



The Vietnam Cauldron: Defense Intelligence in the War for Southeast Asia

United States Defense Intelligence Agency

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The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) was the first new agency established by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara after he assumed office in 1961. The ambitious McNamara intended to reformulate U.S. strategic nuclear policy and reduce inefficiencies that had developed in the Department of Defense (DoD) in the 1950s. DIA was the lynchpin to both efforts. In the early and middle 1960s, McNamara and his subordinates, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric and new DIA Director Lieutenant General Joseph Carroll (USAF), worked hard to establish the Agency, but their efforts were delayed or stymied by intransigent and parochial military leadership who objected to the creation of DIA because they feared a loss of both battlefield effectiveness and political influence in Washington, D.C. The work of building the DIA was made all the more urgent by the deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia. By the early 1960s, millions of dollars and hundreds of advisory personnel sent by the U.S. were having a negligible impact on the anti-communist campaign there. As the U.S. continued to commit more resources to the ill-fated government in Saigon, the country found itself drawn deeper and deeper into the maelstrom. For DIA, the looming war in Southeast Asia would expose major problems in its organization and performance. Especially in the period from 1961 to 1969, DIA, either because of structural weaknesses or leadership failures, often failed to energetically seize opportunities to assert itself in the major intelligence questions involving the conflict there. This tendency was exacerbated by national military leadership's predilection for ignoring or undercutting the Agency's authority. In turn, this opened up DIA to severe criticism by Congress and other national policymakers, some of whom even considered abolishing the Agency. During the war, McNamara's great hope for reforming military intelligence would be swept up in quarrels between powerful domestic adversaries, and DIA's performance left the Secretary of Defense deeply embittered toward his creation. It was only at the end of the war that DIA assumed a more influential role in Southeast Asia. Until then, however, the Agency was consigned to the wilderness when it came to questions about the Vietnam conflict.

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