

# Notes on Johnson Discussion With Wheeler and Westmoreland

*Excerpts from the Pentagon study describing a conversation on April 27, 1967, between President Johnson and Generals Wheeler and Westmoreland. The narrative says the conversation was reported in notes by John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Italicized emphasis and words in parentheses are those of the Pentagon study.*

Westmoreland was quoted as saying that without the  $2\frac{1}{3}$  additional divisions which he had requested "we will not be in danger of being defeated but it will be nip and tuck to oppose the reinforcements the enemy is capable of providing. In the final analysis we are fighting a war of attrition in Southeast Asia."

Westmoreland predicted that the next step if we were to pursue our present strategy to fruition would probably be the second addition of  $2\frac{1}{3}$  divisions or approximately another 100,000 men. Throughout the conversations he repeated his assessment that the war would not be lost but that progress would certainly be slowed down. To him this was "not an encouraging outlook but a realistic one." When asked about the influence of increased infiltration upon his operations the general replied that as he saw it "this war is action and counteraction. Anytime we take an action we expect a reaction." The President replied: "When we add divisions can't the enemy add divisions? If so, where does it all end?" Westmoreland answered: "The VC and DRV strength in SVN now totals 285,000 men. It appears that last month we reached the crossover point in areas excluding the two northern provinces." (Emphasis added.) "Attritions will be greater than additions to the force. . . . The enemy has 8 divisions in South Vietnam. He has the capability of deploying 12 divisions although he would have difficulty supporting all of these. He would be hard pressed to sup-

port more than 12 divisions. If we add  $2\frac{1}{2}$  divisions, it is likely the enemy will react by adding troops." The President then asked "At what point does the enemy ask for volunteers?" Westmoreland's only reply was, "That is a good question."

COMUSMACV briefly analyzed the strategy under the present program of 470,000 men for the President. He explained his concept of a "meatgrinder" where we would kill large numbers of the enemy but in the end do little better than hold our own, with the shortage of troops still restricting MACV to a fire brigade technique—chasing after enemy main force units when and where it could find them. He then predicted that "unless the will of the enemy is broken or unless there was an unraveling of the VC infrastructure the war could go on for 5 years. If our forces were increased that period could be reduced although not necessarily in proportion to increases in strength, since factors other than increase in strength had to be considered. For instance, a non-professional force, such as that which would result from fulfilling the requirement for 100,000 additional men by calling reserves, would cause some degradation of normal lead-

ership and effectiveness. Westmoreland concluded by estimating that with a force level of 565,000 men, the war could well go on for three years. With a second increment of  $2\frac{1}{3}$  divisions leading to a total of 665,000 men, it could go on for two years.

General Wheeler . . . listed three matters . . . which were bothering the JCS. These were:

(a) DRV troop activity in Cambodia. US troops may be forced to move against these units in Cambodia.

(b) DRV troop activity in Laos. US troops may be forced to move against these units.

(c) Possible invasion of North Vietnam. We may wish to take offensive action against the DRV with ground troops.

The bombing which had always attracted considerable JCS attention was in Wheeler's estimation about to reach the point of target saturation—when all worthwhile fixed targets except the ports had been struck. Once this saturation level was reached the decision-makers would be impelled to address the requirement to deny to the North Vietnamese use of the ports. He summarized the JCS position saying that the JCS firmly believed that the President must review the contingencies which they faced, the troops required to meet them and additional punitive action against DRV. Westmoreland parenthetically added that he was "frankly dismayed at even the thought of stopping the bombing program." . . .

The President closed the meeting by asking: "What if we do not add the  $2\frac{1}{3}$  divisions?" General Wheeler replied first, observing that the momentum would die; in some areas the enemy would recapture the initiative, an important but hardly disastrous development, meaning that we wouldn't lose the war but it would be a longer one. He added that:

"Of the  $2\frac{1}{3}$  divisions, I would add one division on the DMZ to relieve the Marines to work with ARVN on pacification; and I would put one division east of Saigon to relieve the 9th Division to deploy to the Delta to increase the effectiveness of the three good ARVN divisions now there; the brigade I would send to Quang Ngai to make there the progress in the next year that we have made in Binh Dinh in the past year."

The President reacted by saying:

"We should make certain we are getting value received from the South Vietnamese troops. Check the discharges to determine whether we could make use of them by forming additional units, by mating them with US troops, as is done in Korea, or in other ways."

There is no record of General Westmoreland's reply, if any. . . .