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Gen. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1964–1970, confers with President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House in January 1968.

spect to fairness, numbers and available talent. In the midst of war and sustained containment, the military also contended with massive domestic violence in the late 1960s. Hasty initiatives such as Operation Garden Plot generally got forces where they were needed. Fortuitously, reserve forces were made available for domestic contingencies. Again doctrine had to be re-designed, and performances such as that of the 101st Airborne Division in Detroit became models for handling violence when the perpetrators are among one's own countrymen. Under Gen. Wheeler's steady hand, American units almost invariably sustained high standards of performance despite the obstacles that had emerged in fielding them.

Gen. Wheeler proved capable in managing flaps inside and outside of the services. Like Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, he presided over headstrong subordinates with prickly senses of prerogative—and without the benefit of the subsequent Goldwater-Nichols Act. His interventions with the services concerning the composition of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Headquarters enabled that agency to work, and he repeatedly smoothed the waters between Gen. William C. Westmoreland in Vietnam and ostensible superiors of naval provenance in Hawaii. Gen. Wheeler managed to downplay much that could have been damaging in the media. Cases in point include recriminations between the Army and the Marines after the Tet Offensive, and Gen. Westmoreland's planning for the use of nuclear weapons around Khe Sanh. One piece of information he could not

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much suppress was the post-Tet calculation that 206,000 more troops would be needed to finish the job. At some point, costs in blood and treasure would not be considered worth the stakes.

It has become fashionable to accuse Gen. Wheeler and his colleagues of dereliction of duty for not revolting against their civilian masters. A response would depend in part on when one believes the war was lost, who

knew for sure and the extent to which the loss was a military phenomenon. In *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, Lewis Sorley argues that the Vietnam War had been won by 1970—the year of Gen. Wheeler's retirement—and America subsequently jettisoned the victory and abandoned the effort. If true, Gen. Wheeler would have little to apologize for with respect to his watch. One might also ask whether it would have been better to abandon Vietnam in 1965 or 1975. By 1975 the Sino-Soviet alliance had visibly disintegrated, the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and other constraints had softened the Soviet threat and the long-term validity of containment was reflecting itself in an increasingly prosperous West and restive East Bloc. In this new strategic context, Vietnam seemed less consequential as a domino. Finally, there is one's take on the oath officers swear to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. A downside of *hari-kari* is that one only gets to commit it once. Until and unless the right moment comes, officers obey the lawful orders of those appointed over them. In Earle G. Wheeler we find a soldier who had been dealt a bad hand, but nevertheless believed results would be better if he stayed at his post than if he left it. His example remains relevant today. ★

Recommended Reading:

Cosmas, Graham A., *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2006)

Hammond, William M., *Reporting Vietnam: Media & Military at War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998)

Sorley, Lewis, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt, 1999)