

## A Prospective Look at McNamara's *In Retrospect*

McNamara, Robert. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. New York: Times Books, 1995.

Robert McNamara's *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, a book that has expectedly unleashed an emotional debate in this country, should be evaluated along several dimensions. Aside from offering a retrospective look at the Vietnam conflict, its reading will also be helpful to the present and future architects of American foreign policy in years to come. Because I think the value of the book lies in what it may contribute to the future for US foreign policy, I have called my review "prospective."

This book will be closely scrutinized by students of foreign and defense policy, especially those who are interested in looking for answers, as I was, to the following questions: what were America's "best and the brightest" thinking as their country was escalating its involvement in Vietnam?; how much did they really know about Vietnam, or Southeast Asia?; how was the decision to commit America's military power made?; and, most important, how can America avoid involvement in the *terra incognita* of the future?

Even though the Vietnam conflict is an extensively dissected and scrutinized tragedy of American foreign policy, its description by one of its chief architects carries a special meaning. The author makes his position about US involvement in this war clear in the Preface of the book by observing, "We were wrong, terribly wrong" and "We made an error... of judgement and capabilities." However, as one thumbs through this book, one is showered by a number of observations that are shocking about the American decision-making process that then prevailed. For instance, McNamara writes, "We faced a complex and growing crisis in southeast Asia with sparse knowledge, scant experience, and simplistic assumptions." (p. 29)

The failure of Presidents Kennedy's and Johnson's advisers to thoroughly scrutinize the basic premise of the growing American involvement in Vietnam becomes abundantly clear by the fact that Washington was operating on "two premises that ultimately proved contradictory." The first one was that the fall of South Vietnam would threaten the security of the United States; the second, that only South Vietnam could defend itself against the aggression from the north. A third premise was that the United States' role should be limited to furnishing logistical support and training for the South Vietnamese troops.

What worries me about this book is the sections that deal with what I call the "strategic consensus" that prevailed among the architects of US foreign policy spanning four administrations — those of Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. This strategic consensus was about the monolithic nature of communism, its purported international conspiratorial character that was so heralded during the McCarthy era. the so-called "domino theory" (which has its believers even in the 1990s), and the ominous implications of the fall of South Vietnam for US security interests, not only in the Pacific region, but indeed in the entire non-communist world.

The conventional wisdom about these variables that then prevailed was not thoroughly debated. Just from reading McNamara's account of the public support for this war, it is apparent that the public was misled, and even the Congress not fully informed. When the tide of the war could not be turned against the communist north, public opposition to it at home proved to be a major cause of America's defeat in Vietnam. During the course of its involvement, the United States never asked what McNamara calls the following 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 US troops fighting alongside the South Vietnamese?" (pp. 39 and 101); and "should we not know," asks McNamara, "the answers to these questions before deciding whether to commit troops?"

The second dimension concerns America's knowledge of the politics and culture of Vietnam when it got involved in a very complicated conflict. Vietnam, as McNamara tells us, was *terra incognita* for the United States. The United States "totally underestimated the nationalistic aspect of Ho Chi Minn." (p. 33) By the same token, American decision makers had scant understanding of the South Vietnamese leaders with whom we were dealing on a day-to-day basis. Regarding Ngo Din Diem — leader of South Vietnam from 1954 through 1963, who was assassinated in a US-sponsored coup in 1963 — McNamara writes,

"Because he was uncommunicative and from a different cultural background, Diem was an enigma to me and, to virtually every American who met him. I did not understand him." (p. 42) Similarly, Americans knew nothing about Vietnam. "How were we to know," asks McNamara, "when we were moving in an alien environment, alongside a people whose language and culture we do not understand and whose history, values, and political traditions differed profoundly from our own?" (p. 43)

The third dimension deals with an issue that is raised intermittently in this book, the widely different perspectives of the civilian and military leadership regarding the handling of the Vietnam conflict (not just the war itself). McNamara writes, "We never carefully debated what U.S. forces 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*" (p. 107, emphasis added) The military leadership, on the contrary, had a clear perception about this conflict. In light of National Security Action Memorandum 273 (NSAM 273) that was signed by President Johnson on 26 November 1963, and which underscored his resolve to *win* the war, the Joint Chiefs of Staff saw the US objective in Vietnam as winning victory over the communist forces. In order to achieve this objective, they wanted their civilian leaders to "put aside many of the self-imposed restrictions which now limit our efforts, and to undertake bolder actions which may embody greater risks." (pp. 107-8)

McNamara cites the analysis of General Bruce Palmer (who was the deputy commanding general in Vietnam in 1967, and who also served as the US Army Vice Chief of Staff from 1968 to 1973) of 1984, when he wrote, "not once during the war did the Joint Chiefs of Staff advise the Commander-in-Chief or the Secretary of Defense that the strategy being pursued most probably would fail and that the United States would be unable to achieve its objectives." (p. 108) One can very easily question both McNamara and General Palmer on this point. It was not the role of the military to set US strategic objectives in Vietnam, or to evaluate the element of political realism related to these objectives. Their task was to translate the strategic objectives established by the National Command Authorities (NCA) into military actions, and give the civilian leadership an operational plan to attain those objectives.

From the perspective of the military leadership, they were unable to do their job "right" or "weir<sup>1</sup>" because of the "micromanagement" of this war by a civilian leadership which, throughout the course of this conflict, remained confused about what exactly it wanted to achieve in Vietnam. McNamara's account only substantiates the military side of the argument on this conflict. The disagreement between the civilian and military leadership during the Vietnamese imbroglio created a permanent scar on the collective memory of America's military establishment of that era. The future military leaders were not only to avoid the "mistakes of Vietnam." but to convert it, with the help of President George Bush's own determination not to micromanage the Gulf War of 1991, into a glaring military success in Iraq.

The fourth dimension to consider in *In Retrospect* is the morality of McNamara's action in writing this book. There is no doubt that his version of this war, as emotionally wrenching as it has been both for him and for those whose lives have been permanently altered (and ended for the 58,000), comes twenty years too late. His reason for not speaking out about this war for this long is so unpersuasive that it borders on being disingenuous. In the Preface he explains his silence on the issue of Vietnam by observing, "I hesitated for fear that I might appear self-serving, defensive, or vindictive, which I wished to avoid at all costs." Yet, most of his analysis deals with the fact that he ardently promoted the policy of American military involvement in Vietnam, even while his own reservations about the fallacy of this policy gradually changed into a conviction. He systematically cites memo after memo, statement after statement supporting his own feeling that the US endeavors were doomed to fail in Vietnam. And he stayed in office. Why? McNamara is nebulous in explaining his position. He states that resigning in protest or challenging LBJ's Vietnam policy "would have been a violation of my responsibility to the President and my oath to uphold the constitution." (p. 314) This is a sad and a wrong-headed observation from a public servant with a remarkable career.

In the American system of government, the ultimate loyalty for all rests with the Constitution, not with presidents. When a public servant disagrees with a policy, no matter how passionately and ardently supported by his/her president, he/she must resign and become a participant in public scrutiny of that policy. The long and well-established traditions of democracy leave little doubt in anyone's mind that a public debate on all matters of public policy is bound to minimize, if not eliminate altogether, its pathologies and

shortcomings that usually creep up when policies are made by a few, debated by a few, and not scrutinized by a larger group of individuals. In this sense, McNamara can never wash away the moral guilt that he has in the eyes of the American people — and especially for those who fought and died in this war — for not resigning in protest and publicly debating Vietnam twenty years ago, and for remaining silent for so long.

The final dimension is lessons learned, not just along the lines suggested by McNamara in his last chapter, but in a broader sense. To begin with, we must ask what, if anything have we learned about the Vietnam conflict along the decisional dimension? The most indelible imprint related to Vietnam is that the United States will never again get involved in a conflict without developing a clear understanding of *what* it is getting into, *what* it wants to achieve, *what* price it has to pay for it, *whether* the public will support the price of American involvement in future conflicts along the political, military, and economic dimensions, *how* long will the US stay in it, and *when* and *how* will it get out of it. The Gulf War of 1991 is a clear example of the fact that the United States will never again get embroiled in a protracted land war. Washington's decision to pull out of Somalia in 1993 is another example that the lesson of Vietnam will also be applied to Operations Other Than War (OOTW).

The issue of developing a strategic consensus or questioning a strategic consensus that prevails during one time is a more difficult issue to handle. Since the American public is least interested in, and gets most of its cues about, foreign policy issues from the senior decision makers, it is very easy to "buy into," or not seriously questions assumptions, that govern major foreign policy pronouncements. So, unless people become more interested in, and informed about, foreign policy issues — the chances of which are minimal at best — they remain highly vulnerable to unquestioningly accepting the leadership's version of strategic consensus that prevails at a given time.

On the issue of developing a sophisticated understanding of politics and cultures of those regions of the world that are important to us, our record is comparatively better in the 1990s than it was during the 1950s and 1960s. Even now, however, we must continue to make progress along these lines since the world of the 1990s is more of a "global village" than it was ever before. The issue of civil-military disagreement is not an issue, and the Gulf War of 1991 is persuasive evidence of that.

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