

STILL FIGHTING "MCNAMARA'S WAR"

The Living and the Dead: Robert McNamara and Five Lives of a Lost War

by Paul Hendrickson

New York: Knopf, 1996, 428 pp., \$27.50 cloth.

In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam

by Robert S. McNamara

New York: Times Books, 1995, 414 pp., \$27.50 cloth.

Reviewed by John C. Springer

In 1984, journalist Paul Hendrickson interviewed Robert McNamara, defense secretary under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, for several feature stories that ran in *The Washington Post*. McNamara disliked the results and refused Hendrickson's requests for further interviews, which Hendrickson had hoped to conduct for a book on McNamara. Hendrickson temporarily abandoned the book project but later revived it with a different angle: the book would focus not solely on McNamara but also on five people affected by the Vietnam War.

That book has now appeared as *The Living and the Dead: Robert McNamara and Five Lives of a Lost War*. The five lives Hendrickson follows are an anonymous artist who in 1972 tried to heave McNamara off the ferry to Martha's Vineyard; James Farley, a Marine who was shown crying for a dead comrade in one of the war's most famous photos; Norman Morrison, a Quaker who burned himself to death outside McNamara's Pentagon office in 1965 to protest the war; Marlene Kramel, an Army nurse who tended the wounded in

John C. Springer is Supervising Editor of Social Studies at Prentice Hall. He received a master's degree from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in 1986.

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Vietnam; and Tran Tu Thanh, a South Vietnamese who was imprisoned and tortured by the victorious communists.

These five stories occupy the bulk of the pages of *The Living and the Dead* but generate only a fraction of its intensity. Hendrickson's obsession remains McNamara, and it is McNamara who dominates the book:

Many years after, you would spy him now and then on the street—a narrow figure in a tan trench coat hurrying down Connecticut Avenue or across Farragut Square or through the park that cuts in front of the White House. You would see him and start: My God, it's McNamara. The body was still lean and fit, remarkably so, but the face had aged almost terrifyingly, as if meant to be a window on what lay heaped within. He was a ghost, a ghost of all that had passed and rolled on beneath his country in barely a generation (Hendrickson, p. 2).

What lies heaped within McNamara, Hendrickson believes, is responsibility for the Vietnam War.

Hendrickson is not alone in this view. In 1971, as Hendrickson notes, *The New York Times* ran an op-ed piece by a French journalist who compared Mc-

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Namara to Albert Speer, Hitler's minister of armaments. Twenty-four years later, when McNamara published *In Retrospect*, his own book on the war, the *Times* had not mellowed: "Mr. McNamara must not escape the lasting moral condemnation of his countrymen," read the lead editorial. "His regret cannot be huge enough to balance the books for our dead soldiers. The ghosts of those un-lived lives circle close around Mr. McNamara." That same year, 1995, a Vietnam veteran e-mailed *USA Today* to claim that "McNamara ranks with Hitler and Stalin as a perpetrator of crimes against humanity" (Hendrickson, p. 377).

What exactly was McNamara's crime? I see three possible answers. The first and simplest is that he was wrong about the war. Thinking the United States could defeat the communists in South Vietnam, he helped get the nation involved in a hopeless war, and tens of thousands of Americans and countless more Vietnamese died before he could be proven wrong. McNamara was indeed wrong, a fact he readily admits in *In Retrospect*. But so was the rest of the nation's leadership, practically without exception, and it is difficult to imagine others from that era being compared to Nazis a full two decades after the fall of Saigon.

The second possible answer is that McNamara was not merely wrong but arrogant—so convinced of the superiority of his mind and of his famously analytical approach to problems that he refused to recognize his mistakes until

it was too late. Hendrickson follows this argument for a while, writing that McNamara “was terribly ambitious and he was terribly proud and he became, sooner than later, terribly arrogant. That is, until he fell. And then he became arrogant again. You could say with only slight exaggeration he had all the math down and none of the meaning” (Hendrickson, p. 356). But this isn’t the full answer either, as Hendrickson admits. He writes that following the 1965 battle of Ia Drang, the first major clash between American and North Vietnamese forces, “a numerically brilliant defense secretary came to grasp what so few others at the time in either Saigon or Washington were able to comprehend: that America couldn’t win the war, not on the battlefield That there had been a terrible, terrible miscalculation. It was in the numbers” (Hendrickson, p. 225). Thus, McNamara’s love of statistics, so easy to lampoon (“So it is fifteen percent of ten percent of thirteen-thirtieths” that is at issue, McNamara once explained at a briefing), helped lead him to the truth as it had earlier led him into error.

That brings us to the third, and I believe fundamental, answer to the charge of McNamara’s “crime.” His crime was to have learned the truth about the war, and yet not to have spoken it publicly when doing so could have saved lives. As David Halberstam, author of *The Best and the Brightest*, has written, McNamara’s “greatest crime . . . was the crime of silence.”¹ It was not a complete silence, for Hendrickson describes McNamara’s increasingly gloomy memos to President Johnson, his public ridicule of the effectiveness of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam, and his growing inner—and, on occasion, public—agony over the war, all of which led to his resignation as defense secretary in 1968. But, Hendrickson adds, McNamara remains guilty of two crucial failures:

First, that the man in charge of America’s military forces didn’t quit when he no longer held out honest military belief; and second, that he didn’t speak out afterward, while the war was still being waged, though not by him, but when his voice and decision to tell the truth might have changed history and saved thousands from their graves or wounds (Hendrickson, p. 296).

Instead, as defense secretary, McNamara continued to make optimistic public statements about the progress of the war even as his private reports to Johnson became increasingly pessimistic. And from the time of his resignation until the publication of *In Retrospect*, he scarcely spoke publicly of Vietnam at all.

Why didn’t McNamara make his doubts public? “The word loyalty tolls in him like a bell,” Hendrickson explains. In 1968 McNamara put it this way:

Around Washington, there is this concept of “the higher loyalty.” I think it’s a heretical concept, this idea that there’s a duty to serve the nation above the duty to serve the president, and that you’re justified in doing so. It will destroy democracy if it’s followed. You

have to subordinate a part of yourself, a part of your views (Hendrickson, p. 323).

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is more likely a protector of democracy than a threat to it. Not surprisingly, McNamara's explanation in 1995's *In Retrospect* was somewhat different. There he wrote that to break publicly with the president "would have been a violation of my responsibility to the president and my oath to uphold the Constitution" (McNamara, p. 314). But it's far from clear how McNamara's silence—in effect, his participation in the administration's campaign to mislead the American public about the state of the war—helped uphold the Constitution.

While McNamara's explanations for his silence are unconvincing, it is worth asking what would have happened if McNamara *had* spoken out. Years later, former Deputy Secretary of State George Ball told historian Stanley Karnow that he didn't leave the Johnson administration over Vietnam because "I figured I could do better by remaining on the inside. Had I quit, the story would have made the front page of *The*

New York Times the next day—and then I would have been promptly forgotten."² Likewise, public opposition from McNamara would, quite probably, have had little lasting impact. By 1968, Americans had figured out for themselves that the war could not be won. The American policy dilemma had changed from how to win the war to how to escape it at a cost of less than total defeat, and here McNamara had no better answers than anyone else.

Such historical what-ifs aside, what should we think of McNamara now? Hendrickson presents his "five lives of a lost war" as signs of the enormous reach of McNamara's crime—five ordinary people dragged into the folly of one extraordinary man. But their experiences since Vietnam have been too varied for them to serve as convincing martyrs to the war. Marlene Kramel endured years of debilitating pain due to tumors that were apparently unrelated to her Vietnam tour, but recovered and now is married with a family. James Farley drifted through jobs and marriages for a time, but his life also later stabilized. Tran Tu Thanh moved to the United States, where, despite a law degree from Saigon University, he has had to mow lawns and sell vacuum cleaners door to door to make ends meet. The anonymous artist still lives on Martha's Vineyard and still paints. With the stark exception of Norman

Morrison, who truly was a martyr to the war (though a voluntary one), the message of Hendrickson's subjects seems to be simply that life goes on.

That message comes through in their personal attitudes toward McNamara today. When Hendrickson finds that Marlene Kramel is not consumed by bitterness despite her health problems, he wonders whether she is in denial. "I know I wished to see it all as some far subtler form of Vietnam victimization," Hendrickson admits (Hendrickson, p. 249). Similarly, recalling a meeting with a friend of James Farley, Hendrickson writes, "I remember him saying . . . that he didn't hold personal grudges against McNamara, and if I was looking for that, I was probably climbing the wrong trees. I felt a kind of reproof" (Hendrickson, p. 177). The artist who tried to throw McNamara off the Martha's Vineyard ferry actually scolds Hendrickson: "I don't really need you coming around again to remind me. . . . I don't want sympathy out of the thing and I don't want to be hated for it. . . . I would just like to drop it" (Hendrickson, p. 354).

Of course Hendrickson can't drop the subject of the war, and the equally stubborn McNamara cannot remove the blinders that made him see the war as essentially a technical problem. "I truly believe that we made an error not of values and intentions but of judgment and capabilities," McNamara writes in *In Retrospect*, a book he closes with a list of the United States' 11 key mistakes in the war (McNamara, p. xvi). It is this maddening faith in lists and figures—this refusal, even now, to face the war in human terms—that makes McNamara an irresistible symbol of the mistakes of Vietnam. The mistakes were plentiful enough, and McNamara's role in them direct enough, that he remains a tempting target for anyone still angry about the war.

That many are indeed still angry can be seen in the critical reaction to the publication of *In Retrospect*. McNamara's harshest critics have called it McNamara's plea for history to let him off the hook—Vietnam was indeed a disaster, he seems to be arguing, but at least he was one of the first to figure that out. There are two problems with this charge. First, McNamara's memoirs are no more self-serving than those of Kissinger or anyone else; to plea for a positive verdict from history is precisely why people write memoirs. In fact, McNamara probably would have been criticized less if he had written a more frankly personal and self-serving book. Instead, *In Retrospect* adopts the cool and distant tone of the historian making impartial judgments. This is a tone that no one, no matter how sincere, can credibly maintain when describing his own life.

Second, in the long run, McNamara's degree of responsibility for the war

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matters much less than a different question: why did it take the United States so many years and so many lives to get out of Vietnam? "Folly is a child of power," historian Barbara Tuchman has answered, making the obvious but critical point that rulers are more likely to continue with a self-destructive policy when there is no one with the power to make them stop.³

This is the same point McNamara made in a conversation with Hendrickson. Defending Johnson and other administration officials, McNamara said, "None of these people I'm talking about 'led' us into Vietnam. The nation took itself into Vietnam" (Hendrickson, p. 372). More accurately, the nation let Johnson, McNamara and the rest take it into Vietnam; however grating McNamara's statement may be, it does contain a kernel of truth. As citizens of a democracy, we are responsible for the actions of our government. Its mistakes are our mistakes, and if the government sinks years of effort and billions of dollars and thousands of lives into a hopeless cause, we ultimately have no one to blame but ourselves. McNamara complains at the start of *In Retrospect* about "the cynicism and even contempt with which so many people view our political institutions and leaders" (McNamara, p. xv). Contempt does no good for anyone, but perhaps a little more public cynicism a little sooner might have helped us avoid the mistakes of Vietnam.

Notes

1. Halberstam quoted in Hendrickson, page 361.
2. Ball quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (Viking, 1991), page 420.
3. Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (Knopf, 1984), page 32.

