

## INTERVIEW II

DATE: July 25, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM C. WESTMORELAND

INTERVIEWER: Charles B. MacDonald

PLACE: Washington, D.C.

M: General [Paul] Harkins' optimism about the situation in Vietnam is well established. Did he ever confide in you about any doubts he may have entertained? Did his optimism mislead official circles in Washington, in your judgment?

W: I do not recall that he ever expressed doubts to me, and I would not know if his views misled Washington; [Robert] McNamara would know better on that. As related in my book [A Soldier Remembers], page 67, he was markedly optimistic when briefing McNamara, but I think he was being conscientiously objective. Harkins was convinced that if he were given total command over the South Vietnamese, that would make a big difference. I disagreed with that. I think in that case there would have been some defections by South Vietnamese officials, perhaps not overt but tacit cooperation with the VC. Some few, of course, were in effect VC agents, and that would have increased.

M: Did General Harkins and General [Maxwell] Taylor have a special relationship?

W: Yes, a long and close relationship. When Taylor was superintendent of the Military Academy, Harkins was on his staff.

M: Did General Harkins confide in you about his relationship with Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge?

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- W: Yes, and there was friction. Mutual confidence was not there. Mainly, Harkins thought it a mistake to get involved in removing [Ngo Dinh] Diem, but Lodge influenced Washington against Diem. Taylor agreed with Harkins, but remember that Harkins was not under the Ambassador; they were on the same level. The creation of head of mission came with Taylor's arrival.
- M: Have you gained any insights into the failure of David Nes to establish an overall pacification committee under Ambassador Lodge?
- W: I was the one who proposed to Nes that a committee be set up to concentrate on pacification and suggested that Nes chair it. Nes, who was deputy chief of mission, accepted this, and the committee with me, [Barry] Zorthian, the head of AID, and others was to meet once a week. The military attache to the Ambassador was designated the secretary. I think Lodge saw the committee as a divisive thing eroding his authority as ambassador; so after the first meeting, he dissolved it.
- M: You have written that Ambassadors Graham Martin in Thailand and William Sullivan in Laos were reluctant to yield to you on military points you considered essential. Would you give examples of this?
- W: I remark on this on pages 76-77 of my book. Both Martin and Sullivan were supersensitive; neither wanted anybody imposing on his domain. I suggested frequent conferences, which were usually convened at U Dorn.
- M: Would you elaborate on General Taylor's attitude on the commitment of U.S. troops in Vietnam? What seemed to be his objections, and what persuaded him to accept the commitment?

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- W: Nobody was happy about committing U.S. troops, neither I nor Taylor. But it simply came down to doing it or losing South Vietnam. The situation was clearly deteriorating, and Washington did not consider a defeat to be an option. See my book, page 123.
- M: Would you assess the performance of each of the three ambassadors under whom you served in Vietnam--Henry Cabot Lodge, Maxwell Taylor, and Ellsworth Bunker? Was there any discernible difference in Lodge's styles in his first and second tours? Did Taylor's background as chairman of the Joint Chiefs show in the way he operated as ambassador? Did any of the three impinge unduly on your operations as COMUSMACV?
- W: On Lodge's first tour, he had no authority over the military but had it on the second. He inherited the mission council from Taylor, but he was not as effective at using it as Taylor was. When I urged in 1964 that I be made his executive agent for pacification, Lodge approved but went home before it was implemented. Taylor set up the mission council but did not accept me as deputy for pacification. It was finally done at Guam in March of 1967. Lodge was a poor organizer; he was superb on political matters. He did not appreciate staff work. Taylor was the reverse; he was not an accomplished diplomat, sometimes rubbing the South Vietnamese the wrong way. Bunker was a combination of the two, a statesman, a diplomat, and an organizer, a man of tremendous depth. He retained the mission council as set up by Taylor and operated it smoothly and effectively.

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M: In your view, what were the bases for the longevity and success of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam prior to 1968? Were the forces of insurrection based on something more than terror and coercion? What legitimacy did the VC have in the eyes of the common people?

W: Hanoi's propaganda was immensely successful. The South Vietnamese government lacked unity of effort, and only after [Nguyen Van] Thieu-[Nguyen Cao] Ky took over did we know who was really running the country. Unhappiness and perplexity pervaded the whole country, contributing to a lack of cohesiveness. The people viewed Saigon as a "French" city, a symbol of colonialism; that had a powerful psychological effect. Many people were not emotionally supportive of a government with a colonial image. And they had no hero to look to. The only visible hero was Ho Chi Minh, and the people want a hero. Ho's picture was easy to come by, and Ho was not necessarily just a communist hero; he had gained Vietnam's freedom from the French. The people in the countryside wanted to be left alone by any government, but they could be taken in by propaganda which pictured the U.S. as merely replacing the French. Many apparently believed we were there to stay.

M: What were the most serious weaknesses of the South Vietnamese forces during your tenure as senior adviser? If you had it to do over, would you do anything differently in trying to correct those faults?

W: The biggest weakness was in leadership at all levels; and remember that we were in conflict with the VC militarily, psychologically, and politically. As I look at the situation in retrospect, I can see

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nothing that I would--or could--do differently. It was like trying to push a piece of cooked spaghetti. We had contradictory objectives: get results, but we could not do that without assuming command, and if we did that, we would build no senior South Vietnamese leadership. Some Vietnamese leaders would have been happy to lean on us just as they had done with the French, but in that case we would never have been able to leave. Others would have defected to the enemy if our posture had been like that of the French. I was very sensitive to these contradictions.

M: What kinds of leverage were available to you to encourage the Vietnamese to follow your advice?

W: Basically, only stern and frank talk and a threat to withhold logistical support and modernization, both of which were self-defeating. I would also appeal to Thieu to improve the selection of his officers. Thieu was sensitive to being considered a U.S. puppet, and we wanted to create an image of independence. I talked frequently with Thieu in confidence, trying to persuade, to influence, but would defer to him as president and head of the armed forces, the image we were trying to build. It was an anomaly. Thieu would eventually accept my advice, but he wanted a time distance so it would appear to be his decision alone.

M: Some critics, even friendly ones, have suggested that you may have kept too many strings in your own hands as COMUSMACV. If you had it to do over, would you create a field army and appoint a commander, for instance?

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M: What do you think of the way General [Earle] Wheeler handled the so-called two-hundred-and-six-thousand-man troop request in 1968? We have little in the way of detail on General Wheeler's visit to Vietnam in February of that year and would appreciate any information on meetings, General Wheeler's frame of mind, and so forth.

W: I have covered this as best I can in my book. See again the paper by Major Paul Miles. I submitted no written request for major reinforcements.

M: Was there undue civilian interference either from Washington or the embassy in the conduct of military operations in Vietnam? If so, who were the individuals or agencies responsible, and what recourse was open to you?

W: In regard to the bombing campaign and operations in Laos and Cambodia, very much so. Sometimes nitpicking items, such as refusal to let us use tear gas at the beginning of U.S. troop commitment. My cable requests and messages from Washington speak for themselves. I do not know the source of the detailed control, but I believe it was basically the Secretary of Defense, whose views on the war--including how it was to be fought and the sources to be provided--were paramount.

M: What has been the overall effect of the Vietnam experience on the army as an institution?

W: It was a major strain and drain, but the army as an institution was tough enough and flexible enough to survive it.

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W: In retrospect, I would not modify my command arrangements. I consider that I had no choice but to do it the way I did. When [Bruce] Palmer arrived, he wanted to be the field army commander. But by that time the South Vietnamese had confidence in me, and I considered coordination between U.S. forces and the Vietnamese vital. Also, I knew the country and the terrain, and Palmer was new to the scene. As an example, one of my more successful tactical moves was when I foresaw that the enemy would try to take over the two northernmost provinces. As I saw that coming, we began on a priority basis to build a logistical structure there to accommodate more U.S. forces, which I later moved in as reinforcements. The marines did not seek army troops in the north; the reinforcement initiative was mine alone. Would Palmer have been willing to give up his limited army resources to shift them to a sector long recognized as a marine bailiwick? As it turned out, we were ready when the enemy acted, no small achievement when you consider that we had almost a nine hundred mile front. Had I turned two-thirds of my strength--the army portion--over to a subordinate, I would have lost flexibility. How would Palmer have handled pacification and [Robert] Komer? From a practical standpoint, a subordinate command made no sense. I was not overwhelmed with responsibilities; it was a unique war, and it required a unique organization. I never dealt by the formalized book. There were no stereotyped solutions, and I was not hogtied to doctrine. A standard, textbook organization was not apropos to South Vietnam; the traditional approach would have been awkward.

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- M: What were the strong and weak points of the U.S. forces as they operated in Vietnam? Were the marines used properly, for instance?
- W: The strong points were our weapons and leadership, although leadership later deteriorated at lower levels during the latter years of the war and became a weak point. Operations put such a load on small-unit action that leadership at that level became strained. The one-year tour exacerbated it. I consider that the marines were used properly, for there was no necessity for amphibious assaults. The marines heavy organization was well suited to the type of war in the northern corps area. See my book for my differences with [Victor] Krulak. I thought the idea of the CAP teams was good, but they became fixtures in the villages rather than a device to train the South Vietnamese.
- M: Do you see "nation building" as a proper role for U.S. forces in such situations as Vietnam?
- W: Not necessarily, but nobody else had the capacity. It would have been awkward to divorce ourselves from nation building as long as the Vietnamese military was running the country. With the arrival of Komer, we were able to concentrate more on pacification, but again the problem was convincing the Vietnamese that they themselves had to do the job, not us.
- M: How could press relations in Vietnam have been improved? Are you satisfied with the job done by Barry Zorthian and JUSPAO? In retrospect, do you think that censorship should have been imposed? How could it have been enforced?



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W: I do not see how relations could have been much improved. Censorship would have failed on the issue of how to enforce it. I wrote at some length on this subject in my book, and my views have not changed.

M: What were some of the better jobs done by reporters in Vietnam, and some of those that were less good?

W: Again, I comment on this in my book. See in particular pages 420-422.

M: Some have charged that the war of attrition was unwinnable so long as the infiltration routes were closed and the sanctuaries inviolate. Could bombing have closed the routes and cleared the sanctuaries, if sufficiently intense? Could the war have been won without closing the routes?

W: True militarily but possibly not overall when coupled with attrition of will, which was our weakness and the enemy's strength. LBJ would not broaden the war geographically, so we continued to be plagued by a static almost nine hundred mile hostile front. Bombing cannot hold ground--no amount of bombing would have done it. If Hanoi's will could have been affected--as the Christmas bombing did but four years too late--our political objective--a divided Vietnam--could have been achieved. But to sustain the peace would have required some U.S. military forces in Southeast Asia for an indefinite period.

M: Your memoirs discount the possibility of Russian or Chinese intervention in case we had bombed or mined Haiphong. Did you feel so at the time you were COMUSMACV? Did any Washington policymaker ask your opinion on this subject?

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- W: CINCPAC and not COMUSMACV had responsibility for bombing. I never thought the Chinese would come in unless we threatened their borders. On Haiphong, I was conscious of the possibility of hitting a Russian ship, which would have posed political problems. I do not recall that Washington ever specifically asked for my advice on the bombing, but in many cables I supported CINCPAC's position.
- M: Have you learned anything about the enemy's plans for the Tet offensive that has altered your thinking about his intentions during that time? For example, what is your current view of the role of Khe Sanh in that campaign? Did the enemy intend it to be another Dien Bien Phu, a diversion, or were there elements of both involved? What were the intelligence indications in January 1968 which prompted you to alter troop dispositions around Saigon? What role did General [Frederick] Weyand play in this? Was U.S. public opinion a target of the enemy at Tet? What is the evidence for this?
- W: I do not believe the enemy expected another Dien Bien Phu; he thought he could move swiftly, overrun the position, and push to the sea. I do not think he expected our strong resistance. Phil Davidson, my J-2, thinks his objective was to take over the two northern provinces. I thought that at the time, for his dispositions reflected that. On Tet, general intelligence: Weyand called me on the telephone, and we got together later to talk. I shifted troops so we would have greater flexibility to react and told all commanders to hold reserves in readiness. On matters related to Tet, see the paper pulled together by Major Paul Miles--in my records.

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