

Mr. Michael Hayes
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Dear Michael,

I thank you for the loan of Robert Strange McNamara's *In Retrospect* which I read it rather grudgingly from the beginning to end, wondering why he had to rationalise and regret US actions in Vietnam.

He did a tremendous job as Secretary of Defence and implemented policies with the conviction and commitment of a true blue professional. He served his country with distinction and went on to become an outstanding President of the World Bank. The book shows the human side of the Whiz Kid of the Air Force and The Ford Motor Company-- an individual with compassion and a generous spirit and the courage to admit that he was wrong. This is, in my view, the mark of greatness.

McNamara called the Vietnam War a tragedy. The Press Corps in Washington dubbed it as McNamara's War. In fact, it was a deliberate and conscious decision by the United States to support a repressive and corrupt regime(s) against the forces of nationalism under Ho Chi Minh which was, by McNamara's own admission, mistaken as monolithic Communism with hegemonic ambitions in the Southeast Asia and East Asia. How this, in turn, could have been regarded at that time a threat to the security of the United States beats me. It must have baffled McNamara himself.

The reality is that the Vietnam War was a war without legitimacy. The United States did not formally declare war against North Vietnam as that would have required the approval of Congress (and the American people). President Lyndon Baines Johnson used the Gulf of Tonkin "incident" as the pretext for a massive build-up of US military forces, and the justification for direct intervention in the war which was up to that point was a domestic affair. The rest of it is now history, and a story of inflated egos in the likes of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, top brass in the military like Maxwell Taylor and William Westmoreland et.al. and geo-political strategists in the White House and Pentagon, diplomats at the State Department and spooks in the CIA.

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War brings out the worst in man with consequences on those who have nothing to do with it: the women and children and other non-combatants, young and old. The bombs and other weapons, despite the technology, do not discriminate. Cambodia, for example, became a victim of American hot pursuit and endured untold hardships and suffering in the 1970s under the Khmer Rouge regime.

One either avoids war or one pursues it. If one chooses to wage war, then the purpose is to win it. America could have won that war in Vietnam, given the resources which were deployed or available at the time. A spirit of a nation can be broken, if consistently and persistently tested and incessantly bombarded. But the Johnson Administration (I was a graduate student in Washington D.C. at the time) chose to fight a limited war by tying the hands of the military.

The war then became a political game in the United States which North Vietnam to their great credit exploited to good effect. Public opinion was against the war and many outstanding political and professional careers were destroyed in the process. Students took to the streets in protest and more or less dictated what should be done: Nixon's Peace with Honour was hammered out. The bottomline is defeat for the United States.

If McNamara's is the real account of behind the scenes conduct of the war (and I have no cause to doubt this Great American), then nearly 60,000 young and able bodied Americans who to-day are remembered in a special monument in Washington D.C., died in vain. Those alive returned to the United States badly disfigured, maimed and psychologically disturbed, to be insulted and cursed for being "dogs of war". May be, McNamara was seeking atonement from families of the dead and the living for his participation in war which Americans did not want.

McNamara devotes the final chapter on Lessons of Vietnam, as a sort of parting advice to the Clinton Administration, like Richard Nixon did in *Beyond Peace*, and the American people. Is US involvement in Vietnam justified given the high cost?:

" By the time the United States finally left South Vietnam in 1973, we had lost over 58,000 men and women; our economy had been damaged by years of heavy and improperly financed war spending; and the political unity of our society had been shattered, not to be restored for decades."
(McNamara, pp 319)

To the proponents of the "Domino Theory", it is a yes. Like McNamara, I am not sure. In Malaysia during the late 1940s through the 1960s, we fought the Communists in the form of China's proxy, The Malayan Communist Party, and won. It would not have made much difference to us whether the United States was involved militarily in South Vietnam for democracy and freedom. The Malaysians, especially the Malays, fought tooth and nail because Communism was the antithesis of our way of life, Islam and our social and political values and institutions. At the same time, I must admit that Malaysia (Malaya then) which was a major primary commodity producer benefited economically from the Vietnam War because of favourable prices for our tin and rubber. But then the same could be said for Singapore, Philippines, Thailand and other in the region.

There were 11 major causes of US disaster in Vietnam. According to McNamara, the United States:

- Misjudged the geopolitical intentions of North Vietnam and the Vietcong and exaggerated the impact on US interests in the area.
- Saw the people and leaders of South Vietnam as wanting American style democracy and freedom.
- underestimated the power of nationalism.
- misjudged friends and foes in Southeast Asia due to the lack of understanding of their history, culture and politics and the personalities and habits of their leaders.
- overestimated the value of sophisticated high-technology military hardware, conventional forces and doctrine in fighting unconventional highly motivated "people power" movements.

- failed to engage Congress and the American people and obtain their support.
- failed to maintain unity of the American people when the going got tough.
- abandoned the principle of multilateral action with support of the international community.
- failed to recognise that " in international affairs, as in other aspects of life, there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions... But, at times, we may have to live with an imperfect, untidy world." (McNamara, pp.323)
- failed to organise the top echelon of the Executive Branch to fully analyse and debate actions in Southeast Asia.

In the light of the above, I wonder what happened to the "Best and The Brightest" of the Kennedy-Johnson era. They appeared to have chosen to go along with the war believing that it was going to be a quick fix. Over-confidence led to arrogance and from there to defeat.

We are always wiser with hindsight. Accumulated experience is, in fact, wisdom. History is full of it. Yet we refuse to learn from the Lessons of History. We are, therefore, condemned to repeat them. I do not believe that the Lessons of Vietnam will ever be learnt. We still have Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia and other trouble spots. What will be the next BIG one?

I take this occasion to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Let nothing get you down--this is an imperfect and untidy world. From time to time, however, little Heavens appear; so take them before they slip away. It is great to be a man and I for one would not like it any other way. Like good wine, we become better with age.

Yours Sincerely,



Din Merican