

McNamara's New War

His Vietnam
— And His
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By William B. Falk

STAFF WRITER

New York — Alone, surrounded by documents and thoroughly insulated from the clamor outside, Robert S. McNamara was mustering his defenses.

McNamara was holed up Friday morning with his papers in a plush lounge at the River Club in Manhattan, the East River framed behind him in a picture window. His bony body curled up in a corner of the couch, the 78-year-old former secretary of defense was preparing himself for another day of blood-letting in support of his book, "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam."

"Did you see this?" McNamara asked. From the pile he pulled out a largely laudatory article about his book by Col. David Hackworth — "the most decorated living veteran," McNamara noted.

"And this, you can have a copy of this," he said, handing over a letter from the widow of a peace protester who burned himself outside McNamara's window at the Pentagon in 1965. In her letter, Anne Morrison Welsh thanks him for "his courageous and honest reappraisal of the Vietnam war and his involvement in it."

McNamara keeps a photocopy of every positive review, editorial and note, reading and re-reading them. "Those are the people who mean the most to me." Like a security blanket, the positive responses will go with him to Washington, D.C., as he begins the second leg of a publicity tour that will take him to nine U.S. cities, a tour that has ripped off the scab of a two-decade-old wound from what protesters once called "Mr. McNamara's war." "We expected there to be strong feelings," said Peter Osnos, the publisher of Times Books, who served as McNamara's editor. "What we didn't expect was the intensity of the reaction."

In the book, the former defense secretary under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, whom Johnson once called "the smartest man I ever met," admits he knew as early as 1966 that the U.S. could not achieve a military victory over North Vietnam. In several memos and meetings, he expressed his misgivings about continued U.S. escalation to President Lyndon Johnson.

Johnson, determined to avoid a military defeat and irritated at the hand-wringing of his once hard-headed technocrat, pushed him out of the Pentagon and into a job as head of the World Bank. "He's an emotional basket case," Johnson complained to his press secretary, George Christian.

McNamara went at the press conference marking

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his departure in 1968, and went quietly, saying nothing publicly of his doubts about the war. He held his peace for almost three decades, while privately replaying the years he spent presiding over the war's doomed escalation.

"No, I don't want to say I was haunted," McNamara said. "That sounds like emotions or something. What I was doing was turning it over in my mind, trying to understand what had happened."

Approximately 51,000 of the 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam died after McNamara saw the conflict as doomed.

McNamara said he kept his silence out of his loyalty to Johnson. To have questioned the war publicly, even after he left office, McNamara said, would be "giving aid and comfort to the enemy."

The response to his admissions has been withering. On radio talk shows, in TV panels, and on the pages of newspapers and magazines, McNamara has been lacerated by both those who supported the war and those who protested it. David Halberstam, who examined the nation's Vietnam policy and the men who formed it in the book "The Best and the Brightest," assailed McNamara's work as "surprisingly bloodless" and "singularly dishonest," and described its author as blinded by "self-delusion."

Prominent veterans said his belated revelations serve only to renew their pain. John Behan, the direc-



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McNamara reports to President Johnson after returning from a trip to ^{US} ¹⁸

tor of the New York State Office of Veterans Affairs, said that in the past two weeks the number of Vietnam vets seeking counseling from state outreach offices has increased tenfold.

"A lot of guys who had finally gone through the recovery process are saying, 'What is this man saying about my service? Did it all mean nothing?'" Behan said. While a Marine sergeant in Vietnam, Behan lost both his legs to a landmine. "I don't know if he did this for profit or as an old man trying to cleanse his soul, but I wish he had kept his mouth shut."

In his stack of papers, McNamara doesn't carry around photocopies of the intense criticism his book has generated, but it weighs on him heavily, nonetheless. "Of course it hurts," he said, his face ensing into a tight smile. "Yes. Certainly."

Even before veterans began demanding that he donate proceeds of the book to veterans organizations, McNamara said, he was considering contributing some profits to sponsor a conference bringing together U.S. and Vietnamese policymakers and military leaders. The Council on Foreign Relations, he said, has agreed to help set up that conference.

Whatever he contributes, he said, "is a personal matter." He would rather talk about the nine stages of the war's escalation and the 11 lessons of Vietnam outlined in his book, and their implications for current and future foreign policy.

"The book is not a memoir," he said, holding his glasses in one hand and a pen in the other. "It is a historical retrospective review, and an analysis. I don't wish to explore my private feelings any more than is essential to disclose the environment in which the decisions were being made."

But though wedded to logic and in thrall to the power of numbers, McNamara is also a man who, he admits, cries easily. Suppressed feelings exact revenge by flooding him at embarrassing moments.

He wept on "Prime Time Live" when Diane Sawyer questioned him about the divisions the war had made in his own family. While McNamara masterminded the war from the Pentagon, his college-son participated in peace protests. McNamara also admits to having strong feelings of anguish and guilt upon visiting the Vietnam memorial in Washington, feelings that he won't discuss.

"To express those feelings doesn't throw any historical light," he said. Exploring his own anguish, he said, would create the impression he's asking for forgiveness, that the book was an act of contrition.

He wrote the book, he said, so that history would understand the mind-set of the men he calls "my associates," the officials of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who pursued the war.

"It was an intelligent, dedicated group of public officials." He described "the best and the brightest," as men who meant well but were mired in the fear of appeasement bred by the international experience with Nazi Germany in World War II, and

in the Cold War fear of communist expansion.

They didn't understand that Vietnam was less about communist expansionism than about nationalism, he said. They didn't understand that the only way to defeat North Vietnam would be to invade it, destroy much of its civilian population and invite the intervention of China and the possibility of a Third World War.

McNamara said he didn't realize until much later the error of the domino theory, which said a loss in Vietnam would cause the countries of Southeast Asia to fall one by one to communism. That's another reason for his silence in 1967, he said: he still believed the fall of South Vietnam to the communists would be a grave disaster, which is why he urged Johnson to seek a diplomatic solution, not a pullout.

"I wasn't wise enough to write this book until very recently," McNamara said.

Until very recently, he said, he never intended to write the book at all, fearing he would "unconsciously" portray events in a self-serving way.

"Most human beings, when they look at their past, put themselves in the best light possible," McNamara said, gathering up his documents and small pile of supportive letters and articles. He had four more interviews to do this day.

"They write of their actions of the past in ways that justify their actions. I was determined not to do that."

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