

1999

Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam

Charles E. Neu

H. R. McMaster

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Neu, Charles E. and McMaster, H. R. (1999) "Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 52 : No. 2 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol52/iss2/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

concluding that although such a rescue effort was seemingly inefficient in the short term or when seen as an isolated event, it becomes far more understandable in a broader context. What had kept the American military doing its mission in a remarkably professional fashion for so long was, to a great extent, the realization of its members that they could count on each other, that they would not be abandoned when they were in trouble. Whitcomb argues that by 1972 that bond was particularly strong among the airmen of all the services, for the simple reason that they were virtually the only Americans left in combat. They never questioned whether Hambleton was "worth it"; he was, as they would be in the same situation.

This is an outstanding book, made all the more timely by the release of the blockbuster movie *Saving Private Ryan*. It was in 1944 and in 1972, and it is today, an article of faith in the American military that when people are lost, every effort will be made to get them back. This book is exhaustively researched, extremely well written, and contains some penetrating insights into combat: a must-read.

PHILLIP S. MEILINGER
Colonel, U.S. Air Force

McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997. 446pp. \$27.50
Major H. R. McMaster, a West Point graduate and a University of North

Carolina (Chapel Hill) Ph.D., believes that "despite scores of books on the subject, the why and how of direct U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War remains [sic] unclear." Drawing on recently opened sources, such as the official history of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) during the war and the papers of General Wallace M. Greene, Jr. (Commandant of the Marine Corps from 1964 to 1967), McMaster focuses on the period from November 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson was elected to the office in his own right, to late July 1965, when Johnson announced a major escalation of the Vietnam War. The result is a dense, repetitive, but fascinating book that explores in great detail the approach of LBJ, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and the JCS to the growing crisis in South Vietnam.

McMaster rejects the argument of many scholars that the transformation of the war in 1965 was inevitable, the result of larger political, ideological, and institutional forces that overshadowed the peculiarities of individual leaders. The Vietnam War, he argues, "was not forced on the United States by a tidal wave of Cold War ideology"; rather, LBJ's decisions leading to full-scale war "depended primarily on his character, his motivations, and his relationships with his principal advisers."

What emerges from these pages is an unflattering portrait of the president and his secretary of defense, one that at times is scathing. McMaster depicts LBJ as a parochial political leader, obsessed with his domestic programs, insistent on consensus among his advisers, distrustful of the military, unaware of where his incremental decisions on

160 Naval War College Review

Vietnam would lead, and deceitful in his dealings with the public and Congress. McNamara, if anything, emerges as an even more unsavory figure: arrogant, manipulative, untruthful, and convinced that a policy of graduated pressure would both force the enemy to back down and satisfy the president's domestic political needs.

The most illuminating part of this book deals with the Joint Chiefs and their peculiar performance during this critical period. McMaster traces with skill the careers and attitudes of individual chiefs and the transformation of the JCS from a group of combat commanders to a collection of officers "more experienced in staff work and managing information." From November 1964 through July 1965 the JCS accepted a marginal position in the deliberations over the escalation of the war, and they were often consulted only after the fact or in a perfunctory way. In part their influence was limited because of clever manipulation by the president and McNamara, who exploited divisions among the JCS and who repeatedly hinted that the military would eventually get all that it wanted. In part, however, the Joint Chiefs were instrumental in their own undoing; they were paralyzed by interservice rivalries and divided by differences over how the war should be fought. Also, they were led by a political general, Earle Wheeler, who allowed President Johnson to undercut the authority of his military advisers. While all the members of the JCS rejected the idea of graduated pressure and advocated the aggressive use of force, they could not subordinate the parochial interests of their various services to a larger strategic plan. Lacking an alternative, they accepted the president's

and McNamara's incremental approach, convinced that restrictions on the deployment of American forces would gradually be removed.

McMaster's analysis of the frailties of LBJ's decision-making system, and especially of the role of the JCS, is full of new information, and his doubts about the inevitability of American involvement in a large-scale war, if not entirely convincing, pose a stimulating challenge to earlier scholarship. However, his portrait of Johnson is misleading, exaggerating his flaws and the weaknesses of his advisory system. McMaster's analysis of McNamara misses the enormous confidence that the secretary of defense had in the application of American power in Vietnam. Also, he is so preoccupied with the dynamics of the inner circle around the president that he largely ignores the assessment that LBJ, McNamara, and the JCS made of the strength of revolutionary forces in Vietnam. This Washington-centered approach relegates the battlefield to the historical margins and leads to the conclusion that the war in Vietnam "was lost in Washington, D.C. even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war." McMaster would have us believe that while American entrance into the war could have been avoided, our defeat in that struggle was foreordained. This curious conclusion mars what is in many ways an impressive work of scholarship.

CHARLES E. NEU
Brown University