

greater than Vietnam. It set him adrift, friends say. That there were other dimensions to the straight-arrow boy from Berkeley who was devoted to his youthful-sweetheart wife was shown when, soon after her death, he began seeing Joan Braden, a prominent Washington figure. They have been close friends and traveling companions for more than a decade, while Braden remains married and living with her husband, Tom.

Friends often characterized Bob and Margy as “two halves of one person.” They meant it as a compliment to the marriage. But the remark suggested they sensed Bob lacked part of himself: He could not spread affection to others, even his children, without an effort.

The man ill at ease with his farewells at the Pentagon was also uncomfortable with his only son. There were two older daughters; “Little” Margaret, the eldest, was the child most like her mother. Kathleen resembled her father in ability and temperament. As often happens when two personalities in a family are alike, they seemed destined not to get along. Craig defied his father over Vietnam, among other things.

Bob’s diffidence toward Craig started long before Vietnam, long before the antiwar movement swept the boy up in its emotionally charged embrace. Craig inherited his mother’s humanity along with her wide cheekbones. He grew up in their big white Italian-style house, in a household centered on his dad, hoping that the man who dashed in and out, and who was so smart and famous, would notice him.

He didn’t, so Margy compensated. She coached Craig on his reading; she worried when he went to a psychiatrist. But all her worry could not stop the boy from running through the streets with antiwar demonstrators, smashing windows. He ran as far as South America and then to Easter Island, putting a continent and one fourth of the Pacific between him and Washington.

The first time I saw McNamara I saw not a face but a tan oval across the desk, lit in the dim office by a single overhead light. After a moment I realized that he was hunched over and peering at a paper on the desk and that I was looking at the bare top of his head, which was no longer covered with the dark thick hair shown in old photographs.⁷

The desk was enormous and covered in black leather, with a border of carved wood. He had used it as president of the World Bank;

it was big enough, certainly, to be the launchpad for running the world. A faded globe, one he had evidently used for a long time, was next to him.

Hearing my footfall on the carpet, he stirred and rose. He greeted me as if we had seen each other just yesterday, then waved me to a barrel-backed chair beside the desk and sat down again, in one agile movement. The paper he was reading was my letter, telling him I planned to write a book about him, with or without his cooperation, and asking for six interviews. He had placed the letter before him at precise right angles to the edge of the desk.

He composed himself to speak. I had expected to debate the question of cooperation, but he had made up his mind and came straight to the point. He announced he would grant the six interviews. With a guardedness I would hear many times, he added that he was unsure if his participation would be “productive” for him or for me. He required one condition, that he be able to review his quotes from our sessions before I used them in the book. He liked to be precise, he said.

McNamara was a reclusive figure, known for giving carefully selected interviews. Since I had expected little or no cooperation, I agreed. It occurred to me that this gave me access to the “off-the-record” McNamara, who might be more revealing than the public man talking stiffly into a tape recorder. During the years it took to complete the project, our six interviews stretched to more than twenty. And in these discussions, off the record, he delved more and more into the one topic he has not discussed in public since that last day in the rain: his role in and feelings about the war in Vietnam.

In subsequent meetings after that first, I tried to explore the enigma. Much of the time McNamara seemed uncomfortable talking about any aspect of the past. Simple questions, such as What lessons did you learn in World War II?, got no reply. Too general, apparently. Subjective questions, such as What was your father like?, got nowhere. McNamara is not self-revealing — at least he does not reveal himself on purpose. I discovered that many of his friends find him this way, too.

For some, the only point about McNamara is his supposed bad character, evident in a series of deceits that have defined his life and career. Others describe him as a true scout, eager to take up the challenges of the world and fight the good fight admirably.

Views are equally polarized on his supposed genius as a manager. At the time they happened, his makeovers of Ford, the Defense

Department, and the World Bank won public acclaim. But there are many who have argued since that McNamara “ruined” the auto industry, the U.S. military, and even the Bank.

To me, the charges that the “real” Robert McNamara is a pure manipulator and that his attempts to appear virtuous, like his dedication to fighting poverty at the World Bank, are insincere seem incompatible with the facts: He helped remake Ford into a successful company after the war; he reformed the defense budget and ran defense policy in two administrations in positive ways that endure; he was critical in unhooking the military, the public, and America’s allies from plans to use nuclear weapons in war and in changing NATO doctrine. And at the World Bank, by vigorous executive action, he helped redirect the Green Revolution to feed millions of people in Asia, Latin America, and Africa who otherwise would have gone hungry or worse. Many men who have done less have been treated kindly by history.

At a time when the U.S. auto industry and armed forces are in transition, if not a downright crisis, the legacy of McNamara’s management deserves study. Americans today also face Africa’s long depression and the deepening problems in the poorest parts of the Third World. So his thirteen years at the Bank trying to actively manage foreign aid to help the poor are relevant today.

“Bob is so American,” says a high-ranking Pakistani at the World Bank. “He really believes that if he is not taking two steps forward he is falling behind.”⁸ If, as Walter Lippmann wrote, leaders should be judged by what they leave behind,⁹ then McNamara’s impact on the American Century must be judged, not only on Ford, the Pentagon, and Vietnam, but also on his attempt at the World Bank and after to define post-Vietnam American liberalism, with all its lights and shadows.

Neither did the theory that the real McNamara is the man of total sincerity and balance seem the whole story, although in the course of many sessions I saw this side of him, too. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., once referred in his diary to McNamara’s “inextinguishable decency.”¹⁰ But if this is the real man, why, in each of his three careers, has he from the start left a trail of bitter enemies, enraged not by his values but by his conduct?

It was hard to get him to look back, but I soon found one way. The man loves combat. Give him documents, raise the charges against him, and he springs to life, reliving old disputes, often with a detailed

and accurate memory. One side, which is neither a liar nor a scout, loves confrontation; this must be part of his story, too.

Then there is the reflective McNamara. Not the man who says that black is white and white is black, that he thought the war he led was militarily unwinnable, or that he never considered initiating the use of nuclear weapons despite frequent public statements that he would. The sobered McNamara seemed to me deeply troubled by his errors on Vietnam and regretful on other scores as well.

I also heard him lie, to cut off a line of questioning or for some other quick advantage. Some of the stories he told on himself also revealed he lied on occasion. It seemed to be a reflex, a habit he has used to grab and hold on to power. It revealed a different side of him from historian McNamara, who at other times pored over documents with precise care and frequent self-criticism.

I concluded during our alternately tense and friendly sessions that the “real” Robert McNamara is — awkwardly enough — both a man of a ruthless will to win and the thoughtful analyst. Simpler explanations do not suffice. In the end, I could not avoid the fact that he is both manipulator and scout, a devious tactician and a man of sincere and noble goals. This twinning of opposites has shaped his life, his story as a manager, Vietnam; it has, one way or another, affected all of our lives.

McNamara released most of the quotes I asked for, with some negotiation but few exceptions overall. He did not approve — or see — the contents of this book before it was published, nor did he control what I put in, except for the quotes from our meetings. He maintained his stance of not speaking publicly on Vietnam; but he did release quotes from two oral histories, in which he discussed the subject, for quotation in this book. I also quote here what he said on Vietnam in the CBS-Westmoreland lawsuit; McNamara then clarified his statements from the oral histories and lawsuit by releasing portions of his background interviews with me on the subject.

These statements on Vietnam go well beyond mere clarifications, however; in this book, he now explains haltingly, for the first time, why he urged the United States to enter the conflict, where he thinks he and the government erred, the nature of his supposed “disillusion” with the shooting war, and why, in his opinion, he spoke validly and optimistically when he urged American soldiers to fight on.

So this book is a biography, not the memoir he says he will never write. It does not focus on one part of character but tries to present

the whole, insofar as anyone outside McNamara, Margy, or their children has seen the whole man.

His story starts between the two world wars, nearly eight years before Henry Luce, in a *Life* editorial in February 1941, gave the American Century its name.¹¹ It opens in the hills of northern California, where two boys in early morning mists are getting off to school.¹²

When the boys were very small, Woodrow Wilson had entered the war to end all wars, and won. Now, in 1933, storm clouds were rising in Europe, although they seemed faraway problems, for the British and French to solve. America had troubles enough of its own, with the stock market crash of 1929, with banks and companies failing, with good men out of work. Even these crises seemed remote to the boys, reared in the isolation of the valleys. The region was just entering the twentieth century; the farmlands were starting to yield wealth to organized human effort.

The boys are sitting in a Ford Roadster that rolls silently down a steep hill. They coast and avoid turning on the engine until they reach the bottom. They are always short of cash, and by coasting down hills as often as possible, they can save on gasoline and put away some change.