Robert McNamara
Richard Parker

I talked with Robert McNamara just once, at a London dinner party in 1992. I'd flown over to give a talk to a little group of former heads of state called the InterAction Council. So had McNamara, which I hadn't known before I arrived.

At the dinner party, I'd just seated myself when someone suddenly yanked back the chair to my left and thrust out his hand. It took me a nanosecond to recognize him – and not thanks to the trademark steel-rimmed glasses and slicked-back hair. It was the energy my dinner companion radiated – he almost literally pulsed with energy. “McNamara. BOB McNamara,” he said, before dropping himself onto the chair; the words seemed to burst toward me. Pumping my hand, he had at 76 the grip and vigor of a college football player. We talked nonstop for the next three hours.

When McNamara finally died last month, at 93, I wondered whether journalists and commentators might finally be ready to look more deeply into who he was. I shouldn't have. They weren't.

Every one of the obituaries and commentaries I read ended up covering the same well-plowed ground. His role in the Vietnam War, his “Whiz Kid” background, the career arc of Harvard and Ford before the DoD, the World Bank afterward. Everyone noted that he cried a lot when discussing the war – and that he could be coldly dismissive of critics (I saw him brush off a wounded veteran’s objections at a talk at the Kennedy School when his memoirs appeared; it was not pretty to watch).

They all added that he maintained his vigor by mountain climbing and constant motion; that he was ramrod straight right up until he died. His mind invited the same speculations: was it a) a steel trap; b) a calculating machine; c) an instrument of self-deception; d) all of the above? No one seemed to have a final answer. And because allusion to David Halberstam's by-now dead “best and brightest” trope was de rigeur, the tone to all the pieces seemed perfectly uniform, rooted in a combination of McNamara’s by-now potted personal attributes, dipped in a concoction of varying blends of melancholy, anger, confusion and, among the more literary, faux existentialism.

Just two points dominated, however: the question whether he’d said he was sorry for what he’d done in Vietnam – and whether he meant it, really meant it. Neither, for me, gets at the meaning of McNamara.

To understand his meaning, you have to realize that at some point Robert McNamara ceased being McNamara – to himself, to me, to all of us. He became, not to put too fine a point on it, a Greek eikon, a figurative representation which has, at least in religious terms, a status and power all its own as an object of veneration that somehow (often mysteriously) leads us to connect with the deeper ground truth beneath the image.

It wasn't, however, the Vietnam War that made Bob McNamara who he was, in our minds or in his; Vietnam in effect merely publicized what was already iconic in him, made it better known. It was World War II – the one we nowadays call “the good war,” fought by America’s eponymous “greatest generation” – that ultimately vested
meaning in McNamara, iconic meaning and purpose whose living out led inevitably McNamara and us to Vietnam, and the darkness that haunted him thereafter unto death.

World War II was fought with a savagery on all sides that we today still can’t admit. The horrors of the Nazi death camps, Japanese death marches, Soviet killing fields we readily point to, because all stand for the darkness of others – but not our own.

When the Smithsonian several years ago tried to hint at that darkness in an exhibit on Hiroshima, the exhibit wasn’t allowed to open. When one raises the fire-bombing of Dresden or Tokyo, a silence fills the room – and a look of incomprehension.

But long before Hue or Hanoi, the Tet Offensive or Operation Phoenix, Bob McNamara had put his prodigious rationalism to work targeting millions of human beings for death. In The Fog of War, almost as an aside, he acknowledges what he’d done by imagining what would have happened had America had lost World War II. “Curtis LeMay and I,” he said, “would have been tried as war criminals.”

First over Europe, then over Japan, McNamara had used his prodigious calculating skills to optimize the killing effects of Air Force bombing of soldiers, factories, and civilians alike. Human lives became numbers, murder a form of numeracy.

America certainly had a prior history of violence with its Indians and slaves, but never on this scale, never with this fury, never so sheerly mechanized. By 1945, no shred of innocence remained; we were ready to be the superpower we are still today.

Henry Ford had pioneered the assembly line’s use, but it was McNamara, working for LeMay, who brought Fordism to air power—and ultimately justified the first (and so far only) use of atomic weapons. Vietnam, to be sure, was a killing field—but the agony for McNamara had begun much earlier, remaining subterranean only because we’d won “the good war;” it was not the killing of Vietnamese that was McNamara’s and the nation’s crime, but that in losing we had nowhere to hide our crime, and no way to stop us from killing again.

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