

POST INSIGHT, OPINION & VIEWS

McNAMARA'S SURRENDER

ROBERT McNamara has every right to publish a book advising the world that in his opinion we had been wrong, "terribly wrong," in engaging in war in Vietnam. But what more can be said about the liberties of Bob McNamara? He is free, if he is so impelled, to join the Communist Party — or to form one, if it no longer exists.

What is creepy about his most recent exercise in self-mortification is the auspices under which it is being done.

If you missed it, McNamara's trip to Vietnam, alongside a few other dignitaries whose names do not get into the papers, was done under

ON THE RIGHT

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.



the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations. The announced purpose of the visit was to explore whether the war might have ended sooner — or indeed might have been averted altogether.

Now I am a member, however inert, of the Council on Foreign Relations, and I wonder why it should sponsor on a trip to Vietnam someone who has publicly abjured the reasoning of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, and the overwhelming majority of their advisers, on why the operation in Vietnam was justified. Inasmuch as McNamara received approximately 100 percent of the publicity of the

visiting delegation, the world has quite reasonably concluded that McNamara's obligation constitutes an official apology by the United States for acting as it did.

Well, the world is wrong: McNamara arrived with no such portfolio. When a few days ago Japan finally elected to apologize for Japanese conduct in Korea during and before World War II, the apology was tendered by the prime minister and represented official government opinion in the matter.

McNamara's sole credential was as one representative of the Council on Foreign Relations, and several questions arise. The first is: What is the purpose of sending on an exploratory mission to investigate tensions with Vietnam an American who has publicly rejected, indeed scorned, the reason for such tensions?

He wholly rejects the reasoning of the president who made him secretary of defense, the successor president who in 1964 was elected by a landslide in part because of his reaffirmation of the policy of containment, pronounced 20 years earlier by President Truman calling for resistance to communist aggression whether in Greece, in Berlin, in Iran, in Guatemala, in Korea — or in Vietnam.

It would have been interesting if our former secretary of defense, in his meeting with General Giap — the equivalent of Vietnam's secretary of defense — had met as old football coaches might have done to exchange locker-room talk about what might have worked in this situation,



ROBERT McNAMARA
A baffling trip.

what in that situation, at tight moments in the ballgame. But McNamara wasn't in Vietnam to say to Giap, "You proved the better soldier." He was there as the prominent American whose opposition to the same war he had while in office advertised so proudly, so enthusiastically, gestated, after 30 tortuous years, into a profound rejection of all the premises of that war.

If a Christian theologian decides, at age 78, that on second thought, he doesn't really think Christ was the redeemer, he isn't very useful as a delegate to a conference inquiring into the causes of impiety. And if McNamara ever thought to ask Giap such questions as, Since I have retreated from my moral position about going to war, have you retreated from yours about treating the people of Vietnam like slaves?

In 1964, McNamara absolutely affirmed that the Viet-

namese were responsible for a second assault on an American naval vessel on Aug. 4, 1964. He now declares that he is "overwhelmingly" convinced that no such assault actually occurred. And who does he ask to confirm his reversal? Why, the man who would have engineered the Tonkin Gulf attack.

It happens that I am a student, however superficial, of the Tonkin Gulf episode, and I am convinced it never happened. I am also deeply convinced that the military and the Johnson administration did genuinely believe it had happened. But the idea of going to Giap to ask for final judgment in the matter is the equivalent of going to Goering at Nuremberg and asking, Did you really slaughter six million Jews?

There is no effective way absolutely to teach people what manners are appropriate in what situations. I mean, there are several hundred thousand wives, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters who lost husbands, offspring, siblings or parents in Vietnam. And they are justly solaced by their conviction that the fight was made in pursuit of a most honorable cause: i.e., to spare the people of South Vietnam the miseries of living under such as Gen. Giap and Ho Chi Minh, while continuing to contain the animating strategic policy of the Cold War.

We lost that chapter in the war in Vietnam, but won the final victory because the enemy had at least a temporary experience of American resolution in Southeast Asia.