

The Wrong Kind of Loyalty -- McNamara's Apology for Vietnam

As much as any other individual, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara personified the American commitment in Vietnam. He was "the

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can-do man in the can-do society in the can-do era," David Halberstam wrote in *The Best and the Brightest*, and during the Kennedy and early Johnson years, he managed America's expanding involvement almost as if he were a desk officer. Whether slogging through Vietnam in army fatigues, spewing out statistics to demonstrate progress, or presiding at a press conference, map on the wall, pointer in hand, he epitomized what came to be called "McNamara's war." Whatever the difficulties of the moment, he exuded a certainty that promised ultimate success.

In fact, as has long been clear, his public confidence far outlasted the emergence of personal skepticism, and McNamara's tearful departure from the Pentagon at the height of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, as much as Lyndon B. Johnson's March 31, 1968, speech, marked the inglorious end of an era once bright with promise.

As the war aroused growing controversy in the United States, McNamara became a major target for critics from both left and right. Ignorant of his muted, tightly constrained internal dissent, doves viewed him as the ultimate technocrat, whose blind faith in technology and statistics plunged the nation into a destructive quagmire. Hawks, on the other hand, denounced with growing venom his interference with the military and his refusal to give it the freedom and tools to win an eminently

winnable war.

For McNamara, Vietnam became a source of great personal torment. He left office quietly in 1968, declining out of a sense of loyalty to his president to air publicly his grave doubts. From that day forward, he refused to speak of Vietnam, even when he resurfaced in the 1980s during the debate over nuclear responsibility. He broke his vow of silence only briefly, at the time of the Westmoreland-CBS trial and on the eve of the Persian Gulf War.

His completion of the book he "never planned to write" is as mysterious and characteristic of the man as his curious internal dissent against the war and his subsequent silence. He insists that he did not write to defend himself, and the results seem to speak for themselves on this score. His purpose, he claims, was rather to explain to the nation the reasons why its government and leaders acted as they did and to draw appropriate lessons. The fundamental question he raises is, why did the best and the brightest go wrong in Vietnam? Why did they make errors "not of values or intentions but of judgment and capabilities?"

DECLASSIFIED DOUBTS

In compiling this memoir, McNamara followed the example of his successor as Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, in Counsel to the President. Rather than rely on memory, he consulted the documentary record, examining the vast quantity of recently declassified materials and some sources not yet available to historians, such as Johnson's tape-recorded phone conversations. He also brought in historian Brian VanDeMark to help him access that record and ensure that "insofar as hu-

manly possible" he remained faithful to it. This method gives the memoir an air of authority that others lack but robs it of some personal reflection. Clifford compensated by offering sometimes shrewd retrospective judgments about people and events. True to character, McNamara only occasionally provides the insights that give the documents fuller meaning. He reveals little on the interaction of personalities in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the decision-making process, or the conflict with the military and Joint Chiefs of Staff that raged throughout his tenure and reached a crisis point in late 1967.

McNamara does shed new light on the origins of the bombing halt of late 1965 and his inception of the Pentagon Papers project, and he provides important new examples of the way Johnson in the last years of his presidency squelched internal dissent. He also provides some illuminating personal insights, especially on his growing disillusionment with the war. He admits, for example, the profound impact on him of the self-immolation of the young Quaker, Norman Morrison, outside his Pentagon office in November 1965, and he deplores the way he bottled up his reaction. He also admits that the impact of visits to Harvard and Amherst in 1966 led to his realization that "opposition to the administration's Vietnam policy increased with the institution's prestige and the educational attainments of its students." Johnson long suspected that his defense minister's dovishness derived from the sinister influence of Robert Kennedy, but McNamara recalls a dramatic encounter in which Jackie Kennedy literally beat his chest and demanded that he "do something to stop the slaughter." Though a private person, he speaks with remarkable candor about the effects of the war on himself and his family.

What is truly remarkable about this book, however, is the pervasive apologetic tone. For public officials to write memoirs to defend their actions is conventional, and McNamara does this on occasion, mostly on smaller issues. He continues to insist that the alleged second Gulf of Tonkin attack of August 4, 1964, "appears probable but not certain" yet presents no new evidence. He defends the much-maligned body count as a measure of progress in the war yet rejects charges that he was a mindless number cruncher. He also claims the much-criticized McNamara line, his project for an electronic barrier, helped reduce North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam.

McNamara has never been conventional, however, and his memoir seems more apology than apologia. Throughout the book, he concedes -- and deplores -- the errors of his ways, for all practical purposes assuming personal responsibility for the Vietnam debacle. The list goes on almost in the fashion of a litany. The secretary of defense was a key figure in decisions to escalate the war between 1961 and 1965, and he readily concedes that the assumptions upon which he and his colleagues acted were badly flawed. They approached Vietnam, he recalls, with "sparse knowledge, scant experience and simplistic assumptions." Victims of their own "innocence and confidence," they foolishly viewed communism as monolithic, knew nothing about Indochina, and were "simple-minded" regarding the historical relationship between China and Vietnam. They badly misjudged Ho Chi Minh's nationalism and consistently overestimated South Vietnam's ability to survive. Regarding the key decisions of 1965, he admits he should have anticipated that bombing North Vietnam would lead to requests for ground troops. He concedes there should have been a public debate on the July 1965 decision for

war. Over and over he acknowledges that he should have examined the unexamined assumptions, asked the unasked questions, and explored the readily dismissed alternatives.

McNamara was the primary war manager for both John F. Kennedy and Johnson, and here too he admits error. He concedes a lack of candor in his reports to the public, defending himself only to the point of wondering how top officials can be frank without aiding the enemy. He regrets on numerous peace initiatives that "we failed to utilize all possible channels and to convey our position clearly." He admits that he and his military and civilian colleagues repeatedly underestimated the ability of the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front to endure losses.

THE PRISON-HOUSE OF CONTAINMENT

As to why the failure occurred, McNamara draws two conclusions. One, commonly cited by beleaguered top officials, is a "blizzard of problems" that left no time to think. Of the crucial decisions to escalate in 1964, for example, he writes that "we were left harried, overburdened, and holding a map with only one road on it. Eager to get moving, we never stopped to explore fully whether there were other routes to our destination." He also emphasizes the lack of expertise in the administration. In the Cuban missile crisis, he notes, the Kennedy administration had the great advantage of such veteran Kremlinologists as Llewellyn Thompson. For Vietnam, he insists, no such expertise was available, and major miscalculations resulted.

Much is compelling in McNamara's analysis. The speed of events in present times leaves precious little time for ordinary citizens, much less

for harried top officials, to think. It has long been recognized, moreover, that the purge of Asia hands from the State Department during the McCarthy era crippled policymaking for Indochina and had a deadly impact on Vietnam decisions.

But is it really so simple? As former National Security Council official James C. Thomson, Jr., pointed out in the April 1968 *Atlantic Monthly*, even the available expertise was difficult to get to the top. And when it got to the top, such as State Department official Paul Kattenburg's criticism in the Kennedy years, it was ignored. McNamara admits, incidentally, that Undersecretary of State George Ball's dissent was dismissed because he was "Eurocentric."

Conceding McNamara's point that the pace of events is indeed dizzying, one must ask whether the real problem was the time available to think or the way people were thinking. U.S. policymakers miscalculated, to be sure, and they were woefully ignorant of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. In the final analysis, however, the American debacle in Vietnam was not primarily a result of errors of judgment or the personality quirks of the policymakers. It was a logical, if not inevitable, outgrowth of a worldview and a policy -- the policy of global containment -- that Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades. Even those who had time to think, intellectuals, for example, shared this view, as did most experts. The foreign policy elite had few dissenters until the United States was waist-deep in the big mudd. Those who did dissent normally concluded not that the worldview was wrong but that Vietnam was not doable. Some doves indeed advocated liquidating the Vietnam commitment only to save the larger containment policy.

Skeptics gained a hearing only with great difficulty because of the pervasive optimism that is so much a part of the American character. Top policymakers persisted in believing that, despite the problems in Vietnam, the United States, as always in the past, would eventually prevail. "In the lands of the blind, one-eyed men are king," said President Eisenhower in 1954, explaining his decision, against the recommendations of many of his expert advisers, to aid South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem. Kennedy fell victim to the same delusion, as did Johnson.

If ever they wavered, the imperatives of domestic politics (about which McNamara says virtually nothing) brought them back into line. No political figure, especially a Democrat, was prepared to risk the fate that had befallen Harry Truman and Dean Acheson for the loss of China. Despite his doubts, Kennedy refused even to consider withdrawal from Vietnam until he had been safely reelected. Johnson repeatedly insisted that he was not going to be the president to see Vietnam go the way of China.

DISLOYALTY TO THE TRUTH

To his credit, McNamara recognized earlier than most of his colleagues that the war was not winnable. Tragically, however, he refused to act decisively on his convictions, and perhaps the most serious issue raised by his memoir involves his handling of his own steadily growing doubts. He readily admits -- as has long been known -- that his "sense of the war gradually shifted from concern to skepticism to frustration to anguish. I had always been confident that every problem could be solved, but now I found myself confronting one -- involving national pride and human life -- that could not." He does not say exactly when

he reached this conclusion. Some claim as early as the summer of 1965; most agree no later than the end of that year. Yet he revealed his doubts to only a few confidants. While desperately exploring presumably less costly and destructive alternatives, such as the bombing halt and peace offensive of late 1965 and a shift of focus to pacification and the McNamara line in 1966, he continued to give in piecemeal to military proposals for escalation. Only in 1967 did he propose radical changes in policy, and when his suggestions, predictably, were rejected, he quietly left government.

The reason historians usually give for his behavior is that he put loyalty to his president above what he had come to see as the unpleasant truth, and McNamara does nothing to challenge that notion here. He claims, somewhat lamely, that he hoped his November 1, 1967, memorandum calling for a cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam and a change in the ground strategy would stir debate within the administration. Surely, from earlier dealings with Johnson, McNamara must have known better. Not only did the president refuse to distribute the memo to his other advisers and the informal advisory group known as the "wise men" then meeting in Washington, but he refused even to invite former wise men he knew had turned against the war. L.B.J. sought validation of his policy, not debate.

Many have argued that McNamara should have resigned in protest. Like others, including George Ball, he persuaded himself he could better influence policy by staying. He also believed, he notes here, that resigning and challenging the prevailing policy would have violated his responsibility to the president and his oath to uphold the Constitution.

In an era when personal ambition usually seems to prevail and loyalty seems a lost virtue, McNamara's stand appears in many ways admirable. But, it must be asked, what about loyalty to the truth, and does not loyalty to the Constitution, the welfare of the nation, indeed to the president demand a willingness to confront him with the unpleasant truth, to try any means available to force him from his self-destructive course? However honorable McNamara's intent, the nation -- and indeed Lyndon Johnson -- have been ill-served by this kind of loyalty.

Robert S. McNamara has accepted a full measure of responsibility for a great tragedy (far more for Vietnam than for America, it must be remembered). His candid memoir provides useful insight into his and America's agony over Vietnam. To understand what went wrong, however, requires looking beyond his essentially instrumental explanation. It was McNamara's war, yes, but also Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles' war, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson's war, and Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's war. The ideology of a generation of policymakers and a flawed set of policies, more than anything else, explain why the United States intervened in Vietnam and ultimately failed.