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By John B. Henry II

In the spring of 1970 John Henry, then a junior at Harvard, began, on an "off the record" basis, interviewing the main civilian and military officials of the Johnson Administration. Mr. Henry had an undergraduate honors thesis to write. He wanted to explore in depth how U.S. policy-makers in February and March of 1968 reached a number of critical decisions, culminating in President Johnson's announcement of his political retirement. The result is a narrative reconstruction of how U.S. policy was made from the time of the Communist Tet offensive (January 30-February 4, 1968) up to the President's speech of March 31, 1968.

*FOREIGN POLICY believes that the Henry interviews add an important dimension to our knowledge of the history of the period by shedding new light on the motivations and behavior of U.S. policy-makers. Therefore, we are presenting a significant portion of the 35,000 word Henry thesis, covering military decision-making during February 1968. Persons directly quoted in this article have given the author permission for such quotation. Further parts of the Henry study are to be published in The Atlantic Monthly. -
--The Editors.*

I. The Tet Offensive

On February 3, four days after the outbreak of the Tet offensive, President Johnson told General Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), to ask General Westmoreland "if there is any reinforcement or help we can give you." In public Johnson said that the Tet offensive was a failure for the Communists; but in private he prodded the U.S. military for reassurance. Wheeler cabled the President's question to Saigon, adding a note of

special concern about the U.S. garrison besieged at Khesanh.

Since early 1966 Westmoreland's strategy had been to divide military responsibilities between American and South Vietnamese forces. U.S. forces conducted most offensive operations against the "bully boys" (the North Vietnamese and Vietcong main force units), thereby constituting a "shield" behind which the South Vietnamese could concentrate on providing area security and eradicating the "termites" (Vietcong guerrillas). When the enemy simultaneously assaulted most of the cities in South Vietnam at Tet, Westmoreland was forced to redeploy his troops in order to compensate for the failure to provide adequate protection. As a result, Westmoreland's campaign plans for 1968 were severely disrupted.

Westmoreland reported to Washington that the enemy had dealt the GVN a "severe blow" by bringing the war to the towns and cities and thus inflicting costly damage and casualties on the population. CIA reported that the enemy intended to instigate a popular uprising in South Vietnam, and that the Vietcong were spreading the rumor that the Americans supported VC efforts since the Americans wanted to stop the war through encouragement of a coalition government.

Back in Washington, news of the stunned South Vietnamese government and the enemy's costly assaults on the cities had caused serious worry. If things continued to get worse, a shaky South Vietnamese government might fall and be succeeded by coalitionists, jeopardizing American goals in Vietnam. President Johnson and his advisers also had another fear: that the enemy might concentrate on the takeover of a South Vietnamese city, run up a North Vietnamese flag and proclaim to an attentive world the first liberated zone and the true capital of South Vietnam. On February 8, in a message to Westmoreland, Wheeler expressed Washington's fear of a forced coalition government:

There is a theory, which could be logical, that over-all enemy strategy is to

attack and attrite the ARVN and thereby destroying them and ultimately gaining acceptance by the people of the coalition government which would request the withdrawal of U.S. forces in South Vietnam.¹

After five days of heavy fighting, Westmoreland had rooted out the enemy from most of the cities it had occupied. At this point, he indulged in a guarded optimism-an optimism that was to characterize all of his subsequent messages to Washington. On February 4, in a message to Wheeler, Westmoreland stated that the "enemy has failed in his objectives and has not been able to sustain his attacks. Thus, he has demonstrated the lack of a basic capability to do so." Westmoreland indicated that he considered the greatest threat existed in I Corps-the northern provinces-where he accorded the enemy the capability of a second cycle of attacks. In accordance with this estimate, he informed Wheeler on February 8 of his intention to move elements of the 101st Airborne Division from the Saigon area north to deal with the situation in I Corps.

Although Westmoreland stated his estimate with much conviction, Washington continued to treat the uncertainty of the battlefield situation with great unease. One startling event had just occurred and it was felt

¹ *Official cables between Washington and Saigon, Quoted here and throughout the Henry study, serve-when read in conjunction with the author's interviews with officials-to illuminate two central themes: (1) In recommending 206,000 fresh troops after the Tet offensive, U.S. military leaders were motivated primarily by a desire to pursue a more offensive strategy in Indochina and to rebuild the "strategic reserves" in the U.S., not by any need for "emergency reinforcements" in Vietnam; and (2) there were critical differences between the U.S. field commander's estimate of enemy strength in the post-Tet period and the gloomier estimates made by military and civilian leaders in Washington; these differing perceptions had an important impact on the internal negotiating process of the U.S. Government. Of 21 quotations from official cables appearing in this article, 11 overlap in whole or in part with documentary material used in *Roots of Involvement* (New York: Norton, 1971) by Marvin Kalb and Elie Abel and *Anatomy of Error* (Boston: Gambit, 1969) by Henry Brandon.*

that another should at all costs be avoided. No one had predicted that the enemy would deviate from Maoist doctrine (which focuses on struggle in the countryside) and launch an offensive on the cities. A cautious Washington officialdom questioned Westmoreland's concern for I Corps, for might not the enemy still be strong enough to move against the southern cities in a second wave?

Washington's open-mindedness to the worst possible contingencies stemmed, in large part, from its reliance on CIA reports. Disagreeing with Westmoreland, Ambassador Bunker and Deputy Ambassador Komer, the CIA believed the enemy still had the capability, and possibly the intention, of mounting further attacks on the cities. Komer recalled:

The CIA in Washington used our facts, and drew their own conclusions, gloomy ones. . . . We were saying that the bottle was half full and filling up. And the CIA estimators were saying that the bottle was half empty and emptying down.²

The confusion that derived from different official reporting merely reflected the ambiguous situation that existed in Vietnam. Yet the President and his advisers were subject to another source of unsettling information. The American press depicted the Tet offensive as a military defeat for the United States and its allies. So black were the descriptions of the battlefield that the Tet offensive generated an unprecedented public debate at and President Johnson could ill afford the risks involved in accepting Saigon's picture of events. Domestic politics required that he not rule out the possibility of a repetition of what had just occurred. Consequently on February 8, acting under Presidential guidance, Wheeler again asked Westmoreland if he needed reinforcements; if so, he should not hesitate to ask for them, and forget previous troop ceilings, because "the United States government is not prepared to accept defeat in Vietnam." Wheeler's explicit reference to "defeat" reflected the private

² *Interview with Robert Komer, December 24, 1970.*

fears of the White House that the enemy might overrun Khesanh or seize other pieces of real estate in South Vietnam.

In response to Wheeler's query, Westmoreland re-emphasized his concern about the northern provinces and stated that it was "only prudent to plan for the worst contingency, in which I will definitely need reinforcements." He defended his redeployment of forces to I Corps and acknowledged the new troop dispositions represented a thinning out of forces in the southern provinces. Because he believed the Tet offensive to be a one-shot effort Westmoreland did not give much credence to Washington's fear of another series of attacks on the cities. The enemy had suffered, in one week, the heaviest casualties in Vietnamese history (the estimates ran above 30,000 killed); U.S. forces were able to capitalize on the opportunity provided by the enemy "surfacing" from his sanctuaries and jungle hideouts. Westmoreland felt a follow-on attack was possible, but would lack the advantage of surprise and could not equal the intensity of the first.³

In stating his plans for the reinforcements, Westmoreland displayed an assurance which Washington lacked. On February 9, he cabled Wheeler: "In summary, I would prefer a bird in the hand than two in the bush. But I would like the birds to be deployed to the I Corps area and not the II and III Corps." Wheeler replied: "Please understand that I am not trying to sell you on the deployment of additional forces... However, my sensing is that the critical phase of the war is upon us, and I do not believe that you should refrain from asking what you believe is required under the circumstances."

Westmoreland's request for limited reinforcements of about 10,500 troops was approved by the President on February 12. But apprehension about military defeat was still evident at the White House meeting the day the decision was reached. The President's advisers interpreted Westmoreland's request to mean: "you could use additional U.S. units, but you are

³ *Interview with General W. C. Westmoreland. August 20, 1970.*

not expressing a firm demand for them. In sum, you do not fear defeat..." Westmoreland shot back a message stating flatly: "I am expressing a firm request for additional troops, not because I fear defeat if I am not reinforced, but because I do not feel that I can fully grasp the initiative from the recently reinforced enemy without it." This pattern of misunderstanding---a gap between Saigon optimism and Washington pessimism---persisted throughout February and into March.

II. The Strategic Reserves

For three years, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had been recommending a mobilization of reserves, but were continually rebuffed by President Johnson and his civilian advisers (though McNamara in July of 1965, initially supported the *JCS* recommendation). The *JCS* were never entirely comfortable with the doctrine of "graduated response," which their civilian masters used as a justification for not calling up the reserves. By relying primarily on the draft, an incremental process of escalation in Vietnam was required.

One result of this policy was that Westmoreland seldom received the troops he requested when he wanted them, in addition to never receiving the total numbers required to support the strategy he and the *JCS* recommended. But he had gone along with the policy of gradual escalation and no reserve call-ups. "I stayed within the ballpark," he said, "but I played it right up to the fence."⁴

The *JCS* had attempted a half dozen times to persuade President Johnson and Secretary McNamara to mobilize reservists and thus replenish the strategic reserves. Each time the budget was discussed and each time additional troops for Vietnam were being considered they raised the issue. Now in 1968 the strategic reserves were at an all-time low.⁵

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The reserves are the active division forces in the continental U.S., Hawaii, and Okinawa In June, 1965 they consisted of 9 Army and 3 Marine divisions. By February 1968 they had shrunk to 4-2/3 Army and 1-1/3 Marine divisions (with 2 of the Army divisions earmarked for NATO) The only combat-ready and*

The management of the Vietnam war, therefore, had put the Administration and the JCS at odds. The JCS argued that the nation's security was being jeopardized by the Administration's failure to rebuild the strategic reserves, for without such reserves the United States could not respond to international emergencies. In January 1968, a number of outbreaks in the world served to reinforce the arguments of the JCS. In Korea, incidents at the 38th parallel, the Pueblo seizure, and an abortive assassination plot on the South Korean President caused serious concern. There were tensions in Berlin. Only six months after the June War in 1967, the Middle East was still worrisome. The Pathet Lao had just scored a tactical victory in Laos. As Westmoreland recalled, "The JCS feared a concerted, worldwide Communist effort."⁶

President Johnson had similar fears. As he remembered two years later, "The Communist world that's aligned against us... would create other incidents that would require a beefing up of our forces elsewhere."⁷

The President suspected a direct linkage between the Tet offensive and the other international rumbles that occurred during January. The day after the North Vietnamese-Vietcong offensive began, Walt Rostow, at the President's request, cabled Westmoreland and Bunker the following inquiry: "Do you believe there is a relationship between activities in South Vietnam and those in Korea?"

On January 25, President Johnson had mobilized 14,000 reserves to meet the Korean emergency. Kim Il Sung's threatening moves caused the South Korean regime to take a hard look at the need for withdrawal of its two and one-third divisions from Vietnam and cancellation of an additionally promised light division for Vietnam. It was with these troops that U.S. military planners expected to meet their requirements and stay within the "Program Five"

readily deployable forces consisted of the 82nd Airborne Division and the 1-1/3 Marine divisions.

⁶ Interview with General W. C. Westmoreland, August 20, 1970.

⁷ Interview with Walter Cronkite on C.B.S. Television, February 6, 1970.

ceiling of 525,000 American troops that had been approved in July 1967. An estimated 50,000 additional American forces would be needed to replace the South Korean losses. Westmoreland thus faced the possible loss of more than half of his allied troops just as Hanoi launched the largest offensive of the war. He informed Washington that the withdrawal of South Korean forces from Vietnam was "militarily unacceptable," and that if insisted upon by the South Koreans a "man for man replacement" was imperative. President Johnson in early February sent Cyrus Vance on a special mission to calm the South Korean leaders. Vance persuaded them to put off a decision on the withdrawal of forces already in Vietnam.

The Tet offensive, following on the heels of flare-ups elsewhere, provided the JCS with an immediate rationale for a reserve call-up. In that narrow sense, Tet was as much a solution as a problem for the JCS.

On February 12, when the decision was to be made on sending extra troops to Vietnam, the jcs took their stand. They recommended a 500,000 increase in over-all U.S. military strength. In addition to providing a capability for reinforcing Westmoreland, the JCS argued that this massive increase was necessary to rebuild the strategic reserves. Otherwise, the United States would be unable to respond to global contingencies.⁸ But President Johnson evaded a decision on the JCS request.

At a White House meeting on that same day (February 12) the President considered a number of ways of providing additional manpower for Vietnam: mobilizing the reserves, enlarging draft calls, lengthening the twelve month combat tour and sending Vietnam veterans back earlier for a second tour of duty. The Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, strongly opposed sending any reinforcements to Vietnam without a reserve call-up, and he considered the President's decision to send 10,500 emergency reinforcements, which were loaded with Vietnam veterans, an irresponsible decision. "There was a policy, and it was a good policy, that our men

⁸ *Interview with General Earle G. Wheeler U. S. Army February 17, 1971.*

would have only a year tour of duty in Vietnam and two years away," General Wheeler recalled. "This was a great morale factor, for each man knew that come 360 days he would be leaving that place. We hated to violate our tacit commitment to that rule. It was choosing between a rock and a hard place."⁹

The February 12 decision to send Westmoreland 10,500 reinforcements bypassed and avoided the JCS recommendation of a reserve call-up and 500,000 increase in over-all forces. Shortly thereafter, Wheeler asked the President if he could go to Vietnam to make a firsthand assessment. President Johnson agreed but asked Wheeler to delay the trip.

On February 17 the President flew to Fort Bragg, North Carolina and then to San Diego to see off the reinforcements he was sending back to Vietnam. "He felt bad about it," General Wheeler recalled. "It upset him. It was his way of saying: 'Sorry I got to do it, fellows.'"¹⁰ The next day, February 18, Wheeler was given the go-ahead on his Saigon trip, and he cabled Westmoreland that he wanted to get a comprehensive view of the military situation in light of the Tet offensive. Wheeler added that the Administration had to face up to some "hard decisions" in the near future regarding additional reinforcements, recouping the strategic reserves, and obtaining necessary congressional support. President Johnson was in a bind in February. The JCS were pressing for a reserve call-up and Westmoreland, he feared, might be in trouble. Wanting to insure that American forces were still "capable of victory," President Johnson instructed Wheeler to have Westmoreland state his additional military needs for the coming year. Wheeler was to include the Vietnam

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* The Pentagon study of the war, as Published in *The New York Times*, mistakenly reports that the President's trip to Fort Bragg and San Diego was on February 14, three days earlier than it actually occurred (see *The Pentagon Papers Bantam Books, 1971, p. 596*). The trip received front-page coverage in the *Times* on February 18, 1968. President Johnson told the departing troops "This IS a decisive time in Vietnam. . . the eyes of history . . . are on that brave band of defenders who hold the pass at Khesanh... Freedom will survive because brave men like you are going our there to preserve it. "

commander's request along with the recommendations of the JCS for additional American military needs on a world-wide basis for the rest of 1968.

The President, by his open-ended queries to Westmoreland, had put himself on the spot. As Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach observed:

If you go out to any commander, in any theatre, anywhere, at any time in history, and say: Do you need more troops? I don't know how that guy can ever say no. He can only say no if he is going to win the next day. Look at the burden you are putting on him, because the President stands in an exposed position to a commander in the field who says: I needed more troops, but I couldn't get them. A commander of troops in the theatre of war has got a lot of public attention and has a tremendous political power that no President can ignore.¹¹

III. Westmoreland's "Offensive" Strategy

After the Tet offensive, Westmoreland reached two major conclusions which further persuaded him of the need for a new strategic approach to the war. First, he concluded, the enemy's change in strategy was a "last gasp" effort. As early as February 9, he cabled Washington his impression that the Hanoi Politburo had decided that a protracted war was not in its long-range interest and was instead adopting an alternative strategy to bring the war to an early conclusion by launching a decisive campaign. Second, indications from Washington that U.S. strategy was under review encouraged Westmoreland to believe that proposals for a bolder strategy, which had been rejected in 1967, might now be considered in a new light.¹²

On February 12, with Ambassador Bunker's concurrence, Westmoreland cabled this opinion to the President:

¹¹ *Interview with Nicholas Katzenbach, July 13, 1970.*

¹² *Interview with General W.C. Westmoreland, August 20, 1970.*

This has been a limited war with limited objectives, fought with limited means and programmed for the utilization of limited resources. This is a feasible proposition on the assumption that the enemy was to fight a protracted war. We are now in a new ball game where we face a determined, highly disciplined enemy, fully mobilized to achieve a quick victory. He is in the process of throwing in all his "military chips" to "go for broke."

A situation of great opportunity as well as heightened risk was at hand, he continued, which meant "time is of the essence." Westmoreland finished by saying that a new strategy was needed: "The enemy has changed his strategy; we must change ours."

Westmoreland had never opposed the concept of a limited war, but he advocated the pursuit of "decisive military objectives" with a more "dynamic strategy." Conversely, he argued that failure to manage the war in this way would probably lead to U.S. involvement in a conflict of indefinite duration with unacceptable economic and political consequences for the American people. Westmoreland had joined the *JCS* in advocating a more ambitious bombing campaign against North Vietnam and a bolder offensive strategy on the ground in South Vietnam. Instead of "creeping escalation," he favored intensive bombing of the North that would have "shock action" on enemy will and morale, and by late 1966 he began to press for authorization to invade the enemy's sanctuaries along South Vietnam's borders. (Before that time, Westmoreland recalled: "I wasn't yet gnashing at the bit to attack the sanctuaries.")¹³

In 1967, when the North Vietnamese expanded their bases in the sanctuaries, Westmoreland asked for an "optimum force structure" of 670,000 in order to switch from the "strategic defensive" to the "strategic offensive." The "strategic offensive" that he and the *JCS* advocated included, in addition to an intensified "shock action" bombing campaign, incursions

¹³ *Ibid.*

into Laos and Cambodia. Recommending this force structure and strategy at a White House meeting in April, 1967, Westmoreland said that the war could be ended by these means in three years, while continuing on the "strategic defensive" would give the enemy a major reprieve and prolong the war for another five years.¹⁴

On the eve of the Tet offensive, Westmoreland had continued to suggest his alternative strategy. He emphasized the problem of the Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries, and informed Washington that he was seriously considering "a corps-size operation astride the most critical choke points" on the Ho Chi Minh trail for the purpose of blocking enemy movement. He also stressed the threat of enemy force dispositions to the northern provinces, and recommended an "amphibious landing feint north of the DMZ." With the outbreak of the Tet offensive, the Johnson Administration reconsidered some of Westmoreland's earlier suggestions. At the February 12 White House meeting there was considerable discussion of the "change" in the enemy's strategy and of whether the United States should change its strategy as well.

On February 23 General Wheeler arrived in Saigon. Wheeler was less confident than Westmoreland about the outcome of the recent fighting. "Westy was more positive than I was," Wheeler recalled. "The many imponderables made me think the enemy could repeat his recent offensive. The enemy was in the pipeline, and we didn't know how many were

¹⁴ *This estimate may have had special significance for President Johnson, since it was the first time Westmoreland had made a finite prediction on the duration of the war. During his first meeting with Westmoreland at the Honolulu Conference in February 1966, President Johnson had pressed for such a prediction, but the General had demurred, citing the many "imponderables" of the military-political situation in Vietnam. The Pentagon on Papers released by The New York Times allege that Westmoreland during July, 1965, told Washington that he could defeat the enemy "by the end of 1967." (The Pentagon Papers, Bantam Books, 1971, p. 464). The author of this article believes this is an erroneous conclusion, based on a misinterpretation of Westmoreland's three-phase Concept of Operations.*

coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail, because the weather was so bad."¹⁵ The same day Wheeler arrived in Saigon, Walt Rostow sent Westmoreland the following message:

There is a suggestion in intelligence that additional North Vietnamese regulars are being brought south-perhaps two additional divisions. It may well be that the enemy is about to make a virtually total effort with the capital he has at hand. He may then try to lock us into negotiation at his peak position before we can counterattack.

Though Westmoreland felt relatively sure that the imponderables of the battlefield would turn favorably, Wheeler feared a major change for the worse. As Wheeler later said: "I guess I was influenced by those newspapers I read. Those newspapers colored my thinking, they said it was the worst calamity since Bull Run."¹⁶ Furthermore, while Westmoreland's attention was directed toward Vietnam, Wheeler was concerned about the world-wide military posture of the United States. In January and early February he had argued that the Administration should approve additional forces for the strategic reserves. But President Johnson had not acted on the request and, during this time, the crises in Korea, Berlin, Laos, and the Mideast cooled off. As a consequence, in late February the JCS only had the Vietnam crisis left as a strong pretext for a reserve call-up.

At the Saigon conference, Wheeler told Westmoreland that he was competing with other theatre commanders. General Bonesteel in

¹⁵ *Interview with General Earle G. Wheeler. February 17, 1971.*

¹⁶ *Ibid. It is difficult to determine how dark Wheeler's estimate of the current fighting in Vietnam really was before he left Washington and the extent to which he changed that estimate after arriving in Saigon on February 23. He told Bob Young of ABC-TV on February 20. "The enemy effort has not been successful. He has not forced General Westmoreland to draw troops from the critical Khesanh-DMZ area. He has not succeeded in overrunning and holding a major Vietnamese city. He has not succeeded in achieving a military success which... is worth the cost to him."*

Korea, General Lemnitzer in Europe, General Conway at Strike Command in Florida, and Admiral Sharp in Hawaii were all pressing for more forces. Each of these commanders over the years had had to give up forces for the Vietnam effort. Westmoreland's request, he was told, would be reviewed in the context of the other theatre commanders' requests. Moreover, he was instructed for planning purposes to assume the worst contingencies, which could include the withdrawal of the Korean forces from Vietnam, the inability of ARVN to resume the offensive, the collapse of the Thieu-Ky regime, and the capability of the North Vietnamese to commit major additional forces in the South.¹⁷

The plan that Wheeler and Westmoreland developed added up to about 206,000 additional men. It was tailored to meet both global and Vietnam interests by providing both generals with reserves. In theory, it was divided into three "slugs": the first increment of 108,000 troops to be deployed to Vietnam by May 1, 1968, and the second and third increments of 42,000 and 55,000 to be prepared for deployment by September 1 and December 31, respectively. But Wheeler had a "clear understanding" with Westmoreland that the first increment was the only increment earmarked for Vietnam, and that the other increments were to be kept in the strategic reserves.¹⁸ The later increments could be made available for Vietnam if all the worst contingencies materialized, but even that would require separate decisions. In short, Westmoreland did not expect to receive the entire 206,000 request but only half of it if and when approved.

Westmoreland, with Wheeler's concurrence and apparent *carte blanche* from the President, designed a total strategy which he believed would materially shorten the war. Because of General Giap's change of strategy, Westmoreland felt a golden opportunity was at hand. By "taking the war to the enemy" in a relatively short period of time following Tet, Westmoreland felt he could destroy the enemy's

¹⁷ *Interview with General W. C. Westmoreland, August 20, 1970.*

¹⁸ *Interview with General Earl G. Wheeler, February 17, 1971.*

will to win and desire to prolong the war. To implement his new strategy, Westmoreland requested that the bulk of the 108,000 increment be deployed to I Corps to serve as a "springboard," once the "enemy was beaten back," for amphibious and amphibious-airmobile operations against North Vietnamese bases just north of the DMZ¹⁹ As he later described his plan: "Once I Corps was cleaned up, and the northeast monsoon had dissipated, an amphibious hook, an Inchontype operation around the DMZ and into North Vietnam could be staged." Significant elements of the extra 108,000 troops were to be used for attacks against the enemy's border sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, in addition to blocking infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh trail. But some of these ground operations were not to be conducted until the end of the southwest monsoon and the arrival of the dry season in October. The other "fist" of Westmoreland's "two-fisted strategy" was an accelerated bombing campaign in the North, to include striking more "lucrative" targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area.²⁰

Although Westmoreland was preoccupied with the various strategic options he hoped to exercise with the additional 108,000 troops, he agreed with Wheeler that acquiring the troops was the first and most pressing concern. They agreed that it was best to do one thing at a time; first talk troops, and then talk strategy. "It was in his hands," Westmoreland recalled: "He was a soldier and a diplomat. He wanted to get forces world-wide in order to restore the military posture of the U.S. He wanted-as a separate

¹⁹ *Interview with General W. C. Westmoreland August 20, 1970.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* On February 15, eight days before the Wheeler-Westmoreland strategy sessions began in Saigon, the *New York Times* reported "widespread speculation" in Washington **that** the Administration **was** also giving consideration to another strategic option-- the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam (see "Wheeler Doubts Khesanh Will Need Atom Weapons." by John W. Finney in the *New York Times*, February 15, 1968, p.1). Queried by reporters on February 14, Wheeler replied, **I do not think that nuclear weapons will be required to defend Khesanh.** "Pressed for additional comment, the General stated: "I refuse to speculate any further."

action-to get the new Vietnam strategy approved."²¹ Neither general felt there were sufficient forces in Vietnam for conducting major operations against the sanctuaries. "The problem was to give Westy the capability to do those strategic options," Wheeler recalled. "I wanted to get troops to Westy so he could exercise initiatives instead of just reacting."²²

Before the Tet offensive, Westmoreland had resigned himself to the fact that he would have to be content with the earlier ceiling of 525,000 troops - a force he believed could be sustained without a reserve call-up. He had made the good fight for his optimum force structure (670,000) the previous year-not once but two or three times-and had lost. With the coming of the Tet offensive, Westmoreland had hoped that he might receive another division sometime in 1968, which would give him the "minimum essential" force structure of approximately 565,000 he had requested the previous year. As an indication of the scope of his thinking, Westmoreland had informed Wheeler on February 8 that he was undertaking an "in-depth requirements study." His "number one priority" was the improvement of the South Vietnamese forces, whereas an additional U.S. division he listed third in priority. It was not until Wheeler's arrival in Saigon on February 23 that Westmoreland raised his sights. The Chairman of the JCS, in effect, extracted the old optimum force structure plan from the policy planning womb of Westmoreland's staff in order to give the JCS a strong argument for a reconstitution of the strategic reserves.

After being held on a tight civilian leash for three years, the JCS saw the Tet crisis as the solution to the strategic reserves crisis. Not only was there a new event, the Tet offensive, but the arrival of a new man in the Pentagon held some promise of a new strategic posture for the United States. The nemesis of the JCS, Robert McNamara, was being replaced by the super-hawk, Clark Clifford. Wheeler and Westmoreland hoped that Clifford would be a

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Interview with General Earle G. Wheeler, February 17, 1971.*

tabula rasa on which they could write their plan. As Westmoreland recalled:

Bus [General Wheeler's nickname] and I felt that now was the time to try for a change in our conduct of the war, if we ever were. As the senior military adviser to the President and the Vietnam commander, it was our duty to offer alternatives. And the new strategy and the 206,000 was the best alternative. But it was General Wheeler's responsibility to carry the ball in Washington. I realized that a reserve call-up would be a difficult pill to swallow, and the new strategy would have all sorts of ramifications in international affairs. But I was out in Vietnam, and these problems were not my responsibility, they were Washington's.²³

Although Westmoreland had agreed with Wheeler's tactic of asking for the troops before raising the matter of strategic options, he did not realize that Wheeler was going to depict the request in the context of an emergency situation. Westmoreland recalled: "I was shocked to later learn that my recommendation was portrayed as an urgent request."²⁴

IV. Wheeler's Return

On February 26, General Wheeler, in Saigon, cabled President Johnson his private report and the request for 206,000 additional forces. Wheeler's cable painted a dark picture of the battlefield situation in Vietnam. He said that the enemy's offensive was by no means over; the attacks had nearly succeeded in a dozen places and the margin of victory was very small; the enemy was probably capable of continuing the present level of attacks. If the enemy synchronized major attacks on the cities with increased pressure throughout the countryside, Wheeler said, Westmoreland's margin would be paper thin. Wheeler said that Westmoreland

²³ *Interview with General W. C. Westmoreland, August 20, 1970.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

required a theatre reserve of two divisions--the 108,000 increment.

Wheeler's cable was unsettling to Washington. His decision to send the cable served the purpose of dramatizing the troop request and fostering the impression that an emergency was at hand. It appears that Wheeler hoped to exploit the atmosphere back in Washington so that upon his return the likelihood of a reserve call-up would be enhanced.

Wheeler's failure to accentuate the positive was matched by his failure to describe the new strategy that Westmoreland had in mind when making the request. As a sophisticated officer, Wheeler argued in the manner that would be most persuasive to civilians. He knew that the Vietnam commander's reasons for desiring additional forces were unacceptable to the President. If he reiterated Saigon's favorable estimate of the situation and its detailed plans for a geographically expanded war, the 206,000 request would never get serious consideration. Rather than complicate the troop issue with the strategy issue, Wheeler decided to build the argumentation that best President Johnson of the necessity for a reserve call-up. As Wheeler later recalled his decision against promoting the new strategy: "It was, I felt, an inappropriate time to argue that far down the line. Westy couldn't do that until he got the troops, so why argue strategy then! I didn't hang my hat on that. I wanted to get the capability."²⁵ Troops, not strategy, was the "stronger talking point."

President Johnson's advisers discussed Wheeler's disturbing cable on February 27. Secretary McNamara, preparing to leave the Administration two days later, spoke out strongly against the request and referred to some of the de-escalatory proposals that he had made the previous November. On November 1, 1967 McNamara had submitted a memorandum to the President (a "Draft Presidential Memorandum") recommending a total bombing halt, a public announcement of a troop ceiling and an extensive review of U.S. military operations in South Vietnam. This review would aim at

²⁵ *Interview with General Earle G. Wheeler, February 17, 1971.*

lowering U.S. casualties, turning over greater responsibility to the Vietnamese, and reducing the level of destruction. After making these recommendations, McNamara was officially dead. His eventual move to the World Bank was announced by President Johnson at the end of November, but McNamara continued to argue for de-escalation until February 29, 1968, the day he left office. McNamara's opposition to the 206,000 request set the stage for the strategic review that President Johnson was soon to initiate.

At a White House breakfast meeting of the President and his advisers on February 28,²⁶ Wheeler, just back from Saigon, gave a lengthy briefing. "He was deadly serious," Clifford recalled. "He meant business."²⁷ Wheeler was gloomy in his analysis of immediate setbacks and potential threats, but optimistic about long-range prospects, provided an additional 206,000 forces were authorized. He stated in his report: "The current situation in Vietnam is still developing and fraught with opportunities as well as dangers."²⁸

Wheeler credited the enemy with the capability to launch another offensive on the cities and throughout the countryside as well. If the enemy synchronized his attacks, Wheeler reported, "We must be prepared to accept some reverses." Looking ahead, Wheeler continued, "we see the enemy pursuing a reinforced offensive to enlarge his control throughout the country... We expect him to maintain strong threats in the DMZ area, at Khesanh, in the highlands, and at Saigon, and to attack in force when conditions seem favorable." He emphasized that the enemy's minimum objective was to seize sufficient territory and gain control of enough of the population to force an "NLF dominated" coalition government.

²⁶ *Those present were: Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, Clark Clifford, Paul Nitze, General Maxwell Taylor, Richard Helms, and Walt Rostow.*

²⁷ *Interview with Clark Clifford, June 22, 1970.*

²⁸ *Those texts of the report included in the Pentagon study of the Vietnam War, appeared in The New York Times, July 4, 1971 p. 15, and is reprinted in The Pentagon Papers (Bantam, 1971), pp. 615-621.*

Wheeler argued that additional forces were required to achieve Macy's four objectives: to counter the enemy offensive and destroy or eject North Vietnam Army (NVA) invasion forces in the north; to restore security in the cities and towns; to restore security in heavily populated areas of the countryside; and to regain the initiative through offensive operations. However he chose not to elaborate on what Westmoreland meant by his fourth objective: to "regain the initiative through offensive operations." He stressed Westmoreland's lack of flexibility without reserves if the situation turned worse, and his inability to capitalize on opportunities without reserves if the situation turned favorably. In briefing the White House conferees, Wheeler also stressed the need for replenishing the depleted strategic reserves in the United States (which would enable him to supply Westmoreland with extra forces for Vietnam).²⁹

The gist of Wheeler's oral briefing and written report was that another large infusion of U.S. troops was necessary if the Administration was to achieve its objectives in Vietnam. His dark estimate, presented simultaneously with the request for 206,000 extra troops, fostered the impression that additional "emergency reinforcements" were required lest major military setbacks occur.³⁰ Clifford has the following stark recollection of the effect of the Wheeler briefing on the men who met at the White House February 28 to hear it:

But Wheeler's report was so somber, so discouraging, to the point where it was really shocking. And the thrust of his reaction, which he sought to impress upon us, was not only that the recent offensive was a colossal disaster

²⁹ *Interview with General Earle G. Wheeler, February 17, 1971.*

³⁰ *McNamara, a veteran of JCS arguments, estimated that a 400,000-man increase in the size of the Armed Forces would be needed in order to deploy the 206,000 troops requested. On February 27, at a farewell luncheon given by Secretary of State Rusk. McNamara had launched into a passionate speech against the new military request and the inconsistency of the Administration's stated objectives as compared to its actual military conduct of the war. The proper number of additional forces, he declared, was zero.*

for us, but that another one was on the way. It is not possible to overestimate the degree of concern and even fear that possessed the heads of our government when Wheeler returned.

He said we were in an emergency situation --- that we were in real peril. The main thrust of his briefing concerned a second wave, and the dire need for 206,000 more forces to meet that emergency. We took Bus very seriously, for it looked as though the war could get away from us if they hit us again. President Johnson was as worried as I have ever seen him.³¹

As Wheeler himself recalls the briefing he gave:

Back in Washington I emphasized how Westy's forces were very badly stretched, that he had no capability to redress threats except by moving troops around. I emphasized the threat in I Corps. More attacks on the cities were, I said, a possibility. I argued that Westy needed flexibility and capability. I talked about going on the offensive and taking offensive operations, but I didn't necessarily spell out the strategic options.^{31a}

At the February 28 breakfast meeting, President Johnson directed Clifford, as his first assignment, to chair a task force to advise him on the 206,000 request. Regarding the new Defense Secretary's instructions, President Johnson's and Clifford's accounts are at some variance. Clifford's recollection is that the President asked him "to determine how this new requirement could be met. We [the task force] were not instructed to assess the need for substantial increases in men and material; we were to devise the means by which they could be provided."³²

³¹ *Interview with Clark Clifford, June 22, 1970.*

^{31a} *Interview with General Earle G. Wheeler February 17, 1971.*

³² *Clark Clifford "A Vietnam Reappraisal." Foreign Affairs, July 1969, p. 609.*

Lyndon Johnson's account is that Clifford was instructed, not to implement the request, but to examine it along with other alternatives in an across-the-board review. For this purpose, President Johnson had the following directive drafted later on the day of February 28:

Memorandum to Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. As I indicated at breakfast this morning, I wish you to develop by Monday morning, March 4th, recommendations in response to the situation presented to us by General Wheeler and his proposal. I wish alternatives examined. In particular, I wish you to consider, among other things, the following specific issues: What military and other objectives in Vietnam are additional U.S. forces designed to advance? What specific dangers is their dispatch designed to avoid? What specific goals would the increment of force, if recommended by you (the committee), aim to achieve in the next six months or over the next year? What probable Communist reactions do you anticipate in connection with each of the alternatives you examine? What negotiating postures should we strike in general? And what modifications, if any, would you recommend with respect to the San Antonio formula? What major Congressional problems can be anticipated? And how should they be met? What problems can we anticipate in U.S. public opinion? And how should they be dealt with? You should feel free in making this report to call on the best minds in this government to work on specific aspects of the problem, but you should assure the highest possible degree of security up to the moment when the President's decision on these matters is announced.³³

³³ *Interview with Walter Cronkite on C.B.S. Television, February 6, 1970. Clifford has no recollection of ever having seen this draft directive.*

It is doubtful that President Johnson ever made a mental commitment to the entire 206,000 request. In fact, circumstantial evidence suggests that he was reluctant, prior to late February 1968, to send any additional troops to Vietnam beyond the Program Five ceiling of 525,000. In December 1967, after conducting a review of the McNamara suggestions, the President put in the files a note saying that he was against further increases in Vietnam troop strength³⁴. In early February, after the Tet offensive, he ignored the JCS recommendation for a major reserve call-up. He had sent only 10,500 reinforcements to Vietnam, and announced that they were within the existing troop ceiling. It seems, however, that Wheeler's estimate of the Vietnam situation in late February caused the President to change his mind momentarily. Fearing an emergency, Johnson may have given Clifford the impression that the 206,000 proposal had Presidential blessing.³⁵

³⁴ Interview with John Roche. March 3, 1971.

³⁵ Apparently Robert McNamara also had the impression that the Presidential assignment to Clifford was a narrow one, and that the President wanted a recommendation as to what forces could be mustered and be ready in time to meet the military's request. The importance of the formal directive may have been exaggerated in retrospect. "I never thought directives were very important." Nicholas Katzenbach recalled. "You just can't control a man like Clifford with a directive." General Wheeler and General Taylor recall that the Task Force was instructed to examine the 206,000 proposal as "contingency planning," and that other alternatives should be studied as well. According to *The Pentagon Papers* (Bantam, 1971. p. 598) at the first Task Force meeting "... Mr. Clifford said that the real problem was 'not whether we should send 200,000 additional troops to Vietnam, but whether if 'we follow the present course in SVN could it ever prove successful even if **vastly** more than **200,000** troops were sent?' MY. Clifford stipulated that the various papers he assigned on United States strategy should consider four options, ranging from granting General Westmoreland's full request to sending him no additional troops." Thus the documentary record seems to support President Johnson, while some of the oral reminiscences support Clifford. The formal memorandum, however, seems to have been less important than the oral discussion among the President Clifford and others at the February 28 breakfast meeting in communicating to those present the purpose of the **Task Force**.

On February 29 Wheeler, at the President's request, cabled Westmoreland and asked him a number of questions (many lifted from the draft Presidential directive of the previous day) pertaining directly to the 206,000 proposal: "What military and other objectives are additional forces designed to advance? What specific dangers are their dispatch to South Vietnam designed to avoid, and what specific goals would the increment of force, if recommended by you (the committee) [s.i.c.] aim to achieve!" As an indication of the Administration's defensive thinking, Wheeler also asked Westmoreland: "What alternative military strategies could you adopt with Program Five forces, plus the six battalions recently deployed, which would defend adequately the essential areas and population of South Vietnam?"

V. Nitze, Warnke and Clifford

At the end of February, the stage was set for the Pentagon's civilian leadership and the JCS to battle out their differences in an unprecedented way. The JCS at last had the opportunity they had long awaited: McNamara was being replaced by a reputedly pro-military man, Clifford. The Pentagon's civilian officials had also prepared their case---a case opposing the Administration's military strategy in Vietnam. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Warnke were the key civilian officials who gained Clifford's ear.

A veteran Cold Warrior, Paul Nitze felt the Administration's Vietnam policy had gone to extremes. He thought that the war was best fought on a reduced-cost basis; both a policy of military victory and a policy of disengagement favored the Communist world because of the interrelationship between U.S. Vietnam objectives and strategy and U.S. global policy. Disengagement would lead to a North Vietnamese victory which was unacceptable to Nitze because it would mean a change in the correlation of forces between the Communist world and the free world. Nitze favored a policy

that, while solving the essential problem of security in South Vietnam, would also lower the U.S. profile and free needed resources for deterrence against Soviet initiatives elsewhere in the world.³⁶

Nitze thought that U.S. objectives in Vietnam should be seen in a broad context of world-wide commitments. Though it was important to prevent South Vietnam from going Communist, the U.S. should not lose its sense of proportion and pay too heavy a price for any single foreign policy objective. "Vietnam was not worth 100 points," Nitze said, "but it was worth more than zero points."³⁷ Nitze felt the bombing campaign against the North entailed greater costs than benefits. On March 1, he gave Clifford a detailed memorandum arguing for a reappraisal of the Administration's Vietnam strategy in light of other national security interests. Nitze favored a total stoppage of the bombing of the North, and recommended that Westmoreland be given up to, but not more than, 50,000 men before June. He recalled:

Tet was a disaster for both sides. So I thought the critical question was who could pick themselves up the fastest. Time was of the essence. From Tet to June 30 was the critical period. If the South Vietnamese didn't pick themselves up fast, then we would be forced to the alternative of disengagement. The range of uncertainty was very great. I thought things could be as bad as Wheeler said, but not necessarily so. I wanted to send those additional troops to deal with uncertainty. I wanted to get them out there before June 30 so they could make a difference; after that it might not matter.³⁸

Paul Warnke, head of the Pentagon's "little State Department"---the Office of International Security Affairs (ISA), also opposed the Administration's Vietnam strategy, but for different reasons than Nitze. Warnke's dissent stemmed from the belief that U.S.

³⁶ *Interview with Paul Nitze, February 5, 1971*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

national security interests were not involved in Vietnam. "What happens in Southeast Asia is of only marginal importance to the Soviet Union," Warnke said. "Whether Hanoi wins or Saigon manages to hold on indefinitely is not going to have the least impact on Russians in Egypt or Egyptians in Russia or pressure on Berlin or anything else." The Administration's policy, therefore, was based on the "misconception that Southeast Asia was an arena of superpower confrontation."³⁹

In the fall of 1967 McNamara had asked Warnke to study where the U.S. would be militarily in one year. "My general conclusion was that a year later we would be exactly where we were then, except that another *10,000* Americans would have been killed," Warnke recalled. "I turned out to be wrong. There were another 14,000 Americans killed."⁴⁰ He had reported that the indices that attempted to measure progress were illusory because they were not measuring anything. "You were taking your own temperature and using that to diagnose the existence of plague," he said." Warnke felt that American involvement in Vietnam was a military occupation which could be successful only as long as it was maintained. He recalled:

There is no question of the fact that we can keep on winning the war forever. We always win and we always will, and it won't ever make any difference. Our wins won't make a dent because there is no way in which we can bring about political progress in South Vietnam... The more of an American military occupation you engage in the longer you're going to stay. What Tet exposed was the fact that what we had thought was political progress was just so thin as to be illusory.⁴²

Warnke thought that bombing North Vietnam was "so infinitely more costly to us than it was to the North Vietnamese that it was irrational."⁴³ The cost of the American planes lost was greater

³⁹ *Interview with Paul Warnke, August 12, 1970.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

than the cost of the facilities destroyed. The bombing campaign was also costly, Warnke said, in terms of world opinion:

Events have shown that the world supports with less rebellion and less recrimination our continued military effort as long as we are not bombing the North. So if you were serious about trying to conduct the war over a long period of time, bombing the North was self-defeating.⁴⁴

With the arrival of the JCS troop request in late February, Warnke had directed his ISA staff to compile a comprehensive notebook which would constitute an exhaustive and critical review of the Administration's entire approach to the war. For practical reasons, the *ISA* notebook did not attack existing policies head-on; instead, it concentrated on presenting alternative strategies. It called for a publicly announced troop ceiling and the beginning of a crash program to increase the size, strength and quality of the South Vietnamese forces. Instead of conducting offensive search-and-destroy operations and maintaining the northern outposts, it argued that American forces should be pulled back and used as a mobile shield around the population centers. This so-called "demographic frontier" strategy was designed to achieve enough staying power for entering into negotiations for mutual U.S.-North Vietnamese withdrawals from South Vietnam.⁴⁵ On March 1 the ISA staff drafted an additional paper for the notebook which called for a full cessation of the bombing on the grounds that the San Antonio formula⁴⁶ had been "satisfied." However,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ironically this new strategy was similar to one rejected by Warnke's predecessor John McNaughton, two and a half years previously. In a memorandum for a special JCS study group dated July 2, 1965. McNaughton wrote: "I presume that we would rule out the ceding to the VC (either tacitly or explicitly) of large areas of the country. More specifically the Brigadier Thompson suggestion that we withdraw to enclaves and sit it out for a couple of years is not what we have in mind."*

⁴⁶ *In a speech at San Antonio, Texas on September 30, 1967 President Johnson offered to halt the bombing of North Vietnam provided that would lead promptly to*

William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, substituted a paper of his own in place of the ISA draft. Bundy's paper recommended a continuation of the bombing.

In essence, the ISA notebook argued that the JCS troop request would not do what the JCS claimed it would do—that additional forces would not make any real difference because Vietnam was a bottomless pit. Rather than increase American involvement without decisive results, ISA argued, the Administration's objective of a non-Communist South Vietnam was best achieved by a reduced-cost strategy. The notebook reflected Warnke's view that a policy of turning over the war to the South Vietnamese was the most feasible way of moving toward complete U.S. withdrawal.

The new Secretary of Defense whose ear Nitze and Warnke sought had based his professional life on personal relationships with Presidents. Clark Clifford, as President Truman's Special Counsel, had drafted in September, 1946 an influential 70-page memorandum which argued for U.S. military containment of the Soviet Union. He left the White House in 1950 to establish one of the most prestigious law firms in America, and was (and still is) reputed to be the highest paid lawyer in the country. For President Kennedy in 1960, he coordinated the transition from the Eisenhower Administration, and believed, at that time, that the United States had a vital interest in preventing the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia.

As a backstair adviser to President Johnson and chairman of his Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Clifford had consistently expressed some of the most hawkish views in Washington. Along with Abe Fortas, he had been an informal ally of the jcs over the years of escalation in Vietnam. Clifford had adamantly opposed the 37-day bombing halt over the Christmas 1965-New Year's 1966 holiday season.⁴⁷ And it was Clifford whose advice was

productive peace talks and "assuming" that Hanoi would not take military advantage of the halt.

⁴⁷ *As McGeorge Bundy Recalled: "Johnson never tires of heckling the people that recommended that. Having been one. I've had my share. He would often say something like: 'Ole Bundy got over in the corner with the Soviet Ambassador, and those fellows from*

decisive in persuading the President to resume the bombing at that time. McNamara, who had recommended the bombing pause, had browbeat the JCS into accepting a continuation of the pause into February, 1966. But President Johnson decided against the extension and later said on more than one occasion that it was Clifford and Fortas who saved him from that act of folly. At the Manila Conference in October 1966, Clifford was listed on the delegation only after the President and the Secretary of State another indication of his independent stature and President Johnson's high regard for him.

In November 1967, after President Johnson circulated copies of McNamara's swan song memorandum among a dozen advisers both in and outside the government, it was Clifford who responded with some of the most hardline advice. Clifford drew an analogy to the French experience in Indochina following Dienbienphu-Hanoi was waiting for the American will to weaken. Clifford's view was that the war had to be concluded quickly, the quicker the better, and intensified bombing was the alternative that provided the fastest means. That same November, Clifford, as a member of the Senior Advisory Group on Vietnam, had reassured the President that his war policy was on a successful course. Recalling the consensus of that Group, Clifford said that except for a lone dissenter, George Ball, "we told the President that he was headed toward the North Star."⁴⁸

As Clifford prepared to take office on March 1, he was still widely regarded as the President's hand-picked "War Minister," someone who strongly believed in the importance of a firm U.S. stand in Vietnam and consistently backed President Johnson's war policies. "I was a child of the Cold War," Clifford recalls, looking back. "I believed that hostilities in Berlin and in Vietnam directly threatened our national security. I accepted all that. I had been raised on it."⁴⁹

Harvard will take anything from any diplomat if he comes with a little vodka. " (Interview with McGeorge Bundy, July 13, 1970).

⁴⁸ Interview with Clark Clifford, August 8, 1970.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

VI. Conclusion: *The Uses of Adversity*

The Tet offensive and its disrupting aftermath were used by the JCS and General Westmoreland to force President Johnson's hand by pressing for a decision on two different things that the 206,000 troop request only imperfectly symbolized: (1) for the JCS, a reserve call-up and over-all increase in U.S. military strength of approximately 500,000 men, which would rebuild the strategic reserves to their pre-July 1965 levels, and (2) for *the Vietnam field commander*, a new, more offensive strategy, including heavier bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, an amphibious landing in the North Vietnamese panhandle, and ground attacks across the Cambodian and Laotian borders, which would clean out enemy bases and cut the Ho Chi Minh trail. The JCS chose not to accept the field commander's optimistic picture of the Vietnam battlefield in the wake of Tet, but instead described the situation in very dark terms. They also failed to communicate to the President and his civilian advisers the full extent of Westmoreland's plans for a more offensive ground strategy in Indochina. This helped foster the false impression that the 206,000 more troops were needed to meet an emergency. Thus February, 1968 was an anxious and uncertain time for U.S. policy-makers. Throughout most of the trying month, it was immediate military considerations-fear of a debacle and of further enemy "surprises"- that took first priority in that mysterious inner odds-making process by which Southeast Asia policy decisions were reached in the Johnson Administration.