Introduction

Robert Strange McNamara, President John F. Kennedy's restless Secretary of Defense, was flying back to Washington, returning from yet another trip, this time from South Vietnam. The Southeast Asian country was a nuisance, a nagging problem for the Secretary but one that few could predict would eventually tarnish his reputation irreparably and mark US foreign policy for the remainder of the Cold War. That was still a few years off. On this day, October 1, 1963, McNamara worked alongside his assistant, William P. Bundy, to finalize their delegation's trip report.

Despite their fatigue, McNamara did not sleep on the long journey back to Washington but instead parsed over the report. President Kennedy had asked his Secretary to produce a document that would define the government's policy on South Vietnam and, in so doing, bring some order to the chaotic scenes both in Washington and in the field. Over the past week, the US team in South Vietnam had frustrated McNamara, who had observed and disapproved of the bickering between agencies and advisors whose "emotional" attitudes seemed to cloud their judgment.

Now the focus was on the future and moving past these obstacles to produce what the Secretary saw as a coherent and rational policy in the shape of the report. It was his intention to present a document that reconciled disagreements among advisors over their diagnosis of the core problems in South Vietnam as well as their evaluation of the prospects for the existing US policy there. When he was not rolling off statistics, as he was wont to do, McNamara was questioning Bundy's choice of words. McNamara liked precision, in numbers and in words. The Secretary

enjoyed poetry and the poet's sparse and attentive choice of words. His plane rides occasionally involved sharing poetry with his colleagues and his rare friends among those colleagues.

The day before he had left for South Vietnam, on September 26, 1963, CBS had broadcast an hour-long interview with the Secretary during which he had recited a poem to illustrate his 980 days in office and to describe relations with the Soviet Union, with whom the prospect of détente was appearing on the horizon. Quoting the dissident Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, McNamara read:

> There's no doubt that it's spring. It's a rough spring, a difficult spring, with late frosts and a cold wind, a spring which takes a step to the left and then a step to the right and then a step back, but which is certain nevertheless to go on and take two or three steps forward. And the fact that winter should hold the earth so desperately in its grip and refuse to give up is also quite in the order of things. But then in the very counter attacks of winter one can sense its growing impotence because times have changed.[1]

As the poem suggested, the Kennedy administration was enjoying an optimistic moment. Over the last ten days, the administration had scored a number of victories with a hitherto uncooperative Congress. The Senate had ratified the nuclear test ban treaty, which McNamara and his team had worked tirelessly to achieve against the objections of many military officials. Despite their disappointment with its details, the product of many compromises, for Kennedy and McNamara, the treaty represented an important first step. Just two days later, the House of Representatives also approved the President's proposed income tax cut, which to the relief of his Keynesian advisors, Kennedy had finally agreed to. His Council of Economic Advisers in particular predicted that it would kick-start the economy and bring down the unemployment numbers that had helped him get elected.

More than South Vietnam, as the Secretary returned to Washington, President Kennedy's focus was on the domestic front. If there was one battlefield that preoccupied the New Frontiersmen during these warm fall days of October, it was on the home front. *Time Magazine*'s cover featured Alabama Governor George Wallace's profile and the headline "Alabama: Civil Rights Battlefield." The administration had faced a stand-off with the Governor as he resisted federal efforts to force desegregation of schools across the country. In a frenzy of southern resistance, white supremacists had bombed a church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young black girls as they changed into their choir clothes. In yet another symbol of the domestic tensions that flared around the young

President and his team of New Frontiersmen, on the day that McNamara had left for South Vietnam, a deranged man had crashed the White House gates in a paranoid episode.

However, for the next few days, McNamara and his report took center stage, setting strictly domestic concerns aside for a time. An exhausted William Bundy accompanied McNamara as they went directly from the plane to the White House to present their report to the President before convening the whole national security team in the ensuing days.[2] On October 3, after meeting with all of Kennedy's senior advisors, with the notable exception of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who was away at a NATO meeting in Europe, the administration produced a press release that summarized McNamara's preferred policy for South Vietnam.

Speaking to the gathered press corps, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger explained: "The security of South Vietnam is a major interest of the United States as of other free nations ... Major United States assistance in support of [the] military effort is needed only until the insurgency has been suppressed or until the national security forces of the Government of South Vietnam are capable of suppressing it. Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the United States military task can be completed by the end of 1965." He concluded by saying, "It remains the policy of the United States in South Vietnam, as in other parts of the world, to support the efforts of the people of that country to defeat aggression and to build a peaceful and free society."[3]

By tracing the policy enshrined in the carefully worded press release back to its origins, this book sheds light on McNamara's early decisions on Vietnam and specifically on his plans to withdraw from the country in that period. Although his policy for withdrawal was made public only in October 1963, it originated in the spring of 1962 when McNamara took control of the administration's policy for South Vietnam. During the spring of 1962, McNamara received counsel from a number of people that would shape his recommendations for South Vietnam. In particular, he met with the British counterinsurgency expert Robert G. K. Thompson, who accelerated McNamara's adoption of other advisors' counterinsurgency strategies for South Vietnam. He also met with the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who drew McNamara's attention to the potential repercussions of a more open-ended or traditional military commitment to South Vietnam.

Although McNamara later explained that war was not amenable to calculation, in these early years he approached the problems in Vietnam with numbers in mind. His calculations were not in terms of "body

counts," as they would infamously become later, but in terms of the economic and fiscal impact of overseas military commitments on the US balance of payments position and on the administration's budget. From McNamara's vantage point, the problems in South Vietnam were not entirely unrelated to domestic issues.

The responsibilities of the Cold War had produced a range of defense installations around the world that were producing year-on-year balance of payments deficits, an alarming prospect for Kennedy, who feared that a run on the dollar could undermine all other aspects of US power. President Kennedy weighed on his Secretary of Defense to help him balance the budget and to alleviate pressures on the dollar. The fall 1963 policy for South Vietnam was more economical in both respects.

By looking at McNamara's positions on South Vietnam, in the context not of the broader Vietnam War but of his office, the book provides insight into how the machinery of defense policy had evolved until and then under McNamara's stewardship. Understanding how McNamara defined his job provides some explanation for his preoccupation with economic issues as well as his resistance when Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson eventually overturned his withdrawal plans. The role of the Secretary of Defense was ill-defined when McNamara joined the Kennedy administration, and its primary focus was inward. Even when the war escalated under Johnson, McNamara scarcely considered the "other side" very much. His inability to factor in Hanoi's motives and the international context, beyond his fears of a Chinese intervention when the United States escalated, were a remarkable oversight.

As Secretary of Defense, McNamara's first concern was with civilian control, both in controlling the impact of the defense budget on economic issues and in ensuring that military tools were best aligned to civilian objectives. Unfortunately, McNamara defined his role too narrowly. Although he recognized the shortcomings, and later the absence, of a strategy for South Vietnam, he refused to step in to fill the void, and instead waited for non-defense advisors to do so. He only belatedly broke out of his self-imposed restrictions.

The received wisdom that McNamara's estimate that the United States would withdraw from South Vietnam in 1965 was based solely on optimism about the situation on the ground is also challenged in the chapters ahead. In reality, from 1962 and into the early months of the Johnson administration, McNamara was pessimistic about prospects in South Vietnam and in particular about the ability of the South Vietnamese to sustain the proposed program both economically and logistically.

Similarly, as the war escalated under President Johnson, he questioned the military value of the bombing campaign and of the introduction of US ground troops, which he publicly recommended. However, McNamara repeatedly self-censored his doubts, at first so they would not detract from his planning and later out of loyalty to the President that he served.

Perhaps the greatest insight of this book is into how important the notion of "loyalty" was to McNamara in the execution of his job. Loyalty trumped even his best judgment. This became especially problematic as he oversaw increasing troop deployments into South Vietnam despite having little or no faith in what those troops could accomplish and despite understanding sooner than most that those deployments could have a crippling economic effect on the United States and, in so doing, on the international monetary system as a whole.[4]

The new insight into McNamara adds to the usual counterfactual question on the early period of US involvement in Vietnam, namely: "What would Kennedy have done if he had lived?" In its stead, it provides other questions that are implicit in each of the chapters that follow. The alternative counterfactuals include: Could the counterinsurgency strategy laid out in the 1962–1963 period have worked if it had been scrupulously applied? Could the war have been prevented if Lyndon Baines Johnson had been less of a spendthrift New Deal Democrat? Could a stronger civilian voice at the State Department or elsewhere have provided alternatives to the application of military force to solve the problems in South Vietnam?

The chapters ahead build on several important histories of the Vietnam War, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and of Robert McNamara himself. Andrew Preston's work on the National Security Council under McGeorge Bundy provided a template: he described his work as a "bureaucratic history of the changes in presidential decision-making and a diplomatic history of the origins of the Vietnam War."[5] To paraphrase Preston, this book is a bureaucratic history of the changes in *the OSD* and a history of the early years of the Vietnam War. This approach borrows from political science models and assumes that "where you stand depends on where you sit."[6] The research looks at the OSD to see how "where McNamara sat" had an effect on "where he stood" on Vietnam. At the same time, it suggests that idiosyncratic personalities and human relationships complicate neat analytical models.

The book attempts to recreate McNamara's reality from the vantage point of his office to explain his recommendations for Vietnam. It does

not provide a chronological account of the decisions for Vietnam and how these interacted with international events. Instead, it casts a light on how McNamara and his colleagues at the OSD experienced the Vietnam War, focusing on events and factors that mattered most to them. Central to this has been the need to understand how McNamara defined his job and, in so doing, reconcile two historiographies that have largely been treated as discrete, namely the history of the OSD and the history of McNamara in Vietnam. In so doing, another interpretation of McNamara's decisions on Vietnam emerges.

In keeping with trends in the history of the Cold War more broadly, the existing literature on the Vietnam War has gone through a number of waves as new materials emerge and new, often more nuanced, interpretations are provided.[7] For the most part, across these waves, McNamara has been described as one of the war's "villains" albeit for different reasons. Where military authors criticize him for putting far too many restraints on his military advisors,[8] others insist on his role in silencing voices of dissent, especially in the Johnson administration.[9] One possible reason for this consensus among unlikely allies is that McNamara was an iconic figure of the war, the images of his press conference so deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the war. As a case in point, Deborah Shapley's leading biography of McNamara is dedicated: "to the millions who, like me, were born as World War II ended and the cold war began, and whose lives were changed by this one life."[10] A similar, more mournful, interpretation of McNamara's trajectory pervades Paul Hendrickson's *The Living and the Dead*, which describes an aged McNamara as a "ghost, a ghost of all that had passed and rolled on beneath his country in barely a generation."[11]

As time has passed and the polarizing memory of McNamara as the architect of Vietnam has either faded or been replaced by the image of the reflective man in Errol Morris's *The Fog of War*, a different interpretation is perhaps no longer taboo. In areas outside history, and particularly in business management from where McNamara came, he has gone through something of a revival.[12] This sympathetic literature harks back to McNamara's early years before Vietnam when his revolutionary leadership was widely applauded.[13]

The goal of this book is not to try to redeem McNamara but to treat his early contributions without the benefit of hindsight and without the need to fit him into a binary "hawk" or "dove" framework.[14] As new documents have emerged, historians have reassessed other advisors to President Kennedy and Johnson, including McGeorge Bundy, Paul Nitze and

to a lesser extent Dean Rusk, but McNamara has largely eluded this treatment. This book is a first attempt at rectifying that oversight.

At a minimum, the book contributes to answering Shapley's question, "Was his choice of war an aberration in his character and career? Or was it inevitable, given his nature?"[15] It also disproves statements that "It is a painful irony that the man who preached the gospel of cost-effectiveness for the nuts and bolts of military hardware failed to comprehend that the Vietnam intervention would become the least effective and most costly military venture in American history."[16] Quite the contrary: this book suggests that economic concerns and relatively accurate predictions about the costs of escalation conditioned McNamara's recommendations for Vietnam. They explain why he led withdrawal plans from 1962 to 1963 and later resisted the introduction of ground troops.

Rather than focus on McNamara as an individual, the book evaluates his role as Secretary of Defense and situates him at the end of a historical process for that office, a young agency still being shaped by incumbent Secretaries. Also, where many historians have tended to treat the Pentagon as a unitary organization or, at best, as an uncertain union between the OSD and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) separately, this book goes a little deeper in identifying the key centers of power within the OSD for Vietnam decision-making.[17] It traces the key offices that McNamara created to continue the process of enforcing civilian control over the military and how these offices were distinct, if not in outright opposition, to the military services. As Chapter 2 explains, many of the offices that were either created or elevated in importance during McNamara's tenure, for instance Systems Analysis or the International Security Advisor's office, were specifically designed to undercut the Chiefs' budgetary and policy-making roles.

Moreover, diplomatic historians of the Vietnam War have tended to overemphasize the diplomatic and military aspects of decision-making. As a result, the existing literature has relied heavily on archival collections that are more narrowly relevant to Vietnam without placing those decisions in their economic context.[18] This tendency is particularly problematic with McNamara since he was the first to acknowledge that he had very little knowledge of foreign policy coming into his role as Secretary of Defense. His focus was on another dimension of civilian control, namely controlling the economic and fiscal aspects of defense.

In this regard, this research builds on Francis Gavin's work, which places greater onus on issues such as the balance of payments and gold outflow.[19] Economic concerns were central to McNamara's decision for

Vietnam and in determining the timing and shape of withdrawal plans from 1962 to 1963. The change in strategy from the Kennedy to the Johnson administration also hinged on the two Presidents' different appreciation of economic issues and specifically on Johnson's judgment, which he shared with more liberal economic advisors, that Kennedy had been too fiscally conservative.[20]

In addition, the book challenges the tendency to depict a relatively neat upward trajectory in the US commitment to Vietnam.[21] While many studies recognize that 1965 was a watershed moment, they nevertheless rely on statistics of ever-increasing troop numbers, even if they were "just" advisors in the Kennedy years, to describe an almost inexorable process toward the full-scale American war in Vietnam. However, what these troop numbers overlook is that a period of planning for withdrawal led by McNamara in 1962–1963, and underpinned by a strategy for counterinsurgency rather than for conventional war, punctuated this process.

More recently, with the declassification of relevant archival collections, historians have given more credence to "Kennedy's withdrawal plans." These move beyond the early, and often speculative, recollections of Kennedy's colleagues, who affirmed that the slain President was determined to withdraw on the eve of his death irrespective of the situation on the ground.[22]

However, in portraying Kennedy as an isolated clairvoyant, most historians have overlooked McNamara's role in the withdrawal plans. They have glossed over McNamara's interests in pushing for withdrawal and, in painting a picture of him as a mere "implementer," discounted his ability to learn on the job and to seek out experts, in particular on issues like counterinsurgency. Although their approach makes for a consistent reading of McNamara's place in the Vietnam War – as a hawk until later in the Johnson administration – it is at odds with new documentary evidence. Marc Selverstone has provided an invaluable corrective here. As he persuasively argues, Kennedy may have inspired the actual withdrawal plans, but they were closely aligned to McNamara's own priorities for the Department of Defense (DOD) and he was their main architect.[23]

The book confirms Fredrik Logevall's view in his seminal book *Choosing War* that Johnson *chose* war in South Vietnam. By relying more heavily on the presidential recordings during the early months of the Johnson administration, it challenges the opposing view that Johnson was "scrupulous in continuing" Kennedy's Vietnam policy.[24] Instead, as Chapter 7 shows, during the transition, Johnson knowingly changed

strategy, abandoning the counterinsurgency strategy that was central to Kennedy's approach to Vietnam and to his withdrawal plans.

Unlike Johnson, Kennedy was deeply immersed in counterinsurgency theory and surrounded himself with formal and informal experts on the issue, most of whom were isolated, pushed out or left under Johnson, notably Roger Hilsman and his brother Robert F. Kennedy.[25] As McNamara explained, "[The] statements and recommendations [about the 1965 end date] were associated with the strategy we were then following in Vietnam. That strategy was subsequently changed; and when it changed, the statements and recommendations made with respect to that strategy were no longer valid."[26] In other words, the withdrawal plans under Kennedy relied on his understanding of counterinsurgency: when the counterinsurgency strategy was dropped, so too were the withdrawal plans.

Johnson's starker views on Vietnam underpinned the shift in strategy. From the outset, he believed in falling dominos more strongly than Kennedy had and was against the idea of withdrawal in any situation short of victory. There had been two lowest common denominators in government under Kennedy (policies that could earn broad administration agreement albeit for conflicting reasons): one was withdrawal and the other was the introduction of troops. Kennedy expressly rejected the latter. Unlike Johnson, he had a somewhat blasé attitude to recommendations for the introduction of troops.[27] By contrast, very early on, Johnson felt that the "sky was the limit" for US support to Vietnam and sought out military advice more often than McNamara himself was inclined to do.[28]

In addition, as Chapter 6 will also show, Kennedy and McNamara placed Vietnam in a broader context of US commitments around the world and were concerned about its impact on the balance of payments. As such, withdrawal from Vietnam did not imply the abandonment of Vietnam, only the creation of a new model of influence around the world – one that need not rely on military tools or a heavy US troop presence. Both Kennedy and McNamara shifted the administration's definition of the problem in Vietnam in a way that would facilitate this view: instead of being an externally driven conflict, it was internal; and instead of being "our" war it was "their" war.

Broader economic considerations did not weigh on Johnson in the same way. Instead, and ironically, as Chapter 8 shows, he seemed more willing to "bear any burden" and criticized his predecessors' concern for balanced budgets as he, in contrast, embraced neo-Keynesianism in the Great Society programs. McNamara, who was reluctant to identify any

divergences between his views and those of the President he served, later admitted that he and Johnson had not seen eye to eye on the costs inherent to escalation in Vietnam.

When the transition is seen through the lens of civilian control – namely aligning military tools to civilian-designed strategy and weighing the defense budget against internal constraints, and primarily a sound economic base – McNamara was remarkably consistent as he transitioned from the Kennedy to the Johnson administration. In both instances, McNamara did not design strategy but instead devised the most cost-efficient program to support the President's chosen strategy. Also, McNamara had embraced Kennedy's policy because it promised to reduce the balance of payments deficit and could deal with a congressional attack on the Military Assistance Program that funded Vietnam operations. In the Johnson administration, he pressed harder to reduce defense outlays to compensate for the increase in costs on Vietnam while urging the President to repeal the tax cut that he had inherited from Kennedy.

McNamara was especially consistent in allowing the Presidents he served to make him the public face of a policy that was not his alone: out of a sense of loyalty to the Presidency, first he became the public face of the withdrawal plans and then for escalation. As each of the chapters shows, this was a deliberate decision by both Presidents and by McNamara himself. McNamara sought to protect the Presidents he served because he understood the reputational damages that could be incurred if their policies were unsuccessful. As Chapter 9 shows, he waited a long time to publicly break ranks with the administration. From the fall of 1965 onward, when he understood that his days at the OSD were numbered, he tried to repair his damaged reputation and legacy.

These new findings are possible because the full body of primary materials is now available. They complete what was already a rich set of materials. In a classified oral history for the Historical Office of the OSD undertaken in 1986, McNamara explained why, in office, he had asked his Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, John T. McNaughton, to compile *United States–Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*, or what would become more commonly known as the *Pentagon Papers*. He recounted that he told McNaughton: "This is a damn mess. We must insure that those who at some point will wish to study the action and draw lessons from it will have all the raw materials they need. So collect all the raw materials and be sure they are available to historians." He

wanted "historians, political scientists, and military experts [to] examine the mistakes in judgment."[29]

Although the *Pentagon Papers* are an important resource for any research on the OSD in Vietnam, especially since they now have been declassified in full, they also do not provide the definitive account of the Defense Department in Vietnam. First, its authors did not have access to "all the raw materials": they drew only on documents that were both directly relevant to Vietnam and that came through the OSD. In addition, the *Pentagon Papers* are essentially a curated selection of documents that are framed in analysis rather than the raw material per se. Their analysis, especially for the Kennedy years, is sometimes off the mark. Daniel Ellsberg was responsible for the Kennedy chapters and, perhaps because he had no contact with Vietnam in those early years, may have overlooked collections or factors that were equally, if not more, relevant to understanding decisions on Vietnam. In the *Pentagon Papers*, Ellsberg dismissed Kennedy's withdrawal plans as premised on optimism and primarily designed for budgetary projections not operational realities. However, in later years, in light of new documents, he revisited that conclusion.[30] Finally, the *Papers* relied only on the written record and, in this, were at a major disadvantage to histories today that have a far richer set of primary documents to draw from, especially the presidential recordings.

On the issue of relying on the written record, McNamara's Special Assistant and later Deputy to McNaughton, Adam Yarmolinsky, explained: "The written record more and more, and even in those days, tends to be defensive and it provides rationalizations rather than reasons. The written record is that – you know, McNamara, the DPMs [Draft Presidential Memoranda] – they were drafts until they were promulgated so that it could never be said that there was disagreement between the Pentagon or the Secretary and the President." When asked specifically what was not on the written record, Yarmolinsky replied, "Probably everything. Almost everything." He also added, "I think [McNamara] realized early on than the record shows that it was a mistake. And he tried in ways that are not apparent to disentangle."[31]

This research has benefited from a number of new resources, material that has either just come to light or was only recently declassified as well as material beyond the written record to provide a more complete picture of McNamara's early decisions on Vietnam.

First and foremost, since 2010, Robert McNamara's personal papers have been accessible at the Library of Congress. These contain

McNamara's notes as he researched his own memoirs, his heretofore classified oral histories for the OSD Office of the Historian and his personal correspondence. In addition, his papers contain his calendar as Secretary of Defense, which has proven invaluable in terms of identifying the people McNamara spoke to as he turned to a policy of disengagement from Vietnam, most notably Robert Thompson and John Kenneth Galbraith.

Second, John Newman has made his material available to researchers at the Kennedy Library.[32] His papers provide an invaluable shortcut as they contain much of the material that has been declassified on Kennedy's withdrawal plans in archives around the United States, including many of the military archives that are less accessible to researchers.

Also, Marc Selverstone and the Miller Center have posted a number of transcribed tapes online that provide fascinating insight into Vietnam decision-making during the Kennedy and Johnson years, and on McNamara in particular. In the Kennedy tapes, more than anywhere else, McNamara is heard dominating discussions on Vietnam and going against the current for escalation instead of leading it. Similarly, the Lyndon B. Johnson Library online collection of presidential recordings has been crucial to contextualizing and explaining the written record during the transition. For the reasons Yarmolinsky described, these recordings underpin the chapters on the Johnson years.

In addition, this research has drawn on oral histories, primarily at the presidential libraries, to understand the context in which recommendations were made and the relationships between people and agencies. Despite their inherent problems, the oral histories on McNamara and his tenure as Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy years provide an interesting perspective into his management style, his relationship with his military advisors and those whom he consulted on Vietnam.

McNamara's oral histories for the Office of the Historian at the Office of the Secretary of Defense, which were declassified in 2010, offer a fresh perspective on the Kennedy administration's withdrawal plans as McNamara is unusually candid in them. Indeed, twice during the interviews he asks for guarantees that they would remain classified. Those oral histories are the only place, for instance, where McNamara unambiguously admits that President Johnson fired him. Moreover, other key oral histories, notably with McNamara's Deputy Roswell Gilpatric, Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon and the Council of Economic Advisers, were recorded in 1964 and thus before the full-scale escalation in Vietnam that could have colored judgments on President Johnson, McNamara or others.

Also, because this research tries to place the Vietnam War in its broader bureaucratic context, it has drawn on the papers of a larger swathe of advisors, not just those directly concerned with Vietnam and national security issues, but also advisors that dealt with economic issues (e.g. Carl Kaysen and C. Douglas Dillon) and organizational issues (e.g. Adam Yarmolinsky) to understand how they perceived Vietnam. For the economic dimensions, a number of online archives, in particular the Federal Reserve Archive, were also helpful.

Finally, the research has benefited from access to collections and documents that are not widely available to researchers. In particular, Alex McNaughton, through Thomas Paullin, the author of a blog on McNaughton, kindly provided a copy of his father John McNaughton's private diary, which gives an unparalleled and unfiltered view onto the private thoughts of McNamara and his closest confidants during the 1966–1967 period.

By using this full set of materials, the book reframes the withdrawal plans in the 1962–1963 period and the military escalation thereafter, as well as McNamara's role therein. It suggests that the decisions for withdrawal were rooted in issues that were less glamorous than Kennedy's vision, namely bureaucratic and budgetary processes. Also, by analyzing the decisions for Vietnam through the lens of the OSD, different lessons emerge about the "mistakes" made. McNamara's eventual disillusionment with the war and his advisors' post-mortem conclusions about the process that led to the war are revealing. While McNamara's reforms had been designed primarily to provide a "checks and balances" function, they had also strengthened the Department of Defense so that it had become a more flexible, well-run, well-funded and "active" organization in contrast to the State Department, which had a "talking shop" role. In so doing, the OSD produced what McNamara's Special Assistant Adam Yarmolinsky called "centrifugal tendencies," where military solutions to international problems were available and easier to deploy. In the end, the same factors that had, until 1963, coalesced into a policy for disengagement from Vietnam made escalation more likely under the Johnson administration.

In some respects, McNamara was a victim of his own success. His ability to implement policy loyally and efficiently and to execute the President's chosen policy faithfully made him the ideal agent for potentially delicate policies. In one presidential recording, President Johnson can be heard saying, "I thought you'd done the best job I've ever seen done. I hope you go on and brag yourself to your wife. I know you won't

do it to anyone else."[33] McNamara echoed this theme when he was asked in an oral history why he had become involved in economic issues that were only tangentially relevant to his role as Secretary of Defense. He explained, "I was loyal to the point that he had complete assurance that I would carry through those tactics; and [that I was] skillful and tough enough that there was a high degree of probability that I would carry them out successfully."[34]

While that loyalty served the Presidents he worked for well, the same cannot be said for US efforts in Vietnam. Instead, as the chapters ahead will show, McNamara's conception of loyalty, which he felt served the interest of healthy civil-military relations, became especially problematic during the transition into the Johnson administration. It led him to self-censor his prescient understanding about the economic impact of the conflict in Vietnam and about the lack of an overarching strategy that could justify the increasing troop deployments that he also oversaw.