

# War Stories

*Robert McNamara comes clean on Vietnam*

**BY RICHARD REEVES**

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## **In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam**

Robert McNamara, *Times Books*, \$27.50

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**I**n 1989, I interviewed Robert McNamara for my book *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. When the questions turned to Vietnam, the former defense secretary stopped me and said that he had long ago decided that he would not speak or write about the war in Vietnam—ever. But, if I was interested, he said, I might want to look for the memorandum he wrote after his last trip to South Vietnam before Kennedy's death.

He was vague about the details, but clear in urging me to judge him (and Kennedy, too) by that memo. Despite McNamara's almost conspiratorial tone that day, the memo of October 2, 1963—a report to the President by him and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor—was no secret. Everything in it, including the deliberately misleading idea that the U.S. was accomplishing its goals in Vietnam and might be able to end the war in 1965 and withdraw 1,000 of its 17,000 uniformed “trainers” by the end of 1963, was announced by the White House and was on the front page of *The New York Times*.

To McNamara, the memo proved that he and Kennedy had been just about ready to shut down U.S. involvement in the war until fate intervened and the young president was shot down in Dallas. If this were true, it would offer an absolution of sorts to McNamara,

but it doesn't hold up to scrutiny. There was no secret plan to end the war. General Taylor, for one, said later that the real purpose was to pressure the South Vietnamese government to “put their noses to the wheel or the grindstone or whatever” by threatening to abandon them if they didn't shape up in the war against the Viet Cong and North Vietnam. I thought the old warrior, or civilian director of warriors, took reporters for fools, and I wondered how many times he had tried this and whether he had gotten away with it.

Now McNamara has changed his mind about talking and written *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. It is a strange and amazing book. I would guess that no other high-ranking official of the U.S. government has ever written a book intended, apparently, to demean his own contribution to the Republic. On almost every one of its 320 pages, McNamara asserts that he and his colleagues who decided the country's policy towards Vietnam were misguided, wrong, stupid, deceptive, and deceived.

It is as savage an attack on McNamara as anyone has written—or likely will write. “Mea culpa” doesn't suffice to describe the late thoughts of this tortured man. He has written a breast-beating plea for mercy. Yes, yes, it was me, he seems to say. Please forgive me! McNamara is no longer sure of anything and the re-

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*Richard Reeves, a syndicated columnist, is currently writing a book on the presidency of Richard Nixon.*

sults are pathetic. "We were wrong, terribly wrong," he writes. Then follows, again and again and again:

I was wrong.... We were wrong.... They were wrong.... We often did not have time to think straight.... The truth is I did not understand the plan.... I misunderstood the nature of the conflict.... We lacked experts for us to consult to compensate our ignorance.... We totally misjudged the political forces.... Once again, we failed miserably to coordinate our diplomatic and military actions.... In retrospect, we erred seriously.

Sad, too, are McNamara's dances around that McNamara-Taylor Report of October 1963. At one point, he corroborates Taylor's statement. "By threatening to reduce U.S. help or even actually reducing it," he writes, "we thought we could, over time, convince South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem to modify his destructive behavior." At another, he cites the memo to support what he had implied to me and so many others: "With the advantage of hindsight, I think it highly probable that, had President Kennedy lived, he would have pulled us out of Vietnam."

Yes, but when? Kennedy was the one who got us into Vietnam. There is nothing new in the book upon which to base this—most of the sourcing is from "Foreign Relations of the United States," volumes which have been public for years. Without providing any new information, McNamara's spin on the events of the summer and fall of 1963 carries no more historical weight than any other well-informed guess about Kennedy's intentions.

## Killing Time

The pivotal event seems to have occurred late in the summer of 1963. On August 24, with the President, McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk out of town for a summer weekend, a cabal led by Undersecretary of State Averell Harriman, and including Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman and Michael Forrestal, persuaded (or tricked) Kennedy into signing off on a telegram to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that gave the CIA permission to work with the South Vietnamese army and overthrow Diem's govern-

ment.

Two months later, on the first day of November 1963, Diem was dead, assassinated in the coup. From that day on, South Vietnam was an American colony and the U.S. was in the quagmire. Author McNamara does not state (or does not understand) that a key event in the run up to the murder of Diem was his own switching sides during his late September visit from pro-Diem to pro-coup—maneuvered, or tricked again, by Harriman and Lodge.

McNamara recounts a meeting, set up by Lodge, between himself and a British Vietnam expert named P.J. Honey at Lodge's Saigon residence on September 26, 1963. (In McNamara's notes from the time, Honey is referred to as "Professor Smith.") Honey's thoughts—he urged McNamara to back the overthrow of Diem—"carried special weight with me because of his strong background and because he had previously supported Diem," he writes. Strangely, when I asked McNamara in a letter about this meeting, he claimed not to remember ever meeting Honey.

McNamara makes much of the fact that just after Kennedy was killed, he realized that he had been wrong—and arrogantly so—about Vietnam. On December 21, 1963, after another visit to Saigon, he wrote a memo saying:

There is no organized government in South Vietnam at this time.... It is abundantly clear that statistics received over the past year or more from GVN officials and reported by the U.S. mission on which we gauged the trend of the war were grossly in error.... It is my conclusion that the coup came when there was a downward trend which was more serious than was reported. And, therefore, more serious than realized.... There are more reasons to doubt the future of the effort ... than there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of the our cause in South Vietnam.

That memo, however, was "to the record"—for his own files rather than to the new president, Lyndon Johnson. For the next five years or so, he went in the opposite direction, lying to protect the falsehood of an inevitable American victory.

*In Retrospect* does, however, reveal one big lie: the fiction that President Kennedy was unaware that his administration was in the assassination business, with Fidel Castro as the usual target. More than once McNamara advocated assassinating Castro. "The only thing to do is eliminate Castro," he said at a Cuba Task Force session after the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961. "I mean it. It's the only way." He was saying the same thing at least as late as the end of 1962, according to the minutes of various task forces dealing with covert Cuban actions.

In 1975, testifying before the Church Committee investigating the CIA and its assassination plots, McNamara, by then president of the World Bank, said this: "I do not believe that President Kennedy gave the authority. I also do not believe that the CIA would take such actions without the authorization of the President. I know that it is contradictory, but that's the way it is."

### **Can We Talk?**

That background is not part of his book, but McNamara is now more straightforward about who was giving the orders in the Kennedy White House, writing: "During my seven years in the Defense Department (and I believe throughout the preceding and following administrations) all CIA 'covert operations' (excluding spying operations) were subject to approval by the President and the secretaries of state and defense, or their representatives. The CIA had no authority to act without that approval. So far as I know, it never did." For that reason alone, it strikes me as worthwhile that McNamara, for his own reasons, did finally decide to write this down and clear up one of the more enduring questions of Kennedy's presidency.

He does not tell all, by any means. But there

are flashes of a human being there when he writes of the pain his family endured as millions of his countrymen saw him as some kind of monster. In the midst of his statistics and heavy-handed discussions of public policy, he tells of anti-war demonstrators' attempts to burn down his vacation house outside Aspen, Colorado, and of his friend, the President's widow, Jacqueline Kennedy, beating her fists against his chest and crying, "Do something to stop the slaughter!"

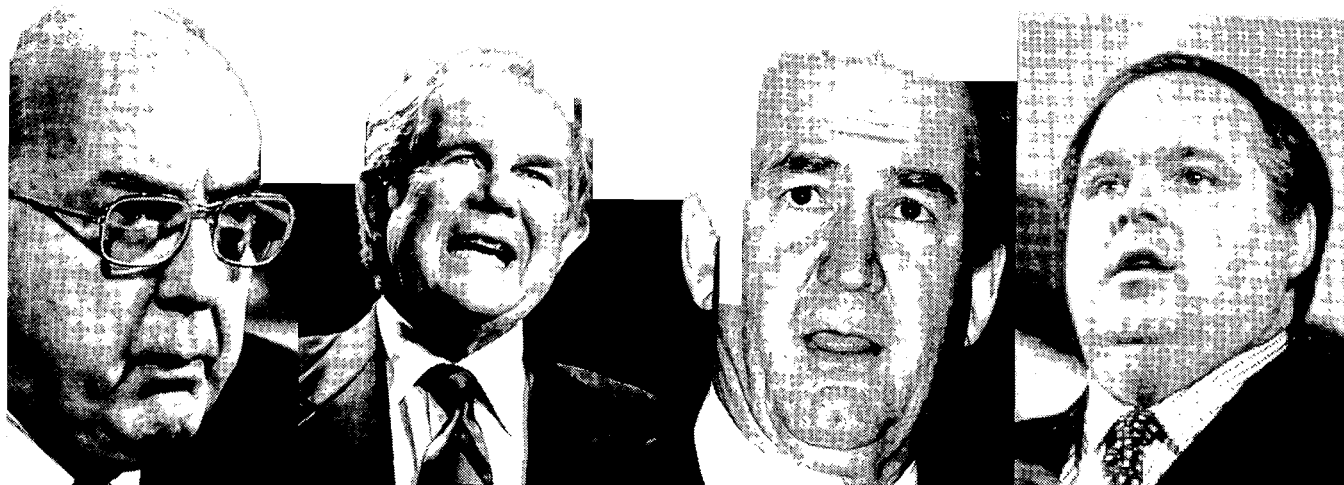
McNamara's last chapter is called, of course, "The Lessons of Vietnam." They are quite ordinary. Except for some detail they are probably the same ones taught by good high school history teachers: Don't fight a people you don't know

anything about and can't figure out; tell the truth if you want the long-term support of the American people; organize better, etc.

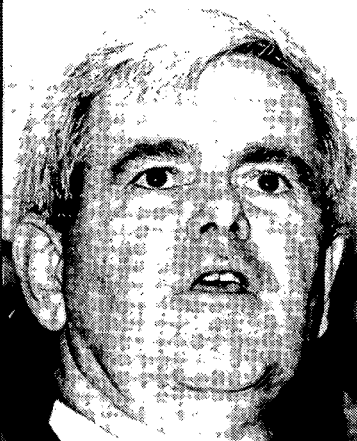
But, truth be told, McNamara still doesn't understand Vietnam. He still calls it a "tiny" country. Unified Vietnam has more than 70 million people and it is more than 1,000 miles from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The Vietnamese have been there for thousands of years and they will be there a thousand years from now. We never had a chance.

What is the lesson, then? Perhaps that Americans on both sides of the divisive national debate on Vietnam should not wait until they are 78 years old to tell the truth about what happened. The war was foolish, perhaps pointless, but many of us are still trying to justify what we did or did not do then. Some of us are trying to have it both ways. We have a president now, a protester then, who seems to be destined, like McNamara, to wait his entire life before standing up and saying what needs to be said: "The war was a mistake. I thought so then. I think so now. Whether we agree or disagree on that, it's over and we have to move on together now." □

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SO MANY IMPORTANT  
PEOPLE CAN'T BE ALL BAD.**



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# Political Booknotes

## **It's All the Rage: Crime and Culture**

Wendy Kaminer

Addison Wesley, \$22

By John J. Dilulio, Jr.

In 1994, Delaware Democrat Joseph Biden chaired the Senate Judiciary Committee as it groped its way toward a \$30 billion-plus crime bill that had something for just about everyone—prison construction firms, Mayberry-sized police departments, drug rehabilitation therapists, midnight basketball referees, and unemployed executioners. Republican ingrates said the Biden-led bill was full of pork. Untrue! As the GOP rushes to steal poor children's lunch money, they must learn the difference between pork and baloney.

The main baloney in Biden's crime bill was its "100,000 cops" provision. On average, it costs \$50,000 a year for a cop, and that's not counting the badges, blue suits, patrol cars, and pension liabilities. And with four shifts (three on, one off), non-patrol work (desk supervisory, special assignment), sick leave, days off, and training time, putting ten sworn officers on the payroll buys barely one around-the-clock beat cop.

Last August, instant analyses by conservative critics found that the bill's \$8.8 billion for police funded only 20,000 cops, but even this figure was way too generous. In reality, the bill offered only a fistful of seed money for three years. Sunnyvale, California—the city that inspired "reinventing government"—was offered \$450,000 in Biden dollars. But to meet its quota of six cops, it found it would have to spend \$8 million of its own. The city said no thanks. In February the Justice Department hustled grants for 7,000 cops to 6,600 other small cities.

Wendy Kaminer's *It's All the Rage: Crime and Culture* is at its best

exploring how America's Joe Bidens—well-intentioned lawmakers who know better—have produced such a large, ineffective, dishonest, and downright dopey body of federal anti-crime legislation. Kaminer, who worked briefly as a public defender and is now a contributing editor to *The Atlantic Monthly*, examines how over the last two decades the crime issue has turned potential profiles in courage into pandering politicians. The title of chapter seven, "Knowledge is Irrelevant—Federal Crime Control," just about sums it up. In a typically pointed passage, Kaminer writes: "Protesting the influence of politics on policy, you feel a little like Claude Rains protesting gambling at Rick's. It's hard not to be *shocked! shocked!* by the utter politicization of criminal justice debates."

Or for a more contemporary cinematic reference on federal crime policy, how about *Dumb and Dumber*? In place of Biden's oft-repeated white lie about "100,000 cops," the Contract-bound Republicans have told a whopper, namely, that the best way to "Take Back Our Streets" is by dropping a do-whatever-you-want \$10 billion grant on the states.

Knowledge, including history, is irrelevant to these folks. I hereby sentence House GOP leaders to reading the thousands of pages that have been written about the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). Born under Johnson and buried under Reagan, the LEAA channeled billions to the states but did virtually nothing to combat crime. Block grants on crime are recipes for leaky-bucket inter-governmental administration, cost overruns, and outright corruption. I also hereby sentence House GOP leaders to a course in remedial logic; the same Republicans who clamor for block grants in the name of our third "new federalism" since 1970 (please!)

have attached tight strings to the \$10.5 billion earmarked for prison construction.

But I would offer suspended sentences to anyone who agreed to undergo treatment by reading *It's All the Rage*. In addition to her cogent assessment of federal crime policy, Kaminer devotes entire chapters to victims' rights, the death penalty, and the prosecutor's perspective on crime and punishment. With no pretense to detailed expertise on any of these subjects (the research for this book consisted mainly of selective secondary reading plus interviews, many of them with liberal crime analysts), Kaminer shows admirable frankness about where she's coming from. (She confesses, for example, that she's never been a fan of the death penalty and isn't going to start now.) She thinks out loud, writes with a refreshing, show-me attitude, and offers several keen insights.

Immanuel Kant couldn't quite square the circle of free-will-versus-determinism in relation to "justice," so no one should fault Wendy Kaminer for failing to do so, or for occasionally sounding sophomoric in addressing our "existential confusion" about who is "guilty" of what. Instead, credit her with the intellectual intuition to understand that our crime debate is irrational not merely because of the sensational mass media. Rather, our crime-crazed culture springs from the lack of any consistent criteria for deciding who ought to be punished, for what crime, how, by whom, and under which conditions.

Kaminer writes that she "felt challenged and sometimes intimidated by the wealth of research and commentary by people who've spent years studying the death penalty and litigating capital cases." I'm glad that she overcame these feelings long enough to write the book. I wish more top-