



In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam

By Robert S. McNamara, Brian VanDeMark

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Written twenty years after the end of the Vietnam War, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's controversial book answers the lingering questions that surround this disastrous episode in American history, in a groundbreaking book that is the definitive insider's account of American policy making in Vietnam.

"We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation," McNamara writes. "We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why."

With unprecedented candor and drawing on a wealth of newly declassified documents, McNamara reveals the fatal misassumptions behind our involvement in Vietnam. Keenly observed and dramatically written, *In Retrospect* possesses the urgency and poignancy that mark the very best histories—and the unsparing candor that is the trademark of the greatest personal memoirs.

Includes a preface written by McNamara for the paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Former Secretary of Defense McNamara's controversial indictment of American policy in Vietnam was a PW bestseller for 12 weeks.

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From Library Journal

McNamara, Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1967 under both presidents Kennedy and Johnson, has remained silent about U.S. policy toward Vietnam until now. This memoir reveals a decent, loyal, and able man who struggled to remain loyal to the president and yet to get the United States out of Vietnam. When McNamara left office, 15,979 Americans had been killed in Viet Nam; by the time the United States left Vietnam, the number stood at over 58,000. McNamara's recollections are put to rigorous testing by his junior author, VanDeMark, who checked them against the now-declassified written and taped records of the period. Publicly perceived as a "hawk," McNamara documents his attempts from 1966 on to find a way for the United States to exit from the war. The culmination of his effort is a May 19, 1967 memorandum to LBJ, calling for U.S. withdrawal. President Johnson never sent a reply. McNamara reveals that "I do not know to this day, whether I quit or was fired." At any rate, McNamara left the Pentagon to begin a successful ten-year term as president of the World Bank. In looking back, he holds that "we sought to do the right thing...but in my judgment hindsight proved us wrong." McNamara's unpretentious, genuine, and touching memoir should contribute further to healing the wounds of the Vietnam experience; it belongs in all public and academic libraries. James Rhodes, Luther Coll., Decorah, Ia.

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From [Booklist](#)

Breaking 27 years of silence, former defense secretary McNamara seeks "to put Vietnam in context" and counter "the cynicism and even contempt with which so many people view our political institutions and leaders." The two administrations McNamara served made their "terribly wrong" decisions, he argues, because of "an error not of values and intentions but of judgment and capabilities." Though one brief chapter sketches McNamara's life before 1961, *In Retrospect* is more than memoir: Annapolis history professor VanDeMark--author of *Into the Quagmire* (1990)--supplied thorough research files, including newly declassified documents, and reviewed McNamara's drafts for historical accuracy. McNamara maintains that U.S. Vietnam policy rested on contradictory premises: a "domino" theory that, in retrospect, overstated the threat to U.S. security and world peace if Ho Chi Minh's forces won; and recognition that if the South Vietnamese were not committed to defending themselves, no other nation could do it. McNamara assumes responsibility for failing to address that contradiction and other unexamined assumptions and undebated disagreements that plagued decision making in these years. He identifies "eleven major causes for our disaster in Vietnam" and six points when the U.S. could legitimately have withdrawn. Certainly not the last word on this still-controversial subject but an essential acquisition for most libraries. *Mary Carroll*

Users Review

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