

MCNAMARA'S WAR

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Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara
by Deborah Shapley
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Deborah Shapley has written a highly readable and comprehensive study of the life of Robert McNamara, who rose to the presidency of the Ford Motor Company in the 1950s, ran the Pentagon from 1961-1968, and headed the World Bank until 1981, when he retired to private life. Many Bulletin readers probably remember him best as an opponent of nuclear deterrence during the 1980s.

Promise and Power is full of interesting stories, and it helps us understand a truly important figure in Cold War America. It deserves to be widely read, especially since it is the first full-blown biography of McNamara.

McNamara has been involved in many important and controversial issues. For example, at Ford he fought against the infamous Edsel, but championed the Falcon. He helped escalate the arms race after the Kennedy administration assumed office, even though it was clear that the famous "missile gap" favored the Americans, not the Russians. He was also a key figure in the Cuban missile crisis, and was the father of the controversial F-111 aircraft. Later, as president of the World Bank, he liberally provided developing countries with large loans in the 1970s, which eventually contributed to the Third World debt crisis. One could point to many other issues that bear his handprints.

There was one issue, however, that overshadowed all the others, and that was Vietnam. Robert McNamara was the principal architect of the Vietnam War, arguably the greatest foreign policy disaster in American history. His legacy will be forever bound up with the war he fathered. More than 58,000 Americans died and many more were wounded, both physically and psychologically, in a losing cause. The war caused tremendous political turmoil at home, and did serious damage to America's reputation abroad. Moreover, defeat in Vietnam did not hurt America's overall strategic position, as McNamara—a staunch believer in the domino theory—had predicted.

The war was also a personal disaster for McNamara. It wrecked his professional life, and by his own admission, wreaked havoc on his personal life.

Thus, the central question that any study of Robert McNamara must answer is how he could have made such a monumental blunder. Shapley's book throws much light on this question, although her bottom-line assessment of McNamara is flawed.

McNamara was at first perceived to be a brilliant and wildly successful secretary of defense. He was bombarded with lavish praise in the early 1960s. A journalist's claim that he " may be the greatest managerial genius of our time" was typical. Even Barry Goldwater was wowed by the early McNamara, describing him in 1961 as "one of the best secretaries ever, an IBM machine with legs."

Interestingly, he felt he had the Vietnam problem well under control in the early 1960s. In fact, he was confident to the point of being cocky about his ability to manage that conflict. When a journalist told McNamara that Sen. Wayne Morse-an early opponent of the war-had labeled the conflict "McNamara's war," he responded, "I don't mind its being called McNamara's war. In fact I'm proud to be associated with it."

His bosses-John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson-thought he walked on water. Kennedy wanted McNamara, not Johnson, to be the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in 1968. When Johnson assumed the presidency and had to think about standing for election, he seriously considered McNamara as a running mate.

However, in a few years' time, McNamara's fortunes had been completely reversed. By mid-1967, contempt for McNamara was widespread in Washington, and he could not step on a college campus without arousing a major protest. Moreover, McNamara himself was a broken man. He was given to sudden fits of crying in meetings, and colleagues began to worry about his mental health. After Johnson talked with McNamara's wife in August 1967, he told an aide, "We just can't afford another Forrestal." (James Forrestal, the first defense secretary, committed suicide; Johnson was worried that McNamara might do the same.)

The root of McNamara's fall was the war in Vietnam, although, as Shapley makes clear, he bungled other policy decisions as well. When he finally left the Pentagon, shortly after the famous Tet offensive in early 1968, he fully recognized that the United States was "in a hell of a mess." It was a mess he created.

His family also paid an awful price for Vietnam. His relations with his children, especially his son, were badly strained by the war. His children were roughly of college age in the war years, and it was surely no picnic to be identified as the child of the man who was running a war that was wildly unpopular. McNamara's wife, Margy, also suffered. Years later when she died of a rare cancer, McNamara maintained that the ultimate cause of her demise was the "deep trauma" of the war.

At first blush, McNamara does not appear to be a likely candidate to lead the United States down the path to disaster in Vietnam. Certainly, it would have been hard to find anyone in the early 1960s who would have anticipated him making such a blunder. He was very smart, in the sense that he surely had a high IQ and always did extremely well in school. He was a star undergraduate at Berkeley in the 1930s, and he later did well enough at the Harvard Business School to warrant an appointment as a junior instructor.

He was especially good with numbers, he had a terrific memory, and he possessed excellent analytical skills. Moreover, when engaged in intellectual combat, he was agile and quick. Not surprisingly, he was one of the world's greatest briefers. Put a pointer in his hand, stand him behind a lectern, and he would dazzle his audience.

McNamara also had considerable managerial experience before he began making the fateful decisions on Vietnam. He left his teaching position at Harvard in 1942 and spent World War II in a number of middle management jobs in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Then came 14 years at or near the top at Ford. He even had a few years of experience at the Pentagon before making the crucial Vietnam decisions.

Nevertheless, he was a man with fatal flaws that were apparent well before he became defense secretary, which ultimately did him and his country terrible harm. Shapley does a wonderful job of laying those flaws bare, and one cannot help coming away from her book with the strong sense that Robert McNamara was the last person you would want directing the American national security establishment in troubled times.

First, McNamara made snap judgments about important issues largely by himself. He was supremely self-confident about his ability to analyze a problem quickly and come up with the correct solution. He was not a contemplative or thoughtful man who carefully weighed his options before making key decisions. He came from the "shoot first and ask questions later" school of management.

This point is illustrated by looking at McNamara's controversial 1961 decision to adopt a counterforce nuclear strategy, which meant the United States would avoid targeting cities in a nuclear war and try instead to fight a nuclear war much like a conventional war. Shortly after McNamara assumed control of the Pentagon, and at a point at which he knew very little of the ABCs of nuclear strategy, William Kaufmann of the RAND Corporation briefed him about the virtues of counterforce. Shapley describes the meeting: "McNamara was such a fast student that he absorbed Kaufmann's points and 54 slides in one hour instead of the four it took everyone else. In characteristic fashion, he adopted Kaufmann's plan wholesale. Counterforce-no cities-thus was transformed into U.S. nuclear doctrine at the flick of his pen." [Emphasis added.] It is shocking that such a momentous decision was made without the benefit of debate inside or outside the Pentagon.

Making snap judgments is not necessarily a fatal flaw, if the policymaker is willing to reverse a decision when others show it to be wrongheaded. McNamara, however, was an exceptionally arrogant man, who not only had little interest in soliciting other opinions, but would not tolerate dissent. Open and honest debate had no place in any organization he ran. His modus operandi was to treat doubters and dissenters with contempt, and to bully them into accepting his position.

Shapley writes: "His critics were convinced that he purposely wore the Phi Beta Kappa key across his chest on days when he wanted to be particularly fearsome; it glittered there like a small, poisoned dagger. He humiliated those who could not pick up his language of

numbers. He could use 'facts' for intimidation more easily than for reasoned exchange. And his instinct of treating all but a chosen few as antagonists, of slighting people who were really his partners in a common effort, hurt cooperation, morale, and his claim to leadership."

George Ball, an undersecretary of state at the time the United States was edging its way into the abyss, was an early in-house critic of McNamara's Vietnam strategy, and he wrote lengthy memoranda challenging it. Ball's writings are now famous, mainly because they were so remarkably prescient.

How did McNamara deal with Ball and his memoranda when he was forced to confront them? In Ball's own words, he "regarded it as next to treason" that Ball would dare to challenge him over Vietnam. In typical fashion, McNamara treated Ball rudely and contemptuously and went to considerable lengths to isolate and neutralize him within the bureaucracy.

McNamara's third flaw was that he was not a truth teller. In fact, he often lied, says Shapley. This is a serious charge and one that should not be made lightly. But Shapley's book is filled with stories that support the charge. Moreover, it is clear that many individuals who dealt with McNamara over the years came to believe he was not trustworthy. Shapley's description of her own interviews with McNamara is revealing on this point: "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."

The fourth chink in McNamara's armor was that he was obsequious in his behavior towards powerful individuals. He was a classic case of the "kiss up, kick down" personality. He generally told superiors what they wanted to hear, not what they needed to hear, and he went to considerable lengths not to offend influential individuals. In fact, he behaved towards his superiors just the way he expected his subordinates to behave toward him.

This behavior explains in good part why he was so liked by his bosses. Shapley's discussion of how smoothly McNamara made the transfer of presidential power from Kennedy to Johnson illustrates this point nicely. "In the halls of power," she writes, "observers began noting the almost robotic character of McNamara's obedience to his new boss." Moreover, as the rivalry between Bobby Kennedy and Johnson heated up, McNamara remained friendly with both parties.

McNamara simply had no sharp edges when he was dealing with those more powerful than himself. Even in the Reagan years, when he was deeply involved with the left on military policy questions, he "conspicuously praised Reagan personally."

Finally, McNamara was not a strategist, which was probably the most important requirement of his job. He was remarkably ignorant about international security affairs when he became secretary of defense. He spent hardly any time in Washington, D.C.,

before joining the Kennedy administration, and he paid little attention to foreign affairs and military matters when he was at Ford. Moreover, he had no training in the field of international politics. Simply put, he had no philosophy about war and politics in 1960 because he had rarely thought about these subjects. It is difficult to think of a recent secretary of defense who was more unprepared for the job than McNamara.

He was hired because he had a reputation for being a brilliant manager-in the terminology of the day, a "whiz kid." He was supposed to be the consummate bureaucrat who would get the uniformed services in line and run the Pentagon efficiently. However, he proved to be a poor manager.

He made a mess of the weapons acquisition process. Among his more notable failures were the C-5A transport aircraft, the F-111 fighter-bomber, and the MBT-70 main battle tank. He also made a mess of civil-military relations, which is hardly surprising since he was contemptuous of the military profession. The chiefs of staff were so upset with him by the summer of 1967 that they secretly agreed to call a news conference and resign en masse. What would have been the most important civil-military crisis of the Cold War-including the MacArthur-Truman controversy-was barely avoided because Gen. Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, got cold feet at the last moment.

Vietnam was more of a strategic than a managerial problem, and therefore it is hardly surprising that McNamara was at sea when it came to running the war. He still might have avoided disaster if he had been less arrogant and more willing to listen and learn from others. But that was not the McNamara style. He was instead closed-minded and bull-headed on the issue, and he dismissed out of hand the views of dissenters like George Ball.

In sum, the story of McNamara and his failures is straightforward and not very complicated. He had a number of character flaws that made him unsuitable for directing U.S. national security policy. He was hard-wired to produce disasters. It was unfortunate that he was at the pinnacle of power when his country was deciding whether to escalate the Vietnam War. One can never be sure what would have happened in Southeast Asia if a more able person had been at the Pentagon helm in those years, but a good case can be made that we might have avoided the disastrous policy that McNamara championed. This harsh assessment of McNamara is drawn straight from *Promise and Power*. However, Shapley's final assessment is softer; she maintains that he is a complicated figure, and "purely negative judgments are too easy." She argues that there is much good to be said about the man. But she offers little evidence of his more benevolent side, burying the reader with stories that explain why he "left a trail of bitter enemies" in his wake. The McNamara Shapley portrays is not complicated and is fully deserving of the abundant criticism that has been directed at him since he left the Pentagon.

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