

John M. Taylor

Gen. Taylor's Vietnam Memoir

Post w/col 95

The intensity of the reaction to Robert McNamara's Vietnam memoir has been a reminder to me and all of how close to the surface are our recent national divisions over the Vietnam War. I have followed the furor with special interest, for my father, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, was intimately involved with Vietnam during much of McNamara's tour as secretary of defense. As military adviser to President Kennedy, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs under both Kennedy and Johnson and, finally, as ambassador to Saigon in 1964-65, he was a prominent and unrepentant hawk on the importance of preventing a Communist conquest of South Vietnam.

A British statesman once remarked, "What all the wise men praised has not happened, and what all the damned fools said would happen has come to pass." My father's positions on the war are a reminder of the wide range of opinions in even the highest echelons of government as to what should have been the U.S. role in Southeast Asia. Although my father urged a stepped-up U.S. advisory effort in Vietnam as early as 1961, he counseled repeatedly against turning the conflict into an American war. If he was a dove with respect to U.S. ground forces, however, he was a

hawk regarding the use of air power. As early as 1964 he favored a bombing campaign against North Vietnam, because he regarded bombing as the one means by which Hanoi might be brought into meaningful negotiations.

The story behind my father's memoirs offers an interesting contrast to McNamara's in both substance and timing. In about 1969, at a time when the outcome in Vietnam was still in doubt, he contracted with his publisher, W. W. Norton, for an autobiography. As he worked on what was to become a 420-page work, writing in longhand on yellow legal pads, it became less an autobiography than a detailed discussion of why he had acted as he had in matters concerning Vietnam. Eventually, "Swords and Plowshares" devoted seven pages to the author's secret visit to Rome in 1943 to bring about the surrender of Italy; it devoted six pages to D-day, in which the author had led the 101st Airborne Division into Normandy and had become the first American general to land in France. In contrast, it devoted 14 chapters wholly or in part to Vietnam.

When he considered the lessons of Vietnam, my father came to some of the same conclusions in 1970 as McNamara was to reach nearly three

decades later. He found our lack of information—political, social and military—on the Vietnamese to be lamentable. He deplored the U.S. role in removing President Ngo Dinh Diem, an action that, in his judgment, had destroyed what little political infrastructure South Vietnam had. And although he avoided criticism of individuals, he indicated long-standing reservations about the war of attrition being waged by U.S. ground forces in Vietnam.

Nevertheless, my father felt that the war might have been brought to a satisfactory conclusion had not the internal divisions in the United States become so stark as to make it unnecessary for the enemy to offer concessions. He had the temerity to attack the media, writing, "It required only selective reporting, not deliberate falsification, to create the impression that we Americans were the prime aggressors, bent on expanding the war to avoid impending defeat."

By 1971, when my father delivered his manuscript to Norton, such unrepentant views on Vietnam were decidedly unpopular. A senior executive at the publishing house wrote an internal memorandum in which he declared the book a failure. "Our own reputation . . . would not suffer

much, because anyone can see we publish all sorts of books, and no one can remember a publisher's name, anyhow. But General Taylor's reputation, and that of the cause he served, would be damaged beyond repair." The book went forward in a small printing.

Not surprisingly, "Swords and Plowshares" played to mixed reviews when it appeared in 1972. Marvin Kalb called it "the first really honest account" of the Vietnam War written from the inside, but David Halberstam complained that "Swords and Plowshares" contained "no sense of remorse." And Halberstam's own "The Best and the Brightest" doubtless outsold "Swords and Plowshares" by about a thousand to one.

The tone and timing of the Taylor and McNamara memoirs are very different. My father deplored the loss of life in Vietnam, but believed that he and his senior colleagues had acted responsibly given the choices available to them at any given time. He felt no need for personal absolution, but wrote in the hope that errors of the Kennedy-Johnson years would be studied and corrected. Like his fellow Missourian, Harry

Truman, Taylor had the clear conscience of one who had "done his damndest."

When I interviewed McNamara in the course of writing a biography of my father in 1988, the secretary could not be drawn into any discussion of Vietnam, but spoke warmly of Taylor and the breadth of his geopolitical knowledge. Significantly, however, I am not aware that McNamara ever discussed his evolving views about the war with his erstwhile colleague, who, after 1965, could have been found just down the street on Washington's Massachusetts Avenue.

In retirement, my father lectured widely on Vietnam. He was spat at by Students for a Democratic Society in Berkeley and required police protection in appearances at prestigious campuses elsewhere. Although he deplored the willingness of antiwar zealots to undermine their elected representatives in time of war, he refused to demonize them. Once, asked to comment on a statement attributed to Halberstam, he declined, remarking, "This lad must have villains."

John M. Taylor is the author of several books including a biography of his father, the late Gen. Maxwell Taylor.