

Rich Rusk

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Did He Help With the Healing?

Two decades after the American withdrawal from Vietnam, 27 years since my father, former secretary of state Dean Rusk, left office, the Vietnam War explodes again in the national consciousness, thanks to Robert McNamara's new book.

"This is the book I planned never to write," wrote McNamara in "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam." But at age 79, he changed his mind. "We must tell the American people why their government and its leader behaved as we did." He implores us all "to learn from that experience."

I first met Robert McNamara in January 1961 at the swearing-in ceremony for John Kennedy's new Cabinet. I was a squirt-faced kid of fourteen. I met him again in 1985 at his office in Washington, D.C., while researching my dad's memoirs, published under the title "As I Saw It."

Our paths crossed once more last Sunday night, this time on a radio talk show in Sacramento, Calif. Bob McNamara wasn't on the air, but Ron Kovic was. On Christmas Eve in 1964, Ron and I rode a Greyhound bus from boot camp to Washington, D.C., two young Marines going home for the holidays.

I had forgotten the bus ride and Ron Kovic. He wasn't yet famous. Ron hadn't yet gone to Nam, been horribly wounded or written "Born on the Fourth of July."

"Hey, Ron," I asked last Sunday. "What's it like having Oliver Stone and Tom Cruise make a movie about your life?"

"Incredible!" said Kovic.

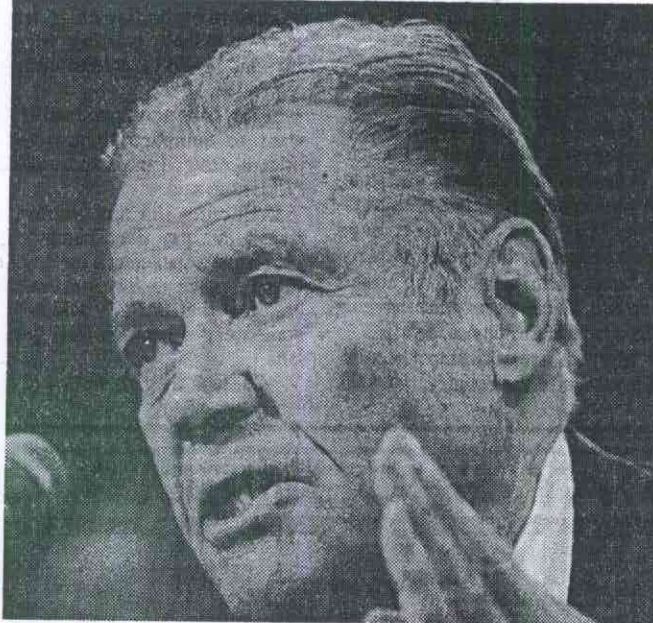
That was the easy question. The tough one was asked by radio host Phil Angeles:

"Does it help with the healing?" Angeles queried us. "Should McNamara have written this book?"

McNamara's published mea culpa—"we were wrong, terribly wrong"—has gut-punched many Americans, especially Vietnam vets.

"Why now?" demand his critics. "Why didn't McNamara do anything about the war while in office?"

I can't speak for Bob McNamara beyond restating his written views. But I know something about my fa-



BY CRAIG HERNDON—THE WASHINGTON POST

ther's views. He too was an "architect" of the Vietnam War. Critics dubbed it "Dean Rusk's War" as much as "Robert McNamara's War."

"It was 'Ho Chi Minh's War,'" my father always insisted.

My dad remembered Ron Kovic and his Vietnam Veterans Against the War. They had hurled their medals from the steps of the Capitol in angry and bitter protest. It was a searing moment.

"They compelled our attention," my dad said.

But they didn't change his mind about Vietnam.

Years later I asked my father point-blank:

"Pop, why didn't you change your mind about the war?"

It was a central question of "As I Saw It" and a riddle for me. In five years of research and long hours talking with my dad, I never heard his "mea culpa" about Vietnam. He went to his grave last Dec. 20 with no public apologies and no confessions. There were no private ones either.

"I believed in those decisions at the

time they were made," explained my father. "There is nothing I can say now that would diminish my share of responsibility. I live with that, and others can make of it what they will."

"We all made decisions we came to regret," he added. "But I feel that I owe my primary allegiance to my two presidents, to the men and women we sent to South Vietnam, and to the cause they tried their best to serve."

My dad's staunchness won him grudging respect as the years went by. But somehow, failing to change his mind became a kind of virtue. And in this same curious alchemy, changing one's mind—i.e., Bob McNamara—became a vice. For me, my dad's resoluteness in supporting a doomed cause was neither good nor bad, just part of the continuing tragedy of Vietnam.

As much as I loved my father and revere his memory, honesty compels me to say more.

I have no secret wisdom with which to unravel these mysteries. But in this son's perspective, one thing was never acknowledged by my father, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Clark Clifford, George Ball or any of those with whom I talked.

Let's call it the "psychology of command decision-making."

By the mid and late '60s, Americans by the thousands were dying in Vietnam. My dad and Bob McNamara made decisions that sent young men to their deaths. They had the blood of thousands on their consciences.

Once American troops were committed, there would be no turning back, goes the syndrome. And thus began the process by which "one dead American begets another dead American," wrote David Halberstam.

From a son's perspective, I often wondered: What choice did my dad have, once the buildup had begun and the coffins started coming home to small towns all across America? What choice did he have, this decent, humane father of mine to whom the sanctity of human life was all-important?

His taciturn nature, which served him well in negotiating with heads of state, ill prepared him for the

wrenching, introspective, soul-shattering journey that a true reappraisal of Vietnam policy would have involved.

For all my father's strength and courage and intelligence, changing his mind on Vietnam was something he just couldn't do. Although trained for high office, he was unprepared for such a journey, for admitting that thousands of lives might have been lost in vain.

He couldn't do it. He just couldn't do it. That is how I saw it.

And that is what I read to him in our final draft.

"That's bull—!" my father roared. In our 48 years together I had never heard him use the phrase.

It may well have been. And maybe I was practicing "pop psychology" as Pop suggested.

But the fact remains: Of that small circle who made Vietnam policy in the '60s, only one was able to stare into the abyss, challenge his own assumptions and confront that horrible question:

"What if I am wrong?"

That man was Robert McNamara.

He may have been weak in conversion, irresolute in pressing his doubts. But a shattered Bob McNamara did try to change policy. He lost that argument within the administration, out of public view, and resigned—or was fired—in 1967.

There was another panelist on Sunday's talk show who thought McNamara had done right—a former Marine who also knows something about sin and confession and courage—and laying bare one's soul. Thirty-one years ago, we rode a Greyhound bus together.

Ron Kovic.

"Over the long run," Ron said, "McNamara's book and his comments will promote healing."

"As Americans, we must all embrace McNamara."

"We must all welcome him home."

The writer, son of former secretary of state Dean Rusk, is news editor of the Oconee Arrow, Watkinsville, Ga., from which this article is reprinted by permission.