

Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive

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ABSTRACT As the January 1968 Tet holiday approached, CIA analysts and American commanders in South Vietnam developed more accurate conclusions about communist military strategy than did intelligence analysts at CIA headquarters. Besides valuing different types of intelligence, General William Westmoreland, Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand, and CIA analysts in Saigon also placed greater emphasis on new information about communist military strategy than did CIA analysts at Langley. These different reactions to information highlight reasons why military commanders and intelligence analysts stationed in the theater of operations might develop more accurate conclusions about enemy military strategy than intelligence analysts stationed at their national headquarters.

KEY WORDS: Tet Offensive, Intelligence, Threat Assessment

The 1968 Tet Offensive, named after its timing with the Vietnamese lunar holiday, represented a significant political and military turning-point in the Vietnam War. Although it did not reverse US public opinion towards the war, the Tet Offensive intensified popular opposition by undermining the Lyndon B. Johnson administration's contention that the United States was making progress against communist forces in South Vietnam.¹ The apparent capacity of the enemy to unleash coordinated attacks across South Vietnam made it seem as though 'the Communists had a limitless supply of

¹See, especially, Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP 2001).

manpower'.² Public opposition towards the war grew large enough that President Johnson decided not to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968.

Paradoxically, the Vietnamese communists – or Viet Cong (VC), as they were called – suffered heavy casualties during the offensive, significantly diminishing their military capacities. North Vietnam became more involved in communist military operations in South Vietnam after the offensive had ended to compensate for VC losses. Although American forces achieved a military victory, President Johnson decided to replace the commanding American general in South Vietnam, William C. Westmoreland, and announced on 31 March 1968 the beginning of earnest peace negotiations with Hanoi – actions that marked a significant change in American policy.

The literature on American expectations of the Tet Offensive has provided considerable insight into the factors that inhibited American officials from anticipating the full extent of communist attacks. In a comprehensive analysis, James Wirtz demonstrates how American generals, policymakers, and intelligence analysts in the United States and South Vietnam reacted to information about a large-scale communist offensive.³ Among other things, his analysis details how General Westmoreland came to believe that the communists would focus their attacks near the northern border separating South Vietnam from North Vietnam and how intelligence analysts at the allied military command center, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), concluded that a large offensive across South Vietnam would probably not materialize. Wirtz shows that the timing selected for the offensive and the concentration of communist forces near the northern town of Khe Sanh turned the nation-wide attacks into a surprise for many American military commanders and intelligence officials.

Ronnie Ford provides a different explanation for the failure to fully anticipate the offensive by emphasizing the lack of coordination among intelligence analysts, military commanders, and policy officials.⁴ Divisions in intelligence-gathering and intelligence analysis among the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and agencies in the Department of Defense contributed to the general failure to appreciate the full extent of communist plans. The surprise, according to Ford, was fundamentally a consequence of political imperatives surrounding the

²James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia UP 2007), 68.

³James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1991).

⁴Ronnie E. Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London/Portland, OR: Frank Cass 1995).

Vietnam War and of systemic dysfunction in the national security bureaucracy in analyzing and reacting to the enemy.

This article has a different scope and purpose than the literature. In particular, it highlights the extent to which CIA analysts stationed in Saigon and American military commanders in South Vietnam developed more accurate conclusions about communist military strategy than did intelligence analysts at CIA headquarters. It does not attempt to explain why the attacks surprised many American officials, but rather why intelligence analysts at CIA headquarters became less alarmed than certain American commanders and CIA analysts in South Vietnam at indications of a large-scale communist offensive. In this respect, the analysis focuses on the assessments of intelligence analysts at CIA headquarters, and those of General William Westmoreland, Lieutenant General Frederick C. Weyand (Commanding General US II Field Force in the III Corps Saigon area), and CIA analysts in Saigon. The focused comparison highlights why military commanders and intelligence analysts stationed in the theater of operations might develop more accurate conclusions about enemy military strategy than intelligence analysts stationed at their national headquarters.

The different conclusions about communist strategy are paradoxical because the American military in South Vietnam defended lower estimates of enemy manpower⁵ than those maintained by the CIA, suggesting that military commanders would have expressed less alarm than CIA headquarters at signs of a large-scale communist offensive. Yet the opposite occurred: General Westmoreland came to believe that the communists would undertake a large offensive as the Tet holiday approached, while prevailing judgments at CIA headquarters discounted warnings from Saigon about a large enemy offensive. This paradox beckons a consideration of not only why CIA headquarters and senior military commanders in South Vietnam arrived at different conclusions by the end of January 1968 (when Tet began), but also why those conclusions stood in marked contrast to the stated positions of the military and the CIA on communist manpower in South Vietnam.

Generals Westmoreland and Weyand, and CIA analysts in Saigon developed more accurate conclusions than intelligence analysts at CIA headquarters because of differences in both the intelligence they valued and the emphasis they placed on new information about communist strategy. At CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, intelligence analysts questioned the informational value of captured documents recovered

⁵American officials often used the term 'manpower' in reference to the number of individuals involved in the communist military effort in South Vietnam, although the military and CIA sharply disagreed over which communists units the term should subsume.

from battles with communist forces, but Joseph Hovey and his CIA colleagues in Saigon drafted analytical reports on communist strategy that relied heavily on these documents, believing they offered insight into hitherto recent changes in communist strategy. Similarly, Generals Westmoreland and Weyand premised their conclusions regarding communist strategy largely on different types of intelligence. Westmoreland considered indications of a threat to the interior of South Vietnam as less compelling than the unmistakable evidence of a communist build-up in the northernmost province of South Vietnam. Weyand, however, believed that the signals intelligence he viewed provided a coherent picture of the communist threat to Saigon.

Furthermore, analysts at CIA headquarters claimed that the intelligence they received from Saigon portrayed communist strategy as so unrealistic and misinformed that it could not possibly reflect the actual strategy. By contrast, Generals Westmoreland and Weyand, and CIA analysts in Saigon were receptive to new information that suggested the communists would undertake a large-scale offensive. More so than Westmoreland, however, Weyand and CIA analysts in Saigon accepted new indications of communist intentions at face-value without devaluing them in light of preexisting expectations of communist military actions.

The next section characterizes the extent to which Westmoreland, Weyand, and CIA analysts in Saigon developed more accurate conclusions than CIA analysts at Langley in the few months before the Tet holiday.⁶ The section afterwards explains why their assessments became different by focusing on the types of intelligence they valued and the emphasis they placed on new information about communist military strategy. The final section briefly discusses a theoretical implication of the comparative analysis and identifies two avenues for future inquiry.

Military and CIA Assessments of Communist Strategy

By the summer of 1967, American policymakers and military officers began to believe they were slowly winning the war in South Vietnam. They believed that winning would come by gradually wearing down the communist military threat inside South Vietnam and by diminishing Hanoi's capacity to sustain that threat. Winning required not only a plan for defeating the Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam, but also a

⁶The description and explanation of different reactions to intelligence rely on archival materials and secondary accounts, some of which were written by individuals discussed in the article. However, the personal recollections presented here are consistent with other types of sources.

plan for reducing infiltration from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) into South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Hanoi had previously increased the infiltration of troops to match the deployment of more American troops, seeking to prevent the communist military threat from succumbing to superior American firepower and increased troop strength. Yet, by the summer of 1967, MACV began to claim that infiltration from the north and communist recruitment in South Vietnam were not matching communist losses and, consequently, overall communist strength was declining. Policymakers in Washington and the leadership of MACV thought they saw a 'light at the end of the tunnel'.⁷

Determining whether communist manpower was declining depended on highly uncertain estimates by American intelligence analysts in South Vietnam. These estimates were prone to considerable error because the unconventional nature of the war rendered more traditional means of estimating enemy manpower highly suspect. MACV knew the total number of communists killed in combat but not the number infiltrating from North Vietnam or the number recruited inside South Vietnam. Estimates of these quantities relied largely on the information gathered from captured enemy documents. Analysts at CIA headquarters judged that these captured documents had not been 'planted' for US consumption and that they provided valuable information about the size and intentions of communist military and political operations in South Vietnam.⁸ Yet captured documents with information about communist manpower hardly ever provided an accounting for the whole of South Vietnam, since their scope was limited to local military and administrative districts, and often provided information about infiltration and recruitment that had been dated well before MACV officials viewed them.

Estimating communist manpower was crucial not only in assessing the effectiveness of General Westmoreland's military strategy, but also in characterizing the type of war in which America was engaged. Military commanders viewed the Order of Battle (OB) estimate of enemy strength as considerably important because the size of the communist threat served as an important, if not the most important, metric for judging the effectiveness of America's military strategy and tactical operations in South Vietnam. Increases in the estimated number of communist forces suggested that General Westmoreland was not

⁷George W. Allen, *None so Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee 2001), 250.

⁸'Questions and Answers Relating to Vietnam', 8 Dec. 1967, Lyndon B. Johnson National Security Files. *Vietnam, Special Subjects: National Security Files, 1963-1969* (Fredrick, MD: Univ. Publications of America 1987), reel 5, frames 518-88.

achieving his goal of gradually wearing down the insurgency. Perhaps more importantly, the types of enemy units included in the OB reports also distinguished those units deemed to pose a military threat from those deemed to pose no such threat. The types of units included in the OB reports effectively determined the functional scope of the enemy, not merely its total size. Including communist units that served only minor or ad hoc military purposes meant that the composition of the military threat in South Vietnam was very different than if only regular VC and NVA forces and guerrilla units were included in the OB reports. Thus, estimating enemy manpower in South Vietnam carried an important dual role in prosecuting the war.

In this context, the OB estimates became a chief source of disagreement and tension between MACV and the CIA. Under pressure from Washington to show progress, MACV maintained estimates of enemy manpower that were far lower than those advanced by Vietnam specialists in the CIA. Intelligence officers at MACV headquarters claimed that total enemy strength was no greater than 300,000, but Sam Adams of the CIA claimed that the actual number was closer to 500,000. The discrepancy centered on so-called 'irregulars' – communist units that served limited and ad hoc military roles and that did not have as much training or firepower as the main VC and NVA units. CIA officials argued for the inclusion of irregular units in the total estimate of communist military strength because they contributed to the insurgency in South Vietnam. Adams also claimed that MACV had grossly underestimated the number of irregular forces, having noticed that MACV had not accurately or consistently updated its estimates of these units.⁹ MACV officers refused to accept the evidence and arguments of Adams and his CIA colleagues. They contended that some categories of irregulars should not be included in the estimate because they served a minor military role in the insurgency. Fundamentally, MACV believed that the enemy was smaller in an absolute sense than did CIA analysts focusing on Vietnam.¹⁰ The CIA eventually acquiesced to MACV's position on the OB estimates, as both turned their attention to the increasing amount of intelligence suggesting that the communists would soon undertake a large-scale offensive.

⁹Sam Adams, *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press 1994).

¹⁰This was clearly stated in a memo by the Saigon Station: 'The Crossover – VC/NVA Manpower Balance', 14 Nov. 1967, *CIA Research Reports: Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Supplement* (Frederick, MD: Univ. Publications of America 1982), reel 5, frames 338–56.

In late November 1967, President Johnson's national security advisor, Walt W. Rostow, requested a report from Saigon about recent developments in communist strategy. The CIA's office in Saigon, often called the 'Saigon Station', responded immediately to the request with a report written over Thanksgiving on 24 November. The office was headed by Robert Layton and included two other analysts, Joseph Hovey and James Ogle. Drafted by Hovey with help from his two colleagues, the report stated that the communists had begun their Winter-Spring campaign and that they viewed the campaign as a crucial period of the war.¹¹ It claimed that the Winter-Spring campaign consisted of three phases, with the first phase having begun in September 1967 and the third phase expected to end in June 1968. Captured documents referenced in the report suggested that the communists intended to achieve a decisive victory in 1968 by launching large-scale offensives, including against urban centers throughout South Vietnam, marking a clear departure from the attrition strategy they had previously maintained. Captured documents also suggested that the communists intended to pursue their ambitious goals with great intensity, although they acknowledged facing a manpower problem. Hovey's military analysis concluded by stating that it seemed as though the war was entering a turning-point and that communist operations during the Winter-Spring campaign would probably determine the future trajectory of the war.

The intelligence official at CIA headquarters who received the 24 November 1967 report from the Saigon Station was George Carver, Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs (SAVA) to the Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms. Carver asked his deputy, George Allen, to draft a response memorandum from the perspective of CIA headquarters.¹² Dated 2 December, Allen's response acknowledged that analysts at Langley had not yet received some of the captured enemy documents referenced in the memorandum by Hovey and his colleagues.¹³ Nonetheless, the response questioned whether communist strategy was in a state of flux, claiming that it had remained consistent since at least early 1966. Statements about the significance of the Winter-Spring campaign or references to a 'decisive victory' were no different than earlier statements by the communists about their past campaigns. Therefore, Allen claimed, these statements were not reliable

¹¹'Review of Available Documentation on the Winter-Spring Campaign, Coalition Government, Negotiations, and Front's New Program', 24 Nov. 1967, *CIA Research Reports: Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Supplement*, reel 5, frames 389-411.

¹²Wirtz, *Tet Offensive*, 175.

¹³CIA Memorandum, 2 Dec. 1967, *Westmoreland v. CBS* (New York: Clearing House 1985), Joint Exhibit 616, microfiche 744.

as indications of what the communists actually believed or expected, especially since much of what was said may have served as propaganda to indoctrinate individual members of communist forces and prepare them for battle. The captured documents that analysts at CIA headquarters had seen did not suggest that the communists truly believed claims about decisively defeating American forces, so it was doubtful that they expected to achieve the ambitious objectives set forth in the captured documents.

By early December 1967, analysts at the Saigon Station had determined that the communists viewed the Winter–Spring campaign as a crucial period during which they would use the full extent of their military resources. On 5 December, they sent a brief memo to CIA headquarters that reviewed captured enemy documents which suggested the communists had adopted a more aggressive military posture towards the war.¹⁴ Believing that the situation in South Vietnam might soon change, Joseph Hovey and his colleagues drafted a report that reiterated the prior analysis drafted on Thanksgiving, but in a more systematic and extensive manner.¹⁵ Dated 8 December, the first section of the new report claimed that the Winter–Spring campaign would become a crucial period of the war, as the communists would unleash a large offensive in an attempt to achieve a decisive victory. It claimed that the communists knew they were losing manpower and could not sustain attrition warfare for much longer, motivating them to seek a ‘radical change in the balance of forces’. Another section of the report claimed that communist strategy sought to draw American forces into the border areas and away from the urban locations, thereby relieving the pressure on VC and NVA forces in urban areas in the interior of the country. Captured documents suggested that the VC were not following the usual three-phase strategy of mounting resistance, undertaking a general offensive, and stimulating a general uprising, but instead sought to achieve a decisive military victory against American forces in the near future to precipitate their withdrawal from South Vietnam.

A subsequent memorandum from the Saigon Station dated 10 December 1967 questioned the wisdom of the communists’ new strategy.¹⁶ It reiterated warnings expressed in the previous reports, but

¹⁴‘Summary Extracts of Captured Documents’, 5 Dec. 1967, *CIA Research Reports: Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Supplement*, reel 5, frames 443–47.

¹⁵[Lubbock, Texas, Texas Tech University] [The Vietnam Archive] VMQCC [Veteran Members of the 109th Quartermaster Company (Air Delivery) Collection] 23/2, Papers on Viet Cong Strategy, 16 Dec. 1967, Rostow to Johnson.

¹⁶[Austin, Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson Library] PCLF [Papers of the Capital Legal Foundation] CIA 149–167, 10 Dec. 1967, ‘The Winter-Spring Campaign – A Big Gamble?’.

added that the odds did not favor a communist military success. Earlier, the Saigon Station had judged that VC morale was slowly declining and that desertions were increasing.¹⁷ Although the CIA had not determined that overall enemy manpower was declining, despite MACV statements to that effect, the 10 December memorandum concluded that the enemy had misread the military situation in South Vietnam in believing it could defeat American forces in a country-wide show of force.¹⁸ It stated that the communists had overestimated the losses they had inflicted on American forces and severely overestimated what they could accomplish in the field against American troops. A large-scale offensive would not only fail, the memo stated, but would leave the communists significantly vulnerable after the offensive. Like the 8 December report, however, this memo noted that communist strategy seemed to have changed from preserving strength and prolonging the war to making a large push towards a decisive victory.

When Carver received the 8 December 1967 report, he immediately solicited opinions at Langley before forwarding it to Walt Rostow. The first response Carver received came from the Office of Current Intelligence (OCI), which questioned the assessment of communist strategy offered by the Saigon Station. The OCI response effectively claimed that analysts in Saigon had overreacted to the captured documents, adding that they did not have clear evidence suggesting that the communists actually believed that they could mount a decisive campaign against American forces.¹⁹ The response reiterated the generally accepted assessment that the communists would probably maintain a strategy of protracted warfare. Carver also asked Sam Adams for his reactions to the report. In a written statement, Adams claimed that the analysis seemed to make sense and should be taken seriously, but mentioned that it omitted a discussion of communist manpower—a subject that continued to occupy much of his time and mental energy.²⁰ Thus, apart from Sam Adams, the Saigon Station's analysis failed to raise alarm at CIA headquarters to the possibility of a large-scale communist offensive.

¹⁷'The State of Viet Cong Morale', 27 Nov. 1967, *CIA Research Reports: Vietnam and Southeast Asia, 1946–1976* (Frederick, MD: Univ. Publications of America 1982), reel 5, frames 418–25.

¹⁸The memo 'The Crossover – VC/NVA Manpower Balance' stated that it was not clear whether enemy manpower was declining.

¹⁹Adams, *War of Numbers*, 133.

²⁰[Lubbock, Texas, Texas Tech University] [The Vietnam Archive] LBC [Larry Berman Collection (Westmoreland v. CBS)] 24/12, May 1981, Mike Wallace interview with Sam Adams.

Carver sent the Saigon Station's report to Rostow on 15 December 1967 with a response note attached.²¹ Carver again asked George Allen to draft a rebuttal from the headquarters' perspective.²² The rebuttal stated that the Saigon Station had drawn different conclusions than did CIA headquarters in part because the analysts in Saigon did not have all the data that analysts at Langley had observed.

The rebuttal also questioned the reliability of the evidence marshaled in the 8 December report, claiming that the captured documents might carry misleading information. It also claimed that the report was predicated on the assumption that Hanoi believed it could not continue the war at its present loss rate. Although the communists faced a manpower problem, 'Hanoi is prepared to pay this price in an effort to reverse the unfavorable trends of the past two years',²³ remaining able to replace communist losses enough to maintain the basic force structure in South Vietnam. Allen offered a different perspective of Hanoi's outlook in writing that the communists believed they could win the war by convincing Washington that continuing to fight was futile, thus restating the CIA's position that the fundamental communist strategy was to continue the war until American forces withdrew in the belief they could not win. The attachment concluded by stating that the communists would not only be defeated if they launched a large-scale offensive, but would become vulnerable to psychological attacks by failing to frustrate American hopes of winning. Thus, the response note amounted to a total rejection of the Saigon Station's report.

As this disagreement between the Saigon Station and CIA headquarters developed, MACV maintained its view that communist strategy remained largely the same as it had for over a year. In that respect, officials at MACV and CIA headquarters held similar positions on the question of communist strategy. Dated 25 November 1967, a report by MACV claimed that the enemy retained the strategy of waging a prolonged war of attrition in the hope of eventually achieving political goals.²⁴ It postulated that the communists would probably attempt to maintain their strength by fighting along the periphery of South Vietnam and thus avoid over-committing themselves, especially because they had been losing manpower and suffered from low morale. This would allow them to pose a constant threat to South Vietnam without exposing them to major military defeats against

²¹VMQCC 23/2, Papers on Viet Cong Strategy, 16 Dec. 1967, Rostow to Johnson.

²²C. Michael Hiam, *Who the Hell are We Fighting? The Story of Sam Adams and the Vietnam Intelligence Wars* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press 2006), 130.

²³VMQCC 23/2, Papers on Viet Cong Strategy, 15 Dec. 1967, Helms to Rostow, 4.

²⁴'An Assessment of the Current Enemy Situation', 25 Nov. 1967, Lyndon B. Johnson National Security Files, reel 5, frames 150–63.

US forces. Nonetheless, the report added, the enemy would still seek to launch large offensives to demonstrate its capacity to maintain a military threat in South Vietnam, seeking to achieve psychological goals in the protracted war.

Westmoreland shared this view until signs began to suggest a different communist strategy. In a cable telegram sent on 10 December 1967 to General Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, Westmoreland claimed that the communists had chosen to locate in the tri-border areas connecting Laos and Cambodia to South Vietnam because they could quickly attack from there and return before American forces defeated them.²⁵ This allowed them to maintain the capacity to attack while not exposing them to a decisive defeat. He added that the logic of his 'shield strategy', as he called it, was to prevent penetration by communist forces from the border areas into South Vietnam for limited military operations. Westmoreland defended the shield strategy, which emphasized positioning American troops along the border areas, by claiming that it did not necessarily leave the interior of the country exposed to communist attack. Pacification programs, he believed, would help stabilize the interior and diminish the incidence of communist guerrilla activities.

Westmoreland began to change his view towards the end of December 1967, as communist attacks increased throughout South Vietnam and captured enemy documents began to reveal a different communist strategy. In a cable telegram to Wheeler dated 20 December, Westmoreland responded directly to the Saigon Station's report of 8 December. He agreed with the claim that the communists had made a significant decision regarding the future course of the war.²⁶ Specifically, Westmoreland stated that the communists had already decided in late September to reverse the downward trend with a major military effort during the Winter-Spring campaign. They had determined that a continuation of the same strategy would lead to defeat because of the heavy casualties they had suffered. Thus, the communists were forced into this decision by the successes of the American military in South Vietnam. Westmoreland postulated that the communists had decided to exert their maximum effort on both military and political fronts, adding that captured documents included exhortations to make greater efforts to achieve a victory in the near term. Finding the telegram an occasion to defend his strategy, Westmoreland concluded that American forces must pursue the enemy in the tri-border sanctuaries, as they were often called, indicating that

²⁵[Carlisle, Pennsylvania, US Army Military History Institute] [The William C.] Westmoreland Collection, Box 22, 10 Dec. 1967, Westmoreland to Wheeler.

²⁶Westmoreland Collection, Box 22, 20 Dec. 1967, Westmoreland to Wheeler.

he maintained confidence in the shield strategy and its focus on the periphery of South Vietnam.

In early January 1968, Westmoreland turned his attention to an emerging situation around the town of Khe Sanh, located in the northwestern part of Quang Tri Province in I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ). A total of four NVA regiments had positioned themselves to surround the US Marine base in Khe Sanh, posing a major threat to both the troops stationed there and American control of that outpost. Figure 1 displays an administrative map of the provinces and cities of South Vietnam, as well as the CTZ demarcations used by the American military in prosecuting the war.²⁷

Westmoreland saw communist activities in I Corps zone as ominous signs of a major offensive that might begin shortly. He and others came to believe that the emerging situation resembled the prelude to the Siege of Dien Bien Phu (1954) that brought an end to French colonial rule in Indochina. To avoid a defeat, Westmoreland devised a plan to meet the communist challenge, the first phase of which consisted of aerial reconnaissance missions intended to assess the extent and positioning of enemy forces surrounding Khe Sanh. On 6 January, Westmoreland ordered air assaults against communist positions, the second phase of his plan for defending Khe Sanh. The anticipated siege and recent communist attacks in the interior of the country, south of I Corps, drew enough concern from Westmoreland that, on 8 January, he urged General Cao Van Vien, the chairman of the Joint General Staff of South Vietnam, to cancel the temporary ceasefire scheduled for Tet.²⁸ Vien preferred limiting it to 24 hours, but Westmoreland replied that the holiday held no significance to American troops, as it did for Vietnamese troops. They revisited the issue weeks later.

During early January 1968, Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand was receiving intelligence about communist activities near Saigon that he found alarming. As commander of II Field Force, Weyand held direct responsibility for the security of III Corps zone and, thus, the Saigon area. Weyand's intelligence officer or G-2, Captain Robert Simmons, had reviewed captured documents and noticed that the National Liberation Front, the communists' political organization in South Vietnam, had changed its post office boxes for the Saigon area.

²⁷Obtained from Merle L. Pribbenow, 'North Vietnam's Final Offensive: Strategic Endgame Nonpareil', *Parameters* 29/4 (Winter 1999–2000), 58–71. Permission for use of Figure 1 kindly granted by the Editor of *Parameters*, published by the US Army War College, on 4 January 2011.

²⁸Meeting with Gen. Vien, 8 Jan. 1968, *War in Vietnam: The Papers of William C. Westmoreland* (Bethesda, MD: Univ. Publications of America 1993), reel 12, frame 540.

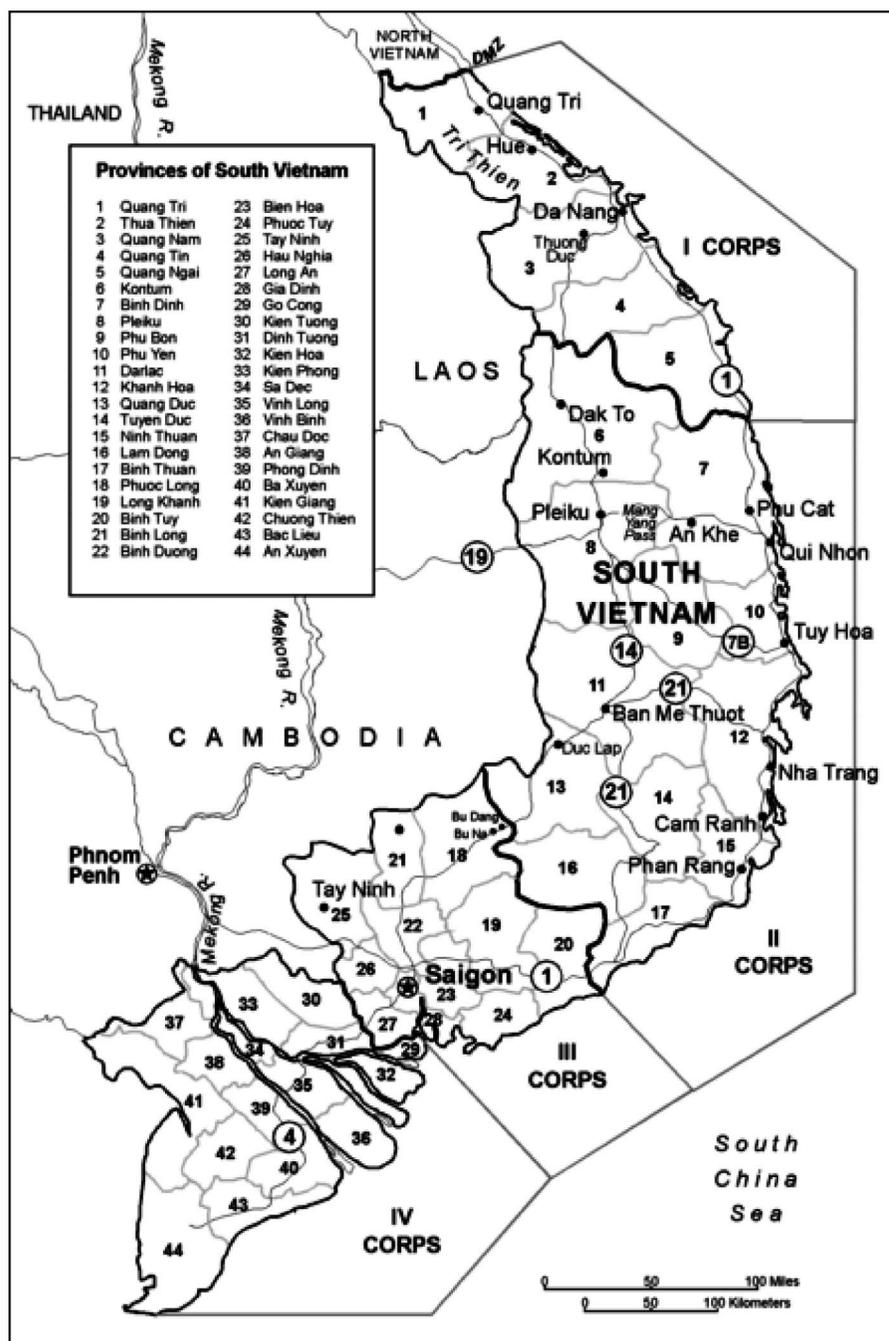


Figure 1. South Vietnam, 1968.

Source: See note 27.

After plotting the new post office setup, Captain Simmons realized that the communists had realigned the command zones to point as a dagger towards Saigon, suggesting that they were planning to target the capital. Simmons brought this to the attention of General Weyand, who agreed with his inference about the danger to Saigon.²⁹ This evidence added to what Weyand had gathered in preceding weeks from intercepts of communist radio traffic. Long after the war, the American commander recalled his reaction to the signals intelligence he viewed in the first weeks of January:

I noted that while we were considering moving north there were very strong indications from radio intelligence that they were moving south. We weren't reading their messages, but we knew how much traffic their units were sending out. All of a sudden there would be an unidentified unit come on the air in an area to the south, closer to Saigon. Then the communications with the southernmost would get stronger and stronger. That would be an obvious indication that somebody is moving south. I talked with John Vann and we both agreed that, 'Hey, there is something going on here that we don't have a good handle on. It doesn't look like they are going to be where we thought they were going to be if we move north and attack up in the Song Be area. There could be nothing there and the enemy might very well be behind us.' Over a period of a very short time, maybe a few days, the two of us decided that we shouldn't be moving north and we'd better wait until we [had] this situation sorted out.³⁰

Weyand telephoned Westmoreland to schedule a meeting so they could discuss the intelligence signals and determine appropriate troop deployments. During the meeting, held on 10 January 1968, Weyand presented the evidence Simmons, his G-2, had assembled regarding Saigon. In his memoir, Westmoreland recalls that Weyand had 'put together various bits of tenuous but disturbing intelligence and concluded that the enemy in III Corps Zone was attempting to shift away from his border sanctuaries toward population centers, including

²⁹For a full description of Capt. Simmons' realization and General Weyand's reaction, see John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press 2001), 231.

³⁰[Carlisle, Pennsylvania, US Army Military History Institute] [Frederick C.] Weyand Papers, [Senior Officer Oral History Program, Box 1, Gen. Frederick C.] Weyand interviewed by Dr [Lewis] Sorley [9–15 Nov. 1999], 123.

Saigon'.³¹ Asked by Westmoreland what he recommended, Weyand requested a cancellation of planned operations in Phouc Long province (in northern III Corps), near the border with Cambodia. He asked that the troops scheduled for deployment to Phouc Long be repositioned to defend Saigon against a possible communist offensive. Weyand's request accorded with his general lack of confidence in the shield strategy, as he believed it over-emphasized the periphery of South Vietnam and under-emphasized the security of urban locations in the interior of the country. Westmoreland granted Weyand's request for a cancellation of the troop deployment three days after their meeting, when his intelligence chief, Major General Phillip Davidson, offered further support for Weyand's conclusion. Westmoreland later called this decision to cancel the planned operations in Phouc Long and deploy 15 battalions for the defense of Saigon 'one of the most critical of the Vietnam War'.³²

By mid-January 1968, many policy officials in the national security bureaucracy in Washington had come to expect a siege of Khe Sanh that they believed might resemble the siege of Dien Bien Phu. Accordingly, the CIA issued a memorandum that analyzed the situation around Khe Sanh and its relation to overall communist strategy.³³ Dated 10 January, the memorandum postulated that communist activities around Khe Sanh were preparation for an offensive that would take place after the Tet holiday. Attacking Khe Sanh, it stated, would allow the communists to tie down American forces there and inflict losses on them over a prolonged period. At a minimum, the communists sought to force the Marines to abandon their base; at a maximum, they sought to exact a heavy toll on American forces defending the base. Thus, the CIA judged that a siege of Khe Sanh was entirely consistent with the communist strategy of wearing down American forces until public pressure would force a withdrawal from South Vietnam.

About a week after issuing the memorandum on Khe Sanh, the CIA issued another, more general memorandum entitled 'Alternative Interpretations of Hanoi's Intentions'.³⁴ Dated 18 January 1968, it discussed collective views at Langley of Hanoi's outlook and options regarding the war. The memorandum stated that Hanoi may believe it

³¹William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1976), 318.

³²Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, 137.

³³[College Park, Maryland, National Archives and Records Administration] GCIA [General CIA Records (Electronic Database)] 10 Jan. 1968, 'The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh'.

³⁴'Alternative Interpretations of Hanoi's Intentions', 18 Jan. 1968, Intelligence Memorandum. Accessed at the CIA Freedom of Information Act webpage at <www.foia.cia.gov>.

is losing the war but that reversing the trend with a large offensive would undermine the effectiveness of communist military and political operations in South Vietnam. It stated that Hanoi would not talk of a decisive victory or coalition government if it did not believe that either represented a realistic goal. The memorandum claimed that Hanoi could sustain the war effort because the strains of the war on North Vietnam were within its manageable limits. Indeed, infiltration had remained consistent and deployments in the western end of the demilitarized zone (especially near Khe Sanh) suggested that the communists sought to win an important battle. The basic strategy, then, would remain as it had been: the communists would fight a protracted war until the US withdrew from South Vietnam. The memorandum stated that the communists were best served by conserving their forces and not exposing themselves in a large-scale offensive. It concluded by claiming that, since it would be surprising if Hanoi attempted to end the war soon (i.e., in 1968), it would instead probably continue its military efforts to achieve an acceptable political settlement in South Vietnam.

Westmoreland had drawn a different conclusion than CIA headquarters about communist strategy – one that more closely reflected communist activities in South Vietnam. By mid-January, he expected the communists to undertake a large offensive before the Tet holiday arrived. Westmoreland telephoned President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam on 15 January to say he believed there was a 60:40 chance of a major communist attack before Tet.³⁵ This speculation reflected the increase in communist activities since the beginning of January, as Westmoreland had earlier expected the communists to wait until after Tet to unleash an attack.³⁶ He added that Major General Davidson believed the odds were 40:60, but they agreed that signs pointed to a major military effort by the enemy in the near term. Westmoreland had expressed to President Johnson that he wanted a complete cancellation of the scheduled Tet ceasefire, but he understood the South Vietnamese would not accept that precautionary measure.³⁷

As an alternative, Westmoreland asked Thieu to reduce the ceasefire scheduled for Tet from 48 hours to 24 hours in light of communist violations of the Christmas and New Year's ceasefires. Thieu claimed that limiting the ceasefire to 24 hours would damage morale because of

³⁵Westmoreland, History Number 28 (I), *War in Vietnam*, reel 12, frame 438.

³⁶[Lubbock, Texas, Texas Tech University] [The Vietnam Archive] LBC-PAR [Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research)] 8/9, 7 Jan. 1968, Westmoreland to Sharp, 'Estimate of Current Enemy Strategy'.

³⁷Rostow to Johnson, 19 Jan. 1968, *Westmoreland v. CBS*, Joint Exhibit 982, microfiche 39.

Tet's symbolic and spiritual importance to the South Vietnamese troops, but they compromised on having a 36-hour ceasefire. Westmoreland said that all American troops would remain on high alert during the 36 hours, and President Thieu replied that half of South Vietnamese troops would remain on alert during the ceasefire.³⁸

Nonetheless, by mid-January 1968, Westmoreland had turned his attention squarely towards the defense of Khe Sanh, believing it would serve as the focal point of the communist offensive that he expected. In a memo prepared for the president, Westmoreland claimed that withdrawing from Khe Sanh would mean a tactical loss for American forces and a psychological victory for the communists, supporting their propaganda efforts in South Vietnam.³⁹ Major General Davidson briefed Westmoreland on 16 January regarding enemy movements into Quang Tri province.⁴⁰ The following day, Westmoreland convened a conference of senior commanders and MACV staff officers to discuss reinforcing I Corps, and soon thereafter ordered the creation of a forward command post in I Corps under the direction of Lieutenant General Creighton Abrams, the deputy MACV commander. So intent was Westmoreland on defending Khe Sanh that he ordered General Weyand to deploy some of his troops to help reinforce Khe Sanh, despite having granted Weyand's earlier request to deploy troops in defense of Saigon.⁴¹

As Tet approached, Westmoreland faced a difficult trade-off in deciding where to position American forces. He determined that signals suggesting the communists might attack in the interior of the country, south of I Corps, should not detract from the primary concern of defending Khe Sanh. He later recalled:

As the [communist] build-up became more in I Corps, the challenge that I faced was to maintain a strong military posture in all threatened areas, to include the Saigon area, while holding up the enemy thrust in I Corps with minimum essential forces until the enemy's efforts could be spoiled in other areas and I could provide troops to reinforce northern I Corps, which was becoming very evidently the enemy's major effort in terms of troops involved.⁴²

³⁸Meetings with President Thieu and Gen. Vien, *War in Vietnam*, reel 12, frame 567.

³⁹LBC-PAR 8/9, 13 Jan. 1968, Rostow to Johnson.

⁴⁰Westmoreland, History Number 28 (I), *War in Vietnam*, reel 12, frame 438.

⁴¹Sharp to Wheeler, 21 Jan. 1968, *War in Vietnam*, reel 12, frame 615.

⁴²Westmoreland, History Number 28 (I), *War in Vietnam*, reel 12, frame 445.

The communist buildup made tactical sense, Westmoreland believed, because Khe Sanh was near the border sanctuaries and thus the enemy's base of manpower and supplies, making motorized transport to Khe Sanh from the supply areas much easier than transport to areas further south and inside the country.

Westmoreland had developed a detailed understanding of communist activities in South Vietnam by the end of January. In a two-part memorandum to President Johnson dated 22 January, Westmoreland stated that captured documents indicated that the communists believed the present operations would bring a decisive victory.⁴³ The intensity of the war had increased and the communists had increased their attacks recently. The particularly unusual development, he noted, was the increased intensity in III Corps and IV Corps. Westmoreland inferred that the communists were apparently engaging in a short-term surge to bring about political negotiations and a coalition government in South Vietnam. He claimed that the enemy was planning a coordinated offensive in the northern two provinces. In the second part of the memorandum, Westmoreland stated that 'the enemy will attempt a country-wide show of strength just prior to Tet'.⁴⁴ He demonstrated a keen understanding of communist strategy in claiming that the enemy would attack multiple locations through South Vietnam, particularly urban centers. Two days earlier, he even postulated that the communists might attack during the Tet holiday, in light of their history of launching surprise attacks during ceasefires, thus exhibiting his deep distrust of the communists on the ceasefire issue.⁴⁵ Indeed, less than a week before the Tet holiday, Westmoreland convinced President Thieu to cancel the ceasefire in I Corps altogether in anticipation of a siege against Khe Sanh.

By the end of January, Weyand and Westmoreland had both received intelligence about communist activities in III Corps zone, but arrived at different assessments of communist intentions. The intelligence Weyand received was enough for his G-2 officer to claim, 'It is logical to assume [at this point] that a major VC effort will occur during the Tet period and certain indicators point towards this.'⁴⁶ Taking precautions, Weyand responded by doubling the number of battalions in the Saigon area during the 20 days between his meeting with

⁴³Rostow to Johnson, 22 Jan. 1968, *Lyndon B. Johnson National Security Files*, reel 5, frames 776–81.

⁴⁴Ibid., frames 782–3.

⁴⁵Westmoreland Collection, Box 22, 20 Jan. 1968, Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp.

⁴⁶PCLF, Box 22, 'General Davidson', 18 Jan. 1968, Simmons to Davidson.

Westmoreland on 10 January and the beginning of Tet.⁴⁷ On 29 January, the day before the first wave of attacks began, he moved the US 25th ('Tropic Lightning') Infantry Division nearer to the capital from its sweep operations in the countryside after receiving signals of possible communist attacks in the immediate future.⁴⁸

By contrast, Westmoreland placed considerable emphasis on defending Khe Sanh, despite receiving reports from the National Security Agency (NSA) suggesting that the communists might attack urban locations throughout the country, including in III Corps. By 29 January, he had begun to speculate whether indications of attacks against urban locations were intended as diversions from the situation around Khe Sanh.⁴⁹ Holding responsibility for defending the whole of South Vietnam, Westmoreland prioritized preparing for what he believed was an inevitable assault instead of reinforcing urban locations that might or might not fall under communist attack.

The Sources of Different Threat Assessments

The previous section highlighted the extent to which Generals Westmoreland and Weyand, and CIA analysts in Saigon developed more accurate conclusions than intelligence analysts at CIA headquarters about communist military strategy. Westmoreland, Weyand, and CIA analysts in Saigon did not predict the Tet Offensive, but they developed conclusions that closely reflected the information they received, unlike intelligence officials at CIA headquarters, who largely retained their preexisting views of communist strategy after receiving intelligence suggesting that the communists might attempt a large-scale offensive across South Vietnam. In this respect, Weyand and CIA analysts at the Saigon Station were more receptive than Westmoreland to incoming information about communist strategy. The records suggest that Westmoreland did not fully appreciate the threat of communist attacks in the interior of the country – a proposition that CIA headquarters rejected after receiving warnings to that effect from the Saigon Station.

Military and CIA assessments of communist strategy are paradoxical in that General Westmoreland and his MACV headquarters maintained

⁴⁷Prados, *Vietnam*, 231.

⁴⁸William Colby (with James McCarger), *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books 1989), 228.

⁴⁹Robert J. Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945–1975* (Ft Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency 2002), 326, <www.fas.org/irp/nsa/spartans/index.html>.

that the communists faced a growing manpower problem that would steadily reduce the offensive pressure they could mount against South Vietnam. By contrast, the CIA had not concluded that the communists had passed what MACV called the 'cross-over point' – the point at which the overall communist losses exceeded the combined input from recruitment and infiltration. Assuming both military commanders and CIA analysts considered enemy manpower as a key factor affecting communist strategy, we might expect that Westmoreland would have believed that the communists would seek to preserve strength and thus retain their strategy of prolonging the war until Washington decided to withdraw troops. Yet the exact opposite happened: the CIA concluded that Hanoi would retain its preexisting strategy, but Westmoreland expected a large-scale offensive that would include multiple locations in South Vietnam, albeit primarily Khe Sanh.

Types of Intelligence

Westmoreland, Weyand, the Saigon Station, and CIA headquarters developed different conclusions about communist military intentions in part because they viewed and valued different types of intelligence. CIA analysts at the Saigon Station relied on captured documents as their primary source of information on communist strategy, more so than Westmoreland, Weyand, or intelligence analysts at Langley. Often, these documents came in the form of notebooks that the American military recovered during and after engagements with communist forces. The analytical reports of 24 November and 8 December 1967 drew almost entirely from captured documents relating to the Winter–Spring campaign; and it was precisely those documents that indicated the change in communist strategy that had occurred in the fall of 1967.

Analysts at the Saigon Station continued to rely on captured documents as the Tet holiday approached: a memorandum dated 23 January reiterated that the communists believed the Winter–Spring campaign represented a historical phase of the war during which they would achieve a decisive victory.⁵⁰ Hovey and his colleagues, Robert Layton and James Ogle, accepted the written statements they referenced as accurate reflections of decisions made by the leadership in Hanoi, making them valuable sources of direct insight into recent developments in communist thinking towards the war.

The SAVA office at CIA headquarters claimed that analysts at Langley had developed different conclusions than their CIA counterparts in Saigon because of differences in the information upon which

⁵⁰'Comments on Proposed VC Winter-Spring Campaign', 23 Jan. 1968, *CIA Research Reports: Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Supplement*, reel 5, frames 542–55.

their respective conclusions rested. It usually took about three weeks for the headquarters to receive reports from MACV detailing information in the captured documents, but the Saigon Station received them quickly after MACV circulated them as intelligence bulletins. In his response to the 8 December report from Saigon, George Allen stated that analysts at Langley viewed other forms of information that the Saigon Station had not viewed, perhaps because they were more sensitive and not available to CIA analysts in Saigon, particularly diplomatic reports and other materials reflecting Hanoi's official policies.⁵¹ He added that the captured documents must be viewed in light of these other forms of information, especially when the captured documents seemed to contradict one another or involved embellishments unsupported by what the CIA 'knew' (in Allen's words) to be communist strategy. CIA headquarters also questioned the intelligence value of captured documents by claiming that they did not reveal whether their ambitious pronouncements reflected actual communist strategy or merely served indoctrination purposes. This stood in contrast to the CIA's use of captured documents in judging the state of VC morale and recruitment. Thus, CIA headquarters took less stock in the intelligence sources upon which the Saigon Station's conclusions rested, yet those sources were precisely the ones that revealed major changes in communist strategy, not diplomatic reports or other official expressions of Hanoi's policies towards the war.

Lieutenant General Weyand differed from CIA analysts and General Westmoreland in the types of intelligence he valued in developing his expectation of communist military plans in III Corps zone. Weyand began to suspect that the communists would attack Saigon after viewing signals intelligence in the form of intercepted radio traffic that his intelligence officer had collected.⁵² These radio signals supported the inference drawn from the apparent realignment of the communists' post office boxes – information that his intelligence officer had obtained from a captured enemy document.⁵³ Westmoreland later called these signals tenuous, but Weyand at the time considered them suggestive enough to warrant a different deployment of troops in III Corps. Although he referenced captured documents in the cable telegram of 22 January to President Johnson, Westmoreland did not rely on signals intelligence such as intercepted radio traffic in developing his views about communist strategy, despite receiving multiple warnings from the

⁵¹VMQCC 23/2, Papers on Viet Cong Strategy, 16 Dec. 1967, Rostow to Johnson.

⁵²Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House 1988), 707.

⁵³Weyand Papers, Weyand interviewed by Dr Sorley, 123.

NSA gathered through signals intelligence.⁵⁴ Neither did CIA analysts in Saigon or at Langley mention the information gained from any type of signals intelligence, as it often provided tactical information more useful to field commanders than to civilian intelligence analysts. In this respect, Weyand viewed the signals intelligence as providing more than simply tactical information, but as one among several types of indicators of communist military intentions.

New Information vs. Preexisting Expectations

Beyond differences in the types of intelligence they viewed and valued in assessing communist strategy, Westmoreland, Weyand, and CIA analysts in Saigon emphasized incoming information to a greater extent than did CIA analysts at Langley, contributing to the development of more accurate conclusions among the three officials in South Vietnam. General Weyand had previously served as a military intelligence officer during World War II and afterwards in the Pentagon. Devoting high priority to his intelligence-gathering operation,⁵⁵ Weyand appreciated the difficulty his intelligence officer faced in predicting communist actions, stating a few months after the Tet Offensive had ended,

The assessment of the threat is a much more difficult problem for the G-2 in a limited war situation such as Vietnam. The enemy, as do we, employs limited means but backing this up is a capability of relatively unlimited means. In other words, in a limited war the enemy's capability and option to escalate is ever-present and almost impossible for the friendly G-2 to state in terms that would be meaningful or helpful to his commander who must deal with the enemy situation with the limited means at hand. The result of all of this is great command pressure upon the G-2 to assess what the enemy 'intends' to do. The enemy's absolute capability so far outstrips the friendly commander's ability to cope with it [*sic*] that he focuses on the question of 'what will the enemy do', rather than 'what can the enemy do'. I did not find any clean-cut solution for this dilemma. In any case, it further emphasizes the urgency of the requirement to keep current a complete picture of the enemy, his habits, his tactics, his activities; in short, anything and everything that will assist in establishing valid patterns from which estimates

⁵⁴Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962–1968* (Langley, VA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency 1998), 116.

⁵⁵Weyand Papers, Weyand interviewed by Dr Sorley, 122.

of enemy intentions might be drawn with some basis in fact (underlining in original document).⁵⁶

Weyand believed that fighting an insurgency in South Vietnam made intelligence fundamentally important, perhaps more so than in conventional wars against field armies. Highly receptive to the signals embedded in sparse intelligence, he attempted to find coherence in bits of information about communist activities.

Westmoreland reacted differently in that he emphasized information relating to what he believed was a clear desire by the enemy to take Khe Sanh but eventually discounted other information that suggested the communists sought to attack III Corps. Weyand emphasized disparate pieces of information pointing in one direction, but Westmoreland emphasized the unmistakable and evident build-up of communist forces around Khe Sanh, likening the situation there to the communists' siege of Dien Bien Phu. He agreed with Weyand's analysis of the threat to Saigon after Major General Davidson presented corroborating evidence to Westmoreland on 13 January. Thus, Westmoreland was receptive to information about the danger to III Corps during mid-January. Afterwards, however, he began to increasingly emphasize the defense of Khe Sanh after granting Weyand's request regarding troop deployment, in part because it seemed like a sensible target for a communist assault in light of its proximity to the border and the communists' likely desire to reverse unfavorable trends. This focus became accentuated even as Westmoreland received reports from Major General Davidson and the NSA indicating that multiple population centers were in danger. These reports conveyed the same types of signals intelligence that Weyand relied upon in developing his expectations of communist actions.⁵⁷ In that sense, the fragmentary and disparate information that Weyand considered important in understanding enemy strategy Westmoreland did not value as much as clear proof of what seemed like an inevitable showdown over Khe Sanh.

Although they placed different emphasis on the information they received, Weyand and Westmoreland updated their views of enemy strategy to a greater extent than intelligence analysts at CIA headquarters, who maintained their preexisting views, despite receiving

⁵⁶[College Park, Maryland, National Archives and Records Administration] USAV RG 472 [Records of the United States Army Vietnam, Record Group 472] CH [Headquarters, United States Army Vietnam Command Historian] Senior Officer Debriefing Reports, 15 July 1968, Lt. Gen. Fred C. Weyand, Debriefing Report.

⁵⁷Samuel Zaffiri, *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland* (New York: William Morrow 1994), 275.

warnings that suggested the communists had changed their strategy. As George Allen later explained, analysts at Langley believed that it made no sense for the communists to attempt a general offensive because it would not lead to a general uprising and would only result in heavy communist losses.⁵⁸ Thus, the communists simply could not believe their own words when they talked of a decisive victory. Such pronouncements in captured documents were either rhetoric or propaganda, as they did not evince realistic expectations of what the communists could achieve by military force. Under this assumption, analysts at Langley concluded that the communists would at most attempt an 'unprecedentedly massive offensive along more traditional, post-Tet lines, involving widespread assaults on allied military bases, airfields, command posts, outposts, and pacified hamlets, combined with an effort to culminate the siege at Khe Sanh with a victory'.⁵⁹ The CIA memoranda of 10 January and 18 January claimed that such a conservative strategy would better serve communist purposes than a country-wide offensive, which might overexpose the enemy to American firepower.

By contrast, the three analysts at the Saigon Station accepted signs of a new enemy strategy as accurate indications of communist intentions, but also explained why the new strategy seemed overly ambitious and potentially disastrous for the communists. They were receptive towards intelligence that suggested the Winter–Spring campaign would become a turning-point in the war. Receiving intelligence bulletins from MACV on a regular basis, Hovey, Layton, and Ogle openly and frequently discussed what the jargon in captured documents suggested about actual communist strategy, helping them produce the accurate predictions conveyed in the reports of 24 November and 8 December.⁶⁰ Yet they also drafted the memorandum dated 10 December that analyzed the consequences of this new strategy by focusing particularly on the communist manpower situation. The 10 December memo acknowledged that the communists were taking a big gamble that would leave them militarily defeated and highly vulnerable, but did not reject the captured documents as untrue or misleading simply because the goals they expressed conflicted with the military reality in South Vietnam. In this respect, they accepted the documents at face-value as indications of communist strategy, but questioned the assumptions upon which that strategy rested, distinguishing themselves from their colleagues at Langley.

⁵⁸'Indo-China War – 1950–1975', George Allen, *Westmoreland v. CBS*, Joint Exhibit 313, microfiche 668.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 321.

⁶⁰Ford, *Tet 1968*, 181.

Theoretical Implication

The analysis highlights informational and cognitive differences in how General Westmoreland, Lieutenant General Weyand, the Saigon Station, and CIA analysts at Langley estimated communist strategy as the 1968 Tet holiday approached. It explains how the types of intelligence they valued and the degrees to which they emphasized new intelligence affected their expectations of enemy military actions. In this respect, the analysis comports with a cognitive psychological explanation of how the quality, availability, and saliency of information affect judgments about possible surprise attacks.⁶¹ Indeed, as others have shown, a wide range of American reactions to information about the Tet Offensive illustrate how cognitive biases can inhibit individuals from developing accurate conclusions about enemy intentions.⁶²

Yet the analysis also complements a psychological explanation by identifying how the intensity of cognitive biases and the intelligence available in making assessments might vary depending on whether one is stationed in the field or at a national headquarters. In particular, CIA analysts stationed at their national headquarters possessed more intelligence sources than their field counterparts in Saigon, whose range of sources remained limited in the months preceding the Tet attacks. Nonetheless, intelligence analysts at Langley reacted to new information in an atmosphere characterized by more entrenched collective views held among more individuals than the atmosphere in which the three Saigon analysts developed their assessments. This raises a general question about whether being stationed in the theater of operations facilitates a more accurate understanding of enemy military strategy than does being stationed at a national intelligence headquarters.

In conclusion, the analysis suggests two avenues for further inquiry. Future studies should investigate why analysts at a national headquarters might react differently than field analysts or commanding generals towards information that does not comport with preexisting understandings of enemy strategy. They should also investigate how differences in the types of information valued by field analysts and their counterparts at a national headquarters affect their expectations of enemy military actions.

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⁶¹The author thanks an anonymous referee for raising this point.

⁶²See, especially, Wirtz, *Tet Offensive*.

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