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SAIGON—American commander General William C. Westmoreland has requested a total of three-quarter million American troops for Vietnam by mid-1969.

The request is one of the most momentous decisions facing President Lyndon B. Johnson, reliable sources here report.

The request may be almost as difficult for President Johnson as his original decisions to send 480,000 American troops here—for the next increment would demand quasi-wartime footing for America, with demands of more ~~money~~ money and men cutting ~~across the~~ across the 1968 election year.

Reliable sources here report that General Westmoreland has already requested—and been promised—a ^{TOTAL} ~~troop~~ troop level of ~~550,000~~ 550,000 American men here by mid-1968. However, he wants to ~~raise~~ receive authorization for 600,000 men ~~by mid-1968~~ before the American election and a total of 750,000 men by mid-1969, these sources say.

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The great center of decision for President Johnson now is: how many more American troops can he authorize after the 550,000 he has already approved? A peripheral question here is: How much longer will General Westmoreland be retained as commander of American forces here?

While no immediate decision is likely to be announced, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, in his farewell press conference here, indicated that American troops for Vietnam would be increasingly difficult to ~~commit~~ commit. Instead, he called for more efficient use of the one-million-plus troops in Vietnam already--American troops as well as the flagging Vietnamese forces.

Reliable observers here believe that, given the present direction and pace of the military war, three-quarter million American troops will still be too few by mid-1969. They note an increase in the strength and activity of the Communist main-force units, coupled with the inability of the Allied forces to defend the Vietnamese villages from Communist guerrillas and political cadre. These observers concede, however, that if the Johnson Administration or the Vietnamese government to be elected in September enter into negotiations with the Communists, ~~requirements~~ requirements for more American troops might drop.

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The request by General Westmoreland for 750,000 American troops in the next two years ~~is~~ represents a sizeable increase over the Administration's original estimates of the American manpower needs for the Vietnam war. Two years ago, American generals here ~~was~~ reportedly estimated they would need only 350,000 American troops in Vietnam to continue pressure against the Communist main force units, plus securing major installations in their key cities. However, the massive Communist buildup of forces--from local recruitment and infiltration--plus the inability of the Vietnamese armed forces to recover its fighting effectiveness has caused a major re-assessment.

Vietnamese sources believe the Johnson Administration has created and followed a "deliberate policy of confusion" regarding the future American troop requirements for Vietnam. For, they explain, on the one hand the official Administration statements and leaks to newsmen--each quote^{ing} different buildup figures--is designed to prepare American public opinion for more troops, while, on the other hand, not giving too much information to the Communist bloc.

Based on reliable military sources here, this is the story:

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Currently, there are 466,000 American troops in Vietnam. But, more important than the actual in-country figure is the number already authorized. This ~~is~~ authorized figure is 480,000. Some of these are already "in the pipeline" enroute to Vietnam, but they are behind schedule in arriving. Several months ago, the figure already approved for Vietnam was 470,000-- but with the heavy fighting along the demilitarized zone, ~~Westmore~~ Westmoreland reportedly requested and received approval for another increment of ~~10,000~~ 10,000, the most significant ~~pro-portion~~ portion coming in the form of artillery units.

At this time, requests for more troops are ~~is~~ based on sliding timetables--which creates some of the confusion in press articles. From now until June of next year, Westmoreland has requested--and has been ~~promised~~ virtually promised--another 70,000 troops. This would raise the total ~~commitment~~ commitment level to ~~550,000~~ 550,000 by mid-1968.

This increment of 70,000 is important to American field commanders, because they would be mainly ground forces--which they badly need to keep pace with the Communist buildup. This chunk of 70,000 troops is equivalent to two American divisions, one light brigade, plus their organic supporting units.

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During this same time period--from now until mid-1968--~~and~~ Westmoreland has requested another chunk of 50,000 American troops--mainly direct support units, such as helicopter companies, ~~artillery~~ artillery batteries and naval groups. He ~~is~~ reportedly wants to have in Vietnam a total of 600,000 American troops before the American Presidential election in 1968. He is not so sure to get this, ~~is~~ however.

Then, after the American election through mid-1969, Westmoreland has requested an additional 150,000 troops--raising the over-all total to three-quarter million American ~~troops~~ fighting men. And this is where President Johnson and Secretary McNamara have dilemmas no computer can solve. More American men and money will ~~cost~~ ~~cost~~ may mean fewer votes and more criticism during the election.

The tactical policy of sending American troops to Vietnam in "tranches" (French for slices) or "on the installment plan" has raised some controversy within the official American community ~~to~~ here.

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One critic—a military officer--said: "The idea of sending American troops here on the installment plan is absurd. It's like taking a bath. One can't jump into a tub-full of scalding hot water and stand it. But one can take it if the water ~~is~~ gradually gets hotter. That's ~~the way~~ the way the Communists are--they are adjusting to our measured troops levels without feeling any heat."

One American civilian official, speaking in private, said no more American troops should be sent to Vietnam without radical improvements in the efforts of the Vietnamese officialdom at all levels and in all fields--the Vietnamese army, administration and government.

Another source, who believed more American ground troops were needed--and needed fast--questioned the tactical uses General Westmoreland has chosen^N to use. He suggested Westmoreland's search-and-destroy strategy be re-evaluated and ~~de-emphasized~~.
DE-EMPHASIZED.

Another factor adding to the controversy and uncertainty here is the increase in rumors that General Westmoreland will be replaced in the near^g future. ~~Previous~~^{EARLIER} rumors to this effect have been denied.