

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE SIEGE OF KHE SANH**

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This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013



Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>30 MAR 2007</b>		2. REPORT TYPE <b>Strategy Research Project</b>		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2006 to 00-00-2007</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Strategic Implications of the Siege of Khe Sanh</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) <b>Robert Mitchell</b>				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5050</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>See attached.</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>25</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			



## **ABSTRACT**

AUTHOR: Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Mitchell  
TITLE: Strategic Implications of the Siege of Khe Sanh  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 2 March 2007 WORD COUNT: 7761 PAGES: 25  
KEY TERMS: Military and Political Strategy  
CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

Throughout military history, certain battles are key turning points in any war. The 77-day siege of Khe Sanh, beginning on 21 January 1968, was one such battle and signaled the beginning of the end for the President, General Westmoreland, and the Vietnam War. The siege of Khe Sanh was one of many tactical battles fought during the 10-year Vietnam War. What makes this tactical battle different from others in January 1968 is the personal involvement by many at the highest levels of government to include the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of Defense, cabinet members, senior advisers, the press, and ultimately the President of the United States. Their personal involvement at Khe Sanh led to a miscalculated over-emphasis in the strategic importance of Khe Sanh. Consequently, General Westmoreland focused his main effort at Khe Sanh and ultimately failed to identify the siege as a well orchestrated feint by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) for the ensuing TET Offensive. This research paper will examine the strategic implications of the siege of Khe Sanh. Specifically, this paper will examine how failures in strategic communications at Khe Sanh were the turning point for American involvement in the Vietnam War.







## STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE SIEGE OF KHE SANH

No single battlefield event in Vietnam elicited more public disparagement of my conduct of the Vietnam war than did my decision in 1968 to stand and fight at Khe Sanh. The decision to hold onto that previously obscure little plateau in the rugged northwestern corner of South Vietnam was to my mind militarily sound and strategically rewarding, yet many who viewed it from a distance deemed it misguided and tragic. The decision generated one of the more caustic public attacks I encountered.<sup>1</sup>

—General William C. Westmoreland

Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., summed it up best in his book *On Strategy; A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. He stated “in engagement after engagement the forces of the Viet Cong and of the North Vietnamese Army were thrown back with terrible losses. Yet, in the end, it was North Vietnam, not the United States, that emerged victorious.”<sup>2</sup> The United States never lost a single battle in Vietnam, but in the end, lost the war. In every war, there is a defining battle, a turning point that shapes history forever. The 77-day siege of Khe Sanh, beginning on 21 January 1968, was one such battle and signaled the beginning of the end for President Johnson, General Westmoreland, and the Vietnam War. The siege of Khe Sanh was one of many tactical battles fought during the 10-year Vietnam War. At the operational level, General Westmoreland viewed Khe Sanh as a strategic stronghold in the northwest section of South Vietnam. In Westmoreland’s mind, Khe Sanh was key to the overall northern defense against communist troops operating in and out of Laos along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But it proved to be much more than just an ordinary battle. Four months later in June 1968, the Vietnam war was changed forever: Khe Sanh was abandoned, the TET Offensive was a political and psychological defeat, Secretary of Defense McNamara had resigned, General Westmoreland was reassigned as the Commander of all forces in Vietnam, and the President of the United States had painfully decided not to run for re-election. This paper will examine the strategic implications from the involvement of the political and military leadership in Washington during the siege of Khe Sanh. Specifically, this paper will examine how failures in strategic communications at Khe Sanh were the turning point for American involvement in the Vietnam War.

### Setting the Stage Politically in 1967

The years was 1967, and it was one of the most challenging years for the United States. Racial tensions, domestic unrest, lack of trust in the federal government, and a war in Vietnam with no apparent end in sight, were issues that were clearly on the minds of all Americans in late



1967. This was also a time of contrasting views with respect to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. On the one hand, the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) was reporting significant progress in the prosecution of the war, and the end appeared to be in sight. On the other hand, troop levels were approaching nearly 500,000 in late 1967 and nationwide protests of the draft were gaining public momentum and support while American casualties were increasing daily. Intense debates ensued in Congress and within the administration over ground strategy, pacification, and bombing.<sup>3</sup> Although America was being told that the United States was on track for a victory in Vietnam, secretly, General Westmoreland was requesting additional troops with the appearance of an open-ended escalation. President Johnson was clearly concerned about his declining approval rating, which dipped below 38% in October 1967.<sup>4</sup> Behind the scenes, President Johnson was pressing General Westmoreland and Secretary of Defense McNamara for a new military and public relation's strategy in order to garner waning support. General Westmoreland and his public affairs officers developed a strategy to convince the American public that the allies were making progress in the war. Despite the negative media portrayal of the South Vietnamese as incompetent and ineffective, MACV volleyed back with positive reports of improvement and battlefield successes by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).<sup>5</sup>

Westmoreland's public relations strategy was not working and the president was growing increasingly impatient as his public support increasingly headed south. President Johnson insisted that General Westmoreland travel to Washington and engage on the diplomatic circuit in an attempt to win back public support for the war.<sup>6</sup> In what was considered an unprecedented event in military history, General Westmoreland delivered a passionate speech, on behalf of the President, to a joint session of Congress in April 1967. General Westmoreland declared "if backed at home by resolve, confidence, patience, determination, and continued support, we will prevail in Vietnam over the Communist aggressor!"<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1. General Westmoreland Addressing Congress



Congress, on the other hand, was divided over the country's involvement in Vietnam. A majority in Congress supported the current strategy of attrition in Vietnam in order to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Other members of Congress were skeptical of the current strategy as American casualties were mounting by the day. Clearly, some members of Congress had issues with bringing a uniformed commander to speak on behalf of the President of the United States to a joint session of Congress. Specifically, Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy stated, "I have grave reservations about using a field commander on active duty as an instrument to make a case which is not only military but also political."<sup>8</sup>

Despite the initial success of Westmoreland's speech, the President continued to receive media criticism for escalating the war which accounted for nearly 500,000 men in late 1967.<sup>9</sup> The unpopularity of the Vietnam War coupled with the slow evaporation of the President's domestic programs for a "Great Society" was beginning to take a physical and mental toll on the president. To understand some of the political and military decisions made during the siege of Khe Sanh, one must briefly examine President Johnson's past.

#### The Drive Behind President Johnson

President Lyndon Baines Johnson was born on 27 August 1908, in a modest farmhouse in the rural central Texas hill-country. An unassuming man of average intellect and personality, Johnson eventually held several key House and Senate leadership positions culminating with his selection as the Vice President nominee on the Kennedy Democratic ticket in 1961. According to those who knew Johnson best, he resented the fact that he was not nominated for the Democratic Presidential ticket for which he had to settle for the number two position. "This situation put him in a disagreeable position of working for a younger man to whom he felt intellectually and socially inferior. Johnson seemed painfully sensitive to Kennedy's good looks, Harvard education, sophistication, family wealth, and influence. Though the two men shared an incredible passion for politics, they remained distant to each other."<sup>10</sup> Within the Kennedy Administration, it was common knowledge that President Kennedy was reluctant to escalate the situation in Vietnam with additional troops. As Vice President under Kennedy, Johnson had little control over foreign policy direction in Vietnam. All of that was to change as Johnson was sworn in as the 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States following the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, on 22 November, 1963. President Johnson now inherited Kennedy's war and he quickly became consumed with winning, even to the point of reluctantly escalating a greater U.S. combat role in the short term in order to achieve a defeat of the communist insurgency and stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia in the long run.<sup>11</sup> Many of



Johnson's closest military and civilian advisers were holdovers from the Kennedy administration and they were split on escalation and bombing issues, but Johnson remained resolute with General Westmoreland's military advice, despite his skepticism.<sup>12</sup>

The genesis of his skepticism with military advice dates back to his time as the Vice President. Johnson was greatly influenced by Kennedy and events such as the Bay of Pigs, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and the Cuban missile crisis further solidified the tenuous civil-military relationship between Kennedy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Kennedy did not hide the fact that he blamed the Joint Chiefs for the debacle at the Bay of Pigs and it was no secret that Kennedy did not trust the advice of senior military officials during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.<sup>13</sup> As at the Bay of Pigs, the military felt the civilians had not acted decisively. The senior brass was insistent on the use of air strikes and an invasion during the Cuban missile crisis which outright frightened the civilian leadership. Kennedy remarked that the military was mad while at the same time Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara feared the United States would mistakenly blunder into a nuclear disaster.<sup>14</sup> Military leaders deeply resented McNamara's intrusion into their domain. "The national security was too important, the brass insisted, to be an area for experimentation by sophisticates sublimely ignorant of both the knowledge and history of war."<sup>15</sup>

As early as 1965, President Johnson had shown a propensity to wrangle in the details, both militarily and politically, as he expanded the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. One could argue that presidents don't belong in the details of tactical military matters, but in the same respect, Johnson had shown early on that as Commander in Chief, he could make policy decisions affecting the military after careful analysis. One particular decision impressed McNamara in 1965:

On July 28, 1965 President Johnson announced that U.S. fighting strength in Vietnam would immediately be increased from 75,000 to 125,000 and that additional U.S. forces would be sent as they were requested by field commander Gen. Westmoreland. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara emphasized that not since the Cuban missile crisis had such care been taken in making a decision. On the average of four hours a day has been spent with the President in discussing the problem. The President sought the advice of every responsible government official in coming to a decision.<sup>16</sup>

However, as the Vietnam War dragged on, many of the decisions that President Johnson would make would be influenced more from his closest personal advisers rather than from his military advisers. Johnson's decisions would also be reflected by his past civil-military relationship fostered by President Kennedy. At one particular meeting at the White House in 1966, Johnson was testing Westmoreland's loyalty and confided to him, "General, I have a lot riding on you, I



hope you don't pull a MacArthur on me. He was referring to MacArthur's reluctance to answer tactical questions to the Joint Chiefs and President Truman for which Truman had no choice but to relieve him."<sup>17</sup>

As the summer of 1967 approached, it was clear that President Johnson was physically and emotionally exhausted with the situation in Vietnam. He was frustrated by the lack of military success and was being torn apart with advice, from both the military and his staff. Johnson shared McNamara's reluctance on numerous accounts, specifically, the military's request to continue to expand the war. Without question, President Johnson was firmly opposed in the Joint Chief's request for reserve mobilization to offset the draft. Publicly, President Johnson supported the military and the current strategy in Vietnam, but behind closed doors his cabinet and closest advisers were not in concurrence with the military brass. This disagreement would come full circle at Khe Sanh where thousands of NVA Soldiers were massing for their attack.

### Military Strategy

General Westmoreland's overall long range strategy for Vietnam consisted of the deployment of American and South Vietnamese troops in and around U.S. air bases and supply depots near the capital city of Saigon, the central highlands, and other strategic locations for protection. Once security was established around key lines of communication, General Westmoreland then pursued a strategy of "search and destroy" operations which would later symbolize the tactics used in the Vietnam War.<sup>18</sup>

Khe Sanh was originally established in 1962 as a border post and served Army Special Forces detachments for intelligence gathering operations. Geographically, Khe Sanh lay in the dense, mountainous terrain four miles east of the Laotian border and 14 miles south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The village of Khe Sanh lay just south of the airstrip along Highway 9 in the Quang Tri Province. In reality, Highway 9 was not an actual road, but rather an unimproved trail running east and west, occupied mainly by the local Montagnards.

In August 1966, the first elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Regiment were sent to Khe Sanh to begin preparations for the establishment of a fire base in the I Corps Tactical Zone. (ICTZ). Westmoreland understood the long range strategic importance of Khe Sanh and later dispatched additional Marine battalions to the northern zone with responsibility to control over 1,600 square miles in the Quang Tri Province, with the additional mission of blocking Route 9 from North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltrating from Laos.<sup>19</sup> By late 1967, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Regiment was replaced by the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment. Three prominent hilltops (Hills 861, 881,



and 950) overlooked the entire base camp and would be key in the defense of Khe Sanh and the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, under the command of Colonel David Lownds, slowly executed a strategy to take control of the hilltops in preparation for the coming offensive.

Multiple sources of intelligence indicated that the NVA was prepping for a spring offensive in 1968. The Central Intelligence Agency was reporting substantial ground and vehicular movements along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. At the same time, Westmoreland's intelligence analysts at MACV were predicting a major offensive from the NVA with a focus on Khe Sanh. In mid-December 1967, a captured document from a north Vietnamese scout indicated that North Vietnam intended to reenact a new Dien Bien Phu at Khe Sanh.<sup>20</sup> This document would later be the defining piece of intelligence that would direct a disproportionate share of military assets and attention at Khe Sanh, and become the object of obsession for both General Westmoreland and President Johnson. In Westmoreland's estimation, the NVA wanted and needed to duplicate their resounding victory as they did with the French at Dien Bien Phu. Westmoreland's assessment carried significant weight, but there were others who disagreed with his prediction. Analysts at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in Washington, D.C., assembled a joint paper predicting that the NVA's main attack was not Khe Sanh, but rather a feint for a larger scale offensive:

Among the more experienced Vietnam analysts, the DIA people had spent four years studying NVA methods and they based their conclusions on the understanding of Giap's techniques. The paper outlined the NVA alternative purpose: to draw American forces away from the coastal plain. When the analysts presented their paper at a DIA briefing, the audience was amused and listeners laughed when the analysts suggested that the Joint Chiefs be appraised of the analysis and that it be sent to Saigon as a DIA assessment. Their boss, an Army colonel, remarked, "How could you possibly know more than General Westmoreland?"<sup>21</sup>

Westmoreland increasingly became more obsessed with Khe Sanh. He was convinced that Khe Sanh was the main effort. He led others, to include most intelligence sources, the JCS, and the White House, to the same conclusion. He was also convinced that this battle could be the defining moment in his military career as well as be the turning point for the Vietnam War.<sup>22</sup> As the senior operational commander, he went to great lengths in providing the necessary support to the Marines at Khe Sanh. He became personally involved in the buildup of the airbase and surrounding terrain which included overseeing improvements to the runway, installation of ground and air intelligence sensors, and reinforcements of artillery.<sup>23</sup> Increasingly, there had been professional disagreements between the Marine tactical command and General Westmoreland over operations, intelligence, and maneuver at Khe Sanh. The Marines argued



that Westmoreland was micromanaging the tactical fight. General Robert Cushman, Commander of III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) and the higher Headquarters for the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, disagreed with the earlier objectives at Khe Sanh. He saw the need, as did his predecessor, for the continued pacification mission in the Northern Province. Cushman did not want his Marines being tied down at Khe Sanh. General Westmoreland and the MACV staff were convinced that Highway 9 was being used by the NVA for infiltration from the west along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>24</sup> In the bigger picture, Westmoreland envisioned Khe Sanh as an eventual launching pad for operations into Laos and Cambodia, and began to stockpile it with ammunition, fuel, and Marine troops.<sup>25</sup> Westmoreland's proposed strategy of interdicting lines of communication across the border into Laos and Cambodia was immediately shot down by Johnson. President Johnson's denial of Westmoreland's request for interdiction into Laos and Cambodia forced the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment into a deliberate defense at Khe Sanh. The Marine chain of command at Khe Sanh did not embrace this mission and felt they should go on the offensive. The Marines wanted to use Khe Sanh as a patrol base for operations to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This request was again met with stiff resistance from Westmoreland, even as Westmoreland continually pressed the JCS and President Johnson for expansion into Laos to no avail.<sup>26</sup> Neither McNamara nor Johnson seriously entertained Westmoreland's proposed contingency plan, but the opportunity presented itself again on 1 January 1968, when human intelligence sources indicated a substantial enemy force moving towards Khe Sanh which got the immediate attention at the highest levels in the White House. National Security Adviser Walt Rostow now supported Westmoreland's concept of a Laotian or North Vietnamese invasion as preemption of the attack in light of the overwhelming force.<sup>27</sup> Although the Joint Chiefs favored a withdrawal versus preemption at this time, President Johnson was at least considering the idea of an invasion into Laos. But in a surprised turn around, Westmoreland flat out rejected the idea; "Preempting a Khe Sanh assault by an offensive into Laos is neither logistically nor tactically feasible at this time."<sup>28</sup> Westmoreland had several reasons for rejecting preemption which included inadequate airlift capability, foul weather, and the likelihood of overwhelming anti-aircraft fire over Laos.<sup>29</sup> In another example of failed communications, the only message sent back to the Pentagon and White House was Westmoreland's opinion that a withdrawal would be a psychological victory for the enemy. The JCS and President Johnson could only conclude that MACV wanted to fight a battle at Khe Sanh and had no choice but to support Westmoreland's decision.<sup>30</sup>

Such concerns, however, did not deter General Westmoreland from pressing ahead. Westmoreland was convinced now more than ever that the enemy intended to overrun the base



as the first step in an all-out drive to seize Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces and in turn, reinforced the outpost with three additional battalions of Marines and deployed more than half of all U.S. maneuver battalions to the northern I Corps.<sup>31</sup>

In an inter-service dispute over the command and control of aviation assets, the 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force Commander pressured General Westmoreland for overall control of all air assets (minus helicopters). General Cushman balked. He took the sensitive issue to the Commander of Pacific Forces Command, then to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and finally to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>32</sup> The Chairman deferred the decision to Admiral Sharp. General Westmoreland was livid with Cushman's tactic of bypassing him on this doctrinal issue. Westmoreland took the issue directly to Admiral Sharp. Sharp sent mixed messages on the matter and waffled on the decision more than two months. In a struggle of service component tradition versus the needs of the senior tactical commander, Admiral Sharp reluctantly approved the realignment of air assets under one commander on 8 March 1968.<sup>33</sup> Having resolved this issue, General Westmoreland turned his attention to the latest intelligence reports indicating several regimental-size forces moving south towards Khe Sanh. "Alarmed by these moves, on 20 January 1968, Westmoreland sent his intelligence chief, Colonel Phillip Davidson, up to Khe Sanh for a firsthand appraisal of the situation there."<sup>34</sup> Davidson was shocked at the lack of preparation by Colonel Lownds and the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment at the airbase. The airbase was not protected with sandbags and was literally exposed to enemy artillery and mortar fires.<sup>35</sup> Colonel Lownds even went so far as to disagree with Colonel Davidson on the size and capability of the approaching NVA divisions:

Davidson was equally shocked when he talked with Colonel David Lownds. In spite of what MACV considered overwhelming evidence that two, three, or possibly even four NVA divisions were closing in on the base, Lownds refused to believe it. The Colonel told Davidson that he was certain that there was an enemy regiment out there in the hills beyond the Marine wire, but that was all he was certain of. Davidson spent the next thirty minutes trying to convince Lownds of the accuracy of MACV's intelligence reports, but the Colonel remained skeptical.<sup>36</sup>

Westmoreland was not amused over this lack of focus and began to question the competence of the Marine command in I Corps. Westmoreland dispatched his deputy, General Creighton Abrams, to visit Khe Sanh and make his own assessment. Abrams verified the lack of readiness and unity of effort and wanted to relieve Colonel Lownds on the spot, but Westmoreland overruled him.<sup>37</sup> Westmoreland instead directed that General Abrams position himself in the I Corps sector and stand up and assume the MACV forward headquarters, as commander of all forces in the northern province.<sup>38</sup>



## The Battle is Joined

In early January 1968, several intelligence reports indicated an NVA troop strength of some 40,000 enemy Soldiers, consisting of four Divisions with supporting artillery and under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap, were converging from the highlands to the northern province around Khe Sanh.<sup>39</sup> On 21 January 1968, Giap unleashed his attack on the perimeter of Khe Sanh. The vastly outnumbered Marine Regiment would have to defend their location in much the same fashion as the rebel Texans had done 132 years ago against the Mexican Army at the Alamo. Operationally, General Giap's intent was to create a diversion with two objectives: focus the American's efforts at Khe Sanh in order to conceal the ensuing TET Offensive, and in the long term, prevent forces at Khe Sanh from disrupting the movement of NVA troops along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>40</sup> As the battle unfolded, the media's attention on Khe Sanh was drawing almost immediate national interest at home. The intense and repetitive shelling of the airbase drew media comparisons of the situation at Khe Sanh to those of the disastrous results of the French at Dien Bien Phu in November 1953. Nightly television reports featuring nearly 6,000 U.S. Marines surrounded and under enemy fire was the kind of action and drama that editors and reporters deemed attractive to American audiences.<sup>41</sup> As if the situation at Khe Sanh wasn't enough for the President, on 30 January 1968, the NVA launched a major offensive and the North Koreans captured the crew of the USS Pueblo. At a meeting at the White House on that same day, Senator Byrd from West Virginia was concerned by the growing situation at Khe Sanh and asked the President, "I am very concerned about the build up at Khe Sanh and have been told that we have 5,000 troops there compared with 40,000 enemy troops. Are we prepared for this attack?"<sup>42</sup> President Johnson responded, "This has been a matter of great concern to me. I met with the Joint Chiefs yesterday and I have in writing that they are prepared. I asked the Joint Chiefs if we should withdraw from Khe Sanh. They said no, that it is too important to us militarily and psychologically."<sup>43</sup> The more Khe Sanh dragged on, the more the media compared it to the Dien Bien Phu disaster. Once the momentum of the comparison to Dien Bien Phu picked up steam, there was no turning it off. With public opinion eroding rapidly, the Johnson Administration became overwhelmingly obsessed with Khe Sanh. Strategic communication failures between the press, General Westmoreland, and the White House, were dominant throughout this tactical battle. Strategic communication failures were contributing factors in the exaggerated comparisons of Dien Bien Phu, the erosion of confidence at the highest levels, and a miscalculated military strategy resulting in the TET Offensive. This paper will now examine each of these three areas.



### Exaggerated Comparison of Dien Bien Phu

As early as December 1967, General Westmoreland and MACV staff began analyzing the comparisons of Dien Bien Phu to Khe Sanh. Captured intelligence documents indicated a major enemy thrust of two to three NVA Divisions towards Khe Sanh. Westmoreland understood the importance of drawing from lessons learned in military history and he couldn't disregard the comparisons. As the enemy continued to build in and around Khe Sanh, Westmoreland was receiving advice from just about everyone that he was inviting another Dien Bien Phu and the wise course of action should be to abandon the airstrip.<sup>44</sup> Westmoreland was confident that Khe Sanh was not another Dien Bien Phu and he based his analysis and intuition largely on his consultation with current and former French Officers who had fought at Dien Bien Phu.<sup>45</sup> In Westmoreland's analysis, the French had been trapped in an inaccessible valley with limited artillery and no air support, while the Marines at Khe Sanh owned the high ground with overwhelming artillery and air support.<sup>46</sup> Not to be outdone by other intergovernmental agencies, Westmoreland directed his command historian, Colonel Reamer Argo, to do comparisons as well. Argo's back brief to Westmoreland and the MACV staff was gloomy and pessimistic.<sup>47</sup> According to Westmoreland, it was good for his staff to hear the worst, but he sternly followed up with the following remarks; "We are not, repeat not, going to be defeated at Khe Sanh," and with that he marched out of the room to drive his point home.<sup>48</sup>

As the intense shelling with views of hunkered down Marines played out on the nightly news, the media were insatiable about characterizing Khe Sanh as another Dien Bien Phu. Johnson was clearly being swayed by the media. As late as February 1968, Pentagon and White House briefers were jumping on the bandwagon and comparing the similarities of the two battles. Although the press may get its unfair share of blame for the mischaracterization, they are quick to point out that others shared in this responsibility:

Although the siege of Khe Sanh never evolved into a major enemy ground assault, it still proved irresistible to the American news media. Westmoreland's statements suggesting the imminence of an enemy offensive in the northern portion of South Vietnam were in part responsible. So was the Johnson Administration's obvious concern, relayed to the press through leaks as well as official statements that the battle might somehow evolve into a debacle. Featuring 6,000 U.S. troops surrounded and under fire, it possessed just the sort of action and drama editors and reporters had always deemed attractive to American audiences.<sup>49</sup>

More than anything, both Westmoreland and Johnson played into the media hands by dramatically overemphasizing the tactical importance of Khe Sanh. There was no effective public relations strategy to counter the Dien Bien Phu comparison. An aggressive military and



White House public relations and/or information operations campaign might have diverted or killed the Dien Bien Phu hype comparison. However, there is a strong possibility that even an effective public relations/information campaign at this time would not have changed the press's opinion and/or stance in regards to Khe Sanh.

### Eroding Confidence at the White House

As days rolled into weeks after the initial attacks, the president was clearly worried if the Marines could hold Khe Sanh in the face of an overwhelming enemy force. A number of military historians believed that Johnson was losing confidence in Westmoreland's ability to stave off the impending massacre at Khe Sanh. It's highly irregular and unlikely that the President of the United States would delve into the details of a tactical fight, but if he should, it's an indicator that the Commander in Chief has lost confidence in those prosecuting the tactical fight. This was clearly the case when President Johnson inquired to General Wheeler about the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons if the inevitable should happen at Khe Sanh. General Wheeler in turn had his own concerns that the situation at Khe Sanh may turn into Vietnam's own version of the Alamo and in a discussion with Admiral Sharp, he expressed the concerns of the President:

There is a considerable amount of discussion around town about the Khe Sanh situation to include the inevitable comparisons with Dien Bien Phu. One question raised recently in this connection (and I believe it received some consideration at the time of the Dien Bien Phu siege) is whether tactical nuclear weapons should be used if the situation in Khe Sanh should become that desperate. I consider such an eventuality unlikely. Nevertheless, I would appreciate your views as to whether there are targets in the area which lend themselves to nuclear strikes, whether some contingency nuclear planning would be in order, and what you would consider to be some of the more significant pros and cons of using tac nukes in such a contingency.<sup>50</sup>

Westmoreland thought it was prudent that the nuclear option be addressed and he directed a secret group to analyze and make recommendations for this possibility. For fear of word getting out in Washington, President Johnson told Westmoreland to desist.<sup>51</sup> As the situation continued to intensify, Johnson began to have serious misgivings about backing Westmoreland's decision to hold the base.<sup>52</sup> Johnson became more excited when on the night of 7 February 1968, the NVA attacked the American Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei. This attack was significant psychologically because of the NVA's use of tanks for the first time in the war and further propelled Washington's concern for the siege at Khe Sanh.<sup>53</sup>

While the tactical fight was intensifying at Khe Sanh, Westmoreland was not finding many advocates back home for defense of the airbase. Although Westmoreland understood the



President's anxiety of the defense of Khe Sanh, he also thought the President was worrying needlessly.<sup>54</sup> In another example of failed communications as the strategic level, Westmoreland's strategic assessment was not being presented to the president. With too many layers of chain of command to go through, Westmoreland did not fully grasp the implications of Johnson's anxiety over Khe Sanh. Westmoreland was making assumptions that his assessment and professional military advice was being presented to the President when in fact it was not. At the White House, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor, held a key and influential position on the President's personal staff. As President Johnson's chief military adviser, he believed that the base was simply too isolated to be adequately defended. As President Kennedy's former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Taylor was highly thought of by President Johnson. Noting the parallels between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu, Taylor pointed out the problems of re-supplying the base, and emphasizing that any defensive position can be taken if the enemy is willing to pay the price in casualties.<sup>55</sup> Although Taylor unsuccessfully argued for a presidential order to withdrawal, he convinced the President that he needed to stay abreast daily, sometimes hourly, on the tactical situation at Khe Sanh. At the request of the President, Taylor and the NSA staff developed a sand-table like terrain model in the White House Situation Room.<sup>56</sup> Westmoreland was clearly frustrated, knowing that Maxwell Taylor had the president's ear and that Taylor's advice conflicted with the recommendation to defend Khe Sanh from General Wheeler. General Westmoreland's feelings on the subject were expressed in this manner:

Much of the attention of press, my own command, and Washington officials understandably focused on Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh was isolated enough and bore enough similarities to Dien Bien Phu to excite arm chair strategists. President Johnson, I learned later, had begun to develop a fixation about it. General Taylor had to set up a special White House Situation Room to depict and analyze American and enemy dispositions and terrain model.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 2. President Johnson Being Briefed On Khe Sanh



The President was clearly in the tactical details at Khe Sanh. In his biography, Johnson talks about how dreams of Dien Bien Phu haunted him at night. He would jump out of bed and in his bathrobe and rush down to the White House Situation Room for hourly updates where he studied aerial photographs, intelligence, friendly and enemy troop movements.<sup>58</sup> The situation was not improving and Johnson directed Westmoreland to hold daily press conferences, but was vague in what Westmoreland should say.<sup>59</sup> These daily press conferences were cursory at best and did nothing to improve the President's approval rating. With declining popularity numbers, the President was getting desperate. In what is considered to be the most unusual request of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Johnson insisted that the Joint Chiefs of Staff sign a formal declaration of faith in Westmoreland's ability to hold Khe Sanh.<sup>60</sup> Johnson was emphatic about his intent to the Chairman: "I don't want any damn Dinbinphoo."<sup>61</sup>

At another key meeting at the White House on 9 February 1968, the Joint Chiefs were waiting in an adjoining room while the President discussed Khe Sanh matters with his civilian advisers.<sup>62</sup> The Joint Chiefs were routinely kept waiting while the President listened to his civilian advisers first. Once General Wheeler and the Joint Chiefs were called in, the President was again knee deep into the tactical details of Khe Sanh, comparing his civilian advice with that from the military. Johnson asked General Wheeler "How is the supply problem at Khe Sanh? Will artillery and rockets knock this out? Can we rely on roads?"<sup>63</sup> The President, along with Secretary McNamara, asked specific questions to General Wheeler such as what would happen if the airfield was overrun?, how would the MACV conduct and supervise an evacuation? The President wanted McNamara, Clifford, Rusk, and the JCS to consider all options and brief him later.<sup>64</sup> The President continued with detailed questions of the Defense Secretary to include why tanks weren't being used in the defense of Khe Sanh or why the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division and another Marine Division were not being staged at Okinawa for assistance if Westmoreland requested them.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the President wanted considered the possibility of extensions, call ups, and the use of specialists.<sup>66</sup> Also on February 9, Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson made a sobering statement. If the airstrip at Khe Sanh fell to the enemy, the problem of re-supply would be the deciding factor, and with that, General Johnson thought U.S. forces had a 50-50 chance of sustaining actions at Khe Sanh.<sup>67</sup> General Johnson also alluded to the difficulty of evacuating the wounded by helicopter at night for which U.S. forces were not well prepared. As the recital of enemy capabilities went on, President Johnson turned to Secretary Rusk. "Dean, should we have more than the Tonkin Gulf resolution in going into this? Should we ask for a declaration of war?" Rusk had no desire to get into that subject. But clearly, the President was getting desperate with Khe Sanh.<sup>68</sup> In probably one of the most



telling parts of this meeting on February 9 was Johnson's last statement to his staff and the JCS: "Let's hope for the best, but expect the worst."<sup>69</sup> All of these questions the President was asking were in effect strategic communications between the JCS and General Westmoreland. There certainly was confusion in the President's statement. Did he mean expect the worst at Khe Sanh, or did he mean expect additional troop requests for the fight?

On 10 February 1968, during a meeting at the senior foreign advisory council at the White House, the President was concerned again that things were not getting better at Khe Sanh and that all of his military advisers kept reassuring him that they could hold and defend Khe Sanh to which the President replied: "All I'm asking is that we make sure that everything has been done. I do not want my advisers to shift from a position of sureness to a position of uncertainty. I don't want them to ask for something, not get it, and then have all of this placed on me."<sup>70</sup>

Johnson was referring to possible troop reinforcements. There were several high level discussions in mid February 1968, on supporting Westmoreland on additional troops. In another example of failures in strategic communications, Johnson wanted to support Westmoreland on a troop request for Khe Sanh, but privately in coordination with his personal advisers, he was concerned about the negative publicity this would bring to an already unpopular war. Johnson remained firm that regardless of Westmoreland's request, he was not going to mobilize the reserves, which to this day, still remains controversial.

In one particular example, communications between General Westmoreland, the JCS, and President Johnson, on the issue of deploying additional troops to Khe Sanh, was confusing and ineffective. Westmoreland was hesitant to request additional troops because he did not view the current situation as critical. The President's advisers did. Troop levels in Vietnam were approaching 500,000 and both the Army and the JCS struggled to identify an additional 30,000 troops for deployment without mobilizing the reserves. Johnson certainly viewed the situation at Khe Sanh as critical and indicated to General Wheeler that he would support the request if Westmoreland needed them. Another failure in strategic communications occurred as Westmoreland initially indicated via telegram that he did not need them, but after conferring with Wheeler the same day, changed his request.<sup>71</sup> The two cables, which arrived at the same time, were confusing to Johnson as Westmoreland appeared indecisive.

### Miscalculated Military Strategy

Westmoreland's obsession with defeating Giap's second Dien Bien Phu at Khe Sanh forced the JCS and the White House to focus on a miscalculated main effort. General Giap insisted that Khe Sanh was never strategically important, but rather its importance was drawn



from Westmoreland's importance to stand and defend Khe Sanh.<sup>72</sup> General Giap went on to say "the Americans completely misjudged our intentions at Khe Sanh."<sup>73</sup> Clearly, the nightly news inferences and parallels of Khe Sanh to the French massacre at Dien Bien Phu were influencing President Johnson. Although General Westmoreland emphasized that the decision to remain and fight the NVA at Khe Sanh was his and his alone there are indications behind closed doors that senior policy personnel, to include the President, did not support his decision.

The siege of Khe Sanh went on for 77 days and ended on 8 April 1968. Debates go on as to General Giap's real intent when he attacked Khe Sanh. "Westmoreland believed that Giap wanted another Dien Bien Phu victory on the U.S. at Khe Sanh, although in defeat, Giap claims that Khe Sanh was just a diversion for the TET Offensive; however, postwar documents from Hanoi revealed that much more was at stake. Khe Sanh was to be a test of whether or not to proceed with Phase II of the TCK/TKN which began with the border wars in previous September. In North Vietnam's strategy, if Corps-sized attacks by the NVA across the DMZ were not enough to provoke a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam, then Phase II (TET Offensive) could be ordered without threat to North Vietnam. The attacks at Khe Sanh and along the DMZ would also open a gap in U.S. defenses, so that during Phase III NVA regulars could pour south and provide the final spark for the general uprising."<sup>74</sup> The results of the battle were mixed. The failure of the United States to respond to the attack with an invasion of North Vietnam gave the green light for the TET Offensive to go ahead, but the successful defense of the base forestalled the planned NVA cross-border invasion that was to follow.<sup>75</sup> Westmoreland was highly criticized by those in the press and in Washington. In a detailed memo from the President to General Westmoreland, the President wrote:

There is some irresponsible talk in the newspapers abroad and here today that we have lost confidence in you. I wish to tell you in the bluntest and most direct way that I can that I have never dealt with a man in whom I had more confidence. You and your Vietnamese colleagues have, in my judgment, dealt with the attack on the cites well.[. . .]<sup>76</sup>

The irony of the President's statement is just weeks later, Westmoreland was replaced in Vietnam by General Abrams, the Secretary of Defense was replaced by Clifford Clark, and President Johnson declined to run for a second term. In the aftermath of the TET Offensive, Giap finally withdrew the bulk of his forces surrounding Khe Sanh. On 15 April 1968, a relief column opened the road to Khe Sahn, where the Marines remained there for three more months, but in early June 1968, they abandoned the base. They called in bulldozers to obliterate any signs of the encampment so the North Vietnamese could not create a monument to victory at the spot.<sup>77</sup>



## Summary

So what were the strategic implications of the siege of Khe Sanh? Research on this topic indicates that the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense were not making tactical decisions for General Westmoreland at Khe Sanh as some would believe. However, an inference can be drawn to indicate that the President and General Westmoreland became so involved in the tactical fight at Khe Sanh that a successful feint was conducted by General Giap that caught the military and the White House off guard. Many historians will argue that the TET Offensive, which followed just ten days after the initial attacks at Khe Sanh, was the turning point of the Vietnam war and the careers of General Westmoreland and President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

On numerous occasions, failure to properly and accurately communicate at the highest levels of government affected military operations at Khe Sanh. In regards to military and foreign policy, General Westmoreland had to channel his communications through several layers; Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Army Chief of Staff, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and on occasion, President Johnson directly. Further complicating the issue was the direct and indirect role retired General Maxwell Taylor, Chief Military Adviser to the President, played in advising the President with military advice that at times, was not consistent with advice coming from JCS and General Westmoreland. This continued to put a strain on civil-military relations that would last until Johnson's decision on 31 March 1968, not to run for re-election. It comes to no surprise that the military brass did not always get the political support for the prosecution of the Vietnam war. There were indications that Westmoreland and the service chiefs were not getting the political support back in Washington. However, as a professional officer, Westmoreland and other senior military leaders are prohibited from speaking out. H.R. McMaster stated, "Several factors kept the Chiefs from challenging the President's subterfuges. The professional code of the military officer prohibits him or her from engaging in political activity. Actions that could have undermined the administration's credibility and derail its Vietnam policy could not have been taken lightly. The Chiefs felt loyalty to their Commander in Chief. The Truman-MacArthur controversy during the Korean War had warned the Chiefs about the dangers of overstepping the bounds of civilian control."<sup>78</sup>

One could argue that Johnson's obsession that Khe Sanh was an imminent failure and reminiscent of the Alamo and Dien Bien Phu was inaccurate. Always the prepared commander, Westmoreland directed well in advance, his own staff analysis of the French disaster at Dien Bien Phu. Although similar in many ways to Dien Bien Phu, Westmoreland concluded that U.S. forces were well protected, with overwatch positions in the adjacent hills, superior air and



artillery support, and a comprehensive and aggressive bombing plan that would seriously cripple the northern offensive. Johnson's insistence on the Joint Chiefs guaranteeing victory at Khe Sanh in writing placed undue political pressure on the military at the tactical, operational, and strategic level.

The media's constant reporting and comparison of Khe Sanh to Dien Bien Phu only exacerbated the public's protest of the war in Vietnam. Images of Marines hunkered down with C-130s flying in relief supplies under fire were displayed nightly on the evening news. For the first time in history, the media brought live coverage to America's television sets. The military lost the public relation's war at Khe Sanh. An effective and aggressive information operations and public relation's campaign could have set the conditions for public support for the eventual victory at Khe Sanh. But then again, maybe it wouldn't have.

There is no debate that NVA losses at Khe Sanh were considerable; however, debate continues today whether Khe Sanh was a stalemate or a tactical victory. There was tremendous public and administrative pressure on Westmoreland before, during, and after the siege of Khe Sanh. Whether or not General Giap's intent for Khe Sanh was a feint or not, Westmoreland clearly envisioned Khe Sanh as the main effort and applied any and all of his military assets at the defense of Khe Sanh. In doing so, he created vulnerabilities in the country's defense thus enabling the successful and undetected invasion from the west during the TET Offensive. Hanoi's intentions were misinterpreted by many, to include MACV's intelligence staff, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and most importantly, the White House.<sup>79</sup> The political, public, and military obsession with Khe Sanh's comparison to Dien Bien Phu was a distraction that played right into the hands of the enemy. He was able to capitalize on a siege in a remote section of Vietnam and exploit our weakness to win at all costs while missing the blinding obvious of TET.

In the end, Khe Sanh, TET, and the ever increasing protestation of the war in Vietnam spelled the end for President Johnson, Defense Secretary McNamara, and General Westmoreland. A sound strategy of ends, ways, and means with overwhelming public support and strategic communication's plan will ensure successful national military strategy in the future.

The siege of Khe Sanh and the precipitating TET Offensive was in the opinion of many, the turning point in America's support and involvement in Vietnam. Whether or not we were victorious at Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland's tenure as the Commander of all forces in Vietnam could very well have been decided at Khe Sanh and strategic communications at all levels was a contributing factor.



## Endnotes

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