The case for the war

How American resistance in Vietnam helped Southeast Asia to prosper in independence

W. W. ROSTOW

Robert S. McNamara and Brian Van De Mark

IN RETROSPECT
The tragedy and lessons of Vietnam
414pp. New York: Times / Random House. $27.50.
0 8129 2523 8

For seven years, Robert McNamara and I were colleagues in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. It is difficult to describe the ties that were formed as a result of our facing together the series of crises that confronted the United States in the 1960s. On occasion, my advice to the President differed from McNamara's, most notably on Vietnam and on policy towards Southeast Asia. Such differences among colleagues were inevitable and proper, however, and now, thirty years after we worked together, I continue to hold McNamara's devoted service in high regard.

In Retrospect: The tragedy and lessons of Vietnam begins with a dozen or so interesting but terse pages on the author's background; his schooling; his meeting, and marriage to, Margaret McKinstry Craig, to whose memory the book is dedicated; his war-time service as an air corps statistical control officer; and his post-war service with the Ford Motor Company. He had been president of that company for only seven weeks when John Kennedy made him Secretary of Defense in 1961. The problems of Vietnam from 1961 to early 1968 occupy virtually the rest of the book. Although the war lasted some eight more years, the story ends with McNamara's translation to the World Bank in 1968, as the Tet offensive begins.

In the period 1965–7, Robert McNamara came to believe that Vietnam was "a problem with no solution". This is the theme of his book. His frustration arose because the war was fought under five rules, which, as he saw it, proved incompatible with victory. These rules were: (1) that Southeast Asia as a whole must be kept from Communist control; (2) that US troops should not be sent outside the borders of South Vietnam; (3) that the South Vietnamese should achieve political stability and – with US tutelage and military aid – learn to defend themselves; (4) that the United States under no circumstances should initiate the use of nuclear weapons; and (5) that the enemy operated under the assumption that it could win "a long inconclusive war". In the face of these rules, McNamara came to believe that the United States should withdraw from Vietnam, because Rule 3 proved impossible of attainment, and the costs of withdrawal (Rule 1) would be tolerable. To a degree impossible to determine, his conclusion, by his own account, was influenced also by the anti-war sentiment in the country which extended to his immediate family.

As far as the South Vietnamese were concerned, McNamara found President Ngo Dinh Diem inscrutable; was much disturbed by the assassination of Diem and his brother and close collaborator, Ngo Diem Nhu; was rendered almost hopeless by the subsequent period, when one impotent government followed another; and quoted with approval a characterization by an American official that President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky were "the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel".

On the tolerability of pulling out American forces from Vietnam, McNamara relies heavily in arguing his conclusion, already arrived at, on a private memorandum to the President of September 12, 1967, from Richard Helms. This memorandum was recently declassified and released. Written by "an experienced intelligence analyst" in the CIA, it addressed the question, "Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam". The general conclusion of a thirty-three-page analysis was that the risks of withdrawal "are probably more limited and controllable than most previous argument has indicated". The specific conclusion about Southeast Asia was that "The most direct and immediate [implications] would be in the region of Southeast Asia itself." The key country would prove to be Thailand, where the situation would be "perilous and complicated".

On the US domestic scene, the memorandum said:

> The worst potential damage would be of the self-inflicted kind: internal dissension which would limit our future ability to use our power and resources wisely and to full effect, and lead to a loss of confidence by others in the American capacity for leadership.

Having concluded, then, that the South Vietnamese would be unable to defend themselves in any time that would not overstretch the patience of American public opinion, and that the costs of pulling out were tolerable, McNamara in retrospect feels we ought to have withdrawn our forces "either in late 1963 amid the turmoil following Diem's assassination or in late 1964 or early 1965 in the face of increasing political weakness in South Vietnam". He adds three other dates when a pull-out would have been possible and desirable: July 1965, December 1965 and December 1967.

At the end of the book, McNamara offers a list of eleven major failures in Vietnam policy, which follow closely his point of view in hindsight. There are also eight pages of reflection on post-Cold War military policy and a final word on Vietnam, the heart of which is:

> Although we sought to do the right thing – and believed we were doing the right thing – in my judgment, hindsight proves us wrong. We both overestimated the effect of South Vietnam's loss on the security of the West and failed to adhere to the fundamental principle that, in the final analysis, if the South Vietnamese were to be saved, they had to win the war themselves.

This is as accurate a statement as I can muster of the author's present position.

McNamara's argument depends heavily on his view of the importance of Asia to the United States and the extent to which withdrawal from Vietnam would affect the balance of power in Asia. At one point, referring to the human and material costs of the war, he asks:

> Were such high costs justified?
> Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, Lee Kwan Yew and many other geopoliticians across the globe to this day answer yes. They conclude that without U.S. intervention in Vietnam, Communist hegemony – both Soviet and Chinese – would have spread farther through South and East Asia to include control of Indonesia, Thailand, and possibly India. Some would go further and say that the USSR would have been led to take greater risks to extend its influence elsewhere in the world particularly in the Middle East, where it might well have sought control of the oil-producing nations. They might be correct, but I seriously question such judgments.

What these "geopoliticians" thought did not matter to the outcome. What Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson thought did matter. Each, from a different experience and perspective, had thought deeply about Asia; and they had arrived at similar conclusions about the balance of power in that continent.

US Marines charge through the streets of Hue, South Vietnam, during the Tet offensive of February, 1968

Eisenhower had served in the Philippines on General MacArthur's staff. His job required him to think about the strategic shape of Asia. It was he who mounted in 1954 the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) as a bipartisan effort in the wake of the Korean War, designed to hold the balance of power in Southeast Asia as it was held in Northeast Asia by the outcome of the Korean War. It was he who first applied the phrase "domino theory" to the American engagement in what was French Indo-China. The day before Kennedy's Inaugural, he laid before the new President and his major aides (Rusk, McNamara and Dillon) the two serious problems he most wished them to understand: the balance of payments issue and Laos. Although there are several versions of what Eisenhower said about Laos, the evidence, on balance, is that he thought it likely that Kennedy would have to invoke the SEATO Treaty and put troops into Laos; if possible, with others, if necessary, alone. Eisenhower, from 1961 to 1968, gave unfailing support to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson on Southeast Asia.

Kennedy's experience of Asia was quite different, although it brought him to similar conclusions. As a member of Congress, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, he was focused on the Soviet threat in Europe, and a repetition by Stalin of Hitler's attack on Western Europe. He did not vote for Truman's Point Four technical assistance programme for the developing countries.

In 1951, when it was clear that the Communist attack in Korea was not a feint for an attack on Western Europe, and the truce negotiations had begun at Panmunjom, Kennedy went with members of his family on a tour of the Middle East, India and the Far East, including Vietnam. He returned convinced that the Communist threat would come mainly in the underdeveloped regions. He told his colleagues in the House of Representatives that he had been wrong on Point Four and subsequently supported it. And, in time, he believed China would succeed the Soviet Union as the main threat. He led support in the Senate during 1958 for the Indian Second Five-Year Plan with Senator John Sherman Cooper, a Republican Senator from Kentucky, who had also been Ambassador in India. At the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, he created a special team to work in support of India over the concurrent clash in Ladakh, saying that in the long run this conflict might well be more important than the confrontation with the Soviet Union in the Caribbean.

All this background bears on the much debated question of whether or not Kennedy would have ended US military involvement in Vietnam. He was clearly frustrated by the political performance of Diem and Nhu. On the other hand, he was against American encouragement of a coup, and was appalled when Diem and Nhu were killed in the coup that took place. That the two were killed in an American-made armoured troop-carrier added to his unhappiness.

McNamara writes that it is "highly probable" that Kennedy would have pulled US forces out of Vietnam. But in the autumn of 1963, Kennedy said this to Walter Cronkite, harking back to his Asian trip of 1951:

> Our best judgment is that he [Diem] can't be successful on this basis. We hope that he comes to see that, but in the final analysis it is the people and the government [of South Vietnam] itself who have to win or lose this struggle. All we can do is help, and we are making it very clear, but I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. I know people don't like Americans to be engaged in this kind of an effort. Forty-seven Americans have been killed in combat with the enemy, but this is a very important struggle even though it is far away.
>
> We . . . made this effort to defend Europe. Now Europe is quite secure. We also have to participate – we may not like it – in the defense of Asia.

A week later, in a similar interview with David Brinkley, he was asked:

> "Mr President, have you had any reason to doubt this so-called 'domino theory', that if South Vietnam falls, the rest of Southeast Asia will go behind it?"
>
> "No, I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, loom

so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Viet-Nam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the communists. So I believe it."

The main weight of the war fell, of course, on President Johnson. His view of Asia came out of a quite different background. He had been briefly in Australia during the Second World War; and this experience led to a life-long sympathy and affection for that country. In the late 1950s, his view of Asia as a whole crystallized. The turning-point was the question of statehood for Hawaii. Johnson spoke of this matter during a speech at the East-West Center in Honolulu on October 18, 1966:

> My forebears came from Britain, Ireland, and Germany. People in my section of the country regarded Asia as totally alien in spirit as well as nationality .... We therefore looked away from the Pacific, away from its hopes as well as away from its great crises. Even the wars that many of us fought here were often [fought] with left overs of preparedness, and they did not heal our blindness .... One consequence of that blindness was that Hawaii was denied its rightful part in our Union of States for many, many years. Frankly, for two decades I opposed its admission as a State, until at last the undeniable evidence of history, as well as the irresistible persuasiveness of Jack Burns [the non-voting Hawaiian delegate to the Congress], removed the scales from my eyes. Then I began to work and fight for Hawaiian statehood. And I hold that to be one of the proudest achievements of my twenty-five years in Congress.

Later in the speech, he referred to Hawaii as "a model of how men and women of different races and different cultures can come and live and work together; to respect each other in freedom and in hope". The period of an intense and ultimately successful struggle for Hawaiian statehood (achieved in 1959) coincided with the emergence of Johnson as an effective civil rights leader in the Senate – with his critical role in the passage of the 1957 legislation, the first formal civil rights action by the Congress since the Civil War. The link in his mind between his positions on civil rights and on Asia remained throughout his life.

In May 1961, Johnson, as Vice President, was plunged still more deeply into the Asian scene. At Kennedy's request, he visited South Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Taiwan, India and Pakistan. Johnson's recommendation to Kennedy was to create an organization of the free nations of the Pacific and Asia which would not only deal with defence isues but issues of social justice, housing, land reform: "the greatest danger Southeast Asia offers to nations like the United States is not the momentary threat of Communism itself, rather that danger stems from hunger, ignorance, poverty, and disease". It was this line of thought which led Johnson as President to deliver on April 7, 1965, his speech at Johns Hopkins University, from which the Asian Development Bank arose.

But a great deal was going on in Asia in 1964–5 which McNamara does not detail. Sukarno left the United Nations on January 7, 1965, and allied with Hanoi and Peking. Within Indonesia, he worked closely with Aidit, head of that country's Communist party. He launched the confrontation with Malaysia just as the first North Vietnamese regulars infiltrated South Vietnam. Some eighty ships of the British Commonwealth were mobilized to defend Malaysia. As McNamara said in a joint memorandum to the President with McGeorge Bundy on January 27, 1965: "The underlying difficulties in Saigon arise from the spreading conviction that the future is without hope for anti-communists." From one end of Asia to the other, the local people knew that a dangerous crisis was taking place in 1965 which could go one way or the other.

This was the setting in which McNamara and Bundy wrote their famous "Fork in the Road" memorandum at the end of January 1965. This memorandum told President Johnson that he had to choose between sending more troops to Vietnam or "negotiations aimed at salvaging what little can be preserved with no further addition to our present military risk". Both favoured the first course. The memorandum played a significant role in President Johnson's reluctant decision in early 1965 to commit a substantial number of American troops to South Vietnam. It was a late and painful decision to match the escalating activity of the North Vietnamese regulars and Sukarno, an escalation which was, in turn, an opportunistic but understandable response to the disarray of South Vietnamese politics in the wake of the assassination of Diem and Nhu.

Is it credible that the United States would have withdrawn in the aftermath of a coup and assassination which were seen by the world to have been carried out with its acquiescence? Is it credible that any US President would not respond to the Communist "nutcracker" of 1965: the simultaneous entrance of North Vietnamese regulars into South Vietnam and the enterprise of Sukarno in joining the supposed Communist wave of the future in Asia? I think not.

And so in Vietnam, General Westmoreland set about the slow work of building up an adequate logistical base, dealing with the Communist forces as he found them and as they were introduced and supplied via the Ho Chi Minh trails in Laos. By the end of 1965, he had achieved a stalemate; about a million men, women and children in 1966 were added to those under the protection of the Vietnamese government. And this positive trend continued for most of 1967. The plan for the Tet offensive of 1968, hatched in the summer months of 1967, was Hanoi's reaction to the slowly eroding position in the South.

On September 29, 1967, President Johnson replied in San Antonio both to McNamara and to the "experienced intelligence analyst" who had written the memorandum sent to him a few weeks earlier by Richard Helms, the memorandum whose latter-day release made such a profound impression on McNamara:

> I cannot tell you tonight as your president – with certainty – that a Communist conquest of South Vietnam would be followed by a Communist conquest of Southeast Asia. But I do know there are North Vietnamese troops in Laos. I do know that there are North Vietnamese trained guerrillas tonight in Northeast Thailand. I do know that there are Communist-supported guerrilla forces operating in Burma. And a Communist coup was barely averted in Indonesia, the fifth largest nation in the world.
>
> So your American President cannot tell you with certainty that a Southeast Asia dominated by Communist power would bring a third world war much closer to terrible reality. One could hope that this would not be so.
>
> But all that we have learned in this tragic century strongly suggests to me that it would be so. As President of the United States, I am not prepared to gamble on the chance that it is not so. I am not prepared to risk the security – indeed, the survival of this American Nation on mere hope and wishful thinking. I am convinced that by seeing this struggle through now, we are greatly reducing the chances of a much larger war – perhaps a nuclear war. I would rather stand in Vietnam, in our time, and by meeting this danger now, and facing up to it, thereby reduce the danger for our children and for our grandchildren.

There is no doubt President Johnson was frustrated by his inability to bring the war to a quick conclusion. But he was heartened by the progress of the rest of Asia behind the barrier created by South Vietnam and her allies who were "holding aggression at bay".

From the beginning to the end of his time as President, Johnson was governed by the conclusion he had reached in the late 1950s; namely, that Asia – all of Asia – mattered greatly to the future of America and was worth fighting for and nurturing. When he went through Asia for three weeks at the end of 1966, he spoke at least 90 per cent of the time about the need for Asia to unite and organize, not about the struggle in Vietnam.

In the end, Johnson left for his successor a good post-Tet situation in the field, both military and political; but a difficult political situation at home. He met Thieu in Honolulu after he had announced, on March 31, that he would not run in 1968. He refused Thieu's offer to put in the joint communiqué that American forces would be reduced over the next year. He chose to leave that decision to his successor.

The Malaysian foreign minister, speaking retrospectively in Boston on November 11, 1981, first recalled the early days of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) between 1968 and 1975:

> They were very useful years to further bind the member countries together .... In 1975 North Vietnamese tanks rolled past Danang, Cam Ranh Bay, and Ton Son Nut into Saigon. The United States withdrew their last soldiers from Vietnam, and the worst of ASEAN's fears which underscored the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 came to pass. But ASEAN by then had seven solid years of living in neighbourly cooperation. Call it foresight, or what you will, the fact remains that with ASEAN solidarity there were no falling dominoes in Southeast Asia following the fall of Saigon to the Communists, and the United States withdrawal from Southeast Asia.

Both the NICs (New Industrial Countries) and the ASEAN members roughly quadrupled their real GNP between 1960 and 1981. They were, socially and politically as well as economically, quite different countries to what they had been when Southeast Asia went through the crisis of 1965. McNamara does not deal with the importance of Southeast Asia or its dynamics in these critical years.

Another weakness of McNamara's book is his failure to discuss systematically the gift of sanctuary which rendered the war inevitably "long and inconclusive". There have been no examples in which a guerrilla war (or a war dependent on external supply) has been won in which one side was granted sanctuary by the other. The guerrilla wars in the Philippines under Magsaysay and the British effort in Malaysia were successful because one was a group of islands, while the other had a narrow neck of land to the north and sea supply for the guerrillas in Malaysia was denied. On the other hand, Napoleon met his first setback in the Peninsular War when the British helped the guerrillas; the guerrillas in Algeria were helped through Morocco and Tunisia; and the United States and others helped the Afghan defenders against the Russians through Pakistan.

South Vietnam was explicitly protected, by the Laos Accords of 1962, from the North Vietnamese transiting of Laos and Cambodia, via the Ho Chi Minh Trails and the Cambodian ports. This was not an understanding whispered in the corridors of the Palais des Nations, but a formal agreement between Ambassador Pushkin of the Soviet Union and Averell Harriman, who negotiated the treaty. It called for the Soviet Union to guarantee that no third party be transited by Hanoi in supply to the guerrillas in the South.

The North Vietnamese did not obey the Laos Accords for a single day after they came into force in early October 1962, nor did the Soviet government ever act on its freely taken responsibilities. October 1962 was the month of the Cuban missile crisis; and it led to a visit to Washington by Anastas Mikoyan, fresh from a rather miserable experience in Havana. There were those who urged President Kennedy to confront the Soviet Union immediately over its failure to act on its Laos Treaty commitments. They were turned down. It was not difficult to explain President Kennedy's reluctance to act in the wake of the traumatic confrontation in the Caribbean; but the alternative put to President Kennedy was to act decisively now or face a crisis "in a waning situation".

General Maxwell Taylor had all this in mind when he sent a long cable at the end of 1964 that included this passage:

> It [Hanoi] enjoys the priceless asset of a protected logistic sanctuary in the DRV and in Laos. I do not recall in history a successful anti-guerrilla campaign with less than a 10 to 1 numerical superiority over the guerrillas and without the elimination of assistance from outside the country.

Senator John Stennis echoed this point in August 1967: "The question is growing in the Congress as to whether it is wise to send more men if we are going to just leave them at the mercy of the guerrilla war without trying to cut off the enemy's supplies more effectively."

And McNamara himself quotes General DuPuy, General Westmoreland's planner, in a 1986 interview: ". . . it turned out that it [search and destroy] was a faulty concept, given the sanctuaries, given the fact that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was never closed. It was a losing concept of operation." Thus, the sanctuary granted Hanoi was historically incompatible with American and South Vietnamese victory in a time-span consistent with American patience as a nation; and the bombing of the supply trails or other devices to reduce the flow from North Vietnam were demonstrably inadequate.

Those who advocated blocking the trails on the ground believed that action would force a concentration of North Vietnamese troops to keep the trails open, and two or three reinforced US divisions together with air supremacy could deal with them. This happened, incidentally, at Khe Sanh, where Hanoi concentrated during the Tet offensive several divisions (some think five) which were defeated by some 6,000 US and Vietnamese forces plus air power intelligently directed by General Momyer. This reversed at Khe Sanh the normal proportions of guerrillas versus the defending force.

This proposal was definitively turned down on April 27, 1967, by President Johnson and Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, presumably on the grounds that any movement of American troops to block infiltration on the trails would bring the Russians and Chinese into the war.

On this matter General William Westmoreland (whom McNamara quotes) may have the last word:

> . . . the geographic restraints on the ground war were very real, and understandable.
>
> Yet if you'll look at the situation as it's turned out, we basically attained our strategic objectives. We stopped the flow of communism .... I conclude that by strength, awkwardness, and good luck, most of our strategic objectives have been reached. I also say that we have to give President Johnson credit for not allowing the war to expand geographically . . . he was quite fearful that this was going to escalate into a world war. One of his main strategic objectives was to confine the war. He did not want it to spread .... Having said that, that's not the way I felt at the time. I felt that our hands were tied.

Historians will have to decide in the light of President Johnson's conclusion at San Antonio whether that price was worth paying. Clearly, if the alternative might have been a larger war or the risk of nuclear war, it was worth paying. In any case, Johnson was following the rules governing the policy of containment: block the extension of Communist rule while minimizing the likelihood of nuclear war. McNamara refers to, but does not discuss, this central issue.

Considering that he is writing in the 1990s, McNamara's view of the Vietnamese is remarkably static. It stops in early 1968, if not earlier. In fact, the whole period 1954–75 was highly dynamic in South Vietnam. Vietnam was an underdeveloped, post-colonial country. Like Syngman Rhee in Korea, its first nationalist ruler earned his legitimacy by having nothing to do with the occupying power. Diem was also a mandarin to whom the sharing of power outside the family was extremely awkward. Each president was followed by a series of weak rulers and then their countries found relative stability with men of the next generation – in Korea under Park, in Vietnam under Thieu and Ky from 1965.

Starting in September 1966, a political process was started. A Constituent Assembly was elected to draft a constitution. Despite Communist intimidation, 81 per cent of the population voted, out of 5.3 million registered. On September 3, 1967, a well-inspected presidential election was held. The Thieu-Ky ticket won with 34.8 per cent of the votes. Typical of an underdeveloped country, there were ten civilian candidates. Registra-

tion had increased 11 per cent since the vote of the previous year. Fifty-seven per cent of the population of the country of voting age took part. Ambassador Dobrynin of the Soviet Union was almost precisely accurate when he said before the election that the Popular Front candidate commended by the Communists would get 16 per cent of the vote. The rest were explicitly anti-Communist.

The Tet offensive is not dealt with in McNamara's book, except for one reference at the end to the attack on the US Embassy compound. Thieu was in the Delta when the Tet offensive struck late in January 1968; but Ky and Robert Komer, Westmoreland's deputy for civilian affairs, led in the clean-up of Saigon where many refugees congregated. American and Vietnamese marines cleared Hue, where the North Vietnamese had established a foothold in the Citadel. And most remarkable of all, it was the local police and militia that picked up the Communist forces which attacked thirty-four of the forty-four provincial capitals, five of the six autonomous cities, seventy-one of 242 district capitals, and fifty hamlets. Thus the Communists failed to produce the uprising they expected. Thieu mobilized an additional 122,000 men for the armed forces in the first half of 1968. The South Vietnamese remained steady. Tet was an utter military and political defeat for the Communists in Vietnam, yet a political disaster in the United States. The conventional American view was that the South Vietnamese government's military, economic and social programme was set back by some years.

This programme had resulted in a revolution in education, where school enrolment increased massively, for example, from 410,000 to 2.7 million in primary education, starting in 1954. There were similar advances made over the same period in agriculture, trade and industry. The South Vietnam of 1969 was not the same country it was in 1954, 1961 or even 1967. I have no doubt that it would have followed the development path of South Korea if it had not been caught up in a difficult war and then Communist rule.

As for the military, it is essential to understand that neither North nor South Vietnam produced any armaments at all. Essentially, however, the war was fought with weapons imported into Vietnam by their respective allies. As time passed, the average skill of the Vietnamese divisions improved, although they continued to vary greatly according to their commanding officers. This uneven but improving force, under General Abram's tutelage, was tested by the battle with the North Vietnamese of 1972. American ground forces had been withdrawn, leaving only air and naval units until in support of the South Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese were generously supported by Soviet tanks and artillery superior to those available to the South Vietnamese, as well as many anti-aircraft guns. It was in the context of this battle that President Nixon used B-52s against Hanoi, mined the harbour at Haiphong and attacked the railway lines leading to China from Hanoi. The upshot was a military victory on the ground for the South Vietnamese.

In 1973, an accord was negotiated between North and South Vietnam. The North licked its wounds, paved the supply trails through Laos, and watched the American air and naval units withdraw on President Nixon's promise of $2.2 billion dollars in military aid to complete the process of Vietnamization of the South Vietnam military.

Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore was a kind of Greek chorus for the Asians throughout this period. In 1965, when all of Southeast Asia was menaced, he had remarked that "We may all go through the mincing machine". In 1966, he said to a group of students after noting that the Americans were buying time for a united Asia to emerge: "If we just sit down and believe people are going to buy time forever after for us, then we deserve to perish." In 1967, ASEAN was founded. In April 1973, at the National Press Club, Lee Kwan Yew laid out the alternatives in the following terms:

> At the risk of being proved wrong, there are three scenarios I envisage as a result of the Paris agreement. First, . . . the provisions are in the main honoured . . . . In this case, the contest will become primarily political. The South Vietnamese government stands a very fair chance in such a contest. Second, an all-out offensive by both the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong as soon as they believe they are strong enough to overwhelm the armed forces of the South Vietnamese government . . . . Third, the North Vietnamese, to avoid unnecessary risks, ostensibly honour the Paris agreement. However, they will leave it to the Vietcong, with North Vietnamese infiltrators and fresh military supplies to augment their strength, to make a bid for power in the South . . . .
>
> But, if the worst does happen, and the Vietcong, with the help of the North Vietnamese, do gain control over the South in the middle 1970s, it does not necessarily follow that the rest of Southeast Asia will go communist. The morale of the other peoples of Southeast Asia is now very different from what it was after Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The Thais are now more prepared psychologically to face up to such a situation . . . . A crucial factor is whether they believe they can depend on American military and economic aid, as spelt out under the Guam doctrine.

For reasons which no one could have predicted in the spring of 1973, before Watergate had progressively undermined Nixon's authority and legitimacy, it was Lee's second scenario that came to pass in the mid-1970s. The simple fact is that, as of April 1975, the American public, with the China *détente* established, was prepared to end its involvement with Vietnam; and Southeast Asia was prepared to stand on its own feet. Second, the South Vietnamese did all that could be expected of them in the post-Diem period; and as time passes, they will deserve better of history than McNamara allows.

One returns to the wild card in this story: the manner in which the United States, including McNamara's own family, were driven into painful controversy over the war. And that is a part of the equation that all Americans must weigh for themselves. In fact, only McNamara can weigh all the factors which have driven him into the position that, whatever the cost, the United States should have withdrawn its troops from Vietnam.

With the exception of the Second World War, every conflict in which Americans have been engaged has involved public controversy. And this is to their credit; for who wants war? In the Revolutionary War perhaps one-third of the people wanted independence; one third were pro-British; and one-third were simply out to make a fast buck by selling supplies to the Continental army. In the war of 1812, the New England states, after the Hartford Convention, passed a resolution calling for withdrawal from the union rather than joining in the war against Canada. The Mexican War stirred great controversy in the United States. The Civil War split the nation from top to bottom. The Spanish–American War was followed by the unpopular conflict with the Philippine guerrillas. The First World War, like the Civil War, touched off draft riots. The Korean War left Truman more unpopular than either Nixon at the nadir of his fortunes, or Lyndon Johnson at his lowest point in the polls.

No one has promised that American independence itself, or America's role as a bastion for those who believe deeply in democracy, could be achieved without pain or loss or controversy. The pain, loss and controversy resulting from Vietnam were accepted for ten years by the American people. That acceptance held the line so that a free Asia could survive and grow; for, in the end, the war and the treaty which led to it were about who would control the balance of power in Asia, an issue which was evidently at stake in the Asian crisis of 1965 and thereafter. Those who died or were wounded in Vietnam or are veterans of that conflict were not involved in a pointless war.

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