McNAMARA'S BOYS

INSIDE THE PENTAGON'S SHAMEFUL EFFORT *TO DRAFT MENTALLY DISABLED MEN TO FIGHT IN VIETNAM*

+

***THE MOST DISGRACEFUL, FOUL-MOUTHED MESSAGE BY A US PRESIDENT* TO THE MILITARY CHIEFS OF STAFF YOU HAVE EVER HEARD THAT THE AMERICAN PUBLIC NEVER KNEW ABOUT. MORE POLTICAL SILENCE!**

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A FEW OTHER TAINTED SECRETS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

SOME SOLDIERS REFERRED TO THEM AS McNAMARA'S MORONS

THIS IS A LONG ARTICLE AND MAY BE ONE OF THE MOST DISGUSTING YOU WILL EVER READ

THIS ARTICLE HAS 3 PARTS

PART 1 - MCNAMARA'S BOYS (*THIS WILL SURPRISE YOU*)

PART 2 – HOW ROBERT MCNAMARA CAME TO REGRET THE WAR HE ESCALATED

PART 3 - THE DAY VIETNAM BECAME OUR LONGEST WAR AND THE DISGRACEFUL BEHAVIOR OF AN AMERICAN PRESIDENT

SOURCE

Horst Faas/Associated Press By Hamilton Gregory

MCNAMARA'S BOYS

In 1966, with American involvement in the Vietnam War rapidly escalating, President Lyndon B. Johnson faced a big problem: How could the U.S. military round up enough men to send to war? Johnson could have moved to revoke student deferments, but in so doing he would have heaped lots of political misery on himself and put his administration at sharp odds with powerful lawmakers, who were writing a new Selective Service statute that would continue to guarantee 2-S deferments to undergraduate college students in good standing. He could also have chosen to draw on the million or so men and women in the National Guard and Reserves.

But LBJ and his advisers knew that this course of action would be just as unpopular politically. Johnson's secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, had another idea: to dramatically widen the pool of draft-eligible Americans by lowering the standards for entry into the armed forces. There were plenty of young people out there who weren't protected by student deferments but had flunked the military's entrance exam, the Armed Forces Qualification Test. If the standards for passing the test could be lowered, McNamara argued, tens of thousands of previously "unqualified" young men and women would suddenly be available for military service.

In August 1966 McNamara went before the annual convention of Veterans of Foreign Wars to unveil his plan, promising that it would "salvage" some 40,000 draft rejects and substandard volunteers—most of them from "poverty-encrusted backgrounds"—in the ensuing 10 months.

"Currently," McNamara noted, *"the military rejects 600,000 young men a year for failure to meet minimum standards."*

In his VFW speech at the New York Hilton Hotel, McNamara framed the plan as a compassionate rescue mission. Disadvantaged youths—many from urban slums and rural backwaters—would, he said, be lifted out of poverty and ignorance. They would be taught basic skills, including reading and arithmetic. Though the men may have failed these subjects in school, they wouldn't fail now because the military was, as he put it, "the world's greatest educator of skilled manpower." It knew how to motivate men and deploy an impressive array of pedagogical gadgets.

McNamara had made a name for himself as one of the "Whiz Kids" who helped to rebuild Ford Motor Company after World War II. He believed that the military could raise the intelligence of those it might otherwise reject through the use of videotapes and closed-circuit TV lessons.

"A low-aptitude student," he said, "can use videotapes as an aid to his formal instruction and end by becoming as proficient as a high-aptitude student."

McNamara's announcement caught the Pentagon by surprise, as the plan was a dramatically expanded version of a proposed three-year, $16.4 million experiment—the Special Training Enlistment Program (STEP)—that Congress had killed the previous year.

Nonetheless, Project 100,000—named for its target first-fiscal-year recruitment level—was officially launched on October 1, 1966. By the end of the war, it would bring 354,000 "second-class fellows"—as President Johnson had referred to its recruits in private—into the armed forces.

In announcing Project 100,000, McNamara didn't say anything about combat duty. He said the participants would gain valuable skills and self-confidence, which would help them get good-paying civilian jobs when they got out of the service. To hear him describe it, one would have thought the men were going off to school, not to war.

From nearly the beginning of Project 100,000, McNamara's critics accused him of disguising its true objective: using the poor instead of the middle class for combat in Vietnam. The truth was more complex. McNamara had proposed Project 100,000 two years earlier, seeing it as a way to contribute to the Johnson administration's War on Poverty. The idea had been kicking around Washington before McNamara arrived on the scene.

Its leading advocate was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist who in 1976 would be elected to the U.S. Senate from New York. The best way to alleviate poverty in America, Moynihan's argument went, would be to draft the hundreds of thousands of young men and women being rejected annually as unfit for military service. Take these young men—mostly inner-city blacks and poor, rural whites—and put them into uniform. Instill discipline. Train them to bathe daily, salute, and take orders. Teach them a marketable skill. After a couple of years, lazy, unmotivated slackers would be transformed into hard-working, law-abiding citizens. Moreover, the new generation of military recruits could then teach their children to be solid middle-class citizens, thus breaking the generation-to-generation continuity of poverty.

Johnson and McNamara embraced Moynihan's concept in 1964, two years before Project 100,000 was launched. *Secret White House recordings captured a conversation in which Johnson said that he wished the military could be persuaded to take the "second-class fellow," adding:*

"We'll…teach him to get up at daylight and work till dark and shave and bathe…. And when we turn him out, we'll have him prepared at least to drive a truck or bakery wagon or stand at a gate [as a guard]."

Project 100,000 recruits—"New Standards" men, they were called—were assigned to all major branches of the armed forces: 71 percent to the army, 10 percent to the Marine Corps, 10 percent to the Navy, and 9 percent to the air force.

Most of the 354,000 men and women brought into military service through Project 100,000 went to Vietnam, and about half of those who went to Vietnam were assigned to combat units. All told, 5,478 of them died while in the military, most of them in combat. *Their fatality rate was three times that of other GIs.*

McNamara told LBJ that uniformed officers in the Defense Department were opposed to drafting such men because "*they don't want to be in the business of dealing with 'morons.*' They call these 'moron camps' now, inside the [Pentagon]. The army doesn't want to be thought of as a rehabilitation agency."

In 1964 and 1965 Johnson and McNamara had tried repeatedly to lower the bar for military service, only to be stymied by higher-ups at the Pentagon and their allies in Congress. Democrat Richard Russell of Georgia, the powerful chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and LBJ's mentor on Capitol Hill, accused McNamara of trying to set up a "moron corps." The Department of the Army was more temperate in its criticism, saying only that it wanted to "fight with the highest caliber of men available."

By 1966, however, the top brass, desperate for manpower, had to capitulate: If Johnson and McNamara weren't willing to draft more middle-class Americans, then "second-class" servicemen would have to suffice. With bitter disappointment and grave doubts, military leaders went along with the decision of their civilian bosses, and Project 100,000 became a reality.

Military recruiters, backed by an aggressive public relations campaign (one army ad in Hot Rod Magazine proclaimed, "Vietnam: Hot, Wet, and Muddy—Here's the Place to Make a Man!"), had great success persuading men from poor urban neighborhoods to join Project 100,000. Glossy brochures with exotic locations and glamorous jobs portrayed the military—even with a war going at full tilt—as a good career choice. The pressure on recruiters to sign up more "volunteers" for the program was intense. *Many resorted to using "ringers" to take tests to gain a passing score for enough recruits to meet quotas.*

Typically, military recruiters would get the names of low-scoring men who were now acceptable to the armed forces and visit them to steer them toward three-year hitches. The recruiters would tell them that if they waited for the draft, they would serve only two years but almost certainly end up in an infantry platoon in Vietnam.

But if they signed up for three years, they would be assigned to a non-combat job. There was, however, an important catch: *The military didn't have to honor any oral promise made by a recruiter*

A recruiter might promise prospects a job like helicopter maintenance, but after basic training—when it was time to go to a specialized school—the military could decide that their test scores weren't high enough to qualify for helicopter maintenance

Or if they did qualify and flunked the training, they could be transferred to infantry. Thousands of three-year Project 100,000 "volunteers" ended up in the infantry this way.

FULL TEXT

THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

25 JULY, 1967

MEMORADUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Project One Hundred Thousand

In the Spring of 1965, we became concerned with the fact that 35% of the Nation's youth were being disqualified for military service. In September 1965 and again in March 1966, I advised you that we were instituting modest revisions in our mental standards in order to determine whether we could qualify, through improved training programs, some portion of these rejectees for service. These initial revisions quickly demonstrated that we were capable of training successfully many thousands of men who did not score well on our tests. As a result, we announced last August "Project One Hundred Thousand," under which we are further reducing both mental and physical standards in order to accept (1) 40,000 formerly disqualified men in the year beginning October 1, 1966, and (2) 100,000 such men in the year beginning October 1, 1967.

During the 41 weeks between October 1, 1966, and July 14, 1967, we accepted over 35,200 men who would have been disqualified under standards in existence prior to Project One Hundred Thousand. Thus, we are assured of meeting the goal set for the first twelve months of this program.

We have kept individual records on the 35,200 men. An analysis of their backgrounds reveals that 4 out of 10 are non-white (mainly Negroes) compared to 1 out of 10 Negroes among all new enlisted men. Almost 6 out of 10 had not finished high school & over twice the percent of non-high school graduates among new enlisted men as a whole. Furthermore, 30% were unemployed and over 56% were either unemployed or under-employed in terms of earnings at the time of their entry into service.

Thus far, 21,000 of the Project One Hundred Thousand men have been processed through basic training. Less than 4% have been discharged; of these, over half failed for physical reasons. While this rate of discharge in basic training is greater than for men with higher mental aptitudes, it is a very satisfactory rate, and far less than expected.

Beginning October 1, 1967, we plan to increase the intake of Project One Hundred Thousand men to 100,000 in the succeeding twelve months. Of this group, we expect 15,000 to be men with physical defects which can be remedied within six weeks, and the remainder to be men who would have failed under last year's mental test standards.

Robert S. McNamara

McNamara's memorandum to President Johnson on Project 100,000

Project 100,000 men had to complete basic training, and, in some cases, undergo additional training. Novelist Larry Heinemann, who had served with the 25th Infantry Division in Vietnam, recalled in a 2005 memoir that in his basic training barracks at Fort Polk, Louisiana, he would look across the street and watch McNamara's Boys in a special training company. "These were the guys who could not hack it during regular basic training," he wrote. "It was painful to watch.… *Some of them could not even get the hang of so simple a thing as standing at attention, and otherwise seemed severely unsuited for military life."*

"The young men of Project 100,000 couldn't read," **Joseph Galloway, a war correspondent who was awarded a Bronze Star with Valor in Vietnam for carrying wounded men to safety in the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley, later recalled. "They had to be taught to tie their boots.**

They often failed [basic training] and were recycled over and over until they finally reached some low standard and were declared trained and ready. They could not be taught any more demanding job than trigger-pulling, [so most of them] went straight into combat, where the learning curve is steep and deadly."

One veteran who had good reason to be dismayed by the deaths of Project 100,000 men in Vietnam was John Leslieohn Shellhase, who had been wounded in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II and had served as a lieutenant colonel under McNamara on a planning team at the Pentagon in the 1960s. "We resisted Project 100,000 because we knew that wars are not won by using marginal manpower as cannon fodder, but rather by risking, and sometimes losing, the flower of a nation's youth." He and other Pentagon planners tried to persuade McNamara to drop Project 100,000. When that failed, they proposed altering the program so that military commanders would be barred from sending low-aptitude men into danger zones. *"We never envisioned that these men would be used in combat*," he said. "Instead, we intended for them to be used in service and support areas, where their mental limitations would not cause them to be killed." Unfortunately, Shellhase and his fellow officers failed in their effort to keep Project 100,000 men off the battlefield.

Barry Romo saw a lot of combat in Vietnam as an infantry platoon leader in 1967-1968, receiving a Bronze Star for his courage on the battlefield.

During his tour, he learned that his nephew Robert, just a month younger than him, had been drafted and was being trained at Fort Lewis, Washington, to be an infantryman, destined for Vietnam.

Barry was alarmed because he knew that Robert had failed the army's mental test. But Project 100,000 had lowered the standards, making him eligible to serve. A host of people—his relatives, his comrades at Fort Lewis, his sergeants, his officers—wrote to the commanding general at Fort Lewis, asking that Robert not be sent into combat because, as one relative put it, "he would die."

But the general turned down the request, and when Robert arrived in Vietnam he was sent to an infantry unit near the border of North Vietnam—one of the most dangerous combat areas. During a patrol, he was shot in the neck while trying to help a wounded friend and died.

In a speech delivered 42 years later, Barry Romo said that the family had never recovered from losing Robert. "His death," he said, "almost destroyed us with anger and sorrow."

Military leaders—from William Westmoreland, the commanding general in Vietnam, to lieutenants and sergeants at the platoon level—*viewed McNamara's program as a disaster*. Project 100,000 men were typically slow learners, so they had difficulty absorbing training. And because many of them were incompetent in combat, they endangered not only themselves but their comrades as well.

"Project 100,000 was implemented to produce more grunts for the killing fields of Vietnam," wrote Colonel David Hackworth, who fought in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars and became one of the most highly decorated warriors in American history. "It took unfit recruits from the bottom of the barrel and rushed them to Vietnam. The result was human applesauce."

McNamara's intentions to use video instruction to raise the intelligence levels of Project 100,000 may have been sincere, but few men received it. There was a bloody war raging, and army and marine units in Vietnam desperately needed replacements. Training centers were under great pressure to get troops to Vietnam as quickly as possible. There was no time for remedial reading and arithmetic.

Westmoreland estimated that only about 10 percent of McNamara's Boys could be molded into real soldiers. Although some Project 100,000 men did well in the service—passing basic training and going on to productive military assignments—large numbers of them had trouble coping with the demands of military life. *They were often hazed, ridiculed, and demeaned.*

Ironically, McNamara, in one of his speeches extolling Project 100,000, had said, "I have directed that these men shall never be singled out or stigmatized in any manner."

When it was time for Project 100,000 men to leave the military, many of them received a heavy blow. Slightly ***over half of them—180,000—were separated with discharges "under conditions other than honorable,"*** a stigma that made it hard to get good jobs because many employers would not hire veterans who failed to produce a certificate of honorable discharge. They were often barred from veterans' benefits such as health care, housing assistance, and employment counseling. Some of them became chronically homeless and troubled.

Although some "bad-paper" vets had been guilty of serious offenses, most had been accused of minor offenses related to the stresses of military life and combat: AWOL, missing duty, abusing alcohol or drugs, or talking back to a superior.

David Addlestone, the director of the National Veterans Law Center from its founding in 1978 until his retirement in 2005, said that one of the leading reasons that the military gave for bad-paper discharges for Project 100,000 men was "unsuitability."***Little wonder: Many of the men were unsuitable to be drafted in the first place.***

President Lyndon B. Johnson reacts to news of heightened problems in Vietnam while hosting Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (right) at the LBJ Ranch in Stonewall, Texas

In their 1978 book, Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation, Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, who were senior officials on President Gerald Ford's Clemency Board, told of Gus Peters, who "came from a broken home, dropped out of school after the eighth grade, and was unemployed for most of his teenage years. His IQ was only 62. His physical condition was no better." Drafted under Project 100,000, Peters was ridiculed by other soldiers, and he failed basic training. Unable to cope with military life, he went AWOL and was eventually given an undesirable discharge. Baskir and Strauss concluded that Peters was worse off when he left the service than when he had entered it. "He still had no skills and no useful job experience," they wrote, "and he now was officially branded a misfit.

There was a cruel irony in the less-than-honorable discharges. Millions of men who beat the draft through deferments and exemptions suffered nothing. They held an advantage over men who served: They got the first crack at jobs and compiled seniority and experience. ***Even the draft dodgers who fled to Canada and Sweden got an amnesty. But not McNamara's bad-paper vets. They had no one to lobby for them.***

In his starry-eyed belief that videotapes could dramatically transform slow learners, McNamara revealed the same blind faith that deluded him into thinking that he could defeat the enemy in Vietnam by using computers, statistical analyses, and advanced technology. As biographer Deborah Shapley put it, McNamara was "a naive believer in technological miracles."

At the beginning of his program, McNamara had predicted that after returning to civilian life, Project 100,000 men would have an earning capacity "two to three times what it would have been if there had been no such program." However, a follow-up study on Project 100,000 men showed that in the 1986-1987 labor market, they were "either no better off or worse off" than nonveterans of similar aptitude.

Many veterans of Project 100,000 were psychologically devastated by the war. John Wilson, a psychologist at Cleveland State University who spent several years studying Vietnam veterans' emotional problems, estimated that thousands of Project 100,000 men who had served in Southeast Asia were so "severely messed up" that they couldn't function in society—hold jobs, raise families, and cope with day-to-day living.

Historians have also rendered harsh verdicts of Project 100,000. In his 1993 book, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, Christian G. Appy of the University of Massachusetts wrote that while the program "was instituted with high-minded rhetoric about offering the poor an opportunity to serve," its result "was to send many poor, terribly confused, and woefully undereducated boys to risk death in Vietnam." Anni P. Baker, a history professor at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, has branded Project 100,000 "a disaster, benefiting neither the men nor the Armed Forces."

In 1993 Jacob Heilbrunn, then a fellow at Georgetown University, wrote in the *New Republic* that "McNamara's experiment in social engineering had the most awful results," including ridicule in training camps and death in Vietnam. The late Samuel F. Yette, a professor at Howard University, said that instead of preparing impoverished young men with skills for a better life, Project 100,000 was "little more than an express vehicle to Vietnam."

Toward the end of his life, McNamara issued a series of candid regrets for misjudgments about Vietnam that were made during his tenure at the Pentagon (1961 to 1968), especially his delay in acting on growing doubts that the war could be won. "I'm very sorry that in the process of accomplishing things, I've made errors," McNamara told filmmaker Errol Morris for *The Fog of War*, Morris's Oscar-winning 2003 documentary.

Caskets containing the bodies of U.S. servicemen killed in Vietnam are unloaded from an Air Force transport plane following its return to the United States.

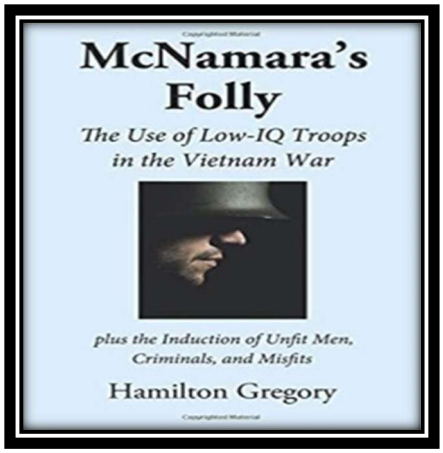
While he never issued a formal apology for his role in the Vietnam quagmire, McNamara, who died in July 2009 at age 93, made clear he was haunted by the blunders made under his watch that cost the lives of thousands of U.S. troops. "People don't want to admit they made mistakes," he explained in 2003 to a reporter for the New York Times. "This is true of the Catholic Church, it's true of companies, it's true of nongovernmental organizations, and it's certainly true of political bodies."

Conspicuously absent from McNamara's apologies was Project 100,000, which officially ended on December 31, 1971. To the very end of his life, McNamara refused to acknowledge the many accounts of abuse, suffering, and death associated with Project 100,000. Selectively looking at the success stories of some Project 100,000 men who did well, he insisted that the program had been beneficial. He was resentful of the term "McNamara's Moron Corps," which he had heard for years.

Nonetheless, Project 100,000 and other Vietnam-era failures wrecked McNamara's reputation. "At first admired for his intelligence and analytical prowess, ***he later became one of the most hated men in America by the officers and enlisted personnel he had led,"*** Thomas Sticht wrote of McNamara in the 2012 anthology, Scraping the Barrel: The Military Use of Substandard Manpower, 1860-1960. One officer even confronted McNamara in public.

As McNamara touted the virtues of Project 100,000 at a Washington conference, an army psychologist who was treating psychologically afflicted Vietnam veterans at Walter Reed Army Medical Center stood up and spoke out.

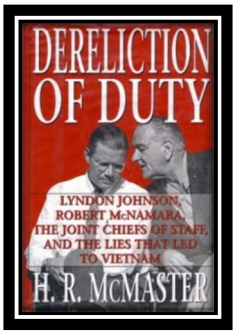
Although he was a "mere" captain, Dr. Walter P. Knake told McNamara, "What you are doing is wrong!"



Regardless of culpability, the results of the project—not its intentions—doomed McNamara's Boys, who were, on average, just 20 years old and disproportionately black. "They never got the training that military service seemed to promise," Baskir and Strauss concluded.

They were the last to be promoted and the first to be sent to Vietnam. **They saw more than their share of combat and got more than their share of bad discharges. Many ended up with greater difficulties in civilian society than when they started. For them, it was an ironic and tragic conclusion to a program that promised special treatment and a brighter future, and denied both." MHQ**

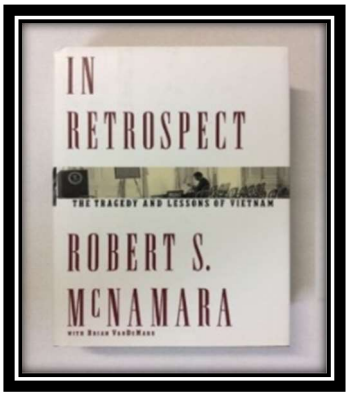
Hamilton Gregory, who served in Army Intelligence in Vietnam from 1968-1969, is the author of McNamara's Folly: The Use of Low-IQ Troops in the Vietnam War.



PART 2

HOW ROBERT MCNAMARA CAME TO REGRET THE WAR HE ESCALATED

The architect of the Vietnam War never formally apologized but struggled with its consequences for the rest of his life.



McNamara's Book on Vietnam

Vietnam was a war the Americans couldn't win and Robert McNamara couldn't make peace with.

In April 1964, a U.S. Senator described Vietnam as "McNamara's War." Robert McNamara himself, in the middle of his tenure as defense secretary, embraced the moniker and wrote Tim Weiner for the New York Times on the occasion of McNamara's death in 2009. "I am pleased to be identified with it," he said, "and do whatever I can to win it." Even if insufficient, Weiner writes that his contrition appeared sincere.

Less than four years later, he sat in front of the yellow backdrop of a newscast and announced his resignation, on this day in 1967. "No one of my predecessors has served so long. I did not plan to.

I have done so because of my feeling of obligation to the President and the nation," he says. A beat passes. "Although I have felt for some time that there would be benefits from the appointment of a fresh person."

8,500 miles away, the war would ultimately cost 58,000 American lives and more than three million Vietnamese ones, to say nothing of its long-term impacts on the country where it was fought. The Vietnamese people and American veterans continue to endure the effects of Agent Orange exposure today.

McNamara wrote in a 1995 memoir that his behavior in shaping the war was "wrong, terribly wrong," but, to many—including then-editor of the Times Howell Raines—that confession was too little, too late.

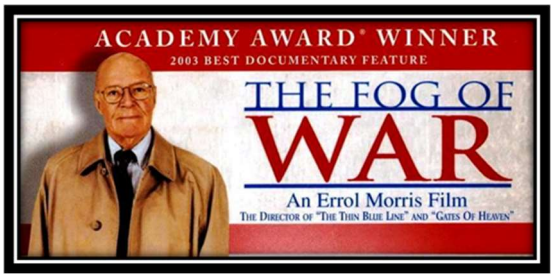
"I think the human race needs to think more about killing," he says in the award-winning documentary "Fog of War". How much evil must we do to do good?"

The "lessons" McNamara discusses in the film encompass many of the military events he participated in or witnessed during his career: American firebombing of Japanese cities during the Second World War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and of course Vietnam.

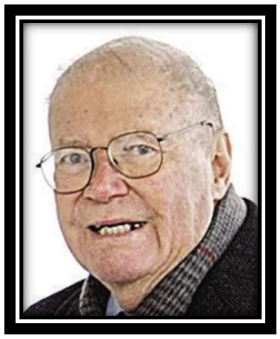
"What I'm doing is thinking through this in hindsight," he says in the documentary. "... I'm very proud of my accomplishments, and I'm very sorry that in the process of accomplishing things, I've made errors."

McNamara expressed regret, but never made a formal apology for his central role in stoking the conflict in Vietnam. **Nor did he speak out after stepping down, although by 1967, as Raines wrote, he realized the war had to be stopped to avoid "a major national disaster." His public contrition came at almost a thirty-year remove from when it might have affected the war.**

"Surely he must in every quiet and prosperous moment hear the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry, dying in the tall grass, platoon by platoon, for no purpose," the Times editor wrote "What 'he took from them cannot be repaid by prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades late."



Eight years after that editorial was written, *Fog of War* premiered. McNamara lived another six after that, dying in his sleep on *July 6, 2009, at the age of 93*.



MACNAMARA' S FIRING/RESIGNATION?

On Nov. 29, 1967, President Lyndon Johnson announced that Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense, would leave his post to run the World Bank. "I do not know to this day whether I quit or was fired," McNamara wrote decades later. "Maybe it was both."

It's quite clear: He was fired. **But he wasn't the only one who was confused. The conditions of McNamara's departure from the Pentagon were murky at the time — and that murkiness speaks volumes about McNamara, Johnson, and the domestic politics of the Vietnam War. Over the previous months, Johnson had become frustrated with McNamara's growing disenchantment with the American war in Vietnam: his rising suspicion that the air war against North Vietnam was not working and would not work, that political stability in Saigon remained elusive and that therefore the administration ought to seek a negotiated exit. Johnson, raging privately that McNamara had turned soft, also suspected him of secretly scheming to prod Robert Kennedy, then a Democratic senator from New York, to run on a peace ticket in the presidential election the following year, challenging Johnson for the Democratic nomination.**

Johnson couldn't just dismiss McNamara outright, however; doing so risked him publicly defecting to Kennedy and denouncing the war. Better, Johnson determined, to find him a new position where he could be trusted to maintain a discreet silence — a place, that is, like the World Bank.

That McNamara did not consider leaving the administration of his own accord in that grim year of 1967 says much about the man and the demands of loyalty in American presidential politics.

While certainly not defending McNamara, I cannot help but say that in my opinion after reading this and many other articles about the Vietnam War I feel that President *Johnson did as much to start and escalate the war as much as Secretary McNamara did. Though not addressed in this article the Military Family hated Johnson as much as they did McNamara.* As this and many other articles point out, so very clearly, this was a Political War.

The below article covers one of President Johnson's meetings with his Joint Chiefs of Staff and conveys to you one of the most embarrassing situations ever exhibited by a US President.

History confirms that, in addition to some others, three major names were responsible for extending the Vietnam War and there is proof of this, some of it in the National Archives…and they are all politicians.

They are all very familiar names like Johnson, McNamara, and Nixon, and could easily add Kissinger to that list for he knew what was going on and did absolutely nothing.

The question that always comes to mind….. 58,220 young (average age 21) American soldiers killed, a country torn apart with thousands and thousands of their people killed, a War started by false and/or misinterpreted intelligence which we did not and could win and fought under the rules of the politicians rather than the Military ……for what? To let the Politicians play their game!

PART THREE

THE DAY VIETNAM BECAME THE LONGEST WAR AND THE DISGRACEFUL BEHAVIOR OF AN AMERICAN PRESIDENT

An unbelievable meeting of President Johnson and his Military Joint Chiefs in November 1965

By Lt. Gen Charles Cooper, USMC (Retired) (

(He was at the meeting)

"The President will see you at 2 O'clock.

It was a beautiful fall day in November of 1965; early in the Vietnam War beautiful a day to be what many of us, anticipating it, had been calling "the day of reckoning." We didn't know how accurate that label would be.

The Pentagon is a busy place. Its workday starts early-especially if, as the expression goes, "there's a war on." By seven o'clock, the staff of Admiral David L. McDonald, the Navy's senior admiral and Chief of Naval Operations, had started to work. Shortly after seven, Admiral McDonald arrived and began making final preparations for a meeting with President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

The Vietnam War was in its first year, and its uncertain direction troubled Admiral McDonald and the other service chiefs. They'd had several disagreements with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara about strategy and had finally requested a private meeting with the Commander in Chief legitimate procedure. Now, after many delays, the Joint Chiefs were finally to have that meeting. They hoped it would determine whether the US military would continue its seemingly directionless buildup to fight a protracted ground war, or take bold measures that would bring the war to an early and victorious end.

The bold measures they would propose were to apply massive air power to the head of the enemy, Hanoi, and to close North Vietnam's harbors by mining them.

The situation was not a simple one for several reasons. The most important reason was that North Vietnam's neighbor to the north was communist China. Only 12 years had passed since the Korean War had ended in a stalemate. The aggressors in that war had been the North Koreans.

When the North Koreans' defeat appeared to be inevitable, communist China sent hundreds of thousands of its Peoples' Liberation Army "volunteers" to the rescue.

Now, in this new war, the North Vietnamese aggressor had the logistic support of the Soviet Union and, more to the point, of neighboring communist China. Although we had the air and naval forces with which to paralyze North Vietnam, we had to consider the possible reactions of the Chinese and the Russians.

Both China and the Soviet Union had pledged to support North Vietnam in the "war of national liberation" It was fighting to reunite the divided country, and both had the wherewithal to cause major problems. An important unknown was what the Russians would do if prevented from delivering goods to their communist protege in Hanoi. A more important question concerned communist China, next-door neighbor to North Vietnam. How would the Chinese react to a massive pummeling of their ally? More specifically, would they enter the war as they had done in North Korea? Or would they let the Vietnamese, for centuries a traditional enemy, fend for themselves?

The service chiefs had considered these and similar questions *and had also asked the Central Intelligence Agency for answers and estimates.*

The CIA was of little help, **though it produced reams of text, executive summaries of the texts, and briefs of the executive summaries top secret, all extremely sensitive, and all of little use. The principal conclusion was that it was impossible to predict with any accuracy what the Chinese or Russians might do.**

Despite the lack of a clear-cut intelligence estimate, Admiral McDonald and the other Joint Chiefs did what they were paid to do and reached a conclusion. They decided unanimously that the risk of the Chinese or Soviets reacting to massive US measures taken in North Vietnam was acceptably low, but only if we acted without delay. *Unfortunately, the Secretary of Defense and his coterie of civilian "whiz kids" did not agree with the Joint Chiefs, and McNamara and his people were the ones who were steering military strategy.* In the view of the Joint Chiefs, the United States was piling on forces in Vietnam without understanding the consequences. In the view of McNamara and his civilian team, we were doing the right thing. *This was the fundamental dispute that had caused the Chiefs to request the seldom-used private audience with the Commander in Chief to present their military recommendations directly to him. McNamara had finally granted their request.*

The 1965 Joint Chiefs of Staff had ample combat experience. Each was serving in his third war. The Chairman was General Earle Wheeler, US Army, highly regarded by the other members.

General Harold Johnson was the Army Chief of Staff. A World War II prisoner of the Japanese, he was a soft-spoken, even-tempered, deeply religious man.

General John P. McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, was a native of Arkansas and a 1932 graduate of West Point.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps was General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., a slim, short, all-business Marine. General Greene was a Naval Academy graduate and a zealous protector of the Marine Corps concept of controlling its air resources as part of an integrated air-ground team.

Last and by no means least was Admiral McDonald, a Georgia minister's son, also a Naval Academy graduate, and a naval aviator. While Admiral McDonald was a most capable leader, he was also a reluctant warrior. He did not like what he saw emerging as a national commitment. He did not want the US to get involved with land warfare, believing as he did that the Navy could apply sea power against North Vietnam very effectively by mining, blockading, and assisting in a bombing campaign and in this way help to bring the war to a swift and satisfactory conclusion.

The Joint Chiefs intended that the prime topics of the meeting with the President would be naval matters mining and blockading of the port of Haiphong and naval support of a bombing campaign aimed at Hanoi. *For that reason, the Navy was to furnish a briefing map, and that became my (The author Lt. Gen Charles Cooper) responsibility.*

We mounted a suitable map on a large piece of plywood, then coated it with clear acetate so that the chiefs could mark it with grease pencils during the discussion.

The whole thing weighed about 30 pounds.

The Military Office at the White House agreed to set up an easel in the Oval Office to hold the map. I would accompany Admiral McDonald to the White House with the map, put the map in place when the meeting started, and then get out. There would be no strap-hangers at the military summit meeting with Lyndon Johnson.

The map and I joined Admiral McDonald in his staff car for the short drive to the White House, a drive that was memorable only because of the silence. My admiral was preoccupied.

The chiefs' appointment with the President was for two o'clock, and Admiral McDonald and I arrived about 20 minutes early. The chiefs were ushered into a fairly large room across the hall from the Oval Office.

I propped the map board on the arms of a fancy chair where all could view it, left two of the grease pencils in the tray attached to the bottom of the board, and stepped out into the corridor.

US Military Joint Chiefs of Staff – 1965

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Gen. JP McConnell (USAF), Adm. DL McDonald (US Navy), Gen.EG Wheeler (Chairman-US Army), Gen.HK Johnson (US Army) Gen. WM Green (Far right – US Marine Corps)

One of the chiefs shut the door, and they conferred in private until someone on the White House staff interrupted them about fifteen minutes later. As they came out, I retrieved the map and then joined them in the corridor outside the President's office.

Precisely at two o'clock President Johnson emerged from the Oval Office and greeted the chiefs. He was all charm. He was also big: at three or more inches over six feet tall and something on the order of 250 pounds, he was bigger than any of the chiefs. He ushered them into his office, all the while delivering gracious and solicitous comments with a Texas accent far more pronounced than the one that came through when he spoke on television.

Holding the map board as the chiefs entered, I peered between them, trying to find the easel. There was none. The President looked at me, grasped the situation at once, and invited me in, adding, "You can stand right over here." I had become an easel-one with eyes and ears.

To the right of the door, not far inside the office, large windows framed evergreen bushes growing in a nearby garden. The President's desk and several chairs were farther in, diagonally across the room from the windows.

The President positioned me near the windows, then arranged the chiefs in a semicircle in front of the map and its human easel. *He did not offer them seats*: they stood, with those who were to speak-Wheeler, McDonald, and McConnell-standing nearest the President. Paradoxically, the two whose services were most affected by a continuation of the ground buildup in Vietnam --Generals Johnson and Stood farthest from the President.

President Johnson stood nearest the door, about five feet from the map.

In retrospect, the setup failure to have an easel in place, the positioning of the chiefs on the outer fringe of the office, and the lack of seating did not augur well. The chiefs had expected the meeting to be a short one, and it met that expectation. They also expected it to be of momentous import, and it met that expectation, too. Unfortunately, it also proved to be a meeting that was critical to the proper pursuit of what was to become the longest, most divisive, and least conclusive war in our nation's history war that almost tore the nation apart.

As General Wheeler started talking, President Johnson peered at the map. In five minutes or so, the general summarized our entry into Vietnam, the current status of forces, and the purpose of the meeting.

Then he thanked the President for having allowed his senior military advisers to present their opinions and recommendations. *Finally, he noted that although Secretary McNamara did not subscribe to their views, he did agree that a presidential-level decision was required.* President Johnson, arms crossed, seemed to be listening carefully.

The essence of General Wheeler's presentation was that we had come to an early moment of truth in our ever-increasing Vietnam involvement. We had to start using our principal strengths and naval power to punish the North Vietnamese, or we would risk becoming involved in another protracted Asian ground war with no prospects of a satisfactory solution. Speaking for the chiefs, General Wheeler offered a bold course of action that would avoid protracted land warfare. He proposed that we isolate the major port of Haiphong through naval mining, blockade the rest of the North Vietnamese coastline, and simultaneously start bombing Hanoi with B-52s.

General Wheeler then asked Admiral McDonald to describe how the Navy and Air Force would combine forces to mine the waters off Haiphong and establish a naval blockade. When Admiral McDonald finished, General McConnell added that speed of execution would be essential and that we would have to make the North Vietnamese believe that we would increase the level of punishment if they did not sue for peace.

Normally, time dims our memories-but it hasn't dimmed this one. *My memory of Lyndon Johnson on that day remains crystal clear.* While General Wheeler, Admiral McDonald, and General McConnell spoke, he seemed to be listening closely, communicating only with an occasional nod. When General McConnell finished, General Wheeler asked the President if he had any questions. Johnson waited a moment or so, then turned to Generals Johnson and Greene, who had remained silent during the briefing, and asked, "Do you fully support these ideas?" He followed with the thought that it was they who were providing the ground troops, in effect acknowledging that the Army and the Marines were the services that had the most to gain or lose as a result of this discussion. Both generals indicated their agreement with the proposal. *Seemingly deep in thought, President Johnson turned his back on them for a minute or so, then suddenly discarding the calm,* patient demeanor he had maintained throughout the meeting, *whirled to face them and exploded.*

I almost dropped the map. He screamed obscenities, he cursed them personally, he ridiculed them for coming to his office with their "military advice."

Noting that it was he who was carrying the weight of the free world on his shoulders, *he called them filthy names-shitheads, dumb shits, pompous assholes-and used "the F-word" as an adjective more freely than a Marine in boot camp would use it.*

He then accused them of trying to pass the buck for World War III to him. It was unnerving, degrading.

After the tantrum, he resumed the calm, relaxed manner he had displayed earlier and again folded his arms. It was as though he had punished them, cowed them, and would now control them.

Using soft-spoken profanities, he said something to the effect that they all knew now that he did not care about their military advice. After disparaging their abilities, he added that he did expect their help.

He suggested that each one of them change places with him and assume that five incompetents had just made these "military recommendations." ***He told them that he was going to let them go through what he had to go through when idiots gave him stupid advice, adding that he had the whole damn world to worry about, and it was time to "see what kind of guts you have."***

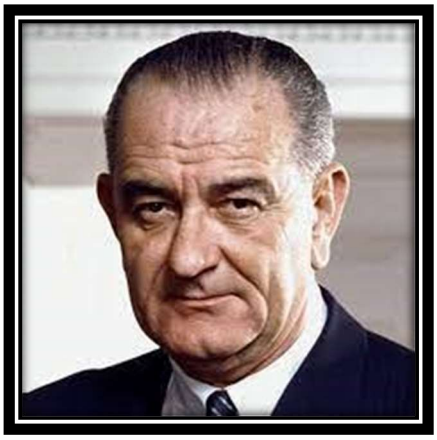
He paused as if to let it sink in. The silence was like a palpable solid, the tension like that in a drumhead. After thirty or forty seconds of this, he turned to General Wheeler and demanded that Wheeler say what he would do if he were the President of the United States.

General Wheeler took a deep breath before answering. He was not an easy man to shake: his calm response set the tone for the others. He had known coming in, as had the others that Lyndon Johnson was an exceptionally strong personality and a venal and vindictive man as well. He had known that the stakes were high and now realized that McNamara had prepared Johnson carefully for this meeting, which had been a charade.

Looking President Johnson squarely in the eye, General Wheeler told him that he understood the tremendous pressure and sense of responsibility Johnson felt. He added that probably no other President in history had had to decide this importance, and further cushioned his remarks by saying that no matter how much about the presidency he did understand, there were many things about it that only one human being could ever understand. General Wheeler closed his remarks by saying something very close to this: "You, Mr. President, are that one human being. I cannot take your place, think your thoughts, know all you know, and tell you what I would do if I were you. I can't do it, Mr. President. No man can honestly do it. Respectfully, sir, it is your decision and yours alone."

Unmoved, Johnson asked each of the other Chiefs the same question. One at a time, they supported General Wheeler and his rationale. By now, my arms felt as though they were about to break. The map seemed to weigh a ton, but the end appeared to be near. General Greene was the last to speak.

When General Greene finished, President Johnson, who was nothing if not a skilled actor, looked sad for a moment, then suddenly erupted again, yelling and cursing, again using language that even a Marine seldom hears. He told them he was disgusted with their naive approach, and that he was not going to let some military idiots talk him into World War III. He ended the conference by shouting "Get the hell out of my office!"



The Joint Chiefs of Staff had done their duty. They knew that the nation was making a strategic military error, and despite the rebuffs of their civilian masters in the Pentagon, they had insisted on presenting the problem as they saw it to the highest authority and recommending solutions. That authority had not only rejected their solutions but had also insulted and demeaned them. As Admiral McDonald and I drove back to the Pentagon, he turned to me and said that he had known tough days in his life, and sad ones as well, but ". . . this has got to have been the worst experience I could ever imagine."

The US involvement in Vietnam lasted another ten years.

The irony is that it began to end only when President Richard Nixon, after some backstage maneuvering on the international scene, did precisely what the Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended to President Johnson in 1965. Why had Johnson not only dismissed their recommendations but also ridiculed them? It must have been that Johnson had lacked something. Maybe it was foresight or boldness.

Maybe it was the sophistication and understanding it took to deal with complex international issues. Or, since he was a bully, maybe what he lacked was courage. We will never know.

But, had General Wheeler and the others received a fair hearing, and had their recommendations received serious study, the United States may well have saved the lives of most of its more than 55,000 sons who died in a war that its major architect, Robert Strange McNamara, now considers to have been a tragic mistake.

THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF ON THE COVER OF TIME MAGAZINE IN 1965

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