

BOOKS

A Soldier Reports, by General William C. Westmoreland. 446 pages. New York: Doubleday. \$12.95.

BY CAROL BRIGHTMAN

At first glance this is a high-priced ceremonial memoir, likely to pass unnoticed by veterans of the antiwar movement. For many of us, the final rout of America's imperial mission in Vietnam one year ago exorcised the demon (and lesser dybbuks like Westmoreland) once and for all. And the image of America at war with the world which flashed like a comet before our eyes is gone, buried in Vietnam. Out of mind, out of sight.

This is unfortunate. In Vietnam, where the earth is still swollen with toxic wastes and seeded with unexploded bombs, a resolution of the conflict at least permits reclamation. Here the conflict is merely suppressed. And the offending elements, discredited in defeat, are wished away in an orgy of idol-smashing. The venal sins of presidents are paraded before the public conscience like carnival grotesques, and the fear and loathing unleashed in us, *not* by the crimes of this or that official, agency, or policy, but by the unraveling (in a faraway place) of the global order to which we are bound, is deflected and tamed.

The memoir of General Westmoreland, Deputy Commander in Vietnam in 1964 and Field Commander from 1965 to 1968, merits attention for the simple reason that it stands apart from this orgy of atonement. *A Soldier Reports* is an unreconstructed document of war. As such it sustains a vital connection with operational realities which official reconstructions like the *Pentagon Papers*—whose job is to teach the “lessons” and secure the *continuity* of U.S. foreign policy—necessarily surrender.

Overcoming a Strategic Impasse

For Westmoreland it is a syllogism that a U.S. soldier goes to war to fight Communism. Essentially, it is unimportant where. But by the late 50's his country had a problem. The Cold War confrontation with Communism, so productive for capitalist development, had iced over. Once both camps bristled with the Bomb, the Dulles line on “massive retaliation” canceled itself out. The United States found itself forbidden by the rules of its own game from playing out the laws of perpetual motion and continuous growth (which

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General Misconceptions

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guided it) and specifically from winning the west on the new frontiers of Southeast Asia. "Now we have a problem in making our power credible," Kennedy told James Reston in 1961, following his disastrous meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna, "and Vietnam looks like the place."

Thus it was fundamentally to overcome a strategic impasse that imperial America developed the theory of "limited war," and it was to open a theater for the new doctrine that the United States hatched the myth of aggression from North Vietnam. Even Westmoreland provides us with no better rationale for the Vietnam War than to point to the theories of Maxwell Taylor (*The Uncertain Trumpet*, 1959) and Henry Kissinger (*Nuclear War and Foreign Policy*, 1957).

But it was the fallen General Douglas MacArthur who cut through the theory to the bone. "Do not overlook the possibility," he told Westmoreland in 1963, a few months before the latter's assignment to Vietnam, "that in order to defeat the guerrilla, you may have to resort to a scorched-earth policy."

The White Whale

This is a strange and tortuous log of war. In his first year we follow Westmoreland lumbering back and forth over paddy, highland, and mountain in a converted C-123 named the *White Whale*. Below is the land that will soon be overrun by nearly half a million U.S. troops under his command and burned by the greatest concentration of firepower in the history of warfare. Yet in 1964 he is still fully absorbed in the mission of fabricating a South Vietnamese government and army. Early plans to bomb the North are opposed on the grounds that the fledgling Saigon regime would buckle under the first retaliatory blow. Westmoreland appears oddly comfortable in the role of Big Brother to the South Vietnamese ("Treat them as you did your cadets," MacArthur advised). Far more onerous is the task of achieving tactical "coordination" (read "centralization," a fetish with him) with the quarreling U.S. embassy, agency, and service personnel who parade through Saigon as the war heats up.

More than bureaucratic infighting, what emerges here is a kind of war within a war, whose outcome remains unsettled. Just as diverse political and financial elites jockeyed for leadership in Washington, manipulating the press via selective "leaks" to discredit contending options, deposing a president, elevating brokers and lawyers to the War Room, so too on the military front the distrust and competition between embassy, CIA, AID, MACV, and CINCPAC were fierce.

For Americans this hidden war is the untold story. It is the squabbling of

thieves over spilt treasure; if we could track the quarreling parties back to their roots in the conflicting priorities of an embattled empire, we could learn much.

No Questions Asked

As a field commander Westmoreland was well trained to implement the impossibly shifting directives from Washington. As a Boy Scout and then a prep school cadet he learned early to "enjoy challenge and discipline, so much a part of military life"—no questions asked. Westmoreland was also well equipped, perhaps by West Point, with management skills to distract him from the more grisly realities of the field. "While a commander must avoid over-control," he reflects, "it behooves him to know what goes on at least two echelons of command below him."

Of course, the realities of a \$120 billion, no-win war do eventually register on the General—but not till the bitter end. As late as spring 1968, in fact following the "defeat of the enemy's Tet Offensive" (yes!), he argues that if Johnson had allowed him to widen the war into Laos and Cambodia and north of the DMZ, "the North Vietnamese doubtlessly would have broken." But that was not to be. "Press and television had created an aura not of victory but of defeat, which, coupled with the vocal antiwar elements, profoundly influenced timid officials in Washington. . . . It was like two boxers in a ring, one having the other on the ropes, close to a knock-out, when the apparent winner's second inexplicably throws in the towel." (Westmoreland and the first contingent of U.S. troops were withdrawn then.) This is outlandish but

predictable; self-criticism is not a skill prized by the U.S. military profession. Moreover, his feelings were hurt.

Kennedy's Inaugural Pledge

Once Westmoreland removes himself from the battles he has lost, however, and reconsiders the *theory* of the war, the man sounds quite sane. "Between 1963 and 1965, when . . . the lack of cohesiveness in South Vietnam's heterogeneous society became clearly evident, the United States could have severed its commitment with justification and honor, though not without strong political reaction at home."

He rightly recalls the obstacle to be Kennedy's inaugural pledge "to bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, and oppose any foe to assure the success of liberty." It was Kennedy's "long slow struggle, with no immediately visible foe" that came home to roost and spoiled the show. Westmoreland quotes two of his favorite strategists, Sun Tzu and the Duke of Wellington, respectively, to make his point: "There has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited," and "A great country cannot wage a little war."

A Soldier Reports is haunted by an unstated truth. The war itself was born of the exhaustion and impotence of the bipolar system consolidated after World War II. How could it have achieved anything *but* military, political, and moral ignominy for the United States? But the question emerges: Now that this nation is no longer camp-leader for the "free world" and roams the international arena uncommitted to any doctrine, is its government less dangerous, or more? □

Vietnam, April 1967: General Westmoreland (seated, center) on a one-day helicopter trip to battle zones. This area was taken the day before his visit.

