

## IN RETROSPECT: THE TRAGEDY AND LESSONS OF VIETNAM

Robert S. McNamara with Brian Van De Mark

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reviewed by VICTOR GOLD

*"Can anyone remember a public official with the courage to confess error and explain where he and his country went wrong?"*

—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.  
from the dust jacket of *In Retrospect*

Now that you mention it, one comes immediately to mind—Albert Speer. Not to equate the metaphysical bastardy of Hitler's chief technocrat and sycophant with that of Lyndon Johnson's; only to credit Speer for his shrewd discovery of the first rule of postmodern morality: Confession is good for the image.

To be sure, that rule has been embellished since the Nazi Minister of Armaments applied it at Nuremberg, then turned it into royalties with his *Memoirs*. (Contrition is good for the wallet.) In 1961 John F. Kennedy, after presiding over the Bay of Pigs fiasco, owned up that he was responsible—that is, confessed the obvious. The result: applause all around, editorial accolades from the *Post* and *Times*, a huge jump in his Gallup numbers. But, wouldn't you know, along came loyal Bob McNamara, baring his Sulka-covered breast to tell the world that *he*, not Kennedy, was the real culprit—he and Allen Dulles and the CIA, who, after all, had dropped the invasion into the new president's lap without so much as a warning label. So you see, when you got right down to it, Kennedy wasn't responsible at all.

The Speer rule squared: first, *mea culpa* and get the PR benefits thereof; then, let it be known that there were exculpatory circumstances. A cynic might say that the Kennedy White House

orchestrated McNamara's grandstand performance with just that in mind. But that would discount loyal Bob's self-aggrandizing capacity to brown-nose his superiors, as he did Henry Ford II before becoming Secretary of Defense, and as he did Kennedy, then Johnson. The consummate Harvard Business School product: Whatever it takes.

Now, thirty rain seasons late, McNamara is back, taking Speer into uncharted realms of chutzpah—the word Schlesinger *should* have used. Back, and telling us what was really on his febrile mind in those glory years when he was dazzling his bosses as a number-cruncher and treating critics with that gelid disdain that the best and brightest reserve for land-grant college graduates.

Tears yet, on every talk show in America. Even Albert didn't do tears, though he might have if encouraged by Diane Sawyer—the Ricki Lake of prime-time—and told by his agent that one brush of a tear could be worth two extra printings.

But wait: I fear I'm beating a dead, or in any case a swaybacked, horse. Odds are that by the time this magazine goes to print we will all have overdosed on what Max Frankel touchingly refers to as McNamara's "aching conscience." Suffice it to say that in disgorging this *cri du culot*, McNamara manages to apportion blame for the tragedy of Vietnam with the same passion for credibility he gave body counts during his seven years in the Pentagon:

• *It was all Ike's fault.* Eisenhower scholars Stephen Ambrose and Fred Greenstein to the contrary, beneath the façade of the Ike who refused to intervene in Indochina there lurked, writes

McNamara, a bellicose madman urging Johnson to drop the Big One if that's what it took to win the war. Bad enough that Ike gave LBJ such advice on Vietnam, but he also left the White House, according to McNamara, with hints of "a certain inner satisfaction from laying a potentially intractable problem in Kennedy's lap."

• *It was all Joe McCarthy's fault.* When it came to Vietnam, writes McNamara, members of the Kennedy-Johnson administration "found ourselves setting policy for a region that was terra incognita." I could have sworn Dean Rusk once headed the Far East desk at State; but, according to McNamara, all "the top 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 in the 1950s." As a result, he writes, there were no officials, either at Foggy Bottom or Defense, with the slightest degree of "geopolitical expertise" on Southeast Asia. Not a one.

• *It was all Goldwater's fault.* Because "Barry Goldwater took a hard line on Vietnam throughout the 1964 campaign," writes loyal Bob, Lyndon Johnson, ordinarily "a model of moderation and restraint," was driven to escalate the war. "President Johnson firmly believed that a Goldwater victory would endanger the United States and threaten world stability. He also believed that the end—Goldwater's defeat—justified the means." So there you have it, in a nuclear nutshell. The right-wing devil made him do it.

• *It was the fault of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.* Not to forget John Stennis, Strom Thurmond, and the rest of the war-mongering Senate Armed Services Committee, all of whom wanted to bomb Hanoi back to the Stone Age, despite McNamara's 1967 testimony that "to pursue [bombing] would not only be futile, [it] would involve risks to our personnel and to our Nation that I am unable to recommend." After which, the good Secretary got on a plane and flew to his Aspen ski lodge—which, he discovered to his horror, was being picketed by anti-war demonstrators.

(McNamara, incidentally, approved of war protesters—so he claims—though he was spared hands-on contact with any, save in one instance: "Jackie was indeed a glamorous woman," he writes of the

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widow Kennedy. "But she was also extremely sensitive. . . . She had grown very depressed by, and very critical of, the war. In any event, she became so tense she could hardly speak [and] suddenly exploded . . . turned and began, literally, to beat on my chest, demanding that I 'do something to stop the slaughter!'"

Eisenhower, Goldwater, McCarthy, the JCS—so much for the black hats, those McNamara now sees as having plunged the United States into the Southeast Asian equivalent of our own Civil War (with Ho Chi Minh, presumably, in the role of Lincoln). But what about the white hats, those who, had they lived, might—no, most certainly *would*—have done something to stop the slaughter?

"John F. Kennedy saw the world as history," writes the author of *In Retrospect*. "He took the long view. He was truly a great leader, with uncommon charisma and ability to inspire. . . . In an imperfect world, he raised our eyes to the stars." And what would Kennedy have done about Vietnam had he lived?

I have been asked that question countless times over the last thirty years. Thus far, I have refused to answer for two reasons. [First,] the president did not tell me what he planned to do in the future. [Second,] I saw no gain to our nation from speculation by me—or others—about how the dead president might have acted. But today I feel differently. Having reviewed the record in detail, and with the advantage of hindsight, I think it highly probable that, had President Kennedy lived, he would have pulled us out of Vietnam.

So much for Ike's lousy advice, Joe McCarthy's purge of experts, that old devil Goldwater, the Strangeloves of the JCS; if Kennedy had lived, we would have had a leader with "the ability to stand back from an issue and see its broader implications."

Odious comparison, but what does this say of Lyndon Johnson? Only that he, like Kennedy, is dead, but *Kennedys* are still around—senators, congressmen, rainmakers. And there come those world-historic moments when sycophants with *courage* must choose between masters.

Loyal Bob. Still brown-nose after all these years. Speer would approve. □

## THE SECRET WORLD OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM

Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov

Yale University Press / 348 pages / \$25

reviewed by PHILIP TERZIAN

For those who were startled to learn that Joseph Alsop was homosexual, or that Oprah Winfrey once used cocaine, the contents of this book will come as something of a shock. For while the authors' revelation—that the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) was subsidized by Moscow to undertake espionage—is sensational enough, it should scarcely surprise anyone who knows much about the Soviet Union, or about the moral presumptions of certain American leftists.

*The Secret World of American Communism* confirms what was long suspected: that, beginning as early as 1919, American party members organized and nurtured an underground spy network, financed and directed by a Soviet controller. The network flourished even—and perhaps especially—when the nation was imperiled by the fascist dictatorships, and lasted throughout the Cold War. It was only when Gus Hall, who still heads the CPUSA, wouldn't cease criticizing perestroika that Mikhail Gorbachev stopped the subsidy in 1989.

For decades it has been a safe assumption that many American Communists spied for the Soviet Union, deliberately subverting the American national interest. Until now, however, proof positive was unavailable. The testimony of certain former Communists was persuasive, as were the revelations of various security agencies. But in *Secret World*, the first volume of a projected series based on the declassified archives of the Communist International (Comintern), we have first-hand, primary, irrefutable evidence of treachery—evidence which sweeps away all previous polemics and accounts, and bathes a lurid story in unrelenting light.

Philip Terzian writes a column from Washington for the Providence Journal.

The notion that the American Communist Party was a homegrown assemblage of impractical eccentrics, friendly but by no means connected to the Kremlin, may no longer be presented as a charming romance; it is a fiction, a lie, methodically deceptive, historically false. American Communists did not just agitate for union organization, or to end segregation, or against military preparedness on the eve of World War II. They infiltrated the agencies of government, stole atomic secrets, corrupted the republican cause in the Spanish civil war, kept the Kremlin informed about what Washington might be thinking, and spread disinformation. For this knowledge we may thank the authors and their Russian research associates, and hope that some semblance of the truth may now take root. But that will not be easy, for it is in the popular culture, and in the accumulated folk wisdom of the past thirty years, that the fiction persists.

It is easy enough now to dismiss the work of revisionist historian/journalists—David Caute, Maurice Isserman, Ellen Schrecker, Victor Navasky, Richard M. Fried, Vivian Gornick, Robert Rosenstone, etc.—but expecting that the press, or the academy, or Hollywood, or the publishing industry, will come to understand their fundamental error about the nature of American Communism is probably expecting too much. The mythology of the Cold War, of patient Mother Russia and belligerent Uncle Sam, of gallant radicals and feverish ex-Communists, is too deeply embedded to be easily extracted.

In a series of annotated documents, Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes neatly demonstrate a number of remarkable facts. For example, it is now certain that John Reed was not just