

ARCHIVES | 1995

McNamara's Retreat

By MAX FRANKEL

IN RETROSPECT The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. By Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark. Illustrated. 414 pp. New York: Times Books/Random House. \$27.50.

IN his 79th year, Robert S. McNamara at long last offers the public a glimpse of his aching conscience. The most willful Vietnam warrior in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, he was also the first at the top to admit defeat, in private. He then stood silent on the war for a quarter-century and drowned his sorrow in good works at the World Bank. Mr. McNamara personified the slow maturing of America's foreign policy from cocky interventionism to cost-conscious realism, yet for a generation he refused to explain his conversion, explore his mistakes, judge his colleagues or instruct posterity. The pain, or the guilt, was simply too great. As he states in the preface to "In Retrospect": "This is the book I planned never to write."

Until now, he contends, the story of how "the best and the brightest" got it wrong in Vietnam has not been told. But David Halberstam, who applied that ironic phrase to his rendering of the tale 23 years ago, told it better in many ways than Mr. McNamara does now. So, too, did the Pentagon Papers, that huge trove of documents assembled at Mr. McNamara's behest when he first recognized a debt to history. The contemporary analyses in the papers, which were leaked to The Times in 1971, stand up so well that they now serve their patron as a major source.

What Mr. McNamara adds to the public record are some White House documents and tape transcripts revealing, most notably, his own agonized attempts in 1967 to persuade President Lyndon B. Johnson to stop sending more men to the slaughter: the Secretary of Defense who had come to tame the Pentagon with managerial wizardry ended up desperately begging for a fig leaf for withdrawal, in the form of a coalition

that would inevitably give the Vietcong dominance in Saigon. Mr. McNamara says he does not know to this day whether he thus quit or was fired. "Maybe it was both."

But he left with a whimper, not a bang. So why speak out now? The main reason, he says, is that he has "grown sick at heart witnessing the cynicism and even contempt" with which so many Americans view their institutions and leaders. He knows how much Vietnam contributed to that disaffection; he would never deny the war's terrible damage. But he hopes to prove that the mistakes were "mostly honest," even if traceable to a ghastly ignorance of the Vietnamese people, culture and terrain, and the historical forces of that time.

Why should the rest of us relive his agony? Mr. McNamara, characteristically statistical, points to "11 major causes for our disaster in Vietnam" in a chapter called "The Lessons of Vietnam." But implicitly his book screams another lesson: Though cynicism and contempt for power are destructive of government, a respectful skepticism is essential, and rarely wrong.

BY delaying his war memoir so long, Mr. McNamara has greatly compounded the difficulty of his mission. Now that the Soviet Union lies in ruins and American corporations beg for business in China and Vietnam, no one under the age of 50 can be expected to fathom the fears and phobias of the 1960's to which he rightly ascribes the Indochina disaster. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the most venerated American of the time, had taught -- and the Kennedy and Johnson teams never dared to doubt in time -- that if South Vietnam was "lost" to Communism, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia would fall like dominoes, imperiling India, Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines, if not also Japan, and emboldening the Russians and Chinese to extend Communist conquests by military force or subversion in ways that would sooner or later provoke a nuclear World War III, the very destruction of civilization.

Yes, that is how America's leaders spoke to each other and, all too persuasively, to the public. Mr. McNamara's book reminds us that they even repeated the litany in memos to their Presidents, to inoculate them against any temptation to retreat from Vietnam. And if all those dominoes were not cause enough, there were promises to be kept in order to preserve the value of America's other diplomatic threats and commitments.

Mr. McNamara and his generation came to power convinced that the "appeasement" of Nazi Germany -- the failure to block its early grasp for Europe's dominoes -- had led inevitably to a catastrophic World War II. Averting another such

aggression in its earliest stages, when the cos it was their creed
 as they rebuilt Western Europe and stood toe to toe with the Soviet armies across

SEE MY OPTIONS

Subscriber login

Germany, fought to a bloody stalemate against China in Korea, threatened war over Berlin and risked war to force Soviet missiles out of Cuba. Thus "contained," the Soviets and Chinese took to endorsing "wars of liberation," thereby qualifying even distant uprisings as threats to American security. Mr. McNamara's first assignment from President John F. Kennedy was to augment America's nuclear power, whose use was unimaginable, with the forces and weapons they were sure would be needed to fight "conventional" wars.

From this bed of doctrine grew what Mr. McNamara considers his team's most fateful error: mistaking Ho Chi Minh's nationalist drive to unite Vietnam as the challenge of a monolithic Communist world. That misjudgment foreclosed any discussion of how an American withdrawal from Indochina could be made strategically tolerable. It even prevented analysis, before the plunge, of how high a price the commitment was worth. Mr. McNamara's dry rendering of those fateful tenets of containment fails to convey the passion with which they were embraced. And he mostly ignores their powerful resonance in domestic politics.

Kennedy, no less than Johnson, subscribed to these simplistic doctrines and the misjudgments they inspired, even though Mr. McNamara, without persuasive evidence, deems it "highly probable" that Kennedy would have pulled back from massive intervention in a second term. This presumes that had Kennedy lived, the same cast of senior officials would have avoided what Mr. McNamara describes as a second tier of error: the failure to live by the mantra that the battle in Vietnam was political, a fight for the "hearts and minds" of an abused peasantry, and that Americans could assist but never supplant the South Vietnamese.

In this pew, Mr. McNamara himself was a prominent sinner. His can-do spirit found no mission impossible, even as Saigon's governments and armies crumbled. His domineering intellect and predilection for systems analysis made him a pathetic victim of erroneous and deceptive military audits of bodies counted, weapons captured, sorties flown, supply lines ruptured. Soon enough, as the press decided, it became "McNamara's war," and certainly America's.

Mr. McNamara deplores the absence of political advice from old Asia hands who had been driven from Government service in the McCarthy purges. But as he proves again in this memoir, he did not easily integrate political wisdom and intuition into his analyses. Even in retrospect, he does not associate the drift into war in Vietnam with

the Republican taunts that Democrats had "lost" China to Communism. (Kennedy was afraid to recognize not only China but even Outer Mongolia!) Mr. McNamara cannot bring himself to believe that the election calendar affected Johnson's willingness to escalate the war in 1965 but not in 1964 or, as Johnson eventually confessed to Doris Kearns, that he stayed the course in Asia because he feared losing effectiveness at home -- like Truman after the "loss" of China -- as much as he feared the repercussions of defeat abroad.

Finally, Mr. McNamara recounts a third tier of error -- an escalating pattern of military misjudgment. He is hard on the Joint Chiefs of Staff for their misplaced optimism in the early years, their always excessive faith in high-tech weapons and their later expectations that massive bombing and frontal battles could wear down the Vietnamese enemy. He is remiss in not fully rebutting the postwar claims that timid civilians had tied the military's hands with unreasonable limits on troop commitments and bombing targets. Mr. McNamara emphasizes how little was accomplished by bombings heavier even than those in World War II. And he explains Johnson's caution in target selection by recalling the fear that a more rapid escalation could provoke Chinese intervention. But Americans who cannot accept David's triumph over Goliath draw more belligerent "lessons" from this history, which Mr. McNamara should have engaged more directly.

Even more disappointing is Mr. McNamara's unwillingness to explore the human tragedies and political legacies of this longest American war. What was it like to send tens of thousands to their deaths in an increasingly dubious cause? How did the strain affect the men in charge? We get a glimpse of Jacqueline Kennedy beating him on the chest in protest against the war, and of angry insults hurled on the ski slopes, but no real introspection. Mr. McNamara says the war tore deeply at his own family, but quickly adds: "I am not comfortable speaking in such terms."

What then of the political legacy? How, without growing cynical, can citizens protect themselves against the stubborn ignorance and misplaced zeal of their leaders? In the darkest days, Mr. McNamara remembers, he watched the demonstrators from his Pentagon window and insisted that his subordinates show respect for the freedoms of speech and assembly. But he took refuge -- and takes it even now -- in opinion polls that recorded support from the majority of Americans who, as he well knew, had been misinformed and denied vital information at every major turn.

"Looking back," he writes, "I clearly erred by not forcing . . . a knock-down, drag-out debate over the loose assumptions, unasked questions and thin analyses

underlying our military strategy in Vietnam. I had spent 20 years as a manager identifying problems and forcing organizations -- often against their will -- to think deeply and realistically about alternative courses of action and their consequences. I doubt I will ever fully understand why I did not do so here."

YET even now Mr. McNamara means he should have stirred debate only inside the small circle of Presidential counselors led by himself, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser (later succeeded by Walt Rostow). Mr. McNamara blames Johnson for going to war furtively, with no regard for the rights of Congress and the public, but he rejects any obligation to resign in protest or, once out of office, to share his policy disagreements with the country. Cabinet officers, he contends, should have a constituency of one: the President -- from whom they derive all authority and through whom alone they can be held accountable.

That is surely the right ethic for normal times. Unelected officials should not steal their President's mandate to pursue an independent course. But a thousand dead Americans a month create their own constituency. Even military discipline admits a higher duty than hierarchical loyalty when power is badly used and puts lives at risk.

Mr. McNamara relieved his private turmoil by reading poetry, and shared his misgivings with Robert F. Kennedy and a few other intimates. But he refused to abandon or attack the President whom he had helped to guide into quicksand. He and Johnson "loved and respected" each other, in a bond that even now, in retrospect, keeps the public at a distance looking on, with skepticism, I hope.

The TimesMachine archive viewer is a subscriber-only feature.

We are continually improving the quality of our text archives. Please send feedback, error reports, and suggestions to archive_feedback@nytimes.com.

A version of this review appears in print on April 16, 1995, on Page 7007001 of the National edition with the headline: McNamara's Retreat.