

The Telegraph

Robert McNamara

Robert McNamara, the former American Secretary of State for Defence, who died yesterday aged 93, was the architect of America's involvement in Vietnam and its most vehement advocate.



McNamara with Jack Kennedy, 1961 Photo: GETTY

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In 1995, however, he revealed to general astonishment that he had been fired for privately expressing his opposition to the war – and the fact that he did not speak out until long after the conflict had ended ensured that he remained a morally ambiguous figure.

Under Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, "Mac the Knife" became a hate figure on university campuses throughout the Western world. Many students regarded him as an unfeeling, unsmiling technocrat who dealt in body counts and bomb tonnage as if they were mere numbers on an IBM balance sheet.

From the war's inception in 1961 to the Tet offensive of 1968, it was McNamara above all others who seemed hell-

bent on ratcheting up American involvement. When US ground troops were about to be sent to Vietnam, he issued the army with an "unlimited appropriation" – a blank cheque to spend whatever was needed to finance the war. He helped President Johnson to misuse the infamous Tonkin Gulf resolution so that an eventual total of more than 500,000 combat troops was sent to Vietnam. Indeed, he pursued the Vietnam War with such determination that it became known as "McNamara's War".

But later, in *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995), he claimed that, from as early as 1965, after the dispatch of US ground forces and the start of massive bombing, he thought the war "impossible" to win "short of genocidal destruction". By late 1967 he believed that America would suffer "a major national disaster" if the war did not stop and wrote a memorandum to President Johnson urging the case for complete withdrawal. Within weeks he had been forced to resign, albeit with the consolation prize of the World Bank presidency and a Presidential Medal of Freedom.

McNamara's claims were borne out by declassified secret tapes of cabinet discussions at the time which seemed to support his contention that he was a restraining influence. He could be heard urging President Kennedy to get out of Vietnam as early as October 1963, and in a telephone conversation in 1964 Johnson could be heard chastising McNamara for giving Kennedy that advice.

In a memo to Johnson on May 19 1967, he warned: "There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States to go. The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny, backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one. It could conceivably produce a costly distortion in the American national consciousness and in the world image of the United States."

McNamara's *mea culpa* surprised many of those who had met him at the time. "This is not the McNamara I did business with," said General William Westmoreland, the American commander in Saigon for much of the war. "None of this ever came up with me". His British opposite number, Denis Healey, recalled meeting McNamara over breakfast: "I once asked him how things were going in Vietnam. 'Just fine,' he replied. 'Next month we'll be dropping twice the tonnage of bombs we are dropping this month.'"

McNamara's book was greeted with anger, both from hawks, who felt he had let the side down, and from doves who noted that – while he admitted the Vietnam policy had been "wrong, terribly wrong" – he expressed no regret for failing to speak out at the time when it might have saved lives. In the five years after he had begun to harbour doubts, a further 35,000 Americans would lose their lives along with an estimated 1.4 million Vietnamese. His intervention might well have tipped the balance in favour of an early withdrawal. As it was, the anti-war case was left to a group easily demonised as long-haired draft-dodgers, dope-heads and "Commies".

"Surely he must in every quiet and prosperous moment hear the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry, dying in the tall grass, platoon by platoon, for no purpose," commented *The New York Times* in a bitter editorial. "What he took from them cannot be repaid by prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades too late."

A cartoonist in *The Los Angeles Times* depicted an ageing McNamara standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial wall in Washington, which bears the names of all 58,000 American servicemen and women who died there. "Sorry about that," he says.

McNamara never came up with an adequate explanation for his failure to speak out at the time. "Can you imagine in the middle of the Second World War, when the Germans were beginning to lose, the impact on the German military and the lives of the German people of a major individual coming out and saying, 'We have got to give up?'" he asked. To speak out, he said on another occasion, "would have been a violation of my responsibility to the president and my oath to uphold the Constitution". But as he also acknowledged, Johnson's legitimacy on the Vietnam War was weak because he deliberately concealed the truth about the costs and prospects from the public.

Yet in 2004 McNamara became the unlikely star of Errol Morris's *Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S McNamara*, an Oscar-winning documentary about his career and the surprise box office hit of the season.

Although it went over the same ground as his book, many were moved by McNamara's often painful effort to confront his past and explore the moral quandaries in which he found himself. Indeed, he put on such a beguiling performance as an interviewee that, after a private screening at The Hague, an audience of judges from the war crimes trial of Slobodan Milosevic rose to applaud him – in spite of his almost casual admission to being a war criminal (in the Second World War).

In the film, an often mesmeric McNamara displayed a dispassionate honesty about the conflicts of which he had been part. It was not so much an apology for past misdemeanours as an articulate attempt to explain the dilemmas created by a human race that had "not grappled with the rules of war".

At one point an apparently much-moved McNamara referred to Norman Morrison, the Quaker who in 1965 burned himself to death beneath McNamara's office at the Pentagon as a protest against the Vietnam War. "How much evil must we do in order to do good?" McNamara asked. "It's a very, very difficult position for sensitive human beings to be in. Morrison was one of those. I think I was."

The eldest son of an Irish-American shoe salesman, Robert Strange McNamara was born in San Francisco on June 9 1916. An excellent student, he won a scholarship to Berkeley to study Philosophy and Economics, and, after taking a brilliant postgraduate degree at Harvard Business School, became the youngest professor in its history. During the Second World War, McNamara served in the US Army Air Corps' statistics department under General Curtis LeMay, the notorious hawk who commanded the air campaign against Japan. Rising to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, McNamara described himself as "part of the mechanism" that agreed a strategy of firebombing 67 Japanese cities with the loss of 1.5 million civilian lives (before the atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki), a strategy he later described as a war crime. McNamara thought LeMay the greatest air force leader there had ever been, but a man concerned only with American interests and unrestrained by normal moral principles.

After the war McNamara joined Ford Motors, where he was one of the strongest advocates for the introduction of seat belts and received substantial credit for Ford's expansion and success in the postwar period. He became a director in 1957, and three years later, aged 45, was made company president – the first non-family member to occupy that position.

But he had been in the job for only a few weeks when Robert Kennedy called to say that his brother wanted him as Defence Secretary. He arrived at the Pentagon just in time to deal with the Cuban missile crisis. In his memoirs, McNamara portrayed himself as someone who fought against the hawks during the crisis, but some felt that, as with Vietnam, he was probably presenting a one-sided account of his role.

McNamara was regarded as one of the brightest members of Kennedy's entourage, although he was seen by some as cold and arrogant. Within the Pentagon, he proved himself a financial and managerial wizard, reorganising the bureaucracy to establish more effective controls over departmental spending and containing the more damaging aspects of service rivalry; he closed down uneconomic military bases and refused to spend funds on weapon systems, such as the Skybolt project, which he felt offered poor value for money.

Applying the techniques of systems analysis, he inaugurated a planning-programming-budgeting system and introduced the first five-year budget in the history of the Defence Department, a plan that he unveiled to Congress in January 1963.

Strategically, much of his energy during his first few years was devoted to revitalising America's conventional forces and moving away from what he viewed as an excessive reliance on nuclear deterrence. He accepted the doctrine of "flexible response", which called for the development of a broad choice of deterrent forces, ranging from the nuclear to the anti-guerrilla.

After leaving the Pentagon, McNamara served as president of the World Bank for 13 years, from 1968 to 1981, building it into the largest and most important single source of international development assistance. After his retirement, he continued to write and speak on a broad range of public issues.

He also served on a number of corporate and other boards, including Royal Dutch Petroleum, The Washington Post, Trans World Airlines, Bank of America, the Ford Foundation, the Brookings Institution and the California Institute of Technology.

McNamara's reasons for publishing *In Retrospect* were complex. In one interview, he said that it was mainly because he had "grown sick at heart witnessing the cynicism and even contempt with which so many people view our political institutions and leaders". The Vietnam War, he felt, lay at the root of social troubles such as racial tension, violent crime, drug abuse, suicide, unmarried motherhood and even Aids. The time had come for present and future generations of Americans "to understand why we made the mistakes we did and learn from them".

Whether McNamara really learned from his mistakes was not entirely clear. During the war in Iraq, he was reluctant

– as he had been during the Vietnam War – to criticise a serving president, though in an unguarded moment he told a Canadian journalist that he thought the whole venture was "morally wrong, politically wrong and economically wrong".

Robert McNamara married, in 1940, Margaret Craig, his childhood sweetheart, with whom he had two daughters and a son. After she died of cancer in 1981, he remained a widower until 2004 when, at the age of 88, he married a 70-year-old widow, Diana Byfield.

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