

IN THE SEARCH FOR A SCAPEGOAT

On the Margin of the Book: Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*, New York 2011, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, XX + 398 pages

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The Second Indochina War, commonly known as the Vietnam War, remains one of the most controversial conflicts in the history of the United States. It still divides not only American society, but also professional historians, who have been trying to find answers to numerous questions associated with this war for years: Why did America decide to engage in Indochina? Was it necessary? Was this war possible to win? And, asked probably the most often, why did the U.S. lose? Many history scholars tried and still try to find an answer to that specific question.

Even before enemy tanks rolled into Saigon, and the whole South Vietnam ultimately fell into the hands of triumphing Communists, on the other side of Pacific the search for people guilty of Indochina debacle had begun. The bulk of criticism fell on American leaders from the time of the 1968 *Tet Offensive* – President Lyndon B. Johnson and General William C. Westmoreland.¹ Despite the long duration and complexity of the Second Indochina War, many historians and journalists have been tempted to generalize and depict complex issues in a simplified way. Sadly, it seems that dr. Lewis Sorley, author of presented here biography of the *MACV*² commander, also wasn't able to escape from those schemes in his book, as he drops the responsibility for the outcome of the long-running conflict on the shoulders of one man.

The author's approach is even more surprising as Sorley seems to be a quite competent person to write such a kind of objective work. He is a third generation professional officer in his family, who graduated from the Military Academy at West Point in 1956. In the next few years he held teaching positions in several military colleges, and from 1963 to 1966 served in Vietnam. In the second half of the seventies he worked in the CIA, in the meantime obtaining a Ph.D. degree at Johns Hopkins Uni-

¹ General William Childs Westmoreland served as U.S. commander in the Vietnam from June 1964 to June 1968. J.H. Williams, *Vietnam War Almanac*, New York 2009, pp. 74, 264.

² Military Assistance Command Vietnam – formed on 8 February 1962, in order to control the increasing number of American troops in Vietnam. G.A. Cosmas, *MACV. The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967*, Washington DC 2006, p. 123.

versity in Maryland. He is the author of General's Creighton Abrams biography³ and of many other influential books.⁴

General William C. Westmoreland, graduated from West Point in 1936. His service in the army may be an example of a model climb up on the military career ladder. During World War II he commanded an artillery battalion, but after the end of this conflict he joined airborne troops. In the Korean War, he served as commander of the 187th Airborne Combat Team. Following the conclusion of the armistice on the Korean peninsula, he took command of the famous 101st Airborne Division.

In 1960, he returned to his *alma mater*, being appointed for Superintendent office. Three years later, tall and handsome, and widely regarded as the rising star of the U.S. Army, he was sent to Vietnam. During the period of his *MACV* command (1964–68) probably the most significant and controversial events of the Vietnam War took place: the Gulf of Tonkin incident, start of the air bombing raids on North Vietnam, landing of the first regular U.S. troops and expansion of this force to more than half a million men, and finally, the *Tet Offensive*.

In June 1968, General Westmoreland was promoted to the position of Chief of Staff of the Army and returned to the United States.⁵ However, Vietnam still remained his main concern, not only because of the continued military action in this country, but also because, as he said: "I deemed one of my more important responsibilities to be making the Army's role known and understood".⁶ Vietnam occupied the mind of the general even after retirement. In his memoirs, published in 1976, his time spent in Southeast Asia occupies 392 pages out of 542.

The discussed Westmoreland biography is divided into 30 chapters, arranged chronologically, dedicated to particular stages of the general's life. The first eight chapters deal with the period before Vietnam, such as his youth, studies at West Point, commanding in the Second World War and the Korean War, and various functions in the U.S. Army in the United States. For a description of Westmoreland participation in the Second Indochina War, the author allocated twelve chapters. The last ten are devoted to his service as the U.S. Army Chief of Staff and his retirement, during which he tried his hand in the election for governor of South Carolina, wrote memoirs, and was vigorously engaged in the activities of the Vietnam War veterans movement.

³ L. Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times*. New York 1992, pp. 429.

⁴ L. Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, Orlando 1999, reportedly influenced the U.S. strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. P. Spiegel and J. Weisman, *Behind Afghan War Debate, a Battle of Two Books Rages*, "The Wall Street Journal" (New York), Oct. 7, 2009.

⁵ For many historians, and the contemporary public opinion, the promotion was perceived as the proverbial kick up. It should be noted however, that initially, General Westmoreland was to leave Vietnam as early as in 1967, when his successor, General Creighton Abrams, arrived in this country. However, due to ongoing fighting and for political reasons (the presidential administration tried at that time to convince the public opinion that matters in Vietnam were heading in the right direction), change of *MACV* commander was constantly delayed. G.A. Cosmas, op. cit., Washington D.C. 2006, p. 277.

⁶ W.C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, New York 1976, p. 442.

Lewis Sorley starts his book in a very promising way, writing in the preface that “until we understand William Childs Westmoreland, we will never understand fully what happened to us in Vietnam, or why.”⁷ Unfortunately, it very soon becomes clear that the author is not so much trying to understand the man he writes about, but rather to give us his authorial, and not very flattering vision of the U.S. commander. From the pages of this book emerges a slightly grotesque image of a megalomaniac, overpowered with the ambition, who by manipulating and taking advantage of his connections, in the path of his career had gone further than his intellectual ability should allowed him to. Finally ending up in Vietnam, Westmoreland collided with a task that in Sorley’s opinion was beyond his capabilities. As a result, the author concludes that the *MACV* commander was personally responsible for the American defeat in Vietnam.

But attempts to present General Westmoreland in a bad light would be perhaps more convincing if they were not so intrusive. First up example: writing about the stay of the future commander of *MACV* in West Point, Sorley calculates the exact number of his offenses and warnings, devoting to this issue more space than to the academic achievements of the young cadet. Moreover, citing the anecdote about a situation when performing the duties of the First Captain Westmoreland had forgotten his sword, but nevertheless still managed to lead the parade so skillfully that none of the observers have realized, Sorley devotes some time to consider whether it was at all possible.⁸

This type of narration, full of *well-meaning comments*, dominates on the book pages. The paragraph about the first experiences of combat in World War II begins with the sentence: “Although eventually served in three wars, Westmoreland was never decorated for valor”.⁹ Whereas the description of a situation from fighting in Sicily, when at the military staff meeting Westmoreland suggested to allocate his artillery battalion and its machine park to the 82nd Airborne Division, ends up with Sorley’s acerbic remark that “nothing is said concerning how the losing division commander felt about freelancing on Westmoreland part.”¹⁰ Notwithstanding, during this period the author still sometimes praises the young officer’s achievements and skills, admitting that he was an efficient and well liked leader, both commanding an artillery battalion on the Western Front, as well as the airborne division in America.

Open criticism begins when Westmoreland goes to Vietnam. Interestingly, Sorley focuses on the issues, which for quite a few years, have already been (or should be) interpreted differently than the author presents it. A good example would be the charge laid against *MACV* commander which claims that he completely did not un-

⁷ L. Sorley, *Westmoreland. The General Who Lost Vietnam*, New York 2011, p. XVII.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁹ It is quite unjust allegation, if we consider that General Westmoreland in all these wars served at command posts. What’s more, Sorley forgets to mention that the hero of his book was twice awarded the U.S. Bronze Star medal for his service in both World War II and in Korea. *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹⁰ The condemnation which can be felt in the words of Sorley about “freelancing” is all the more strange because a few sentences before he himself acknowledges that whole matter was approved by the commander of the corps present at the meeting. *Ibidem*, p. 17.

derstand the nature of the war in which he took part.¹¹ Insisting on this view, Sorley completely ignores the official strategy presented by the Westmoreland even in his memoirs, instead using the hackneyed clichés about the war of attrition, and search-and-destroy missions. Apart from issues of scientific objectivity, it means that he completely ignores the fact that since December 1963 the Communists led a Big Units War in the South, rather than a classical guerrilla activity.¹²

Even more shocking is Sorley's evaluation of the *Tet Offensive*, which sounds more like a newspaper articles from 1968, rather than the work of a historian. He claims for example, that General Westmoreland had not at all expected the incoming communists strike. He however supports his opinion, with such a *reliable source* as the MBS radio network interview from December 1967.¹³ At the same time, he omits the fact that the *MACV* commander placed American troops on alert status on the eve of the communist offensive, and redeployed many units specifically in anticipation of the enemy attack. What's more, Sorley practically ridicules Westmoreland claims that the *Tet Offensive* was the result of American military success in the preceding period, claiming that in reality the operation testified about the strength of the communists.¹⁴ Yet communist documents, available for quite a few years, clearly show that the U.S. commander was much closer to the truth in his conjectures than his biographer.¹⁵

This book is probably the ideal example illustrating just how big an emotional issue for Americans is the Vietnam War. It is dominated not by the desire to fairly present a controversial figure, that General Westmoreland undoubtedly was, but to put him in the role of the proverbial villain, individually responsible for the defeat in Vietnam, and therefore in a way exempting other U.S. policymakers from the liability.¹⁶ In this context, it is worth to look up a case raised by Gregory A. Daddis in the essay which appeared in the magazine *Parameters*.¹⁷ In his text, he suggests that Sorley, demonizing the General Westmoreland, does so in order to strengthen the positive image of his successor, Gen. Creighton Abrams, whom he described in glowing terms in his earlier publications.¹⁸

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 91.

¹² It was the reaction of the Hanoi to the chaos that prevailed in the South after the military junta overthrew and murdered President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963. M. M o y a r, *Triumph Forsaken. The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 332–333.

¹³ The assumption that the officer will reveal his real knowledge about plans of the enemy in a public radio interview is a bit bizarre.

¹⁴ L. S o r l e y, op.cit., p. 178.

¹⁵ Motivations of the communist side, and how desperate Hanoi was to carry out the country-wide operation, is detailed by L.-H.T. N g u y e n, *The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tet Offensive*, "Journal of Vietnamese Studies" (Berkeley) 2006, vol. 1, Nos. 1–2.

¹⁶ It is no wonder then that the book quotes heavily from former Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, one of the main architects of U.S. policy in Vietnam up to 1968. It is worth mentioning that he abandoned his office during the middle of the *Tet Offensive*, and then became a bitter enemy of United States involvement in Southeast Asia. His opinions hardly can be described as objective.

¹⁷ The magazine published by "U.S. Army War College" in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

¹⁸ Daddis also notes that most of negative feedback on of General Westmoreland comes from oral interviews conducted by Sorley only in the late 90's or even after 2000. As he then writes, "It raises ques-

To sum up, the work of Lewis Sorley is not the best biography of General Westmoreland. The author tries very hard to convince the reader that the hero of his book was a flawed and haughty individual, of not very volatile mind, but instead endowed with rampant ambition, and who is solely to be blamed for the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. Sorley does it, however, on the basis of biased interpretation of selectively chosen documents, and oral interviews conducted mainly with people who were fierce critics of the former *MACV* commander, such as former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. In the same time, the book lacks the voices that would distort a vision of General Westmoreland built by the author,¹⁹ especially in the critical Vietnamese period. Finally, as I demonstrated in the following text, Sorley often omits facts inconvenient to him, or interprets them only in a manner consistent with the previously staked thesis.



tions about the reliability of the selected interviews and how the soldiers remember war”. G.A. D a d d i s, *On Lewis Sorley Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*, “Parameters” (Carlisle) Autumn 2011.

¹⁹ And there was no shortage of such individuals. Among them, for example, General Bruce Palmer, Jr., who recalled Westmoreland as someone “thoughtful, sensitive and very smart”. Quoted after Bruce Palmer Jr., *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam*, Lexington, 1984, p. 40.