CULTURAL IMPACT OR IMPACT OF CULTURES: ANALYZING CULTURES OF INTELLIGENCE IN THE VIETNAM WAR, 1964-1968

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Abstract

Intelligence failures are inevitable. However, a distorted relationship between the intelligence community and policymakers can alter and increase the chance of the occurrence of intelligence failures. For decades, academic debate has existed on the occurrence and typology of intelligence failures taking place during the Vietnam War. Following the relatively novel cultural turn in intelligence studies, this thesis investigated the role of intelligence culture on the intelligence failures that occurred during the Vietnam War by examining the relationship between a distorted intelligence-policy nexus and the occurrence of intelligence failures. Hereby this thesis contributed to developing deeper understanding of the major intelligence failures that materialized during the Vietnam War.

This study argues that the intelligence culture within the US intelligence-policy nexus during the Vietnam War distorted the strategic decision-making process of policymakers on two different occasions. During the Gulf of Tonkin incident, a persisting culture of path-dependency inflicted by the policymakers disturbed the balance in the intelligence cycle, allowing for failures to take place. During the Tet Offensive, cultures of intense competition within the intelligence community disturbed the analysis process and dissemination of intelligence products, creating opportunity for policymakers to politicize the intelligence products and leading to intelligence failure. The analysis of these cases enabled further insight into the dynamics at play during major intelligence failures.

Keywords: Vietnam War, Intelligence-policy nexus, Intelligence culture, Intelligence failure

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List of abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
IC	Intelligence Community
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
MACV	Military Assistance Command – Vietnam
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NSA	National Security Agency
US	United States

I. Introduction

Few areas of governmental business demonstrate a closer alignment with a nation's strategic culture than the domain of strategic intelligence.[1] The United States (US) intelligence community played a vital role in the process of decision-making and strategizing American efforts during the Vietnam War. However, despite the objective of policymakers and members of the Intelligence Community (IC) to facilitate and succeed in an informed strategic decision-making process, strategic surprise was inevitable during the war. On two distinct occasions, the dynamics and interactions taking place between the IC and the policymakers during the Vietnam War, distorted the strategic decision-making process. An intelligence culture was shaped in which intelligence failures could occur.

These two events constituted turning points for the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson in the decision-making process of troop deployment during the Vietnam War. On August 4, 1964, the President of the United States declared that its troops would directly enter the Vietnam War following two alleged attacks on US destroyers. Later research proved that the first attack was misinterpreted, and that the second attack never occurred. However, based on the information available at the time, the US congress made the decision to allow President Johnson to carry out retaliating actions, which led to escalating involvement of the US army in the Vietnam War. This event is now remembered as the Gulf of Tonkin incident of 1964.

The second defining moment, the Tet Offensive, was a major escalation of the war. A series of surprise attacks by the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Viet Cong) and the North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam against the South Vietnamese Army and the US troops occurred in 1968. While signs of possible series of actions and attacks were picked up by intelligence services, these warnings were dismissed. This resulted in unpreparedness and strategic surprise about the size and scale of the offensive. While the offensive turned out to be a military defeat for North Vietnam and the Vietnamese communists, the Tet Offensive had insurmountable consequences for the American perception of the war. This eventually led to President Johnson's decision to withdraw from the war.

Both these events are characterized as intelligence failures, attributed to a distorted relationship between the IC and the policymakers. While it is certain that several types of

[1] Chris Clough, "Quid Pro Quo: The Challenges of International Strategic Intelligence Cooperation," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 17, no. 4 (2004): 601, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850600490446736.

intelligence failures materialized during the Vietnam War, it remains to be determined *how* an environment in which these failures could occur, affected these intelligence failures.

Background

The Vietnam War is one of the most highly documented and reported wars in history. A multitude of studies have been carried out into the political, social, and historical dimensions of the war. Scholars often name intelligence studies the 'missing dimension' of social and historical research.[2] Over the past decades, the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act in the US and investigative requests for documents from journalists and researchers have resulted in a vast amount of previously classified documents on the Vietnam War being released. The availability of these documents has aided research in uncovering this missing dimension of the Vietnam war, which played a vital role during the war.

This thesis research contributes to the existing research on the use of intelligence during the Vietnam War. While multiple intelligence failures occurred during the Vietnam War, this study focuses its analysis on two distinct failures that occurred during the US involvement in the Vietnam War: The Gulf of Tonkin incident of 1964, which led to the direct military involvement of US troops in the war, and the Tet Offensive of 1968, which eventually led to the withdrawal of US troops.

Relevance

A vast amount of declassified information is available on the Vietnam War. Current literature on the (mis)use of intelligence during the Vietnam War oftentimes focuses on the analysis of the intelligence-policy nexus to determine *what* aspect failed during the process of strategic decision-making. However, a novel 'cultural turn' within intelligence studies underpins that these types of studies neglect an important aspect of research intelligence failures: how these failures could occur. Increasingly, scholars recognize that to fully grasp the nature of the intelligence failures, it is valuable to analyze the factors that shape the setting in which the intelligence-policy nexus is performed: the national intelligence culture.[3] This thesis contributed to the expanding field of intelligence culture research, by developing a deeper

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[2] Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, eds., *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (MacMillan, 1984).

[3] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States."; Matthew Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission: Strategic Cultural Factors and US Intelligence Failures During the Cold War," *Intelligence and National Security* 26, no. 4 (2011): 478–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2011.580602.

understanding of the root causes of intelligence failures during the Vietnam War, through examination of the intelligence culture of the US during this specific timeframe. Current research provides little insight into these conditions.

While American intelligence culture has been studied more extensively, the available literature on studies of intelligence cultures does not deal with an in-depth analysis of the US intelligence culture during the Vietnam War.[4] Research that incorporates intelligence culture in its analysis on intelligence failures during the Vietnam War, is often limited and does not incorporate all aspects of the intelligence-policy nexus, even though it is an integrated process.[5]

During the Vietnam War, intelligence was used to inform strategic decision-making.[6] It is known that multiple intelligence failures occurred during the Vietnam War. To this date much research has focused on explaining the type of intelligence failures that occurred, whereas this thesis was focused on *understanding how* these failures could occur. This reframing of intelligence failure fits into the 'cultural turn' of intelligence studies.[7] Researching the role of intelligence cultures on the occurrence of intelligence failures is a relatively understudied and novel approach. Therefore, this thesis contributed to gaining a more profound and reframed understanding of intelligence failure during the Vietnam War, moving beyond a mere classification of the failures occurring. [8]

Research questions and objectives

This thesis set out to determine *how* an environment in which intelligence failures during the Vietnam War could occur, could exist. Researching the role of intelligence culture on the intelligence failures that occurred during the Vietnam War, aids in explaining the relationship between a distorted intelligence-policy nexus and the occurrence of intelligence failures. Specifically, this thesis examined the existing intelligence culture during Johnson's first and

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[4] Michael Turner, *Why Secret Intelligence Fails* (Potomac Books, 2005).; Loch Johnson, "The United States," in *PSI Handbook of Global Security and Intelligence*, ed. Stuart Farson et al. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), 52–66.; Richard Aldrich and John Kasuku, "Escaping from American Intelligence: Culture, Ethnocentrism and the Anglosphere," *International Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2012): 1009–28, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01116.x.

[5] Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission."; Alexander Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2011): 119–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.541769.

[6] Nancy Bird, "Vietnam: Lessons for Intelligence in Wartime," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 20, no. 2 (2007): 317–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850600601079990.

[7] Simon Willmetts, "The Cultural Turn in Intelligence Studies," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 6 (May 23, 2019): 800–817, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1615711.

[8] Milo Jones and Philippe Silberzahn, *Constructing Cassandra: Reframing Intelligence Failure at the CIA, 1947–2001* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

second presidential term, and how these cultures affected the types of failures that occurred during times of high-pressure strategic decision-making. To guide this research, the following research question was posed:

- Why did the intelligence culture within the US intelligence-policy nexus during the Vietnam War distort the strategic decision-making process of policymakers?

This main research question was supported by the following sub-questions. Each sub-question was answered for both selected case studies. Sub-questions one through three were answered respectively in chapters 5.3.1 and 6.3.1; 5.3.2 and 6.3.2; and 5.3.3 and 6.3.3. The findings of these sub-questions were used to formulate the answer to the main research question.

1. How did the course of the 'planning and direction' phase of the intelligence cycle contribute to a disturbed intelligence-policy nexus?
2. How did the course of the 'collection, processing and analysis' phase of the intelligence cycle contribute to a disturbed intelligence-policy nexus?
3. How did the course of the 'dissemination' phase of the intelligence cycle contribute to a disturbed intelligence-policy nexus?

Structure and foreshadowing

This thesis consists of six sections. The following section discusses the existing literature on the analysis of the intelligence-policy nexus within the context of the US involvement in the Vietnam War. The third section reviews concepts of intelligence culture, strategic surprise and intelligence failure, and a theoretical framework of intelligence culture analysis is proposed. The fourth section discusses the methodology used during the analysis of the cases and provides a justification for the case selection. The fifth section examines the relationship between intelligence culture, strategic decision-making, and intelligence failures during the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Here, it is examined how mistrust between President Johnson and the IC, tendencies of path-dependency and *ad hoc* decision-making structures negatively impacted the prevailing intelligence culture, creating an environment in which intelligence failures could occur. The Tet Offensive is discussed in the sixth chapter. This section explores the impact of the fragmentation within the IC, the incoherent intelligence estimations, and the high demand of the policymakers on the prevailing intelligence culture. It is argued that this culture created an imbalance in priority setting, which negatively affected the performance of the intelligence cycle. The final section discusses the main conclusions: while both cases demonstrate some

similarities, differences in the intelligence culture contributed to the differing types of intelligence failures that occurred. This conclusion is followed by a consideration of limitations to the research and opportunities for future research.

II. Literature review

The broader United States-Indochina conflict, and the war in Vietnam specifically, is one of the best documented wars in history. These works range from detailed accounts of the initiation of the war and the US intervention following the Gulf of Tonkin incident from the perspectives of both adversaries, to analyses of the factors that shaped the US sphere of influence in Vietnam during the war, as done by Wicks and Schulzinger.[9] This literature review blends a discussion of general works on the Vietnam War with more theoretical works on the use of intelligence during the Vietnam War, to provide a review of the current body of work on the Vietnam War and the use of intelligence therein.

The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War, or Second Indochina War, was a prolonged conflict officially fought between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. North Vietnamese troops were supported by several communist states, whereas South Vietnam was supported by the United States and its allies. Several accounts of US involvement from 1950 to 1975 detail the increasing presence of US troops in Vietnam since 1961.[10] US military involvement further escalated under the Johnson administration. As president, Johnson was determined to maintain the reputation of the US as a constant and reliable force in the battle against communism.[11] After passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, US and South Vietnamese troops engaged in large-scale conventional battles with the communist forces, as well as in counter-guerrilla operations.[12] In 1965, it became clear that the war would require prolonged efforts, as a "stalemate" lasted from July 1965 until December 1966.[13] American planes regularly attacked military and industrial

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[9] Shaun Wicks, "What Went Wrong in Vietnam: Why Intelligence Failed to Influence Policymaking," *Journal of the Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers* 8, no. 2 (1999): 5–22; Robert Schulzinger, "The Johnson Administration, China, and the Vietnam War," in *Re-Examining the Cold War: US-China Diplomacy, 1954–1973*, ed. Robert Ross and Changbin Jiang (Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 238–61, https://doi.org/10.1163/9781684173594.; Ang Guan, "The Vietnam War, 1962–64: The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 4 (2000): 601–18, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200940003500405.; Mark Gilbert, *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (Springer, 2002).; Yukiko Ochiai, "U.S. Intelligence and the Origins of the Vietnam War, 1962 - 1965" (Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2011).;

[10] George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed. (Temple University Press, 1986).

[11] David Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 42.

[12] Dominic Tierney, "The Two Vietnam Wars: American Perceptions of the Use of Force," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 4 (2018): 647, https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12836.

[13] Thomas Reinstein, "The Way a Drunk Uses a Lamp Post: Intelligence Analysis and Policy during the Vietnam War, 1962-1968" (Dissertation, Temple University, 2018), 185.

targets in North Vietnam, but their effect on the course of the war was limited. At the beginning of 1967, the size of the US presence steadily expanded, further escalating tensions between the warring parties. During the summer of 1967, North Vietnam began planning for an offensive to take place during Vietnamese Lunar New Year (Tet) in 1968.[14] American military and civil intelligence agencies failed to effectively portray the potential offensive. This led to strategic surprise in January 1968 among US military and policymakers, at the beginning of the Tet Offensive.[15]

While other parties than the Vietnamese troops and the US were involved, scholarly work on the course of the war is mainly devoted to US perspectives. Several collections and reference guides have been composed to provide essential overviews of the diverse scholarship on the Vietnam War. In his guide, Anderson offers an interpretive history of the entire war, serving as a guidance to navigate the complex ongoing debate.[16] Willbanks composed a reference guide which detailed the chronology of the war and which critically examined the complexities of the protracted conflict.[17] Several other overviews of the state of the field are offered, covering the historical background, escalation, strategy, and de-escalation in chronological order of presidential administrations.[18] As more data became available over the years, the scholarship broadened beyond the US perspective.[19]

In accordance with general academic contributions to the study of the Vietnam War, most of the scholarly work on the use of intelligence during the Vietnam War follows the perspective of the US. A minimal section of the literature on intelligence and strategy during the Vietnam War is devoted to analyses of the intelligence practices of the US's opponent: North Vietnam, as for instance done by Pribbenow and Strachan-Morris.[20] In some instances, intelligence practices during the Vietnam War are recognized in a wider context. For instance, the

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[14] Reinstein, "The Way a Drunk Uses a Lamp Post: Intelligence Analysis and Policy during the Vietnam War, 1962-1968," 241.
[15] Ibid.
[16] David Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War* (Columbia University Press, 2002), xii.
[17] James Willbanks, *Vietnam War: The Essential Reference Guide* (ABC-CLIO, 2013).
[18] Marvin Gettleman, ed., *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (Grove Press, 1985).; Spencer Tucker, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, 2nd ed. (ABC-CLIO, 2011).; James Willbanks, *Vietnam War Almanac: An In-Depth Guide to the Most Controversial Conflict in American History* (Simon and Schuster, 2013).
[19] Mark Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
[20] Merle Pribbenow, "The Soviet-Vietnamese Intelligence Relationship during the Vietnam War," *Cold War International History Project* (Wilson Center, 2014), accessed March 26, 2023, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-soviet-vietnamese-intelligence-relationship-during-the-vietnam-war.; David Strachan-Morris, "The Use of Intelligence by Insurgent Groups: The North Vietnamese in the Second Indochina War as a Case Study," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 7 (2019): 985–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1668714.

contribution of British intelligence estimates to US intelligence products is examined by Wolf.[21] Zhang and Lin offer insights into China's role in the escalation of the war by examining China's Vietnam policy, its military-strategic impact, and its connection to the 'domino theory' that prevailed among US policymakers.[22]

Within the military-strategic domain of scholarly literature, much research has been done on how the US could best deal with the "communist aggression" that emerged in Vietnam. The use of intelligence during wartime is a powerful tool to shape, identify and understand threats posed by the enemy. This was no different during the Vietnam War. Official accounts of the use of intelligence during the Vietnam War demonstrate that intelligence was used in four distinct domains, and that each domain contributed to the success of the US policy.[23] These four domains (intelligence being used to: increase local political and military support; maintain operational safety; determine the enemies' intentions and capabilities; ensure comprehensive and accurate information to support the decision-makers) are also indirectly reflected in the works mentioned previously.[24] However, this thesis is limited to a discussion of works which directly consider the impact and effects of the use of intelligence during the Vietnam War. This follows the thesis' objective to explore the prevailing intelligence culture in the US during the Vietnam War, which resulted in intelligence failures.

Traditional interpretations of intelligence

Current literature that discusses the use of intelligence in the Vietnam War generally accepts that multiple strategic missteps and failures occurred during the war. The attribution of this failure of intelligence, either by the side of the producers, the "intelligence community" or by the side of the consumers, the "policymakers" because of a strained relationship, is often highly debated. Analysis of this strained relationship, as for instance observable in the works of Borer, Twing and Burkett and Benton, is usually structured along interpretations of the

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[21] Nikita Wolf, "This Secret Town: British Intelligence, the Special Relationship, and the Vietnam War," *The International History Review* 39, no. 2 (2017): 338–67.
[22] Xixiang Zhang, "The Vietnam War, 1964-1969: A Chinese Perspective," *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 4 (October 1, 1996): 731, https://doi.org/10.2307/2944663.; Mao-Shin Lin, "China and the Escalation of the Vietnam War: The First Years of the Johnson Administration," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 2 (2009): 35–69, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2009.11.2.35.; Peter Leeson and Andrea Dean, "The Democratic Domino Theory: An Empirical Investigation," *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2009): 533–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00385.x. Leeson and Dean state that according to the democratic domino theory, increases or decreases in democracy in one country spread and "infect" neighboring countries, increasing or decreasing their democratic or communist tendencies.
[23] Michael Warner, "'US Intelligence and Vietnam': The Official Version(s)," *Intelligence and National Security* 25, no. 5 (October 1, 2010): 616, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2010.537119.
[24] Ibid., 616.

functioning of the intelligence-policy nexus.[25] The intelligence-policy nexus is a critical part of strategic decision-making for modern governments.[26] While the intelligence community exists almost solely to inform policymakers and provide them with the information necessary to formulate effective policies and strategies, the relationship has proven to be challenging. Within scholarly literature, debate still exists on the optimal performance of the relationship and interaction between the intelligence and policymaking communities. One of the most historically significant debates on interplay of the intelligence-policy nexus is the Kent-Kendall debate. Kendall described the ideal relationship between the intelligence community and policymakers as 'the intelligence community functioning to help policymakers *influence* the course of events, by helping policymakers understand the operative factors on which they can have impact'.[27] This would lead to close cooperation, providing intelligence products better tailored to the needs and understanding of the policymakers. On the other hand, Kent argued for a clear division between the intelligence community and policymakers. By doing so, Kent argued that risks of politicization could be avoided, because the intelligence community was guarded from public and political issues.[28] In contemporary analysis of the intelligence-policy nexus, Kent's approach is often favored.[29]

The intelligence cycle itself is also a topic of much debate. The most common understanding of the intelligence cycle consists of five phases, providing a continuous loop of feedback: planning and direction, collection, processing, analysis, and dissemination.[30] However, scholars warn that this interpretation should be updated to fit the contemporary world.[31] Hulnick argues that the entire concept of the intelligence cycle as it is, is flawed. It fails to consider counterintelligence and assumes wrongly that collection and analysis of data

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[25] Borer, Twing, and Burkett, "Problems in the Intelligence-Policy Nexus."; Michael Benton, "Strained Policy-Intelligence Relations Led to America's Involvement in the Vietnam War" (Dissertation, National American University, 2020).
[26] Loch Johnson and James Wirtz, eds., *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies, An Anthology*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2014).
[27] Jack Davis, "The Kent-Kendall Debate of 1949," *Studies in Intelligence* 35, no. 2 (1992): 91–103.
[28] Sherman Kent, *Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1946).
[29] Johnson and Wirtz, *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies, An Anthology.*
[30] Mark Phythian, "Introduction: Beyond the Intelligence Cycle?," in *Understanding the Intelligence Cycle*, ed. Mark Phythian (Routledge, 2013), 15–22.
[31] Arthur Hulnick, "What's Wrong with the Intelligence Cycle," *Intelligence and National Security* 21, no. 6 (2006): 959–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520601046291.; Geraint Evans, "Rethinking Military Intelligence Failure – Putting the Wheels Back on the Intelligence Cycle," *Defence Studies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 22–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/14702430701811987.; Michael Warner, "The Past and Future of the Intelligence Cycle," in *Understanding the Intelligence Cycle*, ed. Mark Phythian (Routledge, 2013), 23–33.; Ricky Malone, "Protective Intelligence: Applying the Intelligence Cycle Model to Threat Assessment.," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2, no. 1 (2015): 53–62, https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000034.

work in tandem.[32] Following his examination of weak links in the original intelligence cycle, Evans proposes a new cycle that is supplemented with a 'hub-and-spoke' model that adheres to the following principle: to support the policymakers' decision-making process, the intelligence community should be more attentive to the needs of the policymaker.[33] On the other hand, Malone argues to maintain the original five phases and to enhance it by a systematical assessment of analytic confidence throughout the phases.[34]

Scholars agree that intelligence failures can happen throughout each step of the intelligence cycle. The functioning of the intelligence cycle takes place within the broader context of the intelligence-policy nexus, which can be classified as an institutional setting, or culture.[35] The creation and dissemination of intelligence products, failing or successful, is therefore the product of this system rather than of a single step or individual in the process. Accordingly, to assess the performance of the intelligence cycle and its points of failure, it is essential to review the system in which this takes place: the intelligence culture.

Intelligence failures

A significant amount of the existing research attempts to explain the cause and impact of failures during the Vietnam War. Multiple events during the war are widely discussed and novel insights and declassified documents continuously spark debate on the cause and consequences of these events. Two main events during the Vietnam War stand out in this discussion, due to their strategic impact and relevance.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident is often perceived as the final development which directly led to US involvement in the Vietnam War.[36] Two attacks on US marine vessels were reported on the second and fourth of August 1964. Benton argues that these incidents were used by the Johnson administration as a justification to approve US intervention in Vietnam.[37] He proposes that the Gulf of Tonkin incident served to escalate, but that the gravity of the situation was widely misjudged by the policymakers who allowed little to no input from the intelligence community.[38] Thus, Benton argues that this misuse of intelligence finds its origins in the dissemination stage of the intelligence cycle, as the consumers of the intelligence product failed

[32] Hulnick, "What's Wrong with the Intelligence Cycle."
[33] Evans, "Rethinking Military Intelligence Failure."
[34] Malone, "Protective Intelligence: Applying the Intelligence Cycle Model to Threat Assessment."
[35] Gustavo Diaz, "Methodological Approaches to the Concept of Intelligence Failure," *Revista UNISCI* 7 (2005): 5, https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=76711286004.
[36] Tal Tovy, *The Gulf of Tonkin: The United States and the Escalation in the Vietnam War* (Routledge, 2021).
[37] Benton, "Strained Policy-Intelligence Relations Led to America's Involvement in the Vietnam War."
[38] Ibid., 50.

to engage with the product.[39] Aid goes one step further and argues that the Johnson administration willingly framed the available intelligence as a 'smoking gun' to intervene in the Vietnam War.[40] Hanyok, on the other hand, adopts a different approach.[41] He argues that not all correct raw data was available to the intelligence community at the time of drafting the intelligence estimates.[42] He states that the intelligence community was overwhelmed by the data available, attributing the failure to the processing and analysis phase of the intelligence cycle. However, Hanyok does recognize that pressure from the consumers of the final product, the policymakers of the Johnson administration, may have influenced the intelligence analyst during the drafting stage of the estimates.[43]

The 1968 Tet Offensive is considered a turning point in the US involvement in the Vietnam War.[44] Wirtz provides a detailed account of the deteriorating relationship between several bureaus of intelligence agencies in the months prior to the Tet Offensive, 1968.[45] He argues bureaucratic hurdles counteracted both the processing of data as well as the analysis of data, due to competition within the intelligence community, leading to failures.[46] Ovodenko proposes a different approach, arguing that the inability to properly scale the communist intentions resulted from differences in interpretation of the data between the different agencies.[47] This theory argues that analysts stationed in the US and Vietnam were affected differently by expectations and bias, which in turn led to alternatively interpreted data.[48] In contrast, Reinstein argues that the failure originated from the planning and direction phase of the cycle and can be attributed to the policymakers, as President Johnson and his administration interpreted intelligence analyses according to their own preconceptions.[49] Therefore, Reinstein

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[39] Ibid., 53.
[40] Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission," 492.
[41] Robert Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964," *The Navy Department Library* (Naval History and Heritage Command, 1998), https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/s/skunks-bogies-silent-hounds-flying-fish.html.; Benton, "Strained Policy-Intelligence Relations Led to America's Involvement in the Vietnam War."; Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission.".
[42] Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish," 49.
[43] Ibid.
[44] James Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 2.
[45] James Wirtz, "Intelligence to Please? The Order of Battle Controversy during the Vietnam War," *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (1991): 239–63, https://doi.org/10.2307/2152228.
[46] Ibid., 248.
[47] Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive."
[48] Ibid.
[49] Reinstein, "The Way a Drunk Uses a Lamp Post: Intelligence Analysis and Policy during the Vietnam War, 1962-1968," 351.

argues that policymakers directed the intelligence agencies to adapt their products to suit the existing expectations.[50]

The abovementioned debates on attributing intelligence failures in the Vietnam War remain, as more previously classified sources become available for analysis. To discuss instances of intelligence failures, and how these could occur, it is necessary to define what exactly constitutes an intelligence failure. The domain of intelligence failures is often considered the most academically mature subject of intelligence studies.[51] However, authors often rely on intuitive understandings of what is meant by an 'intelligence failure'.[52] This can result in a partial or biased understanding of what an intelligence failure encompasses. Gentry observes that intelligence failures occur if a state does not adequately collect and interpret intelligence information, make sound policy based on the intelligence (and other factors), and effectively act.[53] Jervis describes intelligence failures in the broadest sense as a mismatch between the estimates, and what later information reveals.[54] Jervis also states that intelligence failure arises when it is falling short from what is expected of good intelligence.[55] This raises a follow-up question, rooted in the debate discussed above: who decides what is expected of good intelligence? Copeland contributes to this discussion by defining intelligence failures as follows: "policymakers or analysts knew or reasonably should have known, under the circumstances and relative to the complex decision-making environment and priorities of policymakers, enough information to accurately assess the probability and consequences of the eventual action or incident".[56] This definition includes both the intelligence community and policymakers as responsible actors for the use and misuse of intelligence. It is highlighted that failures are often a mix of political, psychological, and relational factors in both the communities of intelligence professionals and policymakers, all factors that make up the intelligence culture of a state at a certain moment in time. Due to the scope of this research, including both producers and consumers of intelligence in an integral way, the extended definitions of intelligence failures of Jervis and Copeland (2007) were adhered to.[57]

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Mark Jensen, "Intelligence Failures: What Are They Really and What Do We Do about Them?," *Intelligence and National Security* 27, no. 2 (2012): 261–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2012.661646.
[52] Thomas Copeland, "Intelligence Failure Theory," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 2010, 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.27.
[53] John Gentry, "Intelligence Failure Reframed," *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2008): 247–70.
[54] Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails* (Cornell University Press, 2010).
[55] Ibid.
[56] Thomas Copeland, *Fool Me Twice: Intelligence Failure and Mass Casualty Terrorism* (Brill, 2007), 6, https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004158450.i-292.64.
[57] Copeland, *Fool Me Twice: Intelligence Failure and Mass Casualty Terrorism*.; Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*.

Within this definition, different types of intelligence failures can be identified. Betts proposes that intelligence failures can be conceptualized in three overlapping ways: as a failure in perspective, as a pathology in communication and as a paradox in perception.[58] Aid supplements the third perspective with the notion that strategic cultural factors shape the way in which intelligence agencies work, and that these can help explain strategic failures made by intelligence communities.[59] Betts' proposition is advanced by Jervis, who puts forward six types of intelligence-related failures: (1) threat warning failure by intelligence agencies, (2) policymakers' failure to respond effectively to threat warnings, (3) failure by intelligence agencies to alert policymakers of opportunities to exploit, (4) policymakers' failure to effectively exploit opportunities, (5) failure to recognize one's own vulnerabilities in the context of other actor's intentions and capabilities, and (6) failure to ameliorate one's own vulnerabilities.[60] Rovner provides an extensive analysis of the impact of politicization (attempts to influence intelligence estimates to reflect policy preferences by policymakers) and concludes that it has a lasting negative impact on the intelligence-policy nexus.[61] On the other hand, analysts' cognitive biases influence the creation of intelligence products in early stages of the intelligence cycle.[62] Jervis' overview provides a framework to further assess types of intelligence failures, how these arise within the intelligence-policy nexus and how these influence strategic decision-making. It demonstrates how intelligence failures can be attributed to either the intelligence community or the policymakers.

The occurrence of each of these types of failures signals towards a strained relationship between the intelligence community and the policymakers. Therefore, the literature demonstrates that this strained relationship also existed during the terms of Johnson's presidency during the Vietnam War. The next chapter puts forward a theoretical framework of 'intelligence cultures' to analyze *how* these failures could occur.

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[58] Richard Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (1978): 61–89, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009967.
[59] Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission."
[60] Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 249.
[61] Joshua Rovner, "Is Politicization Ever a Good Thing?," *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 1 (2013): 55–67, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2012.749065.
[62] Amanda Gookins, "The Role of Intelligence in Policy Making," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 28, no. 1 (2008): 65–73, https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2008.0025.; Ralf Lillbacka, "Schelling Traps as Drivers of Intelligence Failure," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 35, no. 1 (2022): 101–30.

III. Theoretical framework

The previous chapter reviewed the available literature on the Vietnam War, the use of intelligence during the Vietnam War, and the occurrence of two impactful strategic surprises. This thesis explored the occurrence of intelligence failures during times of high-pressure strategic decision-making during the Vietnam War. To determine *how* an environment in which these intelligence failures could occur, could exist, this study therefore utilized the conceptual framework of 'intelligence cultures'. In this chapter the larger context for the study is outlined, detailing the 'lens' through which the main research question was examined.

Turning to culture

As outlined in the previous chapter, most debate on intelligence failures during the Vietnam War consists of attempts to define what actor the failure should be attributed to, based on the factual proceedings of the event, and what the exact typology of the failure is. However, what is omitted in these cases is a concern for *how* these failures could occur, i.e., what factors contributed to the creation of an environment in which these different types of failures could emerge and grow. While this is covered to some extent within certain types of intelligence failures, such as politicization, more recent research has stressed the importance of assessing the broader environment in which the consumers and producers of the intelligence product operated to determine its operational quality and effectiveness.[63]

The environment in which the intelligence-policy nexus is situated, is described as the 'intelligence culture' of a country. The core of this culturalist approach is that an intelligence system can be determined by identifying the specific norms, ideas, rules, and practices of the intelligence-policy nexus within a country.[64] Scholars of the culturalist approach recognize that the study of intelligence cannot be approached as an independent domain, and that sociopolitical interactions contribute to success and failure of the intelligence-policy nexus.[65] It is recognized that the system of the intelligence-policy nexus functions through a cycle of

[63] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States."; Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations," *Intelligence and National Security* 26, no. 4 (2011): 521–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2011.580605.; Sebastiaan Rietjens, "Explaining the Cultures of Intelligence," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 32, no. 1 (2019): 202, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2018.1524250.
[64] Marco Munier, "The Canadian National Intelligence Culture," *A Minimalist and Defensive National Intelligence Apparatus* 76, no. 3 (2021): 428.D
[65] Willmetts, "The Cultural Turn in Intelligence Studies."

inputs and outputs, resulting in the specific intelligence culture.[66] As internal and external factors change, the culture is altered, either positively or negatively. An intelligence culture characterized by troubled conditions is often linked to intelligence failures.[67]

Davies presents an early call for a systematic theory to analyze intelligence culture within a country-specific context, to enhance the examination of concepts and tools used in the intelligence-policy nexus.[68] In 2004, Davies builds on this argument by providing a preliminary comparative study, demonstrating the ability of conceptualizing intelligence culture to explore modes of failure that emerge within the intelligence-policy nexus.[69] Davies finds that different cultural factors existing within the intelligence-policy nexus can act as force multipliers upon one another, facilitating an environment in which failures can occur.[70] While Davies neglects to present a clear definition on what is understood as 'intelligence culture', a workable definition is provided by De Graaff and Nyce: intelligence culture is understood as "*the product of a task and value environment, in which the task environment consists of all actors that may have an influence upon the intelligence organization and/or may be influenced by the acts and products of the organization. The value environment is the cultural and ideological climate in which the organization operates*."[71]

The "cultural understanding" of war

Only a handful of authors have applied this conceptual lens to the practice and environment of the intelligence-policy nexus during the Vietnam War. Ovodenko explored the differences between US intelligence practitioners stationed in Vietnam and in the US.[72] By providing a comparative analysis at the organizational level of the intelligence community, Ovodenko was able to explore the failure of the Tet Offensive from a novel perspective compared to traditional approaches of intelligence failure.[73] A similar approach is put forward by Aid, who proposes

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[66] Charlotte Yelamos, Michael Goodman, and Mark Stout, "Intelligence and Culture: An Introduction," *Intelligence and National Security* 37, no. 4 (2022): 475–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2065610.
[67] Hamilton Bean, "Organizational Culture and US Intelligence Affairs," *Intelligence and National* Security 24, no. 4 (2009): 479, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520903069413.
[68] Philip Davies, "Ideas of Intelligence: Divergent National Concepts and Institutions. (Intelligence)," *Harvard International Review* 24, no. 3 (2002): 62–67.
[69] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States," 499.
[70] Ibid., 503.
[71] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States."; Bob De Graaff and James Nyce, "Introduction," in *Handbook of European Intelligence Cultures*, ed. Bob De Graaff and James Nyce (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xxxiv.
[72] Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive."
[73] Ibid.

several strategic cultural factors that can contribute to intelligence failures, such as consensus, risk aversity and the Rational Actor Theory, and tests these against historical events of the Cold War.[74] However, Ovodenko merely analyzes the impact of the observed cultural factors on the intelligence community and does not pay attention to the policymakers.[75] On the other hand, while Aid does take the whole intelligence-policy nexus into account, his use of declassified documents is limited which results in more general observations of the intelligence culture instead of specific analyses and assessments of the impact of the culture on operations.[76]

While the study of intelligence cultures has been limitedly applied to aspects of the Vietnam War, the American intelligence culture has been studied more extensively. Multiple authors have devoted works to identifying the orientation and preferences of the intelligence culture of the US, see for instance Johnson, Aldrich and Kasuku or Marrin.[77] The focus of these works is oriented towards discussing general trends and observations that can be made about the intelligence-policy nexus in the 'Americanosphere'. An analysis of how the intelligence culture has contributed to the occurrence of intelligence failures during the specific timeframe of the Vietnam War was yet to be performed.

The impact of culture: A framework

Several frameworks for performing specific and comparative analysis on intelligence culture have been developed. As discussed above, initial steps were undertaken by Davies.[78] De Graaff & Nyce furthered this by outlining a framework by which intelligence organizations and their policy-developing counterparts could be examined.[79] The framework consists of three parts, offering guiding questions to analyze 'the impact of environmental (external) factors contributing to the formation and functioning of the intelligence-policy nexus', the community and organization itself, and finally the effects the intelligence-policy nexus has upon its environment to determine the intelligence culture.[80] Also stressing the importance of the relationship between intelligence culture and performance, Duyvesteyn argues that the role of

[74] Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission."
[75] Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive."
[76] Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission."
[77] Johnson, "The United States."; Aldrich and Kasuku, "Escaping from American Intelligence: Culture, Ethnocentrism and the Anglosphere."; Stephen Marrin, "The United States," in *Routledge Companion to Intelligence Studies*, ed. Robert Dover, Michael Goodman, and Claudia Hillebrand, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2015), 145–53.
[78] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States."
[79] De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction," xxxiv.
[80] De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction," xxxv–xxxviii.

intelligence culture on the intelligence cycle can be logically derived from a step-by-step analysis.[81] According to Duyvesteyn this 'process of intelligence' should be taken as the starting point to dissect the intelligence culture of a country in a specified timeframe.[82] Several guiding principles are offered by Duyvesteyn to determine the effect of the intelligence culture on the performance of the intelligence cycle, and therefore on the intelligence-policy nexus.[83]

The broad framework proposed by De Graaff and Nyce would benefit from further specification towards the intelligence cycle, given the scope of this research.[84] By combining the frameworks offered by De Graaff and Nyce and Duyvesteyn, emphasis is placed within the three pillars of De Graaff and Nyce on the determining factors of the intelligence culture that are expected to influence the performance of the intelligence cycle the most.[85] This resulted in the conceptual framework utilized to establish the impact of the existing intelligence cultures on intelligence failures during the Vietnam War, 1964-1968, as shown in Table 1. A detailed overview of the determining questions to establish the intelligence culture and their respective markers distilled from Duyvesteyn's guiding principles is displayed in Appendix 1.[86]

According to De Graaff and Nyce this framework reflects the complex set of perceptions of reality, values and behavioral norms which constitute the national intelligence culture, while also being targeted towards the performance of the intelligence cycle as according to Duyvesteyn.[87]

[81] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations," 524.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction."; See Appendix 1 for a detailed overview of all determining questions to establish the intelligence culture.
[85] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction."
[86] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction."
[87] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction," xxxv.

Table 1

A framework to determine intelligence culture and its effects

Pillar	**Position on the intelligence cycle**
Environmental factors	Planning and direction
Internal factors	Collection
	Processing
	Analysis
Effects upon the environment	Dissemination

Data combined from De Graaff and Nyce and Duyvesteyn.[88]

Note: This framework was supplemented with the determining questions from De Graaff and Nyce and markers proposed by Duyvesteyn.[89]

[88] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction."
[89] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction." The selected supplementing questions are listed in cursive in Appendix 1.

IV. Methodology

This thesis was tasked with uncovering the relationship between the existing intelligence cultures during the Vietnam War (1964-1968), the occurrence of intelligence failures and the flawed patterns of sustained interaction between the IC and the policymakers. It analyzed the performance of the intelligence cycle within the context of the existing intelligence culture, providing insight in 'how' intelligence failures could occur. This research assessed the effects of the intelligence culture in which intelligence producers and consumers operated on the reliability of their relationship during the Vietnam War. This was done during two distinct moments, following the performance of the updated intelligence cycle as proposed by Johnson, Omand and Evans.[90] It evaluated what parts of the intelligence-policy nexus were most vulnerable to common failures during the selected timeframe as a result of the characteristics of the prevailing intelligence culture. Additionally, a textual assessment of the presence of indicators for the operationalized components of the conceptual framework of intelligence culture was carried out. In turn, this data was used to examine the prevailing intelligence culture during the Vietnam War, what existing patterns of sustained interaction shaped this culture and how this culture affected the types of failures that occurred during times of high-pressure strategic decision-making. The research followed a qualitative approach, with an in-depth examination of two crucial moments which defined the scope of the US involvement in the Vietnam War between 1964-1968. This examination was performed via a textual analysis of a mix of primary and secondary sources, which is detailed below.

Method of analysis

To uncover the relationship between the existing intelligence cultures during the Vietnam War (1964-1968), the occurrence of intelligence failures and the flawed patterns of sustained interaction between the intelligence community and the policymakers, a comparative case study of two intelligence failures was carried out. The data collected from primary sources was analyzed for the presence of the operationalized indicators of the intelligence culture framework, by De Graaff and Nyce and Duyvesteyn as presented in the theoretical framework

[90] Loch Johnson, "Making the Intelligence 'Cycle' Work," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 1, no. 4 (1986): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850608608435033.; Evans, "Rethinking Military Intelligence Failure."; David Omand, "The Intelligence Cycle," in *Routledge Companion to Intelligence Studies*, ed. Robert Dover, Michael Goodman, and Claudia Hillebrand, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2015), 59–70.

and in Appendix 1.[91] The presence of a relevant marker in a primary source was indicated in a footnote. This analysis was supplemented by an examination of how the prevailing intelligence culture impacted the intelligence community and the policymakers for each case. After this, an analysis was made of how the observed indicators of intelligence culture related to the intelligence failures occurring during the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tet Offensive, comparing the cases. This analysis discussed the differences and similarities of the prevailing intelligence culture for each case, how this impacted the functioning of the intelligence cycle. Thereby this analysis contributed to the debate on the strained but evolving relationship between the IC and the policymakers, to determine how these cultures affect the types of failures that occur during times of high-pressure strategic decision-making. To improve comparability, several guiding sub-questions were answered for each case:

1. How did the course of the 'planning and direction' phase of the intelligence cycle contribute to a disturbed intelligence-policy nexus?
2. How did the course of the 'collection, processing and analysis' phase of the intelligence cycle contribute to a disturbed intelligence-policy nexus?
3. How did the course of the 'dissemination' phase of the intelligence cycle contribute to a disturbed intelligence-policy nexus?

Conducting a comparative study of intelligence cultures is proposed by multiple scholars in intelligence as the preferred research method to enable theory development and understand the ways in which states seek to protect their priorities, and how this fails.[92] However, while recognizing the benefits of a comparative study, Warner also puts forward the lack of agreement among scholars and practitioners as to what should be compared.[93] This underpins the need for a specified scope and objective in the research design. The scope of this research is stated in the following section.

Phythian characterizes the study of intelligence cultures as an area well equipped for comparative study, as differences between communities of intelligence can be highlighted over all four levels that constitute the national intelligence culture.[94] Davies also put comparative

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[91] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction."
[92] Brainard Peters, *Comparative Politics: Theory and Methods*, 1st ed. (Red Globe Press London, 1998), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-26926-6.; Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States."; Mark Phythian, "Cultures of National Intelligence," in *Routledge Companion to Intelligence Studies*, ed. Robert Dover, Michael Goodman, and Claudia Hillebrand, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2015), 33–41.
[93] Michael Warner, "Building a Theory of Intelligence Systems," in *National Intelligence Systems: Current Research and Future Prospects*, ed. Gregory Treverton and Wilhelm Agrell (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11.
[94] Phythian, "Cultures of National Intelligence," 31, 41.

studies forward as the most compelling research design to provide insight into how intelligence operates and how failures occur because of the prevailing culture, arguing that elements of a specific environment contributing to failures are hard to establish without comparative data.[95] The US involvement in the Vietnam War can be characterized by two defining moments that had great impact on the intelligence community, policymakers, and the wider political and public context: the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tet Offensive.[96] These two defining moments are also considered significant moments of strained interactions between the intelligence community and the policymakers. Therefore, these cases were selected for comparative research. As outlined in the literature review, the two cases demonstrate many commonalities, but also some key differences. Both the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tet Offensive took place under the Johnson administration, against a similar historical and cultural backdrop, and in a context of strained intelligence-policy relations. Contrastingly, the outcome of this distorted relationship differed for both cases. Most of the scholars contribute the failure of the Gulf of Tonkin incident to the policymakers, whereas the failure to recognize the Tet Offensive is most often attributed to the intelligence community. Determining how changing intelligence cultures affected the types of failures that occurred during periods of high-pressure strategic decision-making was the main point of inquiry for this research. Therefore, to adhere to the comparative research principles proposed by Phythian, the scope of this research was limited to an analysis of the selected case studies taking place, and to primary documents produced within six months prior to the events.[97] This timeframe ensured that the whole performance of the intelligence cycle within the context of the intelligence culture was thoroughly analyzed and interpreted according to the indicators, while maintaining focus on determining the key differences between the cases.

Data: selection, processing, and justification

The data used in this study was obtained via analysis of unclassified and declassified documents, policy documents, and policy briefs found online for the two defined periods of time. These documents were gathered from the following online databases: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Reading Room, Digital National Security Archive, the Office of the Historian of the US State Department Archive, and the intelligence vault of the Office of the Director of

[95] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States," 518.
[96] Jim Walda, "The Performance of the CIA during the Tonkin-Incident and the Tet Offensive" (Dissertation, Erasmus University, 2016).
[97] Phythian, "Cultures of National Intelligence."

National Intelligence.[98] These databases include available sources from the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and several US ministries. The availability of classified documents has steadily increased since 1971. The most recent declassification of documents took place in 2019, when more than eleven hundred documents related to the Tet Offensive were made available to the public.

The collection of documents was limited to those drafted a maximum of six months prior to the selected event taking place and one month afterwards, resulting in a selection of documents between February and September 1964, and between August 1967 and March 1968. The resulting selection of documents, including briefings, intelligence estimates, meeting notes, policy documents, was narrowed down further via an assessment of the presence of indicators of intelligence culture: to be selected, a document should contain (implicit) references to the organization of the intelligence process, the relationships between organizations, the dissemination of products, national or foreign policies, or the strategic decision-making process. The use of these selection criteria was done to mitigate the risk of biased selectivity. This resulted in a final selection of 154 documents. A textual document analysis was selected as the main method of analysis, as this highly applicable to qualitative case studies aimed to produce a rich description of a phenomenon.[99] The selection of documents was used for a systemic evaluation of the presence of aspects of intelligence culture known to negatively influence the intelligence-policy nexus. A negative influence is understood here as the creation of a process or environment in which intelligence failures can prevail. While there is a vast amount of data available through unclassified, declassified, and other primary sources, a gap remained in determining whether the documents available accurately reflected the intelligence culture and functioning of the intelligence-policy nexus. To moderate this limitation, findings were triangulated with data obtained from secondary sources, which aided in contextualization and gaining understanding of historical and societal roots of developments.

Models in intelligence research are often biased towards American, British, and Russian organizational structures and frameworks.[100] This research focused on the intelligence culture within the US and its relation to the intelligence-policy nexus, therefore, this theoretical bias

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[98] "CIA Reading Room," n.d., https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/home.; "Digital National Security Archive," n.d., https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/digital-national-security-archive.; "The Office of the Historian of the US State Department Archive," n.d., https://history.state.gov.; "The Intelligence Vault of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence," n.d., https://www.intel.gov/intel-vault.

[99] Glenn Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 29, https://doi.org/10.3316/qrj0902027.

[100] De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction," xxxii.

was not expected to pose any problems to the validity of the research. The following chapters discuss the collected data, the analysis, and the interpretations of the data.

V. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, 1964

In this chapter, an analysis of the collected data on the Gulf of Tonkin incident is conducted. The discussion of the analysis is divided into three key themes: a brief description of the events leading up to the incident (5.1), a characterization of the intelligence culture (5.2), and an analysis of why the intelligence culture impacted the functioning of the intelligence cycle (5.3). The examination of these three themes contributed to determining how an environment in which intelligence failures during Gulf of Tonkin incident of the Vietnam War could occur, could exist, by systematically analyzing the prevailing intelligence culture.

5.1 The events of August 1964

The Gulf of Tonkin incident is considered a crucial event in a series of incidents that led to military escalation between the US and North Vietnam.[101] In the months leading up to the incident, tensions were already building between the US and North Vietnam, and the pressure to alter American policy in Southeast Asia was increasing.[102] In March 1964, Defense Minister Robert McNamara started the process to launch preparatory activities to bomb North Vietnam. In May 1964, the sudden gains made by the communist forces in Laos and the further 'weakening' of South Vietnam provided cause for grave concerns within Johnson's administration, resulting in greater calls for action.[103] Simultaneously, calls for US military support from the government of South Vietnam increased.[104]

During this time, several divisions of the US army were present in South Vietnam and in The South China Sea. On the second of August 1964, two US destroyers radioed that they had been attacked by North Vietnamese forces and were required to defend themselves.[105] Two days later, on the fourth of August, the occurrence of a similar attack was reported.[106] In response to these events, a resolution was presented to the US Congress by the President to ask

[101] Tovy, *The Gulf of Tonkin: The United States and the Escalation in the Vietnam War*, 1.
[102] Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War, Revised Edition*, 2nd ed. (Naval Institute Press, 2019), 25.
[103] Ibid., 25.
[104] Ibid., 32.
[105] Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, "U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Gulf of Tonkin and Escalation, 1964," *State Department Archive: Office of the Historian*, accessed May 10, 2023, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/gulf-of-tonkin.
[106] Richard Cherwitz, "Lyndon Johnson and the 'Crisis'; of Tonkin Gulf: A President's Justification of War," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 42, no. 2 (1978): 94, https://doi.org/10.1080/10570317809373928.

permission to increase US military presence and engagement in the region.[107] Later reports revealed that while suspicions existed of the planning of a second attack, it never actually occurred.[108] This was revealed in 1971 and the resolution was repealed to limit the further continuation of the US involvement in the Vietnam War.[109]

Several actors were involved during these critical events that eventually led to the passing of the Congress resolution. From the policymaker's perspective, the Johnson's presidential administration was involved including Johnson himself, the Secretary of Defense, McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Secondly, US military commanders based in Vietnam were involved. The intelligence community was also involved in the analysis and reporting on both events, as the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), CIA as well as the National Security Agency (NSA) were disseminating intelligence products. The following section details circumstances of the environment, internal factors, and effects upon the environment of the aforementioned actors involved in the intelligence cycle, shedding light on the prevailing intelligence culture and its relation to the intelligence failure of the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

5.2 Characterizing the intelligence culture

Several broad trends in the intelligence culture of 1964, specifically in the months prior to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, were observed. This analysis is based on the highlighted factors following the contributions of Duyvesteyn and De Graaff and Nyce.[110] The next section provides an analysis of how the observed characteristics of the US intelligence culture in 1964 as reflected in secondary sources, could lead to the intelligence failure of the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

The US intelligence community of 1964 was considered a competitive environment. Several intelligence agencies functioned as competing producers of intelligence products.[111] Collaboration was fostered via the Office of National Estimates, and its National Intelligence

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[107] Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, "U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Gulf of Tonkin and Escalation, 1964."; Speaker of the House of Representatives and President of the Senate, "Joint Resolution for the Maintenance of Peace and Security in Southeast Asia," *National Archives Catalog: Lyndon B. Johnson Library*, 1964, accessed May 1, 2023, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2803448.
[108] McGeorge Bundy, "The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, September 18," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/gulf-tonkin-incident-september-18/docview/1679081378/se-2.
[109] The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, "Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964)," February 8, 2022, accessed May 12, 2023, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution.
[110] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction."
[111] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States," 502.

Estimates (NIEs) were regarded as the most authoritative analytical publication.[112] However, the NIEs did not always reflect a genuine intelligence consensus and multiple rival intelligence products were produced by the individual agencies.[113] Weaker inter-agency collaboration was further complicated by agency-specific struggles: the US intelligence agencies had dual missions, where they both engaged in the collection and assessment of the information. A dual mission is found to complicate the organizational process, as it can cause internal struggles.[114]

Earlier deployment of US military forces against a 'communist threat', the US involvement in the Korean War, had resulted in a major intelligence failure neglecting to predict Chinese entrance into the war.[115] While the context of the Cold War was vastly different in 1964, the failure of the Korean War had a lasting impact on the intelligence culture in 1964 due to internal tensions.[116] While estimates on Chinese intervention in the Vietnam War were drafted, these warnings were dismissed because they did not suit the preconceived ideas of the policymakers.[117] This analysis demonstrated that the trauma of the Korean War had a lasting impact on the US intelligence culture in 1964, by altering the requirements for priority setting.[118]

While most intelligence agencies were in some way related to a policy department, the CIA operates independently. This means it only received requests for intelligence support from the presidential administration's executive branch, and only disseminated the finished products to them.[119] However, Johnson's relationship with his primary intelligence agency was characterized by a lack of trust from the start of his presidency.[120] As a result, Johnson repeatedly disregarded disseminated intelligence products, especially when these contradicted

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[112] Giordana Pulcini, "Breaking the ONE: The Evolution of the National Intelligence Estimate Production Cycle from Johnson to Carter," *Nuclear Proliferation International History Project* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2022), 2, accessed May 2, 2023, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/NPIHP_Working_Paper_18_Breaking_the_ONE_%28March_2022%29.pdf.

[113] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States," 502.

[114] Charles Hermann, "Bureaucracy," n.d., 196, http://m.voxprof.com/cfh/hermann-pubs/Hermann-Bureaucracy.pdf.

[115] Jonathan Corrado, "Rethinking Intelligence Failure: China's Intervention in the Korean War," International *Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 36, no. 1 (2023): 199–219, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2021.1938905.

[116] Gary Stone, *Elites for Peace: The Senate and the Vietnam War, 1964-1968* (University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 24–25.; Tierney, "The Two Vietnam Wars: American Perceptions of the Use of Force."

[117] Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission."

[118] Stone, *Elites for Peace: The Senate and the Vietnam War, 1964-1968*, 24–25.; Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations," 526.

[119] Robert Gates, "The CIA and American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 2 (1987): 216, https://doi.org/10.2307/20043370.

[120] Benton, "Strained Policy-Intelligence Relations Led to America's Involvement in the Vietnam War," 66.

his chosen policy, as observed in meeting records.[121] This led to much resentment within the intelligence community, as their work only seemed to be relevant if it resonated with the preferred policy options. This form of 'risk aversion' troubled the division between the IC and decision-makers, as challenging policies was considered a 'bad career move', which affected the type of intelligence products that were disseminated in 1964.[122] Moreover, the relationship between the IC and the policymakers deteriorated since the Kennedy administration, creating a situation in which the fear of losing political access to decision-making circles had become so high for the IC, that manipulation of intelligence products had become common practice.[123]

5.3 Assessing culture and failure

The following section explores the three dimensions of the intelligence culture framework. Following an analysis of primary and declassified sources, it is argued that the intelligence culture negatively impacted the functioning of the intelligence cycle in 1964. Persisting cultures of path-dependency in the process of planning and direction, analysis and dissemination deteriorated the functioning of the intelligence-policy nexus. Within the existing literature, it is argued that the existence of this culture contributed to an environment in which failures could occur.

5.3.1. Environmental factors

A notable trend observable in Johnson's first administration was the *ad hoc* character of the intelligence-policy nexus. The multiple intelligence agencies present in the 1964 playing field competed for the attention of high-level decision-makers. The *ad hoc* character of the decision-making process, led to the result that intelligence analysts or their products could be

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[121] John McCone, "Meeting with the President, Attended by Secretaries Rusk, and McNamara, Mr. Bundy and Mr. McCone - To Discuss South Vietnam Report," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/meeting-with-president-attended-secretaries-rusk/docview/1679127488/se-2. Markers: bias, intelligence-policymaker divide.; William Colby (CIA Chief of the Far East Division), "Presidential Meeting on Vietnam (6 May 1964)," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/presidential-meeting-on-vietnam-6-may-1964/docview/1679127556/se-2. Markers: bias, intelligence-policymaker divide.; United States National Security Council, "Summary Record of the Meeting on Southeast Asia, Cabinet Room, (June 10, 1964, 5:30 p.m.) - Southeast Asia," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, 7, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/summary-record-meeting-on-southeast-asia-cabinet/docview/1679128189/se-2. Markers: bias, intelligence-policymaker divide.; Benton, "Strained Policy-Intelligence Relations Led to America's Involvement in the Vietnam War," 66.; Gates, "The CIA and American Foreign Policy," 221.

[122] Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission," 484.

[123] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations," 528.

excluded or included on meetings, based on the content of their estimations.[124] This is for instance observed in the exclusion of the intelligence report by Sherman Kent, which discredits the credibility of the Domino Theory, which the US used as its foundation for the justification of its overseas actions.[125] The drafting and publication of this intelligence report was done per request of the president.[126] However, discussion of this publication did not end up on any meeting agenda in the following days, while further drafts for courses of action to mitigate the 'communist threat' and reviews of military situations were continuously disseminated.[127] This signals that the *ad hoc* character of the intelligence-policy nexus allowed room for policymakers to choose which intelligence estimates to act on, and which to ignore. This disturbed the balance of the intelligence-policy nexus and created an environment in which failures could occur. While the intelligence agencies demonstrated that collaboration was possible with the initiation of a large-scale interagency study in February and March of 1964, the final products produced did not represent coordinated views.[128] This could be a result from the rising competition to obtain a seat at the table in the decision-making process, as also seen in the fluctuating attendance of meetings, which disturbed the intelligence cycle in the process.[129]

In the months prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, policymakers frequently demanded intelligence requests that were built upon certain assumptions foundational to US policies.

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[124] Reinstein, "The Way a Drunk Uses a Lamp Post: Intelligence Analysis and Policy during the Vietnam War, 1962-1968," 4.

[125] Sherman Kent, "Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a 'Domino Effect' in the Far East?," *CIA Reading Room*, 1964, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0001166427. Marker: awareness.; Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Cornell University Press, 2011), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7z94g.

[126] John McCone (DCI) and Sherman Kent, "Domino Effect in the Far East: Includes Attachment Entitled 'Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a "Domino Effect" in the Far East?' By Sherman Kent," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/domino-effect-far-east-includes-attachment/docview/1679062155/se-2. Markers: oversimplification, bias.

[127] McGeorge Bundy, "Agenda for Lunch, July 14, 1964, 1:30," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/agenda-lunch-july-14-1964-1-30-includes-mcgeorge/docview/1679124058/se-2. Markers: priority setting, oversimplification.; Central Intelligence Agency, "National Security Council Meeting--12:15 p.m.--28 July 1964--Attended by the President, Rusk, Ball, Harriman, Thompson, McNamara, Vance, General Wheeler, Dillon, McGeorge Bundy, and McCone, plus Three or Four Members of the President's Staff, Including George Reedy," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/national-security-council-meeting-12-15-p-m-28/docview/1679127136/se-2. Markers: priority setting, oversimplification.

[128] Vietnam Task Force, "Evolution of the War, Military Pressures against North Vietnam: Action and Debate, Feb-Jun 1964," *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*, 1967, 6, https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/research/pentagon-papers/Pentagon-Papers-Part-IV-C-2a.pdf. Marker: competition.

[129] United States White House, "President Lyndon B. Johnson, Daily Diary (Worksheet)," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/president-lyndon-b-johnson-daily-diary-worksheet/docview/1679126495/se-2. Marker: competition.

These assumptions heavily influenced priority setting for the intelligence community. These preconceived notions of reality steered the IC towards certain pathways, which enlarged the risk of groupthink. For instance, in preparation for the Honolulu conference of June 1964, the intelligence community was asked by the JCS to prepare answers to several questions regarding the scope and impact of the developments in North Vietnam, based on the following assumption: *"Our point of departure is and must be that we cannot accept overrunning of Southeast Asia by Hanoi and Peiping [Ed. Beijing]"*.[130] The presentation of the findings during the conference was followed by a discussion over the desirability of operations and retaliatory action.

> *-" Secretary McNamara said that before we undertook attacks against the North, we certainly had to be prepared to meet threats at the level stated by General Taylor."*
>
> *- "Mr. McCone agreed with this point, but went on to say that there was a serious question about the effect of major deployments on Communist Chinese reactions. The intelligence community was inclined to the view that the more substantial the deployment, the greater the possible chance of a drastic Communist Chinese reaction."*
>
> *- "Secretary McNamara noted that all this planning was on the basis that a really drastic communist reaction was possible, and was not based on any judgment that it was probable. The best current view was that appropriately limited attacks on the North would not bring in Communist Chinese air or North Vietnam or Communist Chinese ground forces."*[131]

During this discussion between McNamara (Secretary of Defense) and McCone (Director of Intelligence, DCI), the desire to strongly adhere to the stated 'point of departure' became apparent, providing an example of how requirement and priority setting influenced the way intelligence products were received and interpreted. In documents such as the NIEs, the contributing agencies explicitly stated the limitations they faced by adhering to these

[130] Vietnam Task Force, "Evolution of the War, Military Pressures against North Vietnam: Action and Debate, Feb-Jun 1964," 28. Marker: competition.
[131] Vietnam Task Force, "Evolution of the War, Military Pressures against North Vietnam: Action and Debate, Feb-Jun 1964," 32. Marker: competition.

assumptions.[132] The tendencies of policymakers to influence requirement and priority-setting, to a point where estimates diverging from these assumed realities were ignored, demonstrate a culture of path-dependency. By requesting and selecting information that adheres to preconceived ideas of the policymakers, the intelligence-policy nexus was disturbed. This disturbance affected the dissemination process of finished intelligence products and created a culture in which intelligence failures could occur.

5.3.2. Internal factors

Whereas the environmental factors influenced the priority setting and direction based on preconceived notions of reality, pressures from internal factors shaped the culture in which the process of collecting, processing, and analyzing information into a workable intelligence product took place. As discussed, one of the observed trends within the intelligence community was the response to the aftermath of the strategic surprise of the Korean War in 1950. It was widely accepted and advised within the intelligence community that the possibility of a Chinese intervention could not be dismissed, as for instance done in the presentation of *'Alternatives for the Imposition of Measured Pressures against North Vietnam'*.[133] This is demonstrative of the growth of the intelligence community, as it tries to overcome a 'group mindset'. During the Korean War, the intervention of Chinese troops was not considered a possibility, due to preconceived ideas, which led the intelligence community into a 'collective state of denial'.[134] However, the lessons learned during this strategic surprise were incorporated in the procedures of the intelligence cycle in 1964. The intelligence processed and analyzed the first months of 1964 frequently mentioned the possibility of Chinese or communist intervention in the case of escalation of war and provided alternative routes to formulate a response.[135] While this

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[132] Central Intelligence Agency, "Probable Consequences of Certain U.S. Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, 1, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/probable-consequences-certain-u-s-actions-with/docview/1679063605/se-2. Markers: competition, priority setting.

[133] Robert Johnson (United States Department of State), "Alternatives for the Imposition of Measured Pressures against North Vietnam," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, 5, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/alternatives-imposition-measured-pressures/docview/1679126332/se-2. Markers: trauma, previous failure, risk aversion.

[134] Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission."

[135] United States Department of Defense, "Scenario for Strikes on North Vietnam," *Digital National Security Archive*, May 23, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/scenario-strikes-on-north-vietnam-includes/docview/1679127785/se-2. Markers: previous failure, risk aversion.; Thomas Hughes (United States Department of State), "Peiping and Hanoi: Motivations and Probable Reactions to Gulf of Tonkin Crisis," *Digital National Security Archive*, August 6, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/peiping-hanoi-motivations-probable-reactions-gulf/docview/1679080137/se-2. Markers: previous failure, risk aversion.

recognition demonstrates the internal adaptive capacities of the intelligence community, which benefitted the functioning of the intelligence-policy nexus, the adaptive capacities of the IC did not stand on their own. For the whole cycle to benefit, the estimations presented in the intelligence products had to be accepted by the policymakers during the dissemination process as well, even if these went against preconceived or biased ideas.

The collection of information proved a difficult task during the Vietnam War. American intelligence officers in Vietnam encountered difficulties obtaining raw data themselves. However, intelligence learning from local recruits and sources was further complicated over cultural differences, such as intercultural communication.[136] These cultural obstacles resulted in a less cooperative stance of Vietnamese contributors to the collection of data, which limited the American signals intelligence and human intelligence capacities.[137] The limited access to several types of high-value information resulted in a weaker information position of the US intelligence community, and as a result, the processed analysis became more reactive instead of foreshadowing, which was reflected in more descriptive Intelligence Checklists and Daily Briefs.[138]

> *"Kahn is under growing pressure from the young generals who saved him from the coup. General Xung, now commander of the Civil Guard, says Khanh has been given his 'last chance'. Xung is insisting that Khanh purge the army and install a civilian government by 1 November. […] All this appears to have had some effect."*[139]

Descriptive narratives like the above citation emerged in intelligence estimates, which were less useful for the policymakers. It is expected that this reactive and descriptive character of the IC's culture has had detrimental effects on the already instable relationship between the intelligence community and the policymakers. It appeared likely that when path-dependent policymakers were presented with descriptive intelligence estimates that were not actionable,

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[136] John Prados, "Impatience, Illusion and Asymmetry: Intelligence in Vietnam," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War,* ed. Marc Gilbert (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 134, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230108240.
[137] Reinstein, "The Way a Drunk Uses a Lamp Post: Intelligence Analysis and Policy during the Vietnam War, 1962-1968," 9.
[138] Central Intelligence Agency, "The President's Intelligence Review 12-14 August 1964," *CIA Reading Room*, 1964, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005959361. Markers: groupthink, standardized practices.; Central Intelligence Agency, "The President's Intelligence Checklist 21 August 1964," *CIA Reading Room*, 1964, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005959373. Markers: groupthink, standardized practices.
[139] Central Intelligence Agency, "The President's Intelligence Checklist 17 September 1964," *CIA Reading Room*, 1964, accessed May 4, 2023, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005959428. Markers: groupthink, standardized practices, risk aversion.

they were less likely to utilize these estimates over their own preconceived notions of reality. Intelligence products being disregarded could result in an imbalance in the intelligence-policy nexus, as policymakers started to act without the necessary knowledge, resulting in further distrust between the IC and the policymakers, and possibly in intelligence failure. The culture of producing descriptive estimates could therefore have contributed to an environment in which intelligence failures could occur.

5.3.3 Effects upon the environment

Right from the start of Johnson's presidency, immediate developments indicated that he had a strained relationship with the intelligence community. As the principal executive giving orders to the leader of the intelligence community (John McCone) Johnson gravely influenced the dissemination process. Johnson progressively limited McCone's access to the White House in the months following this inauguration. Whenever meetings did occur, the output was limited, frustrating McCone and the IC as was reflected in memorandums of meetings.[140]

To improve the perceived performance of the intelligence community, McCone adapted the intelligence products, to better suit the preferences of the president.[141] As a result, the President and his policy advisors became slightly more involved with the intelligence products.[142] However, as the months progressed, the relationship between the leaders of the IC and the policymakers deteriorated. These effects of these changes can be observed in the data and explained through multiple processes impacting the intelligence culture. Firstly, the lack of interest in intelligence products from the White House led to a shift in the CIA's assisting role. The information disseminated was increasingly geared towards the US military instead of high-level government executives.[143] This alteration in objectives of the CIA and performance of the dissemination process can be perceived an indicator of the effects of the strained relationship between the IC and the policymakers. Secondly, the deteriorating relationship

[140] John McCone, "Breakfast Meeting at the White House (22 April 1964)," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, 2, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/breakfast-meeting-at-white-house-22-april-1964/docview/1679150282/se-2. Markers: feedback, access to decision-making process.
[141] David Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence 1961-1965* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 354, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001262720.pdf. Markers: standardized practices, intelligence-policymaker divide.
[142] Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence 1961-1965*, 354. Markers: standardized practices, intelligence-policymaker divide.
[143] John McCone, "Memorandum from the Director of Central Intelligence to the President [Probable Communist Reactions to Certain U.S. or U.S.-Sponsored Courses of Action in Vietnam and Laos]," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/memorandum-director-central-intelligence-mccone/docview/1679127425/se-2. Marker: intelligence-policymaker divide.; Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence 1961-1965*, 355. Marker: intelligence-policymaker divide.

altered the division between the IC and strategic decision-makers. A lack of trust between high-level policy officers, combined with the perceived pressure to deliver intelligence products that suited the policymakers' objectives, seemed to have played a role during the discussion and interpretation of the events of August second and fourth.

McCone and several other high-ranking intelligence officers were not invited to the meetings between Johnson and his key Vietnam advisors. On the other hand, several lower ranking intelligence officers were invited to the meeting to interpret the received signals.[144] This resulted in friction and contrasting interpretations of the data, complicating the decision-making process. During a follow-up meeting with the National Security Council McCone expressed that, from an intelligence perspective, it was expected that "*the proposed U.S. reprisals will result in a sharp North Vietnamese military reaction*".[145]

The other attendants of the meeting with McCone, who had been allowed to attend the previous meetings in which the role of the US in the Gulf of Tonkin incident had been discussed, knew that US covert operations could have provoked the North Vietnamese troops.[146] Therefore, they were aware of the possibility that the attack on the second of August had been a retaliation for the covert operation the US was running, and thus that further escalation by the US would be met with resistance from the North Vietnamese forces. However, these reservations were disregarded, as the official course of action had been decided earlier on - a telegram containing the following information had already been sent out to the prime minister of South Vietnam: "*tell him [the prime minister of South Vietnam] that President will shortly be announcing US responsive measures against NVN…"*.[147]

It becomes clear from this analysis that the strained relationship between President Johnson, his high-level policymakers and the IC gravely affected the dissemination of intelligence products. Finished products were altered and tailored to suit the preferences and tendencies of

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[144] United States White House, "President Lyndon B. Johnson, Daily Diary (Worksheet)." Markers: information sharing, intelligence-policymaker divide.; Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence 1961-1965*, 372. Marker: intelligence-policymaker divide.

[145] Bromley Smith, Executive Secretary of the United States National Security Council, "Summary Notes of the 538th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, August 4, 1964, 6:15-6:40 p.m.: [Gulf of Tonkin Attack; Includes Draft Joint Resolution on Southeast Asia]," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/summary-notes-538th-meeting-national-security/docview/1679080840/se-2. Marker: access to decision-making process.

[146] McGeorge Bundy, "McGeorge Bundy's Notes of 8/4/64--"Tuesday Lunch" with President and Others," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/mcgeorge-bundys-notes-8-4-64-tuesday-lunch-with/docview/1679063830/se-2. Marker: access to decision-making process.

[147] United States Department of State, "Retaliation against North Vietnam," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1964, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/retaliation-against-north-vietnam/docview/1679079829/se-2. Markers: reliance on technical intelligence, access to decision-making process.

the policymakers. Additionally, the policymakers tampered with the division between themselves and the IC, as they only invited members of the IC to meetings that would cooperate with their preconceived notions and perceptions of reality. This practice disturbed the divide between the IC and the policymakers and aggravated the risk of intelligence failures, as the policymakers became less perceptible for alternatives to their proposed actions. This disturbed dissemination process created a culture in which intelligence failures could occur.

VI. The Tet Offensive, 1968

In this chapter, an analysis of the collected data on the Tet Offensive is conducted. The discussion of this analysis is divided into three key themes: a brief description of the events leading up to the incident (6.1), a characterization of the intelligence culture (6.2), and an analysis of why the intelligence culture impacted the functioning of the intelligence cycle (6.3). The examination of these three themes contributed to determining how an environment in which intelligence failures during the Tet Offensive of the Vietnam War could occur, could exist, by systematically analyzing the prevailing intelligence culture.

6.1 The events of early 1968

The Tet Offensive is considered a turning point in the US involvement in the Vietnam War.[148] The events of the Tet Offensive resulted in an intensification of the opposition of the US public against the war, which eventually contributed to the withdrawal of US forces.[149] Since 1964, an extensive buildup of US military had taken place in South Vietnam. However, American policy goals of ensuring a "free and prosperous South Vietnam" proved increasingly difficult to obtain.[150] To this end, continued bombing of North Vietnam had taken place, in the hopes to coerce North Vietnam to end the war. The North Vietnamese troops assessed that the warring parties had entered a stalemate, and therefore the decision was made in July 1967 to prepare an offensive to coerce the US to submit to negotiations.[151] Simultaneously, the Johnson administration initiated a campaign to promote the successes and advancements made by the US troops in Vietnam. In November 1967, General Westmoreland announced as part of this campaign that North Vietnamese military would soon be defeated.[152]

Near the end of January 1968, a series of large-scale attacks was launched by the North Vietnamese forces and the Vietnamese communists on targets across South Vietnam. Both the scope and scale of this offensive were of surprise to the US military leadership and high-level policymakers. Already in November 1967, the Saigon Station, a local intelligence division of

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[148] Ang Guan, "Decision-Making Leading to the Tet Offensive (1968) - The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 3 (1998): 341.
[149] Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, "U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Tet Offensive, 1968," *State Department Archive: Office of the Historian*, accessed May 10, 2023, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/tet.
[150] James Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 1.
[151] Guan, "Decision-Making Leading to the Tet Offensive (1968) - The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," 347.
[152] Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, 7.

the CIA, had produced predictions about possible escalations during the first months of 1968.[153] However, these estimates were disregarded by both US-based intelligence agencies as well as by army command.[154] The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) also openly downplayed these estimates.[155] Conflicting and competing perspectives on the size of the North Vietnamese military and its agenda prevailed within the intelligence community, led by DCI Helms. This created divides between central and military intelligence agencies, as well as between Vietnam-based and US-based intelligence agencies. From the policymakers' perspective, the President, the Department of State and the Department of Defense and several high-ranking military commanders, such as General Westmoreland, were closely involved in the strategic decision-making process. The following section details circumstances of the environment, internal factors, and effects upon the environment of the aforementioned actors involved in the intelligence cycle, shedding light on the prevailing intelligence culture and its relation to the intelligence failure of the Tet Offensive.

6.2 Characterizing the intelligence culture

Several broad trends in the intelligence culture of 1967 and 1968, in the months prior to the Tet Offensive, have been observed. This analysis is based on the highlighted factors following the contributions of Duyvesteyn and De Graaff and Nyce.[156] The next section provides an analysis of how the observed characteristics of the US intelligence culture in the context of 1967 and 1968 as reflected in secondary sources, could lead to the intelligence failure of the Tet Offensive.

The intelligence community in late 1967 and 1968 is often characterized by its divided nature.[157] Four main actors within the intelligence community can be distinguished: the US-based divisions of the CIA and DIA, the CIA Saigon Station, and the intelligence division of the MACV. These actors were generally in consensus over their estimates on the prospects of the Vietnam War, concluding that the US efforts would only delay the reunification of North

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[153] Director of Intelligence, "Special National Intelligence Estimate, Number 14.3-67: Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam," *CIA Reading Room*, 1967, accessed May 7, 2023, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/03137879.; James Willbanks, "Reconsidering the 1968 Tet Offensive," *Australian Army Journal* 5, no. 1 (2008): 9.

[154] Harold Ford, "CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes 1962 - 1968," *Central Intelligence Agency*, 1998, 104–5, accessed May 2, 2023, https://www.cia.gov/static/1768c7c6f5560bafdc7c57afc7b0f1d6/CIA-and-the-Vietnam-Policymakers.pdf. Markers: disintegrative practices, turf wars.

[155] Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, 95.

[156] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction."

[157] Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive."

and South Vietnam.[158] Yet, contrastingly, the estimates over the scale and scope of the communist' intentions varied widely.[159] Complex bureaucratic structures and varying methods of analysis complicated collaboration and resulted in incoherent estimates.[160] The fragmentation within these disseminated products complicated the priority-setting process for the policymakers, as it was unclear what direction to pursue. During 1967 and 1968, the intelligence requirements were highly demand driven, and because of the incoherent estimates, an almost continuous stream of intelligence products was demanded by the policymakers.[161] It is probable that these high demands did not have a positive influence on the quality and coherence of the disseminated intelligence products, demonstrating how cultures of prioritization and requirement-setting affected the whole intelligence cycle.

Several counterintelligence and covert action operations were active in 1967 and 1968 in Vietnam, with the aims to both collect data as well as to influence the decline of popular support for the communist regime.[162] Collecting, processing, and analyzing data was mostly done via signals intelligence and human intelligence. However, the different intelligence agencies handled collection and processing process differently. Cultural differences between Vietnam and the US were addressed with little sensitivity. The MACV did not assess Vietnamese agencies as capable of producing solid information and publicly disregarded their estimates, damaging the relationship.[163] The Saigon Station was more accepting of estimates produced by Vietnamese sources, but the US-based CIA was inclined to disregard the Vietnam-based agencies' intelligence products if they did not suit the policymakers' preconceived ideas.[164]

The divide between the IC and policymakers during 1967 and 1968 became blurred as the competition between intelligence divisions and agencies intensified. The large amount of disseminated products created a situation in which policymakers could evaluate the products

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[158] Thomas Reinstein, "Seeking Second Opinion: Robert McNamara's Distrust of the U.S. Intelligence Community during Operation Rolling Thunder," *Federal History* 8 (2016): 40.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Wirtz, "Intelligence to Please? The Order of Battle Controversy during the Vietnam War."; Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive."
[161] Prados, "Impatience, Illusion and Asymmetry: Intelligence in Vietnam," 144.
[162] James Dillard, "Cultural Intelligence and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam, 1967-1971," *American Intelligence Journal* 30, no. 1 (2012): 61.
[163] Prados, "Impatience, Illusion and Asymmetry: Intelligence in Vietnam," 143.; Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, 97.
[164] Ovodenko, "Visions of the Enemy from the Field and from Abroad: Revisiting CIA and Military Expectations of the Tet Offensive."

and select those that best matched their policy preferences.[165] It is probable that this fostered a greater distrust between the IC and policymakers, which would only be turned around when President Johnson reconsidered the intelligence estimates produced during the Tet Offensive.[166]

6.3 Assessing culture and failure

The following section explores the three dimensions of the intelligence culture framework. Following an analysis of primary and declassified sources, it is argued that the intelligence culture impacted the functioning of the intelligence cycle in 1967 and 1968 as persisting cultures of competition and politicization deteriorated the process. Within the existing literature, it is argued that the existence of these cultures contributed to an environment in which failures could occur.

6.3.1 Environmental factors

Over the course of the Vietnam War, a highly complicated command structure developed. Separated channels and communication flows emerged for different military and civilian agencies, units, and headquarters. This resulted in an increasing demand for information, overwhelming communication facilities, as each unit issued increasing amounts of requests for information to intelligence agencies, all of which had to be provided in different formats.[167] This fragmented structure made the intelligence-policy nexus more prone to disintegration, a development which the American intelligence culture was already inclined towards.[168] The overall aim of the requests set out by the political and military divisions in the US and in Vietnam was similar, namely determining the best course of action to resist and defeat the 'communist threat'. However, the overload in requests for information resulted in a duplication of intelligence products, further obstructing the intelligence cycle, which would then lead to even more information requests.[169] This lack of structure is considered characteristic for the intelligence culture in 1967 and 1968 and strained the performance of the intelligence cycle. Some scholars even suggest that this was further complicated by arguing that the Commanding

[165] Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, 98.
[166] Rovner, "Is Politicization Ever a Good Thing?," 62.
[167] Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, 96.
[168] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States."
[169] Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, 95–96.

General, Westmoreland, paid more attention to the commanding of US units instead of to supervising the unity of the effort.[170]

In the months leading up to the Tet Offensive, political pressure to emphasize 'progress' increased within the President's administration, as for instance seen in speeches given by the American ambassador to Vietnam.[171] In this process policymakers, such as the President and his Vietnam advisors, started to require and prioritize different intelligence products. Policymakers sought estimates that they could utilize to persuade the US government and public. The context of competing and overwhelmed intelligence agencies in which the demands for these estimates were made, resulted in an unbalanced intelligence environment prone to intelligence failures. Competition to best adhere to the priorities set by the policymakers rose among intelligence agencies, and as a result a culture was created in which it would be beneficial to alter estimates to better suit the priorities set by the policymakers.[172] It is assumed that this also affected the internal factors contributing to the intelligence culture, discussed in the following section.

6.3.2 Internal factors

General studies on American intelligence culture have concluded that it can be characterized as lacking effective institutional integration.[173] An interpretive analysis of the intelligence products disseminated by Vietnam-based and US-based agencies demonstrated the existence of a strong competition between agencies.[174] As early as November 1967, the US embassy in Vietnam advised against a holiday ceasefire based on its reported estimates on the probability of a North Vietnamese attack during the Tet holiday.[175] However, a memorandum of the JCS of December 1967 revealed that the ceasefire was set to take place.[176] As the

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[170] Ibid., 96.
[171] Ellsworth Bunker, "Report on Vietnam: Address to Overseas Press Club," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1967, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/report-on-viet-nam-ellsworth-bunkers-address/docview/1679081366/se-2. Markers: priority setting, oversimplification.; Jonathan Acuff and Madison Nowlin, "Competitive Intelligence and National Intelligence Estimates," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 5 (2019): 568, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1592839.
[172] Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, 95.
[173] Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States," 503.
[174] Russel Jack Smith, "Intelligence Production During the Helms Regime," *CIA Reading Room*, 1995, 95, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0006122498. Markers: disintegrative practices, turf wars.
[175] Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," *State Department Archive: Office of the Historian*, 1967, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v05/d412. Markers: turf wars, bias.
[176] United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chairman, "Military Operating Authorities during Holiday Standdowns for Christmas 1967 and New Year's and Tet 1968: [Includes Attachment]," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1967, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/military-operating-authorities-during-holiday/docview/1679064170/se-2. Markers: bias, groupthink, turf wars.

probability of the Tet Offensive increased in the Saigon-based intelligence products, stronger language was used by the US-based intelligence community.[177] In December 1967, the Saigon Station was tasked to perform an analysis on the "communist strategy for the upcoming four months", which led to their following summarizing estimate:

> *"The war is probably nearing a turning point and the outcome of the 1967-68 winter-spring campaign will in all likelihood determine the future direction of the war."*[178]

Per request of the Special Assistant to the President, Rostow, the CIA drafted a response to this estimate. The response demonstrated characteristics of a competitive environment in which turf wars could grow within the 1967 intelligence culture, as the validity of the data, sources, methods, and skill of the Saigon Station were openly questioned:

> *"… The basic thrust of the papers [by the Saigon Station, Ed.] is predicated on certain assumptions whose validity seems questionable from our perspective here in Washington. For these reasons, we are inclined to draw interpretations which differ somewhat on major points with those of our colleagues in Saigon"*[179]

> *"Among the principal reasons for our drawing conclusions different from those of our Saigon colleagues is the fact that our reading of captured documents on Viet Cong strategy and attitudes on negotiations and a coalition government is conditioned by other evidence on Hanoi's outlook. … Moreover, many [documents] are no more than handwritten notes taken by students from low-level political indoctrination courses…"*[180]

This divide, as demonstrated in the quotes above, between Vietnam and the US could have potentially impacted both intelligence analysis as well as the policymakers' decision-making abilities. Throughout the produced intelligence products, it was stressed that, no matter the changing circumstances, that *"US action will eventually lead to achievement of US national*

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[177] Central Intelligence Agency, "Comments on Saigon 4956 - 1967/12/02," *CIA Reading Room*, 1967, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/06752131. Markers: groupthink, bias.
[178] Walt Rostow, "Are the next Four Months Decisive," *CIA Reading Room*, 1967, 1, accessed May 8, 2023, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/02959201. Markers: risk aversion, threat-focus.
[179] Director of Intelligence, "Papers on Vietcong Strategy," *CIA Reading Room*, 1967, 1, accessed May 7, 2023, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/05007909. Markers: disintegrative practices, bias, opportunity-focus.
[180] Ibid., 2. Markers: disintegrative practices, bias, opportunity-focus.

objectives".[181] Estimates that contradicted this contention, were met with resistance, as demonstrated above. Furthermore, being presented with multiple, conflicting intelligence estimates complicated the decision-making process. In this context the consumer was unsure which view was correct, which Rostow described as an *"interesting difference of emphasis and judgement"*.[182] As a consequence of this analysis-paralysis, it became probable that the policymaker selected the option which was closest to the preconceived ideas of the analyzed event. This was observed in the policymakers' preference of the US-based response to the Saigon Station's estimates on the communist strategy. The observed data and communication between the IC in Vietnam, the US, and the policymakers tended to reflect this phenomenon. This demonstrated that the internal competition in the IC did have an impact on the intelligence cycle, disturbing the process of data analysis and dissemination.

6.3.3 Effects upon the environment

The entanglement of political agendas and intelligence assessments could cause an environment in which failures prevailed.[183] Therefore, the division between the IC and policymakers was essential during the war. However, as the months progressed, US policy officials made requests to the IC that reduced this divide, as observed in primary documentation such as commentary pieces by the DCI and requests by policymakers to generate analyses that supported their specific conceptions.[184] On the other hand, the IC tried to limit its involvement in policy discussions, to uphold the divide between the IC and the policymakers.

> *"The discussion of policy options gets into matters outside this agency's purview."*[185]

From November 1967 onwards, President Johnson regularly met with a group of advisors called 'the Wise Men' to discuss policy options. Johnson and this group of advisors decided

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[181] Central Intelligence Agency, "Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam," *CIA Reading Room*, 1967, 2, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0001166443. Marker: groupthink, bias.; United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chairman, "Policies for the Conduct of Operations in Southeast Asia over the next Four Months," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1967, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/policies-conduct-operations-southeast-asia-over/docview/1679081569/se-2. Marker: groupthink, bias.

[182] Rostow, "Are The Next Four Months Decisive." Markers: risk aversion, threat-focus.; Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States," 499.

[183] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations," 528.

[184] United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chairman, "Military Strategy Debate: Exclusive for General Westmoreland," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1967, 2, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/military-strategy-debate-exclusive-general/docview/1679063858/se-2. Marker: intelligence-policymaker divide.

[185] Director of Intelligence, "Comments on 'An Estimate of the North Vietnam Situation, 1967,'" *CIA Reading Room*, 1967, accessed May 7, 2023, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/00012073. Marker: intelligence-policymaker divide.

early in November that the bombing of Vietnam should be continued. Their influence and dedication to this choice of policy was powerful, and having access to their exclusive policy-making circle was highly regarded. Halfway through November, a NIE was disseminated which gravely altered the understanding of the forces of the Vietnamese Communists and North Vietnamese troops.[186] This NIE was covered with a cautionary message from DCI Helms, stating that:

> *"This Special-NIE is 'sensitive and potentially controversial' because of the 'variance' of its figures with past estimates."*[187]

Helms had initially hesitated to share the estimation, of which certain elements had already been known since the beginning of October 1967 to the IC, signaling towards the dominance of the policymakers in this matter. An accompanying memorandum to the NIE of Rostow also appeared to mitigate the impact of the controversial estimation, as Rostow mentioned that "considerable debate within the intelligence community" still existed.[188] This dominance of policymakers to alter or adapt interpretations of intelligence products occurred in multiple instances, by requesting alternative interpretations or disregarding the estimates.[189] Secondly, Rostow recommended to postpone future briefings on this estimate until general Westmoreland, who was generally considered to be more in favor of the selected policy options, *"gives an over-all picture of the military side of the war in all its aspects"*. Thereby again signaling a move towards mitigating the impact of an intelligence estimate.[190] This same dominance is demonstrated by the policymakers' decision to install a 48-hour ceasefire during the Tet holiday, despite continuous warnings from the IC, JCS and the MACV that this could inflict

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[186] Director of Intelligence, "Special National Intelligence Estimate, Number 14.3-67: Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam." Markers: feedback, information sharing, access to decision-making process.
[187] Richard Helms, "North Vietnamese Fighting Capabilities; Includes Attachments," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1967, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/north-vietnamese-fighting-capabilities-includes/docview/1679062668/se-2. Marker: access to decision-making process.
[188] Walt Rostow, "Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant to President Johnson," *State Department Archive: Office of the Historian*, 1967, accessed May 4, 2023, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v05/d399. Markers: reliance on political intelligence, intelligence-policymaker divide.
[189] Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, "Memorandum by the Chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (Clifford)," *State Department Archive: Office of the Historian*, 1967, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v05/d388. Marker: intelligence-policymaker divide.; Central Intelligence Agency, "ONE Memo 1/18-/68 Alternative Interpretations of Hanoi's Intentions (1968/01/18)," *CIA Reading Room*, 1968, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/01142498. Marker: intelligence-policymaker divide.
[190] Rostow, "Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant to President Johnson." Markers: reliance on political intelligence, intelligence-policymaker divide.

damage upon the strategic position of US and South Vietnamese troops.[191] These examples indicated that the prevailing intelligence culture, which resulted in a dominant policymakers' side, did not positively contribute to the functioning of the intelligence cycle.

[191] South Vietnam United States Embassy, "Tet Ceasefire," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1968, https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/tet-ceas-e-fire/docview/1679063997/se-2. Marker: information sharing, intelligence-policymaker divide.

VII. Conclusion

Intelligence failures are inevitable during peace- and wartime. However, a distorted relationship between the intelligence community and policymakers can alter and increase the chance of the occurrence of these failures. Two instances of these intelligence failures were assessed in this thesis: the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tet Offensive. Through the analysis of the persisting intelligence culture during these two intelligence failures, this chapter compares the evidence and answers the main research question 'why did the intelligence culture within the US intelligence-policy nexus during the Vietnam War distort the strategic decision-making process of policymakers?'. This section provides an overview of the changing intelligence cultures between presidential administrations and how the failures that occurred were affected by the prevailing intelligence culture. This is followed by a reflection on the research and a discussion of certain limitations. In the final section, recommendations for future studies have been put forward.

The two examined cases demonstrate some similarities, but also some striking differences. It is shown that these differences are probable contributors to the differing types of intelligence failures that occurred. Both during the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tet Offensive, the intelligence community could be characterized as a highly competitive environment. The environments in which the IC operated, became even more competitive due to the tendencies of the policymakers. During the months prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the relationship between the IC and the policymakers was complicated due to President Johnson's lack of trust in the IC. This distrust resulted in an environment in which *ad hoc* structures were preferred over existing institutional relationships between the IC and policymakers. This *ad hoc* organization created insecurity among the IC, which became characteristic to their operating method: the fear of losing access to policymaking circles resulted in intelligence estimates altered to the desires of the policymakers. On the other hand, during the Tet Offensive the competition within the intelligence community was fostered by the policymakers due to the high demand of intelligence products. High pressure on the IC resulted in incoherent estimations, each slightly adapted to the desired format of the requesting policymakers. It appears that the fractioned IC, the high demand from the policymakers and the incoherent estimations created a vicious circle regarding priority setting. This imbalance is distinctive to

the intelligence culture during the Tet Offensive and is assumed to have had detrimental effects on the quality of the performance of the intelligence cycle.

When comparing the internal factors of the intelligence culture, the collection, processing, and analysis phase, between the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tet Offensive, it became clear that the different modes of priority setting and driving demands, lead to different modes of operation. Analysis of the produced NIEs during 1964 showed heightened awareness of the possible effects of overseas American military involvement, which suggested the implementation of the lessons learned since the Korean War. The learning ability of the IC could have had a positive impact on the intelligence-policy nexus. However, the interpretation of data by the IC often resulted in descriptive intelligence estimates, which did not have a positive effect on the already instable relationship with the policymakers. Descriptive products were regarded as less actionable, which increased the tendency of the policymakers to pick the estimates they trusted most or the one that suited their selected policies best. This analytical weakness, and the subsequent consequences, distorted the strategic decision-making process. The analysis revealed that during months prior to the Tet Offensive, the high degree of competition within the intelligence community also affected the relationship between those responsible for collection, processing, and analysis of data. Vietnamese-based estimates that conflicted with proposed policies from US origin were questioned and discredited by the US-based intelligence divisions. Instead of collaboration to create an intelligence product of the highest possible quality, open competition resulted in analysis-paralysis. It can therefore be concluded that the culture of internal competition within the IC did have a negative impact on the performance of intelligence cycle, disturbing the process of data analysis and dissemination.

The effects of the produced intelligence upon the environment, or the dissemination phase, demonstrated characteristics of a strained intelligence-policy nexus in its intelligence culture in both cases. During both analyzed timeframes, the policymakers demonstrated tendencies to act as the dominant actor in the relationship. During 1964, the dominance of the policymakers in the dissemination process resulted in a form of path-dependency: minutes of meetings and memoranda revealed that intelligence estimates that did not fit the dominant discourse were simply disregarded in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that this path-dependency was further intensified by President Johnson's distrust of the IC. In turn, this dominance of the policymakers also affected the other steps of the intelligence cycle, for instance by shaping the prioritization process, which distorted the functioning of the intelligence-policy nexus. Analysis of the intelligence culture during 1967 and 1968 revealed

that the dominance of the policymakers was related to the high amount of competing intelligence estimates that were produced. The incoherence within the disseminated products allowed the policymakers to select the intelligence that best suited them. Over time, this tendency to disregard intelligence estimates that did not suit the selected policies or policymakers' preconceived ideas resulted in politicization of the intelligence process, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. The imbalance in the intelligence-policy nexus resulting from this dominance can be linked to distortion of the strategic-decision making process.

Overall, the analysis showed that the intelligence culture in 1964 displayed tendencies of path-dependency. This mostly affected the planning and direction of the intelligence process and the dissemination of intelligence products. As these aspects of the intelligence cycle were disturbed, policymakers were not always presented with the necessary information to carry out the strategic decision-making process, resulting in intelligence failures. In 1967 and 1968, the intelligence culture can be characterized as a highly competitive and politicized environment. Open expression of high levels of distrust within the IC allowed policymakers to take advantage and act only on the intelligence products that best suited their interests. However, this did not result in the correct strategic decision-making process, resulting in intelligence failure.

This thesis contributed to the relatively novel 'cultural turn' of intelligence studies and was aimed at developing deeper understanding of the root causes of intelligence failures, founded in the intelligence culture of a country within a certain timeframe. By examining the intelligence culture and testing the application of intelligence culture frameworks on historical analyses of intelligence failures, this thesis aimed to offer a novel perspective on the historical discussion of foreign affairs that shaped world politics. Therefore, this thesis contributed to the developing framework of intelligence culture-analysis, especially in the context of the Vietnam War. However, research on intelligence culture by means of analyzing declassified primary sources also faces limitations. To determine the intelligence culture, a mix of secondary and primary sources was used. While the use of declassified material had its benefits, it was also limited in the sense that only currently declassified sources could be made use of. Future declassifications could reveal different relationships that this thesis was unable to uncover due to the unavailability of the material. A suggestion for future research to mitigate this risk, is to supplement the research with interviews with key actors.

Secondly, while the results of this research did reveal initial findings into the connections between intelligence culture and intelligence failures during the Vietnam War, they cannot be unambiguously generalized beyond the scope of this research. Intelligence cultures vary over time, and the focus of this thesis was analyzing the effect of the persistent intelligence cultures on the intelligence failures that occurred during the Vietnam War in times of high-pressure strategic decision-making. Results of future research with a different scope could therefore present some variation. Simultaneously, this research was subject to limitations of the developing research framework on intelligence cultures. Possible other factors influencing intelligence culture and its effect on intelligence failures that were not incorporated within this framework, could present novel perspectives in future research.

Finally, due to the scope of this research, a limited analysis of the intelligence cultures in 1964, 1967 and 1968 was presented. This thesis focused on analyzing the determinants of intelligence culture most closely related to the intelligence cycle to be able to make a comparison between the selected cases. Future research could benefit from operationalizing an in-depth study of the full breadth of intelligence cultures during the Vietnam War to expand the framework on intelligence culture research by performing an interdisciplinary study.

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Appendix 1: The framework for analyzing Intelligence Cultures

This list of questions is drafted by De Graaff and Nyce.[192] As introduced in the theoretical and methodological chapters, these questions aided in determining circumstances of the environment, internal factors and effects upon the environment that comprise the intelligence culture at a certain time. The questions that have been operationalized within the framework of this research are italicized. The markers associated with each question to determine the impact on the intelligence culture within the analyzed primary sources are derived from the framework proposed by Duyvesteyn.[193] A concise overview of the utilized questions, markers and their respective reference to the intelligence cycle is presented in Table 2.

Environmental factors:

1. The national, international, political, and military setting within which these communities or agencies operate. Is their nation part of an alliance or alliances? What is its political structure and culture? Is the organization civilian or part of a military establishment? More generally, how can the intelligence environment be described given the number and kinds of relevant actors?
2. Which laws influence the working (and mandate) of the organization or community? How is oversight arranged and, to what extent, enforced?
3. What events have had a lasting impact on the outlook and mission of the organization(s), Have any had the effect Pearl Harbor or 9/11 has had on the mission of the U.S. intelligence community?
4. What are the (foreign) policies they are to support? A great power may need different intelligence input regarding these policies than a small- er nation. But the link between a nation's intelligence community and its foreign policy can be worthwhile to explore: Do the intelligence producers operate and produce in a setting that can be described as realistic, idealistic, or constructivist? What does a nation's service(s') (perceived) threat environment look like, externally and internally?
5. *Are there any competitors within their task environment? To what extent do they compete, and to what extent is it possible for them to collaborate?*[194]

[192] De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction," xxxv–xxxviii.
[193] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."
[194] Markers in the primary source: competition (negative), collaboration (positive).

6. Who are the consumers of intelligence products? Are intelligence requirements demand driven? Or are they determined by the service(s) themselves? And if they are demand driven, who formulates these demands: for example, the government, ministries, or politicians, or elements outside the government itself?[195]

7. What are the organization's or community's targets? In particular, what is its scope? And is there a particular focus? What does the community prioritize, and how does this reflect the target's history and previous engagement(s) with the service and its nation-state?

8. What are the organization's or community's resources? How is it funded? What can it invest in (and does it?), for example, expensive technical means of collection, such as interception facilities, satellites, or submarines? How do funding constraints inform the use (and collection) of different types of "intelligence"?

9. What is the international and national reputation of the organization and community? How did this reputation emerge, and how has it changed over time?

Internal factors:

1. What is the official mission of the organization? And to what extent has this become a reality?

2. How is the intelligence organization/community linked up to the national identity?

3. Has a founding father had a decisive influence upon the community or agencies? If so, has the organization been able to move away from or reinvent his principles once he left the organization?

4. Does some traumatic experience(s) haunt the organization, such as a particular intelligence failure, a molehunt, or a tainted political past? Do these traumas today create specific problems for the organization? If so what kinds of problems?[196]

5. What is the size of the organization? How is it structured?[197]

6. What is the organization's relationship with the outside world? How is staff recruited and from where? Are contractors or temporary staff used? If so, for what purposes and on what terms are they employed? How are intelligence officers trained and promoted? Is gender ever an issue? What is the salary range: is it competitive?

7. Does the intelligence community have a vision? How is this articulated? Is it, for example, threat or opportunity focused? Does it include counter-intelligence and covert action?[198]

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[195] Markers in the primary source: priority setting, oversimplification, reactive, pro-active, awareness.
[196] Markers in the primary source: trauma, previous failure, previous success.
[197] Markers in the primary source: integration of units, disintegrative practices, groupthink, turf wars.
[198] Markers in the primary source: risk aversion, threat-focus, opportunity-focus.

8. How are the intelligence processes organized? Is the focus, for example, on particular countries, themes, or functions? Is project management by the book, or does it depend more upon the threats or opportunities that present themselves? What is the relationship between long-term intelligence gathering, analysis, and reporting and the pressure of daily intelligence requirements?

9. What is the relationship between those responsible for collection, analysis, and dissemination? To what extent (and how) do they collaborate? Is there a code of conduct or a platform for discussing ethical questions within the organization? How are whistleblowers regarded and treated?[199]

10. How is the organization's morale? How is morale managed within the organization? Do many of the employees see themselves as lifelong employees within the organization? Do retirees or alumni have a role? Does it condone the writing of memoirs by former employees? Is there a mechanism in place to vet such memoirs?

The effects upon the environment:

1. Does the intelligence agency primarily distribute finished or raw intelligence? Who does the dissemination and in what form?

2. To whom are reports and other types of information disseminated? Does the organization or community solicit information, that is, from policy makers, regarding its performance? Is there a structure in place to help facilitate this?[200]

3. Is there a clear division between intelligence policy making and decision making? To what extent does politics (at any level) play a role in maintaining or reducing this divide and in the kinds of intelligence the community disseminates?[201]

4. Is there cooperation with the armed forces, special forces, law enforcement and private companies? How well does this work in practice?

5. How transparent is the organization/community? Does it publish vacancies? Are there other ways it promotes transparency? What is the relationship with the media, civil rights advocates, and such?

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[199] Markers in the primary source: norms, bias, standardized practices.

[200] Markers in the primary source: feedback, standardized practices, information sharing, reliance on technical intelligence, reliance on political intelligence.

[201] Markers in the primary source: intelligence-policymaker divide, access to decision-making process, admitting to failures.

Table 2

Overview of the framework to determine intelligence culture and its effects

Pillar	Intelligence cycle	Determining questions	Markers
Environmental factors	Planning and direction	▪ Are there any competitors within their task environment? To what extent do they compete, and to what extent is it possible for them to collaborate? ▪ Who are the consumers of intelligence products? Are intelligence requirements demand driven? Or are they determined by the service(s) themselves? And if they are demand driven, who formulates these demands: for example, the government, ministries, or politicians, or elements outside the government itself?	▪ Collaboration, competition. ▪ Priority setting, oversimplification, reactive, pro-active, awareness.
Internal factors	Collection Processing Analysis	▪ Does some traumatic experience(s) haunt the organization, such as a particular intelligence failure, a molehunt, or a tainted political past? Do these traumas today create specific problems for the organization? If so what kinds of problems? ▪ What is the size of the organization? How is it structured? ▪ Does the intelligence community have a vision? How is this articulated? Is it, for example, threat or opportunity focused? Does it include counter-intelligence and covert action? ▪ What is the relationship between those responsible for collection, analysis, and dissemination? To what extent (and how) do they collaborate? Is there a code of conduct or a platform for discussing ethical questions within the organization? How are whistleblowers regarded and treated?	▪ Trauma, previous failure, previous success. ▪ Integration of units, disintegrative practices, groupthink, turf wars. ▪ Risk aversion, threat-focus, opportunity-focus. ▪ Norms, bias, standardized practices.
Effects upon the environment	Dissemination	▪ To whom are reports and other types of information disseminated? Does the organization or community solicit information, that is, from policy makers, regarding its performance? Is there a structure in place to help facilitate this? ▪ Is there a clear division between intelligence policy making and decision making? To what extent does politics (at any level) play a role in maintaining or reducing this divide and in the kinds of intelligence the community disseminates?	▪ Feedback, standardized practices, information sharing, reliance on technical intelligence, reliance on political intelligence. ▪ Intelligence-policymaker divide, access to decision-making process, admitting to failures.

Data combined from De Graaff and Nyce and Duyvesteyn.[202]

[202] Duyvesteyn, "Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations."; De Graaff and Nyce, "Introduction," xxxv–xxxviii.