

Ex-CIA Agent Foresees Fall of Vietnam, Cambodia

By Patrick J. Sloyan

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WASHINGTON — A veteran Central Intelligence Agency expert on Indochina, who quit because of what he calls the government's pursuit of "self delusion," says it is "just a matter of time" before the fall of U.S.-backed governments of South Vietnam and Cambodia.

"The basic problem today for the South Vietnamese government is that it is riddled with North Vietnamese agents," said Samuel A. Adams. "There are about 30,000 Communist agents in the Thieu government, from top posts down to province and hamlet jobs."

As for the government of Lon Nol in Phnom Penh, Adams says U.S.-supported forces are facing double the number of insurgent forces originally estimated. "It could go anytime," he said.

Expert on Viet Cong

Adams' statements are based on a ten-year career at the CIA, most of it as the leading expert on the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese Communists who support and are supplied by North Vietnam.

Because of his Vietnam background, he was called as a defense witness in the Pentagon Papers case against Daniel Ellsberg, which ended recently in a mistrial and dismissal of charges.

Adams' resignation becomes effective June 1 and has already caused ripples of controversy at CIA headquarters and on Capitol Hill.

"My main reason (for leaving) is that U.S. intelligence has been neither honest enough nor thorough enough in conducting research on the war in Indochina," Adams said.

'Misjudgments'

"The failures in research have led to repeated misjudgments of the nature and strength of our adversaries there."

In a series of interviews, Adams, 39, said he has been attempting to improve matters through channels. "My criticisms were met with evasion, delay and sometimes threat," he said.

Sam Adams, 39, a descendant of the Adams family of Revolutionary fame, may be the Central Intelligence Agency's most outspoken expert. He has resigned, charging the CIA has mishandled Indochina intelligence. In this first of two "Exclusive Reports" based on extensive interviews with Adams, correspondent Patrick J. Sloyan sets forth the analyst's detailed account of CIA surprise over the Communists' 1968 Tet offensive.

Adams' battles within the agency, including face-to-face struggles with former CIA Director Richard Helms, go to the heart of crucial decisions made by the President of the United States.

Through elaborate and expensive collection systems, including spy satellites, electronic eavesdropping and secret agents, the CIA amasses secret information about nations, their forces and their leaders.

The covert or clandestine operation of the CIA in intelligence gathering is the most celebrated and often the source of controversy, such as agency links with the Watergate scandal.

This information is funneled into CIA headquarters at Langley, Va. There it is analyzed by men such as Adams, with important information going to the President in the bound, blue book titled, "National Intelligence Estimates."

It was one of these top secret reports, presented to President Johnson, that became a "monument of deceit," according to Adams.

Besides misleading Johnson, Adams contends the CIA has used doctored reports to fit the demands of senior military and civilian officials who wanted to appear to be winning the war in Indochina.

"It is continuing today in Cambodia," Adams said. "They are giving estimates to President Nixon based on

It is difficult to dispute Adams' views. The CIA refuses to discuss its inner working with newsmen. But some CIA officials say privately that Adams has a reputation as a "boat-rocker."

"The trouble with Sam is he was right most of the time," said one official. "And that caused a lot of trouble for some important people."

Harvard Grad

Adams was born in Redding, Conn., a descendant of the Adams family of Revolutionary fame. He was graduated from Harvard, served as a naval officer and joined the CIA in 1963. After a stint in the Belgian Congo, he was assigned in 1965 to study Viet Cong morale.

"I became the expert on the Viet Cong because I was the only guy to do any research on them," Adams said. "We had some general information, but no real detailed stuff."

Adams made a series of trips to Vietnam to learn about the enemy. He conducted endless interviews with enemy prisoners and defectors. He filled four safes with captured documents. "The documents are valuable if you use them properly, judging them as a whole rather than to back up a specific point," he said.

He authored, "Guide to a Viet Cong Province," still the only government handbook on the guerrilla forces. He was assigned to lecture

on the Viet Cong to all CIA agents destined for Vietnam. He was promoted to the staff of Helms, the then CIA chief.

Knowledge of Viet Cong

This detailed knowledge of the Viet Cong organization and order of battle led Adams to an astounding conclusion in 1967. Upon understanding the extensiveness of Viet Cong operations and administration, it became clear to Adams that American forces were facing double the number of enemy then estimated.

Most intelligence is based on guesswork, and at that point, the intelligence community had guessed the Viet Cong involved 300,000 men, divided into main and local forces plus civilian guerrilla and service personnel.

"It was a conservative estimate based on what was called 'actual' evidence," Adams said. For example, to determine the existence of a battalion, at least three battalion identification cards had to be recovered from enemy bodies.

"You can jump these estimates up or down by changing the requirements — two I.D. cards instead of three," Adams said. "The trouble is, these estimates will always be low because you do not estimate what you can't see."

Carefully Organized

Adams took a different tack. If intelligence obtained evidence of a regiment here, a battalion there, he would fill out the rest of the organizational chart he knew the enemy used.

"These weren't just isolated units," he said. "It was very elaborate, everything from sappers, engineers, medical corps, artillery, post office and administration — they were carefully organized for years."

By filling out organizational charts, Adams guessed the Viet Cong strength closer to 600,000 than 300,000. "It was a shock," he said. "In 1967, everyone wanted to hear that there were less Viet Cong, not more."

In 1967, the only good news President Johnson was getting was from Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. William Westmoreland, U.S. Commander in Vietnam.

Although Adams said his estimates were accepted by the military unofficially, for the record they kept insisting that there were only 300,000 Viet Cong.

"Initially, the CIA accepted my figures but we were ordered to get together with MACV (Military Headquarters in Vietnam) and come up with a common estimate," Adams said.

"The army was under orders from Westmoreland to keep the figures at 300,000 even though some of the Army intelligence men told

me later that I was right," Adams said.

After a three-day session in air-conditioned "Pentagon East" Adams said Helms ordered him to go along with the military view.

"They were more concerned with what to tell the press," he said. "It fit in to the view that we were winning a war of attrition."

But Adams did not give up.

The issue still had to be reported to the President and it was up to the Board of Estimates to approve the official findings.

The six man board, made up of intelligence community veterans, compile the national intelligence estimate in a windowless, carpeted room on the seventh floor of the CIA headquarters.

"Sam, have we gone beyond the bounds of reasonable dishonesty?" a board member asked Adams. Adams said yes and showed why he believed the military was misleading.

"It makes my blood boil to see MACV cooking the books," said another board member after Adams' presentation.

"There's no voting by the board," Adams explained recently. "They read the draft paragraph by paragraph, listening to objections and accepting or rejecting. They ended up following orders."

Overruled by the board, Adams continued to fight. For the record, he attacked the draft that eventually was given to President Johnson as "unwise, less than candid, sneaky, and ill-formed."

He recalled that he said just that in a 1968 memo.

"My memo on the draft made it clear that I was accusing the agency of lying, cowardice, bad judgment and incompetence."

But Adams got nowhere. Finally, he requested to be taken off the director's staff in a letter that accused the agency of approving a "monument of deceit."

Tet Offensive

The letter requesting transfer was dated Jan. 30, 1967.

The very next day, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese launched the Tet holiday offensive. "The attack on the cities was totally unexpected and so was the number of attackers," Adams said.

The cutting edge of the attacking units were Viet Cong sapper groups and other service units—the very same units the Army only three months before termed nonexistent.

By April, the CIA changed its mind. It then formally estimated the Viet Cong at more than 500,000.

"It was too late by then," Adams said.

Next — Adams: Congress Must Reform the CIA.