

[Anderson on Basha i Novosejt, "'I Made Mistakes": Robert McNamara's Vietnam War Policy, 1960-1968'](#)

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Aurélié Basha i Novosejt. *"I Made Mistakes": Robert McNamara's Vietnam War Policy, 1960-1968.* Cambridge Studies in US Foreign Relations Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Illustrations. 338 pp. \$49.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-41553-8.

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

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Aurélié Basha i Novosejt, a lecturer in American history at the University of Kent, has studied documents to reexamine US secretary of defense Robert McNamara's policies toward South Vietnam, especially concerning the early years of his tenure. Her aim here is not to join the "Hawk" versus "Dove" argument about the secretary. Instead, "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" (p. 7).

Novosejt's documents include the full declassified Pentagon Papers but more important McNamara's personal papers and oral history, available since 2010 at the Library of Congress. The author also was able to inspect the private papers of John McNaughton, who was the secretary's confidant and coworker at the Department of Defense, and she read dozens of oral histories now available online and at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

In 1962 and the next year, McNamara was very interested in counterinsurgency and keeping the budget low for the Department of Defense. He had meetings with, and was impressed by, British counterinsurgency expert Robert G. K. Thompson and economist John Kenneth Galbraith. As the author notes, "McNamara was a mathematical man, more concerned with budgetary issues than with geopolitics. He was never really concerned with designing strategy for Vietnam but the counterinsurgency strategies fit neatly with his cost-cutting approach" (p. 118). Thus, he wanted to withdraw one thousand military trainers and advisers by the end of 1963, hoped that the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) could be trained to take over the fight against the Vietcong, and also hoped that the US could withdraw most of its troops by the end of 1965.

The author emphasizes that in private McNamara "was not optimistic about US prospects in Vietnam but neither was he convinced that all intervention was doomed to failure" (p. 120). The secretary "was more concerned with economic and budgetary issues than any grand strategy per se. Historians have largely ignored the period in part, perhaps, because it fits poorly with the conventional view of McNamara as one of the most prominent and explicitly hawkish architects of the war" (p. 75). By 1963 McNamara feared what would happen if South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem was ousted, and wrote, "dangerous to make a change ... then what is going to replace it—this is extremely

risky” (p. 133). That same month, November, both Diem and Kennedy were assassinated.

Novosejt stresses that Kennedy and McNamara were interested in withdrawing the sixteen thousand advisers they had stationed in South Vietnam, but the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, was not as interested in withdrawal. He moved away from counterinsurgency and training and in 1964 toward a combat commitment, which he accelerated in 1965.

Johnson chose war. Why did McNamara go along with the Americanization of the war? “Perhaps the greatest insight of this book,” the author writes, is “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” (p. 5).

After 1965, the author contends, McNamara’s influence waned in the administration and by 1967 “he was a broken man” (p. 201). Then, he commissioned the study that eventually became known as the Pentagon Papers. He wanted to identify the mistakes he and others made with Vietnam and prevent future catastrophes.

In the conclusion the author asks a number of counterfactual questions that might interest some readers. “I’ve made mistakes,” McNamara said to a colleague. “But the mistakes I made are not the ones they say I made” (p. 209). According to Novosejt, “McNamara’s most important mistakes on Vietnam were situated in his human flaws.” He was too loyal to Johnson and would not speak out on the troop deployments or on the impact of the war on domestic protests and the enormous economic costs. That, she writes, “is a terrible mark on his legacy” (p. 223).

As many quotes in this book demonstrate, McNamara was just another American “expert” who did not know what he was doing in Southeast Asia, did not understand the Vietnamese, and thought that the war could be “won” based almost exclusively on the American response—not that of the Vietcong or North Vietnamese. “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” (p. 4).

This book has some problems. The writing is clunky. In some paragraphs there is a footnote after every sentence, sometime even dividing a sentence. Chapter 1 is on the history of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1947-61, which could have been covered in a few pages, and there are so many quotes that at times the narrative is hard to follow.

Nevertheless, Novosejt has done judicious research, enriched our understanding of the secretary of defense, and produced a book that should be the last word on McNamara’s war.

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