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### Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam

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# Westmoreland's War

*Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*

BY GREGORY A. DADDIS

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To  
*My mother, Doris*  
*My wife, Susan*  
*And my daughter, Cameron*

## Introduction

# A Word on War and Strategy

When Maxwell D. Taylor, the famed World War II commander of the 101st Airborne Division, became the US Army Chief of Staff in June 1955, he recruited Brigadier General William Westmoreland for the position of secretary of the General Staff (SGS). According to Taylor, the SGS was a “traditional stepping stone to senior rank” and afforded the 44-year-old Westmoreland a unique opportunity to consider the problems of strategy at the national level.<sup>1</sup> The assignment came at a time when senior military leaders were clashing with President Dwight D. Eisenhower over a host of strategic questions—deterrence of a perceived global communist threat, the role of nuclear weapons in national security, and the implications of burgeoning defense budgets. Westmoreland thus held a front-row seat as Taylor developed his views on a “National Military Program.” Rather than relying primarily on nuclear weapons for national security, the army’s chief argued the United States should have enough “political, military, economic, and moral strength sufficient to induce the Communist Bloc to renounce or refrain from all forms of aggression.”<sup>2</sup> Sound strategy rested on more than just military muscle. In the aftermath of the Korean War, Taylor advocated a flexible force structure capable of defeating local wars of aggression while also fighting on potential nuclear battlefields. For the next three years, Westmoreland was “associated with virtually all of the Chief of Staff’s activities,” gaining a practical education not found in the army’s school system of the day.<sup>3</sup> Few officers, in truth, had the chance to glimpse the process of developing national strategy from such a close distance.

Westmoreland’s education in strategy took a different form when he assumed command of Taylor’s old outfit in the spring of 1958. Leading the 101st Airborne Division entailed putting strategic theory into practice for an officer who had just spent the last three years working at the highest levels inside the Pentagon. Taylor’s advocacy of more flexible army formations led to the development of “Pentomic” divisions, units no longer based on the triangular concept of three regiments but on five independent “battle groups.” Westmoreland took over the 101st just as it was preparing for the final shakedown exercise that would mark

it as a combat-ready Pentomic. (With an atomic-armed rocket battery, the 101st was the first US Army division to have an organic nuclear capability.)<sup>4</sup> Because of the division's designation as a rapid deployment force requiring movement within six hours of an emergency notification, Westmoreland stressed constant readiness as he watched the Lebanon crisis unfold in the summer of 1958. He kept a close eye as well on the rising levels of violence in Indochina over the next two years. These emerging local threats helped spur the general to create a special "Recondo" school that focused training on "counterinsurgency warfare, with an emphasis on small-unit operations."<sup>5</sup> In short, Westmoreland's command of the 101st provided him the chance to put abstract strategic theories into concrete operational practice.

Westmoreland's final assignment before heading to South Vietnam served as a sort of strategic finishing school for the future Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) commander. In the summer of 1960, Westmoreland relinquished command at Fort Campbell and assumed the post of superintendent of the United States Military Academy. For the next three years, the general met with foreign dignitaries, congressional delegations, senior military leaders, Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson, and President John F. Kennedy. Johnson, who gave the commencement address in 1961, was followed by Kennedy in 1962. In his remarks, Kennedy told the commissioning class they could no longer focus on "strictly military responsibilities." Their future assignments, taking them across the globe, would "require a versatility and an adaptability never before required in either war or peace." As the president put it, service in such places as Vietnam would place unprecedented "burdens" on a new generation of military leaders.<sup>6</sup> Just two years later, Kennedy's message would prove to have special meaning for not only the graduating cadets but also Westmoreland himself.

The three years at West Point were busy ones for Westmoreland and illustrated his growing appreciation of the challenges young army officers would face in the early 1960s. He oversaw revision of the academic curriculum aimed at promoting the intellectual development of cadets across a wide range of topics, from math and engineering to history and philosophy. Drawing upon his experience with the 101st, Westmoreland instituted Recondo training for cadets and formed a committee whose recommendations led to the adoption of 54 hours of instruction on counterinsurgency over a cadet's four-year West Point experience. Given the growing number of US advisors being sent to South Vietnam, the superintendent hosted a senior British general who had fought against the communist insurgency in Malaya. He also refocused cadet summer training and sponsored a counterinsurgency conference that featured Walt W. Rostow, a special national security advisor in the Kennedy White House, as the keynote speaker.<sup>7</sup> While at West Point, Westmoreland was exposed to the question of strategy as an intellectual problem that required serious professional study.

In three successive assignments—on the Pentagon staff, as a division commander, and as academy superintendent—the general thus grappled with distinct, yet corresponding, aspects of US strategy in the Cold War era even though he had little experience with strategic planning per se.<sup>8</sup> But what did strategy really mean to American military officers and civilian policymakers in the decade before William Westmoreland departed for command in Vietnam? Clearly the general had taken part in discussions and training that reflected contemporary strategic concerns, whether they be debates over force structure or the best way to train for conflict in the post-World War II period. But what were the implications of these forays into the realm of strategy? It seems reasonable to suggest that both Westmoreland and the US Army as a whole in the late 1950s and early 1960s understood that strategy meant more than just leadership or tactical skill on the battlefield. We should also consider the prospect that many army officers went to Vietnam with a more expansive definition of strategy in mind than is generally realized. Reassessing Westmoreland's war in Vietnam therefore first requires a broader reconsideration of how American military leaders came to think about the word "strategy" in the early 1960s.

Strategy is more than just how a nation and its armed forces think about and discuss war. Language, as was the case in Vietnam, often can prove insufficient for fully articulating strategic concepts like attrition or annihilation. Even the word itself, strategy—first used in antiquity to describe the art and skill of a general—can disorient and confuse when applied in modern contexts. (One student of the subject during the Vietnam years called it "a loose sort of a word.")<sup>9</sup> In large part, this potential for confusion stems from the fact that strategy is both a concept and a process. It is an idea—and a highly contingent one—for how military force should be used to achieve political objectives, as well as the way such force actually is employed in a time of war. Thus, in evaluating strategy, historians arguably are best served when exploring not only what an army discusses but what it does. Contemporary lexicon, of course, can be inadequate when attempting to explain the intricacies of complex wars, and incongruities almost always exist between what is being done and said. One must also consider the climate in which the definition is being used and for what purpose. Moreover, the concept of strategy has evolved over time.<sup>10</sup>

Take, for instance, how Carl von Clausewitz, writing in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, approached the topic. In *On War*, the Prussian theorist defined strategy as "the use of the engagement for the purpose of war."<sup>11</sup> Such a limited conception of the word centered on the commander's ability to shape individual campaigns, what is called "operational art" in today's military vocabulary, for achieving a political objective. In this sense, strategy focused on the conduct of battles and its results. A commander aimed to achieve tactical successes in such a way that led directly to a political goal. Clausewitz's ideal found no better

expression than in Napoleon's stunning victory at Austerlitz. The emperor's 1805 masterpiece battle not only crushed the Third Coalition but compelled Austria to sign the Treaty of Pressburg and effectively forced the Hapsburg Empire out of the war. Battle, and the planning behind its execution, had resulted in a tangible political outcome.

A close read of *On War*, however, suggests that Clausewitz believed the interplay between military means and political aims encompassed more than simply using battlefield engagements for a specific political purpose. "It is only in the highest realms of strategy," he argued, "that intellectual complications and extreme diversity of factors and relationships occur. At that level there is little to no difference between strategy, policy and statesmanship." Strategy, in this sense, became more than "the art of skillfully exploiting force for a larger purpose."<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz thus used the term in two different senses, one for what we might consider today operational design, the other for general war planning. In some contexts he used the more limited, restrictive definition and in others employed the term to impress upon his readers a much broader meaning. In both versions of the concept, though, Clausewitz emphasized that war was a function of interdependent variables, whether they be the unique capabilities of the commander or the oftentimes shifting political intentions of the government. Consequently, fixed rules and prescriptions were unsuited for a fuller understanding of strategy.<sup>13</sup>

In the wake of the First World War, British military theorist Basil H. Liddell Hart rendered a severe, and highly tendentious, criticism of Clausewitz's supposed glorification of battle as the principal element of strategy. Surely there were other means to one's political ends than the wholesale killing of a generation of young men. Liddell Hart thus strove to broaden strategy's definition, emphasizing not only the application of force but its distribution and allocation over space and time. Strategy therefore meant "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy."<sup>14</sup> Liddell Hart certainly concerned himself with the conduct of military operations as well as their effects, yet found a narrow focus on military instruments dangerous. A nation's armed forces had to serve a sensible policy, one that properly allocated and coordinated national resources in such a way that regulated the use of force "to avoid damage to the future state of peace." Here was the art of "grand strategy," a concept that encompassed more than just fighting power. Liddell Hart argued that other instruments of power—financial, diplomatic, commercial, even ethical—could be brought to bear for weakening an opponent's will. Strategy was more than "the pure utilization of battle."<sup>15</sup>

Liddell Hart's expanded definition of strategy implied that a nation's leaders establish priorities when establishing political objectives in a time of war, a topic highlighted by more recent commentators like Colin Gray. Gray's contributions

to the literature have in part concentrated on the civil-military relationships required for the successful prosecution of strategy. If strategy "seeks control over an enemy's political behaviour" it also serves as the "bridge that relates military power to political purpose; it is neither military power *per se* nor political purpose."<sup>16</sup> Good strategists and policymakers thus not only need a vision but a policy that provides aim and direction for those waging war. In Gray's formulation, the strategic bridge helps "connect policy purposefully with the military and other instruments of power and influence."<sup>17</sup> In an age of nuclear weapons, such a definition made patent sense. Yet Gray's observations are hardly novel. General Matthew B. Ridgway, writing in the Korean War's aftermath, maintained that civilian leaders needed "to work closely with military authorities in setting attainable goals and in selecting the means to attain them."<sup>18</sup> Strategy was not the exclusive preserve of uniformed officers.

These few examples of strategic definitions, far from comprehensive, underscore the elasticity of the word "strategy" and how different characterizations can serve very different needs. Yet it would be misleading to propose that civilian and military leaders always develop strategy based on well-laid plans. Strategy can be, and too often is, a matter of improvisation. Given the sheer complexity of the topic, this should not be surprising. Recall Clausewitz's interdependent variables which strategists must address not only when planning for war but when directing it as well. Systematic analysis is not always possible in the fog of war, whether it be a conventional or unconventional conflict. The eminent British historian Michael Howard well articulated this phenomenon in his exploration of Anglo-American Mediterranean strategy in the Second World War. As Howard maintained, the "development of British—and Allied—strategy was a piecemeal affair, in which military leaders had often simply to do what they could, where they could, with the forces which they had to hand."<sup>19</sup> Is it possible that strategists more often than not extemporize when it comes to war?

In part, such improvisation fulfills an important role in strategy. War is an undertaking of chance, uncertainty, and reciprocal action between actors who make choices before and during actual conflict. In this environment, strategy cannot be stagnant. Field Marshal Helmuth Graf von Moltke, writing in 1871, believed strategy was a "system of expedients... the continued development of the original leading thought in accordance with constantly changing circumstances."<sup>20</sup> Learning and adaptation thus seem essential considerations for those planning and prosecuting war at the strategic level. The trouble, of course, is that military commanders often find it difficult to make momentous changes to their doctrine and units' organizational structures once committed to open hostilities. Few soldiers tend toward self-examination in the heat of battle. Military organizations, traditional in nature and hierarchical in structure, also are inclined to be constrained by cultural preferences that circumscribe leaders' visions of

what might be possible outside of normal routine. "Nevertheless," von Moltke claimed, "the conduct of war does not lapse into blind, arbitrary action."<sup>21</sup>

This appears to be the case at the two most recognized levels of strategy—grand strategy and military strategy. While the two terms are not synonymous, they most certainly are interdependent. Policy influences both levels but remains a separate entity unto itself. The term grand strategy, evoking the multi-dimensional definition of strategy promoted by Liddell Hart, includes the relationships among a nation's allies, enemies, and neutral countries. It entails the coordination of military and nonmilitary means that support long-term political interests and attempts to tailor theater, if not larger regional, operations to realistic national security objectives.<sup>22</sup> In the context of the Vietnam War, contemporary critics protested that an overly ambitious military strategy inside South Vietnam was forcing the United States to cut back on its global commitments in the larger Cold War effort. Seasoned diplomat George Kennan, for instance, complained in 1965 that Washington had lost "almost all flexibility of choice" in Vietnam and in its "approach to the communist world generally."<sup>23</sup> American political and military leaders consequently found themselves limiting their military strategy in Southeast Asia to better support the nation's grand strategy for the overarching Cold War.

As with strategy, definitions abound for the term grand strategy. Barry Posen, as an example, describes grand strategy as "a political-military, means-ends chain, a state's theory about how it can best 'cause' security for itself." Other commentators have classified the term as the "art and science of employing national power" or of relating a nation's instruments of power and influence to its vital interests.<sup>24</sup> For evaluating US strategy in Vietnam, however, it seems best to use contemporary terminology. American military leaders and civilian policymakers might not have benefited from more recent explorations into the complex topic of strategy but they certainly wrestled with its conceptual and theoretical problems during the Cold War. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the US Army's 1962 *Field Service Regulations* provides a useful definition for what was then called "national strategy." The army's doctrine opined that "national strategy is the long range plan through which a nation applies its strength toward the attainment of its objectives." In line with Liddell Hart's concept, the army included all elements of national power into this broad description: "political, economic, psychological, and military and... other national assets such as geographic location and spiritual attitudes."<sup>25</sup>

Supporting this grand vision, army doctrine defined military strategy as the "development and use of the military means which further national strategy though the direct or indirect application of military power."<sup>26</sup> While this work focuses on American strategy inside South Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, such a definition proves too narrow for fully evaluating how William Westmoreland

sought to fulfill American objectives in the Vietnam War. The ground war over which Westmoreland exercised command and influence included much more than strict military means. Instead, this study relies on the more general definition of strategy published as part of a 1961 *Dictionary of United States Army Terms*. The army characterized strategy as the "art and science of developing and using the political, economic, psychological, and armed forces of a nation, during peace and war, to afford the maximum support to national policies, in order to increase the probabilities of victory and to lessen the chances of defeat."<sup>27</sup> As will be argued, Westmoreland embraced this broader definition of strategy instead of focusing strictly on destruction of the enemy's military forces. It is important to note, however, the constraints MACV's commander faced in developing his campaign plans and concepts of operation. As Westmoreland recalled, his "responsibilities and prerogatives were basically confined within the borders of South Vietnam."<sup>28</sup> American strategy in Vietnam paradoxically was as comprehensive as it was limited.

## Assessing Strategy

So how should one assess strategy? Is victory or defeat the only true metric for evaluating a strategy? Is it possible to develop a sound strategy and still lose? It seems problematic to assess any strategy without reference to its successes and failures. Even if strategy is more a process than an outcome, ideally it should evolve in the direction of success. Should one assess strategy through an evaluation of the strategist alone? Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery's quip that the right man with the right plan would suffice for British victory in Malaya seems unsatisfactory for explaining the outcome of a war as complex as Vietnam. Strategy entails both purpose and the design for achieving that purpose and, as was the case in Vietnam, the man on the ground does not always devise the overarching purpose for strategy.<sup>29</sup> Westmoreland certainly conceived his own strategic plan but the president and secretary of defense assigned the general his military and political objectives. As will be argued, the Johnson administration made few if any grand strategic reassessments as the war evolved.

Moreover, defining victory in Vietnam became just as thorny a problem as articulating strategy itself. As US combat forces deployed to Southeast Asia in mid-1965, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara listed nine fundamental elements for achieving a "favorable outcome" in Vietnam, among them reducing incidents of terror and sabotage, ensuring the Saigon government remained independent (and "hopefully pro-US"), and forcing North Vietnam to withdraw its forces from the south. Also at play, of course, was the will of the enemy.<sup>30</sup>

Would a successful strategy account for all of these elements or rather determine which among these numerous political and military objectives actually were achievable? Were all elements necessary for achieving the strategic end-state and thus victory?

The conventional answer to these questions posits that Westmoreland failed to understand his environment, neglected new ideas, and implemented a narrow strategy of attrition that led ultimately to failure. Unquestionably, recent scholarship by the likes of Graham Cosmas, Andrew Birtle, and John Prados has moved beyond this rather oversimplified picture. Notwithstanding these new contributions, the conventional narrative continues to shape not only popular but more scholarly literature.<sup>31</sup> Eventual defeat in Vietnam reinforced arguments that MACV's commander presided over a flawed strategy. Constrained by an organizational culture favoring firepower and enemy-centric operations, Westmoreland, along with most of the US Army officers he led, "devoted insufficient attention to pacification" in their quest for high body counts. One American journalist further claimed that US strategists "misgauged the North Vietnamese and Vietcong by applying their own values to them."<sup>32</sup> For such critics, the causal chain effortlessly linked poorly conceived strategy, implemented in a heavy-handed manner, to failure in Vietnam.

Yet it seems plausible to argue that every army responds to stimuli, both internal and external, when developing and carrying out its strategic concepts. Admittedly, reactive change does not equal institutional learning. Still, even armies slow to learn in new environments must act in response to their surroundings. A proper strategy is one that responds to local, regional, and even international conditions. Culture may help explain organizational choices but it by no means dictates those choices. Accordingly, the longer an army is involved in war, searching for victory, one should expect to find an evolution of strategic thinking over time. In this sense, strategy is a process steeped in problem solving. For the US Army in Vietnam—confronting military, political, social, and economic issues all simultaneously—the chief difficulty came from finding the proper relationships between and among these diverse problem sets. The path to victory hardly ran in a straight line through the destruction of enemy forces, a point well understood by William Westmoreland.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, this study assumes that to properly evaluate strategy one must assess how armies draw conclusions from their environment, from their own experiences, and from the experiences of others, particularly those of the enemy. An evaluation of strategy also must consider how armies draw upon their own history. Perceived lessons from the past often are interpreted within existing intellectual and doctrinal constructs. The US Army of the 1950s and 1960s (or, more accurately, military intellectuals within the army) learned lessons from World War II and Korea that confirmed many officers' preexisting visions of war.<sup>34</sup>

Victory came from defeating the enemy in the field. Yet the legacy of these wars did not straightjacket officers into viewing strategy as simply using battlefield engagements for achieving a political purpose. Change may have been unnatural for veterans of the Second World War and Korea, but they did realize that the conflict in Southeast Asia diverged significantly from their past experiences. Despite their cultural affinity toward conventional warfare, many US Army officers in the 1960s, Westmoreland included, embraced a wider definition of strategy that appeared better suited to the environment of South Vietnam.<sup>35</sup>

The point here is that observing the process of strategy is as important as assessing the theory behind it. Enticing as it is to judge war simply through the lens of victory or defeat, such evaluations suffer from reduction. Outcome cannot solely explain process. This is particularly true for a war as multifaceted as Vietnam. Officers like Westmoreland wrestled with the thorny problems of translating American power into feasible strategic concepts for a conflict that was at once a revolutionary war, a limited-scale conventional war, an internal political struggle, and a contest within the larger Cold War. As one observer recalled, in "intellectual terms, understanding the war in Vietnam demanded a great deal more than had prior US overseas conflicts. In military terms alone, it was a complicated shifting war, without a front line to signal progress."<sup>36</sup> General Maxwell Taylor, who served as ambassador to Vietnam in 1964 and 1965, found equal challenges in bridging the gap between policy and performance. "One of the facts of life about Vietnam," Taylor recalled, "was that it was never difficult to decide what should be done but it was almost impossible to get it done, at least in an acceptable period of time." In short, merely ascertaining success or failure is insufficient *alone* for judging strategy.<sup>37</sup>

## Reconsidering Strategy in Vietnam

In the process of assigning blame for a lost war, histories often have overlooked the nonmilitary aspects of American strategy in Vietnam. For decades, critics of the war have relied on catchphrases like "attrition," "body counts," and "search-and-destroy," all of which have become mainstays within Vietnam War literature. One historian has even described Westmoreland's "strategic equation" as "mobility + firepower = attrition."<sup>38</sup> Strategy could not be made any simpler. Yet attrition, "a word commonly employed but rarely defined," has helped distort the historical record of the Vietnam War. German academic Hans Delbrück first used the term *Ermattungsstrategie* (a "wearing out" or "attrition" strategy) in the early 1900s when defining an alternative to an annihilation strategy and the concept soon took hold for explaining the destructiveness of World War I.<sup>39</sup> In the



aftermath of the slaughter on the Western Front, attrition assumed an ominous meaning. Critics argued an attrition strategy lacked aim, was unimaginative or used as a last resort, and, in the extreme, was "irrefutable proof of the *absence* of strategy." Journalist Ward Just, writing in 1969, maintained attrition was "an ugly word, signifying a long-drawn-out struggle with many dead and one side or the other exhausted and beaten at the end."<sup>40</sup>

Pundits further claimed that the US Army's attraction with killing the enemy flowed directly from its experiences in World War II when generals viewed military strategy only as a matter of attacking the enemy in the most efficient and effective manner possible. Guided by the political aim of forcing the Axis powers to accept an "unconditional surrender," senior American officers sought to place "unremitting pressure" on the enemy. Destruction of German and Japanese armed forces thus ranked high among US strategic objectives.<sup>41</sup> In Vietnam, however, applying overwhelming military power to destroy the enemy seemed out of place. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, himself a critic of Westmoreland's strategy, wrote to Secretary of Defense McNamara in 1966 that "'Seek out and destroy' should not be an end unto itself, as it rightly was in World War II. This war will not be won by killing Viet Cong or soldiers of North Viet-Nam, but by destroying terrorist organizations in South Viet-Nam." While Westmoreland retorted that Lodge did "not have a deep feel of military tactics and strategy" and was "inclined to over-simplify the military situation," the ambassador's critique represents a particular commentary on US strategy in Vietnam.<sup>42</sup>

Lodge's assessment, however, presumed American strategic thought had remained stagnant in the wake of World War II. Yet many US Army officers well understood the changes wrought by the Second World War, chief among them the advent of atomic weaponry and the process of decolonization in Africa, India, and Southeast Asia. Warfare seemed at once more constrained and comprehensive. If no political objectives were worth fighting a general nuclear war, then localized aggression, ostensibly sponsored by communist agents, required a credible response beyond just military means. Strategies of annihilation risked just that—obliteration not only of opposing armed forces but of entire nations.<sup>43</sup> In this context, it should be unsurprising that contemporary definitions of strategy evolved to encompass more than just battlefield engagements. If one aim of war was to achieve "some measure of control over the enemy," then strategists had to incorporate elements of power besides military into their planning, a point not lost on US Army officers. One lieutenant colonel, writing his student thesis for the Army War College in 1963, noted that "the number of situations requiring a strategy coordinating military, political and economic factors seems always increasing." The officer went on to argue that "the effective study of military strategy [could] be accomplished only within the broader framework of political and economic relationships."<sup>44</sup>

Such a broad approach seems best for understanding American strategy in Vietnam. Westmoreland, for instance, did not subscribe to a narrow strategy of attrition, just as he did not subscribe exclusively to a counterinsurgency approach. In fact, American strategy proved much more expansive; consequently, Westmoreland exercised influence in a variety of ways, both directly and indirectly. True, the compartmentalized nature of the Vietnam War ensured that the MACV commander's authority paled in comparison to that of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander of the European theater in World War II.<sup>45</sup> Westmoreland recalled, for example, that his "interest in the air war was somewhat incidental" because of the "dichotomy in organization between the air war and the ground war." Still, as will be seen, the general had to accommodate, integrate, and direct a wide array of activities inside South Vietnam.<sup>46</sup>

Westmoreland's chief intelligence officer drew attention to MACV's diverse undertakings. As Phillip B. Davidson recalled, the general "had not one battle, but three to fight: first, to contain a growing enemy conventional threat; second, to develop the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces (RVNAF); and third, to pacify and protect the peasants in the South Vietnamese countryside. Each was a monumental task."<sup>47</sup> Westmoreland thus had to develop a concept of operations for the employment of US forces in South Vietnam, provide advice and assistance to the RVNAF, support civil operations and pacification, and advise both the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on strategic issues. It is equally important to note Westmoreland's occasional direct interaction with the commander in chief. Military success alone would not suffice for achieving US objectives in Vietnam. As Westmoreland himself argued in early 1967, "Political, economic, and psychological victory is equally important, and support of Revolutionary Development is mandatory."<sup>48</sup>

The first section of this work provides context on Cold War strategy and doctrine and the growing US involvement in Vietnam. Thematic chapters then analyze Westmoreland's multiple tasks as MACV's commander. The first reassessment concentrates on the strategic concept for the ground war devised by Westmoreland, a topic as hotly contested today as it was in the early 1960s. Critics argued, and still do, that MACV misjudged the nature of the war, focusing on the symptoms and not the cause of the problem in South Vietnam. As one colonel claimed, military professionals in Vietnam incorrectly focused on the guerrilla threat and thereby confused tactics with strategy.<sup>49</sup> Certainly, the nature of the threat looms large in any conversation on strategy. The chapters on Westmoreland's strategy and the tactics employed to support strategic objectives thus highlight the discord among political and military officials over whether internal subversion or external aggression posed the greatest threat to South Vietnam's independence. The war, of course, did not fit easily into a

standard framework. Westmoreland consequently had to discern not only the nature of the threat but of the war as a whole. "The real question," one senior officer recalled, "was *not* what was the proper strategy to guide the ground war in South Vietnam, but *what kind of war was the United States fighting in Vietnam at any given period.*"<sup>50</sup>

The second section focuses on the role the US Army played in supporting civil operations and pacification. As with the ground war, this topic engenders strong disagreement among historians. Most critics contend that Westmoreland gave little notice to pacification and one recent biography even dismisses the topic whole cloth, apparently to suggest that MACV ignored fully the war's non-military aspects. Under Westmoreland, however, pacification—what one study termed "the establishment of internal security, political stability, and economic viability"—became an integral part of MACV's concept of operations.<sup>51</sup> Most army officers in Vietnam understood the importance their adversaries placed on political activity, especially in the countryside. MACV equally appreciated the relationships between territorial security and the need for reviving the Saigon government's rural administration and services. The problem, one of implementation, arose from imbalances between the constructive efforts of pacification and the destructive results of military operations.<sup>52</sup> As the US embassy reported in early 1965, the limited effectiveness of pacification programs following "on the heels of military clearing operations" served as a major "cause of lack of progress against the insurgency."<sup>53</sup> If pacification efforts were to succeed, MACV had to find balance in its approach to both the political and military struggles then being waged in South Vietnam.

The final area in which to reconsider Westmoreland's strategy falls within the realm of MACV's advice and assistance to the RVNAF, particularly the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). The general realized early on that while US forces might be able to "dislodge the Communists from local areas"—itself a dubious prospect—they "would not have a 'lasting effect' unless the South Vietnamese were able to retain control over such areas."<sup>54</sup> Westmoreland accordingly conferred often with his counterpart General Cao Van Vien and urged RVNAF leadership to correct persistent shortcomings that appeared to be hampering the war effort. As with pacification, the challenge Westmoreland faced lay in implementation. The decision to deploy US forces to South Vietnam rested on the conclusion that the RVNAF was on the verge of collapse in early 1965. How best to divide responsibilities between Americans and South Vietnamese remained a matter of debate throughout the war. While Westmoreland conceived of using American forces primarily in an offensive role, MACV recognized that for "political and psychological reasons the conflict must retain primarily a Vietnamese character at all times."<sup>55</sup> Clearly, that goal would be difficult to achieve with nearly 400,000 Americans serving in South Vietnam by the end of 1966, a number that



Figure 0.1 REUNION. General Westmoreland visits his family in Hawaii, 1965, after President Lyndon Johnson ordered the evacuation of more than 1,800 American dependents from Vietnam in February 1965. (WPUSC, Westmoreland Family Photos)

would rise to more than 530,000 troops by the time Westmoreland left command in mid-1968.

One could reason that few historical precedents existed for a military commander juggling a comparable array of responsibilities. Journalist Robert Shaplen, perhaps overstating his case in mid-1967, argued that it was "doubtful if any commander in the history of warfare has ever faced such a complicated combination of tasks as Westmoreland." Still, fellow correspondent Hanson Baldwin agreed, characterizing the general as a "theater commander with more responsibility and less authority than any in our history."<sup>56</sup> Surely single declarative words like "attrition" were, and are, insufficient for communicating the intricacy of Westmoreland's war. The conflict was a synthesis of political and military action, pacification efforts and conventional tactics, and technological advances and deep historical imperatives that bedeviled those seeking straightforward explanations of strategy and tactics. As General Frederick C. Weyand remarked in late 1968, efforts to categorize the war using terms like "search-and-destroy" or "massive sweeps" failed to convey accurately the situation in the field. "The

truth is that the strategy I was directed to pursue during the past two and a half years involved every type of military operation I have ever heard of and some I hadn't heard of."<sup>57</sup> If attrition truly steered Westmoreland's strategy, one might expect a professional such as Weyand to be more certain of the role he played as a senior officer in Westmoreland's command.

In the last 30 years, however, Westmoreland has become a caricature, an incarnation of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Modern Major General" from *The Pirates of Penzance*. Surely, he was not as obtuse as some historians and other critics would have us believe.<sup>58</sup> Hence, this work makes the argument that William Westmoreland, and the organization he led, not only learned and adapted in Vietnam but also developed a comprehensive strategy best suited for the multifaceted environment in which the US Army was operating. Many officers, Westmoreland included, understood the problems associated with rising nationalism and decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. Their strategy, while comprehensively planned and faithfully implemented, was not sufficient in itself for securing victory in Vietnam. It seems that the one common failing of most military officers and senior civilian officials—among them MACV's commander—was their faith that military power, broadly defined, could achieve political objectives in post-colonial states during the Cold War era. This, of course, presents an uncomfortable truth, especially for those who served, and continue to serve, in uniform.<sup>59</sup> Talented American generals can develop and implement a comprehensive political-military strategy and still lose a war.