

WESTMORELAND

VS.

CBS:

WAS INTELLIGENCE CORRUPTED  
BY POLICY DEMANDS?

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the United States Government.*

## INTELLIGENCE AND POLICY DEMANDS

The dispute between CIA's Sam Adams and the men at J-2 MACV, and between a number of the officers within J-2 MACV, reflects a fundamental struggle between information processing—the ability to analyze more data and to define more subcategories across a spectrum of dedication that ranged from the Viet Cong main force maneuver battalions to the marginally sympathetic old men, women and children in the villages and hamlets—and the publication of a genuinely *useful* and *helpful* intelligent product. Sam Adams' focus, and that of General McChristian, was on the ability to make the total count without a true concern for policymaking relevance. The concern of General Davidson as J-2 was to focus on and understand the strength of the statistically significant segment of the enemy's main combat force and the immediately supporting infrastructure. Sam Adams and Gains Hawkins demanded that the order of battle count include every one who regularly was part of the Viet Cong infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Davidson, McChristian's successor as the J-2 MACV, wanted to continue to restrict the order of battle count to those armed men and women who were going to fight as part of the Viet Cong's military effort on a regular basis.

This author believes that the fact that some segments of the Viet Cong irregular militia infrequently made booby traps and laid mines, and the fact that mines and booby traps may have caused as much as one-third (15,000) of the total U.S. casualties, according to Sam Adams, was not determinative of the question of who should be counted in the J-2 MACV order of battle

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<sup>1</sup> Adams and Hawkins stopped short of wanting to count everyone who had Viet Cong sympathies—"to have done so would have given the Viet Cong an order of battle of several million." Adams, Notes, 94. Westmoreland wanted only to count the armed Viet Cong—the ones he considered to be "fair game" under the MACV rules of engagement (civilians were not "fair game"). Westmoreland, conversation with author, 21 May 1987.

summary.<sup>2</sup> The nature and degree of the threat of the Viet Cong irregular militia was defined by the acts they committed.<sup>3</sup> The J-2 MACV carried the Guerrilla-Militia strength at just over 103,000 in September 1966.<sup>4</sup> That estimated number was responsible for a certain number of casualty-producing incidents in 1966. Therefore, if, as Adams and Hawkins believed, the Guerrilla-Militia force was three times as large, then man-for-man they were one-third as effective a force. If the J-2 MACV had slashed the number in half, then they would be seen as being twice as dangerous. In short, MACV did not need to include the Guerrilla-Militia in the order of battle count in order to understand the nature of the threat that this segment of the Viet Cong sympathizers represented. That does not mean that Sam Adams and Gains Hawkins should not have assessed the threat the Viet Cong irregulars presented or tried to count them.

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<sup>2</sup> As the Allied armies prepared to enter Germany in the fall of 1944, Field-Marshal Montgomery issued the following special order: “*When we enter Germany, Headquarter leaguers, and units and sub-unit areas, will require to be tighter, and special [counter-intelligence] arrangements will have to be made to prevent spies and Gestapo agents getting in. Sniping may be a problem, and senior officers must exercise due care when traveling about their areas.*” **He did not suggest that the enemy’s order of battle numbers be increased.** The quoted order is para. 22, M.525, 21 Army Group, General Operational Situation and Directive, 14 September 1944, Ref. No. PP/MCR/C 30, Reel No. 10, BLM 107/23, Imperial War Museum, London.

<sup>3</sup> According to Adams, in the populated areas—where the Viet Cong Militia were located—over half of the U.S. casualties were caused by mines and booby traps. In the unpopulated areas—like the DMZ, where there were no Militia forces—only about three percent of the casualties were so caused. Adams, Notes, 94. This author suggest that the proof afforded by this statistic is not self-evident. The most authoritative figures are: “Booby traps, mines - Deaths 11% & Wounds 15%; Punji stakes - Deaths none & Wounds 2%.” *DA Pamphlet, Vietnam Studies, Medical Support* (1973). These figures are for the period from 1965 to 1970. While there was some fighting after 1970, there was not enough to run the casualty figures for mines and booby traps up to 33 percent.

<sup>4</sup> Linking the guerrilla and the “militia” may lead to confusion. The guerrilla *did* cause casualties, while as a general rule the militia (SD and SSD) did not. Thus, after mid-1967 the single category was separated and only the guerrillas were listed in the military OB tables. Davidson, op. cit.

Of Sam Adams, James Wirtz has written, “he never realized that other organizations that employed dozens of analysts, diverse methodologies, and multiple sources of information could develop legitimate estimates of the Viet Cong that were quite different than his own.”<sup>5</sup> It is hard to find real support for this alleged error in Adam’s analysis. On the question of how many Communist regulars were in the south, MACV and Adams are very close, with Adams being more conservative. However, the accepted J-2 MACV figures for the other three categories had been fixed for two years. Prior to May 1967 those numbers cannot be described as being the legitimate product of an independent, thorough and sifting inquiry. Beginning in 1965 J-2 MACV was concerned about finding, fixing and fighting the Viet Cong main force regulars and the official figures for this category of the enemy force were reasonably accurate. It is clear that the J-2 MACV OB analysts were concentrating on these forces, to the general exclusion of the other three categories. Colonel Hawkins, testified that “his estimates of main force units were far more important to him than estimating the strength of the part-time guerrillas.” But that exclusive focus had changed by mid-1967 and the J-2 MACV, in conjunction with the CIA, began to develop a better understanding of the three order of battle categories—the Guerrilla-Militia, the Service Troops and the Political Cadre—that it had inherited along with the South Vietnamese order of battle methodology. Accordingly, it is fit and proper that least by mid-1966 both were looking at a problem that the J-2 MACV had yet to come to grips with.

Were Sam Adams and Gains Hawkins right about their numbers—were there really a total of 500,000 to 600,000 Viet Cong in South Vietnam in mid to late-1967? Probably there were not.

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<sup>5</sup> James J. Wirtz, review of *Reckless Disregard*, by Renata Adler, *Intelligence and National Security*, 2 (October 1987): 183.

This author believes that the J-2 MACV estimate, as flawed as it surely was in some respects, was a good deal closer to the mark than the numbers Sam Adams and Gains Hawkins believed in.<sup>6</sup> Their solutions to the order of battle number riddles were truly elegant—one has to credit Adams and Hawkins for doing the basic research—but neither reached the right solutions. Renata Adler notes that “there is evidence even in the memoirs of Truong Nhu Tang, a founder of the National Liberation Front and Minister of Justice of the Vietcong, that the President’s, the Joint Chiefs’ and Westmoreland’s estimates of the total enemy troop strength, including irregulars ... were more accurate [than those] of Sam Adams.”<sup>7</sup> Adams and Hawkins surely demonstrated an expertise in the art of analysis by *sagacity*; both lacked the *acumen* needed to temper their judgments.

Sagacity relates to the ability to make keen discernments. It is a statistical approach to problem-solving. While there are a number of intelligence predictions that can be made using the sagacity approach, it is—at best—a “bean counter” methodology. The use of base rate statistical analysis may be appropriate when occurrences are repetitive and when the predictions are expected to be in error proportional to the probabilities

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Palmer writes that “in May 1970 during the Cambodian invasion, the capture of numerous important enemy documents roughly confirmed the validity of the generally higher enemy strength estimates held by the CIA in November 1967.” Palmer, *25-Year War*, 213 n.4. Phillip Davidson does not agree, saying “no such documents [were captured] ... at the time (1970).” Davidson, *op. cit.* In a conversation with this author, General Westmoreland made it clear that he never doubted the higher CIA numbers that counted all of the Viet Cong military and civilian infrastructure; however, the General did not believe that the J-2 MACV Order of Battle Summary should count the Viet Cong non-combatants. Westmoreland, conversation with author, 21 May 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Adler. *Reckless Disregard*, 36-37. According to Adams, Adler “doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Truong’s memoirs make no mention whatsoever about VC troop strength, even obliquely. In his forward, he disclaims knowledge of military matters.” Adams, *Notes*, 96. However, this author notes that in an interview published in the Book Review Section of the *New York Times*, Tang obliquely discussed the strength of the VC forces. The author has been unable to find the citation for that interview.

contained in the base rate. This explains why the J-2 MACV count of Communist regular forces was so accurate.<sup>8</sup> The enemy's main force or maneuver battalions were regular in their establishment or TO&E.<sup>9</sup> Thus, if a regularly established enemy division, regiment, battalion, or part of any of them, was known to be in an area, then sagacity analysis would give a reasonably accurate count for the total manpower of the unit, *assuming it was up to strength*. No such rule of correlation applied to the other categories of Viet Cong forces—the Guerrilla Militia, the Service Troops and the Political Cadre. Originally this author believed that both Sam Adams and Gains Hawkins made their whole case on the false premise that the other categories also had regular TO&E's but Adams says that this was not so as far as his count of the Guerrilla Militia was concerned. Instead, Adams used selected captured enemy documents which contained country-wide counts of the Viet Cong Guerrilla Militia forces.<sup>10</sup> While Adams' approach was not the same as Hawkins, it nonetheless was based on the sagacity approach.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "The main reason we had a solid count of Main Forces was that we had frequent contact with them, with the resultant windfall of PW's, defectors and documents." Davidson, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> A unit's *establishment* (U.K.) is the same as its *Table of Organization and Equipment*, or *TO&E* (U.S.). For more on *sagacity*, and *perceptual bias*, see T. L. Cabbage II, "The German Misappreciations Regarding Overlord Understanding Failure in the Estimative Process," *Strategic and Operational Deception in the Second World War*, Michael I. Handel, ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1987) p 132..

<sup>10</sup> Adams, Notes, 97–97a. Adams admittedly did use the sagacity method to estimate the number of Service Troops. Adams, "Vietnam Cover-up," 65 ("I had estimated that there were about seventy-five service soldiers in each of the VC's districts, explaining I had averaged the numbers in a sample of twenty-eight documents."). His estimates of Political Cadre also appear to have been based on a sagacity approach.

<sup>11</sup> By May 1967 Adams had three Viet Cong documents that were the cornerstone to his calculations. All three were captured under different circumstances in widely separated locations. They all said that the total of Viet Cong Guerrillas was about 180,000 in the third quarter of 1966. One was the notebook from an unidentified general; another was the text of a COSVN-level speech; and the third—the one Adams believed to be the most important—was a Viet Cong accounting document which broke down the number

What Adams and Hawkins lacked, and what some officers at J-2 MACV apparently were able to bring to bear on the key questions of whether, and how, to count the Viet Cong's so-called "irregular forces," was that superior mental astuteness called *acumen*. Some of the analysts in Vietnam seemed to have been possessed of the instinct, the imagination, the touch—*Fingerspitzengefühl*, that enabled them to discern correctly that as much of a problem as the irregular forces might appear to be, they were neither armed nor numerous nor capable of being organized efficiently or quickly into anything like a combat-ready unit.<sup>12</sup>

This brings up the final point: What was J-2 MACV to do with the Viet Cong irregular force numbers once they were finalized? As has been seen, the question was whether to add them to the existing "historic" order of battle table—one which by definition presumptively had counted the enemy's full-time "fighters" and the close-support irregulars—or to ignore them. In the end MACV did neither. The non-combatant Guerrilla-Militia and Political Cadre numbers were dealt with in the narrative materials that accompanied the order of battle summary and tables. This was the so-called "compromise solution" or "cave-in" that so angered and was criticized by Adams.

There is always the danger that intelligence officers may be influenced by the policy makers and become, in the end, simply "intelligence waiters" that serve up tasty morsels of intelligence according to the taste and appetite of the policy-making consumers of intelligence.<sup>13</sup> Such was not the case in

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of guerrillas by region. Adams cross-checked the regional accounting list with other more localized list which he believed to be accurate. Adams, Notes, 97a. Because he used a small sample of uncertain validity, and compared it with other small samples, this too is a sagacity technique. The technique is not wrong; however, the product of the method often may be wrong.

<sup>12</sup> For more on *acumen*, and *perceptual bias*, see Cabbage, "The German Misappreciations Regarding Overlord," 133-34.

<sup>13</sup> For a sampling of good articles on the role of intelligence vis-à-vis policymaking see: Thomas L. Hughes, "The Fate of Facts in a World of Men: Foreign Policy and

regard to the J-2 MACV order of battle figures. Every policymaker in Washington—Johnson, McNamara, Rusk and Wheeler—knew about the numbers and the disagreement between MACV and CIA over how to handle the counting and public reporting of the information—for, after all, the J-2 MACV order of battle numbers were made public and that was part of the problem the policymakers had to deal with. Every policymaker in Washington, and all of the policy-shapers—Rostow, Helms, Carver, Westmoreland, Komer, Sharp, and Davidson—understood the policy implications of an improvident publication of the J-2 MACV numbers. The only people who appear not to have been privy to both the intelligence debate and its full policy implications were McChristian, Hawkins, Adams, Allen and Smith. Everyone, save those five, understood the damage—assuming a misuse by the press—that the improper publication of the revised and updated order of battle intelligence could have on the war effort.

It would appear that McChristian, Hawkins, Adams, Allen and Smith could not be content in the knowledge that they had done their jobs as best they thought they could, and that it was time to let others do their jobs. They had analyzed the raw data and they had drawn their conclusions—then they wanted for J-2 MACV and other to accept and to act on their intelligence product, no matter what the consequence of such action might have been. It did not work that way—it should not work that way. Military intelligence is a product that is designed to assist the policymaker and not to make his task

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Intelligence Making," *Headline Series (Foreign Policy Association) # 233* (December, 1976): 1-60 ("The Butcher, ... the Baker, ... the Intelligence Maker."); Richard K. Betts, "Intelligence for Policymaking," III *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer, 1980): 118–29; Richard K. Betts, "Careerism, Intelligence and Misperception," in *Soldiers, States-men and the Cold War Crisis*, Richard K. Betts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 183–208, 270–77; Arthur S. Hulnick, "The Intelligence Producer-Policy Consumer Linkage: A Theoretical Approach," 1 *Intelligence and National Security* (May, 1986): 212-33; Yehoshafat Harkabi, "The Intelligence-Policymaker Tangle," 30 *Jerusalem Quarterly* (Winter, 1984): 125–131; Patrick J. McGarvey, "DIA: Intelligence to Please," in

more difficult. It is clear that each of the errant five was mistaken in his understanding of his rôle in relation to the policymakers; Sam Adams compounded that error by going public with his “exposé”

## CONCLUSION

*It is a paradox that in our time of rapid, drastic change, when the future is in our midst, devouring the present before our eyes, we have never been less certain about what is ahead of us. Our need for [greater] predictability is far more urgent than in times past, and we are addicted to forecasters and pollsters. Even when forecasters are wrong we go on asking for them. We watch our experts read their graphs the way the ancients watched the soothsayers read the entrails of a chicken.*

— Eric Hoffer<sup>14</sup>

To this day Sam Adams has never admitted that he was wrong—both about his estimates of the Viet Cong strength and about the existence of a conspiracy.<sup>15</sup> When one examines this matter on the whole record it is clear

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*Readings in American Foreign Policy: A Bureaucratic Perspective*, Morton H. Halperin and Arnold Kanter, eds. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 318–326.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Hoffer, *Between the Devil and the Dragon: The Best Essays and Aphorisms of Eric Hoffer* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), 302. “There has been a gradual narrowing of the range of predictability during the past five hundred years. In the heyday of Christianity predictability reached the utmost limit—the life beyond. In the idea of progress, which took the place of millennial prognostication, the range of predictability was narrowed to a century or so. With the end of the First World War, predictability shrank further: the craving for security took the place of hope, and people were satisfied if they could foresee the course of a single lifetime. If the shrinking continues, we shall be satisfied if we can predict in the evening the eventualities of the next morning....” Ibid, 302–303.

<sup>15</sup> “Initial impressions tend to persist even after the evidence that created them is fully discredited.” Richard J. Heuer, Jr., “Cognitive Factors in Deception and

that Adams was wrong on both counts. Adams built his whole case on what was said in certain captured enemy documents, but he refused to accept as true the post-Têt documents and evidence which corroborated the J-2 MACV figures. Adams accepted the theories of Smith and Hawkins that a MACV conspiracy—led by Westmoreland—existed to hide the very numbers that every single relevant policymaker already knew about, and he did it either with or without the knowledge that neither Westmoreland nor his J-2 MACV staff controlled all of the intelligence production channels. This author agrees with James Wirtz who noted “*Adams’ refusal to recognize that honest differences of opinion could exist in the realm of intelligence analysis led him to an error which is rare among individuals with experience in large governmental organizations. He claimed that the workings of a conspiracy offered a better explanation of the shortcomings of intelligence analysis than human frailty or organizational pathologies.*”<sup>16</sup>

“If one were to pick the chief trait which characterizes the temper of our time it would be impatience.”<sup>17</sup> Sam Adams, a man who otherwise might have had a brilliant career as a CIA analyst seems to have been a victim of that trait. He had produced what he believed was a “definitive study” of the Viet Cong irregular forces and he literally demanded, again and again, that it be accepted and used by all and immediately. With the passage of time, as his predictions became history, Adam’s numbers proved to be wrong.

This author, like Renata Adler, in *Reckless Disregard*, must conclude that “*Westmoreland led no ... conspiracy. Têt was a public relations*

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Counterdeception,” in *Strategic Military Deception*, Donald C. Daniel and Katherine L. Herbig, eds. (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), 51–51.

<sup>16</sup> James J. Wirtz, op. cit., 183.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Hoffer, *The Temper of Our Time* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964), 99.

*catastrophe but not a military defeat; and though the war was lost, the loss could hardly be attributed to a conspiracy or a defeat that never was.”<sup>18</sup>*

The so-called “documentary” produced and broadcast by CBS News rightly should be branded as contemporary news-fiction.<sup>19</sup> For George Crile and for Mike Wallace, in lasting remembrance of their lackluster part in the Adams conspiracy fantasy, an apt epitaph for each should be: “*He was on the alert constantly for every signal, shrewdly sensitive to relationships and situations that did not exist.*”<sup>20</sup>

*“In human affairs every solution serves only to sharpen the problem, to show us more clearly what we are up against. There are no final solutions.”<sup>21</sup>*

Some intelligence officers understood that the order of battle debate that Rostow asked Wheeler to initiate, and which Komer, Carver and Westmoreland resolved, led to a better understanding of the problems attendant to defining and categorizing the enemy in a counter-insurgency situation; others seem to have learned nothing. Fortunately for all, in the process, the military intelligence on the Viet Cong military order of battle was not corrupted by policy demands.



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<sup>18</sup> Adler, *Reckless Disregard*, 76.

<sup>19</sup> See Palmer, *25-Years War*, 78 (“deliberate manipulation of intelligence is neither a fair nor true judgment”).

<sup>20</sup> This saying is from an anonymous quote on a plaque that hung over this author’s desk when he was a current intelligence analyst in the Pentagon. It served to remind that, while it is true that if one seeks, then one shall find, there is no guarantee that what the seeker finds will be true. For more on the impact of *current expectations* on problem analysis, see Cubbage, “The German Misappreciations Regarding Overlord,” 48-51.

<sup>21</sup> Hoffer, *Between the Devil and the Dragon*, 11.

## EPILOGUE

When this author read his paper at the War College conference, Sam Adams was an invited guest, and was present. During the scheduled Q&A period that immediately followed, he asked me three questions that did not directly challenge my statement of facts or conclusions. I have no reason to think that he was not sincere in his beliefs, but, as noted, wrong in his conclusions, especially about General Westmoreland and the integrity of the MACV OB documents.

Samuel A. Adams, age 54, died of a heart attack at this home in Strafford, Vermont.

— Tom Cabbage, September 13, 2015

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