

DERELICTION OF DUTY:**LYNDON JOHNSON, ROBERT MCNAMARA, THE JOINT
CHIEFS OF STAFF, AND THE LIES THAT LED TO VIETNAM¹**REVIEWED BY MAJOR ROBERT K. FRICKE²

“Vietnam was not forced on the United States by a tidal wave of Cold War ideology. It slunk in on cat’s feet.”³

I. Introduction

In his book, *Dereliction of Duty*, H. R. McMaster vigorously argues that neither the American entry into the war in Vietnam, nor the manner in which it was conducted was inevitable.⁴ Instead, he reasons that the escalation of U.S. military intervention “grew out of a complicated chain of events and a complex web of decisions that slowly transformed the conflict in Vietnam into an American war.”⁵

After his own experiences in the Persian Gulf War as the commander of an armored cavalry troop, McMaster wondered *how* and *why* Vietnam had become an American war. As the full title of the book suggests, the author answers these two questions by focusing primarily on the personalities of, and the interactions between, Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Ultimately, McMaster argues that American policy on Vietnam was arrived at by default—there was no strategic vision or planning. It was instead, the by-product of the dynamic that existed between these individuals, the advice they gave or failed to give, and the conflicts that Vietnam posed to Lyndon Johnson’s primary goals of reelection in 1964 and the

1. H. R. McMASTER, *DERELICTION OF DUTY: LYNDON JOHNSON, ROBERT MCNAMARA, THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, AND THE LIES THAT LED TO VIETNAM* (2d ed., HarperPerennial 1998) (1997).

2. United States Marine Corps. Written while assigned as a student, 47th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. McMASTER, *supra* note 1, at 323.

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

passing of his "Great Society" legislation during his second term. McMaster supports his thesis through extensive research that relies primarily on personal papers, oral histories, and tape-recorded interviews of the people named in the book's title and others who worked closely with them.

McMaster's thorough analysis of the personalities of these essential figures, their selfish goals, and the policy-making structure in which they operated helps to answer *how* we fought in Vietnam. *Dereliction of Duty* is not nearly as probative as he would have us believe in answering *why* we fought there. To use his metaphor, while Vietnam may have "slunk in on cat's feet,"⁶ the feet of this "cat" were the feet of a wild, hungry tiger that had escaped from its cage long before the Johnson administration. This "cat" remained on the prowl until it was returned to its cage during the Reagan administration.

Sprinkled throughout *Dereliction of Duty* are isolated references to the events of the Cold War. Among some of the crises and Cold War doctrine mentioned within the book are Truman's "Domino Theory;" Korea; the Bay of Pigs; the Cuban missile crisis; the Laotian crisis; the Congo from 1961-1963; confrontation with the Kremlin over a divided Berlin; Krushchev's support for communist insurgents fighting wars of national liberation in the countries of the developing world; and Kennedy's inaugural speech where he exhorted America's youth to "pay any price" and "bear any burden" to extend the virtues of their country to the rest of the world. Johnson, McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff lived through these events as adults.

McMaster's sparse treatment of these events helps to lessen their impact on *his* theory of the *why* of Vietnam. He uses these events not to explain a Cold War mentality that led to Vietnam, but rather to explain the relationships that were formed based on the advice given during these crises. He argues that it is the nature of these advisory relationships that ultimately led to the Americanization of Vietnam.

It is his attempt to use the interaction of these personalities to explain the *why* of Vietnam that causes McMaster's work to fall short. He offhandedly discounts, and all but ignores, the cumulative affect these Cold War events had on the "inevitability theory" of *why* Vietnam. In fact, McMaster waits until a footnote in his epilogue to acknowledge the argument of a large majority who believe the war in Vietnam was inevitable due to this

6. *Id.*

“Cold War mentality.”⁷ McMaster’s view of this theory is that the Cold War crises, particularly those that occurred during the Kennedy years, shaped advisory relationships that carried over into the Johnson administration.

McMaster, however, betrays his *why* theory early on in his book. “November 1963 marked a turning point in the Vietnam War. The U.S. role in fomenting a change in the South Vietnamese government *saddled* the United States with responsibility for its successor.”⁸ By his own words then, the author acknowledges the “inevitability theory” of Vietnam that he builds a case against throughout the remainder of his book.

Perhaps the best evidence of the Cold War theory of the inevitability of American involvement in Vietnam is provided unwittingly by McMaster. He uses the Dominican Republic crisis to illustrate Johnson’s political “gimmick” to overcome opposition to his Vietnam policy. More telling is the introduction of 20,000 troops to prevent a Communist takeover that would result in another “Cuba” in the Caribbean. “Although he was aware that the intervention would expose him to charges of gunboat diplomacy, Johnson thought that the public and congressional criticism would be ‘nothing compared to what I’d be called if the Dominican Republic went down the drain.’”⁹ The Dominican Republic crisis was not “bequeathed” from Kennedy. It best illustrates the cultural milieu of our nation at the time, and our unthinking, knee-jerk reaction to the potential spread of Communism. The battle between the “Free World” and “Communism” is the correct answer to the *why* of Vietnam.

McMaster’s analysis is brilliant, however, in explaining the *how* of Vietnam. Johnson, McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff each get their chance in the McMaster spotlight. He illuminates throughout the book the improper functioning of staffs, the very deep consequences that are paid in failing to exercise moral courage to voice one’s true beliefs, and how those bent on political gain can distort the policy making process to achieve their own selfish goals.

7. *Id.* at 323.

8. *Id.* at 41 (emphasis added).

9. *Id.* at 282.

II. Lyndon Johnson

Lyndon Johnson's dereliction in the *how* of American involvement in Vietnam was primarily fourfold. First, he accepted and ratified a method of doing business that limited the source of advice and displaced the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on military issues. Second, his insecurity in having "inherited" the presidency caused him to crave consensus. As such, he was so obsessed with validating himself in the 1964 election that he neglected to develop a coherent policy on Vietnam. Third, after the election, his focus became his legacy. Passage of his "Great Society" legislation was the mechanism by which he would achieve it, again, to the exclusion of a coherent policy on Vietnam.¹⁰ Fourth, he was willing to lie for political purposes, and did so when it served his need.

McMaster uses the Kennedy administration as the backdrop for the flawed policy-making process that Lyndon Johnson adopted when confronted with issues on Vietnam. Kennedy had dismantled the National Security Council apparatus in favor of "task forces" and "inner clubs" of most trusted advisors to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of proposed policy actions. McMaster makes a compelling argument that an assassin's bullet thrust Johnson into a job he was not yet ready to assume,¹¹ and that Kennedy's flawed method of doing business carried over into Johnson's administration.¹²

McMaster's use of the word "bequeathed"¹³ is correct. While Kennedy certainly felt free to change his predecessor's method of doing business to a leadership/management style that Kennedy was more comfortable with, his assassination did not afford Johnson that luxury—at least not initially. Continuity and status quo were the guiding principles after Johnson initially assumed his duties as President. At some point, however,

10. *Id.* at 317 ("Thirty years later McNamara admitted that the Great Society had dominated the president's desire to conceal the cost and scale of American intervention in Vietnam.").

11. *Id.* at 50 ("He later told a biographer that he felt as if he was "illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender to the throne, an illegal usurper.").

12. *Id.* at 41 ("John Kennedy bequeathed to Lyndon Johnson an advisory system that limited real influence to his inner circle and treated others, particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff, more like a source of potential opposition than of useful advice.").

13. *Id.* at 41.

Johnson adopted the policy-making apparatus that he inherited from Kennedy, and it reflected his own leadership style.

McMaster provides no evidence that Johnson was ever privy to Kennedy's "task forces" and "inner clubs."¹⁴ For all the reader knows, Johnson the vice-president was busy attending state funerals, as had been the experience of most vice-presidents until the very recent modern era. If anything, Johnson's exclusion from these groups as a vice-president arguably should have made him more resentful of such groups as President. At some point, presumably after the mandate he received in the 1964 election, Johnson could have refused this "inheritance." Instead, he made it his own.

III. Robert McNamara

Robert McNamara's dereliction in relation to the *how* of American involvement in Vietnam was threefold. First, he believed that geopolitical and technological changes of the last fifteen years had rendered advice based on military experience irrelevant and, in fact, dangerous.¹⁵ Second, and related to the first point, he overused the "success" of the Cuban missile crisis, and the policy of "graduated pressure" as the model for a solution to the Vietnam situation. Third, instead of assuming the role of "honest broker," he tried to live up to the label given to him by Johnson as a "can do fellow." He would make Johnson's wishes come true.

McMaster paints McNamara, through the comments of uniformed military personnel, as a statistician who believed that statistics and the Harvard business-school solution would be the answer to all problems.¹⁶ Yet it was the uniformed services' parochialism that alienated McNamara and prompted him to centralize power in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. In light of "Goldwater-Nichols" and the emphasis on "jointness" in our services today, McNamara seemed visionary in this regard.

McMaster's criticism of McNamara is misplaced as to his perceived over-reliance on the Cuban missile crisis as a model for the graduated use of force. McNamara had concluded that the principal lesson of the Cuban

14. *Id.* at 26. For example, membership of the Executive Committee (EXCOM) of the National Security Council during the Cuban missile crisis did not include Vice-president Johnson.

15. *Id.* at 328.

16. *Id.* at 20.

missile crisis was that graduated pressure provided a “firebreak between conventional conflict and that situation of low probability but highly adverse consequences” that could lead to nuclear war.¹⁷ This “success” (with the caveat of the under-the-table negotiation of the removal of Jupiter missiles brokered between Robert Kennedy and Anatoli Dobrynin) is a concrete example of a real life, military “lesson learned.” These “lessons” are what our uniformed military is so anxious to collect, catalogue, and apply as guiding principles to ensure the success of future operations. It is easy for the author to criticize applying this “lesson learned” to Vietnam based upon its subsequent failure. The proper question is whether it was reasonable at the time to apply this lesson. Given the “Cold War” mentality that existed at the time and that the author chooses to minimize, criticism of McNamara on this point is unjustified.

McMaster asserts that the collective lack of military experience among McNamara and his “whiz kids” caused them to “fail to consider that Hanoi’s commitment to revolutionary war made losses that seemed unconscionable to American white-collar professionals of little consequence to Ho’s government.”¹⁸ McMaster properly charges McNamara with trying to do the enemy’s thinking for him and validates the advice of the uniformed services based upon the war gaming results of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In the same vein, however, McMaster seems unwilling to give any credence to McNamara’s concern over possible Russian or Chinese involvement based upon the United States’ recent experience in Korea.

McMaster’s greatest criticism of McNamara is the “can do” label that was placed on him by Johnson, and McNamara’s zealous efforts to live up to it.

McNamara knew that Johnson wanted advisors who would tell him what he wanted to hear, who would find solutions even if there were none to be found. Bearers of bad news or those who expressed views that ran counter to his priorities would hold little sway. McNamara could sense the president’s desires and determined to do all that he could to fulfill them. He would become Lyndon Johnson’s “oracle” for Vietnam.¹⁹

17. *Id.* at 73.

18. *Id.* at 163.

19. *Id.* at 61.

McNamara and others had witnessed Johnson's exclusion of Vice President Humphrey from future deliberations on Vietnam after he had offered advice that questioned the direction of Johnson's policy. It was this blind loyalty and personal desire to hold sway over the President that was the most destructive.

When Johnson "wanted to conceal from the American public and Congress the costs of deepening American involvement in Vietnam, McNamara's can-do attitude and talent for manipulating numbers and people would prove indispensable."²⁰ This point goes a long way toward answering the *how* of Vietnam.

IV. The Joint Chiefs of Staff

The dereliction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in relation to the *how* of American involvement in Vietnam is *Dereliction of Duty's* greatest revelation. McMaster unmasks the service parochialism that virtually paralyzed the Joint Chiefs of Staff in carrying out their role as principal military advisor to the President. In sum, because of their inability to put their rivalries and own self-interests aside, they were relegated to the role of technicians for planners in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, rather than as strategic planners in their own rite.

Dereliction of Duty is full of concrete examples of how each service elevated its own interest at the expense of the common good. McMaster makes a very strong case for the proposition that the Joint Chiefs determined their own fate and shared in the complicity for *how* we fought in Vietnam, principally due to their own inaction.

McMaster tempers this argument slightly with some sympathy for their plight by listing the unique restraints that encumbered them as military professionals. McMaster reminds the reader of the Truman-MacArthur controversy during the Korean War and the dangers of overstepping the bounds of civilian control. He also points out that the professional code of the military officer prevents political activity.

In the same breath, McMaster posits that action that could have undermined the administration's credibility and derailed its Vietnam policy could not have been taken lightly. This is an excellent point. Where a

20. *Id.* at 54.

civilian advisor might “leak to the press”²¹ that he opposed a policy course in an effort to derail it, the leadership trait of loyalty is most certainly burned into the psyche of the military officer by the time he attains flag rank. The true mark of a military professional is the ability to execute lawful orders that you do not agree with personally without blaming the “old man.” The same traits that make military officers “professionals” also serve to inhibit their role and influence in a political setting.

V. Vitality for Today

The reader need look no farther than the present presidential administration to find many of McMaster’s observations relevant today. The political use of the military can still occur. Johnson’s use of the “Gulf of Tonkin” incident and his desire for action “in time for the seven o’clock news” might be an interesting case study for analyzing President Clinton’s decision to use retaliatory missile strikes against Sudan and Afghanistan during the Monica Lewinsky grand jury testimony.²²

McMaster makes a telling reference to General Westmoreland’s complaint to General Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, about Washington’s control of the Vietnam air campaign. General Westmoreland relayed that “experience indicated that the more remote the authority which directs how a mission is to be accomplished, the more we are vulnerable to mishaps resulting from such things as incomplete briefings and preparation, loss of tactical flexibility and lack of tactical coordination.”²³ These appear to be prophetic words in light of the criticism of President Clinton and then Secretary of Defense Les Aspin for their role in the massacre of U.S. Army rangers in Somalia.²⁴

Dereliction of Duty is highly recommended reading for any young military staff officer and should be mandatory reading for general officers. Senior military leaders must be prepared to deal with the tension between the restraint on political activity of the military officer and his concomitant duty in a democratic society to propose military solutions that take into

21. Howell Raines, *Reagan Defends Policies to Curb New Disclosures*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 10, 1983, at B1.

22. Russell Watson & John Barry, *Our Target Was Terror*, NEWSWEEK, Aug. 31, 1998, at 24.

23. McMASTER, *supra* note 1, at 233.

24. Steven A. Holmes, *The Somalia Mission: Clinton Defends Aspin on Action Regarding Request for U.S. Tanks*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 9, 1993, at sec. 1-7.

account political viability. Senior military leaders must also be able to properly balance their loyalty to their service branch with the welfare of the nation. Future officers who aspire to such positions owe their country no less.

Those senior level policy advisors whose uniform consists of a civilian coat and tie should also read it. The lack of prior military experience in the staff of the present presidential administration, and the likelihood that the trend will continue in the future based upon military downsizing, makes the “lessons learned” in *Dereliction of Duty* even more relevant today.