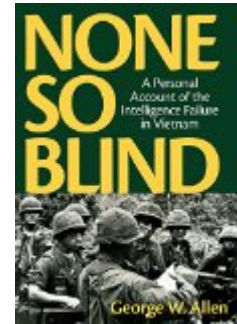


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George W. Allen. *None So Blind: A Personal Account of Intelligence Failure in Vietnam*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2001. xiv + 296 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-387-1.

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None So Blind

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This reviewer was delighted to learn that George W. Allen, who during the 1960s was one of the most respected U.S. intelligence analysts working on Vietnam, had published a memoir. It turns out to be, if anything, even better than expected.

Allen served in the Navy, Pacific Theater, during the latter part of World War II. He decided after the war, while a student at the University of Utah on the GI Bill, that he wanted to go into intelligence. Unable to obtain a position in naval intelligence, he took a job as a clerk-typist in the Far East Section of ACSI (the office of the Army's Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence) in 1949. In 1950 he was promoted to intelligence analyst. ACSI was just beginning serious study of the ongoing war in Indochina, and Allen got in on the ground floor of the effort. He worked full-time on Indochina from 1950 to 1957.

ACSI had a good relationship with French military intelligence in Indochina. Allen says French intelligence was professional, competent, and honest. Higher levels in the French forces often ignored the findings of the intelligence officers, preferring to believe what they found convenient or comfortable to believe, but ACSI was getting the valid information, from lower levels in the French system, that the French high command sometimes chose to ignore.

Allen claims, convincingly, that he and his colleagues

had a good understanding of what was going on in Indochina in the early 1950s. Higher levels of the U.S. government did not. Partly this was because their eyes tended to glaze over if one attempted to brief them on the political aspects of the struggle (p. 24). Partly it was because the rules compartmenting highly secret information prevented intelligence officers even from trying to report some of what they knew. Allen describes how in 1952, the U.S. military suspected the French of exaggerating the level of Chinese military aid to the Viet Minh. Allen and his colleagues, who knew the French estimates were valid, could not say so because they were not supposed to reveal, even to the people cleared to read secret-level reports, that the U.S. government had good sources of information on that subject (pp. 43-45). If Allen and his colleagues had been permitted to tell the staff officers under the Joint Chiefs of Staff what they knew about Viet Minh antiaircraft capabilities around Dien Bien Phu in February 1954, the United States might have become willing to give the French some of the additional aircraft they were requesting. Allen does not feel that this would have averted the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu, but it would have increased the price the Viet Minh paid for that victory.

Allen is also convincing in his claim to have been right in his judgments of Vietnam most of the time. He does mention times he was wrong, and explains what led him astray in those instances. In the first half of 1955, he encountered the problem of compartmented information from outside the compartment. Army intelligence was

not cleared to know about CIA covert assistance to Ngo Dinh Diem. Unaware of that crucial support for Diem, Allen and his colleagues embarrassingly failed to predict Diem's victory over the "sects."

In 1957, Allen moved from the Pentagon to Honolulu, where he served on the intelligence staff of the Army's headquarters for the Pacific Theater (USARPAC), working on restructuring intelligence staffs in the theater, and dealing with intelligence on a wide area of Asia, not just Indochina. In May 1960, he made an extended visit to Vietnam. He found that the guerrilla movement coming to be known as the "Viet Cong" was growing rapidly, much more than was being reported by the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). MAAG's failure to understand the extent of the problem came partly from a mindset oriented to conventional rather than guerrilla warfare, and partly from a lack of respect for intelligence. The colonel who was supposed to be MAAG's chief advisor to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) on intelligence matters told Allen that he was not an intelligence officer and did not wish to become one (he had been assigned the intelligence job as punishment for poor performance in a previous assignment, as adviser to an ARVN regiment). When Allen reported back to USARPAC in Honolulu, the commanding general did not believe him, preferring to trust the complacent reports from the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).

Allen shifted back to Washington at the beginning of 1961. At first he returned to Army intelligence, where his duties for the first time involved intelligence on all areas of the world. Soon he shifted to a poorly defined role at the newly created Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). Then, in 1962, MACV borrowed him from DIA to head a team developing an order of battle for the enemy forces in South Vietnam—a listing of what units the Viet Cong had, indicating their strengths and organizational structures. His team came up with what he considered a good first effort, listing the Viet Cong units whose existence was solidly verified, omitting those believed probably to exist but for which the evidence was still thin. He was expecting that this document would be regularly modified, as new Viet Cong units were created and new information came in confirming the existence of some of the ones that had been considered only probable. But over the months that followed, MACV's chief of intelligence, a colonel whom Allen describes as blatantly alcoholic and grossly incompetent, blocked revision to the order of battle in the light of new information. This was in line with the attitudes of MACV's commander, General Paul Harkins, who was determined that U.S. reports

should show progress and success for the ARVN, not enemy strength.

In 1963, feeling that his opinions and knowledge were not respected at DIA, Allen transferred to the CIA. He was reluctant to become once again a specialist on Vietnam. He had enjoyed dealing with the wider world during much of his time at DIA, and he was very pessimistic about the way the war in Vietnam was going. But after leading a CIA team on an extended inspection of the intelligence situation in Vietnam in early 1964, during which he again found the war going much worse than MACV would admit, he was assigned a two-year tour in Vietnam—his first, really—extended stay in the country.

Twice in early 1965, Washington asked for a joint assessment, by the various U.S. intelligence organizations in South Vietnam, of the state of the war. This required some negotiation, since MACV intelligence was more optimistic than the CIA's, but agreement was reached without much difficulty. But when the final drafts, which had been agreed upon by all the intelligence agencies, were shown to Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, he said they were too pessimistic, and demanded that certain sections be deleted before the reports were sent to Washington. Allen says these episodes were unique in his professional experience. It was common enough for officials like Taylor, consumers of intelligence, to ignore or reject the estimates they got from the intelligence professionals. But they did not normally edit intelligence estimates.

Allen was in Vietnam from June 1964 to June 1966, watching the massive Americanization of the war there. Many of the developments were depressing, but at least, toward the end of his time in Saigon, he witnessed a dramatic improvement in MACV intelligence, brought about by General Joseph McChristian.

In 1966, Allen returned to the United States and became the deputy of George Carter, the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs (SAVA) to the Director of Central Intelligence. It was while in this job that Allen presided over the birth of the Hamlet Evaluation System. Carter habitually represented the CIA at meetings with other agencies of the government dealing with Vietnam; Allen would go in his stead if Carver were unavailable. This could create odd situations sometimes, since Carver was an optimist about the war, and Allen a pessimist. The problem was most acute when Allen substituted for Carver at an inter-agency working group, established in mid-1967 at the initiative of the White House for the purpose of persuading the American public and the Congress that the war was going well. Allen found his involve-

ment with this group profoundly distasteful. “There was no consideration of objective truth, honesty, or integrity in performing these tasks, and surprisingly little concern about credibility” (p. 235).

Allen believed that what was needed, if there were to be a chance for victory in Vietnam, was a serious anti-Communist political movement in Vietnam, to serve as a political foundation for the Saigon government and to give the mass of the South Vietnamese population a sense that, if they supported the government, they might be fighting *for* something, not just against the Communists. Some senior ARVN officers—Allen particularly mentions General Nguyen Chanh Thi—were aware how badly such a thing was needed, but the United States never came close to being ready to provide such a program the degree of support it would have required.

Allen gives only a brief account of the famous order of battle dispute of 1967. The various U.S. intelligence agencies were trying to thrash out an agreed estimate of the size and composition of the Communist forces in South Vietnam. CIA representatives argued for relatively high numbers. MACV representatives, fearing that high numbers would shake the faith of the American public that the war was being won, argued for lower ones. Finally the CIA accepted an agreement under which the Viet Cong village militia (previously included in the order of battle) were no longer counted at all, and some other categories were counted at less than what the CIA believed to be their true size. Allen considered resigning from the CIA in protest, but decided not to.

At the end of January 1968, the Tet Offensive hit. The United States was caught partially by surprise; it had expected a major Communist offensive, but not quite as soon as it actually came, and not as ambitious—that is, not aimed so much at the cities of South Vietnam. Allen goes into some detail on the reasons he and his colleagues at CIA headquarters were not convinced by some lower-level CIA analysts in Vietnam, who came closer to predicting the true magnitude of the offensive.

At the end of 1968, Allen left CIA headquarters for a year of study at the Imperial Defence College in Lon-

don. He was thus not a participant in the controversy between CIA and MACV intelligence in 1969 over Viet Cong supply routes. MACV argued that important shipments were coming by sea to the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville, and then going overland across Cambodia to be delivered to Vietnamese Communist forces. CIA analysts denied that such a supply route was in operation. The CIA analysts were, as Allen comments (p. 272), “dead wrong.” This reviewer wishes that Allen had been involved, and thus able to give a much more detailed account of this very important affair.

Allen devotes only a few pages to the remainder of his career at the CIA. He served as head of a division at the Office of Strategic Intelligence, then head of the Office of Imagery Analysis, then worked from 1976 to 1978 mostly on arms control. U.S. intelligence was able to contribute far more to the arms control process—evaluating the extent of the Soviet weapons buildup and the likely Soviet reactions to various possible U.S. moves—than had been the case in Vietnam. Allen formally retired in 1979, but continued working for the agency as an independent contractor.

This book seems generally reliable, but it is not perfect. For example, Allen refers (p. 85) to a North Vietnamese population of over twenty million in the mid 1950s, long before the population actually reached that level, and the map on page 87 has several minor errors. The reviewer would also like to know in what sense the Communist offensive of May 1968, usually called “mini-Tet,” could be called “only a pale shadow of the Tet offensive.” It certainly was not a pale shadow if one measures its intensity by the number of Americans killed in action.

Despite the occasional defects, George Allen has produced one of the best and most informative memoirs this reviewer has seen. It has very sophisticated analysis, and many interesting details, about what actually happened in Vietnam during the period covered. It also says much about how the events were understood and discussed in Washington. It is a “must read” for those interested in the struggle for control of Vietnam from 1950 to 1968. It will also be useful to scholars of U.S. intelligence. It is suitable both for the specialist and for the general reader.

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