

BOB McNAMARA: THE GREAT VINDICATOR

BY EUGENE J. MCCARTHY

The writer was a Democratic senator from Minnesota who ran for president as an anti-war candidate in 1968.

IF YOU DON'T get it, you don't get it." That's *The Washington Post's* advertising slogan. So I was somewhat surprised to be invited to a reception, given by Katharine Graham, the chairman of the board of *The Post*, for Robert McNamara, on the publication of his new book, *In Retrospect*.

I didn't get it. I had not in 20 years been invited to the residence of the publisher. I had never been on social or friendly or good political terms with the author. I was out of town on the day of the reception, but would not have gone had I been here. I had no very clear reason for not going, other than a vague sense that the event was to be a kind of rite of reconciliation, a return of a prodigal son. I was not prepared to participate.

If one were to apply to Robert McNamara one sobriquet, in the manner of Lincoln's "The Great Emancipator," or Reagan's "The Great Communicator," it would best be "The Great Vindicator." The early response to the publication of *In Retrospect* was anger, if not rage, on the part of those who had been against the war, those who fought and those who were for it, and those who managed it and promoted it. The current attitude by most of those involved in the war is that what they have learned from McNamara's book has vindicated them for support or opposition to the war.

President Clinton says his opposition and avoidance of service in the war was justified by McNamara's confession; that he has been vindicated. Admirals and generals are claiming a kind of vindication for not having prosecuted the war successfully, evidently because McNamara had not believed in it strongly enough.

Officers, some retired, some still in service, feel vindicated for having accepted and made fraudulent reports of body counts and of mili-

tary progress, reports supporting McNamara's false and misleading public statements.

Leading newspapers that supported the war, and supported McNamara when he was nominated to be secretary of Defense and during his service in that office — especially *The New York Times* — are attacking him, but still accepting him as their vindicator. They did not need full vindication from McNamara, though, as they had granted themselves partial vindication with the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. Neither the recent *Times* editorials nor an earlier magazine-length article carried any reference to a *Times* front-page story, published in mid-March of 1968,

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that reported how U.S. Marines had surrounded 128 Vietcong soldiers, and held them in a pincer movement, while they were killed by helicopter fire. This was the report of what turned out to be the My Lai Massacre.

McNamara should not be allowed to claim too much guilt or power. Or to claim that his resignation or public statements, at one or the other critical points in the escalation of the war, would have made much difference. It might have saved him from the anguish he seems to be suffering now. "One

could have wished," wrote Daniel Berrigan in 1971, "when Robert McNamara . . . stepped off the scene, for some public utterance." High-ranking military and naval officers, now retired, say they were convinced that the war could not be won, under the political restraints being imposed upon it.

But not one of them resigned in protest. MacArthur, in the Korean War, did not resign, but he challenged political policy, and got himself fired. A better way to act than to serve silently and wait for vindication.

The academics, the intellectuals, the social thinkers may want to claim vindication. They, too, should be held to stronger judgments, possibly "pardons," as in the distinction President Carter made when he said he would not grant amnesty to Vietnam protesters, and detectors, but he would pardon them.

The accretion of McNamara's self-confidence began before he be-

came secretary of Defense. It was amplified as he took over that office, a former "Whiz Kid," a Harvard Business School graduate. He came from Ford Motors, at a time when it was gospel that American automobile companies could make no mistakes, at least no small ones. A power also attributed to the prospective secretary of Defense, along with a steel-trap mind. He came into a Pentagon that at that time believed it, too, was above failure. McNamara incarnated the myth described by L. P. Jacks in a lecture given in 1926. Jacks remarked, "I am informed by philologists that the rise to power of these two words (problem and solution) as the determining terms of public debate, is an affair of the last two centuries. On the whole the influence of these words, is malignant and becoming increasingly so. They have deluded poor men with Messianic expectations. . . ."

I began to have doubts about

McNamara's power of judgment, and accuracy of reports, in the Kennedy years, with his part in the Bay of Pigs, and then his "have the boys home by Christmas," and his "two wars like Vietnam." And I was moved to question his reliability when on Nov. 30, 1965, on his return from Vietnam, he said, "The most vital impression that I bring back is that we have stopped losing the war."

I would not be numbered among those vindicated or said to be vindicated by McNamara. In retrospect, I would rather credit "vindication" to the voters of New Hampshire in March of 1968. Or to the soldier, in uniform, who appeared at an early rally in New Hampshire and gave me a small package, which I thought contained a book. When I opened the package later in the evening, I found it to be a small case. The case contained a Medal of Honor, given to the soldier for his service in Vietnam, and a note saying that he was ashamed of what the United States was doing in Vietnam.



McCarthy

The veterans of the war, of course, are an exception.

They have spoken not of having been vindicated, but of having been betrayed.

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