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## Choosing Progress: Evaluating the "Salesmanship" of the Vietnam War in 1967

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# 12

## CHOOSING PROGRESS

### EVALUATING THE “SALESMANSHIP” OF THE VIETNAM WAR IN 1967

Gregory A. Daddis

THE WEATHER IN DALLAS, TEXAS, on November 19, 1967, was a pleasant 55 degrees, ideal for a National Football League game. Under a strong performance by quarterback Sonny Jurgensen, who threw four touchdown passes, the Washington Redskins held off a late comeback by the rival Cowboys, winning 27–20. Far from the Cotton Bowl stadium that Sunday, the US ambassador to South Vietnam and the top American military commander there appeared on NBC’s *Meet the Press*. In the Redskins’ hometown, the two senior officials offered their assessment of a war apparently mired in stalemate. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, contesting such notions, believed his South Vietnamese allies were making “excellent progress” toward democracy while his uniformed counterpart, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, found “an attitude of confidence and growing optimism” wherever he traveled throughout the war-torn country. “We are making progress,” the general affirmed. Asked about the possibility of a reduced American presence given such developments, Westmoreland foresaw “within two years or less that we will be able to phase-down the level of our military effort, which means that we could reduce the number of people involved.” Viewers that Sunday morning likely would have concluded the war was being won.<sup>1</sup>

Less than three months later, countrywide attacks by the combined forces of the North Vietnamese Army and the National Liberation Front swept

across South Vietnam. The Tet Offensive, launched in late January 1968, not only ravaged the southern population but also brought sharp condemnation from the American press. Westmoreland and Bunker were painted as accomplices in a year-long campaign, run by the White House, to sell the war at home. Though allied forces thwarted the offensive, Tet exposed a yawning credibility gap that seemingly turned most Americans, even respected CBS correspondent Walter Cronkite, against the war. Either senior officials in Vietnam were “truly blind” to the circumstances facing them or, worse, they had been purposefully misleading the public. Journalist David Halberstam believed “the American military apparatus in Vietnam became a vast lying machine, telling Washington what Washington wanted to hear and insisted upon hearing. The purpose of this lying machine was to propagandize our alleged progress in the war and to convince Congress and the American public to support the war.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet were these senior war managers acting unethically by publicly highlighting the positive aspects of American strategy in Vietnam to minimize the war’s political costs? Were they violating the public trust? Based on numerous assessment metrics, one could legitimately portray progress in South Vietnam: The enemy was stalemated on the battlefield, at least from a military standpoint; economic and social development programs were growing in scope and emphasis; the Army of the Republic of Vietnam was increasingly supporting rural pacification plans; and nation-building efforts were ongoing.<sup>3</sup> Certainly the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) needed to assess more than just attrition of enemy forces given Westmoreland’s mission of helping build a viable, independent, and noncommunist South Vietnam. In a war without front lines, demonstrating progress proved daunting. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle G. Wheeler concluded in early 1967 that the Lyndon Johnson administration “should be doing everything possible now to gain the support of U.S. and international public opinion for our position in Vietnam.” Thus, to serve the nation’s interests, Wheeler and others—including the president—focused public attention on American accomplishments in Vietnam while simultaneously cautioning the war was far from over.<sup>4</sup>

The confidential, back-channel messages between senior officials in 1967, however, proved more forthcoming than their public pronouncements. Perhaps this disparity between public and private comments, what *New York Times* reporter James Reston called a conversation gap, should not surprise.<sup>5</sup> If war-time assessments appeared contradictory in the uncertain mosaic of Vietnam, was it wrong to accentuate the positive in public when private messages were less sanguine? How Johnson administration officials transmitted information and to whom seemed vital for maintaining domestic support in a war where

vital national interests were not clearly at stake. Moreover, by 1967 the media had become the “primary battlefield,” according to one foreign correspondent. In that critical year, discerning the truth preoccupied nearly all participants of the American war: the Johnson White House, the Pentagon and MACV headquarters, and major media outlets. At the center of this search for truth stood domestic public opinion. As the president and his war managers increasingly saw Vietnam as a “race between accomplishment and patience,” publicizing progress became an integral part of the war.<sup>6</sup> Yet far from a unique case of bureaucratic dishonesty, the 1967 salesmanship campaign demonstrates the reality, even necessity, of conversation gaps when one is assessing progress in wars where the military struggle abroad matters less than the political one at home.

### THE WHITE HOUSE AT WAR

By early 1967 senior officials reviewing the war in Vietnam offered a measured outlook for the coming year. Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy believed the prognosis for 1967 “was not comforting.” One general officer judged the enemy to be “hurting” but did not think “we’re anywhere near the mopping-up stage.” (American deaths in the year’s first half averaged more than eight hundred per month, validating such claims.)<sup>7</sup> Even Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), hoping to extol American progress in Vietnam for an increasingly skeptical home front, found little to applaud during his State of the Union speech on January 10. “I wish I could report to you that the conflict is almost over,” the president remarked. “This I cannot do. We have more cost, more loss, and more agony. For the end is not yet. I cannot promise you that it will come this year—or come next year.” For a president less than candid about the war’s expanding costs, the speech struck a somber tone. While Johnson spoke of the need to keep sustained pressure on the enemy, he asked Americans for their patience, “a great deal of patience.”<sup>8</sup>

Patience, however, seemed to be running out. In January *Time* reported growing doubts that “America’s vital interests are sufficiently threatened in Viet Nam to necessitate the growing commitment there.”<sup>9</sup> One month later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy (D-NY) broke with Johnson over Vietnam policy, and in March, civil rights champion Martin Luther King Jr. joined the antiwar movement. Even a personal note to Ho Chi Minh and a halt to US bombing of North Vietnam merely left LBJ with sinking approval ratings. In short, the costs of war, now running \$20 billion annually, were threatening not only the president’s Great Society programs but his political authority as well.<sup>10</sup> Johnson had to plug the dike before a flood of antiwar

sentiment upended what had become the centerpiece of US foreign policy. Senior officials consequently required fresh assessments to sustain their case for continuing the American-dominated conflict and, ostensibly, upholding the country's prestige and honor abroad. Making the case for progress—and continued patience and sacrifice—thus focused increasingly on manufacturing domestic support.

Unquestionably the White House placed pressure on military officers to help generate this support. These same officers, however, recognized the importance of public opinion. Adm. Ulysses Sharp, head of US Pacific Command, wrote the Joint Chiefs in December 1966 that the “American people can become aroused either for or against this war. . . . It's up to us to convince our people that there is an end in sight and that it is clearly defeat for Hanoi.”<sup>11</sup> Despite pressures to feed into this public relations campaign, Westmoreland, copied on Sharp's message, offered a subdued assessment two months later. In February 1967 the MACV commander summarized Hanoi's strategy as “a practical and clever one designed to continue a protracted war, inflict unacceptable casualties on our forces,” and to “establish a favorable political posture.” In March the general admitted, “Military success alone will not achieve the U.S. objectives in Vietnam.”<sup>12</sup> Little in these official messages, meant only for Westmoreland's superiors, suggested victory was near. Certainly the general was in a conflicted position. He had to show progress for maintaining support of an increasingly contentious war, but he also realized this “conflict of strategic political attrition” would not be concluded quickly. Westmoreland thus had to justify America's investment in Vietnam while admitting the United States was in for a long war.<sup>13</sup>

Translating official reports for public consumption became ever more important to Johnson, whose approval ratings on Vietnam were slipping. In late March the president flew to Guam to confer with Westmoreland, Bunker, and South Vietnamese leaders. Johnson highlighted advances in pacification and revolutionary development programs, declaring upon his arrival that the allies were meeting “in a time of progress.”<sup>14</sup> In private meetings with the president, however, Westmoreland struck a sober tone. He noted “serious problems” in the area around Saigon, the continuing infiltration of North Vietnamese forces into the south, and Hanoi's unbroken will. As the general recalled, he indicated it was possible the “war could go on indefinitely.”<sup>15</sup> Asking for an “optimum” reinforcement of 200,000 troops, Westmoreland stressed the difficulties ahead. Johnson thus softened his rhetoric before departing Guam. “I think we have a difficult, serious, long, drawn-out, agonizing problem that we do not yet have the answer for,” the president noted. “We think that our military situation is considerably strengthened.”

The day after Johnson's remarks, the *Los Angeles Times* seemed unconvinced: "The prospects, in sum, are for more of the same."<sup>16</sup>

For proof of a strengthened military position, LBJ called Westmoreland home in April for the first of several public appearances in 1967. Against the backdrop of an antiwar Spring Mobilization march scheduled for mid-month, MACV's commander pressed Johnson in closed-door meetings for more troops. "With the troops now in country, we are not going to lose," Westmoreland argued, "but progress will be slowed down. This is not an encouraging outlook, but it is a realistic one." Sustaining public support drove the general's concerns. Westmoreland feared that in this protracted conflict, attrition of political will at home mattered just as much as attrition of enemy forces in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> Speaking at the Associated Press's annual meeting in late April, he acknowledged that he did "not see any end to the war in sight," yet as long as Americans remained determined, the war still could be won. While the *Washington Post* hailed the "admirably forthright report," critics latched onto Westmoreland's contention that the enemy saw "protest as evidence of crumbling morale and diminishing resolve" at home. By disparaging legitimate dissent, Senator Thruston B. Morton (KY-R) argued, the general was only adding to the controversy. Johnson's plan to silence critics by bringing MACV's commander home had backfired.<sup>18</sup>

Westmoreland generated further debate when addressing a joint session of Congress on April 28. Carefully avoiding the word "victory," he cited heavy enemy combat losses, an increasing number of defectors rallying to Saigon's South Vietnamese government (GVN), and progress within the South Vietnamese Army ranks as evidence of forward momentum. Though the speech was "warmly received," according to the *Washington Post*, Westmoreland "made no converts to the policies he is carrying out in Vietnam."<sup>19</sup> In fact, critics pointed to the general's unprecedented call home to endorse an ongoing war as proof that Johnson's Vietnam policy was plagued with inconsistencies. Senator George McGovern (D-SD), believing Westmoreland's visit aimed to stifle criticism, proclaimed that deepening US involvement in Vietnam represented "the most tragic diplomatic and moral failure in our national experience." Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AR), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, thought from a military standpoint Westmoreland's speech was fine. But he disagreed with Westmoreland, remarking that "the point is the policy that put our boys over there." While numerous congressional leaders and editorial writers sided with Westmoreland in the following days, Johnson's aim of mobilizing domestic support was coming up short.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, concerns among the president's inner circle over reinforcements and a potentially expanding war surfaced in mid-May. For more than a year,

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had been privately questioning American strategy in Vietnam. In February he openly described the limitations of the US bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Then on May 19 he drafted Johnson an honest, if not anguished, critique of Vietnam policy. There was “rot in the fabric” of South Vietnamese society, McNamara opined. Pacification efforts were faltering, corruption was widespread, and the population remained apathetic to the war’s outcome. Hanoi’s resolve, meanwhile, was far from broken. Challenging Westmoreland’s request for additional troops, McNamara argued the “war in Vietnam is acquiring a momentum of its own and that must be stopped.”<sup>21</sup> In short with unresolved GVN deficiencies, Americans would achieve nothing more than a stalemate. As McNamara asked long after the war, “If the South Vietnamese government, such as it was, could not gain and keep its people’s support and defeat the insurgents, could we do it for them?”<sup>22</sup>

While claims Saigon was not shouldering enough of the burden were unfair—anticommunist South Vietnamese had been fighting since Indochina’s partition in 1954—contemporary assessments for President Johnson candidly depicted the political and military struggles inside South Vietnam. These faithfully presented reports rested on solid evidence, at least from their authors’ perspectives. Even under pressure from LBJ, Westmoreland, McNamara, and other senior officials privately gave the president their honest appraisal of the war. The White House, though, still contended with flagging domestic support. Thus, when Westmoreland returned home in July for his mother’s funeral, Johnson called a hasty news conference with Westmoreland, McNamara, and Joint Chiefs chairman Wheeler. While the president described both the successes and shortcomings in Vietnam, he was generally pleased with the progress being made. “We are very sure that we are on the right track.” Taking a few questions, LBJ turned to Westmoreland and asked if he could briefly “touch on this ‘stalemate’ creature.” In front of reporters, the general replied dutifully, “The statement that we are in a stalemate is complete fiction. It is completely unrealistic.”<sup>23</sup>

## BACK CHANNELS

Without question Westmoreland proved more candid with his confidential assessments and military advice. This private narrative demonstrated not only the war’s complexity but also the general’s concerns over a prolonged conflict. His concept of operations for 1967 highlighted MACV’s primary mission to “support the Vietnamese government and its armed forces and coalesce the

military efforts (and civilian efforts as appropriate) of the GVN and Free World Military Assistance Forces in defeating the Communist insurgents and aggressors from the North, expanding security in populated and productive areas, and encouraging and supporting all aspects of nation building.”<sup>24</sup> Here was an immense task. When National Security Adviser Walt Rostow forwarded Westmoreland’s concept to the president in January, he underlined several “unresolved problems” in the general’s report. Among MACV’s greatest concerns, none ranked more important than expanding security so pacification efforts could succeed. While acknowledging enemy difficulties, the general thought Hanoi probably would “continue his protracted war” well into 1967. No surprise then that at a high-level conference of GVN and American leaders in Guam, Westmoreland suggested, “As things stand now it may take ten years.”<sup>25</sup>

MACV’s chief problem remained one of accurately evaluating the war’s progress to make such claims. Even assessing conventional operations such as Cedar Falls and Junction City proved nettlesome. Both campaigns, intended to destroy Communist forces and infrastructure, amassed high numbers of enemy killed and supplies captured. Four months after these operations ended, Ambassador Bunker reported that the “enemy has been badly hurt, has been kept off balance, and his time schedule has been disrupted.” Westmoreland, though, tempered such optimism, informing Johnson that enemy forces had not been reduced because “heavy infiltration and continuing recruitment in the South were making up for battle casualties.”<sup>26</sup> Body counts told only part of the story. Left unanswered was how these operations were impacting the enemy’s political infrastructure and, as important, the civilian population. Correspondent Jonathan Schell, reporting on allied troops abusing civilians during Cedar Falls, questioned how an operation could be deemed successful when it had displaced nearly six thousand refugees from the local population.<sup>27</sup>

Equally difficult to ascertain was the willpower of Hanoi’s leadership, ostensibly a key target of US military power in Southeast Asia. Relying on captured documents and prisoner interrogations, Westmoreland could only guess at Hanoi’s intentions for 1967. MACV believed the enemy would seek a battlefield victory, “not with the intent to hold ground permanently, but rather to create a psychological shock designed to affect U.S. public opinion against continuation of the war, to bolster his own morale, or to improve his position for negotiation or further combat.”<sup>28</sup> In truth Hanoi’s Politburo heatedly debated its strategic options during 1967. While some party members advocated a diplomatic solution given the war’s increasing costs, First Secretary Le Duan insisted upon seeking a decisive battlefield victory. Though the 1968 Tet Offensive would prove Westmoreland’s earlier concerns prescient, he was unaware of any dissension within the enemy’s camp.<sup>29</sup>



On the American side, debate over strategy proved more public and often centered on what critics perceived as an omission of essential facts on the war's progress. By early July newspapers were openly contesting official reports on Vietnam. Erwin Canham of the *Christian Science Monitor* supposed that "the American people have never been more discouraged about Vietnam than they are now," while Drew Pearson of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote of a "standstill in Vietnam."<sup>30</sup> As MACV officials reasoned they "must convince Washington that there is something more than stalemate in prospect," key questions remained. Who was the audience for public progress reports? Were they generated to provide political support for the White House? Did Westmoreland feel the need to be a public advocate for his own soldiers or to buoy morale inside South Vietnam and generate support for the Saigon government? Certainly airing doubts about the GVN and its armed forces called into question the war itself. Journalist Joseph Kraft, for instance, claimed that "in blaming the continuing war on American public opinion," MACV was covering up "the true failure in Vietnam," the South Vietnamese Army.<sup>31</sup>

Westmoreland was all too cognizant of the faltering public support, yet there is little evidence to suggest he changed his assessments, either publicly or privately, to help sell the war. When Wheeler asked the general in March to report on the bombing campaign's positive results, Westmoreland declined because he found scant evidence supporting a bright assessment.<sup>32</sup> This is not to say MACV was mired in pessimism as 1967 wore on. It was not. Monthly evaluations spoke of measured progress even if the enemy's determination remained unbroken. While MACV's June report admitted "little direct progress was achieved" in meeting the year's campaign plan goals, it otherwise hit an upbeat tone. Reporting on operations in July, Westmoreland spoke of increased enemy losses, progress in revolutionary development programs, and how units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam were "continuing to improve in all areas." The general's civilian counterparts agreed. Ambassador Robert Komer, head of MACV's civil operations branch, wrote the president in July that "at long last we are slowly but surely winning [the] war of attrition in [the] South."<sup>33</sup>

Of course, optimism had purpose. As foreign policy experts Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts have argued, positive news "was seen as a job well done; bad news represented failure. Moreover, optimism bred optimism so that it was difficult not to continue it."<sup>34</sup> Whether cultural—Americans generally value performance—or organizational, senior military leaders were hesitant to share their personal doubts in public. Westmoreland, for example, was serving not only as the chief advocate for his president's war in Southeast Asia but also as the head of a military organization expected to defeat a Third

World country's military forces. Yet the general also knew full well that over-optimism destroyed the credibility of his predecessor, Gen. Paul Harkins. Thus, Westmoreland approached the press carefully. As journalist Ward Just recalled, MACV's commander "never predicted when the war would end, nor would he forecast the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end, or when the corner would be turned or if, indeed, there was a corner."<sup>35</sup> As such, the very definition of "winning" seemed perpetually open to interrogation.

Making matters worse, the question "How are we doing?" remained a mystery in 1967. Staffs from multiple agencies—MACV, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the US Agency for International Development—counted hundreds of metrics but never achieved consensus on the vector of progress. Was it moving in a positive, upward direction or not? The sheer complexity of tasks required by Westmoreland's comprehensive strategy made any assessment difficult. MACV's concept involved denying enemy infiltration into South Vietnam, securing the population, opening roads and waterways, fighting the enemy's main forces, blocking an invasion, and supporting revolutionary development programs.<sup>36</sup> These tasks were related, yet progress in one area did not guarantee progress elsewhere. A successful search-and-destroy operation, for instance, might create refugees, an outcome that undermined pacification efforts. One CIA report suggested the "ideal would be a single 'Dow Jones' index of how the war is going, but such an index is not currently feasible." No wonder reporters in late summer began speaking of the "ever-widening gap" between the assessments of senior officials and lower-echelon field commanders.<sup>37</sup> The war's interactive, and thus fluid, nature between Washington, Hanoi, and Saigon meant few could agree on the war's true rate of progress.

Senior Washington officials certainly received mixed messages from Saigon. Even during John F. Kennedy's administration, single reports contained internal contradictions on the political and military struggle inside South Vietnam. Little had changed by 1967. Conflicting views flooded the White House, some from individual advisers. The secretary of defense noted "substantial progress" in military operations, yet he conceded there was "not equivalent progress in the pacification program."<sup>38</sup> In fact, McNamara was a prime example of publicly communicating a positive picture while expressing deep-seated concerns in private. In July the secretary proclaimed, "More progress had been made in the Vietnam war in the last nine months than in the previous six years." Yet to the president, McNamara advised that "continuation of our current course of action in Southeast Asia would be dangerous, costly, and unsatisfactory to our people." By late summer, however, Johnson felt incapable of changing course. Rather than reconcile the competing interpretations of what many believed was a stalemated war, LBJ decided upon a

more forceful public relations campaign to convince Americans the war was being won.<sup>39</sup>

Ambiguous evidence, however, failed to support such claims. The so-called order of battle controversy, coming to a head in mid-1967, demonstrated the problems of gaining consensus on the evolving war.<sup>40</sup> In open view of the administration, the CIA and MACV bitterly debated including “irregulars”—local self-defense units—in the overall number of enemy forces. Deputy MACV commander Creighton Abrams believed incorporating these figures “in an estimate of military capabilities is highly questionable. These forces contain a sizeable number of women and old people. They operate entirely in their own hamlets.” If Abrams missed the potential for such irregulars contributing to the war effort, he clearly understood the risks of adding these figures into official estimates. The general argued that MACV had been “projecting an image of success over the recent months, and properly so.”<sup>41</sup> If irregular forces were included in the enemy’s order of battle, the press reaction would be potentially damaging, Abrams maintained. Though an honest disagreement with the CIA, rather than press concerns, drove MACV estimates, the controversy clearly revealed the obstacles to gaining consensus on the question “how are we doing?”

In reality deliberations unfolding in backchannel messages, often beyond public view, suggested the impenetrability of what largely, if not exclusively, was a Vietnamese problem. In the end the entire US mission in Vietnam rested on how well the Americans were supporting the development of a legitimate, stable GVN. In this crucial aspect of strategy, Westmoreland and others expressed their deepest concerns. Field commanders found it difficult to gain the trust of the population while Johnson’s advisers believed “most Vietnamese are politically inert.”<sup>42</sup> A congressional trip report insisted the concept of pacification was “based on the dubious premise that Government control results in political loyalty,” and thus “reports of progress in pacification continue to be misleading.” Even Robert Komer, a perpetual optimist, recalled the destabilizing presence of US forces: “If we pushed too hard, we would end up collapsing the very structure we were trying to shore up.”<sup>43</sup> For a president believing his Vietnam policy under siege, there seemed little choice but to push hard from a public relations standpoint. And push hard he did.

## MANAGING THE MESSAGE

As the summer of 1967 wore on, disparate assessments of the war seemed the new norm. The American public read some news reports hailing progress as

other journalists used words such as “quagmire” to describe Vietnam. A late July Gallup poll found 52 percent of the nation disapproved of Johnson’s handling of the war, yet earlier in the year, the number of Americans favoring a “total military victory” rose by more than 10 percent. The president might argue his critics were misinformed, but LBJ stood partly to blame. As special counsel to the president Harry McPherson recalled, Johnson “sent out confusing signals to the public. We must win; but ‘victory’ was not our goal. The men of Hanoi were the enemies of freedom and democracy . . . but our ultimate purpose was to make peace with them.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, not only did the goals appear contradictory but the momentum toward achieving them did as well. How could Westmoreland, for instance, be making progress yet requesting reinforcements? Though senior military leaders railed against “immature, naïve, and hostile” correspondents in Vietnam, journalists more often reflected, rather than constructed, the concerns of perplexed Americans.<sup>45</sup> At best the United States was making only incremental progress in Vietnam, clearly not enough to bolster domestic support.

Worse for Johnson, those following the war increasingly considered the administration’s official assessments misleading. MACV was partially at fault. Leaders such as Westmoreland were unable to articulate, based on the mosaic of Vietnam, what success looked like in 1967. As Komer wrote the president: “The whole trouble with analyzing this peculiar war is that it is so fragmented—so much a matter of little things happening everywhere—that the results are barely visible to the untrained eye.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps unsurprising the Joint Chiefs chairman wrote Westmoreland in early August about his concerns regarding the war. Wheeler thought MACV should “prepare a precise, factual, non-generalized case to explain why we are making progress rather than facing a stalemate in Vietnam.” Westmoreland responded by accusing “a vocal segment of the news profession” of “equating a lack of major combat operations such as Cedar Falls and Junction City with a stalemate at best, or a loss of the initiative on our part at worst. Nothing could be farther from the truth.” Rather than censor the press—the command would pay “a terrible price for it”—Westmoreland instead increased his number of news conferences and strove “to talk personally with more newsmen and to take as many as possible on field trips with us.”<sup>47</sup>

The message, however, seemed only to sour. On August 7 the *New York Times* printed R. W. Apple’s story, “Vietnam: Signs of Stalemate.” (Of note, the same day US Army chief of staff Harold K. Johnson sensed a “smell of success” in every major area of the war.) Apple doubted progress because the president, the week before, had authorized an additional forty-five thousand to fifty thousand men to be sent to Vietnam. “Victory is not close at hand,”

the journalist claimed. “It may be beyond reach.”<sup>48</sup> Apple’s article immediately attracted the Joint Chiefs’ attention, with Wheeler writing Westmoreland of his disappointment that senior MACV officers had been “disloyal” by feeding the story with pessimistic evaluations.<sup>49</sup> The White House also took note. Though not directly responding to the *New York Times* piece, the administration established a Vietnam Information Group in August to better coordinate the information campaign. This quick reaction team would seize opportunities to “strike a positive note” and break out of the “siege mentality” overshadowing public relations. Still two weeks after Apple’s story ran, the president was fielding questions on whether the United States had reached a stalemate in Vietnam. LBJ dismissed the charge as “nothing more than propaganda.”<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, though, accusations of stalemate had rattled the administration. On September 27, Rostow cabled Westmoreland, Bunker, and Komer and urgently requested “sound evidence of progress.” Senior military officials, however, were already complying. In mid-August, upon returning from South Vietnam, US Army chief of staff Johnson held a news conference in which he declared “significant progress being made” everywhere he went. Less than a month later, the general gave an interview to *U.S. News & World Report*. “From the Army’s No. 1 officer comes one of the most encouraging appraisals yet on the Vietnam war,” the news magazine exclaimed. In the interview, Johnson lauded the “forward movement everywhere” in South Vietnam. “We are very definitely winning,” the general professed.<sup>51</sup> Internal reports from Westmoreland seemed to bolster such claims even if they hedged on the propinquity of overall victory. MACV evaluations highlighted the enemy losses, the nationwide elections held September 3, and the “emergence of an effective Vietnamese ground force.” Though noting “limited progress in pacification programs,” Westmoreland enumerated significant objectives being accomplished that fed the public relations campaign.<sup>52</sup>

Even if MACV’s upbeat assessments rested on sound evidence—senior military officials believed so—the overall message gained little traction at home. Though Maj. Gen. Winant Sidle, Westmoreland’s information chief, blamed the media for an “inaccurate and often misleading picture of the U.S. war effort,” few news stories in 1967 reflected journalists’ personal biases either for or against the war.<sup>53</sup> Accepting the administration’s positive messages, however, grew increasingly difficult, especially as draft increases brought the war to more homes. And though most voters steered a middle course on the topic of Vietnam, those leading public discourse had progressively taken sides. In the process, the president struggled to satisfy either side of the debate. While “hawks” demanded greater action to end the “crisis of indecision,” the October 21 march on the Pentagon, organized by the National Mobilization

Committee to End the War in Vietnam, laid bare the antiwar movement's growing influence. Despite the White House publicity campaign, Americans increasingly found it difficult to reconcile requests for sacrifice abroad to support a war that seemed stalemated at best, unjust at worst.<sup>54</sup>

By November LBJ's inner circle grasped the full weight of public opinion burdening US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Walt Rostow reported McNamara's concerns that any advances over the next fifteen months would neither lead to peace nor "convince our people that major progress has been made and there is light at the end of the tunnel." Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach wrote Johnson on the crucial element of time: "Can the tortoise of progress in Viet-Nam stay ahead of the hare of dissent at home?" The undersecretary even suggested the possibility of losing the war in the United States.<sup>55</sup> Still when Johnson convened the "Wise Men," a group of elder statesmen, early that month, he heard few dissenting voices. Gen. Omar Bradley felt the "need to raise patriotism." Career ambassador Robert Murphy urged the White House to orchestrate a "hate complex directed at Ho Chi Minh similar to Hitler." Rostow reiterated his theme of "guiding the press to show light at the end of the tunnel." As the meeting concluded, the advisers almost unanimously recommended staying the course in Vietnam.<sup>56</sup>

Johnson then called Westmoreland and Bunker home to offer yet another progress report. Senior officers in Saigon realized the president's motives. Lt. Gen. Bruce Palmer Jr. recalled, "It was obvious Westmoreland was being used for political purposes."<sup>57</sup> Two days after his appearance on *Meet the Press*, MACV's commander gave his most important public remarks of the year at the National Press Club in Washington. Dutifully conforming to the president's wishes, Westmoreland offered a laundry list of indexes denoting progress, all of which rested on a truthful accounting of allied accomplishments. The press, however, latched onto fourteen words: "We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view." Westmoreland defended the statement, saying it was conceivable within two years to turn over more of the war to Vietnamese armed forces.<sup>58</sup> But critics saw the speech as little more than performance art supporting the president's hard sell on Vietnam. Even Westmoreland predicted that the final phase of his strategy "will probably last several years."<sup>59</sup> Such qualifications did little to convince doubters the stalemate had been broken.

As Westmoreland returned to Saigon, the chief doubter within the administration broke ties with Johnson. On November 29 Robert McNamara, secretary of defense since early 1961, accepted the presidency of the World Bank. McNamara's pessimism only grew as the war dragged on. In truth as early as November 1965, in the aftermath of the first US battles inside the

Central Highlands' Ia Drang Valley, the secretary's confidence in helping transform South Vietnamese society had been gradually evaporating. As the White House ramped up its public relations campaign in 1967, the defense secretary dissented increasingly with his commander in chief. "I had come to the conclusion," McNamara recalled, "that we could not achieve our objective in Vietnam through any reasonable military means, and we therefore should seek a lesser political objective through negotiations."<sup>60</sup> Although Johnson's own doubts grew as well, the public relations campaign seemed finally to be yielding limited results. Despite most Americans still disapproving of LBJ's handling of the war by a large margin, a Harris poll at year's end found that 63 percent of those asked "favored escalation over curtailment of the military effort."<sup>61</sup> Low approval ratings and McNamara's departure may have shaken the president but not enough to derail his plans to continue the war.

As 1967 drew to a close, the "conversation gap" seemed as wide as ever. David Halberstam offered a gloomy outlook in *Harper's* magazine, depicting Vietnamese society as "rotten, tired, and numb." Official pronouncements proved more cheerful. At the Association of the US Army's annual meeting in December, Harold K. Johnson offered "clear and concrete evidence of progress": the improving morale and performance of South Vietnamese forces, the prevention of a major enemy offensive across the demilitarized zone, and the food shortages within the enemy camp. Westmoreland called 1967 a year of "great progress," though once more he qualified the good news by admitting he saw no evidence the enemy strategy would change in the coming year.<sup>62</sup> Internal MACV assessments struck a similarly confident tone yet equally acknowledged the limits of US advances. For instance, MACV reported only a 3 percent increase of population under GVN control for the entire year. Westmoreland conceded that the insurgency's political infrastructure "persists as a significant influence over portions of the population." Inadequate South Vietnamese leadership, in both quality and quantity, remained a problem.<sup>63</sup> Few of these concerns, however, surfaced in public. In retrospect, the year's final pronouncements of progress offered the American home front only selective evidence to continue supporting the Johnson administration's policies in Vietnam.

## **CONCLUSION: EXPECTING A CONVERSATION GAP?**

When the Tet Offensive broke in late January 1968, the conversation gap transformed suddenly into a visible credibility gap. As one member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs asked, "How . . . could the Tet offensive have occurred if things were going so well?"<sup>64</sup> In part the answer could

be found in President Johnson's need to maintain support for Vietnam, thus setting a kind of moral trap for senior military leaders given the tradition of American civil-military relations. Westmoreland never acted out of dishonest motives even if he was not completely forthcoming in public. As he recalled in his memoirs, he would have been "out of bounds" if he sought to alter policy through his public statements.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the larger national commitment to South Vietnam became *the* rationale for accentuating the positive. Yet as signs of progress became less compelling, the White House's—and to a large extent, Westmoreland's—conversation about the war became less convincing as the country became more polarized. As the war persisted, the problem of strategic assessment and the pressure to demonstrate progress became more acute. In the process, critical observers wondered aloud if there was some bureaucratic veil behind which the real truth lay.

It seems plausible that senior leaders such as Westmoreland were not simply concealing bad news but may also have been struggling to understand, even make sense of, larger trends in the war. This all raises important questions. What are our expectations of senior civilian and military leaders being candid in wartime? Veteran correspondent Malcolm Browne believed few: "Honest reporting is the last thing most people want when the subject is war."<sup>66</sup> Thus, should we expect those in high office, along with their military commanders, to acknowledge assessment problems, to be somewhat ambiguous, especially in limited wars like Vietnam? Should we expect a conversation gap? As historian George Herring has remarked, the "central problem of waging limited war is to *maintain* public support without *arousing* public emotion" (italics in original). Clearly Johnson had failed at this delicate balancing act. By the end of 1967, with the US troop presence in Vietnam nearing a half million and with American soldiers killed in action surpassing nine thousand, few among the intended audience believed the war was being won. Perhaps the perceived justness of their cause deluded Johnson's war managers into accepting their own optimistic assessments.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, there remained a thread of honesty within the larger quilt of wishful thinking.

All humans, of course, are subject to self-deception, and one cannot dismiss the primacy of politics in war. Is it inevitable, though, that public persons shade the truth? If so, is it possible to do so while maintaining one's moral compass? Officers such as William Westmoreland and Harold K. Johnson no doubt withheld the *full* truth because they believed it would prevent some future harm to the war's overriding objective of creating an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam. But politics as they were in the Johnson administration tended to create these ethical dilemmas. In a modern war without front lines, it was difficult, if not impossible, for military leaders to



inoculate themselves sufficiently against political pressures to sell their president's war.<sup>68</sup> Thus, they felt compelled to help shape the changing reality of what was an exceedingly complex war. By remaining obedient to political authority, uniformed leaders had to construct a reality, based on selective interpretation of the facts, that justified continued sacrifices in a protracted political-military struggle.

In a large sense, there is a timelessness to this dilemma of the serving officer who must speak to multiple audiences about the progress of a less than existential war without visible decision points and identifiable conventional campaigns. In the Vietnam War the rhetoric of strategic assessment often blurred the reality of back-channel appraisals. It seems important then to appreciate the vague, if not imprecise, language used to publicly assess the progress of protracted wars. Such language arguably requires the public to question the relation of truth to any larger wartime assessment. The problems posed by the murky situation in Vietnam also illustrate the dangers of overselling progress in wartime assessment. The credibility of a government, and its senior civilian and military officials, is a precious commodity that is difficult to restore once it begins to slip. A lack of confidence in higher officials' statements leads, almost inexorably, to a lack of faith in a nation's military power itself. Perhaps this is the true dilemma of strategic assessment in complex wars without front lines. Unlike football, it isn't always clear who is winning and losing.<sup>69</sup>

## NOTES

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