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28 March 1968D  
MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD:

SUBJECT: History of Strength Estimates of Viet Cong Irregulars

1. Strength estimates of irregulars prior to 1962 are unavailable.
2. In mid-1962 MACV estimated there were <sup>100,000</sup> ~~125,000~~ Viet Cong irregulars in South Vietnam. The estimate was based on extrapolations

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3. Early in 1963 the estimate was reduced to 80-100,000, and before the end of the year was reduced again to 60-80,000. The stated justification for the reductions was two-fold:

a. The high level of casualties inflicted on the Viet Cong in 1962 and 1963, and

b. The narrowing of the Viet Cong recruiting base<sup>e</sup> caused by the strategic hamlet program.

4. An unstated reason for the decline was that MACV was compensating for numbers it was then adding to the Main and Local Forces. With the lowering of the irregular figure, the OB showed a net decline, despite strength rises in the Main and Local Forces.

5. After the collapse of the Diem government on 1 November 1963, and the ensuing political chaos, MACV revised its holdings in 1964 upwards to 100-120,000.

6. In late 1964, MACV combined its Order of Battle with that of the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), accepting the latter's figures for irregulars. In early 1965 MACV's Order of Battle, using ARVN's estimate, listed 103,573 as the number of irregulars, including 34,315 guerrillas, 35,661 militiamen, and 33,597 were identified as belonging to the "secret self defense."\*

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\*A COSVN document, apparently written in April 1965, suggested that the number of guerrillas and militiamen at that time was between 200,000 and 225,000. The document did not break them down by type.

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7. The official irregular figure continued at 103,573 until May 1966 when ARVN surfaced a new irregular OB.\*. MACV adopted ARVN's new number, 112,760. The number was not broken down by component.

8. On 8 September 1966, a "draft working paper" based on captured documents which suggested that the irregular OB should be doubled at least, was issued -- after considerable hesitation -- by the CIA and passed shortly thereafter to MACV. The paper induced MACV to review its irregular holdings. In October, MACV sent intelligence requirements to the provinces, asking them to come up with new irregular estimates.

9. At the Honolulu Intelligence Conference of 6-12 February 1967, MACV indicated that reports from the provinces suggested there were then 198,000 irregulars in South Vietnam, including some 65,000-odd guerrillas.\*\* CIA representatives attending the conference gave MACV a draft CIA study -- never published subsequently -- suggesting there were 250-300,000 irregulars in South Vietnam.

10. Officially, MACV continued to hold ARVN's May 1966 number of 112,760. This number was challenged in July 1967 during discussions of preliminary drafts of National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-67.

11. As a result of controversies engendered by the challenge to the irregular figure (and other OB numbers), a conference was convened in Saigon in September 1967, attended by representatives of MACV, DIA, CIA, and the State Department. The conference, CIA officially concurring, agreed to the following propositions vis-a-vis irregulars:

- a. That the number of guerrillas was 84,000.
- b. That the self-defense and secret self-defense forces <sup>should</sup> be dropped from the OB.

12. Since then, the OB, which dropped the self-defense and secret self-defense forces, has carried the following guerrilla strengths:

- a. 81,300 in the 31 October 1967 OB.
- b. 71,700 in the 31 December 1967 OB.
- c. 72,605 in the 31 January 1968 OB.
- d. 47,470 in the 29 February 1968 OB.

\*A COSVN-level document apparently written in April 1966 indicated the number of irregulars had risen to 330,000, including 180,000 guerrillas and 150,000 militiamen.

\*\*A high-level Viet Cong document of February 1967 suggested that there were then 150,000 guerrillas. The document did not list the number of militia.

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13. Thus, in the four-month period between 31 October 1967 and 29 February 1968, the number of guerrillas has declined 33,830, or about 42 percent. The stated reasons for the reductions were:

- a. The high level of casualties inflicted on the Viet Cong during the period (particularly during the Tet offensive), and
- b. The large-scale upgrading of guerrillas into higher level units.



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