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Charles F. Brower IV
U.S. Army

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Strategic Reassessment in Vietnam The Westmoreland "Alternate Strategy" of 1967-1968

Colonel Charles F. Brower, IV, U.S. Army

In the spring of 1967 the United States reached a strategic crossroads in the war with Vietnam. Significant U.S. domestic opposition to the war had emerged in late 1966, crystallizing as American casualties rose with the expanded offensive operations of an American force that approached half a million men. At the same time, despite impressive American battlefield successes and heavy enemy losses, prominent civilian members of the Department of Defense concluded that the American strategy of attrition would lead to stalemate and required change if the United States was to secure a favorable settlement. When combined with the stunning impact of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, these factors established the framework for the reorientation of American policy and strategy in Vietnam that took place during the last year of Lyndon B. Johnson's administration.¹

What has not been appreciated is the full extent of General William C. Westmoreland's efforts in 1967 and 1968 to stimulate a strategic reassessment, or the true influence of his efforts on the reorientation of 1968. An analysis of Westmoreland's plans and initiatives during the period reveals a more refined strategic perspective than heretofore understood. In January 1967 Westmoreland began to formulate an "alternate strategy" for Vietnam which reflected his misgivings about the strategy of attrition.² In effect, Westmoreland sought to turn away from the aim of breaking Hanoi's will by destroying its forces in the South to an aim of convincing Hanoi, through the isolation of the battlefield by ground operations in Laos and North Vietnam, that it could not win.

Throughout much of 1967, Westmoreland's consistently grim assessments about the pace of North Vietnamese infiltration and the length of the war, his development of logistics and fire support bases in South Vietnam opposite the Laotian panhandle, his pressure on Saigon both to mobilize its manpower more expeditiously and to seek approval for South Vietnamese ground operations into Laos, and his own request for a substantial increase in

Colonel Brower is Professor and Deputy Head, Department of History, at West Point. He is a 1990 graduate of the Naval War College.

American troops, all evidenced a systematic effort on his part to stimulate such a reconsideration and to secure the adoption of his alternate strategy.

The approach of election year 1968, however, proved too formidable an obstacle to American strategic reassessment. From the summer of 1967 on, the Johnson administration sought to lay aside convincingly accusations that the war was in stalemate. Its efforts inexorably drew Westmoreland into the partisan political debate and inevitably muted his expressions of pessimism about attrition. Westmoreland's efforts to stimulate strategic reassessment in 1967 foundered on this rock. If the war was not in stalemate, no new strategy was necessary; if the administration acknowledged stalemate, it meant political disaster. Consequently, despite important misgivings on the part of its senior field commander in Vietnam, American strategy continued its sluggish course toward stalemate.

Rebuffed by the President and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara for these reasons in August 1967, Westmoreland resurrected his alternate strategy following the Tet Offensive in January-February 1968. His failure at that time to articulate clearly and advocate forcefully his new strategy, combined with the clumsy bureaucratic tactics of General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, once again denied it serious consideration at the highest levels of the American government. Rejection of the alternate strategy in March, in effect by non-consideration, was another missed opportunity for a systematic consideration of military alternatives in the context of national policy. Such a strategic reassessment would have revealed the promise and problems of the alternate strategy and could very well have forced policymakers to come to grips with the full price of a successful American commitment in Vietnam.

Internal Criticism of Attrition

Following President Johnson's decision in July 1965 to commit the United States to major combat in Vietnam, military forces under Westmoreland arrested the losing trend in Vietnam, seized the initiative from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong (VC) main force units, and inflicted staggering losses upon them. By March 1967 NVA/VC battle losses since the American escalation exceeded 100,000, and it was clear, in the words of perhaps the most able historian of the war, that Westmoreland had "staved off what appeared to be certain defeat in 1965."³

Westmoreland's concept for ground operations during this period came to be called the "search and destroy" strategy. After seizing and maintaining the initiative, the strategy sought to exploit American firepower and mobility by engaging and destroying NVA/VC main force units, thereby denying the enemy freedom to threaten the populated areas. While American units destroyed the main force units, the Armed Forces of the Republic of South

Vietnam were to focus their efforts on the pacification effort in the populated areas.⁴

Search and destroy was essentially a classic strategy of attrition, aimed at inflicting unacceptable losses on the NVA/VC forces in the south. When Westmoreland was most graphic, he likened his strategy to a "meat-grinder," designed to kill large numbers of enemy soldiers and thus force Hanoi to concede the existence of an independent South Vietnam.⁵ The official historian of the Army's advisory effort has further observed that the attrition strategy also allowed American strategists to circumvent the byzantine politics of Saigon and avoid the "extraordinarily complex politico-military strategy of pacification."⁶ Westmoreland acknowledged later that attrition was "a strategy in disrepute" that conjured up visions of World War I trench warfare. Nonetheless, given political guidance not to broaden the war, both Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued it was the best strategy for defeating Hanoi, albeit a protracted one.⁷

Because the objective of Westmoreland's strategy was to destroy the NVA/VC in South Vietnam, it represented a subtle shift in national aim. Following the Honolulu Conference in April 1965, Secretary of Defense McNamara had told President Johnson that the aim of Westmoreland's "victory strategy" was to "break the will of the DRV/VC [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] by denying them victory. Impotence would eventually lead to a political solution." Later in July he elaborated that the American objective was "to create conditions for a favorable settlement by demonstrating to the DRV/VC that the odds are against their winning."⁸

The strategy of attrition suggested another aim. Instead of convincing Hanoi that it could not win, Westmoreland's aim now seemed to be the complete defeat of the enemy in the South. The implications were ominous. With the aim defined in terms of attrition, so long as Hanoi was prepared to continue the battle, an American "victory" would be denied. And because Hanoi maintained the strategic initiative in terms of both the pace and size of the engagements, the strategy of attrition raised the specter of an open-ended military stalemate at increasingly higher levels of American troop commitment and casualties. Moreover, these implications suggested significantly greater political risk to the President.⁹

Questioning of the attrition strategy began among the civilian leadership of the Defense Department as early as December 1965. In discussions with Johnson that month concerning raising troop levels in Vietnam to 400,000 by the end of 1966 with "a possible need for an additional 200,000 in 1967," McNamara observed that "the odds are about even that, even with the recommended deployments, we will be faced in early 1967 with a military standoff at a much higher level." By October 1966 he was even more pessimistic, telling the President that he saw "no sign of an impending break in enemy morale," that the enemy appeared to be able to "more than replace

its losses” by infiltration and recruitment, and that he could “see no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon.”¹⁰

In McNamara’s mind, attrition had become a bankrupt strategy contributing little in the foreseeable future to the political aim of breaking Hanoi’s will to win. His solution was to get the United States “into a military posture that we credibly could maintain indefinitely—a posture that makes trying to ‘wait us out’ less attractive.” Such a posture directly challenged Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition by establishing a troop ceiling at 470,000, by implying some drawdown of offensive operations in order to moderate American casualties over the long haul, and by raising the priority of the pacification program.¹¹

Despite a violent and predictable reaction by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to his “long haul strategy,” McNamara had succeeded by the end of 1966 in convincing the President to stabilize temporarily American forces in Vietnam at the 470,000 level and had raised important questions about the viability of the strategy of attrition.¹² Westmoreland’s actions in early 1967 suggest that he too had begun to appreciate the limits of attrition.

The Westmoreland Strategic Reassessment in 1967

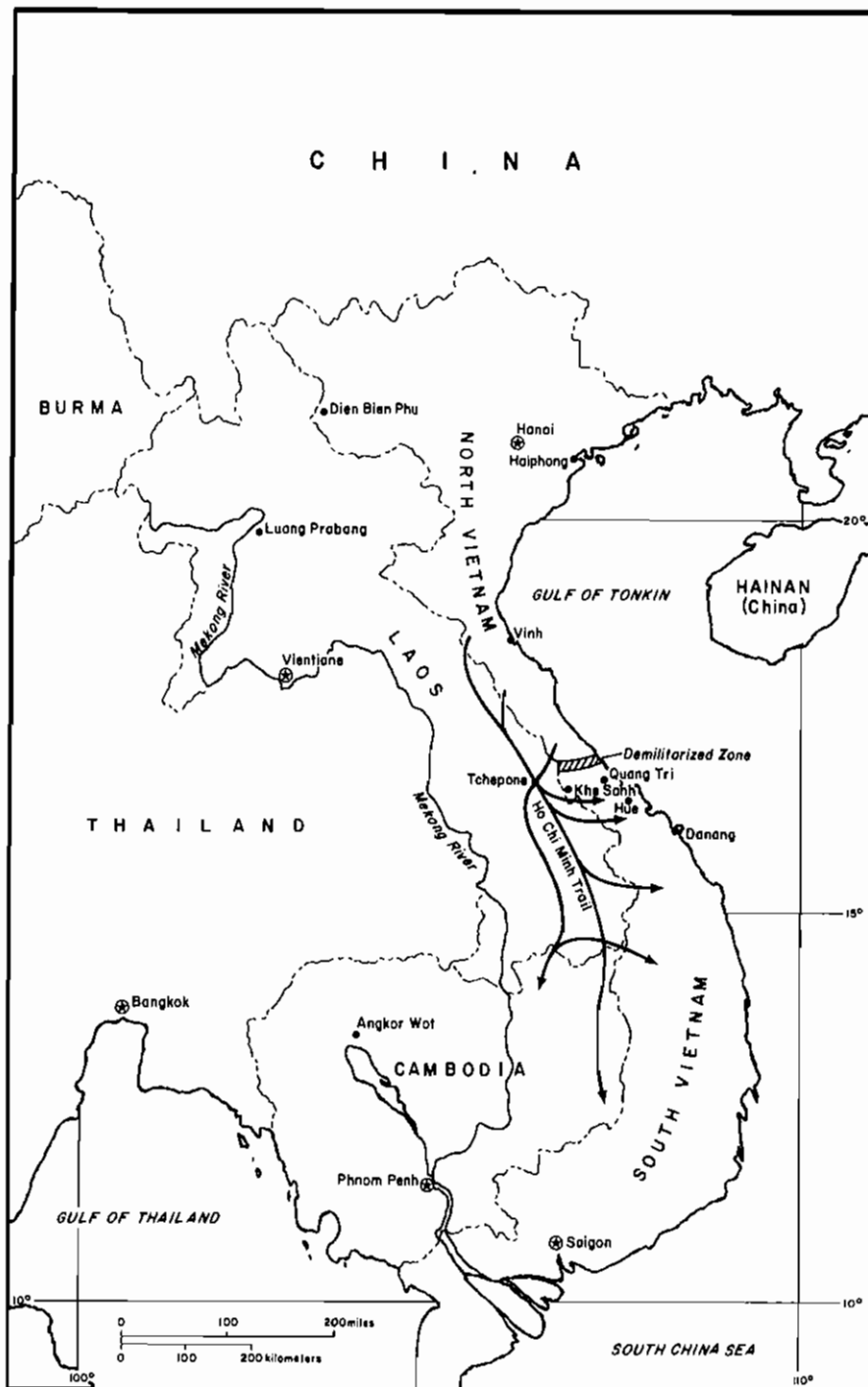
Unlike the Joint Chiefs, Westmoreland had not strongly objected to the 470,000-man ceiling imposed in November 1966 by McNamara. Believing then that enemy casualties were approaching the elusive “cross-over point” where enemy attrition would exceed its ability to reinforce, Westmoreland expected that minor troop increases to the 500,000 level might be necessary, but not more substantial ones. McNamara’s Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, John T. McNaughton, twice discussed this issue with Westmoreland at the Manila Conference in late October in the deliberations leading to the 470,000-man ceiling. Westmoreland told McNaughton that his requirements could be met without major additions to in-country forces, although he did emphasize the need for an emergency “Corps contingency force” based in Hawaii, Okinawa or the United States. The only consequence of the 470,000 ceiling, Westmoreland reminded McNaughton, was that “it would be a longer war.” In October 1966, however, this consideration of time did not appear to be a strategic imperative to Westmoreland.¹³

Westmoreland’s strategic reassessment seems to have begun sometime after the Manila Conference, perhaps as a result of normal end-of-year reflection. On 2 January 1967, he provided the Joint Chiefs with an assessment which raised troubling questions about the adequacy of the strategy of attrition. After sketching the implications of the ominous enemy buildup in Laos and Cambodia and across the DMZ in North Vietnam, he admitted that the NVA/VC were still able to reinforce or recruit from within South Vietnam at a rate of nearly 12,000 per month. Thus, despite the fact that the enemy had

been "hurt during 1966 in many areas" and had suffered "heavy losses," Westmoreland noted that this ability to reinforce had resulted in an enemy strength increase of 42,000 during 1966. His conclusion both indicted the strategy of attrition and hinted how he sought to deal with the problem: "Despite known losses, [Hanoi] has been able to maintain a proportional counter buildup to the growth of US/Free World Forces. Sources of this increase are in-country conscription and foot infiltration down the trails from NVN [North Vietnam] through the DMZ, but principally through Laos and the Cambodian extension."¹⁴ This conclusion suggested that so long as Hanoi was able to infiltrate and recruit at this rate, an attrition strategy at current force ceilings would not avoid an unreasonably protracted war. What was necessary was an alternate strategy which delivered the political objective of the war at a time and cost acceptable to the American people.

Laos as Strategic Key. In 1967 ground operations in the Laotian panhandle (that part of Laos south of the 18th Parallel, forming a corridor between Thailand and the narrow waist of Vietnam), to interdict infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and isolate the battlefield in South Vietnam increasingly seemed the strategic key to Westmoreland. This was not an idea new to 1967. In January 1966, U.S. Military Assistance Command/Thailand (MACTHAI) had taken the initiative to provide the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) a proposal for converging operations from Thailand and South Vietnam against the Laotian corridor. According to CINCPAC's Political Adviser, MACTHAI called for an expanded logistical system in Thailand and estimated at least 18 months were needed for preparations. Viewed as "empire building" by CINCPAC, the proposal was quickly shelved.¹⁵

For his part, Westmoreland had included operations in the Laotian panhandle as one course of action in his initial "Commander's Estimate of the Situation" in March 1965, but had subsequently turned his attention to operations within the borders of Vietnam.¹⁶ Throughout 1966 and into 1967, however, he directed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) staff to prepare numerous contingency plans for cross-border operations, giving special attention to the Laotian panhandle. While varied in size and complexity, most plans envisioned at least three American divisions pushing westward along Route 9 from Khe Sanh to seize Tchepone, a key communications hub of the Ho Chi Minh Trail about 25 miles inside Laos. These operations were designed to destroy the enemy and his facilities in the panhandle, deny him use of the area, and ultimately help to establish a defensive line across the panhandle to the Mekong River. In 1966, while progress under the attrition strategy appeared satisfactory, such plans merely represented Westmoreland's prudent efforts to anticipate a variety of lines of action open, in theory, to Washington. In early 1967, as Westmoreland's



The Ho Chi Minh Trail

Jerry Lamothe

misgivings about the attrition strategy grew, these plans assumed greater strategic significance.¹⁷

Early in 1967 Westmoreland began to provide even more pointed guidance to the MACV staff regarding operations in Laos. On 28 January, MACV planners were directed to develop a politico-military rationale and scenarios aiming at "the preparation of a battlefield for US initiatives in the Panhandle area." Westmoreland explained that he had studied the situation for several months and had become "convinced that the Panhandle in Laos must be cleared of enemy elements and secured before we can expect any security in Southeast Asia." The resulting study, "Drag Hunt," assumed the overt deployment of U.S. forces into the Laotian panhandle by late 1968-early 1969. Westmoreland noted at the time "an amazing lack of initiative in planning for the future by higher echelons of government . . . and an amazing lack of boldness in our approach to the future" and sought to use the study to encourage a bolder approach to policy in Washington.¹⁸

Laying the Ground for a New Strategy. That Westmoreland looked longingly toward ground operations in Laos and hoped for a change in national policy permitting such operations is well-documented in his memoirs.¹⁹ Few have appreciated the extent or sophistication of his efforts in 1967 to influence such a shift in policy, however.

Westmoreland had the ability to influence certain conditions which might facilitate a move by the President toward operations in Laos. First, as the senior field commander, his assessments of progress in the war carried special weight with a president who clearly feared a protracted war. Conservative, even grim, estimates of the time required for victory might help stimulate a shift to a strategy promising faster progress. Westmoreland also knew that important South Vietnamese leaders favored operations in Laos and he sought to cultivate and encourage their efforts to secure Washington's approval for such operations. ARVN ground operations in Laos would serve as a useful precedent for cross-border operations in general, as well as laying the ground for American operations there. Moreover, American forces would provide extensive support from within South Vietnam for any ARVN operations in Laos, thus establishing infrastructure and bases for subsequent American operations, if approved.

A major obstacle to Westmoreland's alternate strategy was that insufficient forces were available in 1966 and 1967 to conduct the corps-sized operation he envisioned. This shortfall required additional American forces well above the 470,000-troop ceiling and most likely would require mobilization of the reserves in the United States, a particularly explosive political issue on the eve of an election year. Westmoreland believed he understood the political problems facing President Johnson, but nonetheless pressed forward in March 1967 to secure the forces necessary for his alternate strategy. At the same

time, in order to assist the President in making the mobilization issue more politically acceptable, Westmoreland pressed the Saigon government to maximize its efforts to mobilize its manpower.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1967, Westmoreland provided the Johnson administration with a remarkable series of pessimistic assessments about the pace of progress in the war. The general theme of these reports was that although progress was being made, it was painstakingly slow and its evidence difficult to measure. During the period Westmoreland was consistently conservative in his estimates about how much longer the war would continue, and this specter of a protracted war stimulated his turn to an alternate strategy.

In early March 1967, for example, Westmoreland informed the Joint Chiefs that a MACV analysis of enemy activity in 1966 indicated that battalion-sized attacks had increased from 10 in January 1966 to 25 in January 1967, and the total number of all enemy attacks had more than doubled during the same period.²⁰ As General Wheeler quickly recognized, the implications of this increase were alarming. Despite the dramatic increase in American forces and combat operations in 1966, this evidence suggested a correspondingly steady increase in enemy offensive operations, "with the January 1967 level some two-and-one-half times above the average in the first three months of 1966." Wheeler quickly challenged the validity of the statistics and directed Westmoreland to treat the information as sensitive, warning that "if these figures should reach the public domain, they would literally blow the lid off Washington." Westmoreland complied, but continued to endorse his staff's analysis.²¹

At the Guam Conference with the President a week later, Westmoreland's assessment of the war's progress continued to be grim. After a token acknowledgement that "we are making progress" and some cautious optimism about nearing the "crossover point," he told the President frankly that "unless our military pressure causes the Viet Cong to crumble, or Hanoi withdraws her support, the war could go on indefinitely." Given the steady increase in enemy combat operations reported to the JCS earlier, neither of the stated preconditions seemed likely under the current strategy and force levels.²²

While in the United States in April for consultations with the President, Westmoreland told the Associated Press managing editors that he did not "see any end of the war in sight . . . We will have to grind [the enemy] down."²³ Face-to-face with the President afterwards, Westmoreland offered a somewhat more moderate, but still pessimistic, assessment. When queried directly by McNamara for his "best estimate" on how much longer the war would continue, the general estimated that, without reinforcements, "we would do a little better than hold our own. . . . Unless the will of the enemy was broken or unless there was an unraveling of the VC structure, the war

could go on for five years.”²⁴ In June, however, Westmoreland returned to the more pessimistic assessment, telling journalists in Saigon that he believed Hanoi “could carry [the war] on almost indefinitely if they wanted to pay the price” and acknowledging that despite enormous losses, Hanoi was now making them up “by sending more troops into the South.”²⁵

Westmoreland’s concerns about protracted war reflected a traditional appreciation by the American military of the relation of domestic pressures to national policy and strategy. Following World War II, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall succinctly captured the concept when he reminded his biographer that “a democracy cannot fight a Seven Years war.” The British military theorist and historian, B. H. Liddell Hart, further developed the argument about democratic strategists working on a “narrower margin of time and cost” in his analysis of the strategy of Grant and Sherman in the American Civil War. Such concerns have placed great pressure upon American military strategists to develop strategies which deliver “incremental dividends” in order to sustain popular support. Unless clear, incremental evidence of progress toward the strategic aim was demonstrated, the strategy and its political objective risked rejection. Westmoreland’s regular references to the war’s indefinite nature during the spring and summer of 1967 evidenced serious misgivings about the absence of clear, incremental progress under the attrition strategy and anticipated the need for an alternate approach.²⁶

At the Guam Conference in March, General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, proposed to the U.S.-South Vietnamese political and military conferees that three to five ARVN divisions be aligned along Route 9 from the Vietnamese border to the Mekong River. The deployment would not be “a Maginot Line,” he explained, “but instead a series of interlocking strong points created by an aggressive deployment of ground troops.” The Saigon government “recognized the political difficulties involved,” he concluded, but thought it “a practical plan” justifying serious consideration. There is no record that any American responded at Guam to the South Vietnamese initiative.²⁷

President Johnson and other Washington policymakers may not have explored the Vien proposal further, but Westmoreland recognized its possibilities. In February, the President had asked Westmoreland to address the April meeting of the Associated Press managing editors in New York, and while in the United States Westmoreland fully expected further consultations with Johnson. Using the Vien proposal as a starting point, Westmoreland directed his staff on 8 April to develop Operation “High Port,” a plan for an elite ARVN divisional operation against enemy bases in Laos. Westmoreland indicated to his staff that he intended to press the concept in Washington. Moreover, although High Port was clearly more modest in scale than either the Vien or Westmoreland concepts, a close study of

Westmoreland's guidance indicates that its larger purpose was to prepare the battlefield for larger American initiatives in Laos.²⁸

Major General William B. Rosson, Westmoreland's Chief of Staff, explained to the MACV staff that High Port was "a direct outgrowth of COMUSMACV's conviction that the war must be carried to the enemy on the ground in Laos." The plan was to be developed "in utmost secrecy" and focus on operations in the Tchepone area, "with other enemy base areas to be considered for subsequent operations." Special attention was to be given to the construction of a logistics base and supporting road network in South Vietnam generally opposite Tchepone, development of a C-130 capable airfield in the area, and the installation of supporting 175mm long-range artillery fire bases in the vicinity of the logistics base.²⁹

Although the evidence may only be suggestive here, the extensive logistics and support infrastructure planned for High Port seems applicable to operations far larger than division-sized ones. Given Westmoreland's pessimism about the pace of the war, his conviction that clearing the panhandle was the key to stability in South Vietnam, and his January guidance to the MACV staff to prepare the battlefield for American initiatives in the panhandle, High Port's linkage to future American operations in Laos seems a fair conclusion.

No alternate strategy was possible without a substantial increase in American troop strength. Westmoreland's strategic reassessment had led him to conclude that McNamara's 470,000 ceiling would not "permit sustained operations of the scope and intensity required to avoid an unreasonably protracted war." On 18 March, therefore, he submitted to the Joint Chiefs proposed troop requirements for FY 1968 which would secure the resources necessary for his new strategy.³⁰

The FY 1968 troop requirements detailed by Westmoreland actually identified two proposals, a "minimum essential force" totaling about an additional 100,000 men and an "optimum force" increment of about 200,000. Westmoreland explained that the former, in effect asking for an increase of two and one-third "division equivalents" with associated Air Force and Navy elements, would be "necessary to exploit success of the current offensive and to retain control of the expanding areas being cleaned of enemy influence" by search and destroy operations. This proposal was designed essentially to sustain the strategy of attrition. On the other hand, the "optimum force" requirement envisioned an addition of four and one-third divisions, ten tactical fighter squadrons, and a mobile riverine force. According to Westmoreland, this reinforcement would provide "the capability to extend offensive operations into an exploitation phase."³¹

The "optimum force" requirement was in fact linked to his proposal for an alternate strategy. When McNamara visited Saigon in July to discuss the troop request, Westmoreland emphasized that the larger troop package

provided "for greatly intensified military operations both inside and outside South Vietnam, to include Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam." COMUSMACV argued that "we must convince the enemy that he cannot win, that time is not on his side. I believe that this strategy will succeed, provided we step up the pressure by reinforcing our mounting successes." In his mind, this meant that the United States "should step up [its] operations in pacification in the south, increase the pressure in the north, and exercise new initiatives in Laos."³²

After the war Westmoreland argued that expanding his force to the approximately 670,000 level would have allowed him to "speed the end to the American role in the war," particularly if granted "authority for a drive into Laos and possibly Cambodia and for an amphibious hook north of the DMZ." The programmed arrival of these forces in late 1968 and early 1969 also coincided neatly with the time frame assumptions of Westmoreland and the MACV staff regarding operations in Laos.³³

While Westmoreland had viewed operations into Laos as more decisive in nature, operations into North Vietnam had also been under study by MACV and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) since 1966. Westmoreland gauged their value principally in terms of fixing enemy reserves and as supplementary to operations in Laos. Three separate contingency plans had been prepared by 1967. All variations of either "Frisco City" or Durango City," each envisioned a three-division "joint ground-airborne-amphibious invasion," either aimed just above the DMZ, or at Vinh, 100 miles further to the north. Forces were to come from the United States, staged through Okinawa, and from Westmoreland's forces already in-country. In 1966 Westmoreland had believed that he could not spare the resources for any cross-border operations and the plans had been laid aside; the "optimum force" of 1967 now would solve the problem of resources.³⁴

But the March 1967 troop request once again challenged Johnson's reluctance to mobilize American manpower reserves. In the words of the authors of *The Pentagon Papers*, mobilization of the reserves was "a political sound barrier" which remained unbroken during the war. Most historians agree with Herbert Y. Schandler's observation that this domestic constraint virtually dictated American war policy. Committed to the primacy of his Great Society programs, President Johnson viewed reserve mobilization as the "threshold" beyond which the nation would understand itself to be on a "war footing." In Johnson's mind, such a step meant leaving "the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world."³⁵

Westmoreland recognized that one minimum condition for American mobilization was clear evidence that the South Vietnamese were fully mobilizing their manpower resources. In June 1966 he had urged Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to take the initiative in studying the requirement for

general mobilization in South Vietnam and in encouraging Saigon's efforts to that end. Lodge's efforts had been stillborn. In the spring of 1967, Westmoreland turned his attention to a more receptive Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who began to achieve some results.³⁶ Westmoreland recorded privately on 25 May that South Vietnamese mobilization was required "before the United States can politically afford to call up its reserves and effect partial mobilization in order to support the required level of troops in Vietnam." More strenuous efforts by the Saigon government "to realize its own maximum military potential," he reminded Wheeler, "would make it more palatable at home for the US to send additional troops to Vietnam."³⁷

Thus, isolating the battlefield offered the enticing alternate strategy of stifling infiltration by blocking the Ho Chi Minh Trail while at the same time allowing destruction of the remaining main force units, objectives designed to convince North Vietnam of the improbability of victory. Acquiring and holding ground in Laos and North Vietnam also might provide an "incremental dividend" necessary for the maintenance of domestic support for the war. In the first months of 1967, Westmoreland had systematically sought to establish the conditions he thought necessary for the adoption of his alternate strategy. The spring and summer of 1967 would reveal how effective his efforts to stimulate a strategic reassessment in Washington had been.

The Alternate Strategy in Washington, 1967. After study and some refinement of Westmoreland's FY 1968 manpower forecast, the Joint Chiefs formally endorsed it on 20 April, but did so in a manner that failed to highlight properly its strategic implications. In a familiar litany, the JCS identified three areas of military effort as paramount: search and destroy operations against the NVA/VC in South Vietnam, operations to "obstruct and reduce the flow of men and materials" from North to South Vietnam, and operations to close the port of Haiphong. Claiming "considerable success" in the first area and "appreciable success" in the second, they complained that "relatively little effort has been permitted" in the third. They then strongly recommended that Westmoreland's force requirements be met and that steps be taken to "reduce and obstruct the enemy capability to import the material support required to sustain the war effort." Nevertheless, by focusing their attention on the force requirements and their perennial recommendation to "close the port of Haiphong," the JCS diverted attention from Westmoreland's proposal to modify the strategy for the ground war. Their actions heralded future JCS ineptitude in the strategic debates of March 1968.³⁸

Westmoreland's recommendations naturally generated an intensive review of his strategy and force requirements. Recalled to Washington in April for that review, he met twice with President Johnson and his principal military and political advisers in the White House. Without the "minimum essential"

reinforcement, Westmoreland argued that the situation in Vietnam would be "nip and tuck" in dealing with the reinforcements generated by the NVA/VC buildup in Laos and Cambodia. "We will not be in danger of being defeated," he explained, but success in the war of attrition would be undermined.³⁹

Turning to his "optimum" proposal, Westmoreland characterized its forces as necessary to bring the war to "fruition" in a timely manner. Laying out his proposal for ARVN operations into Laos and his plans for the American logistics and support infrastructure for such operations, he emphasized the need for Laos to "become more and more the battlefield," thus relieving pressure on South Vietnam. "It would be wise, he concluded, "to think of the same plan for Cambodia."⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Westmoreland cautiously stopped short of developing his strategic concept to the point of American operations in Laos and missed an opportunity to provide Johnson the full perspective of his senior field commander.

Wheeler's actions suggest that Westmoreland's omission may have been a prearranged tactic, however. Following Westmoreland's remarks, the chairman offered comments that were pointedly supportive of Westmoreland's alternate strategy. He identified three matters of concern to the JCS: North Vietnamese activity in Laos, and Cambodia, and the need for a "possible invasion of North Vietnam." Wheeler made it clear, given the situation, that American troops might have to be used against these areas. "The JCS firmly believed," he summarized, "that the President must review the contingencies which they faced, the troops required to meet them, and additional punitive action against DRV." The JCS "matters of concern" mirrored elements in Westmoreland's alternate strategy.⁴¹

Walt Whitman Rostow, Johnson's national security adviser and an attendee at the White House meeting, clearly recognized Westmoreland's proposal as a new strategic concept. In his view, Westmoreland's suggestion offered "moves that might, without excessive risk of enlarging the war, force the issue in Hanoi." Apparently sensitive to the concept of incremental dividends, Rostow argued that "if additional forces were committed they should be committed in such a way as to gain spectacular advantage" rather than pursuing the same strategy. The "optimum force," he wrote later, "would permit Westmoreland to harass the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia and to capture the southern part of North Vietnam."⁴²

Rostow strongly supported an amphibious invasion north of the demilitarized zone, going so far as to outline the operation on the large map of Vietnam located in the Cabinet Room. Westmoreland indicated that he had studied such an operation, that it was "militarily feasible and could produce significant military results," but that the shortage of forces, combined with the weather, meant that the earliest it could be conducted was spring-summer 1968. Westmoreland also sensed very little enthusiasm for the

operation from anyone in the Cabinet Room other than Rostow. "The discussion died," he drily noted at the time, "with only me and Rostow participating."⁴³

No decision on the Westmoreland proposal was reached at the April White House meetings and the general returned to Saigon immediately. In the months following, the debate between McNamara and the JCS raged bitterly in Washington. Ostensibly about Westmoreland's force requirements and new strategy, the debate was more fundamentally about America's global national security position.⁴⁴ McNamara and other key members of the Administration, including Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy and John McNaughton, had come to view the apparently open-ended American escalation in Vietnam as a dangerous threat to the political, economic and military foundations of American national security policy. In order to preserve that global position, they therefore advocated establishing limits to the American involvement in Vietnam and what McNaughton called "a 'cool' drive to settle the war—a deliberate process on three fronts: Large unit, politico-pacification, and diplomatic."⁴⁵

By 1967 the Joint Chiefs had also come to view Vietnam strategy largely in terms of American global military commitments. On 20 May they submitted a "World-wide US Military Posture Paper" which cast the United States as precariously overextended and advocated a selective call-up of the reserves in the United States to provide resources both to enable Westmoreland to prosecute the war successfully and to reconstitute the badly depleted overall strategic reserve. The Joint Chiefs considered only two of the seven force postures they reviewed to be "adequate" and noted that with the present force structure they could only provide an "extremely limited" response capability for other worldwide military commitments and contingencies.⁴⁶

In the summer of 1967, buffeted by conflicting strategic advice and constrained by an approaching election year, Lyndon Johnson was unable to accept the consequences of either recommendation. McNamara's course implied a reversal of sorts; Westmoreland's strategy suggested a broadening of the war into North Vietnam and the sanctuaries, increased domestic debate between hawks and doves, and even the risk of Chinese intervention. Johnson's decision on 4 August to dispatch 55,000 troops to Vietnam, a figure well below Westmoreland's "minimum essential" force, was a compromise which forestalled Westmoreland's alternate strategy, but also stopped short of adopting McNamara's "long haul" approach.⁴⁷

Westmoreland's response to this decision reflected remarkable stoicism given his misgivings about attrition's ability to deliver a timely decision in the war. Although he would continue to raise the issue of operations in Laos and North Vietnam in the remaining months of 1967, both his advocacy of

his alternate strategy and his pessimism about progress in the war were clearly more muted than in the spring and summer.⁴⁸

In his memoirs, Westmoreland acknowledged that he was "extremely disappointed" by the decision, but added that he "understood the pressures weighing on the President . . . and had made it clear [to him] that for the time being I could live with the minimum proposal." He was also extremely wary of challenging the President's policy too extensively. As the senior field commander, he had appropriately raised the problem of the length of the war to the policy level and had proposed a strategic alternative. Other considerations apparently had been more controlling in the President's calculations. Reminded at least once by Johnson of Truman's problems with MacArthur, Westmoreland later admitted that he "had no intention of crossing [the President] in any way."⁴⁹

The general especially appreciated the explosiveness of the reserve mobilization issue. Reserve mobilization was a complicated and in many ways dangerous proposition. First of all, it raised questions about training readiness. "A non-professional force," he had told the President in April, "would cause some degradation of normal leadership and effectiveness."⁵⁰ Moreover, he was particularly aware that Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson, responsible for training and equipping the army in the continental United States, faced serious shortages in his training base and capabilities. "You just don't train units overnight," he reminded one interviewer after the war. Second, American policy called for a one-year rotation tour in Vietnam. Westmoreland feared that "if the reserves came back after one year, there probably would be tremendous pressure to discharge them and have them revert to reserve status." In his view, this risked generating public pressure to "call the whole thing off and disengage prematurely." Finally, Westmoreland was not unaware of the proximity of the 1968 presidential election and the political sensitivity of the mobilization issue for Lyndon Johnson. He recalled that in 1967, "I concluded we couldn't expect any initiatives until the election was over My feeling was that there was very little prospect for a new strategy unless something dramatic occurred."⁵¹

Stalemate or Progress? Recent research has highlighted just how significantly the impending presidential election influenced Westmoreland. Public questioning that the war might be in stalemate began in earnest in August 1967, matching the private doubts within the Johnson administration that had emerged in late 1966.⁵² Fearful that a prolonged debate over allegations of stalemate would encourage Hanoi and dominate the upcoming presidential campaign, the Johnson administration vigorously attempted to marshal evidence of substantial progress in the war. The army's official history on the media and the war has shown that Westmoreland was inexorably drawn into domestic politics due to Johnson's pressure on him to give speeches to

bolster domestic support for the war. Westmoreland was able to deflect such requests throughout 1966, but by early 1967 was unable to keep his command above politics.⁵³

Until August 1967 Westmoreland's pronouncements on progress in the war, both public and private, had been decidedly pessimistic; after the President's rebuff of his alternate strategy his commentary became markedly more upbeat. Perhaps influenced by the pressure from Washington to demonstrate progress, or convinced that some progress under attrition properly justified a rejection of stalemate, Westmoreland became a visible public spokesman for the Johnson administration's Vietnam policies. His visit to Washington in November 1967 with appearances before the House Armed Services Committee, National Press Club and NBC television program "Meet the Press" epitomized this role. This optimism may have helped the Commander-in-Chief build some domestic support for the war, but it also clearly undermined Westmoreland's carefully constructed framework for his alternate strategy. Further, it virtually assured that the only strategic reassessment that would take place before November 1968 would be one done in crisis.⁵⁴

By the end of 1967, the Westmoreland alternate strategy lay dormant, held down by the increasing political pressure on the eve of a presidential campaign and strong disagreement within the Defense Department over the war's strategy. Still, Westmoreland was upbeat at year's end, claiming that "the friendly picture gives rise to optimism for increased success in 1968" and telling the National Press Club in late November that "we have reached an important point where the end comes into view."⁵⁵ The President, after all, had not adopted McNamara's proposal, but instead had compromised and established no firm troop ceilings. Given Johnson's past willingness to provide troops, Westmoreland had every reason to conclude that the current ceiling could be moved upward after the election. The announcement in November of McNamara's move to the presidency of the World Bank and his replacement by a more hawkish Clark Clifford made this attitude even more understandable.⁵⁶ And on 30 January 1968, "something dramatic" occurred.

The Alternate Strategy Resurrected

Midnight, 30 January 1968, ushered in both the Vietnamese "Year of the Monkey" and a massive country-wide NVA/VC offensive against thirty-six provincial capitals, sixty-four district capitals, fifty hamlets, and all of South Vietnam's autonomous cities. Enemy forces seized and held the ancient Citadel in Hue for three weeks, boldly but unsuccessfully assaulted the American embassy in Saigon, and shocked Americans with the extent and ferocity of the offensive. *Time* magazine, for example, characterized "the spectacle of an enemy force dispersed and unseen, everywhere hunted

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unremittingly, suddenly materializing to strike simultaneously in a hundred places throughout the country" as a "tour de force."⁵⁷

There is now little debate that the offensive was quickly crushed at enormous cost to the NVA/VC forces. Westmoreland claimed 32,000 enemy were killed and 5,800 were detained out of a force of 84,000 committed. Even if these figures were excessive, the enemy losses were significant, especially because the VC bore the brunt and never regained their pre-Tet effectiveness.⁵⁸

There is also little debate that Hanoi's military defeat was nevertheless an immense strategic victory for them. The magnitude of the offensive shrouded official Washington in gloom and catalyzed a more pessimistic attitude in the United States. Under Secretary of the Air Force Townsend Hoopes later explained that Tet "performed the curious service of fully revealing the doubters and dissenters to each other, as in a lightning flash." Philip Habib, a State Department expert on Vietnam, gave former Secretary of State Dean Acheson a picture far more pessimistic than the official White House position. Tet made Vietnam "a new ball game. . . . We were winning, steadily if not spectacularly. Now the other side has put in a lot of new players and scored heavily against us." Habib summarized the situation well: "We did not win a 'victory' despite the losses inflicted on the enemy. The Tet offensive was a serious setback." The normally conservative *Wall Street Journal* echoed similar sentiments, warning Americans on 23 February to get "ready to accept . . . the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed." Even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff admitted he was affected, comparing the atmosphere in Washington after Tet to that in Washington after the first battle of Bull Run in the Civil War.⁵⁹

Westmoreland was much more optimistic about the implications of Tet for his mission in Vietnam. Acknowledging that it was a "bold move by the enemy," he sensed that Hanoi had opened itself up for a decisive counterpunch. Tet "entailed temporary risks," he said later, but also it "afforded near and long-term opportunities." These were opportunities that Westmoreland thought he could exploit by inflicting heavier casualties to punish the enemy, and by convincing Hanoi of the war's futility through the isolation of the battlefield. Further, he believed Tet offered psychological opportunities that the President might be able to use to advantage—in Westmoreland's words: "an opportunity to rally the [American] people."⁶⁰

Although the evidence suggests that Westmoreland's assessment may have been only wishful thinking, he had some reason to believe that a reappraisal of national strategy was in the wind and that Washington might also see the same opportunities. Admiral Sharp cabled in February that he believed that the restrictive troop ceiling would be lifted, but CINCPAC's reading of Washington from Honolulu was mostly speculative. During the first week of the Tet Offensive, General Wheeler reported to Westmoreland that a

“diversionary amphibious operation” and “a possible attack” across the eastern DMZ had been discussed briefly at a meeting in the White House. On 9 February, a Wheeler cable offered some additional hope with its assessment that “a critical phase of the war is upon us,” a phrase Westmoreland seemed to interpret as meaning a strategic reassessment was near. A week later, another Wheeler cable spoke of “some hard decisions” facing the Administration “in the near future.”⁶¹

More likely, however, as Westmoreland viewed events through his own lens, the picture probably conformed to his needs. Believing a new strategic approach was warranted, he winnowed positive signals supporting such a reassessment from his message traffic. In his mind, the Tet Offensive signaled a change in Hanoi’s strategy from protracted war to “one of quick military/political victory during the American election year.” Westmoreland sensed the need to adapt his own strategy to the new situation. “If the enemy has changed his strategy, we must change ours,” he cabled Wheeler on 12 February. Before Tet, Westmoreland continued, the war had been “a limited war with limited objectives, fought with limited means and programmed for the utilization of limited resources.” While this approach was feasible in a protracted war scenario, Westmoreland now saw the United States in a “new ball game,” facing “a determined, highly disciplined enemy, fully mobilized to achieve a quick victory.” The task was clear to Westmoreland: “We cannot permit this. . . . We must seize the opportunity to crush him.”⁶²

What Westmoreland had in mind was, in effect, his alternate strategy of 1967. Concerned about the effects of a prolonged war on the morale of the American people, Westmoreland believed it “imperative that we exploit the ultimate failure of the enemy’s offensive.” In his view, operations into the sanctuaries and against North Vietnam proper would offer decisive results. Public opinion surveys in the United States following the Tet Offensive seemed to indicate, at least initially, an increased willingness of the American people to step up military action. Westmoreland sought to exploit this psychological opportunity with a “bold offensive campaign” aimed at “destroying [the enemy’s] will to win and his desire to prolong the war.”⁶³

Even after Johnson’s decisions in August 1967, plans for isolating the battlefield had remained central to Westmoreland’s strategic concept, although they remained contingent on a reassessment of national policy. On 6 January 1968, three weeks prior to the Tet Offensive, Westmoreland authorized the planning of Operation “El Paso,” an updated version of the old concept for a multidivision drive into Laos to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Westmoreland envisioned El Paso as “a corps size operation astride the most critical choke points” in the vicinity of Tchepone on Route 9. Involving two American divisions, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and the 101st Airborne Division, and the ARVN Airborne Division, it called for sustained operations in the Laotian panhandle. On order, these forces would

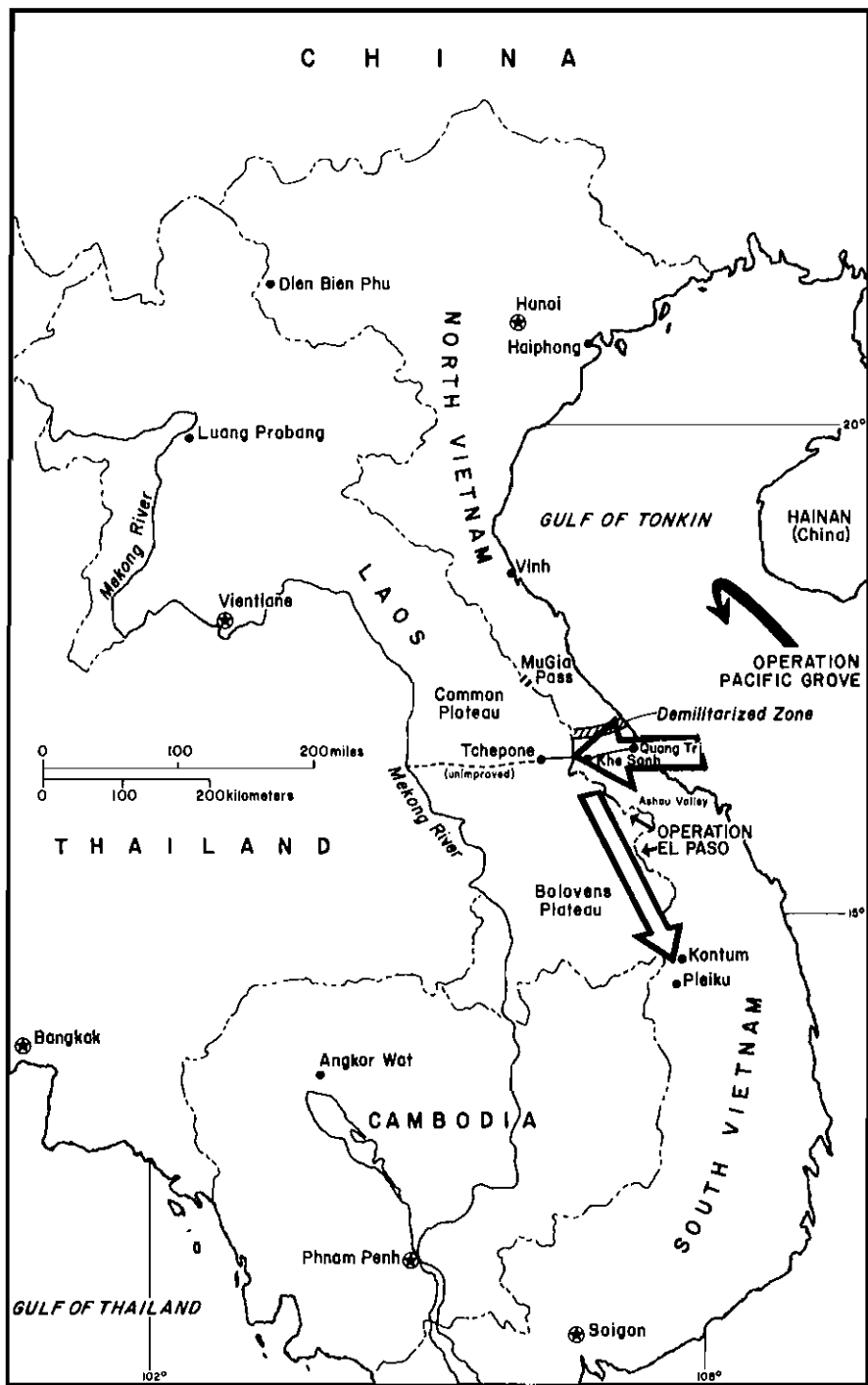
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withdraw south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail into the Central Highlands near Kontum in order to allow the further destruction of enemy supplies. Route 9 from Quang Tri west through Khe Sanh and into Laos was to be established as an all-weather road and secured by the Third Marine Amphibious Force already positioned in the I Corps Tactical Zone. Because Westmoreland had been told by President Johnson in November that he had decided not to seek reelection in 1968, planning for El Paso anticipated a "possible change in national policy" after the November elections. In fact, Westmoreland envisioned the cross-border operation taking place in the late fall or early winter of 1968-1969 following the advent of the dry season in October.⁶⁴

On 24 January, a week before Tet, the significant NVA buildup near Khe Sanh and across the DMZ also resurrected plans for amphibious operations north of the DMZ. Seeking to fix enemy reserves in North Vietnam, Westmoreland proposed an amphibious feint against Vinh utilizing CINCPAC resources based in Okinawa. A variation of Durango City, Westmoreland's new proposal was more modest in scale than its model, reflecting his belief that Laotian operations were the decisive element in this alternate strategy. Taken together, El Paso and Operation Pacific Grove, the code name given Westmoreland's amphibious feint proposal, indicated renewed interest on Westmoreland's part for his alternate strategy before the Tet Offensive.⁶⁵

This pre-Tet interest in cross-border operations should be considered as advance planning, contingent upon a shift in national policy after the election. In January 1968 Westmoreland believed he was unprepared both in terms of forces and logistical support to conduct cross-border operations. Indeed, as Washington fears about the threat to Khe Sanh grew in the period before Tet, Westmoreland was forced to go to extraordinary lengths to explain to the Joint Chiefs and the President the infeasibility of El Paso as a means of preempting an assault on Khe Sanh.⁶⁶ Before Tet, Westmoreland's strategic focus had been on the post-election period, far beyond the immediate problems of early 1968. The Tet Offensive now seemed to offer to him the opportunity to hasten the strategic reassessment he had anticipated after the election and to secure the resources necessary to implement it.

Dispatched by the President, Wheeler traveled to Saigon on 23 February to assess the situation firsthand and to confer with Westmoreland. The Chairman took a decidedly more pessimistic view of the situation than did Westmoreland. Given his global responsibilities, Wheeler was mostly concerned about reconstituting a strategic reserve almost depleted by the Vietnam buildup. Growing international tensions since October 1967 had further heightened his earlier anxieties about strategic overcommitment. In December 1967, for example, China conducted a test of an air-delivered thermonuclear weapon; in January Pathet Lao and NVA troops in Laos destroyed the Royal Laotian Army's general reserve at the battle of Nam



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Bac and negated four years of Royal Laotian military effort; and in Europe tension over Berlin led to a series of sharply worded letters between the Soviet Union and the United States. In January alone, North Korea had attempted to assassinate the South Korean president in a raid on the Blue House in Seoul, had perpetrated 112 other incidents along the DMZ and in South Korea resulting in the deaths of 28 United Nations Command soldiers, and had seized the U.S. intelligence ship, *Pueblo*, and her crew of 82. Tet now added to those anxieties but also provided an opportunity to convince the President to reconstitute a strategic reserve able to deal with all these challenges.⁶⁷

In terms of their respective interests, both Wheeler and Westmoreland viewed their discussions in Saigon as productive. The two generals developed a troop request totaling 206,000, to be generated in three increments over the remainder of 1968 and designed to satisfy the reserve requirements of MACV and the JCS.⁶⁸

The degree to which Wheeler was committed to pursuing Westmoreland's new strategy remains unclear, however. Most accounts agree that he believed it unlikely that the geographical restrictions regarding North Vietnam and the sanctuaries would be lifted.⁶⁹ Westmoreland nonetheless fully believed that Wheeler would lay the new strategic proposal on the table in Washington at the appropriate time. It was a question of bureaucratic tactics, of how to orchestrate the strategic reassessment, and Westmoreland was confident of Wheeler's abilities. "It was in his hands," Westmoreland later told an interviewer. Wheeler was "a soldier and a diplomat." He would first restore the worldwide military posture of the United States and then, "as a separate action," he would "get the new Vietnam strategy approved."⁷⁰

Westmoreland also clearly recognized the need for careful orchestration in Washington. His troop request could only be accommodated by a significant mobilization of reserves in the United States. Even from Saigon he appreciated the political obstacles facing Johnson over such "an extreme measure," but he now believed that Tet had provided a "bench mark" which would facilitate the decision. Such a call-up was fundamental to his new strategy. Mobilizing the reserves provided more than just additional military capability. Isolating the battlefield was aimed principally at Hanoi's will, at convincing the North of the improbability of securing their objectives. Westmoreland believed that mobilization offered a psychological advantage over Hanoi in the war, evidence that the United States meant to make the necessary sacrifice, "a highly-visible manifestation of the nation's resolve." This demonstration of American commitment, new military capability, and alternate strategy would demonstrate to Hanoi that their efforts were futile.⁷¹

However, Wheeler's cable to the President on 27 February while en route to Washington and his subsequent briefing for him in the White House on 28 February painted Westmoreland's situation in its darkest hues and made no mention of the link between the troop request and the new strategy.⁷²

The report told a "story that was really frightening," recalled Clark Clifford, and it stimulated Lyndon Johnson to direct Clifford, the Secretary of Defense-designate, to conduct a thorough study of its implications. The results of that study, conducted over the next month and announced in a stunning television speech by Johnson on 31 March, are well-known. Lyndon Johnson's decisions to reject major troop increases, to limit the bombing of North Vietnam, and to withdraw from the 1968 presidential race signaled an important watershed in the American involvement in Vietnam. The President may not have abandoned the policy of securing a stable, noncommunist South Vietnam, but he had decided to pursue that policy within certain limits: a troop ceiling of about 550,000, no mobilization of the reserves, no expansion of the bombing of North Vietnam, and no geographic broadening of the war.⁷³

The President's decisions announced on 31 March clearly rejected the Westmoreland alternate strategy. Equally as clear, the Westmoreland strategy never received serious consideration in the deliberations of March 1968. Neither Wheeler, Westmoreland, nor any other proponent of the new strategy unambiguously placed the strategy before the Clifford Task Force or the President for consideration, despite numerous opportunities to do so. Wheeler spoke only of using the new forces to "regain the initiative through offensive operations" and never in the context of the Westmoreland strategy.⁷⁴ When questioned by Clifford about specific employment plans for the additional forces, Wheeler passed the questions on to Westmoreland. Following the tactics agreed upon at their Saigon meeting, Westmoreland responded with a list of six objectives which studiously avoided mention of a new strategy. Only objective six, "Be prepared for contingency operations if required," gave a subtle hint of his new strategic concept.⁷⁵

Other evidence from key members of the Clifford Task Force confirms that the alternate strategy was not considered. Paul Warnke, McNaughton's successor at International Security Affairs, and equally disenchanted with American strategy, later commented that he would have been "delighted" if Wheeler had raised the question of a new strategy because it would have helped to block the troop request. "If it was thought that giving Westy the 206,000 would lead in fact to an invasion of Laos, Cambodia or North Vietnam," he argued in 1970, "a lot of people who supported the troop request might have withdrawn their support." Clifford also saw the troop request as merely a continuation of the strategy of attrition and complained about his inability to discern a "military plan for attaining victory in Vietnam" out of the Wheeler and Westmoreland explanations.⁷⁶

Thus, for tactical reasons Wheeler and Westmoreland chose, in Wheeler's words, not to "spell out the strategic options" to Johnson during the strategic reassessment of February and March.⁷⁷ Given the situation, perhaps their actions were appropriate. Westmoreland characterized the chances of adoption of his new strategy as "probably less than 50-50" and naturally

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deferred to Wheeler's experience and judgment to improve its chances in the delicate negotiations within the Clifford Task Force. It was, as he put it, "General Wheeler's responsibility to carry the ball in Washington."⁷⁸ The absence of Wheeler's personal papers makes Wheeler's actions more difficult to sort out. Perhaps he sensed that the new strategy was too dramatic for the moment, that it would tilt the delicate balance in the White House in favor of deescalation, that the Warnke assessment was correct. Or, given his record of uneven support for the alternate strategy throughout 1967 and 1968, perhaps he was skeptical of its efficacy and simply sought to use Westmoreland to justify reconstitution of the strategic reserve.⁷⁹

Nonetheless, the failure of both officers to inject the alternate strategy directly into the strategic debate was a significant miscalculation. It narrowed the President's strategic options and ensured that the debate would be conducted in terms of "more of the same" versus deescalation. Westmoreland already appreciated the limitations of attrition and had serious doubts about the effects of prolonged war on the American home front. Indeed, these reservations had helped to stimulate the alternate strategy.⁸⁰ Any argument resting its merit on the strategy of attrition was sure to be at a disadvantage. Yet, when presented the opportunity by Wheeler to explain how he planned to use the 206,000 troops—explanations that had been detailed to Wheeler in Saigon in February—Westmoreland fell back on ambiguity and failed to press his case.

Westmoreland's reluctance to seize the moment and to articulate clearly the logic of his strategy detracted from an otherwise sound strategic sense which appreciated the limits of attrition and the need to devise a strategy which delivered for the American people evidence of significant progress in the war. The failure of Wheeler and Westmoreland to present their alternative also indicted the American military leadership. At a major turning point in the conduct of the war, had they more clearly and forcefully advocated an alternate strategy, they would have more fully fulfilled their duties as the President's chief military adviser and senior field commander.⁸¹

The Alternate Strategy in Retrospect

Ironically, the Westmoreland alternate strategy may now be finally receiving a full assessment more than twenty years after the decisions of March 1968 passed it by. Two important and well-received recent contributions to the literature analyzing the Vietnam war have argued that isolating the battlefield was a feasible strategic alternative.⁸² Both Colonel Harry G. Summers and General Bruce Palmer argue that cutting off NVA/VC infiltration should have been the basic military objective of the United States and that it was requisite to any solution of South Vietnam's internal problems. Both also include most of the key elements of Westmoreland's

alternate strategy: taking the strategic offensive against the NVA, cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, maintaining a “visible and credible amphibious presence” off North Vietnam threatening invasion, increased aerial interdiction of North Vietnamese lines of communications, and blockading northern ports. Palmer, the former commanding general of II Field Force and later Westmoreland’s Army deputy in MACV, believes, in retrospect, the strategy offered enormous advantages, including the retention of the strategic initiative, fighting on ground of American choosing, lower American casualties, a reduced American logistical effort, and clearly identified objectives.⁸³

Would the alternate strategy have made a strategic difference if adopted? No conclusive answer to the question is possible, of course. One can debate, perhaps, the extraordinary operational and logistical challenges of extending the battlefield to Laos, or whether the alternate strategy continued to underestimate the will and determination of Hanoi, or whether it was possible for U.S. forces to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail without broadening the ground war into Thailand, or whether China’s preoccupation with the Cultural Revolution would have forestalled its intervention in response to an invasion of North Vietnam.⁸⁴

One cannot, however, debate military feasibility in a political vacuum. Alternate strategies seeking to isolate the battlefield rested on the premise that Hanoi controlled the insurgency in the South and that choking off NVA infiltration and supplies would inevitably cause the insurgency to wither. Even if these assessments were correct and did not misjudge the nature of a war that many analysts have argued was essentially an indigenous insurgency,⁸⁵ key questions still remain. How long, for example, would American forces be required to remain “astride the most critical choke points” of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos? When Hanoi attempted to circumvent this blocking position by detours to the west, how many additional divisions would be necessary to cover the more than one hundred kilometers between Tchepone and the Mekong River?⁸⁶ Could the United States bear the cost—financial and social—of this burden? Perhaps most important, assuming a respite from external invasion, was the government of South Vietnam up to the task of nation-building? And given that it was, once it was established and the American presence withdrawn, would not Hanoi start the process anew?

By 1968, immense political and economic obstacles stood in the way of Westmoreland’s alternate strategy, factors the general seems not to have fully appreciated. The Johnson administration and influential members of the American foreign policy establishment saw strong evidence that the nation was dangerously overcommitted.

The Joint Chiefs’ concerns about the depletion of the strategic reserve and the decreased readiness of its forces elsewhere have been established earlier. By December 1967, the picture was even more dismal. Indeed, the drain of

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the commitment in Vietnam had savaged the combat effectiveness of the U.S. Army outside of Vietnam. Every major Army unit in Europe, with the exception of the Berlin Brigade and one armored cavalry regiment, was rated "not combat ready." In the continental United States, only the 82d Airborne Division was considered "marginally combat ready," and one of its brigades constituted part of the emergency reinforcements provided Westmoreland following Tet. And in Korea, anxious and tense in the face of growing North Korean provocations, both American infantry divisions were also rated "not combat ready."⁸⁷

In addition, public opposition to the war rose sharply in late 1967, and Johnson's approval rating dipped to 28 percent, its lowest overall point.⁸⁸ That same period began the "quiet defection" of the American postwar foreign policy establishment from unqualified support of the war. In November 1967, for example, McGeorge Bundy, Johnson's former national security adviser, wrote the President questioning the search and destroy strategy and suggesting that the time was at hand for drawing back to a more sustainable strategy. This defection culminated in March 1968 with the recommendation to President Johnson, by the so-called "Wise Men," that the United States begin to take steps to disengage. Dean Acheson summarized their majority position for the President with precision: "We can no longer accomplish what we have set out to do in the time we have left and we must begin to take steps to disengage."⁸⁹

Recent studies have shown that the strain on the domestic and international economy of a war that cost \$3.6 billion annually was perhaps the most significant factor in this reorientation. Within weeks of Westmoreland's troop proposal, Treasury Secretary Henry Fowler estimated that the 206,000 troops would cost \$2.5 billion in 1968 and \$10 billion in 1969. McNamara estimated its cost over the same period at \$15 billion.⁹⁰ According to Burton I. Kaufman, the war exacerbated a dangerous balance of payments problem, worsened an already overheated economy, and generated pressures which "threatened the very stability of the dollar, and indeed the international monetary system."⁹¹ In March, for example, a wild speculation in gold collapsed the multilateral gold pool, forcing Washington to establish a "two-tiered" system separating official gold sales from the private gold market.⁹²

These events provided a backdrop of economic crisis to the March deliberations over the Westmoreland troop request and clearly influenced their outcome. The economic crisis, however, was not a transitory one, and instead reflected the economic consequences of global overcommitment. Johnson may have inherited the balance of payments problem from preceding administrations, but his decision to escalate the war in 1965-1967 created what he later admitted to be "one of the most serious financial crises of recent years." This crisis threatened the global national security position of the United States, revealed the limits of American power, and forced a more

realistic consideration of national security priorities. Its logic would likely have been just as compelling in 1967.⁹³

Some Conclusions

The foregoing analysis of the Westmoreland alternate strategy of 1967-1968 suggests the need to reconsider the traditional assessment of Westmoreland as strategist. Aware of the limits of the home front's patience, Westmoreland recognized in early 1967 the need for a change in strategic concept. The evidence reveals his misgivings about the strategy of attrition and a cautious effort on his part to advise the President about the limits of attrition and to pursue initiatives aimed at facilitating a shift in policy consistent with his alternate strategy. Given the obstacles, stimulating strategic reassessment from below proved to be too difficult for Westmoreland. Nonetheless, his strategic gifts emerged most clearly in these efforts to prompt a reassessment in the period through August 1967.

Westmoreland's strategic role after August 1967 was less noteworthy, especially after he became involved in Administration efforts to demonstrate that the war was not stalemated on the eve of an election year. During the fall and winter of 1967-1968, the clear muting of his earlier pessimism about attrition's ability to deliver a timely decision diminishes his strategic record. His continued interest at the same time in an alternate strategy for the post-election period suggests strongly that many of his earlier reservations about attrition remained extant. As the senior field commander, he had a special responsibility to continue to convey frankly the limitations of attrition to the President.

In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive in 1968, Westmoreland sensed another opportunity for strategic reassessment. Once again, however, Westmoreland's and Wheeler's ineffective advocacy of his alternate strategy precluded its full consideration by the President. By March 1968, moreover, any effort to broaden the war was virtually doomed, given the gloomy atmosphere in Washington. The time for a full consideration of such alternate strategies had been missed in 1967.

The analysis also raises troubling questions about the viability of the Westmoreland alternate strategy itself. Indeed, the minuses of expanding the war into Laos and North Vietnam seem to far outweigh the pluses. Westmoreland's underestimation of these factors must be considered in any evaluation of his role as strategist. Nonetheless, one cannot conclusively rule out in hindsight the possibility that the strategy would have worked. A systematic assessment of the alternative at the time—the implicit objective of Westmoreland's efforts in 1967—would have better revealed not only its promise and problems, but also would likely have stimulated a review of Vietnam strategy in general.

Perhaps most important, the analysis also provides insight into the phenomenon of strategic reassessment in general. Regardless of whether or not the specific Westmoreland alternative had merit, the case flags certain factors which may need to be considered when the United States attempts strategic reassessment.

One obvious inhibition to strategic reassessment was the impending presidential election of 1968. If Johnson had decided to run in 1968, the looming presence of the election limited execution of the alternate strategy in a practical sense to the early fall of 1967-late winter 1968 (after the October advent of the northeast monsoon with its dry and cooling winds but before the beginning of the March New Hampshire presidential primary). A successful operation in Laos or North Vietnam then might have offered attractive evidence of progress in the war for the incumbent. Conversely, the President's decision not to run may have pushed the window for the alternate strategy to after the election in November (and perhaps as late as January 1969 were a Republican administration elected), thus effectively extending the length of the war to about that of World War II, with a difficult road still ahead. Experience from past wars warned that maintenance of domestic support for a strategic timetable of that duration would be a formidable task.

Westmoreland sensed the strategic limitations of 1968 and the opportunity in 1967, and timed his efforts to prompt strategic reassessment accordingly. In Westmoreland's mind, President Johnson's decision in August not to provide the Westmoreland "optimum force" closed off any opportunity for adoption of the alternate strategy until after the election. To forestall a strategic shift away from the alternate strategy and toward disengagement, progress under attrition thus had to be demonstrated. Westmoreland's subsequent efforts to assist Johnson in mobilizing domestic support for the war had the ironic effect both of undermining the arguments for his alternate strategy and of creating an aura of optimism which starkly contrasted with the events of the Tet Offensive. When the alternate strategy was revisited at that time, operations in Laos in late 1968-early 1969 naturally seemed a long time off and a much less attractive alternative.

But the proximity of the election does not explain the failure to reassess before the election became controlling, say, in the spring and summer of 1967, precisely when Westmoreland was laying the ground for his alternate strategy. At that time, three other factors appear to have been controlling—the resistance of Secretary of Defense McNamara to any broadening of the war, the preoccupation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with reconstituting the strategic reserve, and Westmoreland's own fear of recreating even the perception of a MacArthur-like challenge to presidential authority. Each factor in its own way served to dilute Westmoreland's message that an alternate strategy was needed and thereby inhibited the chance for a strategic

reassessment at the time it may have been most productive, that is, in the spring and summer of 1967.

Perhaps most striking, these factors indicated the absence of an effective politico-military mechanism for thinking strategically. The principal officers responsible for American military strategy in Vietnam—the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the senior field commander—failed to coordinate their efforts in a way which facilitated a balanced assessment of the strategic alternatives. The sad consequence was strategic bankruptcy.

Notes

1. The standard works on this period are Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977); Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention* (New York: David McKay, 1969); Henry Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970); and Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, 1971). Also useful are Clark M. Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal: The Personal History of One Man's View and How It Evolved," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1969, pp. 601-622 and John B. Henry, "March 1968: Continuity or Change?" unpublished undergraduate honors thesis, Harvard College, 1971. An abridged version of the Henry thesis appeared as "February 1968," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1971, pp. 3-34.

2. "Alternate strategy" is Westmoreland's term. See William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell, 1976), p. 461ff.

3. Admiral U.S.G. Sharp and General William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam (As of 30 June 1968)* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1969), pp. 99-100; Chart 38-6, "Comparison of Enemy and Friendly Battle Deaths" in W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (New York: MacMillan, 1972), p. 445; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2d ed., (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 153.

4. Senator Mike Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers. The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), III, p. 395. Hereafter cited as *The Pentagon Papers*.

5. "Notes on Discussions with the President," 27 April 1967, McNTN III-Drafts 1967 (2) folder, Files of John McNaughton, Box 2, Paul C. Warnke Papers, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL), Austin, Texas.

6. Jeffrey Clarke, "On Strategy and the Vietnam War," *Parameters*, Spring, 1986, p. 40.

7. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 198-199. Westmoreland's strategy of attrition has been widely criticized by historians and military analysts. See, for example, Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Wayne, N.J.: Avery, 1985), pp. 39-46; Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford, 1978), pp. 51-52, 77-84; Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, Ky.: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1984), pp. 42-43; Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 164-168; and Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio, 1978), p. 117.

8. *The Pentagon Papers*, III, p. 456; McNamara Memorandum for the President, 26 June 1965 (Revised 1 July 1965), "Program of Expanded Military and Political Moves with Respect to Vietnam," NSC History, Vol 6: Deployment of Major U.S. Forces to Vietnam, July 1965, National Security File (NSF), LBJL.

9. *The Pentagon Papers*, III, pp. 395-396.

10. McNamara Memorandum, 7 December 1965, "Military and Political Actions Recommended for SVN," *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 623-624, 309; McNamara Memorandum for the President, 14 October 1966, *ibid.*, p. 348.

11. McNamara Memorandum for the President, 14 October 1966, *ibid.*, pp. 348-354. See also Charles Mohr, "McNamara on Record, Reluctantly, on Vietnam," *New York Times*, 16 May 1984, p. A23.

12. Draft Memorandum for the President, 17 November 1966, *ibid.*, pp. 365-378, especially "Military Strategy in Vietnam," pp. 368-374. For a more succinct perspective, see Henry L. Trewhitt, *McNamara: His Ordeal in the Pentagon* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 222-240.

13. McNaughton Memo for McNamara, 26 October 1966, "McNaughton in Manila, October 23-25, 1966," Vietnam, 1966-68 (2) folder, Files of John McNaughton, Box 7, Warnke Papers, LBJL; *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 359-361, 424-427.

14. Message, Westmoreland for Sharp and Wheeler, MAC 0039, 2 January 1967, Vol. 58, Vietnam Country File, Box 35, NSF, LBJL.

15. Norman B. Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1987), p. 220.

16. *The Pentagon Papers*, III, p. 464.

17. JCS Study, (May 1967), "Alternative Courses of Action for Southeast Asia," McNTN-Memoranda 1967 (I) folder, Files of John McNaughton, Box 5, Warnke Papers, LBJL; Background Paper, "Military Questions with Political Implications (Laos Activities)," The President's Trip to Guam Briefing Book, March 1967 folder, International Meetings and Travel File, Box 14, NSF, LBJL. See also Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 356-358 and Palmer, *The Twenty-Five Year War*, pp. 105-106.

18. Memo for Record, Brigadier General A.M. Hendry, 28 January 1967, "CIIC Meeting," 28 January 1967 and "Westmoreland Historical Briefing," 3 February 1967, both in #13 History File, 27 January-25 March 1967 (I), Box 10, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL; *MACV Command History, 1967*, Vol. II, 16 September 1968, p. 1029. National Records Center, National Archives and Records Administration, Suitland, Maryland. Hereafter cited as NRC, Suitland.

19. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 252-253, 267, 285, 298-299, 355-358, 412-413, 466-467.

20. Messages, Westmoreland for Wheeler, MAC 2344, 10 March 1967 and MAC 2450, 14 March 1967, cited in William M. Hammond, *The United States Army in Vietnam, Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), pp. 280-281.

21. Messages, Wheeler for Westmoreland, CJCS 184-67, 11 March 1967 and Westmoreland for Wheeler, MAC 2450, 14 March 1967, *ibid*.

22. Transcript of 2d Day of Guam Conference, 20 March 1967, International Meetings and Travel File, Box 12, NSF, LBJL. President Johnson confirms Westmoreland's pessimism in *The Vantage Point*, p. 259.

23. Text of Westmoreland Address at the Associated Press (AP) Managing Editors Luncheon, 24 April 1967, Miles Papers.

24. "Notes on Discussions with the President," 27 April 1967, McNTN-Drafts (2) folder, Files of John McNaughton, Box 2, Warnke Papers, LBJL.

25. "Background Briefing Presented by General Westmoreland, 29 June 1967," #18 History File (II), 1 June-1 July 1967 folder, Box 12, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

26. Marshall interview with Forrest Pogue, 11 February 1949, quoted in Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Organizer of Victory, 1943-1945* (New York: Viking, 1973), p. 34; B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 150. For an analysis of military sensitivity to the pressures of the home front on strategy in World War II, see Charles F. Brower, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy: American Strategy and the War with Japan* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. Microfilms, 1987). I am indebted to Colonel Paul Miles' for concisely stating this concept in terms of the need for incremental dividends.

27. George Carver Memo for Rostow, n.d., "Transmittal of Working Notes," President's Trip to Guam (II) folder, International Meetings and Travel File, Box 13, NSF, LBJL. See also General Cao Van Vien and Lt. General Dong Van Khuyen, *Reflections on the Vietnam War* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), pp. 99-100, 141. Vien told the Senate Preparedness Committee in August 1967 that without operations in Laos and Cambodia "the war might last 30 years." See *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, p. 527.

28. "General Westmoreland's History Notes, 27 March-8 April 1967," #15 History File (I), 27 March-30 April 1967, Box 11, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL. For LBJ and the address before the AP Managing Editors, see Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 294.

29. Rosson Memo for Record, 8 April 1968, "CIIC Meeting, 8 April 1968," #15 History File (I), 27 March-30 April 1967, Box 11, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

30. Message, Westmoreland for Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 09101, 18 March 1967, #15 History File, 27 March-8 April 1967 (I), Box 11, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL; *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 427-431.

31. *Ibid*.

32. *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 517-518.

33. Major General W.T. Kerwin Memorandum for Westmoreland, 6 July 1967, "SECDEF Briefing," #19 History File, 6 July-3 August 1967, Box 12, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 297-298. Westmoreland also made this point to an interviewer in 1970. See Major Paul L. Miles, Memo for Record, 28 August 1970, "Notes on Conversation between General Westmoreland and John Henry, Harvard University," 19 August 1970, Paul L. Miles Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. Hereafter cited as "Notes on Westmoreland-Henry Conversation."

34. *MACV Command History, 1968*, Vol. III, 30 April 1969, pp. 781-782, NRC, Suitland; Message, Westmoreland to Sharp, MAC 10451, 22 November 1967, subject: Amphibious Operations North of the DMZ, Eyes Only Message File, 1-30 November 1967, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

35. *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, p. 385; Herbert Y. Schandler, "America and Vietnam: The Failure of American Strategy, 1964-67," in Peter Braestrup, ed., *Vietnam as History: Ten Years after the Paris Peace Accords* (Washington: Univ. press of America, 1984), p. 25. The Johnson quote is found in Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 251.

36. Message, Westmoreland for Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 4600, 16 May 1967, #17 History File, 1-31 May 1967, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL. For Bunker's perspective, see Message, Bunker for the President, Saigon 26566, 25 May 1967, Aides Files, Memos to the President-Walt Rostow, Vol. 29, NSF, LBJL. GVN mobilization improvements were not significantly realized until after the Tet Offensive. See Vien and Khuyen, p. 90, and Jeffrey J. Clarke, *United States Army in Vietnam. Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), pp. 293-294.

37. "General Westmoreland's History Notes, 23 May-31 May 1967," and Message, Westmoreland for Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 4600, 16 May 1967, both in #17 History File, 1-31 May 1967, Box 12, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

38. JCSM-218-67, 20 April 1967, *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 436-437. The explanation for this tactic may be that the JCS, aware of growing bureaucratic resistance within the Defense Department, sought to deal with the problem incrementally, first securing the capability, and then modifying the strategy. See Interview with General Earle G. Wheeler, 17 February 1971, cited in Henry, "March 1968," p. S1, which illustrates a later use of this tactic by the JCS.

39. "Notes on Johnson Discussion with Wheeler and Westmoreland," 27 April 1967, McNNTN III-Drafts 1967 (2) folder, Files of John McNaughton, Box 2, Warnke Papers, LBJL. See also, *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 441-443.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. "General Westmoreland's History Notes," #15 History File (I), 27 March-30 April 1967, Box 11, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL; Rostow, pp. 512-513.

43. *Ibid.*

44. On this thesis, see George C. Herring, "Vietnam and American National Security," paper presented at the Third USMA History Symposium, "The Theory and Practice of American National Security, 1960-1968," April 1988, in author's possession. For evidence that the JCS saw the McNamara strategic review as a serious threat to their strategy in Vietnam, see Message, Wheeler for Westmoreland and Sharp, JCS 389, 25 May 1967, Miles Papers. Wheeler advises Westmoreland to "batten down for rough weather ahead."

45. McNaughton Draft Presidential Memorandum, 19 May 1967, *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 477-489, especially p. 487. Herring argues that de Gaulle's announcement of French withdrawal from Nato, British plans to cut back their forces in Germany and overseas, and growing economic weaknesses in the United States and Western industrialized nations, all contributed to this sense of threat to the American global position. See Herring, "Vietnam and American National Security."

46. JCSM-288-67, 20 May 1967, "World-wide US Military Posture," McNNTN-Memoranda 1967 (I) folder, Files of John McNaughton, Box 5, Warnke Papers, LBJL.

47. Herring, *America's Longest War*, pp. 177-180; *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 527-528.

48. For advocacy of cross-border operations during this period, see Message, Westmoreland for Sharp and General Harold K. Johnson, Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, MAC 9056, 27 September 1967, #22 History File (II), 10-30 September 1967, Box 13, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL and Memo for the President, "Notes on Breakfast Meeting on 21 November 1967 (with General Westmoreland)," Meetings from February 1967 through February 1968 folder, Box 3, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings File, LBJL.

49. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 302-303, 207.

50. *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, p. 442.

51. Transcript of interview of Westmoreland by Major Paul L. Miles, Jr., 6 March 1971, Fort Myer, Virginia, Miles Papers. On the complexities of reserve mobilization, see BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam. Vol. V: Planning the War* (McLean, Va.: BDM Corporation, 1980), pp. 4-8 through 4-13 and Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, p. 367.

52. *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, p. 197.

53. Hammond, pp. 287-288.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 315-340, especially pp. 328-338.

55. Westmoreland Year-end Assessment, 1967, *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 538-539; Westmoreland Address to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 21 November 1967, Miles Papers.

56. On McNamara's departure, see Memo for the President, 1 December 1967, November 29, 1967—12 noon NSC Meeting folder, Box 1, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings File, LBJL. See also David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 783-784.

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57. Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 189. The *Time* quote is found in Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War* (New York: Avon, 1981), p. 204.

58. Sharp and Westmoreland, p. 161. On the impact of Tet on the Vietcong, see William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1981), p. 269 and Harry G. Summers, "Defense without Purpose," *Society*, November/December 1983, p. 8. Westmoreland had effectively reached this conclusion at the end of the first week of the offensive. See Message, Westmoreland for Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 01754, 7 February 1968, Aides Files, Walt Rostow-Memos for the President, 7-9 February 1968, Vol. 60, NSF, LBJL.

59. Hoopes, p. 145; Habib Memo for Acheson, "Observations on Vietnam," 26 February 1968, quoted in Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 693; *Wall Street Journal* cited in Rostow, p. 519; Transcript, Earle G. Wheeler Oral History Interview, 21 August 1969, by Dorothy Pierce McSweeney, tape 1, page 29, LBJL. For a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Tet on the home front, see Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, abridged ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 465-507.

60. "Notes on Westmoreland-Henry Conversation," Miles Papers; General William C. Westmoreland, "The Origins of the Post-Tet Plans for Additional American Forces in RVN," (April 1970), pp. 2-3, Miles Papers. Hereafter cited as "Origins of Post-Tet Plans." The preface to this paper, signed by Major Paul L. Miles and dated 9 November 1970, indicates that it was read and endorsed by General Earle G. Wheeler, Admiral U.S.G. Sharp, and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.

61. "Origins of Post-Tet Plans," pp. 9, 15-16; Message, Wheeler for Westmoreland, JCS 01974, 17 February 1968, quoted in Schandler, p. 105.

62. Message, Westmoreland for Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 01975, 12 February 1968, #29 History File (I), 1-29 February 1968, Box 16, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

63. "Origins of Post-Tet Plans," pp. 16, 20, John Mueller, "A Summary of Public Opinion and the Vietnam War," in Braestrup, ed., *Vietnam as History*, Appendix 2.

64. Message, Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 00321, 8 January 1968, Eyes Only Message File, 1-31 January 1968, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL. See also Message, Westmoreland for Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 00686, 15 January 1968, #15 History File (I), 27 December 1967-31 January 1968, Box 15, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL and *MACV Command History, 1968*, Vol. III, 30 April 1969, NRC, Suitland. Westmoreland's discussion of El Paso in his memoirs includes participation by Thai/Royal Laotian Army forces converging on Tchepone from the west. See *A Soldier Reports*, p. 358. On Westmoreland and Johnson's decision not to seek re-election, see Transcript, Westmoreland Oral History Interview, 8 February 1969, by Dorothy Pierce McSweeney, tape 1, pp. 8-9, LBJL and Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, p. 366.

65. *MACV Command History, 1968*, Vol. III, 30 April 1969, pp. 781-782, NRC, Suitland. After the Tet Offensive, Admiral Sharp had Westmoreland dust off the plans for Durango City, an amphibious/airmobile/airborne assault to North Vietnam, followed by a thrust southward through the DMZ to destroy NVA forces and supplies.

66. Messages, Westmoreland for Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 00547, 12 January 1968 and MAC 00686, 15 January 1968, both in #28 History File (I), 27 December 1967-31 January 1968, Box 15, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

67. Talking Paper, 12 August 1969, "The World Situation Dec 67-Feb 68 versus the U.S. Army's Capability to React," #29 History File (II), 1-29 February 1968, Box 16, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

68. Schandler, pp. 109-110.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 108; Henry, pp. 49-55; Herring, *America's Longest War*, pp. 194-195.

70. Westmoreland interview, 20 August 1970, quoted in Henry, pp. 44-45. Westmoreland was also aware that this was a typical Wheeler bureaucratic stratagem. See Message, Wheeler for Westmoreland, JCS 01589, 9 February 1968, Eyes Only Message File, 1-29 February 1968, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL, where he reminds Westmoreland: "I know you have heard me say before that we can handle only one major problem at a time. I become more convinced of this as time progresses. . . ."

71. Transcript of interview of Westmoreland by Major Paul L. Miles, Jr., 6 March 1971, Miles Papers; "Notes on Westmoreland-Henry Conversations," Miles Papers; "Origins of Post-Tet Plans," p. 24.

72. Report of the Chairman, JCS, subject: "Situation in Vietnam and MACV Force Requirements," 27 February 1968, *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, pp. 546-549.

73. Clifford interview, 16 November 1972, quoted in Schandler, p. 119; Johnson, pp. 390-393. On the question of whether or not Johnson's action constituted a reversal of policy, compare Herring, pp. 207-220, Schandler, pp. 290-319, and Henry, pp. 186-197.

74. *The Pentagon Papers*, IV, p. 548.

75. Message, MAC 02951, Westmoreland to Wheeler, 2 March 1968, #30 History File, 1-31 March 1968 (I), Box 16, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

76. Interview with Paul Warnke, 12 August 1970, quoted in Henry, pp. 94-95; Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal," p. 611. Maxwell Taylor also indicated that no new strategy was considered. See Taylor, pp. 385-386.

77. Quoted in Schandler, p. 116.

78. "Notes on Westmoreland-Henry Conversations," Miles Papers; Interview with Westmoreland, 20 August 1970, quoted in Henry, pp. 47-48.

79. On this last possibility, see Rostow Memo for the President, 14 February 1968, "Relations between the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Aides Files, Memos to the President-Rostow, Vol. 62, NSF, LBJL, which quotes the JCS as arguing: "The Joint Chiefs of Staff have not recommended sending troops into Laos. Neither have they recommended attacking the sanctuaries in Cambodia."

80. "Origins of Post-Tet Plans," p. 16.

81. Westmoreland's account of his actions during this period actually portrays them in terms of "a senior military commander's contribution to a policy reappraisal . . . underway at the highest levels of government." See "Origins of Post-Tet Plans," p. 28.

82. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982) and Palmer, *The 25-Year War*. A briefer explication of the same argument is General William E. DePuy, "What We Might Have Done and Why We Didn't Do It," *Army*, February 1986, pp. 23-40. For an excellent review essay, see Gary R. Hess, "The Military Perspective on Strategy in Vietnam: Harry Summers's *On Strategy* and Bruce Palmer's *The 25-Year War*," *Diplomatic History*, Winter 1986, pp. 91-106.

83. Palmer, pp. 182-186; Summers, pp. 170-171, 104. For an earlier and different version of the Palmer strategy, see Summers, "Defense without Purpose," p. 17.

84. For a discussion of these and related issues, see Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale Brown, eds., *Assessing the Vietnam War* (Washington: Perinagon-Brassey's, 1987). Westmoreland himself appreciated the operational and logistical challenges of El Paso. See Message, Westmoreland for Wheeler and Sharp, MAC 00321, 8 January 1968, "Eyes Only Message File," 1-31 January 1968, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

85. On this point, see John M. Gates, "Vietnam: The Debate Goes On," *Parameters* (Journal of the US Army War College), Spring 1984 pp. 15-25.

86. General William DePuy has estimated as many as seven divisions would be necessary to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail effectively. See "What We Might Have Done And Why We Didn't Do It," pp. 36-39.

87. Talking Paper, 12 August 1969, "The World Situation Dec 67-Feb 68 versus the U.S. Army's Capability to React," #29 History File (II), 1-29 February 1968, Box 16, Westmoreland Papers, LBJL.

88. John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Univ. Press of America, 1985), pp. 54-56, 201.

89. On the abandonment of the Wise Men, see "Summary of Notes of Meeting, March 26, 1968 - 3:15 p.m.," Meeting with Special Advisory Group, Cabinet Room, 26 March 1968 folder, Box 2, Meeting Notes File, LBJL. See also, Isaacson and Thomas, pp. 676-706, esp. pp. 678, 699 and Schandler, pp. 256-265.

90. Memo for the President, 21 March 1968, Meeting on Fiscal policy, March 20, 1968—2:52 p.m. folder, Box 2, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings File, LBJL. For the McNamara figure, see Henry McPherson's Notes, Meeting of Advisers on Vietnam, 27 February 1968, Box 2, Meeting Notes File, LBJL.

91. Burton I. Kaufman, "Foreign Aid and the Balance-of-Payments Problem: Vietnam and Johnson's Foreign Economic Policy," in Robert A. Divine, ed., *The Johnson Years: Volume Two, Vietnam, the Environment, and Science* (Lawrence, Kans.: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1987), p. 88.

92. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, pp. 314-319.

93. David Calleo, "The United States in the 1960s: Hegemon in Decline," paper presented at the Third United States Military Academy History Symposium, West Point, New York, April 1988, in author's possession; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, p. 406.

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