

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE A-19WASHINGTON POST  
21 February 1985

FILE

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## ... In the Name of Revenge

The William Westmoreland-CBS trial was a jungle thick with metaphors about the Vietnam War itself. As with the war, Westmoreland miscounted the enemy, didn't realize until too late that he was outlawed and then, in the spirit of the late Sen. George Aiken's advice about how to end the conflict, called his defeat a mighty victory—and got the hell out.

But once again the stab-in-the-back accusation has surfaced. This time the hand that held the dagger was not the press's, but Westmoreland's "disloyal" subordinates who sided with CBS. By name and rank they were Gen. Joseph A. McChristian and Col. Gains B. Hawkins. As for their number, Westmoreland said he had it. The disloyal McChristian had a "vendetta against" him and Hawkins was "disgruntled" and amenable to brainwashing.

But it was Westmoreland's lawyer, Dan M. Burt, who was quickest to propound revisionist doctrine: "We came here to clear the name of a general. That is what I, in my heart, believe we have done."

Hardly—although Westmoreland himself came away with something. He managed to picture himself as the Army's oldest Lonesome End, abandoned once in the field by his country, a second time by disloyal subordinates and, finally, by his once-cocky lawyers. All through the trial, he conducted himself with dignity, humor and even warmth. History cannot dismiss a general who took the subway to court.

Still, Burt's statement is a bit hard to take. Neither he, nor the Capital Legal Foundation for which he works, nor the reactionary rich who amply endow it, cared primarily about "the name of a general." They cared instead about the press, about its alleged bias, about the way they think it sold out America during the Vietnam War. Westmoreland may be their hero, but in the end he was to be their vehicle. The name of this game was revenge.

This was another Vietnam metaphor. Here were America's press haters on their own futile search-and-destroy mission. Here they were, like America itself in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, subscribing to a false theory, looking for an enemy that was not there. Vietnam itself was

once a domino. The red on the map had gone from Russia to China to North Vietnam and was threatening to seep down into South Vietnam. If it fell, so would the rest of Asia and, eventually, San Francisco, or at least Oakland.

But now China and Vietnam fight a border war and, through proxies, another in Cambodia. China and the Soviet Union are feuding relatives, related to Karl Marx in whose name they from time to time pummel one another. The dominoes have collapsed from the center, taking the theory with it. The war was for nothing.

And so was the Westmoreland suit. It, too, was predicated on an ideological fixation: The press lies. It supposedly does so because it's excessively liberal, vaguely un-American. Burt, et al., may insist otherwise, but that was their premise and their purpose was to expose the lie—to bloody the press. How else can you explain Westmoreland's evident shock when he found that his former subordinates were willing to say on the witness stand what they had said in the CBS documentary: My God! You mean it was not all done in the editing booth? You mean these men had actually said what CBS aired?

The lie was not there. The more Burt and his colleagues hacked through the jungle of depositions and witnesses, documents and memos, the more they realized that they were like pious explorers of antiquity searching for the mythical land of Gog and Magog. They followed a map showing things not as they are, but as they thought they ought to be. They are not alone. Sen. Jesse Helms, for instance, thinks that if only he can buy CBS he can, in the process, buy a truth that conforms to his beliefs. The truth exists for no one.

As Westmoreland knows, old soldiers never die and neither, really, do controversies over wars. For that reason, it would have been best if CBS has done what Westy and others always wanted the United States to do in Vietnam—press on to victory no matter what the cost. That way both sides could not claim, as they did immediately after halting the trial, that they both won.

Unfortunately, the final Vietnam metaphor is in the outcome. Once again, you can make what you want of it.