

Hanoi and Peking might at that point yield and

salvage their resources for another day; but there is an almost equal chance that they would enlarge the war. . . . and bring in large numbers of Chinese forces . . . the odds are about even that, even with the recommended deployments, we will be faced in early 1967 with a military standoff at a much higher level, with pacification still stalled, and with any prospect of military success marred by the chances of an active Chinese intervention.²²

Robert McNamara looked into the abyss and saw three years of war leading only to stalemate, and he warned the president.²³ He went through the motions of considering compromise but rejected this course. He saw his miscalculation but stuck with the war that winter; he was committed to it, politically, publicly, and emotionally. Giving up was not in his program or his temperament. And he believed the cause was just: To contain Lin Piao's expansionary China was "the role we have chosen for ourselves," the duty of American power.

Henceforth, McNamara's public promotion of the war and private skepticism would have a tense moral dimension. As long as the war went on — and two and a half years was very long on McNamara's time scale — as many as 1,000 young Americans a month were going to die. In November 1965, the toll of Americans lost in Vietnam since 1961 passed the 1,000 mark.²⁴ He once told me that those rising numbers were one of his deepest concerns. "Numbers, as you know, are a language to me."

McNamara could have gone public and revealed that he thought the military situation was worse than General Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff said it was, that they might have to send 600,000 American troops instead of the 200,000-plus so far announced by the administration, and tried to turn the war off by speaking out. But support for the war still ran strong; his naysaying could have brought escalation in the hopes of a quick win. Had McNamara's voice caused a pullout and spared American suffering, South Vietnam would have suffered — and fallen.

For many of McNamara's critics on the left and right, his performance, after his supposed moment of disillusion in late 1965, was fraudulent because he went on publicly supporting the war and the fighting men when he knew the war would be more frustrating and

bloody than Westmoreland or the administration as a whole was saying. He should have stepped out of government and stopped it; therefore, by staying he caused needless U.S. casualties. David Halberstam wrote in 1979, for example, that McNamara's "entire role contradicts his image of a man who will sacrifice his career for moral purposes. . . . The real McNamara is someone who says one thing in public and always follows the mandate of his superiors in private."²⁵

Hesitantly, on the record, McNamara offers a partial explanation of why he chose to stay in his job and went on supporting the war, in public and in his memos to the president, after the fall of 1965. First, McNamara disputes the popular notion that he was disillusioned about the war in late 1965, because, based on his memos of the spring and own recollection, he had not been convinced they could gain a military victory even in July, when he recommended sending troops.²⁶ The purpose of the U.S. intervention was to force Hanoi to pull back, which would be a political result, not a military win.

Therefore "it was not in vain" to press on with the ground war, even though he — but not the chiefs and Westmoreland — saw it evolving toward stalemate. "We were trying to press the war in the field and achieve at the same time our diplomatic objective. . . . I thought pressure in the field, pressure militarily, would increase the likelihood of movement on the political track. The linkage between the two tracks was that large-unit military action was exacting a cost.

"And that cost was the stimulus, we hoped, or I hoped, to progress on the political track. It was important that the North Vietnamese believe we could continue that cost through the large-unit actions. *So the fighting was not in vain*, even though I was pessimistic about how well we were doing in the field."

The fact that McNamara's memos were privately pessimistic was part of his duty, he says, in effect. "In my memos to the president, I tried to give the pros and cons of our position, and then end up with my judgment [that] I had real doubts as to whether we could win militarily, and I wanted him to understand that."

As to the moral balance between continuing to expend American lives in what, with hindsight, many would see as the hopeless cause of propping up South Vietnam, McNamara, like many other people during the late sixties, believed Asian communism was expansionary and aggressive. He answered the moral point at the time, more than once, when reporters asked, for example in October 1966, whether sending more Americans was worth it: "I would rather expend a

limited number of American lives if it saves millions of South Vietnamese and other Asian peoples," he shot back.²⁷

As McNamara headed toward widening the war, he contacted the Kennedy camp, which was becoming critical of Johnson and the conflict. The day he returned from Vietnam, he asked his secretary to get Arthur Schlesinger on the phone. The Harvard historian's new book, *A Thousand Days*, had just come out, based on the diary Schlesinger kept while he worked in the Kennedy White House. The book made headlines by revealing Kennedy's dissatisfaction with Dean Rusk and his plans to make McNamara secretary of state in his second term.

On the phone McNamara said "he wanted some fresh thinking," Schlesinger wrote in his diary on January 21, 1966.

Schlesinger arranged a dinner at his Georgetown house on January 6 with some other former Kennedy advisers: Carl Kaysen, Richard Goodwin, and John Kenneth Galbraith. Schlesinger recorded that

the subject was, of course, Vietnam. Bob combined frankness about issues with discretion about personalities in his usual fashion.

McNamara said, as he had before, that he did not regard a military solution as possible. The military advantages of the bombing, he seemed to feel, were marginal and outweighed by the political disadvantages. The infiltration rate had increased steadily (fourfold?) since the bombing had started.

McNamara seemed "skeptical about the value of enlarging our ground forces." When Schlesinger asked "whether the North Vietnamese had increased their commitment in response to or independently of American action, he said flatly the first." When he was asked about U.S. goals, McNamara defined "his objective in South Vietnam as 'withdrawal with honor.'" ²⁸

The phrase "withdrawal with honor" was literally consistent with McNamara's private advice to the president that their goal should be to force the enemy to stand down and get a favorable settlement, even if it took years and 600,000 American troops. But in the jargon of the emerging doves that winter, withdrawal with honor meant leaving soon in any form that did not immediately cede turf or government control to the Communists. The exact makeup of a government in the South that Washington was prepared to leave behind was the nub of the debate.²⁹ At Schlesinger's house that night, McNamara seemed to

favor the “compromise outcome” scenario he had rejected in memos to the president:

“One gathered that he might even be prepared to consider Viet Cong participation in such a [neutralist] government — presumably on the Laos model,” Schlesinger records.³⁰

As for McNamara’s emotional state, Schlesinger found him “oppressed and concerned at the prospect of indefinite escalation.” He wondered, in his diary, why McNamara had sought him out, since the group “had very little to offer” besides “moral and intellectual reinforcement.” McNamara clearly used the session to forewarn these men that escalation was on the way. “He may be assembling support among his liberal friends,” Schlesinger speculated, but dismissed this thought as “too Machiavellian.”

Maybe he had only wanted an evening of “unfettered and far-ranging speculation,” Schlesinger went on. “In any case, we all left with increased admiration for his intelligence, openness of mind, and inextinguishable decency.”³¹

McNamara was looking for “fresh” ideas when he returned from Vietnam in November, and he was handed one in particular — for a technological “barrier” — that would play a major part in his attempt to redirect the war. Economist Carl Kaysen, who had worked in John Kennedy’s White House and then returned to M.I.T., recalls visiting McNamara twice in December 1965 in his office.

It was common for leading university scientists and other experts to work on military problems during war, in a long and important tradition dating back to World War I and before. In Cambridge in 1965, there evolved a “floating crap game,” Kaysen says, involving a few Harvard and M.I.T. faculty — some with formal Pentagon ties and some without — to brainstorm on ways to resolve the war. Since Hanoi said that an end to the bombing was a precondition for talks and a settlement, the Cambridge group asked “what the bombing was supposed to achieve.” It was supposed to lower infiltration; the group then asked if there were other ways to achieve this. Thus the idea arose of the “electronic fence,” or “barrier” — later as notoriously linked to McNamara’s name as the TFX and the Edsel.

Perhaps America’s technology could be used to advantage in the jungle after all, Kaysen’s group told McNamara in December. A string of new devices — tiny sensors that detected footfalls, air-dropped mines, remotely guided air and ground fire — could be in-