

Robert McNamara

Robert McNamara, systems analyst and defence secretary, died on July 6th, aged 93

Jul 9th 2009



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QUANTIFICATION was a word Robert McNamara loved. Numbers could express almost any human activity. Well, perhaps not beauty, honour, love. But certainly the rigours of a youthful trip to sea (19 bed-bug bites on one leg), and the pleasure of climbing Mount Whitney, all 14,495 feet. Five or six bullet points, reinforced when you saw him with vigorous hand-chops, summed up any argument.

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There were four

McNamara steps to changing the thinking of any organisation, including the Pentagon: state an objective, work out how to get there, cost out everything, systematically monitor progress against the plan. There were 11 lessons to be learned from the war in Vietnam, but most of them occurred to him too late.

Things you could count, he said, you ought to count. At the Ford Motor Company, where he was one of the ten “Whiz Kids” brought in in 1946 to shake things up, all the components of each new Chevy (made by GM) would be laid out on a table to inspect. This was not cheating, but competitive evaluation. At the Air Force Office of Statistical Control, where he worked in 1943-45, he counted the firebombing sorties made by the B-29s, at what height, with what percentage hits on target (58% of Yokohama, 51% of Tokyo). System and data together helped win that war. In the Pentagon in 1965, again by applying metrics—targets hit, captives taken, weapons seized, the enemy's body-count—he could tell with equal certainty that America was losing.

The South Vietnamese, America's allies, were cavalier with numbers. Hence his frustration with them. The enemy Vietcong made each person count. After saturation American bombing in 1965, Mr McNamara found they were still getting 200 tons of supplies a day along the Ho Chi Minh trail, and had scattered the country with a secret

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crash of oil in hundreds of 55-gallon drums. The importance of tiny peasant efforts to the health of a nation struck him again when, from 1968-81, he headed the World Bank, shifting its focus and its money to rural development.

He saw himself as an “enlightened rationalist”, and looked the part, with his oiled hair and boffin's glasses and strict attention to time. If business had not called, in the shape of Henry Ford, and if public service had not called later, with John Kennedy asking him to take first Treasury and then Defence, he might have stayed at Harvard teaching economics. Not long after joining Kennedy's White House, he drew the president a little graph of his authority: power on the vertical axis, his putative two terms on the horizontal, with effectiveness a declining line between them. Sadly, his horizontal axis proved too long.

It was often his fate to be saddled with bad numbers. At Ford it was the Edsel, a clunker-car with contrasting tail-fins and unlovely squarish styling, which sold only 68,045 in 1958, its first year, and 47,496 in its second, until he killed it in favour of the smaller, cheaper Falcon. At the Pentagon, where he arrived in 1961 with 99 topics for evaluation, he found a budget of \$55 billion that had to be trimmed by bringing in systems analysis and five-year plans. He forced cuts in bases and procurement on the outraged joint chiefs, only to find some money mysteriously restored again.

But the worst numbers appeared from the mid-1960s, in a series of ever-increasing demands from General William Westmoreland in Vietnam: a force of 210,000 by the end of 1965, 325,000 by July 1966, 410,000 by that December. Vietcong numbers smoothly kept pace, despite losses estimated at 60,000 a year. Figures for Americans killed in action ran at 400-500 a month, ever upwards. Mr McNamara, ordered to win the war and clinging to his statistical strategy of attrition, approved the troop increases. But his company-man efficiency was often rattled. At cabinet meetings, especially with the “rough”, Lyndon Johnson (far left), he would nervously hitch up his trousers, sigh, bury his head in his hands. It was all unravelling. When in 1968 “Westy” asked for 200,000 more men, he left. He had once been happy to take responsibility for “McNamara's war”. But as he admitted later, in penitent memoirs and interviews, he had not understood the variables of war itself.

The limits of reason

At the height of the conflict, he was called a baby-burner. His son marched against him. Jackie Kennedy once pummelled his chest with her fists, crying at him to “stop the slaughter”. All this was difficult. He was an instinctive liberal, driving a battered Ford, living in university suburbs, where his recommended book for the reading group was Camus's “L'Etranger”. Warmongering was not in his nature.

He was haunted by the thought that amid all the objective-setting and evaluating, the careful counting and the cost-benefit analysis, stood ordinary human beings. They behaved unpredictably. During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, which he had lived through at cabinet level, “Kennedy was rational. Khrushchev was rational. Castro was rational.” Yet between them they had pushed the world to the brink. Rationality, he concluded, “will not save us.” Perhaps what would were the little quirks that had made him love John Kennedy: the president's sudden capacity to be empathetic, surprised, intuitive, and ready to jettison his most confident calculations.

• This article appeared in the Obituary section of the print edition



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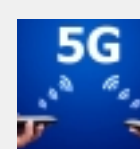
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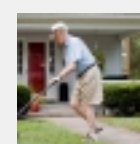


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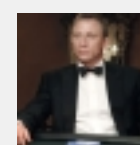
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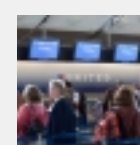
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