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The Story We Never Saw in Vietnam

In Saigon, We Missed the History. In McNamara's Washington, They Suppressed the Truth

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By David Halberstam

THE WASHINGTON POST'S former deputy managing editor and ombudsman Richard Harwood recently suggested that I (and by implication other young reporters in Vietnam) did not stand sufficiently apart in the critical days when the Johnson administration crossed the Rubicon in Vietnam in 1965. Harwood was saying that American journalists in Vietnam in the mid-'60s were willing to support the changeover from an advisory commitment to what appeared to be limited combat intervention, and thus share some of the responsibility for the full scale disaster which followed.

I think he is right, and it is one of the singular regrets of my life that I was not more prescient at that moment about the Johnson administration's policies and the consequences of them, and that I did not dissent more vigorously rather than acquiesce to what I thought would be a different, albeit considerably more limited, form of combat aid to South Vietnam.

My book, "The Making of a Quagmire," has now been singled out by Harwood and former defense secretary Robert McNamara for its few sentences supportive of the war. To me, there is considerable irony here, for the book was primarily an account of how the American military leadership distorted the reporting of its own field officers in the critical early years, and was sharply attacked 30 years ago by the administration and the centrist press for being too critical of the American effort in Vietnam.

Back then, The Post not only neglected to cover the Washington implications of the failed policy in Vietnam, but was the paper where columnist Joseph Alsop's first attacks on the Saigon press corps were printed. Though there was a significant struggle going on in the bureaucracy at both Defense and State in those early years, The Post's reporters, like most of their Washington colleagues, apparently listened only to the people at the top of the bureaucracy. These Washington journalists were unconscious instruments in the attempt of the senior policy architects to silence any dissent and to limit debate.

This is something that brings us to the very center of today's impassioned debate over McNamara's book, in no small part because the secretary, in sanitizing his own far more complicated role in those years, makes no mention of his own vigorous and quite systematic role in suppressing negative reporting on the part of American military officers in the field. Instead, the secretary claims that he and the other senior officials were never quite able to get the information they wanted. Of all the curious claims in his book, this may well be the most disingenuous. The McNamara portrayed in "In Retrospect" is one anxious to discover the truth in Vietnam; the flesh and blood McNamara was quite different—he was a signature figure for an administration that trashed anyone who tried to report honestly or to dissent.

That I and my colleagues, such as Neil

Sheehan, did not have any accurate sense of the terrible size of the commitment was not surprising since the architects themselves had no idea of the degree to which they would lose control over events and be sucked in. (Barry Zorthian told me recently that at the time of the assault by the Viet Cong on Pleiku in February 1965, then-Ambassador Maxwell Taylor told the country team that he was going back to Washington to recommend combat troops, *and that the number might eventually go as high as 100,000 men* [italics mine].) I wish my sophistication about the larger geopolitical implications of our policy in those days was as good as my reporting. It wasn't and I'll live with my shortcomings.

But I've puzzled over it often in the past, and indeed, some 23 years ago in "The Best and the Brightest," I pointed out that while we had good military sources on the war, the political ones, who might have made the connection to the fall of China, and to the French Indochina war, had been destroyed by the earlier McCarthy purges. But I do not think that that argument, which McNamara now has also made, goes nearly far enough in explaining what happened.

Let me suggest—with the aid of hindsight—that as the self-evidently flawed policy in Vietnam was collapsing on its own, there were, two critical and separate aspects of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' attempts to hide the weakness of the policy. Because it was so fragile a policy, I suspect, its principal architects felt they had to work exceptionally hard to hide its flaws and keep it from being fully debated and its weaknesses thereby exposed by Congress and the press.

The administration, I think, feared a full debate because of what the implications of failure were: either the need to send combat troops, or, alternately, to let Vietnam fall, and thus be accused of being soft on Communism. Confronted by those choices it took a flawed policy in an area which at first its policy makers did not feel was very important, and dissembled to the public about it. Its senior members did not dare look very hard at the reality in the field because of their fear of the consequences.

As such, to avoid any real debate or at the very least to delay it until after the election of 1964, the administration manipulated information at two levels. The first was the more obvious, and the one which my colleagues and I witnessed in Vietnam and it extended over the period from 1962 to 1964. In that time the limited advisory commitment which followed the early Max Taylor-Walt Rostow mission and which raised the American presence from roughly 600 to 20,000, was made, and almost immediately failed.

The moment it was made there was immense—indeed furious—pressure on the small number of senior American advisers in country to issue optimistic reports. It did not seem to matter to Washington or to the Saigon command whether an ARVN (South Vietnamese army) unit actually fought as the Americans now claimed they were fighting. Nor was there punishment for a senior American adviser whose Vietnamese unit behaved passively.

David Halberstam won the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for his reporting in Vietnam.

But it mattered greatly if a senior adviser complained about the lack of aggressiveness of his unit, if he seemed to think that the Viet Cong were winning, and even worse, if he went semi-public (that is, he spoke candidly but anonymously to the American reporters of his frustrations). Nor was this taboo a casual thing; from the start it was nothing less than policy.

Yet, sadly, almost from the start, the policy was a failure. The roots of this we now know, are in Vietnam's own history—the other side had a powerful military-political dynamic, greatly enhanced by their brilliant victory over the French. Those of us who were young reporters were not that sophisticated about Vietnam in that embryonic part of our careers and we did not know all of this, but we knew the most important thing of all, and which was at the core of our assignment: that the policy did not work, and that what was going on in the field was largely a sham and that there were a good many honest Americans in the field who were trying to report back about a mounting crisis. As they did, their careers were put at risk.

Gen. Paul Harkins, who headed MACV (America's Saigon headquarters) in those days, was hardly the Army's most luminescent officer. He had only one critical credential to recommend him for that most sensitive and important job: He was Maxwell Taylor's man. He did what Taylor and McNamara wanted, which was to suppress negative reporting and to try and make the progress of the policy look better than was justified.

All of this was detailed in our reporting. In my part, it was from the field in the New York Times; later, in "Quagmire," I recounted such episodes as Harkins blowing up at Lt. Col. Fred Ladd, the admirable senior adviser to the ARVN 21st division, when Ladd tried to warn Harkins privately after an unusually fanciful briefing by an ARVN officer. Ladd was severely rebuked. That was the reason that the people in Washington got bad information: It was what they ordered up—anything else and careers were placed at risk. I should add that Fred Ladd was considered typical of the senior advisers in country

when he first arrived in Saigon—the best of the breed, almost sure to get a star. But neither he nor any of the other exceptional officers who got in the way of that fraudulent policy ever got their stars.

Thirty years ago, McNamara and Taylor (with Harkins as their proxy) loaded the debate, pressured the field people to report dishonestly, and made sure in the process there was only one source of pessimistic reporting, the American journalists. Reporters like myself were a relatively easy target, young and still uncredentialed. If they could have destroyed our reputations they would have. There were systematic attacks upon our manhood, our courage and our patriotism; at one point, Lyndon Johnson told other reporters that Neil Sheehan and I were traitors to our country. Certainly in Washington we were then considered journalistic lepers. (I was amused when, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, I was asked by four major network television programs to be part of panels on Vietnam, including "Meet the Press" and "Face the Nation." Thirty-one years ago when I had just returned from Vietnam and I was one of the few knowledgeable American reporters about what was going on there, these same interview shows, including the now-defunct "Issues and Answers," never asked me to be on a panel.)

By contrast, when the Truman administration watched China collapse in the late 1940s, both the American military and the American reporters told essentially the same story about the fall of Chiang Kai Shek's regime: that it was a feudal regime imploding of its own, and that no amount of American treasure, human or material, could help it.

But these were different times. There was going to be no Vinegar Joe Stilwell, ever blunt and candid, in Vietnam; instead there was Maj. Gen. Dick (no kin) Stilwell, a fast-track officer who went around taking the pessimistic military reports filed by the journalists, and proving to his superiors what they wanted proven, as he once boasted to me about a story I wrote on the collapse of the Saigon military in the Delta in mid-1963: "I showed them word by word that your story was false." Except, as the Pentagon Papers ruefully noted years later, Dick Stilwell was wrong. He was, of course, eventually rewarded with his third star.

None of these manipulations, certainly, helped to get a better performance out of the ARVN commanders, nor did they weaken the Viet Cong. But it allowed NcNamara and others to change the nature of the debate at home, which was described as a press controversy. In truth it was a controversy between two parts of the United States Army, in which the better and more honest side lost. Or as my friend Charlie Mohr later said, referring to the Army's system of promotions, what the United States Army lost in Vietnam was its intellectual integrity.

Because of this sham the country lost two crucial years when we might have debated our limits, our possibilities and our obligations, and the limits of our resources. We also lost a chance to study what it would take if we actually went in with our own combat troops.

There was still on hand the old Matthew Ridgway report from 1954 which said that it would take 500,000 to 1 million men, and 20 engineering battalions, that we would have to build the entire infrastructure of the country, that we would have to have major increases in the draft, thereby affecting the nation's budgeting, and that the indigenous people, unlike those in Korea, would not be sympathetic to us.

The Ridgway report is the work of a great and truly honest soldier, telling the president of the United States that if he chooses to go in, what the real cost will be. It is something rare: loyalty downward as well as upward; it reflects the loyalty of an officer to the men who might have to fight under his command. Ten years later, we got a new kind of loyalty, that of high bureaucrats to those above them.

If there was ever a moment when McNamara-Taylor repression of information showed itself, it came in mid-1963 when the not-yet-famous Lt. Col. John Paul Vann, already the most impassioned of the senior advisers in Vietnam, came back to the Pentagon and gave a vividly pessimistic briefing about what was happening in the Delta. He kept giving it at ever higher levels until one day he was permitted by the vice chief of staff of the Army to give it to the Joint Chiefs themselves.

On July 8, 1963, he showed up, bright and eager to brief. Then the phone rang. It was a call from the office of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Max Taylor. Could Vann's briefing be scratched at the chairman's request? "Looks like you don't brief today, buddy," the aide who took the call said.

To anyone looking back, this is the smoking gun. To me and to my colleagues in Saigon this story, when Vann repeated it to me a few months later, was an epiphany: We had always thought the problem was Harkins in Saigon misleading his superiors in Washington. It was only then that we realized how controlled the entire system was, that Harkins was giving Washington what it not only wanted, but what it demanded.

But unknown to us in Vietnam there was another part of the larger argument also being suppressed: the geopolitical debate about Vietnam's place in the national security picture. Was the success of the Viet Cong a reflection of nationalism or, rather, the success of Communism as a monolith?

Despite the McCarthy purges, there re-

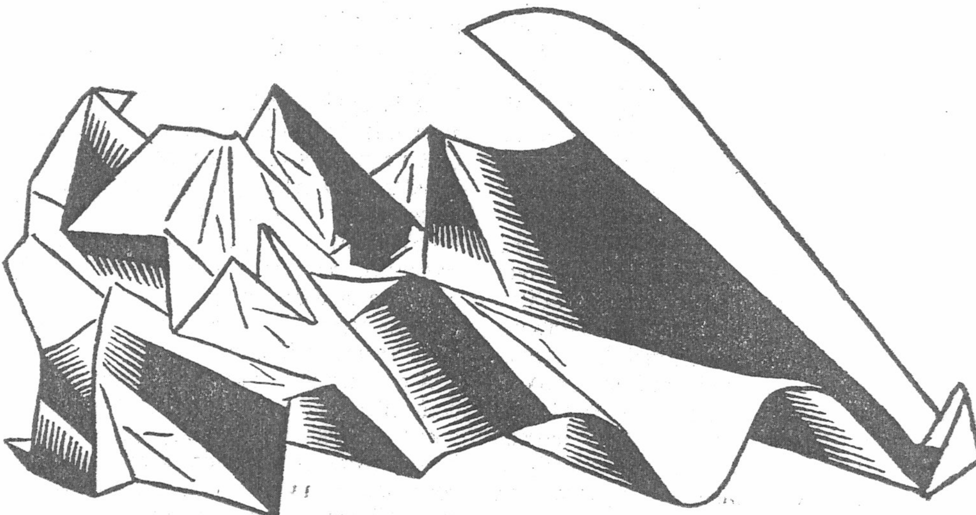
mained a handful of Asia hands who had their doubts, and whose doubts were being systematically crushed. What they were trying to suggest was that there were already significant signs of a split between the Russians and the Chinese, and that what was happening in Vietnam was driven by nationalism that was historically antagonistic to Chinese nationalism. That was a legitimate position, but given the fears in that administration of even talking about China and taking a route like this, it was essentially a stillborn one.

The struggle of the military officers was easy to report. In Vietnam there was a war on and we who regularly went out in the field could calibrate it rather easily. But the suppression of the Asian experts, armed only with their doubts and their instincts and their sense of history—with views at that moment extremely unfashionable in the American political climate—was infinitely easier to arrange. To my knowledge, despite the large number of journalists covering State and the Defense Department, there was virtually no reporting at all in any daily paper about this attempt to challenge the very premise of the policy.

These men, Paul Kattenburg, Allen Whiting, George Springsteen, Jim Thomson and a few others, often raised the right questions. But they were deliberately either kept out of the core meetings or, in the case of Kattenburg, perhaps the most fearless of them, hammered by either McNamara, Taylor or John McNaughton, McNamara's deputy whose own doubts about Vietnam were growing.

These dissenters faced their own Catch-22: The more vigorously they dissented, the more likely they were to be barred from future meetings. They became known in the vernacular as soft, a tag that they could never overcome. Soft they sounded, soft they were, and soft was bad.

In the end they coalesced for only one brief moment, which was to help Undersecretary of State George Ball make the dove's case for ending the war. Here once again one singular opponent emerged to challenge Ball: Robert S. McNamara. When the two men met in private without the president present, Ball told me, McNamara seemed to share Ball's doubts and even told Ball that there was not much difference between them. But with Johnson present it was a different McNamara; he flattened Ball, and used, Ball told me, statistics that—he discovered—McNamara would invent right on the spot.



Sadly, if these dissenters knew about us out in Saigon, we did not know about them back in Washington. Yet we were, without knowing it or knowing each other, two halves of the same coin. At high-level meetings, they were denied one critical element: They were not allowed to say that the war was being lost, because officially the Pentagon stated that it was being won.

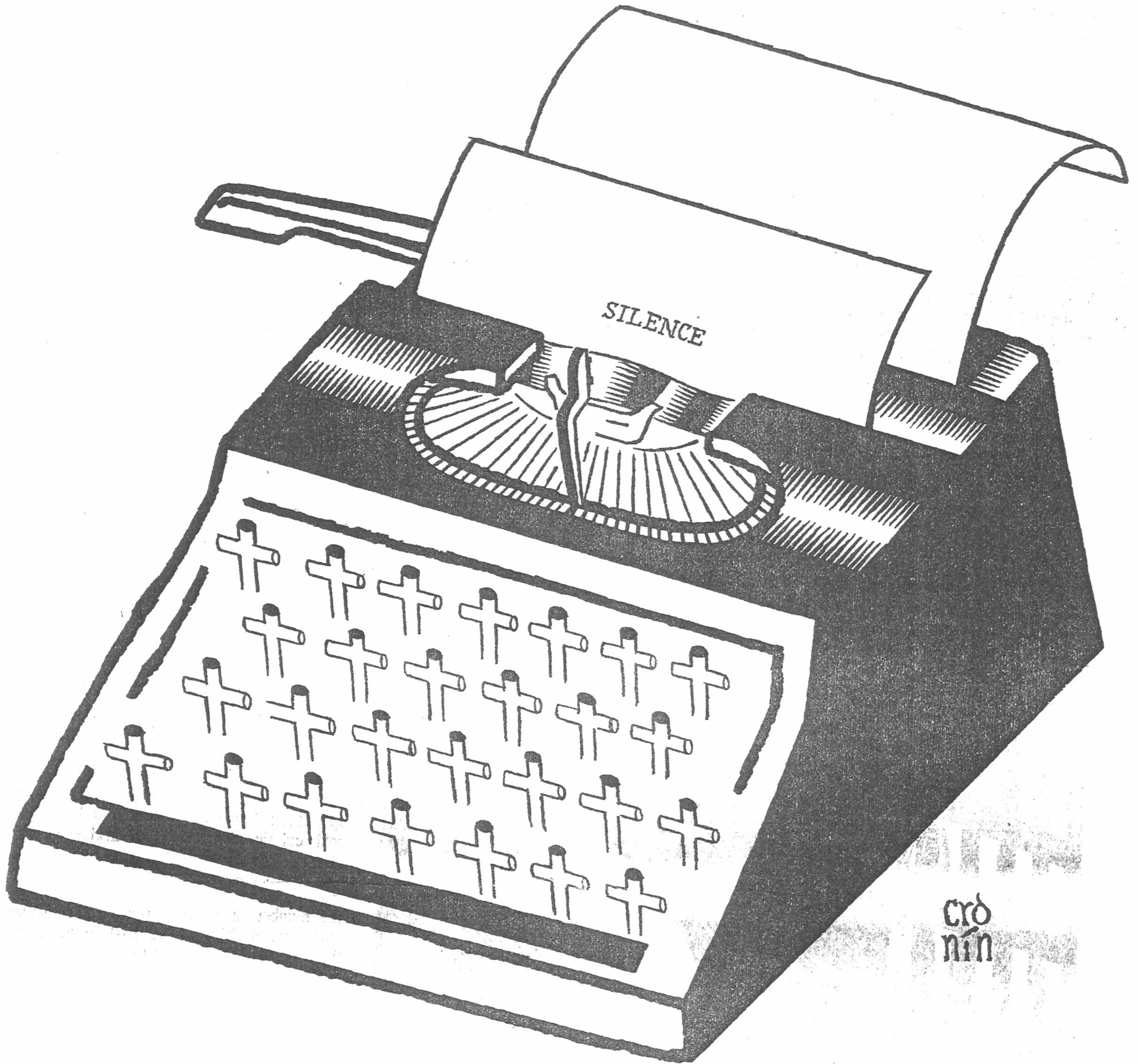
That was no small bureaucratic advantage for McNamara, the shrewdest and most ferocious man of the era in terms of bureaucratic control of governmental meetings. It made their dissent an abstract one—because they could not tie the failure on the ground to the lessons of history; they could speak of the lessons of history but they had to pretend that despite them, we were winning on the ground.

In the fall of 1963, when McNamara came through Saigon on one of his many trips, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge asked a group of the resident reporters to talk with him about what we knew, including the fact that the war in the Delta was virtually over and the ARVN had lost. Our group included Neil Sheehan, Mal Browne, Peter Arnett, Mert Perry and Charlie Mohr, as good a group of reporters as I've ever known, and we were as wired on that story at that moment, as knowledgeable as, say, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were late in Watergate some 10 years later.

As we walked into the room, we were told that we could brief the secretary on political problems, but not on *military* ones. It was a great move on McNamara's part, for it allowed him to go back to Washington and still maintain that he had heard nothing that would make him think that the military side of the war was not going well; equally important, it allowed him to keep the potential civilian dissenters where he wanted them, on the defensive.

As those in Washington were silenced, those of us who were reporting from Vietnam were diminished in one critical way: We were not able to trace what we saw in front of us to a far deeper historical root. The two halves were kept separate: we might as well have been in separate locked, sound-proofed rooms.

Had there been a real debate, had not the high bureaucracy silenced the low bureaucracy, had Lyndon Johnson not sedated the Congress and kept secret the magnitude of what he was willing to do, and taken us to war, in James Reston's apt phrase, by stealth, with no public debate, and with the fig leaf of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution as the



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN CRONIN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

declaration of war, we who were in the field covering the war, would have fed the outsiders in the State Department and they would have fed us. We had found out the crucial facts in the field, that it didn't work, but the questions of why it didn't work (and why it might not work even when far greater American power and far more American human treasure was applied) were left unanswered and, indeed, unexamined.

That I did not know more at the time and did not have better teachers at that moment is a major regret for me, and I've tried to learn from it, and to pursue in my reporting what had actually happened in those years and why. If some of us who reported in those days remain angry about the way that policy was made, that anger seems to me, years later as I have learned the full magnitude of the era's manipulations, completely justified. It is probably comparable to the anger that members of the Senate such as William Fulbright and Eugene McCarthy felt when they went along with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution only to find a year later that Johnson considered it a declaration of war.

In 1968 I was traveling with Robert Kennedy when George Romney, then running for the Republican nomination, explained away his earlier hawkishness on Vietnam by saying that he had been "brainwashed" when he had been briefed by American officials in Saigon. The next day Bobby Kennedy took an immediate cheap shot at him. That night Kennedy and I had a furious argument: I told him he had no right to make fun of Romney, particularly now when Bobby himself was trying to undo the past. Romney was right, I said, and he was right to try to tell the truth. We had all, and I included myself, I said, been brainwashed, Bobby in particular for he had been both brainwashee and brainwasher.

The sad thing, I told him, and it is appropriate now in the wake of the turmoil over the McNamara book, was that the greatest deceptions were the ones inflicted on those who were themselves the deceivers. Our argument that day was heated and it did not end amicably. The next day, he looked at me somewhat ruefully, and grunted to me that I was probably right.

And the real journalistic lessons to be learned from the belated publication of McNamara's book are these: The greatest failure of American journalism in the Vietnam years was not on location in Vietnam, where in fact it was generally quite good (no one brought his paper more honor than the Post's Ward Just). Rather, the failure could be found in Washington, where all kinds of reporters who should have known better accepted the hierarchical version of the truth and did not try and penetrate that myth.