

IN RETROSPECT, THE TRAGEDY AND LESSONS OF VIETNAM

Robert S. McNamara

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As Secretary of Defence for seven years under two presidents. Kennedy and Johnson, Robert S. McNamara was the second most important manager of the Vietnam War after the President of the United States. Not surprisingly, the war was called "McNamara's War". He resigned in February 1968, after becoming convinced that the war was unwinnable and a negotiated settlement must be sought.

Now, almost thirty years later, McNamara speaks up to explain why a US Government staffed with "the best and brightest" failed so tragically in Vietnam.

For Asians who consider a strong and reliable US a key factor of world peace and freedom through a global balance of power, the reading of McNamara's book is both enlightening and disturbing.

McNamara calls the Vietnam War "very wrong". This is surely true in the sense that it was very wrongly managed. The book deals extensively with this poor management aspect of the war.

McNamara stresses the grave defects in the American government machinery at the highest level: failure to define the goals clearly and to identify and thoroughly debate the major issues; lack of real Asia experts, the "sparse knowledge, scant experience, simplicity of assumptions" of those involved. Vietnam was considered "a cornerstone of the Free World", but to American key decision-makers like him, it was "terra incognita". The book is thus very enlightening reading for those who need a good understanding of the decision-making process in the US government.

The second major cause of the US failure, on which McNamara dwells at length throughout the book, is that the US could not win the war because of the lack of political stability in South Vietnam. The disappearance of Diem was followed by political chaos. The communist forces took advantage of this situation to step up their attacks, scoring spectacular successes against the South Vietnamese armed forces. The US had to intervene directly to prevent an immediate collapse. But, after long years of efforts and constant escalation, the Americans could not stem the tide either. To excuse himself and his government, McNamara pins the blame on South Vietnam. He asserts that the war could not be won because of the South Vietnamese, and the only alternative the US had was to withdraw or to negotiate with Hanoi the best terms it could get. In sum it amounted to abandoning South Vietnam to its fate.

McNamara does not blame himself for not having strongly objected to the overthrow of a friendly government in the midst of a war or for not having vigorously opposed the “anti-Diem activists” who sought the removal of Diem without knowing what would happen after that. Nor does he point out that the US government was structured in such a way that an activist in the State Department (Roger Hillsman) could bypass all the top officials of the administration, including the US president, to carry out his plan, and push the US government into an inextricable situation. These are disturbing facts for nations which look upon the US as a pillar of the world’s freedom.

McNamara does not insist on, or even mention, the fact that President Diem and his brother Nhu were fiercely opposed to the introduction of American troops. If they had not been overthrown by an American-incited coup, South Vietnam may still have been lost, but American lives and US\$ 120 billion would have been saved.

Lastly, McNamara makes no mention of Averell Harriman’s secret exploration with the Hanoi Delegation, during the Geneva Conference on Laos in 1961-1962 if it would accept for Vietnam the solution adopted for Laos. This inquiry, authorised by President Kennedy, convinced the Vietnamese communist leaders that the US was prepared to abandon South Vietnam also, and if they took the American blows without flinching, they would win in the end. This turned out to be correct.

McNamara spent the next five years trying to undo, unsuccessfully, what another “best and brightest” on the American team had done. It should be mentioned that Harriman was a prominent member of the “anti-Diem activist” group.

What is a glaring omission in the book is a historical perspective. McNamara would not have embraced the masochism, so prevalent among his compatriots, and beaten his chest so hard had he taken the trouble of looking up the history of Indochina.

What happened, if fact, is that from 1965 to 1975, the US expended numerous lives and vast amounts of resources to try, in vain, to redress disastrous situations of its own making. This is something which goes all the way back to 1945. Historically, the men who really lost Vietnam to communism are Roosevelt and Truman.

Roosevelt was dead set against a return of the French to Indochina. He had a vague scheme about an international trusteeship for Indochina, but left no formal instructions, and Truman and the State Department were not privy to his plan. When he died, the US intelligence (OSS) agents in South China continued their policy as no order for a change came from the new president. The major consequence of this was that Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party with OSS help, were in a position to seize control of Hanoi and North Vietnam during the crucial months of August to December 1945. They had enough time to entrench themselves.

When Truman realised the mistake and, at the meeting with General de Gaulle in August 1945, accepted the latter’s plea to allow France to return to Indochina, he failed to extract a formal pledge from the General that France would grant Vietnam independence within a specified period, say 15 to 20 years, or even 30 years. If this pledge had been made,

no Vietnamese would have found it compelling to enlist in Ho's army to fight for national independence.

The two following wars which devastated Vietnam and seriously damaged the reputation of France and the US were only wars to undo the fundamental mistakes made by the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. McNamara is not responsible for the loss of Vietnam to communism and the devastation of that country. But, he does not realise it because he pays no attention to history. Therein lies the real tragedy.

One last major point deserves mention. In his zeal to be accepted into the ranks of American masochists to be politically correct, McNamara failed to see from the vantage point of today that, thanks to the sacrifices of countless people who fought in Vietnam (Americans among them), the real aim has been achieved: the denial of real victory to communism. Obviously not in military terms, but in two other ways.

First, the communists had their hands full in Vietnam and could not stir up trouble in the other countries of Southeast Asia, thus giving them 30 years of security and peace to deal successfully with their economic development. This enabled them to solve their social and political problems, enjoy stability and progress and lay the foundations for the "economic miracles" which we witness today. Some 350 million people in Southeast Asia and millions of others in Asia, owe a debt of gratitude to those who fought communism in Vietnam.

Second, for thirty years, the people of South Vietnam were free from communist control and enjoyed relative security and property. Through their contact with the Americans and the outside world, they were given the opportunity to learn the virtues of democracy and free enterprise, to which they became so attached that after the North's conquest of the South in 1975, the communists were unable to subdue the population from carrying out their "socialist transformation". Rather the opposite happened. It is the people of South Vietnam who have forced their military conquerors from North Vietnam to make more and more concessions, and move further and further away from communism! It is the communists who really lost the war.