

# Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland

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president, escalation of the war was no longer a viable political option; thus he accepted Johnson's decision not to reinforce American armed forces in Vietnam after March 1968.

The editor has compiled a superlative collection of essays that examine what columnist George Will describes as the most significant power of the commander in chief, the presidential role that has come to predominate over all others. Professor Roger A. Beaumont of Texas A&M has stated that these issues require serious scholarship and analysis is still required. In *Commanders In Chief*, he and his colleagues have taken the initial step.

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Zaffiri, Samuel. *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland*. New York: William Morrow, 1994. 502pp. \$25

This is the first attempt at a postwar biography of General William C. Westmoreland, who, with Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, was one of the three major American figures permanently marked by the Vietnam War. It was written by Samuel Zaffiri (*Hamburger Hill, May 11-20, 1969*, 1988) in the style of popular history. It is apparently not an authorized biography.

Westmoreland is described in his early years as an extremely ambitious young man, as evidenced by his graduating in the West Point class of 1936 as first captain. His early service was in the field artillery of the brown-shoe army, and in World War II he was

in Europe with the 9th Infantry Division. Subsequent to the war, a transfer to the infantry was followed by four years in airborne duty at Fort Bragg. Increasingly, he was marked as a comer with great ambition.

Beginning with his stint as a brigadier general, commanding the 187th Regimental Combat Team in the last year of the Korean War, Westmoreland's star rose both figuratively and literally. His assignments were, in order, as secretary of the Army General Staff under Maxwell Taylor, commander of the 101st Airborne, Superintendent of West Point, and commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps. All this culminated in his assignment in January 1964 as deputy to Paul Harkins, whom he succeeded as Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COM-USMACV) the following summer. The remainder of the book, about 80 percent of it, is related to Vietnam, directly or indirectly. It is, of course, Westmoreland's connection with that war which makes him a significant military figure of the "American Century."

Early on, Zaffiri attempts to explain why Westmoreland was selected for this major command. His answer is wandering and elaborate, invoking Janowitz's writings and Westmoreland's southern accent. What nonsense. Westmoreland was selected primarily because among those being considered he was the only one recommended by Maxwell Taylor, who was influential because he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Taylor's recommendation was largely based on Westmoreland's reputation as a trainer of troops, particularly at Fort

## 156 Naval War College Review

Campbell from 1958 to 1960. The main problem in Vietnam in early 1964 (when the U.S. troop commitment was still eighteen months off) was to stimulate the training of the South Vietnamese army for combat. I cite this to make a general point about the author: when he leaves the area of chronology or battle description he seems to be “looking through a glass darkly.”

Zaffiri depicts Westmoreland in Vietnam as being “really pessimistic” and having “grave doubts” about the war and America’s ability to win. That will come as a great surprise to many people who were associated with him during that period. What about his address to a joint session of Congress in April 1967, or his talk before the National Press Club in November of the same year, both predicting victory? What of his testimony before the House Appropriations Subcommittee in October 1969? There he stated, “It is my opinion that if we had continued to bomb, the war would be over at this time.” To counter all this, Zaffiri would need to cite more than a 1970 article by Blair Clark in *Harper’s*.

Other examples of inadequate sources are in the area of personalities. Zaffiri asserts that Westmoreland did not want either General Creighton Abrams or General Bruce Palmer (both his 1936 classmates) assigned as his deputies. Palmer served as Westmoreland’s deputy secretary of General Staff in 1957–1958, his deputy in Vietnam in 1967–1968, and finally as his Vice Chief of Staff in 1968–1972—in the latter case, the author states, against Westmoreland’s desires. This is all possible, of course, but what is the source? Not Westmoreland, it turns out, but an

unnamed two-star retired officer who served in the Joint Chiefs. The author claims to have interviewed Westmoreland (but not Palmer) from 1991 to 1993. If so, why didn’t he ask him?

The book is written in a lively fashion and moves along nicely, especially the battle descriptions. There are, however, more factual errors in this book than in any other I have read. To cite just a few: the jacket blurb has a retired Westmoreland running for governor of North Carolina instead of South Carolina; the book places Maryland’s Andrews Air Force Base in California; it was not the 101st Airborne that was involved in the invasion of Sicily but the 82nd; Westmoreland returned from Europe as head of the 77th Division, not the 71st; and on and on.

The real failure of this biography, however, is its omission of Westmoreland’s involvement with the important issues of Vietnam—at the strategic-political level—areas in which the author clearly is in over his head. Not only does he not know the answers, which is understandable, but he does not seem to know what questions to ask.

Any biography of Westmoreland should concern itself with at least such questions as these: Why did Westmoreland not insist on a greater part in key decisions on the war, at the very least on a theater commander’s role? Why did he not insist on operational command of all forces, including the South Vietnamese? Why did he not insist on the force and strategic leeway needed to “win,” or else recommend that the U.S. withdraw once South Vietnam was partially stabilized in 1966? This latter point

is not strictly in the realm of civilian leadership, or so those might claim who misread what American civil-military relations are about. To quote Bernard Brodie, "there also has to be at the top, certainly in the civilian and preferably also in the military departments of the government, the basic and prevailing conception of what any war existing or impending is really about and what it is attempting to accomplish. This attitude includes necessarily a readiness to reexamine whether under the circumstances existing it is right to continue it or whether it is better to seek some solution or termination other than victory."

These are the kinds of questions a biography of Westmoreland needs to address. The book being reviewed here does not meet the standards required for a serious or definitive biography of William Westmoreland.

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Simpson, Howard R. *Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1994. 193pp. \$24

Dien Bien Phu ranks as one of history's great battles, both in decisiveness and drama. In 1954, in a remote valley in upper Tonkin, a handful of French imperial soldiers bore the future of French Indochina on their shoulders for fifty-six days, as they struggled to defend their ill fated fortress against a Viet Minh enemy equally determined to exterminate them.

Few authors are more qualified than Howard Simpson to write an account

of that battle. His *Tiger in the Barbed Wire* (1992) supplied a lively firsthand account of his experiences as a United States Information Agency war correspondent assigned to cover the Indochina War. Simpson not only visited Dien Bien Phu prior to the attack, but he knew well many of the French officers whose personalities and heroic acts he describes with deft prose. Although there is no shortage of accounts of the battle, this one is unsurpassed. It is a real page-turner, as the author shifts from the feuding French commanders in Hanoi (Generals Henri Navarre and Rene Cogny), to the paras and Legionnaires grappling to retain a few meters of blasted mud, to the almost superhuman manhandling of huge artillery pieces over roads cut by coolies through nearly impenetrable jungle.

The idea for Operation Castor, for instance, is traced to Navarre's wish to block a Viet Minh invasion of Laos. That is true as far as it goes, but the immediate objective was to save a special operations (GCMA) initiative among T'ai partisans loyal to the French. For this reason, the author's praise for Major Roger Trinquier's GCMA appears excessive and misplaced; special operations gobbled up a disproportionate share of scarce French resources to no apparent benefit and ultimately exercised a fatal influence upon French strategy.

The book also appears to have gone to press before recent revelations of the extent of the influence of the Chinese Military Advisory Group on the strategy, operations, and even tactics of the Viet Minh. For the purposes of Dien Bien Phu, new evidence suggests three things. First, it was the Chinese, not