In Retrospect: 
The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam
By Robert S. McNamara with Brian Van De Mark

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REVIEW BY THOMAS DE MONCHAUX

Never judge a book by its cover.

There is, as with most cliches, at the center of this one a kernel of truth. The cover of a book can complement its contents. But it can also mislead: such is the case with In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, the recent memoir of the Vietnam War by Robert McNamara, the American secretary of defense for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson whose involvement in the policies and strategies of the Vietnam War earned the conflict the sobriquet, “McNamara’s War.” The cover of the book is a slickly contemporary minimalist design, cleverly cropped photographs that show McNamara in consultation with Johnson and in silent contemplation next to a podium with the Presidential Seal. But the design of the interior is altogether a different thing. Cream colored pages, paragraph-long chapter headings, quotes from Montaigne, and hand-drawn maps as the endpapers, give the impression, at first glance, of a British general’s memoir of, say, the Boer War. The effect is of an ancient text in modern wrapping.

The paradox of the packaging reflects, however inadvertently, the current position of the Vietnam War in American discourse, somewhere between history and current events. Aspects of the conflict, such as the Cold War rhetoric of the Domino Theory in Southeast Asia (as presented to Kennedy by President Eisenhower at a 1961 meeting vividly described by McNamara), seem like something out of the distant past. The currently bustling, entrepreneurial Vietnam only seems to confirm the distance travelled since US involvement there. But other aspects of the conflict, such as an increasingly cynical and skeptical mistrust of government decisions and institutions (which McNamara, to the extent that he sees such skepticism as having its origins in the Vietnam era, cites as having prompted his book), are all too familiar today. It is at this moment that McNamara has chosen to break a long public silence on the subject, and to talk about Vietnam: “I want to put Vietnam in context,” McNamara writes in the introduction to In Retrospect, “We...acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values.”

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“Yet,” he adds, “we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why.”

That first sentence—more, it seems, than the details of McNamara’s explanations—has prompted a vocal and emotional public reaction that reminds Americans that the conflicts and arguments of that era are still very much with the country today. The vocal response to the book, as much as the text itself, has illuminated how Vietnam rests in American memory. From veterans of the war, from protesters, and from the generals and advisors who were McNamara’s colleagues, the public reaction has been a combination of a sense of vindication and a sense of betrayal. A sampling of reactions reported in Boston, New York, and Washington media illustrates the tone of public response:

From Senator John McCain of Arizona, a former navy pilot and Vietnam prisoner of war: “I think it’s about 25 years too late to save those Americans who would be alive if he hadn’t pursued a policy of failure. I can only assume that McNamara’s doing it now because he’s trying to assume some place in history. What that place would be, I don’t know, unless it would be as one of the architects of a policy that doomed more than 40,000 American young people and caused a division in our country.”

From Martin Kaplan, a Seattle veteran who served in 1969: “I don’t see McNamara’s revelations doing any good for anyone...There’s a sense of betrayal. To him it was all just an intellectual exercise. And he was called one of the best and the brightest?”

From Lee Raaen, an Army veteran who served in 1970: “We’re seeing another Vietnam veteran deal with his grief and guilt. But I suppose I could say, from a historical standpoint, ‘It’s about time.’”

From David Harris, a San Francisco protester who was sentenced to three years in prison after he refused induction to the army in 1968: “I welcome the converted. It’s a little late and a lot of people are dead or have been in prison or took off for Canada, but I say, ‘welcome aboard’ to the man, better late than never. [But] you just don’t drop the equivalent of 250 pounds of high explosives on every man, woman, and child in Southeast Asia and kill close to 60,000 Americans and something like three million Vietnamese and then turn around, even thirty years too late, and be done with it all by saying, ‘Oh I’m sorry. We were terribly wrong.’”

From retired General William Westmoreland, the US commander in Saigon for much of the war: “He obviously has something to get off his chest but this is not the McNamara I did business with...None of this ever came up, never was indicated to me. Recall that we went into Vietnam promising we would bear any price and any burden to bolster the Vietnamese to self-sufficiency and we almost did until Congress cut us off. You can’t turn your back on a promise like that.”

From David Halberstam, the historian whose 1972 book, The Best and the Brightest, was among the first to attempt to chronicle many of the events recounted by McNamara: “The book is stunningly dishonest [and] McNamara has almost completely sanitized his own role as the Johnson Administration’s most savage enforcer of escalation. The McNamara of the book is a rather benign,
puzzled man looking for a way out of a terrible dilemma; the flesh-and-blood McNamara was a man of certitude, a fierce infighter within the bureaucracy, a man who relentlessly pressured senior military advisors in the field to report optimistically..."

From former Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, Johnson’s rival in the 1968 Democratic presidential primaries: “The current attitude by most of those involved in the war is that what they have learned from McNamara’s book has vindicated them for support or opposition to the war. Admirals and generals are claiming a kind of vindication for not having prosecuted the war successfully, evidently because McNamara had not believed in it strongly enough...The veterans of the war, of course, are an exception. They have spoken not of being vindicated, but of having been betrayed.”

And from Paul Bartell, a Boston Marine Corps veteran from Boston who served in 1967: “A mistake. Twenty-five years later and he figures it was a mistake. The guy went to Harvard Business School and I went to South Boston High and I knew it was a mistake five minutes after I got there.”

In February of 1966, Parade magazine dubbed McNamara, “a man under fire.” The description still applies. Now, as then, McNamara has become a lightning rod for continuing ambivalence, debate, frustration and anguish about what has been called, “The Lost War,” in American history; the conflict with great costs and no clear benefits, great sacrifices with ambiguous results; the seeming quagmire that introduced the phrase, “not another Vietnam” into discussions of American involvement with conflicts from Beirut to Haiti, Bosnia to Somalia. Whatever one calls it—admission, concession, or confession—the observation from one of the chief architects of American involvement and strategy in Vietnam that such involvement was, “terribly wrong,” is alone sufficient to prompt frustration and ambivalence, debate and anguish. The present reaction to McNamara’s book confirms that battles may be concluded, but that in memory and in retrospect, wars such as the conflict of Vietnam have a continuing presence.

But the war was not run by one man. As Senator Eugene McCarthy has observed, “McNamara should not be allowed to claim too much guilt or power.” American engagement in Vietnam spanned almost two decades and three presidencies, and its planning and implementation involved layer upon layer of departments, agencies, councils, and committees. The public reaction to McNamara’s “confession” has in part obscured the details of McNamara’s explanation of what went wrong, and how, if at all, his observations about the working of the US foreign policy machine in the 1960s apply to the present day.

So what, exactly, does McNamara suggest was wrong? In a phrase that recalls the memorandum-esque language of systems-analysis that McNamara learned at Harvard Business School and applied as chairman of Ford before his appointment by Kennedy as secretary of defense, McNamara enumerates the “Eleven key events or decisions [of the conflict] and the implications or decision-making process related to each,” which correspond to, “Eleven major causes for our disaster in Vietnam.”

The Eleven Major Causes range from “1. We misjudged then—as we
have since—the geopolitical intentions of our adversaries...and we exaggerated
the dangers to the United States of their actions;” to, “3. We underestimated the
power of nationalism to motivate a people (in this case the North Vietnamese
and Vietcong) to fight and die for their beliefs and values—and we continue to
do so;” to “5. we failed then—as we have since—to recognize the limitations of
modern, high-technology military equipment, forces, and doctrine in confront-
ing unconventional, highly motivated people’s movements; we failed...to adapt
our military tactics to winning the hearts and minds of people from a totally
different culture;” to, “6. We failed to draw Congress and the American people
into a full and frank discussion and debate about the pros and cons of...involvement...before we initiated action...We failed to retain popular sup-
port in part because we did not explain fully [to the public] what was happen-
ing;” to, “9. We did not hold to the principle that US 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 cosmeti-
cally) by the international community;” to, “We did not recognize [that where
our own security is not directly at stake, our judgement of what is another
people’s or country’s best interest should be put to the test of open discussions
in international forums.”

It’s quite a list. The enumerations and descriptions of errors that continue
through the book are orderly and seemingly precise; they form a crisp and
methodically argued narrative of events, from the indecision, miscommunica-
tion, and equivocation among President Kennedy and his advisors surrounding
US support for the November 1963 coup against South Vietnamese President
Ngo Dinh Diem; to the escalation of American involvement in the first half of
1965, (with the initiation of bombing and the commitment of 175,000 US troops);
to McNamara’s departure from the Pentagon for the chairmanship of the World
Bank in February of 1968, following disagreements and estrangement from
President Johnson. There is a long succession of “underestimations,” and
“failures to recognize,” and “incorrect appraisals.” There are “events piling on
top of each other,” and “slippery slopes,” and “sinking into quicksand.” In
accounts of the meetings and memoranda between the shapers of American
Vietnam policy, politics both of the globe and the office are crisply observed.
What McNamara sees as particular misjudgments of the era by himself and
others are analyzed, generalized, and compared—sometimes strenuously—to
the actions of current global leaders. It is an efficient book.

This efficiency is, perhaps, the problem. In the attempt to reduce an
account of the period to a sequence of miscalculations (with their attendant
explanations and lessons) one loses precisely what one hopes for in such a
memoir as this: a capturing of the distinct pressures and tensions of a particular
moment, an evocation of the particular characters, paradoxes and themes of a
certain time and place. McNamara’s colleagues emerge in the narrative to speak
at meetings and exchange memoranda, but in his attempt to place those
memoranda and meetings within a methodical framework of errors and lessons,
we lose the sense of their characters, principles, and interactions that only an
insider such as McNamara might have been able to provide. While the personal
qualities and dilemmas of President Kennedy (out of obvious affection and admiration) and of Ambassador to Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge (out of apparent frustration) are detailed, the depictions of other figures involved in the policy process under Kennedy and Johnson, such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk or General Westmoreland, are surprisingly thin.

While McNamara does describe the pressures of particular moments in the policy process, the result is informative, not evocative: For instance, a central paradox of the American position in Vietnam (which McNamara identifies as being apparent from the earliest days of the Kennedy administration) was that "we operated on two premises that ultimately proved contradictory. One was that the fall of South Vietnam to Communism would threaten the security of the United States and the Western world. The other was that only the South Vietnamese could defend their nation, and that America should limit its role..."

McNamara returned to this paradox in a May 19, 1967 memorandum to Johnson arguing against the deployment of another 200,000 troops. McNamara concluded, to Johnson's apparent consternation, that "(1) our commitment is only to see that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their own future, [and] (2) this commitment ceases if the country ceases to help itself;" which, McNamara observes in retrospect, it had. This ambivalence about the global significance of Vietnamese politics and about the nature of American interests in the region is an issue to which McNamara returns indirectly throughout the book. He notes how such ambivalence was exacerbated by a number of other problems, such as an incomprehension of Vietnamese culture, and an overestimation of the interests of China and, for that matter, the Soviet Union, in the conflict. But what one hopes for from such an insider's account as McNamara's is a greater and more direct reflection on the roots of such an issue in the personalities, principles, and precepts of those who oversaw American policy. McNamara's own criticism of how that policy was made perhaps applies as well, in this sense, to his own memoir of it: "It seems beyond understanding, incredible, that we did not force ourselves to confront such issues head on."

One issue that McNamara does confront head on is the continuing and often fruitless attempt at gaining information and knowledge about the situation in Vietnam, both during the administration of Diem and in the escalation of war that followed. McNamara writes ruefully of the "sparse knowledge, scant experience, and simplistic assumptions" that the policymakers of the Kennedy Administration initially had about events in South East Asia: "Our government lacked experts for us to consult to compensate for our ignorance about Southeast Asia. [T]op East Asian and China experts in the State Department—John Paton Davies Jr., John Stewart Service, and John Carter Vincent—had been purged during the McCarthy hysteria of the 1950s. Without [their] sophisticated, nuanced insights, we—certainly I—badly misread China's objectives [and] totally underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh's movement...We failed to analyze our assumptions, then [under Kennedy] or later. The foundations of our decision making were gravely flawed."

Information, and its manipulation and analysis, is of course arguably McNamara's area of expertise. Among the number-crunching "Whiz Kids" who
were McNamara's contemporaries at Ford, he was known as "the computer." Such expertise and reliance on the quantifiable and the statistical seems to have lent itself well to the task initially facing McNamara at Defense: the management and organization of a massive and complex bureaucracy, the streamlining of a long and complex procurement process, the writing of a five-year plan. "I intended," McNamara writes, "that the big decisions would be made on the basis of study and analysis." There emerges from much of the analysis the sense that if only one could learn enough and organize such learning into systems and numbers, that if only one could reduce dilemmas to comprehensible and quantifiable relationships and equations, then the right decisions could have been made. "I always pressed our commanders very hard for estimates of progress—or lack of it," McNamara writes, "The monitoring of progress—which I still consider a bedrock principle of good management—was very poorly handled in Vietnam. Both the [Joint Chiefs of Staff] and I bear responsibility for that failure. Uncertain how to evaluate results in a war without battle lines, the military tried to gauge its progress without with quantitative measurements such as enemy casualties (which became infamous as body counts), weapons seized, prisoners taken, sorties flown, and so on. We later learned that many of these measures were misleading or erroneous.”

McNamara begins his book with the observation that he and his colleagues, "were wrong" in their policy toward Vietnam, despite acting "according to what we taught were the principles and traditions [and values] of this nation." While in McNamara’s discussion there is an implied sense of the interpretation and effect of values and traditions among those who directed the American engagement in Vietnam, the errors that McNamara highlights are more to do with process than with precept: the errors are flaws in information-gathering, in intelligence, in calculation, in anticipation. It is perhaps ironic that much of what McNamara notes could have better informed the decision-making process are inherently unquantifiable qualities of character and tradition, such as the tone of American popular response to developments in Vietnam over the '60s, or of the tenor of South East Asian politics and culture during the same period.

There is apparent in the book an impulse to generalize, systematize, organize, and enumerate even the very lessons that emerged, arguably, from an overconfidence in the applicability to waging war in Vietnam of generalizations, systems analysis, and organization of information and numbers. McNamara quotes critics of his practice of “measuring the enemy body count [as saying] ‘This guy McNamara...tries to quantify everything.'” He makes the valid point that, “the things you can count, you ought to count.” But there emerges in In Retrospect a sense of an attempt to count the uncountable, to be, whatever the intention, “the quantifier trying to quantify the unquantifiable,” in a phrase used by Halberstam to describe McNamara in 1969. In Retrospect is a depiction of the decisions behind the war, and of their lessons, that is in this sense compelling, and, as with the design and cover of the book itself, perhaps inadvertently apt.