

Robert S. McNamara, 1916-2009

Pentagon chief during Vietnam War escalation dead at 93

Patrick Martin
8 July 2009

Robert S. McNamara, one of the principal architects of the US war in Vietnam, died Monday morning at the age of 93. McNamara was second only to President Lyndon B. Johnson in overseeing the first half of the war, which saw the escalation of the US military presence from a few thousand advisers to an army of nearly 600,000 troops.

Secretary of defense from January 1961 to February 1968, McNamara headed the Pentagon longer than any predecessor. Only Donald Rumsfeld exceeded his tenure, combining his terms as Pentagon chief under Gerald Ford (1975-77) and a quarter-century later under George W. Bush (2001-2006). Like Rumsfeld, McNamara is indelibly associated in history with a military debacle, one which to this day still haunts the American ruling class.

For those who came of age during the Vietnam War (1961-1975), McNamara's name is synonymous with hideous crimes against humanity—saturation bombing by B-52s, the use of chemical weapons like napalm and Agent Orange, the death of one million Vietnamese, and the bloody sacrifice of 16,000 American soldiers in a war of aggression. By the war's end, in 1975, some three million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans, most of them conscripts, had been killed.

McNamara is also associated with disinformation and lies that perhaps pale in comparison to today's media blitzes, but ultimately discredited the US government in the eyes of the world and the American people. McNamara and his aides perpetrated the fraud of the Gulf of Tonkin incident (the August 1964 "attack" by Vietnamese PT boats on US naval warships, later revealed as a fabrication), professed to see "light at the end of the tunnel" with each new increase in the US military presence and each new expansion of bombing, labeled the Vietnamese national liberation fighters "terrorists," and portrayed the South Vietnamese stooge regime of generals and war profiteers as an imperiled "democracy."

The lengthy obituaries published in the major US dailies on Tuesday gave only slight hints of the popular hatred that attached to McNamara by the time he left office. He had concluded by the spring of 1967 that the war was a failure, and

attempted unsuccessfully to convince President Johnson to change course. In this he was acting, not as an opponent of military aggression, but in order to salvage something from the massive investment of American military and economic resources in Southeast Asia.

Overall, the press obituaries treat McNamara himself as a casualty of the war, whose consequences he could never escape, and which left its scars on both his public and private life. This is, however, only an aspect of the truth, and not a truly important one. That a war criminal suffers conscience pangs is perhaps of some interest psychologically, but it does not alter the impact of his crimes on the millions who were killed or maimed and the tens of millions who were affected by that killing and maiming.

The obituaries seek to offload the guilt of the American ruling stratum as a whole on the shoulders of the late Pentagon chief, presenting the war in Vietnam as a monumental error, a mistake in judgment, not as a crime perpetrated for the strategic interests of a definite class—the same class that is today responsible for two more imperialist wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan-Pakistan.

Upon his removal as Pentagon chief, McNamara was appointed by Johnson to head the World Bank. His role at that institution, from 1968 through 1981, is portrayed in most obituaries as an effort to offset his guilty conscience over Vietnam through "good works" in the field of economic and social development. A more sober analysis, however, suggests that McNamara continued to serve the same master, American imperialism, and to afflict the same victims, the masses of the former colonial countries—albeit in a less violent fashion.

The World Bank is one of the key institutions upholding the global domination of finance capital. The International Monetary Fund oversees draconian "adjustment" regimes for Third World debtor nations, imposing cuts in public services and living standards for the great majority of humanity. The World Bank doles out funds for infrastructure projects, supposedly beneficial to those receiving aid, but all of them are designed to foster the subordination of these impoverished countries to the world market—dominated during McNamara's

tenure by American, European and Japanese corporations.

More than a decade after leaving the World Bank, by then approaching 80, McNamara broke his long silence and sought to come to terms with the war. He wrote a memoir, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, and later cooperated in a 2003 documentary film, directed by Errol Morris, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. This writer reviewed the 1995 memoir in the *International Workers Bulletin*, predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and made a critical analysis of both McNamara's history and his account of his role in the war.

The Fog of War, despite the limitations imposed on it in different ways by McNamara and Morris, is more illuminating than the memoir. Perhaps the most notable section of the film does not concern Vietnam at all, but rather McNamara's role in the firebombing of Japanese cities during World War II. This atrocity, directed by US General Curtis E. LeMay, killed an estimated one million civilians in firestorms that were deliberately triggered through bombing patterns devised by US military planners, prominent among them being McNamara.

McNamara had volunteered for the US military after Pearl Harbor but was rejected for poor eyesight. He served as a civilian adviser, helping train Army officers to conduct mathematical analysis of military logistics. In 1943, he took a temporary captain's commission to apply these same numerical methods to analyze the results of bombing raids and devise more efficient—i.e., more deadly—methods of distributing bomb payloads against targets.

"We burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo—men, women and children," McNamara told Morris in the film. "LeMay said, 'If we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals.' And I think he's right. He—and I'd say I—were behaving as war criminals." He then posed the question, without answering it: "What makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?"

In Vietnam, of course, while the United States lost the war, those responsible for instigating and directing the aggression—Kennedy, Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, Rostow, Nixon, Kissinger, Laird—were never held accountable before any tribunal. Nor were the generals and admirals who did their bidding, nor the CIA officials who conducted a campaign of torture and mass assassination (20,000 were murdered in Operation Phoenix alone).

McNamara played a significant role in other crimes of US imperialism during his more than seven years at the Pentagon, including the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and the 1965 invasion and occupation of the Dominican Republic. Under his direction, American troops were sent into battle in the United States as well, mobilized to suppress urban riots in the summer of 1967, most notably in Detroit.

The *New York Times*, in a 1995 editorial written in response to the McNamara memoir, denounced him in the following

terms: "Mr. McNamara must not escape the lasting moral condemnation of his countrymen... 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 prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades late."

This typifies the duplicity of American liberalism. McNamara is condemned, deservedly, for the tens of thousands of American soldiers he sent to their deaths. He is not at all condemned for the millions of Vietnamese whom the American military machine destroyed while McNamara was at its head. And even the American deaths are condemned because they were "for no purpose." In other words, the *Times* editors attack McNamara not for being a war criminal, but for failing to win a military victory in Vietnam.

The defeat of American imperialism in Vietnam and the victory of the national liberation struggle was a milestone in world history. It demonstrated—along with its economic counterpart, the 1971 collapse of the Bretton Woods system of gold-dollar convertibility—that even the strongest imperialist power could not overcome the contradictions of the capitalist system.

The war in Vietnam not only drained the economic and military resources of the United States, it destabilized the country politically. The mass movement against the war, spearheaded by youth and students, combined with the ghetto uprisings and a wages offensive by the industrial working class, created conditions of unprecedented political crisis. It was this crisis, even more than the ongoing resistance of the Vietnamese people, which forced the American ruling elite to abandon its effort to militarily subjugate Vietnam.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact