

SEP 19 1975

FALSE TROOP DATA IN VIETNAM CITED

Ex-C.I.A. Man Quotes Secret Papers to Show Deliberate Underrating of Vietcong NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 18—A former Vietnam specialist for the Central Intelligence Agency today quoted to a House committee from what he said were previously undisclosed military and diplomatic cablegrams supporting his previous assertions of a deliberate effort to undervalue the strength of Communist forces in South Vietnam.

Samuel A. Adams, who served for seven years, as the principal C.I.A. analyst studying the insurgents, told the committee that the surprise of the Vietcong's 1968 Tet offensive had resulted largely from underrating the Communists' strength by as much as one-half.

Mr. Adams resigned from the C.I.A. in 1973, impugning its honesty in connection with underestimates of the size of the insurgency. As a witness for the defense at the Pentagon papers trial in that year, Mr. Adams said there had been "political pressures in the military to display the enemy as weaker than he actually was." He made the same point in last May's issue of Harper's magazine.

As evidence of his assertions, Mr. Adams included in today's testimony parts of two secret cablegrams transmitted from Saigon to Washington in the fall of 1967. He did not display copies of the documents.

The first, he said, was a "secret eyes only" message sent Aug. 20 from the late Gen. Creighton W. Abrams Jr., then the deputy American military commander in Vietnam, to Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

By that time, Mr. Adams told members of the Select Committee in Intelligence of the House of Representatives, there was documentary evidence that Communist strength was nearly 600,000 troops.

General Abrams's message said the newly found higher numbers were "in sharp contrast to the current over-all strength figure of about 299,000 given to the press here," Mr. Adams said.

General Abrams "thereupon suggested dropping two categories of VC from the strength estimated in order to keep it at its old level," Mr. Adams said.

"The main reason for this, he indicated, was 'press reaction,'" Mr. Adams added.

Representative Otis G. Pike, the Long Island Democrat who heads the select intelligence committee, asked Mr. Adams whether a "fair characterization" of his testimony would support the inference that "intelligence was shaped to fit decisions that had already been made." "Yes, Sir," Mr. Adams replied softly.

General Abrams's position was supported, Mr. Abrams said, by Ellsworth Bunker, then the ambassador to South Vietnam.

Mr. Bunker suggested in a cablegram on Oct. 28 to Walt W. Rostow, President Johnson's national security adviser, that no public mention be made of the dropping of the two categories of Vietcong forces from the strength figures.

"Given the overriding need to demonstrate progress in grinding down the enemy," Mr. Adams quoted Ambassador Bunker as having said, "it is essential that we do not drag too many red herrings across the trail."

To make such a disclosure, the Bunker message cautioned, "seems to me simply to invite trouble."

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

Two weeks later, Mr. Adams noted, the military told the press at a briefing in Saigon that Communist strength had actually declined to 242,000, "due to heavy casualties and plummeting morale."

The Tet offensive of 1968 is one of four international crises that the Pike committee has chosen as models for its current inquiry into whether intelligence agencies, and principally, the C.I.A., were providing sufficient forewarnings to policy-makers.

The intelligence panel last week subpoenaed a number of secret intelligence documents dealing with official foreknowledge of the Tet offensive, the 1973 Middle East war, and last year's invasion of Cyprus by Turkey—all of which caught the United States off guard to some extent.

After the committee made public over the C.I.A.'s objections a single phrase from an intelligence summary dealing with the Arab build-up in the 1973 war, President Ford ordered that the committee's access to further secret documents be halted. The matter is now at an impasse.

The committee's decision to go ahead with the testimony of Mr. Adams is being interpreted as an effort by Mr. Pike to demonstrate to the White House that his investigation will continue with or without its assistance, and to put pressure on the President to provide documents and witnesses to report critics of the intelligence agencies.