

Edwin Moise Failures to Communicate

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The Tet Offensive achieved partial surprise. Some American commanders and officials were ready for what came, but others were not. Information was not flowing well within the US government; some officials and officers knew crucial facts while others were unaware of them. Mostly this was because information known to some officers at lower levels was not passing up the chain of command. President Johnson in particular was not getting nearly the range of good information he should have been getting. But in one important case, information available at a higher level was not passing down the chain of command.

The most widespread problem, and probably the most important, was the US estimates of enemy strength. In the second half of 1967, the intelligence system at Military Assistance Command Vietnam—MACV—had come to be dominated by a spirit of compulsive optimism. Those in command, concerned that public support for the war was weakening in the United States, became determined to have intelligence show that the war was being won, and that enemy strength was declining.

MACV was able to achieve a substantial drop in its figure for total enemy strength in October, simply by deciding that certain categories of enemy personnel—political cadres and the Viet Cong's part-time village militia—should no longer be included in the count. Neither Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms nor National Security Adviser Walt Rostow mentioned the fact that the drop in the total figure was purely a result of the dropping of

categories, in the memos they wrote to President Johnson about the new figures. There is no evidence that Johnson found out about this from any other source.¹

But a one-time drop in the figure for total enemy strength was not good enough. Even before the change in categories had become final, Brigadier General Phillip Davidson, chief of intelligence at MACV, had issued a directive to the people compiling the estimates of enemy strength: “The figure of combat strength and particularly of guerrillas must take a steady and significant downward trend as I am convinced this reflects true enemy status.”²

It may well have been true that enemy strength was declining at the time he wrote this; Davidson almost certainly believed it was. But by issuing this directive to the people who were his own main sources of information, Davidson ensured that if enemy strength began to increase, he would not hear about the increase very quickly.

In the last months of 1967, the Communists, preparing for the Tet Offensive, were building up their strength, partly by increased recruiting inside South Vietnam, but even more by a great increase in the level of infiltration from North Vietnam. This should have been the biggest and most reliable indicator to the Americans that a large offensive might be coming.

There were intelligence officers who noticed the increase in infiltration, but they were unable to get this information into MACV’s official reporting system, so it was not widely disseminated. A colonel named Daniel Graham (who later became a lieutenant general and head of the Defense Intelligence Agency) was the main enforcer of Davidson’s desire that the

¹ Rostow to President Johnson, November 15, 1967, with Helms to President Johnson, November 14, 1967 attached, Rostow Memos, Box 25 (1 of 2), LBJ Presidential Library. Trial transcript, *Westmoreland v. CBS et al.*, October 16, 1984, p. 425, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University (hereafter TTU) item #0250216001.

² BG Phillip Davidson, “New Procedures for OB,” August 15, 1967, TTU #0240715002.

estimate of enemy strength show a steady decline. Norman House, who headed a team responsible for evaluating enemy strength in I Corps, the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, described what happened in rather strong language, years later. He said Colonel Graham

seemed obsessed in his determination to prove that we were winning the war of attrition and was unwilling to accept any intelligence information or analysis to the contrary. He would blatantly disregard reliable evidence and berate and humiliate those analysts who tried to present intelligence information which showed an increased enemy presence in South Vietnam....

I would regularly receive reports about abnormally large sightings of enemy forces moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam. Graham always went out of his way to disparage such reports.³

When House found solid evidence of a North Vietnamese unit newly arrived in South Vietnam, he could “seldom if ever” get permission to add it to MACV’s order of battle, its official listing of enemy units.⁴

Between October 1967 and January 1968, the MACV estimate for overall Communist strength in South Vietnam dropped by about ten thousand men. Years later, after both Davidson and Graham had left Vietnam, officers at MACV looked at the evidence again. They concluded that the MACV estimate for October had already been well below the actual level of Communist strength, and that from then to January, while MACV was saying enemy strength was dropping further, it had actually been rising by more than twenty thousand.⁵ And even those retrospective figures probably understated the actual growth in Communist strength.

³ Affidavit of Norman House, August 25, 1983, pp. 5-6, TTU #0250204001.

⁴ Lt. Col. Norman House, in trial transcript, Westmoreland v. CBS, et al., February 13, 1985, p. 9691, TTU #0250517001.

⁵ For details see Edwin Moise, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), pp. 115-117.

A CIA officer named Joe Hovey may have been the first American to notice signs, in captured documents, that a major Communist offensive was coming. He took this to his immediate superior in Saigon, and they wrote a formal report in December 1967, but they were unable to make this report convincing because they were not aware of the extent to which MACV was underestimating Communist strength. Even with the strength the Communists actually had, their plan for the Tet Offensive was grossly over-optimistic. If the Communists had been as weak as MACV was saying, the plan would have made no sense at all. Only after the offensive did Hovey realize the Communists had had far more troops to work with than had been reflected in the MACV estimates he had been using.

The two places where the offensive most conspicuously achieved tactical surprise were the cities of Saigon and Hue.

Brigadier General Albin Irzyk, who as commander of the US Army's Headquarters Area Command controlled the American units actually in Saigon, later wrote that the enemy achieved "totally unbelievable surprise." He had no warning until January 30, when he was told that there might be enemy sappers in the city during the coming night. He had a few hours to prepare for that, and then found himself facing "far more and much bigger than mere sappers."⁶

The headquarters for the III Corps Tactical Zone, the eleven-province area surrounding Saigon, was at Long Binh northeast of Saigon. Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand, the commander there, was aware that the Communist forces were considerably stronger than

⁶ Brig. Gen. Albin F. Irzyk, *Unsung Heroes, Saving Saigon* (Raleigh, NC: Ivy House, 2008), 1, xiv, 57-59.

MACV was saying they were.⁷ When he got indications, especially from signals intelligence, that a major offensive was coming, he took the danger very seriously. He shifted troops southward away from the Cambodian border toward Saigon during January 1968. This was the most important case of an American commander not being surprised by the Tet Offensive. The units Weyand placed not far north of Saigon first blocked the movements of some of the Communist forces that were attempting to approach the city from the north, and then were available to come to the rescue when Saigon and positions in its immediate vicinity were attacked on January 31.

The fact that nobody at Long Binh seems to have sent any clear warning to General Irzyk, only about thirty miles away in Saigon, was the most bizarre failure of communication in connection with the offensive. One can only conjecture that even General Weyand, who had known that what was coming was going to be “pretty goddam bad,”⁸ had not understood how large and how widespread the offensive was going to be. In particular, he had not understood the extent to which Saigon was going to be attacked not just from the north but also from the southeast, from the direction of the Mekong Delta. So he did not realize he needed to warn Irzyk.

MACV’s underestimation of Communist strength had much greater consequences in I Corps than it did in III Corps, because the American commanders in I Corps, and in particular those in Thua Thien, the province that included the city of Hue, did not understand the way Weyand did the fact that the Communist forces were much stronger than the intelligence

⁷ John Laurence notes, Weyand backgrounder, January 11, 1968, Walter Cronkite Papers, Box 2M787, Vietnam 1968-69, Briscoe Center, University of Texas

⁸ Quoted in Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Random House, 1988), 707.

estimates said they were. Mark Bowden's recent book *Tet 68* described the disastrous results of this at Hue. Brigadier General Foster LaHue, commanding two regiments of US Marines, had his headquarters at Phu Bai, a few miles southeast of Hue. He and other American commanders did not understand that the Communist forces in Thua Thien were strong enough to be capable of seriously threatening Hue. Even after Communist troops in the next province south from Thua Thien jumped the gun and launched their Tet Offensive attack on Danang twenty-four hours ahead of schedule, American commanders did not see a threat to Hue. And when large Communist forces occupied Hue on January 31, and the small American forces there found themselves badly outnumbered, LaHue did not at first believe that any such thing could be happening. He was convinced that the Communist force in Hue could not be large, so he sent only small American forces to Hue to drive the Communists out of that city. Army Major General John Tolson, based at Camp Evans north of Hue, also failed at first to recognize the strength of the enemy forces, and also was sending American units to attack them that were grossly inadequate to the task.⁹

President Johnson was furious at the way the media covered the offensive. He said on February 5, 1968, that the press was "lying like drunken sailors every day." This did not refer only to coverage of Vietnam, but the coverage of Vietnam and specifically the Tet Offensive was the largest part of what he had in mind. He indignantly denied that the Tet Offensive had been a "communist victory." He said that General Westmoreland had killed twenty thousand

⁹ Bowden 256.

Communist troops while losing only four hundred Americans, and that this was “a major, dramatic victory.”¹⁰

Johnson’s suggestion that the press was depicting the Tet Offensive as a Communist victory was false; the press was not in general portraying it as a victory or defeat for either side. But the exaggeration was understandable. There was no way a president in a very bad mood was going to retain enough sense of nuance to say, accurately, that the press was failing to portray the offensive as a major American victory. It was inevitable that he would simplify and say, falsely, that the press was portraying the offensive as a Communist victory.

Johnson’s anger about what he believed to be false stories in the press was probably inspired, at least on part, by the Battle for Hue. The newspapers that morning had said Communist forces still controlled most of that city; there had been a large front-page headline “Bombs Fail to Rout Reds in Hue” in the *Washington Post* and a smaller one “Attacks on Hue Fail To Rout Foe” in the *New York Times*. The White House Situation Room was giving the president a very different picture, which reflected General LaHue’s illusions about enemy weakness in Hue, passed through General Westmoreland. The Situation Room’s morning report on February 4 had said, “In Hue, the northwest and southwest portions of the citadel remain partially occupied with small pockets of enemy forces. Clearing of the built-up areas has slowed the operation. ARVN forces are reported in complete control of the airfield. Sporadic contact continues within the citadel and US forces continue sweep operations to the southwest and maintain blocking positions to the west and northwest.” On February 5, the day Johnson

¹⁰ Transcript, conversation between President Johnson and Garnett D. “Jack” Horner of *The Washington Star*, February 5, 1968, in Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Knopf, 2017), p. 277.

denounced the press in the words I quoted, the morning report had said, "Heavy fighting continued yesterday in the city of Hue as US Marines and ARVN forces fought to clear the remaining pockets of enemy resistance." In fact it was the newspapers that were correct about this. Communist forces were not in "pockets" in Hue, they had firm control of most of the city.

Johnson's statement about twenty thousand Communist dead and four hundred American, a ratio of fifty to one, is also very interesting. It is unlikely that he had gotten any actual report from Vietnam with those numbers. The report the White House Situation Room had given him first thing that morning had been extreme, but not that extreme. It had listed 16,976 Communists killed and 471 Americans.¹¹ Johnson's exaggerated numbers expressed the impression he had that enemy losses were hugely greater than American losses. They were hugely greater. But his impression may to some extent have been shaped by a failure to appreciate how heavy the American losses actually were.

The US government's figures for the number of Americans killed in action each week, which were the figures regularly briefed to the press, were realistic. Each week there were some men killed whose death reports did not reach the relevant office in time for them to be included in the figure for that week, but those would simply be included in the count for the next week. Every death got counted.

But there was also an office at MACV that produced each day a figure for the number of men known to have been killed on the previous day. If this office did not get the report of a death in time to include it in the report of deaths for that date, it would not count that death at

¹¹ Arthur McCafferty, Memorandum for the President, 6:30 AM, February 5, 1968, National Security Files Country File, Vietnam, Folder: Vietnam 8 A (3) Situation Room Rpts. to the President 1/68-5/68, LBJ Presidential Library.

all. So its figures seriously understated American casualty levels. These unrealistically low figures were not briefed to the press, but they did go to the president.

In late January 1968, just before the Tet Offensive, the Situation Room was giving the president each day, conspicuously displayed, a figure for the previous day's American deaths, with no warning that it might be unreliable. In February the Situation Room began adding a caveat that the figure was "preliminary," and also shifted the figure to a less conspicuous location in its morning report, but President Johnson surely took the trouble to look for this figure in the report, and the caveat did not warn that the preliminary figure was likely to be significantly below the actual casualty level.

The figures the president was given for American combat deaths by day averaged sixty-one percent of the actual level for the week ending January 27, eighty-eight percent for the week ending February 3, eighty-four percent for the week ending February 10, and an astonishing forty-two percent—less than half the real level—for the very bloody week ending February 17.¹²

In May 1968, when the Communist forces renewed their offensive, MACV sent to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reports that described this offensive as smaller and weaker than it actually was. MACV once again used its figures for American deaths by day, which once again were well below the actual levels.¹³

President Johnson had access to accurate figures for American deaths by week and for longer periods, but he did not notice that these were inconsistent with the figures for deaths by

¹² National Security Files Country File, Vietnam, Box 104, Folder: Vietnam 8 A (3) Situation Room Rpts. to the President 1/68-5/68, LBJ Presidential Library. See also Moise, *Myths of Tet*, 153-54.

¹³ Moise, *Myths of Tet*, 204-5.

day, and that the daily figures were grossly inaccurate. If he had noticed, his reaction would have been loud, and probably phrased in very crude language, and we would have heard of it. It is not so clear that we would know if the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, or officers on the Joint Staff, had noticed that MACV was sending seriously misleading figures on American casualties during the May offensive. But I am not aware of any evidence that they noticed this.

I might add that it is a pity the figures for American losses day by day were not released to the press. The American media were not as critical and suspicious of official statements during the Vietnam War as many authors have said they were, but they were suspicious enough that if they had been given unrealistically low figures for the numbers of Americans being killed in action, some reporter would have noticed the problem, MACV would have been forced to correct its system, and the unrealistic figures would no longer have been going to the president and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.