

Henry & Tumbler:
McNamara:

*His Obedience
to the Authority*

(Happen & Low: 1971)

Vietnam: Years of Illusion

by General Taylor, he was gone nine days. This time the results were strikingly different. General Harkins was still winning the war on paper. But dissenting voices at lower levels were becoming louder and more numerous. Lodge had taken a hard look at Saigon, disliked what he saw in both military and political terms, and set out to turn McNamara around. He succeeded partially. McNamara conceded a need for active pressure to force the Diem government to change course.

It was a breakthrough of sorts, and it was the most important development at a meeting of the National Security Council on October 2. The McNamara-Taylor report held firmly that the war was continuing to progress favorably, but conceded that further political disaffection could change that trend. McNamara did not reverse course easily.

On the military side, plans would be drafted to clean up the major Viet Cong threats by the end of 1965. At the same time Vietnamese would be trained to take over the roles being performed by Americans. Politically, the United States would begin to withhold aid funds gradually and thus force the government to make reforms. Lodge, whose cool arrogance already was beginning to make the Diem regime nervous, would let Vietnamese officials come to him. When they did, he would tell them what had to be done.

The public statement that followed the NSC meeting seemed so remarkably optimistic that its deeper implications were generally overlooked. It had been drafted and redrafted by McNamara, with a dissent from William H. Sullivan, the State Department officer who had accompanied him to Saigon. It came out of the NSC over the objection of McGeorge Bundy.

According to the most pertinent paragraph:

Major U.S. assistance in support of this military effort is needed only until the insurgency has been suppressed, or until the national security forces of the Government of South Vietnam are capable of suppressing it. Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the U.S. military task can be

completed by the end of 1965, although there may be a continuing requirement for a limited number of U.S. training personnel. They reported that by the end of this year, the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam can be withdrawn.

Against the background of turmoil in Saigon, Washington's commentators peered at the statement with the fascination they would accord a strange bug. Some saw it as a gesture to calm a restive Congress, which was beginning to demand cuts in aid unless Saigon improved. Others suggested McNamara was warning Diem that American patience was not without limit. Both groups were partly correct. Apparently few carried the analysis one step further.

For McNamara, according to officials familiar with his thinking, contemplated a deadline to the Vietnam commitment, win or lose. The Secretary of Defense believed the United States would have to wind up its direct involvement in Vietnam by the end of 1965. If the effort had failed, then the departure would have to be glazed over with the assertion that the U.S. role, which after all was advisory, had been honorably fulfilled.

This, of course, was not the common interpretation of the McNamara-Taylor report, which from hindsight was simply that the two had made a gross miscalculation. Nor is it provable today. Even if McNamara now should step forward with a retrospective explanation, which is most unlikely, allowance would have to be made for the influence of time and intervening events.

Taylor, whose report it was also, certainly did not intend that the United States should get out at any cost. The language, indeed, left open what would happen if the assumptions proved wrong. By endorsing it, Taylor presumably was being tolerant of McNamara, confident that common sense as he saw it would prevail as events demanded. But the statement, written and rewritten, was first of all McNamara's. Taylor's interpretation of it was less important than that of McNamara. What McNamara wanted was language that suited his policy purpose, as vaguely put as neces-

sary to secure Taylor's approval. McNamara conceived Taylor's support to be essential.

The principals who claim certainty that McNamara meant to lay a base for liquidation of the commitment insist also that he believed this to reflect the conviction of the President. Needless to say, particularly in the light of later events, others intimately involved reject this belief. In any case, the effect of McNamara's indulgence in a bit of naïve and clumsy duplicity soon would be neutralized by events.

For the moment, however, the package approach that came out of the NSC meeting assumed the survival of Diem. For most of October there was no change in the attitude of the Saigon government as the first economic restrictions were applied. Then on the last day of the month Diem asked Lodge to accompany him on a brief trip out of Saigon. Along the way he asked the Ambassador what the Americans wanted of him. Lodge told him—including the exile of Nhu. Diem made no commitments. But neither did he rule out reform.

Whether or not he was approaching compromise will never be known. For the next day the generals launched their coup, and both Diem and Nhu were murdered.

Their deaths closed a sadly bungled episode of the exercise of military policy for political ends. There were so many might-have-beens, as there always are in the political genesis of armed conflict. If ARVN had been trained differently, if the political nature of the undertaking had been better understood, if the assessments of progress had not been so grossly incorrect, if the United States had acted sooner to take Diem in hand, if the August 24 cable had been drafted differently . . . or perhaps McNamara was right and the central weakness was the failure to comprehend the Vietnamese, and all that this failure implied. McNamara never believed, even long afterward, that Diem had served U.S. purposes badly until the Buddhist crisis. As a strong leader, however far from ideal, and as a patriot, Diem appeared to him far preferable to the totally unknown. But the deed was done, and it was time to pick up the pieces.

On the day of the coup, just before it erupted, General Harkins had proclaimed that "victory, in the sense it would apply to this kind of war," was only months away. The chief of the American advisory group announced that ARVN had been trained to the point that it was "as professional as you can get."

Yet even as the planned withdrawal of 1,000 Americans began, it was depressingly clear that the Viet Cong were gaining rapidly. Whether or not enemy progress had been constant became irrelevant. What was certain was that the Viet Cong had stepped up their pace by September and from the day of the coup were running wild. Weaknesses in the strategic hamlet program completed the bleak picture.

It was a period of depression for McNamara. The death of Diem was a failure of both policy and performance. He was shattered by the assassination of John Kennedy three weeks later. Aides reported he was driving himself with greater fury. As a military junta led by General Duong Van Minh struggled to establish control in Saigon, his hopes for liquidating the American presence, with some remnants of national prestige intact, began to look less and less realistic.

This was a period of reassessment for the new President of the United States as well, of course, and McNamara set out in mid-December to spend two days with NATO ministers in Paris and two days on the scene in Saigon. As he left Orly Airport in Paris for Saigon, the tires blew on the "McNamara Special" when his pilot made an emergency stop in the fog to avoid a commercial airliner. No one was injured, but it had been close enough.

Under all circumstances, he was in remarkably good spirits when he arrived back in Washington on December 21. He betrayed not a trace of disorientation from his travels. He was still the perfect performer who could leap hemispheres and immediately absorb and translate incredibly complex data without a pause to adjust his internal clock. (General Westmoreland once remarked with awe, "He has an unbelievable constitution.") Hairless, freshly shaved, he was the faithful executor of his new President's policy.