

Architect of the Vietnam War - McNamara and wars lessons which way do we go now?

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On July 6, Neil deGrasse Tyson, head of the Hayden Planetarium, Twittered, “Wondering how many who watched fireworks on July 4 did so because it’s fun, forgetting that it commemorates exploding bombs during warfare.”

That same day, Robert S. McNamara, the former defense secretary, died at 93. He was second only to President Lyndon Baines Johnson (“Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids you kill today?”) as the most hated figure of the Vietnam War era, in our country at least.

Until Vietnam, most Americans had not had a chance to see the fireworks of war up close. The Vietnam War has been called the first televised war. Its most memorable visual sky effects may not have been “bombs bursting in air” — although gunfire and bombs provided plenty of flashes of light (in just three years out of the 13-year war, the 1965-68 “Rolling Thunder” campaign, the U.S. hurled a million tons of missiles, rockets and bombs on North Vietnam) — but the clouds of Agent Orange, the toxic defoliant, streaming from U.S. helicopters, 23 million gallons of it.

McNamara, who was named defense secretary by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and continued in that post under President Johnson until 1967, was considered the architect of the Vietnam War. Sen. Wayne Morse, the Oregon Democrat who was an outspoken war critic, dubbed it “McNamara’s war.” Some half a million U.S. soldiers went off to fight in it, and 58,000 came back in coffins, or not at all. More than 1 million Vietnamese soldiers and some 2 million civilians were killed — a toll that is so shocking it is hard to comprehend, yet it is seldom mentioned in our media.

It turns out that McNamara had second thoughts about the war, in particular the massive U.S. air war, as early as 1966. Early that year he told reporters privately, “No amount of bombing can end the war.” In 1967, he urged Johnson to negotiate an end to the war instead of escalating it. At a farewell lunch after he was fired by Johnson, he actually cried as he spoke about the futility of the war and condemned the bombing. But it was not until decades later, in his 1995 memoir, in an oral history for the University of California at Berkeley, and in the thought-provoking 2003 film “The Fog of War, Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara,” that he made those thoughts public.

A thoughtful *New York Times* obituary describes him as a haunted man.

“Was he a tragic figure? Or simply an evil one? Certainly his regrets came too late and he went public too late for the millions killed and maimed by the bloody war he led, defended, and then kept silent about. Their families and friends experienced real, ongoing tragedy while he lived in comfort.”

"The Fog of War" showed that McNamara as an old man still hadn't come to terms with the meaning of Vietnam, yet he understood enough of its lessons to choose to speak out as the U.S. invasion of Iraq unfolded. "We are the strongest nation in the world today," he said in the film. "I do not believe that we should ever apply that economic, political, and military power unilaterally. If we had followed that rule in Vietnam, we wouldn't have been there."

"War is so complex it's beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend," he continued. "Our judgment, our understanding, are not adequate. And we kill people unnecessarily."

'Vietnam syndrome'

It was that very idea, that the U.S. cannot win such wars, even with overwhelming military might, and should not wage them, that the "Bomb Hanoi" crowd and their successors who grabbed the White House in 2000 were determined to defeat. They called it the "Vietnam syndrome."

In its place George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and the neo-conservative ideologues with their "Project for a New American Century" put forward a doctrine of projecting U.S. military power, unilaterally, anywhere and anytime. They unleashed a spectacular nighttime sky show of their own in March 2003, with the green flares of "shock and awe" over Baghdad.

It took not 13 years but less than six for the American public and the world to reject that doctrine. One might say the Vietnam syndrome is being followed by an Iraq syndrome, a "unilateralism" syndrome, a "pre-emptive war" syndrome.

Lessons of Vietnam and Iraq

With a new administration and a turn toward a new foreign policy, what will replace the Project for a New American Century? What are the real lessons of Vietnam and Iraq?

A new high-powered think tank is looking to supply some answers.

The Center for a New American Security was founded in 2007 by Kurt M. Campbell and Michèle A. Flournoy "to develop strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies that promote and protect American interests and values." Flournoy is now the Obama administration's Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. Campbell was recently confirmed as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

The CNAS board of directors includes luminaries from both Clinton and Bush administrations such as former Navy Secretary Richard Danzig, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, former Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns and former Defense Secretary William Perry, along with two former Lockheed Martin executives and figures connected with the military, financial and intelligence communities.

In addition, the center is involving prominent journalists, writers and academics.

CNAS has produced a slew of conferences and reports, readily available on its web site. (And it's on Facebook and Twitter, and does iTunes and Blip.tv video and audio podcasts.)

Its materials are worth studying. A quick review indicates a real attempt to employ lessons that McNamara and other important policymakers have drawn from the Vietnam and Iraq debacles:

namely, that unilateralism, arrogance, excessive focus on massive military might, and disregard of international and domestic laws, opinions and moral values don't work and harm U.S. interests.

One paper issued in June, titled "Beyond Bullets: A Pragmatic Strategy to Combat Violent Islamist Extremism," is illustrative. It calls for "an approach that is sustainable, properly resourced, grounded in bipartisan political support, and bolstered by a dense network of partnerships that engages actors both inside and outside of government." The U.S. must "find a new way ... that more effectively engages foreign partners," the report says. "America's government and armed forces cannot and should not be at the center of every effort to combat violent extremism."

It continues, "America must respond without overstating the threat, overspending national resources, reacting in ways that are ultimately counterproductive, or compromising core values. Violent extremism will not be the only threat to American security in the coming years. A reaction that compromises America's moral authority undercuts its power. And, perversely, the threat will become all the more potent if it is exaggerated."

Yet this and several other CNAS papers, on Iraq, Afghanistan and related topics, continue to suggest a view of the world as something to be manipulated to advance U.S. "interests," (without clearly defining what those "interests" are).

Take language like this in the report on violent extremism: "The United States must adapt its role to circumstance, being sometimes a leader, sometimes a quiet supporter, sometimes the coordinator of diverse actors, and sometimes the determined projector of force."

"Wherever feasible, the United States should step out of the spotlight," the report advises. "By empowering and supporting local actors, the United States can accomplish its own objectives." It adds, "By engaging vast networks of nongovernmental organizations, private businesses, journalists, and individual citizens, counter-extremism initiatives can reach farther, faster, and more effectively than the U.S. government and armed forces ever could. It is not necessary for these groups to love America or agree with American policies. In fact, distance from American positions enhances their credibility with some audiences."

Covert operations, anyone?

And, the report says, "Significant military operations, even on a large scale, will remain essential in some circumstances."

Following such an approach would mean we really haven't learned all that much from the wreckage of U.S. foreign policy. It's not just Vietnam and Iraq that has done the damage, but the whole history of U.S. Cold War politics, aimed at manipulating the world to ensure the dominance of increasingly interlocked U.S. corporate-military interests. This policy involved notorious covert as well as overt action to repress and even exterminate communist, left, working class and other democratic currents in countries around the world. President Obama, in his recent Cairo speech, mentioned one of the most infamous episodes, the CIA-backed 1953 overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh because of his moves to nationalize Iran's oil.

Which way will we follow?

Drawing real lessons from the past means redefining what our interests are. That means identifying whose interests must be at the center of both our domestic and our foreign policy. At home that

struggle is playing out in the arenas of health care, worker rights and other issues. Who calls the shots — the giants of corporate America or the American people? In world affairs, whose interests defines our security — the insatiable profit interests of our transnational corporations or the shared interests of the people of our country and the world in securing a decent life and livelihood? If we see our future in the shared interests of ordinary Americans and the ordinary people of the rest of the world, we will not pursue a policy that seeks to manipulate them to serve some other interests.

A more useful direction is shown in another CNAS paper issued in June, titled “Natural Security,” which links natural resources, environmental conservation and global economic policies, to U.S. national security.

The report concludes: “From oil to critical minerals to water, the global competition for natural resources in the 21st century will generate economic dislocation, tension, instability, and even conflict. At the same time, the consequences of rising resource consumption, such as climate change and mass extinction of species, can also be a threat multiplier. Just as the nation’s understanding of what constitutes a threat is changing, so is our understanding of how we achieve peace and prosperity. As this young century unfolds, the security of the United States – and most nations of the world – will increasingly depend on our ‘natural security.’”

Which way will we follow — manipulation backed by military might to further narrow interests of a few, or real, peaceful collaboration to promote the shared interests of the many?

We have an opportunity now to leave bombs bursting in air, poison gas clouds and night-vision green rocket flares behind us.

Susan Webb

P.S.

* “McNamara and wars lessons which way do we go now?”. July 10 2009:
<http://www.peoplesworld.org/mcnamara-and-wars-lessons-which-way-do-we-go-now/>