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1 Intelligence Fails On VC Offensive

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ALTHOUGH more than a month has passed since the assault on the cities of South Vietnam, the dispute over the why and the wherefore still smolders. Behind the propaganda curtain sharp differences exist on whether there was a massive intelligence failure and where the blame lies.

To call it a feud is certainly an exaggeration. Nevertheless important elements within the intelligence community were convinced that intelligence had failed to prepare either the American military command or the South Vietnamese for anything like the fury of the attack. This was the conviction, it is believed, of a majority of the United States Intelligence Board.

That is not to say that the USIB has put any final conclusions in the form of a paper for the eyes of the President. The assessment still goes on in provincial capitals and hundreds of villages even as the Vietcong are at last driven out of Hue and threaten new attacks in and around Saigon. The wreckage of the pacification program is a casualty looming large in this reckoning.

SOBER OBSERVERS fear that the propaganda curtain will serve not only its principal purpose—to bolster morale both here and in Vietnam—but will be a convenient cover-up for the errors of the past. In the prolonged analysis, emphasis has been put on the failure to appreciate the extent of infiltration by the North Vietnamese into every level of life in South Vietnam. The degree of success achieved would never have been possible without infiltration from top to bottom.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk gave angry testimony to the sensitivity of the intelligence nerve. Asked in one of those background briefings, since widely publicized on the record, about a failure of intelligence he responded with a diatribe. He concluded by saying to the reporter who had suggested an intelligence failure: "I'd like to ask you a question—which side are you on?"

It happened to be his 50th birthday, well into his eighth year in an extraordinarily difficult office. Hard-pressed, weary after days of concentration over the reports out of Saigon, his flare-up

was understandable. Nevertheless, he seemed to be saying that no matter what the facts may or may not show they must be weighed in the scales of loyalty to a cause, a side, our side as against their side. Even under censorship, as in past wars, this would hardly seem to serve the give and take of criticism essential if errors are to be corrected. And now the American command in Saigon has imposed a form of censorship by withholding information on military operations.

The role of the Central Intelligence Agency is confused with the complexities of the past and the present. The grimmest albatross, the Bay of Pigs disaster. The concept of the CIA as a director who has come up with the professional establishment. Helms, is not as a policy-maker and surely not in controversy with policy-makers in the Government. It is to provide the broad sweep of information based on both open and secret sources gathered through a worldwide intelligence apparatus.

WHAT the policy-makers do with this information is not for the CIA to say. The analogy with a newspaper editor who picks and chooses from the flow of news coming in to him is relevant. The hyper-optimism of White House Adviser Walt W. Rostow may or may not have a firm base in the secret intelligence reports. But in his position, Rostow is privileged to reach his own conclusions with the encouragement of his principal, President Johnson. Others in the Administration who are more cautious and far less optimistic look to Rostow as a kind of daring young man on the flying trapeze. They watch his far-out performance with something like awe, wondering how long events, not to mention the private intelligence reports, will sustain his position.

In the continuing analysis within the United States Intelligence Board, the role of the CIA in Vietnam has been under intensive scrutiny. Was the Agency assigned too many extraneous tasks such as training South Vietnamese hamlet chiefs and in other chores having only a tangential relation to intelligence gathering? Was the true function of an intelligence agency—to establish an effective covert reporting operation—lost sight of?

In these matters objectivity is a dubious word. Men make fallible human judgments. But those who consider this an absolutely critical point in the Vietnam war, perhaps even more critical than the beginning of massive escalation two years ago, remain hopeful that the errors of the past will not be deliberately obscured and the crisis met merely with bigger and bigger troop commitments in Vietnam.