



SECRET//25X1

APPROVED FOR  
RELEASE DATE:  
19-Feb-2009

# Good Questions, Wrong Answers

## *CIA's Estimates of Arms Traffic Through Sihanoukville, Cambodia, During the Vietnam War*

Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.

An Intelligence Monograph

February 2004

Krông Preăh Sihanouk (Sihanoukville)

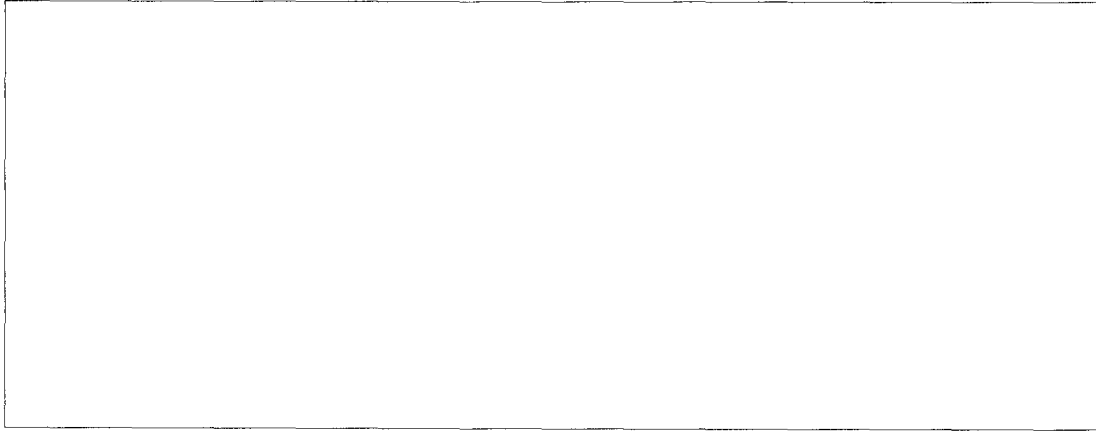
Sihanoukville

Bông Prek Túp



CENTER for the  
STUDY of INTELLIGENCE

SECRET//25X1



**All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this monograph are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or views of the Central Intelligence Agency or any other US Government entity, past or present. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying US Government endorsement of the study's factual statements and interpretations.**

# Good Questions, Wrong Answers

---

Other works of Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. published by the Center *for the Study of Intelligence* include:

CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam   
(1999, )

CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63   
(2000, )

CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam   
(2001, )

A forthcoming book will examine the undercover armies of Laos.

---

The Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) was founded in 1974 in response to Director of Central Intelligence James Schlesinger's desire to create within CIA an organization that could "think through the functions of intelligence and bring the best intellects available to bear on intelligence problems." The Center, comprising both professional historians and experienced practitioners, attempts to document lessons learned from past operations, explore the needs and expectations of intelligence consumers, and stimulate serious debate on current and future intelligence challenges.

To support these activities, CSI publishes *Studies in Intelligence*, as well as books and monographs addressing historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of the intelligence profession. It also administers the CIA Museum and maintains the Agency's Historical Intelligence Collection.

# Good Questions, Wrong Answers

*CIA Estimates of Arms Traffic  
Through Sihanoukville, Cambodia,  
During the Vietnam War*

**Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.**

**An Intelligence Monograph**



Center for the Study of Intelligence  
Washington, DC  
February 2004

To the Memory of  
Thomas Joseph Brennan, C.S.C.,  
Who taught me whatever I know about thinking about thinking

---

**Foreword** 

The effort to make sense out of ambiguous, inconsistent, even contradictory data is a fundamental human impulse. Clarity, certitude, or just escape from the discomfort of not knowing—the urge is to bring order out of chaos, to eliminate uncertainty. The order in things that this effort discovers—or imposes—is taken to be the truth.

Certitude has, of course, no necessary connection with truth. Partly responsible for this is what might be called the paradox of belief. That is, the level of emotional attachment to a given interpretation tends to vary inversely with the amount of empirical evidence supporting it. The more a hypothesis rests on a *priori* argument or circumstantial evidence, the more intensely its proponents defend it. But the less the direct evidence, on an issue of empirical fact, the greater the probability that it is flawed or simply false.

Intelligence analysis approaches the truly objective only to the extent that its practitioners recognize and compensate for the subjective factors that so easily corrupt professional judgment. But even the most professional of analysts is vulnerable to the influence of unexamined preconceptions and values. Conscientious attention to this risk may perhaps attenuate it, and the purpose of the present study is to illuminate, by historical example, unconscious psychological influences on the analytical process.

As an object for the exploration of these influences, the Sihanoukville episode lies far enough in the past to permit dispassionate examination. At the same time, it remains recent enough to allow the interviews with key participants that are indispensable to understanding the defining subjective aspects of the case.

A look at the Sihanoukville record does not, moreover, represent merely an *ex post facto* exercise in connecting the dots, with all the problems of fairness and use of hindsight that attend such an effort. It thus differs from the examination of 11 September 2001 and other cases in which the issue is alleged failure to recognize a pattern in a mass of information of widely varying degrees of specificity, reliability, and consistency.

True, Sihanoukville as an analytical problem arose in a welter of raw reports, some of them alleging an arms traffic that did not exist for a full two years after the first claims for it. As an analytical failure, however, it emerged only after the bulk of the empirical evidence, gradually increasing in volume and improving in source authenticity, began contradicting Agency estimates. Understanding a failure to modify conventional wisdom, rather than assigning responsibility for not seeing the pattern in a chaos of dots, is thus the main object of this study.

This piece may be read as a case study that embodies and elaborates some of the insights for readers of Richard J. Heuer's pioneering work, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999). Together, they represent an effort to illustrate the variety of possible influences on analytical judgment and to do so in both generally conceptual and concretely historical terms.

**Contents***Page*

Introduction	xi
Part One : The Deductive vs. the Empirical	
Chapter One: Mostly Chaff	3
Chapter Two: CIA on the Defensive	15
Part Two : A Rationalizing Animal	
Chapter Three: The Ambiguity of It All	33
Chapter Four: Relying on the Model	41
Source Note	51



---

## Introduction

The neutralist government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk fell to a cabal of Cambodian army officers on 18 March 1970. Driven by a combination of anticommunism and traditional Cambodian antipathy for the Vietnamese, the new junta acted at once to cut the flow of Chinese munitions that, since late 1966, had flowed through the port of Sihanoukville to communist forces in South Vietnam. One of the group soon gave CIA the documentation that detailed the Sihanoukville deliveries and the onward shipment of war materiel by road into the southern provinces [redacted]

The documents supplied by Lt. Col. Les Kosem, an ethnic Cham officer in the Cambodian Army, contradicted CIA's estimates of the volume of the Sihanoukville traffic [redacted]

[redacted] turned out that an Agency analytical process—substantially more sophisticated than [redacted]—had had the perverse effect of obscuring the extent of Chinese arms deliveries through Cambodia [redacted]

The resulting embarrassment produced more than loss of face. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger told President Nixon that this "failure of the intelligence community" resulted from "deficiencies in both intelligence collection and analysis." Kissinger went on to specify CIA's prime responsibility, noting that he was working with DCI Richard Helms on "appropriate personnel changes in the Agency." Nixon penned an angry note: "give me a report on these changes—I want a real shakeup in CIA, not just symbolism." [redacted]

Helms managed to avoid the purge demanded of him, but thereafter, when CIA disagreed with the Pentagon, the White House would ask him, "What about Sihanoukville?" [redacted]

There were more immediately practical consequences of the failure to identify and monitor the munitions supply line to lower South Vietnam. A comprehensive, reasonably up-to-date picture of the Sihanoukville traffic would, for example, have afforded a much better understanding of enemy capabilities in the months leading up to the 1968 Tet offensive. More generally, the US campaign to interdict munitions supplies could hardly succeed so long as it ignored the nearly exclusive source for the most populous half of South Vietnam. [redacted]

As already suggested, Agency analysts displayed more rigorous technique, both in the conceptual models they employed and in their judgment of all-source raw reporting [redacted] [redacted]. Periodic internal reviews challenged the methodologies and conclusions of previous analyses, but the gradual increase in credible reporting of a Sihanoukville [redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

---

traffic [ ] [ ] induced only incremental changes in the CIA position. Until late summer 1970, after the Phnom Penh Station acquired encyclopedic documentation, the Agency clung to the view that what it called the "primary route" for the supply of lower South Vietnam ran overland, down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. [ ]

#### **An Analytical Conundrum** [ ]

The clarity of hindsight can deceive even while it illuminates. This applies especially when evaluating, in the light of a more comprehensive later record, conclusions drawn from fragmentary information of uncertain accuracy. It is easy, after the fact, to see flaws in a line of reasoning that enjoyed the support of compelling circumstantial argument [ ]

There is also the problem of judging assumptions. To begin any argument, some things have to be taken as givens. These usually look, at the time, like common-sense, even self-evident, interpretations of the context in which the available empirical evidence is to be evaluated. Seeing that one or several unexamined assumptions have turned out to be false, the historian may be tempted to make one of his own, namely, that with proper care they can be entirely avoided. One problem for the historian of an analytical failure—or of any failure—is thus the difficulty simply of being fair. He must respect the inevitable influence on his actors' judgments of a host of environmental factors. But he must do so without sinking into a pallid determinism that simply credits them with having done the best they could according to their lights, and in effect denies the possibility of their having made other choices. [ ]

This study tries to find a productive middle course by adopting a chronological approach. It describes the evolution of both the information base and the debate over the meaning of the available data. Having done that, it assesses the Agency's position on the arms traffic through Sihanoukville from a perspective within the historical context. To the extent that this succeeds, it avoids judging the past by the standards of the better-informed present, and the episode's instructive value is allowed to emerge [ ]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

---

~~SECRET#25X1~~

---

**Part One :**  
**The Deductive vs. the Empirical**



---

~~SECRET#25X1~~

**Chapter One: Mostly Chaff** [redacted]

To Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's charismatic head of state, his country's orientation in the Cold War struggle had to be determined by the brute realities of power. For him, as for other leaders on the Pacific Rim, the 800-pound gorilla was and would always be China. No communist sympathizer himself, the Prince sought to preserve his country's sovereignty as much as possible, as long as possible. His strategy was as conceptually simple as it was tortuous in practice: accommodate both sides in the Cold War in order to avoid being absorbed into the orbit of either.<sup>1</sup> [redacted]

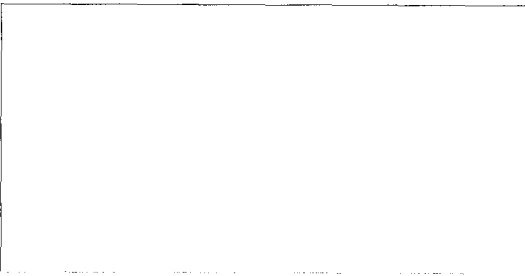
Sihanouk had no inhibitions about revealing to his public his pessimistic vision of the future. In August 1962, for example, he predicted in an article for the magazine *Réalités* that "Cambodia will one day become a 'Peoples' Republic.'" The alleged Sino-Soviet rivalry was nothing but a "Western illusion"; if such a thing ever emerged, it would follow the "elimination of the 'Free World,' especially the US." By that time, Cambodia would have been absorbed into the communist bloc.<sup>2</sup> [redacted]

So often described as "mercurial" that the word seemed part of his name, Sihanouk alternated, over the years, between highly qualified optimism and apocalyptic pessimism. But his understanding of Cambodia's position as a pawn of the great powers endured; the surprises came in the means that he chose to try to keep them at bay. Meanwhile, if Cambodia were to "go Marxist," better it be attached to China or the Soviet Union than to lose its "national identity" by absorption into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> [redacted]

In the early 1960s, Sihanouk's immediate concerns involved quarrels with neighboring Thailand and South Vietnam. Both countries had intermittently supported various Cambodian dissidents, and Sihanouk blamed Washington for not bringing its Saigon and Bangkok clients to heel. During these same years, the sclerotic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem tottered toward the military coup in which he and his brother Nhu perished on 1 November 1963. Sihanouk apparently suspected American complicity in that event and moved to avert a similar fate for himself by shrinking the US presence in Cambodia. On the 19th, he canceled all US aid programs and expelled their American staff.<sup>4</sup> [redacted]

At this point, CIA's Office of National Estimates (ONE) judged that, "Sihanouk still considers himself a true neutralist." Despite his having, "for the moment at least," veered "several notches further in the direction of communist China," ONE was "confident that he does not wish to abandon Cambodia's neutrality. . . ." The danger, from the US point of view, lay in the possibility that Sihanouk might now see the communists' prospects as improving to a point that required further accommodation.<sup>5</sup> [redacted]

**Early Allegations of Chinese Munitions to Sihanoukville** [redacted]

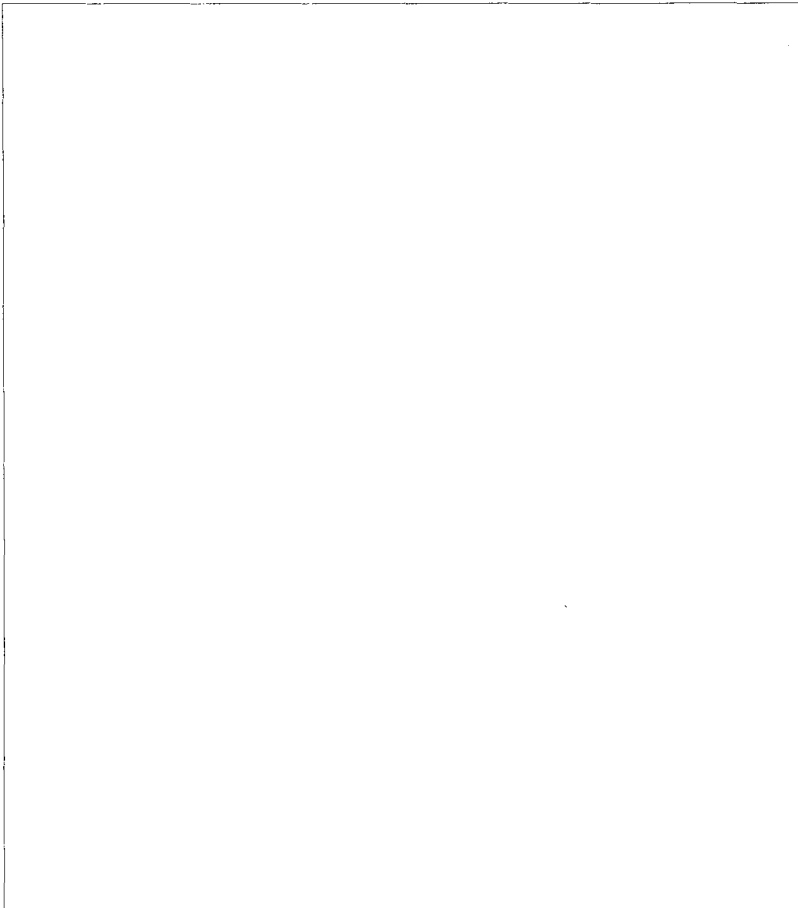


<sup>1</sup> David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), Chapter 4. [redacted]

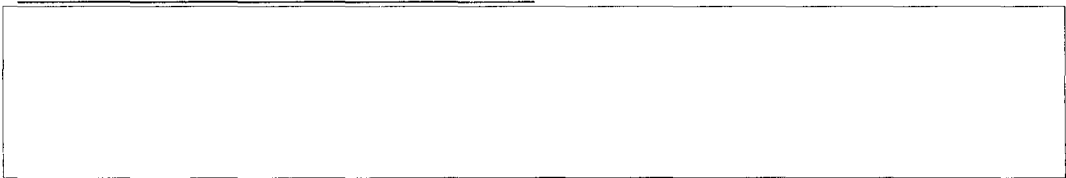
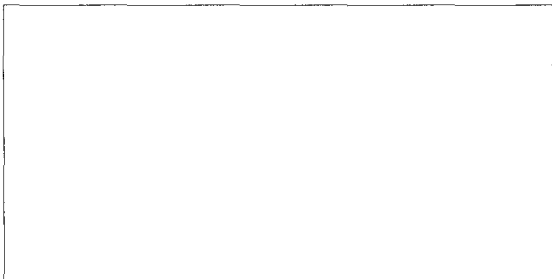
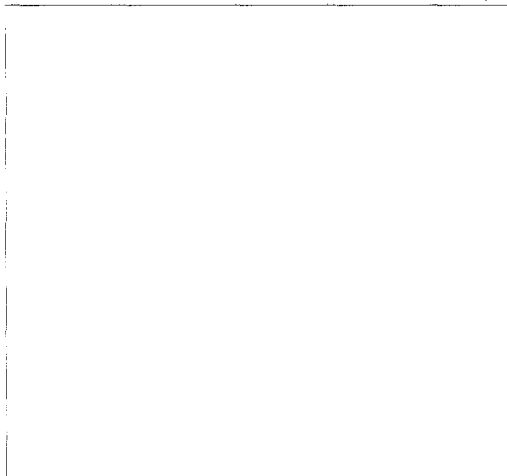
<sup>2</sup> [redacted]

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. [redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~



the first of a series of reports, also from casual sources and nearly always uncorroborated, of convoys moving by night eastward from the port toward Phnom Penh. A May 1965 CIA report originating in Saigon described convoys of 40 to 50 trucks moving "at intervals of two or three days for three months prior to 20 April. On that date source, himself, observed crates being loaded from an unusual number of freighters . . . onto . . . trucks with Chinese markings. Several of the freighters flew the Soviet flag."7



[redacted] This last statement reflected the decay of Saigon's position during a year and a half of military rule. By the end of 1964, collapse had looked imminent, and the first American combat units arrived in March 1965 to bolster the South Vietnamese.<sup>9</sup> [redacted]

Two months later, Prince Sihanouk, still persuaded of American complicity with alleged subversion by his Thai and South Vietnamese neighbors, cut diplomatic relations with Washington. [redacted]

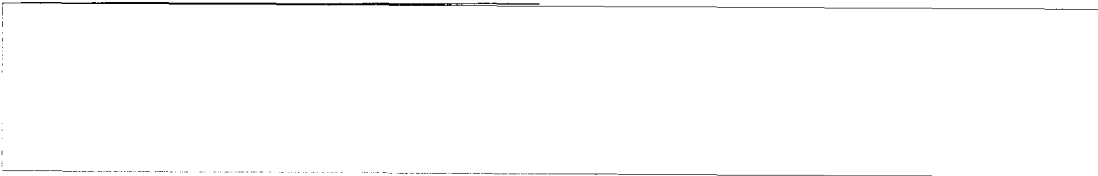
**With US Troops on the Ground** [redacted]

By mid-1965, US troops were committed to offensive ground operations against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. As they fought to gain at least the tactical initiative, the question of communist sources of supply acquired new urgency. The Agency addressed the issue in a paper for the United States Intelligence Board and concluded that most of the communists' logistic requirements were being met inside South Vietnam. Some requirements, for weapons, ammunition, medical supplies, and certain technical gear, had to be met by outside sources, but these were being satisfied primarily via the "principal route," the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>11</sup> [redacted]

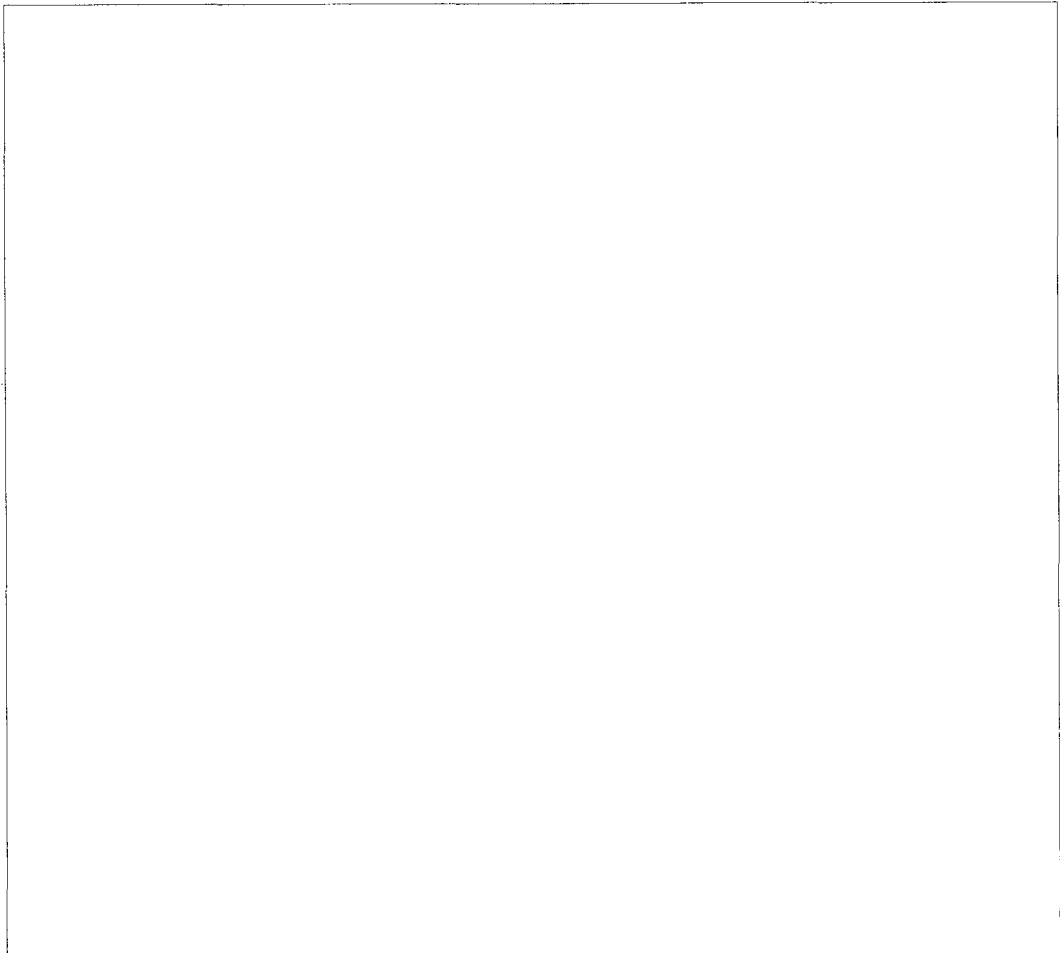
The extent of communist exploitation of Cambodian territory remained indeterminate. "Some supplies" had entered South Vietnam, either through uncontrolled border areas or



with local Cambodian collusion. [redacted]



~~SECRET//25X1~~

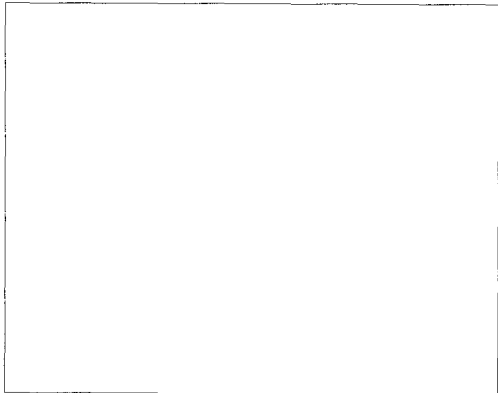


**A Deficit of Evidence**

Agent reporting, at this time, was obscuring the issue as much as illuminating it.

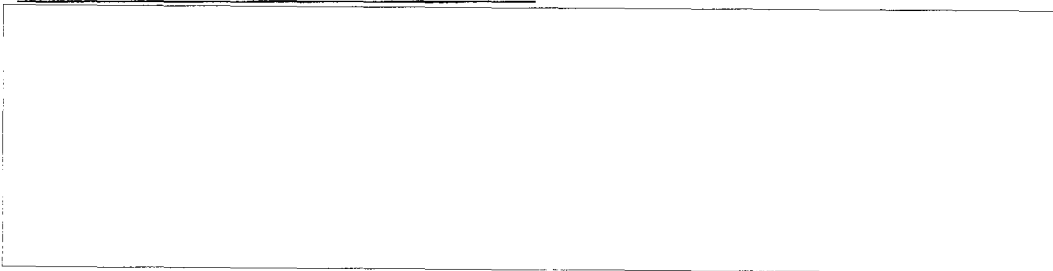
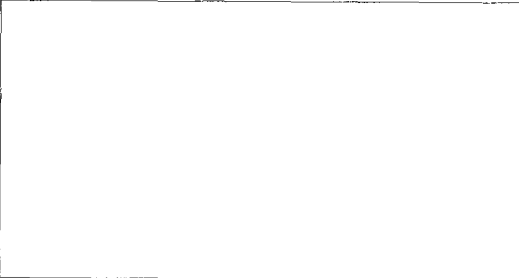


~~SECRET//25X1~~



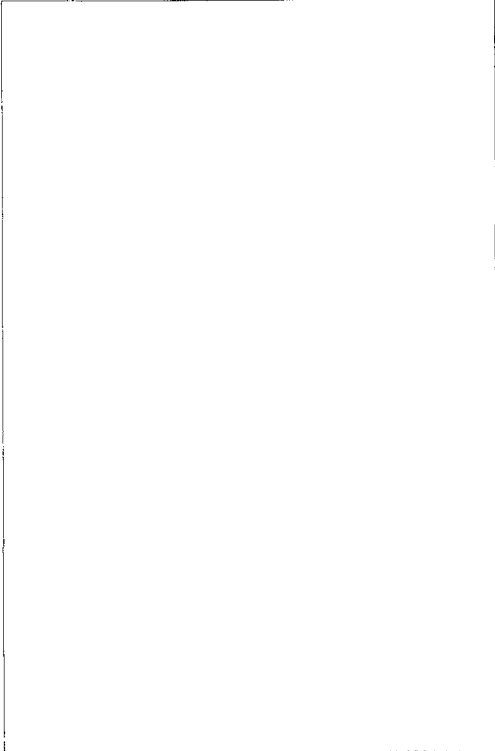
A CIA report came from [redacted]

to look for munitions shipments. The DO saw "no reason to doubt the accuracy" of information from this infrequent reporter that, on this occasion, concerned March 1966 visits by two freighters. One Soviet and the other Chinese, they delivered "military goods" the agent did not—presumably could not—describe.

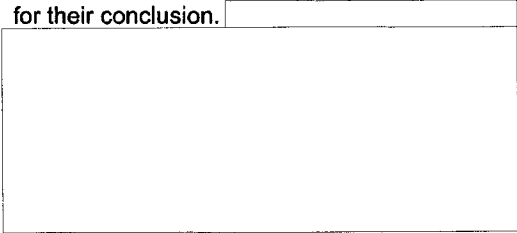




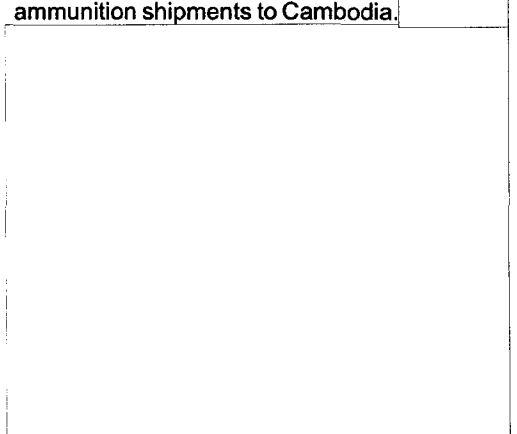
~~SECRET//25X1~~



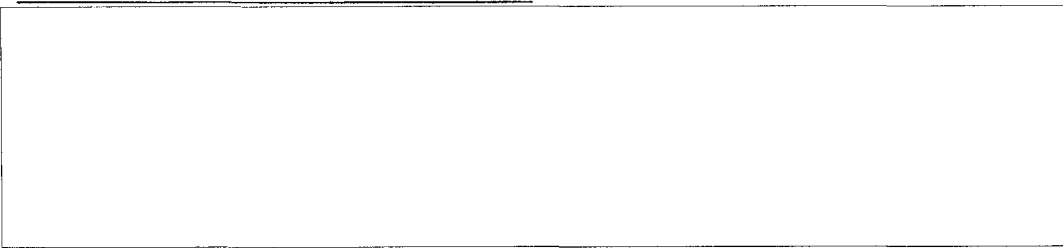
It would later become clear that the Kompong Speu depot served to store Chinese munitions until their dispatch to communist base areas along the South Vietnamese border. At the time, however, the reporting at hand had established no recognizable pattern. One report described a consensus among senior Lao and South Vietnamese military commanders about the growing importance of Sihanoukville, but did not specify the evidence for their conclusion. [redacted]



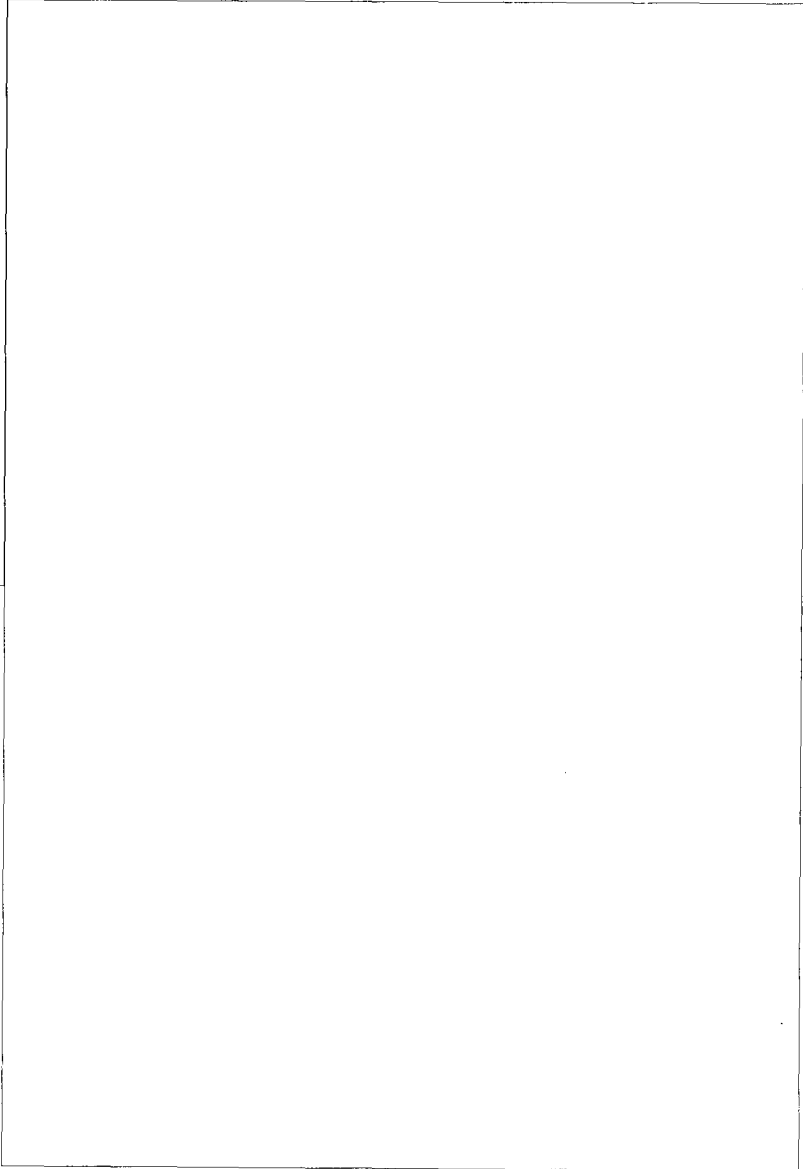
Whatever the skepticism in Washington, the CIA Station in Saigon concurred in an Embassy report in late July 1967 of a "sharp increase in reliable information on arms and ammunition shipments to Cambodia." [redacted]



In this conceptual climate, a trickle of DO reports in the first half of 1967—just two have been found—plausibly described surreptitious shipments of munitions to the Vietnamese communists in eastern and northeastern Cambodia. The trucks of one convoy had been loaded at the Kompong Speu depot of the Cambodian Army (known by its French acronym as FARK), just off the main road from Sihanoukville to Phnom Penh.<sup>24</sup> [redacted]

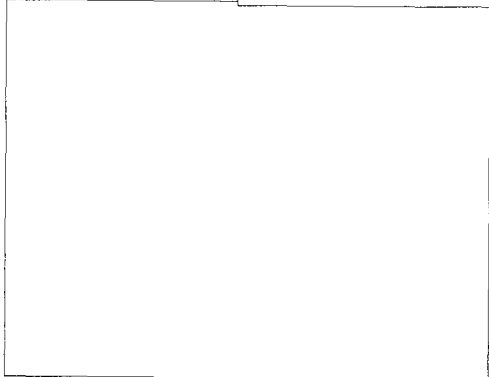


~~SECRET//25X1~~



**An Unpersuasive Case**

The modest flow of well-sourced, plausible information tended to be obscured by a flood of less credible material.



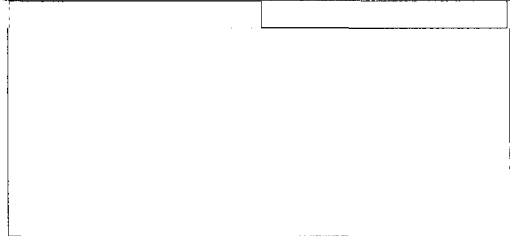
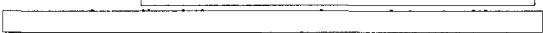


risk of provoking American reprisals." The collective significance of these reports, individually inconclusive, may have been obscured by a US effort, at just that point, to test Sihanouk's vehement public denials of any communist use of Cambodian territory. Washington sent him intelligence information intended to demonstrate that use, [redacted]



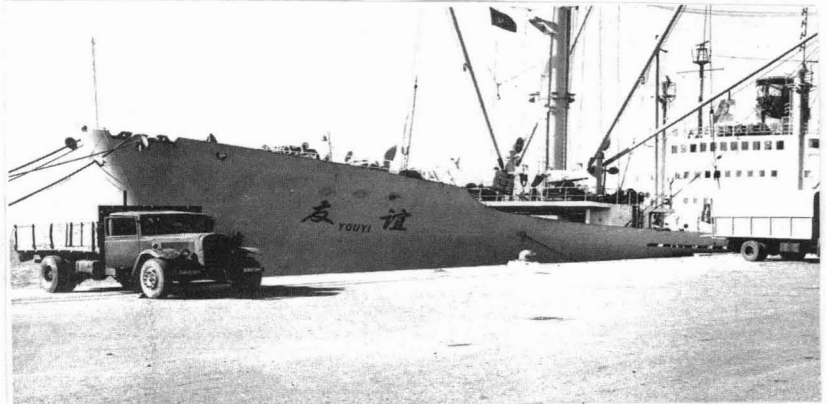
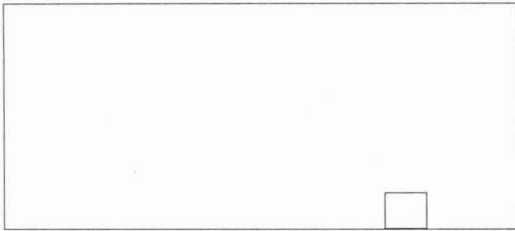
Sihanouk also complained in the press about Viet Cong transgressions and asked for an ICC investigation. He later withdrew that request, but in early 1968 Washington still thought him genuinely outraged by indications of Vietnamese support to indigenous communist rebels—the Khmer Rouge—in northeastern Cambodia. The net effect was to encourage those observers who saw him as consistently acting on his vested interest in neutrality.<sup>33</sup> [redacted]

Whatever the effect of Sihanouk's behavior on OER's deliberations, most analysts found in the reporting of the period no sufficient basis even to qualify, let alone reverse, their position on the role of Sihanoukville. The size of the rice shipments [redacted] exceeded both Cambodian capabilities and communist requirements, as these were then understood. [redacted]



This substantial but still fragmentary reporting was supplemented in late November. A DO source claimed that Sihanouk had privately acknowledged allowing an arms traffic from Sihanoukville to South Vietnam, "despite the





Chinese freighter You Yi at Sihanoukville, date unknown [redacted]

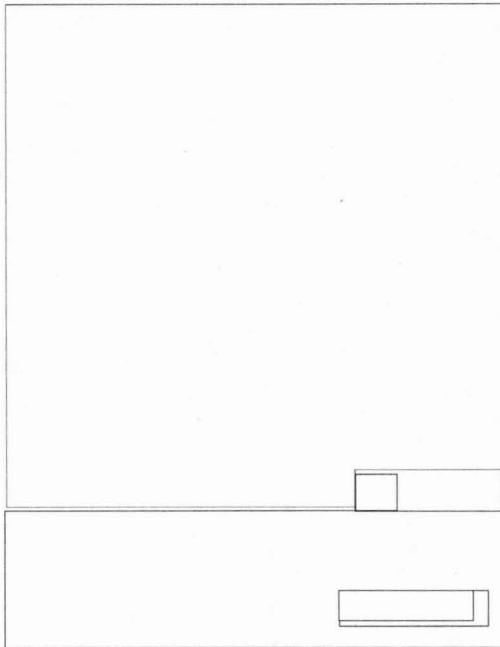
**The Decay of Consensus** [redacted]

Nevertheless, the CIA's consistent position no longer represented, if it ever had, consensus among Agency observers. The [redacted]

[redacted] had been a Cambodia-watcher since 1964 and had, at first, accepted the conventional wisdom about Sihanouk's vital equity in preserving a neutral stance. But the gradual increase in credible DO [redacted] agent reporting eventually convinced him that a government-sanctioned traffic was, in fact, taking place.<sup>35</sup>

[redacted] No one could quantify that traffic, but the mere fact of it, in [redacted] view, erased any Cambodian claim to neutrality. Once neutrality had been abandoned, the communists had no reason not to exploit a maritime route for all it was worth. This perception launched a running argument between [redacted] and [redacted] OER's top analyst on the problem, who was named deputy director of the office in August 1967. [redacted] advanced the empirical case

for Sihanouk-endorsed transshipment and [redacted] defended the circumstantial case against it.<sup>36</sup> [redacted]

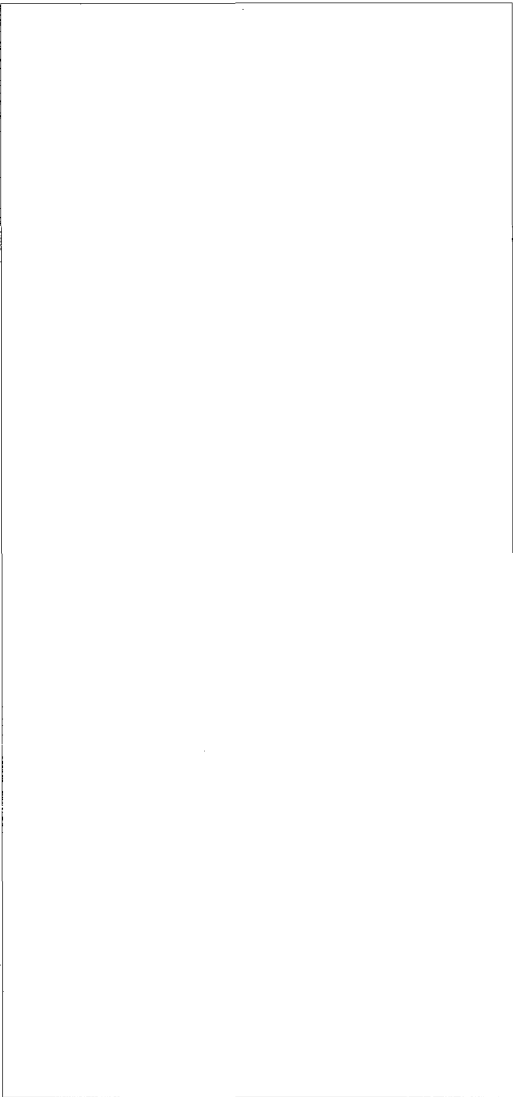


[redacted]

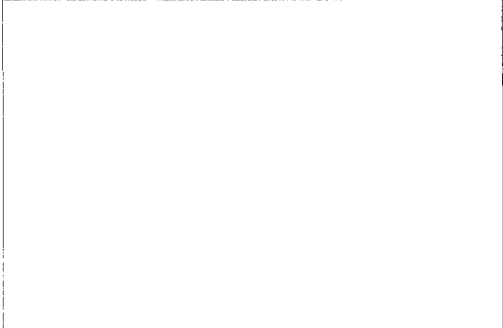
<sup>35</sup> Interview by the author, Langley, VA, 21 October 2002; [redacted]  
<sup>36</sup> Ibid. In the recollection of [redacted] his running debate with [redacted] began not later than 1967. [redacted]



~~SECRET//25X1~~



Kosem's Cham tribal entourage came on line in June with a detailed description of the transfer depot at Kompong Speu and of the mechanics of both the arms traffic and the rice shipments into South Vietnam. In July 1968,



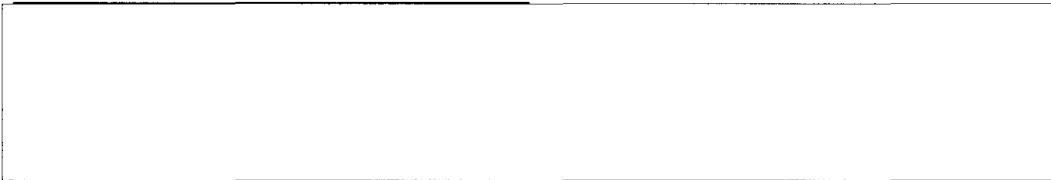
The memorandum credited Sihanouk with moving to restrict smuggling to the Viet Cong and found "no convincing evidence that officials at the highest levels of government are involved" in the traffic. Two and a half years later, [redacted] "we now know" of Sihanouk's intention to control, not eliminate, the traffic. But a clandestine report of 1 April 1968 had already attributed to Sihanouk exactly such an intention. Not enough by itself to establish this as a fact, the dissemination did, at least, invite attention to it as a possibility.<sup>41</sup> [redacted]

While the analysts continued to hold their position, allegations of a munitions traffic through Sihanoukville to the VC/NVA continued to trickle in. [redacted]



[redacted] But in mid-October, a French port adviser told a clandestine source that 20,000 tons of munitions had transited Sihanoukville since early July. [redacted]

Meanwhile, the bulk of such reporting as the DO could provide continued to allege Cambodian complicity. A new source in Les



~~SECRET//25X1~~

[Redacted]

Meanwhile, controlled CIA sources in the capital were reporting similar convoys.<sup>42</sup>

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

OER briefing notes of 13 October 1968 reflect the struggle to reconcile the argument for overland transport with a body of evidence that, however substantial, still lacked the smoking gun the analysts were demanding. "That important quantities of arms and ammunition" go from Cambodia to the VC/NVA in lower South Vietnam "is no longer in question." But their origin was still, for OER, an

[Redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

open question. [redacted]

[redacted]

This thesis had to contend with new information that suggested, even if it did not prove the contrary. [redacted]

[redacted]

In the uncertainty about both the reliability and the significance of clandestine reporting concerning Chinese arms transiting Cambodia, at least one analyst found his skepticism reinforced by his own disdain for the DO product. [redacted] had served in Saigon in the mid-1960s, where he recalled encountering a case officer who took seriously an agent's claim that the VC were tunneling under Bien Hoa Airbase with a machine provided by the Soviets. What were they doing with the massive quantity of soil being removed? No satisfactory answer. Back at Headquarters, analyzing [redacted] [redacted] dealt with agent reporting in the conviction that "you had to look at it very hard."<sup>47</sup> [redacted]

[redacted] judgment of the evidence on Sihanoukville was shaped also by his own "working hypothesis" that the Cambodians would be deterred by the risk of US bombing from letting their country be used as a supply channel for munitions destined for the VC/NVA. The overland route, furthermore, avoided the need for Cambodian authorization. [redacted]

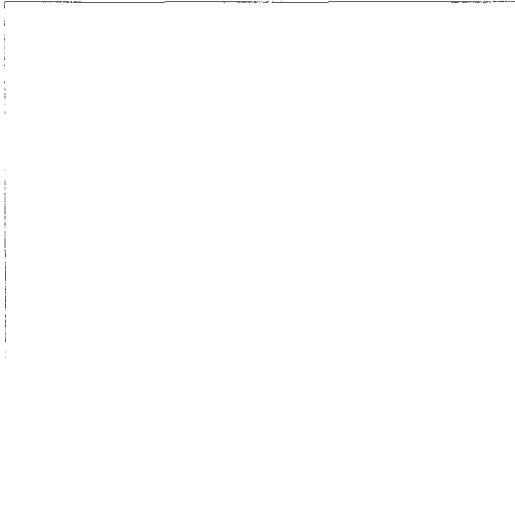
[redacted] On these two points, [redacted] [redacted] seems to have represented the dominant analytical perspective.<sup>48</sup> [redacted]

<sup>44</sup> [redacted]  
<sup>45</sup> [redacted]  
<sup>46</sup> [redacted]

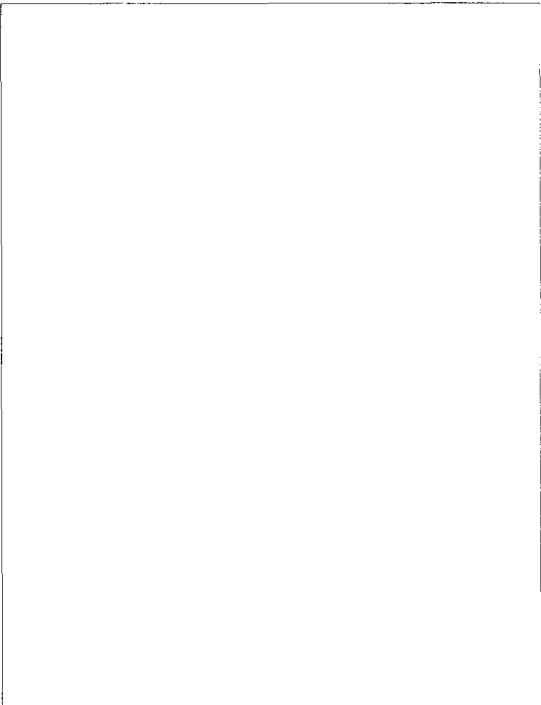
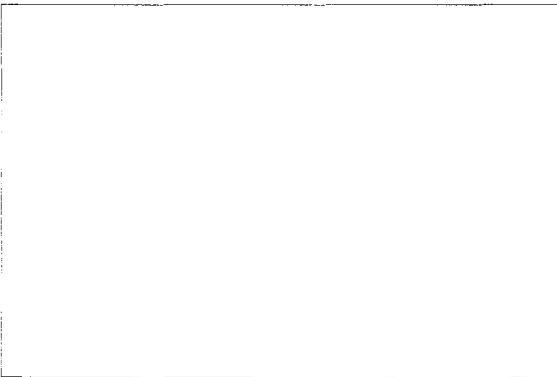
<sup>48</sup> Ibid. [redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

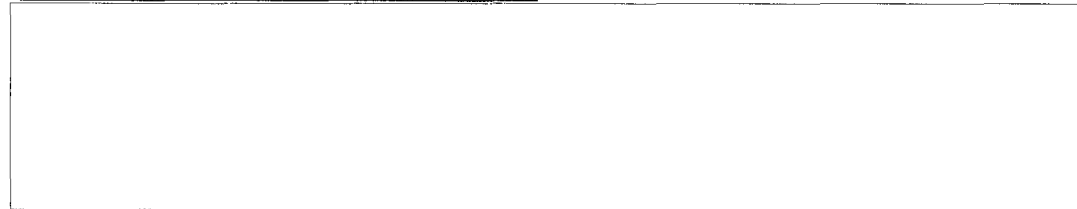
Chapter Two: CIA on the Defensive



At a preparatory meeting devoted to reviewing the available reporting, Far East Division desk officer [redacted] noticed how little interest OER seemed to take in agent reports. Accordingly, he assembled all the relevant DO material and took it to Jim Graham. Graham read it, and said he agreed that it merited more consideration than it had been getting, but [redacted] thought OER was still unimpressed by anything [redacted]



Back in Washington, Graham produced a report that modified the position he had taken in the study done [redacted] in late October. The team now accepted "the involvement of elements of the Cambodian Army in something more than 'small-scale' smuggling of arms to the communists." Graham cautiously added that, "it is suggested that Sihanouk himself is probably aware of this arms traffic." But the team still saw major differences on issues such as quantities going through Sihanoukville, the relationship between these and FARK needs, and the extent to which interdiction and weather had reduced the overland traffic.<sup>5</sup> [redacted]





~~SECRET//25X1~~

Graham acknowledged the absence of "positive proof" that any one route was carrying "the required arms and ammunition to IV, III, and southern II Corps." Nevertheless, all things considered, "we believe that the overland route is the basic channel" for munitions supply to III Corps and all of II Corps. "The communists will almost certainly continue to make every effort to maintain and increase its capacity."<sup>6</sup> [redacted]

The weakness of this conclusion lay in the paucity of positive evidence of a munitions traffic running southward from the tri-border area joining Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. That a trail network there served to infiltrate personnel was generally accepted, but there had been few, if any, reports of weapons or ammunition. One team member, ONE's [redacted] saw more—if still inconclusive—direct evidence for Sihanoukville than for the Ho Chi Minh Trail: "where there's smoke there's fire." He urged both Jim Graham and [redacted] to treat the question as simply open until improved collection settled it. But neither was moved. Accordingly, [redacted] dissented from the team's conclusion about overland primacy.<sup>7</sup> [redacted]

[redacted] In a statement disseminated on 2 November, a tested CIA source had described a "covert Cambodian committee," with Vietnamese communist representation, charged with directing the munitions traffic through Sihanoukville. In one of several other agent reports, the Saigon Station detailed the

organization and activities of a Phnom Penh trucking company called Hak Ly. This entity was reported—though not yet proved—to be an instrumentality of Hanoi, used to organize the transport of munitions from Sihanoukville.

In late 1968, the first reporting of two new sources did as much to confuse the issue as to clarify it. A Phnom Penh trucking company employee known as [redacted] began describing the size and cargo of truck convoys leaving Sihanoukville. This reporting was supplemented by apparently authentic shipping documents from an agent in Phnom Penh, a "purchasing agent" for the Cambodian Army. Well into 1969, their figures were often mutually inconsistent, for neither of them had, or claimed to have, access to all relevant information. [redacted]

In addition to documentation and personal observation, both these two agents and other, occasional, reporters were offering information, often from untested subsources, that tended to confirm the movement of ordnance through Cambodia to the VC/NVA. But these reports were fragmentary and, on occasion, clearly wrong. Moreover, several credible, if unconfirmed, agent reports suggested that the Phnom Penh government was positively hostile to communist smuggling

~~SECRET//25X1~~

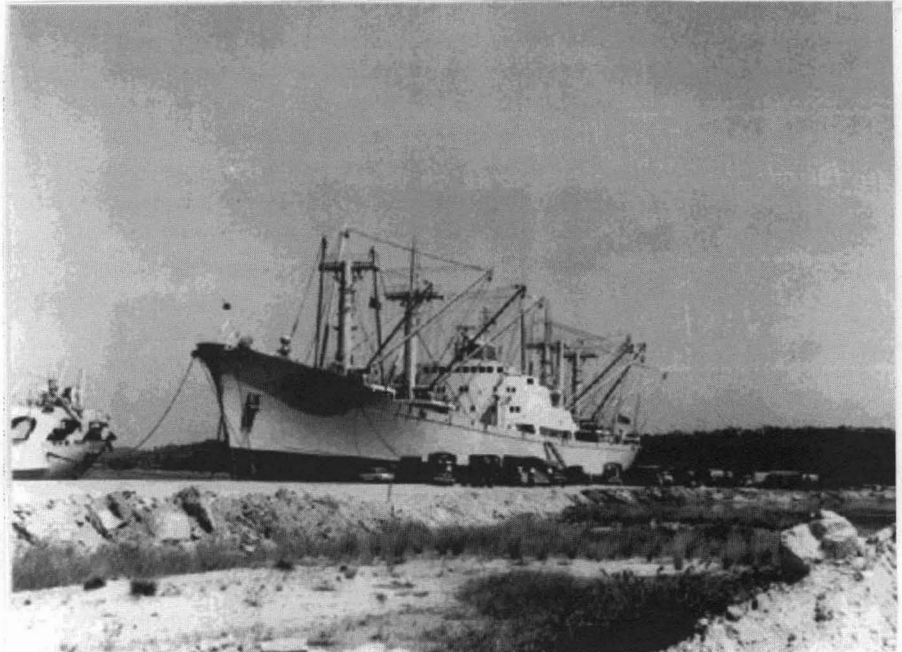
across its borders. [redacted]

[redacted] What remained at issue were the quantities being transported over both the Sihanoukville and overland routes.<sup>10</sup> [redacted]

**Uncertain Facts and Unprovable Theories**

[redacted] One circumstance that argued for the Ho Chi Minh Trail as the principal supply route was the volume of materiel it was carrying to southern Laos. According to CIA estimates, this greatly exceeded the external requirements of communist forces in lower South Vietnam. There was also the scale of roadbuilding in southern Laos. The network there had been essentially out of service during the rainy season, but, at the end of 1968, the communists were restoring it "at an unprecedented rate." Traffic was moving all the way to the Cambodian border, an activity that sharply contrasted with late 1967, when southward movement ended at Tchepone, over 200 kilometers to the north. [redacted]

At the same time, DO reporting—some from agents and some from deserters and prisoners—fleshed out to some degree the functioning of the Sihanoukville supply mechanism. [redacted] detailed a January 1969 call by a Chinese freighter, and numerous agent reports described Hak Ly convoys moving ordnance to the South Vietnamese border. Higher-level reports



Chinese freighter Li Ming at Sihanoukville, January 1969. [redacted]

affirmed Sihanouk's endorsement of the traffic, and agents described another Chinese delivery—altogether, the ninth—in April.<sup>11</sup> [redacted]

A 16-page report from the young Chinese in early May detailed the arrival of 4,500 tons of munitions in April. He claimed a total of 9,300 tons discharged during the January and April port calls. This quantity that, [redacted]

[redacted] contrasted sharply with the version supplied by the purchasing agent, who reported only about half that volume. The lower figure, while not accepted as definitive, had the merit of consistency with circumstantial factors [redacted]

[redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

Nevertheless, reporting from [redacted] whose access was, by then, well established, was not dismissed out of hand.

[redacted]

These discoveries preserved the possibility that the new reporting was authentic, but the analysts saw other factors that still urged some reserve about both [redacted] and the purchasing agent. For one thing, reporting about a Hak Ly branch office in the northern town of Stung Treng "seemed to contradict the allegation of exclusive VC orientation." And no positive evidence had yet confirmed allegations that munitions did, in fact, comprise the reported cargoes. [redacted]

[redacted]

Problems with the reporting of [redacted] and the purchasing agent were multiplied in the case of [redacted] and self-professed business partner of Cambodian Gen. Lon Nol.

Reportedly both a founder of the Hak Ly company and a major smuggler to the VC/NVA, [redacted] was expelled from Cambodia in 1967, probably after a tiff with Cambodian officials over the size of the bribes that bought their cooperation. He settled in Hong Kong and acquired a shipping company, which itself became the subject of reports of transporting Chinese arms to Sihanoukville.<sup>16</sup>

[redacted]

From one perspective, [redacted] looked like the answer to an analyst's prayer. Even the best of the reporting, up to the spring of 1969, was low level and incomplete. If Lon Nol—later the instigator of the coup against Sihanouk—was as deeply involved in the traffic as often alleged, and [redacted] was his partner and confidant [redacted] should be a rich source, at least on its historical background.

[redacted]

The coercive aspect of the recruitment meant that [redacted] good faith could never be taken for granted. FE Division desk officer [redacted] thought him an "enigma," and saw no basis for urging the analysts to accept his bona fides. Like other sources [redacted] furnished plausible information but also made claims that the analysts found implausible—indeed, in his case, simply "preposterous." And like the observations of [redacted] reports regarding the size of the traffic could

[redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

~~SECRET//25X1~~

not be reconciled [redacted]  
 [redacted] with estimated enemy logistic needs. He insisted that, between late 1966 and spring 1969, Beijing had delivered between 26,000 and 28,000 tons of munitions through Sihanoukville. [redacted]

The "preposterous" claims included [redacted] assertion in July 1969 that an incipient rice shortage in Cambodia had led him to propose importing 80,000 tons of Burmese rice. Cambodia was a traditional exporter and, according to the analysts, "had just harvested its best crop in years." [redacted] account of the money being made by a Phnom Penh casino seemed almost as improbable, for he claimed that the government's cut amounted to fully 10 percent of its total revenues. These tales made it hard to credit his inherently more plausible descriptions of his dealings with Lon Nol on the arms traffic. Then, in October, three months after his report, Cambodia found itself compelled to import rice. Some months later, new information also confirmed [redacted] account of casino activity. Meanwhile, however, doubts about his bona fides persisted.<sup>19</sup> [redacted]

Contending with these doubts was information from [redacted] on his smuggling activity with Lon Nol and Les Kosem that accorded with reporting going as far back as 1966. And it was clear that he still had high-level access in Phnom Penh, for he was aware of Lon Nol's May 1969 suspension of distribution to the Vietnamese from the depot at Kompong Speu. But even if the policy information was authentic, the question remained whether [redacted] numbers on

munitions deliveries were—perhaps deliberately, perhaps inadvertently—wrong.<sup>20</sup>

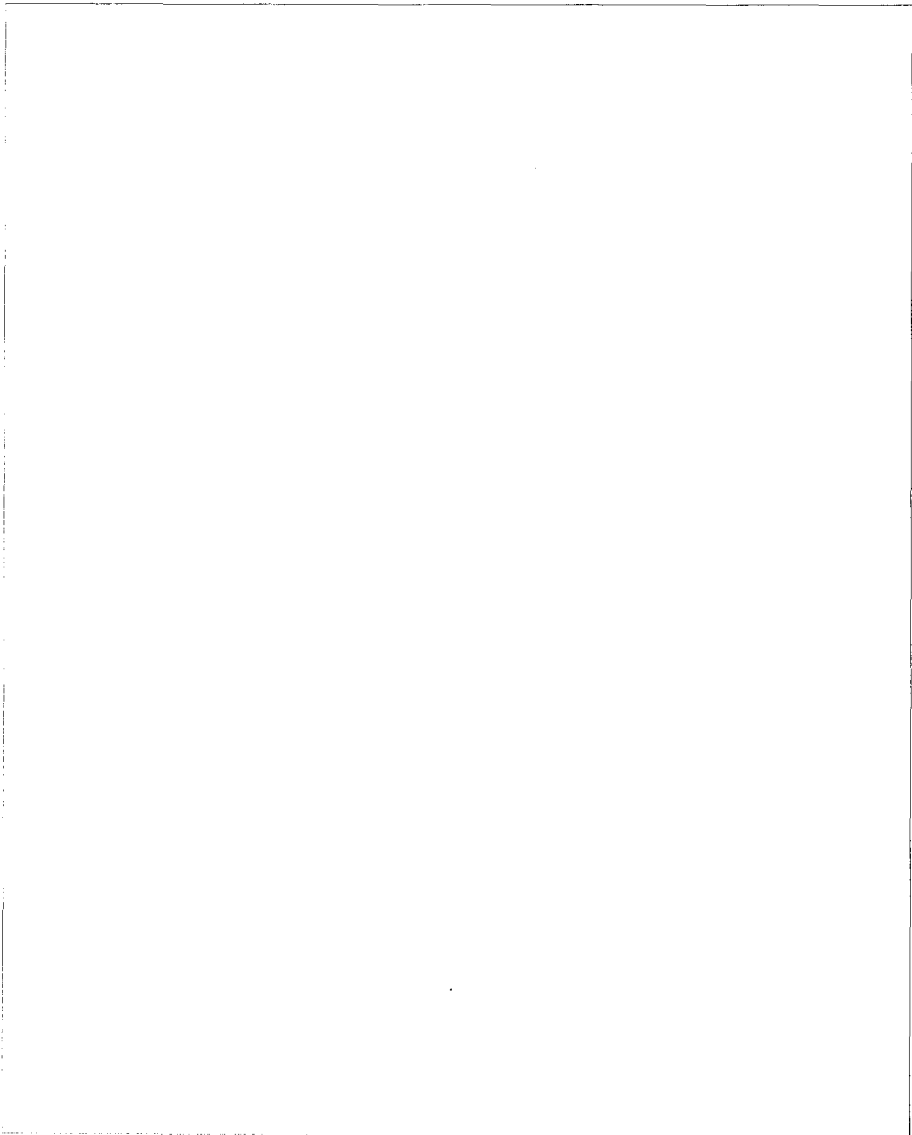
#### An Equivocal Report to Kissinger [redacted]

Whatever the factors inhibiting its acceptance, credible reporting on arms shipments through Sihanoukville greatly exceeded, by late spring 1969, coverage of overland transport—if there was any—southward from the triborder area.

The Agency maintained its equivocal stance in a memorandum for National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger in mid-June 1969. After describing the contending positions on the two supply routes, it concluded only [redacted] and CIA . . . believe that the overland route through Laos plays a much more important role in

~~SECRET//25X1~~

~~SECRET//25X1~~



enemy resupply activities than [redacted]  
[redacted] As far as CIA was concerned,  
the flow over either of the two routes "cannot  
be quantified." The now-standard conclusion,  
that the overland route remained "primary,"  
rested on an implicit redefinition of that term.

The criterion was no longer the quantities  
actually carried—whether observed or only  
estimated—but rather what the Agency  
believed to be "Hanoi's view" of the route's  
importance.<sup>22</sup> [redacted]

[redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

OER recognized that, whatever the circumstantial argument for use of the overland route, there existed, in mid-1969, far more empirical evidence of shipments through Sihanoukville. [redacted]

[redacted]

The information at hand indicated substantial enemy troop concentrations on the segment bordering South Vietnamese II Corps, and the use of the trail for large-scale infiltration of personnel. True, there was no reporting of any concomitant supply operation running from the triborder area into lower South Vietnam. Nevertheless, it seemed to the analysts that a route used for personnel could reasonably be inferred also to carry supplies.<sup>23</sup> [redacted]

The Board of National Estimates summarized the Agency's position in Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-69 of 17 July 1969. It "went as far as any communitywide intelligence" product had gone when it stipulated FARK management of a significant flow of munitions to the communists that had grown over the previous two years. Precise quantities could not be estimated; indeed, the SNIE explicitly acknowledged that neither route could be proved to carry more ordnance than the other. Like the OER memorandum a month earlier, it rested its claim for the primacy of the overland route on its perceived importance to Hanoi as a route firmly under communist control and, therefore, not subject to the vagaries of Sihanouk's political balancing act.<sup>24</sup> [redacted]

[redacted]

Against this background, the purchasing agent began in July to supply additional cargo manifests for earlier deliveries, which he supplemented with information elicited from Cambodian officials in the Ministry of Defense. The analysts, accepting the fact of these shipments, worked to extrapolate totals from the documents now at hand. No firm estimates emerged from this [redacted]

[redacted]

These uncertainties had earlier produced an unusual convergence—though not a meeting—of CIA [redacted] estimates of deliveries to Sihanoukville between December 1966 and August 1968 [redacted]

the CIA figure was 9,654 [redacted]

[redacted] But the gap soon widened.

In July 1969 [redacted]

[redacted] but the

Agency's number declined even farther, to 6,159 tons. [redacted]

[redacted]

No one expected that exchanges of numbers would settle the issue, and in early September 1969 [redacted]

developed an elaborate new analytical model based on estimated tonnages delivered both to Sihanoukville (using [redacted] figure of 21,000 tons) and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the triborder area. He compared quantities delivered with estimated requirements in the two sectors [redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

[Redacted]

Having factored in the numerous variables—estimated consumption and losses en route through Laos, etc.—[Redacted] analysis found a major discrepancy, between north and south, in the ratio of availability to requirement. Between 2.6 and 3.5 to one in the "North," supply was only 1.5 times the total requirement in the "South." [Redacted] assumed that the enemy would maintain the same ratio for all of South Vietnam. If that were the case, a substantial portion of the South's requirements—between 30 and 43 percent—was being met via the overland route.<sup>28</sup> [Redacted]

Analyst [Redacted] praised what he called a "truly sophisticated analysis," but took issue with [Redacted] careful conclusion. It was not just the uncertainty of the global figures on supply and demand, he argued, that dictated caution about accepting the Laotian corridor as an important source of supplies for the South. For one thing, there were indeed indications of stockpiling on a "squirrel-like" basis that defied rational analysis. More importantly, there just wasn't any positive intelligence on use of the corridor to supply the South. [Redacted]

[Redacted] On the contrary, what little information had come to hand suggested the reverse, that "enemy forces in the South get very little via the overland route through Laos."<sup>29</sup> [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Going Back to the Beginning [Redacted]

With the issue still far from resolution in late September 1969, OER undertook a comprehensive review, not only of the evidence but also of its own analytical methodology. Proceeding from primary reporting, the new effort would ignore all published analyses. Its objectivity would be assured by having it conducted by an officer without previous exposure to Cambodian analysis. Meanwhile, a second team would analyze [Redacted]

[Redacted] Cambodian imports from China" as a test of the new shipping estimate;

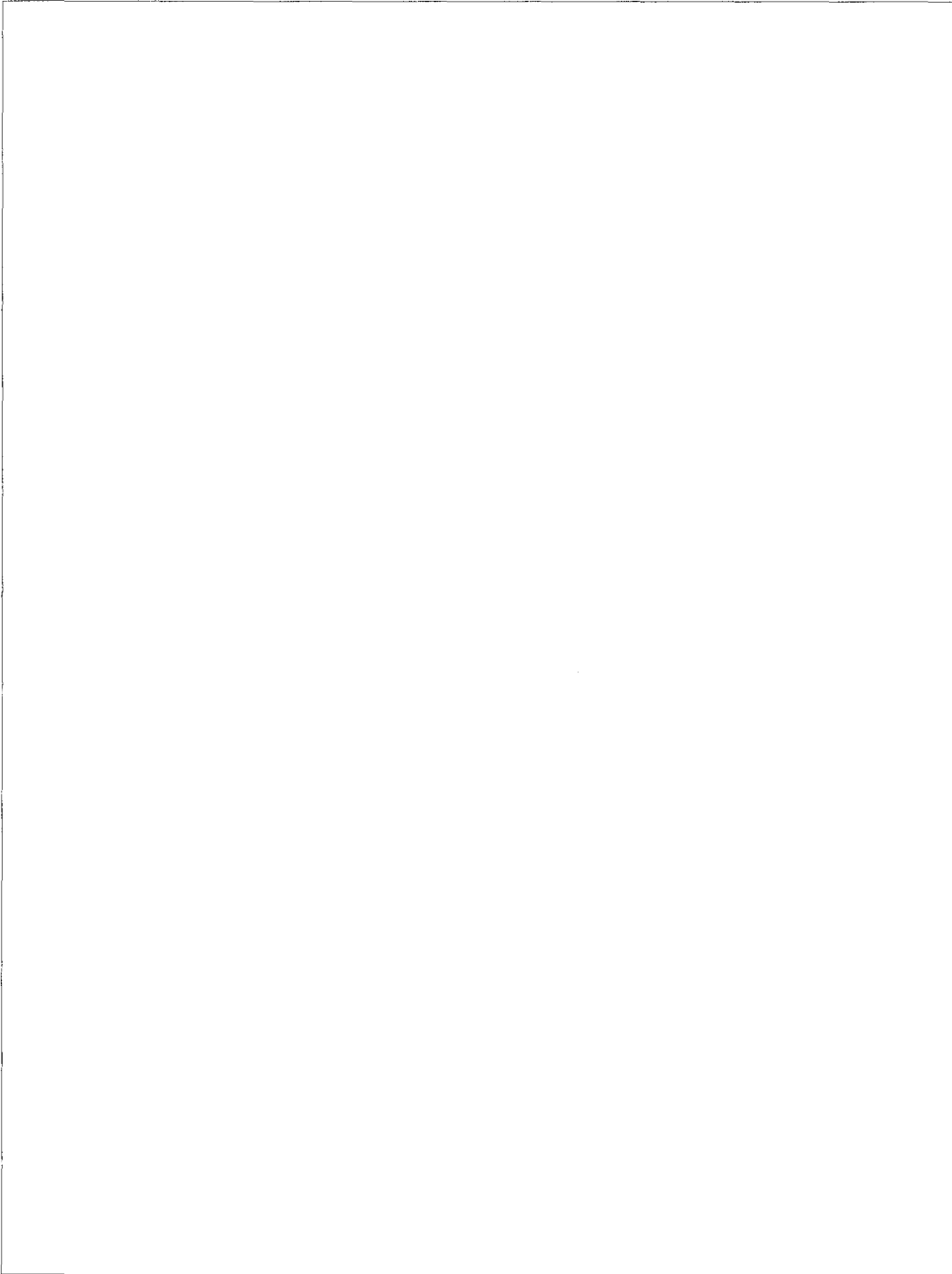
[Redacted]

Charged with making the new shipping estimate was [Redacted]

[Redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

~~SECRET//25X1~~



~~SECRET//25X1~~





~~SECRET//25X1~~

[redacted] revealed a close correlation with the quantities reported by the purchasing agent. Accordingly, the new study confirmed the arrival, through the spring of 1969, of 5,700 tons of ordnance. An additional 4,100 tons of military supplies was classified as probable, with both total quantity and composition—munitions or nonlethal items—undetermined. The report did not address the argument over route primacy, for it was designed only, in the words of the post-mortem, to "establish a benchmark for one input into a model of the communist logistical system . . . in Cambodia." In effect, however, it reinforced the argument for overland supply, accepting less than half of the 21,000 tons assumed in the [redacted] study to have come through Sihanoukville.<sup>36</sup> [redacted]

And, in fact, [redacted] estimates were accorded considerably more than the authority of something actually regarded as merely "one input." Less than a year later, the post-mortem saw OER as having "accepted the [redacted] unloading rate . . . where[ever] there was conflicting evidence. It was the basic factor underlying the substantially low estimates of Chinese deliveries of military cargo to Sihanoukville."<sup>37</sup> [redacted]

The [redacted] exercise was intended to compensate for the gaps and inconsistencies in the positive reporting. Despite the recent spurt of clandestine coverage, these still aggravated the analytical problem when he began work on the new shipping estimates. [redacted]

[redacted] described the history of the Chinese arms traffic to which, he said, Prince Sihanouk had agreed in principle during a visit to Beijing in November 1965. The quantity—20,000 tons—was specified in an agreement with Zhou Enlai in mid-1966. As usual, the impact of [redacted] reporting was dampened by more of his habitual revisions, when it came to quantities delivered, and his continuing failure to provide any documentation.<sup>38</sup> [redacted]

True, [redacted] latest numbers generally accorded with those of [redacted]. But that agent's figures diverged sharply, as we have seen, from those of the purchasing agent. [redacted]

Escape from reliance on shipping estimates might have been offered by comprehensive reporting on the truck convoys leaving Sihanoukville for the South Vietnamese border. Information on some of these did come from a variety of sources, in addition to the three principals, but such data were far from complete. And the analysts still lacked definitive information on other factors that would help determine the quantities actually

~~SECRET//25X1~~

transferred to the VC/NVA [redacted]

[redacted]

to the South, these "were thought [presumably by OER management] to have a high order of reliability."<sup>42</sup> [redacted]

Accepted in the study of covert reporting as "perhaps [the] most important [clandestine] source" on Sihanoukville, [redacted] nevertheless continued to provoke questions that sometimes took on an adversarial tone. Analysts objected that no vessel carried the name Hang Chow, as reportedly given by [redacted] and they denied the authenticity [redacted]

**"Team B" and the Burden of Proof** [redacted]

While [redacted] worked on the new shipping estimates, [redacted] gave the revisionist school an opportunity to make its case. He mandated a kind of "Team B" exercise, inviting skeptics of the overland thesis to rebut it. On 16 October, these analysts concluded that "since 1967, munitions delivered to Sihanoukville had satisfied the bulk of the requirements for communist forces in [the South]." The skeptics offered no new facts, only a reinterpretation that, however plausible as an exercise in deduction, did not, in the view of [redacted] refute the overland thesis.<sup>41</sup> [redacted]

[redacted] he had given for [redacted] Rebutting these objections, [redacted] pointed out the existence of the freighter Hang Zhou—the same name in the new romanization—and [redacted] noted that the analysts had "had to retract" also in the case of [redacted] for which precedent was soon found. These exchanges consumed weeks, during which [redacted] bona fides and accuracy remained, as always, at issue.<sup>43</sup> [redacted]

With the burden of proof on the dissenters, the impact of their effort was further diluted by the simultaneous appearance of an early draft of the [redacted] discharge numbers, which acknowledged only insignificant deliveries well into 1968. In implicit contrast to both the circumstantial arguments and the positive evidence for Sihanoukville as the main supplier

[redacted]

[redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

OER believed that, as of January 1970, the rate of supply through the trail network had risen 30 percent in the last 12 months.<sup>44</sup> [redacted]

The CIA, less in thrall than [redacted] to an estimative methodology, was equally insistent on its own bottom line. The same memorandum that noted growing traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail acknowledged, with respect to Sihanoukville, that "we remain unable to quantify with assurance the volume of VC arms." Even so, "Laos continues to be the predominant supply channel for military ordnance . . . ."<sup>45</sup> [redacted]

More clandestine reporting—some from the core trio of informants but also from other well placed and reliable sources—described the early 1970 resumption of deliveries from the Kompong Speu depot to the South Vietnamese border. In February, the purchasing agent supplemented his reporting of late 1969 with documents on deliveries not earlier described. In early March, [redacted] said the Chinese had just asked Prince Sihanouk to authorize another 20,000 tons of munitions to transit Sihanoukville.<sup>46</sup> [redacted]

Reports like these reinforced the growing recognition in OER that the empirical evidence, however inconclusive with respect to quantities, did not favor the overland thesis. Indeed, OER's contribution to an ONE update of the Graham report acknowledged the arrival at Sihanoukville, by late February, of somewhere between 9,300 and 13,400 tons of "military supplies." (The term presumably

including items other than ordnance.) But their allocation between FARK and the VC/NVA remained uncertain.<sup>47</sup> [redacted]

OER used two methods to estimate the share transferred to the communists. One of these was based on shipments to Sihanoukville, on a recent, clandestinely acquired FARK inventory, and on estimated FARK consumption. Subtraction of consumption and new inventory from deliveries yielded a figure of 4,500 tons available for delivery to the communists since October 1968. The other formula simply added up the numbers obtained from clandestine reporting of deliveries to the border caches; at about 2,000 tons, they nearly matched estimated total communist requirements. OER acknowledged that agent reporting on the reduced amounts of communist ordnance held by FARK after the May 1969 suspension suggested additional transfers making for a "substantially" greater total quantity, but there was no direct evidence of these movements. In the absence of such information, estimates of enemy requirements made the 2,000-ton figure more plausible to the analysts.<sup>48</sup> [redacted]

OER concluded that, if no more than 2,000 tons had actually been put in the hands of the communists, the July 1969 SNIE had overstated the volume of supplies moved through Laos by only about ten percent. Given the "large number of uncertainties and variables," this was "hardly sufficient to change the general validity of the 1969 estimates." The update for ONE, therefore, also left unchallenged [redacted] shipping estimates done in December 1969.<sup>49</sup> [redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

[Redacted]

By early March 1970 DCI Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs George Carver was circulating the draft of an "elaborate study" for augmented collection efforts just as Washington was becoming aware of Sihanouk's precarious position. When Lon Nol overthrew him on 18 March and solicited Western support for his new anticommunist regime, unilateral clandestine collection became irrelevant as collection managers focused on contacting the FARK principals.<sup>50</sup> [Redacted]

Also overtaken by events was a final national intelligence estimate. It would, apparently, have broken no new ground, as OER's contribution to a draft in mid-March accepted the [Redacted] study of port capacity. CIA had not yet established actual deliveries to the front that exceeded 2,000 tons; known military shipments to Sihanoukville since 1965 totaled 6,800 tons, with 4,100 tons more considered probable. With so little new to offer, and with the prospect of an intelligence windfall after the overthrow of Sihanouk, ONE gave up further work on the estimate.<sup>51</sup> [Redacted]

**An End to the Argument** [Redacted]

With the estimative process on hold, the DO scrambled to set up a new station in Phnom Penh. Meanwhile, the Saigon Station did its best to contact Lt. Col. Kosem and an associate named Oum Savouth, who had personally supervised many of the convoys to the border. After an indirect overture from Kosem through tribal contacts in South Vietnam, Saigon had earlier tried to orchestrate a clandestine meeting with him in Singapore. Now, the pressures on him as a key aide to Lon Nol prevented even the short trip to Saigon. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

OER's upper estimate, calculated in late February, of 13,400 tons. But it left open what and how much had actually made its way to the communists, and how much of that still reposed in cache sites on Cambodian soil. President Nixon had just launched the US ground incursion into Cambodia in search of VC/NVA base areas, and the White House was pressing for estimates on the "impact of current operations on enemy capabilities and intentions."<sup>53</sup> [Redacted]

Only Kosem could "tell us things we urgently need to know" about Cambodian stockpiles, and [Redacted] went through George Carver

[Redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

to press FE Division Chief Bill Nelson to arrange direct access to him for the analysts. Nelson stifled his first reaction, that "Carver was once again trying to muscle into our business," and authorized a query to Saigon on the matter. Responding to this, Robert Brown, acting chief of Vietnam operations, observed that, "not too well hidden in OER's enthusiasm to get at Kosem [redacted]

[redacted]

There matters stood for almost a month. In early July, Phnom Penh Station submitted by cable the results of a debriefing of Kosem and Lon Nol's brother, Maj. Lon Non. It raised the total tonnage from [redacted]

[redacted]

An FE Division cable spoke for OER when it advised that, if the higher figure were "dissemed and accepted without qualification by readers, [numerous] important and critical intelligence judgments would be called into question." These included the effectiveness of

[redacted]

the allied incursion into Cambodia, the size of enemy stockpiles still there, and the role of Laos as a supply route.<sup>56</sup> [redacted]

The same FE cable pointed out specific anomalies, such as the date of a reported ship arrival at Sihanoukville. The station duly queried Kosem, with incomplete results that did, at least, resolve the date discrepancy as a typographical error. Meanwhile, the scramble to get full details from Kosem and his subordinate, Oum Savouth, was complicated by a running squabble between [redacted] and Saigon Station over proprietary access to these sources [redacted]

[redacted]

Substantive progress accompanied the bureaucratic maneuvering, and, in late July, [redacted] dealing with Kosem, responded to an exhaustive list of historical questions. [redacted]

[redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

The absence of any further record suggests that Helms succeeded in calming the waters, at least for the moment. Meanwhile, in early August, ONE's Indochina expert, [redacted] and [redacted] arrived in Phnom Penh. They toured Sihanoukville (now once again Kompong Som) with the portmaster and reported back to Jim Graham and [redacted]

[redacted]

But this, approximating the maximum rate [redacted] already described by [redacted] was only 25 percent more than allowed by his model. Questions, therefore, still remained.<sup>59</sup> [redacted]

During the rest of August, [redacted] continued to debrief Lt. Col. Kosem on [redacted] requirements. In addition to more historical background, he got details of the

[redacted]

OER wanted more than summaries, and on 6 September, [redacted] [redacted] spent 12 hours photographing 11,000 frames of the [redacted]

[redacted]

documents stored in Kosem's home. Kosem, treating this hoard like a "small boy with [a] prized collection [of] bubble gum cards," acceded to the Station's argument about their historical value and agreed to let them be shipped to Headquarters for safekeeping; after a quick trip to Algeria and the United Arab Republic (Egypt and Syria), he would visit Washington for a thorough debriefing.<sup>61</sup> [redacted]

After a second photography session the next night, [redacted] reported that about half the Kosem files were now on film. They anticipated little more photography before the Station shipped the files to Headquarters, but thought the most interesting material already done. There were still unanswered questions: had the Chinese made 12 deliveries, or only nine? Also, cache sites were not precisely specified [redacted]

[redacted] expressed some doubt that even the files not yet photographed would clarify all these points; in any case, it appeared that further study could await their shipment to Headquarters.<sup>62</sup> [redacted]

The two analysts and the Station all underestimated the sense of urgency driving the effort at Headquarters. [redacted] reported that, having copied all [redacted] he had done only a sample of [redacted] there was "nothing to be gained" by doing them all. Headquarters disagreed: "Our need [to] obtain copies [of] all documents cannot be overstressed." The analysts needed [redacted] in order to conduct a thorough study of the entire question and having photographs now was more important than getting the source documents later.<sup>63</sup> [redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

Despite the evidence adduced by agent reporting and by Phnom Penh station's summaries of the Kosem documents, OER found the scale of the Chinese shipments difficult to credit. It still doubted the capacity of Sihanoukville to handle the reported volume, and one analyst suggested that the records be treated "with reserve." A total of 26,000 tons of supplies, just over 21,000 tons of it ordnance, so far exceeded earlier estimates that the [redacted] suggested looking for other deliveries that had gone "undetected by the Intelligence Community."<sup>64</sup>

#### Surveying the Wreckage [redacted]

No such deliveries were found. The known visits by Beijing-chartered freighters had indeed brought munitions in an amount "much higher than the one we held. Worse," as then-DDI Jack Smith put it, "it was almost the same as [redacted] snatched-from-thin-air figure." Smith reported this humbling fact at the DCI's regular morning meeting. There, "cool as usual," Helms took the news "without flinching." He reproached no one for the failure, instead [redacted] find out what had gone wrong.<sup>65</sup>

The White House, less forgiving, "interpreted the mistake as further evidence of CIA bias," and Jack Smith was hearing it "murmured that

we were advocates of the 'McNamara position,' whatever that was." The President ordered an inquiry by his Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, none of whose members "seemed to find our account convincing."

Perhaps they expected us to apologize and confess. We did neither. We had made the best judgment we could with the evidence we had at the time. When better evidence came along, we immediately accepted it. No intelligence service can be asked to do more.<sup>66</sup> [redacted]

[redacted]

An official North Vietnamese Army history says that, "between 1966 and 1969, we shipped 21,400 tons of supplies through the port of Sihanoukville and paid the government more than 50 million US dollars in port fees and transportation charges." Gen. Doan Khue, et al., *Review of the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation: Victories and Lessons* (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 1995), p. 221. [redacted]

<sup>65</sup> R. Jack Smith, *The Unknown CIA: My Three Decades with the Agency*, (Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, Inc., 1989), p. 210. [redacted]

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211. [redacted]

<sup>67</sup> [redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

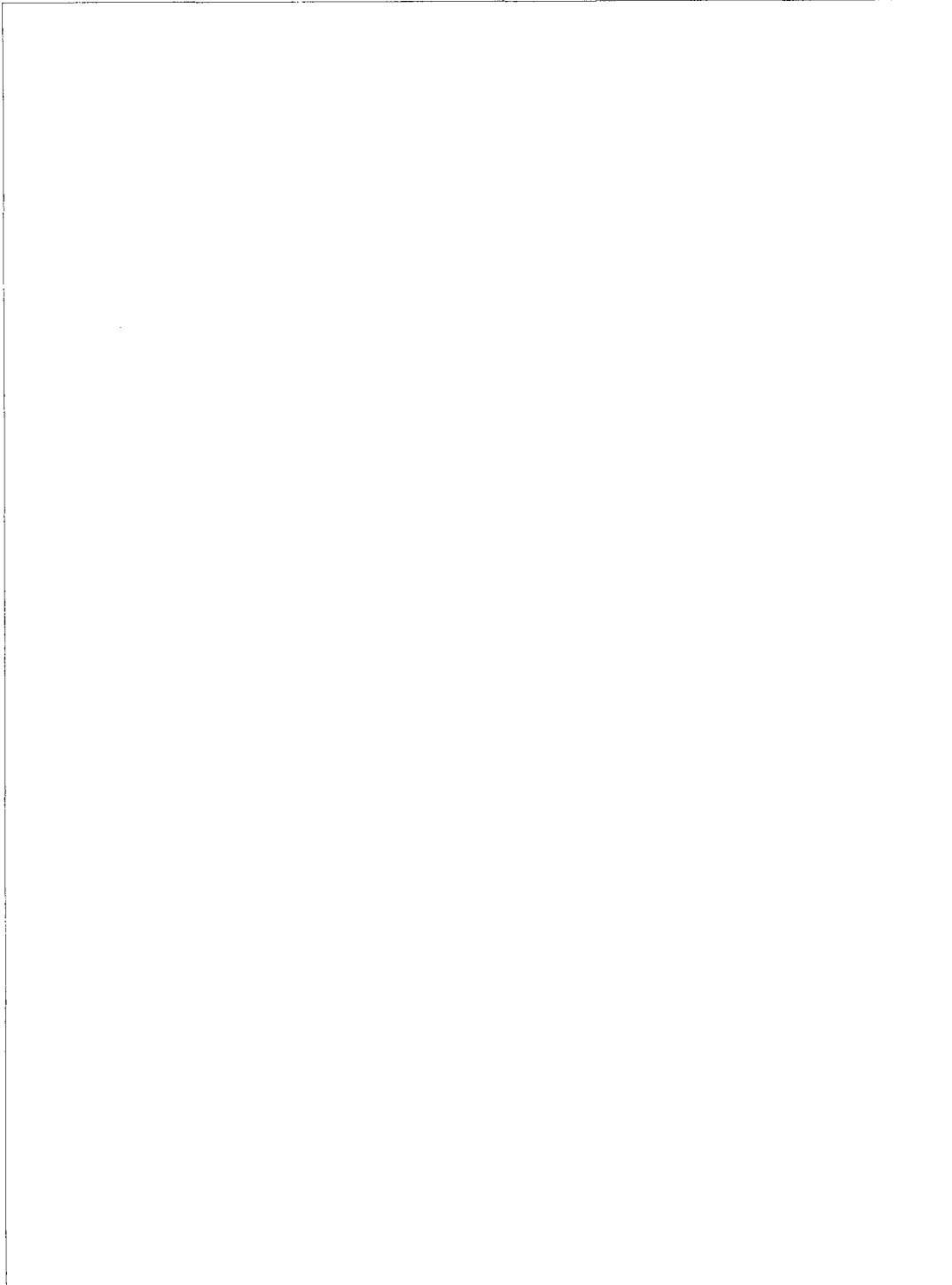
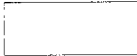
**Part Two :**  
**A Rationalizing Animal**



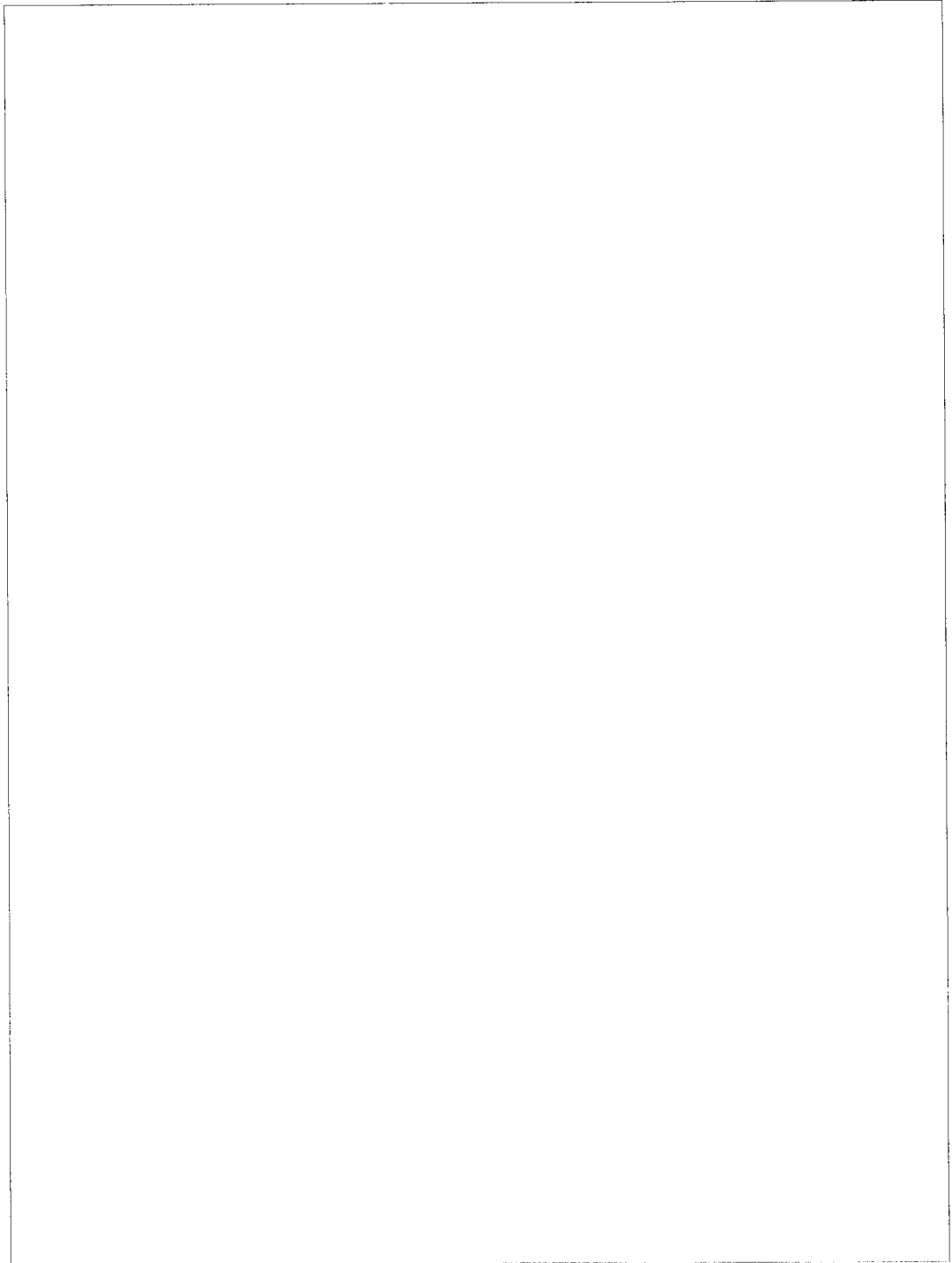


---

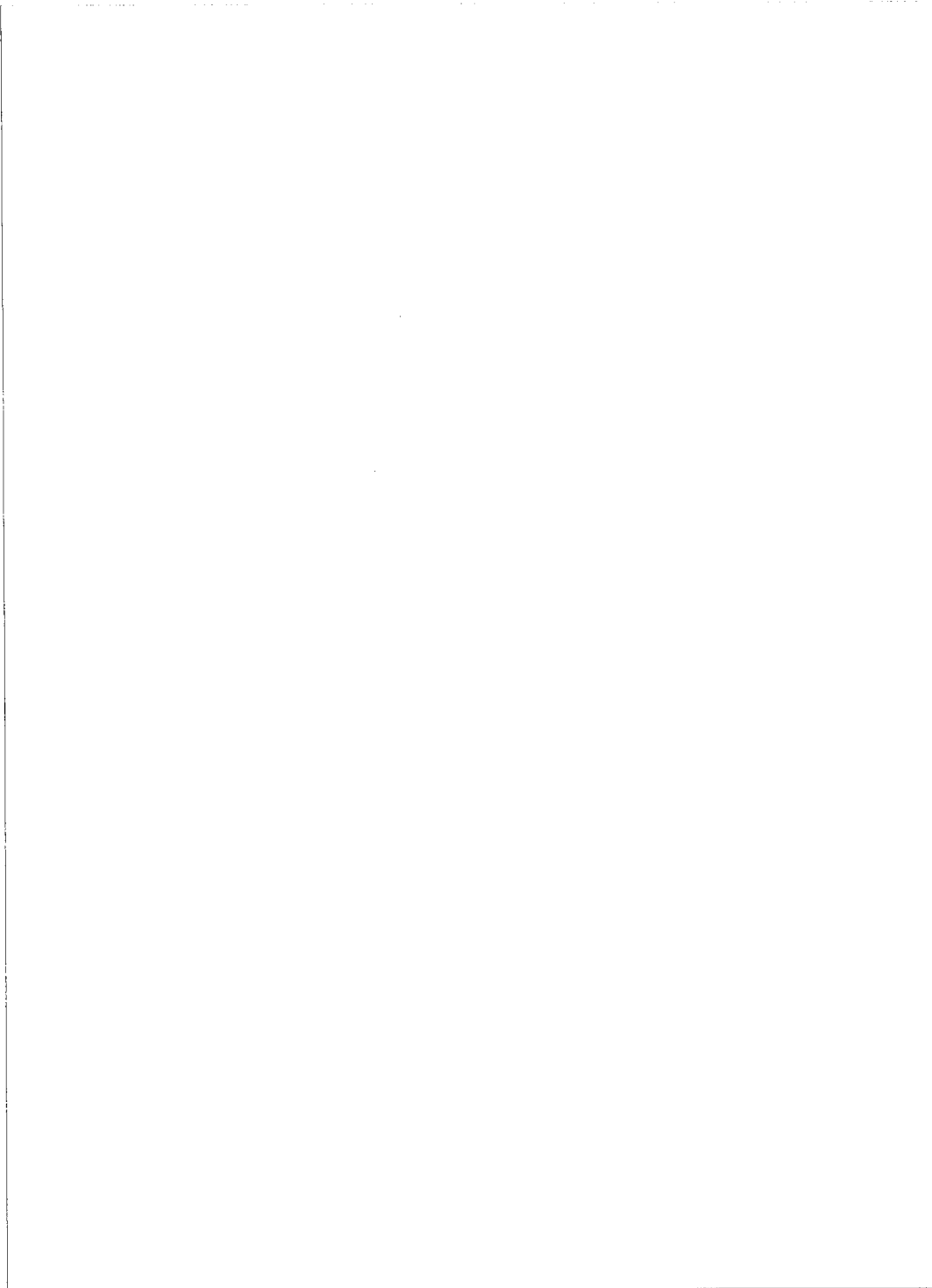
Chapter Three: The Ambiguity of It All



~~SECRET//25X1~~

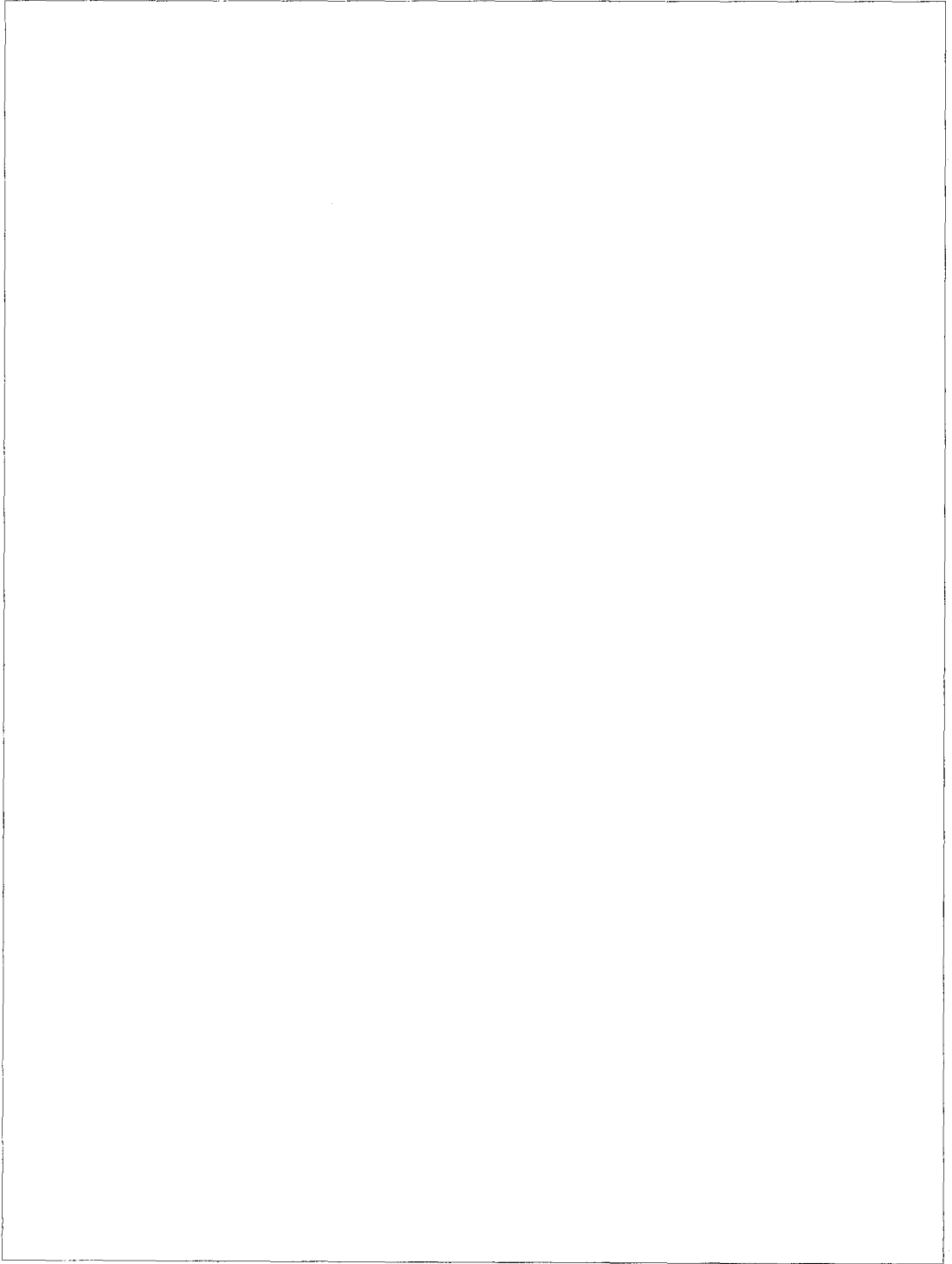


~~SECRET//25X1~~



~~SECRET//25X1~~

---

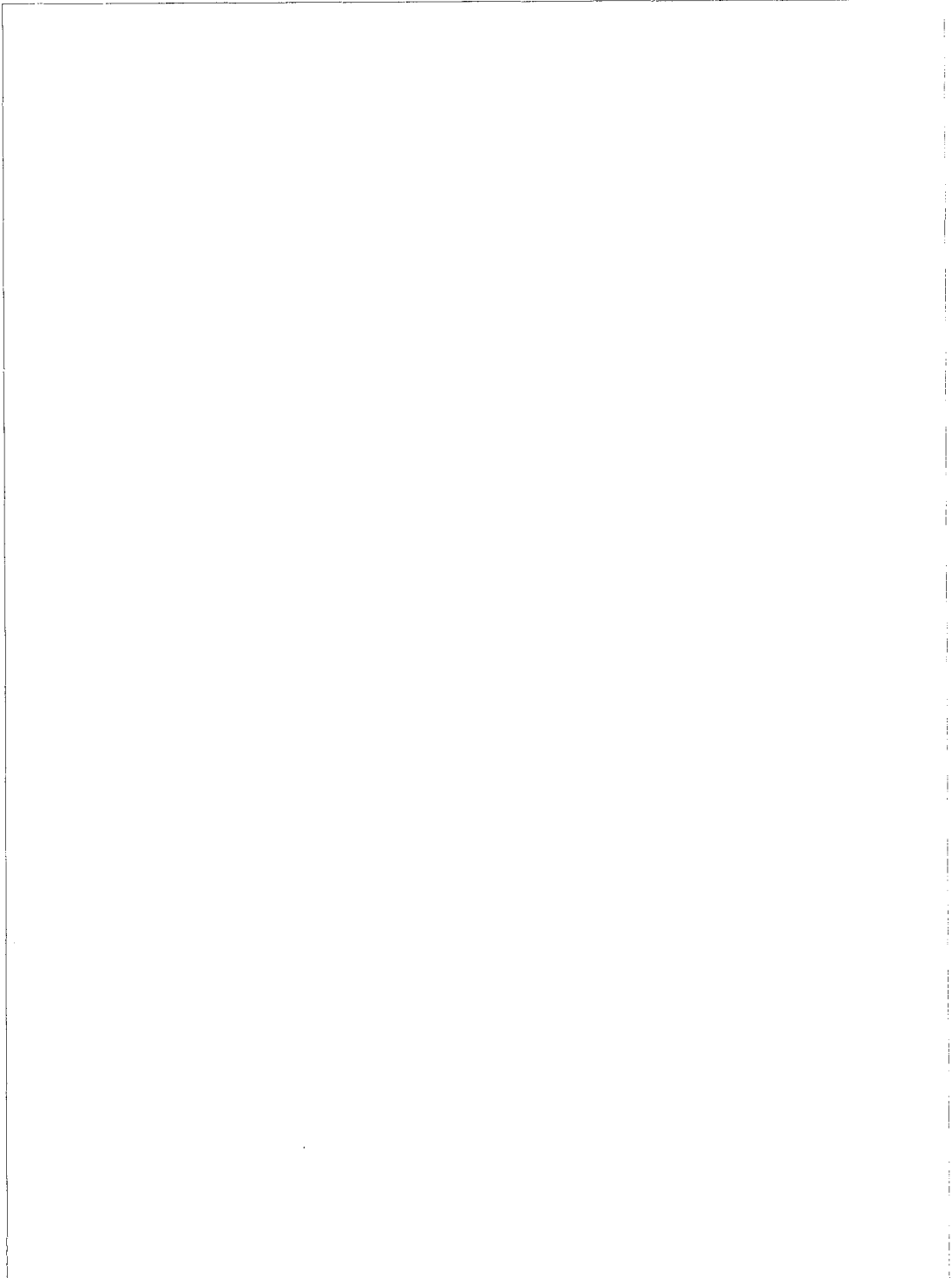


~~SECRET//25X1~~

---



~~SECRET//25X1~~

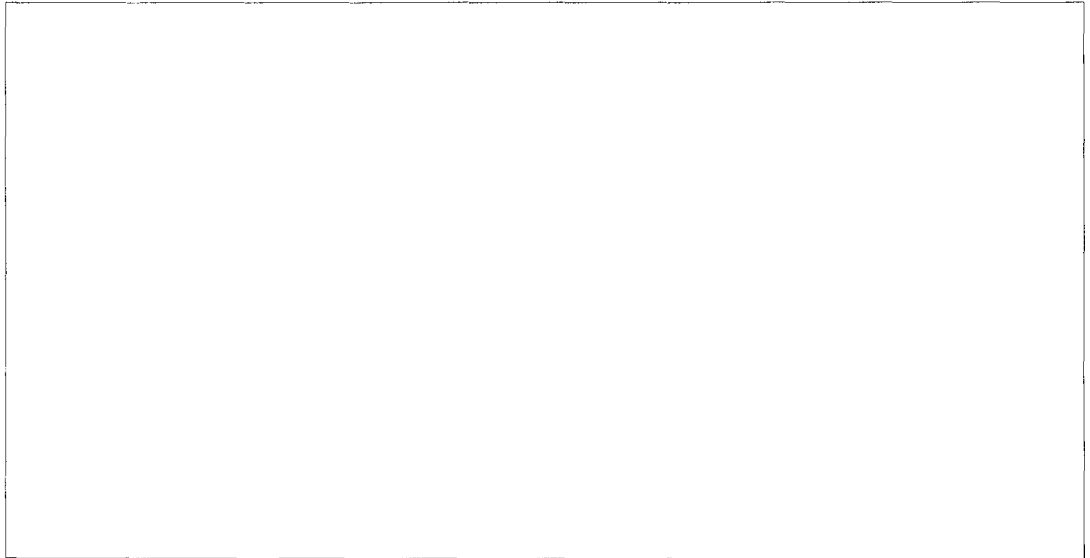


~~SECRET//25X1~~



~~SECRET//25X1~~

---



~~SECRET//25X1~~

---



Chapter Four: Relying on the Model [redacted]

The record of the Sihanoukville episode suggests that some analysts positively preferred a process that favored deductions from an academic model over inferences from incomplete and inconsistent clandestine reporting. The factual bases for the models that governed the measurement of things, like Trail traffic and attrition, were themselves also incomplete. But they aggregated masses of data, obviating the need for judgment about the accuracy or authenticity of individual reports. [redacted]

The Sihanoukville traffic, by contrast, required interpretation of each report: source authenticity and reliability, the access of both primary and subsources, and the inherent plausibility of the content. This surely increased the perceived risk to the analysts of accepting agent reporting that challenged the received wisdom. [redacted]

This mentality helps explain both OER's enduring confidence in [redacted] shipping estimates and its initial reluctance to accept the [redacted] implied by the Kosem documents. One anonymous draft accepted as "theoretically attainable" the [redacted] for the four largest deliveries that the documents described. But it questioned the authenticity of the documents, demanding a level of supporting empirical evidence from which the overland thesis had always been exempt. Thus, no agent reporting had suggested any of the prerequisites for such a [redacted] capacity: [redacted]

[redacted] And there were negative factors: "Most sources" had indicated no [redacted]

[redacted]

The very scarcity of clandestine reporting, whatever its quality, had justified the prevailing skepticism well into 1967. Thereafter, confidence in the explanatory power of the various conceptual models—Cambodian and North Vietnamese interests and intentions, and the 1969 Cambodian shipping estimates, for example—increasingly distorted the analytical process. In this connection, [redacted]

[redacted], himself long inclined to the conventional interpretation, remembered OER's protracted reluctance to credit the purchasing agent's reporting. Considerations like trail capacity and the potential of boats, smuggling, and local acquisition to fill the communists' needs dominated the analysts' thinking and discouraged an evenhanded evaluation of information that challenged received wisdom.<sup>2</sup> [redacted]

Not merely the prevailing substantive assumptions but the very formulation of the issue militated against valid analysis. Throughout the debate, OER insisted on defending a categorical position that classified the overland route as "primary" or "basic." This practice persisted despite opposition from at least three analysts. [redacted] recalled his unsuccessful attempts, after 1968, to persuade [redacted]—and later [redacted]—at least to treat the issue as open and to abstain from taking a categorical position. [redacted] remembered his own similar efforts. And [redacted] was doing the same thing, at the same time, with the same result. Whatever the reasons for the attachment to the overland thesis, they did not include in-house consensus.<sup>3</sup> [redacted]

[redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

[ ] and the other dissenters had at least a common understanding of the terminology. But as used in OER publications, the "primary" or "basic" classification had another weakness, its mushy semantics. It might refer to actual quantities carried, or to the relative security of the two routes, or even, as we have seen, to a subjective judgment of the relative importance assigned to them by the North Vietnamese. As emerges in [ ] testimony, the term "primary" or "basic" could be and was redefined to suit the requirements of the overland thesis. As the quantity issue became increasingly contentious, the reliance on notions like security, control, and importance grew proportionately. [ ]

This semantic carelessness abetted what may well have been an entirely unconscious response to demands—both self-imposed and from management—for a categorical answer to a question that, in fact, defied such an answer. Having taken refuge in the imprecision of "basic" and "primary," the overland school avoided engaging the argument of the skeptics, who were always concerned solely with quantities. [ ]

A reluctance, rooted in professional pride, to admit that the evidence allowed more than one interpretation may account in part for OER's rigidity. But managerial expectations, whether real or perceived, also played a role in OER's insistence, if not on the overland interpretation itself, at least on having a thesis to defend. More than 30 years later, the [ ] representative on the Graham mission, [ ] still thought it "weaselly" of [ ] to have abstained from taking a position, even in categorical dissent. [ ] view, the purpose of the mission was to come up with a definitive answer, and [ ] ambivalence seemed to indulge his perceived "loner" proclivities at the expense of contributing a judgment. To the extent that [ ]

understanding of the team's charter reflected the prevailing mentality in OER, it may be said that bureaucratic pressure affected the objectivity of the process.<sup>4</sup> [ ]

Another analytical crutch took the form of a prevailing assumption that, even at the time, begged to be challenged. Applying the rational-actor model, OER continually asserted that, by opening a route through Sihanoukville, the North Vietnamese would subject the security of their logistics to the whims of a mercurial Sihanouk. But the argument was invalid on its face. Security would not be abdicated, for Hanoi could, at any time, revert to full reliance on the overland route that OER had always maintained could supply all of South Vietnam. And this is what the North Vietnamese promptly did, when Lon Nol cut their access to Sihanoukville in early 1970: they compensated by sending everything down the trail in preparation for the Easter offensive of 1972. [ ]

Still another procedural flaw is to be found in the consistent failure to recognize the double standard applied to the empirical evidence for each of the competing interpretations. Even the best agent reporting on quantities of munitions through Sihanoukville had inconsistencies and gaps that the orthodox school invoked to justify skepticism about the maritime route. Whatever the validity of what [ ] called this "purism"—it was certainly appropriate well into 1967—the same rigor was never applied to quantities asserted to be coming south from the triborder area, about which there was little, if any, reporting.<sup>5</sup> [ ]

By late 1968, dissenting analysts were building a countercase for Sihanoukville. They based it both on clandestine reporting and on circumstantial arguments like [ ] "in-for-a-dime-in-for-a-dollar" insight about

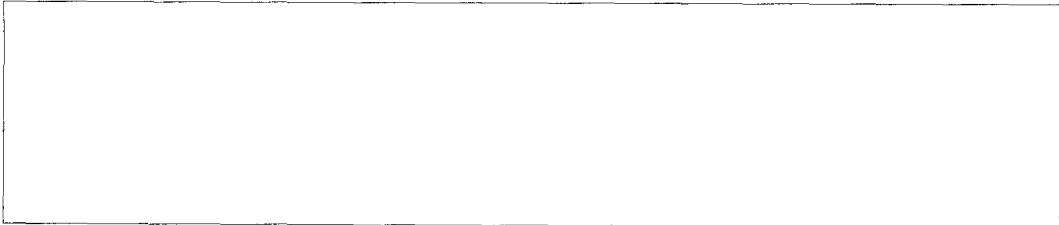
~~SECRET//25X1~~

Sihanouk's abdication of neutrality. In this new situation, a more rigorous analytical process, one more open to self-questioning, would have acknowledged the significance of the sparse evidence for overland shipment below the triborder area.<sup>6</sup> [redacted]

**Compromised Objectivity** [redacted]

Several participants in the debate later came to see individual and institutional bias as encouraging resistance to serious consideration of Sihanoukville as a major transit point for arms. [redacted] believed that service in Cambodia tended to generate sympathy for Sihanouk's position, as the Prince struggled to save his country with a neutralist balancing act. [redacted] remembered his own stance as open to Sihanouk's complicity in the arms traffic, but he agreed that pro-Sihanouk feeling was common [redacted]

But the phenomenon existed also at CIA. [redacted] [redacted] remembered having absorbed the sentiment in OCI in the mid-1960s. He also recalled a visit to DDI Ray Cline's office, sometime in 1964, where Cline advised him to "take it easy on the Cambodians." [redacted] interpreted this cryptic guidance as suggesting he "cut Sihanouk some slack" when interpreting allegations of collusion with the VC/NVA that were already circulating.<sup>8</sup> [redacted]



~~SECRET//25X1~~

OER analysts indulged a similar, if less emotionally charged, bias against clandestine reporting from the CIA's Directorate of Operations. To some extent, it probably resulted from a tendency to lump DO reporting [redacted]. But as we have seen, one analyst, [redacted] acknowledged the enduring bias generated by experience with a credulous DO case officer in Saigon. The DO's perennial failure to achieve a major penetration of the VC reinforced this skepticism. The result for [redacted] was that he was "too skeptical, too long" of the clandestine reporting on Sihanoukville.<sup>11</sup> [redacted]

Analyst [redacted] was among those who recalled an atmosphere of "general skepticism" of DO reporting, an atmosphere that derived only partly from the fact that some of it was demonstrably junk. [redacted]

[redacted] In his view, only those analysts more attuned to the political dimension paid serious attention to human reporting. These included [redacted] and [redacted] were more attuned to the potential as well as the pitfalls of agent reporting.<sup>12</sup> [redacted]

#### Policy Preference as the Engine of Analysis

The intellectual biases that helped distort CIA's logistical estimates were reinforced by the intrusion of policy preferences. One participant in the Graham mission [redacted] made it explicit that he saw his role on the 1968 Graham team as one of helping defend the

overland thesis. In doing so, he asserted, he was driven by conviction, not by pressure from above.<sup>13</sup> [redacted]

[redacted] started with the belief—he thought other civilian observers shared it—that the US military's perceived lust to attack Cambodia stemmed more from frustration with inconclusive combat in South Vietnam than from any rigorous cost-benefit analysis of a broadened war. [redacted]

[redacted] In addition, [redacted] accepted as fact Hanoi's reliance on the overland route, and he believed that Sihanouk was too cagey to jump into bed with Hanoi. With this mindset, [redacted] perceived desire to expand the conflict looked politically and militarily ill-founded, a recipe for disaster.<sup>14</sup> [redacted]

[redacted] regarded himself as having a "mandate" to help support the overland position. [redacted]

[redacted] He considered himself totally free to consider new evidence and received no guidance or instructions or indications as to what he would conclude. At the same time, he assumed that his superiors knew what he would conclude. But he saw no inconsistency here, as he fully shared—indeed, had helped form [redacted] consensus. The fact remains that he did not consider the new information acquired during the visit to South Vietnam to be worth including in the subsequent report. Whether or not, by objective criteria, it merited such consideration, it does appear [redacted] objectivity was compromised to some material

~~SECRET//25X1~~

degree by his commitment to a policy outcome. And it is unlikely that he was the only observer whose judgment was affected in this way.<sup>15</sup> [redacted]

The evidence for the impact of a similar policy commitment at CIA is less direct, but goes to the highest level of the Agency's analytical activity on the arms issue. Over a period of time, ONE's [redacted] acquired the impression that [redacted] attachment to the overland thesis derived, at least in part, from a "subliminal reluctance" to see the war expand into Cambodia. [redacted] emphasized the "subliminal" aspect: he did not see [redacted] as having consciously sought to have the intelligence product serve this view, but as having been influenced by it. To the extent that this was the case, [redacted] joined [redacted] and possibly others in the same distortion of the analytical process of which many of them had long accused MACV: they too used analysis—in [redacted] case quite consciously—to advance a policy agenda.<sup>16</sup> [redacted]

#### The Perils of Argument From Authority [redacted]

No one concerned with ensuring the integrity of an analytical process would support argument from authority as a legitimate instrument of persuasion. Indeed, it appears that the managers involved in CIA's Sihanoukville analysis recognized the importance of intellectual independence and, in periodic reviews of the evidence, actively tried to guarantee it. Nevertheless, it also appears that individual reputations for expertise, buttressed by hierarchical relationships, frequently operated to undermine it. [redacted]

At the center of this issue is [redacted]. Had he been only a working-level analyst, he would have had to compete on an equal basis with other interpretations and other personalities. Even then, working in something more like a free market of ideas, his expertise and force of personality would likely have materially influenced the Agency's position on Sihanoukville. As it was, his position [redacted] combined with his professional reputation and acknowledged mastery of the "numbers," came to dominate the debate in a way that stacked the deck against dissent. [redacted]

On Sihanoukville, [redacted] turned out to be simply wrong. But, as [redacted] pointed out, he had served with real distinction as a leader in Indochina analysis. He would speak truth to power, as in his insistence on the futility of bombing the North in order to break Hanoi's will. Unfortunately for the discussion of the arms traffic, the aura of authority created by this record of accomplishment and the force of his conviction on the subject only made it harder to get a hearing for a revisionist point of view.<sup>17</sup> [redacted]

Having set the CIA position, [redacted] apparently took for granted his analysts' adherence to it. In late 1968, as we have seen [redacted] challenged him to accept the burden of proof for the overland thesis; [redacted] reaction was to commission a piece to "support *our* contention" about the overland route. This formulation—perhaps by [redacted] if not by [redacted]—implied a unanimity of view that [redacted] thought owed something to bureaucratic pressure. As [redacted] recalled it, he had not been urging acceptance of any specific volume of traffic, only that well-sourced clandestine reporting be recognized as a credible

[redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

challenge to the overland model. But [redacted] "didn't want to buck [redacted]." This reluctance motivated, at least partly, in [redacted] view, by deference to authority, ultimately caused some estrangement between him and [redacted] a personal friend who had brought him along to the [redacted] when both left Soviet analysis.<sup>18</sup> [redacted]

By 1968, [redacted] believed that confirmation of deliveries at any level destroyed two arguments: 1) that Sihanouk intended to preserve his neutrality; and 2) that there was reason to doubt that the communists would fully exploit any access through Cambodia. And OER now accepted that some weapons were, indeed, transiting the country. But [redacted] continued to "bulldoze his idea" past [redacted] dissent.<sup>19</sup> [redacted]

Somebody's view had to prevail, and the heterodox were as subject to error as their adversaries. But it seems that, by 1968, subjective considerations had acquired an unhealthy force. [redacted] described [redacted] as so emotionally committed to the overland thesis that "he went around the bend . . . wouldn't talk to me." But if the rigidity of [redacted] position reflected "arrogance and stubbornness," [redacted] concluded also that he had allowed the discussion to reach stalemate when he failed to challenge [redacted] numbers about ships and cargoes.<sup>20</sup> [redacted]

[redacted]

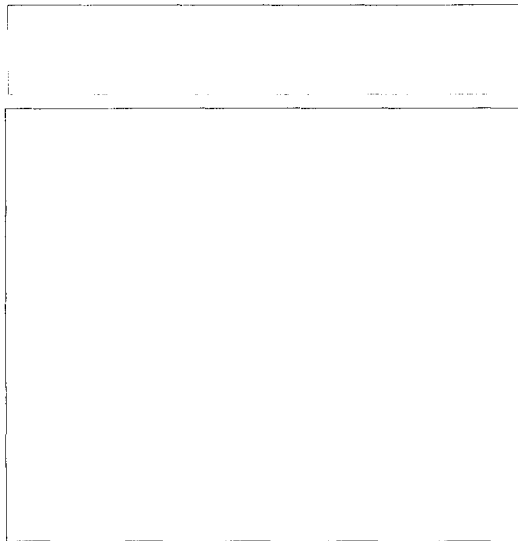
The point is reinforced by [redacted] service on the Graham mission. At the end, listening to the discussion of the draft report, he found himself sympathizing with [redacted] dissent from the overland thesis. But [redacted] had regarded himself, on the trip, more as DO "watchdog" than as substantive participant, and he hesitated even to participate in the discussion. Disclaiming any unique expertise, he decided to cast his layman's vote with the preeminent—and supremely confident—authority on the subject, [redacted]. Accordingly, he signed the report, and [redacted] remained the only dissenting voice.<sup>22</sup> [redacted]

#### Compartmentation and its Discontents [redacted]

DO participation in the Graham team—even if intended as no more than a matter of bureaucratic turf protection at overseas stations—had the salutary effect of generating some communication between operational and analytical elements. [redacted] came to think that, until late 1968, the entire episode served as a paradigm of failed communication between the two directorates. Only when the Graham team was formed did the DO find out about the analytical model being used in the DI and learned to help OER levy precise requirements. Similar regrets were to be found also on the analytical side: [redacted] at least, later deplored the lack of communication with the DO that prevailed during the Sihanoukville debate.<sup>23</sup> [redacted]

~~SECRET//25X1~~

It does seem that better communication would have encouraged a more sophisticated interpretation of significant aspects of the problem. Upon joining the team, [redacted] noted that analysts were still using [redacted] as guides. [redacted] He saw this as an example of academic isolation from real-world practice—in this case the Southeast Asian habit of ignoring official load limits—that the application of operational experience would have mitigated.<sup>24</sup> [redacted]



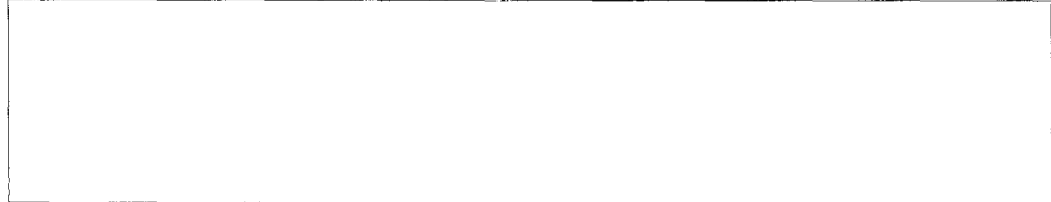
[redacted] thought that the operational perspective would have helped the analysts to avoid an assumption that partially justified rejecting Hak Ly as a North Vietnamese instrumentality. Contrary to the OER interpretation, the existence of a branch office at Stung Treng might have represented nothing more than a cover, designed to give Hak Ly the appearance of a legitimate commercial concern. Ignoring that possibility served the prevailing skepticism about reported truck convoys carrying munitions to the border with lower South Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> [redacted]

**Wrong But Rational** [redacted]

The record thus reveals substantial flaws in CIA analysis of the Cambodian arms controversy. However, it does not establish that, even in early 1970, the DI should have assigned to Sihanoukville—and with the same degree of confidence—the importance that it had earlier attributed to the overland route. There were, after all, powerful circumstantial arguments against it. And if agent reporting had now proved a substantial flow of arms through Sihanoukville, exact quantification still eluded the analysts. [redacted]

[redacted] who replaced [redacted] on the DO desk, had a similar perspective on collaboration between analysts and operators. By late 1968, as he recalled it, he and other desk officers saw Sihanouk as having abandoned neutrality by his wholesale accommodation of the VC/NVA, including the military hospital at Kompong Cham. This perspective was never conveyed to OER,

[redacted]  
 A North Vietnamese Army history says that the Lao Dong Party's Central Office for South Vietnam set up Rear Services Group 17 in July 1966 "in the friendly nation of Cambodia." Under the name "Hac [sic] Ly Company," it "established purchasing offices in a number of different areas in Cambodia." Nguyen Duy Tuong, Chief Editor, *History of the Annamite Mountain Troops of the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, (Hanoi, People's Army Publishing House, 1994), p. 139. Translation [redacted]



~~SECRET#25X1~~

Given the persuasiveness of the circumstantial case, it was certainly reasonable to require a substantial body of reliable evidence to establish a competing interpretation, and this was a long time coming. Fanciful early allegations of deliveries through Sihanoukville inevitably and, to a point, legitimately discredited agent reporting. When knowledgeable CIA sources began producing better information, some of it as early as 1967, it was at first fragmentary and always subject to inconsistencies and even contradictions.

[Redacted]

From a procedural point of view, the problem arose primarily in the treatment of evidence for and against the opposing arguments. Had equal rigor been applied to both, attachment to the overland route would have given way sooner to a more balanced interpretation. Two examples illustrate this. First, the skepticism that always, and often properly, greeted agent reporting was not applied to information from other sources. Thus, OER analysis consistently questioned the authenticity of the larger deliveries described by [Redacted]

[Redacted]

The treatment of empirical evidence is equally asymmetrical in the second example. Regarding Sihanoukville, the analysts wanted assurance that agent reporting was authentic

[Redacted]

and accurate. Indeed, as we have seen, their skepticism led to rejection of what turned out to be the most authoritative coverage. But no such rigor was applied to interpreting the near-total absence of reporting, from any source, on overland deliveries. Factors such as the paucity of human sources below the tri-border area certainly allowed, up to a point, continuing faith in the overland thesis. But faith is what it was. When the overland intelligence vacuum persisted as the evidence for Sihanoukville grew, faith required rationalization in order to survive. [Redacted]

More generally, at least two of the participants later concluded that there was what one of them called too little "bottom up," inductive thinking and too much from the top down.

[Redacted] said he meant by that a propensity, which he shared, to begin with a conclusion rather than to build one from factual evidence. Like other proponents of the overland theory, he began with the conventional wisdom about Sihanouk's equities, the Ho Chi Minh Trail logistic flow and capacity, [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Thus, [Redacted] "proceeded down the ladder to look at the evidence, I was met by [OER] intelligence and analysis coming up from the bottom which fit my prejudices perfectly."<sup>28</sup> [Redacted]

[Redacted] made essentially the same point in even more categorical terms. Reflecting on the Sihanoukville failure, he thought it pointed to the necessity, in any conflict between empirical fact and an *a priori* analytical model, for the analyst to rely on the reporting. Impossible to apply in an absolute sense—individual points of fact acquire meaning only when integrated into a hypothesis, however tentative—this

~~SECRET#25X1~~



prescription does, nevertheless, encapsulate the weakness of the Sihanoukville analysis.<sup>29</sup>

**A Modicum of Objectivity**

No one with any self-knowledge thinks of perfect objectivity as an achievable goal. The most that can be done is to try to question assumptions in hopes of identifying beliefs and values that may interfere with disinterested judgment. Such influences being more visible in others than in oneself, it follows that a vigorous adversarial process is essential to identifying bias.

Even then, subjective factors may persist. If the Sihanoukville episode teaches anything, it is that the assumptions and biases most strongly held are those most in need of examination. Accepting as a general principle the danger of unexamined premises may open the analyst, if not always to proactive self-criticism, at least to respectful attention to divergent views. Absent that openness, the universal human desire for the comfort of certitude may overwhelm the spirit of neutral inquiry that remains the ideal of professional analysis.

## Source Note

The author is indebted to Richards J. Heuer, Jr.'s, discussion of analytical strategies in *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999). Merle Pribbenow's translations of official North Vietnamese Army histories give Hanoi's version of Hak Ly and the size of the Sihanoukville traffic. [redacted]

Source material for this study has come almost exclusively from the official record and from the recollections of what is hoped is a representative sample of surviving participants in the Sihanoukville controversy. The small amount of open literature on the subject is restricted even further by its overlapping authorship. It is written from the perspective of senior management, whose role in the Sihanoukville analysis was limited largely to interpreting to the working level the terms and sense of urgency with which the policymakers were pressing for a resolution. The way in which this guidance actually influenced the analysts ultimately depended, of course, on the latter's understanding of what management wanted. Accordingly, this study relies on working documents and participant recollections to establish the psychological climate in which the debate took place [redacted]

The literature is of interest, nevertheless, for its revelation of various perspectives and purposes at the management and policy levels. [redacted]

Bundy, William P., *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998). With respect to Cambodia, Bundy is concerned mainly to discredit Nixon's ground incursion in the spring of 1970. Despite his presumptive access to the definitive intelligence that proved the contrary, he relies on the findings of an outside academic to justify his conclusion that the Sihanoukville traffic was "insignificant." [redacted]

Hathaway, Robert M., and Russell Jack Smith, *Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence, 1966-1973* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993). Smith's portion of this survey of the Helms incumbency vividly describes the political atmosphere of the late Johnson and early Nixon administrations. It relates the Sihanouk controversy to the even more ferocious battle over enemy order of battle in South Vietnam and to the controversial CIA estimates—validated by subsequent events—of strategic bombing and North Vietnamese morale and will to fight. The CIA analytical process itself, and the reasons for its failure on Sihanoukville, get only perfunctory treatment. [redacted]

Helms, Richard, *A Look over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, April 2003). Helms gives an account of the political context similar to the one provided by Jack Smith for the DCI's biography. The account of the collection effort that ultimately

~~SECRET//25X1~~

---

led to the shipping documents is unreliable, even fanciful, in its assertion that a CIA-owned truck was inserted into the convoy system for Chinese arms. Beyond a rueful acknowledgment of shortcomings, the analytical process is not discussed.

Smith, Russell Jack, *The Unknown CIA: My Three Decades with the Agency* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, Inc., 1989). Smith's autobiography provides some of the material for the Helms memoir. It differs in emphasis in its preoccupation with collisions between CIA and the Nixon White House. Regarding the analytical controversy itself, Smith defends OER when he recounts an undated episode, perhaps in 1968, in which MACV analysts admitted to him with embarrassment the "shoddy, low-grade reports" on which they were relying. Their tentative conclusions were right, he acknowledges, but only for the wrong reasons.<sup>1</sup>

~~SECRET//25X1~~

---