has told his story before — in private to the CIA inspector general, the Nixon White House and members of Congress and in public through an article in the May issue of Harpers magazine.

But in his testimony before the committee headed by Rep. Otis Pike, D-N.Y., Adams provided some new details and read for the first time from notes he took from classified memos, cables and other documents.

"Political decisions were made after which intelligence was shaped to fit the decisions that had already been made," Pike said.

"That is correct," Adams responded.

ADAMS SAID the memos and cables indicated that Walt W. Rostow, Johnson's national security deputy; Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker; Gen. William Westmoreland, then U.S. commander in Vietnam; Gen. Creighton Abrams, then Westmoreland's deputy; Gen. Earle C. Wheeler, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Richard Helms, then CIA director; all knew the Viet Cong troop figures had been doctored.

Rep. James Johnson, R-Colo., asked if the President knew.

Adams said he had no way of knowing what President Johnson knew. But he said it seemed likely that the President was informed if Rostow was.

Adams said the reason for the deception was to avoid giving aid and comfort to critics of the war and to maintain the illusion of a light at the end of the tunnel.

But he offered no theory as to why officials who presumably knew the full story would choose to believe their own press releases.

UNLESS ADAMS' story can be disproved by the CIA, it provides ample ammunition for the agency's critics.

Adams said he discovered documents in 1966 that indicated Viet Cong strength, then estimated at 300,000 men, was probably closer to 600,000.

By mid-1967, Adams said, the evidence was clear

that the Viet Cong presence was much larger than originally thought. At that time, he said, the CIA wanted to increase official enemy troop estimates.

But he said Westmoreland objected to use of the higher figure. So, Adams said, the military command insisted on dropping certain categories of Viet Cong troops from the estimates to keep the overall figure from rising. Ultimately, Adams explained, the CIA agreed to go along with the military.

A month later, Nov. 27, 1967, three CIA analysts predicted there would be a Communist offensive. But Adams said the seriousness of the threat was underestimated because of the "phoney" troop figures.

In an "eyes only" cable to Wheeler, Abrams said Aug. 20, 1967, that the higher numbers were "in sharp contrast to the current overall strength figure of about 299,000 given to the press here." Abrams said if the higher figures were released, "all those who have an incorrect view of the war will be reinforced and the task will be more difficult."

ON OCT. 27, 1967, Bunker sent a cable to the White House marked "secret" and "eyes only Rostow" suggesting that the Defense Department scrap a proposed press briefing that would indicate that certain categories of Viet Cong had been dropped from the official figures.

"We may end up with stories that enemy strength is greater rather than less," Bunker told Rostow. "Far better in our view to deal with the matter orally if it arises . . . forestalling many confusing and undesirable questions."