

1968 Effort for a Major G.I. Build-Up in Vietnam

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 28—A former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. G. Wheeler, reportedly encouraged Gen. William C. Westmoreland, then United States commander in Vietnam, to request large-scale troop reinforcements during the Communist Lunar New Year offensive in 1968.

The request for 206,000 men, which would have brought the United States forces in Vietnam to 730,000 men, was later denied by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The account of the exchange of secret messages between the two generals appears in a new book on the American presence in Vietnam, "Roots of Involvement", by Marvin Kalb and Elie Abel, to be published tomorrow by W. W. Norton & Co.

Mr. Kalb, diplomatic correspondent for The New York Times and the National Broadcasting Company, wrote that on Feb. 3, 1968, General Wheeler told General Westmoreland in a message: "The President asks me if there is any reinforcement or help that we can give you."

Mr. Kalb and Mr. Abel wrote that General Wheeler acted after Mr. Johnson had instructed him to find out "what more Westmoreland needed." At that stage, there were about 500,000 American troops in Vietnam, and 25,000 more had been authorized earlier.

According to the authors, General Wheeler sent a second message to General Westmoreland on Feb. 8 saying:

"Query: Do you need reinforcements? Our capabilities

are limited. We can provide 82d airborne division and about one half a marine corps division, both loaded with Vietnam veterans. However if you consider reinforcements imperative, you should not be bound by earlier agreements. United States Government is not prepared to accept defeat in Vietnam. In summary, if you need more troops, ask for them."

General Westmoreland reportedly replied the same day

that it was "only prudent to plan for the worst contingency, in which case I will definitely need reinforcements." According to the authors, the general also asked President Johnson to "authorize an amphibious landing by the Marines in the North, noting that 'surf conditions would permit the operation to start in April.'"

On Feb. 9, General Westmoreland reportedly replied to General Wheeler:

"Needless to say, I would welcome reinforcements at any time they can be made available. A. To put me in a stronger position to contain the enemy's major campaign in the DMZ-Quangtri-Thuathien area and to go on the offensive as soon as his attack is spent. B. To permit me to carry out my campaign plans despite the enemy's reinforcements from North Vietnam, which have influenced my

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deployment and plans. C. To offset the weakened [south] Vietnamese forces resulting from casualties and Tet desertions. Realistically, we must assume that it will take them at least six weeks to regain the military posture of several weeks ago. D. To take advantage of the enemys weakened posture by taking the offensive against him."