

Bound By Numbers
McNamara's Attempt to Influence the Post-Vietnam War Discourse

Brian Krusell

U.S. Diplomatic History
Professor Pinsker
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Fifty-eight thousand American servicemen died during what some Americans termed “McNamara’s war.”¹ The man many identified as the mastermind of the conflict in Vietnam, Robert S. McNamara, was Secretary of Defense under both the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations from 1961 to 1968.² At the time, many admired McNamara as the “smartest man” in the words of both his superiors, President Kennedy³ and President Johnson.⁴ Having been thrust into the realm of civic service by Kennedy’s appointment, McNamara repeatedly proved his ability to approach problems as a gifted economist and with a brilliant analytical mind. However, in the context of the Vietnam War, the number crunching that McNamara relied upon so heavily failed him, the President, and the country. The year 1967 was a pivotal one in the career of McNamara. Faced with a proposition by General William Westmoreland to expand the action in Vietnam, McNamara defiantly sided with the “doves,” ultimately leading to a falling out with President Johnson and the termination of his career as Secretary of Defense.⁵ Years after his futile attempts to limit the American commitment in Vietnam, McNamara once again sought to influence politicians, both current and future, in his two, tendentious texts, *In Retrospect* and *An Argument Without End*, as well as Morris’s documentary *The Fog of War*. McNamara’s controversial *mea culpa* and accompanying lessons offer a flawed and self-serving analysis of his role in the tragedy of the Vietnam War. By refusing to relinquish his dependence on numerical analysis and by distancing himself from the incredible loss of life, McNamara secured his legacy as a remorseful, yet misguided whiz kid, haunted by the irrationality of war.

¹ Philip D. Beidler, *The Legacy of Vietnam: Late Thoughts on an Old War* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), 140.

² Tim Weiner, “Robert S. McNamara, Architect of a Futile War, Dies at 93,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/us/07mcnamara.html?_r=1.

³ Weiner.

⁴ David M. Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisors* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 25.

⁵ Barrett, 7.

McNamara's Early Life and Entrance into Politics:

Following his death in July of 2009, *The Economist* described McNamara “as an instinctive liberal, driving a battered Ford, living in university suburbs, where his recommended book for the reading group was Camus’s ‘L’Etranger’. Warmongering was not in his nature.”⁶ Yet, despite his background as a peaceful academic, McNamara transformed in the environment of the Pentagon during the Cold War. McNamara was born into the working middle class in 1916. He grew up in San Francisco and was very successful in his studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and later at Harvard Business School.⁷ In his old age, he fondly recalled his philosophy courses in college, especially lessons about ethics and values that he had such difficulty implementing.⁸ McNamara entered the public sector for a short time, but soon went back to Harvard to become a professor. During World War II, McNamara was involved with training in the Air Force, earning high marks for his ability to relate mathematics to the logistics of war.⁹ After the war, McNamara returned to the private sector as an executive at Ford, in part because he had to pay for medical expenses since both he and his wife had contracted polio. Alongside several other recruited “Whiz Kids,”¹⁰ McNamara revitalized Ford and became the first president of the company outside of the Ford family.¹¹ He later recalled how he felt a

⁶ “Robert McNamara, systems analyst and defense secretary,” *The Economist*, July 9, 2009, http://www.economist.com/obituary/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_TPJRPNNQ.

⁷ Tim Weiner, “Robert S. McNamara, Architect of a Futile War, Dies at 93,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/us/07mcnamara.html?_r=1.

⁸ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, Video, directed by Errol Morris (2003; Sony Pictures Classics, 2004).

⁹ “Robert Strange McNamara,” World Bank Archives, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/EXTARCHIVES/0,,contentMDK:20502974~pagePK:36726~piPK:437378~theSitePK:29506,00.html>.

¹⁰ “Robert Strange McNamara.” World Bank Archives.

¹¹ Weiner.

responsibility to the stockholders of Ford for producing success.¹² When McNamara left his private sector career to serve his country, he soon realized that his new “stockholders,” the American people, demanded a level of success far greater than dividends.

Invigorated by his success, McNamara accepted newly elected President Kennedy’s surprise invitation to become the Secretary of Defense, even though he admitted that his knowledge about the military was severely lacking.¹³ Kennedy assigned him the task of implementing the new “Flexible Response” doctrine, which focused on balancing the Soviets without resorting to nuclear weapons.¹⁴ Despite his inexperience, McNamara demonstrated his ability to act as a reliable advisor to Kennedy, notably during the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban missile crisis.¹⁵ These two events had a lasting impact on the young Secretary of Defense. McNamara felt guilty about his inability to prevent the Bay of Pigs catastrophe, and perhaps more deeply, felt loyal to the president whom he had witnessed accept complete responsibility for the failure. Only a short time later, the apocalyptic climate during the Cuban Missile Crisis solidified his trust with both President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. Robert Kennedy even made public his belief that McNamara would make a great Secretary of State.¹⁶ As Bobby Kennedy gained notoriety as a prominent “dove” during the Vietnam War period, McNamara’s relationship with him strained the more crucial partnership between presiding President and Secretary of Defense.

The Escalation of Vietnam and Dismissal by President Johnson:

¹² *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, Video, directed by Errol Morris (2003; Sony Pictures Classics, 2004).

¹³ Weiner.

¹⁴ Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 213.

¹⁵ Weiner.

¹⁶ Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 168.

The assassination of JFK in 1963 was a pivotal point in the course of American Cold War foreign policy, and also in McNamara's career. McNamara was personally notified by Robert Kennedy about the tragedy, a sign of his closeness to the Kennedy family.¹⁷ Scholars contend that McNamara lacked the same level of loyalty for Johnson as he had held for Kennedy.¹⁸ This absence of trust manifested itself in McNamara's forceful imposition about appropriate military action in Vietnam.¹⁹ Another telling example of the complexity of the Johnson-McNamara relationship surfaced leading up to Johnson's bid for reelection. At one time, Johnson publicly considered McNamara for Vice President on his ticket, but many historians now agree that it was a strategic effort to prevent McNamara from allying with Robert Kennedy (a connection that would resurface in 1967).²⁰ The rift in loyalty, but closeness in contact, between the President and Secretary of Defense is a theme that begins to elucidate how McNamara, a man without any political background, became the main strategist of the war in Vietnam.²¹

By 1965, McNamara had become a target of attacks by doves throughout the government because of his proximity to the President and specifically his memorandums requesting more force.²² Men such as George Ball, Under Secretary of State for Economic and Agricultural Affairs, adamantly opposed an escalation of military commitment in Vietnam because they did feared that the United States could not avoid the same fate in Vietnam as France, which had been

¹⁷ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

¹⁸ Porter, 182.

¹⁹ Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 182.

²⁰ Porter, 189.

²¹ Lewis, 213.

²² Robert McNamara, "Recommendations of Additional Deployments to Vietnam," memorandum to the president (20 July 1965), reprinted in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 4:619–22, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon4/doc261.htm>.

forced out of their colonial holdings by their defeat at Dien Bien Phu.²³ Ball wrote to President Johnson, urgent to counter what he identified as “an unmistakable smell of escalation.”²⁴ In reaction, McNamara fiercely defended his position, demanding that the President and members of the House Armed Services Committee “continue our struggle to halt communist expansion in Asia.”²⁵ Years later, McNamara would regret his leadership role in promoting U.S. involvement since it was largely based on the faulty preoccupation with the “domino theory” and the appeasement lesson of Munich.²⁶ From 1963 to 1965, President Johnson, characterized by one author as a “shrewd rationalist” and “hopeless sentimentalist,” encouraged the hawkish war policy led by McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which he viewed as essential to promoting America’s national interest.²⁷

By the end of 1965, McNamara harbored increasing concerns about the U.S. commitment in Vietnam. At times he even considered scaling back the troop level, “because in the back of my mind, I have a very definite limitation on commitment. And I don’t think the chiefs do. In fact, I know they don’t.”²⁸ In 1966, he contended that it was in the strategic interest of the United States not to escalate the bombing campaign because he recognized its role as an impediment to negotiations.²⁹ Nevertheless, many of his concerns remained latent until the following year,

²³ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 146.

²⁴ Barrett, 27.

²⁵ Robert S. McNamara, Speech to the House Armed Services Committee, reprinted in “Foreign Relations: We Will Be Far Better Off Facing the Issue,” *Time Magazine*, February, 26, 1965, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,833468-2,00.html>.

²⁶ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

²⁷ Randall Bennett Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York, Free Press, 2006), 799, accessed via GoogleBooks, http://books.google.com/books?id=Sb8W_Ba3jkkC&pg=PA811&dq=mcnamara+memorandum+to+the+president+regarding+troop+buildup+in+vietnam+1967&cd=8#v=onepage&q=&f=false.

²⁸ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

²⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), V.4, 107. Printed in *The New York Times*, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>.

when he boldly isolated himself from the President and Joint Chiefs of Staff. He proposed a shift in strategy to limit the costs of the war (both lives lost and economic cost), so that the U.S. could prove that it could be a lasting presence.³⁰

The 1967 decision concerning additional forces proved to be a defining moment of the Johnson Administration. The debate centered on how best to ensure an independent South Vietnam.³¹ At the time, only nineteen percent of Americans favored a withdrawal.³² Yet, only thirty eight percent of Americans approved of the President's handling of the war, making some kind of change seem imminent.³³ In March, General Westmoreland put forward a plan of action with two alternatives. He described the problem brashly, as 'holding off the bullies' while "at the same time killing the termites."³⁴ The first course of action, called the "'minimum essential' force," requested an additional 80,500 troops and would not require calling up any Reserves.³⁵ The second option, called the "'optimum' force," requested an additional 200,000 soldiers.³⁶ This more aggressive policy would enable the United States to invade N. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.³⁷ McNamara, a new opponent of the hawkish generals, pressed Westmoreland to find out what the time commitment would be for each of his two options. The General answered

³⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), V.2, 595. Printed in *The New York Times*, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>.

³¹ Barrett, 63.

³² Barrett, 71.

³³ Barrett, 70.

³⁴ Barrett, 77.

³⁵ William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part IV: July 1965-January 1968 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1995, 621, <http://books.google.com/books?id=r0lXf2nNSMIC&pg=PA631&lpg=PA631&dq=mcnamara+memorandum+to+the+president+regarding+troop+buildup+in+vietnam+1967&source...>

³⁶ Barrett, 78.

³⁷ Gibbons, 621.

three years for the “optimal,” and at least five years for the “minimum”,³⁸ estimates that McNamara found overly optimistic. Both McNamara and his chief advisor John McNaughton criticized the plan for its strategic shortcoming – simply adding forces would not yield results unless the troops were used more effectively.³⁹

During this same year, McNamara entrusted McNaughton with beginning a comprehensive, unbiased Defense Department report on the Vietnam War. The *New York Times* later published these records, famously known as the Pentagon Papers, in 1971. McNamara’s decision, kept secret from President Johnson, demonstrates his desire to protect his own dignity, a precursor to his ensuing memoirs.⁴⁰

While the Defense Department was busy compiling records on the past war strategy, Congress remained divided and concerned about the correct course of action in Vietnam. Some senators such as Richard Russell asserted that escalation was the best way to end the war,⁴¹ while others, led by Senator William Fulbright, advocated for negotiations and withdrawal instead.⁴² As an illustration of the involvement of Congress in foreign policy beyond simply passing legislation, a group of thirty dovish representatives confronted President Johnson in a letter about the war policy during the fall of 1967. They felt that reports from officials, especially McNamara’s testimony from the Stennis hearings, raised questions about the President’s active strategy.⁴³ Pressure exerted by Congress undoubtedly reflected the growing national anxiety about the lack of progress in Vietnam, and the necessity of an extensive review of war strategy.

³⁸ Barrett, 81.

³⁹ Gibbons, 630.

⁴⁰ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 281-2.

⁴¹ Barrett, 66.

⁴² Barrett, 64.

⁴³ U.S. Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), V.4, 217. Printed in *The New York Times*, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>.

By this time, McNamara was disillusioned with the ability of the United States military to conduct the war, regardless of American superiority in equipment or numbers. His numerical analysis confirmed the growing pessimism: “small scale attacks in the first quarter of 1967 are running at double the 1966 average.”⁴⁴ The weary Secretary of Defense confided to a colleague, “We have poured more bomb loads onto North Vietnam than in the whole of World War II and yet we have no sign that it has shaken their will to resist, none.”⁴⁵ After traveling to Guam to meet with top military officials, McNamara even displayed his pessimism to the press during the post-briefing: “In sum [the participants] ... agreed that the war could go on indefinitely unless the military pressure being imposed against the enemy forces breaks the will of the North and there is as yet no sign of that...”⁴⁶ His visits to the region validated his argument that the government in Vietnam was too corrupt and weak and that locals had more confidence in the VC.⁴⁷

Following the Westmoreland troop increase proposal, McNamara advised the President that a lower troop surge (less than 30,000), in conjunction with efforts to limit the war to only South Vietnam and its borders, was the best solution.⁴⁸ He hoped that the military would finish bombing the most important targets in the North, and then shift aerial focus to the South.⁴⁹ He also supported a plan to create a barrier of “mined fields [and] electrical fences,” which would isolate the war in South Vietnam, but it was proposed by civilians in the Pentagon and never

⁴⁴ Gibbons, 641.

⁴⁵ Barrett, 78.

⁴⁶ Barrett, 78.

⁴⁷ Randall Bennett Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York, Free Press, 2006), 802, accessed via GoogleBooks, http://books.google.com/books?id=Sb8W_Ba3jkkC&pg=PA811&dq=mcnamara+memorandum+to+the+president+regarding+troop+buildup+in+vietnam+1967&cd=8#v=onepage&q=&f=false.

⁴⁸ Barrett, 86.

⁴⁹ Gibbons, 631.

gained enough support.⁵⁰ In essence, McNamara became a leader of those decision-makers who wanted to scale back American involvement in the region.

President Johnson's final decision about the Westmoreland troop surge somewhat reflected McNamara's dovish stance, an indication of his Defense Secretary's continued influence. Johnson approved an increase of 80,000 troops (Westmoreland's minimum),⁵¹ but by the time a final settlement had been reached on August 14, the number was reduced to 47,296 troops.⁵² Even though the final resolution reinforced McNamara's position, Johnson decided that McNamara had become too much of a liability because of his contact and cooperation with rivals like Robert Kennedy.⁵³ The debate about Westmoreland's troop surge completed McNamara's transformation from hawk to dove, from underlying worries to outspoken critic of the war.

McNamara's reversal on war policy reflects his lifelong reliance on economic decision-making. Unlike the other bureaucrats who had access to the President, McNamara avoided making decisions solely based on ideology, historical analogies, or personal relations.⁵⁴ Instead, he analyzed the numerical representations of each problem, helping to deduce which solution would lead to the most efficient outcome. For example, in the film *The Fog of War*, McNamara says, "I think pushing out 300,000, 400,000 Americans out there without being able to guarantee what it will lead to is a terrible risk at a terrible cost."⁵⁵ Similarly, in his memoir *In Retrospect*, he explains, "The case against expanding the air war was clear. All you had to do was look at

⁵⁰ Barrett, 93.

⁵¹ Barrett, 103.

⁵² Barrett, 104.

⁵³ Barrett, 105.

⁵⁴ Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs. 1999), 250-51.

⁵⁵ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, Video, directed by Errol Morris (2003; Sony Pictures Classics, 2004).

the numbers.”⁵⁶ McNamara felt that the President neglected to take into account the conclusions of his analyses, which, in his mind, offered concrete evidence that the United States needed to limit the scope of its attack. He concluded that in order to win the war, the U.S. must make “efforts to determine whether the ‘cost’ of each major program and each new project is justified by the ‘benefit’ or strength it adds to our security.”⁵⁷ McNamara’s decision to accept a more dovish approach underlined a shift in calculation, not an emotional or moralistic reassessment.

Furthermore, despite McNamara’s denial in his memoirs, his decision to set himself at odds with the presiding viewpoint of the President was rooted in personal motivations. For example, McNamara was undoubtedly influenced by stress about his wife, who was sick in the hospital during this time.⁵⁸ This hardship was compounded by the fact that his children were active demonstrators against the war.⁵⁹ McNamara later admitted on camera that, as a sensitive individual, these factors weighed heavily on him emotionally, especially the growing tensions within his family.⁶⁰ In fact, it is reasonable to infer that without this pressure from his personal life, McNamara may have acted less radically in order to protect his future political career.

McNamara’s revaluation was partially altered by his ethical qualms, namely his philosophy that a government should act to protect what is right, even if it must engage in evil to do so.⁶¹ Yet, his captivation with solving problems by focusing on numbers and statistics prevented him from fully realizing the ethical implications of his work, until his later years. As

⁵⁶ Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs. 1999), 251.

⁵⁷ Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 217.

⁵⁸ David M. Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisors* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 78.

⁵⁹ Woods, 810.

⁶⁰ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

⁶¹ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

his own words to the Senate Armed Services Committee in 1967 insist, the problem came down to a simple judgment: “There is nothing in the past reaction of the North Vietnamese leaders that would provide any confidence that they can be bombed to the negotiating table.”⁶² McNamara preferred to justify his actions by informative analysis, not ethical introspection. Others, including George Allen, a C.I.A. analyst, had the same approach to rebuking the troop surge, but to no avail. Allen’s C.I.A. report reiterated McNamara’s personal memorandum to the President about the futility of the American campaign in Vietnam.⁶³ McNamara’s efforts, although noble in his mind, were insufficient in preventing further escalation of the war, and instead culminated with his dismissal.

Apologies and Lessons Learned: A Critical Analysis

McNamara’s departure from the Pentagon to the World Bank in 1968 was the physical representation of a growing philosophical divide between the once-touted Secretary of Defense and President Johnson. Years later, McNamara would explain that he resigned quietly, without criticizing the war publicly, out of respect for what he felt was his constitutional duty as a cabinet officer.⁶⁴ He openly admitted that he still respected the President and felt gratified by his departing gift, the Medal of Freedom.⁶⁵ However, beneath this veneer of satisfaction, McNamara harbored doubts about his role in the decision-making and its implications for the future, especially as the conflict persisted with no end in sight. His writings and interviews convey his final goal to admit his wrongdoing and to share the wisdom that he gained from his mistakes. McNamara emphasized this point in *An Argument Without and End*: “I believe that if

⁶² Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs. 1999), 252.

⁶³ Tim Weiner, “Robert S. McNamara, Architect of a Futile War, Dies at 93,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/us/07mcnamara.html?_r=1.

⁶⁴ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 314.

⁶⁵ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

things *might* have been different during the Vietnam War, then things *can* be different in the future...”⁶⁶ His decision to avoid entering the Vietnam discourse for almost three decades elucidates the inner turmoil that he finally hoped to reconcile. His writings and interviews illustrate a genuine individual, not in search of money through book sales as cynics often contend, but rather hoping to preserve the legacy of a career that he felt proud about, despite numerous errors.⁶⁷ Unfortunately for McNamara two familiar flaws, his confidence in numerical analysis and detachment from the responsibility of the war, hinder his credibility and goal of shaping future American foreign policy.

In his inaugural reflection, *In Retrospect*, McNamara defends his controversial management philosophy: the key to achieving success and recognizing failure is tracking and analyzing variables. In the case of Vietnam, McNamara famously focused on the numbers of the war, such as “targets destroyed in the North, the traffic down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, ... [and] the enemy body count.”⁶⁸ His written decree that “things you can count, you ought to count,”⁶⁹ represents a blatant over reliance on numerical analysis. McNamara failed to recognize how his counting contributed to the justification of escalation during the mid 1960s, and could become a repeated mistake in future generations. McNamara emphasizes the need for attaining reliable information in his list of lessons learned, even though his career is a testament to the failure of mathematical assessments without accompanying methods of evaluation.

To an even greater extent, McNamara’s ability to admit his wrongdoing is limited by his denial of the irrationality of war. This lack of rationality is the central metaphor of Morris’s

⁶⁶ Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs. 1999), 374.

⁶⁷ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

⁶⁸ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 237-8.

⁶⁹ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 238.

documentary, *The Fog of War*. Both McNamara and the filmmaker agree that this metaphor denotes the complexity of war and the inability of humans to adequately understand it.⁷⁰ However, Morris seems more capable and willing to note the moral ambiguity during wartime than the calculating former Secretary of Defense. Morris even admits that he was attracted to McNamara's story after he read *In Retrospect* and found that it "raised more questions than it answered."⁷¹ The contrast between McNamara's overly simplistic lessons and Morris's depiction of the moral implications of decisions highlights a core cause of McNamara's misjudgments now as well as then; he viewed the world as black and white, positive numbers and negative numbers, which may work in a business or academic setting, but fails when implementing a war strategy.

One of the primary complaints of McNamara, which relates to his dependence on rational thought, is his excuse that the Johnson Administration did not have enough experts. From his perspective, failure in Vietnam resulted from a combination of American ignorance of Vietnamese history, a lack of reliable experts, and a misjudgment of the strength of Vietnamese nationalism.⁷² However, a more accurate assessment contends that experts and critical information were available, but severely underutilized, or worse, ignored. Since McNamara's publications, individuals such as Louis G. Sarris, an analyst in the Department of State, have criticized McNamara and the other high-level decision makers for disregarding information for

⁷⁰ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

⁷¹ Ned Martel, "Old warhorse looks back down the lines: DOCUMENTARY CINEMA: Statesman Robert McNamara shares his Vietnam experience in Errol Morris's 'Fog of War'. Ned Martel explains why it has so affected early viewers: :[USA 1ST EDITION]," *Financial Times*, December 19, 2003, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed December 17, 2009).

⁷² Minh Do, Lit Pick: McNamara's art of war, Review, *VietNow*, 62, (1995, August), Retrieved December 17, 2009, from Ethnic NewsWatch (ENW). (Document ID: 495783031), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=17&did=495783031&SrchMode=1&sid=15&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1260993463&clientId=4534>.

personal reasons. In the case of Sarris, he wrote an editorial condemning McNamara for requesting the termination of Department of State reports critical of the war, such as the one that Sarris wrote.⁷³ This type of negative reaction by contemporaries who were forced out of the intelligence sharing is expected since, from their perspective, McNamara is once again self-servingly attempting to attain control of the war, this time with regard to his legacy.

McNamara's ability to analyze key factors through numerical analysis results in several accurate realizations, but generally these views all verge on conventional knowledge. For example, McNamara proves cognizant of the destructiveness of ideological arguments, such as appeasement and the "domino theory."⁷⁴ He admits, like many of his peers, that at times he followed instead of led, allowing proponents of war to override the national interest and American ideals.⁷⁵ Furthermore, McNamara insists in an interview for the *Fog of War* documentary, "If we can't persuade nations of comparable values of the merit of our cause, we better reexamine our reasoning." This awareness of several overarching factors of the American failure in Vietnam may be intended to influence similar debates today, but remains too broad to be effective.

The second irreconcilable failure of McNamara's reflections is his lack of remorse and justification for the thousands of American soldiers and Vietnamese who perished during the so-called "limited war." McNamara retains a notable ability to distance himself from the human tragedy of Vietnam, preferring to discuss the high level mishaps without fully explaining the

⁷³ Louis G. Sarris, "McNamara's War, and Mine," *New York Times*, September 5, 1995, Op-Ed, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=6&did=115953373&SrchMode=2&sid=1&Fmt=12&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1260414682&clientId=4534>.

⁷⁴ "Mr. McNamara's Other War :[FINAL Edition]," *The Washington Post (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, April 30, 1995, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed December 17, 2009).

⁷⁵ Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs. 1999), 397.

devastating consequences for others. For example, during an interview for *The Fog of War*, McNamara dismisses Sorris's question concerning guilt as a result of errors in his judgment.⁷⁶ Earlier in the documentary, McNamara displays subtle auditory and visual cues of guilt when he recounts the story of Morrison, an anti-war activist who killed himself in 1965. Yet, the emotional response to this tragedy pales in comparison to his recollection of Johnson awarding him the Medal of Freedom.⁷⁷ As a common theme of his retirement, McNamara fails to properly honor the Vietnam war by attempting to downplay his guilt by drawing attention to accomplishments.

To some extent, McNamara also hopes to distance himself from ultimate responsibility by highlighting the deficiencies of those he was working with, especially with regard to communication. Having been an active participant in the Executive Committee deliberations of the JFK administration, which arguably enabled the United States to avoid catastrophe during the Cuban Missile Crisis, McNamara is perfectly justified in critiquing the lack of administrative organization.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, his unsubstantiated accusations that LBJ did not listen to him, and that the President was overly concerned with political pressures, are not constructive.⁷⁹ As a self-proclaimed loyal cabinet officer, McNamara's appropriate opportunity to shape Johnson's legacy was during his period of service, not in his old age. Former Secretary of State McGeorge Bundy, the man whom McNamara claims could have been initiated a more open debate had he not resigned, reiterates many of McNamara's concerns about Johnson's reluctance to debate

⁷⁶ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

⁷⁷ Carl Schoettler, "The scars of Vietnam ; 'Fog of War' recalls one man's ultimate protest, and gives his widow hope it changed one mind :[FINAL Edition]," *The Sun*, February 29, 2004, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed December 17, 2009).

⁷⁸ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 332.

⁷⁹ Bob Woodward and Gordon M Goldstein, "Vietnam offers some valuable lessons." *The Guelph Mercury*, October 24, 2009, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed December 17, 2009).

topics: “The principal players do not engage in anything you can really call an exchange of views. ... That was prevented by [Johnson], and the process he used was really for show and not for choice.”⁸⁰ Even so, these individuals were capable of following McNamara’s own mantra of leading instead of following, and could have exerted more pressure on the President on numerous occasions. Ironically, the policy of appeasement within the White House, concerning Johnson and his advisors, likely contributed to the stalemate of the 1960s.

McNamara simultaneously critiques the Joint Chiefs of Staff directly and indirectly through his reflections. For instance, he harshly criticizes General Westmoreland for persistently requesting more troops, the catalyst for McNamara’s departure.⁸¹ However, at the same time, McNamara uses his literary pulpit for informing readers that Westmoreland did not deliberately lie to influence the course of decision-making as the press had reported.⁸² During other parts of his narrative, McNamara does not convey the hope of making the hawkish generals scapegoats, but rather appropriately identifies them as part of the problem. As McNamara pointed out in more recent interviews, a more responsible and effective military leadership would confront administration officials about inadequacies. His analysis of the relationship between military and civilian leadership deserves some consideration, but is not sufficient to fundamentally influence change as he intended.

McNamara hoped to achieve three goals by contributing to the historical account of Vietnam. First, he sincerely wanted to honor the Americans who, in his words, died for “their

⁸⁰ Bob Woodward and Gordon M Goldstein, “Vietnam offers some valuable lessons.” *The Guelph Mercury*, October 24, 2009, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed December 17, 2009).

⁸¹ Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs. 1999), 385-6.

⁸² Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 240.

country and its ideals.”⁸³ Yet, his second motive, typified by the void of emotion with which he can discuss horrific events, was to prove that he served honorably in his political capacity. *In Retrospect*, in particular, demonstrates McNamara’s desire to vindicate himself to his critics, with only a short vindication for the men whom he was largely responsible for sending into war. The absence of a dedication to these men at the beginning of his first memoir is a telling omission. Finally, McNamara’s third objective, to teach current and future policy makers to avoid the mistakes of his generation, remains largely unfulfilled and in jeopardy. Readers of his books and viewers of *The Fog of War* are often left, like Sarris, with more questions than answers. McNamara cannot overcome his dispassionate, analytical style, preventing him from becoming a leader of the post-Vietnam War historical discourse.

President Johnson once described his Secretary of Defense as “a jackhammer” adding “No human being can take what he takes. He drives too hard. He is too perfect.”⁸⁴ These compliments ironically describe a man who spent the remainder of his life sharing his imperfections in the hope that his disenchanted analysis of the war could prevent new wars. By 1967, McNamara was a changed man, with a mission to prevent the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. McNamara’s service in the government, his realization of the futility of the war and his justifications and remorse after the war, deserve some credit. Nevertheless, McNamara’s self-serving narratives and lessons in his written works fall short of an effective or appropriate renunciation of his role in the war strategy. Unfortunately, McNamara resorts to his lifelong dependence on detached analysis. In doing so, he fails to honor himself and the fallen soldiers or Vietnam veterans, men who paid for the mistakes and undoubtedly recognize the irrationality of war.

⁸³ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 333.

⁸⁴ Weiner.

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