

U.S. General Considered Nuclear Response in Vietnam War, Cables show

By David E. Sanger

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/06/world/asia/vietnam-war-nuclear-weapons.html>



President Johnson with Gen. William Westmoreland in South Vietnam in 1967. Credit: Yoichi Okamoto/Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library

WASHINGTON — In one of the darkest moments of the Vietnam War, the top American military commander in Saigon activated a plan in 1968 to move nuclear weapons to South Vietnam until he was overruled by President Lyndon B. Johnson, according to recently declassified documents cited in a new history of wartime presidential decisions.

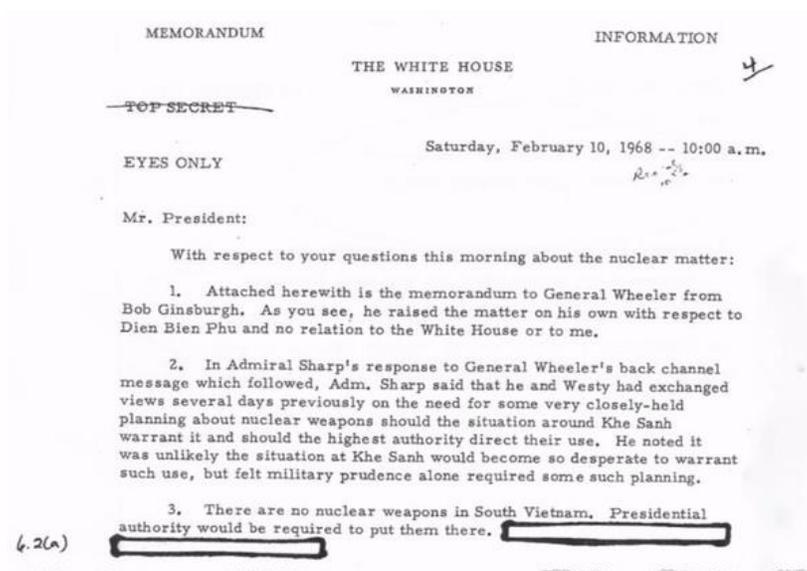
The documents reveal a long-secret set of preparations by the

commander, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, to have nuclear weapons at hand should American forces find themselves on the brink of defeat at Khe Sanh, one of the fiercest battles of the war.

With the approval of the American commander in the Pacific, General Westmoreland had put together a secret operation, code-named Fracture Jaw, that included moving nuclear weapons into South Vietnam so that they could be used on short notice against North Vietnamese troops.

Johnson's national security adviser, Walt W. Rostow, alerted the president in a memorandum on White House stationery.

The president rejected the plan, and ordered a turnaround, according to Tom Johnson, then a young special assistant to the president and note-taker at the meetings on the issue, which were held in the family dining room on the second floor of the White House.



The White House national security adviser, Walt W. Rostow, alerted President Lyndon B. Johnson of plans to move nuclear weapons into South Vietnam on the same day that Gen. William C. Westmoreland had told the American commander in the Pacific that he approved the operation.

"When he learned that the planning had been set in motion, he was extraordinarily upset and forcefully sent word through Rostow, and I think directly to Westmoreland, to shut it down," Mr. Johnson said in an interview. He said the president's fear was "a wider war" in which the Chinese would enter the fray, as they had in Korea in 1950.

"Johnson never fully trusted his generals," said Mr. Johnson, who is of no relation to the president. "He had great admiration for

General Westmoreland, but he didn't want his generals to run the war."

Had the weapons been used, it would have added to the horrors of one of the most tumultuous and violent years in modern American history. Johnson announced weeks later that he would not run for re-election. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated shortly thereafter.

The story of how close the United States came to reaching for nuclear weapons in Vietnam, 23 years after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced Japan to surrender, is contained in "Presidents of War," a coming book by Michael Beschloss, the presidential historian.

"Johnson certainly made serious mistakes in waging the Vietnam War," said Mr. Beschloss, who found the documents during his research for the book. "But we have to thank him for making sure that there was no chance in early 1968 of that tragic conflict going nuclear."

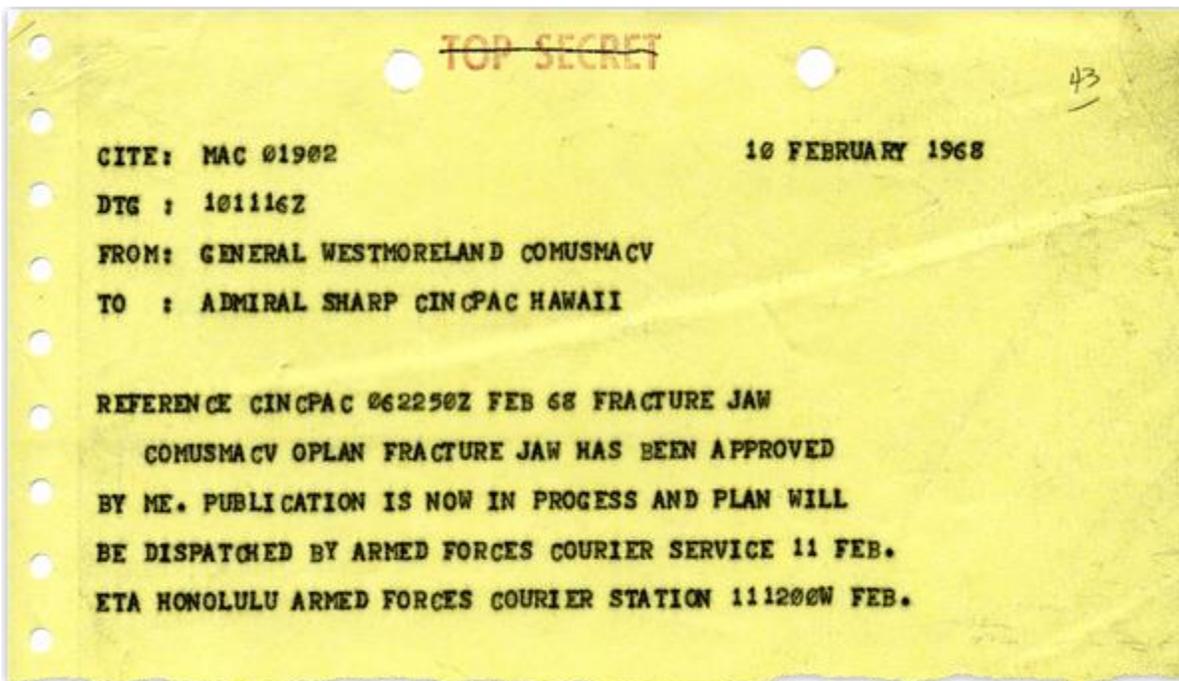
The new documents — some of which were quietly declassified two years ago — suggest it was moving in that direction.

With the Khe Sanh battle on the horizon, Johnson pressed his commanders to make sure the United States did not suffer an embarrassing defeat — one that would have proved to be a political disaster and a personal humiliation.

The North Vietnamese forces were using everything they had against two regiments of United States Marines and a comparatively small number of South Vietnamese troops.

While publicly expressing confidence in the outcome of the battle at Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland was also privately organizing a group to meet in Okinawa to plan how to move nuclear weapons into the South — and how they might be used against the North Vietnamese forces.

"Oplan Fracture Jaw has been approved by me," General Westmoreland wrote to Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr., the American commander in the Pacific, on Feb. 10, 1968. (The admiral was named for the Civil War general and president, who was married to an ancestor.)



The planned operation "Fracture Jaw" to move nuclear weapons into South Vietnam was to be set in motion under this Feb. 10, 1968, notice by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commander of American forces in Vietnam. The plan did not last long.

That day, Mr. Rostow sent an "eyes only" memorandum to the president, his second in a week warning of the impending plan.

Two days later, Admiral Sharp sent an order to "discontinue all planning for Fracture Jaw" and to place all the planning material, "including messages and correspondence relating thereto, under positive security."

~~TOP SECRET~~, SENSITIVE

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CITE: NONE

12 FEBRUARY 1968

DTG: 120242Z

FROM: ADM SHARP, CINCPAC HAWAII

TO: GEN WESTMORELAND COMUSMACV SAIGON

GEN RYAN CINCPACAF HAWAII

GEN BEACH CINCUSARPAC HAWAII

ADM HYLAND CINCPACFLT HAWAII

LGEN KRULAK CG FMFPAC HAWAII

INFO: GEN WHEELER CJCS WASH DC

LGEN UNGER CG USARVIS

FRACTURE JAW

1. DISCONTINUE ALL PLANNING FOR FRACTURE JAW.
2. PLACE ALL PLANNING MATERIAL, INCLUDING MESSAGES AND CORRESPONDENCE RELATING THERETO, UNDER POSITIVE SECURITY.
3. DEBRIEF ALL PERSONNEL WITH ACCESS TO THIS PLANNING PROJECT THAT THERE CAN BE NO DISCLOSURE OF THE CONTENT OF THE PLAN OR KNOWLEDGE THAT SUCH PLANNING WAS EITHER UNDERWAY OR SUSPENDED.
4. SECURITY OF THIS ACTION AND PRIOR ACTIONS MUST BE AIR TIGHT.

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~~TOP SECRET~~, SENSITIVE

"Discontinue all planning for Fracture Jaw," the commander for American operations in the Pacific, Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr., ordered in a terse cable dated Feb. 12, 1968. "Security of this action and prior actions must be air tight."

The incident has echoes for modern times. It was only 14 months ago that President Trump was threatening the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea — which, unlike North Vietnam at the time, possesses its own small nuclear arsenal.

There have been other moments when presidents had to consider, or bluff about, using atomic weapons. The most famous was the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the closest that the United States and the Soviet Union came to nuclear conflict.