

Mission to Hanoi

McNamara Asks Ex-Foes to Join in Search for War's Lessons

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By Keith B. Richburg
Washington Post Foreign Service

HANOI, Nov. 10—He is the repentant warrior now in the capital of the former enemy. But Robert S. McNamara, who as U.S. defense secretary in the 1960s was one of the chief architects of the only war the United States ever lost, says this is neither a mission of personal atonement nor an effort to pin the blame.

Rather, McNamara says, he came here to see if his Vietnamese counterparts are ready to begin jointly searching for lessons of the decade-long conflict and revisit the war's turning points to determine if early opportunities for peace may have been lost.

"How did it come about?" McNamara said of the war he helped escalate and later admitted was wrong. "Could it have been prevented? Were there opportunities to terminate it once it came about? . . . Were there missed opportunities?"

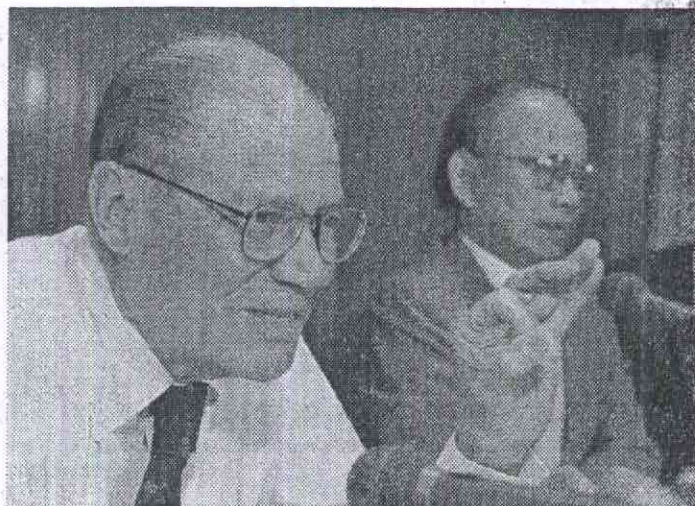
After two days of meetings with senior and retired Vietnamese leaders—including Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander who orchestrated North Vietnam's military victory—McNamara said he found "great interest in the approach we are taking."

The result McNamara hopes for is a major conference some time next year, sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, that will bring together the principal decision-makers from both sides of the war. The purpose of such a gathering, he said, would be to help avoid future conflicts and prevent the next century from being as bloody as the current one.

"This is not an exercise to assess blame," McNamara, 79, said in a hotel room interview at the conclusion of his talks. He said he was motivated by "a desire to help other nations avoid similar conflicts in the future."

The unanswered questions and turning points McNamara said he wants the conference to focus on include:

■ The U.S.-backed 1963 coup in Saigon and the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Di-



Robert McNamara answers a question at a Hanoi news conference. At right is Dao Huy Ngoc, director of Vietnam's Institute for International Relations.

em. McNamara called Diem's death a potentially "determinative" moment in the war, since the subsequent regime allowed the massive American military buildup.

McNamara said he found it "fascinating" that several former high-level Vietnamese Communist officials here told him that Diem was a nationalist and that had he lived, Diem would probably not have accepted the U.S. buildup and the Americanization of the war that eventually cost 58,000 American lives.

■ Were the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations all wrong in their assumption that a united Vietnam under a Communist regime would have served as a springboard for Soviet and Chinese domination of Southeast Asia?

■ Why was the United States unsuccessful in at least seven attempts to initiate negotiations with Hanoi between mid-1965 and the end of McNamara's tenure at the Pentagon in 1968? He said three efforts were made in 1967, through Canada, Poland and a meeting between the Soviet and British foreign ministers. Another secret effort was made in Paris, using a godparent of North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh, and McNamara said any of those paths might have led to a quicker

end to the war. "Why did those attempts fail?"

■ What was the truth surrounding Vietnam's 1964 attack on two American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin—an act that led the Johnson administration to seek a congressional resolution authorizing the direct American entry into the war. In his book on the war, "In Retrospect," McNamara wrote that he was convinced that one attack did occur, on Aug. 2, 1964, and that a reported second attack two days later probably occurred. But after meeting with Giap Thursday, McNamara said today that "I am absolutely positive" the second attack never took place, and he said he would correct the paperback edition of his book now being printed.

Giap, 83, confirmed in a meeting with McNamara on Thursday that a Vietnamese ship did carry out the first attack on the USS Maddox. But Giap said "there was absolutely nothing" two days later. McNamara said Giap "presented his answer in a way that was very, very convincing to me" and confirmed his own suspicions.

"I am prepared to say, without a
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doubt," he said in the interview, "there was no second attack."

"If it didn't occur," McNamara said, "we would not have carried out that military attack on their shore installations"—a retaliatory airstrike ordered by President Lyndon Johnson.

He also said the Johnson administration in any case would have probably sent to Congress the same resolution authorizing the troop deployment—it had already been drafted by the State Department in May and was being pushed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff—but it would likely have been introduced much later in the year and might have been the subject of a fuller and more useful congressional debate.

A full airing of the missed opportunities for peace during the war would likely reopen a painful and emotive chapter in America's recent history. And searching for lessons could easily turn into a round of re-creation on all sides.

Questions such as these will invariably arise: If there was no second attack in the Gulf of Tonkin, who in the chain of command was responsible for misreporting it? And if the coup against Diem turns out to have been a tragic error, how many U.S. officials knew about it beforehand or were actively encouraging it?

A conference involving top U.S. policymakers at the time would also force some to openly confront the same disturbing admissions of error that McNamara made in his confes-

sional memoir, even though some Americans might still view the Vietnam war as a noble cause.

Vietnam, for its part, has never officially dropped its position that the United States owes the country reparations for the damage inflicted during wartime—a topic McNamara declined to discuss today. Hanoi officials have not publicly made much of the reparations demand since the normalization of relations with Washington three months ago, but a full public airing of wartime mistakes made at the highest levels of the U.S. government might persuade Hanoi to revisit that old issue.

But McNamara said he is undeterred because the benefits of his proposed conference far outweigh the potential fallout. "Suppose [people] do want to sweep this under the rug? Should we?" he asked rhetorically. "If we're going to avoid errors in the future, we're going to have to admit it."

"I think the first step toward wisdom is understanding the errors," he said.

Despite the enormous symbolism of his visit here—the former defense secretary and onetime "hawk" coming for the first time to the Communist capital he once ordered bombed—McNamara stolidly avoided revealing any personal or emotional reactions to meeting his former adversaries face-to-face. He pointedly declined to discuss any personal feelings, saying only, "It's been an extraordinary experience because I detected no hostility."