

JULY 21

# General Westmoreland and the war in Iraq

**A**fter he died on July 18, front pages focused on the failures of William Westmoreland as commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Overall, the coverage faulted him for being a big loser, not a mass killer.

The Washington Post noted that Westmoreland "was called a war criminal." But the deaths of thousands of Vietnamese people each week during his four years as the top American general in Vietnam counted for little in the media calculus. The main problem, readers were encouraged to understand, was that Westmoreland pursued a losing strategy. "Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. called Westmoreland possibly 'our most disastrous general since Custer,'" the Post reported.

From early 1964 until 1968, Westmoreland was in charge of a U.S. military machine that methodically slaughtered Vietnamese people. As the Post's front page antiseptically recalled, "Westmoreland's military strategy was to conduct a war of attrition, trying to kill enemy forces faster than they could be replaced."

Augmenting his strictly military functions, Westmoreland did his best to spin the media. Along the way, he was eager to condemn Americans who exercised their First Amendment rights to oppose a horrific war.

In April 1967, a month when several hundred thousand Americans participated in antiwar protests, General Westmoreland spoke to an Associated Press luncheon and asserted that – despite "repeated military defeats" – the Vietnamese Communist enemy was able to continue the anti-U.S. struggle "encouraged by what he believes to be popular opposition to our efforts in Vietnam." At the time, independent journalist I. F. Stone aptly called it "the oldest alibi of frustrated generals — they could have won the war if it hadn't been for those unpatriotic civilians back home."

The alibi has endured in medialand. During an October 1990 appearance on ABC's "Nightline," the retired four-star general must have been pleased by the matter-of-fact slant of this question from correspondent Chris Wallace: "General Westmoreland, it's become almost a truism by now that you didn't lose the Vietnam War so much in the jungles there as you did in the streets in the United States. How worried should the

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president and the Pentagon be now about this new peace movement?"

That rhetorical question came about 10 weeks after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The White House was falsely claiming that Iraqi forces were poised to keep moving – and much of the initial public rationale for a U.S. military buildup in the Persian Gulf that autumn was based on the argument that those Iraqi soldiers represented an imminent threat to invade Saudi Arabia, although more than 100,000 U.S. troops were already stationed in that country.

Responding to the crisis, Westmoreland pushed for war. He echoed the U.S. government line, claiming that the additional U.S. troops being sent to the Gulf were on a mission to defend Saudi borders. During his mid-October appearance on "Nightline," Westmoreland asserted: "Our troops are there to deter any further aggression by Iraq. ... They'll be used if Saddam Hussein attacks Saudi Arabia. ... They're on the battlefield, but they haven't been committed to combat." True to form, the retired general was engaged in deception.

Westmoreland knew that – if the goal is to drag the United States into war – candor won't do. Step by step, propagandistic messages are necessary to fuel the political momentum for war.

Media messages, drawn from the past, light the war path for the future. The reporting on Westmoreland's life after his death is the kind of coverage that made possible the carnage of the Vietnam War in the first place. The overriding media emphasis is on the importance of winning and the tragic specter of losing.

The grisly spirit that animated Westmoreland's professional life has survived him. Today, no less than during the Vietnam War four decades ago, the Washington Post's description of the U.S. military strategy is accurate – "to conduct a war of attrition, trying to kill enemy forces faster than they could be replaced." But the words, a blend of military and journalistic euphemisms, mask the human realities of the consequences.

Imperial wars of occupation routinely try to kill enough "enemy forces" to snuff out resistance. Behind all the rhetoric coming out of Washington, that approach is central to the U.S. war in Iraq. Like Westmoreland, today's war-makers see death as the ultimate solution.

*This article is adapted from Norman Solomon's new book*

*"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."*

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