

Newspaper 4/20/95

Vietnam Lesson: The Evil Is

ON THE 20TH anniversary of the fall of Saigon, on the occasion of Robert McNamara's mea culpa memoirs, Americans are once again debating the lessons of Vietnam. One quick conclusion: It is obscene for McNamara, now at the end of a long and prosperous career, to write a best-selling book in which he admits that all along he knew the war was a mistake. McNamara has had decades to reflect upon the inadequacy of his technocratic body-count analysis — decades of life and love that he helped deny to 58,000 Americans.



James P. Pinkerton

The follies of old generals are usually borne by young soldiers. In "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the poet Alfred Tennyson paid tribute to brave British cavalymen who fought in the Crimea; into the valley of death rode that gallant 600, because, as Tennyson wrote, "Someone had blundered."

But, historical memory must include triumph as well as tragedy.

This year, we remember the 50th anniversary of America's victory over fascism; 1945 also marks the beginning of the far longer twilight struggle against communism. The larger lesson of the Cold War is this: Communism was evil, and we were right to oppose it; we should learn from our mistakes, but we should also take note of our successes.

For example, bipartisan leadership across four decades kept West Berlin free. In 1948, Harry Truman ordered the airlift that saved its people from starvation during the Soviet embargo. In 1961, John Kennedy traveled to the divided city and proclaimed that he, too, was a Berliner. In 1987, Ronald Reagan stood in the shadow of the Wall and told Mikhail Gorbachev to tear it down.

Yet, even now, America can help defeat a new evil: forgetfulness. Both doves and hawks ought to agree that the full history of the Cold War era needs to be preserved. The Vietnam Memorial is a vivid reminder of the cost of containment; so is the Korean Memorial, to be opened this July.

Today, another touchstone of somber recollection is in the planning stages: a shrine to those killed by Communist totalitarians. In 1993, President Bill Clinton, with a nudge from congressional Republicans, authorized the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation to raise private money to construct a remembrance on the Washington Mall to the deaths of as many as

100 million people. Finally, those killed in faraway places — Siberia's Kolyma, Belarus' Katyn Forest, Tibet and Cambodia — will find a home for their memory.

As with the Holocaust Memorial, some Americans will question why the United States should recognize tragedy in other lands. Yet, since 1630, when John Winthrop declared that the Massachusetts Bay Colony should "be as a city upon a hill," Americans have seen it as their duty to lift the lamp of liberty into the darkness of repression and intolerance.

The Mall is already graced by memorials to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, three presidents who spoke universal truths about human freedom and dignity. Someday soon, people from around the world will be able to come to the national capital and

"The full history of the Cold War era needs to be preserved."

Forgetfulness

see not only what freedom can do, but also what the lack of freedom has done.

Twenty years after the last American died in Vietnam, we are left with a sobering realization. McNamara, as he has admitted too late, was

wrong: U.S. intervention was a mistake. Yet the North Vietnamese were not the agrarian reformers their U.S. admirers depicted them as, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia were even worse. Americans aren't used to such

S

murky situations.

So we should remember the wisdom of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who survived the gulag and went on to write history that will long outlive the last commissar: Totalitarian evil cannot exist by itself; it is always intertwined with the lie. If Americans dedicate themselves to remembering the truth, no tyrant will ever be secure.

McNamara's Legacy Is a Genera

By Carol R. Richards

AT A RETREAT in Mt. Sinai last May, 14 men and women sat in a circle and told their life stories. Roughly, we broke down into two age groups: the World War II crowd — mostly retirees — and my cohort, the Vietnam generation. As we spoke, two large themes emerged.

For the older group, all men, fighting in World War II formed the backbone of their subsequent lives; they had left home as uncertain kids and returned as focused adults, serene that they had done their part.

For the younger men and women, their experience fighting in or against the war in Vietnam had sent them in as many different directions as there were individuals at this church retreat. There was the Vietnam veteran with two purple hearts who had been spat upon when he returned to the states. There was me, the editor whose campus paper had campaigned against the war. And others — pro- and anti-war. *Our* theme was anomie. We had come back from our service or our rebellions

lacking the older group's sense of completeness. Whether hawks or doves, our emotions about the war were still raw. It had set us against one another in our youth, and against our country.

So it was hard to watch with compassion as Robert McNamara made his quavery self-defense on the "Today" show Tuesday. The secretary of defense who directed the Vietnam War for President Lyndon Johnson now says he knew in 1967 that it could not be won and that the United States should get out. And yet McNamara failed to speak out.

What possible excuse is there for staying mum when he might have saved more than 20,000 U.S. lives by hastening the war's end? To me, his silence seems monstrous.

And so it does to those who fought. You've probably heard the bitter comments of prominent veterans like John McCain, the POW-turned-senator. I spoke with lesser-known vets, whose attitude was summed up in the words of Charles Kaiser of Kings Park — whose purple hearts I first learned of at the Mt. Sinai retreat: "McNamara is a fool," Kaiser said. "He always was a fool."

The vets are entitled to anger; their lives were on the line. But the effect of McNamara's dishonesty on those who didn't fight merits examination, too.

In modern mythology, the '60s mean sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, but that reputation is a smear to those of us old enough to have had our lives rechanneled by Vietnam. At Syracuse University, I editorialized against it; many of my male friends pursued

NEWSDAY, THURSDAY, APRIL 20, 1995



Carol R. Richards is deputy editor of Newsday's editorial pages.

tion's Cynicism

graduate studies or taught school to escape the draft; two fellow students fled to Canada. Not one of those life choices was made casually. And although saving one's skin was definitely part of the equation, idealism loomed large. We struggled with the question: If the war was immoral, did one have an obligation to country or to the larger ideal?

As we worried over where our loyalties ought to lie, down in the Pentagon, Robert McNamara now tells us, he was doing the same thing.

He made the wrong choice then. As an advocate of war who came to doubt the war, he lived a lie. That lie was the rot at the heart of the war, and it contributed a good deal to the corrosive cynicism the Baby Boom generation feels about government

even today. I think you can trace the unraveling of our culture — the drug abuse, the family disintegration, the disrespect for old virtues like loyalty and patriotism — back to the government's breaching of its bonds of truth with the people. The seeds of that breach were planted with the Vietnam War and grew to full flower in Watergate — another case of a government coverup.

McNamara's admission that "We were wrong, terribly wrong" might be expected to give aid and comfort to the old anti-war crowd. But his confirmation that we were right just makes me mad. Too much damage was done to allow gloating. Ironically, both sides now revile him — the doves because he failed to speak out, the hawks because they believed in "McNamara's War" — and he didn't.