

William Westmoreland

A RETROSPECTIVE

Press Conference, Camp Evans, April 26, 1968

BY JOHN PRADOS

In July Americans learned of the passing of General William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam during the buildup and escalation of the war in Southeast Asia, climaxing with the Tet Offensive and Battle of Khe Sanh in 1968. Seen by some as "the inevitable general" and by others as a tragic figure, Westmoreland epitomized the American drive to win—rather than settle—the Vietnam War.

When "Westy" reached Saigon in 1964 the American role in the Vietnam conflict was rapidly growing but had yet to evolve into a major combat. By the time he left in mid-1968, Vietnam had been transformed into the biggest military engagement the United States had undertaken since World War II. Between 1968 and 1972, when the Johnson and Nixon administrations moved to reduce American involvement, Westmoreland continued to preside over the action as Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army.

Gen. Westmoreland arrived in South Vietnam in January 1964 as deputy to Gen. Paul D. Harkins, who headed the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). There were about 16,000 American troops in South Vietnam. Combat duty was restricted to Special Forces, covert air units, and combat support elements such as helicopter units that worked with the South Vietnamese Army.

Westy replaced Harkins at the head of MACV in June 1964, just before the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, one step on the road to the massive expansion of the American role in the war. Washington policymakers at the time attributed the inability of the Saigon government and South Vietnamese armed forces to make much headway against the insurgency mounted by the National Liberation Front to a lack of military know-how. Gen. Westmoreland, a product of traditional American military thinking, subscribed to that view.

William Childs Westmoreland was born in Spartanburg County, South Carolina, on March 26, 1914. He was the son of a cotton mill manager who became an investment banker. His father wanted

Westy to be a banker; the son wanted nothing more than to be a soldier. Westy's great-uncle had been with Robert E. Lee at Appomattox. When he won an appointment to West Point, courtesy of James F. Byrnes, the uncle assuaged his Confederate sympathies by recollecting that Lee also had gone to the U.S. Military Academy. Having spent a year at The Citadel, Westmoreland entered West Point in 1932, graduating with the Class of 1936. That class produced several notable American generals, including Vietnam War colleagues Bruce Palmer and Creighton V. Abrams, and Gen. Benjamin O. Davis.

Young Westmoreland wanted to be an airman but failed the eye exam and ended up in the field artillery at Hawaii's Schofield Barracks. Later, at Fort Sill, he met a child, the daughter of a superior, who joked that

she would wait for him to grow up. Katharine ("Kitsy") Van Deusen looked him up after World War II and they married. Westy had gone to war as operations officer of the 34th Artillery Battalion of the 9th Infantry Division. He was sent to North Africa late in 1942 and took command of the unit in time to fight against Field Marshal Rommel in the Battle of the Kasserine Pass, during which the 28-year-old Army major won his first combat chops.

Westmoreland devised new methods for rapid movement of his artillery guns, which he employed in Sicily to help the 82nd Airborne Division, whose artillery commander, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, was greatly impressed. The 9th Division landed at Utah Beach a few days after D-Day in 1944, and Westmoreland remained with it, rising to division chief of staff. He crossed the Rhine River at Remagen Bridge on the hood of a darkened Jeep, instructing his driver how to move forward in the night. On several occasions during the war, including at Remagen, German shells and mines exploded near Westy. But he was never harmed and won medals for bravery.

After the war, Westmoreland commanded an infantry regiment (and briefly, the 71st Division) in the occupation of Germany. He went to Airborne School and commanded a paratroop regiment before serving as an instructor at the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College.

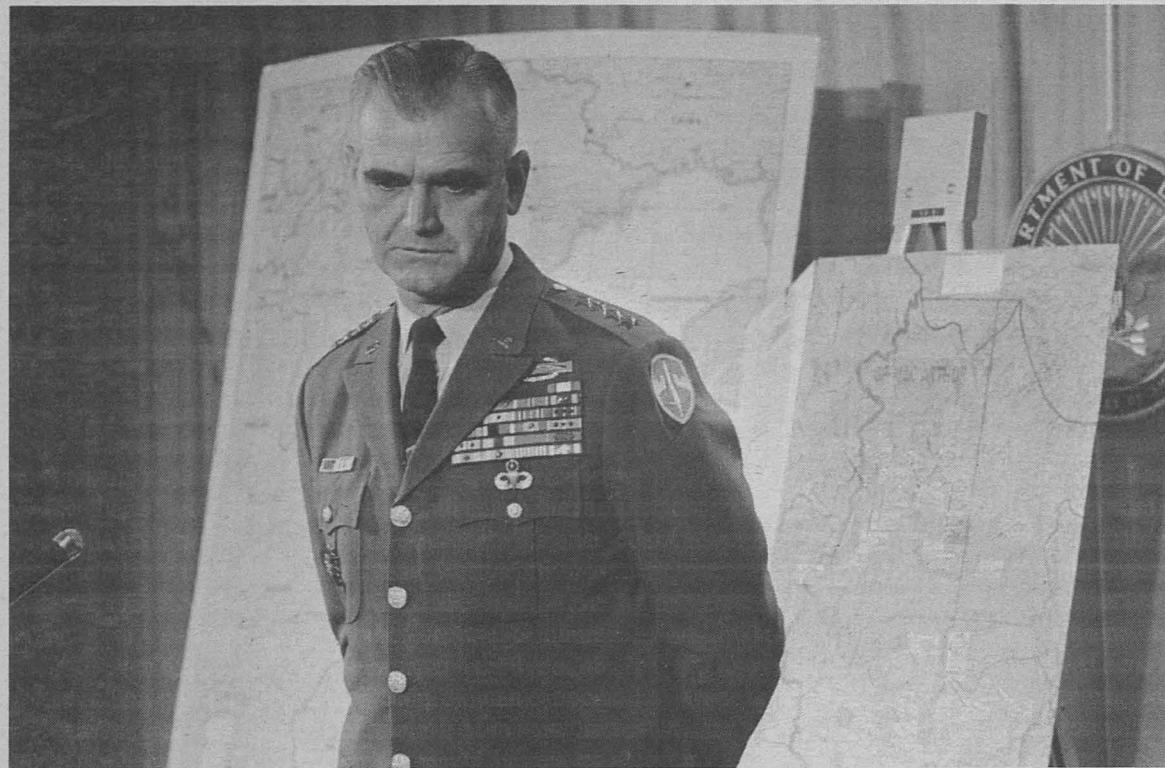
In 1952, Col. Westmoreland went to Korea as commander of the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team and led the unit in the only American parachute assault of the war. Not long afterwards, he was promoted to brigadier general. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, the Army Chief of Staff, who had met Westy in Sicily, brought him onto the Army staff to handle manpower issues. Taylor, Ridgway's successor, elevated Westmoreland to Secretary of the General Staff, a key position he held until 1958. Gen. Westmoreland commanded the 101st Airborne Division, the Corps of Cadets at West Point, and the XVIII Airborne Corps. He then went to Saigon.



Saigon, 1968

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Westmoreland taking questions on the conduct of the war at a Pentagon briefing, 1967

Gen. Westmoreland attempted to shore up political support for the Vietnam War in the spring and fall of 1967. He made visits to the United States and gave speeches and other statements that presented the Vietnam situation in an optimistic light. He also stood aside while MACV intelligence authorities manipulated the Order of Battle estimates of the enemy to convey the impression that its attrition strategy had seriously reduced the adversary.

When North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front forces launched major attacks throughout South Vietnam in the 1968 Tet Offensive, Westmoreland's statements were called into question. When, during the first days of the attack with friendly forces having barely held on to the American Embassy, Westy compared the enemy's situation to that of the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge, the credibility of MACV diminished even more. When Westmoreland used Tet as an opportunity to re-submit essentially the same troop request rejected in 1967—a massive increment of 206,000 new forces—Tet began to seem like a political defeat regardless of the heavy losses inflicted upon the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front.

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Every inch the paratrooper—a combat arm that dominated the Army at this time as carrier pilots did the Navy and heavy bomber commanders the Air Force—Westmoreland was representative of an intellectual elite of innovative, forward-thinking officers. His methods, however, proved inadequate in Vietnam. Hampered by the poor preparation of the U.S. Army to fight a counterinsurgency war, as well as his own predilection for firepower-intensive mass operations, Westmoreland tried to fight a conventional war in Vietnam while his adversary relied upon guerrilla tactics.

During the 1965-67 phase of the war, MACV under Gen. Westmoreland proposed a series of incremental force increases that were partially approved by President Lyndon B. Johnson and yielded a force level of 470,000 troops by the end of that period. In the first part of the period, the deployment of forces with fresh methods—such as the 1st Cavalry Division, which entered the Central Highlands and fought the 1965 Battle of the Ia Drang Valley—gave American operations a sense of dynamism and agility. Westy worked to emphasize that impression, packing his days with events that took him by helicopter and aircraft from the south end of the Saigon zone to the north, and from inspection to press conference to command post

deliberations within the same working day. *Time* Magazine made Gen. Westmoreland its Man of the Year in 1965.

The steady parade of reinforcements served to obscure the inability of American tactics to meet the enemy at its own level of warfare. Westmoreland's strategy of attrition did not yield visible results. His principal tactical methods—search-and-destroy operations, clear-and-hold tactics, and free-fire zones—assumed the adversary had made the transition to large-unit operations. His plans for invasions of Laos or North Vietnam to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail or isolate the Liberation Front by striking at its rear base, were not logically or politically feasible.

Westmoreland kept a continuous eye on the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, successfully countering North Vietnamese efforts to cross the Demilitarized Zone, but enabling the enemy to match American and South Vietnamese strength elsewhere. His strategy preserved a stalemate in the war by means of increasing commitments of force. When his request for some 200,000 troops in the spring of 1967 led President Johnson to cap American forces in Vietnam, the situation became increasingly fragile.

Meanwhile at Khe Sanh, in a notable application of Gen. Westmoreland's basic approach, a saturation bombing and firepower effort he called Operation Niagara succeeded in breaking the North Vietnamese siege of that key combat base. The fixation on Khe Sanh, however, helped Hanoi achieve surprise on Tet in other places in South Vietnam.

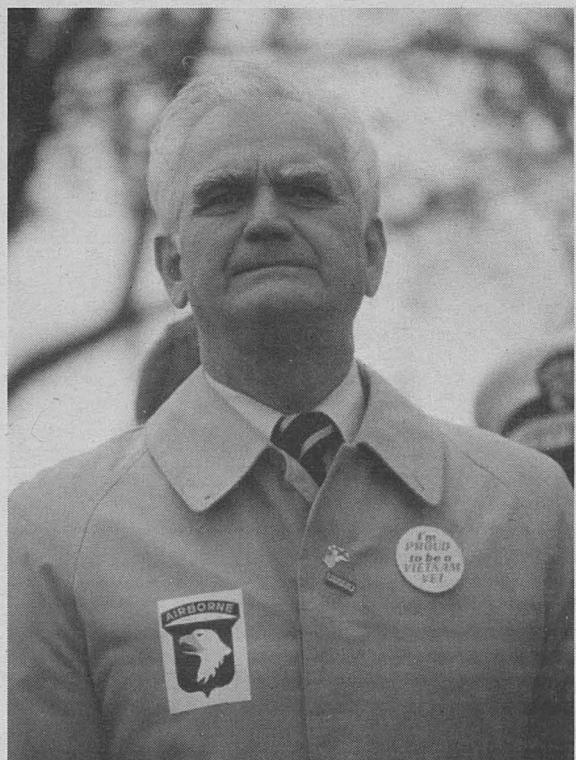
Shortly after an overland relief expedition that Westmoreland organized freed the garrison of Khe Sanh, President Johnson announced Westy's promotion to Army Chief of Staff. Westy took up the reins in Washington in July 1968. He supported his successor at MACV, Gen. Creighton Abrams, who changed tactics to a more pacification-oriented approach. Westmoreland also played significant roles in experimenting with new Army organizations, including the triple capability (armored, air, and infantry) army division, the development of what became the M-1 Abrams tank, and the end of the draft and creation of the all-volunteer army, which helped end the morale problems that became endemic in the Army during the latter stages of the Vietnam War.

Westmoreland retired at the height of the NVA's Easter Offensive in July 1972. He returned to the family home in Spartanburg, South Carolina. He published his memoir, *A Soldier Reports*, in 1976. He marched at the head of the parade of veterans and gave the keynote speech at the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982.

After a CBS Television documentary, "Vietnam: The Uncounted Enemy," alleged that Gen. Westmoreland and others had been complicit in a deliberate manipulation of the Vietnam War intelligence, the general filed a \$120 million libel suit against the television network. The suit went to trial in 1984. The suit produced evidence that manipulation had, in fact, occurred. When a former MACV intelligence chief broke ranks and furnished testimony that contradicted Westmoreland's case, he settled the suit with CBS in exchange for the network's apology.

Afterwards the general lived quietly in retirement. He died at age 91 of natural causes on July 18 at the Bishop Gadsden Retirement Home in Charleston, where he had lived for several years. ■

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Washington, 1982

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