

Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy

by Robert S. McNamara, James Blight, Thomas Biersteker & Col. Herbert Schandler
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War criminal, former Ford Motor Company executive and recent president of the World Bank, Robert S. McNamara has worked through a process resulting in this very satisfying book. Young people with no understanding of the 1960s and older people seeking to piece the puzzle together will find this book very useful.

Genocide

Right on the book jacket in the first sentence it says, "More than three million people were killed in the Vietnam War." By the end of the paragraph, we learn that Vietnamese leaders participated in dialogues reprinted in the book. For these two reasons alone--honesty about the scale of violence and Vietnamese participation--this book is the most useful one by the imperialists about the Vietnam War yet.

Throughout the book, "United States Secretary of Defense" McNamara from 1961-1968 explains that the United States Government could have "won" the war, only if genocide is winning or risking all-out nuclear war is winning. In other words, McNamara does not hide that the Yankee military killed 3.8 million Vietnamese, lost 58,000 Americans and still did not persuade the Vietnamese people of the U.S. imperialist way of life.(p. 1)

As a bourgeois internationalist, McNamara went on to be an influential president of the World Bank and he also upholds the UN charter. Toward that end, he advocates giving a greater role to "morality" in U.S. foreign policy and he believes the American people will support such a change. "Americans are a moralistic people, and their concern carries over into foreign policy. . . . Given the nature of American political culture, there will always be a demand for moral expression in foreign policy."(p. 4)

"Mistake"

When the United States finally and completely lost the Vietnam War in 1975, the general watchword was "mistake" and "learned its lesson." Yet, anyone reading the imperialist media at the time would see there was not much substance behind this idea. What was the mistake and lesson learned one would wonder. This question was answered so indecisively that President Reagan elected in 1980 popularized the myth that the Yankee imperialists could have won the Vietnam War if the military had been freed from corrupt politicians' control.

McNamara was the cabinet official in the Kennedy and Johnson administration responsible for the war and even he says he could not come up with the "lessons learned" chapter of his book until 1995. His earlier book on the Vietnam War titled "In Retrospect" in which he admitted mistakes and took blame was the spark for a series of conferences involving Vietnamese officials and scholars. In 1999, McNamara is 83, but he is still struggling arduously he says to learn the lessons for peace in the 21st century. Like MIM, he observes that 160 million died in wars in the 20th century.(p. 2)

The full meaning of what McNamara means by "mistake" is that he believes the Vietnam War could have been prevented by its leaders. The Vietnamese could have cultivated American doves in the imperialist leadership and people like McNamara could have paid closer attention, says McNamara. "We all make choices. We observe the results."(p. 5) That's McNamara's way of saying there are no inevitable tides or forces in history. As an example he says that President Kennedy did not bomb Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis and he successfully resisted pressure to do so. Likewise we learn in the book that the Joint Chiefs of Staff constantly advised President Johnson to go to all-out war and invade northern Vietnam (above the 17th parallel.)

McNamara's paradigm is demonstrated by his visit to Castro in 1992 to replay some of the Cuban Missile Crisis history. It turns out that as "Secretary of Defense," he did not know how close he came to nuclear disaster in October, 1962. He learned that Castro had tactical nuclear weapons and had those 180,000 U.S. troops gone ashore in Cuba, they would have been used. Castro said it would have been the end of Cuba and probably the world and McNamara agreed.(pp. 10-1) McNamara said he hoped that he would not do the same thing if in Castro's shoes.

MIM would say that McNamara is correct that it is possible to learn from history. The dialectic has not completed its work with McNamara though, because he does not acknowledge the blame for invasion belonging to imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism, which is very impersonal and not just a matter of occasional choices by leaders.

Mao's role

According to McNamara, it is possible to see from Chinese documents and U.S. intelligence that Mao was serious about sending troops to Vietnam. Since Mao's own son had died in the Korean War (1950-3) when the U.S. troops invaded the northern part of Korea, the United States should not have needed anymore proof than it had of China's commitment to internationalism.

A picture also emerges that contrary to what some Trotskyists sometimes say (and no doubt the opportunist-splittists can be found saying the exact opposite as well), the Maoists were not "selling out" Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, but pushing the Vietnamese toward military victory they did not want quite as much. In fact, the relative "hard-liners" in Vietnam were Maoists in the southern region of Vietnam according to McNamara--Le Duan and Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh. Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap of the North were more pro-Soviet.(pp. 181-2) The Maoists came to dominate the whole Vietnamese communist party in the early and mid-1960s. This picture of ideological division within the Vietnamese party is not something MIM can confirm. We only know that there were some comrades who were Maoists while others leaned toward the Soviets.

Only in the late 1960s did the Soviets become the dominant partner according to McNamara. The southern Vietnamese comrades of the 1960s wanted to go ahead to military victory no matter how much it would provoke the imperialists while others said they should not bring down the government even though they could, because they were not ready to defeat the Yankee invasion that would result. The way the imperialists portrayed this was that Mao was the war-monger and Vietnam would have been open to peaceful overtures: "Mao was relentless in pushing Hanoi toward military confrontation with the United States, and it was understood in Hanoi that the Chinese would not mind if the Hanoi government was weakened as a result, so long as it survived as a communist buffer next door to

China."(p. 112; see also p. 127) Obviously the imperialists were trying to create a split, which points up why communists must never split over tactical questions or strategic mistakes. Only when questions reach the level of line is there a possibility there should be split. There will always be those who say a strategy is too soft or too hard, too optimistic or too pessimistic. If a split occurs in the proletarian camp every time there is a disagreement on the assessment of the balance of forces, then there won't be a proletarian camp.

McNamara also makes it clear that the U.S. imperialists preferred to deal with the Soviet Union. The Soviets were more likely to follow diplomatic niceties and the Chinese in retrospect were suspect friends of the Vietnamese because of 1000 years of history between imperial China and Vietnam. McNamara goes so far as to say: "Soviet motives in aiding the Vietminh, and later the government in Hanoi, were clearly ideological."(p. 116)

In 1954, the Soviet Union and China prevailed on the Vietnamese comrades to split Vietnam like Korea so that there would be peace with the Yankees--at least according to the Vietnamese presented in this book. Because of distrust created in the Vietnamese by the 1954 situation, China and the Soviets had no role in the final Paris Peace Conference that settled the Vietnam War in 1973. Only in connection to 1954 is there some resentment toward Chinese "sellout" apparent in this book; however, MIM would point out as always that hard-core Trotskyists make going on the offensive a dogma despite never actually implementing a successful offensive since 1924. They do not understand the difference between moralizing and the science of proletarian victory. We believe it was a reasonable assessment of the balance of forces to believe that having just ended the Korean War, a similar partition of Vietnam was the way to go in 1954. The Chinese had fought and suffered heavy casualties in the Korean War; the Chinese had not just a scientific role in the struggle but also a blood role.

Another role that Mao had was in inspiring the war strategy. According to McNamara, the U.S. military leaders could not figure out a way to win against "People's War." "What kind of war--conventional or guerrilla--might we develop? Answer: Neither. We encountered something called 'people's war,' which we did not anticipate or understand."(p. 58)

For more on Chinese aid to Vietnamese comrades during the Vietnam War, see (pp. 129, 287, 412).

U.S. imperialist victory impossible

In this book, we finally get a clear picture of the upper echelons of imperialists and what they were thinking strategically during the Vietnam War. In retrospect it should have been clear all along why the U.S. imperialists thought they could not "win" the war--at least not until recent revisionist book-writers inspired by rabid reactionary chauvinists like Reagan.

It turns out that both "defense" and CIA intelligence knew the war could not be won and they told President Johnson. They calculated that if they invaded northern Vietnam (Vietnam above the 17th parallel), Mao would send troops welcomed by Vietnam to fight the U.S. invaders--something confirmed by the Vietnamese officials and already seen in the Korean War.

Meanwhile, no one in the U.S. government believed there was a possibility that the U.S.-backed regime in southern Vietnam (the region below the 17th parallel) would survive against the people. "By the end of 1967 the United States had 107 battalions, and a total of 525,000 men in Vietnam, all the while

mounting a virtually unprecedented bombing campaign against the North."(p. 355) This amount of force did not even succeed in propping up the puppet regime in the South. Hence, from the military angle, the choice was between invading northern Vietnam and wiping it out or losing. Those in favor of wiping out northern Vietnam believed the battle in the South would end in Yankee favor if the North were wiped out.

If China had sent in troops to fight the United States it would have been another Korean War all over again, and McNamara knew not even the U.S. people would stand for that. He also calculated there was no saying how embarrassed the Soviet Union would be if Mao's China had to do all the heavy fighting against the United States. Perhaps the Soviet Union would also take aggressive action, including nuclear weapons. Hence, the idea that the United States could waltz into a country created by treaty with Western imperialism at Geneva in 1954 was silly on imperialist terms. The imperialists had to reckon with the Chinese revolutionaries and the contention of Soviet social-imperialists. That is not to mention that victory by killing off all the people of Vietnam would leave the Yankees in charge of nothing. It is for these reasons that the Yankee concluded that even on imperialist terms it would be better to surrender.

From MIM's perspective that conclusion is better than nothing, but not a very thorough basis for peace. It is still a variant of "might makes right." Only we communists are seriously addressing underlying causes of war and peace. McNamara and company are simply working to avoid "mistakes." That is the difference between our approaches. McNamara won't concede that capitalism makes war more likely than socialism does. He believes leaders must simply stand tall against their people and advisers urging them to war. In contrast, we evaluate the pressures on leaders and seek to reduce those pressures on a regular basis.

History

According to the Vietnamese military leaders, 1954 was a missed chance for peace. The French were withdrawing after military defeat by the Vietnamese people. A peace treaty at Geneva was signed. Yet, the United States was aloof at the Geneva meetings and according to McNamara, the reason was the United States did not care much. However, the British and French had already decided that partition of Vietnam was the best solution and agreed with the Soviets and Chinese.(p. 71)

Contrary to the image of the West as the propagators of democracy, the Vietnamese communists favored all-Vietnam elections as mandated by the 1954 Geneva accord. Yet, in 1956, the West and anti-communists refused to carry out the Vietnam-wide elections.(p. 75) They feared loss and wanted ongoing partition.

According to McNamara, the United States only paid for the French war up till 1954 as a favor to the French, not because the U.S. imperialists cared about Vietnam. The United States simply wanted France to be a firm friend in Europe.(pp. 78, 96) Thus it was a matter of solidifying the imperialist bloc against the Soviet Union. He calls bowing to France and earning Vietnamese enmity a mistake.

Next, in the early 1960s, we learn that McNamara and a handful of career diplomats and State Department people favored making Laos, Cambodia and southern Vietnam neutral countries. Some were also open to the idea of coalition government with the NLF, the communist-led opposition

movement in southern Vietnam that included non-communists. However, his efforts failed and soon he was sidelined and agreeing to send Gen. Westmoreland all the troops he asked for. It was not until McNamara left office that the war ended.