

Robert McNamara's Private War

Post
5/23/95

IN RETROSPECT The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam

By Robert S. McNamara
With Brian VanDeMark
Times Books. 414 pp. \$27.50

By Peter Braestrup

FOR ALMOST THREE DECADES, public discussion of the Vietnam War has gone on without the participation of one of its key architects, Robert Strange McNamara, the super-manager who ran the Pentagon under Kennedy and Johnson but strictly refused to talk about it thereafter.

Now, with considerable fanfare from his publisher, McNamara, 78, has issued a Vietnam memoir. It is part emotional *mea culpa*, part a laying of the blame on all of us, part revelation and, inevitably, an exercise in selective memory. Twenty years after the fall of Saigon (on April 30, 1975), he gives us an important cautionary tale.

"The war caused terrible damage to America," he writes. "No doubt exists in my mind about that. None. I want to look at Vietnam in hindsight, not in any way to obscure my own and others' errors of judgment and their egregious costs but to show the full range of pressures and the lack of knowledge that existed at the time."

As McNamara notes, he got off to a fast start in Washington in 1961. Seven weeks after Henry Ford named him president of the Ford Motor Co., he was recruited by John F. Kennedy to head the Pentagon. Unlike JFK, McNamara had seen no combat; in World War II he was a Harvard Business School graduate turned Air Force statistical control officer, one of a team of numbers-crunching Whiz Kids who were hired by Ford and prospered. On top of this, he was a Republican.

He entered the Pentagon, he says, with a "limited grasp of military affairs." At first this did not seem to matter—McNamara saw the Pentagon as no different from Ford Motor Co.: "Define a clear objective . . . develop a plan . . . and systematically monitor progress against that plan." He awed political Washington as he ably led the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history. "I had no patience with the notion that the Pentagon could not be managed," McNamara writes.

War, he would learn, was less manageable.

South Vietnam was not the primary U.S. Cold War concern in 1961. Castro's Cuba, the Berlin Wall, even the Congo preoccupied JFK, McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Outgoing President Dwight Eisenhower had singled out remote Laos, Vietnam's neighbor, as the key Southeast Asia domino threatened by communism. JFK settled with Moscow on a "neutral" Laos and, as McNamara fails to recall, opened the way for Hanoi to freely funnel troops and weapons to South Vietnam through sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia on the Ho Chi Minh Trail—a crucial asset that was to give North Vietnam the strategic initiative thereafter.

McNamara tells the reader little new about the steady increase in Kennedy's commitment of advisors and money to Saigon in 1961-63. But he illuminates the striking "incoherence" and hesitations of Vietnam policy under JFK, notably in his en-

Continued on page 10

Peter Braestrup is a former Washington Post Saigon bureau chief and Pentagon reporter whose "Big Story," an analysis of Vietnam news coverage, has just been reissued.

In Retrospect

Continued from page 1

dorsement of the 1963 military coup against South Vietnam's authoritarian President Ngo Dinh Diem amid growing political turmoil in Saigon. The coup did not end the turmoil. The Viet Cong gained more ground. McNamara now believes that, had Kennedy not been assassinated, he would have coolly pulled out of South Vietnam. But JFK, he notes, never really told him that.

In any event, McNamara recalls, out of "innocence and confidence," JFK and his advisers failed to ask themselves the basic questions: Was it true that the fall of South Vietnam would trigger the fall of all Southeast Asia? Would such a fall be a threat to U.S. vital interests? If so, what kind of war might develop? Could we win? Should we not know the answers before we committed troops?

When Lyndon Johnson entered the Oval Office in 1963, he retained the "best and the brightest"—McNamara, Rusk and JFK's foreign policy advisors. Johnson, McNamara tells us, was more personally committed than JFK to the defense of South Vietnam. Both LBJ and Rusk remembered the pre-World War II appeasement of Hitler and America's successful (albeit costly and unpopular) limited war that preserved South Korea in 1950-53. With the initial backing of Congress and the press, they (and, for a time, McNamara) saw the defense of South Vietnam as essential to American credibility and the containment of Sino-Soviet expansionism.

To a degree unmatched in his former colleagues' published recollections, McNamara's memoir is a tale of high-echelon muddle and contradiction. Johnson feared being accused by the right wing of "losing Vietnam." At the same time, he avoided mobilizing the country or seeking a formal congressional declaration of war lest he forfeit his beloved Great Society program. He wanted to "win," but, afraid to risk possible Chinese intervention or Russian reaction, he refused to go into Laos to block the trail or do what Richard Nixon later did—mine North Vietnam's harbors and send heavy B-52 bombers to batter Hanoi's outskirts. Instead, he and McNamara began with a hesitant, step-by-step air campaign, "Rolling Thunder," hoping to shore up Saigon's morale and, maybe, prompt Hanoi to talk peace.

Like his predecessor, McNamara emphasizes, Johnson never faced up to the painful long-term question of what "winning" or "getting out" might really require. Vietnam was only one Cold War headache among many. Most important in all this was LBJ's leadership style. As other LBJ aides have noted, he listened to everyone but kept his cards close to his chest; he sought instinctively to leave his Vietnam options open even if it meant avoiding key decisions, obfuscating the truth (with McNamara's help) and, ultimately, losing the trust of the press and public.

With the support of McNamara (and, oddly, George Ball, Rusk's deputy and the leading in-house dove), the president started bombing North Vietnam in February 1965. Fearing "escalation," LBJ and McNamara personally vetted the air strikes proposed weekly by the military, incurring their ire by ruling out such targets as the active MIG fighter base at Phuc Yen and the first deadly Soviet-provided surface-to-air missiles, an issue McNamara now overlooks.

Then, to avert impending defeat in the south, LBJ

fatefully sent in the first Marines in March 1965. In July, he publicly committed himself to deploying 175,000 troops (with more to come), then approved a 36-day bombing halt to try peace feelers in December.

By then, even as McNamara dutifully dispatched additional forces to Vietnam, he was already convinced that no U.S. military victory was possible. "We were mired in quicksand," he writes. The only hope was to apply "limited military pressure" and seek to negotiate a deal. However, with Soviet and Chinese support, the tenacious men in Hanoi did not want a compromise peace; they could endure the limited military pressure, and they wanted South Vietnam.

"No wider war" was Johnson's bottom line, and McNamara, judging by his own account, did not ponder its implications for the 500,000 men he and LBJ sent into an endless war of "body counts" in Vietnam. He only cites, repeatedly, his personal fears of an uncontrolled spiral into nuclear conflict. His fears were not shared by the military. From the beginning, every White House move was an LBJ compromise between hawks and doves as the president tried to keep all parties on board.

"My sense of the war gradually shifted from concern

to skepticism to frustration to anguish," says McNamara. But although he was often at odds with LBJ over Vietnam, he did not resign. Instead, he became the prime in-house advocate of repeated bombing pauses and (illusory) peace diplomacy.

Finally, in early 1967, after a two-year troop buildup, Gen. William Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, felt he had enough roads, ports and airfields to begin his long-sought offensive strategy. He asked for 200,000 more men—for a total of 670,000—to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail and seize the strategic initiative. With this "optimum force," Westmoreland said, the United States might be able to start reducing its involvement in three years. Otherwise, it would take at least five years.

AS McNAMARA recalls it, Westy's request was a wake-up call. It pitted the Joint Chiefs against him and LBJ's civilian advisers amid growing public disenchantment. McNamara responded with a controversial May 19, 1967 memo to LBJ saying in effect, "let's cut back the bombing, hold the line on more troops, and try to negotiate." LBJ rejected McNamara's implicit pull-out plea, gave Westy a 525,000 troop ceiling but no new strategy and, characteristically, finessed the issue.

As internal administration disagreements continued, the war ground on. Neither McNamara nor the Joint Chiefs quit in protest. But the May 19 memo signaled the beginning of the end for McNamara and Johnson. In December 1967, LBJ announced that McNamara would leave to head the World Bank at the end of February 1968. And so he did, exhausted and despairing. His ceremonial departure came a month after the communists launched their surprise Tet offensive, suffering a bloody battlefield setback but causing a deep crisis for Lyndon Johnson in Washington. On March 31 he announced that he would not run for reelection, and offered Hanoi an-

other partial bombing pause and peace talks. Even so, McNamara barely mentions Tet, the climactic episode of "his" war (although he appends an essay on the modern risks of nuclear conflict).

Looking back, McNamara contends that no U.S. military success was ever possible, short of genocide. He argues that politically the United States could have pulled out on several occasions—notably in 1964 amid the chaos in Saigon before the U.S. buildup or, less plausibly, as late as December 1967, when more than 480,000 U.S. troops were "in-country." In the end, of course, the United States began withdrawing its troops in 1973, having lost 58,000 dead and suffered grave damage to its civic health, its political institutions and its economic prospects.

Who was to blame? McNamara rightly names LBJ, the commander-in-chief, but he also blames himself, less for his own failings as a military strategist than for his failures as a peacemaker. And he is not loathe to cite others' flaws and contradictions. Historians may question some of his more selective recollections of his administration colleagues and the Joint Chiefs, even as he lauds their good faith. Oddly, McNamara says that Westmoreland, given the White House's constraints, had "no alternative" but to fight a war of attrition; then he quotes the general's critics—at greater length. Vietnam veterans will find few references to the devotion and competence of the men McNamara and LBJ sent into distant battle; they largely remain statistics in McNamara's memoir, as they did in his memos during his days as defense secretary.

Like the American anti-war academics of the '60s, McNamara awards the communists the only banner of Vietnamese nationalism. He ignores the fact that a majority of South Vietnamese, despite a war-torn society and mediocre, often corrupt leadership, fought for a decade and died in far larger numbers than their American allies to stave off "liberation" by Hanoi. Indeed, McNamara depicts the South Vietnamese as exasperating, unworthy allies; their weaknesses, he suggests a bit too often, ultimately underlay the Johnson administration's failures in Indochina.

However, he also concludes that the decision-makers in Washington, however well-intentioned, "failed to address fundamental issues . . . and deep-seated disagreements among the president's advisers were neither surfaced nor resolved." In war, as super-manager Bob McNamara discovered, even more than in other great endeavors, that is a sure recipe for disaster. ■