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Vietnam: Why Did Military Calculations Fail Again?

WHAT I WANT TO KNOW is: Why have we known so little? Why have we misjudged so gravely? I ask the questions, at this point, clinically, without prejudice to any future right to give way to anger.

Ten days ago the President of the United States told the entire country and the entire world that the invasion of South Vietnam would be repulsed, that that was the solid military judgment of General Abrams.

TODAY THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE are almost everywhere in tatters, the millions of pounds of bombs we continue to dump over North Vietnam and much of South Vietnam appear to be about as related to stopping the North Vietnamese offensive as underground atomic explosions in Amchitka.

One province is gone, another teeters at the brink, the refugees swarm out of the cities in such numbers as the Chinese did during the thirties fleeing the Japanese, the South Vietnamese army falls apart, whole regiments and divisions become nothing more than journalistic abstractions.

Why didn't we know? Anticipate it? Warn against it?

There are many cases to be made against President Nixon, but let us confine ourselves to the one that says simply: With all his experience, with his knowledge of the dozen times his predecessor ventilated an optimism which proved to be inopportune to the point of being macabre, what did he do to overhaul the means by which he got his information?

Is it the fault of General Abrams, who was there before President Nixon was elected? What is the nature of Abram's misestimates: Was it on the morale of the South Vietnamese that he guessed wrong? If so, why did he guess it wrong? Did he make enough allowances, in his estimates, for the morale factor? If not why not?

Did the Defense Department probe the matter, or simply accept the estimates of the commander in the field? Did the CIA contribute to the estimate?

When, early in Mr. Nixon's term, the CIA advised that Vietnamization would not work, were its arguments confuted, and if so by whom, using what arguments, what analysis?

OR WAS IT the military strength of North Vietnam that we misestimated? The President told us that it was last October that we discovered that the enemy was preparing for a great offensive.

Indeed: Did we know on what scale the enemy was preparing? Did our intelligence services perform usefully? Did we weigh the amount of equipment being off-loaded from the Soviet freighters? Did we know the nature of the materiel? Did we infer the uses to which it would be put? Did we organize our defenses, given the assumptions, competently?

There are many things to be focused upon in the next weeks, having to do with the consequences of what is happening in Vietnam, but one of them surely is the dumbfounding incompetence of our calculations. We have been made to sound like Nicholas II, confidently advising the court that the imperial navy would knock out Japan in three weeks.

How many other mistakes, and miscalculations, have we made, are we relying on? As we have sat in Helsinki playing poker, have we proceeded on the basis of information put together by the same people who put together the information on which we have relied in Vietnam?

General Thieu has gotten around to firing a couple of generals. Will we? Do we ever fire generals? Senator McGovern points out that although we have only one-fifth as many men under arms these days as we had during the height of the Second World War, nevertheless we have as many high grade officers now as then. How come? Lincoln occasionally found it necessary to change his generals, why is it we haven't?

DO WE NEED to completely revamp our intelligence system? What about the State Department? And of course the army.

There are a lot of people who, after assimilating the loss of South Vietnam and the victimization of those South Vietnamese who fought because we told them on network teevee that we would never let them go down, are going to ask the hard technical questions, and they are not going to spare the army, indeed they may very well not spare the Commander-In-Chief, and I'm not so sure they should.