

# 'Snow Job' on the Vietnam War

It was seven years ago this month that America's military planners lost their stomach for the Vietnam war.

The story is told, in part, in secret cables which Pentagon Papers leaker Daniel Ellsberg held back from the public. A few months ago, the cables were stolen from Ellsberg's home, were recovered by police and wound up in the locked safe of a House subcommittee.

We have obtained copies from non-congressional sources and can now reveal the contents including some fascinating Washington-Saigon dialogue that has been suppressed for seven years.

During the closing months of 1967, our Vietnam war strategists persuaded themselves that they had the Vietcong on the run. It became the prevailing official view that superior American firepower had hounded the ragtag, jungle enemy from their hideouts. Their losses had been severe and their morale had been rubbed raw, the strategists assured one another.

"The enemy has been unable to mount a major offensive, although intelligence indicated they planned to do so last May and June," boasted an October, 1967, cable from the American embassy in Saigon. And in the White House, the late President Lyndon Johnson assured visitors that victory was at hand.

Suddenly three months later, Communist cadres struck a stunning, simultaneous blow at 30 provincial cap-

itals and several other towns in South Vietnam, including Saigon itself.

The Tet offensive, as it was called, raged throughout the month of February, 1968. The allied forces, caught off guard, eventually put down the outbreak. But in Washington, the Tet surprise took the heart out of the war effort and the dreams of victory turned sour.

The earlier false optimism, it now develops, had been based upon deception. The Ellsberg cables contain the story of this deception.

The military strategists, first of all, deceived themselves. Then they set out methodically to deceive the press and public. This deception caused U.S. forces to let down their guard and cost more than 2,000 American lives.

On the eve of the Tet offensive, the secret cables show, the planners in Washington and Saigon prepared a massive snow job "to demonstrate to the press and public that we are making solid progress." Documents were amassed, statistics juggled and arguments sharpened to persuade correspondents that an offensive could not occur.

To prove the U.S. was winning the Vietnam war, the American embassy began a "review of captured documents" for "statements made by the enemy himself."

"Our present thinking," the embassy cabled Washington, "is that we will hold on-the-record briefings whenever some point can be proved by captured documents."

The military command, the cable

added, would also begin "a monthly situation briefing designed to update correspondents on progress and to place current actions in perspective. These briefings will be either on-the-record or background, depending on results of current study to determine whether on-the-record approach will permit meaningful briefings."

The objective, according to the cables, was "a selection of subjects about which the press has doubts and the presentation of concise, hard-hitting briefings designed to allay credibility problems."

In preparation for the briefings, the embassy compiled arguments to show that allied forces were wearing down the Viet Cong. These were presented to Washington in a lengthy cable, which made such a strong case that the State Department cautioned against "overstatement."

"On the basis of the facts available to us," responded State, "we are concerned that we would be unable to substantiate certain data." From the secret Saigon-Washington dialogue, here's how they sought to coordinate their arguments:

Saigon: "We see ample evidence that the enemy is fast losing control of the people for his side."

Washington: "Our feelings is that we are making steady progress in chipping away at Viet Cong-controlled population rather than that the enemy is 'fast' losing control."

Saigon: "We estimated that 7,000 VC (Viet Cong) a month were being re-

cruted in early 1966, but this has declined to 3,000-4,000 now."

Washington: "The intelligence analysis showing a decline in recruitment from 7,000 to 3,500 per month should be well hedged as only an estimate."

Saigon: "That an enemy can be suffering more than we know is illustrated by the fact that when the Japanese surrendered in World War II, we had no idea that their capability had become as low as it had."

Washington: "Analogy to Japan subject to too many exceptions to be useful."

Saigon: "There has been a marked increase in the time necessary to effect repairs of bridges, marshalling yards, bypasses, etc."

Washington: "We are puzzled as to evidence on this point. North Vietnam still seems to be able rapidly to rebuild or circumvent any key facilities."

The cables from Washington, while accepting the view that the Viet Cong were on the ropes, stressed: "We are concerned lest our credibility be tarnished by overstatement of our case. While some pieces of the arguments can stand unchallenged, others are more vulnerable because of the fragmentary nature of the evidence on which they are based."

In the end, Saigon and Washington reached a consensus that the Tet offensive, still several weeks away, could never happen.