

# McNamara Writes Vietnam Mea Culpa

## *Memoirs Break Silence on War*

4/9/95

By Thomas W. Lippman  
Washington Post Staff Writer

After three decades of refusing to discuss publicly his central role in the Vietnam War, former defense secretary Robert S. McNamara has written a brutally self-critical memoir assigning himself much of the blame for what many believe is the most tragic international misadventure in this nation's history.

As recounted by McNamara in "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam," the war could and should have been avoided and should have been halted at several key junctures after it started. According to McNamara, he and other senior advisers to President Lyndon B. Johnson failed to head it off through ignorance, inattention, flawed thinking, political expediency and lack of courage.

Even when he and Johnson's other aides knew that their Vietnam strategy had little chance of success, according to McNamara, they pressed ahead with it, ravaging a beautiful country and sending young Americans to their deaths year after year, because they had no other plan. And had the conflict known as "McNamara's War" never been fought, McNamara now says, communism would not have prevailed in Asia, and the interna-

See McNAMARA, A20, Col. 1

### McNAMARA, From A1

tional strategic position of the United States would be no worse than it is today.

True to his lifelong passion for charts and statistics—made famous in the "body counts" that he still defends—McNamara lists "11 major causes for our failure in Vietnam." The first and most basic is, "We misjudged then—as we have since—the geopolitical intentions of our adversaries . . . and we exaggerated the dangers to the United States of their actions." In other words, Vietnam was not so important after all.

Coming from another source, those would not be startling conclusions. Many scholars and military analysts made similar assessments years ago, even while the war was still raging. The Pentagon Papers, which McNamara commissioned, revealed in 1971 that McNamara himself had doubts about the war even as he was escalat-

ing it. The fact that McNamara now discloses the extent of the Johnson administration's inner turmoil about the war is news only because he has long maintained a sphinx-like silence about his role, arguing that it would serve no purpose to plow such painful ground. He skirted the subject even in long interviews with his biographer, Deborah Shapley.

McNamara's memoir—"the book I planned never to write"—is to be published this week by the Times Books division of Random House, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the fall of Saigon to communist troops.

The book is based not only on his recollections but also on extensive research, including analysis of declassified documents not previously published, by McNamara and his associate, Brian VanDeMark.

To the question "Why now?" he responds, "There are many reasons; the main one is that I have 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 notes, is a large part of the reason for that cynicism, along with the Watergate scandal. Now the time has come, he writes, for "Americans to understand why we made the mistakes we did." He and his colleagues, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, were not stupid or venal. Dubbed "the best and the brightest," they were all smart, dedicated people who "acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future genera-

tions to explain why." His answer mostly is that they could not figure out what to do, so they just blundered ahead, sustained by wishful thinking.

McNamara writes that John F. Kennedy, who preceded Johnson in the White House, insisted that "he did not wish to make an unconditional commitment to prevent the loss of South Vietnam and flatly refused to endorse the introduction of U.S. combat forces." After Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, however, the military buildup in Vietnam was both inevitable and destined to fail, for many reasons, according to McNamara.

Johnson, challenged in the 1964 election campaign by conservative Republican Barry Goldwater, was determined not to appear weak against the perceived threat of communist expansion. South Vietnam's revolving-door governments were corrupt and ineffectual. Johnson's style of governing was to play one set of advisers off against others, blocking development of a coherent strategy. As important as Vietnam was, McNamara and his colleagues were distracted by events elsewhere, including the 1967 Middle East war.

Ignorant of Vietnamese history and culture, McNamara, Rusk and their colleagues failed utterly to understand the dedication and staying power of

the communist North Vietnamese. They misconstrued the relationship between China and Vietnam, failed to appreciate the intense nationalism of the Vietnamese, and never grasped that Vietnam, as a largely agrarian society with a subsistence economy, could not be crippled by bombing.

McNamara admits that he helped President Johnson deceive the press and the American public about the war, though he denies deliberately giving false information to Congress at the time it passed the 1964 Tonkin Gulf resolution. He also admits that Johnson and he misused the resolution to undertake a military commitment far beyond what Congress intended, and argues that a U.S. president should always obtain the assent of Congress before sending troops into action.

McNamara lists numerous occasions on which he says he should have forced the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military team in Vietnam to present a rigorous analysis of their strategy and to resolve their conflicting views on tactics. But it never happened because "we, as a government, failed to address the fundamental issues," he writes.

The Johnson administration's decision-making process has been described at length in earlier accounts of the war by Stanley Karnow, Chester

I. Cooper and others. McNamara adds new details and documents, plus an insider's view, and concludes that there were five key points between November 1963 and December 1967 when, "We could and should have withdrawn from South Vietnam."

The December 1967 decision point came when the Central Intelligence Agency delivered an exhaustive analysis saying no amount of bombing would deter North Vietnam from its objective of winning the south and that a U.S. withdrawal would not undermine this nation's overall security interests. The CIA is the only agency of the U.S. national security apparatus that gets a passing grade from McNamara for its performance during the Vietnam War.

McNamara's memories and his use of previously unexplored archives cast new light on key events. For example, he recounts that he initiated—without telling Rusk or Bundy—his crucial trip to Johnson's Texas ranch on the day after Christmas 1965, during which he persuaded the president to "pause" the bombing of North Vietnam to induce Hanoi to open negotiations. McNamara recalls his sense of satisfaction as he left the ranch to resume a skiing vacation, but says it was tempered by "a strong sense of guilt for having gone around my colleagues to win my case. It was the only time I did so in my seven years as secretary."

Early in 1965, President Johnson sent Army Chief of Staff Gen. Harold K. Johnson to Vietnam to assess the situation after the start of U.S. bombing in the north. It has been widely re-

ported that Gen. Johnson recommended expanding the air war and sending a division of U.S. combat troops, or about 16,000 men. But McNamara now reveals that Gen. Johnson told him and the president privately that "it could take 500,000 troops five more years to win the war." By 1969 there were indeed more than 500,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam.

To illustrate the administrator's complete failure to appreciate the Asian context in which the Vietnam War occurred, McNamara notes that he and his colleagues ignored a seminal event of 1965—the anti-communist coup in Indonesia—that ought to have shown them the "domino theory" was invalid.

George F. Kennan, architect of the "containment" theory of combating communism, recognized at once that this was a strategic setback for communism in general and for Communist China in particular. "This event had greatly reduced America's stakes in Vietnam," McNamara writes now, but at the time "Kennan's point failed to catch our attention and thus to influence our actions."

Oddly, in a memoir almost entirely critical of his own performance, McNamara defends the "body count," the military's often-ridiculed attempt to measure progress in the war by counting enemy dead. Accounts at the time indicated that field commanders routinely inflated the numbers to tell the brass what they wanted to hear.

"Obviously, there are things you cannot quantify: honor and beauty, for

example," McNamara writes. "But things you can count, you ought to count. Loss of life is one when you are fighting a war of attrition."

Those who have followed McNamara's career as president of Ford Motor Co., secretary of defense and president of the World Bank will find in this new memoir an unexpectedly personal approach. He was always a charts-and-graphs, systems analysis type who kept his personal views to himself. Now at the age of 78, he has finally broken down that barrier.

Recalling the Johnson administration's dismay with the lack of progress in the crucial year of 1965, McNamara notes, "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."

And in his summation, McNamara writes that, "People are human; they are fallible. I concede with painful candor and a heavy heart that the adage applies to me and to my generation of American leadership regarding Vietnam. Although we sought to do the right thing—and believed we were doing the right thing—in my judgment, hindsight proves us wrong. We both overestimated the effect of South Vietnam's loss on the security of the West and failed to adhere to the fundamental principle that in the final analysis, if the South Vietnamese were to be saved, they had to end the war themselves. Straying from this central truth, we built a progressively more massive effort on an inherently unstable foundation."

Uncharacteristically, he briefly opens a window onto the war's impact on his family. On Nov. 2, 1965, a young Quaker activist named Norman R. Morrison, emulating the protest tactics of Vietnam's Buddhist monks, burned himself to death outside McNamara's Pentagon window.

"I reacted to the horror of his action by bottling up my emotions and avoided talking about them with anyone, even my family," he recalls. Referring to his late wife, Margaret, he writes, "There was much that Margaret and I and the children should have talked about, yet at moments like this I often turn inward instead—it is a grave weakness."

## Counting Reasons It Went Wrong

**T**here were 11 major causes for our failure in Vietnam:

- **WE MISJUDGED** . . . the geopolitical intentions of our adversaries . . . and we exaggerated the dangers to the United States of their actions.
- **WE VIEWED** the people and leaders of South Vietnam in terms of our own experience. We saw in them a thirst for—and a determination to fight for—freedom and democracy. We totally misjudged the political forces within the country.
- **WE UNDERESTIMATED** the power of nationalism to motivate a people (in this case, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong) to fight and die for their beliefs and values. . . .
- **OUR MISJUDGMENTS OF FRIEND AND FOE** alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area. . . .
- **WE FAILED THEN**—as we have since—to recognize the limitations of modern, high-technology military equipment, forces, and doctrine in confronting unconventional, highly motivated people's movements.
- **WE FAILED TO DRAW CONGRESS** and the American people into a full and frank discussion and debate of the pros and cons of a large-scale U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia before we initiated the action.
- **AFTER THE ACTION GOT UNDER WAY** and unanticipated events forced us off our planned course, we failed to retain popular support in part because we did not explain fully what was happening. . . .
- **WE DID NOT RECOGNIZE** that neither our people nor our leaders are omniscient. Where our own security is not directly at stake, our judgment of what is in another people's or country's best interest should be put to the test of open discussion in international forums. We do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our own image or as we choose.
- **WE DID NOT HOLD TO THE PRINCIPLE** that U.S. military action—other than in response to direct threats to our own security—should be carried out only in conjunction with multinational forces supported fully (and not merely cosmetically) by the international community.
- **WE FAILED TO RECOGNIZE** that in international affairs, as in other aspects of life, there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions.
- **UNDERLYING MANY OF THESE ERRORS** lay our failure to organize the top echelons of the executive branch to deal effectively with the extraordinarily complex range of political and military issues, involving the great risks and costs—including, above all else, loss of life—associated with the application of military force under substantial constraints over a long period of time.

Page

THE WASHINGTON POST



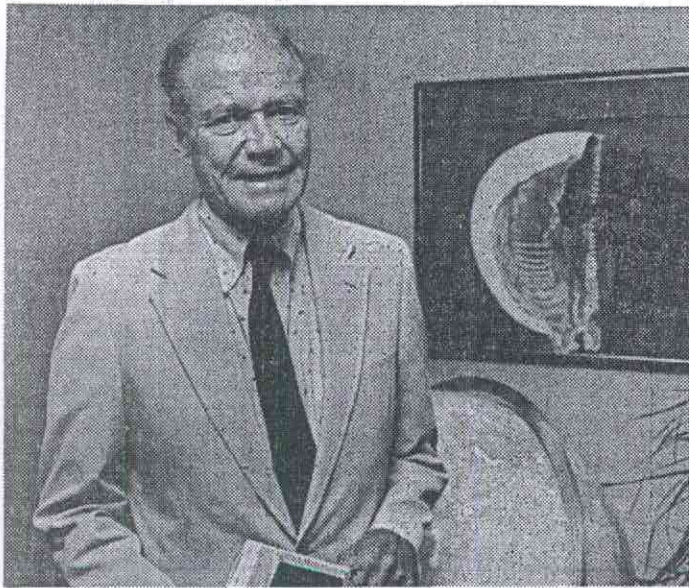
UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

President Johnson presents the Distinguished Civilian Service award to McNamara, far left, on his departure from the Defense Department for the World Bank in 1968. Three years earlier, left, he visited U.S. troops of the 173rd Airborne Brigade stationed in South Vietnam.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

From his window at the Pentagon, McNamara could observe antiwar demonstrations, including the self-immolation of a young activist in 1965 that affected him deeply.



BY FRANK JOHNSTON — THE WASHINGTON POST

**In 1993, the retired auto executive, government official and international banker works on his Vietnam memoirs, "the book I planned never to write."**



UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL



Six months into his seven years as secretary of defense, McNamara, above, meets with President Kennedy in Hyannis Port, Mass., in 1961. Preoccupied with Vietnam four years later, right, he confers with Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, the U.S. ambassador to Saigon.



ASSOCIATED PRESS