/ПРИКАЗИ

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WAR, LIES, AND EXCEPTIONALISM: HALF A CENTURY LATER

'Nobody thinks in terms of human beings.
Governments don't, why should we?'

Orson Welles as Harry Lime,
The Third Man by Carol Reed (1949)

Robert S. McNamara is hardly a household name in the third decade of the 21st century – not even in the US. Nonetheless, in the 1960s, he was more than a household name – and not only in the US. He was a symbol of the time and the token of the war. It is not for nothing that the Vietnam War was labelled 'the McNamara war': he was the key figure in the US administration regarding that war and served as Secretary of Defence under both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Widely considered one of the most brilliant men of his generation in the US, he wielded immense and decisive power

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to persuade presidents and other decision-makers of the necessity of US military engagement in full-fledged war and of its escalation. Whether he liked it or not – this is indisputable. Well, he did like it at first, believing in his capacity to solve hard problems and enjoying the power itself, before doubts surfaced, and from that moment on, it haunted him for the rest of his life. The reader has no sympathy for McNamara's nightmares and torments produced by the Vietnam War. After all, he died peacefully, aged 93, unlike tens of thousands of Americans and more than three million Vietnamese who were killed in the war for which he was the *spiritus agens*.

The authors – brothers Philip, a veteran New York Times reporter, and William, a historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Khrushchev and Gorbachev – joined forces to provide a comprehensive biography of one of the 20th century's most effective and sophisticated American warmongers. This is not the first McNamara biography: three have been previously published (Trewhitt 1971; Shapley 1993; Hendrickson 1996).[1] Nonetheless, the authors had access to materials unavailable to previous McNamara biographers, including Jacqueline 'Jackie' Kennedy's letters to McNamara during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and beyond; family correspondence dating back to McNamara's service in World War II; and, probably the most important source – secret diary kept by John McNaughton while serving as McNamara's closest Pentagon adviser on the Vietnam War, during 1966–1967.[2] Substantial segments of this meticulously researched book are accounts of McNamara's personal life, including his childhood and thorny relationship with his parents, his university years, and his life after leaving the Pentagon and the corridors of power (including a term as the President of the World Bank), with the authors' endless descriptions of his family relations and romantic engagements. The reader ponders whether all that was really necessary: a reasonable attitude is that a comprehensive biography should include all these details, but to the reader, these details seem trivial and redundant, given the millions killed in the Vietnam War due to McNamara's actions and inactions. For that reason, all these segments

[1] In addition to those three biographies, McNamara's period at the Pentagon, as a US Secretary of Defence, has been critically scrutinised by Halberstam (1972). The sequel was published 14 years later (Halberstam 1986).

[2] John McNaughton died in a commercial aeroplane crash in 1967, just days before he was to become the US Secretary of the Navy. A copy of the secret diary was made available to the authors, as acknowledged in the book, by John McNaughton's son, Alex – the only member of the McNaughton family who was not on the plane that fateful day.

of the book will be skipped in this review, which will focus solely on the Vietnam War, emphasising McNamara's role in it and asking what lessons can be learned from that disaster – not only by America.

Nonetheless, there are a few episodes from McNamara's pre-Vietnam life that should be taken into account when considering his role as the Secretary of Defence and a chief architect of the Vietnam War, the first being his academic career. After obtaining an undergraduate degree in economics from the University of California at Berkeley, McNamara graduated from the Harvard Business School (HBS) and found his academic home there, teaching accounting and excelling in the relatively new discipline of management accounting.[3] In short, this is a type of accounting that provides the basis for successfully managing companies, especially in making sound strategic managerial decisions. Well, the reader ponders, if there are enough reliable numbers, perhaps that kind of accounting can be applied to any human activity – whether it should be is an entirely different question.

Taking the versatility of management accounting and with excellent timing 'In 1941, HBS established an Industrial Administrator degree and a new Management Controls course that would form the foundation of the Army Air Force's Statistical School. The premise of this approach, David Halberstam later wrote, "was that this vast new mechanized war was as much about the production and allocation of resources as it was about combat bravery, and the best brains should be applied to that challenge"' (p. 57). This was especially the case since McNamara helped prepare the Army Air Forces Statistical Control Officers School, which opened at Harvard in June 1942. In short, accounting went to war on the Allies' side.

[3] There are two terms that are incorrectly used as synonyms, especially at the time of the nascency of the technique: 'management accounting' (sometimes referred to as 'managerial accounting') and 'control accounting'. The latter is only one segment of the former, so it is much narrower in scope and aim. Before this technique was developed, businesses had operated 'with a more limited set of tools for decision-making, relying heavily on traditional accounting, intuition, and ad hoc methods. While these methods provided a foundation for business operations, the lack of detailed cost analysis, budgeting, and financial forecasting meant that businesses had fewer insights into their operations and were less equipped to make strategic decisions. The emergence of managerial accounting represented a revolutionary advancement, providing businesses with the tools to analyze operations more deeply, plan strategically, and optimize performance. The new process was [...] developed at the E. I. du Pont de Nemours Powder Company in the 1920s, it was used with great success to revive and sustain General Motors after it suffered huge losses early in the Depression' (p. 37).

McNamara soon followed, making that the second important episode of his life. He enlisted and became an officer of the Army Air Force (predecessor of the US Air Force),[4] and in 1943 was dispatched to England to serve as a special consultant to the Eighth Air Force, whose mission was to bomb Germany. His stint in Europe was rather short, as he was recalled to the USA to start working as a consultant in management accounting, to ensure the greatest impact of a new US weapon: the B-29 Superfortress, a four-engine, long-range heavy bomber that was considered a weapon of choice for bombing Japan into submission. Soon enough, McNamara was assigned to the Twentieth Air Force under the command of General Curtis LeMay, whose mission was to end the war against Japan. McNamara's recommendations were based on management accounting, which calculated how to inflict more destruction. This persuaded the commanding officer to change the bombing strategy. From the precise bombing strategy previously applied against the German military and industrial capacities, which had proved ineffective against Japan, the tactic turned to nighttime low-level indiscriminate area bombing of cities using incendiary bombs. The premiere of the new concept was a Tokyo raid on 8/9 March 1945, in which about 100,000 civilians died, and a substantial part of the (wooden housing) city was scorched. During the next five months, American firebombing destroyed or gravely damaged more than sixty Japanese cities. Given this, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not make a great difference in terms of casualties.[5] After the war, no-nonsense General LeMay admitted, 'If we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals' (p. 73). For McNamara, it is evidence that his management accounting approach to warfare was the right one. Japan surrendered, didn't it?[6] That was the source of his confirmation bias two decades later, when he was in charge of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, it

[4] At the time of the World War II, the Air Force was not an independent branch, but rather operated under the auspices of the US Army. It was only in 1947 that the US Air Force became an independent branch of the US armed forces, with the enactment of the National Security Act.

[5] Ovrey (2025) provides details on the preparation and execution of the firebombing campaign of Japan. It took meticulous long-term planning to devise a bombing strategy to incinerate Japanese cities. Accordingly, McNamara was not the only one who contributed to the campaign of deliberately killing Japanese civilians, but he was an indispensable part of it.

[6] It took him 58 years to concur with General Le May's statement. It was too little too late: the too late is self-explanatory; it was too little because he did *not* say something along the lines of "it was a war crime, *regardless* of who won and who lost the war, and I am sorry, and I deeply apologise that it was I who recommended the policy that it was based on." His 58-year deferred concurrence is available in Errol Morris' 2003 documentary *Fog of War*, *https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0317910/*,

was noted that, in the bombing of Japan, McNamara helped to kill hundreds of thousands of civilians, but he was seemingly 'impervious to the human cost of his work' (Boot 2018, 365). This pattern repeated in Vietnam.

The third decisive episode in McNamara's handling of the Vietnam War was the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, in which he was already involved as Secretary of Defence. It was the Soviet Union's secret deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba that triggered the crisis, which culminated in early October 1962, when the nuclear warheads were delivered to Cuba, making the missiles ready for use against the US Southeast, including Washington, DC. It was a hectic time in which the military leaders (including General LeMay, McNamara's superior in 1945) strongly advocated brute military force as a solution – the all-around (i.e. not only the missile sites) bombing of Cuba without any warning, followed by a full-scale invasion of the island.[7] It was McNamara who confronted the top brass, advocated a peaceful way out of the crisis, and persuaded President John F. Kennedy to decide that the US should go in this direction, while also effectively assisting him in pursuing it. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis made McNamara the most influential member of the Kennedy cabinet, save perhaps the President's brother, Robert, who was Attorney General. McNamara 'knew how to brief the president, work the bureaucracy, and control the flow of information' (Rhodes 2026, 44). His reputation as a brilliant technocrat with a sharp mind substantially increased after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, as his belief in his own instincts and self-confidence grew; his arrogance also increased. McNamara was not liked by many but was highly respected by all in Washington, DC at the time.

The stage was set for McNamara's role as an architect of the Vietnam War.[8] Nonetheless, according to the authors, the conflict began much earlier: it can be traced back to the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, signed in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945, aboard the USS *Missouri*, which ended the Japanese administration in Vietnam. Japanese control had not come out of the blue; it was imposed after the collapse of the French administration of what was French Indochina, in the aftermath of France's 1940 defeat. On the day that the Japanese Instrument of Surrender was signed, Ho Chi Minh

last visited March 1, 2026. The transcript of McNamara's monologue and dialogue with Morris, with additional comments, is also available in printed version (Blight, Lang 2005).

7 This would be a massive, fully fledged invasion by regular US troops, unlike the fiasco of the CIA-sponsored landing of ill-trained Cuban emigration irregular paramilitary forces in the Bay of Pigs in April 1961.

8 A comprehensive, well-researched, and unbiased general history of the Vietnam War is provided by a British military historian: Hastings (2019).

proclaimed the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, announcing the end of French colonial rule and the establishment of a new Vietnamese state. It asserted Vietnam's right to national self-determination and independence. Ho Chi Minh asked the US administration to support Vietnam's independence.[9] However, President Harry S. Truman's administration supported the French recolonisation of Indochina. The days of colonial empires were a thing of the past: the resolve of the Vietnamese political elite and the people for independence was substantial – war for national liberation was inevitable. The subsequent French defeat at Dien Bien Phu was so severe that it proved a decisive battle of the war. The 1954 peace conference left Vietnam divided along the 17th parallel, into North and South Vietnam. French rule was over, and independence had been achieved, but the nation was not unified. The North was supported by China and the Soviet Union; the South was supported by the US. Accordingly, Vietnam became a 'domino' in the Cold War.

It is exactly at that time that the US President Dwight D. Eisenhower publicly described the 'falling domino' hypothesis during a press conference about Indochina.[10] In short, if Vietnam was united under the communist North, if Vietnam 'fell', then communism would spread all over Indochina and Asia. If Vietnam fell, then would Cambodia fall, then Laos would fall, then Burma, then Malaysia, then... The most ardent supporters of the 'falling domino' hypothesis included India, Indonesia and Japan. A cynic might add that, perhaps, with such a communist expansion, the only remaining beacons of liberalism in Asia would be Afghanistan and Pakistan.[11]

The reader ponders that the only reasonable assumption in the falling domino hypothesis was that, if Vietnam is unified, it would be the North that leads the endeavour. The South was religiously fragmented, with weak state authority, corrupt governments, and no political figure commanding authority comparable to Ho Chi Minh. All the other assumptions of the falling domino hypothesis were wrong. First, Ho Chi Minh's primary goal was the unification of the independent nation – not a social revolution; he was a communist, but this was secondary to his nationalistic political aims and

[9] It was not for nothing that the Declaration quoted the 1776 US Declaration of Independence 'All men are created equal...'. Obviously, US support was expected after World War II and the beginning of the decolonisation process.

[10] The hypothesis is sometimes labelled as 'domino principle' or even 'domino theory' in various publications: it is hardly a principle, let alone a theory of any kind.

[11] Langguth (2000) provides details of the US views (including illusions and delusions) of the developments leading to the Vietnam War.

activities. He was interested in Vietnam and Vietnam only, not in spreading communist revolution throughout the region. Second, the unified communist front comprising China and the USSR unravelled soon after, with the Sino-Soviet split in 1960. Third, distrust between the Chinese and the Vietnamese had been long-standing and substantial, for cultural and historical reasons, and no ideology could make up for that. Taking all this into account, it is evident that the crucial assumptions behind the falling domino hypothesis were wrong. With the benefit of hindsight, the eventual proof was the result of the North-led unification of Vietnam in 1975, after the terrible war. Which dominoes?[12]

The authors provide a grim picture of the reasons for the failure of the falling domino hypothesis. 'Had intervention in Vietnam been fully examined, it is far from clear that critical factors would have been considered. The complexities of Vietnam were more daunting than McNamara realized and inadequately appreciated by the Kennedy team, [...] Washington's preoccupation with the Communist threat blinded McNamara, Rusk, Bundy, and others to the pivotal role that nationalism played in Ho Chi Minh's determination to reunite Vietnam. American officials, by and large, failed to appreciate the long history of hostility between Vietnam and China, mistakenly viewing the Communist world as a monolithic threat. The Saigon government was corrupt, authoritarian, and lacked popular support. Opposition to it was multifaceted, not simply an invading army [from the North – remark BB]' (p. 158).

Hence, the crucial question is why McNamara, like all the members of John F. Kennedy's cabinet and all advisers, subscribed to the falling domino hypothesis. The authors point out that the Cold War perspective and obsession with the communist threat were decisive. 'The paradox of Vietnam was that although the Kennedy administration knew almost nothing about the country, the Cold War axioms that underlay its broader foreign policy virtually required that it join the war there' (pp. 153–154). The reader is a bit puzzled. It seems, according to the authors, that the USA was 'required' to join the war in Vietnam. It is understandable that the Cold War perspective was applied in US foreign policy – but that was definitely not the only perspective. Furthermore, the global competition with communism

[12] Laos effectively came under communist control in 1962 and was partly occupied by the North Vietnamese military due to its strategic position in the Vietnam War, especially the lines of communication. Under the Prince Sihanouk regime Cambodia had been a relatively stable monarchy up until the US-backed coup in 1970, after the US bombing of the country had already begun. The coup led to the civil war with the Khmer Rouge (communist) regime, which emerged as the winner. Therefore, the fall of the Vietnam domino in 1975 did not cause any other dominoes to fall.

was undeniably not only a military competition. Even if it is reduced to a military contest – it was global, not focused solely on Indochina. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated that the Cold War was underway in the US neighbourhood, and the 1961 Berlin Crisis demonstrated that it was escalating in Europe, with US and Soviet troops directly facing each other. The decision to bear one's teeth in Vietnam, of all places, was puzzling, the reader ponders.

The other lesson from the authors' insight is that the US political elite, who 'knew almost nothing about the country', with McNamara in the forefront, did not realise that what was going on in Vietnam was a civil war aimed at unification of the nation, nor did it care about Vietnam as a nation, about the Vietnamese as people, or about their political and personal desires and lives; they regarded the country solely as a Cold War playground. After all, the reader contemplates, you have to know something about a country in order to care about its people.[13] At least to pretend that you care. This was a sad echo of Wilsonian liberal interventionism, the role model of American exceptionalism in international relations – to make people happy with liberal democracy, whether they like it or not, in addition to the Wilsonian right of self-determination, but only for Europeans – those white people enslaved by decadent empires.

According to the authors, one way or the other, it was clear to the Kennedy administration that the South Vietnamese government was not capable of providing basic stability in the country, that the government's opponents were getting stronger, and that the Viet Cong, an autonomous guerrilla movement with support of a substantial chunk of South Vietnamese peasants and the North Vietnamese government, was becoming more effective. Since the domino must not fall, the support for the South Vietnamese government steadily increased, both in terms of military advisers and military hardware. During the Kennedy administration, no US troops were sent to Vietnam, but the number of military advisers substantially escalated. Nonetheless, there was no strategy whatsoever. 'What McNamara did not do, he later confessed, was "insist that we present the president with an exhaustive analysis of the pros and cons of the alternatives we faced and urge him to participate in a full debate on the merits of each of the alternatives before a decision was made."' (pp. 157–158). The master of 'management accounting' remained silent, not providing a single number.

[13] A cynical view could be that you have to know something about a country even if you do not care about it and treat it only as a playground. If you do not, the likelihood of losing the game becomes substantial. Therefore, the outcome of the Vietnam War is hardly surprising.

The authors did not provide an explanation for this silence. McNamara's loyalty to the president (both Kennedy and Johnson) is mentioned several times in the book, but that loyalty alone cannot explain the inactivity of someone who was a certified workaholic. The problem was that 'Kennedy had two incompatible convictions – that it wasn't America's job to save South Vietnam, but that we couldn't afford not to do so – which he continued to hold until he was assassinated' (p. 162). So, the reader concludes that perhaps McNamara's loyalty was essentially to follow the President's path, whichever it may be. Nonetheless, with Kennedy's political schizophrenia regarding Vietnam, there was no clear path. Perhaps he trusted John F. Kennedy's political instincts, which may have inclined him to withdraw from Vietnam, though only after his 1964 re-election campaign. Nonetheless, the re-election never came.

McNamara, though, stayed with the administration as Secretary of Defence in President Lyndon F. Johnson's cabinet. What had been the American involvement in the Vietnam Civil War during the Kennedy Administration was about to become a full-scale military participation. The key moment was the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident,[14] which enabled Lyndon B. Johnson to secure support from the US Congress, which passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving him broad authority to use military force in Southeast Asia without a formal declaration of war. Furthermore, this was an opportunity for Johnson to flex his muscles in the 1964 presidential election campaign against a Republican hawk candidate. In short, the reader concludes, the bombing of North Vietnam started for US domestic political reasons.[15]

[14] On 4 August, there were two ostensible attacks on US Navy ships by North Vietnamese forces. The first (involving USS *Maddox*) was an unintended side effect of their reaction to the South Vietnamese Navy's action. The US Navy ship was fired upon, probably by mistake, and the ship was not hit. The second incident (ostensibly involving USS *Turner Joy*) was neither recorded nor reported by the US Navy. Nonetheless, these developments, although unsubstantiated, were politically convenient. Lyndon B. Johnson lied to the public, including legislators – and McNamara helped him with the lie.

[15] The reader ponders that the US decision to bomb North Vietnam was a hefty gift for the Soviet Union, especially its military. This decision enabled the Soviets to provide hardware (both aircraft and missiles) to North Vietnam and to send their military advisers who reported everything that was important back to Moscow. That made North Vietnam the best imaginable real-war testing ground for hardware, and especially for the tactics of applying it most effectively. Furthermore, the engagement with the US Air Force provided real-war information about all its weaknesses. Last, but not least, the US military engagement in Vietnam necessitated the reallocation of US military resources, especially personnel, away from the main lines of the Cold War confrontation. There must have been many happy faces in Moscow at that time.

It is evident, from many insights in the book, that McNamara was from the beginning deeply torn between wanting to win militarily in Vietnam and wanting to withdraw from it. He was deeply and privately unsure about whether the war was worth fighting in the first place, whether it could ever be won at a cost that Americans would be willing to pay, and whether withdrawing from it would, in fact, 'lose' most of Asia and trigger fatal political consequences at home. The opportunity for McNamara to get off the Vietnam train came with Johnson's 1964 re-election and the offer of a 'second term' as Secretary of Defence. A close friend and, up to this moment, his deputy, told McNamara that he, too, could now leave office, that '[h]e had fought hard for Lyndon' and that he had done his duty. But McNamara responded that he could not leave office now – he had to 'see the Vietnam thing through'. Perhaps the Pentagon's corridors of power still enticed McNamara.

The way he saw the 'Vietnam thing through' was decisive for the US defeat and for the Vietnamese tragedy. Although privately troubled by his doubts, he publicly advocated escalating US military involvement and sending US ground troops, which launched the palpable, boots-on-the-ground Vietnam War for America. According to his own testimony, in mid–1965, or perhaps sometime later that year, he was positive that the US could not win the war militarily. Nonetheless, he fiercely advocated further escalation, both in terms of ground troops and bombing of both Vietcong positions and North Vietnam. It was hundreds of thousands of Americans who were recruited (randomly drafted) and sent to the war, and many of them were killed *after* McNamara had realised that the war was lost, or at least that it was not winnable. Furthermore, his public addresses about the war, also made while he knew the war was unwinnable, were cautiously optimistic ('we stopped losing the war'), stirring public opinion that victory in Vietnam was in sight. He was lying the entire time, for at least two and a half years.[16] And because of his image of a bright, calm, reasonable, businessman type of person, as opposed to some passionate politician or a zealous general, his lies were much more dangerous, much easier for the American public to swallow.[17]

[16] This became apparent to the American public when *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* published the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971. The source for the document, which was a history of how the United States had gotten involved and managed the war, was Daniel Ellsberg, at the time a defence analyst at the Rand Corporation. The story of the *Pentagon Papers* is dramatized in Steven Spielberg's 2017 movie *The Post*, *https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6294822/*, last visited March 1, 2026.

[17] Contrary to McNamara, after a visit to Vietnam, during which he realised that America could not win the war, CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite shared his thoughts with the American public in a renowned TV commentary. 'To say that we

The reasonable question is: why did he do it? One possible answer mentioned in the book is loyalty to President Lyndon B. Johnson, who invited him to serve in his cabinet. This is the one-word answer McNamara gave his son. The problem with this answer is that, legally, cabinet members are not obliged to be loyal to the president; they do not pledge to honour this when sworn into office.[18] Loyalty to people is undoubtedly a virtue, but it is unclear whether McNamara was loyal to Johnson personally or to the President. Finally, in public office, loyalty to duty is important, far more than loyalty to the person. By lying to everyone, the reader ponders, McNamara was not loyal to his duty: he derelicted his duty and should have resigned the moment he realised that the Vietnam War was unwinnable and that he had failed to convince other decision-makers of that view. By staying in the office after that moment, he only legitimised the government that he disagreed with on the most important issue.

The other potential answer is that McNamara believed his presence was essential to ward off aggressive recommendations, whether from the bellicose top military or hawkish national security advisers like Walt Rostow.[19] The authors provide evidence that in several situations McNamara was a voice opposing military escalation, especially regarding the bombing of North Vietnam. Nevertheless, the authors emphasise '[h]e never told Johnson to

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are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. On the off chance that military and political analysts are right, in the next few months we must test the enemy's intentions, in case this is indeed his last big gasp before negotiations. But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honourable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could.' Walter Cronkite, Report from Vietnam, CBS, 27 February 1968, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2ev-GalTng*, last visited March 1, 2026.

[18] They only accept the obligation to 'support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter' (p. 295).

[19] Walt Rostow was an academic economist and professor of economic history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He attained academic fame for his book on the stages of economic growth (Rostow 1960). He became the National Security Adviser on 1 April 1966 and, as a senior official, insisted on the huge escalation of the bombing of North Vietnam. Nonetheless, his strategy was wrong because it was based on flawed assumptions that neglected that North Vietnam was not a highly industrialised nation. Weldon (2025, 238–251) dedicated a chapter to Rostow's failures in strategy design. Rostow was not allowed to return to MIT after his stint in the US administration.

cut his losses and get out of Vietnam' (p. 352).[20] So, the question is: what could motivate McNamara to remain active within the political endeavour he did not believe in, just to polish some too-rough solutions, and to accept full responsibility for a project he did not believe in? Perhaps, he still felt very well in the corridors of power, regardless of his beliefs.

One way or another, at the end of the day, McNamara was effectively fired from the cabinet by President Johnson at the end of February 1968 and in turn appointed President of the World Bank. He remained in the corridors of (somewhat different) power and stayed in Washington, DC, for another unprecedented, exceptionally long term of 13 years.

Nonetheless, he was silent about the Vietnam War for almost 30 years. The breach of silence came with his memoirs (McNamara 1995), almost entirely dedicated to the Vietnam War. According to the authors, McNamara was not very happy with the content of his biography published two years earlier (Shapley 1993). Be that as it may, the reader ponders that he waited a long time to give his version of the story and speculates that perhaps he waited until all the people who knew the truth and were important to him were dead, including Jacqueline Kennedy, who died in 1994. One way or the other, the most important revelation in the book was that he spelt out that the McNamara's war was 'wrong, terribly wrong'. What follows is a list of mistakes, wrong assumptions, false causalities, and erroneous reasoning.[21]

What is missing is the judgment on the suitability of applying management accounting to strategic and wartime decisions. The reader ponders whether management accounting is designed solely for running corporations, not

[20] Perhaps that was precisely what his close Kennedy friends, Robert F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy, hoped for or even expected from McNamara as Secretary of Defence. If he stayed in the office for that hope, to please them, they were both rather disappointed.

[21] The reaction to his memoirs in the American press was overwhelmingly negative. *The New York Times* editorial was harsh. 'His regret cannot be huge enough to balance the books for our dead soldiers. The ghosts of those unlived lives circle close around Mr. McNamara. Surely, he must in every quiet and prosperous moment hear the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry, dying in the tall grass, platoon by platoon for no purpose. What he took from them cannot be repaid by primetime apology and stale tears three decades later' (p. 353). *The Los Angeles Times* review was harsher, 'A secretary of defense of his seeming certitude who came forward and said that he had been mistaken in his earlier estimates and that the war could not be won would have been the most powerful of witnesses and would be now a revered American instead of one of our most divided and haunted of men. Sadly, the inner strength to do that, to put loyalty to country and to a larger truth above a narrow bureaucratic loyalty to a President and failed policy, was not within his powers' (p. 353).

for waging war, especially given that the quality of input data is a crucial prerequisite for accurate conclusions. In war, the quality of input data is low. There is a fog of war, and adversaries have no incentive to share accurate information about themselves, so the results of such accounting, whether in management or any other context, are inaccurate. The GIGO principle (Garbage In, Garbage Out) applies.[22]

Nonetheless, two more important things are missing from McNamara's memoirs. First is a full moral reckoning, followed by an apology. A sincere apology for his role in McNamara's war, for 58,220 dead Americans, for more than 3 million people dead in Vietnam and almost 5 million people dead in Indochina. A simple 'I am sorry for all these human lives lost' was missing. The reader is not surprised by that. In an intriguing letter from Jacqueline Kennedy to Robert McNamara, written in October 1967 and comprehensively disclosed in the book, she extensively refers to Carol Reed's 1949 film *The Third Man*, implicitly equating McNamara with Harry Lime, a character from the movie. Harry is a profound cynic. He makes money by stealing penicillin from military hospitals and selling it in diluted form on the black market, leading to the death of many innocent people. When he took his friend Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton) to the Vienna Ferris wheel, he opened the door and referred to the people far below as 'dots down there'. Harry continues. 'Don't be melodramatic. Look down there. Look down there. Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stop moving – forever?' (p. 289). The reader is convinced that Mrs Kennedy was right. Robert McNamara *was* Harry Lime; he was not melodramatic and did not care about millions of dots that stopped moving forever in Vietnam. Quite reasonable, isn't it? Who would apologise for dots?[23]

Since, according to Harry Lime, governments do not think in terms of human beings, another important notion is missing from McNamara's memoirs. Basically, this is a rhetorical question: what on Earth was America doing in Vietnam in the first place? It was not McNamara who rejected Ho Chi Minh's plea to the Americans to support the Vietnamese declaration of independence; it was Harry S. Truman who refused it. This move, the reader ponders, was the American 'primordial sin' in Vietnam, and every new president and his administration inherited the Vietnam burden: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, effectively ending with Ford. None of them was

[22] GIGO is an academic economist's self-ironic pun about standard accounting protocols of data entry: FIFO (First In, First Out) and LIFO (Last In, First Out).

[23] It is evident from the letter that Robert McNamara had not seen the movie. Mrs Kennedy cordially recommended the movie to him. Whether he had eventually seen it remains unknown.

willing to break the path-dependency that had been created, leading to the wrong insight that America 'must do' something about Vietnam. Nonetheless, it is quite disappointing that McNamara, after his disillusionment regarding the Vietnam War, did not raise this issue in his memoirs. A simple insight, like 'the biggest of all mistakes we made is that we were in Vietnam in the first place, that we intervened in any form', would suffice. McNamara stopped short of it.

This opens the issue of American exceptionalism, something McNamara fully subscribed to, clinging to it even after the Vietnam War, even after admitting that so many mistakes were made in Vietnam in his memoirs. McNamara went one step further: at the age of 85, he published a manifesto on the principles by which the US should pursue its international interventions (McNamara, Blight 2001). The authors provide an overview of this manifesto, with three remarkable pillars. 'Deeming the most likely sources of twenty-first-century carnage to be great power conflict, communal killing, and nuclear catastrophe, they proposed three "imperatives" to reduce the killing. The "moral imperative" would establish as a major goal of US foreign policy, and indeed of foreign policies across the globe, the avoidance of such carnage. The "multilateral imperative" would demand that the United States "will not apply its economic, political or military power unilaterally, other than in the unlikely circumstances of a defense of the continental United States, Hawaii and Alaska." The third was the "empathy imperative."' (p. 362).

The moral imperative, the first pillar of the after-Vietnam elderly McNamara's manifesto, has actually been a cornerstone of American foreign policy exceptionalism from the beginning. It is precisely because of the belief that the US is superior to all other nations, rooted in its founding principles – liberty, democracy, individual rights, and republicanism. The argument goes on that, because it is superior due to these principles, the US has a special global mission, based on the *moral imperative* to intervene to promote freedom (political, civil, and economic) and democracy, and to be involved in conflicts, including open military confrontations, for moral or ideological reasons, not to be constrained by any international rules and institutions.[24] In short, exceptionalism is a universal exculpation for any US foreign policy engagement based only or predominantly on strategic or economic motives. Accordingly, every single American involvement in international relations outside US borders is morally justified. It is about bringing liberty, democracy,

[24] Tyrrell (2022) provides a detailed yet rather concise history of the notion of US exceptionalism, especially considering its abuses in American foreign policy.

and individual rights to the oppressed people who are not fortunate enough to live in the United States. It is *not* about benefits to America, whatever they may be.[25]

With that framework in mind, it is easy for the reader to sarcastically explain the Cold War not as a strategic global domination contest with the Soviet Union, but as a global moral crusade to save people suffering under communism and to bring them liberty, democracy, individual rights, and prosperity in a market economy. If the US Cold War effort is considered a *moral imperative*, then the motive is deeply human, say, saving some poor Bulgarian peasant from communist oppression, whether he likes it or not. This is the ultimate outcome of applying the concept of American foreign policy exceptionalism to the Cold War, whoever buys it.

Taubman & Taubman did a great job convincing the reader that many people in the American political elite found justification for the Vietnam War in American foreign policy exceptionalism. Some of them used it only as a shroud to conceal the US's aggressive war; some of them actually believed, up to a point, in a moral imperative to protect local peasants in South Vietnam from communism, which was ostensibly flooding from the North, regardless of whether these peasants wanted it or not. It seems that McNamara was, up to a point, one of them. Then, step-by-step, he realised that the land of these peasants was scorched, their forest defoliated, their villages incinerated by napalm, their civilian countrymen indiscriminately killed, all in the name of bringing them happiness and liberating them from communist oppression. He was not up to the task of unsubscribing from that policy, quitting the office implementing it, or going public to denounce what America was doing in the name of its exceptionalism. These images from Vietnam haunted him for the rest of his life and created his torments and nightmares,[26] so vividly expressed

[25] The first major champion of American exceptionalism was President Woodrow Wilson, especially in the ideas he brought to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference in the aftermath of the Great War. To what extent he fought for these ideas, and to what extent he was successful in that fight, are a different matter. MacMillan (2001) provides details about these efforts and their results.

[26] Perhaps, the reader ponders, that is the reason why the third pillar of McNamara's 2001 manifesto is 'empathy', whatever that meant for him. Perhaps it is a possible way for redemption. Nonetheless, without an unambiguous apology for what he has done, such a redemption is futile. In the final minute of the *Fog of War* 'Morris presses on: "Do you feel in any way responsible for the war?" "I don't want to go any further with this discussion," is McNamara's nonanswer. Morris asks whether McNamara feels "damned if you do and [damned] if you don't." McNamara replies: "Yeah, that's right. And I'd rather be damned if I don't."' (p. 365). That is hardly apologising. People who are ready to apologise would rather be 'damned if you do'.

in the *Fog of War* documentary,[27] but he was never up to renouncing US exceptionalism, nor did he apologise for its implementation in Vietnam in the way he saw fit.

This is evidenced not only by his 2001 manifesto, with 'moral imperative' as the first pillar, but also by the content of his 1997 Hanoi meeting with his former Vietnamese adversary, Commander-in-Chief General Vo Nguyen Giap. 'McNamara told General Giap in November 1995 [sic], "Hanoi and Washington may each have been mistaken, have misunderstood each other" in the Tonkin Gulf episode. But General Giap responded: "I don't believe we misunderstood you; you were the enemy; you wished to defeat us – to destroy us. So, we were forced to fight you." McNamara pressed on. "Were we – was I, was Kennedy, was Johnson – a 'neo-imperialist' in the sense that you are using the word?" "I would say, *absolutely not*!" To which Giap retorted, "Excuse me, but we *correctly* understood you."' (p. 358, italics in the original). Unlike McNamara's illusions, even in 1997, the seasoned Vietnamese freedom fighter had no second thought whatsoever about US exceptionalism.[28]

One way or the other, US exceptionalism lives on. In the 21st century, it has been vividly demonstrated, for example, in Afghanistan, with war leading to the horrendous failure of nation-building based on American values.[29] As Rhodes (2026, 45) points out: 'Once you allow yourself to play by a set of rules that's different from everyone else's, the rules themselves are made brittle and ultimately break. That is the original sin of American exceptionalism, which should be a story of multiracial democracy within our

[27] Rhodes (2026, 45) made an interesting point that Henry Kissinger, unlike McNamara, had no torment and nightmares regarding his role in Vietnam; on the contrary, perhaps because Kissinger, as a rational *realpolitik* person, never really subscribed to a virtuous American exceptionalism in the first place.

[28] The American historian who witnessed McNamara-Giap meeting observed the differences in the style of the two men with McNamara repeatedly interrupting Giap to ask questions, as if he was a student at the exam, usually related to something numerical, while Giap gave a long leisurely monologue, quoting various Vietnamese cultural figures such as poets, that began with Vietnamese revolts against China during the years 111 BC–938 AD when Vietnam was a Chinese province (Neu, 1997). The reader comments that the loser lacked the patience to listen to the victor. This was the picture of McNamara, a man of data, and Giap, a man of wisdom.

[29] Whitlock (2021) provides a detailed account of that failure, drawing on revelations from people who played a direct role in the war, from leaders in the White House and the Pentagon to soldiers and aid workers on the front lines. It is a blend of deceit, blunders, and hubris among senior military and civilian officials, with a dose of public choice, with segments of the commercial sector benefiting from the endeavour.

borders rather than of boundless power beyond them'. In an ironic twist, the incumbent US President Donald J. Trump created a new version of US exceptionalism. Instead of ideals, instead of bringing happiness to people in other countries, the new US exceptionalism is based on the exceptional contemporary US military prowess and the 'might is right' principle. With the basic premise that America is morally superior to all other nations, it follows that international rules do not apply to it; the way is clear for the US government to internationally do whatever it sees fit. One of those most responsible for clearing that path is Robert S. McNamara..

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