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In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam

Douglas Kinnard

Robert S. McNamara

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era. Of particular interest is his advocacy of closer integration of Navy and Marine aviation. He believes greater flexibility in the aircraft loading on our carrier decks is necessary and that tailoring for the specific mission will be the rule rather than the exception. These subjects should provoke much thought, and they will certainly stir emotions. It is my judgment that discussions of these issues are healthy and must take place to help shape the difficult decisions ahead for the Navy as the post-Cold War era unfolds. As always, the Navy will be hard pressed to maintain sufficient ready forces to meet its deployment requirements. The trade-off between technology and numbers will dictate some hard choices; indeed some very tough choices have already been necessary.

Owens is eminently qualified to lead the discussion in his book. He skillfully uses his experiences as Commander Sixth Fleet to show the reader that he has the real-world knowledge and hands-on experience needed to lend credibility to his words.

High Seas should be of great value to war colleges and other educational institutions involved in the business of national security. Owens has demonstrated in *High Seas* that he has the courage to take on the difficult problems facing the nation and the armed services in the evolving national security debate.

FRANK B. KELSO II
Admiral, U.S. Navy, Ret.
Springfield, Virginia

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*History to the defeated may say alas
but cannot help or pardon.*

W.H. Auden

In December 1980 I interviewed Robert McNamara, then president of the World Bank, while researching a book I was writing on Maxwell Taylor. When I attempted to raise questions concerning the Vietnam War, he told me that he had decided long before not to discuss that matter for publication. So now he has written a book on that subject. Why did he change his mind at this late hour? His answer as set forth in the preface of the book: "I have grown sick at heart witnessing the cynicism and even contempt with which so many people view our political institutions and leaders." Indeed! But was it McNamara's past actions that contributed to that cynicism? After reading this book, one might grow even more cynical.

The book follows the chronology of McNamara's Vietnam involvement from 1961 until his departure from the Pentagon in early 1968. It is not an impressive work, for many reasons. There are some significant omissions (probably deliberate), and it contains no new documentation. Stylistically, the writing is mechanical and somewhat shallow. But particularly disappointing is his lack of insight into the other major decision makers.

Since the book focuses on Vietnam, it does not cover in detail the author's

Pentagon activities in other areas. A few words about these are necessary to set Vietnam matters in context. McNamara's early imprint as Secretary of Defense was made through management. He was the watershed secretary, and the Pentagon has never been the same since. If we leave aside Vietnam, McNamara played a major and successful role in the development of national strategy and defense policy in the first three or four years of his tenure, but what he did not achieve in the process was a relationship of trust with the military. In fact, he created a serious rift in civil-military relations. In addition, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) as a group were denied adequate presidential exposure. The JCS were, after all, the principal military advisers to the president; of course, they worked also for the Secretary of Defense, but what they should have been doing was too important for the Secretary to have served as a go-between to the president in major matters of war and peace. The result was that when the time came the senior military did not participate sufficiently with the president in developing major decisions concerning the Vietnam War.

When assessing the Kennedy period in 1963, McNamara cannot resist that well known counterfactual that begins, "If Kennedy had not been assassinated . . ." He concludes that "John Kennedy would have eventually gotten us out of Vietnam, rather than move more deeply in." We have heard this before, and there is no new material in this book or in its cited sources to support that conclusion. Here I would render on McNamara's conclusion the familiar

verdict of Scotland's judicial system: *Not Proven*.

The major shaping event in Vietnam in the fall of 1963 was the assassination of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem in early November, three weeks before Kennedy's own assassination. To put it in Maxwell Taylor's words, what happened to Diem was "one of the great tragedies of the Vietnamese conflict and an important cause of the costly prolongation of the war into the next decade." The key initiating event was the infamous 24 August 1963 cable engineered by Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs W. Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman, Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the State Department, while McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk were out of town. The cable to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon in effect gave Lodge and the CIA permission to work with the South Vietnamese to overthrow the Diem government.

McNamara covers events subsequent to the cable in some detail, including his trips to Vietnam both just before and just after the coup, and his recounting seems straightforward. Insofar as events themselves were concerned, only a strong position with the president against both the cable and Lodge's subsequent actions could have possibly had effect. His failure to lead in this major turning point in the war lay not in what he did but in what he failed to do—intervene forcefully in this matter, even though he probably felt ambivalent about it.

I earlier alluded to omission of significant events from McNamara's

narrative. One of these is Lyndon Johnson's failure to call up the reserve forces in July 1965—contrary to the original recommendation of McNamara and the JCS—which in time resulted in the worldwide deterioration of the U.S. Army. Johnson had hoped to avoid debate (he well knew there would be one in Congress and elsewhere) and possible deleterious repercussions for his Great Society programs. It was a momentous step that merely postponed such a debate. It would have been interesting to know why McNamara did not support the JCS and push harder for a reserve call-up. Ironically, in the end it was public debate on the course of the war that brought Johnson down.

Another area of omission concerns an event I first heard of in October 1966 at a conference in Saigon during a McNamara trip. In spite of some military opposition, McNamara had during the previous month approved a project that later would be called "the McNamara Line"—an electronic and firepower fence that, with some troops, would supposedly keep the North Vietnamese out of the South. At the conference he stated, "I will absolutely guarantee that a year from today there is going to be a barrier up there." It was never successful and never completed. Today the North Vietnamese offer tours of this curiosity—a sort of Vietnamese Maginot Line. While this project was perhaps meant as a sop to the scientific community (its chief project officer, General Starbird, thought so), it was most expensive in resources as well as ill advised, and one can see why McNamara

does not allude to this failure in the book.

Another significant omission by McNamara is the February 1966 Honolulu conference. Early in the book he evades discussion of this and certain other significant Pacific conferences, stating that he has no specific memory of those meetings. Why not have researched them, as he did many other events in the book?

I raise this matter because his selective recall strikes me as disingenuous. Specifically, he implies that the objective of the attrition strategy, in particular the "crossover point"—at which enemy casualties would be greater than could be sustained—was something that Westmoreland decided. In fact, at the Honolulu conference Westmoreland was given a joint Defense-State directive requiring him to achieve the following result: "Attrit, by year's end, VC/PAVN [Viet Cong/People's Army of Vietnam] forces at a rate as high as their capability to put men into the field." This directive was the origin of the crossover point. It was McNamara's strategy as much as anyone's that Westmoreland set about to accomplish.

In this context McNamara raises the issue of "body counts," about which some commentary is in order. In a nonlinear war, measurement of the way things are going inevitably involves indicators other than geography: thus the body count. When McNamara speaks of the reports of enemy killed as being often misleading, he is correct (p. 235). In replies to a questionnaire included in the 1985 book *The War Managers* (Avery Publishing Group), 61 percent of the

Army generals who had commanded in Vietnam stated that the enemy body count was often inflated. McNamara is also correct that critics specifically connect him with the body count. For example, *The War Managers* quotes a general that the body count was "the bane of my existence and just about got me fired as a division commander. They were grossly exaggerated by many units primarily because of the incredible interest shown by people like McNamara. . . . I shudder to think how many of our soldiers were killed on a body-counting mission—what a waste."

Inevitably, the book ends with a chapter entitled "The Lessons of Vietnam." McNamara lists eleven major causes for our disaster in the war. These are the usual formulations, which have become banal at this point: failure to retain public support, ignorance of the indigenous situation in Vietnam, the limitations of military technology in a revolutionary en-

vironment, etc. All of these could have been articulated equally well by most of the undergraduates I taught in the 1970s.

In Retrospect's theme reflects observations arrived at by most people a quarter of a century ago—that the war in Vietnam was an American tragedy that was poorly conceived, inadequately understood, and improperly managed by Washington. The author makes it clear that he knew the war was wrong, certainly in 1967 and probably earlier. Why he did not go public then, when it might have made a difference, rather than delay his *mea culpa* until his seventy-ninth year is a matter difficult to understand, but certainly one he will have to live with.

In sum, the book brings to mind John Maynard Keynes's assessment of the Treaty of Versailles: it is "without nobility, without morality, without intellect."

DOUGLAS KINNARD
Richmond, Virginia

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