

The War Over the Vietnam War

A new biography puts an end to the idea that we could not win

By Max Boot



General William Westmoreland, head of Military Assistance Command Vietnam, reviewing soldiers from the 1st Infantry Division in October 1966.

It is hard to think of a more compelling argument for the importance of studying history and in particular the history of the Vietnam War, which, 36 years after the fall of Saigon, continues to cast a long shadow over the American military and American politics. The contentious debate—the war over the Vietnam War—continues to divide scholars and commentators. The debates may be less rancorous than they were a few decades ago, but there is still little agreement over why the United States became involved in Vietnam, why we lost, whether defeat was inevitable, what the consequences were—and what it all means for current policy.

Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam

By Lewis Sorley

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 416 pages, \$30

Among historians, the biggest division has pitted those who think that the Vietnam War was immoral and unwinnable against those who think it was a worthy effort that could have been won with different tactics and strategy. The antiwar view has been the dominant one, expressed in such celebrated books as Frances FitzGerald's "Fire in the Lake" (1972), David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest" (1972), Michael Herr's "Dispatches" (1977), Stanley Karnow's "Vietnam: A History" (1983) and Neil Sheehan's "A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam" (1988). All share the questionable assumptions that Ho Chi Minh was not a dedicated Communist but a nationalist leading a popular liberation struggle; that his enemies in Saigon were hopelessly corrupt and illegitimate; and that American policy makers were blinded to these facts by an excess of Cold War zeal. A recent exposition of this view can be found in Gordon Goldstein's "Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam" (2008), which became a hot item in the fall of 2009 among White House aides opposed to sending more troops to Afghanistan.

The antiwar orthodoxy was challenged from the start by many military officers (and some civilian officials), but while agreeing that the war could and should have been won, the "revisionists" divided over how. Some authors claimed the United States should have been less conventional in approach, concentrating more on counterinsurgency, less on "search and destroy." Others argued that we should have been *more* conventional: invading Cambodia and Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, bombing North Vietnam more heavily, perhaps even marching on Hanoi. As Curtis LeMay, the Air Force chief of staff in the 1960s, memorably put it: "We should stop swatting flies and go after the manure pile." The "manure pile" argument—which ignored the fact that the French had occupied the entire country and still lost to a Communist insurgency with secure bases in China—found its most eloquent expression in "On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War" (1982), a surprise best seller from Col. Harry G. Summers Jr.



Westmoreland visiting a Special Forces unit in January 1966.

The rejoinder was published in 1986 by an Army major named Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. (today long-retired and president of his own think tank in Washington). In "The Army and Vietnam," he argued that the Army had no one else to blame for defeat—it had squandered public support by devoting far too many resources to fruitless big-unit operations in the sparsely populated Highlands while failing to secure the coastal areas where the bulk

of Vietnam's population lived. Mr. Krepinevich argued that less firepower should have been used and more resources devoted to "population-centric" programs such as the Combined Action Platoons, which sent small groups of Marines to live in villages and secure them in cooperation with South Vietnamese militia.

Summers (who died in 1999) is still cited by some conventionally minded Army officers, but the Krepinevich view has become more influential in the military. His critique influenced the development of the counterinsurgency doctrine that was implemented in Iraq in 2007-08. Gen. David Petraeus (who wrote his Princeton dissertation on "The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam") was determined to implement the principles of counterinsurgency that had been ignored by his predecessors in both Iraq and Vietnam. He told his troopers to "live among the people," "patrol on foot and engage the population" and "hold areas that have been secured."

While Mr. Krepinevich was the trailblazer, in recent years his argument has been taken up and extended by Lewis Sorley, a West Point graduate, Vietnam veteran and former CIA official. In his 1999 book, "A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam," he forcefully argued that Gen. Creighton Abrams, who took over as head of Military Assistance Command Vietnam after the 1968 Tet Offensive, changed the course of the conflict for the better by moving away from big-unit sweeps. Mr. Sorley believes that the United States had essentially won the war by 1972. The "final tragedy" of his subtitle refers to the fact that Washington then abandoned South Vietnam, allowing it to fall to an armored invasion by the North in 1975.

Revisionist Views of the Vietnam War

The Army and Vietnam (1986)

By Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr.

The seminal work in the field, it dissented from the dominant view within the officer corps that politicians and the press were to blame for the U.S. defeat. Mr. Krepinevich, then a serving Army officer, bravely argued that ultimate blame lay with the Army itself, which was "neither trained nor organized to fight effectively in a counterinsurgency environment." This book was influential in shaping the "Counterinsurgency Field Manual" implemented during the 2007 "surge" in Iraq.

The Village (1972)

By Bing West

The best account of how counterinsurgency operations could and should have worked. Mr. West, himself a combat Marine, recounts the efforts of 15 Marines, working with South Vietnamese militia, to secure one village from Viet Cong attacks over two years. Such Combined Action Platoons were successful, but Westmoreland was hostile to them and refused to extend them across the country.

Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong (1997)

By Mark Moyar

A young historian who began this book while still a Harvard undergraduate, Mr. Moyar rescued the Phoenix Program and similar pacification efforts from the unwarranted opprobrium heaped on them by the antiwar movement. He shows that they were not a lawless campaign of assassination but rather a targeted, highly effective, intelligence-driven effort to root out the Viet Cong's shadow government in the South.

A Better War (1999)

By Lewis Sorley

A look at what happened in Vietnam after 1968—a period neglected in most history books. In brief, Gen. Creighton Abrams (Westmoreland's successor), Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, and pacification chief William Colby put the emphasis on securing the population, not chasing Communist formations. By the early 1970s, Mr. Sorley argues, victory had been achieved—"defined as a South Vietnam capable of

defending itself and determining its own . . . future." Washington then tossed away this hard-won achievement by refusing to back South Vietnam when it was invaded in 1975.

Why Vietnam Matters (2008)

By Rufus Phillips

Fresh out of Yale and working for the CIA, the author arrived in Saigon in 1954, when the U.S. involvement was just beginning. He helped Edward Lansdale, the legendary "Quiet American," establish a viable South Vietnamese state. In 1962, he became the U.S. mission's head of rural pacification. In this wise and modest memoir, Mr. Phillips argues that the United States did not do enough to develop the South Vietnamese state and so provide a political alternative to communism.

—*Max Boot*

Mr. Sorley, who also wrote an admiring biography of Abrams ("Thunderbolt," 1992), has now focused on the war's early years by producing a biography of Abrams's predecessor—William Childs Westmoreland. The subtitle says it all: "The General Who Lost Vietnam." This judgment flies in the face of the common view—enunciated by no less than George W. Bush and a dominant strain in the 2005 obituaries for Westmoreland—that it was the politicians (with a big assist from the news media) who lost the war. Mr. Sorley makes mincemeat of this myth. While he concedes that Lyndon Johnson was deeply involved in "actions taken *outside* South Vietnam" (such as the bombing of the North), he argues: "Within South Vietnam, the U.S. commander had very wide latitude in deciding how to fight the war. That was true for Westmoreland, and equally true for his eventual successor."

It was Westmoreland—not Lyndon Johnson or even Robert McNamara—who decided to fight a "war of attrition," sending large and cumbersome American formations to thrash through the jungle and rice paddies in search of elusive enemy units. It was Westmoreland who kept demanding more American troops and who encouraged them to fire as many artillery rounds as possible—even if they lacked specific targets. It was Westmoreland who made "body counts" the key metric of the entire war effort in the futile hope that the United States could inflict enough casualties on the Communists to make them cry "Uncle!" He did not seem to realize or care that in the process he was inflicting lesser but still considerable casualties on American forces—and that a democracy like the United States was much more casualty-averse than a one-party dictatorship like North Vietnam.

Why did Westmoreland bungle so badly? It was not, as the most extreme antiwar protesters would have it, because he was a war criminal or psychopath. Mr. Sorley shows that Westmoreland was well-intentioned and conscientious, but also dense, arrogant, vain, humorless and not too honest. Is that too harsh a judgment? You won't think so if you read all the damning assessments compiled by Mr. Sorley from the late general's associates. Air Force Gen. Robert Beckel thought that "he seemed rather stupid. He didn't seem to grasp things or follow the proceedings very well." Or Army Gen. Charles Simmons: "General Westmoreland was intellectually very shallow and made no effort to study, read, or learn. He would just not read *anything*. His performance was appalling."

Those comments were made by officers who worked closely with Westmoreland during his years as Army chief of staff—1968 to 1972—a time when "briefers were dismayed to find that Westmoreland would occupy himself during one-on-one desk-side briefings by signing photographs of himself, one after another, while they made their presentations." But the warning signs had been apparent long before. In 1964, when Westmoreland was first being considered for an assignment in Vietnam, one general privately warned that "it would be a grave mistake to appoint him": "He is spit and polish. . . . This is a counterinsurgency war, and he would have no idea how to deal with it."

Westmoreland's appointment was further validation of the Peter Principle—that eventually every employee is promoted beyond his level of competence. "Westy" was a good division commander who had compiled an impressive record in World War II and Korea. Mr. Sorley summarizes his sterling, pre-Vietnam CV: "Eagle Scout at 15, journeyer to Europe and the World Scout Jamboree, president of the high school senior class, Citadel cadet, First Captain at West Point, battalion commander at age 28, with the Presidential Unit Citation earned in combat in North Africa, full colonel at 30, then a brigadier at 38 while leading the airborne regimental combat team in Korea, major general—youngest in the Army—at 42, serving at the

right-hand of the famous Maxwell Taylor, then sent by him to command the 101st Airborne Division, on to West Point as the dashing Superintendent with the young and beautiful Kitsy and the three attractive children she had borne him, familiar then with so many greats of an earlier day—MacArthur, Eisenhower, Omar Bradley—then corps command, again with his beloved airborne, and the third star."

Alas, none of that experience prepared Westmoreland to deal with a foe that refused to stand and fight like the Wehrmacht. The North Vietnamese preferred to wear down U.S. forces with ambushes and hit-and-run raids, and Westmoreland blundered straight into their trap. By the time he was finally sent home in 1968—kicked upstairs to become chief of staff—he had been thoroughly discredited.

He spent the rest of his life fighting unsuccessfully to reclaim his reputation—often by twisting the truth. In a 1972 Washington Post article, he was quoted saying that "we had full warning that the [Tet] offensive was coming" even though Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker testified that "we had no inkling of the scope, the timing, or the targets of the offensive" and South Vietnam's top intelligence officer said that "the enemy had really achieved the element of surprise." In 1982, Westmoreland even sued CBS News for a "60 Minutes" report that claimed he had deliberately minimized estimates of enemy strength prior to Tet. (He settled out of court without getting any money from CBS.)

Mr. Sorley has stripped away Westmoreland's after-the-fact mythologizing, leaving us with a deeply unflattering portrait of an army careerist who unintentionally did much damage to an institution—and a country—that he loved dearly. "Westmoreland" is a valuable addition to the growing "revisionist" literature that shows the Vietnam War was winnable if we had fought differently—and, contra President Bush, that did not mean simply letting the generals do whatever they wanted.

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