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Distortion Of CIA Viet Data Alleged

Washington

U.S. military and State Department officers once attempted to scale down Central Intelligence Agency estimates of Viet Cong strength to support their own policy decisions, Representative Paul N. McCloskey Jr. (Rep-Calif.) charged yesterday.

Releasing previously secret cables, McCloskey said two former U.S. commanders in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland and General Creighton W. Abrams, took actions which "clearly reflect command influence, if not distortion, on the intelligence-reporting function of the CIA."

Westmoreland, now retired, replied that the charge was "categorically false."

Abrams died last year.

McCloskey, in a personal letter to President Ford, said it is "imperative that the intelligence estimates of CIA not be screened by policy-makers before reaching your desk."

He added, "I have just learned of a specific case of such military and State Department 'screening' which is not only an outrageous example of the modifications of intelligence information, but which may very well have had a significant impact on the ultimate sad result in Vietnam."

McCloskey said that in August, 1967, Westmoreland, Abrams and State Department official Robert W. Komer sought to reduce CIA estimates of Viet Cong manpower by 120,000. This would have placed the official estimate about 300,000 Viet Cong rather than the CIA's 420,000 figure.

At that time, said McCloskey, "our Embassy and MACV (armed forces) people in Saigon were attempting to show a continuing success in reducing the numbers of the Viet Cong."

Abrams, then Westmoreland's chief deputy, said in one of the cables released by McCloskey that the CIA's high figure would cause the press to draw "an erroneous and gloomy conclusion as to the meaning of the increase."

"All those who have an incorrect view of the war will be reinforced and the task will become more difficult," said the Abrams cable to the

Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Komer argued that the CIA estimate included a large number of women and aged peasants who were not combatants. The Viet Cong referred to these people as "self-defense forces" (SDF) and "secret self defense forces" (SSDF).

In a cable the CIA's intelligence director for Vietnam, Komer said:

"MACV is determined to stick by its guns, and you can well imagine ruckus which would be created if it came out as everything tends to on Vietnam that

agency (CIA) and MACV figures were so widely different.

"Any explanation as to why would simply lead press to conclude that MACV was deliberately omitting SDF/SSDF category in order (to) downgrade enemy strength."

Komer, now an official of the Rand Corp., said in an interview that there was "an honest and legitimate disagreement" among intelligence analysts whether Viet Cong self-defense forces were armed and active.

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