

COLMAN McCARTHY

McNamara Still Misses the Moral Point

Instead of traipsing into television studios to shed tears about his book on the Vietnam War, or gadding around the country on a 12-city publicity tour, Robert S. McNamara should go to Southeast Asia. That is where the effects of his warmaking as secretary of defense in the 1960s caused the most death and destruction—to people and land in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

It is where, also, many Americans who carried out the military orders of McNamara to bomb, napalm, defoliate and kill have returned to seek reconciliation with Southeast Asians. These Vietnam veterans have brought incalculable honor to themselves in attempting to mend the wounds of all parties.

McNamara is nowhere near that heightened level of decency. His "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam" is an exercise in intellectualizing, a display of contrived anguish that expresses more remorse for how he lost his bearings than for how Americans and Southeast Asians lost their lives. He writes like a cerebral grandmaster recalling a chess match of yore and wrong moves that he now regrets.

He and others in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations "were wrong, terribly wrong. . . . We made an error not of values and intentions but of judgments and capabilities." Thus, the war wasn't morally wrong, only tactically wrong.

McNamara's message is that he still believes in the values of warmaking and all its calculated violence but that losing the chess match of the Big Muddy was due to strategic errors on the board. McNamara writes "to identify the mistakes we made, understand why we made them, and consider how they can be avoided in the future."

Nowhere is there an apology to the families of the dead—not the Americans, not the Vietnamese. Unmentioned also is a discussion of the effects of Agent Orange on either the sprayed or the sprayers. Nothing about burned villages or massacred civilians or environmental havoc.

Because he trades only in retrospection, not introspection, McNamara seldom expresses personal feelings that the Vietnam War was about killing people. When he does, self-justification takes over. He defends himself against critics who thought his use of numbers was obsessive. "Obviously there are things you cannot quantify: honor and beauty, for example. But things you can count, you ought to count. Loss of life is one when you are fighting a war of attrition. We

tried to use body counts as a measurement to help us figure out what we should be doing in Vietnam to win the war while putting our troops at the least risk. Every attempt to monitor progress in Vietnam during my tenure . . . was directed toward those goals, but the reports were often misleading."

Botched numbers. Another of those errors not to be repeated in the next war.

Rather than acknowledging the suffering his decisions inflicted on human beings—several million killed or wounded in Vietnam alone—and be manly enough to ask forgiveness, McNamara details the hits he took. His dinner in an Aspen restaurant was interrupted when a woman came over and screamed "Baby burner! You have blood on your hands." He was spat on in an airport. After a dinner, Jackie Kennedy, who opposed the war, "suddenly exploded . . . and began, literally, to beat on my chest, demanding that I 'do something to stop the slaughter.'"

For enduring saliva and chest-poundings, let's award this combat hero the Purple Heart.

McNamara claims to have written a memoir, as if the violence of the war were over. It isn't. Last week the Mennonite Central Committee, a Washington-based peace group that saw the war as immoral then and now, issued a report about Laotian villagers who continue to be killed or maimed by cluster bombs that didn't explode during the war but blow up now when disturbed in the fields.

U.S. pilots dropped 300,000 tons of bombs on Xiangkhoang province alone, an average of two tons per villager. The committee estimates that between 10 percent and 30 percent of the bombs did not explode and that 123,000 acres of the province are infested with the buried weapons.

On March 20, a group of diplomats and U.N. officials toured the area. They heard a Laotian woman describe how bombs—the size of tennis balls—are still going off. "She directly declared that the Americans who had dropped these bombs should be responsible to clean them up so the people who had never done anything to harm others could get on with their lives in safety," they reported.

When McNamara concludes his promo tour, perhaps he can take a bomb tour. Clearing the fields of Xiangkhoang province would take a decade or so. If funds can be found to pay for it. If McNamara signs off as a bomb-sweeper, he could put it all down in "Retrospect II: More Lessons from the War."