

U.S. INTELLIGENCE SEES HANOI PUSH

But Timing of Offensive Is
a Matter of Estimates,
Public and Private

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 13—Fifteen years after the first American combat troops entered South Vietnam, the American intelligence community is telling the President that the question is still when—not whether—North Vietnam is going to launch a major offensive against the South.

According to intelligence sources and Administration officials, the formal position of the intelligence community, as embodied in a policy paper, is that the chances are slightly less than 50-50 that Hanoi will strike in a big way in the next six months.

But the informal positions of intelligence analysts—in the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the State Department—vary significantly on both sides from that formal posture. In fact, most intelligence officers believe that the odds are not slightly but significantly less than 50-50 that North Vietnam will mount a big offensive in this dry season in Vietnam.

Hedging Is Protective

It is not unusual for the intelligence community or the bureaucracy generally to display official caution in a formal position paper and then a greater degree of candor in private briefings of senior officials. Because political leaders have often blamed past policy failures on "faulty intelligence," analysts tend to protect themselves from becoming the "scapegoats" by hedging their predictions in written documents.

As a result, the informal briefings of senior officials by analysts—the more unvarnished presentations—tend to assume greater importance than formal papers.

In the case of Vietnam intelligence, the two key men are William E. Colby, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and George A. Carver Jr., its chief national intelligence officer. Mr. Colby headed American political pacification programs in South Vietnam from 1969 to 1971; Mr. Carver was known as the "father of the hamlet-evaluation system," a method of measuring the progress of pacification.

Both were widely considered controversial figures over the years in the development of United States policy toward South Vietnam. One analyst remarked, however, that "even though we recognize their past histories in Vietnam, I think that they're trying to be intellectually fair on the current estimates."

Several intelligence specialists say that they are denied access to key pieces of intelligence, namely the content of conversations between Secretary of State Kissinger and such foreign leaders as Leonid I. Brezhnev, Chou En-lei and Le Duc Tho.

"It's hard to make guesses about what Hanoi is going to do without having some idea of what those guys are telling Kissinger," an analyst said—referring to the Soviet Communist party leader, the Chinese Premier and Hanoi's chief negotiator—"about whether or not Moscow and Peking would help Hanoi out in resupplying an all-out offensive."

Of 'Sensitive' Conversations

In an interview, Mr. Colby confirmed this, but he went on to say: "Kissinger keeps me informed on his conversations with foreign leaders, but I don't get a full formal debriefing. I don't pass this down to the analysts, except on rare occasions. These conversations are very sensitive. I myself factor them into the formal estimates of the intelligence community."

The prevailing judgment of recent months of intelligence-estimating about Vietnam, Administration and intelligence analysts say, is that both Hanoi and Saigon are still unwilling to risk the compromises necessary for a political settlement and that Hanoi's continuing objective is to gain control of South Vietnam by force.

Last September, the intelligence services, in a national-intelligence-estimate policy paper, predicted that the chances were better than even that Hanoi would open a full-scale offensive in the dry season beginning this month; then in December that estimate was updated and the odds reversed.

Following is a composite view of the explanations of analysts for the shift.

Does Hanoi think that Moscow and Peking will support a renewed offensive? Probably not, the analysts say, noting that Mr. Carver believes probably yes. Do Hanoi leaders expect that President Nixon would be able politically to resume the bombing of North Vietnam if big attacks were launched in the south? Almost certainly no.

Will Saigon force Hanoi's hand by launching a major attack in the South? A strong but positive no. Who has the upper hand in Hanoi's Politburo, the hawks or the doves? On balance, the intelligence community believes the doves now prevail. Mr. Carver is said to hold the opposite view.