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Guilty, With an Explanation

SOME DAY the Vietnam War will lose its power to divide and inflame Americans, much as the agony of our own Civil War has diminished to an ache even in the vanquished South. But anyone who thinks our Persian Gulf victory terminated the nation's Vietnam syndrome should pay attention to the seething debate touched off by Robert McNamara's new Vietnam memoir.

McNamara — secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968, through John Kennedy's presidency and most of Lyndon Johnson's — calls his book "In Retrospect." The very phrase carries overtones of regret, and it's clear even from the excerpts in Newsweek magazine that it's altogether warranted. McNamara acknowledges more fully than any other major figure in the war that "We were wrong, terribly wrong." What's more, he adds, "We owe it to future generations to explain why."

How successful has McNamara been in explaining? On the basis of the excerpts — and considerable hostility in the media — not very. We've already heard all about the Cold War context and the domino theory, and if we didn't buy it before, this book isn't going to make us buy it now. Least of all does McNamara explain his own extended public silence about the war's futility, even though he says that was clear to him well before he left the Johnson administration to become president of the World Bank.

Fully a third of the 58,000 Americans who died in Vietnam were killed after McNamara took leave of the Pentagon. It's fair to ask why he didn't go public then with his negative views on the war — if not while Johnson was still in office, then after Richard Nixon was inaugurated. And McNamara gives us no satisfactory answer.

He does offer a tantalizing speculation — one he resisted voicing for three decades — that it's "highly probable" Kennedy would have pulled American forces out of Vietnam had he not been assassinated in

1963. Even if Kennedy were convinced that Southeast Asia would ultimately be lost to communism, McNamara believes, "He would have accepted that cost."

But McNamara himself took a while longer to reach that conclusion unequivocally. And if he didn't precisely keep it to himself when he did, he failed to make the kind of public gesture that might have helped end the killing sooner — a principled resignation, for instance, such as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's during Jimmy Carter's presidency for far less consequential reasons.

Whatever value his book may have as an explanation of the Vietnam quagmire, it throws little light on the enigma of McNamara's own personality. He has often agonized and sometimes wept in public about the war, yet his writing about it now still seems cool, almost flat. It was that annoying coolness, and not just his position as head of the defense establishment, that led many activists to demonize him and personalize their opposition to "McNamara's war."

But of course it was never his alone. It was also Johnson's and Nixon's, McGeorge Bundy's and Henry Kissinger's, Dean Rusk's and William Westmoreland's. And for

a time at least, in the earliest years, it was the nation's war. Only gradually did it dawn on many of us that, unlike the other wars our country has fought in our lifetime, this one was both immoral and unnecessary. That judgment shouldn't demean those who served in Vietnam because they deemed it their duty. But neither should it spare those who continued to support the war after they understood that it was futile and wrong.

"The reward of suffering is experience," McNamara writes, quoting the tragic playwright Aeschylus. And he adds, "Let this be the lasting legacy of Vietnam." But the reward of experience, we hope, is not to cause others to suffer. Let that be the legacy.



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