

McNamara's Makeshift Amends

Mickey Kaus nails down a fundamental problem of *In Retrospect*, Robert McNamara's Vietnam War memoir, when he writes in *The New Republic*:

I suppose admitting mistakes is better than not admitting mistakes. But McNamara was a more sympathetic figure when he seemed tortured by guilt in private than now, when he is cashing in on it in public. There is something creepy, even slightly obscene, about the whole process, and it gets creepier upon inspection. (6)

I'll admit right now that I approached *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* with prejudice and misgiving. What could McNamara after more than twenty years of a dunning silence possibly say? He waited longer than most of the American war dead had actually been granted years to live.

On the same day I picked up the former Secretary's book, I read a review-essay by Carl Mollins in *Maclean's*. He concluded his reaction this way:

Against McNamara, the critical line suggests that it is one thing to say you're sorry for taking part in a crime against humanity, including your own, because of terrible mistakes. It is another to apologize but attempt to justify the course of action on the grounds that it served a greater goal. But to later admit that it was known at the time to be mistaken, and that its claimed purpose was largely bogus, compounds the crime. McNamara and—partly because of him—America have a lot still to live down. (31)

In his memoir, one of McNamara's most often used words is *hindsight*, followed by others like *sadly*, *regrettably*, *incredibly*. *Should have* seemed a most frequently used verb form. But beyond such hints of the tone and purpose of the former Secretary's book, any reader would soon have to question what to do with a person who states in his Preface:

I want to put Vietnam in context.

We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values.

Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why. (xvi)

who then states 200 pages hence:

Looking back, I clearly erred by not forcing—then or later, in either Saigon or Washington—a knock-down, drag-out debate over the loose assumptions, unasked questions, and thin analyses underlying our military strategy in Vietnam. I had spent twenty years as a manager identifying problems and forcing organizations—often against their will—to think deeply and realistically about alternative courses of action and their consequences. I doubt I will ever fully understand why I did not do so here. (203)

only to be followed by

Readers must wonder by now—if they have not been mystified long before—how presumably intelligent, hardworking, and experienced officials—both civilian and military—failed to address systematically and thoroughly questions whose answers so deeply affected the lives of our citizens and the welfare of our nation. Simply put, such an orderly, rational approach was precluded by the “crowding out” which resulted from the fact that Vietnam was but one of a multitude of problems we confronted. (277)

It is impossible to read *In Retrospect* without despair. Not only a book of little substance or heart, it is a book that faithfully self-destructs. Consider McNamara's claim that by adhering to his "standards of intelligence, education, and experience" (17), he drew up a list of people for his Pentagon staff. Next, proudly naming the folks from the Eastern Establishment he says he called for recommendations, he reports that for "each name they and others recommended, I set up a three-by-five card and entered on it all the information I could learn about the individual" (17). He informs that after "numerous cross-checks" (17), he chose those he would interview, after which he decided whom to recommend to president-elect Kennedy. McNamara concludes this odd paragraph (describing what—vigorous government-in-action?) with "President Kennedy did not turn down a single one of my nominations" (17). McNamara presses on:

Out of this process emerged the most outstanding group ever to serve in a cabinet department. It included, among many others, five men who subsequently achieved cabinet status of their own. (17)

Yet how to square this self-congratulating description of an assembling of talent with such later statements as this one:

But we never carefully debated what U.S. force would ultimately be required, what our chances of success would be, or what the political, military, financial, and human costs would be if we provided it. Indeed, these basic questions went unexamined. (107)

I quote amply from *In Retrospect* to suggest what struck me as the principal drive of McNamara's book—a public plea-bargaining for not speaking against what the former Secretary now confesses he knew early on to be a futile and immoral war. By his own admission in his memoir, the Secretary notes that, as early as 1965, he thought the war impossible to win, and that by 1966, he had told reporters (off the record) that massive bombing would not force North Vietnam to end the war. By 1967, he believed the U.S. would suffer a major national disaster if it did not withdraw from Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, in public, McNamara said nothing to stop a war that

was to continue another bloody seven years. In short, as Anthony Lewis reasons in a recent *New York Times* essay: "It is in silence, without accountability, that democratic governments make their cruelest mistakes" (17).

McNamara casts his silence as allegiance to Lyndon Johnson, which is why, says he, he did not publicly oppose the war. He makes, too, the feeble claim that as the departing Secretary of Defense "[his] voice wouldn't have made any difference" (Alter 52). Max Frankel rightly instructs that

Unelected officials should not steal their President's mandate to pursue an independent course. But a thousand dead Americans a month create their own constituency. Even military discipline admits a higher duty than hierarchical loyalty when power is badly used and puts lives at risk. (1)

If he failed as a war architect, then McNamara fails, too, as a tardy penitent—an argument Ronald Steel makes in "Blind Contrition" in *The New Republic*:

Would it have made a difference if McNamara had publicly turned against the war? One cannot be sure. It might or might not have ended the war sooner. But it would have vindicated those who protested against or refused to fight a war they considered immoral, and it might have saved the lives of some of those who went to Vietnam because they believed that their country wanted to send them there for good reason. In any case, the certainty of making a difference is not the issue. We often cannot be sure of the result of our actions when we undertake them. We either do something because we think it is right, or we choose not to do it. McNamara honored what he believed to be his duty to Johnson above what many others, but apparently not he, would consider his duty to his country. He can live with that, but he should not expect our applause. (37)

In one of his defenses, McNamara claims that government lacked experts to consult about Southeast Asia because of the McCarthyism of the 1950s. In fact, many experts were driven from government for their less than cheery views of the future of Chiang Kai-shek. "But," as Steel points out, "they had not moved to Mars. There were telephones then. They were eager to talk to anyone who would listen" (34). McNamara reports in his own book that as early as 1964, Maxwell Taylor had cabled from Saigon that political stability was not in sight, a view that a Special National Intelligence Estimate echoed:

These two assessments should have led us to rethink our basic objective and the likelihood of ever achieving it. We did not do so, in large part because no one was willing to discuss getting out. (154)

The folly of depending upon a military solution in Vietnam was again echoed in 1964 when General Westmoreland himself cabled that

unless there are reasonable prospects of a fairly effective government in South Vietnam in the immediate offing, then no amount of offensive action by the U.S. either in or outside South Vietnam has any chance by itself of reversing the deterioration now underway. (159)

Even George Kennan, the architect of *containment*, the strategic policy that factored so hugely in the presidential commitment to South Vietnam's defense, argued before the Senate on February 10, 1966,

that the Chinese had "suffered an enormous reverse in Indonesia, . . . one of great significance, and one that does rather confine any realistic hopes they may have for expansion of their authority." This event greatly reduced America's stakes in Vietnam. He asserted that fewer dominoes now existed, and they seemed much less likely to fall. (214-15)

But having just reported Kennan's 1966 public argument against high-geared involvement in Southeast Asia, McNamara writes

“Kennan’s point failed to catch our attention and thus influence our actions” (215). Filled as it is with such statements followed by disclaimers and announcements of neglect and unholy confusion, it becomes clear that *In Retrospect* provides few answers. “Looking back at the record,” the Secretary writes,

it is clear our analysis was nowhere near adequate. We failed to ask the five most basic questions: Was it true that the fall of South Vietnam would trigger the fall of all Southeast Asia? Would that constitute a grave threat to the West’s security? What kind of war—conventional or guerrilla—might develop? Could we win it with U.S. troops fighting alongside the South Vietnamese? Should we not know the answers to all these questions before deciding whether to commit troops?

It seems beyond understanding, incredible, that we did not force ourselves to confront such issues head-on. (39)

But when you have faced just a few pages earlier a remark such as, “The objective of the Defense Department was clear to me from the start: to defend the nation at minimal risk and minimal cost, and, whenever we got into combat, with minimal loss of life (25),” you understand perforce that you are in the presence of a book whose principal value a *New York Times* editorial astutely casts as a way

to remind us never to forget that these were men who in the full hubristic glow of their power would not listen to logical warning or ethical appeal. When senior figures talked sense to Mr. Johnson and Mr. McNamara, they were ignored or dismissed from government. When young people in the ranks brought that message, they were court-martialed. When young people in the streets shouted it, they were hounded from the country. (24)

The editorial also reminds us that for his role in the war, McNamara got “a sinecure at the World Bank and summers at the Vineyard” (24). Mr. McNamara now says that “he weeps easily and has strong feelings when he visits the Vietnam Memorial” (24), but it is impossible not to note, as Frank Rich does, that, at present,

McNamara has “nearly twice as many copies of his book in print as there are names on the wall in Washington” (11). Further, in his review of *In Retrospect*, Rich characterized McNamara as only the “Second-Best Killer of the Week.”

If I had to choose a favorite killer of the week, give me the teen-age girl who bludgeoned her mother with a lead-crystal candlestick holder and got turned away from Harvard. Not the man who mastered number-crunching at the Harvard Business School and later took his charts to Washington, where he used them to prolong a war whose body count totaled 58,000 American and some 3 million Vietnamese lives. (11)

Unlike Mr. McNamara, Gina Grant, Rich points out,

did face a judge and was punished for a crime that, like the Vietnam War, may have been committed in theoretical self-defense. Nor is Ms. Grant telling her story in print in a bid for money and sympathy—or making the rounds of media self-promotion—as Mr. McNamara is. (11 emphasis added)

Though grabbing in its choice of tone and example, Rich’s reaction to *In Retrospect* is not exceptional in its spleen or fury. In an introduction to a *Harper’s* essay on the Oklahoma City bombing, Lewis Lapham compares Robert McNamara to Timothy McVeigh in that both employed bombing as a means of rhetoric. Because McNamara published his recollections of the Vietnam War the same week that the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was bombed, the former Secretary of Defense kept showing up on the screen between reports of casualties from Oklahoma City. “The sequence repeated itself,” Lapham writes, “often enough to bring to mind a comparison between the two would-be saviors of Western Civilization, the one in shackles, the other frequently in tears, who both construed heavy explosives as figures of speech” (29).

Tom Vallely, who directs Indochina programs at the Institute for International Development at Harvard, was a member of a faculty panel to discuss with McNamara his confessional memoir. Vallely, who served as a 19-year-old radio operator for his infantry company

near Danang, said that he could make night into day by calling in B-52 bombers, Huey helicopter gunships, or naval bombardment. He could call anybody he wanted, he said, but, as reported by Fox Butterfield of *The New York Times*, Vallely added, "I couldn't call anybody to tell them we were wrong" (16).

For McNamara to now admit that he knew that Vietnam was unwinnable is hardly the antidote this nation needs as it still gropes for closure from America's longest war. Further, as Peter Braestrup mentions about *In Retrospect* in *The Washington Post*:

Vietnam veterans will find few references to the devotion and competence of the men McNamara and LBJ sent into distant battle; they largely remain statistics in McNamara's memoir, as they did in his memos during his days as defense secretary. (10)

It is true that McNamara seems spottily aware of other people's risks or losses. For instance, in his memoir, McNamara enthusiastically recounts the story that when Alabama Governor George Wallace refused state protection for the participants in the march from Selma to Montgomery, he, McNamara, convinced LBJ to federalize the Alabama National Guard. The night following the march, McNamara arrived home from the Pentagon to discover that his own daughter had joined Dr. King and his supporters in the long walk. McNamara immediately dialed LBJ to say:

"Mr. President, I know how you agonized over the decision to federalize the Alabama Guard. But knowing how much you love Margy, I am sure you will realize now you were right. She was one of the marchers!" (178)

McNamara tells the story then moves on to other subjects, never so much as noting the millions of parents who were trusting him to repeat his actions—that is, to protect their children from unnecessary harm.

In another insensitive anecdote, McNamara drops in a paragraph recounting his demonstration for Eunice Shriver of how to operate a fountain pen-like tear gas dispenser kept for security reasons in his government car. He manages to release tear gas into the rear compartment of the chauffeured limousine and incapacitate

President Kennedy's sister. This event occurred following a meeting of the Kennedy family to review plans for the slain president's grave site. What was McNamara thinking at the time—and why does he tell the story now? Does he want us to know he was part of the Kennedy inner circle? Throughout his memoir, the Secretary is diligent in letting us know all the important and swell people he met.

Then on page 333—in a book of a text body of 335—Mr. McNamara gets to what a reader might have expected to have been the single most important matter of his book: “In the end, we must confront the fate of those Americans who served in Vietnam and never returned.” But in the pathetic and painful pattern of *In Retrospect*, the Secretary continues what may be best described as an artless dodge. “Does the unwisdom of our intervention nullify their effort and loss? I think not,” he says. “They did not make the decisions.” After which announcement McNamara feels free to pronounce:

They answered their nation's call to service. They went in harm's way in its behalf. And they gave their lives for their country and its ideals. That our effort in Vietnam proved unwise does not make their sacrifice any less noble. (333)

That “our” effort proved unwise doesn't make any soldier's sacrifice in Vietnam ignoble, but it certainly works to make such sacrifice stupid and inessential. Nonetheless, undaunted, and having assured us of the nobility of the more than eight million mostly conscripted U.S. participants in the Vietnam War, the former Secretary of Defense brings us (after 300 pages) to lines he's “reminded of” from Rudyard Kipling.

I couldn't finish my reading of the poem, for I was busy processing the fact that Robert Strange McNamara had just celebrated, in rosy health, his 79th year. I was preoccupied, too, with the last included photo—of many, courtesy of the author—in *In Retrospect*. The photo I mean is one of the man himself, atop a mountain with a pal. “While writing this manuscript,” McNamara begins his caption of the photo,

I took time off for a winter climb of Homestake Peak (13,200 feet) on the Continental Divide in Colorado.

The peak is approached from a system of huts, the first two of which I built, in memory of Marg, for public use on national forest land. My companion on the climb was Dr. Ben Eiseman, the former vice-chairman of the American College of Surgeons. At the time, we were both in our late seventies. We hope to continue skiing and climbing until the day we die! (unnumbered page facing 207)

No reason to read a Kipling poem when you have the photograph of the septuagenarian McNamara manfully atop a Colorado peak. I headed for a library to find some almanac that would provide the average age of the American Vietnam War dead. I found no such reference, though I did find an alphabetical list of American casualties, complete with rank, branch of armed service, date of birth, date of casualty, and home state. I took a sampling of 26 names, the names falling at the beginning of each letter of the alphabet. Of the 26 selected soldiers, the oldest was 35, the youngest 20. The average age of the 26 dead was 23.7 years. Eighteen U.S. states were represented, all four services, as well as officer, noncommissioned officer, and enlisted ranks.

During McNamara's seven-year tenure in office, 16,000 Americans died; after he left office—*without speaking up*—more than twice that number perished. How many of the sacrificed 58,000 had ever skied or climbed a mountain in Colorado is unrecorded.

Ronald Steel points out in his *New Republic* essay that McNamara's pedestrian book tells us little "about the Vietnam War that we did not already know, and little about the inner life, if any, of the manipulative narrator who improbably presents himself as the sorrowful victim and unsung hero" (34). *In Retrospect* does, though, Steel also points out, inadvertently reveal a great deal about the self-contained bureaucratic machine in which McNamara met all his important friends and in which he operated so successfully.

During the time I was reading *In Retrospect*, I wrote to an old friend, Alfred Kern, who had been a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the United States Air Force Academy in 1979 when I was an Air Force captain and a first-year English instructor. A World War II vet, Al's now 71. "You and I have talked about this before," he wrote back. Then:

Vietnam poisoned us. McNamara's quest for absolution won't erase the 58,000 names on The Wall and will only dishearten or infuriate even more those whose wounds destroyed their lives in ways more cruel than death. In many ways, Vietnam may have poisoned this country permanently. The cynicism toward government, the assumption that elected officials will serve only their own interests or those of the highest bidder, the use of Vietnam in the most callous and unacceptable way by people running for office: these and more continue to defame the dead and separate the living.

"And just wait," Al finished, "both Phil Gramm and Bill Clinton will argue that McNamara has justified them."

I called Al. "Maybe McNamara is," I said, as a colleague had suggested, "a sad man who just doesn't know how to feel sad. Maybe that's what it is."

"McNamara's psyche isn't high on my list of priorities," Al said, then said he couldn't talk more about McNamara. And no wonder, for "there is something wrong," Mickey Kaus writes,

with a culture in which a McNamara is feted for his "guts" [for confessing] while George McGovern and Gene McCarthy who opposed McNamara's mistakes, are regarded as nobodies. (6)

May it be instructive for U.S. leaders to be reminded of "the willful stupidity and obdurate delusions with which the war was prosecuted" (34), something Theodore Draper argued about Vietnam fifteen years ago. And may U.S. leaders be reminded, too, that in addition to our losses—200,000 wounded, 58,000 dead—the Vietnamese suffered up to two million wounded and three million dead. And this: although Vietnam was America's longest war, the war was for Vietnam, in its longer history, its shortest. □

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