



July 17 1971  
 The Greening  
 Of McNamara

MIDWAY IN 1967, President Johnson complained to a senator, "McNamara's gone dovish on me." That anecdote is on page 270 of a very good recent book, Henry L. Trehitt's *McNamara: His Ordeal in the Pentagon*. It is a book that makes good reading just now, as the ex-President's memoirs try to convince us that he was dovish all along.

There is no reason to withhold our pity from Johnson—he was a victim of the war (though other of its victims did not live to write their memoirs). Still, Robert S. McNamara was a victim of the war and of Johnson, a thing to keep in mind as Johnson tells us how beleaguered he was.

Trehitt's book is sympathetic to McNamara. He knows how easy hindsight is, how difficult decisions are, what pressures work on someone in McNamara's position (not to mention Johnson's). But the mere truth, no matter how gently told, is harsh enough.

The first thing that emerges from the book is McNamara's own lack of self-doubt. All that team of Kennedy decision-makers can look back now and say it was hard to make decisions. But at the time they thought it was quite easy. They came into office trumpeting their own competence, mocking Do-Nothing Ike, saying that the worst thing one could do was doing nothing (often it is the best).

Early on, McNamara told his aides, "If we can learn how to analyze this thing, we'll solve it." He needed facts and figures on which to base this analysis—and aides supplied them dutifully. He did not realize, yet, how difficult it is to get

sound data, and to get it passed up to him undistorted.

BUT HE SHOULD have realized it. He was busily distorting data himself, tailoring his reports in a different way for the press, the military, the President and the Congress. There is nothing surprising about this. He wanted a different response from each of these audiences, and weighted things to gain it.

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But he did not reflect on the fact that this "politicizing" of the data goes on at every level of an action like the Vietnamese war—right down to the squad leader's daily report. If one's lieutenant wants kill-counts, you give him kill-counts. After all, the Secretary of Defense was giving his bosses what they wanted.

Trehitt finds convincing evidence that McNamara felt, but suppressed, strong doubts about the Tonkin Gulf "second attack," the overthrow of Diem and the usefulness of strategic bombing. But for years he was all confidence and certitude about the war in his appearances before Congress. He was the best and most convincing (even if sometimes unconvinced) advocate of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the extension of the war, the bombings of the North.

HE WAS CAUGHT in the classic bind of a politician. He had doubts—but didn't that make him a better, more restrained war-monger than his successor would be, if he resigned? He had

doubts, but the war was in large part his responsibility, and he must try to see it through to as good a conclusion as he could manage.

He had doubts, but wasn't the most effective way of voicing them to the President? And if he was to keep the President's ear, he must firmly support his position in public. By such gradual steps was a man of honor led to be for and against the war at the same time.

And we must remember this was just one "functional duplicity" in a whole series of interacting half-truths, white lies, and face-saving evasive answers. The "credibility gap" arose over Vietnam because that war revealed how systemic is the untruth of politics. The point is not that we are faced with a pack of liars, but that their little guarded truths, so carefully inflected, converge in an orchestration of Official Untruth.

Johnson was not the sole orchestrator, though his memoirs give us the "large picture"—and, consequently, very little truth.

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