4/14/95

McNAMARA, STILL THE POINT MAN

Again, His Vietnam Plan Seems to Have Backfired

By David Von Drehle
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Robert S. McNamara says his memoir, "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam," was intended to heal the still-sore wounds of that war. But it hasn't worked out that way. So far, the book has drawn mostly scorn and rage and vilification.

It's called the Doctrine of Unintended Consequences: An enterprise launched toward one goal ends up at another destination altogether. Maybe they should rename it the McNamara Doctrine—because it keeps replaying itself in the life of the former secretary of defense. He writes a book to heal, and instead it exacerbates old wounds. He and his colleagues try to build a democracy in South Vietnam, and instead their actions end up killing millions and costing billions, driving a wedge through their nation, eroding confidence in the government and petering out in a scantly masked surrender.

See the pattern again:

At 78, McNamara pauses during an interview in his comfortable downtown office and thinks back across the expanse of his remarkable life to his earliest memory. "It is of a city exploding with joy," he says in a gravelly tenor. "The date was November 11, 1918, Armistice Day. I was 2 years old. The city was San Francisco. They were celebrating not just the end of World War I; they were celebrating the belief that we'd won a war to end all wars.

"And yet," he continues, as his voice grows somber, "this century has been the bloodiest in all of human history. We human beings have killed roughly 160 million people." He shakes his head at the thought of it: a whole century gone awry.

About 3 million people died in Vietnam, which was the third American war after the war to end all wars. Vietnam, which was widely known as "McNamara's War."

He is a man who ought to know a lot about the tendency of things to go wrong.

McNamara gets right to the nut of his book. On the second page of the preface, he writes: "We were wrong, terribly wrong."

And for many of his outraged critics there is no need to read farther—certainly no need to hear McNamara's "lessons" of the war. This upsets the author: "I've been doing interviews for more than a week and no one—wait, that's wrong: *one* person, one person this morning—has asked me about the appendix on nuclear arms."

His critics don't want instruction. Instead, those who hated the war in Vietnam want to know why McNamara was silent when it counted. Those who supported the war say McNamara was timid then and craven now. Those who fought the war ask what kind of man recommends troops for a battle he doesn't believe they can win. And they resent McNamara for calling their struggle a mistake.

It's a good thing, perhaps, that McNamara has such an extraordinary capacity to absorb criticism. For example: David Halberstam wrote a book called "The Best and the Brightest," about the meritocrats who bungled their way into Vietnam, with McNamara as a starring fool. McNamara cites the book in his bibliography, and in conversation he recycles the title. "The best and the brightest . . . I think that was an apt phrase,

See McNAMARA, D6, Col. 1

McNAMARA, From D1

at least for my associates if not for me. . . . Young, intelligent, well-educated, experienced, dedicated servants of the people," he says. "How it is that we failed?"

An editorial in the New York Times laid the corpses of 58,000 American soldiers at Bob McNamara's feet, called him morally bankrupt and spiritually deaf. Yet he hardly flinches. "Unbelievable," he says, shaking his head briefly. Then he adds, "That part of it I can live with. History is going to render judgment on that editorial."

History is, of course, going to render judgment on McNamara, too. And chances are his confession—"We were wrong"—won't dramatically change that judgment. The major histories of Vietnam have already concluded as much.

What might change, though, is history's view of how these men went wrong—were they foolish, or careless, or murderous? Or were they good men who somehow miscalculated, good men bound by events? The aim of "In Retrospect," it seems, is to affect this analysis. For when you read the whole thing, and discuss it with McNamara, you find him talking not about being wrong but mostly about being *right*.

The Question

"I'm frequently asked, 'Well, if you believed that the war couldn't be won militarily, why didn't you say so?' "

McNamara is perched in an armchair beside his broad desk at his office in the Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue. His platinum résumé—president of Ford Motor Co., secretary of defense, head of the World Bank, board member of many institutions (including the Washington Post Co.)—has led him to this quiet suite with nothing on the door but his name. His thin, muscular mountaineer's legs are crossed at the knee. His hair is combed straight back in the famous style he has worn his entire life, but the rimless eyeglasses he wore at the peak of his power are gone. His eyes and his mind are as clear as Steuben glass. He has been seen in tears on several recent television programs, but here in his office McNamara is in complete command, marching the interview through a series of points he intends to make: Point 1, Point 2, A, B, C, D.

Having posed the question, he leans forward, framing the air with his hands. "And the answer to that is . . . as far back as December of '65 I said to the president, 'I think we have only a 1-in-3 chance to win militarily, at best 1-in-2.' He said: 'Are you saying the war can't be won militarily?' I said yes."

He allows a passing moment for the point to sink in: He did say so! By his terms, he made the right assessment of the military situation and passed the information along. His book is full of similar moments: memos, conversations, briefings, all showing McNamara being absolutely right. The first comes as early as November of 1961: McNamara recounts that he spent "a couple of days" examining the situation in Southeast Asia and came to the conclusion that "if there is a strong South Vietnamese effort," there would be no need to send U.S. troops, while "if there is not such an effort, U.S. forces could not accomplish their mission."

That pretty much sums up the prevailing view of history more than 30 years later.

"So people say, 'My God! Why didn't you say it publicly or why didn't you resign, or why didn't you push for getting out in time?' And the answer to that is, [Secretary of State] Dean Rusk had written a memo to the president." McNamara is speaking again of 1965. "Dean said to the president: If we lose South Vietnam, it can lead to a catastrophic war. World War III.

"Now, these are the two points," he says, and he raises two fingers to emphasize the situation. He knew America was going to lose, but at the same time, America could not be *allowed* to lose. "As an officer of the government, I had to try to reconcile the two," he says. "And my means of reconciling them was to try to move toward negotiations which would lead to a settlement that . . . would not lead to the use of South Vietnam as a steppingstone for the Soviets and Chinese to extend their hegemony across all of Asia."

Another brief pause, just long enough for a thought to form: Gee, didn't Henry Kissinger win a Nobel Prize for just such a settlement in 1973? Apparently McNamara is thinking the same thing, because he says: "The program I had in mind . . . was the one that ultimately led to the start of negotiations the following May." He is now talking about 1967. "Ultimately, between November and May [of 1968] it did lead to a cessation of the bombing, and it did lead to the start of negotiations, and from then on the process was underway."

You have to study other books to learn the rest. According to Stanley Karnow, in "Vietnam: A History," McNamara recommended 200,000 combat troops be sent there as early as 1961, the same year he concluded military might couldn't build a government in Saigon. According to Halberstam in "The Best and the Brightest," McNamara pushed for 400,000 troops in 1965, the same year he told the president the war couldn't be won. According to Neil Sheehan in "A Bright Shining Lie," McNamara showed "abundant moral courage" in 1967 by telling President Johnson to negotiate—but "the high moral courage that Robert McNamara could summon up within the secrecy of the American state he could not summon up outside of it to denounce what the American state was doing."

Was he wrong to have remained silent after Johnson eased him out of the administration and into the World Bank? McNamara doesn't buy it. "You shouldn't use your power that you've accumulated in a sense as the president's appointee . . . to attack and subvert the policies of the elected representative of the people," he says flatly.

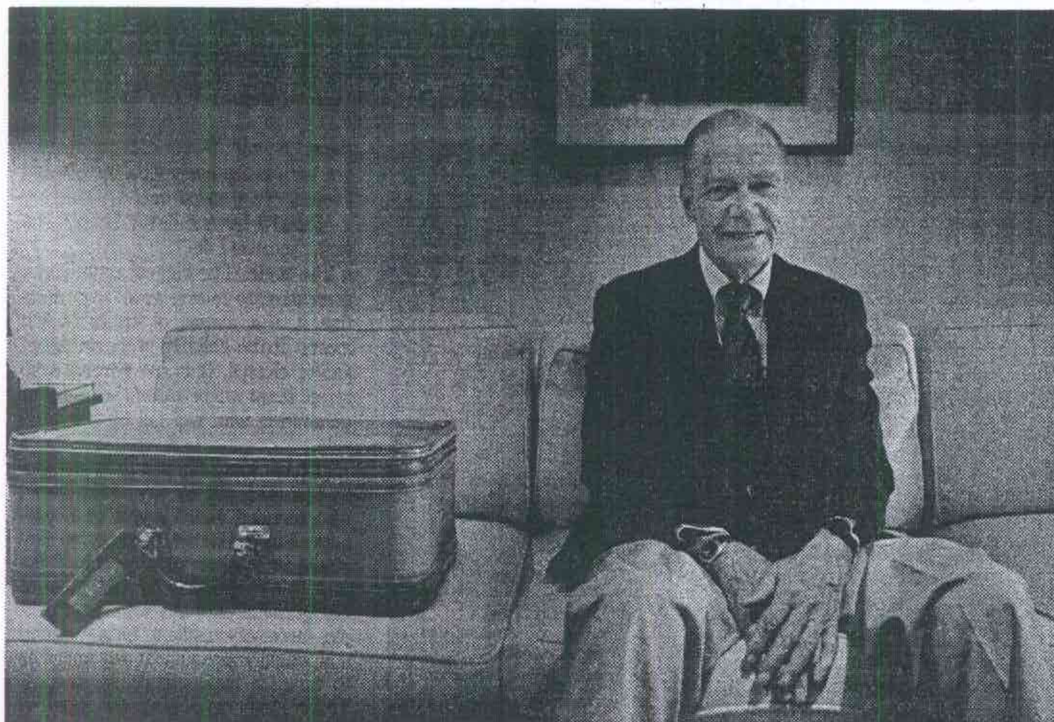
Was he morally wrong about Vietnam?

"I would love to discuss the morality of it," he says, waving his hands no-no-no. "But it opens up such a field, I can't get into it." And quickly McNamara recasts the subject to even larger fields: the immoral stockpiling of nuclear arms and the evil of poverty around the globe. He is proud of the work he has done in these areas.

Dominoes and Theories

The road to Vietnam was paved with good intentions, McNamara says.

"The facts are that the majority of the Congress, the majority of the public, the majority of the press, well into the war, favored exactly what Kennedy and Johnson did," he notes purposefully. McNamara always speaks purposefully, with a confidence that still dazzles



BY KEITH JENKINS—THE WASHINGTON POST

McNamara in retrospect: The pro-war view "was the majority view, go back and check it."

his friends and supporters. Old men love to tell stories; McNamara's are stories with a point.

The pro-war view "was the majority view, go back and check it," he says. "We were captives of our experience.

"And what was our experience? Dean Rusk, John Kennedy, I, many of our associates, certainly the [joint] chiefs, had all fought in World War II. Churchill said we could've saved millions of lives in World War II had the West responded in a timely fashion to Hitler's threat. . . .

"That's the first point. Second point: After we ultimately won the war against Germany and Japan, the Soviet Union took Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Moreover, they sought to subvert the elected governments of France and Italy. It was a terrible threat.

"And then, during my seven years in the Defense Department, in August of '61 we had an attempt by the Soviet Union to take West Berlin. . . . A year later, they put nuclear warheads in Cuba, and we were much closer to nuclear war then than anyone realized. . . . Then, in June of '67, Egypt was determined to wipe Israel off the map as a nation [and] Israel preempted them. . . . [Soviet premier Aleksei] Kosygin told us, in effect, If you want war, you'll get war."

Having set the global stage, McNamara zooms in on Asia.

"All this time," he says, "the Soviets and the Chinese were backing the North Vietnamese in a program that Eisenhower, back in 1954, had said would lead to a fall of the dominoes—meaning we'd lose Vietnam and then we'd lose Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and possibly India, and that would in turn weaken the forces of the West in NATO and in our relationship with Japan." He throws up his hands and falls back in his chair.

"Now, what I say in the book is I think we misjudged that threat. But it was a real threat. And we, having been part of the World War II generation, were very sensitive to that."

In his book, McNamara returns several times to the council of so-called "Wise Men" who advised Lyndon Johnson from time to time on Vietnam. He notes their stellar credentials: Omar Bradley, the World War II hero; Abe Fortas, the canny lawyer; Clark Clif-

ford, confidant of many presidents; John McCloy, spine of the Establishment; Dean Acheson, architect of the Cold War. They all approved of the escalation in Vietnam. The military pushed for it. Congressional leaders virtually demanded it.

And there was a political dimension to the issue that McNamara only touches on. Conservatives of the 1950s and early '60s had successfully attacked liberals for "losing" China to communism. Kennedy, and later Johnson, had no intention of losing Vietnam.

McNamara now says America should have withdrawn from South Vietnam when the parlous Diem government melted down in 1962. But he can only guess what might have happened if we had. Even today, there are those who argue that the fall of the dominoes was a real possibility, that the communists, especially at that early date, would have kept pushing to see how far they could go. Somewhere along the way the United States might have faced an even bigger fight. History does not disclose its alternatives.

Bad as Vietnam was, it could have been worse. "Absolutely, there's no question about that," McNamara says vigorously. "Worse could have happened." He believes he was right to encourage Johnson to keep the war confined.

"The chiefs were honest enough and candid enough to say, Mr. President and Mr. Secretary . . . we recommend you do A, B, C and we want you to understand that may lead to the involvement of China and the Soviet Union and we may be in military confrontation with them. And if that happens we may have to use nuclear weapons. . . . The president and I were determined not to let that happen."

He bolts from his chair to the conference table, which is covered with books, many of them about him. McNamara quickly puts his hands on the volume he wants. It is the record of a conference on Vietnam held in 1991 by the Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

He leafs swiftly through the book, settling on a heavily underlined page. On this page, Gen. William Westmoreland, the ranking officer in Vietnam during the build-up, is quoted saying that Johnson—and by extrapolation McNamara—deserves "credit for not allowing the war to expand geographically" and avoiding a possible "world war."

" 'At the time, I felt like my hands were tied,' " McNamara reads aloud from Westmoreland's statement. "But now," adds McNamara, "he sees what we avoided."

Wrong How?

Finally, you just have to blurt out the question: "What, exactly, do you mean when you say you were wrong?"

"I think we were wrong strategically," he answers, "wrong from the point of view of pursuing the interests of this nation, to insert 500,000 men into Vietnam and carry on combat there. I think we could have protected the security of the nation without it, and therefore we were wrong to do it."

But when one reads the book, the whole thing seems inevitable.

"Nothing's inevitable," he says emphatically. And then repeats, with even more emphasis: "Nothing is inevitable. That's why you have leaders. Not to follow but to lead . . . to break out of the inevitable."

That's precisely the kind of leader Robert S. McNamara was ***not***, of course, nor was Dean Rusk, or McGeorge Bundy, or Maxwell Taylor, or John Foster Dulles, or Eisenhower, or Kennedy, or Johnson. The generation of leaders that took America into Vietnam was not a generation of free thinkers. They didn't dream beyond the horizon or color outside the lines. They believed in the rational things: numbers, strategy, analysis, throw weights. McNamara was a kind of apotheosis of this breed. Facile at math, he rose to the elite as part of the Army Air Corps brain trust that helped win World War II by counting airplanes and bombs and targets destroyed.

After the war, he and his fellow Air Corps "Whiz Kids" joined Ford as a group. There, McNamara brought that same statistical mastery to cutting the cost of a car. He rose to the top of the company, but he never quite divined, in his guts, the reason people would pay more for a convertible with slick fins than for, say, a Falcon.

It was a generation of men who believed that the world makes sense. That human events could be mastered. That if enough planes drop enough bombs on a backward Asian country, victory must follow. X plus Y equals Z.

But the world has proved to be a very big and mysterious place, and the Cold War was a time of particular insanity, the madness of two powers locked in a stare-down in which one wrong move could mean the death of everything. It was, perhaps, not the right time for bravado and slide rules.

Perhaps McNamara and his colleagues were the wrong men at the wrong time, men who believed too much in power. This is a possibility McNamara resists most strongly. "It wasn't inevitable!" he repeats once more. "We were captives of our experience, but we should've broken out of it. That's the point!"

To the very end of his time at the Pentagon, McNamara kept believing he was steering the course of history. It is the reason he didn't resign. "I felt I was continuing to influence the president as long as I was there," he says. "I felt that I was proposing . . . the only course that we could take at that time that would lead to reduction of the war . . . and it was a course I could pursue inside the administration that I couldn't pursue outside the administration without causing it to have no real chance of success."

And he believes he can steer still more. If American will heed his 11 Lessons of Vietnam, he says, we can find the right answers to future dilemmas. He paraphrases approvingly from a recent Newsweek article about his book: "McNamara is pointing to lessons that we should be applying today in Bosnia and Somalia.

"That," he cries, "is exactly correct!"

McNamara's 10th lesson says something else, though. And it is here

that he comes closest to identifying how he and his compatriots went so "terribly wrong":

"We failed to recognize that in international affairs, as in other aspects of life, there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions. For one whose life has been dedicated to the belief and practice of problem solving, this is particularly hard to admit. But at times, we may have to live with an imperfect, untidy world."

May?

Between the Lines

McNamara's late wife, Marg, once called to his attention a passage in a poem by T.S. Eliot, one of his "Four Quartets."

We shall not cease exploring
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

He includes these lines in his book, and at the end of the interview he recites them with a smile, because he thinks they describe his situation pretty well. "I've been exploring," he says, "in the sense of trying to understand myself, understand the world, and understand how things happen. And though I hope I haven't reached the end of my exploring, and I don't know the place I started completely, I know it a hell of a lot better than I did when I left the Pentagon February 29, 1968."

"In Retrospect," says McNamara, is the report of an explorer who has almost come full circle. He hopes it will help strategists of the future better analyze their strategies, better forecast confrontations, better plot the trajectory of the unseen.

"Four Quartets," on the other hand, is about something quite different, if you read the whole thing. It is a series of mystical poems, quite the opposite of analytical. The poems speak of an aging man's discovery that life finds its meaning through suffering and atonement.

That "for us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

That "the only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless."

Shortly before McNamara's chosen passage, the poet lists "the gifts reserved for age." He ticks them off in McNamaran fashion. First comes decay of the body. Next comes impotent rage at human folly.

"And last . . ."

. . . the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

The poet is speaking of the Doctrine of Unintended Consequences. McNamara's Doctrine.