

# H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 928

18 February 2020

**Gregory Daddis. "Planning for a War in Paradise: The 1966 Honolulu Conference and the Shape of the Vietnam War."** *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21:3 (2019): 152-184. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws\\_a\\_00897](https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00897).

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR928>

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY DAVID L. ANDERSON, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, MONTEREY BAY,  
EMERITUS

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Claiming that many historians of the American war in Vietnam have overlooked, discounted, or misunderstood President Lyndon Johnson's two days of closed meetings with General William Westmoreland in Honolulu in February 1966, Gregory Daddis's careful examination of the conference significantly enhances our understanding of United States (U.S.) strategy in Vietnam from that time through the Tet Offensive in 1968. Those present at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel on Waikiki Beach also included Chairman of the National Leadership Committee Nguyen Van Thieu and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and the highest-level American policy officials from Washington and Saigon. This article is a continuation of Daddis's important series of persuasive works that rehabilitate Westmoreland's reputation.<sup>1</sup> He is not seeking to vindicate Westmoreland but rather to correct an oversimplified narrative that is popular in many accounts that argue that Westmoreland developed and followed a flawed and ultimately failed strategy in the war. Daddis finds that U.S. strategy was mistaken and unsuccessful, but he ends his assessment with the prudent observation that drawing accurate lessons or at least accurately identifying historical precedents helps avoid strategic mistakes going forward. Many narratives of the war recall the Honolulu Conference as publicly declaring a pacification strategy—winning political support in the villages for the government in Saigon—while privately placing primary emphasis on an attrition strategy—militarily destroying Vietnamese Communist forces. This version, according to Daddis, fails to correctly portray Westmoreland's own comprehensive plans and how they became frustrated. This erroneous historical narrative also has placed too much attention on American-centered arguments, he argues, when a better focus is on the failure of the American-backed Saigon regime to "harness" the revolution in South Vietnam (183).

Accounts critical of Westmoreland doubt his and Washington's commitment to pacification because that tactic was often under-resourced compared to combat operations. Daddis has a hurdle to surmount against the reasonable contention that the pacification rhetoric of Honolulu was window dressing with little substance, and he more than meets the challenge. Readers have come to expect from him a wealth of detailed evidence in his work since he is one of the most thorough researchers who are mining the daunting amount of documentation now available on the war. This article cites a large quantity of materials from key primary and secondary sources, and he makes especially good use of reports from international news correspondents, who recorded the reality on the ground. These press accounts are a treasure trove for historians because the war was so widely and extensively reported by talented journalists.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). For one of the most strident accounts castigating Westmoreland, see Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

With the Senate Foreign Relations Committee conducting televised hearings that were giving a forum to serious critics of Johnson's policies, such as Lieutenant General James Gavin and Ambassador George Kennan, there is no question that the president hastily convened the Honolulu Conference as a public relations (PR) diversion. Daddis refers to historian George Herring's claims that pacification was "given short shrift" at Honolulu, that the meetings were primarily a PR gimmick, and that the behind-the-scenes reality was to make attrition the primary military objective (155). Authors, such as Phillip Davidson, who offer a might-have-been scenario that attrition was misguided, largely dismiss Honolulu. Davidson asserts that Ky and Thieu presented "paper plans" for reform that they were not going to carry out and that Westmoreland "smugly" contended later that the publicly released Honolulu Memorandum outlined goals he was already pursuing.<sup>2</sup> In partial rebuttal, Daddis cites John Prados's reflection that Ky's comments at Honolulu about social reform may have actually helped convert Johnson to pacification (156).

Davidson attributes the much-maligned and destructive attrition strategy to the Honolulu Memorandum that Westmoreland proceeded to implement through a tactic the general labeled as "search and destroy."<sup>3</sup> Highly praised when it was published 30 years ago, Davidson's account has endured, especially among historians and strategists who persist in the belief that a winning road was available in Vietnam. Davidson's book was listed as recently as 2018 on Amazon's list of Best History Books. His analysis of the Honolulu Conference is suspect, however. He claims, for example, that the *Pentagon Papers* "does not mention it," when the second volume of the Gravel edition of the papers actually includes an extended section on the conference.<sup>4</sup> It is curious that Davidson overlooks the account in these often-cited papers because the authors of the *Pentagon Papers* also dismiss the influence of the conference. They write that the inner workings of the conference (as opposed to the flowery public rhetoric about social reform and economic development) did "not seem to have had much importance on the development of the pacification effort."<sup>5</sup> Daddis quotes Davidson that the Honolulu memo was "momentous" as guidance to Westmoreland (155). Davidson expresses surprise that Westmoreland did not later use the memo as a defense against charges that attrition was his idea. Daddis notes, however, that the Honolulu Declaration's lofty rhetoric about the economy and social justice was arrogant and overly optimistic. Westmoreland may have later preferred to let it be forgotten.

Daddis maintains that Johnson was serious about development but that capable administrators were in short supply in Saigon and the population of South Vietnam distrusted its government. The Johnson administration advocated New Deal style modernization, through which targeted government programs and funding could modernize underdeveloped countries. The prime example of this faith is the president's Johns Hopkins speech in April 1965 proposing the Tennessee Valley Authority as a model for economic improvement of the Mekong River region. Johnson took Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman and Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare John Gardner on the trip to Honolulu. These reformers barely questioned modernization theory, but South Vietnam in the 1960s was not the poverty-plagued Appalachia of the 1930s. The challenge for the RVN was how to modernize during a violent war. American advisers debated the merits of central planning or local control, but only the people of South Vietnam could work out the balance between modern

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<sup>2</sup> Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 400.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson, 401-403. Many survey histories of the Vietnam War assert that, under Westmoreland, the strategy was attrition, the tactic was search and destroy, and the measurement of progress was body count. See, for example, George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 179, 183, 186-188; Christopher G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 153; John Prados, "American Strategy in the Vietnam War," in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 248-251.

<sup>4</sup> Davidson, 400.

<sup>5</sup> *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 2:553.

planning and traditional village life. Meanwhile, Westmoreland and his military and civilian counterinsurgency (COIN) team recognized that security must precede reform, that is, that pacification was a sequential process.

In 1965 and prior to the conference, General Westmoreland had developed a sequential operational plan for the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to enable pacification by protecting against both large, well-equipped military forces of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the guerrilla and terrorist threats posed by the Viet Cong (VC). This plan fit existing COIN theory advanced by David Galula and others envisioning a step-by-step approach. The army's own COIN handbook issued in 1965 advised "clear and hold" to secure an environment in which government control could then be established at the village level (162).

Although serious about pacification, Johnson had little understanding of the revolutionary struggle in South Vietnam. He thought Thieu and Ky could somehow bargain with the VC. The Vietnam War was either/or in the eyes of Hanoi—either it prevailed or it died—which meant that compromise was not necessarily impossible, but was unlikely. Sensing the Communists' determination and what seemed to be White House naivete, media opinion in general viewed the pacification talk at Honolulu as mostly intended to counter domestic American critics of the war. Daddis acknowledges that Johnson dramatically told Westmoreland in Honolulu to "nail the coonskin to the wall" (166). He contends that the "coonskin" statement reflected Johnson's desire to somehow show the public progress in the war, but Daddis thinks that the "other war" discussions behind the scenes were genuine (166).

Westmoreland, the president, and other officials at the meeting developed a comprehensive plan. The Honolulu Memorandum had six points. The first three were quantitative measures to track success, which revealed the systems management approach of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara but were of dubious reliability from the outset, as Daddis has argued elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The last three were political and military goals, including attrition of enemy forces.<sup>7</sup> Westmoreland's 1965 operational plan was already political and military, and he now had permission to proceed.

Westmoreland warned the president that the plan would be difficult to implement. South Vietnam needed an improved logistical system; it had to reorient its forces to rural reconstruction; and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) leadership was young and mediocre. The commander's candor led Johnson to say he did not want a General Douglas MacArthur, meaning he wanted no public space between himself and his general. Westmoreland interpreted this remark to be encouragement, not admonition, but the exchange revealed the anxiety and uncertainty about the plan. It called for both defeating the NVA and VC militarily and strengthening government control. Although critics attacked Westmoreland's search-and-destroy terminology, Daddis thinks that those criticisms overlooked that the enemy, led by the ruthless head of the Politburo, Le Duan, was committed to violent armed struggle. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) had an aggressive military strategy to "annihilate" the "puppet" ARVN with large-scale regimental attacks (169). Westmoreland understood that political tactics to win hearts and minds were not enough. In the political realm, U.S. leaders made some faulty assumptions about what the RVN could accomplish. Westmoreland later regretted use of the expression "search and destroy," but it was accurate.

Johnson timed the Honolulu conference to counter the Senate hearings, somewhat as he used a summit meeting of Asia-Pacific nations in Manila in October 1966 to show allied support to counter his antiwar critics. Daddis insists, however, that "Scholars should take Johnson at his word when he said the allies were trying to defeat not only aggression but also 'social misery'" (173). Hawaii revealed a naïve vision, and Westmoreland would have to deal with reality on the ground (similar to General Creighton Abrams in 1969 trying to fashion a way to make President Richard Nixon's Vietnamization vision a

<sup>6</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Although Davidson places attrition at the top of the list of goals for 1966, the memorandum itself made the objective to "attrit" [sic] enemy forces the last item. See U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, vol. 4, *Vietnam, 1966* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1998), 217-218.

reality).<sup>8</sup> In defense of Westmoreland, Daddis asserts that the general “appreciated much more than battlefield tactics and troop deployment schedules” (174). The plan for 1966 that he had developed in December 1965 anticipated the Honolulu memo. He planned to clear, secure, and assist near Saigon, and to search and destroy in outlying areas. It was a twofold plan against aggression and in support of development. Pacification did not materialize, however, because of unyielding enemy military pressure, domestic protests within the RVN, and debilitating corruption that left the political foundation of the RVN shaky. The DRV maintained an iron discipline that prevented internal challenges to its prosecution of the war. Ironically—since antiwar protesters in America decried the lack of democracy in the RVN—democracy in the South, as fragile and limited as it was, made the South politically weak compared to the authoritarianism of the North. Throughout the war, pacification suffered from a host of ‘if only’ limits: if only there were good district chiefs, if only there was effective political organization in Saigon, if only Saigon could gain control of the countryside, and more (179).

The rural areas of South Vietnam posed specific obstacles. American officials were continually frustrated by the inability of Saigon’s regional and popular forces to secure rural areas. These para-military troops were never given adequate training and equipment to be effective. MACV struggled to come up with what ‘secure’ meant, much less how to measure it. In rural areas, Westmoreland had to give priority to the military use of roads and transport for U.S. and ARVN regiments, which worked against meeting the transportation needs of rural pacification programs to build the economy and to fight social misery. U.S. forces were battling 250,000 enemy forces, and the scale of fighting created terrible damage to farmers’ homes and livelihood and horrific casualties for civilians.

Meanwhile, this level of destruction was not accomplishing attrition or destruction of the enemy main forces and VC infrastructure. Daddis provides one woman’s graphic description of a U.S. attack on a suspected VC village: “a raging elephant stomping on red ants too far down in their holes to feel the blows” (180). The VC endured, NVA infiltration continued, and the Honolulu goals faded into stalemate.

Revolutionary Development, as pacification was called, could not be accomplished as long as the enemy main force units had access to population centers and could destroy rebuilding efforts. Meanwhile, the American public increasingly questioned the stalemated war. Honolulu’s formula of aggressive military action and support for civic action were overly ambitious and impractical. The United States could not harness the social revolution in the South. The Hawaii conference was a turning point at which Johnson committed to the war, but it was an exercise in unrealistic expectations and ‘blind faith’ that U.S. power could shape South Vietnamese reality. Power is not always influence. Assigning U.S. armed forces the mission of exporting democracy is daunting and limited, Daddis concludes, and becomes either “counterproductive futility . . . or arrogant ineptitude” (184).

Westmoreland’s critics allege that potentially successful approaches were ignored or not tried. Daddis counters in this significant and impressive article, as he has elsewhere, that such arguments fail to appreciate the organic weakness of America’s South Vietnamese ally and the political benefits that North Vietnam could leverage in the wake of its victory over the French colonial masters. There is an irony in this final point. The RVN was not democratic, but it was pluralistic in ways that the DRV was not. This proto-democracy that American-designed reforms sought to nurture actually handicapped Saigon in fighting the single-minded authoritarianism and ideology of the North. Saigon could not shake the puppet label that its enemies gave it and could not fashion the unity and discipline it needed to counter the onslaught of a ruthless police state.

**David L. Anderson** is professor of history emeritus at California State University, Monterey Bay, and former senior lecturer of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. He is author or editor of numerous publications on the

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<sup>8</sup> Daddis, *Withdrawal*. 133-134; David L. Anderson, *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 31-44.

Vietnam War, including *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (Columbia University Press, 2011) and most recently *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020). He is a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and a U.S. Army veteran of the Vietnam War.