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## Book Review

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# Robert McNamara in Vietnam: still fighting Britain's Cold War

by Michael O. Billington

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### **Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy**

by Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and  
Robert K. Brigham

New York: Public Affairs, 1999  
479 pages, hardbound, \$27.50

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Robert McNamara, one of the primary architects of America's disastrous war against Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the leading strategist and commander-in-chief of Vietnam's victory in that war, joined forces to organize a series of six extraordinary seminars in Hanoi, between November 1995 and February 1998, bringing together several of the leading political, military, and intelligence officers who had confronted each other in that conflict. In *Argument Without End*, McNamara and his associates have published excerpts from these fascinating and historic dialogues, packaged between endless, lying commentary and spin by the Americans—mostly by McNamara.

The dialogues themselves are extremely useful and enlightening, showing the senior Vietnamese representatives—all in their 70s and 80s—to be men and women of enormous personal integrity and wisdom. They all have spent their entire lives fighting for Vietnam's independence—from French colonialism, from Japanese wartime occupation, and, finally, from America's misguided effort to defend the very European colonial policies which President Franklin Roosevelt had fought to eliminate altogether. These men and women have also been leaders in Vietnam's efforts to build a sovereign nation out of the wreckage left behind by McNamara and his ilk. Their poignant reflection upon Vietnam's unfulfilled hopes for America's support after World War II against British and French recolonization, and again after the 1954 Geneva Accords ended French colonial control, are only surpassed by their insight into the psychological character of America's descent into madness under the axiomatic mental

straitjacket of the Cold War.

The Vietnamese used both ruthless truthfulness and humor to cut through the blocked state of mind of their American counterparts. When McNamara's proposed agenda began with the year 1961, the Vietnamese insisted that the war could never be understood unless the dialogue included the crucial U.S.-Vietnam relations in the 1940s and 1950s. The Americans rejoined that none of them had been involved during that period, and most of those who were, are dead. Vietnam's retired Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach turned to his associate, Foreign Ministry official Luu Doan Huynh, and said: "Excuse me, Huynh, are you dead? You're not dead, are you?" Huynh conceded his current state of existence, and Thach turned to McNamara and said, "You see, he is not dead. And I am not dead, either. Many of us on this side of the table are not dead. We would be happy to discuss the significance of the Geneva Conference [in 1954] with anyone you send to Hanoi who is not dead."

### **McNamara's geopolitics**

The conferences in Hanoi grew out of McNamara's 1995 *mea culpa* in the book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, in which McNamara confessed that American policy in Vietnam was "wrong—terribly wrong." But, of course, McNamara did not acknowledge that the Vietnam War was the intentional creation of the Anglophile elite of the U.S. establishment, not as a just war, nor even as a war whose purpose was to *win*. McNamara, in fact, together with Averell Harriman, McGeorge Bundy, William Bundy, and a few others within the Kennedy administration, was the implementor of the British-designed Cold War, which called for a sustained proxy war between the superpowers, whose purpose was to fulfill Britain's postwar division of the world into warring camps, without quite reaching the level of mutual thermonuclear annihilation. McNamara comes close to admitting this in *Argument Without End*, when he describes the policy of "flexible response"—which he takes credit for formulating in 1962—as follows:

"Thus, acts of war are chosen in part for their *signalling*



Robert McNamara and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap in Hanoi, Nov. 9, 1995, from *Argument Without End*. Giap told McNamara that the war may have been a tragedy for Americans, “but for us, the war against you was a noble sacrifice. We did not want to fight the U.S. We did not. But you gave us no choice.”

value as well as their capacity to disable an opponent. It is *cautious* when confronting a nuclear opponent because of the ever-present fear of escalation to nuclear war. It is concerned with *limited objectives*, not with the destruction of the opponent” (emphasis in the original).

But such British imperial “balance of power” geopolitics is not acknowledged to be the sole *cause* of the war. Rather, McNamara goes to great lengths to argue that the cause of the war was “mutual misunderstandings and missed opportunities,” that the blame must be equally shared for the terrible tragedy, which neither side really wanted. His only proof for this nonsense consists of repeating it at least 10,000 times, before, during, and following each section of transcribed dialogue, and occasionally raising his voice in infantile emotional outbursts of “you were *wrong*—we were wrong, *but you were wrong, too!*”

It was to prove this insane premise that McNamara went to Hanoi to organize the conferences, meeting with the venerable General Giap. The General set the tone for the later conferences in his rebuttal to McNamara’s repeated insistence that the “tragedy” of the war was due to “mutual misunderstanding.” General Giap’s response parallels a point recently developed by Lyndon LaRouche in regard to the Prometheus story in Greek mythology, the immortal who defied Zeus by providing mankind with the knowledge of the use of fire and other arts required for the development of new technologies (see LaRouche, “Prometheus and Europe,” *EIR*, July 23, 1999). For this disobedience—freeing mankind from enslavement to the false gods of Olympus—Prometheus was chained to a rock, to be freed only if he revealed his secret foreknowledge regarding the inevitable downfall of Zeus himself. The typically blocked, oligarchical analysis of this story is that Prometheus is the tragic figure, suffering horribly for a seeming eternity. However, LaRouche insists, it is

clearly Zeus who is the tragic figure, incapable of altering his terribly flawed axioms about the world, eventually bringing about his own demise, and that of Mt. Olympus itself.

### ‘You gave us no choice’

Like Prometheus, General Giap stood up to the doomed gods of the Anglo-American establishment, represented by Robert Strange McNamara:

“You are wrong to call the war a ‘tragedy’—to say that it came from missed opportunities. Maybe it was a tragedy for you, because yours was a war of aggression, in the neo-colonialist style or fashion. . . . So, yes, it was tragic, because they died for a bad cause. But for us, the war against you was a noble sacrifice. We did not want to fight the U.S. We did not. But you gave us no

choice. . . . There were no missed opportunities for us. . . . I think we would do nothing different, under the circumstances.”

McNamara, however, proceeded to prove his inability to break from his fixed preconceptions, by repeating *ad nauseam* that, by the end of the Hanoi meetings, “Many—not all, but many—of our Vietnamese colleagues would . . . ultimately disagree profoundly with Giap’s self-satisfied assessment.” Not only is this insulting, but, from the evidence of the dialogues themselves, it is a total lie.

The ultimate purpose of McNamara’s effort is not simply to justify himself, nor to assuage his guilt by claiming that he “meant well” despite his infamous “body-count” approach to judging the war’s progress. Rather, “Body-Count” Bob continues to serve his mentors in London in distorting the history of the 20th century, in order to facilitate the new version of world empire, now called “globalization,” under the destructive domination of global speculators, international financial institutions, and the unrestrained military power of the London-directed NATO or UN strike forces. As I demonstrated in “Britain’s Cold War Against FDR’s Grand Design: The East Asian Theater, 1943-63” (*EIR*, Oct. 15, 1999), the primary target of London’s Cold War was FDR’s idea of a U.S.-Russia-China alliance after World War II, dedicated to the elimination of European colonialism, and to the development of modern, sovereign nation-states in the Third World through American System methods of science, technology, and education.

### Colonialism under a new name

To that end, Britain worked on both sides of Winston Churchill’s Iron Curtain to keep the Cold War going. After Roosevelt’s death, London’s agents Harriman and Dean Acheson drove President Truman into embracing Churchill’s



*On Sept. 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh began his inaugural address to the citizens of newly independent Vietnam by quoting the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and then said, "The entire Vietnamese people are determined to sacrifice all their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty."*

recolonization of Asia, changing the *name* of London's colonial wars into a crusade against "communism" by the "free world." The United States foolishly played the role assigned by London, contrary to the true principles and interests of the American Republic.

McNamara openly embraces this role for the United States, quoting Dean Rusk that the United States only supported French recolonization in Vietnam due to the overriding necessity to keep France on "our side" against the Soviet threat in Europe. "The French blackmailed us," said Rusk.

To McNamara, the Cold War was absolutely necessary, and justified any policy, anywhere in the world, which cohered with Cold War objectives, just as the British argue today that speculative looting of developing economies must be accepted in order to preserve the objectives of "free trade and globalization," and that the unilateral military destruction of targeted, weak nations is necessary to preserve the objectives of "human rights" and the "rule of law."

McNamara repeatedly rants at his Vietnamese counterparts, that Vietnam was only looking out for its own interests, whereas the United States was acting on the basis of a superior, global perspective, and that, therefore, the Vietnamese were "wrong, terribly wrong" to think of the United States as imperialists. As conference participant Nicholas Katzenbach said to the Vietnamese, "You . . . were totally focussed on what happened here . . . and drew the conclusion that the U.S. was pro-colonial . . . even though almost everything that we did and said opposed colonialism in most parts of the world."

While the following excerpts from the dialogues demonstrate that the Vietnamese team utterly rejected such lies, as well as the attempt to "share the blame," they also show that

the Vietnamese did not understand the British, nor the British subversion of U.S. policy, and thus could not explain or understand America's failure to live up to its historical, moral purpose, as represented by FDR.

Such an understanding is crucial in order to bring about the global alliances necessary to confront the catastrophic economic and strategic breakdown unfolding today.

## Sharp exchanges

*The following are excerpts from comments by conference participants:*

**Tran Quanc Co**, First Deputy Foreign Minister, retired, comments in response to McNamara's insistence that both sides misunderstood the other's "mind-set":

"Yes, in one way, the Vietnamese mind-set was wrong. Prior to 1945, the Vietnamese people perceived the U.S. to be a world leader in the fight against fascism. At that time, the Vietnamese people considered the U.S. to be the only powerful Western country that opposed colonialism. Because of this, Vietnam had hoped that the U.S. would sympathize with the Vietnamese people's legitimate struggle for independence, freedom and happiness. Unfortunately, reality proved that it was not so. . . ."

"Mr. McNamara admits mistakes, which we admire, but he unfortunately attributes most mistakes to misjudgments and miscalculations. But we must also ask: What about values and intentions? As I understand it, the right to self-determination—the independence of a nation—belongs to the general values of the world community. What about U.S. support for the French colonialists after World War II, in defiance of its own democratic traditions?"

**Luu Doan Huynh**, Institute for International Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

"The U.S. mind-set toward Vietnam was influenced by some sort of irrational apprehension or nightmare. . . . Everything, it seems, was perceived through the lens of Cold War politics. It was because of this that you gentlemen could not understand the rise of nationalist movements throughout the Third World."

**Nguyen Khac Huynh**, Institute of International Relations, Ministry of Foreign Relations:

"The French were our defeated enemy of long standing. The U.S. was the enemy on the horizon. The British we knew little about, except we thought they and the U.S. generally agreed on almost everything."

**Chester Cooper** of the U.S. team interrupted at that point, saying, "I hope I have disabused you of at least that mistaken belief [laughter]."

**Nguyen Khac Huynh** responded: "Not entirely, not entirely. I am not talking about hatred between Dulles and Eden. I am talking about policies. . . ."

"About the issue of whether or not the U.S. was a 'colonialist' power. . . . The U.S. did not precisely follow the example of the English or the French. . . . The U.S. used a slightly different approach. It set up a puppet regime through the use

of economic and military assistance that was under U.S. control. In this regime, the U.S. Ambassador played the role of a French or British governor-general. . . . In case the government did not satisfy the U.S., the U.S. would not hesitate to replace it.”

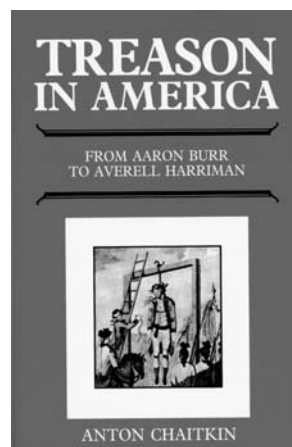
[Note: Following this chapter, McNamara totally misrepresents Mr. Huynh’s meaning by claiming that he had referred to South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, and not to the U.S. Ambassador, as the equivalent of the French colonial governor. McNamara ridicules this as “incorrect” and “incomprehensible.” The well-known fact is, that Averell Harriman and McGeorge Bundy had coerced President Kennedy to appoint Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador to South Vietnam as a “strong man.” Harriman’s aide Roger Hilsman gloated in his memoirs that Lodge was America’s “pro-consul,” sent to get rid of Diem.<sup>1</sup>]

**Luu Doan Huynh:** “To say that, before Geneva (1954), and just after Geneva, the American government knew nothing about Vietnam . . . , that is wrong. I say this because already in 1946, 1947, 1948, many of your Foreign Office officials spoke about Ho Chi Minh. What did they say? ‘Yes, he is a communist, but he is a nationalist first. . . .’ That is a

1. Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

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“Then, in 1950, you discarded all these correct and sensible views of U.S. officials and said that the struggle of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is a part of the Chinese expansionist game in Asia. There you were wrong. If I may say so, you were not only wrong, but you had, so to speak, lost your minds. . . . For anyone who knows the history of Indochina, this is incomprehensible. This is the initial ‘original sin’—if I may use the Catholic term—the ‘original sin’ of the U.S. in 1950, not before, not after, is when you began your downfall.”

**Nguyen Co Thach**, Foreign Minister, retired, comments in response to McNamara arguing that North Vietnam didn’t try hard enough to convince the United States that they only wanted a coalition government, a neutral government, in the South:

“Back then, the U.S. did not want to discuss [neutrality]. . . . Because there was no discussion then, there’s nothing, really, to talk about now. Forget it. It’s just idle speculation. . . . It was obvious then, to us—to me—that you did not care to learn what we thought, what we were trying to do, what we might agree to.”

[Note: McNamara shot back: “We never knew! Averell Harriman and I were the strongest advocates of a neutral solution, and had we even an inkling of what we now know, we would have pursued it vigorously with both President Kennedy and President Johnson.” In fact, Harriman’s aide Roger Hilsman openly acknowledged at the time that the U.S.-run coup against President Diem in 1963 was entirely due to Diem’s moves toward accepting the North’s proposals for a neutral, coalition government.]

**Tran Quang Co**, in response to the question of why the massive U.S. bombing of the North did not drive the Vietnamese leadership to agree to talks, even while the bombing continued, and McNamara’s breathtaking gall in asking, “Were you not influenced by the loss of life?”:

“U.S. aggression did have some positive use. Never before did the people of Vietnam, from top to bottom, unite as they did during the years that the U.S. was bombing us. Never before had Chairman Ho Chi Minh’s appeal—that there is nothing more precious than freedom and independence—gone straight to the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people as at the end of 1966.

“But if Mr. McNamara thinks that the North Vietnamese leadership was not concerned about the suffering of the Vietnamese people, with deaths and privation, then he has a huge misconception of Vietnam. That would be [switching to English] ‘wrong, terribly wrong!’ ”

*Michael Billington is now serving his eighth year of a 77-year sentence in Virginia state prison. Ostensibly convicted on charges of “securities fraud,” he in fact was railroaded into prison because of his association with Lyndon LaRouche.*