McNamara's War of Words
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Not many of the thousand people who crowded to hear Robert McNamara at the LBJ Library in Austin on May 1 [1995] could have yet read his book. None, of course, had missed the torrent of invective that accompanied its publication.

McNamara's assailants came from all sides. Spokesmen for veterans reproached him for suggesting, though he does no such thing, that their sacrifices were "in vain." The New York Times trotted out that old catch-phrase "the best and the brightest," and recast itself as the voice of the sixties war critics, though it was no such thing. Left sharpshooters treated that spectacle with contempt; "War Criminal says Sorry, Sobs" was the headline on Alex Cockburn's Times-bashing column in The Nation. Among McNamara's few defenders, the CIA veteran and whistleblower John Stockwell wondered whether this might be the last time a senior policymaker admits to error on such a subject.

At the Library, McNamara said little until it came to questions. The second question, sent up from the audience and read by local TV newscaster Neal Spelce, concerned the "Fateful Fall of 1963." If Kennedy intended, as McNamara and many others have written, eventually to withdraw the combat advisers then in Vietnam, why did the withdrawal not occur?

A reasonable question, which McNamara did not answer. Instead, he went, like a match-touched fuse, straight to an explosive historical issue. This was the National Security Council meeting of October 2, 1963 at which, McNamara told the audience, President Kennedy decided three things. They were (1) a complete withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam "by December 31, 1965;" (2) a first-phase withdrawal of 1,000 troops "by the end of 1963;" and (3) a public announcement, to put the decision "in concrete."

How did McNamara know (or confirm his memory) that Kennedy had "decided" these things? Answer: there is a tape of this meeting, recorded on Kennedy's White House taping system, "just like Nixon's," McNamara said. The tape resides in the Kennedy Presidential Library at Boston. It is evidently accessible only through the Kennedy family, which granted access to McNamara and to his coauthor Brian Vandemark.

Why is this issue explosive? Because with only two obscure exceptions none of the dozens of books on the history of Vietnam decision-making over the past thirty years has winkled out the story of Kennedy's decision to withdraw. It is not in David Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest, not in Stanley Karnow's Vietnam, not in Richard Reeves' President Kennedy, not in any of the scholarly volumes.

All of the established sources maintain instead that Johnson's policy was a smooth continuation of JFK's, and that escalation did not happen until the Tonkin Gulf incident of August, 1964. One exception, Peter Dale Scott's 1972 The War Conspiracy, disappeared long ago. The other, John M. Newman's JFK and Vietnam (Warner Books, 1992) was withdrawn from print by its publisher in 1993 despite having been reviewed favorably on the front page of The New York Times Book Review, and is for the moment available only in libraries and from the
Now comes McNamara, with confirmation of Newman's argument and the flat statement that there exists a tape as proof. McNamara's book spells out the story of the October 2 meeting. He omits mention of the subsequent meeting of October 5, which formalized the October 2 decision, and of National Security Action Memorandum 263, issued on October 11 and available since 1971 in the "Gravel" edition of the Pentagon Papers, which codified it. Details of this chronology are, however, laid out carefully by Newman. It might be added that McNamara is on record as far back as July 1986 confirming Kennedy's decision to withdraw, in an oral history closely held since then by the Kennedy Library. McNamara's oral history also makes plain, though his book fudges the issue, that Kennedy's decision was based on McNamara's own recommendation to withdraw in spite of the fact that the US was losing the war.

So, to Spelce's question: why did the withdrawal not occur? To this McNamara only said, "it's in the book." And it is. Lyndon Johnson, in line with the military and intelligence chiefs, had other ideas. On November 24, 1963, he told Ambassador Cabot Lodge that his priority was to "win the war." On November 26, he signed NSAM 273, which (as McNamara also confirms) was the authorization for direct, US-controlled covert operations against North Vietnam, known as OPLAN 34A. The proposal for such operations was, as McNamara writes, "first raised [to the Cabinet] at the November 20, 1963 Honolulu conference" — a proposal for escalation at a moment when presidential policy was formally committed to phased withdrawal, and would be for another six days. 1

These issues, it must be stressed, are distinct from the question of what actually happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963 — that black hole of history. They are, for the moment, more a matter of the integrity of historical inquiry when issues of high policy, reputation, longstanding myth and deep suspicion are involved.

The question is whether professional historians will now correct the incomplete or in some cases flawed record left to us by themselves and (often as part of otherwise admirable books) by the journalists such as Halberstam, Karnow and Reeves.

And whether the government will now release all of the still-classified records surrounding Vietnam and other military decision-making, including nuclear policy in the fall of 1963, with all records of the Honolulu conference of November 20-21 and all tapes from the Kennedy and Johnson White Houses.

And whether the press — left, right and center — having vilified Robert McNamara almost to the point of discredit, will pause long enough to reconsider the deadly serious historical issues raised by his book before rushing off to the campaign or some other preoccupation.

Endnote:
1 The veterans of those disastrous missions surfaced on the front page of The New York Times on April 14, 1995, when it was revealed that after 30 years in Vietnamese prisons many could not get US visas because records of their service apparently did not exist.

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