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'I made mistakes': Robert McNamara's Vietnam war policy, 1960 – 1968

by Aurélie Basha i Novosejt, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 223 pp, £39.99 ISBN 9781108415538

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BOOK REVIEW

'I made mistakes': Robert McNamara's Vietnam war policy, 1960 – 1968, by Aurélie Basha i Novosejt, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 223 pp, £39.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781108415538

As his contemporaries often asserted – and as historians have long acknowledged – Robert McNamara made mistakes in his handling of the Vietnam War. But what exactly was the character of these mistakes? In an interesting new volume, Aurélie Basha i Novosejt suggests a new way of conceiving of McNamara's role in wartime policymaking.

Basha argues that McNamara ought to be understood not primarily as one of the key architects of American strategy in the Vietnam War, but rather as a loyal executor of the dictates of the presidents he served – first John F. Kennedy and then Lyndon Johnson. This 'loyalty' got him into trouble, 'trump [ing] even his best judgement. Because of it, he "oversaw increasing troop deployments into South Vietnam despite having little or no faith in what those troops could accomplish and despite understanding sooner than most that those deployments could have a crippling economic effect" on the United States and the wider international monetary system' (5).

The fact that Basha's McNamara saw himself primarily as an implementor rather than a strategist meant that he set himself two main tasks. The first was to provide presidents with the military tools they required to execute their strategies. Decisions on force structure and budget priorities were to become a function of foreign policy, and this foreign policy was to be designed by civilian 'security intellectuals' and not the military (38). The second task was to mitigate the negative impact of the war on the American economy by controlling its costs. One of the strengths of the analysis is that by attempting to 'recreate McNamara's reality from the vantage point of his office', Basha appropriately focuses our attention on the extent to which economic issues such as the balance of payments influenced McNamara's approach to the war (5). Another strength is that Basha's account places McNamara fully in the institutional context in which he operated by narrating the evolution of the Office of the Secretary of Defence in the post-war period.

Basha accords high importance to Kennedy's 1963 decision to announce a timetable for withdrawal from South Vietnam. McNamara, Basha argues, was in fact the 'main architect' of these plans, which accorded with both his desire to cut costs and his pessimism about how well the war was going (8). McNamara wanted to set a final withdrawal date of 1965 and observe it even if 'victory' was not achieved by that time (121). Placing him on the dovish end of the spectrum of opinion in the Administration, this invites us to view American escalation in the Vietnam War not as automatic and linear but as a more complex process. Far from seeing the 1963 withdrawal plan as an unserious bureaucratic feint, we ought instead to see a genuine attempt by McNamara to place limits on a war that he doubted the United States could win. Kennedy's death and Johnson's coming to power put an end to these plans and marked the point when McNamara's 'loyalty' began to bear poisonous fruit.

This book needs reading by all serious students of the Vietnam War and is sure to become a touchstone for future debate. One such discussion is likely to focus on the concept of 'strategy', which the book never clearly defines. The conventional definition of strategy – and the one that, incidentally, McNamara would have recognised – is that it is

a plan for using the means at one's disposal to achieve a desired end. Using this definition, the contention that McNamara did not see it as his role to set strategy seems contradicted by the book's many examples of him doing just that. As the author tells us, at one point McNamara's 'attention turned to counterinsurgency strategies' (82). At another, he was a 'proponent' of air power (90). Most importantly of all, McNamara's role in the 1963 withdrawal episode that is so central to this book's argument – during which he 'overrode Kennedy's reservations about committing the administration to a set date' (130) for withdrawal – seems to show him not just involved in but actually taking the lead in strategic debate. It often seems that the book instead takes the word 'strategy' to refer to the setting of desired ends, but even by this definition, McNamara's many interventions were clearly strategic, for they involved the United States adjusting its expectations of what it could achieve in Vietnam.

A second opportunity for debate is over the reason for McNamara's shifting views over time. The book's narrative is mainly bureaucratic, and the result is arguably to exaggerate the extent to which McNamara's views flowed logically from his bureaucratic goals and his 'loyalty' to his superiors rather than due to changes in external circumstances. The context in which McNamara operated changed dramatically between his 1963 push for withdrawal and his 1965 blessing of escalation, not least because in 1965 South Vietnam's collapse appeared imminent, with all the dire consequences that this was commonly predicted to hold in store for both America's standing in the world and for the stability of American domestic politics. As Gelb argued long ago in *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (1979, 2016), such circumstances forced policy-makers into endorsing actions that would stave off short-term disaster even if they were unsure of the long-term prospects of success, and not just because of 'loyalty'. Even as Basha rightly focuses our attention on a neglected dimension of McNamara's motivations, we ought not to lose sight of these other dimensions as well.

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