by Patrick J. McGarvey

Among a multitude of examples of the Pentagon's proclivity for laboring mountainously and bringing forth mice, an instructive one is the Defense Intelligence Agency, DIA. DIA is responsible for providing the Secretary of Defense, and ultimately the President, with up-to-date facts about military matters of all kinds and with dispassionate assessments of what those facts portend. Presumably, it is because statesmen possess this crucial secret information that they can resolve so much more wisely than an uninformed man in the street such issues as, say, whether or not to send American soldiers into Cambodia. However, the assiduous cultivation by the diplomatic and military establishment of the presumption that it is on the basis of "having all the facts" that a President acts does not mean that it has much basis in reality. Leaving aside the fascinating question of the extent to which any secret intelligence, as compared with political calculation or predeliction or dogma, influences decisions, the secret intelligence dispensed by DIA is all too often of a quality that makes it more of a hindrance than a help to rational decision-making.

Two kinds of defects are pervasive in DIA—an outfit commonly referred to in the intelligence community as "the taxi squad" or "the country club" or "the old people's home." One, probably the less injurious of the two because it is so common a Washington phenomenon that most officials are bound to suspect it and try to compensate for it, is the tendency of any operating agency's evaluation arm to justify the agency's oper-
ations. Thus, DIA’s reports—which to some extent are necessarily guesses—about, for example, the amount of damage bombing the Ho Chi Minh trail inflicts and how much that damage limits Hanoi’s capability to fight, are almost certain to be the highest possible guesses, not so much through slovenliness or mendacity as in accordance with natural bureaucratic law. Or, to cite another example, in determining whether or not the F-105 that the Chinese shot down in May, 1966, had really strayed into Chinese air space as the Chinese claimed, there were two basic sources of data: radar plots and the accounts of the pilots of the other planes in the mission. The radar plots, which had an impressive record of previous accuracy and no personal ax to grind, showed that the flight had flown well into Chinese territory. The returned pilots, who if they were human had some inclination to exonerate themselves, said the flight had done no such thing. DIA resolved this conflict in accordance with the natural law: it took the word of the pilots.

This kind of self-justification, which is by no means an exclusively military vice, may be absurd; but a good deal of the time its sheer blatancy insures that it won’t be taken very seriously. Much harder to detect and guard against are the workings of DIA’s policy of compromise and of blandness, of pleasing everybody and therefore of informing or edifying nobody. For example, during the early days of the bombing of North Vietnam, the Army, which was pushing for a big buildup of ground forces, wanted to show that North Vietnamese forces were pouring into the South at unprecedented rates. However, the Air
Force's interest was to show that very few northern troops were getting through its barrage. In theory DIA was set up to choose among such conflicting claims; in practice it generally refuses to admit that a conflict exists and comes up with something like "Enemy infiltration continued at a rate higher than last month. However, the cumulative effect of U.S. bombing has seriously degraded his ability to mount a large-scale offensive"—never mind whether mounting a large-scale offensive was what the enemy had in mind. It is hard to imagine how such an evaluation could help produce a reasoned bombing policy or, indeed, anything but an intellectual miasma.

Perhaps one reason DIA is so proficient at compromise is that it is a product of compromise itself. It was formed in October, 1961, by former Secretary of Defense McNamara in the hope that he would receive intelligence appraisals without service bias and to eliminate some of the duplication of intelligence activities in the Department of Defense (DOD). Pitched battles took place as the agency was formed. The Army was totally against it. It fought every suggestion, preferring to hang onto the responsibility of producing its own intelligence. The Navy, too, was against the formation of DIA but fought less vehemently. The Air Force seized the ball and ran with it. As a result most of the top management jobs at the beginning went to blue miters. This brawling forced a crucial compromise between McNamara and the service intelligence staffs. To quiet the opposition McNamara finally allowed the DIA to be placed under the supervision of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In short, it was agreed that DIA would serve the civilians through the military rather than report to the Secretary through a (civilian) Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence.

By charter, then, the DIA serves two masters—the JCS and the Secretary of Defense. What this entails with respect to the JCS is providing intelligence background and assessments for just about every decision paper that is put out by the chiefs, briefing the JCS daily on overnight developments and keeping them abreast whenever necessary of longer-range developments worldwide, and working closely with every component of the Joint Staff, the working arm of the JCS. If, for example, the J-5 Plans Staff is drafting a contingency planning paper on Africa, DIA must provide as much detail as is necessary, which could include data on coast and landing beaches, urban maps that show key installations, political, sociological, and economic studies of the countries involved, and, of course, in-depth assessments of the country's military capabilities. In other areas, such as science and technology, DIA must keep the JCS informed on such technical breakthroughs as are achieved by any and all potential enemies around the world. The discovery of a new radar site in the Soviet Union, for example, can generate more paper in the Pentagon than the rational mind can comprehend. If the J-3 Operations Staff wants to plan a bombing campaign, the DIA must come up with suitable lists of targets, pinpointing them on maps and assessing the likely effect the destruction of the targets would have on the target country—a service that reached new heights of absurdity, which will be touched on later, during the bombing of North Vietnam.

The responsibilities the DIA has to the Secretary of Defense are not so easy to define because they depend on the Secretary's attitude. McNamara was a demanding taskmaster. To date, Melvin Laird has chosen not to be one. Several functions, however, persist under Laird. Public affairs people in the Secretary's office relay a lot of foul balls DIA's way. A hot flyer will come winging down with a photocopy of a press article stating, for example, that the Soviets are flying MIGs over Egypt. DIA will be asked to provide, by noon, "a complete assessment of the details. How do they stack up with classified holdings? How did they get this information (as if DIA
knew)? Give me a classified reply and an unclassified reply.” At one time the Secretary’s staff demanded and got detailed information on all matters that had intelligence relevance. This, of course, put DIA squarely in the middle of controversies between the Secretary’s staff and the JCS. For example, it had to provide the JCS with enemy infiltration data that would support a request for more troops for Vietnam, and, on the other hand, it had to provide the Secretary’s staff with an assessment of Vietnamese troop strength, U.S. “body count” claims, and the results of the bombing of North Vietnam, all of which would be used as ammunition to shoot down the requests.

Indeed, figures are used to support any imaginable position and often they are the same figures. I was treated to a fine example of number shuffling several months ago. A knowledgeable source in DIA informed me that the personnel office was concerned about the attrition rate among the agency’s college trainees and had called a conference of young men who had gone through the year-long training program to find out what was on their minds. At this session the personnel staffers disclosed that better than 60 per cent of college trainees in the past two years had quit. A confidential survey among those remaining indicated that 55 per cent were actively seeking employment elsewhere. When I published an article containing these figures, DIA quickly denied it. It stated that the figure was approximately 27 per cent, normal attrition rate in government and industry. Further digging revealed that in the “refining” of the original 60 per cent figure DIA had:

- diluted the issue by “broadening the data base” to take into account all hirings and resignations during the period, including clerks, messengers, and secretaries;
- included in the total only those who quit within 12 months of completion of training; resignations after 12 months were deemed immaterial to the question at hand;
- omitted from its new figures men who had resigned to return to school for graduate work;
- dropped from the total all men who had been drafted and failed to return to DIA after discharge;
- included in its new figures only those men who had resigned while in grades GS-7 and GS-9; higher grade resignations were not included.

Another function DIA performs for the Secretary of Defense is to prepare detailed fact sheets for his trips and interviews. DIA also keeps him informed daily of worldwide developments and provides him with estimates of likely future developments. Most important to the Secretary, DIA is expected to serve as arbiter among the services’ divergent points of view on intelligence matters. It has presumably been given the clout to do this since its director wears three stars and thus outranks the two-star chiefs of the service intelligence branches.

Tell Me What I’d Love to Hear

Indeed, DIA’s performance with respect to Vietnam should have proved the futility of a joint service approach to intelligence, and in fact Secretaries McNamara and Clifford finally stopped paying any attention to DIA and went to the CIA for answers. From 1964-65, when U.S. involvement in Vietnam began to be considerable, until late 1966 or early 1967, the generals in Saigon worked to build up U.S. troop strength. Therefore, they wanted every bit of evidence brought to the fore that could show that infiltration was increasing. DIA obliged and also emphasized in all reports the enemy’s capability to recruit forces from the South Vietnamese population. In 1967 a second period began. The high priests of Saigon decided that we were “winning.” Then the paramount interest became to show the enemy’s reduced capability to recruit and a slowdown in infiltration due to our bombing. The tune and emphasis of reports from the field changed radically,
and so did those put out by DIA.

It should not be concluded that anyone suppressed evidence. No one did. The military in Saigon sent all the facts back to Washington eventually. During the buildup period, infiltration data and recruitment data came in via General Westmoreland's daily cablegram. Data from field contact with enemy units came amid the more mundane cables or by courier up to five weeks later. Cables from Westmoreland, of course, were given higher priority in Washington. When we started "winning," detailed reports highlighting "body counts" and statistics on how many villages were pacified were cabled with Westmoreland's signature; recruitment studies were pouchcd or cabled with the reports on the fluctuating price of rice. It was all a matter of emphasis.

During all this time DIA was thoroughly enmeshed in the numbers game. It paid little or no attention to what Hanoi was saying on the radio, discounting it as propaganda. It made little effort to perceive the enemy's view of the war. It made little effort to reason out what the enemy's strategy was, why he believed he was winning, what he was saying publicly about how he was going to fight the war, or how the bombing was affecting his morale. It was too busy keeping up with the flow of numbers from Saigon.

As the air campaign crept northward, the Operations people on the Joint Staff wanted bigger and better targets. They didn't ask the intelligence people what was worth hitting or what a rational plan of attack might be. On the contrary, they demanded targets that a certain weapons system could attack. They had a TV-guided missile, and they wanted to use it. "Pick out a building for us to hit," they'd say. DIA could have told the JCS this was the wrong approach, but it played the game. It sent photo-interpreters scurrying to their scanners to find, say, a two- or three-story building in an area open to U.S. raids. If they saw no signs of military activity around the building they would dub it a "possible military storage area," a description that gave J-3 the right to go hunting.

The Operations staff's biggest hangup was over the prohibition on bombing the port of Haiphong. It refused to accept the judgment of the CIA that bombing the port wouldn't stop the flow of goods into North Vietnam. It refused to believe that the North Vietnamese man-packed arms across the Chinese border and imported little by sea. DIA, bowing to J-3's insistence, came up with a list of several hundred small, insignificant targets in and near Haiphong, listing them as crucial and suggesting that the cumulative effect of hitting all 200 or more barge and ferry landings, rail spurs, bridges, and road intersections would be the same as flattening Haiphong—again a triumph for the art of compromise and no doubt small comfort to the pilots shot down in that heavily defended area.

Well before the Tet Offensive of January, 1968, when the enemy buildup at Khe Sanh first became obvious, two DIA analysts who had been studying enemy tactics and strategy for four years sat down and wrote a paper that concluded that the enemy was planning a feint at Khe Sanh. They based this judgment on their interpretation of General Giap's fighting methods over the past two years. They outlined a likely enemy course of action designed to draw American forces to the Khe Sanh area so that the populous coastal plains would be left thinly defended and concluded that perhaps it would be unwise to react to the Khe Sanh buildup. They presented the findings of their paper at a briefing, much to the amusement of all present. They suggested that the paper be cabled to Saigon as a DIA assessment of the situation and that the JCS be given the benefit of their thoughts. This, too, caused merriment among the assembled. "How could you possibly know more than General Westmoreland?" they were asked. Their boss, an Army Colonel, finally got angry at their persistence and taped the paper to the wall beside his desk, claiming that the analysts had just stuck their professional reputations on
the line, and adding he hoped they were wrong. The paper hung there until late in March, 1968, after the Tet Offensive, which occurred largely on the coastal plain, and after the enemy ended the siege of Khe Sanh without ever assaulting it. Then it was taken down quietly. The Colonel never mentioned the subject again. The JCS was never given a copy, and it was never cabled to Saigon.

The pressures on DIA to conform to the views of the military are hard to resist. Take a mechanism know as the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), which is supposed to represent the best judgment of the intelligence community on a particular issue and is used by the President and his Cabinet in formulating policy. Everyone in the intelligence business has a chance to assert his point of view in these estimates, and it is here that DIA’s role is crucial. DIA is well aware that many service judgments are biased and don’t reflect reality. Its obligation, in those cases, is to assume its responsibility as arbiter among the services and establish a Defense position on the issue, and it works hard at doing just that. But strong pressures usually come in through the back door.

For one thing, there is something called the “Eyes Only” cable that is sent “back channel” and is severely restricted in dissemination. Usually no more than five people see it. I have seen “Eyes Only” cables come in from the U.S. Commanders in Honolulu and Saigon to the Director of DIA requesting that he give more than a passing consideration to the command viewpoint about this or that. The language is always moving. Such a cable is likely to start off complimenting the recipient for the fine job he is doing and then work in high-sounding phrases which evoke motherhood, apple pie, the American flag, and, of course, the uniform. It then implies that the sender would like to see a particular judgment or set of figures changed to conform to the command view. It rarely offers any evidence to support this request. It is sure to close with a veiled threat that the recipient’s career is in jeopardy if he doesn’t play the game and “get on the team.” Many estimates have been changed or reworded because of an “Eyes Only” cable from a field commander. In one instance the Air Force Chief of Intelligence called my boss at DIA about a nearly completed estimate on U.S. bombing in Laos. He told him that he was sending a team down to change the wording of the estimate and that my boss had better remember what color his uniform was. Of course it was the same as the General’s blue. The team arrived, and, over the protests of the DIA analysts, a compromise was reached.

The classic example of command influence on intelligence matters occurred just after the Tet Offensive in January, 1968. In the early weeks of February the JCS insisted that the offensive was total military defeat for the enemy—General Westmoreland told them so in his daily cables. DIA didn’t agree with this interpretation, but it watered down every paper it wrote on this subject so that its position was impossible to determine. Then General Wheeler went to Saigon and came back with Westmoreland’s request for 206,000 troops to “clean up” the “defeated” enemy. Suddenly it was legitimate to say that the Tet Offensive had really “set us back.” Everybody on the service staffs, with DIA leading the pack, started writing gloomy estimates with unaccustomed forthrightness and clarity.

Wave-Makers Always Sink

Everyone connected with DIA is partially at fault for the agency’s shortcomings. This includes the military who run it, the civilians who staff it, the Secretary of Defense, the JCS, and the individual service staffs. As far as the military men who manage the agency are concerned, their guilt or incompetence results simply from the fact that they are uniformed men with a parent service. Imagine, if you will, what the prospect of a tour with DIA
looks like to a military officer. He knows or soon learns that he will be thrust into a position in which, on occasion, his professional judgement will vary markedly from that of his parent service. He will be expected to defend a position that could 'enrage his Chief of Staff—but officers who do so more than once get known fast and are accorded an appropriate “reward” at a later date in terms of promotion and assignment. Consider also that a tour at DIA—normally two to three years— is very short when compared to a 20- to 30-year military career. And so most officers assigned to DIA go through a predictable pattern. They come on board as “hard-chargers,” ready to set the world on fire. They stick to their principles through one or two scrapes. Then they become a little more circumspect, letting individual issues slide by and rationalizing that it wasn’t a crunch question anyway. Finally, they resign themselves to “sweating out” their tours and playing every situation by ear. They avoid committing themselves or making decisions. They refuse to tackle the agency’s long-term organizational ills because doing so would make too many waves.

The shortness of the tours of duty of the military managers of the agency (about nine-tenths of management jobs are filled by military officers) causes some long-term problems. These officers are interested largely in getting good performance out of staff while they are there, not in building up long-run staff or agency capabilities. They want to impress the General, let him know that he’s running a “cracker-jack” outfit. The General, of course, is largely occupied with current problems, so his subordinates gear up to service his needs. They have discarded over the years in the reduction of DIA’s long-term research capability to near zero. More than 95 per cent of the effort expended in DIA on Vietnam, for example, is on current problems. Long-term study groups have been disbanded and the staff reassigned to the current problem area. Basic intelligence for detailed studies is simply not getting done or is whipped out with a weekend’s furious overtime. The managers who choose to cut the long-term staff don’t worry about the ultimate effect because by the time it becomes evident they’ll be off on other assignments.

Another problem is the “can do” attitude that prevails among the officer corps. It is unthinkable for an officer to tell his superior that he cannot complete a task. It is a form of heresy. Officers accept a requirement for four or six extra hours’ work a day when they know their staff already puts in 12- or 14-hour days. Rarely, if ever, does anyone say no, or point out that certain jobs take time. “Yes Sir, can do!”, is all that is heard. The result is an attitude among DIA staff members that is captured in their motto, “If you want it real bad, you’re gonna get it real bad.”

There is the age-old military problem of “time in grade”—the tradition that confers genius-like powers on the man who’s been around the longest. The impact that this practice has on the efficient functioning of DIA can be illustrated by the fact that I had nine bosses within two years and that each of the first eight was unseated because someone with more time in grade came along. The game of musical chairs goes on constantly. One Army Colonel had been the Commander of the Special Forces in South Vietnam before he was assigned to DIA. He came into the Vietnam division and was contributing tremendously until another Colonel with more time in grade came along. So they transferred the Special Forces Colonel to the Soviet division and assigned the new Colonel to the Vietnam division. The new Colonel was a graduate of the Army’s Foreign Area Specialist Training program in Czech affairs.

Then there is the civilian staff. It is second rate, particularly at the middle and upper levels. The military who run the place have made it that way. They have consistently shown over the years that there’s no room in DIA for truly capable civilians. They have discouraged original thought, drained the civilian
staff of initiative, and inculcated them with the “don’t make waves” approach to everything. Very few civilians hold down management slots in DIA, but that doesn’t mean they are without influence. Throughout the agency there are civilian deputies at most levels of command. They form an infrastructure that wields a great deal of influence in the day-to-day operation of the organization. The problem is that the ones who have survived that long in the bureaucracy are thoroughly bureaucratized. They are the ones who advise a brash Lieutenant Colonel to “soften his judgment,” “temper his language,” and “play the game.” Their strength, in many cases, comes from their detailed familiarity with the inner workings of the complicated JCS paper mill. They know when to delay a paper, when to react quickly to one, how to kill one, how to insure that it gets through, and, most importantly, how and where to find out exactly what the General wants the paper to say. They then set out to insure that the General’s wishes are translated verbatim into the final product, even if those wishes conflict with the evidence on hand or the views of knowledgeable analysts.

Finally, there are half-breed civilians at DIA—retired military officers. These men are generally capable in their areas of job experience, but two factors virtually negate their experience and job skill. The first, and most important, is the fact that they are retired and looking for an easy deal. Their fighting days are over, and they want to take it easy. They never make waves. They simply do what is asked of them. The other factor is simply that they are heavily biased in favor of the military, and they color all of their judgments with this bias. Their attitudes and actions also have a definite influence on the civilians in the agency. For one thing they are hired at the middle grades and clog up the promotion cycle for the younger men. They also have an “in” with the military managers and can frequently be seen on the fairways and greens of the Army-Navy Country Club. Somehow they are always the ones to get the trips abroad.

As far as I can see, the only way to extricate DIA from this morass is to take it altogether out of military hands. There should be an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, a civilian. The line of command within the agency should be staffed by civilians—though not those now present, who are too far down the bureaucratic path for salvation. In the think-tanks around the country, in the universities, and in other areas of government, there is a pool of very capable men who could enable DIA to meet its enormous responsibilities. With civilians in the management positions, the chances that service bias would overwhelm, distort, or avoid intelligence judgments would be considerably less. Military men can play an important role in DIA, but not in the management of the agency. In substantive areas dealing with foreign military capabilities, the expertise of U.S. infantrymen or armor specialists, for example, can be put to good use.

Any prediction for the future of DIA has to be grim. One recent glimmer of hope (now fading) came when Secretary Laird directed his assistant for administration, Robert L. Froehlke, to take a hard look at Defense intelligence activities. However, it seems that Froehlke has fallen prey to the military briefings that he was given at DIA. He has set up an office to “coordinate” all DOD intelligence activities—and if there is one thing the DOD can do without, it is another office to coordinate things. DIA probably will grow larger, less productive, and more expensive as time goes on, coordination to the contrary notwithstanding. It will probably continue to drop the ball in emergencies like the Tet Offensive. DIA will doubtless continue to supply the nation’s decision-makers with evaluations that do them little good and potentially much harm. One can only hope that the decision-makers pay little attention to what DIA tells them.
A Review by Mary Perot Nichols

Public Works: A Dangerous Trade
by Robert Moses

No doubt the admirers of Robert Moses thought this gigantic tome by one of the world’s master builders would go down as the definitive work on the trade. There would seem to be no other commercial reason for its publication. But reading Mr. Moses’s egregious collection of self-congratulatory old Newsday columns, letters to and from famous people, his General Motors prize-winning essay on how to fill more cities with traffic, and so on, is a little like cutting through a wall of concrete with one’s nose.

Never once does self-doubt afflict this remarkable man. Always it was his critics who were out of step, not he. What is fascinating about this book, if anything, is not what it does say but what it leaves out. Nowhere does it analyze how Mr. Moses became the most powerful public servant of his time in New York City and state. And that is the really important story, the one which should be learned by all those interested in public administration—if only to keep the Moses phenomenon from happening again.

Interestingly enough, the two men who did learn most from Moses’s example were Governor Nelson Rockefeller and his close associate, present Metropolitan Transportation Authority Chairman William Ronan. Ronan’s jurisdiction, often referred to as the “Holy Ronan Empire,” is a direct off-shoot of his studies of Moses. When he was a young college professor, Ronan wrote a bill, known as the Hult Bill, designed to cut down Moses’s multitudinous powers. It was overwhelmingly defeated in the Legislature by the forces Moses was able to command. Having been thus defeated as a young man, Ronan became secretary to Governor Rockefeller and finally achieved chairmanship of the MTA with more powers than even Moses had dared to reach for. Rockefeller, of course, was to go on to great dreams of empire expressed by his outrageously expensive...