

NYTimes
On Estimates of Vietcong Strength

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To the Editor:

It is a pity that such outrageous allegations as those of Samuel Adams about falsification of Vietcong strength estimates before Tet 1968 get swallowed whole and then even more highly colored, as by Anthony Lewis in The Times of Sept. 22.

As a senior official in Saigon at the time, and a former professional intelligence analyst, let me say that what they condemn as deceit, and duplicity was nothing of the sort. Instead it was a highly esoteric and complex dispute over an arcane side issue which had little to do with real Vietcong strength. This tempest in an intelligence teapot was chiefly over whether to include two shadowy and marginal categories of VC adherents called village Self Defense and Secret Self Defense in the military order of battle. Since they were neither troops nor guerrillas, but rather unorganized hamlet groups composed largely of old men, women, and youths, few of them even armed, our intelligence people decided they didn't belong in the order of battle (though their existence was acknowledged). This argument over S.D. and S.S.D. was fully aired over eighteen months in 1966-1967.

Therefore Ambassador Bunker and others of us in Saigon were concerned lest including the S.D. and S.S.D. in VC

order of battle would never be understood as essentially unimportant but instead would be misread as a straight increase in VC strength. If anything ever proved us right, it is that this is exactly what has happened eight long years later.

And it stretches credulity that this piddling issue had anything whatsoever to do with our being surprised at Tet 1968. The S.D. and S.S.D. played no role in Hanoi's brilliant offensive. We expected an attack, but what surprised us was that they infiltrated and attacked the cities at Tet. Indeed, careful *ex post facto* reconstruction of the Tet offensive revealed how few enemy really participated—only about 72,000 as I recall.

In short, Mr. Lewis and The Times have been used by Mr. Adams in his self-serving attempt to turn a legitimate intelligence dispute over Vietcong order of battle estimates into an irresponsible vendetta against everyone (including his own colleagues) who dared to question his revealed truth. See for example the devastating retort in the July "Harper's" to Adams' April piece in that magazine, in which a former C.I.A. superior on the Board of National Estimates called it "highly distorted."

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Alexandria, Va., Sept. 22, 1975

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See letter to editor, by John T. Moore,
NYT 18 Oct 75 - this file.