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The Death of a General

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Retired U.S. General William C. Westmoreland died last night at age 91. He died as one of the most controversial figures in American military history. He began in brilliance, leading the cadet corps at West Point, reaching the rank of colonel by age 30, fighting against Erwin Rommel in World War II, and eventually gaining his fourth star.

Yet, he became a hated and divisive figure as he led American forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968. Eventually, more than 46,000 Americans would die in that war, and South Vietnam would fall to the communists shortly after the American withdrawal. His supporters would claim that he did his best, given the unwillingness of successive American administrations to unleash the full force of the American military. Others would claim that he was an American war criminal, whose complicity led to the deaths of thousands of Americans and even more Vietnamese civilians.

The Vietnam war is still an unhealed wound in the American soul. The debates still rage, even as time has clarified many of the issues. As for William C. Westmoreland, historian David Halberstam once commented, "I regard him as a tragic figure, a man you just want to look away from."

That's not the way I felt several years ago when I unexpectedly met General Westmoreland. I was waiting to fly from Nashville to Dallas on an early morning flight and was at the airport with time to spare. I went into the airline club room to get a cup of coffee and check the newspapers and I found the room deserted except for one older man. I was in the fourth grade when Gen. Westmoreland ended his command in Vietnam, but his face and profile were immediately recognizable to me. I had seen his face hundreds of times on the evening news.

I took a risk, crossed the room, and asked, "General Westmoreland?" He immediately looked up, extended a wary hand, and looked me in the eye. He seemed to take a quick inventory of my age, dress, and facial expression, and then relaxed his grip. I was too young to be a Vietnam veteran, too conventionally dressed to be a radical, and too friendly to be a threat. We spent several minutes in a conversation that ranged across several safe issues. I did not ask about Vietnam.

After he asked about my profession, he ventured some thoughts on leadership.

My flight was called all too quickly, and I had to go. I thanked General Westmoreland for his service to our country and for his graciousness in conversation. We shook hands again and I left. I have revisited that short conversation many times since. News of his death brings the memory alive. I am thankful for that brief encounter with history. I will be watching the responses to the news of his death with interest.

NEWS COVERAGE: [The Los Angeles Times](#), [BBC News](#), [The Washington Post](#).

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