

Comments on McNamara

by Scott Camil

When the news of McNamara's book, *IN RETROSPECT* the tragedy and lessons of Vietnam, first became public, I was both elated and dismayed. I was elated by the fact that one of the planners of the Vietnam War had finally admitted that the war in Vietnam was terribly wrong. What dismayed me was that I had to point to this man's book to achieve official credibility for something that everyone I know has known for a long time. I rushed right out to get the book, and the first thing I did was to read the chapter dealing with the American-sponsored assassination of South Vietnamese president Diem and the chapter dealing with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, two issues which were key to our escalation in Vietnam and controversial. I figured that I knew enough about these two issues to decide whether or not I considered McNamara's book to be honest.

McNamara's dealing with the Diem assassination was what I had understood it to be. Basically Diem refused to control his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu [head of South Vietnamese security forces] repression of the Buddhist protesters. The United States also suspected that Diem was trying to secretly work out a deal with France that would reunify the country, so we decided to get rid of him (I believe this is commonly known as murder). There was a coup and Diem and his brother-in-law were murdered. The United States had a new South Vietnamese President to order around.

Concerning the Tonkin Gulf incident, in August of 1964, Congress passed a resolution known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which was the closest that the U.S. ever came to a declaration of war (p. 127) against Vietnam. President Johnson's administration continually used the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution [which was passed unanimously in the House, and with only two dissenting votes in the Senate, one from Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon and one from Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska] to justify the constitutionality of the military actions it took in Vietnam from 1965 on. The Johnson administration claimed that two American warships, the U.S.S. *Turner Joy* and the U.S.S. *Maddox*, were attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats in international waters and that the attack was unprovoked. This is one of the most controversial issues of our involvement in Vietnam.

I was hoping to find a smoking gun that would point to deception ordered by the White House, because I am one of the people who believe that the U.S. lied concerning where its ships actually were, what they were actually doing, and whether or not they were really attacked. McNamara believes that the attacks really did take place. McNamara's book provides some of the contradictory information that has caused doubt. To me, the most astonishing information was the fact that when McNamara contacted Admiral Sharp (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific) to find out the latest information (p. 134), McNamara asked "There isn't any possibility there was no attack, is there?" Admiral Sharp replied, "Yes, I would say there is a slight possibility. Without fully resolving the question as to whether or not the attack took place, he changes the subject to whether or not...under the Constitution, Congress has the right to grant or concede the authority in question, and whether or not Congress committed the error of making a personal judgment as to how President Johnson would implement the resolution. (p. 141) McNamara goes on to say that President Bush was right because he got Congress support before he began combat operations against Iraq, and the Johnson administration was wrong because it did not. (p. 143) Since neither president got a declaration of war from Congress, I don't see the difference between what Johnson did and what Bush did. I believe they were both wrong and that they both deceived the American public to get what they wanted:

The next chapter of the book I went to was The Lessons of the Vietnam War. In this chapter, McNamara gives two reasons that President Kennedy should not have sent advisers to Vietnam. He also gives five key junctures at which he says the U.S. should have withdrawn from Vietnam. Finally, he gives eleven major causes for our disaster in Vietnam. After reading this section, I found myself amazed because none of the reasons that McNamara gives in this section are reasons based on new information that is just now being made public. All of the information was available to the public at the time, and indeed many citizens were expressing these same views. Unfortunately, the public view was clouded by the foggy lenses of patriotism and loyalty, which resulted in a blind obedience to authority, a dereliction of duty by the citizens of a democratic country. When I was in elementary school, on my report card there was a box called citizenship, and it was explained to us that in a democracy, it was the responsibility of good citizens to be active citizens, and that non-participation was how democracy was lost.

Now, those of the public and the government who once supported the war are crying foul concerning Mr. McNamara's book. They are saying that he is wrong for not having told us the truth when he first knew it; even though this is true, we must not allow them to use McNamara as a scapegoat to absolve themselves of their own responsibility and guilt as citizens in a democracy. All the information was there at the time, McNamara did not hide it from us, he just didn't tell us that he knew it. His reasons for not going public, was because of his loyalty to the Administration and the Constitution. I believe that the real lesson is that putting loyalty to a political party above loyalty to the people is not patriotism, it's partisan politics. McNamara totally misses this.

McNamara's two reasons that President Kennedy should not have sent advisers to Vietnam are: 1) political stability did not exist and was not likely ever to be achieved, and 2) ...the South Vietnamese, even with our training, assistance, and logistical support, were incapable of defending themselves. First, if we had lived up to our word, given to Ho Chi Minh during World War II, and allowed Vietnam to have its independence and self-determination, free from foreign colonialism and imperialism, there probably would have been stability by the 1960s. Secondly, McNamara's contention that the South Vietnamese were incapable of defending themselves could not be further from the truth. In my 20 months of combat duty in Vietnam, I only fought against North Vietnamese troops twice. All of the rest of the time, I fought the Viet Cong who were the South Vietnamese. What McNamara probably meant was that South Vietnamese government troops were incapable of defending themselves, but he fails to question whether any troops, drafted against their will, forced to fight against their own countrymen at the side of foreign troops, would really be committed.

McNamara gives five points in time that we should have withdrawn from Vietnam:

01. November, 1963 - the collapse of the Diem regime and lack of political stability.

2. Late 064 - early 065 - clear indication of South Vietnam's inability to defend itself, even with U.S. training and logistical support.

3. July 065 - further evidence of no. 2.

4. December, 65 - evidence that the U.S. military tactics and training were inappropriate for the guerrilla war being waged.

5. CIA reports indicating bombing in the North would not force North Vietnam to desist in the face of our inability to turn back enemy forces in South Vietnam.

While McNamara criticizes the tactics and the training, the fact of the matter is that tactics and training don't amount to a hill of beans without a plan, and in McNamara's book, I did not find a plan for what the U.S. military had to do to accomplish Washington's political goals. When your only plan calls for the measurement of success by which side can stack up the most dead human beings, all you end up with is a bunch of dead and wounded human beings, and a black marble wall in Washington.

McNamara gives eleven major causes for our disaster in Vietnam. (pp. 321-323)

- 1) We misjudged...the... intentions of our adversaries... and we exaggerated the dangers to the United States of their actions.
- 2) We viewed the people and leaders of South Vietnam in terms of our own experience we totally misjudged the political forces within the country.
- 3) We underestimated the power of Nationalism to motivate a people... we continue to do so today
- 4) Our misjudgments of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of history, culture, and politics of the people and the personalities and habits of their leaders... . No Southeast Asian counterparts existed for senior officials to consult...
- 5) We failed then --as we have since--to recognize the limitations of modern high technology, military equipment, forces, and doctrine in confronting unconventional, highly motivated people's movements. We failed as well to adapt our military tactics to the task of winning the hearts and minds of people from a totally different culture.
- 6) We failed to draw Congress and the American people into a full and frank discussion and debate of the pros and cons of a large-scale U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia before we initiated the action.
- 7)...We failed to retain popular support...we did not explain fully what was happening and why...we had not prepared the public... . A nation's deepest strength lies not in its military prowess but rather in the unity of its people.
- 8) We did not recognize that neither our people nor our leaders are omniscient. ...We do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our own image or as we choose.
- 9) We did not hold to the principle that U.S. military action other than in response to direct threats to our own security should be carried out only in conjunction with multinational forces supported fully (and not merely cosmetically) by the international community.
- 10) We failed to recognize that in international affairs as in other aspects of life there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions.
- 11) Underlying many of these errors lay our failure to organize the top echelons of the executive branch to deal effectively with...issues...confronting us. We thus failed to analyze and debate our actions in Southeast Asia, our objectives, the risks and costs of alternative ways of dealing with them, and the necessity of changing course when failure was clear... .

I find McNamara's eleven reasons to be somewhat contradictory. He implies that if we learn from these reasons, we can avoid this type of disaster in the future but if you look at reasons #8 and #10, (our leaders are not omniscient, we do not have the God-given right to shape every nation...as we choose, and there are many problems for which there are no immediate solutions) they really negate the necessity for the other reasons. McNamara claims that George Bush handled the Iraqi War correctly because it was carried out in conjunction with multinational forces but in his reason #9 he says that multinational force has to be more than cosmetic. It is well known that the international support that we received for the Gulf War was cosmetic, it was paid for by giving a \$140 million loan to China, \$7 billion in economic aid to the Soviet Union, \$12 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia, the wiping out of the multi billion debt of Egypt, \$187 million to the United Nations and threats to other nations.

It is important to note that in reason #4 McNamara says we did not have knowledgeable experts in Southeast Asia in the Administration. Elsewhere in the book he says all of the experts on Southeast Asia were purged from the government during the McCarthy period. Also of importance is McNamara's acknowledgement in Reason #5 for the first time that we were fighting a "people's" movement.

McNamara concludes by saying our current defense spending is at an exorbitant level. The United States spends almost as much for national security as the rest of the world combined. (p. 327) Although we sought to do the right thing and believed we were doing the right thing, in my judgment, hindsight proves us wrong. We both overestimated the effect of South Vietnam's loss on the security of the West and failed to adhere to the fundamental principle that, in the final analysis, if the South Vietnamese were to be saved, they had to win the war themselves. ...We built...on an inherently unstable foundation. External military force cannot substitute for the political order and stability that must be forged by a people for themselves.

Finally McNamara says as far as the Americans who served in Vietnam, they answered their nation's call to service... They gave their lives for their country and its ideals. That our effort in Vietnam proved unwise does not make their sacrifice less noble... Let us learn from their sacrifice, and by doing so validate and honor it. That is easy for him to say, especially when you look at who did not sacrifice. Not one member of the house or senate lost a son in Vietnam in ten years of war. Not one fortune 500 company CEO lost a son in Vietnam in ten years. Not one Defense Contractor showed its patriotism by providing the supplies needed for the war at cost, without making a profit no I can't find any sacrifices in those places.

We must validate and honor the sacrifices of those who refused to go to Vietnam and those who tried to keep us all from going. Speaking as an American who voluntarily fought, and was wounded twice in Vietnam it seems clear to me that our lives were made expendable by our government for profit, and because we were lied to and manipulated by our government it is wrong for McNamara to say that those lives were given--they were really stolen.

The real lessons of the Vietnam war is that as long as business can turn a profit from war, politicians will come up with the justifications. Until the people put the government in its place, below us as our public servants they will continue to walk all over us. Get active before the country that imprisons more of its own people per capita, than any other, finds a place for you