

# The Fire Sale of the Post Offices

In an earlier time, U.S. post offices were more than just places to mail letters. They were noble structures, symbols of democracy, stone-and-mortar testimony to the value of community. But many are now neglected and up for sale, laments Gray Brechin.

By Gray Brechin

Who owns America's post offices and their continent-spanning gallery of public art? The "as is" sale of the Bronx's decaying central post office, and of so many other post offices recently sold or for sale, begs the question of Americans for whom those buildings were intended and for which they paid.

The once-noble lobby of the Bronx post office has filled with the cheesy clutter that choked New York City's original Penn Station before wrecking balls leveled that elegant Victorian-era structure in the 1960s. At the Bronx post office, garish signs and obstructive furniture mute the dialogue between marble-framed murals by artists Ben Shahn and his wife Bernarda Bryson, while neglect and a botched restoration renders some of their images virtually illegible.

Chartered to "bind the nation together" by providing secure, efficient and reasonably priced service to all, the U.S. Postal Service is arguably the most democratic of all government services. Shahn and Bryson fittingly painted Walt Whitman at one end of the lobby over a service window. Pointing to the last stanza of his poem "As I Walk These Broad, Majestic Days," the good gray poet reminds an attentive audience that "Democracy rests finally upon us."

The Bronx palace was one of over 1,100 post offices erected and embellished during Franklin Roosevelt's epic public works campaign that did much to extricate the nation from the Great Depression.

An avid stamp collector, Roosevelt took a keen interest in the postal service. He actively participated in the design of six post offices near his Hyde Park home in the Hudson Valley and he well understood that such buildings fulfill many functions beyond the commercial. They are at once centers of community and symbolic of government's integrity, and he believed they should look it.

Excellent materials, construction, and design typify New Deal post offices, many of which were embellished with murals and sculptures specific to their locations and function.

At the National Gallery of Art's dedication in 1941, FDR told his audience that New Deal art, unlike Old Masters, was not ancient, foreign, and sequestered but

“painted by [Americans] in their own country, and painted about things that they know and look at often and have touched and loved.” Public art, he concluded, was of “the present life of all the living and creating peoples all who make and build.”

Heroic images of those builders now struggle for visibility through dingy shellac and past the muddle in the Bronx lobby. Shahn and Bryson’s murals rank among the most important examples of post office art now imperiled by a nationwide fire sale of public assets. Few Americans are aware of what they are losing, and why.

Current USPS management insists that the shift to email has so curtailed its revenues that it must sell the properties it holds, but its fiscal crisis smells strongly of the “shock doctrine” of calculated austerity that has devastated so much of the world and is now coming home to America.

Having survived the telegraph, telephone, and faxes, the postal service could easily ride out the Internet’s inroads were it not hobbled by the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act.

Hastily passed by a lame-duck Republican Congress in 2006, the PAEA hamstring the USPS by requiring it to pre-fund employee health benefits for 75 years into the future within just a decade while at the same time barring it from offering “non-postal” services that could compete with the private sector. The \$5.5 billion drag the PAEA annually imposes on the USPS accounts for most of its well-publicized deficit.

The PAEA is at once accomplishing a long-stated aim of conservative think tanks and the Republican Party to privatize the 239-year old service while throwing a windfall of public property onto the market from which Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, is profiting. Those properties include hundreds of architecturally distinguished buildings, many containing unique works of art. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has named America’s pre-war post offices among its most endangered treasures.

Nowhere have citizens and their representatives resisted more vociferously than in the Bronx and in Berkeley, California, whose century-old downtown post office is also on the block.

Asserting that the USPS has largely ignored environmental and preservation law, the Berkeley-based National Post Office Collaborate blocked the sale of the Stamford, Connecticut post office in federal court. Berkeley Rep. Barbara Lee and Bronx Rep. Jose Serrano directed the Advisory Council of Historic Preservation to investigate the sales. In April, the ACHP issued a report to

Congress sharply critical of the USPS stewardship of its historic and artistic properties.

The auto-liquidation of the USPS could easily be halted if it offered *more* rather than fewer services. Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Massachusetts, has joined others recommending that it revive the postal banking system scrapped by Congress in 1966. Postal banking would serve millions of currently unbanked Americans while generating ongoing revenue for the USPS.

America's historic post offices, and the public services for which they were built, could be saved if current management, Congress and President Barack Obama had the will to do so.

Far more than utilitarian containers for conducting business, they are our piazzas, the places we meet one another and in doing so see our landscapes, history, work, and ourselves reflected back from their walls. They could be so much more than they are. Like the democracy they were built to embody, the responsibility to save them rests finally upon us.

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## The Enduring Myth of Hiroshima

On Aug. 6, 1945, the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on a populated area, the Japanese city of Hiroshima, followed by a second on Nagasaki three days later. There then ensued a U.S. propaganda campaign to claim the slaughter of more than 200,000 people saved lives, writes John LaForge.

By John LaForge

The U.S. atomic destruction of 140,000 people at Hiroshima and 70,000 at Nagasaki was never “necessary” because Japan was already smashed, no land invasion was needed and Japan was suing for peace. The official myth that “the bombs saved lives” by hurrying Japan’s surrender can no longer be believed except by those who love to be fooled.

The long-standing fiction has been destroyed by the historical record kept in U.S., Soviet, Japanese and British archives – now mostly declassified – and detailed by Ward Wilson in his book *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

Greg Mitchell’s *Atomic Cover-Up* (Sinclair Books, 2011) also helps explain the

durability of the “saved lives” ruse. Wartime and occupation censors seized all films and still photos of the two atomic cities, and the U.S. government kept them hidden for decades. Even in 1968, newsreel footage from Hiroshima held in the National Archives was stamped, “SECRET, Not To Be Released Without the Approval of the DOD.” Photos of the atomized cities that did reach the public merely showed burned buildings or mushroom clouds – rarely human victims.

In *Hiroshima in America: 50 Years of Denial*, (Grosset/Putnam, 1995) Robert Lifton and Mitchell note that Gen. Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, “left nothing to chance.” Even before Hiroshima, he prohibited U.S. commanders from commenting on the atomic attacks without clearance from the War Department.

“We didn’t want MacArthur and others saying the war could have been won without the bomb,” Groves said.

In fact, MacArthur did not believe the bomb was needed to end the war, but he too established a censorship program as commander of the U.S. occupation of Japan. He banned reporters from visiting Hiroshima or Nagasaki, expelled reporters who defied the ban and later said that those who complained that censorship existed in Japan were engaged in “a maliciously false propaganda campaign.”

That most people in the United States still believe the “saved lives” rationale to be true is because of decades of this censorship and myth-making, begun by President Harry Truman, who said Aug. 6, 1945, “Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That was because we wished this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.”

In fact, the city of 350,000 had practically no military value at all and the target was the city, not the base three kilometers away.

Taking President Truman at his word, the 140,000 civilians killed at Hiroshima are the minimum to be expected when exploding a small nuclear weapon on a “military base.” Today’s “small” Cruise missile warheads  $\frac{3}{4}$  which are 12 times the power of Truman’s A-bomb  $\frac{3}{4}$  could kill 1.68 million each.

Official censorship of what the two bombs did to people and the reasons for it has been so successful, that 25 years of debunking hasn’t managed to generally topple the official narrative.

In 1989, historian Gar Alperovitz reported, “American leaders knew well in advance that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not required to bring about Japan’s surrender;” and later, in his 847-page *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (Random House, 1995), “I think it can be proven that the bomb was

not only unnecessary but known in advance not to be necessary." The popular myth "didn't just happen," Alperovitz says, "it was *created*."

Kept hidden for decades was the 1946 U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey's conclusion that Japan almost certainly would have surrendered in 1945 without the atomic bombs, without a Soviet invasion and without a U.S. invasion. Not long after V-J Day in 1945, Brig. Gen. Bonnie Feller wrote, "Neither the atomic bombing nor the entry of the Soviet Union into the war forced Japan's unconditional surrender. She was defeated before either of these events took place."

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a five-star general and the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, said in his memoirs he believed "that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary."

Adm. William Leahy, the wartime Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote in 1950, "It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material success in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender."

Feller's, Ike's and Leahy's opinions were conspicuously left out of or censored by the Smithsonian Institution's 1995 display of the atomic B-29 bomber "Enola Gay."

Admiral Leahy's 1950 myth-busting and censor-busting about the Bomb could be an epitaph for the nuclear age: "I was not taught to make war in that fashion," he said of Hiroshima's incineration, "and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."

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## The Long Reach of Vietnam War Deceptions

America's war in Vietnam, which was authorized by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution a half century ago, had lasting consequences for the nation, including deeper public distrust of government and government's determination to restrict the people's right to know, as retired JAG Major Todd E. Pierce explains.

By Todd E. Pierce

A half century ago, on Aug. 10, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Gulf

of Tonkin Resolution though he knew its justification was based entirely on deception. Indeed, it was a continuation of a pattern of deception begun with a series of clandestine acts of war against North Vietnam by U.S. forces known as "Oplan 34-A."

Oplan 34-A consisted of sabotage and psychological warfare attacks directed against and into North Vietnamese territory. This reality was only brought to light seven bloody years later with the release of the "Pentagon Papers" by courageous whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg.

These deceptions, culminating with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, triggered an unwinnable war fought entirely on false pretenses and further deceptions of the American people until defeat could no longer be postponed.

Yet, in addition to the massive loss of life and irreparable wounds to so many participants, along with the enormous economic costs, the other U.S. victim of the Vietnam War was the U.S. Constitution itself. Specifically, it was the Bill of Rights, which, taken together, provide the American people the "right to know."

The Bill of Rights was enacted so the U.S. citizenry could act as "centinels," as James Madison put it, over government officials, including intelligence and military officials, not the opposite. This was to protect the Republic against both perfidious and incompetent officials.

But officials during the Vietnam War worked to turn that principle upside-down. These officials would succeed in institutionalizing within the military their belief that the "people" themselves couldn't be trusted with information of what was being done in their name.

Military and intelligence leaders saw the need for themselves and their institutions to act as "sentinels" over the citizens so civilians could never again appreciably interfere with the military's contemplation, planning or conduct of a "war." The constitutional right to know became the "center of gravity," the main target, for the military's effort to suppress any future civilian "interference" with the military, a strategy that violated the very purpose of the Constitution.

Beyond infringing on the constitutional right of the American people to know what their government is doing, this reversal of who is supposed to control whom also came at the cost of national security. The "right to know" is not a mere privilege or luxury Americans have as a birthright; it is in the Constitution as part of the system of checks and balances the Framers created to provide for the "common defence," and has been the greatest strength the U.S. has had through

its history, as other militaristic regimes that have come and gone show.

## **A Deep Cynicism**

While the “Pentagon Papers” revealed nothing of military significance at the time of their release in 1971, they did reveal the “deep cynicism by the military towards the public and a disregard for the loss of life and injury suffered by soldiers and civilians,” as one historical assessment noted.

More threatening to President Richard Nixon, however, was H.R. “Bob” Haldeman’s observation that the disclosures led the ordinary guy to believe that “You can’t trust the government; you can’t believe what they say; and you can’t rely on their judgment. And the implicit infallibility of presidents, which has been an accepted thing in America, is badly hurt by this, because it shows that people do things the president wants to do even though it’s wrong, and the president can be wrong.”

Military leaders such as General William Westmoreland had a similar view of any information that could prove embarrassing to the military when published by the press corps.

So Nixon, in his role as Commander in Chief presiding over a war that practically everyone conceded as lost, and the military leaders who had run the war with their self-defeating “strategies,” counter-attacked against the press whom they blamed for turning Americans against the war. They charged the media with a “stab in the back” of the military. This became a common belief in the military and among pro-war civilians to the ultimate detriment of the United States. In fact, Nixon had called the press “our worst enemy” in the war.

## **Getting It Right**

There were wiser officials who saw the war as unwinnable from the beginning. Undersecretary of State George Ball advised against entering what he recognized as a Vietnamese civil war.

The military had officers who knew the war was unwinnable as well, at least by 1967 when “only” 12,269 Americans had been listed as killed. General Fred Weyand, though only identified much later, told reporters “Westie just doesn’t get it. The war is unwinnable. We’ve reached a stalemate and we should find a dignified way out.”

This recognition led to a very accurate New York Times article of Aug. 7, 1967, unlike the intelligence reports that Westmoreland’s G-2 (Intelligence) staff produced. Two unidentified generals were quoted, one later revealed as Weyand, who stated that he had destroyed a single North Vietnamese division three times:

"I've chased main-force units all over the country and the impact was zilch. It meant nothing to the people. Unless a more positive and more stirring theme than simple anti-communism can be found, the war appears likely to go on until someone gets tired and quits, which could take generations."

The other general's quote was "Every time Westie makes a speech about how good the South Vietnam Army is, I want to ask him why he keeps calling for more Americans. His need for reinforcements is a measure of our failure with the Vietnamese."

The article's author wrote, referring to the South Vietnamese, that "The best talent in the current generation has long since been lost: Thousands of men who might be leading South Vietnamese troops in combat are serving with the North Vietnamese or the Vietcong, heirs to the country's nationalist revolution against the French." Or they were languishing in exile following South Vietnamese purges.

But it being truthful, the article enraged President Johnson and Generals Westmoreland and Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Had Johnson shaped his decision-making to the astute analysis of the "press" in this case, the losses of the Vietnam War would have been much lower. Instead, he granted Westmoreland's wish for a "surge," and sent an additional 205,000 soldiers to Vietnam.

### **Westmoreland's Bigotry**

Westmoreland expressed what he understood of the Vietnamese people when he said, "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. ... We value life and human dignity. They don't care about life and human dignity." This viewpoint was passed on to too many subordinates we now know, as seen in the far more common occurrence of American war crimes than previously known, which further alienated Vietnamese from the U.S.

Taking such bigotry as a license to treat Vietnamese villagers in the harshest manner, Westmoreland's policy included destroying their rice paddies and herding the people into "relocation camps."

"Herding" villagers and their livestock was literally true as the Army described "Operation Rawhide" in a press release after Westmoreland decreed there would be no more farming, or farmers, in the Central Highlands. In this case, the old adage – "it was worse than a crime, it was a blunder" understated the case.

Nixon's attacks on the press were easily dismissed as routine for him and he eventually shuffled off in disgrace anyway. But most insidiously, American military leaders who couldn't agree amongst themselves on how to fight the war



could agree on who was responsible for losing it: the press.

Their accusation against the press was that it reported negative news, even though true, causing Americans to lose their "will" to fight, and an antiwar movement grew out of that. These military leaders believed or convinced themselves that they would have won the war if not for the media's "negativity."

This "stab in the back" myth became conventional wisdom within much of the military down to the present day, as shown in numerous military journal articles, due to these officers' efforts to revise history at the expense of their country.

This hostility toward the press is best shown in some of the writings of retired Lt. Col. Ralph Peters, who has even suggested that journalists may have to be targeted; killed. Short of that though has come the military's strict grip on the message through the information control policies of today.

These policies are to classify and over-classify practically all information related to the military, total surveillance over the population, both foreign and domestic, and the harshest of consequences for whistle blowers, even though or maybe because they reveal illegality by military and intelligence officials.

### **Stab in the Back Origin**

German General Erich Ludendorff created the template for how guilt was to be assigned by a military after they've lost a war. In his case, it was World War I. He created the "stab in the back" myth that laid blame for Germany losing the war on civilians who were alleged to be defeatist and who undercut morale or were insufficiently loyal.

Germany had become ever more militarized as World War I went on, just as the other belligerents had, so there was no longer a press free of military censorship to cast the blame on. But Ludendorff's accusations of disloyalty against German civilians paved the way for the eventual Nazi takeover and the draconian system of censorship, surveillance and military commissions over civilians that the Nazis put into place.

Political dissent was criminalized as a violation of German's absolute duty of loyalty to the nation under the law of war during wartime, which the Nazis worked to make permanent. (Today, some American legal commentators glibly echo this by suggesting that censorship may be necessary to suppress "antigovernment speech" which "may demoralize soldiers and civilians," while arguing that we're now in a "long war" of indefinite duration against a tactic known as "terrorism.")

In World War II Germany, trying cases of “disloyalty” primarily fell to the infamous “People’s Court;” in actuality a military commission or a “war court.” Anyone “disloyal” in any manner or degree was said to degrade the war-fighting “will” of the German people. Representative examples of these offenses include suggesting the war was the cause of food shortages or making an innocuous joke about a German leader.

## **Vietnam War Lost**

In the style of Ludendorf, senior American military officers in charge of the conduct of the Vietnam War similarly accused civilians of stabbing the military in the back after South Vietnam fell to the North. Their accusation against elected officials was that they didn’t give the military everything the military asked for to fight the war, as if the resources of the U.S. were inexhaustible or as if that was a strategy in itself.

General H.R. McMaster added a slight twist by including the Joint Chiefs of Staff for not demanding even more troops and inflicting even greater harm by increasing costs to the civilian economy. But the most insidious charge was against the press of the day, the media. Leading officers accused the media of having caused the American people to lose their “will” to fight the war.

It wasn’t that these officers didn’t give credit to Americans for drawing conclusions from seeing the dead and wounded returned, it was that civilians had no right to their own conclusions if they were in conflict with military leadership. The solution seen by these military leaders was to deny information to the citizenry regarding military operations except for “feel good” news.

The officers accusing the press were all responsible for the conduct of the war, including General Westmoreland. In his 1976 book, *A Soldier Reports*, Westmoreland revealed that President Johnson expressed regrets he had not imposed censorship and the General obviously shared that regret.

But Westmoreland was coy enough to damn the press with faint praise. While disclaiming any vendetta against the press, in spite of their “errors, misinterpretations, judgments, and falsehoods,” Westmoreland quoted an Australian journalist who had said “there are those who say it was the first war in history lost in the columns of the New York Times.”

Westmoreland lamented elsewhere: “Vietnam was the first war ever fought without any censorship. Without censorship, things can get terribly confused in the public mind.”

But Westmoreland is who was confused. He wrote: “Reflecting the view of the war held by many in the United States and often contributing to it, the general tone

of press and television comment was critical, particularly following the Tet offensive of 1968.”

Not be critical was to be confused. Westmoreland could not fathom that the American people and the press, along with soldiers in his own Army, could see his war strategy was completely irrational and failing, even while he was deliberately covering that fact up with a disinformation campaign.

### **Accept What You're Told**

Westmoreland, like Nixon, believed the citizens' duty was to accept anything they were told by the government, especially by the military. This would explain why neither could understand that the role of the press under the U.S. Constitution is to act as the people's watchdog; to protect the people's interests. This is especially so in wartime as a check on incompetent officers, as Westmoreland proved to be.

Though Westmoreland had sworn an oath to protect and defend the Constitution, he wrote: “It may well be that between press and official there is an inherent, built-in inherent conflict of interest. There is something to be said for both sides, but when the nation is at war and men's lives are at stake, there should be no ambiguity. . . . If the nation is to wage war – declared or undeclared – a policy should be set to protect the interests of both press and government and avoid the ambiguity that characterized relationships in South Vietnam.”

Here, Westmoreland laid the ideological cornerstone of strict military information and media control which the U.S. has now. This allows the appearance of a free press, but one thoroughly conditioned to defer to the government, the military or the intelligence services.

An example of this is the suppression for a year by the New York Times of an article written by James Risen about President George W. Bush's use of warrantless wiretaps against Americans in his “war on terror.” Unlike so many “journalists” who merely celebrate the military and the intelligence agencies, Risen acted as a journalist should.

That the military and the intelligence agencies need the oversight meant to be provided by a free, critical press, the so-called Fourth Estate, is made convincingly, though perhaps unintentionally, by retired Army Lt. Col. Lewis Sorley in his book: *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*. Paradoxically, or ironically, Sorley was one of the officers who blamed the press for determining the course of the war but his book on Westmoreland refutes that argument.

### **Vainglorious Westie**

Westmoreland was a vainglorious officer of shallow intellect in the George Armstrong Custer mold. He had advanced through lower-level commands, not without some controversy regarding his judgment. His major accomplishment in the decade before going to Vietnam seemed to be as Superintendent of West Point. His "accomplishments" there were to get a new football stadium funded, expand the size of the Corps of Cadets so the football team would have more cadets to draw upon, and having a pamphlet sent to influential people, "West Point Points the Way in Post Efficiency."

But upon being appointed Commander of U. S. Forces in Vietnam, Westmoreland immediately assumed he was now an expert on Vietnam.

Brimming with his customary conceit, fresh off his successful campaign for the new football stadium, Westmoreland, according to Sorley, wrote to his father shortly after arrival in Vietnam in April 1964, "this war has been very badly reported to the American people through the press, and I might say the New York Times is perhaps the best example of what I mean."

He claimed that the New York Times had not sent their best reporters to the war zone and that many were "young, immature, impetuous men who have been unprepared to report the situation objectively." He viewed other leading journalists in Vietnam with similar disdain.

But Associated Press reporter Peter Arnett pointed out: "When Westy took command in 1964, I was thirty years of age. I had been in Southeast Asia for eight years, and had been all over Vietnam. I was married to a Vietnamese woman. My father-in-law was a colonel in the Vietnamese army. I knew John Paul Vann and most of the American advisors. What did he [Westmoreland] mean that we were too young and didn't know anything? Westy was wrong."

### **Information Warfare**

According to Sorley, when Westmoreland was decrying the "errors, misinterpretations, judgments, and falsehoods" of the press, all of which pertained to himself, he was actively creating falsehoods of success for the press to report. Sorley describes Westmoreland's active role in LBJ's "Progress Offensive," an active disinformation campaign, or Information Operation as it would be called today, designed to mislead the American people and their elected representatives.

Its objective was consistent with Joint Chief of Staff Chairman General Earle Wheeler's guidance to portray the war in the most favorable light, in disregard of the facts.

The "Progress Offensive" was "a systematic effort to convince the American

people that the war in Vietnam was being won," according to Sorley, especially in 1967. Westmoreland was a willing partner in that. But Westmoreland's deceit began even before he was brought on board the "Progress Offensive."

Westmoreland had submitted statistics to Wheeler in early 1967 showing that the enemy was increasing the "tactical initiative." Sorley wrote that Wheeler was distraught and wailed: "If these figures should reach the public domain they would, literally, blow the lid off Washington."

So Wheeler first instructed Westmoreland not to release the figures to the news media. As more information became available showing the situation worsening, with Westmoreland's maltreatment of Vietnamese villagers probably being a cause, Wheeler sent a general officer out to help Westmoreland "fix" the problem.

Later, Westmoreland sent a memorandum to Wheeler stating: "Lieutenant General Brown's team and members of my staff have developed terms of reference in the form of new definitions, criteria, formats and procedures relating to the reporting of enemy activity which can be used to assess effectively significant trends in the organized enemy combat initiative."

In fact, this amounted to manipulation of intelligence by Westmoreland which later became the "order of battle" controversy and set the stage for Americans to be shocked by the Tet Offensive in January-February 1968. How many additional American lives would be lost and ruined due to this chicanery did not seem to be relevant to the numbers fixers.

### **A Conspiracy to Deceive**

That this numbers manipulation was a conspiracy to deceive the public and the policymakers is shown by a message sent by General Bruce Palmer on Aug. 19, 1967, stating that Westmoreland was concerned that "the U.S. press is painting a pessimistic, stalemated situation in RVN." Palmer continued: "To counteract this distorted impression of the true situation, he [Westmoreland] is launching a local campaign to portray and articulate the very real progress underway in the Vietnamese War."

As Sorley put it, far from being the reluctant participant Westmoreland claimed to be, he "was opening his own branch office of the Progress Offensive."

Westmoreland reported his plans to Wheeler and others in August 1967, at the time of the New York Times article cited above, that "of course we must make haste carefully in order to avoid charges that the military establishment is conducting an organized propaganda campaign, either overt or covert."

As he saw it in Vietnam, "while we work on the nerve endings here we hope that

careful attention will be paid to the roots there – the confused or unknowledgeable pundits who serve as sources for each other.” And as shown, a couple of his own generals including General Weyand also served as sources for those “confused or unknowledgeable pundits.”

Sorley notes that General Wheeler could have told President Johnson the truth and “provided him with the information he needed to make informed decisions about the future course of the war. But he did not.”

This subversion of the constitutional principle that the military is subordinate to civilian officials by a deliberate deception could be said to be tantamount to treason, and should have been cause for Court Martial of Wheeler, Westmoreland and their co-conspirators, without excusing Johnson for his misconduct.

### **Hammering Home the Point**

Following Westmoreland’s lead after the war, other senior military leaders came out with their own books disclaiming any responsibility for the Vietnam disaster. Among them were Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Jr., Commander in Chief, Pacific; Lt.Gen. Phillip Davidson, MACV J-2, (Westmoreland’s chief intelligence officer); General Bruce Palmer, Jr.; and Westmoreland’s one-time aide, Lt. Gen., Dave R. Palmer. All in essence accused the press of stabbing the nation and the military in the back, in the Ludendorf model.

In *Summons of the Trumpet*, written in 1978, Lt. Gen. Dave R. Palmer wrote: “Dissent and dissenters inside America itself did much to discredit the war by spreading doubt and sowing despair.”

Palmer allowed that the dissenters covered a wide spectrum of society, from housewives to retired generals, adding that they had two things in common, they were highly visible and their ranks grew as the war years stretched on.

This caused “confusion” in Dave Palmer’s view. He wrote that “debate and dissent, based on emotion as well as logic, grew apace as the war progressed, serving mightily as major contributors to confusion.” But to Palmer, the news media bore responsibility “for having muddied issues in the war,” concluding that “the American press failed to clarify the war in Vietnam and, not unfairly, can be accused of adding to the public bewilderment.”

But who was truly confused? Later in his book, Palmer quotes part of Westmoreland’s summary of 1967, which reached Washington four days before the Tet Offensive began. As Palmer says, “Like nearly every official, the general was optimistic. He confidently reported:

“In many areas the enemy has been driven away from the population centers; in others he has been compelled to disperse and evade contact, thus nullifying much of his potential. The year ended with the enemy resorting to desperation tactics in attempting to achieve military/psychological victory; and he has experienced only failures in these attempts.’”

But Palmer stated, “the government had not deliberately misled the American people.” He explains that was why they were so stunned, because the “President and his entourage truly believed their own assurances.” But that wasn’t true.

### **Selling the Public**

As a close associate of Westmoreland’s, Palmer would have known of Westmoreland’s “Progress Offensive” which was designed to mislead the American people into believing that “progress” in the war was being made. Palmer’s disingenuous accusation that the press was responsible for the confusion of the American people when it was his own commander working to sow confusion and mislead the people he was supposed to be working for, the American public, can only be seen as shameless blame shifting from his military cronies onto the press.

Continuing this theme was the other commander over the Vietnam War, Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, CINCPAC. As CINCPAC, Sharp was in charge of the air war by the Navy and the Air Force over North Vietnam during Westmoreland’s tenure.

Sharp wrote *Strategy for Defeat*, wherein he explained how he and General Westmoreland would have won the war but for those “civilian politico decision makers” who had “no business ignoring or overriding the counsel of experienced military professionals” in the conduct of the war.

But in the end, Admiral Sharp accused the American press of losing the war by eroding our “will” because “we were subjected to a skillfully waged subversive propaganda campaign, aided and abetted by the media’s bombardment of sensationalism, rumors and half-truths about the Vietnam affair – a campaign that destroyed our national unity?”

Another Westmoreland crony, General Bruce Palmer, Jr., deputy commander in Vietnam, bewailed in his 1984 book that “the United States seems to share a common weakness of Western democracies, an inability to inculcate in people the kind of determination and almost religious zeal which communist countries have achieved.”

But it wasn’t for lack of trying to artificially “inculcate’ this zeal. Palmer claims that many of the officers in Vietnam resented “having our field commander being put on the spot” by being called back to the U.S. and being used for

political purposes by LBJ, such as to testify to Congress on how well the war was going. But Palmer acknowledged that Westmoreland enjoyed those occasions and would return to Saigon still “up on cloud nine.”

But General Palmer’s arguments were logically conflicted. With his book, *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam*, one wonders if the author isn’t schizophrenic. He gives all the evidence for why it was self-evident that Vietnam was an unwinnable war being run by amateurs, even listing the multitudinous errors committed in Vietnam by U.S. military leaders, including their own disputes on strategy.

Palmer also calls congressional members hypocrites for making antiwar speeches while voting money for the war, as if there were not harsh political consequences for anyone not “supporting the troops.” He also faulted teachers and professors for opposing the war. Yet, at the time he was writing his book, General Palmer claimed that, in hindsight, the war might not have been winnable all along. Still, he criticized those who questioned it.

### **Back in Time**

None of the above officers could match Lt. Gen. Phillip B. Davidson, however, in hostility toward the press and the Constitution, which he was sworn to protect. Davidson’s books on Vietnam transports one back to the Second German Reich of Kaiser Wilhelm, when Prussian militarism was at its peak and war was celebrated for its own sake.

Davidson argued that Congress should have declared war on the Vietnamese so the U.S. government could exercise censorship and prosecute dissenters for treason. This, in fact, is a suggestion made today by some authoritarian law school commentators, with the so-called “Long War” that we’re in.

But it was Col. Harry Summers, Jr., relying on works by arch-neoconservative and militarist Norman Podhoretz, who took deception to an even higher level than Westmoreland while making the “stab in the back” accusation against the media.

In doing so, Summers also deceived his intellectually lazy fellow military officers by substituting a parody of *On War* by Carl von Clausewitz, with his own *On Strategy*, which then became very influential in the U.S. military according to David Petraeus and remains on many military reading lists today.

In fact, Summers’s *On Strategy* was a revisionist falsification of Clausewitz’s principles. A slight knowledge of Clausewitz and *On War* is necessary to understand this.

### **Understanding Clausewitz**



Clausewitz fought a war of resistance against Bonaparte imperialism. With an anti-imperial viewpoint and respect for the sovereignty of other nations, Clausewitz saw the defensive as the stronger form of war at the strategic level, not the offensive.

He wrote: "we must say that *the defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger than the offensive*. This is the point we have been trying to make, for although it is implicit in the nature of the matter and experience has confirmed it again and again. It is at odds with prevalent opinion, which proves how ideas can be confused by superficial writers."

Those superficial writers today would include Dick Cheney who has always favored the offensive form of war called "forward leaning" that he wants other Americans to fight.

Clausewitz understood that when nations did go to war, "the reason always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object. War therefore, is an act of policy."

Since war is driven by its political object, "the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration," but once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow. Westmoreland and other pro-Vietnam War advocates failed to understand this.

Clausewitz also wrote, "Be that as it may, we must always consider that with the conclusion of peace the purpose of the war has been achieved and its business is at an end." For Clausewitz, even between adversarial states, the objective of war policy is to restore peace, not to maintain a permanent state of war against a concept such as "terrorism" or with a permanent occupation of territory seized in war, such as the West Bank and Gaza.

### **An Informed Electorate**

Policy for any nation will be what its sovereign decides. In a democratic republic, the sovereign is supposed to be its citizens and, therefore, it is for them to consider how best to pursue national policy. That requires the electorate to be informed, necessitating the free flow of information; a fundamental requirement of democratic governance and its greatest strength.

Without the "right to know" and an involved citizenry, including an active and critical press, there is no gauge for when "the expenditure of effort, exceeds the value of the political object" to determine when "the object must be renounced and peace must follow."

Or if the “object” should never have been pursued in the first place. Military leaders, with only a few exceptions, only demand more “surges.” For the political calculation on war or peace to be made with any accuracy, there also must be tolerance for dissenting opinions.

Clausewitz’s theory of war was fully consistent with the attitudes of many American Founders on the need to avoid “entangling alliances” that could drag the young nation into ill-considered wars. In the early years of the Republic, American leaders were particularly on guard against pressures that sought to involve them in conflicts between France and England.

Contrast this with *On Strategy*, the “Bible” for the “stab in the back” crowd. What its author, Col. Harry Summers, Jr., did was to flip Clausewitz’s strategic theory upside down, ignoring Clausewitz’s recognition that the defensive was the stronger form of war than the offensive.

Unfortunately, Summers’s book, by its association with Clausewitz, acquired a veneer of strategic legitimacy for which the United States is still paying today. Primarily, that cost is paid by the loss of the constitutional “right to know” as most post-Vietnam War administrations have accepted the fallacious claim that the press was responsible for “losing” Vietnam and thus have further curtailed the public’s access to “national security” information.

### **Why Does This Matter?**

This process of over-classification and excessive secrecy has reached an apex with the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama despite the latter’s promises of greater “transparency.” Instead, the antagonism toward a free press and an informed public that came out of the Vietnam War have continued to guide information policy, including aggressive prosecutions aimed at whistleblowers, such as Pvt. Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning and National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, and legal intimidation of journalists, such as James Risen and Glenn Greenwald.

Fanatics such as Fox News commentator retired Lt. Col. Ralph Peters have even called for “targeting” members of the media.

And, despite the Obama administration’s zeal in protecting “national security” secrets, there is now an echo of the “stab in the back” complaint against President Obama for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, even though it was President Bush who accepted the timetable demanded by the Iraqi government.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney and daughter Liz virtually accused Obama of treason against the United States when they claimed “he abandoned Iraq and we are watching American defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.”

The inestimable Lt. Col. Ralph Peters went even further when he charged Obama with “the creation of the first jihadi state in modern history stretching from central Syria to central Iraq and now approaching Baghdad all because President Obama saw everything through a political lens.”

But a more accurate “stab in the back” accusation against President Obama would be that he has continued the post-Vietnam approach of hiding as much “national security” information as possible from the American people and trying to use the press more as a conduit for propaganda than for dissemination of truth.

For decades now, the deadliest “stab in the back” to the American Republic has been the one inflicted on the Bill of Rights, with President Obama seeming to give it a final twist.

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