

## Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam

by Gregory A. Daddis

New York, Oxford University Press, 2014

250 pages, \$40.95 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-19-931650-2

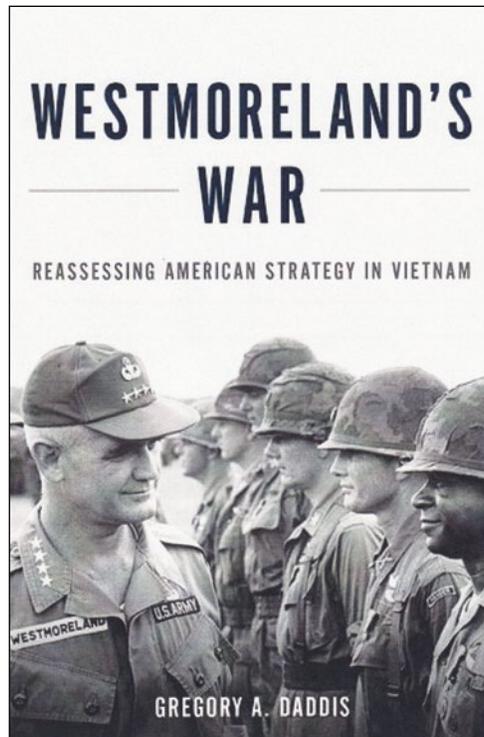
Reviewed by  
Peter J. Williams

**H**aig. Custer. Harris. In the pantheon of military history, there are soldiers such as these (or airmen in the case of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Harris) whose reputations remain controversial, to say the least. To this group could be added 'Westmoreland,' that is, U.S. General William C. Westmoreland, Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV, 1964–1968), and subsequently U.S. Army Chief of Staff.

Such figures attract numerous biographies, and every so often, a re-assessment, which is the object of this book, focused upon the central military figure, in a conflict whose wounds continue to run deep in America, some 40 years on...

The author is a serving U.S. Army officer who has previously written on the Vietnam conflict.<sup>1</sup> It was while conducting research on Vietnam that Daddis got the inspiration for the book under review. He was somewhat confounded on the quantity and breadth of reporting sent in by units in the field in order to measure progress in a war whose ostensible approach was mere attrition. While there were reports with respect to the proverbial "body counts," so too were there submissions related to, "...population security, economic development, political stability and scores of non-military programs."<sup>2</sup> It was with the aim of questioning the conventional wisdom on American strategy in Vietnam, and to demonstrate that the Americans did have a comprehensive strategy for Vietnam encompassing defence, diplomacy, and development (the so-called "3Ds"), that the author set out to write this book.

This book, as the Brits would say, "...does what it says on the tin." It is not a biography of General Westmoreland (who is first mentioned in the Vietnam context only about a third of the way into the book), nor a chronological history of the Vietnam conflict in the 1960s, although on the last point, it is worthwhile remembering that the first U.S. military advisors arrived in Vietnam in 1950, almost 1½ decades before Westmoreland took command of MACV. Initially, the author goes into great detail in providing context for the strategy adopted in Vietnam during an era, it must also be remembered, which was dominated by the Cold War.



Surprisingly, perhaps *counterintuitively* for some, the U.S. Army did not arrive in Vietnam with no knowledge of the counterinsurgency (COIN) environment they were to find there. By the late-1950s, 20 percent of U.S. Army officers had experience of this type of warfare, and it formed part of U.S. military doctrine. Indeed, while he was Commandant of West Point before coming to Vietnam, Westmoreland added COIN to the U.S. Military Academy's core curriculum.

Next, the author takes a thematic approach, which I found to be useful in assessing a conflict whose strategy needed to be multi-pronged. He spends some time in discussing the strategy developed by Westmoreland, which included military, diplomatic, and economic aspects, combined with the realization that the war would not be won quickly. In his words it would require a "long pull," a term which doubtless did not endear Westmoreland to those hoping for a rapid victory. Daddis then

looks at the implementation of the strategy in terms of the U.S. military role in civil operations and pacification, a role in which MACV established an Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), headed by a civilian, who reported to Westmoreland. Finally, in what would be familiar to veterans of the latter stages of our Canadian involvement in Afghanistan, the author analyses the American role in training and advising the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam, a force the author calls "An Uncertain Army."

Personally, I found the author's arguments quite convincing. Time and again, it became quite clear from the documentary evidence presented that from Washington to the U.S. Ambassador, to HQ U.S. MACV, and down to unit level, there was a common understanding that military means alone would not bring victory, and that ultimately, the South Vietnamese would have to bear the burden of defence. In the end, they were unable to do so, and, *inter alia*, when combined with a U.S. media, which appeared to focus upon military matters at the expense of the other "2Ds," as well as differences of culture between the US military and those whom it was advising, meant that the U.S. did not emerge victorious, but had to settle for, in President Nixon's words, "peace with honour." In the end, Daddis concludes that, Westmoreland's strategy, while a correct one, was too optimistic under the circumstances, and that: "Perhaps the time has come to envisage Westmoreland not as a bad general, but rather as a good general fighting a bad war."<sup>3</sup> Doubtless, there will be many who will be uneasy with such an assessment, and it will be interesting to see the extent to which the conclusions reached here make their way into schoolbooks around the world, and into future studies on the Vietnam War.

## BOOK REVIEWS

In writing this book, the author has delved deeply into archival material, such as operational reports and lessons learned submissions from U.S. units in the field, including Westmoreland's own HQ U.S. MACV, military and diplomatic traffic between Saigon and Washington, and internal US government traffic of the State Department, the National Security Council, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Notes run to some 60 pages, and although there is no separate bibliography, the author does provide an annotated bibliography when making references to works on Westmoreland himself, the Vietnam War in general, and on strategy.

Canada's commitment in Afghanistan was, not only its longest such military engagement, but also, and arguably, the first time that a so-called Whole of Government approach to a problem overseas had been truly put to the test. Like the figures mentioned at the outset, our involvement in South-West Asia remains controversial, and it may require a few interim histories of our role there (which to date appear to have been few) before a definitive

re-assessment can be made. This reviewer looks forward to such a future chronicle, and in the meantime, this valuable study, indeed, this *cautionary* tale of the challenges and pitfalls of a comprehensive approach in the midst of a military conflict is recommended for those considering such interventions abroad.

Colonel (Ret'd) Peter J. Williams's *final post before retiring* was as *Director Arms Control Verification on the Strategic Joint Staff*.

### NOTES

1. Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
2. Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 183.