

## DOES THE PRESIDENT REALLY KNOW MORE?

AMERICANS have a natural inclination to trust their President; the office makes him a kind of national *paterfamilias* endowed with special authority and wisdom. In any crisis, the instinct is to feel that the President knows best. When Richard Nixon undertook to send U.S. forces into Cambodia, one could hear the same response from Woonsocket to Wichita: *He knows more than we do, he must be right.* But does a President really have a great deal of special intelligence that is not available to the well-informed, concerned citizen? Sometimes yes, but often the extra facts a President knows are only marginally important.

Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs under Kennedy and Johnson, author of *To Move a Nation*, asserts: "The blunt truth is that the President knows very little that you and I don't know. And even that little extra is going to leak out sooner or later—more often sooner than later."

At the very start of the information-gathering process, there are inevitable limits. The subjectivity of intelligence agents can easily lead them to ask different questions and thus get differing answers from what is before them, whether the subject is a Viet Cong prisoner or a pile of captured documents. Hilsman argues that the intelligence pipeline is further bent because even good data gathered in the field pass through many channels before arriving at their destination. If the information was not digested, of course, it would be unmanageable. So at each step, it is scrutinized, reinterpreted, perhaps expanded, more often cut down. An error at one stage can become magnified in the result.

Also, the President must read what is laid before him with a calculating eye. If, for example, the source of one analysis is the CIA, Hilsman says, he must ask himself: "What axes is the agency grinding at that moment? What is the agency's response likely to be if the President ignores its advice? To whom will the information then be leaked? And at what price to the President?" A President may well get conflicting advice from the CIA, the Defense Department, the State Department, his White House foreign affairs advisers—but he must make a decision. He must do so knowing that anyone he ignores may leak his pique to the press. No President can impose total secrecy for long.

## The Overeager Sonarman

John Kennedy learned skepticism about intelligence estimates—and how difficult it is to keep Government secrets—the hard way, from the Bay of Pigs. Eighteen months later, during the Cuban missile crisis, everyone well-connected in Washington knew something was afoot, but no one outside his inner circle was aware of what the reconnaissance photos showed until Kennedy made his announcement on television. Even so, J.F.K. once reflected: "I don't think the intelligence reports are all that hot. Some days I get more out of the *New York Times*."

During his conduct of the Viet Nam War, Lyndon Johnson often relied heavily on the counsel of his senior military and civilian advisers. Yet in 1966, he confessed: "I can't think of a thing I know that the press doesn't know right now. Oh, yes, some details, a few little secrets. But there isn't one important activity we are in that I haven't seen in the papers or on TV in some way." Even if Johnson's information—especially about Viet Nam—had not been colored by the special pleading of generals and diplomats who told him largely what he wanted to hear, it might have made little difference in what he did or the unhappy outcome of his Presidency.

The Tonkin Gulf incident in 1964 illustrates flaws not only in intelligence but also in Johnson's use of it. When challenged by headquarters, the commander of a two-destroyer

U.S. naval patrol that was supposedly attacked at night by North Vietnamese torpedo boats replied hesitantly: "Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects and overeager sonarman may have accounted for many reports. No actual visual sightings." Washington insisted that it had independent confirmation of the attack, but it was a skinny reed on which Lyndon Johnson based the first U.S. air strikes against North Viet Nam and his successful request to Congress for *carte blanche* to send U.S. combat troops into South Viet Nam.

## 100 Pages a Day

When he needs it most, a President often finds himself least equipped with information. A former member of the Kennedy Administration contends that in the year before the Tonkin Gulf incident, the Administration found itself helpless when it needed to weigh the Buddhist uprisings that preceded the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem. In the pressure of crisis, the Government could find no experts who were capable of appraising why such an apparently trivial series of events came to have such overwhelming importance. While U.S. sophistication about Southeast Asia has inevitably grown since then, intelligence is still based on an uneven apparatus of informers and interpreters; it is a shaky foundation for any statesman to build on.

The President nonetheless has at his command the greatest information-gathering mechanism in the world. It is an untidy, ungainly monster. Cables by the thousands pour in daily to the Pentagon, the State Department and the CIA, in time of crisis or relative calm. In the Nixon Administration, the departments and agencies funnel their foreign intelligence through National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. At roughly 9 o'clock each morning, he passes a 20-page summary on to the President, along with special memos of his own. During the day, Kissinger clips vital cables and forwards them to Nixon, sometimes hourly, sometimes even of teler. The total comes to as many as 100 typewritten pages a day. When any overseas situation heats up, there is a constant barrage of telephone calls between the oval office and Kissinger's basement headquarters. As Cambodia came to a crunch, Nixon met with the National Security Council, with his Washington Special Action Group, with Secretary of State Rogers, with Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, and countless times with Kissinger.

In making the Cambodian decision, *TIME* Washington Bureau Chief Hugh Sidey reports, Nixon "knew the estimate of enemy troops on the other side. He had estimates of supplies that might be captured, of units operating there. He had timetables for the invasion before him. He had casualty estimates, appraisals of probable foreign response—everything he could need on the military and diplomatic side." Still, Nixon misjudged what the domestic political impact would be. But the White House contends that Nixon had to get into Cambodia in order to dispel a growing conviction in Hanoi that the U.S. would no longer answer any North Vietnamese initiative; Hanoi had come to feel that it could act without fear of reprisal, and that is why the U.S. moved.

If that was indeed the reason, rather than, for example, a desire to shore up the new Cambodian government before it toppled under Communist pressure, then Nixon's move was decided not so much by what he knew as by what he felt. Information is not knowledge; action upon any fact or concatenation of facts is an intellectual and even emotional process. Most Americans who say they back the President because he must know more are really pledging allegiance to his judgment, not to the mysteries contained in his top-secret file.