

# Westmoreland and Abrams in Vietnam: A Study of the Military Operational Artist in Limited War

A Monograph

by

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## Abstract

Westmoreland and Abrams in Vietnam: A Study of the Military Operational Artist in Limited War, by MAJ William J. Turner, US Army, 47 pages.

Wars in the 21st century will likely be wars of limited political aim, and thus limited in the scope of the military aim and means. Theater of war commanders, as military operational artists, tasked with the application of operational art in wars of limited policy aims in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, must effectively link tactical actions to the political and military aims. One such war of limited political aim that highlights the importance of the relationship between the policymaker and the military operational artist is the much debated and highly divisive American experience in Vietnam. The Vietnam War provides key insights into the nature, functioning, and limitations of the military operational artist in his responsibility in the negotiation for the military aim and means in the conduct of modern theater operations. This monograph analyzes the comparative history of two military operational artists, General William Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams, during the War in Vietnam from 1967 through 1970. Elements of operational art, end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort serve as the lens to evaluate the success or failure of each MACV commander to arrange tactical actions in time, space, and purpose for strategic ends.

Using the above criteria demonstrates that Westmoreland failed to provide politically aware military advice in the negotiation for the military aim and means in Vietnam, while becoming embroiled in the partisan party politics of President Lyndon B. Johnson. This resulted in a loss of military perspective and a failed relationship between policy and operational art. Abrams provided President Richard Nixon with politically aware military advice and remained a military actor as opposed to a political one. Abrams' tenure in Vietnam provides a successful interaction between policy and the operational artist in large scale military operations in wars of limited aim. These examples underscore the challenge for the operational artist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a world characterized by ambiguity in the determination and execution in wars of limited political aims and the complex weaving of military aim and means in that context.

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## Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific
COMUSMACV	Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
FM	Field Manual
GVN	Government of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PACOM	Pacific Command
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
PROVN	Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SECDEF	Secretary of Defense
US	United States
US/FWMA	United States/Free World Military Alliance
VC	Viet Cong
VCI	Viet Cong Infrastructure

## Section I. Introduction

The war in Afghanistan hit the seventeen-year mark for the United States and its partners this month. Soldiers in the US-led coalition have been fighting and killing and dying for almost eight years longer than the Soviets occupied Afghanistan. The reasons for this protracted stalemate are manifold, but the momentum that would bring the war in Afghanistan to an end remains elusive in large part because the coalition has until now been unable to link the grammar of war to the political object it seeks.

—Robert Cassidy, *How Did Afghanistan Become a War Without End*

The political object – the original motive for the war – will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.

—Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*

The hard-fought victory in the Second World War achieved by the United States and its allies in 1945, when followed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons, facilitated a transition into a new era in modern warfare. Wars of limited political aim define this post-war era, after 1945, and these particular types of limited conflicts continue to pose problems for both the civilian politician responsible for limited policy objectives and the military operational artist responsible for the “violent resolution of limited political aims.”<sup>1</sup> One such war of limited political aim that highlights the importance of the relationship between the policymaker and the military operational artist is the much debated and highly divisive American experience in Vietnam. “It seems that since the Vietnam War senior American civilian and military leaders have often ignored the key idea from Clausewitz – that in war military objectives cannot be divorced from political purposes, and the ultimate directives and decisions on the aims of war reside with senior political leaders of the state.”<sup>2</sup> The attempts of current US Army leaders to link tactical actions to

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<sup>1</sup> G. Stephen Lauer, “Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks: Politics, Policy, and the Military Operational Artist,” *The Strategy Bridge*, February 20, 2018, accessed October 29, 2018, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/2/20/blue-whales-and-tiger-sharks-politics-policy-and-the-military-operational-artist>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Cassidy, “How Did the War in Afghanistan Become a War Without End,” *Modern War Institute*, October 23, 2018, accessed October 29, 2018, <https://mwi.usma.edu/afghanistan-become-war-without-end/>.



the political and military strategic objectives developed by civilian policy makers in Afghanistan, bring to mind the difficulties experienced by US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) during the Vietnam War. Through an analysis of the MACV experience in Vietnam, future military operational artists can, as historian John Lewis Gaddis states in his work *The Landscape of History*, understand “that there is no “correct” interpretation of the past, but that the act of interpreting is itself a vicarious enlargement of experience from which you can benefit.”<sup>3</sup>

The Vietnam War provides key insights into the nature, functioning, and limitations of the military operational artist in his responsibility in the negotiation for the military aim and means in the conduct of modern theater operations. Specifically, an analysis of the comparative history of two military operational artists, General William Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams, during the War in Vietnam from 1967 through 1970 delivers these key insights regarding what current US Army doctrine refers to as operational art. Each of these men served as commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) during the often debated and highly divisive Vietnam War. Furthermore, each of these general officers provides a case study from which to analyze the interactions between the military operational artist and the civilian policy maker in the conduct of large-scale combat operations in wars of limited aim.

MACV served as the primary organization tasked with arranging tactical actions in the pursuit of strategic objectives in Vietnam. “From its establishment, MACV was a subordinate unified command under Pacific Command (PACOM), the US headquarters in Honolulu that directed American forces throughout the Pacific Ocean and the Far East.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, through PACOM, MACV reported directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the Secretary of Defense,

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<sup>3</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2006), 4.

and the President of the United States. General William Westmoreland served as the COMUSMACV from 1964 to 1968 and is “widely regarded as a general who lost his war.”<sup>5</sup> During his tenure at MACV, General Westmoreland’s accomplishments, although numerous, failed to achieve the strategic objectives of the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

“The recent doctrinal update of *Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations*, highlights the US Army’s shift from counterinsurgency operations to large-scale combat operations against a peer threat.”<sup>6</sup> However, this shift to a focus on large-scale combat operations does not negate the fact that wars in the 21st century will likely be wars of limited aim, politically, and thus allow only limited military aims and means. Given this context, the effort taken by MACV to link tactical actions to strategic objectives through the employment of operational art to conduct large-scale combat operations in support of a war of limited aim serves as a prime example from which to learn. The actions of General William Westmoreland before and after the North Vietnamese Tet offensive in 1967-1968 as well as his campaign planning and interactions with the Johnson administration demonstrate a poor application of operational art. Conversely, General Creighton Abrams’ campaign planning of the Cambodian Incursion of 1969-1970 and his coordination with the Nixon administration highlight an example of the successful application of operational art in its connection between limited political aims and tactical operations. Thus, the emphasis on these two military operational artists and their relationships with the policy aims in a limited war help to answer an important question. What can commanders and staffs of today’s US Army learn about the future employment of operational art in wars of limited policy aims after 1945?

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2011), 302.

<sup>6</sup> US Department of the Army, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), ix.

The comparative history of two operational artists, General William Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams, during the War in Vietnam from 1967 through 1970, provides key insights into the nature, functioning, and limitations of the operational artist in his responsibility in the negotiation for the military aim and means in the conduct of modern theater operations. This monograph employs a comparative case study methodology. Presented chronologically, it will examine MACV under the command of General William Westmoreland from 1967 to 1968, and MACV under the command of General Creighton Abrams from 1969 to 1970. The research focus of the General Westmoreland case study is General Westmoreland's role as the military operational artist prior to and immediately following the 1968 North Vietnamese Tet offensive, emphasizing the civilian-military relationship between General Westmoreland and the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson. The research focus of the General Abrams case study is his role as the military operational artist leading up to and following the 1970 Cambodian campaign, again concentrating on the civilian-military relationship between General Abrams and the administration of President Richard M. Nixon. The comparison of these MACV commanders provides a window into what future commanders may experience in the application of operational art and the conduct of large-scale combat operations in wars of limited aim after 1945.

According to *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, Operations*, "for Army forces, operational art is the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose."<sup>7</sup> From this definition, the monograph uses the following elements of operational art: end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort as a lens from which to evaluate the success or failure of each MACV commander to arrange tactical actions in time, space, and purpose for strategic ends. The primary criterion used

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<sup>7</sup> US Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), 6.

to evaluate each MACV commander will be the element of operational art involving end state and conditions. Specifically, the ability of each operational artist to match the military aim to the political and policy aims noted as the required end state and conditions by the policymakers of their respective presidential administrations.

The second criterion used in the evaluation of each MACV commander will be their conceptual understanding of centers of gravity. This conceptual understanding of centers of gravity as it relates to North and South Vietnam evaluates each commander's ability to "identify centers of gravity, their associated decisive points, and the best approach for achieving the desired end state."<sup>8</sup> Finally, lines of effort will demonstrate each MACV commander's efforts to "describe their vision of operations to achieve intangible end state conditions" as they relate to South Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

For the purpose of this evaluation, both primary and secondary sources were utilized to demonstrate the scope of research for each case study involving the respective MACV command tenures of General William Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams. The preponderance of the sources used for this research focus on the actions of the COMUSMACV in the years from 1967 to 1970. The foremost primary source used in this monograph is the US Army Center of Military History's *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* and *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, both written by Graham A. Cosmas.<sup>10</sup> These works provide the perspective of each MACV commander and their respective headquarters. Additionally, "the work deals with theater-level command relationships, strategy,

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<sup>8</sup> US Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), 2-5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-6.

<sup>10</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* (Washington DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2006), xi; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, ix.

and operations and supplements detailed studies in the Center of Military History's United States Army in Vietnam series covering combat operations, the advisory effort, and relations with the media."<sup>11</sup>

An equally useful primary source is the official *Vietnam Command History Volumes I-IV* ranging from the years of 1967 to 1970<sup>12</sup>. These command histories provide a historical account of the programs and activities of MACV from the perspective of command historians directly tasked with the responsibility to compile the MACV records for future historical research and analysis. In addition, to gain an understanding of the actions of General William Westmoreland, his memoir, *A Soldier Reports*, provides an account of his strategic and operational perspective during his tenure as the COMUSMACV.<sup>13</sup>

In 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara commissioned the "*Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force*," or more commonly known after the June 1971 leak, the *Pentagon Papers*. The Department of Defense developed this study to provide a comprehensive history of the political and military involvement of the United States in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967. The *Pentagon Papers* provide an exceptional description of both the military and political objectives for the conduct of a limited war in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, this study highlights the interactions between multiple operational artists and civilian policymakers in the development of strategic aims in Vietnam. Lastly, this study provides an in depth look at the dialogue between General Westmoreland and the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

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<sup>11</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, ix.

<sup>12</sup> US Military Assistance Command, *Vietnam Command History Volumes I-III 1967* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1968), 1.

<sup>13</sup> William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), xi.

<sup>14</sup> US Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, *United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: Study Prepared by the Department of Defense* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 1.

The scholarly work of Lewis Sorley provides analysis of both General Westmoreland and General Abrams. His works to include *The Abrams Tapes: 1968-1972*, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Time*, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*, and *A Better War*, each provide significant background on the respective MACV commanders as well as outlines each of their efforts to arrange tactical actions to strategic objectives. Lastly, John M. Shaw's *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* gives an account of General Abrams role in the planning and conduct of the 1970 Cambodian invasion. Furthermore, this work highlights the efforts of General Abrams to implement the Nixon administration's policy objective of "Vietnamization."<sup>15</sup>

This monograph proceeds chronologically, first highlighting the MACV tenure of General William Westmoreland from 1967 to 1968. This includes a review of Westmoreland's role as the military operational artist prior to and immediately following the 1968 North Vietnamese Tet offensive. This section also emphasizes the civilian-military relationship between General Westmoreland and the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson. With the discussion of General Westmoreland complete, the monograph then analyzes the MACV tenure of General Creighton Abrams from 1969 to 1970. This section details General Abrams' involvement in the campaign planning of the Cambodian Incursion of 1969-1970 as well as his relationship with the Nixon administration. The concluding section summarizes the evidence in support of the hypothesis that a comparative history of two operational artists, General William Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams, during the War in Vietnam from 1967 through 1970, provides key insights into the nature, functioning, and limitations of the operational artist in

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), xvii; Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 178; Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 65; Lewis Sorley, *A Better War* (New York: Houghlin Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), xi; John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2005), xi.

his responsibility in the negotiation for the military aim and means in the conduct of modern theater operations.

## Section II. General Westmoreland: MACV from 1967 to 1968

Having made himself a symbol of the war in the eyes of the American people, Westmoreland inevitably came in for bitter criticism as Americans became disillusioned with the costly, prolonged, and inconclusive conflict. Thus, while it could be argued with some validity that Westmoreland by mid-1968 was winning the war, it could be argued with equal force that he was losing, or had already lost, the psychological and political one.

—Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*

By the fall of 1967, after years of gradual escalation and bloody struggle, the United States appeared to be winning the War in Vietnam. “Army General William C. Westmoreland, the chief of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), expected to get even better results in the coming year as more U.S. combat units joined his command, raising its maximum authorized strength to 525,000 personnel.”<sup>16</sup> At the outset of Westmoreland’s arrival in Vietnam in 1964, the South Vietnamese appeared to be on the brink of collapse. Three years later in 1967, MACV, under the direction of Westmoreland, showed considerable progress in the war against North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong insurgents:

This significant progress comprised notable achievements to include building up a modern combat force and logistical base in an underdeveloped country, transitioning MACV from an advise and assist headquarters to an operational command, modernizing the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and supporting a revival of pacification, conducting multiple large-scale combat operations that heavily damaged enemy forces and their support areas, and contributed to the development of a more stable and constitutional government in South Vietnam.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Adrian G. Traas, *Turning Point 1967-1968* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2017), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 108.

Additionally, in 1967 the American public remained supportive of the anti-communist narrative that served as the primary purpose for the War in Vietnam. Despite his apparent successes, Westmoreland's attempts to arrange tactical actions to strategic and political objectives proved to be politically untenable in the aftermath of the January 1968 North Vietnamese Tet Offensive. To understand General Westmoreland's role as the military operational artist prior to and immediately following the 1968 North Vietnamese Tet offensive, one must first understand the strategic context and initial interactions with the Johnson administration that set the stage for Westmoreland and MACV in 1967-1968.

General William Childs Westmoreland arrived in South Vietnam in January of 1964.<sup>18</sup> The administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson selected General Westmoreland to go to Vietnam "as the deputy COMUSMACV, and when the current COMUSMACV General Paul D. Harkins departed, assume command of MACV."<sup>19</sup> "In March 1964, just two months after Westmoreland arrived in Saigon, the Johnson administration published National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288 which established the "objective" in South Vietnam as a "stable and independent noncommunist government."<sup>20</sup> This strategic objective had been the guiding policy and the national narrative for Vietnam since the administration of President Harry Truman. Following the 1954 Geneva Convention, it applied explicitly to South Vietnam. Furthermore, the strategic objective followed in line with the longstanding general containment policy wherein the United States would work to stop the spread of communism throughout the world. This anti-communist narrative gave legitimacy to the Johnson administration's escalation of the war to

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<sup>18</sup> Ernest B. Furguson, *Westmoreland The Inevitable General* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 294.

<sup>19</sup> Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 65.



“meet localized Communist encroachments upon the “Free World” with equally localized force to maintain or restore the status quo.”<sup>21</sup> However, the focus on containment disguised the failure of the South Vietnamese to form a legitimate government capable of working with MACV to contain communism and resist North Vietnam’s desires to “liberate” the south.<sup>22</sup>

“General Westmoreland formally assumed command of MACV on 1 August 1964, at the same time he received his fourth star.”<sup>23</sup> Immediately following his assumption of command, General Westmoreland began to emphasize the importance of the advisory efforts and relationships with the South Vietnamese. He also pushed for increased inter-agency cooperation with US civilian agencies tasked with aiding the advisory efforts of MACV. It was also at this time that General Westmoreland began to oversee the increasing MACV reporting requirements that started with the American Ambassador to Vietnam and ran up the chain of command to President Johnson. “Westmoreland described 1964 as a hectic year – characterized by constant political turmoil and Viet Cong military successes.”<sup>24</sup> The failure of the pacification plans to effectively integrate military and civilian activities prompted General Westmoreland to campaign for the direct authority for MACV to manage all American pacification efforts.

Pacification, as implemented by the US mission, “called for regular forces working out of relatively secure areas, to drive organized enemy units from steadily widening zones (“spreading oil spots”).<sup>25</sup> These “oil spots” would be concentrated in high population centers to include

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<sup>21</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 425.

<sup>22</sup> Aaron B. O’Connell, “The Lessons and Legacies of the War in Afghanistan,” in *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, eds. Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 323. Quoted from: W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), iv; House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, “The Lessons of Vietnam, 99th Congress 1st Session, April 29, 1985” (Washington, DC: GPO, 1986) 26.

<sup>23</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 123.

<sup>24</sup> Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 75-76.

<sup>25</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 139.

Saigon, the upper Mekong Delta, and the coastal provinces of I and II Corps. As previously mentioned, General Westmoreland sought MACV as the executive agent for pacification. “Westmoreland viewed pacification as the ultimate goal of both the Americans and the South Vietnamese government.”<sup>26</sup> However, both the outgoing US ambassador to Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge and the incoming ambassador Maxwell Taylor declined this request. As the new ambassador to Vietnam, Maxwell Taylor focused his efforts on “unifying American efforts by establishing a Mission Council consisting of himself, Westmoreland, Deputy Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson, the local heads of the US Operations Mission and the US Information Agency, and the chief of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Saigon station.”<sup>27</sup>

The Mission Council did much to unify American pacification efforts but coordination problems between the military and civilian agencies remained. “These resulting differences as to who owned the pacification efforts proved to be difficult to overcome as civilian agencies viewed military cooperation as an interference to their pacification operations.”<sup>28</sup> The difficulties with the pacification mission led to General Westmoreland’s direct role as one of the proponents of Operation Hop Tac. “Operation Hop Tac (the Vietnamese phrase for “cooperation”), called for a unified campaign in the six contiguous provinces—Gia Dinh, Bien Hoa, Binh Duong, Hau Nghia, Long An, and Phuoc Tuy—that together encircled Saigon.”<sup>29</sup> This operation followed the “oil spot” counterinsurgency strategy and started from Saigon. South Vietnamese military and police forces conducted clearing and civil reconstruction operations with the aid of their US advisors, but Operation Hop Tac failed to yield any meaningful results in the fight against the Viet Cong.

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<sup>26</sup> Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 210.

<sup>29</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 142.

By the end of 1964 and into early 1965 “the American advisory effort clearly had proved insufficient for achieving Johnson’s larger objectives of removing North Vietnamese support and influence from the south.”<sup>30</sup> “Ambassador Taylor declared early in January 1965: “We are presently on a losing track and must risk a change ... The game needs to be opened up and new opportunities offered for new breaks which hopefully may be in our favor.”<sup>31</sup> It became clear to both senior military and civilian leaders that an increased American military involvement and the gradual escalation of the war might be needed to keep South Vietnam out of communist hands. President Johnson himself understood the implications of the failure of pacification efforts by proclaiming in mid-1965, “If we are driven from the field in Vietnam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promises, or in American protection.”<sup>32</sup> This gradual escalation, first focused on using American forces to directly engage the Viet Cong and their support zones in South Vietnam as well as attacking North Vietnam, primarily by the use of airpower.

“The White House’s decision to escalate the war, however, was not accompanied by deliberations over developing a coherent strategy for the employment of ground forces.”<sup>33</sup> As a result, the responsibility for the development of a coherent strategy for the employment of ground forces fell squarely on the shoulders of General Westmoreland and his staff at MACV. In July 1965, after deliberations with Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) Robert McNamara, General Westmoreland proposed his initial concept for Vietnam:

COMUSMACV’s objective was to end the war in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) by convincing the enemy that military victory was impossible and to force the enemy to negotiate a solution favorable to the Government of

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<sup>30</sup> Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, 65.

<sup>31</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 157.

<sup>32</sup> Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Vietnam/South Vietnam (GVN) and the US. The concept visualized a three phase operation: (Phase I) The commitment of United States/Free World Military Alliance (US/FWMA) forces necessary to halt the losing trend by the end of 1965, (Phase II) The resumption of the offensive by US/FWMA forces during the first half of 1966 in high priority areas necessary to destroy enemy forces, and reinstatement of rural construction activities, (Phase III) If the enemy persisted, a period of a year to a year and a half following Phase II would be required for the defeat and destruction of the remaining enemy forces and base areas.<sup>34</sup>

Following this proposal, Secretary McNamara approved General Westmoreland's concept and forwarded his recommendations to President Johnson. President Johnson approved building up forces in Vietnam to a total of 175,000 troops in 1965 and General Westmoreland implemented his concept of operations established on his base strategy.

“General Westmoreland's strategy consisted of three successive steps: (1) First, halt the VC offensive – to stem the tide, (2) Second, to resume the offensive – to destroy the VC and pacify selected high priority areas, (3) Third, to restore progressively the entire country to the control of the GVN.”<sup>35</sup> At this point, General Westmoreland assumed direct responsibility for the ground war strategy without any serious input from the civilian policymakers in the Johnson administration. “Most notably, his conception of how to use American ground troops over the “long pull” determined how US forces fought inside South Vietnam from 1965 to 1972.”<sup>36</sup> The administration's sole focus remained political in the timing and number of troop deployments. These circumstances would drive General Westmoreland's efforts to arrange tactical actions through time, space, and purpose to achieve the strategic objectives of the Johnson Administration up to the critical years of 1967 and 1968.

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<sup>34</sup> US Department of Defense, *Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force*, [Part IV. C. 6. a.] Evolution of the War. U.S. Ground Strategy and Force Deployments: 1965 - 1967. Volume I: Phase II, Program 3, Program 4, 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 64.

Operational art, as practiced by the military operational artist in the US Army, encompasses the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.<sup>37</sup> General Sir Rupert Smith describes the operational artist in the book *The Evolution of Operational Art*. He writes,

The operational art is practiced by one man and (1) he is appointed to this responsibility by his superiors at the political and strategic levels, and he must retain their confidence, (2) he is given or must assume the authority to discharge his art, (3) in practicing his art, he links the strategy within which his operation sits to the tactical acts his command performs, and (4) he seeks to achieve the product rather than the sum of the tactical acts so as to gain the operational objectives that either alter the strategic situation to his advantage or directly achieve the strategic goals.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout his tenure at MACV, General Westmoreland personified these traits as the sole military operational artist with authority and responsibility for the negotiation of military means to achieve strategic objectives. With this understanding, how might future operational artists best evaluate General Westmoreland's use of operational art?

Through the doctrinal lens of operational art, the elements of operational art to include end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort provide a guide from which to analyze General Westmoreland's application of operational art prior to and immediately following the 1968 North Vietnamese Tet offensive. "During the planning and execution of Army operations, commanders and staffs consider the elements of operational art as they assess the situation."<sup>39</sup> By the fall of 1967, General Westmoreland's assessment of the situation enabled him to be confident in his determination that the correctly identified end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort as applied by MACV demonstrated improved progress in the war

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<sup>37</sup> US Army, *ADP 3-0*, (2017), 6.

<sup>38</sup> General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, ed John Andreas Olson and Martin Van Creveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 233.

<sup>39</sup> US Army, *ADRP 3-0*, (2017), 2-4.

against the communists. To continue this discussion, the following paragraphs will review General Westmoreland's end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort as they were established in late 1967.

In 1967, the desired end state as dictated by both the Johnson administration and MACV remained in accordance with the concept of operations issued in 1965 – maintain the policy of containment by enabling South Vietnam to be a stable and independent noncommunist government. This end state drove the planning guidance issued to MACV by Westmoreland and dictated his strategy:

The strategy that MACV had pursued since the start of U.S. combat operations in mid-1965 had three main components: wear down the Viet Cong (or PLAF [People's Liberation Armed Forces]) and North Vietnamese (or PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam]) conventional main force units through combat operations, anti-infiltration programs, and the destruction of the enemy's logistical network; help the South Vietnamese government regain control over the territory and people dominated by the enemy's shadow government, a process known as pacification; and train and modernize the South Vietnamese armed forces so they could eventually handle the threat of internal insurgency and external invasion without the need for significant U.S. combat forces.<sup>40</sup>

Westmoreland followed this basic strategy until he completed his tenure at MACV in June of 1968. Even "in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, General Westmoreland saw no need to revise his basic strategy."<sup>41</sup>

Determined to prevent any direct escalation of the war, President Johnson restricted MACV operations to South Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> Thus, given this restriction and General Westmoreland's understanding of the operational environment, he focused his operations primarily on targeting the enemy centers of gravity. The enemy centers of gravity consisted of the North Vietnamese

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<sup>40</sup> Traas, *Turning Point*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 66.

<sup>42</sup> James S. Olsen and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam 1945-2010* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 209.

conventional main force and the Viet Cong. Conversely, Westmoreland's secondary operations focused on the friendly centers of gravity to include the ARVN and the South Vietnamese population.

“In October 1967, Westmoreland commanded some 480,000 uniformed US personnel, including 314,000 soldiers, 52,000 military personnel from the FWMA Forces, and coordinated his actions with but did not control the South Vietnamese armed forces, which consisted of around 615,000 troops, most of them belonging to the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam.”<sup>43</sup> In addition to the ground forces commanded by MACV, Westmoreland enjoyed operational support from the US Seventh Air Force and a riverine/coastal naval element, the US Naval Forces Vietnam. Given this tremendous combat power and the identified centers of gravity in South Vietnam, General Westmoreland planned for three specific lines of effort to describe his vision on how to achieve the end state as outlined by the Johnson administration – attrition, pacification, and ARVN training to describe his vision of how MACV operations achieved the military and political strategic end state.

“Westmoreland asserted that our aim was to defeat the enemy, as he maintained in an interview: our purpose was to defeat the enemy and pacify the country, and the country couldn't be pacified until the enemy was defeated.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, given this focus on defeating the enemy, MACV's operations prioritized attrition followed by pacification and ARVN training. “On the attrition side, Westmoreland used his American divisions plus some of the free world allies and elements of the South Vietnamese Army in mobile offensives against the enemy main forces and logistic bases.”<sup>45</sup> These mobile offensives dedicated their operations to the destruction of North

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<sup>43</sup> Traas, *Turning Point*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 91.

<sup>45</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 15.

Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units. Furthermore, Westmoreland used his ground forces in operations to secure the Demilitarized Zone in the north of the country as well as operations on the border with Laos and Cambodia to prevent incursions by the NVA. “Military leaders in Vietnam referred to the attrition strategy as the Big Unit War.”<sup>46</sup> This war of attrition involved search and destroy operations whose key measure of effectiveness depended on the number of enemy combatants killed, inflicting sufficient casualties to break the will of the enemy to continue the struggle.<sup>47</sup>

“Pacification was a multistage process that employed a mixture of conventional forces, security and police units, and government social welfare agencies.”<sup>48</sup> Westmoreland recognized that pacification was a key to success and gave the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) directorate his full support.<sup>49</sup> The CORDS directorate provided mission command and oversight of all US civilian and military agencies dedicated to pacification efforts in South Vietnam. A civilian CORDS chief managed the directorate as well as the funding and resources required to sustain the 7,000-man US advisory team. Pacification operations initially focused on large-scale combat operations to clear and secure population centers. Once the advisors and their South Vietnamese counterparts secured the population centers, the operations transitioned their focus to rural communities on the periphery. As these areas became more secure, the allies introduced a civil government and other organizations to mobilize support for the government, replacing Communist control with their own. “Finally, the allies would introduce programs—educational, medical, agricultural, political, developmental, and

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<sup>46</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 395.

<sup>47</sup> Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 237.

<sup>48</sup> Traas, *Turning Point*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 215.



humanitarian—that stole the insurgents’ thunder by redressing social ills, won public support, and helped build a new nation.”<sup>50</sup> MACV planned pacification operations to be a combined effort with US advisors and South Vietnamese regular forces in conjunction with regional and popular forces. Moreover, MACV emphasized the importance of South Vietnamese forces taking the lead in all elements of pacification. The main objectives for pacification consisted of destroying the communist support base within South Vietnam and gaining popular support from the Vietnamese people for the legitimate government of South Vietnam.

The third and final line of effort focused on ARVN training. MACV provided 7,000 American soldiers to train and equip the South Vietnamese armed forces and focused training on preparation for combat with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regular units. “Advisers worked at every level of Vietnamese military command, from the Joint General Staff down to battalions.”<sup>51</sup> Westmoreland envisioned well trained and equipped South Vietnamese units that could mutually support American units and play a key role in the pacification efforts throughout the country. “Accordingly, MACV continued to work with the South Vietnamese forces on the basis of mutual coordination and cooperation ... Each nation retained control of its own forces, and field commanders were to collaborate as equals in planning and executing operations.”<sup>52</sup> Despite the difficulties incurred by the cultural divide between the South Vietnamese armed forces and their American advisors, MACV continued to dedicate significant resources to bolster ARVN training until the end of American involvement in Vietnam.

“As 1967 drew to a close, General Westmoreland saw no reason to change the campaign plan for 1968 that he had issued in October. Over the past few months, the Communists had

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<sup>50</sup> Traas, *Turning Point*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 349.

achieved nothing tangible”<sup>53</sup> Concurrently, for the most part of 1967 the Johnson administration conducted what would later be termed the “Progress Offensive.” The progress offensive consisted of a campaign to convince the American public that the War in Vietnam was being won. However, in private, “by late 1967 President Johnson and his closest advisors were reaching the conclusion that American military escalation in Indochina had reached the limits of political, financial, and moral sustainability without any prospect of achieving an early decisive result.”<sup>54</sup> The Johnson administration reached this conclusion despite the continually positive progress reports submitted by Westmoreland and MACV. On January 31, 1968, the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive throughout South Vietnam. This singular act proved to be the ultimate downfall of General Westmoreland.

“Communists attacked 36 of 44 provincial capitals and 64 of 242 district towns, as well as 5 of 6 of South Vietnam’s autonomous cities, among them Hue and Saigon.”<sup>55</sup> Despite the failure of the Tet offensive, the tenacious combat experienced at Hue coupled with the siege of the marine base at Khe Sanh and the success of Viet Cong sappers to infiltrate the American embassy compound in Saigon proved to be a turning point in the American public’s perception of the Vietnam War. Further contributing to the perception of a failed effort in Vietnam was the report that “although MACV received intelligence of a pending North Vietnamese attack the command did not expect the offensive to occur during Tet, to be nationwide in scope, and to include a serious effort to take control of the big cities.”<sup>56</sup> Recognizing the Tet offensive as a catastrophic defeat for the enemy, Westmoreland launched a series of allied counter-offensives in

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<sup>53</sup> Traas, *Turning Point*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Traas, *Turning Point*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 56.

April of 1968 to consolidate gains and increase the pressure on the North Vietnamese. In addition, these operations hoped to compel the enemy to the negotiating table or shorten the war.

The 1968 North Vietnamese Tet Offensive proved to be the culminating event that forever linked General Westmoreland to failure in Vietnam. “It is the military responsibility to advise how its application of violence realistically provides the physical and temporal space for the proposed local political solution.”<sup>57</sup> The proposed local political solution General Westmoreland sought to accomplish was keeping South Vietnam out of communist hands. Tet in January 1968 shattered this goal. Furthermore, the impact of the Tet offensive was enhanced by the fact that in April of 1967, “General Westmoreland addressed a Joint Session of Congress in which he told the legislators that the allies were winning the war militarily, citing various statistical indicators of progress, and suggested that withdrawal of US forces could begin within two years.”<sup>58</sup> “His participation in President Johnson’s optimism campaign undermined the credibility of his reports and estimates; the Tet offensive thoroughly discredited the views of the general and his command in the eyes of the American public.”<sup>59</sup> Westmoreland played a key role in the progress offensive and provided the Johnson administration with a politically expedient highly visible general officer to sell the war effort during multiple speaking engagements and political briefings. “Westmoreland transitioned from a well-respected, nonpolitical, professional military officer to a Johnson administration promoter so well that President Johnson proclaimed, I like Westmoreland ... Westmoreland has played on the team to help me.”<sup>60</sup>

Through this analysis of General Westmoreland’s participation in President Johnson’s optimism campaign, it is clear to see that Westmoreland failed in his responsibility in the

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<sup>57</sup> Lauer, “Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks.”

<sup>58</sup> Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 147.

<sup>59</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 108.

<sup>60</sup> Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 158.

negotiation for the military aim and means in the conduct of the Vietnam War. As evidence of his loss of military perspective in attempting to win the favor of the policymaker, General Westmoreland's address to the joint session of congress highlights the importance of the requirement for military operational artists to provide realistic advice on the progress of military efforts to achieve the limited policy aims of the policymaker, not become a cheerleader for the party politics of the policymaker. Ironically, General Westmoreland professed that "his most memorable moment in his military career was the occasion of my address to a joint session of congress in April of 1967."<sup>61</sup>

Irrespective of the fact that the Tet offensive failed to achieve the politico-military goals of Hanoi, "the fact that it occurred in such a large scale with its casualties and destruction shattered the faith of many American political leaders in the possibility of victory."<sup>62</sup> Another key factor influencing the political leadership consisted of a request for additional forces from MACV. Following Tet, General Westmoreland, influenced by General Earle G. Wheeler of the JCS, requested an additional 206,000 troops be sent to Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> This series of events resulted in the Johnson administration's planning to shift the overall strategic guidance for the war as discussed among policymakers in late 1966. On March 31, 1968, President Johnson addressed the nation in response to the Tet offensive. Ultimately, President Johnson decided to send only 10,000 troops to augment MACV's forces. Furthermore, President Johnson committed to reducing the US involvement in the war and curtailed air strikes against North Vietnam in hopes of initiating negotiations. He also proclaimed the South Vietnamese must increase their

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<sup>61</sup> Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 147; Samuel Zaffiri, *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 61.

<sup>63</sup> James H. Wilbanks, *The Tet Offensive, A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 69-70.

responsibility for the conduct of the war. Lastly, to the surprise of the nation, President Johnson announced he would not seek re-election in November of 1968 and pledged to resolve the Vietnam conflict.

“Operational art links strategy to tactics and for any linkage to occur, there must be a strategy.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, as previously mentioned, current doctrine defines operational art as the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.<sup>65</sup> Given this understanding, one can argue that MACV under the tenure of General Westmoreland identified and understood the elements of operational art to include end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort as they applied to the conflict in Vietnam. If this is the case, why did he fail in his ability to achieve the military and political strategic objectives of the Johnson administration in 1967-1968?

To understand this failure, we must turn again to the familiar maxim of Carl von Clausewitz – “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means.”<sup>66</sup> The Johnson administration abdicated most of the responsibility to implement policy guiding the strategy for the employment of ground forces. This left the primary responsibility for strategy to the COMUSMACV. “Westmoreland’s method of operation is illustrated by his role in deciding two of the most important policy issues of the period—the commitment of large American combat forces to South Vietnam and the evolution of U.S. strategy in the ground war.”<sup>67</sup> This circumstance provided MACV with an initial problem from the beginning, given that in war, the military and political goals must be set by the policymaker. Another fact causing Westmoreland’s difficulty in the application of operational art was the relative weakness of the South Vietnamese

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<sup>64</sup> General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 236.

<sup>65</sup> US Army, *ADP 3-0*, (2017), 6.

<sup>66</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

<sup>67</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 486.

armed forces, thus requiring MACV to prioritize attrition as opposed to a balanced approach between attrition, pacification, and ARVN training. The singular focus on attrition contributed to Westmoreland's inability to arrange tactical actions in time, space, and purpose for strategic ends.

Lastly, General Westmoreland failed to provide the Johnson administration with politically aware military advice. "This implies that the military professional has an understanding of the politics of the environment under which a policy determination occurs, without the requirement, or fear, of being political."<sup>68</sup> Vietnam is an example of a war of limited political aim that required the military operational artist to provide realistic advice on how the military means achieved the strategic objective. Given his role in the development of strategy, General Westmoreland understood the operational environment in Vietnam. "After his first year in command, three factors shaped his operational priorities: the military and political disarray of the Saigon regime, the growing North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force threat, and Johnson's decision to respond to those problems by committing American combat troops on a large scale."<sup>69</sup>

His decision to remain in political consensus with the Johnson administration and participate in the progress offensive, regardless of how the situation developed in Vietnam, proved detrimental to his responsibility as the military operational artist. The resulting political failure doomed Westmoreland, since he inextricably linked himself to the politics of the Johnson administration. As a result, in mid-1968 General Westmoreland relinquished command of MACV to General Creighton Abrams. "Peter Braestrup noted not only how Westmoreland had been co-opted, but how historically unique that it was...For the first time in American history, he wrote, a field commander, Westmoreland, had allowed himself to be snookered into becoming a political

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<sup>68</sup> Lauer, "Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks."

<sup>69</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 485.

spokesman.”<sup>70</sup> The example of Westmoreland provides an important lesson in that the operational artist must fundamentally understand their role in both the political aspect of war and the negotiation with policy, as well as remain cognizant of the fact that the operational artist is always a military actor as opposed to a political one.

### Section III. General Abrams: MACV from 1969 to 1970

“The tactics changed within fifteen minutes of Abram’s taking command,” affirmed General Fred Weyand, who was in a position to know. Under General Westmoreland, Weyand had commanded the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division when it deployed to Vietnam from Hawaii, then moved up to command II Field Force, Vietnam, a corps-level headquarters. From that vantage point he observed the year Abrams spent as Westmoreland’s deputy, then Abrams’s ascension to the top post.

—Lewis Sorley, *A Better War*

“The Cambodian incursion was, as Nixon correctly described it, the most successful military operation of the Vietnam War ... Though it could not, nor was it intended to, prevent Hanoi’s ultimate triumph in Vietnam’s civil war, it had major impact on the degree of risk under which US forces withdrew from Southeast Asia.”<sup>71</sup> This insight from President Nixon is notable given the continued controversial nature of the Vietnam War in 1969-1970 during his first two years in office. If this is the case, then why is it that President Nixon assessed the Cambodian Incursion as “the most successful military operation” of the Vietnam War? It can be argued that President Nixon’s analysis of the Cambodian Incursion resulted from the successful application of operational art demonstrated by General Creighton Abrams in his attempts to arrange MACV tactical actions in the pursuit of strategic objectives in Vietnam as directed by the Nixon administration. To understand General Abrams’ role as the military operational artist prior to and immediately following the 1970 Cambodian Incursion, one must first understand the strategic

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<sup>70</sup> Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 155; Kim Willenson, *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 190.

<sup>71</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 153.

context and initial interactions with the Nixon administration that set the stage for Abrams and MACV in 1969-1970.

General Creighton Abrams officially replaced General William C. Westmoreland and assumed the duties of COMUSMACV on July 1, 1968. Then in November of 1968, Richard M. Nixon won election to serve as the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. “Under President Nixon, MACV’s mission changed to securing the South Vietnamese people’s right to determine their own political future by peaceful means ... The implementing tasks, however, remained fundamentally the same, although with more emphasis on building up Saigon’s armed forces and a new requirement to disengage American ground troops from combat.”<sup>72</sup> Given the loss of popular support for the Vietnam War following the 1968 Tet Offensive, President Nixon recognized the need for an American withdrawal.<sup>73</sup> “Accordingly, soon after entering office Nixon began a gradual disengagement of American forces from Southeast Asia and a reorientation toward matters, he felt more appropriate for a superpower.”<sup>74</sup> The strategic context of the American withdrawal from Vietnam became the key planning consideration driving operations that led to the Cambodian Incursion in April of 1970.

Under the Johnson administration, MACV restricted its conventional combat operations to remain inside the borders of South Vietnam. “Soon after becoming president in 1969, Richard Nixon made a fateful decision: The United States would bomb North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia.”<sup>75</sup> This decision nested with General Abrams’ campaign for requesting the expansion of combat operations outside of South Vietnam. A request Abrams made continuously since he

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<sup>72</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 409.

<sup>73</sup> Dale C. Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable US Defeat in Vietnam* (New York: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 34.

<sup>74</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 153.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



assumed command as COMUSMACV in mid-1968. The expansion of combat operations into Cambodia as well as Laos and North Vietnam resulted from two key events. These events included a North Vietnamese offensive in late February of 1969 which the newly elected Nixon administration viewed as a test and a tacit acknowledgement of the Vietnam War as a regional conflict. “The administration by its actions acknowledged the longstanding fact that the enemy treated the Indochina conflict as one war and systematically used territory of South Vietnam’s nominally neutral neighbors as a base and line of communications for his attack on the southern republic.”<sup>76</sup> The transition to the Nixon administration enhanced Abrams’ position in the policy negotiation regarding an incursion into Cambodia. Abrams in fact, already “coordinated several American wars in Southeast Asia with Admiral McCain and the American ambassadors to South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand in periodic Southeast Asia Coordinating Committee sessions.”<sup>77</sup>

President Nixon ordered these cross-border operations for two principal reasons. “He believed that, by disrupting the enemy’s sanctuaries, he could gain a respite in the war in South Vietnam for redeploying American forces and strengthening Saigon as well as force the North Vietnamese through military escalation to settle for a diplomatic agreement favorable to the United States.”<sup>78</sup> As COMUSMACV, General Abrams’ cross-border campaign planning focused on achieving these political aims. “Almost immediately after President’s Nixon’s inauguration, the Joint Chiefs of Staff raised the issue of the Cambodian sanctuary.”<sup>79</sup> Abrams previously recommended air and ground attacks in Cambodia throughout his tenure at MACV to both the Johnson and Nixon administrations and he gained the full support of the PACOM commander, the Joint Chiefs, and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.

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<sup>76</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 279.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>79</sup> Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 279.

“In the final months of the Johnson administration, General Abrams developed a new operational concept to the War in Vietnam described as the “One War Approach” ... When Admiral John S. McCain, Jr. – the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), based in Hawaii - came out to visit , Abrams explained to him that the one war concept puts equal emphasis on military operations, improvement of RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces) and pacification – all of which are interrelated so that the better we do in one, the more our chance of progress in the others.”<sup>80</sup> Abrams based this operational approach on his previous personal experience during his year spent as General Westmoreland’s deputy. Additionally, General Abrams familiarized himself with the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (PROVN) study, which focused on the benefits of pacification to both secure the population and gain popular support for the government. Abrams’ new direction for the military aim and means in Vietnam garnered support from Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and MACV Deputy Director for CORDS William Colby. Together with these policymakers, Abrams formed a “triumvirate of like-minded leaders who conceived and prosecuted a better war.”<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, in the absence of guidance from the White House as to the mission of MACV, Abrams commissioned a study to determine the mission for MACV. This study resulted in the *MACV Objectives Plan*. “Abrams’ campaign plan, approved early in 1969, accepted that public support for the war had diminished: The realities of the American political situation indicate a need to consider time limitations in developing a strategy to win.”<sup>82</sup> The *MACV Objectives Plan* focused on securing the population, destroying Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI),

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<sup>80</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 316.

<sup>82</sup> John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 171; Guenter Lewy. *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 137.

and improving the ability of both police and army forces to provide security. A key planning consideration of the *MACV Objectives Plan* was the eventual withdrawal of US forces.

Thus, now with an understanding of the strategic context and the initial interactions with the Nixon administration influencing General Abrams, one can examine his actions as the military operational artist. Similar to the Westmoreland case study, the doctrinal lens of the elements of operational art including end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort provide a guide from which to analyze General Abrams' application of operational art prior to, and immediately following, the 1970 Cambodian Incursion. "During the planning and execution of Army operations, commanders and staffs consider the elements of operational art as they assess the situation ... They adjust current and future operations and plans as the operation unfolds, and they reframe as necessary."<sup>83</sup> It is with this doctrinal understanding in mind that General Abrams reframed MACV tactical actions to achieve the strategic objectives of the Nixon administration. Despite the withdrawal of US forces and fierce political opposition to the expansion of the war, the Cambodian Incursion proved to be successful.

"When he inherited the Vietnam War from his Democratic predecessor, President Richard Nixon inherited also a general course of action and limited room to maneuver."<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, any radical change made to the general course of action as developed by the Johnson administration proved to be untenable with the American public as well as the Democratic controlled congress. "President Johnson had stopped the bombing of North Vietnam, committed the United States to the Paris negotiations, topped off the American force in South Vietnam, and set the goal of reducing American involvement and turning the fighting of the war

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<sup>83</sup> US Army, *ADRP 3-0*, (2017), 2-4.

<sup>84</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 141.

back to the South Vietnamese.”<sup>85</sup> Given the political situation in early 1969, President Nixon realized the need for his administration to withdraw from Vietnam and transition the main effort for the conduct of the Vietnam War to the South Vietnamese. This decision resulted in the policy of “Vietnamization” as coined by advisors in the Nixon administration.<sup>86</sup>

“During its first year in office, the Nixon administration gradually developed a two-track policy of negotiation and what came to be called “Vietnamization” – that is, unilateral withdrawal of American combat troops combined with a major effort to strengthen Saigon’s armed forces.”<sup>87</sup> Vietnamization provided the end state and conditions that would drive the planning and execution of tactical actions for General Abrams and MACV in 1969-1970. “This would test America’s will and ability to see the program and Nixon’s policies through to success ... With the stalemate continuing after one year in office, Nixon was still in search of a plan to win the war.”<sup>88</sup> General Abrams’ suggested military resolution in Cambodia provided Nixon with a plan. The ultimate end state of unilateral withdrawal of American combat troops necessitated the requirement to conduct an operation to provide time and space to conduct the withdrawal, as well as accelerate the effort to conduct pacification and modernize the ARVN into a capable fighting force. Given North Vietnam’s use of the Ho Chi Minh trail throughout the region, Cambodia proved to be a natural location for an escalation to the war. Additionally, Cambodian political upheaval in January 1970 provided General Abrams with a window in which to conduct the Cambodian Incursion to achieve the end state and conditions required by the policy of Vietnamization. As early as

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<sup>85</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 141.

<sup>86</sup> Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, The US Army in Vietnam* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 341; Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 679-681.

<sup>87</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 143.

<sup>88</sup> David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 71.

February of 1970, Abrams proposed an invasion to target NVA sanctuaries in both Cambodia and Laos to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird during a visit to Saigon.<sup>89</sup>

“In January 1970, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who throughout the previous year had seemed to be tilting against Vietnamese occupiers of his borderlands, left Phnom Penh for Paris on a combined vacation and diplomatic junket.”<sup>90</sup> His departure resulted in his subsequent overthrow by his prime minister, Lon Nol, in March 1970. The new regime under Lon Nol demanded that all North Vietnamese forces leave Cambodia. The North Vietnamese refused and thus Cambodia and North Vietnam plunged into conflict. Furthermore, Lon Nol requested assistance to help combat North Vietnamese aggression and this gave the United States an opportunity to directly intervene in Cambodia. It was clear Lon Nol could not contend with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) unilaterally, so on March 25, 1970 President Nixon requested the development of military options targeting the NVA sanctuaries in Cambodia.<sup>91</sup>

For years, the North Vietnamese support bases and sanctuaries in Cambodia frustrated MACV operations in South Vietnam. Prior to the Cambodian Incursion, MACV attempted to target the NVA in Cambodia with secret bombing campaigns, such as Operation Menu, or limited ARVN incursions. In February of 1969, General Abrams submitted direct requests to the Nixon administration for the authority to bomb North Vietnam’s Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the enemy headquarters responsible for the war in southern South Vietnam, located in Cambodian sanctuaries just across the border.<sup>92</sup> The frequency of Abrams’ requests to President

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<sup>89</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 30.

<sup>90</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 293.

<sup>91</sup> Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), 555; James H. Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 72.

<sup>92</sup> Richard A. Hunt, *Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military: 1969-1973* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2015), 144-145.

Nixon for broader authority to act in Cambodia increased steadily throughout the remainder of 1969 and Abrams remained in direct contact with Nixon providing both updates on the bombing campaign as well as the development of military options for Cambodia. However, these covert operations failed to disrupt the NVA logistical system in Cambodia. Additionally, the Cambodian border sanctuaries became even more critical to the NVA war effort once the regime of Lon Nol shut down the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville.

“Phnom Penh’s shift from “neutrality” to “belligerency” denied the NVA the use of Kampong Som (formerly Sihanoukville), as well as easy and safe movement across northern and eastern Cambodia to the South Vietnamese Border without fear of US air strikes.”<sup>93</sup> The author, John Shaw, writes in his treatise on the Cambodian campaign that,

The heightened activity and outbreak of fighting in eastern Cambodia during spring 1970 did not unduly surprise Abrams ... Having earlier considered such a development, or perhaps hoping Nixon might become receptive to seizing the Cambodian sanctuaries given his willingness to bomb them in Menu, in January or February 1970 Abrams started MACV’s Intelligence and Operations staffs thinking seriously about such a possibility.<sup>94</sup>

Although previously restricted from conducting operations in Cambodia, General Abrams maintained a firm understanding of the operational environment in the cross-border region. In the previous year, in June of 1969, the JCS with support from Abrams submitted a proposal to conduct operations in Cambodia. The SECDEF declined the JCS proposal but Abrams had continued to advocate for operations targeting the sanctuaries. Abrams’ assessment of the Cambodian situation in 1970 enabled him to understand how the NVA task organized, fought, and made decisions in Cambodia. He also realized how the loss of the NVA port at Kampong Som as well as the loss of freedom of movement throughout Cambodia forced the NVA logistics

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<sup>93</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 163.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

system to rely solely on the Ho Chi Minh trail and the border sanctuaries. Given this understanding of the enemy center of gravity, the Cambodian Incursion targeted the NVA border sanctuaries as well as the VCI. Simultaneously, Abrams continued to accelerate pacification efforts to secure the civilian population and build up regional security forces. The distraction caused by the Cambodian Incursion further enhanced the success of pacification by compelling the NVA to focus their efforts outside of South Vietnam. The identification of both the enemy and friendly centers of gravity as the situation developed in 1969-1970 enabled General Abrams to develop the best approach for achieving the desired end state of the civilian policymakers.

“The enemy’s operational pattern is his understanding that this is just one, repeat one, war, stressed Abrams ... He knows there’s no such thing as a war of big battalions, a war of pacification or a war of territorial security.”<sup>95</sup> These comments echo General Abrams’ belief in the aforementioned “One War Approach.” The operational approach mirrored several components of Westmoreland’s operational approach in that it remained focused on defeating the enemy and providing population security while extending government control. However, Abrams’ approach “contained for the first-time explicit provisions for the defense of cities and province capitals, and it emphasized pacification and the enlargement and improvement of South Vietnamese forces.”<sup>96</sup> Perhaps the most striking difference from General Westmoreland, is that this approach enforced the inevitability of the RVNAF to assume responsibility for the war as well as required both American and South Vietnamese forces to jointly participate along four lines of effort. These lines of effort included “attacking enemy main forces and base areas, guarding the borders and the Demilitarized Zone, defending the cities, and supporting

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<sup>95</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 18; Charles R. Smith, *US Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Stand-down 1969* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, US Marine Corps, 1988), 10.

<sup>96</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 130.

pacification.”<sup>97</sup> Each of these lines of effort connected the Cambodian Incursion to a central unifying purpose, the eventual American withdrawal from South Vietnam.

“The idea for the Cambodian cross-border operation had a number of fathers, Abrams among them.”<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Abrams, in conjunction with the CINCPAC and JCS, directly communicated the need for cross border operations to President Nixon during his initial review of Vietnam policy in early 1969. As COMUSMACV, General Abrams was solely responsible for the planning and execution of the Cambodian Incursion. “The best way American leaders saw to buy the time they needed for the United States to pull out safely and for Saigon to secure its position was to destroy those border sanctuaries that made possible any major communist assault against the southern, more populated half of South Vietnam.”<sup>99</sup> Additionally, subsequent goals for the Cambodian Incursion included the disruption of NVA lines of communication as well as preventing the potential installation of pro-Communist regimes in Laos and Thailand should Lon Nol fail to retain power in Cambodia. “Abrams characterized [the Cambodian Incursion] as “the military move to make at this time in support of our mission in South Vietnam both in terms of security of our own forces and for the advancement of the Vietnamization program.”<sup>100</sup> Despite the condensed planning timeline and high level of operational security needed to prevent leaks, General Abrams managed to develop an operational approach to the Cambodian Incursion that nested with the Nixon administrations policy aim of withdrawing from Vietnam. “Prior to the operation, Nixon sent a back-channel cable to Abrams asking him to send the “unvarnished truth” about the way he felt ... a joint response from Abrams and US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker

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<sup>97</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 130.

<sup>98</sup> Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 282.

<sup>99</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 23.

<sup>100</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 297.



indicated full support on their part.”<sup>101</sup> On April 27, 1970, President Nixon ordered General Abrams to execute the Cambodian Incursion.

“Allied columns – ARVN forces on 29 April and then a combined US/ARVN force on 1 May – pushed into the Parrot’s Beak and Fishhook areas of Cambodia, thus targeting two of the enemy’s most important border sanctuaries.”<sup>102</sup> Though large in scale, President Nixon limited the incursion to a depth of just 30 kilometers beyond the South Vietnamese/Cambodian border and mandated that all US forces withdraw from Cambodia no later than June 30, 1970.

Regardless of these restrictions, the Cambodian Incursion surprised the NVA and disrupted their ability to conduct operations in South Vietnam for the next two years. “From the viewpoint of MACV and the Saigon government, the Cambodian upheaval and the allied offensive brought significant strategic benefits ... The enemy had lost his border base areas, thousands of troops, and huge material stockpiles, not to mention his secure, efficient Sihanoukville supply route.”<sup>103</sup>

Another beneficial result of the Cambodian Incursion included the widespread success of the government of South Vietnam to pacify the countryside. General Abrams orchestrated the Cambodian Incursion and counterinsurgency in South Vietnam simultaneously to significant effect. The success of both operations swelled the ranks of the Regional Forces and Popular Forces which further enhanced the security of the population. Furthermore, the communist political infrastructure within South Vietnam did not exist as it had in the past. “In Military Region 3, the critical complex of provinces surrounding Saigon, recalled General Michael Davison, it is fair to say that by the winter of 1970-1971 the Viet Cong (VC) had virtually been

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<sup>101</sup> Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 557.

<sup>102</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 202.

<sup>103</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 309.

exterminated and the NVA, which had endeavored to go big time with divisional size units, had been driven across the border into Cambodia.”<sup>104</sup>

“The political object – the original motive for the war – will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.”<sup>105</sup> Once again, the maxims of Carl von Clausewitz provides a guide from which to evaluate General Creighton Abrams’ ability to achieve the military and political strategic objectives of the Nixon administration in 1969-1970. Conversely, many scholars and historians alike submit that there is no discernable contrast between General William C. Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams. Historian Gregory A. Daddis compares Westmoreland and Abrams in his book *Westmoreland’s War*. He writes, “After four years of war that led only to stalemate, Abrams’ appointment offered hope that a new general with an improved strategic concept would turn the war effort around ... This “better war” thesis, however, remains problematic.”<sup>106</sup> Regardless of the various narratives comparing Westmoreland and Abrams, it was Abrams who was able to provide politically aware military advice and apply operational art through the use of military force to satisfy the necessary political outcomes for Vietnam as directed by President Nixon.

“Abrams bought time for pacification and US withdrawal by destroying the NVA’s border sanctuaries ... Had he not done so, Saigon would have been far more vulnerable to a major NVA attack out of Cambodia in 1971 or 1972 while US ground troops were still in South Vietnam.”<sup>107</sup> The arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose demonstrated in the 1970 Cambodian Incursion achieved the strategic objectives of the Nixon Administration. The incursion provided at a minimum two years to facilitate the successful withdrawal of US combat

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<sup>104</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 217-218.

<sup>105</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 81.

<sup>106</sup> Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, 170.

<sup>107</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 153.

forces and bolstered efforts by MACV to modernize the RVNAF and accelerate pacification. Furthermore, the incursion disrupted the NVA's ability to contest the withdrawal and inflict additional combat casualties on the United States. "Had US units been compelled to fight well-armed and well-equipped NVA regulars, or even VC main force guerilla's in the environs of Saigon and other major cities to reach and depart from the airfields and ports of southern South Vietnam, thousands more Americans and Vietnamese would have been wounded or killed than was the case."<sup>108</sup> The fact that the majority of the Cambodian sanctuaries were only 60 miles from the outskirts of Saigon reinforces the effectiveness of the two-month raid to avoid a bloody defeat in Southeast Asia.

Lastly, the Cambodian Incursion demonstrated General Abrams' ability to provide politically aware military advice in the conduct of the Vietnam War. "The Nixon administration faced a Congress controlled by Democrats, who were free as they had not been under Johnson to take radical antiwar positions ... Hard-line anti-Communist though he had been throughout his political career, Nixon understood from the start that he had to disengage the United States from Vietnam or see his administration destroyed."<sup>109</sup> General Abrams thoroughly understood this political context as well as the operational environment in South Vietnam. "Westmoreland had been succeeded by Abrams, a pragmatic and aggressive commander with a clear idea of what he had to do to achieve American goals."<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, Abrams' military advice gained the support of Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and the JCS. At the close of 1968, Abrams directly appealed to the JCS for military action to address the threat posed by enemy sanctuaries in

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<sup>108</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 170.

<sup>109</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 141.

<sup>110</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 169.

Cambodia.<sup>111</sup> Abrams' constant communication and assessment of the situation in Cambodia provided the JCS with the military aim and means to provide a recommended military resolution to the Cambodian problem. The resulting dialogue convinced President Nixon and Henry Kissinger to authorize the incursion even though both Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird opposed the decision.

Abrams' application of operational art paid dividends in the Cambodian Incursion as evidenced by the fact that future NVA conventional offensives in 1972 and 1975 took place in Military Regions I and II (previously I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) and II CTZ) in northern South Vietnam rather than in Military Regions III and IV in the vicinity of Saigon. Additionally, "in contrast to Johnson's aversion to any military actions that might interfere with the Great Society, Nixon was willing to take the political heat he knew would result from such a controversial but essential decision."<sup>112</sup> A decision made all the more easy by the fact that General Creighton Abrams served as the principal architect of the Cambodian Incursion intended to respond to "Washington's demands for movement toward turning the war over to the South Vietnamese, improve and modernize the RVNAF, and initiate American troop withdrawals with or without a cessation of hostilities."<sup>113</sup>

"Most important, we achieved the operation's two main goals: we prevented the fall of Cambodia and relieved the pressure on Phnom Penh ... We undercut North Vietnam's offensive striking power and thereby bought time to press forward with Vietnamization."<sup>114</sup> This analysis, found in President Richard Nixon's memoir *No More Vietnams*, captures the political solution

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<sup>111</sup> Willard J. Webb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam: 1969-1970* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2002), 135.

<sup>112</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 169.

<sup>113</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 139.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 122.

that the Cambodian Incursion provided to policymakers. “Clausewitz noted that the entire phenomenon of war is embedded in politics.”<sup>115</sup> General Abrams understood the need for the eventual withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam as well as the political pressures facing the Nixon administration. “The beginning of 1970 found President Richard Nixon frustrated by the lack of progress in Vietnam and the growing opposition at home to his quest for victory.”<sup>116</sup> General Abrams recognized the political upheaval and military situation in Cambodia presented an opportunity to escalate the war to facilitate Nixon’s policy of Vietnamization. “As enemy forces advanced in Cambodia and Nixon and his advisors debated over the US response, General Abrams and Ambassador Bunker weighed in on the side of aggressive action.”<sup>117</sup>

“John Vann called the incursion “the most favorable development, other than Tet, that has occurred in this war.”<sup>118</sup> Unlike General Westmoreland, General Abrams provided politically aware military advice while not succumbing to the temptation to involve himself in the politics of the Nixon administration. Furthermore, Abrams understood the importance of civil-military dialogue to determine how MACV could achieve the policy objectives of the Nixon administration. This is evidenced by Abrams’ near continuous dialogue with both the JCS and the Nixon administration beginning shortly after the inauguration in early 1969 up until the completion of the Cambodian Incursion on June 30, 1970. Abrams’ ability to link the tactical actions of the Cambodian Incursion to achieve the strategic objective of Vietnamization enabled him to provide a military resolution that reassured President Nixon. The success of the Cambodian Incursion proved to be fortuitous since only a few days prior to the conclusion of the operation on June 30, 1971, Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. This congressional

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<sup>115</sup> Lauer, “Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks.”

<sup>116</sup> Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War*, 75.

<sup>117</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 297.

<sup>118</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 210.

action further limited the Nixon administration's prosecution of the war and highlighted the increasing lack of domestic political support for the war. Abrams understood these implications and although politically aware, remained conscious of the fact that as the COMUSMACV he must remain a military actor as opposed to a political one. Thus, General Abrams' ability to maintain his military responsibility in negotiations with policymakers to provide a military resolution to the policy of Vietnamization is what differentiates his tenure at MACV from that of General Westmoreland.

#### Section IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

Over the last century, American operational art has continuously improved the concepts and methods by which it fights battles. In doing so, it assumed, as many militaries have, that winning battles would lead, ultimately, to winning wars. America's experience in the Vietnam conflict called that assumption into question. Although it won many battles, almost all of them in fact, in the end those victories were not enough.

—Antulio J. Echevarria II, *American Operational Art, 1917-2008*

“In short, the exercise of the operational art lay with the source of the strategic direction or someone appointed by that source.”<sup>119</sup> The ability of General William C. Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams to achieve strategic objectives in Vietnam as directed by Presidents Johnson and Nixon through the arrangement of MACV tactical actions remains a subject of fierce debate to this day. “Throughout most of the command's existence, its basic mission was the same: in the words of the JCS, “to assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression and attain an independent non-communist ... South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment.”<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, as the COMUSMACV, each officer held the responsibility as the sole military

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<sup>119</sup> General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 228.

<sup>120</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 409.

operational artist to provide politically aware military advice. Through an understanding of operational art and the military responsibility in wars of limited aim, General Abrams proved to be more successful in his application of operational art.

General William C. Westmoreland is remembered as the General who failed to lead US forces to victory in Vietnam. “Although allied forces under his command defeated the Communist Tet offensive in 1968, the nationwide attack invalidated Westmoreland’s earlier claims of progress in the eyes of both US officials and the American public.”<sup>121</sup> Despite an understanding of the elements of operational art to include end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort as they applied to the conflict in Vietnam, Westmoreland did not achieve the strategic objectives of the Johnson administration.

However, the blame for MACV’s failure in Vietnam during General Westmoreland’s command tenure does not rest solely with this often-polarizing officer. Both General Westmoreland and the Johnson administration failed in their responsibility for the necessary dialogue involving the limited political aim in Vietnam and its subsequent limited military means and execution. “The president’s fixation on short term political goals, combined with his character and the personalities of his principal civilian and military advisors, rendered the administration incapable of dealing adequately with the complexities of the situation in Vietnam.”<sup>122</sup> Given the failure of the Johnson administration to provide a political solution to Vietnam through an achievable political aim, General Westmoreland failed to realize that despite his best efforts, it was fundamentally impossible to achieve a favorable military resolution. Thus, MACV under Westmoreland, conducted a bloody war of attrition that had no end in sight in

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<sup>121</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 412.

<sup>122</sup> H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 325.

1968. Furthermore, General Westmoreland damaged his credibility by indirectly assuming a role as a political spokesperson for President Johnson. Westmoreland's role in Johnson's "progress offensives" distorted his ability to provide politically aware military advice and made him a symbol of a failed war effort. "Ultimately, under Richard Nixon, Westmoreland as Army chief of staff found himself marginalized and largely ignored in the shaping of Vietnam policy."<sup>123</sup>

Conversely, General Creighton Abrams utilized the elements of operational art to include end state and conditions, center of gravity, and lines of effort, as demonstrated in the 1970 Cambodian Incursion, to achieve the strategic objective of US withdrawal from Vietnam as directed by President Richard Nixon. "He inherited from Westmoreland a mature MACV organization, a stable Saigon government, and a severely weakened enemy ... Building on these assets, Abrams competently executed Nixon's troop withdrawal policy while simultaneously strengthening Saigon's forces and working with them in the most effective pacification campaign yet conducted in the war."<sup>124</sup> MACV tactical actions in the Cambodian Incursion provided time and space for a successful US withdrawal from Vietnam and President Nixon's policy of Vietnamization. Alternatively, the dialogue regarding the limited political aim in Vietnam and its subsequent limited military means and execution was by far more productive between MACV under Abrams and the Nixon administration. This resulted in the Nixon administration's success in connecting its actual political goals with its military means.

General Abrams provided President Nixon with politically aware military advice on how he could best achieve the military resolution to the stated policy goals of US withdrawal and Vietnamization. His understanding of the operational environment in Vietnam led to his development of the "One War Strategy" and the subsequent *MACV Objectives Plan*. These

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<sup>123</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 412.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.



directives proved Abrams' political understanding of the lack of public support for the war as well as the time limitations placed on MACV to achieve the limited policy goals of the Nixon administration. The resulting 1970 Cambodian Incursion highlighted General Abrams' skill as the military operational artist. The operation provided the time and space to achieve the primary political solution of American withdrawal from Vietnam. "Rather than being a minor operation, deserving only passing mention in the rush to focus on American campus protests and congressional outrage, the Cambodian Incursion was as great a military victory as Tet 1968, made possible by political leaders seizing fleeting opportunities and armed forces carrying out a mission they were ready, willing and able to do."<sup>125</sup> Perhaps even more impressive, is the fact that General Abrams convinced President Nixon of the military necessity to conduct the incursion in the face of certain tremendous public outrage and protest upon escalation of the war. Moreover, unlike his predecessor General Westmoreland, "Abrams emerged from the unpopular Vietnam War with praise for a difficult job well executed and with his military reputation unblemished."<sup>126</sup> Subsequently, on June 30, 1972, Abrams passed the command of MACV to General Frederick C. Weyand and left Vietnam to replace Westmoreland as the next US Army Chief of Staff.

MACV's war remains deeply controversial three decades after General Weyand folded the command's colors for the last time on March 29, 1973 and shows little sign of becoming less so."<sup>127</sup> This is because senior American civilian and military leaders continue to struggle with the concept that in war, military objectives cannot be divorced from political purposes. This is evidenced by the continuing policy challenges the United States experienced and continues to experience in the past seventeen years of conflict. Through numerous presidential administrations

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<sup>125</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 170.

<sup>126</sup> Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 332.

<sup>127</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, 427.

and four-star generals, the United States cannot seem to solve the Afghan problem. In a September 2018 interview discussing the Afghan war effort, the newly selected commander of NATO Resolute Support in Afghanistan, General Austin Miller proclaimed, “this is not going to be won militarily ... This is going to a political solution.”<sup>128</sup> These comments highlight the difficulties current military leaders experience in their attempts to link tactical actions to the political and military strategic objectives developed by civilian policymakers. Again, these comments echo the trials and tribulations faced by both Westmoreland and Abrams during their respective tenures as COMUSMACV.

Wars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will likely be wars of limited aim, politically, and thus limited military aim and means. Given this consideration, commanders and staffs of today’s US Army must understand the importance of the effective employment of operational art in wars of limited policy aims so that they in turn can effectively link tactical actions to the political and military strategic objectives. Additionally, military leaders also must understand their responsibility to provide politically aware military advice in the dialogue from political aim to the execution of military means. “Military leaders advise how the application of violence realistically provides the physical and temporal space for the local political solution ... if policy does not provide the political solution, then no military resolution exists.”<sup>129</sup>

Historian Antulio Echevarria is of the opinion that, “American operational art over the last century has concentrated on fighting battles rather than on waging wars, and rests on the flawed assumption that winning battles can easily translate into winning the peace for which the

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<sup>128</sup> Kyle Rempfer, “This is not going to be won militarily: Top US commander in Afghanistan reveals pessimism,” *Military Times*, November 1, 2018, accessed December 16, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-air-force/2018/11/01/this-is-not-going-to-be-won-militarily-top-us-commander-in-afghanistan-reveals-pessimism/>.

<sup>129</sup> Lauer, “Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks.”

wars were waged.”<sup>130</sup> As the post 1945 world order continues to be challenged, the US military will consistently find itself in a continuum of conflict tasked with fighting wars of limited aims against belligerents, both state and non-state, around the world. Thus, future military operational artists would do well to remember the words of Clausewitz when he stated, “that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”<sup>131</sup> Given this consideration, the operational artist with the responsibility in the negotiation for the military aim and means in the conduct of modern theater operations should strive to wage war in the model of General Creighton Abrams as opposed to fighting battles in the model of General William C. Westmoreland.

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<sup>130</sup> John Andreas Olson and Martin Van Crelde, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 06.

<sup>131</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

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