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McNamara Can't Rewrite History

ONCE CAUGHT a glimpse of Robert S. McNamara during one of his visits to Saigon. Whenever this secretary of defense was in-country, the MACV brass, starting with Gen. William C. Westmoreland, jumped even more frenetic. He was the civilian boss from hell, a grim auditor come for the battlefield books. The generals loathed McNamara because he was smarter, got up earlier, and invariably asked them a barrage of questions they could not answer.

Once noticing the hordes of draft-age Vietnamese and their girlfriends motorbiking the Saigon streets, McNamara asked Westmoreland why were they not in the army. The commanding general said he'd get back to him on that.

The assignment fell to me, a captain working as an information officer in MACV headquarters. It developed that the South Vietnamese Constitution provided for both a partial and a full military mobilization. Yet in July, 1967, with 466,000 GIs on the ground and dying, the Vietnamese had not officially triggered even a partial mobilization. This embarrassing conclusion of my staff study was marked "Hold" and probably never forwarded to McNamara.

The South Vietnamese were rabbits to the Viet Cong tigers, lacking the will to fight this U.S.-subsidized civil war against national unity. The U.S. ruling class — taking pain to spare its own sons — sent GIs to defend a dying European colonialism horrified at the prospect of a Vietnam run by the Vietnamese. Those attuned to the falling colonial dominoes of China, India and Africa could easily discern the inevitability of the U.S. defeat.

McNamara knew by 1967, but remained silent after President Lyndon B. Johnson rewarded him with a cushy job heading the World Bank. After all, those Americans dying on the plains and in the delta were not the children of the "best and the brightest." Now, just before heading into the shade, McNamara has regained his tongue on the Vietnam War.

In his new book, the title of which I will not print, McNamara voices sorrow for his war role in the administrations of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Johnson. "We were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why." What, Mr. Secretary, do you owe 58,000 dead Americans? Hundreds of thousands wounded by hot steel or wrecked by white powder? What about the orphans? The widows? The horror of displacement? The 3 million dead Vietnamese?

Tracking the grisly "body count," McNamara took great pride in unleashing his high-tech war-dogs against the scantily clad peasantry. At a 1965 Saigon press conference, AP reporter Peter Arnett asked McNamara how he felt about Vietnam becoming "McNamara's War." According to Arnett, in his book, "Live From the Battlefield," he responded: "McNamara's War? I'll have you know I am proud to have my name associated with this venture, proud of it, I tell you."

Now, with the devil thumping through his c. vita,

McNamara has thrown himself on the mercy of the angels. He cries easily and these days has much for which to weep. But his TV tears on ABC's PrimeTime Live seemed to have been shed not for the GIs who died but for his son, Craig, who, classified 4F with a stomach ulcer, was spared the battlefield.

It recalls President Johnson feeling the horror of his war only when his daughter Linda curled up in bed with him and cried about his son-in-law Chuck Robb's upcoming assignment to Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Johnson, McNamara and the other top planners continued to squander the nation's credibility, talent and resources on a bloody and senseless war. McNamara now admits that they wandered blindly into Asia, a terra incognita, with "limited and shallow" analysis, without benefit of proper information, a coherent plan or good intentions.

Unlike, his secretary of defense, Johnson refused to the very end to admit to a gross U.S. miscalculation in Vietnam. To do so, according to historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, would have meant, he felt, that the young Americans he sent there to die did so in vain. McNamara has no such qualms. If, as McNamara insists even now with the onset of dotage, he truly was the best and the brightest, then God help us all.