How exactly Robert McNamara became a Trustee of Economists Allied for Arms Reduction (as it then was) is lost to history. But at least one of his connections to our group is known. In the foreword to his memoir *In Retrospect*, McNamara states that the recommendation to President-elect Kennedy that he be made Secretary of Defense came from my father, John Kenneth Galbraith – who became, thirty years later, a founder of ECAAR.

I had never met McNamara when he came to Austin on May 1, 1995, to speak at the University of Texas. But I had been working, on and off, for three years on the question of Kennedy’s plans for Vietnam. My interest had been piqued by John Newman’s remarkable 1992 *JFK and Vietnam*, which alleged that Kennedy had decided, in October, 1963, to order a withdrawal of all US advisory forces from Vietnam, beginning immediately and finishing by the end of 1965. I was aware, too, that McNamara had given Newman the transcript of his oral history, taped in 1986 and otherwise closed, confirming that this was so.

Thus, I knew that McNamara’s memoir would have to deal with the subject. And so, on the afternoon of his visit, I located the one copy so far arrived in Austin, bought it, and found the relevant passage – the account of Kennedy’s Vietnam withdrawal decision meetings, given in great detail. There was a cryptic footnote: “JFKLPR.” What could that mean, if not, “John F. Kennedy Library Presidential Recordings?”

Armed with this thought, and knowing that the LBJ Library’s questioning procedures involved submitting handwritten queries on half-page forms, I printed my question in large computer type on a full sheet of paper. This worked like a charm. My friend the local anchorman, Neal Spelce, must have thought, at first, that my question was a plant from the chair. So he read it out – and McNamara responded with the utmost clarity. There were tapes.

The column I then wrote for the *Texas Observer* had an interesting career. Someone – I suspect Arthur Schlesinger – sent it on to McNamara. A few months later, I received a form letter from Viking Press, requesting permission to reprint it. It was a seemingly routine request, but one thing caught my eye: the estimate of 150,000 copies. And then I noticed the name of the requestor: Robert Strange McNamara. The column appears in the appendix to the *In Retrospect*’s paperback edition.

Only later did I learn the full role my father had played in Kennedy’s decision. In fact the plan to withdraw all US forces from Vietnam originated with my father’s September 1961 trip to Saigon. It was taken up by Kennedy in 1962, and McNamara was tasked with bringing it to the point of decision. This he accomplished by October, 1963.

The larger story of the withdrawal plan I have told elsewhere, mainly in the *Boston Review* and in *Salon*. It has been the subject of a confirming exchange in late 2007 with Francis Bator — Deputy National Security Adviser under Johnson — in *The New York Review of Books*. Most comprehensively, there was the conference at
Musgrove Island in April, 2005, involving a battery of historians and living participants in these events, now magnificently summarized by James G. Blight, Janet Lang and David Welch in their book *Vietnam: If Kennedy Had Lived* (Roman and Littlefield, 2009).

Robert McNamara, in what may have been his last published comment, had this to say of this book: “I urge everyone interested in Kennedy, Johnson and Vietnam, and everyone concerned about the kind of leadership we need to keep our nation out of war, to read this book. I recommend it not because the authors agree with my own conclusion – though in the end, they too feel JFK probably would have avoided a major war in Vietnam. I recommend it because it is far and away the best book on these subjects I have ever read – lucid, rich and balanced, with all sides getting a fair, but critical hearing.”

The long argument over JFK and Vietnam is, or ought to be, over.

The other question on which I engaged McNamara on that day in Vermont was that of nuclear war. He didn’t need to say much. I had already worked out, and published in *The American Prospect*, the fact that the American war-fighting plan, as presented to Kennedy and to McNamara in July 1961, was a plan for an unprovoked first strike — for a preventive war. I knew that the key to McNamara’s tenure at Defense, including much of the conduct of the war in Vietnam, had been the necessity to block any circumstance that might force the President toward such an outcome. I knew that we were not fully safe from this possibility until around 1967, for only then did the Soviet Union actually acquire a deterrent force, making a first-strike plan militarily unviable. I did not know, until Daniel Ellsberg revealed it plainly in *Secrets*, that Kennedy and Johnson had adopted a flat no-first-use policy, in violation of stated NATO doctrine. I also did not know – McNamara himself did not yet know it – that McNamara’s restraint over Cuba in October, 1962 had prevented a battle between invading American forces and Soviet defenders armed with atomic torpedoes.

It was for nuclear reasons, mainly, that ECAAR’s Board agreed to honor Robert McNamara at our annual dinner in 2003. My role was to make a brief introduction. I told McNamara that while I was not among the marchers who circled the Pentagon in 1965, I might have been. Still, I had learned some things since. I’d learned about the nuclear balance, or lack thereof, between the United States and the Soviet Union. I suggested that one reason we were alive, and able to enjoy dinner on that occasion in the beautiful and historic city of Washington DC, was the dark struggle carried out, for us all, by President Kennedy, by President Johnson, and by Bob McNamara in those years.

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