

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The McNamara Story

reviewed by LtGen Victor H. Krulak, USMC(Ret)

IN RETROSPECT: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. By Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark. Random House, New York, 1995, 414 pp., \$27.50. (Member \$24.75)

Robert McNamara's apologia offers many reasons why his stewardship of the Vietnam conflict was less than a dramatic success, but it never addresses the simplest reason of all—McNamara was the wrong man for the job from the start, unsuited both emotionally and professionally to serve as the principal Defense Department executive in fighting a complex jungle war halfway around the world.

The responsibility for creating this situation rests with President Kennedy, who chose McNamara for his Defense Secretary only two months after his elevation to the presidency of the Ford Motor Company. The institutional job that McNamara faced was far bigger than anything he had undertaken before. The war we were to fight was complex in the extreme, the military people destined to fight it were strange to him, and he never did get to know or understand them.

At Ford, McNamara's long suit was quantification. He was comfortable only when he was able to put some sort of number to each problem and to each element of a problem. This, of course, did not work in Vietnam where the number of "enemy" killed may well have included 20, 30, or 50 percent friends or neutrals, or where the number of hamlets reported as under friendly control could be—and probably was—in error by half. Quantified results were

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McNamara's relations with his subordinates and colleagues are a clear measure of his unsuitability for the job. Criticized by the military as a martinet, he was actually very gentle with those with whom he disagreed and those whose recommendations he rejected. He listened politely, but that was it. Having made up his own mind, he didn't much care what they thought, did, or said. An example is an occasion when we were preparing for a trip to Vietnam. His desk was a disorganized pyramid of papers. This was not his usual behavior, and I asked him what the confusion meant. His response was that he was in a hurry to put the finishing touches on this trip report. When I pointed out the obvious—that we hadn't even departed on the trip—he said that was true, but he knew what he was going to hear and had already made up his own mind.

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A major point in the book is McNamara's frequent lament that critical decisions were often taken without full examination. The truth is quite different. Decisions—often wrong, it is true—were made following agonizing study, as permitted by the parameters of the flawed system then current in the government. Labored, clumsy, and layered with bureaucracy, the government system, or lack of it, produced some wretched results. McNamara, as a major player, shared

IN
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ROBERT S.
MCNAMARA
WITH BRIAN VANDEMARK



McNamara (center) visiting Vietnam in July 1965.

in the responsibility. Sometimes the decision was his to make—if only he would make it. I will offer three varied examples of poor decisionmaking—issues of such importance as to have a dramatic impact on the outcome of the war.

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The first is the coup that unseated Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and resulted in his and his brother’s murder. A coup was opposed by the military commander on the spot, Gen Paul D. Harkins. It was also opposed by Gen Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by John McCone of the C.I.A., by Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, by Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and by the President of the United States. It may have been opposed by McNamara, too, although his position was not clear. In any case, the proposition had been examined in detail many times and rejected as involving too much hazard.

But a coup was favored by a small group in the State Department—led by Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and Averill Harriman, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, as well as by Michael Forrestal of the White House staff. Well knowing the contrary views of the President, they still proceeded, on a Saturday morning, with what Gen Taylor called an “egregious end run” to crystallize U.S. support for a coup. Hilsman drafted a message to the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon directing him to “make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem’s replacement if this should become necessary” and promising support for Vietnamese military commanders should they undertake a coup.

Then he set about procuring concurrences. The draft cable was sent to the President, who was in Hyannisport, with the assertion that “clearances are being obtained.” However, the Secretary of State was out of town, as was the Director of Central Intelligence, and McNamara himself. George Ball, the Undersecretary of State, in his superior’s absence, called the President in Hyannisport to discuss the message. The President stated that he would approve the cable “if his senior advisers concurred.”

Ball then called the Secretary of State and told him that the President had agreed. (Not accurate, since no “senior advisors” had yet concurred.)

However, when told that the President had agreed to the message, the Secretary of State and the acting Director of Central Intelligence concurred reluctantly, as did the Deputy Secretary of Defense, after telephone consultation with McNamara.

That left the military—Joint Chiefs Chairman General Taylor. Hilsman could not reach him. (He was out shopping.) As a substitute, Hilsman found me on the golf course at the Chevy Chase Club and asked me to come as soon as possible to the White House situation room. I did and was briefed on the draft message and on the concurrences that had been obtained. Hilsman asked me, in Taylor’s absence, to register a concurrence. I declined, on the basis that I did not like the message and, although I worked for Taylor, my concurrence would be inappropriate. However, I said I would find Taylor and acquaint him with the facts as Hilsman related them. I finally located him and offered my opinion that he should not concur with the message. He agreed, but it made no difference. The cable was already gone—a melancholy example of a fatally flawed process that certainly affected the entire progress of the war.

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McNamara’s part in the travesty? He was out of town when it happened but was totally aware of the issues involved and had taken part in the numerous detailed discussions of the subject. And, when he returned and learned the details of Hilsman’s perfidy, what did he do?—nothing. He didn’t urge the President or the Secretary of State to fire Hilsman

and, in his book, he says that he did not share Gen Taylor's view that Hilsman's behavior was "an egregious end run." Or, put another way, McNamara was acknowledging that his own standards of loyal, decisive, and courageous behavior were suspect.

Second, a good example of McNamara's unwillingness to make a critical decision was his reluctance to exhibit leadership in the very area where his concerns were paramount, which is to say the basic philosophy of how the war should be fought. There were two clearly competitive views as to how we should prosecute the conflict. One view said that the South Vietnamese people were the prize, not hills and road junctions. If the people trusted us, they would be allies in every real sense, bringing us essential intelligence and assistance and denying those things to the enemy. However, if they put their trust in the enemy, we would be fighting in an insidiously hostile environment.

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Since 80 percent of the people lived in the rich and productive 20 percent of the country along the sea-coast, it was contended by the proponents of this strategy that our attention should be focused on the coastal region. We should clear the enemy out of the critical area and then, with the sea at our back to provide freedom of movement and secure logistics, help the Vietnamese protect their homes and their sources of income. This is the way the Marines wanted to fight the battle, and they never stopped saying so.

In direct contrast there was the classic formula of "find, fix, and destroy" the enemy—go into the unforgiving back country, where the mountains rise to 7,000 feet and nothing grows but jungle, search out the enemy forces and, in effect, exchange casualties with him on his own terms.

It minimized our own logistic and fire support advantages and magnified the same benefits to the enemy. This idea, while it may have been reasonable on the West German Plain, was quite unsuited to jungle war in Indochina, and it ignored the basic truth that, in the end, the people were the prize.

It is McNamara's premise that this basic operational divergence had never been debated adequately. His view does not bear analysis. He was leaned on very heavily by those who saw the cost and futility of a jungle war fought on the enemy's terms—not just Marines, but Army generals as well. I wrote a 17-page study that exhibited the unwisdom of our swapping lives with the enemy in a costly effort to defeat his military units while leaving the Vietnamese people fair game for subversion, or worse.

The truth is, McNamara understood the issue clearly but was not willing, for whatever reason, to question the search and destroy formula. If any further debate or analysis was necessary, McNamara was in a position to generate it, and to make the related decisions, too. But he didn't and if, in his apologetic book, he acknowledges some responsibility for the strategy's failure, he has full justification for doing so—and for acknowledging responsibility as well for the dead American soldiers resulting from that flawed strategy.

Finally, there is the matter of the air campaign. This boils down to a simple issue of courage. McNamara makes a faulty case. He declares that the material needs of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were very small. He says that, except for food, they required only 15 tons of imports a day. I could never understand this. It was ridiculous on its face. On the one hand he laments the 500 trucks a day hauling materials from North Viet-

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nam southward down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam, but he never acknowledges the hailstorm of rockets and artillery rounds drenching the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces daily. The trucks, their fuel and the warlike things they carried, had to



27 July 1965: The day the President made the decision to embark on a major ground war in Southeast Asia.

come from somewhere. And we all knew where—90 percent, and maybe more, from the Soviet Union.

He speaks of the very large number of U.S. air sorties, but finds nothing wrong with the fact that most of them were directed at unprofitable targets in the southern part of North Vietnam, and that the critical ones—Haiphong, its docks and harbor, and

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Hanoi—were proscribed, not because they were not seen as profitable, but because of fear that attacking them would bring on hostilities with China and the Soviets.

We all knew that the prime port of entry was Haiphong. Shut down Haiphong and the whole North Vietnam operation would be dealt a body blow. Was that technically feasible? Of course. Bomb the docks, mine the port. Ultimately, President Nixon did just that, and the enemy came to the bargaining table at once.

Why, then, was it not done? It was not done because McNamara and some of his colleagues clung stubbornly to three flawed convictions:

- Because of the wooded terrain, and because of the many alternative distribution means, he believed that bombing would never have a major effect on the North Vietnamese. Never mind that the first demand that their peace negotiators would invariably make had to do with bombing. “Stop bombing and we will talk,” they said. This had no effect on the Secretary.

- Closing the port of Haiphong, he said, would simply encourage the use of over-the-beach unloading. The inefficiency of this process was obvious to all who had experience in over-the-beach logistics, but no amount of logic was effective in

shaking McNamara in his determination that Haiphong was not decisively important.

- He, along with some of his government colleagues, were deathly afraid of the Russians and Chinese. He believed that destruction of the Haiphong port facilities, bombing of the Hanoi rail center and the rail routes to China would enlarge the hazard of war with those two powers. On one occasion he sent a memo to the President saying without any qualification: “Actions sufficient to topple the Hanoi regime will put us in a war with the Soviet Union and China.” He knew that a U.S. Air Force plane had already attacked a Soviet ship in a North Vietnamese port, and the result was just a mild protest. And he seemed to ignore the reality that transport of things from Russia to North Vietnam via China required a 7,000-mile trip and the use of three rail gauges and, in any case, that the Chinese hated the North Vietnamese and did not trust them. Willing to forgo a critical tactical opportunity because of sheer timidity, McNamara affected the entire conduct of our air offensive. As it turned out, Clausewitz was, once

again, validated: “A thousand times more is lost in war through timidity than through boldness.”

At the outset I postulated that McNamara was not the man for the job. Nobody could have worked any harder, but his indecision on the one hand and stubbornness on the other did violence to him and, more important, to the United States. Shakespeare said it best: “To wilful men, the injuries that they themselves procure must be their schoolmasters.”

And, in this regard, his book makes clear that McNamara was a slow learner. It emphasizes that he has not altered his essential views of 25 years ago. They were wrong then, and they are wrong now. While the confessional may help him make peace with himself, it exhibits a certain arrogance in his undertaking to establish himself as the conscience of America. His book cannot atone for errors committed a quarter century ago. It will only open old wounds, causing pain without ponderable benefit.

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