

# Vietnam: How wrong was McNamara?

Affairs of State, by Stewart Alsop



Policy-makers McNamara, Taylor.

WASHINGTON:

**W**alter Lippmann: "As each succeeding prediction and promise of the President's advisers turned out to be wrong, the only remedy they have been able to offer the President is that he should send in more troops and do more bombing."

James Reston: "Error starts in the mind. Wrong assumptions lead to wrong decisions, and this has been the tragedy of Vietnam from the beginning."

As these words—written by two of Washington's most eminent journalists—indicate, it is becoming an article of faith, among many intelligent persons, that the advice received by President Johnson on Vietnam has been consistently and totally wrong. It is worth asking whether this conviction is correct. For if it is, the President obviously ought to fire out of hand all his chief advisers, starting with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who has had more to do with policy on Vietnam than anyone else. Indeed, high officials whose advice on matters of vital national interest is *always* wrong ought not simply to be fired—they ought to be put on trial for high crimes and misdemeanors, and possibly drawn and quartered.

Have President Johnson's chief advisers on Vietnam always been wrong? No one will claim that they have always been right. The chief specific item of evidence of their wrongness is the statement issued by the White House on October 2, 1963, that "Secretary McNamara and General Maxwell D. Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the U.S. military task [in Vietnam] can be completed by the end of 1965."

This "judgment" certainly turned out to be totally wrong. But it is only fair to add that the judgment was heavily qualified. The statement was made before the collapse of the Diem regime, but there were already very ominous signs of trouble on Saigon's political horizon. The last paragraph of the McNamara-Taylor report noted:

"The political situation in South Vietnam remains deeply serious. . . . Repressive actions in South Vietnam . . . have not yet significantly affected the military situation, [but] they could do so in the future." The fall of the Diem regime a few weeks later, and the political chaos which ensued, affected the military situation not only "significantly" but disastrously—more disastrously, certainly, than McNamara or Taylor had foreseen. But at least they were not the blithering idiots that the one sentence, quoted out of context, makes them seem.

Actually, because it is so spectacularly wrong,

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that one sentence is merely a useful stick with which to beat McNamara and company over the head. The really serious charge against McNamara and the other presidential advisers on Vietnam is that they have made three basically incorrect assumptions, as follows:

1. That the South Vietnamese alone could deal with the Viet Cong, with our help and advice.
2. That bombing of North Vietnam would by itself bring the Communists to the bargaining table in a reasonable mood.
3. That the commitment of American troops in South Vietnam would do the same thing.

In assessing this triple charge, it is necessary to distinguish between the verb "to hope" and the verb "to assume." McNamara and the President's other advisers certainly hoped that these things would happen. But they did not assume they would happen.

On the first point, for example, here is McNamara to the House Armed Services Committee, in January, 1964: "We hope that, with our full support, the new government [in Saigon] can . . . eventually suppress the Viet Cong insurrection. . . . However, the survival of an independent government in South Vietnam is so important . . . that I can conceive of no alternative other than to take all necessary measures within our capability to prevent a Communist victory." Bombing the North and committing U.S. ground troops to the South were certainly "measures within our capability."

As for the second point, McNamara and the Joint Chiefs repeatedly warned the President, both before and after the bombing of the North started, that "bombing alone won't do the job." The purpose of the bombing was twofold—to make infiltration of men and supplies from the North more difficult; and, more important, to give the U.S. a bargaining counter in eventual negotiations. Both these limited objectives have been achieved.

Finally, McNamara and the other Vietnam policy-makers advised the President to commit U.S. divisions to Vietnam, only with the most agonized reluctance. They were perfectly well aware of the danger that the war might thus become an almost unwinnable "American war"; and aware too that to extricate the United States from such a commitment might be mountainously difficult. But they were also aware of another fact—that if American ground troops were not committed, the war would be lost. This points to the heart of the difference between the policy-makers and their critics.

"Walter Lippmann is absolutely right if you accept his premise," says one policy-maker. "His premise, which he has been honest enough to state often, is that Communist domination of all Vietnam, and even ultimately of all Southeast Asia, is an acceptable risk for the United States to take. We don't think it is an acceptable risk—not one of us does. But his premise is certainly one on which honest men can differ. What I resent is the notion that we could have failed to do what we have done, and yet somehow, without effort or risk, Southeast Asia would have been saved."

No doubt McNamara and the other presidential advisers have been too hopeful, a natural human failing. But they are all highly intelligent and extremely logical men. Their chief fault, indeed, may well have been a tendency to assume that Asian Communists share their kind of intelligence and logic. "In the long run," an American general told this reporter in Saigon last year, "Hanoi is going to have to settle on terms acceptable to us. They have no choice—to do otherwise would be illogical. It would be irrational."

The really basic assumption of the Vietnam policy-makers in Washington has been this, in the words of one of them: "We'll get a settlement once the other side is *really* convinced they can't win." This is a logical and rational assumption. But it does not allow for the possibility that "the other side" may not be rational or logical at all. The other side may be totally unwilling to settle the war as long as they are convinced that *our* side can't win.

Ho Chi Minh's great, unforgettable moment of triumph came in 1954, when he defeated the French—at a time when the French controlled all the industry and all the big towns in Indochina. Old men dream old dreams, and Ho's past haunts the present. This is why the basic assumption of the Vietnam policy-makers may turn out to be wrong. But at least it is a perfectly logical assumption, and the men who advise the President are not a pack of fools who have been wrong about everything. And those who are now so wise by hindsight ought to consider the price we would have had to pay if the President had not accepted the advice of McNamara and company. That price would be not only "Communist domination of all of Asia" but a humiliation for the United States such as this country has not yet suffered in all its history.

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