

How Westmoreland Lost Vietnam

An Interview with Lewis Sorley, author of *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* – Part 1 of 4



Written by: [Eric Tegler](#) on November 9, 2011

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President Lyndon B. Johnson (left) at a visit in South Vietnam on Oct. 26, 1966, with Gen. William Westmoreland, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky. National Archives photo by Yoichi Robert Okamoto

For many who remember the period, Gen. William Childs Westmoreland is the face of the Vietnam War. And as commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1964-1968, his would seem to have been the perfect face aesthetically; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara once said that Westmoreland looked as if he'd come right from central casting.

Unfortunately, as Lewis Sorley – a former member of Westmoreland's staff and author of the recently released biography [Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam](#) – explains, the confidence which Westmoreland's looks inspired was ill-founded. Despite a career building upon his experience as an Eagle Scout at 15, First Captain of his West Point class, combat commander in World War II and Korea, command of the 101st Airborne Division, and a return to West Point as Superintendent, Westmoreland proved woefully inadequate as the man in charge of America's war in Vietnam and, later, of the U.S. Army.

In his book, Sorley details Westmoreland's career, his flaws and deceptions and his failure to understand the fundamental nature of the conflict in Vietnam. Westmoreland's tenure as commander of U.S. forces, the author concludes, ultimately put America's massive effort in Vietnam on a negative trajectory from which it never recovered. In this four-part interview with DMN writer Eric Tegler, Sorley discusses Westmoreland's tenure as Army Chief of Staff, how he became commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, his conduct of the war, and why he remained in command for so long.

Eric Tegler: You served with Gen. Westmoreland after he returned from Vietnam. How did you view Westmoreland at that time?

Lewis Sorley: I served 20 years as an armor officer and retired as a lieutenant colonel. I was a new lieutenant colonel at the time I served in Gen. Westmoreland's office. Within the office of the

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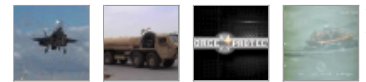
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chief of staff there was an element known as SGS [secretary of the general staff] and I was an assistant (of whom there were quite a few) to the SGS. Our role was to receive matters to be briefed to the chief of staff for his information or for a decision he would render. When it was time to brief we would be sent into his office following a very strict routine.

His desk was maybe 20 paces from the door to his office. In front of the desk there were two hard wooden chairs. When his executive officer sent us in, we were to walk directly to one of those chairs and sit down with no preliminaries. We weren't allowed to say 'Good morning, sir,' or anything like that. You would launch immediately into your case and, as soon as it was finished, would stand up and, with no parting words, march back out the door. Meanwhile the Exec is looking through a peephole in the door and, when you stand up, he sends in the next man, who you'd pass on your way out. That detail is very illustrative of the relationship that most of us had with Gen. Westmoreland – very distant, very formal, no chitchat, no personal interest whatever.

How was Westmoreland viewed by the rest of the Army at that time?

I was there for the first two-and-a-half of the four years he was chief of staff, then I went to Europe to command a tank battalion. But it was almost a joke that [Westmoreland] was on the road so much of the time. He said himself that he was determined to speak in every one of the 50 states and that he considered that his primary duty. When he'd speak he would always speak of Vietnam, usually in an exculpatory manner, trying put his service there in the best possible light.

Given the era, place, culture and institutions with which Westmoreland grew up he seems, even by 1965, to be a man of the "old Army," a figure of the past fighting a conflict for which he was not only intellectually unprepared but by experience not ready for.

It's interesting in that not only did he have the background he had but, unaccountably, he missed out on all the great stops in the Army's fantastic school system. The only formal schooling he received during his 36 years as an officer was a one-month course in mess management given by the Cooks and Bakers School in Hawaii when he was a lieutenant, and parachute school right after World War II.

“He did not go to the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and he did not go to the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks. He was rather proud of that. He said, 'I hadn't read the book and so I wasn't burdened by it.'”

He was assigned to be Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, an astounding assignment to me. Not only had he not had military schooling; he had no graduate schooling, had not had a prior tour as a junior officer on the faculty at West Point, was not known as an intellectual, and had not written anything scholarly for publication. It was quite a surprising choice.

He wrote a letter soon after the appointment was made telling others he didn't really feel very well prepared for it and that he was apprehensive about it. He handled himself reasonably well because he concentrated on post administration rather than on the academic or military training of cadets.

Westmoreland was commissioned in 1936. He served initially in the horse artillery. His World War II service was in Europe and his Korean War service was in the last year of the war when it was basically a static conflict. So he has certain outlooks that he derived from that background.

But after his four years in command of U.S. forces in Vietnam he was succeeded by Gen. Creighton Abrams, his exact contemporary, his West Point classmate who also served in World War II in Europe and during the final stages of the Korean War, but who brought to his command of U.S. forces in Vietnam a radically different outlook on the nature of the war. His was generated by [www.PDFonFly.com](http://www.defensemajianetwork.com/stories/how-westmoreland-lost-vietnam/) at 11/10/2011 12:49:29 PM

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any question a far more availing approach than Westmoreland's 'head-down, bang, bang, bang' approach against the enemy's main forces out in the jungle.

Though Westmoreland's view of American strategy in Vietnam doesn't seem to have changed in the years following his command, others did reflect on its failure, didn't they?

Westmoreland's closest staff associate in Vietnam was Gen. William DePuy, who was then the J-3, the operations officer as it was called. DePuy was probably the actual originator of the search-and-destroy approach to conduct of a war of attrition. After Vietnam, DePuy said very clearly that their analysis was faulty, that their operational approach had no possibility of bringing a favorable outcome to the war.

During the war Gen. Harold K. Johnson, who was Chief of Staff of the Army for the same four years Westmoreland commanded in Vietnam, was terribly distressed with Westmoreland's approach to the war. He created a major study known as PROVN [Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam] which concluded that the Westmoreland approach was not working and could not work, and the reason it could not was that it was ignoring the war in the villages.

Thrashing around in the deep jungle did nothing to help people who were under the domination of a covert enemy infrastructure that was using terror and coercion to keep them under its foot. Gen. Palmer, Westmoreland's classmate and deputy commanding general of U.S. Army, Vietnam, went to Westmoreland and said he had some real concerns about how the war was going. Westmoreland didn't want to talk to him about it, as Palmer said later.

“When Gen. Abrams came out to Vietnam in May of 1967 to be the deputy commander, thinking he was going to be taking over within weeks [which did not happen for about 13 months], Palmer went to this other West Point classmate and said, ‘What Westy’s doing isn’t working. Everything’s going to hell. You’ve got to do something about this.’”

Gen. Fred Weyand, later Chief of Staff of the Army, was a corps-level commander with the II Field Force, Vietnam, when Westmoreland was in command. He told reporters that [the strategy] was not working at all. He said, 'I've beat up on the same VC division three times in a row and they just go back across the border into their sanctuaries, refit, re-supply, fill up with new people and come back. We're getting nowhere.'

Person after person, including civilian officials like our Ambassador to Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge said we could beat up on the enemy in the Central Highlands for the next 20 years and it wouldn't change the course of the war. I could extend that list almost limitlessly. The infuriating as well as baffling thing is why those with the authority to do so didn't step in and remove him.

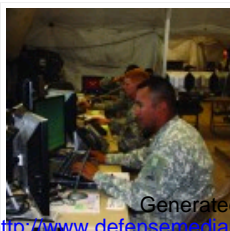
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