

Numbers Game on Tet Offensive

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

The conscience-stricken ex-CIA analyst, Sam Adams, told Congress the truth about the false estimates spread by U.S. officials before the 1968 Tet offensive.

His testimony has produced a controversy over juggled statistics. Other intelligence experts have called it all "a numbers game." But the numbers, tragically, were flesh and blood. By official count, 920 Americans died in the Tet attack.

Sam Adams' revelations have led the House intelligence committee to investigate the alleged role of Lt. Gen. Daniel Graham, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, in distributing the phony figures.

It's a story we happen to know something about. Ten weeks before the Tet offensive, we learned about the secret dispute over intelligence estimates. We reported on Nov. 30, 1967, that Maj. Gen. Joseph

McChristian, the Army intelligence chief in Vietnam, had been transferred to Texas for reporting higher estimates than the Pentagon liked.

"Intelligence specialists, who worked with McChristian,

have told this column that his estimates were conservative. He insisted upon hard information and would never resort to guesswork . . . There was subtle pressure on McChristian from the Pentagon to reduce his estimates, which he refused to do."

The Tet explosion convinced us that the military brass had made a ghastly miscalculation. We flew to the battle scene to seek the evidence. In Vietnam, we obtained a confidential, pre-Tet report that badly underestimated Communist strength.

We quoted at length from the confidential report, which concluded: "We believe the tide has turned and the enemy strength is on the decline. There is evidence of faltering morale and discipline among the southern enemy — the true Viet cong. There are fewer but significant signs that the northern invader is likewise weakening."

We were shown other corroborative documents in Vietnam, but nervous sources asked us not to quote from them. Some of these have now been made available to us.

They show how Washington not only suppressed McChristian's unwanted warnings but encouraged the

Saigon command to sell a rosy outlook to the press.

The Saigon proposals went so far that Washington cautioned in a secret "joint State-Defense message" in November, 1967: "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."

Still, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, sent the Pentagon a secret, year-end report promising: "Through careful exploitation of the enemy's vulnerabilities and application of our superior firepower and mobility, we should expect our gains of 1967 to be increased manyfold in 1968."

Exactly 29 days later, the Communists, far from faltering, stunned Washington by attacking South Vietnam's main centers during the Tet holiday. McChristian had been right, his critics wrong. Their miscalculations were paid for with American blood.

Now Adams, whose CIA intelligence confirmed McChristian's estimates, has

reopened the episode. We can furnish the House intelligence committee with documents supporting Adams' testimony. We also suggest that the committee invite McChristian to testify.

With the help of *Saga* magazine, we located the retired general who spoke out publicly for the first time. He told us how he organized military intelligence from the ground up, beginning in 1965. He wound up with the best intelligence "we ever had on the battlefield," he said.

An operation, code-named Cedar Falls, brought in key enemy documents and personnel throughout 1966-67. As early as the spring of 1967, almost a year before the Tet invasion, U.S. military intelligence had sufficient data to predict the offensive, McChristian contended.

He forwarded the information to the top command, which took his information "very seriously," he related. But over his protests, he was transferred to Texas in June, 1967.

The Tet offensive should not have been a surprise, he told us. "We had a very good picture of the enemy's strength and plans."

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