

POST INSIGHT, OPINION & VIEWS

ONLY CLINTON CHEERS

NOWHERE in Robert S. McNamara's tortuous recounting of his Vietnam War management does he mention his feckless plan to end the conflict by building a wall to keep communist infiltrators out of the South. But nothing better demonstrates why McNamara's War was McNamara's Folly.

The young secretary of defense was enthusiastic in October 1967 about a wall to reduce the need for bombing North Vietnam, which he always argued against. Two members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff flatly opposed the wall, and the other three said it would be meaningless unless many more American troops than the half million there at that point were sent to police the barrier. McNamara and President Lyndon B. Johnson refused to do that, and the project was never consummated.

This is what anguished the professional military: civilians, lacking experience in both Southeast Asia and warfare, micro-managing the war. McNamara's "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam" gives more than an ample taste of such arrogance.

His book's message is that 58,000 Americans died in vain because McNamara pursued a war he had concluded was unwinnable in quest of a goal he now has come to believe was unworthy. While McNamara displays frequent remorse that he did not press for withdrawal or neutralization, there is no admission that the cocksure secretary of defense's flawed military tactics made sure the war could not be won.

John Paul Van, the U.S. official who so well understood Vietnamese realities and gave his life in the 1972 Communist offensive, told me many times that there were two ways to defeat Hanoi. The first was an all-out U.S. military effort against North Vietnam. Fearful of Chinese intervention, McNamara bitterly fought any step toward that approach. The second course was



ROBERT McNAMARA
Micro-managing didn't work.

INSIDE REPORT

ROBERT NOVAK



concentration on a South Vietnamese-centered counter-guerrilla strategy. McNamara's book shows little interest in the millions of Vietnamese who fought and died against communist tyranny.

The resulting middle course of Americanizing the war but not trying to win it, said Van, was guaranteed disaster. It is now clear that McNamara tacitly agreed. "I expressed to Averell Harriman on June 23, 1966," he writes, "that an acceptable military solution was not possible."

So, why did he merely press for reduced bombing and not go public with what would have been a startling pronouncement when the number of Americans killed was still less than 15,000?

The book's answer is murky. McNamara posits the extra-constitutional doctrine that his first loyalty was to President Johnson, not to the American people, and argues, "I believed I could influence his decisions." But he supplied a more cogent, if less credible, rationale on the Charlie Rose television program this week: "What I feared was if we didn't at least prevent communist control of Vietnam, we would endanger the security of the West."

He told Rose that he rejects that now and if he had rejected it during the war, "I would have fought to my death to get out." In truth, Johnson administration officials believed then and now that U.S. intervention in Vietnam was responsible for the failure of Communist China to subvert Indonesia in 1965, a signal victory in the Cold War.

McNamara writes that the U.S.-promoted ousting and assassination of Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 would have been an opportune time for U.S. withdrawal. "If we had left then," Zbigniew Brzezinski, then a State Department policy planner, told me this week, "it is quite possible that the dominoes would have been real."

McNamara, in seeking atonement, has written a book filled with contradictions. His contention that he lacked sound advice because of the McCarthyite purge of old China hands is shrugged off by former colleagues as irrelevant. They are astounded by his assertion that "I do not know to this day whether I quit or was fired." He was fired, as his successor at the Pentagon, Clark Clifford, made clear in his memoirs. McNamara's claim that he is speaking out "after all these years of silence" belies decades of volubility in Georgetown's salons.

Of all the foes of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, the only one who seems cheered by the former defense secretary's baroque presentation is Bill Clinton. The president should look elsewhere for vindication.