

Using Your Intelligence

By Anthony Lewis

Samuel A. Adams is an intelligence analyst, a specialist on Vietnam, who spent ten years in the Central Intelligence Agency. He liked the work, as he says. But he quit the C.I.A. in 1973 in frustration at the way lies and politics corrupted its function.

Very briefly, what happened to Mr. Adams is that his accurate intelligence estimates of Vietcong military strength were deliberately reduced—falsified. Before the Tet offensive of 1968 he told his superiors and the military that there were 600,000 guerrilla soldiers. The higher-ups kept the figure below 300,000, for both public and official consumption.

The reason for the duplicity was simple enough. President Johnson wanted everyone to think he was winning the war, and perhaps wanted to think it himself. So his underlings did not want it to be known that the Vietcong had such large numbers after years of American warfare. On Oct. 28, 1967, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker cabled Mr. Johnson's security adviser, Walt W. Rostow, from Saigon, urging that the number be kept down. He said:

"Given the overriding need to demonstrate progress in grinding down the enemy, it is essential that we do not drag too many red herrings across the trail."

The Tet offensive made the fiction of Communist weakness in Vietnam inoperative. For a moment Mr. Adams had the ear of his superiors, but that did not last. Eventually he resigned and told his story in public. Last week he detailed it for the House intelligence committee.

The results of the deception were serious in Vietnam, he said. As Mr. Adams put it in an article for Harper's Magazine: "As many as 10,000 American soldiers had been killed in the Tet offensive because the generals had

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played politics with the numbers." Facing the truth might have forced serious consideration, earlier on, of American withdrawal from Vietnam.

But there are lessons beyond the particular impact on the Indochina war. They have to do with maintaining the standard of truth in American intelligence reporting, and with providing effective means to oversee the work of the C.I.A.

After Tet 1968 Mr. Adams sought to bring the Vietcong numbers affair to the attention of the White House staff and the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. But Richard Helms, the director of the C.I.A., said he should not go outside the agency.

Then Mr. Adams sent a memorandum to the House and Senate subcommittees that were supposed to watch the C.I.A. Representative Lucien Nedzi, chairman of the House group, said the subject seemed "pertinent" but he was too concerned with reelection at the moment. A staff assistant to the Senate committee doubted that it would take up the matter because it had not met in a year and a half.

One clear lesson of Mr. Adams' experience is that there must be effective Congressional oversight of the intelligence agencies. That cannot come from an old-pal network of Senators and Representatives such as Mr. Nedzi, who over the years have become intimate with the top figures in the intelligence community.

A second lesson is that, when things do go wrong, the system should not obstruct those who know about the mistakes and want to seek correction. The present director of Central Intelligence, William E. Colby, has sought legislation to let him keep former employees silent. Even without legislation he has won a gag order from the courts in the unfortunate case of Victor Marchetti. Under such a system, a Samuel Adams could be silenced when he is finally moved to speak out. Congress should make clear that the C.I.A. has no open-ended power to censor former employees.

But even before correction is sought from outside, the intelligence service needs to have its own standards and esprit revived. As the Congressional inquiries proceed, it becomes increasingly evident that the needed restoration of spirit can come only with new leadership—and perhaps with a new agency.

The men who practiced duplicity in the case of the Vietcong force estimates paid no penalty. Gen. Daniel Graham, who played a role in the business for the Army, became head of the Defense Intelligence Agency; Edward Proctor of the C.I.A. became that agency's chief of research. Mr. Helms, despite many smudges on his record, remains Ambassador to Iran. And after all, Mr. Colby himself made it to the top after running the disgraceful Phoenix program of political assassination in Vietnam.

Covert operations can be stripped from the C.I.A., as Nicholas Katzenbach, the former Under-Secretary of State, proposed two years ago. So can such monkey business as dropping simulated poison cannisters in the New York subways—the games of white-shoe boys who never grew up. But the United States Government does need intelligence, non-political and reasonably accurate, and ways will have to be found to assure the proper performance of that limited but important function.