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McNamara's self-indulgence

Our initial reaction to Robert S. McNamara's Vietnam-era memoir, "In Retrospect" — which carries the message that the Vietnam War was wrong — was revulsion at the pain the ex-secretary of defense would likely inflict on the loved ones of those who died serving their country in Indochina.

Now, however, it seems that the most insidious consequence of McNamara's mea culpa may be the disgraceful response it has provoked from President Clinton.



McNAMARA

The President was asked whether or not he felt vindicated — as regards his own decision to dodge the draft — by McNamara's argument that the Vietnam War was unwise and unwinnable. Clinton's reply? "Yes, I do. I know that sounds self-serving, but I do."

The President, of course, was an anti-war activist who took elaborate and highly questionable measures to avoid serving in Vietnam; thus, it's not surprising that Clinton would take satisfaction in McNamara's claim that Washington woefully mis-

handled its conduct of the war. No doubt, tens of thousands of others — who fled to Canada or burned their draft cards or spat at returning Vietnam veterans — now feel a good deal less guilty about having allowed their classmates and colleagues to fight and, often, die in the service of this country.

STILL DOESN'T GET IT

The President himself still doesn't seem to understand the implications of having connived to evade the draft. Even though he's now commander-in-chief — and wouldn't much have liked it if each soldier he ordered to Haiti last year decided individually whether or not to go — Clinton continues not to grasp the dubious nature of his own past conduct.

The President's job consists in leading the American people in times of crisis; it is he, after all, who must — if necessary — order U.S. troops into battle. Yet after reading the McNamara memoir, Clinton deems it appropriate to chortle about his own sense of vindication and strikes a self-righteous pose reminiscent of the 1960s — a time when draft dodgers

felt morally superior to the "poor SOBs" who willingly served and sacrificed for their country.

For the President of the United States to assume such a stance can only serve to undermine the discipline and esprit de corps that defines the American military.

As indicated, we'd have been profoundly troubled by the McNamara book even if Clinton had remained silent.

It's not surprising that the memoir has already drawn extraordinary attention; and the former defense secretary's televised display of anguish

last week — he broke into tears on a national program — can only serve to heighten interest in his reminiscences.

McNamara, who oversaw the American buildup in Vietnam, now argues that the United States could simply have withdrawn in 1963 without dire consequences for the rest of Southeast Asia, for American interests in the region or even for Vietnam itself. He reports that he and others in government ignored factors specific to Vietnamese history, and concludes now that the war could never have been won.

SURVIVORS' PAIN

McNamara's central role in planning and carrying out the Vietnam War means his confessional will have special resonance for the families and friends of those who lost their lives fighting communism half-way around the world. Inevitably, these Americans will be profoundly pained by the suggestion that the men who fell in Vietnam died — for practical purposes — in vain.

The former defense secretary's mawkish display of personal anguish suggests a self-indulgent focus on his own emotional well-being.

Although we consider Robert McNamara a patriot and wish him peace of mind, we find ourselves far more concerned with the psychological implications of his book for the families of the men who died.

Insofar as McNamara felt compelled to revisit the decision-making process that took the U.S. into combat, he might have spent a bit more time emphasizing a fact we know to be true: Washington was fighting a just war against a vicious foe acting

in concert with Moscow.

A battle against such an enemy is an inherently noble undertaking.

Robert McNamara, so far as we can tell, still recognizes this reality. Thus, he might easily have devoted some space to underscoring his sense that the young men who fought in Vietnam were engaged in a worthy struggle. Strategic errors — however sweeping — can't alter this fundamental truth.

VALID DEBATE

The ex-Pentagon chief's eagerness, in the twilight of his life, to review what went wrong in Vietnam is altogether understandable. And his speculation that the war may well have been beyond America's capacity to win fuels a valid historical debate.

But the manner in which McNamara has handled this undertaking — drenching the discussion in his own tears — serves only to diminish the sacrifices made by the men who served.

History, certainly, has its claims; and curiosity about how Robert McNamara — a generation later — views the Vietnam War is to be expected.

But human decency has parallel claims.