

Book's Message Painful for Vietnam Vets

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Like a tripwire, Robert McNamara's belated admission that U.S. persistence in Vietnam was "terribly wrong" has opened old wounds among those who battled in the jungles, rice paddies and tall grass of America's longest war.

"A lot of people were wrong about Vietnam. But he knew the truth and concealed it," said retired Col. Harry Summers, editor of Vietnam magazine and a former battalion operations officer in the Army's First Infantry Division. "He betrayed the men and women serving under him," Summers said. "He betrayed the American people."

McNamara, the secretary of defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, was the architect of America's buildup in Vietnam from a small force to a peak of half a million.

To many, the 11-year conflict was "McNamara's War."

But in his new book "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam," and in a tearful TV appearance last week, McNamara said the policy he helped formulate was "terribly wrong."

McNamara said he concluded the war was unwinnable in the mid-'60s, yet he did not speak out and continued to dispatch troops into combat, in part because he feared that the appearance of weakness by the United States could have emboldened the Soviet Union and created the risk of war.

For many who lost friends, lost limbs, lost their eyesight or lost their innocence while America was being torn apart, McNamara's *mea culpa* rings hollow and late.

"You're damn right I'm angry," said

John Sales, 54, a former marine who was blinded in 1967 and founded the Blinded American Veterans Foundation. "It's a slap in the face to everyone who has worn the uniform," Sales said.

"No one deserves an explanation for what went on more than actual veterans and family members of those who fought," said Jan Scruggs, a former infantryman and president of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

"Most of us are glad he wrote the book. [But] what it shows is a failure of courage on his part," said Scruggs.

"A lot of my friends were killed there. A lot of them were wounded, and many of them are still in wheelchairs. If it was really unnecessary, and if we could and should have gotten out of there," Scruggs said, pausing to find the right words, "it's just kind of tough

finding out about it now."

It rankles some that McNamara stands to profit from royalties on the book, which is out just weeks from the 20th anniversary of the fall of Saigon to the communists. Some feel the money should be used for scholarships for children of dead GIs or to help veterans deal with the war's physical and emotional scars.

Interviewed Thursday night on ABC-TV's "Nightline," McNamara said fear that a misstep could bring on World War III had caused him to be silent even when he concluded that the war was unwinnable.

McNamara offered no direct reply to critics who said he had a moral obligation to state his misgivings after he left office in 1968. "This book is not a book of redemption," he said.