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## McNamara and His Vietnam War

By Connor L. Haupt

Robert S. McNamara, one of John F. Kennedy's Whiz Kids, was educated at Harvard Business School and served as the longest and most controversial Secretary of Defense in American history. During his tenure, McNamara oversaw the increase of advisors and troops that were deployed to Vietnam. He had been hopeful when he stated that America could begin to withdraw support from Saigon in 1962 as a result of the progress made. However, after a trip to Vietnam, his response to the disaster laid the groundwork for which the Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations would follow in aiding South Vietnam. Even so, McNamara, who had initially supported the cause, never seemed to have a long-term plan, which frustrated military officials. All the while, he became Johnson's most trusted advisor and lied on his behalf on multiple occasions. In 1966, McNamara introduced Project 100,000, which called for the enlistment of individuals who were mentally deficient and had already flunked the Armed Forces Qualification Test, resulting in tragedy. The historiography and public perception have shifted since the release of his memoirs in 1995, his subsequent speaking tour, and the 2003 documentary *The Fog of War*. His inconsistency towards Vietnam, the multitude of deceptions and lies expressed, and his disastrous attempt to draft mentally deficient individuals displays the man not as a hero, but as incompetent and deceiver.

### **McNamara's War**

President John F. Kennedy inherited from his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, a deteriorating situation in what had once been French Indochina. While Eisenhower had desired a "limited-risk gamble"<sup>1</sup>, Kennedy was on a crusade to contain communism and aid the Republic

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<sup>1</sup> Sheehan, etc., "The Pentagon Papers", 86.

of Vietnam. Pentagon analysts believe that Kennedy, although avoiding a full-frontal deployment of ground troops, “took a series of actions that significantly expanded the American military and political involvement in Vietnam”.<sup>2</sup> General Maxwell D. Taylor recommended that the Kennedy administration commit between “6,000 to 8,000 American ground troops”<sup>3</sup> to aid in Vietnam. Robert McNamara subsequently sent a memorandum to Kennedy on 5 November 1961 which stated that “he and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were ‘inclined to recommend’ General Taylor’s proposal”.<sup>4</sup> However, he warned that more troops were likely to be required in the future but that it wouldn’t “exceed six divisions,” which was roughly 205,000 men.<sup>5</sup> Kennedy would ultimately reject this proposal. However, he approved the increase of advisors. Nevertheless, McNamara refused to concede, and on 8 November wrote another memorandum to the president. This time he reinforced the policy of containment, stating that the United States ought to commit “to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism” which could only succeed through the use of “necessary military actions”.<sup>6</sup> The Secretary of State Dean Rusk and McNamara stated that providing additional advisors, and even deploying troops, would violate the 1954 Geneva accords, but they believed it was justified as a result of the North Vietnamese violations.<sup>7</sup> McNamara, it would appear, lacked a long-term goal in Vietnam. He began the process of “planning for American withdrawal from Vietnam” and called for the reduction of “financial aid to the Saigon Government” because of “tremendous progress” in early 1962”.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, McNamara was obsessed with lowering budgets and believed there

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<sup>2</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 86.

<sup>3</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 90.

<sup>6</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 112.

<sup>8</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 117.

would only be roughly 1,500 troops in Vietnam by 1968. Whereas, Michael V. Forrestal, President Kennedy's senior White House Aid, forecasted "a long and costly war".<sup>9</sup>

By 1963, the United States appeared to be "without a policy and with most of its bridges burned".<sup>10</sup> On the 31st of August, Rusk specified that the United States ought to remain in Vietnam until the war had been won and that they wouldn't support a coup against President Ngô Đình Diệm – a view endorsed by McNamara. For an additional five consecutive weeks, Kennedy moved along without a clear policy towards the situation. McNamara and General Taylor were sent to South Vietnam on 23 September, upon their return, and for the first time, McNamara had serious doubts about the situation in Saigon.<sup>11</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff and McNamara were aware of a plot to overthrow Diệm. General Paul D. Harkins on 5 October was under the impression that there was "no initiative" to "encourage a coup"; but the Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., insisted that "a change of government is desired ... the only way to bring about such a change is by a coup".<sup>12</sup> The coup ultimately took place on the 2nd of November 1963 against Diệm. Herbert McMaster stated in his book *Dereliction of Duty* that America had been complicit "in precipitating a violent change of government in South Vietnam" which resulted in an expansion of "American military and political commitment to Diem's successor".<sup>13</sup> If McNamara and the Chiefs of Staff had warned Diệm, the United States would likely have continued with its current policy. On 21 December McNamara believed that the new regime was ineffective and that the situation in the countryside hadn't been as positive as Diệm had insisted. The situation in the countryside had "been deteriorating... since July to a far greater

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<sup>9</sup> Sheehan, etc., "The Pentagon Papers", 118.

<sup>10</sup> Sheehan, etc., "The Pentagon Papers", 180.

<sup>11</sup> Sheehan, etc., "The Pentagon Papers", 181.

<sup>12</sup> Sheehan, etc., "The Pentagon Papers", 190.

<sup>13</sup> McMaster, "Dereliction of Duty", 46.

extent than we realize” as a result of “distorted Vietnamese reporting”.<sup>14</sup> He continued, stating that the current trend was “very disturbing” and “unless reversed in the next two-three months” it could lead to a “Communist-controlled state”.<sup>15</sup> His assessment ultimately laid the “groundwork for decisions in early 1964”, which included covert operations against North Vietnam and additional aid for South Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> McNamara progressed from wanting to phase-out troops and support in 1962 to the belief that additional American support was required to bolster the South Vietnamese nation. He stated in 1964 that he didn’t “object to it being called McNamara’s war” because he viewed it as “a very important war”, wanting to “be identified with it and do whatever I can to win it”.<sup>17</sup> In March 1964, McNamara once more returned from a trip to Vietnam, believing that plans ought to be drawn up for “new and significant pressures on North Vietnam” due, in large part, to the fact that the newly established Nguyễn Khánh government was ineffective and unable to improve significantly.<sup>18</sup> That being said, McNamara, in May 1964, was, as observed previously, hesitant to commit to a long-term plan. Ambassador Lodge had suggested that to support and boost Saigon, the United States needed to provide action through the use of bombing attacks.<sup>19</sup> McNamara, even though in agreement with Lodge, believed that “such actions must be supplementary to and not a substitute for” success against the Vietcong in the South”.<sup>20</sup> By June, Lodge had convinced McNamara, Rusk, and John McCone that it was paramount to bomb North Vietnamese military targets. The Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred on 2 August 1964 with a follow-up incident on 4 August. The incident on 2 August, according to McNamara in the 2003 documentary *The Fog of War*, occurred without the Defense Department

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<sup>14</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 196.

<sup>16</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 196.

<sup>17</sup> McMaster, “Dereliction of Duty”, 85.

<sup>18</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 242.

<sup>19</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 242.

<sup>20</sup> Sheehan, etc., “The Pentagon Papers”, 242.

responding; while the 4 August attack had never actually happened. As a result of McNamara's intel and testification before the Senate regarding the situation, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which granted Johnson the legal authority to deploy United States troops in countries that were in danger of falling to communism.

McNamara's sheer incompetence towards maintaining a long-term policy or plan for Vietnam and the addition of doubting that the war was winnable was disconcerting for many high-ranking officials in the military. Their doubts of McNamara would ultimately turn into outright hatred.<sup>21</sup> Matters were made worse once he became "the president's dominant advisor on military affairs".<sup>22</sup> McNamara additionally had an act for deception and manipulation. Until the publication of his memoirs in 1995, he had never publicly criticized the Vietnam War or stated to the press, during his tenure as Secretary of Defense, that the war was unwinnable. Another example was when the military defense budget had reportedly exceeded \$400 million for the fiscal year of 1964, which left Johnson worried. McNamara came to his aid and simply manipulated the numbers and "volunteered to underestimate deliberately what moneys were spent for defense and later feign surprise when spending exceeded his department's forecast".<sup>23</sup> Republican Representative Gerald Ford "confronted McNamara with charges that Navy yards had been withheld from a base closure list" and McNamara responded by blaming "incompetent naval officers for the omission", stating that "the Navy don't know their [sic] ass from a hole in the ground".<sup>24</sup> Although he eventually grew hesitant towards the war in Vietnam, McNamara had established the groundwork for an American commitment to the South Vietnamese. Additionally, his belief that it would be a quick incident resulted in him not having a long-term

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<sup>21</sup> Sticht, "Project 100,000 in the Vietnam War and Afterward", 255.

<sup>22</sup> McMaster, "Dereliction of Duty", 41.

<sup>23</sup> McMaster, "Dereliction of Duty", 52.

<sup>24</sup> McMaster, "Dereliction of Duty", 54.

plan or goal for the region – with the only ultimate goal being to contain communism. The Vietnam War was, in essence, McNamara's war. He ultimately lost control of this war once the situation in Saigon grew worse, tried to hide the true cost of the war, misled reporters and congress, and there wasn't a central plan.

### **McNamara's Project 100,000**

Many middle-class American males had been successful in evading the draft. These young men avoided being drafted by attending college or claiming they had a disability. Loopholes existed such as working "certain occupations, such as engineers, farmers, teachers, ministers, and divinity students".<sup>25</sup> Additionally, a willing doctor "would attest to a medical problem, such as flat feet, extreme allergies, or skin rashes".<sup>26</sup> A University of Notre Dame study concluded that an estimated 75% of excused men had been active in avoiding the draft. Many men found refuge in the National Guard or the Reserves. As a result, a standard infantry platoon, according to historian James E. Westheider, consisted primarily of "minorities, the poor, and the working class, with a sprinkling of middle-class youth".<sup>27</sup> The majority of the war's burden was placed upon the less fortunate of society. This, going into 1966, would continue drastically.

President Johnson and McNamara were faced with a dilemma. As a result of so many middle-class Americans evading the draft and the Pentagon only demanding tours lasting less than a year, the military always demanded "thousands of fresh troops... to be deployed to Vietnam every month to replace the thousands that were departing".<sup>28</sup> Johnson refused to anger "the vote-powerful middle class", which would have meant drafting college boys and calling up

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<sup>25</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 88.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 88.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 96.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 94.

the National Guard and Reserves.<sup>29</sup> Thus the working class and poor were called upon to fill the military's manpower requirements. However, issues emerged due to many men from poorer neighborhoods having already "flunked the military's entrance exam".<sup>30</sup> As such, McNamara and Johnson planned to lower the standards for passing the Armed Forces Qualification Test. Men who had once been declared unfit to serve would ultimately be drafted.

In August 1966, Robert McNamara revealed his plan to the Veterans of Foreign Wars that the military would, in addition to waging war in Vietnam, assist Johnson's War on Poverty.<sup>31</sup> The undereducated and disadvantaged young men had initially been rejected by the military "because their mental aptitude scores were at the lower end of the Armed Forces Qualification Test".<sup>32</sup> This scheme was ultimately called Project 100,000 because it called for the enlistment of roughly "one hundred thousand lower aptitude recruits a year".<sup>33</sup> McNamara exclaimed that "These young men... can be rehabilitated... Many are poorly motivated when they reach us. They lack initiative. They lack pride. They lack ambition".<sup>34</sup> He believed "through the use of videotapes and closed-circuit TV lessons" the intelligence of these recruits would increase immensely.<sup>35</sup> McNamara truly believed that "videotapes as an aid to... formal instruction" would result in them "becoming as proficient as high-aptitude student".<sup>36</sup> Educators and psychologists chaffed at McNamara's stance on audiovisual instruction, with biographer Deborah Shapley asserting that he was "a naïve believer in technological miracles".<sup>37</sup> Additional critics believed that Project 100,000 was a cynical dream dreamt up by McNamara to enlist more

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<sup>29</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 94.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 95.

<sup>31</sup> Sticht, "Project 100,000 in the Vietnam War and Afterward", 254.

<sup>32</sup> Sticht, "Project 100,000 in the Vietnam War and Afterward", 254.

<sup>33</sup> Sticht, "Project 100,000 in the Vietnam War and Afterward", 254.

<sup>34</sup> Worsencroft, "Salvageable Manhood", 2.

<sup>35</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 95.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 95.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 96.

less-fortunate instead of middle-class Americans.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, this proposal hadn't originated with McNamara. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist, believed the "best way to solve poverty in America was to draft... young men rejected annually as unfit for military service".<sup>39</sup> This, according to Moynihan, and later McNamara, would teach these individuals critical work skills, implement discipline, and, as such, would become middle-class citizens.

Lyndon Johnson admired Moynihan's vision and stated to McNamara that the military could teach these men how to "get up at daylight and work till dark and shave and bathe".<sup>40</sup> In response, McNamara stated that the Defense Department opposed such an idea because "they don't want to be in the business of dealing with 'morons'".<sup>41</sup> The Defense Department's stance didn't deter McNamara, who, from 1964 till 1965, attempted time and again to lower the Armed Forces Qualification Test standards; however, military leaders, the Pentagon, and Senators resisted McNamara's scheme. Richard Russel, a Democratic Senator from Georgia, "accused McNamara of trying to establish a "moron corps" and the Department of the Army responded, stating they only desired "the highest caliber of men".<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, once the need for more men emerged in 1966, military leaders capitulated to Johnson and McNamara's plan. Before Project 100,000's implementation, to be drafted into the army, a man had to have an intelligence quotient (IQ) of 92 or higher. However, once the standards were lowered, men with an IQ between 72 and 91 were now eligible – even some with an IQ lower than 72 were considered adequate.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 96.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 96.

<sup>40</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 97.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 97.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 97.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 100.

McNamara's "Moron Corps"<sup>44</sup> was, according to the initial unveiling of Project 100,000, supposed to receive training from the military "in special skills that would lift them out of poverty".<sup>45</sup> However, this promise never came to fruition. Marine Captain David Anthony Dawson proclaimed that "The real tragedy of Project 100,000 lay in McNamara's refusal to find additional funding for special training" and that he "allotted just enough to provide the minimum amount of training for all Marines".<sup>46</sup> Drill Instructor Gregg Stoner was shocked that "mentally slow" individuals who were "unable to read" were inducted into the Marines. Upon the death of McNamara in 2009, war correspondent Joseph Galloway, who had been awarded a Brown Star with Valor due to his service in Vietnam, believed it was shameful to have drafted "mentally deficient. Illiterate. Mostly black and redneck whites... By drafting them the Pentagon would not have to draft an equal number of the middle class and elite college boys whose mothers could and would raise hell".<sup>47</sup> The majority "of the 354,000 men of Project 100,000" were deployed to Vietnam, half being assigned to combat roles. In total, 5,478 of these individuals perished with a fatality rate "three times that of other GIs".<sup>48</sup> These men were referred to as cannon fodder, simply more bodies to throw into Vietnam.

Lieutenant colonel Leslie John Shellhase, a World War II veteran, served under McNamara and "played a central role in planning Project 100,000."<sup>49</sup> From his account, Shellhase stated that he believed the concept was a terrible idea. Going on to say that the Pentagon planners had "resisted Project 100,000 because we knew that wars are not won by using marginal manpower as cannon fodder".<sup>50</sup> Once resistance failed, the Pentagon planners attempted to

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<sup>44</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 112.

<sup>45</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 112.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 112.

<sup>47</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 115.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 115.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 116.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory, "McNamara's Folly", 116.

persuade McNamara to no avail. Shellhase, and his fellow Pentagon planners, never “envisioned that these men would be used in combat”<sup>51</sup>, simply for service and support roles. General William Westmoreland complained that Project 100,000 resulted in declining success in Vietnam because they sent him “dummies”, including “low-quality officers” such as Lieutenant William Calley – a man who “flunked out of Palm Beach Junior College... and reportedly managed to get through officer candidate school without even learning to read a map or use a compass”.<sup>52</sup> In the trial for Calley’s role in the My Lai Massacre, his own attorney “used Calley’s low intelligence as a courtroom defense” and blamed the Army for lowering their mental standards.<sup>53</sup> Four-star Marine Corps general Tony Zinni stated that “the need for bodies had been so great that recruiters were sending people into the military who never should have been there” and that promotions were granted too quickly.<sup>54</sup> Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Charles L. Armstrong believed the “single biggest blunders” during the Vietnam era was the introduction of Project 100,000.<sup>55</sup> In addition to taking longer to train, anxiety and stress had a profound effect upon these men. American military leaders believed that these individuals ought to have only been used for “menial tasks performed away from the battlefield” and never “used in combat”.<sup>56</sup> With a death rate three times higher than fellow GIs, false promises of training, and an attempt to simply please middle-class voters, McNamara’s decision to implement Project 100,000 resulted in disaster.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>51</sup> Gregory, “McNamara's Folly”, 116.

<sup>52</sup> Gregory, “McNamara's Folly”, 118.

<sup>53</sup> Gregory, “McNamara's Folly”, 118.

<sup>54</sup> Gregory, “McNamara's Folly”, 118.

<sup>55</sup> Gregory, “McNamara's Folly”, 119.

<sup>56</sup> Gregory, “McNamara's Folly”, 145.

Robert S. McNamara was ultimately relieved of his position in 1968 due, in part, because high-ranking generals and admirals believed he was mismanaging the war. His inability to stick to a policy for the region resulted in inconsistencies and no long-term goal. The coup against President Ngô Đình Diệm, of which he and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were aware, occurred without intervention. He misled the Senate regarding the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, he was willing to cover up a \$400 million excess in defense spending, and, while publicly stating to journalists that the war was going well, privately, he felt otherwise. This behavior exposes McNamara as a consistent liar. His Project 100,000 was, although on the surface altruistic and an attempt to aid Johnson's Great Society, a miserable failure, since military commanders complained that these mentally deficient draftees took longer to train, didn't receive the proper training since McNamara slashed the promised budget, most couldn't read or comprehend instructions, and died at greater rates than other soldiers while in combat. All in an attempt to please middle-class voters, the war was a perfect example of the poor fighting a rich man's war. McNamara's shortcomings expose the man not as a hero of the Vietnam War but as a consistent calamity.

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