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Introduction by Lloyd Gardner

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Introduction by Lloyd Gardner, Emeritus, Rutgers University

In *Westmoreland's War*, Gregory Daddis has set out to fill in one of the blank spots in the history of the Vietnam War – the strategy that General William Westmoreland formulated to preserve the government that the United States had created out of the failed French effort to restore France's colonial empire in Southeast Asia. From the time that President Dwight Eisenhower described the situation in April 1954 as a long row of dominoes falling across Southeast Asia, and ultimately leading to Japan, American policymakers had elevated a 'Communist' victory in Indochina to the undoing of its efforts to manage the de-colonization process. Putting the stakes that high guaranteed a political bloodbath at home should Eisenhower's successors fail in efforts to 'save' Vietnam. The struggle inside Indochina to find a stable regime proved to be the greatest challenge, however, for both political and military leaders. Indeed, it was that struggle which shaped the debates inside successive administrations and produced a series of 'blame game' scenarios long before the fall of Saigon in 1975.

The blame game started early. The first of these scenarios came at the end of World War II when experts in the State Department divided over whether to attempt to deal with the rising force Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh represented or to stick with French attempts to find a substitute for formal colonialism. That debate pitted Europeanists against Asian experts. Since the United States needed France more – at least at the outset of the Cold War – the Europeanists won. But Americans were wont all through the early postwar years to blame the French for losing Indochina.

Then, after the 1954 Geneva Conference that led to a ceasefire and accords to resolve the civil war between North and South Vietnam, those who argued for supporting President Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon in his early struggles to defeat the various political and religious 'sects' won out over those who had severe doubts about where unstinting support for the aloof figure in a white suit would lead. Diem's American 'advisor,' Colonel Edward Lansdale, assured Washington that --properly guided -- Diem would prove equal to the task. Eisenhower was out of the line of fire when the crisis came in 1963, triggered by Buddhist protests. President John F. Kennedy, who affirmed his belief in the domino 'thesis,' finally concluded he could not save both Diem and Indochina, and gave passive approval to the *coup d'état* that overthrew the first elected president of the Republic of Vietnam. The chaos that followed the *coup*, some argued then and later, ultimately destroyed any chance there might have been to save Vietnam.

President Lyndon Johnson was certainly haunted by the 'Who lost China?' accusations when he became 'the accidental president,' and vowed he would not be the man who lost Indochina. Equally so, however, he was afraid of making Harry Truman's mistake in the Korean War of provoking a massive Chinese intervention if he sent troops north into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. He described his predicament privately to friends, and even publicly on several occasions, casting himself as a man surrounded by critics who wanted him to go north, while others wanted to get out of the war. The only safe policy, he insisted, was to steer a course that would become a test of political wills as much as (or

more than) a military contest. American generals in Vietnam were thus presented with a series of boundaries within which they were supposed to devise a strategy that would demonstrate American 'credibility' to both friends and foes. In the end, the assignment proved too much, as American military and political policy simply went round and round in circles, a cycle of escalations and pauses to see if the other side was ready to cry uncle.

Westmoreland proved loyal to Johnson, to a fault – submerging his own doubts when the White House called upon him to back up its assurances to the nation that the war was going well. At a White House news conference in July 1967, the general said that the “statement that we are in a stalemate is complete fiction. It is completely unrealistic. During the past year tremendous progress has been made” (88). Part of the trouble was that political leaders believed the words they had put in the general’s script. While it was true Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was already among the doubters -- and had commissioned the study that became known as the Pentagon Papers to see where American policy had gone wrong -- only a year or so earlier he had responded to a comment by newsman Sander Vanocur in similar terms. During a briefing on one of his fact finding tours, Vanocur asked McNamara whether Vietnam was a bottomless pit. McNamara shot back, ‘Mr. Vanocur, every pit has its bottom.’

When Saigon fell in 1975, the ‘blame game’ resumed in full force. It has never ended – in large part because it is crucial to interpretations of the present and projections about the future. At first, Henry Kissinger, who, as National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State, had presided over Vietnam policy with President Richard Nixon, and then with his successor, Gerald Ford, blamed a weak-willed Congress and the Watergate overflow for losing Vietnam. Then the focus shifted to critiques of American strategy inside Vietnam, and, inevitably, to the man in charge when it all seemed to come apart in the wake of the 1968 Tet Offensive – William C. Westmoreland.

The basic charge leveled against Westmoreland has been that he ignored the principles of counterinsurgency, and was stuck in a search-and-destroy mode, labeled attrition, while failing to understand that in this ‘new’ kind of war, simply killing great numbers of the enemy was not enough. Gregory Daddis argues that it is time to abandon that reductionist picture of a very complicated war. In a book that takes a long look at ‘Westy’s’ war, Daddis examines the implementation of Westmoreland’s strategy, including the actions and outlooks of his subordinates as well – making use of papers written at the Army War College by students engaged in the process of evaluating strategy, as well as the more familiar government archives, memoirs, and secondary sources others have researched. He finds that Westmoreland was well aware of the arguments being put forward by the ‘Green Beret’ counterinsurgency strategizers. Furthermore, he points out, Westmoreland was the first commander to share responsibilities with a political ‘commissar,’ Robert Komer, who headed the CORDS program (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) mandated by President Johnson in an effort to win the war by economic development.

Indeed, even before Vietnam, Westmoreland was the West Point Commander who oversaw changes in the curriculum to emphasize the very points his critics have accused him of neglecting. He even helped David Galula, the French theorist, later recognized as “the U.S.

Army's patron saint of counterinsurgency' secure a position at Harvard University's Center for International Affairs" (57). The question then, it would seem, becomes whether his 'education' at West Point carried over to Vietnam. The reviewers disagree sharply on this key point.

All through the American war in Vietnam, however, there loomed another question: Did bringing security to an area also mean it would be loyal to Saigon? Besides the boundaries placed on Westmoreland by President Johnson, were there invisible limits imposed on the American strategy by the ethnic divisions in Vietnamese society? As Daddis writes, there was great suspicion in the countryside that Saigon – and whoever ruled in Saigon – was the inevitable inheritor of French attitudes toward the 'peasants.' The focus on Westmoreland's supposed fatal flaws may lead, moreover, to an exaggeration of the brilliance of enemy military and political leaders, for if one is to blame Westmoreland's generalship for the 'loss' of Vietnam, doesn't part of the argument become involved in an unfavorable comparison with the other side's generals? And that leads to a final question posed by Daddis: Could one formulate any strategy for America to win the Vietnam War, given both the visible and invisible boundaries?

Andrew Birtle begins his review by suggesting that, yes, there are many unanswered questions remaining about the Vietnam War, questions that pertain to the conditions under which Westmoreland attempted to formulate a strategic answer. He agrees that picturing the general as a 'dolt,' who just didn't get it, is not very helpful in understanding the final outcome of the war. While he believes Daddis should have considered more carefully the contradictions in Westmoreland's heavy use of firepower in populated areas, and suggests that the General lacked skills as a 'strategic communicator' that were particularly evident after the Tet offensive, he concludes that factors beyond the General's control doomed the American military effort. These factors included the White House's decision not to shut down the enemy supply routes in Cambodia and Laos, and the inability of the Saigon regime to establish its legitimacy, but even more than these, the assumption that American military power could determine the outcome in a war of decolonization. In Vietnam, at least, that proved not to be the case.

History is important, writes Birtle, and this book comes at the right time. The Westmoreland narrative, he argues, provided a foundation for post-Vietnam army doctrine, as counterinsurgency came to mean learning from that General's supposed mistakes. That narrative has provided a false sense of confidence, he contends, about the way to wage war in later conflicts. "It is a truism that understanding of the past evolves over time," and Daddis's book may well contribute to the better formulation of military strategy.

But Edwin Moise somewhat surprisingly finds that Daddis's effort to refute Westmoreland's critics is, at the end, unconvincing, and vastly overstates their positions as claiming that the General by himself was responsible for losing the war. He sees Daddis arguing with a straw man of his own creation. It is easy enough, writes Moise, to show that Westmoreland was familiar with pacification as a key part of counterinsurgency, but to prove the author's point that the General gave it proper attention when it came to implementation is another matter. "At this he is less successful." While it is true, moreover,

that the American military had some familiarity with counterinsurgency before Vietnam, Moise believes that Daddis has also exaggerated that knowledge and understanding. Moise thinks that part of the problem is Daddis's willingness to accept General Westmoreland's various statements and reports about how much of his effort entailed actual pacification efforts. At one point, for example, the American commander said that 40% of his efforts went into pacification. But since that seemed to include protecting roads and bases, how much of it actually involved serious pacification? Moise cites the example of the Marine CAP program for putting mixed forces of U.S. and Vietnamese in villages to maintain security, a program that many regarded as particularly effective, but that Westmoreland sought to limit, and otherwise disregarded evidence of its success.

If Westmoreland was serious, finally, about pacification, why did he not place more emphasis on language training of U.S. officers? As for attrition, was it really the worst strategy? Daddis might have been better off defending Westmoreland on that ground, Moise concludes, because it was far more reasonable "than many of the things that American leaders believed about Vietnam."

Andrew Wiest returns to Birtle's points and is far more favorable to Daddis's arguments. He suggests that Westmoreland's concern with pacification efforts probably did not "seep down" to all his commanders, and the desire of most officers was to fight a "normal" war. He finds that Westmoreland adapted his strategy as the war continued, and was able to cooperate with Washington's Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program in important ways. He broadens the issue of the 'blame game' by referring to the history of World War I, and the reputation of Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig to remind readers that the Westmoreland controversy is not unique. Like Birtle, Wiest argues that Daddis's book is not an apology for Westmoreland, but sets us on the path for exploration of questions that have gotten by-passed because of the obsession with failed generals, and savior generals. All three reviewers do agree that Westmoreland and his team understood all too well that no strategy could succeed absent an effective government in Saigon. That in the end, as John Kennedy said, it was their war to win or lose. It was hard, however, for Kennedy to accept the outcome if it meant being blamed for losing Vietnam. The die was cast when he opted for a *coup*. General Westmoreland arrived in Vietnam against that background.

Participants:

Gregory A. Daddis is an Academy Professor in the Department of History where he currently serves as the head of the American history division. A West Point graduate, he is a veteran of both Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. He received his MA from Villanova University and holds a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is author of *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy,

including "Safe For Democracy," "Approaching Vietnam," and "Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam." He has been president of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Affairs, and at present he is working on a book on leakers from Daniel Ellsberg to Edward Snowden. He lives in Newtown, Pa, with his wife Nancy.

Andrew J. Birtle is the chief of the Military Operations Branch at the Center of Military History where he oversees the production of the official history of the U.S. Army in the Vietnam War. He holds a doctorate in U.S. Military History from Ohio State University. He has published two books for the Army on the evolution of U.S. Army counterinsurgency doctrine. He has also published articles about the Vietnam War, including "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History*, October 2008. He is currently writing a book about U.S. Army activities in South Vietnam between 1961 and 1965.

Edwin Moise is Professor of History at Clemson University. He earned his Ph.D. in History, concentrating on modern China and Vietnam, from the University of Michigan. He is the author of *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, and is now working on a study of the Tet Offensive.

Andrew Wiest received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, Chicago and is University Distinguished Professor and Founding Director of the Dale Center for the Study of War and Society in the History Department of the University of Southern Mississippi. A widely published author, Wiest has mainly written on the Vietnam War and World War I, including: *Vietnam: A View from the Front Lines* (Oxford: Osprey, 2013); *The Boys of '67: Charlie Company's War in Vietnam* (Oxford: Osprey, 2012); *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); and *Haig: The Evolution of a Commander* (New York: Potomac, 2005). Professor Wiest is presently working on a study of the wives and families of U.S. soldiers who served in Vietnam.

Review by Andrew J. Birtle, U.S. Army Center of Military History

Fifty years after the deployment of the first U.S. combat troops to Vietnam, Americans still have much to learn about the Vietnam War. Half truths and misunderstandings clutter the historical literature, making it difficult to obtain an accurate picture of this controversial event. For if successful wars breed heroes, defeats lead societies to look for scapegoats. No one has suffered more from the witch hunt than General William C. Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. military forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968.

One of the more egregious myths about Westmoreland is that he was a dolt who single-handedly lost the war by leading an equally unimaginative U.S. Army to employ a 'strategy of attrition' based solely on killing. This contemptuous image of Westmoreland and his methods first arose in the 1960s and has remained a prevalent feature of both scholarship and popular culture ever since. An example of this literature is the recent book by Lewis Sorley, titled *Westmoreland, The General Who Lost Vietnam*.¹ But in the words of Bob Dylan's famous protest song of the 1960s, 'the times they are a-changin.' One of the leaders of this change is West Point history professor and Army Lieutenant Colonel Gregory A. Daddis, whose book *Westmoreland's War, Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* both rehabilitates Westmoreland's image and plants a stake in the heart of the distorted specter of him that has long haunted Vietnam War historiography. In the process, this thoughtful book helps to create a more balanced, objective, and ultimately, I believe, more accurate understanding of the war as a whole.

Daddis starts his book with a useful discourse on the nature of strategy. He then proceeds to examine Westmoreland's alleged incompetence in thematically oriented chapters on U.S. military strategy, operations and tactics, pacification, and assistance to the armed forces of Vietnam. Sprinkled throughout the work are discussions about Vietnam War historiography. Backed by copious endnotes marshaling many primary documents, Daddis demonstrates that contrary to legend, Westmoreland developed an intelligent and comprehensive military strategy that was consistent with U.S. national policy and President Lyndon B. Johnson's larger political agenda. Destroying the enemy, while an important part of this strategy, was but one means to the ultimate end of building a viable nation in Vietnam. Contrary to the stereotype that he was blind to any deviation from conventional soldiering, Westmoreland understood contemporary theories of counterinsurgency and nation building and tried to apply them within the sphere of his responsibility. Many of his subordinates understood counterinsurgency doctrine too, and they never ceased learning and adapting as they waged what Westmoreland had always understood would be a long and exceedingly complex politico-military conflict. Daddis argues that scholars and pundits have too often ignored these facts, producing "wildly simplistic" (xx) histories that "reduce the American experience to the point of distortion" (171). Thanks in part to this lucidly written book, these interpretations are finally giving way to a fuller and more objective understanding of General Westmoreland and his strategy.

¹ Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland, The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2011).

If Daddis is more complementary of Westmoreland than many previous authors, he does not give the General a pass. He criticizes Westmoreland's tolerance of heavy firepower and large-scale population dislocation as working against broader political objectives. Most serious of all, in the author's estimation, Westmoreland failed as a strategic communicator, and this shortcoming contributed to the backlash against the war that occurred in the wake of the Communist Tet offensive in 1968—a backlash that doomed the chance of the allies achieving a successful conclusion to the war. But by and large, Daddis exhibits satisfaction with Westmoreland and U.S. military strategy. The fatal flaws in the allied war effort lay in matters beyond the General's control—the President's refusal to take effective action against enemy infiltration routes in Laos and Cambodia, and “the inability of Saigon's leaders to fashion a political community” (144). The most fundamental error of all, however, was one that was deeply embedded in U.S. national policy, grand strategy, and doctrine—the widely shared belief that “military power, broadly defined, could achieve political objectives in post-colonial states during the Cold War era” (14). In Vietnam, at least, this proved not to be the case.

Contrary to some authors who condemn Westmoreland for ignoring one of counterinsurgency theory's cardinal tenets—population security—Daddis argues that Westmoreland appreciated its significance and worked with his South Vietnamese partners to try and obtain it. The problem was not that Westmoreland ignored population security, which was hard to maintain under Vietnam conditions, but that achieving it did not necessarily produce the presumed result of a more stable nation. An inadequate Vietnamese government, weaknesses inherent South Vietnamese society, and the ever-present influence of large enemy conventional forces that were externally based and supported, doomed the “fallacious” assumption that population security would automatically lead to political stability and a successful resolution of the conflict (134). Equally fallacious was the assumption that an external power like the United States could wield political, social, and economic programs to transform an independent, culturally alien, and troubled society that was in the midst of a serious internal conflict. “This of course,” writes Daddis, “presents an uncomfortable truth, especially for those who served, and who continue to serve, in uniform. Talented American generals can develop and implement a comprehensive politico-military strategy and still lose a war (14).”

History is important, not just for its own sake, but because conceptions of the past—be they accurate or not—often shape the decisions of later generations. This certainly has been true of Vietnam, as people have since 1975 dredged up the alleged ‘lessons’ of the war every time America has contemplated using force. One school of thought argues that the United States would have won the Vietnam War had Westmoreland and his army just followed ‘good’ counterinsurgency practices.² This school influenced the formulation of current

² John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam; Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002); Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1986); Guenther Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War, the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

Army doctrine, which predicts success if its slate of supposedly historically derived ‘best practices’—practices allegedly ignored in Vietnam—were properly applied. By demonstrating that the Army did indeed apply counterinsurgency doctrine in Vietnam and that this doctrine failed to produce victory, *Westmoreland’s War* directly challenges the unrealistic faith that some people have placed in ‘hearts and minds’-style counterinsurgency and nation building. Such a conclusion has stark ramifications for today’s soldiers operating under current doctrine. Had they better understood the Vietnam War, some American soldiers, doctrine writers, pundits, and policymakers might have approached the tasks of quelling resistance and of building viable socio-economic and political institutions in Iraq and Afghanistan with a lot more humility.

I think Daddis has produced a much-needed corrective to Vietnam War historiography. Hopefully, this will result in a more balanced appreciation of the war and of General Westmoreland in the scholarly world, the media, and ultimately the popular consciousness. But sometimes timing is everything, and in this case I think Daddis will be aided by the current milieu. It is a truism that the understanding of the past evolves over time. Sobered, if not disillusioned, by their experiences in trying to apply hearts and minds counterinsurgency and nation building theories in recent conflicts, I think today’s military and civilian veterans of the Iraq and Afghan imbroglios will be receptive to Daddis’s interpretation of the Vietnam War. A better understanding of Vietnam will thus facilitate an understanding of what occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan, and may even shape a better strategic/policy/doctrinal mix for these types of conflicts looking toward the future.

Review by Edwin Moise, Clemson University

General William Westmoreland, commander of American forces in South Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, was a polarizing figure during that period and remains one to this day. His policies have been praised by some, condemned by others. In *Westmoreland's War*, Colonel Gregory Daddis sets out to refute the critics, especially those who have charged that Westmoreland's strategy placed too much emphasis on attrition of enemy combat forces, and too little on pacification of Vietnamese villages and training of South Vietnamese government forces. He offers some important and interesting evidence, but he does not fully prove his case.

Daddis often portrays the criticisms of Westmoreland, the views to which he is responding, as having been more extreme and more widespread than they actually were. He rejects the idea "that Westmoreland almost single-handedly lost the war in Southeast Asia" (xxiv); this reviewer is not aware of a single author who has ever propounded such a notion. There are indeed those who argue that the choice of a strategy based on attrition was the main cause to the American defeat in Vietnam, but it is absurd to speak of "historians' unquestioning acceptance that attrition drove all aspects of the American military experience in South Vietnam" (93; see also xix-xx).

Daddis writes, "Most critics contend that Westmoreland gave little notice to pacification and one recent biography even dismisses the topic whole cloth" (12). The endnote identifies the biography as *Westmoreland*, by Lewis Sorley, and comments that in this book "Sorley never mentions pacification" (191 n 51). If one in fact consults Sorley's book, one finds a substantial index entry for "Pacification," citing sixteen different pages.¹

Daddis writes that "In the last 30 years, . . . Westmoreland has become a caricature, an incarnation of Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Modern Major General'" (14). His endnote cites two books, neither of which caricatures Westmoreland in such a fashion and only one of which was published in the last thirty years.

It is easy enough for Daddis to prove that Westmoreland did not completely ignore pacification, and the need to train the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). But to prove what he sets out to prove, he needs to show that Westmoreland gave not just some attention to these issues, but as much attention as they deserved. At this he is less successful.

Daddis presents some interesting and convincing evidence that the pre-Vietnam U.S. Army was more interested in counterinsurgency than many authors have suggested. But here too his claims are exaggerated. Thus he writes, "By 1956, roughly 20 percent of US Army officers had served as military advisors to foreign armies battling insurgencies" (19). In fact his source had said that 20 percent of US Army officers had served as advisors to

¹ Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), p. 383.

foreign armies, but had not said that all or even half of these had advised armies battling insurgencies.²

Daddis wisely notes that many American officers, including Westmoreland, had an exaggerated belief that establishing military security would promote the development of good civilian institutions, political and economic (35-36). But he is too willing to accept the arguments of Westmoreland and some other senior American officers that an effort to provide military security for the populated areas of Vietnam by putting American troops in and near the populated areas could not possibly succeed. They said that only by putting a lot of their forces out in the jungle, far from the populated areas, could they hope to create security in the populated areas, and thus allow pacification to succeed. For Daddis, as for Westmoreland, these arguments were an important part of the logic that reconciled Westmoreland's stated commitment to pacification with his reluctance to use his troops for pacification. A detailed analysis of these arguments might find some serious validity in them, but Daddis does not offer a careful analysis, he simply accepts these arguments at face value.

One problem with *Westmoreland's War* is that its evidence that pacification and training of the RVNAF were major elements of Westmoreland's strategy is based too much on statements by Westmoreland that he regarded these things as important. He cared enough about these things to say they were important. But did he care enough about them to devote a large portion of his resources to them? Did he care enough about them to choose them when he had to choose between competing priorities? Daddis has some discussion of what Westmoreland actually did, but it is brief and sometimes unconvincing. Take for example his statement that "In 1967, 60 percent of American units focused on offensive operations against main force units, while 40 percent spent their time on operations related to pacification and local security" (132). The 40 percent logically must include everything except offensive operations against main force units—pacification, and efforts to maintain security in Vietnamese villages, but also offensive operations against Viet Cong local and guerrilla forces, and operations mainly aimed at providing local security for American forces by guarding bases and roads. If all of these things added up to 40 percent, what was the figure for forces actually working on pacification? Five percent?

One of the most common charges against Westmoreland deals with the U.S. Marines' pacification program, the Combined Action Platoons (CAP). This put mixed units of U.S. Marines and South Vietnamese local forces into villages to establish control and security on a long-term basis. The critics argue that this was a very effective pacification program but that Westmoreland refused to permit the Marines to apply it on the large scale they would have liked, and instead required them to devote their manpower overwhelmingly to more conventional military operations. Daddis says hardly anything about the CAP program, and does not mention the pressure Westmoreland put on the Marines to limit the size of the program. Instead he makes the questionable statement that if one compares "the true

² Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006), p. 23.

nature” of Westmoreland’s own policies with the Marines’ program, “one finds more similarities than differences” (p. 80; see also p. 61).

Daddis claims that Westmoreland “realized that attrition of enemy main force units could not be achieved at the expense of pacification or counterinsurgency” (77), but he never mentions any case in which Westmoreland was willing to forego any conventional military operation in order to make personnel or resources available for pacification. Daddis includes occasional comments on the fact that devastation of Vietnamese villages by American firepower harmed pacification, and weakened political support for the South Vietnamese government, but he says little about this issue, because Westmoreland was never preoccupied with it, as he would have been if he had really believed his own statements about the vital importance of winning the political struggle for the allegiance of the Vietnamese population.

If Westmoreland had actually been serious about either pacification or training the RVNAF, he should have pushed hard to increase the number of American officers who knew the Vietnamese language, a vital element for both purposes. The reviewer has seen nothing in Daddis’s book, or indeed anywhere else, to suggest that Westmoreland ever even considered such an effort.

Daddis points out correctly, and at some length, that the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese government had more to do with the loss of the war than any policy choices made by Westmoreland. The book also offers something of an exaggeration when making the government forces look more consistently bad than they actually were.

Westmoreland really did devote his efforts much more to attrition than to pacification and to training the RVNAF. It is a pity that Daddis did not attempt to defend Westmoreland by arguing that a policy based on attrition was a reasonable one. Westmoreland was able to place a huge amount of pressure on the Communist forces. We know in hindsight that this pressure was not enough to break their will, but the expectation of Westmoreland and other American leaders that this pressure would be adequate to break the Communists’ will was not at all silly. It was indeed far more reasonable than many of the things that American leaders believed about Vietnam.

There are factual errors, mostly minor. The tactical air strikes that helped to save Lt. Col. Harold Moore’s battalion in the Battle at Landing Zone X-Ray were conducted not by B-52s but by much smaller aircraft (97). And after the fighting at Landing Zone X-Ray ended, North Vietnamese General Chu Huy Man did not decide he had had enough, and withdraw his forces into Cambodia (98). The day after the fighting ended at X-Ray, General Man’s forces ambushed American troops at Landing Zone Albany, farther from the Cambodian border than X-Ray, and killed twice as many Americans there as they had killed at X-Ray. Daddis’s statement that the political struggle in Hanoi in 1967 “resulted in purges and arrests of countless cabinet ministers and high-ranking Politburo officers” (139) is seriously exaggerated but also very unclear; what would a “Politburo officer” have been? This reviewer is unaware of any cabinet minister or Politburo member who was arrested in this affair, although there was at least one deputy minister.

Generations of received wisdom and academic scholarship were in complete agreement. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig had been a failure and even a ‘Butcher and Bungler’ in his leadership of the British Expeditionary Force during the Great War. John Terraine’s 1963 publication of *Douglas Haig, the Educated Soldier*, though, startled the academic world with its heretical portrayal of Haig as a solid commander who struggled against insoluble strategic difficulties, which touched off the ‘great Haig debate.’¹ Was Haig merely a butcher, or was there something more, something historically complex? The historiographical struggle went on for years, with the historical team of Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson blaming the Haig debate for mirroring the history of Britain in the Great War in “its ridiculously protracted adolescence.”²

The historiography of the Vietnam War has followed a very similar trajectory, with a perhaps inordinate amount of the battle for the historical soul of that conflict focused squarely on the strong shoulders of General William Westmoreland. Much of the existing historical orthodoxy of the Vietnam War agrees that Westmoreland was more a part of the problem than he was part of the solution, since he focused his sights on a strategically misguided application of the ‘Army Concept’³ of conventional warfare in Vietnam. Shoving the South Vietnamese military to one side, Westmoreland was a true believer in American military power. A blinkered reliance on firepower and attrition, and an institutionalized failure to learn from his mistakes, also blinded Westmoreland to the possibilities inherent in strategies of counterinsurgency and pacification.⁴

The historian Lewis Sorley took the arguments over Westmoreland’s culpability in America’s defeat in Vietnam to their greatest heights, arguing that Westmoreland’s laser focus on attrition and body count was largely to blame. Sorley put his judgment of Westmoreland’s performance succinctly when quoting Westmoreland’s own senior intelligence officer, General Phillip B. Davidson, “Westmoreland’s interest always lay in the big-unit war. Pacification frankly bored him.”⁵ Westmoreland’s successor General

¹ John Terraine. *Douglas Haig, the Educated Soldier* (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

² Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, “Review of Denis Winter, *Haig’s Command: A Reassessment*,” *Australian War Memorial Journal* (23, October 1993), 57. For the most thorough assessment of Haig as a ‘butcher,’ see John Laffin. *British Butchers and Bunglers of World War One*. London: Sutton Publishing, 1988.

³ Andrew Krepinevich. *The Army and Vietnam* (New York: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 5. Examples, though, of Westmoreland’s misguided reliance on attritional strategies can be found in very nearly every general history of the Vietnam War.

⁴ For the case that the U.S. army was slow to learn during the Vietnam War see, John Nagl. *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005).

⁵ Lewis Sorley, “The Conduct of the War in Vietnam,” in Andrew Wiest ed., *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land* (Oxford: Osprey, 2006), 178. Sorley has published widely on the issue of dichotomy between the

Creighton Abrams, though, very nearly turned the war around with his 'One War' strategy, which focused more on pacification and gave greater agency to the South Vietnamese. Sorley's arguments were so powerful that they resonated far beyond the small world of Vietnam War historiography, informing a modern U.S. military devotion to the ideas of counterinsurgency and the concept that 'savior generals' could swoop in and rescue failed wars.⁶

Gregory Daddis is Vietnam War historiography's John Terraine. Although a number of scholars who have questioned Abrams's supposed role as a 'savior general', few have sought historically to take on the thankless task of rehabilitating Westmoreland.⁷ While *Westmoreland's War* is not an apology, Daddis is able to look past Westmoreland the flawed commander. In seeking to define the meeting point between the U.S. strategic mindset of the time and the political and military realities of the Vietnam War, Daddis attempts to define Westmoreland and his strategy as part of their historical era. As such *Westmoreland's War* calls for both a more complete understanding of the military possibilities for U.S. forces in Vietnam and for a reinterpretation of many of the most basic assumptions about Westmoreland's tenure as Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).

Instead of describing the Cold-War military as one that was wedded to the 'Army Concept,' Daddis portrays it as being prepared "for war along a 'spectrum of conflict' that ranged from the conventional to the unconventional" (21). Armed with this intellectual background, but within geopolitical and force limits imposed by the Johnson administration, Westmoreland "was not the unthinking officer who is presented so contemptuously in many history books" (xx). Instead Daddis offers that "Westmoreland, and the organization he led, not only learned and adapted in Vietnam but also developed a comprehensive strategy best suited for the multifaceted environment in which the U.S. army was operating" (14).

Daddis's arguments are quite compelling, utilizing a mountain of archival evidence to prove that Westmoreland, far from being an attrition and body-count automaton, gave considerable strategic thought and weight to important matters of pacification and the role of the South Vietnamese military. Attrition certainly remained a part of Westmoreland's

commands of Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams in Vietnam, most notably in *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2011); *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and the Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999); and *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

⁶ See Colonel Gian Gentile's *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013) for the detailed connections between Sorley's Vietnam thesis and the U.S. military experience in Iraq.

⁷ See Gentile's *Wrong Turn* and James Willbanks's *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004) among others for a critique of Abrams's command.

strategy, and an important part at that, but he also retained a strong focus on the “political dimensions of revolutionary warfare” and very much understood that only a strong and effective South Vietnamese military could transform tactical victories into anything with “lasting effect” (68).

But if Westmoreland’s strategy was not the root cause of U.S. failure in Vietnam, what was? The real culprit was something much more basic, an issue that still haunts U.S geopolitics and military policy. Daddis argues that in Vietnam the U.S. and its military mistakenly

retained their faith in military force for achieving non-military aims. This conjecturing—embraced by William Westmoreland, if not all commanders in Vietnam—proved to be one of the most unfortunate preconceptions held by contemporary officers. . . . They took for granted that securing a country’s rural population would lead directly to political stability and thus social and economic progress (35-36).

Some international problems cannot be solved by military strategy, no matter how sound it may be.

Daddis makes a very strong case for moving beyond viewing Westmoreland as a modern ‘Butcher and Bungler,’ instead presenting historians with a Westmoreland who was thoughtful, thorough, and correct in his strategy. As with the very best of historical writing, *Westmoreland’s War* opens a plethora of avenues for further research. In providing proof that Westmoreland’s strategic emphasis on pacification and desire to work with the South Vietnamese military were more than just talking points, Daddis also looks at the Vietnam War on more of a tactical level. Even iconic moments of the search and destroy mantra of attrition, such as the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley (November 1965) and Operation Junction City (February-May 1967), were intrinsically linked to the war of pacification. Even the vaunted 1st Cavalry, in arguably its most bloody year of the Vietnam War, “placed equal emphasis on civic action and rural construction programs” as it did on search and destroy (98).

There is no doubt that every U.S. military unit of any size in Vietnam undertook civic action, from running medical calls for local villagers, to building schools, to adopting orphanages. Some commanders ‘got’ Westmoreland’s complex and multifaceted strategy. But a vast number of sources exist, from autobiographies to unit after-action reports, which indicate a continued tactical fascination with engaging the enemy in destructive battle. For some commanders it seems that combat remained the paramount goal, with the other elements of Westmoreland’s strategy lagging behind. Daddis admits that a disconnect existed in Vietnam, writing that

different commanders interpreted Westmoreland’s broad—some critics have argued ‘vague’—strategic and operational concepts differently. With little cohesion among commanders operating in a dispersed environment, few senior leaders agreed on the direction of the war effort (115).

If, as Daddis convincingly argues, Westmoreland’s strategy was well founded and sound,

more research is needed to see how that strategy translated to a tactical level. If there was a systemic disconnect between Westmoreland's strategic goals and the tactical implementation of those goals by his commanders in the field, this would represent a profound failure of wartime leadership.

Westmoreland's War also takes on the thorny issue of pacification, which Daddis argues did not bore Westmoreland but instead was a central part of his planning and formed a parallel war that ran alongside and informed the more traditional war. From working directly with South Vietnamese villagers to the formation of the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), Westmoreland's pacification policy was very real and well integrated into the wider U.S. strategy for the war, a fact best demonstrated by U.S. force balances in 1967 when "60 percent of American units focused on offensive operations against main force units, while 40 percent spent their time on operations related to pacification and local security" (132).

If pacification, though, was a major focus of U.S. strategy all along instead of being an Abrams's epiphany that came too late to win the war, why, then, did it fail so thoroughly? Perhaps pacification enforced by an external military power is simply impossible, no matter how well intentioned or practiced? As Daddis explains,

In a large sense, Americans in Vietnam made a fatal miscalculation. Hypotheses that the population would respect the social contract in which they turned against the insurgency after receiving services and security from the government proved false. Population control did not lead to political stability (134).

Finally Daddis turns his attention to the complex relationship between U.S. and South Vietnamese military forces. Daddis argues that, instead of simply shoving the South Vietnamese to one side in a misguided effort to win their war for them, MACV understood the critical value of the South Vietnamese in what was, after all, their war. Eschewing a combined command structure that he felt would smack too much of colonialism, Westmoreland focused his attention more on training and advising a South Vietnamese military that had been on the brink of defeat when U.S. combat forces splashed ashore in 1965.

Westmoreland, in Daddis's opinion, "never viewed the South Vietnamese as an inferior, bit-part player in the larger war" (154). While Daddis's case is quite compelling, there again seems to be a case to support a tactical disconnect. For good or ill many South Vietnamese commanders did feel marginalized, with General Ngo Quang Truong commenting, "the Americans rushed about to save the South Vietnamese house from destruction but took little interest in caring for the victims."⁸ While Daddis does understand the South

⁸ Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong. *Indochina Monographs. RVNAF and U.S. Operational Cooperation and Coordination* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1980), 172. For a fuller discussion of South Vietnamese military relations with U.S. forces see Andrew Wiest. *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

Vietnamese view that the war became “indisputably an American enterprise” (154), perhaps that view was more pervasive and damaging to Westmoreland’s war effort than he portrays.

In the final analysis, *Westmoreland’s War* is a transformative piece of history. Daddis is convincing in his argument that the traditional view of Westmoreland’s war as one of simple attrition reduces historical understanding of that critical period “to the point of distortion” (171). Clearly Westmoreland and the military of his time were much more than disciples of search and destroy and the application of U.S. firepower. Westmoreland did think. He did develop a cogent and multilayered strategy. Perhaps, given the geostrategic limitations of the time, Westmoreland’s strategy was the best available, even though it might have failed to seep down completely to all tactical levels of command.

In the end *Westmoreland’s War* offers both a historiographical corrective and a cautionary tale. Sometimes good strategies can still fail to win wars, especially messy civil wars in foreign lands. In the case of the Vietnam War Daddis’ reasoning leads to the inevitable conclusion that “It seems unlikely that any form of U.S. military support could compensate for the inherent weaknesses of a manufactured national government” (178).

Author's Response by Gregory A. Daddis, Department of History, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York

First, my sincere thanks to Tom Maddux for compiling a roundtable of scholars I have respected for a number of years. It is humbling to have your work reviewed by a group of historians who have informed your own approach to such a complicated and historically contested war. In fact, one of the intellectual rewards of studying the Vietnam War is the very contentiousness of the topic and being challenged by smart, passionate people.

I share the optimism of both Andy Birtle and Andy Wiest that some of our long-held, basic assumptions on the war are being reassessed thanks to new scholarship, especially from historians relying more and more on Vietnamese sources. The U.S. participation, however, continues to elicit sharp debate. Arguably this fact stems in part from too many American writers who still approach their topic seeking someone to blame. 'Why did the United States lose in Vietnam?' remains the starting point for numerous historians. And yet this question, despite its seeming breadth, has somewhat limited new approaches to scholarship. It has provoked historians to look for demons, for culprits in a mismanaged and mistaken war. In the process, what actually happened and why leaders made the decisions they did too often becomes lost in the quest to find fault. Thus, in *Westmoreland's War* I endeavored to reassess U.S. military strategy on its own merits, rather than solely on the outcome of a long war that, at its heart, could only be won or lost by Vietnamese themselves. Surely, any army must be judged on what it accomplishes. Yet the Vietnam War suggests gaps can exist (as in the United States' more recent overseas conflicts) between what soldiers are called upon to do and what they are capable of doing.¹

It seems best to focus my initial remarks on Edwin Moise's review, not as a matter of personal defense, but because he alone takes issue not only with my interpretation of the Vietnam War but also with my reading of the literature. I consciously approached my topic as more than just a refutation of Lewis Sorley's recent biography on Westmoreland, though I admittedly find it a flawed piece of scholarship.² In his book, which disparages the General, Sorley leaves out any countervailing evidence with the potential to undermine his central argument that "Westmoreland's tenure in Vietnam had gravely damaged the war effort."³ While all historians must make choices in telling their stories, Sorley's choices altered the

¹ On this point, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 133.

² Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

³ Gregory A. Daddis, "On Lewis Sorley's *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*," *Parameters* (Autumn 2011): 99-105. On Sorley's selective use of facts to support his thesis, see Andrew J. Birtle, "In Pursuit of the Great White Whale: Lewis Sorley's *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*," *Army History* (Summer 2012): 26-31.

very storyline of American participation in Southeast Asia. If I overstated my case that some historians have placed blame for a lost war squarely on the former commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), I refer to the subtitle of Westmoreland's most recent biography—"The General Who Lost Vietnam." Having served on a conference panel with Sorley, I believe I am safe in stating the author stands by his claim that Westmoreland, more than any other senior American official, lost the war inside South Vietnam.

Nor do I think it "absurd" that many historians of the Vietnam War have accepted, without considering its accuracy, the word "attrition" as the predominant descriptor of American military strategy in South Vietnam during the crucial years of 1964 to 1968. Among some of the more popular works on the war, offerings from the likes of Dave R. Palmer, Andrew Krepinevich, John Nagl, and Jeffrey Record have all characterized Westmoreland's strategy as a simple and misguided pursuit of attriting the enemy.⁴ In most of these interpretations, it is the body count that reigns supreme when it comes to the strategic approach of the United States. Even in the much admired *Dereliction of Duty*, H.R. McMaster claimed that "Westmoreland's 'strategy' of attrition in South Vietnam, was, in essence, the absence of a strategy."⁵ Thus, it was my hope in reassessing this strategy that I might prompt both scholars and students of the war to scrutinize a word that has come, in my mind, to reductively characterize a much more comprehensive American approach.

In my opinion, this strategic approach has been misconstrued in much of the literature on the Vietnam War. As Wiest notes, the existing historical orthodoxy tends to accept, almost as a matter of faith, that the U.S. Army relied on firepower above all else in a war where political matters often trumped military ones. Though pacification might be cited in overviews on the conflict, rarely is MACV's approach to the nonmilitary side of the war dissected. The creation and work of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program too often remains an afterthought.⁶ Without question there remained throughout the war a gap between aspirations and reality when it came to linking the South Vietnamese population to the Saigon government. But surely more work needs to be done on the American-sponsored pacification effort.

⁴ Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, Ca.: Presidio Press, 1978). Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002). Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1998).

⁵ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), 333.

⁶ Two notable exceptions are Frank L. Jones, *Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2013) and Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

Here, a few points on my historical methodology might be in order, for this is why, I believe, I came to such a different conclusion on American strategy than so many of my predecessors. What I tried to accomplish in *Westmoreland's War*, as best as possible, was linking White House-level conversations and documents to Westmoreland's guidance for his subordinates and then following the MACV commander's messages down to the unit level. Clearly, taking Westmoreland's view at face value better suits a hagiographer than a historian. As Birtle notes, I tried not to "give the general a pass." Still, in my view, most secondary works on Vietnam—to include the ones highlighted above—embrace the cliché of an 'attrition strategy' without actually reviewing what units did on a daily basis in the field. Thus, the tropes of 'body count' and 'search-and-destroy' have become inaccurate shorthand for the larger American experience in Vietnam.

For these reasons, I undertook a deeper review of unit after-action reports (AARs) which present a much different picture than that of an army hard-wired for little more than killing. In Chapter 4, "On Bewildering Battlefields," I follow a detailed unit-by-unit approach in my analysis of how commanders implemented Westmoreland's strategic concepts. Such a methodology allowed me to compartmentalize a wide-ranging strategy—a necessity given the mosaic nature of the war in Vietnam—and compare how different officers attempted to fulfill Westmoreland's comprehensive strategy. Given that the war often unfolded in such a decentralized manner, getting to the truth of how the U.S. Army operated still poses challenges for any historian. Therefore, I think Wiest's point is extremely worthwhile. There is much more to be done in linking strategic concepts to how units operated across South Vietnam's diverse geographic and political landscape. Examining mission orders, AARs, and commanders' message traffic clearly show an army struggling to balance fighting with pacifying.

So too did the U.S. Marines operating in Vietnam. Evaluating the USMC approach within the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam reveals more similarities to than differences with Westmoreland's policies. New scholarship on the marine combined action program (CAP) bears this out. According to John Southard, Lewis Walt, the III Marine Amphibious Force Commander from 1965 to 1967, "focused on pacification in the rural areas, small-unit counterinsurgency operations in the countryside, and large-unit operations against enemy main force units."⁷ As I offered in *Westmoreland's War*, such an approach clearly reflected the priorities of the MACV headquarters. Even Southard, a sharp critic of Westmoreland's strategy of 'attrition,' found no evidence that MACV's commander interfered with either the resourcing or conduct of the marine combined action program. Moreover, a review of CAP after-action reports suggests a program far less effective against the insurgency's political infrastructure than had been hoped for by USMC leaders.

As with any other source, I tried not to take any AARs on face value, but rather matched them with some of the more insightful memoirs, officer debriefing reports (some were

⁷ John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 130. My recent review of Southard can be found at <http://www.miwsr.com/2014-124.aspx>.

painfully honest, others not so much), command conference notes, and contemporary articles in professional journals such as *Military Review*. I also found useful commentary from some of the more perceptive journalists (like James ‘Scotty’ Reston) who spent a great deal of time in Vietnam. What I concluded was that most U.S. units tried to implement a strategy much more encompassing than simply killing the enemy. Most units I researched implemented civic action or other nonmilitary programs. The efficacy of those programs varied widely, as one might expect in such a decentralized war. When I found AAR comments like ‘These operations were successful in turning the population to our side,’ I took a skeptical view and did my best to compare them to provincial studies that rely heavily on Vietnamese sources -- David Elliott’s *The Vietnamese War* being an excellent example.⁸ To me, this holistic approach to the documentary evidence was the best way to substantiate estimates that U.S. programs were working. In many cases they were not, in large part because, at root, the Vietnam War was a Vietnamese war, not an American one.

Based on this methodological approach, the conclusion I came to was that most American units did their best to implement a comprehensive strategy but that comprehensiveness actually worked against the attainment of American political objectives. Too often U.S. agencies across Vietnam were working at cross purposes with one another. And too often Americans were their own worst enemies. We cannot, and should not, discount the fact that many U.S. units took a heavy-handed approach in their attempts to balance destruction of enemy forces with construction of a South Vietnamese nation. Still, I do not believe that this inability to find balance supports conclusions that US Army officers did not learn from their experiences or try to improve upon their tactics and techniques, both military and nonmilitary. Thus, it is my contention that Westmoreland did not fail in Vietnam because of a narrow conception of attrition, but rather because he, along with so many other Americans of the day, placed too much faith in their capacity to transform South Vietnamese society. Thus, I agree wholeheartedly with Andy Birtle. There is valuable perspective here about the faith in and limits of American power overseas, especially in an era exemplified by wars of decolonization and national liberation.

At the risk of quibbling with some of the “factual errors” Moise finds in my work, I relied on what I believed were the most reliable sources for providing an accurate accounting of the war itself. According to the official U.S. Air Force history of the Vietnam War, for instance, B-52s were in fact used during the November 1965 Ia Drang campaign. As the official historian John Schlight has written, “Westmoreland used the B-52s in daily strikes against the ridge lines of the Chu Pong and used the tactical planes against the attacking North Vietnamese closer to the American positions. Two-kilometer by three kilometer grids were drawn over the map of the battle area, and the B-52s hit 3 of these on the 17th and 2 more each 24 hours

⁸ David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*, concise ed. (Armonk, N.Y., London: M.E. Sharpe, 2003, 2007).

thereafter. By the time of their last mission over the valley on the 22d, the bombers had flown 96 sorties and dropped close to 5,000 bombs on enemy positions and supply routes.”⁹

Finally, my discussion of the internal power struggle within the Hanoi Politburo relied on the recent, and highly regarded, work of Lien-Hang Nguyen.¹⁰ While I should not have used the word “officers” in my short accounting of the 1967 arrests, I do not think it is an exaggeration in stating there was a major struggle within Party leadership during a year when most observers believed the war to be mired in stalemate. According to Nguyen, the July arrests included Hoang Minh Chinh and several others (professional and low-ranking Party members), while the October arrests included the most well-known individuals—Vo Nguyen Giap’s Dien Bien Phu staff who were involved in military planning for 1968 and Ho Chi Minh’s personal secretary. The December arrests numbered the highest, more than 100, even if high-ranking members were not detained. In short, leaders in Hanoi, Saigon, and Washington all were engaged in serious discussions about military strategy and the course of the war on the eve of the 1968 Tet offensive.¹¹

Perhaps it is best to conclude by returning to Wiest’s call for further research and Birtle’s hope for history facilitating a better understanding of our current world. We still have much to learn from Vietnam, a conflict that indeed can inform America’s ‘small wars’ in the early twenty-first century. Yet for history to be relevant, it must also move beyond long-held assumptions about the utility of military force abroad. Perhaps a commander other than William Westmoreland would have made greater inroads against the southern insurgency and the external threat posed by the North Vietnamese army. Given the comprehensiveness of U.S. strategy at the time, I find such a proposition unconvincing. Yet any counterfactual alteration of battlefield tactics or command emphasis seems beside the point. Perhaps Vietnam remains most useful as a case study by demonstrating how some grand strategic questions simply cannot be answered by wielding American military power abroad.

⁹ John Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam: The Years of the Offensive, 1965-1968* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1999), 105.

¹⁰ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

¹¹ Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 105-106. The specific number of arrests is cited in Nguyen’s email to author, 8 December 2014.