

HST 195: History of Vietnam War Sp18 (Escobar 41945)

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Fog of War

by [Joe Escobar](#) - Saturday, May 19, 2018, 8:52 PM

This thread is for discussions on the Fog of War topic.

To make your POSTS, click the reply link in this, MY post. To reply to another student's post, be sure to click the reply link within in THEIR post.

IMPORTANT - SUBJECT LINES

BE SURE to use an informative subject line for your post, something that describes which one of the questions you are addressing. Do NOT simply leave it RE: Fog of War

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Clearing the fog

by [Jonathen Gray](#) - Monday, May 21, 2018, 6:43 PM

In the edited Fog of War clip Robert S. McNamara quotes T.S. Eliot in saying "we shall

in the video "Fog of War" and Robert McNamara quotes JFK as saying "We shall not cease from exploring And at the end of our exploration We will return to where we started And know the place for the first time" (Fog of War video 9:37). This quote is could be the tagline for the Vietnam War itself.

I believe it is very telling as to what LBJ or Nixon would say if they were given the chance to speak on behalf of their actions looking back on the Vietnam War from a present day viewpoint. America had gone into Vietnam wanting to contain Communist expansion. A decade later and America still wanted to contain that expansion. With this fog of war lifted I believe both LBJ and Nixon would have assessed Vietnam to not be worth the time, money, and lives. However, only after going down that journey would they truly get the perspective they need.

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1

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Both presidents might have done it all over again

by [Paul Geu](#) - Saturday, May 26, 2018, 11:44 AM

I disagree with you that if the fog was lifted both presidents would have not engaged in Vietnam. Based off of how both of these men acted before and after they left office I think that they believe they did what they thought was right for the nation and would do it all over again. While in the end the mistakes that they made were one that we might have repeated I think that how they acted shows that even with full hindsight they would have done it.

I think this is especially true with President Johnson, who had the personality of wanting to show the United States as someone who would not backed down from anything such as aggression from the Soviets. The domino theory was so fully believed after the fall of China that our leaders would do anything to prevent any nation from falling to communism. What we failed to see is that Vietnam hated the Chinese and were not influenced by Soviet Politics and their main goal was unification.

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Classic Blunder: Never Get Involved in a Land War in Asia

by [Jonathon Gray](#) - Saturday, May 26, 2018, 10:02 PM

"The domino theory was so fully believed after the fall of China that our leaders would do anything to prevent any nation from falling to communism"

Their belief in the domino theory is precisely why they would have stayed out of Vietnam or, at the very least, kept it only an advisory / funding scenario / air war scenario. As we've seen in Vietnam America can wage an air war in Vietnam indefinitely and a whole lot more effective than a ground war.

Meanwhile, if LBJ and Nixon invested a fraction of what they shelled out in Vietnam on countering Soviet influence in Cuba, improving South America free trade, and covering NATO allies in Europe the dominos for American interests would have been strategically covered.

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McNamara's Remarks

by [Daisy Burge](#) - Tuesday, May 22, 2018, 8:54 PM

To me, McNamara's statements seem to be a combination of an apology and a justification for his actions in Vietnam. Though his testimony gives the impression that his memory is somewhat foggy on the subject, I have many doubts about the accuracy of his memories as he explains them in this documentary. McNamara was the Secretary of Defense under JFK and LBJ and as such, had access to some of the most sensitive information about the enemy during the war. Though it is obvious that the war was very chaotic and confusing due to the guerilla nature of the conflict, it is also very difficult to believe that McNamara made so many of his military decisions while in the dark (or "fog") about what he was doing. To this day, it would be fair to say that he knows more classified information than 99.999% of the American public about the military strategy in Vietnam. To act like he made his decisions in Vietnam in ignorance is, in my opinion, a way for him to minimize the human cost of his military strategy. It is my opinion that his decisions were made upon a political basis without regard to human loss of life, and it has only been in the past few decades that he came to regret his decisions in the country.

What struck me about McNamara's testimony was his attempt to justify wartime actions that may have violated the Geneva Convention, such as the use of napalm and Agent Orange as "legal." Many historians argue against this fact due to the widespread devastation that such chemicals wrought. Though it seems clear that McNamara

devastation that such chemicals wrought. Though it seems clear that McNamara regrets the vast majority of his actions in Vietnam, just as much of his rhetoric in the documentary attempts to justify his actions as apologizes for them.



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Re: McNamara's Remarks

by [Parker Mann](#) - Sunday, May 27, 2018, 10:24 PM

Daisy thank you for your post!

I would definitely have to agree with your assessment of McNamara's statements. as you put, "To me, McNamara's statements seem to be a combination of an apology and a justification for his actions in Vietnam. Though his testimony gives the impression that his memory is somewhat foggy on the subject, I have many doubts about the accuracy of his memories as he explains them in this documentary." I would say I have to especially have to agree with your assessment that his statements were a combo of apology and justification. I would have to say that because in my opinion he only uses his apology to help his justification. If he truly was sorry about the detrimental amount of lives lost and damage done during the course of the war he oversaw he just would not of choose the obviously detrimental and awful courses of action he took. The Agent Orange example is a perfect showing of this. It is clear that his excuse was BS, but he still tries to justify his actions. So I totally agree with your assessment of his statements and what he is trying to 'push' to the public.

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Foggy Memories

by [Kate Adkisson](#) - Tuesday, May 22, 2018, 9:11 PM

One thing that struck me and angered me from the clip was Mr. McNamara forgetting

One thing that struck me and angered me from the clip was that McNamara forgetting whether or not he authorized the widespread use of Agent Orange in South Vietnam. After explaining what it was and whether or not it was allowed in war, he comments nonchalantly, "I'm not really sure I authorized Agent Orange, I don't remember it, but it certainly occurred" (Fog of War clip, 5:50). I understand that he is an older man now, memories fade and become "foggy". But how could you forget such a dramatic action such as unleashing millions of pounds of chemicals which devastated the surrounding environments and ecosystems and ended human lives? Could he be trying to save himself from the anger of the public by not admitting to it? Or did he legitimately forget if he was the person who authorized it? From the readings and the documentary sources, we learned that the use of herbicidal warfare was part of the operation called "Operation Ranch Hand", in which according to Herring, "sprayed more than 100 million pounds of chemicals such as Agent Orange over millions of acres of forests, destroying an estimated one-half of South Vietnam's timberlands and leaving horrendous human and ecological costs" (Herring, p.189) Just how exactly does one forget if they authorized or did not authorize such a disastrous thing?

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Foggy Memories

by [Daisy Burge](#) - Thursday, May 24, 2018, 8:24 PM

It is my opinion that it is a lot easier for McNamara to say he "forgets" about many of his actions in Vietnam than to admit that he a) knowingly made morally/ethically questionable decisions for the sake of the "body count," b) had multiple violations of the Geneva Conventions authorized under his leadership to a point where it is arguable that he is a war criminal, and c) failed to confront the ramifications that his actions had on American service members and civilians. Honestly, his "forgetting" seems to be a strategic way around the question.

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Suspect McNamara?

by [Parker Mann](#) - Tuesday, May 22, 2018, 10:10 PM

I think when he stated that the Soviets incorrectly thought that the USA was in Vietnam just to follow the French's path, and take over as a colonial power in the region, his memory was a "little foggy" about the actions he and the USA took at the time. I would argue that they did act as a colonial power at the time, though somewhat indirect rule. I would say this because at the time when the French put Ziem and power, and were almost entirely backed by the USA financially (PBS Episode 1, 7:00), the path was paved for the USA to take power in the region for their own interests as they ended up

pattern for the USA to take power in the region for their own interests as they ended up doing, and I would actually say that the Soviets were correct in saying the USA had colonial power in the region.

When he says that the USA would have given North Vietnam independence and unification at the beginning of the war, and that they did not have to waste so many lives fighting for something they never got, I think that is incorrect and bias of McNamara. The USA was the one who disobeyed the Geneva agreements and delayed the elections, which provided one of the only opportunities for honest independence and unification of Vietnam. They also never really offered unification, as I recall they only offered Ho Chi Ming public building and improvement projects, a deal that Ho rejected. I think this is actually pretty offensive that McNamara said this about a country he somewhat destroyed. He gave no credit to the Vietnamese people who went through hell and persevered through the war to actually try to unify their country.

I also it is strange to me that he keeps bringing up that he doesn't know any military commanders who are honest and say that they have not made any mistakes, while he never really admits to making any mistakes of his own...

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Complexity and morality of war

by [Alysia Knapp](#) - Tuesday, May 22, 2018, 10:17 PM

Robert McNamara was one of the biggest decision makers of the Vietnam War. He was not a student learning about the war, or a civilian whose country was at war. He played an important role in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations regarding Vietnam. Therefore to state several times in the Fog of War video how war is too complicated for people to understand (8:00), and the Vietnam war is too complex for him to discuss any further is surprising. His statement how Vietnam is too complicated is not a fair reason to be intimidated by talking about it more, regardless of any emotions he might have felt about it.

He also gives his thoughts about the ambiguity regarding morality of the laws of war. He said he would not do anything illegal in war if there were specific laws. He does not say he wouldn't do something in war because it was morally horrible. At 5:55 he says "I'm not really sure I authorized Agent Orange. I don't remember it..." which is

incredibly shocking. As "a key architect of American policy in Vietnam" (Appy pg 79), he states it is too complicated for people to comprehend, and he can't remember whether he authorized an incredibly harmful chemical attack that still affects people today. To view such evasive and dismissive behavior is a bit shocking.

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Statements only enforce knowledge base

by [Paul Geu](#) - Tuesday, May 22, 2018, 11:17 PM

After viewing the clip from the Fog of War I feel that his statements only enforce my knowledge on why the war basically started, the misunderstanding of why the North Vietnamese fought the war, and the effects of this misunderstanding on the war itself. At the beginning of the video, McNamara states that at the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis they were able to see the point of the view from the Soviets, but in the case for Vietnam, they did not know their enemy well enough to see their viewpoint (Starting 1:15 in Fog of War video). He further mentions that at the conference in 1995 that he was taken back that on the stance that the former foreign minister had that the US was just another colonial power and that the Vietnamese would have fought to the last man to gain independence (2:40 into Fog of War Video). These points made in the video were also noted in the Herring textbook as well as many of the stories in the Appy book, allowing us to know that this information is basically fact.

I felt that he was a little "foggy" on one point that he made in the interview. The statement that he did not remember whether he approved the use of agent orange and whether or not that it was an illegal act seemed to be very confusing especially on how it was his job to approve of such things (5:50 into Fog of War video).

Another issue I had during the interview was when asked why he did not come out against the war after leaving the administration, he just stated that the interviewer doesn't know what he knows on how his words will be taken (10:15 into Fog of War video). By saying this I felt he was either trying to protect his legacy on the war or he felt that he should have done just that but did not want to go against his friend President Johnson. Overall, it would not be surprising to be a little "foggy" with all the decisions that man had to make.

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LBJ's and Nixon's 'Fog'

by [Parker Mann](#) - Wednesday, May 23, 2018, 3:01 PM

I think that both of them would also give us somewhat murky answers similar to those

given by McNamara. I believe that both of them would try to underplay their mistakes and continue to try to justify what they did in Vietnam and in the USA. I do believe though that LBJ would give us a little more insight about the war than Nixon, and admit more real motives for the USA presence in Vietnam. I also think that LBJ would maybe give us insight on the relationship of the Great Society and the war, and how he tried to get the public to perceive his policies. I would also hope they would answer questions about 'secret deployments' and why at some points they tried to keep the war 'quiet' in the USA. Overall though, I doubt they would admit much, and not really add to our understanding of war.

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Both Presidents would defend their actions but not further our understanding

by [Paul Geu](#) - Thursday, May 24, 2018, 12:07 AM

If either Nixon or LBJ had done an interview similar to the documentary that Secretary McNamara was in I do not think that our understanding of the war would be improved because I do not think they would add any new material to the subject. Based off our experiences with these two men I believe that both would defend the decisions that they made for the good of the American people. I also think based off the actions of President Nixon, including the incursion in Cambodia and the secret wire taps of aids that were dissenting in their opinion of the war lead me to believe that he would be very secretive if he even did the interview at all.

I also think that LBJ might show some regret in his actions with the war when it pertains to the effects of the war on his true passion "The Great Society." He was afraid that if he was weak on Vietnam, then he would not get the support he needed from southern conservatives (Herring 141). This fear led him to escalations of troops that led us ultimately to what happened.

McNamara mentions at the beginning of the video that a good military commander, if they are honest with themselves will admit they have made mistakes with military power. However, it is important when they make a mistake they learn from them and hope to never repeat them. Both of these presidents were the ultimate military commander and mistakes were made in the war, but I do not believe that if they were in a documentary such as the Fog of War, that they would admit that they made many mistakes on the application of policy to the Vietnam War.

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Re: Both Presidents would defend their actions but not further our

**understanding**by [Alysia Knapp](#) - Saturday, May 26, 2018, 5:49 PM

I also doubt whether an interview with Johnson or Nixon would clear up any possible misconceptions about their decisions regarding the war. Regardless of intention, both hid events from the public. And while are known now, we must consider the possibility that some information is still classified and might forever remain so. I don't think an interview would bring forth much new information. I think Johnson would explain his thought process and emotions he was feeling that time, but I think if Nixon had an interview it would be similar to McNamara's where the result leaves the audience with more questions and confusion. McNamara came off a bit defensive, and considering the secret bombings Nixon ordered on Cambodia in 1969(PBS, episode 8, 16:40), and other questionable choices he made, I wouldn't be surprised if his manner would have been similar.

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**Both presidents hid something**by [Paul Geu](#) - Sunday, May 27, 2018, 7:23 AM

I completely agree that an interview with either president would basically be a waste of time if you were seeking new reveling information. President Johnson hid a large amount of the escalation of the war from the American public as well as how badly the war was truly going up until his leaving of office. Why he did this might be a very interesting thought but I think that he was too good of a "Texan politician" to let that out during an interview. I agree that if he did an interview he would explain his reasoning emotionally and would probably convince many of his sincerity.

Nixon on the other hand would have been much more analytical in his reasoning for doing anything including the Christmas bombings that practically did nothing to improve our standing at the negotiation table. Nixon was a very paranoid and secretive president and I believe would have done nothing to further our understanding behind his thought process.

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**What Would LBJ and Nixon Think?**by [Daisy Burge](#) - Friday, May 25, 2018, 6:24 PM

To an extent, I believe that LBJ and Nixon's testimonials in a documentary similar to Fog of War would be the same as McNamara's, if not more nebulous. Though

Fog of War would be the same as McNamara's, if not more nebulous. Though McNamara authorized questionable decisions during the war, both LBJ and Nixon took the war effort to new escalations, some of which McNamara disagreed with. Frankel's article in TheNew York Times details that in 1967 McNamara begged LBJ to stop sending men to Vietnam, a request that LBJ denied. Herring seems to assert that LBJ saw the Vietnam crisis as a deeply personal issue and had psychologically tied Vietnam to his own manhood. Though as his presidency continued it became more clear that Vietnam was unwinnable, LBJ tried so many failed tactics in Vietnam that it would be hard to argue that Johnson did not make the situation much worse. Johnson's failure to seek re-election after 1968 makes his attitudes toward the war clear; he did not think Vietnam was winnable.

Vietnam invariably destroyed the political careers of Nixon, McNamara, and LBJ. All made fatal errors in the country which all would be loathed to fully admit, even decades later. Nixon's political fall from grace was tied directly to the Vietnam war policies of the previous administration - the "Pentagon Papers" - and his dirty tactics dealing with his opponents during the election concerning wartime activities. Though either president could have greatly expanded our understanding of how the war took place, they would have had to have been wholly honest about their wartime strategy and activities, a move I doubt either man would have taken.



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I have always believed that the stress of Vietnam and his belief that the war was destroying what he wanted to be his true legacy, "The Great Society," made LBJ decide not to seek reelection. In most of our material, we saw how much President Johnson struggled with foreign policy and heavily relied on the advice from the advisors from the Kennedy administration.

Another reason that I felt pushed the president to not seek reelection was that the job ended up not being what he thought it would be. He did not actively seek the office until it was forced upon him with the assassination of Kennedy in 1963. Once in office his main goal was to get what Kennedy wanted done and at that was the Civil Rights Act passed. Johnson was always more passionate about his domestic policy and once Vietnam had grew into the quagmire that it was, he did not know how to handle it and it ultimately destroyed him.

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The Fog of War documentary was filmed in 2003, which means 40 or so years had passed since the start of LBJ's role in the Vietnam War. LBJ died in 1973, so unlike Mr. McNamara, he did not possess the hindsight that the future has to offer. If he was still alive in 2003, he would've been a 95-year-old man. Mr. McNamara was 87 years old in 2003. I believe, like Mr. McNamara, he would look back on his actions and attempt to justify his mistakes but apologize for his failures. I did not know President Johnson's character before this class, but through the readings and films, I have grown to somewhat understand his motivations and his personality. I believe he was a man thrust into a presidency after a horrific event. He inherited Vietnam from Kennedy, as well as Mr. McNamara. He was a man who wanted to further his domestic agenda, by creating the Great Society. He pushed for racial equality, and according to Herring, Johnson "tied Vietnam to the realization of these goals, fearing that if he showed weakness, southern conservatives who opposed his domestic programs, especially his commitment to racial equality, would attack him with a vengeance" (Herring, p. 141). If he "lost" Indochina, he would lose his dream for America, I believe he thought. If he were alive and starred in a documentary like Fog of War, I believe he would explain all

the pressure he was under, all the uncertainty and hard decisions he made, but I hope and an older man he could look back on his life with a critical eye and reveal some sort of sorrow or apology for his doings.



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Re: Johnson Documentary

by [Parker Mann](#) - Sunday, May 27, 2018, 10:40 PM

Kate,

Thank you for bringing up the point that LBJ wanted to avoid being seen as weak. "He pushed for racial equality, and according to Herring, Johnson "tied Vietnam to the realization of these goals, fearing that if he showed weakness, southern conservatives who opposed his domestic programs, especially his commitment to racial equality, would attack him with a vengeance" I feel that this quote from your responses is very accurate and can be tied to more than one president. I think that Presidential fear of being seen as weak domestically, and internationally played a huge roll in decisions made throughout the course of the war. Many presidents such as LBJ feared taking the right course of action, because of the fact they might be seen as a weak President compared to others who dealt with Vietnam. I think this is most apparent in the refusal to withdraw troops from the area, and choice to

accelerate military action in Vietnam. This connects to the somewhat popular opinion that the war was partially just a massive display of military power of the USA to demonstrate our military might to the world, and not focused enough on winning a war. I think this is very possible especially considering the goals of the Rolling Thunder campaign and what was demonstrated.

also I thank you for the LBJ mistress cartoon lol.

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