

The Vietnam War and the decline of American imperialism

In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, Robert S. McNamara (1995, Times Books)

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Below we are republishing a review of Robert McNamara's 1995 memoir that originally appeared in the June 19, 1995, edition of the International Workers Bulletin, the forerunner of the World Socialist Web Site.

The recent publication of Robert McNamara's memoir *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* touched off a political furor far out of proportion to the intrinsic significance of this volume, which adds little to the historical record of the US military intervention in Vietnam.

The explosion of media commentary, including an editorial in the *New York Times* denouncing McNamara personally, demonstrates that the deep divisions produced by the war in Vietnam continue to wrack the American ruling class 20 years after the final defeat of the puppet regime and the entry of victorious National Liberation Front (NLF) forces into Saigon.

McNamara was secretary of defense from January 1961 to February 1968, the period during which the US presence in Vietnam grew from a few hundred military and CIA "advisers" to an army of more than 500,000 soldiers, backed by hundreds of warplanes, a naval flotilla offshore and a vast supply apparatus stretching through Australia, the Philippines and Japan, and across the Pacific.

By the time McNamara left office because of policy differences with Lyndon Johnson over the conduct of the war, 18,000 US soldiers had died in Vietnam, along with more than a million Vietnamese. By the war's end, as many as 3 million Vietnamese had died, and the US death toll stood at 58,000.

It was well known at the time of his departure that McNamara had lost confidence in the administration's Vietnam policy and regarded further military effort as futile. In November 1967, Johnson announced that the Pentagon chief would be the US nominee to head the World Bank. McNamara left office three months later, while the last battles of the Tet offensive were still raging. He refused to make any public comment on the Vietnam War for the next 27 years.

Only by the standards of World War II, the most colossal bloodbath in history, could Vietnam be fairly described as a "limited war." At its height nearly 600,000 American troops were deployed in Vietnam, a force four times as large as the entire standing army of the United States in 1940. Because of the duration of the war and the policy of rotating troops in and out on a regular basis, more Americans served in Vietnam than in either World War I or Korea. More bombs were dropped on Vietnam by the US military than were used by all sides in World War II.

As McNamara details, the US intervention in Vietnam threatened to escalate into an even wider and bloodier conflict. At least three times during his tenure at the Pentagon, in the fall of 1964, in November 1965

and in the spring of 1966, American generals pressed the Department of Defense and the White House for authorization to use nuclear weapons.

On the last occasion, May 20, 1966, the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent McNamara a memo "repeating their view that invasion of North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia might become necessary, involving the deployment of US forces to Thailand and, quite possibly, the use of nuclear weapons in southern China. All of this, they emphasized, highlighted the need to mobilize US reserves."

McNamara's inside story of the policy-making process of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations gives a stark demonstration of the bankruptcy of the pragmatic method. Decisions were made on a day-to-day basis, with little consideration of the long-term consequences and no understanding of the interconnections of military action, diplomacy and politics.

According to McNamara, the Kennedy administration set into motion the coup that overthrew and murdered South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963 without any consensus on whether Diem's removal was necessary or what would replace him.

Similarly, Johnson ordered the stationing of US bombers in the South in early 1965 without considering that this would require ground troops to protect the air bases. The escalation of the US presence, until it became a virtual occupation by a vast American army, was carried out step by step without any serious discussion of what this deployment would do to the economy and social structure of South Vietnam.

In the introduction to the book, McNamara makes a staggering declaration about the intellectual incompetence of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The world was a very complicated place, he notes. "Simply put, we faced a blizzard of problems, there were only twenty-four hours in a day, and we often did not have time to think straight."

Later he returns to this theme, commenting that "our failure was partially the result of having many more commitments than just Vietnam. Instability in Latin American, Africa and the Middle East, and the continued Soviet threat in Europe, all took up time and attention. We had no senior group working exclusively on Vietnam, so the crisis there became just one of many items on each person's plate."

The burdens of empire

It is tempting to dismiss these banalities as nothing more than apologetics for the decisions which led to the slaughter of millions in Vietnam. What is raised, however inadvertently, is a more profound issue. American imperialism came to its position of world dominance at the end of the Second World War. In contrast to Great Britain, the dominant

world power of the nineteenth century, the American ruling class reached the height of its power at a time when capitalism on a world scale was in decline.

American capitalism was compelled to assume responsibility to stave off social revolution on every continent. This meant expending vast resources to rebuild its major capitalist rivals in war-devastated Europe and Japan, to conduct a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, and to prop up capitalist rule in the newly “independent” countries of Asia and Africa, as well as Latin America. At the same time, Wall Street sought to maintain and extend the domestic policy of class compromise and limited social reforms initiated by Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s, to prevent an explosion of the class struggle at home.

By the early 1960s the economic consequences of these policies began to be expressed in a growing US balance of payments deficit that was further exacerbated as military spending in support of the war in Vietnam began to swell.

The Johnson administration was repeatedly confronted with the choice between escalating the war and financing the social programs proposed under the slogan of a “war on poverty,” whose urgency was underscored by the eruption of rioting in the ghetto neighborhoods of scores of American cities from 1965 on.

Forced to decide between guns and butter, Johnson sought to have both, and he refused to enact a tax increase to pay for the war, fearing its unpopularity. The result was a steady erosion of US financial reserves and mounting pressure on the dollar, culminating in the gold-dollar crisis of February 1968.

The political crisis that exploded to the surface in 1968—the year of the Tet offensive, Johnson’s announcement that he would not seek reelection, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy—staggered American imperialism. The war in Vietnam dragged on for another seven years, but however bloody the denouement, decisive sections of the American ruling class had by then decided that the cost of the war was too great.

The first significant withdrawals of American forces were announced by the fall of 1969, and by 1972, when Democrat George McGovern ran as the “peace” candidate, there were no US ground troops in Vietnam. In 1975, deprived of its financial and military subsidies, the Saigon regime disintegrated in the face of an NLF offensive.

In Retrospect focuses on the discussions about military and political strategy that took place within first the Kennedy administration and then the Johnson administration. McNamara is at pains to admit the colossal ignorance and blind confidence in American power that prevailed at the highest levels of the US government.

Top officials had no knowledge of the history, culture or political traditions of the countries of Southeast Asia whose future they proposed to determine. This blindness was a self-inflicted wound, as McNamara points out, writing: “The irony of this gap was that it existed largely because the top East Asian and China experts in the State Department—John Paton Davies, Jr., John Stewart Service, and John Carter Vincent—had been purged during the McCarthy hysteria of the 1950s.”

McNamara and other officials believed fervently in the notorious “domino theory,” which held that the war in Vietnam was a proxy war with China, and that the fall of Saigon would be followed rapidly by the installation of Stalinist regimes in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, even India.

This theory was then the conventional wisdom of the Democratic and Republican parties, of the Washington and Wall Street establishment, and of the mass media. It was as popular in the early 1960s as today’s official platitudes that the collapse of the Soviet Union proves the “failure of socialism”—and had as little to do with the truth.

McNamara quotes one of his own memorandums of that period, which

warns that China “like Germany in 1917, like Germany in the west and Japan in the east in the late 30s, and like the USSR in 1947—looms as a major power threatening to undercut our importance and effectiveness in the world, and, more remotely but more menacingly, to organize all of Asia against us.”

Such was the state of ignorance in the State Department and Pentagon, according to McNamara, that US officials did not fully grasp the importance of the 1965 anticommunist coup in Indonesia, in which a million workers and peasants were slaughtered and the largest Communist Party outside of China and the USSR was suppressed. (Significantly, McNamara refers to the bloody Suharto dictatorship, set up by the Indonesia coup, as an “independent nationalist” regime, of the kind he believed was necessary in South Vietnam as well.)

Cold war anticommunism

McNamara’s book thus confirms that the Vietnam debacle was the price American capitalism paid for its promotion of fanatical anticommunism as the official national ideology in the period after World War II. The McCarthy witch-hunt at home and the Cold War abroad were waged under its banner.

The most important function of the anticommunist campaign in the United States was to discipline the newly formed industrial unions, established in the CIO upsurge of the 1930s, and block any political movement of the working class against American capitalism. Repression, violence and political witch-hunting were employed to purge any radical or socialist-minded elements from the unions and consolidate the right-wing bureaucracy.

Anticommunism was always a lie, based on the grotesque claim that Stalinism equaled communism and the bureaucratic regimes in the Soviet Union and China represented a global threat to capitalism. But for an entire historical period this falsification proved useful in justifying global intervention by US imperialism and providing a common enemy to divert social tensions at home—and it was all the more effective because those who peddled the lie came to believe it themselves.

The older imperialist powers, Britain and France, had a clearer understanding of the real nature of Stalinism and utilized the services of both the Soviet bureaucracy and the local Communist parties to block the development of social revolution: in postwar France, in Greece, in India and in Vietnam itself, where the French disaster at Dien Bien Phu was partially salvaged through the diplomacy of Molotov and Chou En-Lai at the 1954 Geneva conference.

It required seven years of bloody fighting in Vietnam before American imperialism was compelled to seek a rapprochement with the Chinese Stalinists and extricate itself from the war. Even then, as successive US administrations made use of Beijing’s collaboration to sabotage revolutionary struggles in Asia and Africa and pave the way for the restoration of capitalism in China itself, Washington still clung to the view of the counterrevolutionary Kremlin bureaucracy as an “evil empire” with an agenda of world conquest.

Four decades of anticommunist propaganda left American imperialism disoriented and unprepared for the upheavals that have followed the collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself—and for the upheavals that must inevitably be produced by the deepening social polarization at home.

The defeat in Vietnam still haunts American imperialism. In the course of the three decades since US Marines went ashore in Southeast Asia, the decline of American capitalism has accelerated, and America has lost the dominant economic position it enjoyed in the post-World War II period.

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson was able to send 500,000 soldiers halfway around the world to engage in a major war and simultaneously propose a substantial increase in spending on health care, education and antipoverty programs at home. Ultimately this combined burden proved too great for

even the most powerful imperialist power.

In 1995, the Clinton administration is nearly paralyzed by the Bosnia crisis, fearful of the spread of the civil war yet terrified at the domestic consequences of any substantial involvement of US ground troops. Meanwhile, both the White House and the Republican Congress are carrying out the systematic dismantling of social programs established in the period of the New Deal and the postwar boom, a policy that will provoke massive class struggles within the United States.

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