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Richard Harwood

As Wrong as McNamara

The punishment of Robert McNamara for his role in the Vietnam War has begun anew with the publication of his apologetic memoirs. "We were wrong, terribly wrong," he tells us now.

On the talk shows the "war criminal" charge is heard. In other quarters "moral condemnation" is proposed. The *New York Times*, in a scathing editorial, "Mr. McNamara's War," writes of "how fate dispensed rewards and punishment for [his] thousand days of error. Three million Vietnamese died. Fifty-eight thousand Americans got to come home in body bags. Mr. McNamara . . . got a sinecure at the World Bank and summers at the Vineyard." Mickey Kaus in the *New Republic* asks: "Has any single American of this century done more harm than Robert McNamara?"

On the promotional tour for his book he has taken to weeping. The lesson, I suppose, is that what goes around comes around.

That may be fair. But to lay all of this heavy burden on McNamara's frail shoulders too easily lets a lot of us, both living and dead, off the hook. He did not single-handedly make the war. It was the American Establishment—political, military, journalistic and academic—that wrote the script: the "best and the brightest" as David Halberstam, years later, put it. A virtually unanimous consensus supported the judgment that the war had to be fought. That judgment was strongly supported by a very substantial majority of the American people as well.

It is fashionable these days to argue that the people were (and are) sheep-like dupes, misled and betrayed by rose-colored lies from their

leaders, McNamara included: The devil made me do it. But that is not true. Lies, deliberate or unknowing, may have been told. But the people knew what was happening. They could read the casualty reports and were not blinded by lights at the end of the tunnel.

By mid-1967 a plurality of Americans had concluded without any help from Washington that "the U.S. made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam." A year later a clear majority shared that view. Nevertheless, public support for a precipitous withdrawal was thin—10 percent in late 1967, 13 percent in September 1968, 29 percent in June 1969. (These numbers come from John Mueller's classic study, "War, Presidents and Public Opinion," published in 1985.)

There is an explanation (not Mueller's) for the apparent inconsistency in American opinion at that time. It involves the press.

The *Times* said in its editorial last week that McNamara finally has "grasped realities that seemed readily apparent to millions of Americans throughout the Vietnam War."

But the *New York Times* was not among those prescient millions, nor *The Washington Post*, nor virtually every other major American newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune* excepted. The *Times* hailed the Tonkin Gulf resolution in 1964 as proof of "our united determination to support the cause of freedom in Southeast Asia . . . [against] the mad adventure by the North Vietnamese Communists. . . . United States determination to assure the independence of South Vietnam, if ever

doubted before, can not be doubted now by the Communists to the north or their allies."

Halberstam, the Times' correspondent in Vietnam, published a few months later his well-received book, "The Making of a Quagmire." He opposed any American abandonment of South Vietnam:

"It would mean that those Vietnamese who committed themselves fully to the United States will suffer the most under a Communist government. . . . It means a drab, lifeless and controlled society for a people who deserve better. Withdrawal also means that the United States' prestige will be lowered throughout the world and it means that the pressure of Communism on the rest of Southeast Asia will intensify. Lastly, withdrawal means that throughout the world the enemies of the West will be encouraged to try insurgencies like the one in Vietnam."

Halberstam was apprehensive about a major U.S. military involvement. But it may come to that, he warned, because Vietnam "is a legitimate part of [America's] global commitment. A strategic country in a key area, it is perhaps one of only five or six nations in the world that is truly vital to U.S. interests."

For years, beginning in the 1950s and long before McNamara came on the scene, this was an insistent theme in the media's coverage of Vietnam and was the subject of a major study in 1970 by Susan Welch, a political scientist at the University of Illinois. It was a theme that helped set in concrete in the American mind the "issues" in Indochina. It helped ensure, Welch concluded,

"that the reading public would view the war as a struggle between Communism and the Free World, vital to the preservation of all of Southeast Asia and perhaps all of Asia." Finally, she wrote, our major newspapers propagated a view that "the only way out of the crisis which could result in a satisfactory solution for the West was a military victory over the forces of Ho Chi Minh." These assumptions were not abandoned or seriously challenged by the mainstream press until the late 1960s.

The public had earlier begun arriving at the conclusion that the war was a mistake but, having been indoctrinated for so many years about our "vital interests" in Vietnam, were nevertheless reluctant to give in.

The Times now can say of McNamara: "His regret cannot be huge enough to balance the books for our dead soldiers. The ghosts of those un-lived lives circle close around Mr. McNamara. Surely he must in every quiet and prosperous moment hear the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry, dying in the tall grass, platoon by platoon, for no purpose. What he took from them cannot be repaid by prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades later."

A lot of us in the press, if we are honest with ourselves, will hear those whispers, too. We do not balance the books or cleanse our own record with glib and self-serving revisionism in these prosperous times. We could begin by acknowledging that McNamara's vision was no more flawed than our own.

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