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McNamara's Regrets Over Vietnam War

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New York — As defense secretary for two presidents — one of John F. Kennedy's "best and brightest" — Robert McNamara helped draw the United States deeply into the Vietnam War.

Now he admits: "We were terribly wrong."

With the upcoming release of his memoirs, McNamara is breaking his quarter-century public silence on the war that left 58,000 Americans dead and bitterly divided the country. The memoirs of other officials, along with other documents, have described how dissension grew in the Johnson White House over Vietnam policy as the war worsened.

McNamara, whose internal criticism led President Lyndon B. Johnson to replace him in 1968, is the highest-ranking former U.S. official to say publicly and unequivocally that pursuing the war was a mistake.

"We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of our country. But we were wrong. We were terribly wrong," McNamara, 78, told the AP Radio Network in an interview to be broadcast today.

"We were just wrong, both military leaders and civilian leaders, in failing to recognize the nature of the conflict and failing to recognize early on that the strategy we were following would not accomplish our objective," he said.

McNamara has written a book, "In Retrospect," due in bookstores soon. The April 17 Newsweek, to hit newsstands tomorrow, has excerpts.

They say that Johnson sought advice from former President Dwight Eisenhower on bombing Vietnam. In a Feb. 17, 1965, meeting, Eisenhower counseled that "LBJ's first duty was to con-

tain communism in Southeast Asia," even if it meant threatening nuclear war. Eisenhower said he hoped a huge ground war wouldn't be necessary but if it were, "So be it." And if the Soviets or Chinese threatened to intervene, Eisenhower said, "We should pass the word back to them to take care lest dire results (i.e. nuclear strikes) occur to them."



McNamara

In the AP interview, McNamara said, "The first major mistake we made was in exaggerating and misjudging the security of the West and the security of our nation [in case of] the loss of Vietnam to the Communists."

He added: "It wasn't Eisenhower's responsibility, it was Johnson's responsibility, and [Secretary of State] Dean Rusk's and mine."

According to the Newsweek excerpts, North Vietnam made "a very specific peace offer" in 1966 but withdrew it after the United States went ahead with bombing raids that had been delayed by bad weather. Johnson feared that further delays "would be interpreted as weakness," McNamara wrote.

McNamara told the AP that he and Henry Kissinger, then a Harvard professor, came close to setting up U.S.-North Vietnamese negotiations in the fall of 1967. "Unfortunately, through, I think, clumsiness on our part, the effort came apart," he said.

In 1967, McNamara urged Johnson to seek a diplomatic solution to the Vietnam War, but Johnson rejected the suggestion. In early 1968, McNamara stepped down as defense secretary to become president of the World Bank, where he served for 13 years.

He quoted the ancient Greek dramatist Aeschylus: "The reward of suffering is experience." McNamara added: "Let this be the lasting legacy of Vietnam."