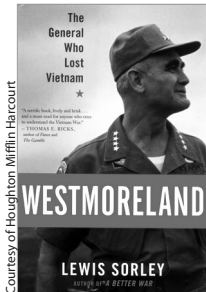


Review Essay

On Lewis Sorley's *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*

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Studying the individual commander's role in war has been a staple of military history since Homer's epic the *Iliad*. Biographies of Julius Caesar, Frederick the Great, and Napoleon have long enticed audiences with explorations of how great captains won or lost battles, and thus wars, in near single-handed fashion. Good biographies, of course, must be written with balance in mind. Events, and the environments in which they unfold, shape individuals, influence decisions, and often circumscribe actions. Context matters. Of writing biographies, John Lewis Gaddis observes that "it's a little like riding a unicycle: you need to be aware all the time of a wider horizon, even as you concentrate on the single problematic point at which the rubber meets the road."¹ Gaddis's point is significant for it helps explain the ultimate disappointment with

Lewis Sorley's new biography on William C. Westmoreland. In losing sight of the wider horizon, Dr. Sorley has reduced the history of the Vietnam War into a competition over the merits of two individual commanders, one of whom, in his view, won the war, the other who lost it.²

Certainly, the purpose of this new biography is well-founded as Sorley argues that until we understand Westmoreland, "we will never understand fully what happened to us in Vietnam, or why."³ Philosophically, this work is an effort to keep the individual at the center of the Vietnam War, especially during the crucial years of American military escalation from 1964 to 1968. Sorley tells a tragic tale in which one man, fueled by ambition and promoted above his abilities, lost the war in Vietnam and then spent his remaining days absorbed in sad attempts to defend his record while leading the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).

While there is much to debate philosophically over the contention that individuals win or lose modern wars, methodological problems eventually derail Sorley from offering a fuller understanding of the Vietnam War. In focusing narrowly on Westmoreland, Sorley omits crucial elements of the conflict's history, especially those at cross-purposes with his thesis that Westmoreland's inability to understand the war had "gravely damaged" American efforts in Southeast Asia.⁴ Rather than evaluate the relationships between the political, strategic, and

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tactical levels—which Colin S. Gray notes are “not so neatly hierarchical”—Sorley instead concentrates on Westmoreland as a failed military commander.⁵ At times, this is useful, for the MACV chief played a significant role in the introduction of American ground forces to Vietnam, and, more importantly, in how they were employed against both regular formations of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and irregular forces of the southern National Liberation Front (NLF). Westmoreland’s role in shaping an ultimately unsuccessful strategy in Vietnam is worth exploring.

It is thus tempting to view Westmoreland as a tragic figure and early on Sorley establishes his antihero as a paragon of military excellence. The former West Point first captain excelled as a battalion commander in World War II—his field artillerymen nicknamed him “Superman.” He later gained wide respect commanding a parachute infantry regiment, while subsequent commendable service in the Pentagon and as commander of the 101st Airborne Division marked Westmoreland as a rising star who found patronage from senior officers like Maxwell Taylor. Assignments as a student at Harvard Business School and as Superintendent of the US Military Academy served to enhance the development of a leader whose “concern for the well-being of his soldiers was genuine and almost without limit.”⁶ Marriage to Katherine “Kitsy” Van Deusen equally helped “humanize” a formal, if not humorless, general. Westmoreland’s professional maturation, therefore, suggested an officer well-suited for higher levels of responsibility.

In reality, Sorley employs the chronicling of Westmoreland’s rise to MACV command as an artifice for bolstering his allegation of a man promoted beyond his means. For instance, a former aide-de-camp, interviewed in 2006, judged division command to be Westmoreland’s best role. (Similar condemnations come mainly from interviews Sorley conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, raising questions about the veracity of selective oral histories and how soldiers remember war.)⁷ For the remainder of the work, Sorley presents his subject as fueled by ambition, ignorant of revolutionary warfare—as well as his personal limitations—and presiding over a strategy which doomed the United States to failure. Little room is made for countervailing views, such as those from General Bruce Palmer Jr. who recalled Westmoreland as “thoughtful, sensitive, and very shrewd.”⁸ In a bit of irony, Sorley notes that en route to Vietnam in mid-1964, the presumptive MACV commander received “plenty of advice,” with one retired officer warning him not to be made “a scapegoat for a situation for which there may be no solution.”⁹ In this narrative, a scapegoat is exactly what Westmoreland becomes.

Central to caricaturing Westmoreland as a man promoted above his ability is Sorley’s tendentious rendering of American strategy in Vietnam: given wide latitude in determining how to run the war, Westmoreland independently developed a campaign plan centered on killing the enemy at the expense of all other missions. Such an account, however, fails to acknowledge not only the compartmentalized nature of the war in which the ground campaign was but one part of a larger whole, but also the concurrence of Westmoreland’s superiors.

Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief Pacific, considered MACV strategy to be "both well conceived and entirely appropriate to the ground-battle conditions under which [Westmoreland] was compelled to fight."¹⁰ National security advisor McGeorge Bundy equally wrote to President Lyndon B. Johnson in early 1965 that the MACV commander and his subordinates, though thinking first of military programs, had been "imaginative and understanding about the importance of other aspects."¹¹ Rather than exploring the complexities of creating and implementing a strategy for a complex war, Sorley instead relies on the well-worn tropes of "attrition" and "search-and-destroy." Recent scholarship suggests more work is to be done here, as evidenced by Eric Bergerud's contention that such labels are unsatisfactory.¹² In reality, Sorley leaves much out of these important chapters on Westmoreland's role in Vietnam. He evades how enemy activities influenced the development of US strategy and fails to detail the nonmilitary aspects of Westmoreland's three-phase concept of operations. A more careful review of archival material evokes an officer who understood the political-military interrelationships of the war in Vietnam. "Probably the fundamental issue is the question of the coordination of mission activities in Saigon," the MACV commander opined in early 1966. "It is abundantly clear that all political, military, economic, and security (police) programs must be completely integrated in order to attain any kind of success in a country which has been greatly weakened by prolonged conflict and is under increasing pressure by large military and subversive forces."¹³ Far from being an officer ignorant of unconventional warfare, Westmoreland considered the issues of land reform, improving the South Vietnamese armed forces, limiting civilian casualties, and facilitating country-wide population security essential objectives.¹⁴

Sorley further dismisses the fact that policymakers and military commanders negotiated strategy in Vietnam throughout the war. Determined to paint Westmoreland as a military dullard, Sorley makes little mention of American pacification efforts from 1964-1968. In what only can be described as willful omission, the author ignores completely the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program. CORDS represented the single most important managerial innovation during the war and Westmoreland's support played a decisive role in the organization's inception and survival.¹⁵ MACV's chief placed command emphasis on revolutionary development and civic action programs and noted in his strategic guidance for 1967 that the pacification effort should "properly dovetail the military and civil programs."¹⁶ Sorley, however, turns a blind eye to this and, worse, to his own experiences. In November 1967, then Major Sorley published an article in *Military Review* on revolutionary development and community-level programs which, while "Vietnamese in concept and execution," were being "supported and encouraged by the United States."¹⁷ Such awkward truths, however, receive no attention in Sorley's biography.

Instead, in this account, Westmoreland missed an opportunity to reconsider his misguided strategy by shelving the 1966 report titled, "A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam" (PROVN). Sorley, though, does not tackle Andrew Birtle's counterargument that there "was much

less disagreement between Westmoreland and the study's authors than many commentators have implied."¹⁸ Alternatively, the focus remains on body counts, inflating progress reports, and deceptively miscalculating enemy numbers. This "order of battle" controversy would lead Westmoreland to a defamation lawsuit against CBS News in the early 1980s and continues to offer worthwhile insight into the difficulties of assessing the differences between enemy main force units, self-defense forces, and part-time guerrillas. Sorley, however, prefers to use the controversy for exposing Westmoreland's character flaws. A general, under pressure to report progress, lied about enemy strength to make the war effort look better. If this charge was fully true, there would have been a conspiracy of great magnitude involving West Point classmates Creighton Abrams and Bruce Palmer. If the MACV commander was lying about the enemy's order of battle, why did not one of his peers publicly expose the deceit?¹⁹

The reader is left with an equally disingenuous accounting of Westmoreland's relationship with the South Vietnamese army (ARVN). Sorley employs a chapter on M16 rifles to "definitively" illustrate "Westmoreland's neglect of the South Vietnamese armed forces." He argues that MACV's indifference towards ARVN's improvement and modernization resulted in "wasted years" when the "South Vietnamese could have been developing in terms of leadership, combat operations experience, and skill in the use of modern weaponry."²⁰ As with so much in this biography, obscuration of contradictory evidence lies at the heart of such a contention. For example, Sorley neglects the work of Robert K. Brigham who argues persuasively that many ARVN soldiers "were ambivalent about service in the army because of the lack of proper ideological training and the recognition that the RVN was not a legitimate political entity with a cultural or historical precedent in Vietnam, two requirements for a viable future."²¹ Sorley also conveniently avoids the 1967 creation of mobile advisory teams, a concept which, according to the official army historian on ARVN training, was "hailed as the turning point in improving the effectiveness of the territorial forces."²² Similar to the order of battle controversy, MACV's conception and implementation of ARVN training and modernization programs remains relevant for contemporary officers. Such officers, though, should be wary of Sorley's partial accounting.

The ARVN, in fact, all but disappears from the biography during the climactic 1968 Tet offensive. So do all Vietnamese. Sorley takes no notice of the enemy's strategy on the eve of Tet—or in the rest of the work, leaving Westmoreland fighting a vague apparition which only rarely forms into discernible view.²³ ARVN generals are employed simply to demonstrate that Tet had surprised Westmoreland. Left unmentioned is how the strain of American escalation shaped Hanoi's strategic conceptions in mid-1967 and helped instigate the early 1968 offensive. So, too, is the political and military aftermath, the role of ARVN, and how Creighton Abrams profited from NLF reversals during Tet. Journalist Peter Braestrup offered a more balanced treatment as early as 1969. "When he left Saigon last June, Westmoreland bequeathed to Abrams an apparently weakened foe, a vast logistics network to give U.S. forces mobility and

firepower, and a growing South Vietnamese Army which, to the private surprise of its own leaders, had held up rather well at Tet."²⁴ According to Sorley, when Westmoreland did leave Vietnam in 1968, he did so as a man preoccupied with salvaging his own reputation. Instead of focusing on the myriad duties of the army's chief of staff, Westmoreland crossed the country justifying his actions to a war-weary public. In this telling, Richard Nixon, seeing the failed commander as a political liability, never once solicited the general's views as the war in Vietnam wound down. Recently declassified documents suggest otherwise. National security advisor Henry Kissinger actually sought Westmoreland's counsel on the 1971 Laotian incursion and in early April personally called to apologize for not following it.²⁵ Certainly, Westmoreland was not a key player in developing strategy during the war's final years. Yet to dismiss his post-Vietnam life as nothing more than "miserable" seems an unfair oversimplification.²⁶

In the end, Sorley's biography stands as an incomplete view of Westmoreland and thus of the Vietnam War. Westmoreland certainly was a flawed man, but his biographer's refusal to confront countervailing arguments suggests an underlying agenda aimed at condemning one general in order to lionize another.²⁷ By painting William Westmoreland as duplicitous, conniving, and self-promotional at all costs, Sorley can strengthen his own past work arguing that Creighton Abrams had fought a better war. In the process, however, this partisan work languishes in overly reductive analysis.

There is, of course, much to learn about how a senior American officer dealt with the war in Vietnam during the mid-1960s, but Sorley's preoccupation with bolstering Abrams at Westmoreland's expense is both misleading and mean-spirited. Individuals do matter but so too does context. No single individual, not even Ho Chi Minh, should be saddled with the sole blame for either the causes or outcome of such a complex war as Vietnam. As John Lewis Gaddis warned in *The Landscape of History*, it is somewhat "irresponsible to seek to isolate . . . single causes for complex events."²⁸ Philosophically, readers of this work should consider how much impact individual generals can have in determining the outcome of modern wars. Methodologically, those same readers should contemplate how history can change depending on what gets left out of the story. If Creighton Abrams deserved a better war, certainly William Westmoreland deserves a more complete biography.

NOTES

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 116.

2. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 217. Sorley argued the war was won, thanks to changes made by Creighton Abrams, in late 1970. This argument presents a logic problem. How could Westmoreland be blamed for losing the Vietnam War if Abrams had won it in 1970?

3. Sorley, *Westmoreland*, xvii.

4. *Ibid.*, 199.

5. Colin Gray, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 54.

6. Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 53.

7. Robert McMahon, "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 159-184. Recent American experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan arguably have colored the memories of Vietnam veterans. McMahon's book addresses the topic of war and memory.

8. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 40.

9. Willard Holbrook Jr. quoted in Sorley, 67

10. U. S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 92. On the Joint Chiefs concurring with Westmoreland's concept, see Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2006), 250.

11. George Bundy to Lyndon Johnson, 7 February 1965, quoted in David C. Humphrey, Ronald D. Landa, and Louis J. Smith, eds., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume II, Vietnam January-June 1965* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1996), 179.

12. Eric Bergerud, "The Village War in Vietnam, 1965-1973," in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 278.

13. Westmoreland to Collins, cable MAC 0117, 7 January 1966, *Pacification Overview/Conclusions Folder*, Historian's Files, US Army Center of Military History, Ft. McNair, Washington, D.C.

14. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command*, 140.

15. Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 240; George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 64.

16. On Westmoreland's views, see "Command Emphasis on Revolutionary Development/Civic Action Programs," 22 October 1966, in Robert E. Lester, ed., *The War in Vietnam: The Papers of William C. Westmoreland* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1993); text-fiche, Reel 7, Folder 10, 18-29 October 1966; "Strategic Guidelines for 1967 in Vietnam," 14 December 1966, Reel 18, Statements Folder, October-December 1966; and U.S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 132.

17. Lewis S. Sorley III, "The Quiet War: Revolutionary Development," *Military Review* 47, no. 11 (November 1967): 14. Ignored are other pacification experiences, like those from MG Fred C. Weyand, "Winning the People in Hau Nghia Province," *Army* 17, no. 1 (January 1967): 52-55.

18. Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of Military History* 72, no. 4 (October 2008): 1220.

19. John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 217-218. Both Robert McNamara and Walt Rostow knew of the CIA-MACV numbers controversy. Sorley does note that several of Westmoreland's key lieutenants testified against him during the CBS trial.

20. Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 131, 139.

21. Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), xi.

22. James L. Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), 121.

23. On Hanoi's strategy, see Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 120-127 and William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power*, 2d ed. (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1981, 1996), 286-287.

24. Peter Braestrup, "The Abrams Strategy in Vietnam," *The New Leader*, 9 June 1969, 4.

25. Phone conversation between Kissinger and Westmoreland, 12 April 1971, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume VII, Vietnam July 1970-January 1972* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 2010), 537-538.

26. Dave Palmer quoted in Sorley, 295.

27. Dale Andrade, "Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 2 (June 2008): 145-181. Andrade argues that "Westmoreland could not have done much differently than he actually did given the realities on the ground."

28. Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 65.

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