

The No-Brainers of Robert S. McNamara

IT SHOULD be evident to all that Robert S. McNamara, to paraphrase a line from the 1940 book *Guilty Men*, was among the worst selections for high office since Caligula chose to make his horse a consul at Rome. He died July 6 at age 93. Today's officials can profit from studying his career.

McNamara, the Pentagon chief in the Kennedy and Johnson years, showed sketchy character on many occasions, but nowhere did he do this more baldly than in his 1995 memoir, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. My predecessor, John T. Correll, dissected it in an editorial, "The Confessions of Robert S. McNamara." I cannot improve upon it. He wrote:

"Robert S. McNamara could give duplicity a bad name. In his new memoir, ... he says that the Vietnam War was a mistake and that he knew it all along. We should have gotten out in 1963, when fewer than 100 Americans had been killed. When he and other US policymakers took us to war, they 'had not truly investigated what was essentially at stake.'

"McNamara was Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968 in the Kennedy Administration, which led the US into the Vietnam adventure, and in the Johnson Administration, which widened the involvement to a war in which 58,000 American troops died. He was not some star-crossed functionary who went passively along with a policy he opposed. He was so fiery an advocate that Vietnam became known as 'McNamara's War.' His actions then and his statements now cannot be reconciled with honor.

"The duplicity has another dimension. News accounts bill In Retrospect as a stark admission of guilt, but an actual reading of it tells a different story. McNamara does, to be sure, acknowledge that he and his colleagues were 'wrong, terribly wrong,' but the admissions account for relatively little of the book's substance. The bulk of it explains how these were honest mistakes and not altogether the fault of McNamara and his friends."

Correll went on to point out a startling blind spot in the book:

"Somehow, it is not altogether surprising that McNamara comes close

to ignoring the rank and file of the US armed forces. In the entire book, there are just four brief instances, one of them in a footnote, when the troops cross his mind. The best he can bring himself to say for those killed in action is that 'the unwisdom of our intervention' does not 'nullify their effort and their loss.'"

Damning as these passages are, it is what comes next that most clearly spotlights McNamara's biggest failing. Correll wrote:

"McNamara never learned the real lessons of the war. In Retrospect ticks

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off '11 major causes for our disaster in Vietnam,' but they run mostly to philosophical mush like, 'We misjudged then—as we have since—the geopolitical intentions of our adversaries,' and, '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.'

"Incredibly, McNamara recalls—but regards it as insignificant—that the service Chiefs told him in 1964 that the US had not defined a 'militarily valid objective for Vietnam.' With similar arrogance, McNamara continues to believe that his strategic and tactical abilities were better than those of the military professionals and that his micromanagement of the war was a good idea."

In short, his lack of integrity was deeply troubling, but it was the world-class arrogance that did the real military damage.

Many have testified to the pervasiveness of this arrogance. One who experienced it up close and personal was Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, USAF Chief of Staff in the years 1961-65. LeMay was the greatest combat commander the Air Force had ever produced, yet it counted for little in the lounges of the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Warren Kozak, author of a new biography, *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay*, notes that, "Robert McNamara had very clear ideas of what he wanted to do at the Pentagon. ... He was determined to take control."

Faced with such brash confidence, LeMay and the Chiefs didn't have much of a chance. McNamara killed key service programs. He halted the supersonic B-70 bomber that was LeMay's top priority. The Pentagon chief forced on the Navy and the Air Force the dual-service TFX—later F-111. Most especially, LeMay quarreled with McNamara over the latter's embrace of "gradualism" in Vietnam. LeMay was proved right.

The New Frontiersman saw little reason to consult with the Chiefs. They "sensed this and felt that Kennedy and the people under him simply ignored the military's advice." LeMay was "especially incensed" when McNamara brought in a group of young statisticians as a buffer between him and the military. LeMay referred to them with the dismissive term "whiz kids."

"These young men, who seemed to have the President's ear, ... exuded a sureness of their opinions that LeMay saw as arrogance," writes Kozak. They made decisions with a startling self-assurance.

Today, some call such obvious decisions "no-brainers."

This grated on LeMay, writes Kozak. "As LeMay approached almost everything in his life with a feeling of self-doubt," he says, "he was actually surprised when things worked out well. Here, he saw the opposite—inexperienced people coming in absolutely sure of themselves and ultimately making the wrong decisions with terrible consequences."

Syndicated columnist Richard Reeves, in a July 11 dispatch, called McNamara "possibly the smartest fool ever to serve at the highest level of government in the United States." Part of that "unwisdom," to use McNamara's term, flowed from his arrogance—his firm belief that he already knew all the answers.

As we said, today's officials can profit from studying McNamara's career. ■