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IDEAS

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A Pin-striped Suit And a Heart of Stone

Suffering the tragedy of the Organization Man, McNamara has difficulty understanding himself separate from the corporation.

"Late in spring, Herzog had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends."

— From "Herzog" by Saul Bellow

IN THIS MID-SPRING, Robert McNamara comes before America to explain his role in the Vietnam War in his memoir, "In Retrospect", conceding "on a piece of paper," as Herzog did, "I cannot justify."

Pilloried by critics for his failure to "go public" as a life-saving dissenter long ago, the former Secretary of Defense seems unable to find his voice as a convincing penitent. Why is this 78-year-old man kept on the stand or kneeling in the confessional, uncomfortable and unshriven?

This is America, after all, where no unforgivable sin against the Spirit is acknowledged, indeed, where sin itself is classified not under religion but under entertainment. On television talk shows uncontrite Jukes-like family ensembles — there to flaunt rather than be forgiven — are absolved anyway and all day long by father- and mother-confessor television hosts.

Perhaps pardon is withheld because McNamara so perfectly symbolizes the Organization Man who was thought, almost half a century ago, to be the evolutionary triumph of a command-and-control business culture. Their charcoal-suited legion gave itself generously to corporation and country, stabilizing both during post-World War II prosperity.

The terrible irony of the century's end is that even organizations no longer make a place for organization men. The latter's single-eyed loyal-

ty has been sacrificed to "re-engineering," "downsizing" and "outplacing" — killed by the very jargon by which they had lived.

McNamara still speaks that language fluently but it is a tongue that cannot convey emotion and does not address the nation's still grieving heart. He avoided talking about his feelings, he tells us, to family members who held opposite views from his own about the war. He held his tongue in his own home where tension brought ulcers to his wife and son over the conflict he did not think we could win and that he did not think he could end. Lear, bereft, stirs sympathy that is largely denied to McNamara as he stands lonely and uncomprehending at the mount of his tragedy.

McNamara seems puzzled and frustrated by interviewers, book reviewers and other Americans who hesitate to raise their hands in abso-

lution. His discomfort with emotion institutionalizes the distance between himself and his readers. They do not hear the voice of the agonized soul but of the company president explaining away losses from bad judgements: "Yes, breadwinners were fired but we had to keep the company going, and there was nothing I could do about it at the time."

The sincere confessions that McNamara may have intended read instead like an annual report. The woes to which he was witness are as depersonalized as they were a generation and more ago by his cost-accountant's analyses of body counts, ratios of troops to Vietcong, numbers of sorties flown and tons of bombs dropped. A prisoner of such dehumanized numerology, he concludes with an 11-point list explaining the

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Vietnam failure. Suffering the seminal tragedy of the Organization Man, he has difficulty in observing or understanding himself separate from the corporation — as footnoted by the blur under which he left government saying he never knew if he quit or was fired:

Organization men only commit passionless crimes. They sacrifice less out of a great love than man from rampant fear. The former Defense Secretary is thereby handicapped. He explains that he did for America out of fear, that the mirrors would fall, that we would lose the Far East, that "security" justified everything. He cannot help but sound more like the icy rationing Boesky than the profoundly human but pentant Augustine.

The essence of confession is found when we face the truth about ourselves and acknowledge aloud. It demands the spoken word as *bha*, the Latin root of the word confess, tells us. It is the art of the Latin *fari*, "to speak"; it is the seal meaning in *effabilis*, "capable of being expressed in words", and fate, "the power that predetermines events," or the "inevitable event" itself. McNamara holds a shield of blandness against these overlapping echoes, speaking hatched out words about blood-red history.

When pressed recently by CBS's Richard Prekel about why he didn't express his convictions about the futility of the Vietnam War when he left the cabinet in 1968, it is the power of his own voice that McNamara disowns. "I wouldn't have been an effective voice . . . I was the last voice anyone would have listened to . . . there was no way I could have affected the

course of events then." Does he sigh internally with Lear: "I have full cause of weeping but this heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or e'er I'll weep."?

A shallow saying once urged us to believe that "Love means you never have to say you're sorry." But in fact, loves means just the opposite. We do have to say we are sorry out loud, so that the beloved can hear it, so indeed, that we ourselves can hear it too. McNamara's agony is that he still cannot find the words to exorcise the fate that has enveloped him. It is painful for him to search and not find the words that he, as much as everyone else, needs to hear in order to bring him forgiveness.

McNamara writes less in sorrow for the nation's dead than to defend the institutions of government he views as now threatened by public cynicism. But he does not seem to recognize his own contribution to that cynicism. An Organization Man to the end. His tragedy — perhaps a great American tragedy — is the cruel destiny he is now experiencing for being more comfortable with numbers than words, for being loyal to institutions for their own sake rather than to the human purposes they are meant to serve.

He remains so distant that nobody is even tempted to respond to his sin with the American cliché, "I feel your pain." The sadness of McNamara is that having lived for the corporation — even when he disagreed with it — he cannot easily distinguish himself from it. Unable to touch his own sorrow or find its cause, he cannot forgive himself. That is why so many others cannot forgive him either.