IP!Se to the NEWS

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WESTMORELAND ASSESSMENT

Now that the anguish and bitterness associated with the Vietnam War have dimmed, it is time to start assessing our mistakes and redesigning our defenses against any recurrence.

That's the opinion of General William C. Westmoreland who was Field Commander in Vietnam, 1965-68, and Army Chief of Staff, 1968-72. It isn't a pleasant task, but it is certainly useful and probably essential.

How did America get itself locked in a death embrace with South Vietnam that cost us 10 years, 55,000 lives, and at least $140 billion? It had its origin in the boast of young President John F. Kennedy, who was long on eloquent words but short on facing up to reality.

President Kennedy pledged to the world that Americans would "bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, and oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty." In fulfillment of that promise, he sent advisers, Green Berets, and helicopters to Vietnam; but he also approved our involvement in the overthrow of President Diem., who was winning the war without U.S. ground troops.

President Lyndon Johnson inherited the problem and the obligation. Unfortunately he decided that the war would be run, not by military men, but by civilians whose decisions shifted with the ebb and flow of domestic political pressures. LBJ is reported to have once boasted, "My boys can't even bomb an outhouse without my approva1." "

A career military officer, General Westmoreland is restrained in his criticism of the way civilian bosses tied the hands of the military men from winning the war. He contents himself with reminding us that we should have used.timely

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and appropriate force to bring the war to an end."

In a recent speech, General Westmoreland showed that he has obviously done a lot of thinking about what went wrong in Vietnam. His conclusions are not definitive, but they are a good springboard to the postmortems that the American people should make.

The General calls for a nonpartisan review of our foreign policy every two years. That's an excellent idea. Most of those in the past who called for a nonpartisan or bipartisan foreign policy really meant, "Foreign policy should be immune from any criticism on either side of the aisle." General Westmoreland is asking for criticism from both sides of the aisle in order to keep foreign policy attuned to our national interest and cleansed of special-interest political pressures.

A major lesson we learned in the 1960s, according to General Westmoreland, was the mistake of deferring college students. That policy was discriminatory and undemocratic. It contributed to the guilt complex that fomented anti-war activism and filled the faculties with those who avoided the draft. The burden and hardship of war should not be borne by the poor man's son only.

The deferral of college students also hampered the war effort by forcing the Army to lower its standards for officers. Some marginal types were commissioned. General Westmoreland pointed out that this was "the tragedy of Lieutenant Calley"; he obviously was not of officer caliber.

After college deferments ran out, the Army inducted thousands with graduate and postgraduate degrees. New problems were caused because many privates had a better education than their sergeants and lieutenants.

Maybe General Westmoreland, being so close to the Vietnam War, is not the one to give the final assessment on what went wrong in Vietnam. But his conclusions are a good place to start. It is not in the national interest to sweep the Vietnam mess under the rug and just forget it.

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