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Science**

*Robert S. McNamara's withdrawal plans from
Vietnam: a bureaucratic history*

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Abstract

The thesis looks at Robert S. McNamara's support for withdrawal from Vietnam between 1962 and 1964, during the John F. Kennedy administration and during the transition to the Lyndon B. Johnson presidency. It offers a reassessment of McNamara's role as one of the primary architects of the Vietnam War. From a methodological point of view, it approaches McNamara's recommendations on Vietnam from the bureaucratic perspective of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), explaining the evolution of the office and the balance of civil-military relations during his tenure.

Through a bureaucratic lens, McNamara's support for a policy aimed at disengagement from Vietnam is logical. First, the withdrawal plans – the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam (CPSVN) – supported a strategy informed by the counterinsurgency thinking of the Kennedy administration. McNamara's changes at the OSD were designed to align defense tools to civilian strategy. As a result, as Kennedy and McNamara's counterinsurgency advisers suggested, the CPSVN put the onus on self-help (i.e. the South Vietnamese doing the fighting themselves), clear-and-hold strategies and the strategic hamlet program that was buttressed by paramilitary, rather than traditional military, forces. Secondly, the CPSVN dovetailed with McNamara's economic priorities for the OSD, both mitigating the department's impact on the nagging balance of payments deficit and, in the nearer term, the impact of South Vietnamese operations on the Military Assistance Program.

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Abstract

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List of Abbreviations

ARPA	Advanced Research Projects Agency
ARVN	South Vietnamese Army Forces
BRIAM	British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam
CDTC	Combat Development Test Center
CG	Civil Guard
CI	Counterinsurgency
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CINCAL	Commander in Chief, Alaska
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Support Program
CPSVN	Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam
CY	Calendar Year
DDR&E	Director of Defense Research and Engineering
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DoD	Department of Defense
DPM	Draft Presidential Memorandum
FO	Foreign Office
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States Series
FY	Fiscal Year
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFL	Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library
GWU	George Washington University, National Security Archive
HBS	Harvard Business School
C&C	Commissions & Committees Files
INR	Bureau of Intelligence and Research
ISA	International Security Affairs
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JFKL	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library
LBJL	Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library
LoC	Library of Congress
M&M	Meetings & Memoranda Series
MAAG	Military Assistance and Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAP	Military Assistance Program
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MC	Miller Center, University of Virginia
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration, College Park
NCP	National Campaign Plan
NME	National Military Establishment
NSA	National Security Advisor Files
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
NSF	National Security Files
NSRB	National Security Resources Board
OH	Oral History
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PM	Prime Minister's Files

POF	Presidential Office Files
PPBS	Planning, Programming and Budgeting System
R&D	Research & Development
RAF	Royal Air Force
RNL	Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library
ROK	Republic of Korea
RSC	Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, NL
RSM	Robert S. McNamara
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SDC	Self-Defense Corps
SFRC	Senate Foreign Relations Committee
SASC	Senate Armed Services Committee
TFX	Tactical Fighter Experimental
USAF	United States Air Force
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
USG	United States Government
USIA	United States Information Agency
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USOM	United States Operations Mission
UVAL	University of Virginia Library Archives
WH	White House Files

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INTRODUCTION

The mistakes I made: Robert McNamara's OSD and planning for Vietnam

McNamara, the day before we left for Greece, remarked to Tim Hoopes and me that “we’ve made mistakes in Vietnam...I’ve made mistakes. But the mistakes I made are not the ones they say I made.” I said, “I know.” The fact is that he believes we never should have gotten into the combat role out there.

John T. McNaughton diary, Monday February 28, 1966

Building on new material on McNamara, this research aims to fill gaps and omissions in the otherwise rich historiography on the Vietnam War and McNamara's role therein. In so doing, its conclusions may contribute to recasting his role in “McNamara's War”. Rather than look at McNamara's recommendations on Vietnam throughout the war, the thesis focuses primarily on McNamara's approach to Vietnam during the period of planning for withdrawal from the spring of 1962 until the spring of 1964 in the Johnson administration when the path to escalation had become, as one historian described it, “probable” rather than just “possible”.¹

The research's objective is to live up to Gaddis's suggestion that historians should aim to recreate an “ecological view” of history, recreating reality in all its complexity.² In this instance, the thesis attempts to recreate McNamara's reality from the vantage point of his office in order to explain why he led plans for disengagement from Vietnam in the period between 1962 and 1963. Central to this has been the need to understand how McNamara defined his job and, in so doing, reconcile two historiographies that have

¹ Andrew Preston, “The Soft Hawks' Dilemma in Vietnam: Michael V. Forrestal at the National Security Council, 1962-1964,” *The International History Review* 25:1 (March 2003), pp. 66.

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The landscape of history: how historians map the past* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 55.

largely been treated as discrete, namely the history of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) with the history of McNamara in Vietnam.

Andrew Preston's work on the National Security Council under McGeorge Bundy provided the 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."³ To paraphrase Preston, this thesis is a "bureaucratic history of the changes in *the OSD* and a diplomatic history of *withdrawal* from the Vietnam War."

In taking this bureaucratic approach, a central point emerges about McNamara and about the OSD: the OSD was the leading advocate for withdrawal whenever the option was on the table. At first glance, this seems counterintuitive, as one would assume that wars were the *raison d'être* for the OSD. However, this thesis will show that the OSD was designed to be, and operated as, a fundamentally inward-looking agency. As such, it was among the first offices to recognize the gap between the country's strategic ambitions, as laid out in the White House, the National Security Council (NSC) and the State Department, and its internal constraints.

Viewed through the lens of the OSD, the thesis uses McNamara's recommendations on Vietnam as a case study for broader themes about civil-military relations. When McNamara joined the Kennedy administration as Secretary of Defense, he came into a young office in flux and in the process of defining the proper place of the new defense establishment in national security decision-making and more generally, the place of military force in U.S. foreign policy. As the Prologue shows, the office's evolution until 1960 had been one of progressive centralization of power into the Secretary's hands in parallel to the gradual reduction of military voices at the highest levels of national security decision-making. This evolution had occurred to reinforce civilian control of U.S. national security policy. The Prologue traces

³ Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 10.

the history of the OSD and in so doing, explains the intellectual and bureaucratic context in which McNamara entered in 1961.

As Part I shows, under McNamara's stewardship, and as anticipated in successive waves of reforms at the Department of Defense, McNamara matched military tools and plans to a strategy designed in the State Department and the White House. In the 1962-1963 period, although McNamara led the *implementation* of Vietnam policy, the underlying strategy was designed in the State Department and in a number of cross-government agencies including the Special Group on Counterinsurgency. President Kennedy and key advisers, of whom Roger Hilsman at the State Department was one, had taken a keen interest in counterinsurgency strategies for the developing world and Vietnam had become their testing ground, a laboratory for the administration's efforts to design alternative forms of intervention. The withdrawal plans were, from a strategic point of view, designed to short-circuit what these advisors saw as a growing militarization of policy on Vietnam. In essence, Part I explains the intellectual, political and bureaucratic context in which the notion of withdrawal from Vietnam emerged and was encouraged.

In addition, as Part II describes, McNamara's choice as Secretary of Defense was made on the understanding that his role would be a primarily managerial one, focused on rationalizing and controlling a swelling defense budget and weighing the United States' growing international obligations against the need for a healthy economy. If McNamara embraced counterinsurgency it was also because it provided a cheaper strategy in the face of a worsening balance of payments deficit and because a strategy premised on the disengagement of large-scale troops would pre-empt criticism from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) which oversaw funding for operations in Vietnam through the administration's Military Assistance Program. As Secretary of Defense but also as an economist and managerial expert by training, a large part of McNamara's "reality" was shaped by economic and fiscal concerns. Part II details the economic and fiscal contexts that explain McNamara's enthusiastic support of the withdrawal plans.

The two dimensions of civilian control, namely civilian articulation of both strategy and budgetary prerogatives provide the threads around which this thesis is organized. Rather than treat McNamara's recommendation on Vietnam in a chronological way, the thesis will use the dimensions of civilian control to explain how they fit into his definition of his job as Secretary of Defense. Looking at McNamara's recommendations through the lens of civilian control as he defined it helps to explain his transition to the Johnson administration and especially, the fairly rapid end to planning for withdrawal. As McNamara correctly suggested, the strategy changed under Johnson's leadership and with it, so did the underlying logic for the plans.⁴

Ultimately, liberal criticism of McNamara that he was an increasingly hawkish advisor fails to appreciate his restrictive definition of his job, namely to "comment on the military implications"⁵ of policy rather than to design strategy. Paradoxically, it was a liberal philosophy of civil-military relations that inspired his more limited understanding of the role of the Secretary of Defense. Cast in this light, the "mistakes" McNamara made on Vietnam were perhaps not so much that he recommended escalation but rather that he defined his job too narrowly. As the final, transition chapter shows, even though McNamara was quick to recognize that the Johnson administration lacked an overarching strategy, he did not step in to fill the void.

On a deeper level, as Andrew Preston has also noted, the "false dichotomy between 'hawks' and 'doves' characteristic of works on U.S. involvement in Vietnam is unhelpful and does not capture the complexity of advisers."⁶ Rather than think about McNamara in binary terms, along an artificial but conceptually clear 'hawk' or 'dove' divide, this thesis situates him

⁴ In oral history, McNamara explained, "Those statements and recommendations 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." Robert S. McNamara OH No. 1. by Walt W. Rostow, January 8, 1975, LBJL.

⁵ In another interview, McNamara explained that the Secretary of Defense was a "servant of the foreign policy of the country" that his job was to "comment on the military implications" of the State Department's policies. Robert S. McNamara OH Interview by OSD Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OSD OH 1, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁶ Preston, "The Soft Hawk's Dilemma," pp. 67.

in his bureaucratic place. This approach arguably provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of his positions on Vietnam.

Finally, 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.”⁷ 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] skilful and tough enough that there was a high degree of probability that I would carry them out successfully.”⁸

⁷ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: January 2, 1964. WH 6401.03, Conversation 1149.

⁸ Robert S. McNamara OH No. 1. by Walt W. Rostow, January 8, 1975, LBJL.

McNamara, from iconic hawk to the *Fog of War*

In keeping with trends in U.S. foreign policy history more broadly, the historiography of the Vietnam War has gone through a number of waves.⁹ Robert Divine has identified three general periods: first, the contemporary phase marked by a “strong distaste” for the U.S. intervention; second, a rather more favorable period in the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of conservative interpretations of the war, culminating in a third, and final period of “synthesis” in the 1990s during which the historical consensus was relatively more sympathetic to the decision-makers who were seen largely as “victims of ignorance and circumstances beyond their control.”¹⁰ By contrast, John Dumbrell sees two main movements: an initial, critical reading of the circumstances leading to the war then a new revisionism across several axes.¹¹

For the most part, across these groups and waves, McNamara has been described as one of the war’s “villains” albeit for different reasons.

⁹ Craig, for instance, describes three typical stages of historiography in U.S. foreign policy and on the Kennedy administration: an “orthodox” stage that reflects the “political mood of the day” when a President leaves office and that typically relies by journalistic accounts and memoirs, followed by a “revisionist” stage as new sources appear, concluding in a more nuanced stage with “mature literature” that is “refined by relatively full access to the archival record.” Campbell Craig, “Kennedy’s international legacy, fifty years on,” *International Affairs* 89:6 (2013), pp. 1367.; See also, Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (ed.), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations 2nd Edition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.) for a comprehensive account of the waves in the historiography of U.S. foreign policy, as historians have transitioned along orthodox-revisionist-post-revisionist lines as well as along methodological choices, from realist historians that focused relatively more on nationalist dimensions of foreign policy towards multi-archival, gender and cultural history. Similar critical historiographical reviews include: Michael J. Hogan and Frank Costigliola, *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013.); John Lewis Gaddis, “The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 7 (Summer 1983), pp. 171-90.; Thomas W. Zeiler, “The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History* 95:4 (March 2009), pp. 1053-1073.; Peter Novick, *That noble dream: the objectivity question and the American historical profession* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Part 4.

¹⁰ Robert A. Divine, “Vietnam reconsidered,” *Diplomatic History* 12:1 (1988), pp. 92. See also: Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).; Gary R. Hess, “The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War,” *Diplomatic History* 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 239-264.

¹¹ For Dumbrell, the orthodox-revisionist dichotomy essentially falls between those who, from various angles implied that the war was unnecessary or unjustified on the one hand and those that defended the war as either winnable, justified or necessary on the other. John Dumbrell, *Rethinking the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 5-21.

Where military authors criticize him for putting far too many restraints on his military advisors¹², others insist on his role in silencing voices of dissent, especially in the Johnson administration.¹³ 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 deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the war.¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ A similar, more mournful, interpretation of McNamara's trajectory pervades Hendrickson's *The Living and the Dead*.¹⁶

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, aging man in Errol Morris's *The Fog of War*, a different interpretation seems to be emerging. In areas outside of history, and particularly in business management from where McNamara came, he has gone through something of a revival.¹⁷ This sympathetic literature harks back

¹² On this type of criticism, see especially: H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that led to Vietnam* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1997).; Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978).; William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1976).; David R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978).; Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: the Vietnam War in Context* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2003).; Shelby L. Stanton, *The rise and fall of the American Army: U.S. ground forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995).; Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007).; Gary R. Hess, "The Military Perspective on Strategy in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 10:1 (January 1986), pp. 91-106.

¹³ This was very much Hilsman's line, not least in: Roger Hilsman OH Interview No. 1, Paige E. Mulhollan, May 15, 1969, LBJL. George Ball recalled McNamara's anger at dissent over the administration's policies, that a memo that he wrote in September 1964 questioning the administration's policy on Vietnam was greeted with hostility: "McNamara, in particular, was absolutely horrified. He treated it like a poisonous snake. The idea that people would put these kinds of things down on paper!" George Ball OH Interview No. 1 by Paige E. Mulhollan, July 8, 1971, LBJL.

¹⁴ For recent scholarship on the "collective memory" of the Vietnam War, see for instance, David Ryan, *US Collective Memory, Intervention and Vietnam: The Cultural Politics of US foreign Policy since 1969* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁵ Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (New York, NY: Little Brown & Co, 1993), Dedication.

¹⁶ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead: Robert McNamara and the five lives of a lost war* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996).

¹⁷ Phil Rosenzweig, "Robert S. McNamara and the Evolution of Modern Management," *Harvard Business Review* (December 2010), pp. 87-93.

to McNamara's early years before Vietnam when his revolutionary leadership was widely applauded.¹⁸

The goal of this research is not to try to redeem McNamara in the history of the Vietnam War but to treat his early contributions without the benefit of hindsight and without the need to fit him into a "hawk" or "dove" dichotomy. At a minimum, the thesis 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?"¹⁹ and to disproving statements such as Douglas Brinkley's that "it is a painful irony that a 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."²⁰ On the contrary, shaped by his own lessons from the Korean commitment especially²¹, McNamara led the withdrawal plans in 1962-1963 precisely because he saw the cost implications of another international commitment in Asia.

The history of the OSD

Rather than focus on McNamara as an individual, the thesis 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 the historiography of the Vietnam War tends 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 thesis goes a little deeper in

¹⁸ R.J. Sutherland, "Cost-Effectiveness and Defense Management; Mr. McNamara's Pentagon" (Paper presented at the ORD Informal Paper, Ottawa, 1966).; Thomas Norris, "A Giant of Management" (Paper presented at the 38th Annual Meeting of the Academy for Management, undated).; Henry Brandon, "Kennedy Fights the Generals," *The Sunday Times* (May 27, 1962).; William W. Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964).; Theodore H. White, "Revolution in the Pentagon," *Look Magazine* (April 23, 1963).

¹⁹ Shapley, *Promise and Power*, pp. 291.

²⁰ Douglas Brinkley, "The Stain of Vietnam: Robert McNamara, Redemption Denied," *Foreign Affairs* (1993).

²¹ The Korean analogy is used here in a different way than that proposed by Khong: instead of an analogy *per se*, what is meant is that the experience with the Korean commitment, an intractable and "stuck" commitment, formed McNamara's views on Vietnam and new commitments in Asia. Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

identifying the key centers of power within the OSD for Vietnam decision-making. It traces the key offices that McNamara created to enforce civilian control and how these were distinct, if not in outright opposition, to the military services. 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.

Some diplomatic and military historians, such as Buzzanco, Krepinevich and McMaster have contributed to disaggregating the OSD and the JCS on the historiography of Vietnam. However, Buzzanco focuses on the dissent of individual military officials rather than the services as a whole while Krepinevich focuses on the Army's relationship with civilian authorities.²² Neither has gone as far as to contribute a structural understanding of how the different military and OSD positions interacted and competed for policy space on the Vietnam War.

McMaster's work, in many ways the most impressive work of the three, adds most to this research project. Many of its findings complement or mirror those in this thesis. For instance, he suggests that the evolving policy for Vietnam was a product of the interaction between bureaucratic priorities and Presidential personalities and, just as this thesis does, he describes the gradual alienation of the JCS, which was helped along by their inability to transcend inter-service rivalries. However, McMaster's focus is on the JCS whereas this research focuses on the OSD and he comes to different conclusions about McNamara. McMaster has fostered the idea that McNamara was the principal architect of the war, not least by inaccurately assuming that it was McNamara's responsibility to define the strategy for Vietnam and stating that McNamara "refused to consider the consequences of his recommendations."²³ However, the most important distinction between

²² Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986).; Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996).; McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*.

²³ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 327.

McMaster's research and this one is that his focus is primarily on the services and the JCS rather than on the OSD.

Moreover, one existing attempt to map McNamara's priorities at the OSD with his recommendations on Vietnam - Palmer's *The McNamara Strategy and the Vietnam War* - was written too close to events to draw on primary source material and was colored by military resentment about McNamara's domineering personality. In a less than objective manner, the writer complains about McNamara's "intolerance of tradition and authority" and his "attack on the citadel of democratic decision-making."²⁴

The research has relied heavily on histories of the OSD. These works give relatively more weight to the innovations that McNamara implemented and that endure today and to the important precedents that he created for the unification of the services and for positioning the Secretary of Defense as a pivot in national security decision-making.²⁵ In so doing, the revolutionary aspects of McNamara's time at the OSD are made clearer as is the importance of the economics of defense – its contribution to the balance of payments deficit at the time and its wastefulness – to him.

Vietnam War historians as diplomatic historians

Diplomatic historians of the Vietnam War have arguably tended to overemphasize the diplomatic and military aspects of decision-making. As a result, the existing historiography has relied heavily on archival collections that are more narrowly relevant to Vietnam without placing those decisions in their economic context.²⁶ This tendency is particularly problematic with

²⁴ Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, pp. 2, 24.

²⁵ Douglas T. Stuart, *Creating the National Security State: A History of the Law That Transformed America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).; Lawrence S. Kaplan et al., *The McNamara Ascendancy: 1961-1965*, Vol. V, History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006).; Douglas Kinnard, *The Secretary of Defense* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1980).; Steven L. Rearden, *The Formative Years: 1947-1950*, Vol. I, History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (Washington D.C.: OSD Historical Office, 1984).

²⁶ The "economic context" is understood to mean the prevailing domestic economic conditions that existed during McNamara's tenure at the OSD, rather than the global economic context as understood by more left-wing historians such as Gabriel Kolko. For this body of literature, see especially: Gabriel Kolko, *Vietnam: anatomy of war, 1940-1975* (London, UK: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

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 the second dimension of civilian control, namely controlling the economic and fiscal aspects of defense.

In this regard, this thesis builds on Francis Gavin's work on the Kennedy administration, which places greater onus on issues such as the balance of payments and gold outflow.²⁷ The secondary literature on the economic history of the 1960s, and especially Barry Eichengreen's work, has also been useful in challenging the conventional wisdom that balance of payments concerns only became salient later in the 1960s.²⁸ Ultimately, the economic concerns that Gavin has emphasized for Europe were, in fact, especially significant on Vietnam and specifically on 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.

Moreover, in emphasizing the economic dimensions of the Kennedy administration as it pertains to defense, the thesis connects rather more to earlier histories of that administration. While some see a "hagiography" or "worshipful" approach in the "Camelot School" of books produced by Kennedy's advisors such as Sorensen or Schlesinger in the years immediately after the assassination²⁹, these books are also interesting because they dedicate far more pages to the economic troubles that faced the President than to issues such as Vietnam, which has tended to be the focus of later histories. For instance, while Robert Dallek spends only one chapter on the economic situation of the early 1960s, and intertwines that discussion

²⁷ Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, dollars, and power: the politics of international monetary relations, 1958-1971* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

²⁸ Barry Eichengreen, "From Benign Neglect to Malignant Preoccupation: U.S. Balance-of-Payments Policy in the 1960s," in George L. Perry and James Tobin (eds.) *Economic events, ideas, and policies: The 1960s and after* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000).

²⁹ Campbell Craig, "Kennedy's international legacy," pp. 1368.

with domestic issues more broadly, Sorensen dedicated five chapters to the same issues.³⁰

History and neat trajectories

In addition, the thesis challenges the tendency to depict a relatively neat upward trajectory in the United States' commitment to Vietnam. Miller has described this trajectory most vividly in stating that "decisions by Kennedy served to move U.S. policy forward in a straight line from those taken by the Truman and Eisenhower administrations; they progressively burdened the United States with ever-greater responsibility for the fate of South Vietnam, thereby correspondingly reducing South Vietnam's incentives for shaping its own future itself. Failure became inevitable."³¹ Similarly, and in less stark terms, the *Pentagon Papers* describe the 1962-1963 period of planning for withdrawal as follows: "In retrospect, this experience falls into place as a more or less isolated episode of secondary importance; eventually abortive, it had little impact on the evolution of the Vietnam War."³²

While these same historians recognize that 1965 was a watershed moment, they nevertheless rely on statistics of ever-increasing troop numbers, even if they were "just" advisers in the early years, to describe an almost inexorable process towards the full-scale American war in Vietnam. However, what these troop numbers belie 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.

In part, this conventional narrative has been reproduced because historians have often relied heavily on two flawed studies: first, on Halberstam's early analysis of both Kennedy's withdrawal plans and of

³⁰ Robert Dallek, *John F. Kennedy: an unfinished life, 1917-1963* (London, UK: Allen Lane, 2003).; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York, NY: Greenwich House, 1983).; Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, NY: Smithmark Publishers, 1995).

³¹ Robert H. Miller, "Vietnam: Folly, Quagmire, or Inevitability?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 15 (April 1992), pp. 114.

³² *Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition*, Vol. 2., (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), Chapter 3. Retrieved online December 12, 2014 *Mt Holyoke*: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon2/pent5.htm>. See below for additional, methodological points on the *Pentagon Papers*.

McNamara himself and second, on the *Pentagon Papers*.³³ Halberstam's seminal book was contemporaneous to events in Vietnam while the *Pentagon Papers* relied solely on written documents that came through the OSD rather than a range of documents, including presidential recordings, which are arguably more important to understanding why and when key decisions were made in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

Despite these inherent flaws, both works have served as key reference points for discussions on Kennedy's withdrawal plans. For instance, Stanley Karnow's otherwise thorough history of the Vietnam War only dedicates one sentence to Kennedy's withdrawal plans. He dismisses the announcement of a 1965 end date as "prophecy evidently made for domestic political consumption at Kennedy's insistence" and adds nothing else.³⁴ Karnow references Halberstam's work and the *Pentagon Papers*; he does not rely on any primary sources to support his argument while his suggestion that Kennedy "insisted" on a public announcement is, as the tapes demonstrate, inaccurate. Similarly, Krepinevich calls the withdrawal plans "victory plans" and restates the idea that McNamara was stubbornly optimistic in noting that a "sunny portrait of the war's progress shone through McNamara's Honolulu Conference in May" (the moment when he instructed the Chiefs to begin planning for withdrawal).³⁵ Again, he references Halberstam, the *Pentagon Papers* as well as Roger Hilsman's *To Move a Nation*, which General Maxwell Taylor described as "largely fiction"³⁶. Krepinevich does not make allowances for the fact that a public display of optimism may have been a calculated posture on McNamara's part.

This thesis may contribute to challenging the argument, most clearly put forward by George Herring in his seminal work on Vietnam that, "The extent to which Kennedy was committed to withdrawal remains quite unclear, and there is not a shred of evidence to support the notion of a secret plan for

³³ Ibid.; David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1972).

³⁴ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 307.

³⁵ Krepinevich. *The Army and Vietnam*, pp. 76, 86.

³⁶ General Maxwell Taylor OH Interview No. 2. By L. J. Hackman, November 13, 1969, Robert F. Kennedy OH Collection. JFKL.

extrication.”³⁷ As the thesis will show, there was in fact no secret plan; it was publicly announced in October 1963 after almost 18 months of planning by the Joint Chiefs of Staff under pressure from McNamara. The plans were known within the bureaucracy, budgeted for and, in October 1963, publicly announced in a carefully worded press statement.

If historians may be inclined to favor neat trajectories and perhaps look on the early years with the benefit of hindsight, they are also uncomfortable with counterfactual reasoning, which seem to be an inevitable outgrowth of studies on Kennedy’s Vietnam policies. More often than not, studies that have focused on Kennedy’s withdrawal plans are answering the question: “*what* would he have done?” rather than explore explicitly “*why*”. In addition, as later sections describe, they tend to focus on Kennedy rather than McNamara. Perhaps the most obvious example of this approach is the book *Virtual JFK*, a discussion hosted by Blight, Lang and Welch where they asked historians and former decision-makers to engage in what Niall Ferguson has called “virtual” history, namely counterfactual history.³⁸ This kind of speculation is tempting and the conclusions of this thesis might inform this debate, but it will not be the focus of the research. Instead, the thesis looks at what *did* happen on withdrawal from Vietnam and why.³⁹

This research as diplomatic and bureaucratic history: methodological families

Despite its approach, whereby the thesis focuses relatively more on the OSD and the dimensions of civilian control, it also makes a contribution to the diplomatic history of the Vietnam War. The latter can be grouped into three methodological families: histories that focus on agency, or individual decision-makers; those that focus on structure or the underlying ideology of the Cold

³⁷ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, pp. 114.

³⁸ James G. Blight et al., *Virtual JFK: Vietnam if Kennedy Had Lived* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009).

³⁹ For a critique of *Virtual JFK*, see especially Andrew Preston, “Review: Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived,” *Michigan War Studies Review* 19 (2011).

War; and those, like this thesis, that take a bureaucratic approach to understanding the Vietnam War.⁴⁰

Also, setting aside the group of authors who either identify solutions (what could have been done differently) or overlooked gains in the war⁴¹, most of the literature on Vietnam has focused on what was wired within the U.S. and its national security decision-making process to produce this seemingly inexorable tragedy. Even if they may also draw lessons, these authors focus primarily on describing factors that led to the war. The current thesis will be within this group, but turned on its head, namely: instead of looking at what factors led to war, it will look at what factors played into staying out, or getting out, of the war.

The literature on the Vietnam War and on withdrawal can be grouped into three methodological families even if they often overlap. First, there is the literature that focuses on personalities or individual characters. Perhaps the

⁴⁰ A caveat, the thesis is relatively narrow, eschewing international dimensions and instead focusing on the war from the perspective of the United States and specifically from the OSD. For recent and a burgeoning scholarship on the war from the North and South Vietnamese vantage point, see especially: Lien Hang Nguyen. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).; Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).; Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London, UK: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).; Matthew Masure, "Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy, 1965-1960," *Diplomatic History* 33:2, pp. 292-313. Also, for recent and relatively favorable scholarship on Ngo Dinh Diem, see especially: Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003).; Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁴¹ Walt Rostow, for instance, has argued that the war bought time for neighboring Asian countries to strengthen themselves against Communism; that this was a hidden victory that historians have overlooked. Walt W. Rostow, "The Case for the Vietnam War," *Times Literary Supplement* (1995). A number of other writers, primarily from the military, have also produced counterfactual histories to explain why defeat was not inevitable: for example, both Westmoreland, the commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) under Johnson, and U.S. Grant Sharp, the former Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), have argued that the war could have been won if the military had been less constrained by political considerations at home and on the ground. (See footnote 10 above for more details and resources on military criticism.) In a similar vein, Willbanks' study of Vietnamization also identifies tactical failings and how these contributed to defeat. James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2008). Similarly, Mark Moyar focuses on civilian mistakes, notably the assassination of Diem and Johnson's sheepishness. Mark Moyar. *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

best example of the individual or personality-focused approach is Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* in which he goes into some detail about each of the key decision-makers, describing their strengths and biases, to explain the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam. The problem with Halberstam's work and this approach more generally, is that it favors internal consistency – i.e. McNamara was the “can-do man in the can-do society in the can-do era”⁴² – over the documentary evidence. Halberstam overlooks the withdrawal plans in order to preserve a simplified narrative on the U.S. role in Vietnam and on McNamara.

More often than not, this literature overlaps closely with the bureaucratic approach but its focus remains on individual characteristics rather than the underlying institutional interests and agendas of each government unit. The personality-focused histories reject the schematic approach that is inherent to bureaucratic histories. For example, McMaster ends his book stating that the war was lost not as a “result of impersonal forces but a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisers. The failings were many and reinforcing: arrogance, weakness, lying in the pursuit of self-interest, and, above all, the abdication of responsibility to the American people.”⁴³ For him, it was not the *impersonal* forces of bureaucratic interests that were decisive in shaping the war decisions but instead individual agency.

As applied to the issue of withdrawal, this methodological family tends to focus on the power of the President and his own vision. In other words, the President (his vision and interests) determined whether or not there were withdrawal plans and how prominent they were. With the Kennedy administration, a body of literature argues that while it is unclear whether or not Kennedy would have withdrawn, his particular perspective and vision would have prevented the escalation that occurred under Johnson. The historians David Kaiser, Fredrik Logevall, Robert Dallek and Richard Reeves

⁴² David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, pp. 215.

⁴³ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 334.

have each written a version of this argument.⁴⁴ It is also implicit or explicit in Townsend Hoopes, Theodore Sorenson and in Arthur Schlesinger's recollections of their time in office. Since the policy derived from Kennedy, this view explains why the roughly same set of advisers produced *prima facie* different policies in the next administration.⁴⁵

Going a step further, many of Kennedy's advisors or confidants – including Senator Mansfield; McNamara's deputy, Roswell Gilpatric; and Kenneth O'Donnell and David Powers - have written or stated in oral histories that Kennedy was determined to withdraw and had instructed McNamara to begin this process on the eve of his death.⁴⁶ Building on this, historians like Howard Jones have argued that the “decision to withdraw was unconditional, for [Kennedy] approved a calendar of events that did not necessitate a victory.”⁴⁷ For them, Kennedy had begun a momentum that would lead to withdrawal from Vietnam after he was re-elected in 1964 irrespective of the situation on the ground.

Although Howard Jones is right that Kennedy began a momentum towards withdrawal that was not pegged against victory, he overlooks the key role McNamara played and the way in which Kennedy's views converged with

⁴⁴ David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).; Fredrik Logevall. *Choosing war: the lost chance for peace and the escalation of war in Vietnam*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).; Richard Reeves. *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Dallek. *An Unfinished Life*.

⁴⁵ At first, Schlesinger seemed to downplay Kennedy's withdrawal plans (Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 548-550.) and in his letters at the time where he implored a fellow historian not to speculate on what Kennedy would have done, by writing “no one can possibly know what a dead President would be saying or doing if he were still alive.” (Andrew Schlesinger and Steven Schlesinger. *The Letters of Arthur Schlesinger* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013), pp. 339. That said, he later went back on his statements and sided with those who argued that Kennedy would have withdrawn irrespective of the situation on the ground. Arthur M. Jr. Schlesinger, “What Would He Have Done?,” *The New York Times* (1992). For the latter perspective, see for instance: Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention: How Vietnam Policy Was Made - and Reversed - During the Johnson Administration* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973), pp. 240.; Sorenson, *Kennedy*, pp. 653-661.

⁴⁶ Senator Mansfield quoted in Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth. McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp. 260..; Roswell Gilpatric OH Interview by Ted Gittinger, November 2, 1982, LBJL.; Kenneth P. O'Donnell et al., *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1970), pp. 15-18.

⁴⁷ Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 377.; James K. Galbraith, “Exit Strategy,” *Boston Review* (October/November 2003).

the OSD's bureaucratic interests. By focusing too narrowly on Kennedy's personal vision, Jones overlooks bureaucratic factors and fails to acknowledge the central role played by McNamara in pushing these withdrawal plans through the bureaucracy.

John Newman has perhaps gone the furthest in this President-focused direction by arguing that Kennedy was not only planning to withdraw from Vietnam after his re-election but also that he successfully manipulated the whole bureaucracy along the way. In a somewhat conspiracy theorist vein, he argues that Kennedy neutralized his more hawkish advisors and was planning to use his military advisors' overly-optimistic reporting against them by getting them to publicly commit to an irreversible withdrawal timetable. He calls this a "deception within a deception".⁴⁸ Newman improves on Jones' work by giving a more prominent role to McNamara: he suggests that there was a secret arrangement between Kennedy and McNamara to implement their "deception".

Indirectly, Kinnard also takes this President and individual-focused approach in his study of the Secretary of Defense when he argues that McNamara committed to withdrawal because on the one hand, his optimism blinded him to contradicting information, and especially, because he took on Kennedy's political judgment and worldview because he had none of his own.⁴⁹ Again, it is from the President's overarching vision that the policy of withdrawal flows.

While it may be tempting to frame Kennedy in this positive light, as the President who would have avoided the tragedy that became Vietnam, this thesis also tries to interpret the events and policies of the time in their own context without hindsight. The Camelot mythology has a strong influence on the interpretation of Vietnam policies in the period until 1963. However, in portraying Kennedy as an isolated clairvoyant, these authors have a tendency to gloss over, or entirely disregard, McNamara's role in the withdrawal plans. They fail to identify the powerful interests he had in pushing for withdrawal

⁴⁸ John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power*, pp. 321-322.

⁴⁹ Douglas Kinnard, *The Secretary of Defense*, pp. 76-112.

and, in painting a picture of McNamara as a mere “implementer” as Kinnard does, they overlook 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.

Furthermore, although Newman’s detailed work is very helpful in understanding the military’s perspective (both their institutional foot-dragging and General Harkins’ genuine optimism), he also underestimates McNamara. The withdrawal plans were not hidden as Newman would have it, but instead fully above board. In many ways, in assuming that McNamara and Kennedy would have to hide a withdrawal agenda, Newman underestimates McNamara’s ability to bully advisors, and his military advisors in particular, into adopting his policy.

The next and second methodological family focuses on American ideology and the “system” as a whole. Perhaps the most famous example is George Herring’s work where he argues that the war was a logical culmination, and misapplication, of the strategy of containment. For him, the “obsession with containment” led to blindness about the local specificities of the situation in Vietnam and to misreading the United States’ national interests there.⁵⁰ Gelb and Betts have bridged this approach with the bureaucratic one, arguing that containment produced suffocating constraints (externally, as well as domestically, in the need to placate the “right”) and so the bureaucracy played “only a subsidiary role in setting the basic American commitment in Vietnam but a central role in shaping the war itself.”⁵¹

Several policy-makers from the time have also encouraged this line of thinking, perhaps to absolve themselves of responsibility. In other words, if they as individuals or representatives of agencies and departments could do

⁵⁰ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, pp. xiv. Frances Fitzgerald also approaches the Vietnam War from the perspective of biases but for her, these were the product of something more culturally-determined, a certain ethnocentricity. Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2002).

⁵¹ Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1979), pp. 354.

nothing to prevent the escalation into this losing war, it was because something was wrong with the system as a whole. Most notably, McNamara writes in his Memoirs: "We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values."⁵² Similarly, Townsend Hoopes, who became Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs in 1965 (a position he tellingly describes as "not at the center of policy, but on the near periphery"), indicates that it was the blind spots born of the Cold War that made them overlook Vietnam's specificities. He notes, "We were propelled by our sense of Great Power responsibility to our conception of world order, by the dynamics of our internal politics, and by an innate belief in American omnipotence."⁵³

Hoopes' words, if not his perspective as a whole, were probably borrowed from Senator Fulbright whose series of lectures, which were subsequently published as a book, *The Arrogance of Power*, made a similar argument. Fulbright wrote of the America's "confus[ion] of power with wisdom" and its misplaced "idea of being responsible for the whole world [which] seems to have dazzled us, or what the French, perhaps more aptly, call *le vertige de puissance*", by which they mean a kind of dizziness or giddiness inspired by the possession of great power." For Fulbright, this dizziness about U.S. power and responsibility explained the intervention and escalation in Vietnam.⁵⁴

Within this perspective, withdrawal was simply not possible. More than any other approach, it is concerned with factors that led to war. The system and its underlying ideology were wired for war and made abandoning the U.S. commitment to Vietnam inconceivable. It is precisely because, to quote Kissinger, the "consensus that had sustained [the U.S.'] post-war foreign

⁵² Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995). pp. 270.

⁵³ Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*, pp. vii.

⁵⁴ William J. Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (London: Penguin Books, 1966). pp. 129, 136.

policy had evaporated”⁵⁵ that Nixon could withdraw as he did in the 1970s.⁵⁶ However, this narrative glosses over or disregards the 1962-1963 period during which McNamara planned for withdrawal. A more careful analysis of this period shows that a homogenous understanding of the United States’ role in the world did not exist.

A sub-section of this literature is primarily concerned with the military and explains its own particular brand of blindness and ideology – its inability to see the war in Vietnam on its own terms and to adjust military doctrine accordingly. For Krepinevich, for instance, counterinsurgency was not fully incorporated into the military planning; even the Army, that most benefited from this new thinking, paid mere lip service to it. Ultimately, the dictum that the military is trained to fight the last war (a conventional war) proved true and explains the loss in Vietnam.⁵⁷ In contrast to the military, Krepinevich shows how intellectually engaged Kennedy, as well as a number of his key advisors, were with counterinsurgency theory. However, he does not see the withdrawal plans as stemming from this particular understanding of counterinsurgency but instead from McNamara’s confidence that the war could be brought to an early conclusion.

Krepinevich’s description of the doctrinal gap between civilians and the military provides an important backdrop for this research’s conclusions about the Kennedy years. However, the thesis will show that this doctrinal gap was not a separate issue from withdrawal. Instead, the two were intrinsically connected: Kennedy’s civilian advisors’ sense that there was an irreconcilable doctrinal gap explains why they sought to demilitarize the situation in Vietnam.

The final methodological family, where this research falls, looks at bureaucratic politics to explain Vietnam policy. This borrows from political science models – most famously Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow’s study of the Cuban Missile Crisis – and assumes that “where you stand depends on

⁵⁵ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (New York, NY: Little, Brown & Co., 1979), pp. 56-7.

⁵⁶ Gelb & Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, pp.368.

⁵⁷ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, pp. 4.

where you sit.”⁵⁸ The research will look at the OSD and see to what extent “where McNamara sat” had an effect on “where he stood” on Vietnam.

But first, it is worth going over some of the existing contributions to a bureaucratic history of the Vietnam War. Stavins, Barnet and Raskin have looked at the issue of institutional momentum as a self-reinforcing process: on Vietnam, bureaucrats developed a stake in the solution and found it difficult to admit past failure.⁵⁹ This is also Isaacs’⁶⁰ and Schlesinger’s position who both described the process of the U.S. entry into the Vietnam War as policy by inadvertence, of incremental steps and momentum.⁶¹ Barnet also adds that within this process, there was a tendency to favor “tough” responses, thus encouraging hawkish policy responses.⁶² Each of these studies overlaps, to a greater or lesser extent, with the other methodological families described before.

The most structured application of a bureaucratic approach to the history of the Vietnam War is Robert Gallucci’s *Neither Peace Nor Honor* in which he argues that, by taking a bureaucratic perspective, “We move to a lower level of analysis where, for example, the policy of the United States in Southeast Asia is accounted for in terms other than the pursuit of the national interest or the protection of national security.”⁶³ He also identifies a number of “key issues” that will guide the current research as well.

The most relevant points are first, that the President is more than just a “first among equals”, that he can skew recommendations but that the implementation will necessarily be a product of organizational issues and procedures. Second, that individuals do not necessarily consciously take a

⁵⁸ Graham T. Allison, and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: Longman, 1999), pp. 307.

⁵⁹ Ralph Stavins et al., *Washington Plans an Aggressive War* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1971).

⁶⁰ Arnold Isaacs in his scathing study of Nixon’s withdrawal policy describes “bureaucratic circumstances that inhibited admission of errors and made it always seem safe to keep repeating the same mistakes rather than risk the unknown perils of a different policy.” Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 489.

⁶¹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, Chapter 20.

⁶² Richard Barnet, “The Men Who Made the War,” in Ralph Stavins et al. (ed.) *Washington Plans an Aggressive War* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1971), pp. 234.

⁶³ Robert L. Gallucci, *Neither Peace Nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Viet-Nam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 137.

bureaucratic position but become imbued with a sense that what is good for their office is good for national security. Third, that organizational processes tend to be conservative in the sense that they avoid uncertainty and adhere to acquired knowledge. Finally, that the bureaucratic bargaining process needs to be understood in a broader context where there is give-and-take across a range of issues, where actors will deliberately pick their battles, and where competition is implicit on any policy.⁶⁴ However, Gallucci does not apply his methodology to Kennedy's withdrawal plans; his focus is on the transition to Johnson and his changes in decision-making processes.

Gallucci's framework is implicit in Marc Selverstone's work on withdrawal plans in the Kennedy administration. Selverstone notes that while Kennedy may have inspired the actual withdrawal plans, they were closely aligned to McNamara's own priorities for the Department of Defense (DoD) and that he was their main architect. From a bureaucratic perspective, they were "conditioned by the demands of the budgetary process" that McNamara was implementing within the DoD and reflected the broader attempts to "systematize and rationalize government planning and expenditures" which McNamara and his team of "whiz kids" were inspiring across government.⁶⁵ This effort to align the bureaucratic interest of the OSD with resulting policies is exactly what this research will try to do. In many ways, the current research builds on Selverstone's work but narrows it, by focusing specifically on the OSD and civil-military relations. Instead of focusing on the Kennedy administration as a whole, as Selverstone does, it focuses instead on McNamara and treats the administration's priorities and concerns only insofar as they impinged on the OSD's planning. By focusing on McNamara alone, the research sheds new light on the people and bureaucratic forces that shaped and influenced his positions on Vietnam.

Other studies that address withdrawal under the Kennedy administration from a bureaucratic perspective have tended to emphasize that the escalatory momentum was already too strong. At best, the withdrawal

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 139-150.

⁶⁵ Marc J. Selverstone, "It's a Date: Kennedy and the Timetable for a Vietnam Troop Withdrawal," *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010), pp. 485-495.

plans presented by McNamara were allowed because Kennedy had created a decision-making style where as many options as possible were kept open. As such, these plans did not represent a fundamental shift in policy and it was unlikely that the OSD, even if it did have an interest in withdrawing, would have managed to push them through the rest of the national security bureaucracy.⁶⁶

Challenges, existing debates and the transition to the Johnson administration

The current research confronts and offers its own interpretation on debates about whether withdrawal plans were real rather than theoretical, as well as why a roughly same set of advisors, and McNamara in particular, produced such different policies under Johnson. For the Kennedy administration, the debate hinges on whether he was in fact set on withdrawal, whether the plans were real or “cosmetic”.⁶⁷ As discussed, for some, it was clear that he wanted to withdraw as soon as he was re-elected. Others have argued that he would not have withdrawn but would not have allowed combat troops to be deployed either. And for others, Kennedy would not have strayed significantly from Johnson’s policies because the escalation was primarily a product of changed circumstances on the ground instead of Washington-based factors.⁶⁸ While historians cannot know with certainty what Kennedy would have done with the plans in the after-Diem period in Vietnam, it is possible to study the existing withdrawal plans and ascertain what they included and why. In so doing, Kennedy’s thinking on counterinsurgency becomes clearer as well as McNamara’s obsession with the economic impact of the OSD’s activities.

In the end, most historians discount the significance of Kennedy’s withdrawal plans by remarking that the same set of advisors stayed on under

⁶⁶ Lawrence J. Basset, and Stephen E. Pelz, “The Failed Search for Victory,” in Robert J. McMahon (ed.) *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Co., 1990).; Preston, *The War Council*.

⁶⁷ Bird, for instance, writes that “the White House wanted a noisy, public – but cosmetic – withdrawal that would not harm the military effort”, adding that Kennedy had not made a decision on it yet. Bird, *The Color of Truth*, pp. 259.

⁶⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).; Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978).; General Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972).

Johnson and, after December 1963, argued for escalation. Alternatively, they point to the fact that the situation on the ground unraveled after Kennedy's assassination thus forcing an escalation that even Kennedy could not have avoided. Even Howard Jones, who acknowledges that Kennedy did have credible withdrawal plans on the eve of his death, argues that escalation in Vietnam became inevitable because of Diem's assassination and the internal collapse of South Vietnam.⁶⁹ However, these arguments are incomplete. Conspiracy theories or over-elaborate stories of secret meetings between Kennedy and McNamara are not necessary to argue that Kennedy attached a seriousness to the withdrawal plans that Johnson did not.

Moreover, a more detailed analysis of Kennedy's withdrawal plans, and McNamara's role therein, recasts the decisions during the transition. By relying more heavily on the presidential recordings during the early months of the Johnson administration, the thesis challenges VanDeMark's assertion that Johnson was "scrupulous in continuing" Kennedy's Vietnam policy.⁷⁰ Instead, 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 was surrounded by formal and informal experts on the issue, most of whom were isolated, pushed out or left under Johnson, notably Roger Hilsman and Robert Kennedy.⁷¹ 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."⁷² In other words, the withdrawal plans under Kennedy relied on his understanding of

⁶⁹ Jones, *Death of a Generation*, Chapter 17.

⁷⁰ Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 7.

⁷¹ On this issue, Freedman writes, "1964 was not a good year for doubters, many of which were squeezed out of the lower ranks of the administration." Lawrence Freedman, "Vietnam and the Disillusioned Strategist," *International Affairs* 72:1 (1996): pp. 141.

⁷² Robert S. McNamara OH Interview No. 1 by Walt W. Rostow, August 1, 1975, LBJL.

counterinsurgency: when the counterinsurgency strategy was dropped, so too were the withdrawal plans.

Johnson's starker views on Vietnam underpinned the shift in strategy. He believed in falling dominos more strongly than Kennedy did and was against the idea of withdrawal in any situation short of victory from the outset. There had been two lowest common denominators in government under Kennedy (policies that could garner broad administration agreement albeit for conflicting reasons as this thesis will show): 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.⁷³ By contrast, very early on, Johnson felt that the "sky was the limit" for U.S. support to Vietnam and sought out military advice more often than McNamara himself was inclined to do.⁷⁴

In addition, as this thesis will also show, Kennedy and McNamara placed Vietnam in a broader context of the U.S. 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 U.S. 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 external, it was internal; and instead of being "our" war it was "their" war. These broader considerations did not weigh on Johnson in the same way. Instead, and ironically, 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 did not see eye-to-eye on the costs inherent to escalation in Vietnam.

⁷³ Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*, pp. 240.

⁷⁴ Hohler, UK Embassy, Saigon to Warmer, FO, July 14, 1961, Reel 8: FO 371/160114, FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

When the transition is cast into the two dimensions of civilian control that guide this thesis – 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 from the Kennedy to the Johnson administration. In both administrations, McNamara did not design strategy but instead brought 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 the SFRC's 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. Crucially, as McNamara recognized that the program for Vietnam would become increasingly expensive and militarized, he moved funding for Vietnam to the services budget, which came under the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) oversight. In this way, he removed a key, budgetary constraint on operations on Vietnam. In other words, his role in identifying the internal constraints remained, only now he served a President who wasn't "obsessed" either with the gold outflow as Kennedy had been⁷⁵ or with balanced budgets.

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, he became the public face of the withdrawal plans and then for escalation. As the thesis 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 policy was unsuccessful.

⁷⁵ Two of Kennedy's principal economic advisers, Carl Kaysen and Seymour Harris, described Kennedy's concern for the balance of payments deficit as an obsession. Seymour E. Harris, *Economics and the Kennedy Years and a Look Ahead* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1964).; Carl Kaysen OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph E. Connor, July 11, 1966, JFKL.

New material

In a classified oral history for the Historical Office of the OSD undertaken in 1986, McNamara explained why, in office, he had asked his International Security Advisor John 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.”⁷⁶

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 have flaws as a source for historians. First, its authors did not have access to “all the raw materials”: they only 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, this thesis suggests, especially for the Kennedy years, is shaped by biases and therefore, 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.⁷⁷ Finally, the *Papers* only relied on the written record and in this, were at a major disadvantage to histories today

⁷⁶ Robert S. McNamara OH Interview by OSD Historical Office, July 24, 1986, Folder: OSD OH 3, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁷⁷ Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, phone interview with author, January 10, 2013.

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 – 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."⁷⁸

In trying to recreate an "ecological view" of McNamara's reality, the research has relied on a broader set of second literature, and was as much, if not more, influenced by economic history and the histories of the OSD, as by the historiography on Vietnam. In addition, the research has greatly benefited from a number of new documents that have recently been declassified and to private materials that are not openly available to researchers.

First and foremost, since 2010, Robert McNamara's personal papers have been accessible at the Library of Congress. These contain a number of important notes by McNamara as he researched his own Memoirs, his heretofore classified oral histories for the OSD Office of the Historian as well as 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 the British counterinsurgency expert Robert Thompson and the economist John Kenneth Galbraith.

Second, John Newman, who wrote the most comprehensive account of Kennedy's withdrawal plans, has made his material available to researchers

⁷⁸ Adam Yarmolinsky interview by Brian VanDeMark, April 1, 1995, Folder: Yarmolinsky, 1993, Box II:104, RSM Papers, LoC.

at the Kennedy Library.⁷⁹ His papers provide an invaluable shortcut as they contain much of the material that has been declassified on withdrawal in archives around the U.S., including many of the military archives that are less accessible to researchers.

Also, building on Marc Selverstone's work, the Miller Center has posted a number of transcribed tapes online that provide fascinating insight into the discussions on withdrawal during the Kennedy administration and on McNamara in particular. In those tapes, more than anywhere else, McNamara is heard dominating discussions on Vietnam and it emerges that he understood that he was going against the current for escalation instead of leading it. Similarly, the Lyndon B. Johnson Library online collection of presidential recordings has been key to contextualizing and explaining the written record during the transition. For the reasons described by Yarmolinsky, these recordings provide the backbone of the transition chapter.

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. In addition, 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. Those oral histories are the only place, for instance, where McNamara unambiguously admits that he was fired by President Johnson.

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 Douglas Dillon) and organizational issues (e.g. Adam Yarmolinsky) to see

⁷⁹ Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*.

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. Also, Errol Morris has kindly provided support and insight from his off-the-record conversations with McNamara.

McNamara's papers and Errol Morris's research materials have been especially important because, as the chapter on the transition to Johnson explains, the early drafts for *In Retrospect* contained a lot more material on Kennedy's withdrawal plans and the premise for withdrawal. In 1986, McNamara asked: "Why aren't there dissertations or thoughtful, definitive studies of the process and the lessons to be learned from it? That's what needs to be done." In part, this was probably McNamara's objective in *In Retrospect* but key points on the issue of withdrawal were removed, often because Brian VanDeMark argued that there was a shortage of documentary evidence to support them. Whereas the research material for *In Retrospect* comprised mostly written documents from the *FRUS* volumes, Errol Morris's research on *The Fog of War* had a broader range of materials and especially revealed key tapes that shed light on the transition from the Kennedy to the Johnson administrations.

Conclusion

While it may be tempting to frame decisions for withdrawal and subsequently, for escalation, within the context of the personal qualities or the geopolitical vision or lack thereof of individuals, it is at least conceivable that something less glamorous, namely bureaucratic processes, had a role to play. Moreover, bureaucratic operators sometimes have conflicting objectives that produce unlikely or unintended outcomes. Paradoxically, McNamara's efforts to

consolidate civilian control both in strategic and economic terms away from military advisors also contributed to escalation. Although the current research only focuses on the period until 1964, it provides a new way of interpreting McNamara and specifically his restraining influence on early Vietnam decisions and, as a result, it may spur a reassessment of his later years in office.

PROLOGUE – THE HISTORY OF THE OSD, 1947-1961

When Robert McNamara accepted President Kennedy's offer to serve as the United States' eighth Secretary of Defense, the role was still new, a barely decade-old innovation emanating from the Second World War. As a young agency, the OSD was still defining its place in the national security decision-making landscape and, in so doing, trying to find the appropriate balance of power between civilian and military authorities. President Eisenhower had left the new administration with the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958, a congressionally mandated program for change at the Department of Defense. McNamara recognized its sweeping potential to pave the way for his bureaucratic revolutions as the longest-serving Secretary of Defense.⁸⁰ Overall, 1960 was a propitious moment in the office's history and for a man who by personality as well as professional and intellectual inclination was predisposed to pushing organizational change and centralizing authority around himself.

The chapter reviews both the history of the OSD and McNamara's predecessors to provide a framework in which to consider civil-military relations at the time and ultimately, to understand McNamara's recommendations for Vietnam. The suggested framework breaks with existing literature that has tended to consider civilian control in terms of cultural, sociological or organizational relationships with the military. Instead, building loosely on Samuel Huntington's model, the thesis suggests that the history of civilian control by the OSD until 1960 was essentially the history of two trends: strategic and operational control on the one hand, "resource allocation" on the other.⁸¹

⁸⁰ The average tenure for all of McNamara's successors was 696 days in office. McNamara stayed in office 2,595 days.

⁸¹ Huntington distinguishes three trends. For him, civilian control was consolidated along three lines: strategic planning, combat command and resource allocation. This thesis fuses the strategic planning and combat command into one: civilian control of strategy both in planning and execution. Samuel P. Huntington, "Defense Organization and Military Strategy," *The Public Interest* 75 (Spring 1984), pp. 22.

First, civilian control of strategy and of operational decisions has been the traditional focus of civil-military relations literature and concentrates on the changing relationships and power dynamics between the OSD, the President, State Department, NSC and military services in the articulation of national strategy. The progression of civilian control before McNamara's arrival at the OSD was steady and was coupled by the gradual reduction of military voices in the upper echelons of decision-making, a process that each incumbent Secretary basically supported.

The second dimension is the economic one or what Huntington called "resource allocation": civilian control was also about defining the appropriate level of fiscal commitment to military expenditures and balancing defense spending with other domestic or civilian needs. Here, the evolution had been more fitful and controversial. Senator Kennedy had campaigned aggressively for increased defense spending and criticized his opponent's thriftiness. However, despite his campaign rhetoric, Kennedy's transition team recruited a Secretary of Defense with the managerial skills to control the ballooning defense establishment and its costs. Although the defense budget expanded during the Kennedy years and McNamara's tenure, the reforms they engineered were specifically designed to reduce defense expenditures in the long term.⁸²

Prima facie, withdrawal from Vietnam or elsewhere appears to be a paradoxical policy for McNamara to support; as a man whom the historiography largely remembers as a principal architect of the war in Vietnam and as a bureaucrat at the helm of an organization designed to mobilize resources for the application of military force, it makes little sense. However, it is precisely at a bureaucratic level that McNamara's recommendation to begin the process of leaving Vietnam in 1962 makes the most sense. An analysis of McNamara's policy recommendations that considers this prism rather than the binary, hawk-dove lines that the Vietnam War historiography typically provides may be more revelatory.

⁸² Adam Yarmolinsky, "Civilian Control: New Perspectives for New Problems," *Indiana Law Journal* 49:4 (Summer 1974), pp. 654-672.

Intellectual and cultural resistance to a defense establishment

Each Secretary of Defense from the first incumbent James Forrestal to McNamara had to face an in-built cultural ambivalence in the United States about anything that could be construed as extending the reach of the federal government in general and of military authorities specifically. Americans were uncomfortable with the military establishment that they had inherited from the Second World War. The Pentagon building itself was erected hastily between 1941 and 1942 to coordinate the war but with a stipulation from Congress that it was a temporary structure and that it would be converted into a veteran's hospital "after peace is restored and the army no longer needs the room."⁸³

As Ernest May observed, although the U.S. federal government and its military structures were among the "longer-lasting artifacts of the Cold War", they were not preordained in a culture that had resisted permanent structures to organize the country's relations with the world.⁸⁴ Instead, the Defense Department was a product of necessity, born of battlefield imperatives during the war rather than from deliberate design. All previous and subsequent attempts to centralize and organize a standing military force faced in-built resistance as it raised the specter of a Prussian-style General Staff.⁸⁵

After the attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into the war, the Roosevelt administration recognized that existing structures were

⁸³ Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: propaganda, politics and political opinion in the United States 1950-1953* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 173.

⁸⁴ Ernest R. May "The U.S. Government, A Legacy of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 16:2 (1992), pp. 270. For additional resources on the Defense Department as a militarized outcome of the Cold War, see also: Carolyn Eisenberg, "The New Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 29:3 (June 2005), pp. 423-27.; John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 8.; Stephanie C. Young, *Power and the Purse: Defense Budgeting and American Politics, 1947-1972* (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2009).; Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).; Saki Dockrill, *Eisenhower's New-Look National Security Strategy, 1952-61* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996), Chapter 1. In addition, for a discussion on the singular role of the Korean War and NSC68 in shaping the defense budget and the role of the Defense Department, see: Casey, *Selling the Korean War*, Chapter 7.; Ernest R. May (ed.) *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC68* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1993).; Samuel F. Wells Jr., "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC68 and the Soviet Threat," *International Security* 4 (Spring 1979), pp. 116-58.; Walter S. Pool, *The JCS and National Policy, 1950-1952* (Washington DC: Office of Joint History, 1998).; Robert Jervis "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24:4 (December 1980), pp. 563-592.

⁸⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, "American Ideals versus American Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly* 97:1 (Spring 1982), pp. 11.

inadequate for a world war and especially for joint operations with British Allies. As a result, in February 1942, “quickly and without great fanfare”, the existing, more loosely-organized Joint Boards between the Army and Navy were replaced with what would become known as the Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁸⁶ The latter mirrored the British armed forces as a way to streamline coordination of the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff that oversaw allied operations. To provide a counterpart to the British Royal Air Force (RAF), and in recognition of the growing role of air power in this new conflict, the Army’s Air Force was given co-equal status to the Army and Navy and eventually became a third, independent service.⁸⁷

The organizational changes to the services challenged the previous segregation of the Army and Navy which, on the basis of “elemental distinction” between land and sea, had jealously guarded their independence until that point, going so far as to produce separate war plans. Now, the war experience offered a case for the unification of the services. In spite of these operational realities, unification did not occur. The Navy, under the stewardship of James Forrestal attacked the plans. In addition to philosophical fears associated with a centralized, military command, the Navy felt that it had the most to lose with unification: it could lose its air power to the newly-created Air Force that seemed destined to play a leading role in the command of atomic weapons, and its Marine Corps could be subordinated to the Army to leave the Navy with a much-reduced role.⁸⁸ By contrast, the Army welcomed and even encouraged the wholesale merger of the armed services.⁸⁹

In addition to debates on the merits of unification, the new national security infrastructure spawned a debate about the appropriate balance between respecting and protecting military expertise on the one hand, and ensuring civilian control on the other. Reflecting this climate, in 1957, Samuel

⁸⁶ At first, as agreed upon in January 1942, the organization was called the Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (OJCS). Rearden, *The Formative Years*, pp. 17.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 388.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 314-16, 391.

⁸⁹ For an account of the unification debate, see: Stuart, *Creating the National Security State*, pp. 74-106.

Huntington produced his groundbreaking work on civil-military relations, *The Soldier and the State*.⁹⁰ Huntington later described the book as an “unabashed defense of the professional military ethic and rejection of traditional liberalism [which] was in itself evidence of this intellectual debate.”⁹¹

In the book, Huntington described how the increased complexity of warfare and technology in the nuclear age and the attendant need for specialized military expertise required “institutional autonomy”. Washington’s civilian leaders should resist the temptation to civilianize the military or interfere with its conduct – what he termed “subjective control” – and instead encourage independent military professionalism, or “objective control”. For Huntington, the “requisite for military security [was] a shift in basic American values from liberalism to conservatism”, that society itself could be enriched by military values rather than vice-versa. Ultimately, Huntington’s work was a product of and reaction to the debates of the times and was born of a concern, which was also distinctly American, that overbearing control of the military was a distinguishing characteristic of dictatorial regimes.⁹²

Huntington juxtaposed two types of actors – civilian and military – in a neat dichotomy around which the battle lines of civil-military relations would be drawn. Barring emblematic civil-military clashes such as the MacArthur controversy over the Truman administration’s policies in Korea, the situation in practice was more complicated. Also, Huntington assumed that military institutions were or could be apolitical, which ignored the fact that from the 1940s onwards, military authorities had become political as they became more savvy at competing for resources and influence in Washington.⁹³

Instead of a battle between two sets of actors, the creation of the national security infrastructure had created tensions across several, interlocking axes, including between services themselves, between

⁹⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *The soldier and the state: the theory and politics of civil-military relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁹¹ Samuel P. Huntington and Andrew J. Goodpaster, *Civil-Military Relations* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977), pp. 11.

⁹² Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2002), pp. 243.

⁹³ Dale R. Herspring, *The Pentagon and the Presidency: Civil-Military Relations from FDR to George W. Bush* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005), pp. 2.

coordinating bodies such as the NSC and the State Department, between the legislative and executive branches⁹⁴, as well as between the JCS and the OSD. As the Defense Department's budget expanded, many were concerned about the growing focus of military power on the projection of U.S. power abroad and the OSD's growing prominence over the State Department. The relationship between the State and Defense Departments and between the Secretaries in defining national security strategy troubled each incumbent pair; more often than not the issues were resolved through personal rapport rather than any enduring bureaucratic solution.

The JCS/OSD axis was equally salient because it hinged on who should be the leading military advisor to the President, the Commander-in-Chief. For General Taylor, Eisenhower's Army Chief and later Kennedy's Chairman of the JCS, the JCS should be a non-political body that could transcend agency needs and provide advice on the best way of fulfilling civilian-set objectives.⁹⁵ At the same time, he agreed with two of McNamara's civilian advisors who later suggested that "meaningful professional advice" from the JCS was "difficult" if not impossible because of the individual Chiefs' "channelized thinking". As he noted, each Chief was still embedded in their service and as a result, the JCS's advice was "largely the product of bargaining" between the services.⁹⁶

The manner in which each President defined the JCS's role had a direct bearing on the type of Secretary of Defense he sought, namely in determining if the Secretary's role should be a policy-making one or a managerial one primarily concerned with organizing the budgetary process.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Alain Enthoven, McNamara's Assistant Secretary for Systems Analysis, and his colleague Wayne Smith were particularly critical of this axis. They complained that the Senate had "not produce[d] strong budgetary oversight" because it relied on the authority of the military officials rather than evidence *per se*, asking Generals what they wanted and supporting it, without critically assessing needs. Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), pp. 310.

⁹⁵ General Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), pp. 20-21, 92-95.

⁹⁶ Enthoven and Smith, *How Much is Enough?*, pp. 96.

⁹⁷ James Roherty provides useful labels to distinguish between two types of Secretaries of Defense among McNamara's predecessors: first, those that were primarily concerned with the managerial aspects of the job, which he called "functionalist" and the policy-makers, which he

During these key decades, the OSD expanded its responsibilities along both lines, often to the detriment of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Defense spending, in millions, as share of federal budget and Gross Domestic Product (GDP)⁹⁸

	Defense spending (in millions)	National Defense as % federal outlays	National Defense as % GDP
1940	1,660	17.5	1.7
1941	6,435	47.1	5.6
1942	25,658	73	17.8
1943	66,699	84.9	37
1944	79,143	86.7	37.8
1945	82,681	89.5	37.5
1946	42,681	77.2	19.2
1947	12,808	37.1	5.5
1948	9,105	30.6	3.5
1949	13,150	33.9	4.8
1950	13,724	32.2	5
1951	23,566	51.8	7.4
1952	46,089	68.1	13.2
1953	52,802	69.4	14.2
1954	49,266	69.5	13.1
1955	42,729	62.4	10.8
1956	42,523	60.2	10
1957	45,430	59.3	10.1
1958	46,815	56.8	10.2
1959	49,015	53.2	10
1960	48,130	52.2	9.3
1961	49,601	50.8	9.4
1962	52,345	49	9.2
1963	53,400	48	8.9
1964	54,757	46.2	8.5
1965	50,620	42.8	7.4

The Truman administration

The first President to grapple with these bureaucratic and intellectual challenges was Harry S. Truman. Thrust into the role of President in the closing years of the war, he oversaw the defining moments of the Cold War. During the last months of the war, the Truman administration also faced the challenging task of demobilization. However, confronted with new threats and

called “generalist”. James Roherty, *Decisions of Robert S. McNamara: A Study of the Role of Secretary of Defense* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1970), pp. 100.

⁹⁸ Data is adjusted to 2011 USD. *Historical Tables: Budget of the U.S. Government* (Washington, DC: Office of Management and Budget, 2011). Retrieved online March 6, 2013, *White House Historical Series*: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2011/assets/hist.pdf>.

international obligations, not least of which was the occupation of Germany and Japan, the United States retained a force that was four times that which had existed in 1939. This was the first time that the United States had a substantial military force in a time of peace. With it, came a five-fold increase in defense allocations from 1.8 billion in 1940 to 10 billion in 1948, representing 14% of the U.S. GDP by the end of the Truman administration.⁹⁹

Events including the Berlin airlift in Europe, McCarthyism at home and above all the Korean War, dashed Truman's earlier hopes to reap a "peace dividend" or a major reduction in this new defense budget. Instead, the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the defining characteristic of international relations. Responding to new international realities and responsibilities, Truman presided over the expansion of the national security state. His four Secretaries of Defense - James Forrestal, Louis Johnson, George Marshall and Robert Lovett – each grappled with the President's inclination to compromise among stakeholders, to "satisfice" in setting up often flawed national security structures and to give them contradictory objectives. In particular, President Truman urged each of his Secretaries of Defense to keep the military budget down even while he expanded the United States' worldwide commitments.¹⁰⁰

Landmark legislation

The founding act for the Department of Defense, the "compromise National Security Act of 1947" as one scholar has called it, created most of the principal structures for national security decision-making without settling underlying issues that plagued inter-service relations and their relations with the civilian authorities.¹⁰¹ As Gaddis has critically noted, "preoccupied as they were with maintaining support for containment within the bureaucracy, the Congress, the informed public, and among allies overseas" the administration chose political expediency over efficiency: the "price of administrative

⁹⁹ May "The U.S. Government, A Legacy of the Cold War," pp. 275.

¹⁰⁰ See also: Keith D. McFarland and David L. Roll, *Louis Johnson and the Arming of America* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005).; Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power:*

¹⁰¹ May "The U.S. Government, A Legacy of the Cold War," pp. 271.

effectiveness can be strategic shortsightedness” and, in this instance in particular, “process triumphed over policy”, where policies and structures that were feasible were chosen over those that were desirable.¹⁰² Moreover, many of the structures and especially the OSD were structurally weak, with a notable gap between their formal authority, which was relatively broad, and their substantive authority.

Principally for economic reasons, Truman was initially favorable to the wholesale merger of the services. However, faced with congressional resistance, he compromised and proposed a program of legislative reform whose "overall purpose was to erect an integrated structure to formulate national security policy at the uppermost level of government."¹⁰³ The National Security Act created the NSC, which was designed to advise the President on national security issues and provide strategic direction as the country's international obligations expanded. The NSC's Chairman was the President and its members included the Secretary of State as well as representatives of three new agencies: the National Security Resources Board (NSRB), the Secretary of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA, the successor agency to another World War II innovation the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), became the NSC's main source of intelligence although other intelligence agencies scattered across government, including in the military services, continued to operate in parallel. Crucially, each of the Service Secretaries was on the NSC. As a result, defense representatives held four of the seven seats on the NSC in its founding years.¹⁰⁴

In addition, the National Security Act created the OSD to oversee the National Military Establishment (NME) later renamed the Department of Defense. The Secretary of Defense was designated as the President's principal advisor on military affairs and, as such, provided “general direction” to the Secretaries of the Army, Navy and of the new Air Force. However, in practice, his supervisory responsibilities were limited and, more often than not, undermined by the President himself. Furthermore, the Act created three

¹⁰² Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 85-86.

¹⁰³ Rearden, *The Formative Years: 1947-1950*, pp. iii.

¹⁰⁴ Kinnard, *The Secretary of Defense*, pp. 2, 204.

civilian “special assistants” to support the Secretary. These included a Comptroller who was responsible for harmonizing the service budgets into one annual military budget.¹⁰⁵ In addition, the Secretary oversaw two new boards that concerned all military services: the Munitions Board and the Research & Development (R&D) Board.

Despite these reforms, the Service Secretaries retained most of their power, notably by keeping a direct line of communication to both the President and the Bureau of Budget. The position of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was a shallow one even if his announced responsibility was ambitious. Officially, he was charged with providing strategic direction to the military forces, preparing plans, establishing unified commands and reviewing materiel and training requirements. In practice however, he had no power over the Service Chiefs and instead acted primarily as a liaison with the White House. General Eisenhower was appointed as the first Chairman on a temporary basis in November 1948 but since he continued in his capacity as President of Columbia University, he spent scarce time on his JCS duties. It was not until August 1950, with the appointment of General Omar Bradley, that the JCS even had an official Chairman. Moreover, from the start, the Chairman of the Joints of Chiefs and the individual Chiefs were in an unhappy tension with the Secretary of Defense: although they reported to the Secretary of Defense, they were also rival military advisors to the President, the NSC, State Department and Congress.

As a result, In August 1949, the Act was amended to clarify the respective roles of the Secretary of Defense and the JCS. The powers of the Comptroller were reinforced with a view to creating a first unified budget in Fiscal Year (FY) 50. Although the amendments strengthened the Secretary of Defense’s position on the budget, they weakened him by limiting his role to that of “principal assistant to the President in all matters related to the Department of Defense” rather than to defense policy more generally.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, since the Service Secretaries no longer chaired in the NSC, they

¹⁰⁵ Rearden, *The Formative Years*, pp. 74.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 132.

were forced to consolidate their views through one representative, the Chairman of the JCS. In so doing, the latter's role was strengthened.

In addition, in a move that would frustrate successive administrations, the amendments allowed members of the JCS who were designated as the "principal military advisors to the President and the Secretary of Defense" to disagree with the administration's policy and to raise their disagreements in Congress "on [their] own initiative, after first informing the Secretary of Defense."¹⁰⁷ The Chiefs independent advisory role to Congress, to the President but also to the NSC and the State Department, further politicized them and arguably paved the way for public spats with each administration, most notably over the Truman administration's strategy in Korea which culminated in the MacArthur controversy.¹⁰⁸

Truman's Secretaries of Defense

The first Secretary of Defense, in office from September 1947 to March 1949, was former Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal. At the Navy, Forrestal had been a leading opponent of President Truman's plans to support the unification of the services. In his first week on the job, he wrote in his diaries, "My chief misgivings about unification derived from my fear that there would be a tendency toward overconcentration and reliance on one man or one-group direction. In other words, too much central control."¹⁰⁹ As a result of his "misgivings", Forrestal was more responsible than most for the compromises that had resulted in the OSD's structural weaknesses. Yet despite a personal relationship that would continue to be ambivalent, Truman chose him to be the first Secretary of Defense.

Forrestal was given a near impossible task riddled, as it was, with conflicting goals and stakeholders. Truman extended the United States'

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 140.

¹⁰⁸ On this, see for instance: John W. Spanier *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).; Richard H. Rovere and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. *The MacArthur Controversy and American Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965).

¹⁰⁹ Walter Millis (ed.) *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1951), pp. 300-301. The diaries offer a privileged view into Forrestal's frustrations in his dealings with the President and the services.

responsibilities but imposed low force and budgetary ceilings on Forrestal, which he then had to communicate and enforce on the Chiefs. In an effort to assuage inter-service issues, the administration insisted on balanced forces or an equal distribution of resources across the three services. This was counter-productive and resulted in heated debates about strategy between the services. The perceived unfairness of balanced forces played a part in the bitter battle between the Navy and the Air Force about who should be the custodian of atomic weapons.¹¹⁰

The Secretary's lack of executive power over the Chiefs was almost immediately apparent: the Chiefs ignored his suggested national strategic concept that was designed to guide their military assessments as well as Truman's budgetary ceiling.¹¹¹ Instead, they presented him with separate positions and budgets and the Chairmen of the JCS, Eisenhower and then Bradley sidestepped their official responsibility for coordinating the Chiefs' views. Truman further undermined Forrestal's authority by regularly bypassing him and reaching out to the Chiefs and the Service Secretaries directly. Perhaps the only relationship that was comparatively smooth during Forrestal's tenure was with the State Department where he benefited from his friendships with Secretary of State George Marshall and his Undersecretary, Robert Lovett. Their relationships did much to smooth collaboration between the two departments.

Eventually the stresses of the office began to take their toll on Forrestal. Faced with his inability to bring the NME under control, he began to retreat into a state of increased isolation and paranoia. By reaching out to Thomas Dewey, Truman's opponent in the 1948 election, he effectively ended his career. Within three months of resigning from office, Forrestal committed suicide, throwing himself from the window of his hospital room at Bethesda Naval Hospital where he was recovering from "nervous exhaustion" that his

³¹ Rearden, *The Formative Years*, pp. 330-338.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 336.

doctors and friends traced back to the unification debate and to “excessive work during the war and post-war years.”¹¹²

James Forrestal’s experience would continue to cast a long shadow over each of his successors and on McNamara’s colleagues specifically, many of whom had begun their careers in government under him. For some, the relationship with Forrestal was especially personal. Michael Forrestal at the NSC was James Forrestal’s son and was unofficially adopted by one of his father’s closest friends, Averell Harriman at the State Department. Townsend Hoopes, a Forrestal mentee and later McNamara’s Deputy for International Security Affairs, wrote a biography of Forrestal in which he described the latter’s death as “towering loss” and a “profound personal tragedy.”¹¹³ Kennedy’s Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon’s father had chosen Forrestal to succeed him at the head of his investment bank Dillon, Read & Co. where Forrestal also worked with the younger Dillon and Paul Nitze. In later years, Forrestal offered Dillon his first job in government.

However, it was the legacy of Forrestal’s failure to mould already entrenched service interests, or what Samuel Huntington termed “Servicem”¹¹⁴, and other resistances that most haunted his successors. McNamara kept a photo of Forrestal in his office and was informed by his example throughout his tenure. In one telling exchange with President Johnson after several years in the job, the President complimented McNamara’s ability to maintain a stronger team than had existed in “Jim Forrestal’s time.” McNamara responded that, “He wouldn’t have killed himself that’s for sure.”¹¹⁵ McNamara’s tight control and high expectations of loyalty from his subordinates was primed by Forrestal’s failures to do the same.

¹¹² The quote comes from the official statement released by his Navy physicians. “Fatigue Blamed for Condition of Forrestal,” *St. Petersburg Times* (April 12, 1949), pp. 6. On his growing mental health issues, see: Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, *Driven patriot: the life and times of James Forrestal* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press: 1992).; James C. Olson, *Stuart Symington: A Life* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), pp. 164-175.

¹¹³ Hoopes and Brinkley, *Driven patriot*, Preface.

¹¹⁴ Huntington, “Defense Organization and Military Strategy,” pp. 24.

¹¹⁵ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: January 2, 1964. WH 6401.03, Conversation 1149.

In a similar vein, during McNamara's confirmation hearings as Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the SASC, Richard Russell wryly commented: "In the past, there have been partly humorous suggestions that being named Secretary of Defense merits condolences instead of congratulations; and, of course, it is true that any person who successfully discharges the duties of this position needs all the cardinal virtues, a double portion of fortitude, and some others."¹¹⁶

The experience of Louis Johnson, Forrestal's immediate successor who served from March 1949 to September 1950, was hardly more encouraging. A lawyer by training, Johnson had been Assistant Secretary for War from 1937 to 1940 during which time he oversaw the wartime industrial mobilization. After the war, he had been a major fundraiser for Truman. Promising to "knock a few heads together", Johnson announced that he would succeed where Forrestal had failed particularly in achieving greater unification and keeping the budget in line with, if not below, the President's wishes.¹¹⁷

However, in trying to make his reputation as a "great economizer", Johnson also made enemies who would subsequently make him the scapegoat for the Truman administration's humiliation at being caught off-guard and unprepared at the outbreak of the Korean War. His choice to focus relatively more on strategic air power, which he saw as cost-effective investment in security, alienated the Navy who staged a major protest that became known as the "Revolt of the Admirals". In general, his tendency to ignore the advice of military colleagues meant that they remembered him as "probably the worst Secretary of Defense."¹¹⁸ His relationship with the State Department was no better: he feuded with his counterpart, Dean Acheson, who described him as "mentally ill".¹¹⁹ At first, he was philosophical about the criticisms aimed at him: "A public official, of course, must expect a good deal

¹¹⁶ "Nomination of Robert S. McNamara", 87th Congress (January 17, 1961) (Senate Committee on Armed Services), pp. 1. Hearing ID: HRG-1961-SAS-0005, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

¹¹⁷ McFarland and Roll, *Louis Johnson*, pp. 197-199.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ In reference to a brain operation Johnson had undertaken to remove blood clots ("subdural hematoma"). *Ibid.*, pp. 354.

of criticism, particularly when he must take a stand on a controversial issue.”¹²⁰ Still, he was eventually dismissed.

Johnson’s discharge came at a time when NSC68, with President Truman’s approval, began to gain momentum across government and in the midst of the Korean crisis. Both created pressures for increased military spending. In particular, NSC68, the joint State-Defense document that had been primarily drafted by Paul Nitze, now at the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department, called for a “substantial increase” in military forces and in the massive investments to match the growing Soviet threat.

Within two months of taking office as the third Secretary of Defense, George Marshall, the Army war hero and retired Secretary of State, championed a changed defense posture. In a nod to his predecessor, he explained that:

“Always there has been a drive to find scapegoats to shoulder the blame. The basic error, however, has always been with the American people themselves. The fault has been with their refusal to sanction an enduring posture of defense that would discourage aggression, and, if war came, would reduce the casualties, the sacrifices, the excessive costs and the needless waste.”

Echoing an argument James Forrestal had made, he criticized the “emotional instability” of the American people and their legislators to push for massive demobilization (a “violent dip”) after the war despite being “in the midst of a dangerous world.”¹²¹

When Marshall left, he insisted that his Deputy, Robert Lovett, succeed him as Secretary of Defense. A banker before the war, Lovett had directed the buildup of U.S. air power during the war as Assistant Secretary for Air in the War Department after which he had worked on the Marshall Plan. He shared Marshall’s view about the American tendency to neglect defense, explaining

¹²⁰ Johnson to Thurman A. Stout, August 30, 1950, Folder: 3, Box 109, Louis A. Johnson Papers, Secretary of Defense, Correspondence, UVAL.

¹²¹ “Marshall Urges Enduring Defense,” *The New York Times* (November 25, 1950), pp.6.

that “we seem to have had only two throttle positions in the past: wide open when we are at war and tight shut when there is no shooting.”¹²²

Lovett oversaw the Korean buildup and, more than any Secretary of Defense, played a central part in raising the United States’ level of military readiness to respond to the Cold War and the growing potential of limited war. Echoing a rhetoric that would become commonplace and that would justify a growing defense budget throughout the Cold War, he explained: “We must make an effort to get the only insurance that works – strength. We tried peace through weakness for generations, and it didn’t work.”¹²³ At the same time, as a progressive Democrat who understood that defense drew on finite governmental resources that could be instead earmarked for domestic issues, he explained how a longer-term level of preparedness would be cheaper in the longer term: that “less money annually, but steadily, can accomplish much more than huge sums today and nothing tomorrow.”¹²⁴

Although his tenure was relatively smooth and free of controversy, Lovett closed the Truman administration’s chapter for defense policy by raising concerns about the organizational arrangements for defense, warning his successor that the 1949 Amendments had not solved inherent tensions between the Secretary of Defense and the JCS, and that the budgetary process was still not efficient and economical enough.

The Eisenhower administration

At this critical juncture in the history of the OSD, General Eisenhower was elected as President, an exceptional presidency in many respects especially for defense policy. In addition to promising a prompt end to the Korean War, Eisenhower campaigned on the pledge to restore fiscal responsibility to government. As one of the most decorated generals in U.S. history and as the first Chairman of the JCS, Eisenhower had a keen interest in defense policy. Although he had three Secretaries of Defense during his two terms, in reality,

¹²² Bart Barnes, "Financier Robert A. Lovett, 90, Former Secretary of Defense, Dies," *The Washington Post* (August 5, 1986), pp. D6.

¹²³ Quoted in Gerard Clarfield, *Security with Solvency: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Shaping of the Military Establishment* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), pp. 95.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Eisenhower was his own Secretary. Moreover, as someone who had commanded or served with many of his Chiefs and senior military officers, Eisenhower was a special President and could more easily overrule his military advisors, something he did repeatedly.

Moreover, having been consulted at various points in the Defense Department's nascent years, Eisenhower was quick to identify and act on its structural problems. He was predisposed to support greater unification because of his experience as Supreme Allied Commander in the war and at NATO, while his fiscal conservatism moved him to act on more efficient budgeting practices. As he explained to a friend shortly before his inauguration in 1953, Eisenhower's attitude to defense and to security was grounded in this attitude to federal spending: "The financial solvency and economic soundness of the United States constitute the first requisite to collective security in the free world. That comes before all else."¹²⁵ In practice, although he set up a number of structures and reforms aimed at reducing expenditures, his budgets "were never as austere as he made out."¹²⁶

Still, in a spirit of managerial reform, in his first year in office, Eisenhower asked the banker David Rockefeller to chair the "Committee on Methods of Reorganizing the Executive Branch for the Federal Government" that also included Robert Lovett and General Bradley. Among its recommendations, many of which would inform the administration's congressional moves, the Committee suggested centralizing authority at the OSD with respect to research, logistics and procurement decisions, and at the level of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Perhaps Eisenhower's most important innovation was to strengthen the NSC as a way of enforcing his fiscal discipline and bringing defense expenditures down. The NSC was expanded to include the Secretary of the Treasury and the Bureau of Budget who participated in spelling out a Basic National Security Policy that was meant to inform the military department's

¹²⁵ Quoted in Melvyn P. Leffler, "Defense on a Diet: How Budget Crises Have Improved U.S. Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2013). Retrieved online November 2, 2014: <http://fam.ag/132TXkn>

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

budgets within an overall budget ceiling although Eisenhower tactfully called them “targets” instead.¹²⁷

Eisenhower’s Secretaries of Defense

If Truman’s last Secretaries of Defense lamented the lack of investment in defense, Eisenhower’s first Secretary of Defense, Charles Wilson, swung the pendulum decidedly in the other direction. Coming from General Motors, which he had led for over a decade, Wilson controversially quipped during his confirmation hearings that, “What’s good for General Motors is good for the country.” In addition to being the largest U.S. corporation at the time, General Motors had been a major supplier of military equipment during the war. The comments exacerbated criticism leveled against the Eisenhower administration that it was dominated by out-of-touch businessmen, or as one critic put it, that it was an administration with “seventeen millionaires and one plumber” with Secretary Wilson as the “businessman *ne plus ultra*.”¹²⁸

However, Wilson ruffled the most feathers in his search for savings. He drastically cut appropriations without consulting the Chiefs as he presumed they would continue to ask for much more than could be realistically appropriated. Within his first four months in office, he cut 40,000 civilian employees in the Department. In addition, he designed the administration’s new strategy, “the New Look” with the NSC and not with JCS. The New Look focused heavily on nuclear weapons and thus *prima facie* favored the Air Force. The Army, who had historically supported unification, now, under the stewardship of Chief of Staff Maxwell Taylor, decidedly turned against it in a confrontation that the *New York Times* dubbed the “revolt of the colonels”.¹²⁹ All in all, in his steadfastness to achieve savings and his inability to communicate constructively with the Chiefs, Wilson’s tenure was one characterized by acrimony.

¹²⁷ Kinnard, *The Secretary of Defense*, pp. 622.

¹²⁸ Robert Coughlan, “Top Managers in ‘Business Cabinet’”, *Life Magazine* (January 19, 1953) pp. 100. Another press report described a mere “eight millionaires” instead. “Washington Wire,” *The New Republic*, (December 15, 1952).

¹²⁹ See also Major Jay M. Parker “The Colonels’ Revolt: Eisenhower, the Army and the Politics of National Security” (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1994).

In October 1957, the industrialist and former President of Proctor & Gamble, Neil McElroy replaced Wilson. During his two years in office, and under the impetus of Eisenhower, McElroy oversaw the most important legislative reform of defense organization since the war: the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958. The Act gave President Eisenhower virtually all he had asked Congress for and laid the groundwork for McNamara's changes to the Department. It placed defense policy and the budget especially in civilian hands in order to balance each of the services' needs while keeping in mind administration-wide fiscal priorities. As the Act read, it aimed "to provide for the establishment of integrated policies and procedures for the departments, agencies, and functions of the Government relating to the national security." Reflecting the administration's concern about the role of the defense budget in federal spending, it sought "to provide more effective, efficient, and economical administration in the Department of Defense."¹³⁰

Overall, the Secretary of Defense's power was substantially increased. The Act "provide[d] a Department of Defense, including the three military Departments of the Army, the Navy (including naval aviation and the United States Marine Corps), and the Air Force under the direction, authority and control of the Secretary of Defense" and increased the staff at the OSD and the JCS. The Chairman of the JCS was given voting rights on the JCS, changing his role to one with clearer executive responsibility. The services themselves were changed from being separately *administered* to departments that were now separately *organized* but under the authority of the Secretary of Defense. In other words, the services now reported to the President through the Secretary of Defense. However, over McElroy's objections, the Act preserved the right of the Service Secretaries and Chiefs to make recommendations and express independent opinions to Congress, the "legislated insubordination" that had troubled him and every other Secretary before and after.

¹³⁰ "Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958", August 6, 1958. Retrieved online December 17, 2014, *Government Printing Office*: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-72/pdf/STATUTE-72-Pg514.pdf>.

Finally, As Eisenhower had suggested, the Act “provide[d] for the unified strategic direction of the combatant forces, for their operation under unified command, and for their integration into an efficient team of land, naval, and air forces.” By setting up a new system of unified commands under the direction of the Secretary of Defense and the President, the Act cut the Chiefs authority across horizontal lines as well.¹³¹

The first Secretary of Defense to benefit from these changes, although he did not act on them in any significant way, was Thomas Gates. A former banker and Secretary of the Navy, Gates had hoped to return to banking until the untimely death of Deputy Secretary of Defense Donald A. Oarles, who was on track to replace McElroy, forced him to change his plans. In many ways, Gates’ tenure was a care-taking one but one during which the tone was set for the arrival of McNamara. Gates passed the Defense Reorganization Act and turned attention to the growing salience of limited wars in the nuclear age.

Building on an intellectual and legislative context that was open to questioning the Defense Department’s position and structures, Eisenhower took two final steps before leaving office. First, in 1960, he appointed New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller to review the organization for defense and to present his findings before the Jackson Sub Committee on National Policy Machinery. In his report, Rockefeller recommended greater centralization around the office of the President and presented an ideal Secretary of Defense as a “management specialist” who could faithfully implement Presidential directives through “active management”.¹³² The report also suggested one of the reforms that would make McNamara famous, namely that the defense budget should be organized according to themes and defense functions rather than by services.¹³³ Second, Eisenhower’s departure

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Louis Kraar, “Defense Dynamo: McNamara Centralizes Pentagon Control, Puts Civilians in Command,” *The Wall Street Journal* (February 19, 1962).

¹³³ It differed from McNamara and his colleagues’ understanding of the budgetary process, notably by suggesting that budgets should be allocated year by year, rather than projecting estimates over a longer timeframe that would capture cost overruns, and under budgetary ceilings set by economic and political feasibility as determined by the President, rather than by priorities spelled out by the Secretary of Defense. For an earlier iteration and the

speech was decidedly pedagogical and warned Americans of the dangers that their new defense establishment could represent to the country's economic health. He reminded the public that the "conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience" and had been "compelled", and he warned of the "potential for the disastrous rise" of "unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought by the military-industrial complex" in "the councils of government."¹³⁴ The speech went on to expand on a related theme, namely the danger that federal spending could increase to a point that it would crowd out private entrepreneurial efforts in science or in any field. He explained that, "It is the role of statesmanship to mold, to balance, and to integrate these and other forces, new and old, within the principles of our democratic system – ever aiming towards the supreme goals of our free society."¹³⁵

Senator Kennedy campaign and transition

Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy had demonstrated a lively interest in defense policy during his campaign. He had set up a Special Committee during the transition to study "how to strengthen the Defense Department and make it more responsive to the needs of our time" and chose Senator Stuart Symington as Chairman. A one-time competitor for the Democratic nomination, Symington converged with Kennedy on the issue of a possible "missile gap" that Eisenhower had allowed to open by emphasizing fiscal prudence over military strength.¹³⁶ Symington, who had been the first Secretary of the Air Force under Forrestal, turned to his old friends and associates from the Truman administration.¹³⁷ The Committee's final report reiterated many of the same positions that Symington had championed since his days at the Air Force. These included recommending the unification of the

intellectual framework for McNamara's reforms, see: Charles J. Hitch and Roland N. McKean, *The Economics of Defense in Nuclear Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1960).

¹³⁴ President Dwight D. Eisenhower "Military-Industrial Complex Speech" (speech, January 17, 1961). Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960, pp. 1035- 1040.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ For more recent literature on the missile gap controversy, see: Christopher Preble *John F. Kennedy and the missile gap* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).

¹³⁷ Olson, *Stuart Symington: A Life*, pp. 360-362.

services under a single chief of staff and the wholesale reorganization of the armed services into functional commands, for instance with one concerned solely with nuclear weapons and another with limited war. The report was greeted with predictable hostility in the services and much of the Congress, and was privately deemed “not feasible” by the incoming administration.¹³⁸ Publicly, Kennedy’s reaction to the 5,000-page report was more diplomatic: he told the waiting press that it was “an interesting and constructive study which I know will be carefully analyzed by the Congress and the incoming Administration.”¹³⁹

Within the transition team, Richard Neustadt, the famed political scientist of presidential power, echoing the Army and Secretary Gates’ response to the Symington report, wrote to the incumbent President that he should focus on the “far-reaching potential”¹⁴⁰ of Eisenhower’s legislative legacy. He wrote that “27 months after the passage of the 1958 Act”, the Defense Department was in a “transitional period” and explained to the President that “steps towards unification have been made necessary” by two imperatives: “One, to bring better business management to the massive operations of the Defense Department and thereby to effect efficiencies and prevent waste in the activities that have come to consume more than half the Federal expenditures and, two, to accommodate military strategy and operations to the technological revolution in warfare that has marked the past two decades.” The challenge for the administration was to organize the defense establishment in the “most economical and efficient manner possible [...] in a framework of responsible civilian control.”

Although Neustadt favored making the most of the 1958 Act as a first step, he nevertheless proposed a number of bureaucratic steps and changes which went well beyond the Act as a sort of menu for the incoming administration. These steps included converting Secretaries of the military

¹³⁸ Thomas Norris, “A Giant of Management” (Paper presented at the 38th Annual Meeting of the Academy for Management, undated).

¹³⁹ W.H. Lawrence, “Symington Panel Urges Revamping of the Pentagon,” *New York Times* (December 6, 1960), pp. 1.

¹⁴⁰ “Defense Organization”, November 17, 1960, Folder: Transition Memoranda, Topic memoranda Folder: 1, Box 17, Neustadt Papers, Government Consulting Files, JFKL.

departments into Undersecretaries of Defense or abolishing them altogether, and getting rid of the Chiefs dual responsibilities to their departments and the JCS. Neustadt also reiterated many of Symington's recommendations, including "restructuring the military departments into functional organizations", creating a single chief of staff even while he accepted that "this is the most controversial step" and the wholesale merger of the services "the most controversial of all [...] a most extreme degree of unification." All in all, although Neustadt and his colleagues in the transition team accepted that the 1958 Act had established a framework for reforming the Defense Department, they did not exclude further and more aggressive moves.

As far as staffing arrangements at the OSD were concerned, Neustadt explained, "The main present need is not further legal structural changes but improvements in the programming, budgeting, another decision-making processes and in the staff arrangements to get on top of the remaining difficult problems." The administration needed a first-class manager of people and processes. He suggested to the new President that key bureaucratic changes were needed at the OSD whose "central defect" was the "lack of civilian advisors." A Secretary of Defense aided by civilian advisors should work towards a "fundamental overhaul of the Department's budgetary processes to achieve a sound management framework."¹⁴¹

Robert Lovett, who had served as Truman's last Secretary of Defense and who was initially offered the job but declined suggesting Robert McNamara in his place, echoed Neustadt's views. Together with Charles Wilson, Eisenhower's first Secretary of Defense, Lovett counseled the transition team and described the ideal candidate. He argued that the Pentagon needed an "analytical statistician who can tear out the overlap, the empire building."¹⁴² He later explained his choice of Robert McNamara to fill these shoes by saying that there "very few people who were competent to deal with the basic problems in the Pentagon which was getting into the unnecessary duplication and the over-layering which had grown up under our

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 2.

system of operation. I felt that there should be a really careful analysis of the Department and that statistics should be developed which might help in pointing a way to a solution.”¹⁴³

Both Neustadt and Lovett’s remarks illustrate how ill-defined the role of the Office of the Secretary of Defense was and just how much in “transition” it was when McNamara came to Washington. As one of McNamara’s predecessors, Lovett had first-hand experience of the problems that would confront the new Secretary. The administration needed a candidate with the managerial and budgetary vision to implement Eisenhower’s reforms and to deal with the inevitable and ongoing bureaucratic resistance.

Neustadt and Lovett also implied that achieving “civilian control” would depend on appointing a manager who could be completely loyal to the President and who could, in turn, inspire the loyalty of his own advisers. Moreover, the transition team counseled that the ideal Secretary would come from the private sector, bringing managerial experience, but without appearing to be part of the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower had spoken about. The Kennedy campaign latched onto criticism of the Eisenhower team, and his Secretaries of Defense in particular, as being an administration dominated by business people. In later years, McNamara was explicitly compared to his predecessors in this respect: one wrote, “Mr. McNamara is not subject to the family, socialite and public-figure consciousness of Neil McElroy (Secretary from October 1957 to December 1959). Nor is he subject to the Ivy League inhibitions and investment-trust dignity of Thomas Gates (December 1959 to January 1961). Mr. McNamara simply isn’t susceptible to any pressures – social, military, intellectually, or editorial.”¹⁴⁴

As the British Foreign Office observed at the time, appointments in the Kennedy administration put a greater “emphasis on a professional or professorial background” with “strikingly few connections with big business.”¹⁴⁵ Although McNamara came from the Ford Motor Co., he also

¹⁴³ Robert A. Lovett OH No. 1 by Dorothy Foedlick, July 20, 1964, JFKL, pp. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Kraar, “Defense Dynamo.”

¹⁴⁵ “President Kennedy’s Appointments”, American Department FO to Prime Minister, January 26, 1961, PREM 11/4574, National Archives, Kew.

captured the spirit and tone of the New Frontier and became one of its iconic figures. As David Halberstam described, “Bob McNamara was a remarkable man in a remarkable era.”¹⁴⁶

Much has been made of McNamara’s intellectual qualities, in particular of his quantitative logic and “cold rationality”. While his statistical skills made him stand out to people like Robert Lovett, for John Kenneth Galbraith and Adam Yarmolinsky (who with Kennedy’s brother-in-law Sargent Shriver led the staffing task force of the transition team), it was McNamara’s sense of public service that distinguished him most.¹⁴⁷ On paper, McNamara’s professional journey was one that fit the stereotype of the quantitative-minded manager. However, his CV belied a greater degree of intellectualism and interest in public service. As Halberstam put it, “challenges fascinated him, but not worldly goods or profit as ends in themselves.”¹⁴⁸

Born in San Francisco to a modest family, McNamara attended public schools and Berkeley, the state university, before going on to Harvard Business School (HBS) for his MBA. After spending a year at Price Waterhouse accounting firm, he returned to HBS where he taught a course on planning and control from August 1940 until January 1942. Newly-married, McNamara described living in Cambridge “more happily than we had ever dreamed possible.”¹⁴⁹

He left Harvard on unpaid leave to join the war effort and apply some of the statistical skills from academia to public purposes. He worked for Robert Lovett, then Assistant Secretary of War for Air, in the Army’s Department of Statistical Control under Charles B. “Tex” Thornton reviewing the Army Air Force’s bombing campaign, and eventually served under General Curtis

¹⁴⁶ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, pp. 219.

¹⁴⁷ As part of his work for the Ford Foundation’s Fund for the Republic, Yarmolinsky had produced a study on individuals that had been unfairly treated under McCarthyism and the federal security program. On a visit to Ann Arbor, McNamara and Yarmolinsky met, discussed Yarmolinsky’s report as well as McNamara’s work on auto safety. He described McNamara saying: “I think his whole bent is towards Service. We are put on the earth to be useful.” Adam Yarmolinsky OH Interview No. 1 by Daniel Ellsberg, November 11, 1964, JFKL.

¹⁴⁸ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, pp. 228.

¹⁴⁹ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, pp. 8.

LeMay in the Eight Air Force in England.¹⁵⁰ McNamara and his team of “whiz kids” applied statistical methods to strategic bombing and, in so doing, improved both the efficiency and lethality of the air strikes.

After the war, McNamara hoped to return to Harvard and to the intellectual excitement that he had enjoyed there. However, when he and his wife Margaret contracted polio, their “very, very expensive”¹⁵¹ medical bills forced him to choose a more profitable path. Although he was not particularly drawn to business - in fact his first response to Thornton’s suggestion to go into the corporate world was an “unequivocal no”¹⁵² - the “whiz kids” including McNamara brought their skills to the Ford Motor Company and overhauled the company in the ensuing decade. Building on his course at HBS, McNamara became Director of Planning at the company.

However, at Ford, McNamara chose a lifestyle that was more academic than it was corporate: he described himself as “a motor company executive who seemed an oddball for Detroit.”¹⁵³ Whether or not his intellectualism was “self-conscious”¹⁵⁴, the McNamaras chose to live in the university town of Ann Arbor rather than Detroit and preferred local book clubs to golf clubs. In his job as well, McNamara did not fit the typical model of the corporate leader: he was instrumental in improving the cars’ security record and in pushing social responsibility measures at time when they were rare, as well as in building up the Ford Foundation in its formative years.¹⁵⁵

On November 9, 1960, the day after the election, McNamara was promoted to become the first President of the Ford Motor Company that was not a member of the Ford family. As McNamara later explained, he “was one of the highest paid industrial executives in the world, not wealthy, but in a position to become so.”¹⁵⁶ Although he declined the administration’s first offer to serve as Secretary of the Treasury, it was not long before he accepted to

¹⁵⁰ Rosenzweig, “Robert S. McNamara and the Evolution of Modern Management,” pp. 89.; *The Fog of War*, directed by Errol Morris. (CA: Sony Classics, 2004), DVD.

¹⁵¹ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, pp. 10.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15.

¹⁵⁴ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, pp. 237.

¹⁵⁵ Rosenzweig, “Robert S. McNamara and the Evolution of Modern Management,” pp. 87-93.

¹⁵⁶ OH Interview of Robert McNamara by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OSD OH 1, Box 1:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

serve as Secretary of Defense even while he admitted that he only “followed defense matters in a rather superficial way through the press.”¹⁵⁷ Despite his “deep loyalty to [the Ford family] and to the Ford Motor Company”, McNamara explained, “I could not let their interests outweigh my obligation to serve the nation when called upon.”¹⁵⁸

McNamara’s conditions

In addition to providing a platform for public service, the OSD provided an intellectual challenge. McNamara told a *New York Times* reporter how: “I think each large organization goes through a period of evaluation when the patterns of the future are formed, when the intellectual framework for decisions is established, when the administrative techniques are sharpened, when the organization structure takes shape, I believe that the Department of Defense is in such a period today.”¹⁵⁹ After successive leaders’ attempts at “trimming”, McNamara was determined to press on with bottom-up reform.

McNamara accepted Kennedy’s offer on two conditions, both of which were largely met. First, that he “would have the authority to organize and staff the Defense Department with the most competent men [he] could find without regard to political affiliation or obligation.” Barring some Service Secretary positions, this condition was largely upheld. McNamara’s second condition spoke to the campaign and transition team’s intellectual approach to the Department. Although McNamara agreed with “the premise” of Symington’s report, he “felt that it was extremely unlikely that the report, or any significant part of it, could be implemented politically.”¹⁶⁰ As a result, he asked that “during at least the early part of my term (i.e., approximately the first year), I would not be obligated to undertake a major reorganization of the Defense Department of the type recommended in the Symington Report.”

A final and implied third condition was his “belief that the Secretary of Defense, in order to succeed, must have the closest possible, personal

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, pp. 17.

¹⁵⁹ “McNamara Defines His Job,” *The New York Times* (April 26, 1964).

¹⁶⁰ OH Interview of Robert McNamara by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OSD OH 1, Box 1:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

working relationship with the President and must receive the President's full backing and support so long as he is carrying out the policies of the President."¹⁶¹ Just as his success at the Ford Foundation rested on his personal loyalty to the Ford family, his efforts to bring military bureaucracies and power under civilian and Presidential control was determined by his loyalty to Kennedy.

The congressional leaders who had pushed through the 1958 Act welcomed the arrival of a Secretary who was prepared to deliver on its promise. Richard Russell, the Chairman of the SASC, applauded McNamara's efforts, saying: "It is gratifying to note that the Secretary is making use of the authority the Congress has vested in him to streamline the Defense Establishment as it has been the position of this committee that the Secretary of Defense needs no additional authority to accomplish desirable changes but need only exercise the authority given him by the Congress. It is hoped that such changes as have been made and other yet to be accomplished will go far to eliminate many of the examples of wasteful duplication and competition between the services which have all too frequently come to the attention of the committee."¹⁶²

In a similar vein, his counterpart in the House, Carl Vinson added, "He's a genius, the best who's ever held the job."¹⁶³ While both Chairmen were Democrats, admittedly southern conservative Democrats, McNamara also provided a measure of protection from Republicans. McNamara, who had been a nominal Republican although he had voted for Kennedy, was widely appreciated by even the most conservative members of the committees, including Barry Goldwater. Republicans were generally satisfied with his skills as a manager and only later became frustrated when he cut into R&D projects

¹⁶¹ McNamara to President elect Kennedy, December 12, 1960, Folder: Secretary of Defense letter of acceptance, 1960, Box II:46, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁶² Chairman Richard Russell, 87th Congress, "Military Construction Authorization FY63" (June 14, 1962) (Senate Committee on Armed Services), pp. 14. Hearing ID: HRG-1962-SAS-0053, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

¹⁶³ Kraar, "Defense Dynamo."

in their constituencies or in ways that they felt could undermined the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Soviets.¹⁶⁴

Looking back on his arrival at the OSD, McNamara remarked that the two most pressing needs that he confronted were to align policy and strategy to force structure and to integrate the different parts of the Department. He recognized that his predecessor, Thomas Gates, had been moving in that direction “but the linkage between foreign policy and the defense budget was totally lacking.”¹⁶⁵ Instead of following the rather more political avenues suggested by Symington, McNamara followed Neustadt’s suggestion in capitalizing on Eisenhower’s reforms and centralizing authority around his office, notably through the budgetary process, as “a substitute for unification of the services and the establishment of a single chief of staff.”¹⁶⁶

As this brief history of the OSD has shown, by the time McNamara entered the Pentagon, the nature of civil-military relations had evolved on two fronts. First, civilians had progressively implemented greater control over their military counterparts in designing policy and strategy. Through various permutations, the power relationship between the JCS and the Secretary of Defense had become clearer and leaned decisively in the OSD’s favor. Second, the defense establishment and its budget had become a central part of the federal government. Yet, the debate about “how much is enough” raged on, especially in determining the exact process by which civilian objectives and service budgets could be reconciled.¹⁶⁷

McNamara’s revolution at the OSD in the 1960s intensified this process on both fronts. In the spring of 1962, McNamara proudly submitted his first budget for FY63, the first budget that demonstrated his transformation of the budgetary process and that showcased his “tearing into” the inefficiencies at the Department of Defense. He could proudly look forward to cost savings in

¹⁶⁴ Joshua E. Klimas, *Balancing Consensus, Consent, and Competence: Richard Russell, the Senate Armed Services Committee & Oversight of America's Defense, 1955-1968* (PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 2007).

¹⁶⁵ OH Interview of Robert McNamara by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OSD OH 1, Box 1:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁶⁶ Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy*, pp. 189.

¹⁶⁷ Enthoven and Smith, *How Much is Enough?*

the coming years. At about the same time, the issue of Vietnam landed on his desk as President Kennedy leaned on his “dynamo” of a Secretary to bring order to another messy challenge for the administration.

Too often, historians have evaluated McNamara’s contributions to Vietnam through diplomatic and military lenses and in binary terms, along neat dove-hawk lines that obscure an arguably more informative lens, namely how Vietnam might have been perceived from the vantage point of his office at a special time in its history. The bureaucratic influences on McNamara worked in contradictory and at times paradoxical ways. However, as this thesis shows, McNamara favored withdrawal and minimizing the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam because, not in spite of, being Secretary of Defense. By mapping how McNamara defined his job, as this thesis does throughout, his policy recommendations on Vietnam begin to make much more sense.

PART I: CIVILIAN CONTROL OF NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY-MAKING

CHAPTER 1. CIVILIAN CONTROL OF POLICY

Since the end of the Second World War, the balance between civilian and military voices in the formulation of national security policy had decisively leaned in favor of the OSD and its civilian authorities. In its early years, military voices dominated the NSC but with the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 and then McNamara's tenure, these voices became increasingly removed from the process of setting national security strategy. McNamara also reduced his own office to one primarily concerned with managing defense agencies and aligning military tools and resources to the President's overarching strategy.

McNamara positioned the office as a pivot for foreign policy in a way that derived from his particular conception of his job as Secretary of Defense and of what he considered to be the appropriate nature of civil-military relations. For him, the Secretary of Defense served the President and the services were there to provide tools and not policy guidance, in the execution of foreign policy. To use Samuel Huntington's labels, McNamara favored "subjective control" in implementing processes and rules that were designed to reinforce civilian authority.

McNamara's changes within the Defense Department came at a time when President Kennedy dismantled the structures of the NSC that his predecessor had built up and relied on for foreign and defense policy. Together with McNamara's personal influence on the President, these changes paved the way for the OSD to become ubiquitous on many foreign policy issues and eventually on Vietnam. Paradoxically, although McNamara's reforms were designed to limit the role of the Defense Department in national

policy formulation, they instead resulted in his office becoming far more influential.

As this part of the thesis explains, in some respects, McNamara was the victim of his own success. He was made responsible for implementing the administration's counterinsurgency agenda in its first major test case, Vietnam. The administration's interest in counterinsurgency provided the intellectual bedrock for the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam (CPSVN). In keeping with McNamara's notions of civilian control of policy-making, the plan was predicated on a strategy coming from civilian advisors primarily at the State Department and he limited his role to aligning military resources to best serve this strategy. He did not comment on the strategy's substance but focused instead on the organizational and military requirements required to meet its objectives. McNamara's priorities for the Department of Defense, and how these dovetailed and complemented the chosen counterinsurgency strategy, are treated in Part II of the thesis.

Implementing the Defense Reorganization Act

McNamara came to office with a reform agenda essentially already laid out for him by his predecessor, Thomas Gates. Above all else, the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 had been concerned with centralizing power over strategy and operations in the hands of the President and his civilian advisers. In time, each of the Act's objectives were, albeit imperfectly, implemented through what became McNamara's landmark reforms. As the Act had anticipated, McNamara and his Deputy, Roswell Gilpatric, centralized authority in their hands in an unprecedented manner.

The Act also called for "integrated policies and procedures" in national security policy. To achieve this objective, McNamara introduced Draft Presidential Memoranda (DPMs) that provided strategic guidance upon which force levels were planned for. Finally, it called economies and efficiency gains. Here, McNamara introduced Systems Analysis and the Planning, Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS) that "rationalized" the budgetary process in a groundbreaking way.

Each of McNamara's reforms was concerned with *aligning* civilian and military objectives. Much like Eisenhower before him, McNamara believed that in order to achieve this alignment, the administration needed a guiding grand strategy and civilian "security intellectuals". The latter could inform defense policy in a way that allowed the Secretary of Defense to "avoid becoming a captive of the Chiefs and the Joint Staff and the Generals" or what McNamara saw as their parochial bureaucratic interests.¹⁶⁸ McNamara acknowledged that while Eisenhower and Secretary Gates had made some progress in producing an overarching strategy, they had failed to produce a detailed strategy that could usefully serve as a basis for defense planning and budgeting.¹⁶⁹

Informed by the Defense Reorganization Act, McNamara also felt that the President should have greater control over the formulation of national security policy to the detriment of military voices. Charles J. Hitch, McNamara's Comptroller and a leading "security intellectual" in his Department, recalled that "Robert S. McNamara made it clear from the beginning that he intended to be the kind of Secretary that President Eisenhower had in mind in 1958."¹⁷⁰ McNamara explained what this "kind of Secretary" was: "I believed, for example, that there must be a definite integration of defense policies and programs with State Department policies. Military strategy must be a derivative of foreign policy. Force structure is a derivative of military strategy. Budgets are a derivative of force structures. So in a very real sense, a defense budget, in all of its detail, is a function of the foreign policy of the nation." McNamara was to be the civilian manager who executed this neat alignment.¹⁷¹

McNamara moved to cut back the Chiefs' power in designing national security policy in part because he sought neat alignment with foreign policy objectives but also because both he, and arguably the Kennedy administration as a whole, lacked respect for the Chiefs who were deemed out

¹⁶⁸ OH Interview No. 1 of Robert McNamara by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OH 1 for OSD, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Roherty, *Decisions of Robert S. McNamara*, pp. 66.

¹⁷¹ Robert S. McNamara OH Interview No. 1 by Walt W. Rostow, January 8, 1975, LBJL.

of step with their times. Many of the administration's senior advisors had also served in some capacity during the war and according to the in-house historian Arthur Schlesinger, "The war experience helped give the New Frontier generation its casual and laconic tone, its grim, puncturing humor and its mistrust of evangelism."¹⁷²

Although McNamara had served under General Curtis LeMay in the U.S. strategic bombing campaign during the war, once he came to office and with the General now Chief of Staff of the Air Force, whatever respect he had had seemed to evaporate. The young Secretary felt that neither of his Generals "got it" and seemed especially irritated with his old boss who needed a hearing aid and did not reflect the tenor of the New Frontier either physically or intellectually.¹⁷³ For his part, the President mirrored this chasm: he always referred to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lyman Lemnitzer as "General" a mark, as one colleague remembered, "that he didn't like him."¹⁷⁴

From almost the start of the administration, the Chiefs' views were not given a central role nor were their intellectual contributions valued. McNamara remembered that, "It never bothered me that I overruled the majority of the Chiefs, or even occasionally the unanimous recommendations of the Chiefs. It didn't bother me in the slightest."¹⁷⁵ McNamara's will to impose his authority and his condescending attitude towards military institutions and leaders drove this attitude. For instance, McNamara refused to speak at military colleges, telling his friends, "These are not worthy academic institutions, and I will not lend my presence to them."¹⁷⁶

Authority and efficiency

From an organizational point of view, McNamara became dominant in the administration and loomed large across the board on Kennedy's foreign policy

¹⁷² Jeffrey G. Barlow, *President John F. Kennedy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff* (PhD dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1981), pp. 110.

¹⁷³ Roswell Gilpatric OH Interview No 1 by Ted Gittinger, November 12, 1982, LBJL.

¹⁷⁴ Carl Kaysen OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph E. O'Connor, July 11, 1966, JFKL.

¹⁷⁵ Robert S. McNamara OH Interview No. 1 by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OH 1 for OSD, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁷⁶ Interview between Brian VanDeMark and Adam Yarmolinsky, April 1, 1993, Folder: Yarmolinsky 1993, Box II:104, RSM Papers, LoC.

but especially on Vietnam for a number of reasons. First and foremost, he centralized authority around his office. Making good on Eisenhower's reforms, the JCS now reported to him rather than directly to the President. In turn, this centralization of authority meant that McNamara could come to the President with one, clear position for his department. Given Kennedy's dismantling of the NSC structures with the result that decision-making in the administration was somewhat chaotic, this clarity gave him enormous power. Finally, his personality and bullishness, if not authoritarianism, coupled with his personal connection to Kennedy gave him an advantage over other actors involved in national security decision-making.

McNamara's changes to the budgetary process that are treated in the second part of this thesis reflected a move to impose "subjective control" over the Chiefs. This ultimately strained relations with congressional leaders as well. One flash point in these deteriorating relations occurred during what came to be called the "muzzling hearings". McNamara's Special Assistant, Adam Yarmolinsky had asked that all public statements made by senior military officials be sent to his office for clearance in order to remove "color words". As McNamara later explained, the administration was "annoyed" that military leaders "were exaggerating the [Communist] threat, treating it as monolithic" whereas the administration did not feel "it should be simplified to the extent of an ideology." He also added, "I wasn't an expert of the Soviet Union but I did recognize that a degree of paranoia existed in certain parts of our Republic."¹⁷⁷

The administration's directive led to a furor in Congress, which accused the OSD of attempting to "muzzle" the military and insidiously suggested that Yarmolinsky was a Communist infiltrator.¹⁷⁸ McNamara, defending his assistant, insisted to the Chairman of the SASC Richard Russell, that while the Chiefs had a right to share their frank opinions with Congress "as provided by the National Security Act", it was the "long-standing policy of the

¹⁷⁷ OH Interview No. 1 of Robert McNamara by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OH 1 for OSD, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁷⁸ McNamara to Taylor, June 11, 1963, Folder: Reading File, June 1963, Box 118, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

Department [that] military and civilian personnel of the Department should not volunteer pronouncements at variance with established policy.”¹⁷⁹

Although these issues, in retrospect, may seem minor or inconsequential, in 1962 they contributed greatly to the souring of relations between McNamara, the services and key members of Congress. Writing in 1963, a columnist noted how quickly McNamara had fallen from grace. Formerly “the greatest thing to come off the Ford assembly line since the Model T”, he was now decried as a “dictator and a bum.”¹⁸⁰ McNamara persevered despite the many headlines – “Kennedy Fights the Generals” read one, for instance – and in spite of a climate of mutual distrust if not hostility.¹⁸¹

Outside of the OSD, Kennedy made a move that further undermined the authority of the Chiefs. After the debacle over the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Kennedy commissioned Maxwell Taylor to produce a report to identify what had gone wrong. Taylor had an impressive background, notably as Superintendent of West Point and as Eisenhower’s Army Chief of Staff. During the Eisenhower years, he had openly criticized the New Look strategy and published two best sellers that had contributed to the intellectual foundations of flexible response. He was widely respected as a soldier-scholar and became very close to both Kennedy brothers.¹⁸² In his final report on the Bay of Pigs, Taylor was especially scathing about the Chiefs. When, Kennedy subsequently kept him on as his personal Military Representative, the Chiefs quietly seethed. The position was unprecedented and effectively went even further in cutting the Chiefs off from the President.

In 1962, Taylor was promoted to become the Chairman of the JCS. On one level, this meant that Kennedy and McNamara had an “agent” within the Chiefs. Taylor explained that he informed McNamara that he “would never take a black snake whip to try to drive unanimity between the Chiefs” but then that, “It was amazing how few splits we had. Why? Because they knew that I

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ James Reston, “On Getting Run Over By a Gravy Train,” *The New York Times* (March 15, 1963).

¹⁸¹ Henry Brandon, “Kennedy Fights the Generals,” *The Sunday Times* (May 27, 1962).; Kraar, “Defense Dynamo”.

¹⁸² Robert Kennedy’s ninth child, born in January 1965, was named Matthew Maxwell Taylor.

was very close to McNamara, that I would never bring a paper that the Secretary wouldn't support. So I had a great advantage versus the Chiefs."¹⁸³ However, Taylor's was perhaps also tactfully pushed out as he began to show his "limits". In the months leading up this "promotion", Taylor had repeatedly taken hawkish stances on a range of issues, notably in suggesting the introduction of troops to Vietnam, leading to suspicions that, in practice, he really was more of a "soldier" than a "scholar".¹⁸⁴

Roswell Gilpatric and International Security Affairs

Two offices within the Defense Department were especially concerned with strategy. These were the Deputy Secretary of Defense's office whose incumbent, Roswell Gilpatric, McNamara described as his "alter-ego" and the Office of International Security Affairs (ISA). A lawyer by training and protégé of former Secretary of Defense Lovett, Gilpatric had a long career in and around the Defense Department, including as Undersecretary of the Air Force and as a member of the Symington Committee. As for ISA, it became a central unit for adapting defense policy to the administration's new thinking: McNamara described it as "one of the two or three most significant posts in the department."¹⁸⁵

ISA was set up in the fall of 1949 to help administer the Mutual Assistance Program. Although the military aid program remained one of its core functions, during the Eisenhower administration, in a reflection of the United States' growing international responsibilities, it grew and became known as the "little State Department" as it was the principal vehicle through which the Department coordinated its policies with other agencies concerned with foreign policy, principally the State Department.¹⁸⁶ Among its new and more visible responsibilities, ISA also oversaw NATO affairs.

¹⁸³ Maxwell Taylor OH Interview by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, October 18, 1983, Folder: In Retrospect, Background and research materials, misc., Box II:95, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁸⁴ Jones, *Death of a Generation*, pp. 114.

¹⁸⁵ Robert McNamara OH Interview 1 by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OH 1 for OSD, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁸⁶ David Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities: Paul Nitze and the Cold War* (New York, NY: Edward Burlingame, 1990), pp. 198-199.

However, the office really came into its own with the Kennedy administration's expanded interest in the developing world and with McNamara's efforts at aligning defense tools to foreign policy. As one Foreign Office report at the time put it: it was "one of the main instruments through which Mr. McNamara has affected his considerable changes in the Pentagon."¹⁸⁷ For McNamara, the Secretary of Defense was "a servant of the foreign policy of the country, and therefore I conceived Dean Rusk as superior to me."¹⁸⁸ This hierarchy was reflected in the budgetary changes with Planning, Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS): the President and Secretary of State established missions and objectives, military strategy derived from this, force structures derived from military strategy and budgets derived from force structures.¹⁸⁹ By definition, this meant that McNamara needed a team within the OSD that could develop security policy independently from military advice. ISA fulfilled this function and became the key unit for the implementation of flexible response and for a very broad set of foreign policy challenges including Vietnam.

At the same time, ISA's growing role in coordinating policy did not necessarily mean that it favored "defense answers" to problems or even that it played a greater part in designing policy. McNamara slammed, and eventually removed, the first head of ISA, Paul Nitze, largely because he tried to fill in the policy void left by Dean Rusk and because he had advocated more aggressive steps during the 1961 Berlin Crisis and again during the 1962 Cuba Missile Crisis. When Nitze overstepped his office's prerogatives, McNamara angrily told him "just keep your sticky fingers out of foreign policy."¹⁹⁰ For McNamara, the head of ISA needed to align with foreign policy objectives set out elsewhere, not set the policy himself. McNamara "handpicked" each of its incumbents who were all men he trusted. They

¹⁸⁷ "Administration Appointments" Ormsby-Gore to FO, May 25, 1962, PREM 11/4574, National Archives, Kew.

¹⁸⁸ Robert McNamara OH Interview 1 by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OH 1 for OSD, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁸⁹ Robert S. McNamara OH Interview by Walt W. Rostow, January 8, 1975, LBJL.

¹⁹⁰ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, pp. 206, 248.

included William Bundy, Paul Warnke and John McNaughton who became one of McNamara's closest friends and a notable "dove" on Vietnam.

Centers of power in the administration

Ultimately, the centralization of authority within the Defense Department had important repercussions for the role of the OSD in national security decision-making and in the administration as a whole. McNamara ran a tight ship and had gathered an impressive group of experts, most of whom reflected the Kennedy administration's ethos. They were "men in the same age bracket as the President", "tough and highly-trained specialists"¹⁹¹ who were impatient and decisive. McNamara described them as the "finest group of associates of any Cabinet member, possibly ever."¹⁹² Collectively, they guaranteed that the Defense Department maintained one stance on all the key issues, however forced the consensus might be.

In the *New York Times* in 1964, McNamara explained how he managed the potentially unruly defense structure: "It goes without saying, perhaps, that once a decision has been made, we all must close ranks and support it."¹⁹³ However authoritarian the process might have been, it meant that McNamara could report to the President with one "defense" position that fit into the President's worldview. In this, he had a marked advantage over the State Department led at the time by the much softer Dean Rusk.

Kennedy may have deliberately chosen a weak Secretary of State hoping to carve out a central role for himself in the articulation of the administration's foreign policy, much like Eisenhower had done with his Secretary of Defense. However, the result was that, unlike the Defense Department, faced with a more improvised national security decision-making style, many junior State Department officials reported directly to the President. Even while this improvised decision-making process guaranteed access for some State Department officials, more often than not, it ensured that the

¹⁹¹ "President Kennedy's Appointments" American Department, Foreign Office to PM, January 26, 1961, PREM 11/4574, National Archives, Kew.

¹⁹² Robert McNamara OH Interview 1 by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OH 1 for OSD, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

¹⁹³ "McNamara Defines His Job," *New York Times* (April 26, 1964).

Defense Department took responsibility for many issues “by default, because neither the State Department nor AID seemed to zero in on the problem.”¹⁹⁴

Kennedy’s decision to replace existing NSC working groups that had dominated decision-making under the Eisenhower administration with *ad hoc* interdepartmental Task Forces designed to address crises, favored the Defense Department. Defense Department staff, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric and Paul Nitze, led the first two task forces on Laos and Cuba respectively.¹⁹⁵

Part of the problem was also that the State Department was historically a “talking department” as opposed to the Defense Department, which was an “operating department”.¹⁹⁶ As Arthur Schlesinger wrote that: “Other departments provided quick answers to presidential questions and quick action on presidential orders. It was a constant puzzle to Kennedy that the State Department remained so formless and impenetrable.” The State Department seemed riddled with “intellectual exhaustion” and seemed always to fall short of Kennedy’s ambition to have it act as an “agent of coordination.”¹⁹⁷

Moreover, the same junior State Department officials that benefited from direct access to President complained that because Rusk did not defend them or a “State” position in NSC meetings, McNamara inevitably overpowered them. One of the staff members observed: “So it went by, with Rusk not taking a strong stand and McNamara interrupting anybody less than the President and the Secretary of State so there wasn’t much I could do.”¹⁹⁸ The implication is that the Defense Department loomed large on national security decisions by the sheer force of McNamara’s personality, which contrasted starkly with Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s more reserved demeanor. Roger Hilsman of the State Department, who played an important role in the Vietnam decisions, sarcastically described one NSC meeting where the Director of the CIA, McCone “got two sentences out and McNamara

¹⁹⁴ Chester L. Cooper OH Interview by Joseph E. O’Connor, June 9, 1966, JFKL.

¹⁹⁵ Arthur M. Jr. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York, NY: Greenwich House, 1983), pp. 421.

¹⁹⁶ Robert A. Lovett OH Interview by Dorothy Foedlick, July 20, 1964, JFKL.

¹⁹⁷ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 407.

¹⁹⁸ Hilsman Notes, May 9, 1962, Folder: May 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

interrupted him because Man Namara had been in that part of the world only 15 hours before he knew more than the CIA by a long shot.”¹⁹⁹

Personal relationships

Kennedy’s more informal arrangements also tended to favor personal rapport. Here too, McNamara was at an advantage. He enjoyed a special relationship with the President who often remarked that McNamara was his “most versatile member of Cabinet.”²⁰⁰ Listening to the Kennedy presidential tapes, McNamara is the only official who ever interrupted the President. According to Robert Kennedy, “it was a more formal relationship than some but President Kennedy liked and admired him more than anybody else in the Cabinet”²⁰¹ while Jacqueline Kennedy recalled that “the McNamaras” were the only couple, aside from “the Dillons” (Secretary of the Treasury Dillon) that the President interacted with socially and added that the President “loved and admired” him.²⁰²

Aside from personal amity, President Kennedy appreciated McNamara’s proven loyalty, a core value in choosing associates for both the Kennedys and McNamara. Kennedy’s associates recall how McNamara fought through Kennedy’s projects as if they were his own: “He’s got his marching order and he doesn’t walk away because he’s being beaten on the head. I’ve never seen a man more willing to take so much abuse, sometimes for a position I know he’s already taken the opposite position for. He continues to be loyal beyond his congressional testimony, even into his most private remarks.”²⁰³ McNamara, explaining how he defined his role, made clear that he found the “concept of higher loyalty [...] heretic, the idea that there’s a duty to serve the nation above the duty to serve the President, and that you’re

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Theodore H. White, “Revolution in the Pentagon,” *Look Magazine* (April 23, 1963).

²⁰¹ Brock Brower, “Robert S. McNamara Interview,” *Life Magazine* (May 10, 1968).

²⁰² Caroline Kennedy and Michael Beschloss, *Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life With John F. Kennedy* (New York, NY: Hyperion Audiobooks, 2011), part 2.

²⁰³ Brock Brower, “Robert S. McNamara Interview,” *Life Magazine* (May 10, 1968).

justified in doing so, will destroy democracy if it's followed. You have to subordinate a part of yourself, a part of your views."²⁰⁴

The concept of loyalty was central to the way that Kennedy managed his administration and that McNamara managed the OSD. The most loyal members of Kennedy's administration, men such as McNamara, were rewarded with the power of proximity to the President in a sometimes unstructured decision-making process. Loyalty provided organizational coherence and order by guaranteeing a unity of purpose: subordinates applied the directives of their bosses. Recalling the atmosphere at the OSD, Daniel Ellsberg described a "feudal concept of loyalty to the king", that loyalty was "the number one value." As McNamara's himself suggested, it was a particular kind of loyalty: to the boss rather than to the country.²⁰⁵

Each of McNamara's policy decisions, and particularly those on Vietnam, need to be understood in the context of his loyalty to the President and not to his office *per se* and with his definition of the job of Secretary of Defense in mind. McNamara came to the issue of Vietnam, as he did with all issues, with his biases and blind spots, and with his particular understanding of what the role of Secretary of Defense should be. He changed the Defense Department to match the foreign policy direction laid out by the White House and in keeping with this, moved towards capabilities for counterinsurgency that played a central role in Vietnam during the Kennedy years.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Dr. Daniel Ellsberg phone interview with author, January 11, 2013.

CHAPTER 2: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Coming off the back of an electoral campaign, each new administration tends to overplay its “break” with its predecessors and to emphasize the aspects that represent change rather than continuity. In few transitions was this truer than when Kennedy replaced Eisenhower: the New Frontier and its youthful President, the first one born in the 20th century, replacing the “old” generation with a new vision for the projection and use of American power in the Cold War.²⁰⁶ Theodore White captured the mood of expectation in describing “an impatient world wait[ing] for miracles” from the new President who “had been able to recognize and distinguish between those great faceless forces that were changing his country and the individuals who influenced those forces. For if it is true that history is moved on by remorseless forces greater than any man, it is nonetheless true that individual men by individual decision can channel, or deftly guide, those impersonal forces either for the good or to disastrous collision.”

However, for all its promise of change, many of the ideas that Kennedy had articulated for foreign policy in an “impatient world” predated his arrival to the Oval Office. Just as the bureaucratic “revolutions” undertaken by McNamara at the OSD fell within a lineage of change, a gradual process of bureaucratic change that preceded his tenure, so too did many of the Kennedy administration’s foreign policy ideas.

Notwithstanding a high degree of continuity and the fact that President Kennedy’s views on national security and defense policy evolved in office, the new administration did have a number philosophical threads that underpinned its defense policy and differed in emphasis from his predecessor. First and foremost, Kennedy set about shifting away from a policy defined by nuclear forces and towards “flexible response”. This was aimed at applying a broader foreign policy view and deploying a number of tools, both military and non-

²⁰⁶ Gaddis speaks vividly about this “break” and its political motives when he writes, “There was somehow the feeling that the promise – and indeed the legitimacy – of a new generation of national leadership would be called into question if its programs were not made to differ visibly and substantially from what had gone before.” Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 197.

military, to allow cross-government, coordinated interventions on a broader spectrum of international situations, especially in the developing world. The administration pledged to experiment with new ways of projecting U.S. power after decades during which the projection of U.S. power in the aftermath of the Second World War had become increasingly defined in military terms.

Kennedy's inaugural address

Too often, historians have focused on the can-do spirit of the inaugural address and ignored the fact that it ended on a measured note, a message to other countries that they had to make sacrifices and share the burdens of protecting their freedom. Contrary to popular belief, the speech was not “bellicose and filled with soaring hubris”²⁰⁷ and when President Kennedy said that “we shall pay any price, bear any burden [...] in order to assure the survival and success of liberty”, the operative *we* was not just the American people but also the people of the world.²⁰⁸ Although he suggested a clear focus on providing aid to the developing world and to the “peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe”, Kennedy also alerted that the administration would “help them help themselves.” Furthermore, while he accepted the logic of nuclear deterrence and mutual assured destruction, Kennedy also warned that both the Soviet Union and the United States were “overburdened by the costs of modern weapons” and threatened by the danger that “science [might] engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.”²⁰⁹

Nevertheless, the address established a revised intellectual framework, new priorities for and a redefinition of international security. As a result, it spurred drastic changes at the OSD as it moved to align defense capabilities

²⁰⁷ Scott Farris, *Kennedy and Reagan: Why Their Legacies Endure* (Gulfport, CT: Lyons Press, 2013), pp. 221.

²⁰⁸ Kennedy later expanded on this idea in his first state of the union address when he said, “Our role is essential and unavoidable in the construction of a sound and expanding economy for the entire non-communist world, helping other nations build the strength to meet their own problems, to satisfy their own aspirations – to surmount their own dangers.” President Kennedy, “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union” (Washington DC, January 30, 1961). Retrieved online December 13, 2014, *The American Presidency Project*: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8045>.

²⁰⁹ President John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address” (speech, Washington, DC, January 20, 1961). Retrieved online on November 2, 2014, *JFKL*: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/BqXIEM9F4024ntFI7SVAjA.aspx>.

to meet the new objectives. Where Vietnam was concerned, this included the Special Group on Counterinsurgency, ISA at the OSD and McNamara's private office. Each played a pre-eminent role in the articulation of Vietnam policy and eventually in the withdrawal plans initiated in the spring of 1962.

If Kennedy was keen for Allies to pick up a greater share of the costs associated with their defense, it was also because he had set in motion a shift away from nuclear power that, in the short term, was inevitably very expensive. Paradoxically, as McNamara's special assistant Adam Yarmolinsky later explained, it was precisely because the budget was expanding for a time that the administration could push through its necessary reforms. Cutting force levels and the budget at the same time was infeasible – it “tend[ed] to freeze attitudes and to heighten-institutional jealousies” – even if, in the longer-term, a significant budget cut was “highly desirable”.²¹⁰

Strategically, two ideas inspired the shift away from Eisenhower's national security policy that was centered on nuclear deterrence. First, although they were reticent to make these ideas public, Kennedy and several of his closest colleagues believed that nuclear weapons and their use were inherently immoral. Second, reflecting the mood of the times, they felt nuclear deterrence, and the Cold War competition more generally, had created conditions where lower-level conflict had become more likely. In response, defense policy was overhauled to respond to a broader set of contingencies and especially situations of low-level, guerrilla-type conflict in newly independent states where the Communist threat seemed on the rise, notably in Laos and Congo. The Defense Department played a key role in coordinating relevant tools across government for these types of conflicts, particularly with the administration's aid program, and in strengthening its own capabilities, including by reinforcing the Army's Special Forces.

²¹⁰ Yarmolinsky, “Civilian Control: New Perspectives for New Problems,” pp. 663.

Moving away from the New Look

From the outset, the administration adopted a moralistic tone about nuclear weapons.²¹¹ In September 1961, building on the rhetoric of his inaugural address, Kennedy addressed the issue of nuclear disarmament at the UN General Assembly, saying that nuclear weapons threatened to turn the “planet into a flaming funeral pyre” and that “weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.”²¹² At other times, when addressing the issue, religious undertones pervaded the speeches. For instance, in his June 1963 American University Commencement address, he argued for a relaxation of the arms race, saying, “For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s futures. And we are all mortal.” Using quasi-biblical language, he implicitly confronted the reluctance of the JCS to begin disarmament talks²¹³, by adding: “Surely this goal is sufficiently important to require our steady pursuit, yielding neither to the temptation to give up the whole effort nor the temptation to give up our insistence on vital and responsible safeguards.”²¹⁴ Privately, Kennedy held even stronger reservations, questioning whether nuclear weapons could ever be useful, if they could ever achieve what were ultimately political objectives.²¹⁵

Similarly, in April 1963, Alain Enthoven, McNamara’s Deputy Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis, a key figure in the formulation of nuclear policy, wrote an article in a Jesuit publication describing how the

²¹¹ Eisenhower too had made similar speeches, see for instance: President Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Atoms for Peace” (speech, United Nations General Assembly, December 8, 1953). Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *Atomic Archive*: <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Deterrence/Atomsforpeace.shtml>

²¹² President John F. Kennedy, “Address to U.N. General Assembly” (speech, United Nations General Assembly, September 25, 1961), Folder: 48, Box 35, POL, JFKL.

²¹³ The JCS principal opposition to the Test Ban Treaty, which banned tests in the atmosphere, in the water and in space, was that verification systems were inadequate to ensure the Soviets did not resume testing. In return, they asked for a number of “safeguards”, including maintaining the existing program on “standby” should the treaty fall apart. “Statement of the Position of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the Three-Environment Nuclear Test Ban Treaty”, August, 12 1963. Retrieved online November 4, 2014, *GWU Online*: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB94/tb64.pdf>.

²¹⁴ John F. Kennedy, Commencement Address at American University, Washington D.C., June 10, 1963, Folder: 2, Box 45, POF JFKL.

²¹⁵ White House Tapes: President Kennedy and Taylor, December 5, 1962. Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *MC website*: <http://whitehousetapes.net/clip/john-kennedy-maxwell-taylor-jfk-and-nuclear-strategy>.

administration's shift in policy fit within the moral codes of the just war tradition. Enthoven wrote: "Now, much more than in the recent past, our use of force is being carefully proportioned to the objectives being sought, and the objectives are being carefully limited to those which at the same time are necessary for our security and which do not pose the kind of unlimited threat to our opponent in the Cold War that would drive them to unleash nuclear war."²¹⁶ In other words, by developing a force structure that would be more flexible, the administration was laying the groundwork for a more proportional and discriminate response to political crises than a posture that relied primarily on nuclear weapons allowed.

McNamara echoed the President's views in his own speeches, but in a way that also reflected the practical steps that his department had undertaken to loosen the United States' reliance on nuclear weapons and his concerns that Allies, especially France, were increasing the likelihood of nuclear escalation by seeking their independent nuclear force. McNamara made two particularly controversial and landmark speeches: one on May 5, 1962 to the NATO Ministerial Meeting in Athens and a distilled version of the same speech the following month in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Both speeches outlined the administration's general approach to nuclear strategy but, whereas the former was classified and only for NATO Defense Ministers, the latter was a public address aimed at "talking to [unresponsive] NATO Allies through the press."²¹⁷

At Ann Arbor, McNamara said, "Surely an Alliance with the wealth, talent, and experience that we possess can find a better way than extreme reliance on nuclear weapons to meet our common threat." At the same time, he reiterated the inaugural address' ideas that the project of U.S. power had to rely on more than military power, let alone nuclear power: he suggested that, "military strength is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the achievement of our foreign policy goals" and added "military security provides a base on which we can build free world strength through the economic

²¹⁶ Alain C. Enthoven, "Reason, Morality and Defense Policy," *America* (April 13, 1963), pp. 494.

²¹⁷ Adam Yarmolinsky OH Interview No. 2 by Daniel Ellsberg, November 28, 1964, JFKL.

advances and political reforms which are the object of the President's programmes, like the Alliance for Progress and the trade expansion legislation."²¹⁸

Moreover, one of the main ideas in McNamara's speeches and in Enthoven's article was that the United States had enough, even perhaps too many, nuclear weapons.²¹⁹ Although the administration, and the JCS in particular, had many reservations about the viability of disarmament talks and the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, McNamara nevertheless argued that it was important "to lay groundwork" and that the administration could "never know [how useful these initial steps would be] in future."²²⁰

Speeches by McNamara and his colleagues were drafted in a way that reflected the delicate nature of the changes within the Defense Department and with an eye towards their inevitable international impact. According to his main speechwriter, "we began each talk of this kind by pointing out our enormous superiority" before moving on to potentially controversial policy changes.²²¹ The primary purpose was not to reassure Allies but the Chiefs. The administration was declaring that in spite of the shift in policy, it would not cut their nuclear arsenal drastically. McNamara's special assistant Yarmolinsky recalled that the Chiefs had framed "the terms of the debate" in such a way that such cuts were impossible.²²²

Overall, as they did with many of McNamara's reforms, the Chiefs lodged wholesale resistance to almost every aspect of the reforms to nuclear

²¹⁸ Robert S. McNamara, "Address at Michigan University" (speech, Ann Arbor, MI, June 18, 1962), PREM 11/3709, National Archives, Kew.

²¹⁹ Although Kennedy's campaign alleged that Eisenhower had allowed a "missile gap" to widen between the United States and the Soviet Union, soon after coming to office, Gilpatric inadvertently made a public statement to the effect that there was none. The upheaval around his passing comment led to a Defense Department appraisal of relevant capabilities that essentially concluded that there never had been a gap and in the longer-term, to the creation of a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) that was designed to cross-check and centralize the services intelligence efforts since the services were the only bodies who held on to the belief a missile gap. "The Missile Gap Controversy", McNamara to President Kennedy, March 3, 1963, Folder: Statement file, Box I:100, RSM Papers, LoC. For his part, according to Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy never believed that there had been a missile gap. Maxwell Taylor OH Interview No. 1 by Elspeth Rostow, April 12, 1964, JFKL.

²²⁰ "Record of a Meeting Held At the White House", April 28, 1962, PREM 11/3648, National Archives, Kew.

²²¹ Adam Yarmolinsky OH Interview No. 2 by Daniel Ellsberg, November 28, 1964, JFKL.

²²² *Ibid.*

strategy. They resisted disarmament talks and the test ban treaty on the basis that they lacked adequate verification systems. More alarmingly, they refused to share their main nuclear contingency plan, the so-called Single Integrated Operational Plan, or SIOPlan 63, with Defense Department staff and even with the President himself, offering only to brief National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy on its contents.²²³ They resisted Defense Department efforts to integrate flexible response thinking into their planning.²²⁴ Even Maxwell Taylor, one of the main thinkers behind flexible response²²⁵, resisted reform once he became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1962. In a taped conversation with President Kennedy in December 1962, he stated, “As you know, in the past I’ve always said, we probably have too much [...] But sir, I would recommend staying with the program essentially as it is.”²²⁶

Responding to “national wars of liberation”

In their speeches, both President Eisenhower and Kennedy had expressed revulsion at the prospect of nuclear war. However, for Kennedy, this required reshaping defense policy and its tools so that the United States could respond to conflicts across the spectrum of violence from the lowest level to nuclear war. The idea that the United States should be prepared for lower level conflict, especially in the developed world, had intellectual precedents not least in the Eisenhower administration itself.²²⁷ Maxwell Taylor, who had been Eisenhower’s Chief of Staff of the Army, had fallen out with the administration over the New Look strategy and provided much of the intellectual foundation for flexible response in his book *The Uncertain Trumpet*.²²⁸ Within the

²²³ Bird, *The Color of Truth*, pp. 209-210.; “SIOPlan 63 Briefing”, Lemnitzer to President Kennedy, September 22, 1962. Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *GWU Online*: <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb236/background%20doc%203.pdf>

²²⁴ JCS to CINCAL et al., May 9, 1961. Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *GWU Online*: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb236/background%20doc%201.pdf>.

²²⁵ Although most of Kennedy’s colleagues, and Maxwell Taylor himself, insisted that Kennedy’s views were developed independently from Taylor, the latter’s book was certainly prescient of the Kennedy’s defense policy thinking. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet*.

²²⁶ White House Tapes: John F. Kennedy and Taylor, December 5, 1962. Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *MC website*: <http://whitehousetapes.net/clip/john-kennedy-maxwell-taylor-jfk-and-nuclear-strategy>.

²²⁷ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 177-178.

²²⁸ Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet*.

Eisenhower administration, others such as Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs C. Douglas Dillon (later Kennedy's Secretary of the Treasury) recalled that, in the last two or three years of the administration, he and his State Department colleagues were "pushing hard" for limited war capabilities. However, he also accepted that an important shift occurred with Kennedy's election where his "minority view" now took center stage as the President himself adopted it.²²⁹

The Kennedy administration was predisposed to take the contingency of U.S. involvement in lower level conflicts seriously but this gained a sense of urgency in January 1961. At that time, Chairman Khrushchev made his landmark "national wars of liberation" speech in which he predicted that local insurgencies in the developing world were more likely in a thermonuclear world and where he stated that Marxists had "a most positive" attitude towards "such uprisings."²³⁰ Khrushchev's speech made a deep impression on the Kennedy administration: one joint State-Defense from December 1961, noted that the administration recognized "changing political conditions around the world, shifts in the nature and probability of threats" and especially the "likelihood of indirect aggression seems much greater during the 1960s than that overt local aggression."²³¹

McNamara, in an address to the National Bar Association in February 1962, described Khrushchev's speech as possibly "the most important statement made by a world leader in the decade of the 60's." In a lengthy analysis of Khrushchev's words, he explained: "What Chairman Khrushchev describes as wars of liberation and popular uprisings, I prefer to describe as subversion and covert aggression. We have learned to recognize the pattern of this attack. It feeds on conditions of poverty and unequal opportunity, and it distorts the legitimate aspirations of people just beginning to realize the reach

²²⁹ C. Douglas Dillon OH Interview No. 5 by Harvey Brazer, September 22, 1964, JFKL, pp. 93.

²³⁰ Radio Free Europe, Background Information USSR, (Munich, January 20, 1961). Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *Open Society Online Archives*.
<http://www.osaarchivum.org/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/58-4-307.shtml>.

²³¹ Report of the Military Assistance Steering Group Report, December 12, 1961, Folder: MAP – Six Countries Studies, December 1961-January 1962, Box 9, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, 1961-67, NARA.

of the human potential. It is particularly dangerous to those nations that have not yet formulated the essential consensus of values, which a free society requires for survival.”²³²

In responding to this threat, Kennedy argued that the United States’ image abroad needed an overhaul and recommended a full set of strategies ranging from appropriate military interventions to well-designed aid and development efforts.²³³ To this end, delivering on a campaign promise, in March 1961 he established the Peace Corps under the leadership of his brother-in-law Sargent Shriver and, in October 1961 under David Bell, “one of his closest associates”²³⁴, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was established. Responding also to congressional criticism, USAID consolidated existing and scattered aid programs to encourage a longer-term and more strategic approach to existing aid efforts. The changes behind the creation of USAID also embodied the administration’s belief that “foreign aid [was] a relatively cheap way of preventing Communist encroachment.”²³⁵

In keeping with these changes, before Congress McNamara argued that “a dollar of economic aid is as important as a dollar of military aid”²³⁶ and behind the scenes, he coordinated the Defense Department’s overseas programs closely with USAID, notably in Vietnam, where their budgets were practically fused. Paradoxically, McNamara’s ability to think of his office within the larger scope of government rather than downwards to the military services and other bureaucratic interests meant that he weighed heavily on a number of relevant government-wide structures.

²³² Robert S. McNamara, “Address to the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation Dinner” (speech, Chicago, IL, February 17, 1962), pp 1.

²³³ “Annual Review 1961” Ormsby-Gore to Home, January 1, 1962, Reel 12: FO 371/162583. FO: the USA, Series One: USA Politics and Diplomacy, Part I: The John F. Kennedy Years, 1960-1963, National Archives, Kew.

²³⁴ “Administration Appointments” Ormsby-Gore, UK Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, December 1, 1961, Reel 12: FO 371/162583, FO: the USA, Series One: USA Politics and Diplomacy, Part I: The John F. Kennedy Years, 1960-1963, National Archives, Kew.

²³⁵ Hella Pick, “President’s Big Guns Defend Foreign Aid,” *The Guardian* (April 9, 1963).

²³⁶ “Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representative”, 88th Congress (April 5, 8, 9 and 10, 1963), Folder: Background and Research Material, Box II:89, RSM Papers.

The Special Group on Counterinsurgency

At the time, one of the most important cross-government office for the administration's stated willingness to respond to "wars of national liberation" was the Special Group (CI). According to National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 124, which set up the Special Group in January 1962, its purpose was: "to ensure proper recognition throughout the U.S. government that subversive insurgency ("war of national liberation") is a form of politico-military conflict equal in importance to conventional warfare" and to insure the "adequacy of resources" and "interdepartmental programs" to "prevent and defeat subversive insurgency."²³⁷

To this end, the group included a number of military, OSD, NSC and State Department representatives, the Director of the CIA and the Director of AID.²³⁸ Maxwell Taylor, first as the President's Military Representative and then as Chairman of the JCS, together with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, headed the group. Although, from a bureaucratic perspective, the Attorney General was an unusual choice for this role, his selection was designed to send a strong signal that the President was the "driving force behind this effort."²³⁹ Roswell Gilpatric, who usually represented the Defense Department on the Special Group (as it was not McNamara's "dish of tea") remembered that, "You know, [Kennedy had] read some Marine magazine about Green Beret type of activity, and he felt that when you got away from strictly conventional military or intelligence of State Department activities, there wasn't any well-coordinated, cohesive direction. And that's when, I think he told his brother he wanted to get him into this thing."²⁴⁰

At any one time, the Group oversaw efforts in a dozen or so countries spread across Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.²⁴¹ Asia had always been its first focus: Thailand, Laos and Vietnam had been founding

²³⁷ NSAM No. 124, January 18, 1962, Folder: Special Group (CI) - 4/6/61-6/7/62, Box 319, NSF, M&M Series, JFKL.

²³⁸ McGeorge Bundy to President Kennedy, January 2, 1962, Folder: Special Group (CI) - 4/6/61-6/7/62, Box 319, NSF, M&M Series, JFKL.

²³⁹ Paul Nitze OH Interview by Dorothy Fosdick, July 7, 1964, Folder: 6, Box 118, Nitze Papers, LoC.

²⁴⁰ Roswell Gilpatric OH Interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, May 27, 1970, JFKL.

²⁴¹ Parrott to President Kennedy, March 22, 1962. JFKL: NSF, M&M Series, Box 319.

countries in its portfolio although Latin America superseded them by 1963.²⁴² For each of these countries, the Group prepared quarterly Internal Defense Plans: the plans were a kind of progress report on each country's efforts to suppress domestic insurgencies or unrest. The group reviewed and assessed the work of relevant U.S. agencies' work in each of the countries, usually AID, United States Information Agency (USIA) and civic action programs, which included efforts at building up local military and policing capabilities. Although the most visible aspects of the group's work were on military and paramilitary capabilities, its focus was primarily on civic action programs. Civic action was a murkier aspect of U.S. foreign policy and had been "regarded as marginal"²⁴³ within government before the Kennedy administration. It involved projects on the boundaries of the different agencies.

The Special Group was particularly active throughout 1962 but by January 1963, after Taylor's move to the JCS,²⁴⁴ it seemed to fall into disuse, much to the chagrin of Robert Kennedy who complained that "there are a lot of things that could be done under the proper auspices" whereas "our present CI operation is most unsatisfactory."²⁴⁵ His colleagues were even more pointed in their criticism and bemoaned that the State Department could not pick up Taylor's role. One wrote: "I assume that the Department of State is still not ready (I am not prepared to say unable) to assume this leadership role."²⁴⁶

Robert Komer, the NSC's representative to the Group²⁴⁷, was slightly more positive in his assessment and felt it "performed a real service in

²⁴² Recent scholarship has been critical of Kennedy's policies towards Latin American and of the Special Group's efforts there. Specifically, the criticism is that despite the rhetoric of economic and political progress, efforts in Latin America favored military groups that would continue to be a source of instability in the region, and hold it back economically. Stephen G. Rabe. *Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

²⁴³ Komer to Special Group (CI), April 10, 1962. JFKL: Newman Papers, Research Materials: Box 8.

²⁴⁴ Thomas David Jr. to Attorney General Kennedy, January 7, 1963, Folder: Special Group (CI) - 4/6/61-6/7/62, Box 319, NSF, M&M Series, JFKL..

²⁴⁵ Robert Kennedy to McGeorge Bundy, March 13, 1963, Folder: March 1963 11-15, Box 11, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

²⁴⁶ David to Robert Kennedy, January 7, 1963, Folder: Special Group (CI), 7/62-11/63, Box 319, NSF Files, M&M Series, JFKL.

²⁴⁷ Robert Komer would later become rather infamous as Director of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program (CORDS) in South Vietnam under President Johnson (earning the nickname "Blowtorch Bob") during which time he also oversaw the

pushing, needling, prodding and coordinating” counterinsurgency efforts across the administration.²⁴⁸ Yet by July 1962, he too became frustrated at the State Department’s lack of leadership: “A case could be made that [the Special Group] has already performed its main service, i.e. to get the town moving on CI in the way JFK wants. But I fear that if we scratch the Group now everything will sink back into the usual bureaucratic rut. State, which should be monitoring the CI show, is simply not set up to do it.”²⁴⁹

Counterinsurgency at the Defense Department

The Kennedy administration’s counterinsurgency agenda had important budgetary and bureaucratic repercussions for the Defense Department and aggravated its strained relationship with the services. Marine Corps General Victor Krulak had the frustrating task of overseeing the services’ progress on building counterinsurgency expertise and capabilities and in adjusting their doctrines. They reported to Krulak who was based out of the JCS Staff and he, in turn, reported to McNamara and occasionally to the President directly. He also participated in the Special Group CI, sometimes also sitting in for General Taylor or Gilpatric. Later he recalled that most of the time, despite impressive statistics and a service-wide *Joint Counterinsurgency Doctrine*, progress was “more volume than value” and “mostly they weren’t doing much.”²⁵⁰ The services resented yet another OSD-led reform agenda yet were compelled to go along given the administration’s public commitment to counterinsurgency.

Most senior military officials dismissed these efforts as “faddishness” and felt that they were more than prepared to respond to any contingency.²⁵¹

controversial Phoenix Program. The latter has received renewed attention in the U.S. as counterinsurgency has regained prominence, see for instance: Steven J. Weidman, *Resurrecting Phoenix: Lessons in COIN Operations* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2006). Retrieved online on November 2, 2014: <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA463728>; John Prados, “Phoenix and the Drones,” *Passport* 43:3 (January 2013).

²⁴⁸ Komer to Special Group (CI), April 10, 1962, Folder: April 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

²⁴⁹ Komer to McGeorge Bundy, July 23, 1962, Folder: Special Group (CI) Meetings, 6/8/62-11/2/62, Box 319, NSF Files, M&M Series, JFKL.

²⁵⁰ Victor H. Krulak OH Interview by William W. Moss, November 19, 1970, JFKL.

²⁵¹ On this, see also: Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, pp. 259.

In part, as far as the Navy and Air Force were concerned, resistance was also rooted in suspicions that the administration's interest in counterinsurgency was essentially designed to strengthen the Army, who itself had initially resisted involvement in counterinsurgency operations.²⁵² If Eisenhower's New Look had favored the Air Force and to a lesser extent the Navy budget, it was clear that flexible response favored the Army. Both services regularly bemoaned the "Army bias" of the administration, particularly since the arrival of Maxwell Taylor, and were puzzled by the administration's fascination with the Special Forces.

In many ways, this early period of the Kennedy administration's involvement in Vietnam was a "coming of age" period for the Special Forces. Although, the Special Forces had been activated in 1952 at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, they were largely dismissed as an esoteric bunch until Kennedy came to power. Their numbers almost tripled, from 1,810 in 1961 to 4,714 in 1963²⁵³, and the administration's first budget specifically foresaw "a substantial contribution in the form of forces trained" for guerilla warfare.²⁵⁴

In addition, the administration maintained a high level of publicity around the Special Forces. Joe Alsop, an administration insider, writing just weeks after Kennedy's inauguration, described an NSC meeting where Kennedy praised the Special Forces as "equal to the nuclear deterrent."²⁵⁵ Both Kennedy brothers went out of their way to raise the profile of the Special Forces: President Kennedy decreed that they be given their iconic green berets as a "symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction"²⁵⁶ and Robert Kennedy famously kept a green beret on his desk.

²⁵² Christopher K. Ives, *U.S. Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-1963* (London, UK: Routledge, 2007), pp. 64-72.

²⁵³ "Summary of Military CI Progress Including Civic Action Since 27 December 1962", JCS to Special Group (Ci), June 25, 1963, Folder: June 1963, Box 3, RG59, Records of the Special Group (CI), NARA.

²⁵⁴ Report to the President on FY1962 Budget by Secretary McNamara, February 20, 1961, Folder: FY1962 Budget, Box 10, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, 1961-67, NARA.

²⁵⁵ Joseph Alsop, "The President's New Design," *The Guardian* (February 5, 1961).

²⁵⁶ President Kennedy to US Army, April 11, 1962. Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *JFKL website*: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Green-Berets.aspx>.

In his address to the National Bar Association in February 1962, McNamara singled out the Special Forces, though not by name, as a key tool to deal with “wars of national liberation”, which he described as “often not wars at all.” He warned that dealing with these types of situations “requires some shift in our military thinking” and that the Defense Department was “used to developing big weapons and large forces” whereas it now needed to train “fighters who can, in turn, teach the people of free nations to fight for their freedom.”²⁵⁷

In a speech delivered at the Special Forces training school in Fort Bragg that was initially intended for McNamara, his assistant Yarmolinsky explained how the Special Forces fit into flexible response and the need to have forces “across the full spectrum” of conflicts. He explained their special value in the face of guerrilla warfare and subversion where they had “taken on an importance that was virtually undreamed of only a decade ago.” Significantly, one line was removed from his speech at the last minute that might have had special resonance with Vietnam: “We have no desire to, and few countries would want us to, send large scale American troops to their nations to deal with problems of terrorism and subversion and guerrilla warfare. Nothing could be more inappropriate.”²⁵⁸

Also, in private, Yarmolinsky, who as a leading member of Kennedy’s presidential campaign had been instrumental in creating the idea of the “New Frontier” went further and explained how “these people are properly New Frontiersmen as much as any Peace Corps volunteer or AID mission member. In a world where force is still necessary, they can make the necessary use of force both understand and justifiable to the uncommitted people of the world.”²⁵⁹ Thomas Hughes, who became Director of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) in 1963 and worked closely on Vietnam, also saw the Special Forces as a preeminent symbol of the New

²⁵⁷ Robert S. McNamara, “Address to the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation Dinner” (speech, Chicago, IL, February 17, 1962).

²⁵⁸ Adam Yarmolinsky, “Remarks at the Commencement Exercises” (speech, US Army Special Warfare School, Fort Bragg, NC, July 3, 1963), Folder: Speeches 1963, Box 66, Yarmolinsky Papers, JFKL.

²⁵⁹ Yarmolinsky to Vance, July 13, 1962, Folder: July 1962, Box 11, Yarmolinsky Papers, JFKL.

Frontier and Vietnam as their first project: “A new breed of Americans, right out of Kennedy’s inaugural address, was being tested in Vietnam.”²⁶⁰

From a bureaucratic perspective, the Special Forces also fit tidily into the types of cross-government work that the administration wanted to experiment with and from an economic perspective, with a more cost-efficient strategy whereby the United States could rely on airlift capabilities and rapid reaction forces instead of forward positioning to deal with crisis situations across the world. Yarmolinsky explained how “not numbers but quality” mattered most and that the Special Forces showed how a “relatively small body of superbly capable and superbly trained men can provide, and I am sure will provide, an enormous contribution.”²⁶¹ In addition, capabilities such as the Special Forces held a distinct appeal because they were so adaptable, had a much lighter logistic and support base and because the Defense Department did not have to finance them entirely.

The Special Forces in Vietnam represented the type of bureaucratic innovations that the Kennedy administration sought through its Special Group (CI). The Special Forces were deployed under CIA command and ran projects in remote villages where ethnic minorities lived, notably the Montagnard communities. The latter were discriminated against in Vietnamese society and were therefore reluctant to embrace either the Diem regime in Saigon or the North Vietnamese communists. Working with other agencies in Vietnam, the Special Forces’ work combined seemingly anodyne activities such as running clinics and offering job training with psychological and propaganda operations as well as programs to arm and train local militias. As one CIA history explained “they were more than soldiers; they were, in a way, community developers in uniform.”²⁶² From a bureaucratic perspective, the most

²⁶⁰ Thomas L. Hughes Interview by Charles Kennedy, July 7, 1999, *Frontline Diplomacy: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*. Retrieved online November 2, 2014: <http://www.loc.gov/item/mfdipbib001565/>.

²⁶¹ Adam Yarmolinsky, “Remarks at the Commencement Exercises” (speech, US Army Special Warfare School, Fort Bragg, NC, July 3, 1963), Folder: Speeches 1963, Box 66, Yarmolinsky Papers, JFKL.

²⁶² For a more detailed study of Special Forces’ actions in Vietnam during this time, the CIA has recently declassified a number of reports, including: Thomas Jr. Ahern, *CIA and Rural*

interesting aspect of these activities is that the executive authority over the Special Forces and civic action programs was not with the Army but with the CIA, in coordination with the ubiquitous ISA.²⁶³

Pacification in South Vietnam. Retrieved online November 2, 2014: foia.cia.gov.; Francis J. Kelly, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army CMH Publication 90-24, 1989).

²⁶³ Memorandum for the Record, Meeting of the Special Warfare Coordinating Group (Focal Point), May 4, 1962, Folder: May 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

CHAPTER 3: TAKING CHARGE OF VIETNAM POLICY

Vietnam seemed a perfect place for the Kennedy administration to “take a stand” and test out its abilities to wage limited wars in the developing world. As General Taylor enthusiastically wrote, “A victory for us would prove that our people can live in the village with Asians and help them. That underdeveloped nations can defeat “wars of liberation” with our help, strike a telling blow to the mystique of the “wave of the future.””²⁶⁴ Many historians remember the Kennedy administration’s involvement in Vietnam against this militant and hopeful backdrop. They have depicted a linear and uninterrupted upward trajectory toward a deepening United States’ commitment and increasing number of troops that culminated in the full-scale “American War” in Vietnam. However, the trends in increasing troop numbers belie the fact that a period of planning for withdrawal in 1962-1963 punctuated this otherwise steady trajectory and that McNamara was the leading force behind those plans.

In the spring of 1962, after months of disorder in the field and in Washington, the Defense Department “zeroed in” on Vietnam policy as it had already done on many of the administration’s most complex problems. Although this initially seemed to presage a deeper and more militarized presence in Vietnam, the administration instead turned to a policy of disengagement. In July 1962, McNamara formally instructed the JCS to draft what became known as the CPSVN, which posited as its goal a relatively swift U.S. withdrawal by 1965. As the CPSVN emerged as the most effective tool for a general “winding down”²⁶⁵ of the in-country presence and became embedded in the OSD’s budgetary calendar, it created a momentum and imperatives of its own.

²⁶⁴ “Developments in Viet-Nam Between General Taylor’s Visits: Oct 1961- Oct 1962”, Brubeck to McGeorge Bundy, October 8, 1962, Folder: October 1962 1-10, Box 9, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

²⁶⁵ Tape 85, May 7, 1963, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

In some ways, the story of the withdrawal plans begins where it ends, namely in the October 1963 meetings when, following General Maxwell D. Taylor and McNamara's trip to Vietnam, a series of NSC meetings produced a public and administration-wide policy of disengagement from Vietnam. The transcripts of the October NSC meetings reveal the motivations of the various decision-makers. Together with McNamara's trip notes, the transcripts also shed particular light on his role in pushing for withdrawal. They are the focal point for much of the following chapters.

McNamara's understanding of where the Defense Department stood in relation to other agencies in government – namely as an implementing rather than a policy-setting office – together with his own short-term bureaucratic priorities, explain his support for withdrawal. His approach was more mechanistic than visionary: he implemented rather than articulated strategy and was more concerned with the economic and budgetary issues treated in the second part of this thesis than any grand strategy *per se*. Yet historians have largely ignored the period perhaps because its existence fits poorly with the conventional view of McNamara as one of the most prominent and explicitly hawkish architects of the war.

Roger Hilsman, a former colleague and main strategist for Vietnam in the State Department, perhaps overstated McNamara's intelligence, but not his forcefulness in describing how McNamara had the "imagination to push views even farther down the line of their logical development, and [...] the will for strong leadership."²⁶⁶ In the months leading up to McNamara's instructions to the JCS to draft the withdrawal plans, he received a number of overlapping views on Vietnam from Kennedy and his counterinsurgency advisors. Specifically, the advisors felt that U.S. policy in Vietnam had become excessively reliant on military force.

²⁶⁶ Roger Hilsman, *The Politics of Policy Making in Defense and Foreign Affairs* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 166-167.

President Kennedy or McNamara's withdrawal plans?

Historians have long debated “Kennedy’s withdrawal plans”; when they accept that these plans were more than contingency plans or a public relations stunt, they tend to assume the plans flowed from President Kennedy’s vision. John Newman, for instance, has written about secret understandings and meetings where President Kennedy instructed McNamara to begin plans to withdraw after he realized that military advisors in the field had deceived him.²⁶⁷

However, when asked about this, McNamara said he had “absolutely no recollection of any such conversation” and insisted that *he* initiated the planning rather than the President.²⁶⁸ Ultimately, the decisions to move towards a policy of disengagement on Vietnam were largely above board and fit neatly with McNamara’s own bureaucratic priorities at the OSD.

Also, just as the war itself later came to be known as “McNamara’s war”, the withdrawal plans were also closely associated with McNamara. In Washington, in 1963, they were known as “his” plans. Furthermore, just as President Johnson played a key role in the branding of the war as “McNamara’s”, and to some extent hide behind his Secretary of Defense, Kennedy too let McNamara become the public face for plans with which he was at least complicit.

During the crucial October 2-3 1963 meetings where McNamara and Taylor’s report from Vietnam was discussed and after which his disengagement plans were publicized and agreed upon as administration policy, President Kennedy asked McNamara a number of probing questions as if he was discovering the material for the first time. However, they had met alone for two hours on the morning of October 2, 1963 upon McNamara’s return from Vietnam to review the draft report.²⁶⁹ After meeting with the President, McNamara had spent about two hours with William Bundy, finalizing the report in time for the NSC meeting in the late afternoon. Given the importance of “loyalty” in McNamara’s understanding of his job, he would

²⁶⁷ Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, Chapter 16.

²⁶⁸ Robert S. McNamara interview by Brian VanDeMark for *In Retrospect*, December 7, 1963, Folder: Interview McNamara, 7/12/93, Box II:100, RSM Papers, LoC.

²⁶⁹ Secretary's calendar 1963, Folder: Calendar 1963, Box II:67, RSM Papers, LoC.

most likely not have supported such a high-profile policy if it did not have Presidential approval.

Also, and here historians with a more suspicious bent have found fodder for their arguments, it was not unlike McNamara to change the policy he defended after meeting with the President, arguing the exact opposite of what he privately or at least initially supported. McNamara might have shifted from being relatively aggressive on Vietnam to being the leading advocate for disengagement because he wanted to loyally represent the President's secret views. However, his own priorities at the OSD and the fact that, until 1962, he and many in the administration had not really given Vietnam full attention, also explain his change.

The United States' commitment to Vietnam

Although Kennedy had created a Task Force on Vietnam in his first month in office²⁷⁰, the administration only really turned its attention there in the spring of 1961. Before then, the administration's main focus in Southeast Asia had been Laos, a candidate for military intervention until Kennedy settled on negotiations and eventually neutralization. However, both Kennedy and McNamara rejected the idea forcefully put forward by French President Charles de Gaulle and later by Senator Mike Mansfield, that Vietnam should be neutralized as well.

With Vietnam coming to the fore, in May 1961, Kennedy dispatched his Vice President to reassure South Vietnamese Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem and assess the regime's ability to withstand a burgeoning Communist insurgency. Upon his return, Johnson expressed alarm at the situation but applauded Diem's leadership qualities and proposed that with greater U.S. support, he could provide a "pole of attraction for the countries of Southeast Asia."²⁷¹ Kennedy greeted Johnson's suggestion that intervention was needed "with a great deal of impatience" even while he expanded assistance to

²⁷⁰ Roswell Gilpatric also led this Task Force, which included Edward Lansdale, the former OSS operative in Vietnam who was also a friend of South Vietnamese Prime Minister Diem's.

²⁷¹ Exchange of letters between Presidents Diem and Kennedy, May 15, 1961 and June 9, 1961, Folder: 2 Vietnam Security, 1961, Box 128a, POF, JFKL.

Vietnam.²⁷² At the time, McNamara erred on the side of robust support and explained to the House of Representative's Committee on Foreign Affairs, "You ask how much effort should we put in to stem the flow and march of Communism in that area and I would reply whatever effort is required."²⁷³

To some extent, McNamara's strong statements were a product of the administration's lack of strategy for Vietnam. The Vietnam problem had not preoccupied the administration and so it had chosen instead to follow the "path of least immediate resistance", namely to continue to define the conflict in Vietnam in terms it had inherited from Eisenhower.²⁷⁴ The commitment to Ngo Dinh Diem and South Vietnam's independence went unquestioned and, as Eisenhower had described in his landmark "domino theory" speech, the conflict there was defined principally as one of Communist aggression.²⁷⁵

However, even as U.S. assistance expanded, the situation on the ground continued to deteriorate. Within the administration, a consensus was emerging that the Defense Department should prepare for a more active military role for the United States. In this context, in November 1961, Kennedy sent two more advisors to Vietnam: Maxwell Taylor, who was still the President's military advisor then and Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy's Deputy at the NSC and a noted economist and modernization theorist. Kennedy's instructions for them reflected the administration's ambivalence over Vietnam: on the one hand, he asked them to consider "how we organize the execution of this program" while also asking "is the U.S. commitment to prevent the fall of South Vietnam to Communism a public act or an internal policy decision of the U.S. Government?"²⁷⁶ In other words, the trip's objective was two-fold: to ascertain whether the administration should commit itself to the fate of South

²⁷² Roswell Gilpatric OH Interview No. 1 by Dennis J. O'Brien, May 5, 1970, JFKL.

²⁷³ Robert McNamara, "Hearings on the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives", 87th Congress (1st Session, June 7-8 1961), Folder: Background and Research Material, Chapter 2, Box II:89, RSM Papers, LoC.

²⁷⁴ For more information on the commitment that the Kennedy administration had inherited, see especially: Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013), pp. 710.

²⁷⁵ Edward Cuddy, "Vietnam: Mr. Johnson's War – Or Mr. Eisenhower's?," *The Review of Politics* 65:4 (September 2003), pp. 355.

²⁷⁶ President's Questions for the Meeting on South Viet Nam, November 11, 1961, Folder: 2 Vietnam Security, 1961, Box 128a, POF, JFKL.

Vietnam and separately, what it could do in either scenario to improve the situation on the ground.

From the outset, Kennedy and Sorensen expressed reservations over a stronger military role. Sorensen wrote that “we need to think” before sending combat troops including “whether US troops can accomplish much more in the mud and the mountains than Vietnamese troops (who could be better trained, supported and directed.”²⁷⁷ Similarly, Taylor noted that Kennedy’s instructions were that he “should bear in mind that the initial responsibility of the effective maintenance of the independence of South Vietnam rested with the people and the government of that country. This was not something that the United States should take over and deal with unilaterally.”²⁷⁸

Despite this note of caution, Taylor and Rostow returned from Vietnam with a host of recommendations for improving and expanding the assistance program, including replacing Ambassador Frederick Nolting with someone “like [Averell] Harriman”, expanding the defoliation program, deploying more air support and crucially, introducing troops using the cover of floods that had been battering the country.²⁷⁹ The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Vietnam and the Commander in Chief in the Pacific (CINCPAC) had first suggested the floods as “excellent opportunity to minimize adverse publicity” for introducing troops.²⁸⁰ At the same time, knowing the President’s reservations, Taylor reassured Kennedy that the “this force is not proposed to clear the jungles and forests of VC guerrilla. That should be the primary task of the armed forces of Vietnam from which they should be specifically organized, trained and stiffened with ample advisors down to the battalion level.”²⁸¹

²⁷⁷ Notes on combat troops in Vietnam, Theodore Sorensen, November 3, 1961, Folder: Vietnam 5/9/61-10/1/63, Box 55, Sorensen Papers, Subject Files 1961-64, JFKL.

²⁷⁸ Maxwell Taylor OH Interview No. 1 by Elspeth Rostow, April 12, 1964, JFKL.; State Department Report to President Kennedy, November 3, 1961, Folder: 2 Vietnam Security, 1961, Box 128a, POF, JFKL.

²⁷⁹ Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow Report: Vietnam, Subjects, Summaries and Suggested Courses of Action, Folder: Rostow/Taylor Report, Box 203, NSF, Country Series, Vietnam, JFKL.

²⁸⁰ CINCPAC to Secretary of State, October 25, 1961, Folder: Taylor Trip, Vietnam – 10/12/61-10/19/61, Box 251a, NSF, Regional Security Series, JFKL.

²⁸¹ Taylor to President Kennedy, November 1, 1961, Folder: Taylor Trip, Vietnam – 10/12/61-10/19/61c, Box 251a, NSF, Regional Security Series, JFKL.

Although McGeorge Bundy had warned Taylor not to share his views publicly, “especially those relating to US forces”²⁸², he and others in administration welcomed them. Bundy himself told the President, “I believe we should commit limited U.S. combat units, if necessary for military purposes (not for morale) to help South Vietnam” and agreed with Rusk and McNamara that a “military man” rather than a civilian Ambassador should be put in charge of the country team.²⁸³ The State Department agreed: Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson wrote that the government should “take the decision to commit ourselves to the objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam” knowing that the introduction of “US and other SEATO forces may be necessary to achieve that objective.”²⁸⁴

Crucially, McNamara initially supported the conclusions of the report and suggested that the administration should send a “strong signal to the other side”, even if introducing troops threatened to create greater commitments down the road. He even estimated that this could balloon into as many as 205,000 troops.²⁸⁵ However, by November 11, he made a revealing *volte face* and instead agreed with the President that troops should only be a last resort.²⁸⁶ Where some see a “vacillation”²⁸⁷ on McNamara’s part, it is more likely, as the *Pentagon Papers* have suggested, that presidential instructions or nudging explain his change of opinion, with McNamara turning around to loyally defend the President’s view or at least a view Kennedy wanted represented within the bureaucracy.²⁸⁸ Nitze’s notes from the meeting where the Taylor report was discussed are informative. In

²⁸² McGeorge Bundy to Taylor, October 28, 1961, Folder: Taylor Trip, Vietnam – 10/12/61-10/19/61c, Box 251a, NSF, Regional Security Series, JFKL.

²⁸³ McGeorge Bundy to President Kennedy, November 15, 1961, Folder: Vietnam 5/9/61-10/1/63, Box 55, Sorensen Papers, Subject Files 1961-64, JFKL.

²⁸⁴ U. Alexis Johnson to McGeorge Bundy, November 11, 1961, Folder: 2 Vietnam Security, 1961, Box 128a, POF, JFKL.

²⁸⁵ McNamara to President Kennedy, November 9, 1961, Folder: Background and Research Materials, Chapter 2, Box II:89, RSM Papers, LoC.

²⁸⁶ Notes of a meeting, The White House, November 11, 1961, *FRUS, Vietnam 1961*, Vol. 1., Doc. 236.

²⁸⁷ Preston, *The War Council*, pp. 96.

²⁸⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.B.1, pp. 9, 31.

his notes, Nitze wrote that Kennedy commented, “Don’t say we commit. Don’t want to put troops in.”²⁸⁹

Defense Department leadership

In the months that followed, and as he assumed a leadership role on Vietnam policy, McNamara came to push this view more aggressively throughout the bureaucracy. By December 1961, he was redacting Kennedy’s letters to Diem, including by removing a key line that “the needs of your embattled nation will be met”; no such open-ended commitment was provided for the remainder for the Kennedy administration.²⁹⁰

As he did within the OSD, McNamara took charge by also changing organizational structures and the people that staffed them. Some of the staff changes were under his control; others part of a broader administration reshuffle. Two advisors were sidelined because they were considered to be too close to the Diem regime and associated to past, failing policies. The first was Edward Lansdale, a former OSS officer in Vietnam and friend of Diem’s who had been active on the Task Force for Vietnam. He was also eclipsed because McNamara “did not like him.”²⁹¹ The second was Ambassador Nolting who was sidelined before Henry Cabot Lodge eventually replaced him in 1963.²⁹² Lodge had been Kennedy’s political opponent for the Massachusetts Senate seat in 1952 and again as Vice Presidential candidate on the Nixon ticket in 1960. Although the administration insisted that Lodge’s

²⁸⁹ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, pp. 180. Also, many of Kennedy’s aides remember that Kennedy would cite General MacArthur’s warnings against a land war in Southeast Asia and that “whenever he’d get this military advice from the Joint Chiefs [...] he’d say ‘Well, now, you gentlemen, you go back and convince General MacArthur, then I’ll be convinced.’” Arthur M. Jr. Schlesinger, “What Would He Have Done?,” *The New York Times* (March 29, 1992).; Though he approved a substantial escalation in training and advisers, he never seemed to have detracted from his view that the U.S. should not apply direct force, that this would “return the situation in Vietnam to that which existed when the French were fighting a colonial war there.” Memorandum of Conference With the President, September 11, 1963, Folder: meetings on Vietnam, 9/11/63-9/12/63, Box 316, NSF, M&M Series, JFKL.

²⁹⁰ Draft Letter from President Kennedy to President Diem, December 1961, Folder: Vietnam, General, 12/11/61-12/13/61, Box 195a, NSF, JFKL.

²⁹¹ Roswell Gilpatric OH Interview by Dennis J. O’Brien, May 5, 1970, JFKL.

²⁹² On Nolting’s isolation, see also: Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy’s Ambassador to Diem’s Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1988).; Interview of Frederick Nolting, April 30, 1981. Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *Open Vault Archives*: <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/vietnam-454634-interview-with-frederick-nolting-1981>.

choice did “not have political significance” or that Rusk alone had made the decision, this seems unlikely.²⁹³ Instead, McGeorge Bundy’s notes from a later meeting when problems in Vietnam became particularly acute suggest that he was always seen as providing useful political cover against Republican criticism: “put in on Lodge” Bundy wrote and underlined several times.²⁹⁴

Also, in November 1961, with what historians have called the “Thanksgiving Massacre”, key hawks were removed from positions of influence on Vietnam as the administration moved to “bring more people who understand the Kennedy policies and believe in them.”²⁹⁵ Walt Rostow, the Deputy National Security Adviser, who had sparked a governmental debate by suggesting the introduction of ground troops to Vietnam, became head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Council.²⁹⁶ At the CIA, John McCone replaced Allen Dulles and immediately worked on improving cooperation with the OSD. Averell Harriman, who as Ambassador at Large had overseen negotiations on Laos, became Assistant Secretary for the Far East. Arthur Schlesinger later described how the notoriously overpowering and impatient Harriman “gave Far Eastern policy a coherence and force it had not had for

²⁹³ Roger Hilsman insisted that the choice was apolitical and that Lodge had been chosen for objective reasons. His Memcon of a conversation with a journalist reads: “As a matter of fact, if you are going to play that game, you would pick a liberal like Chet Bowles.” Mr. Hilsman said that Mr. Lodge is bilingual in French; he has been interested in Vietnam. He is a Major General in the Army Reserve. Last year when he took his two weeks’ active duty he was in the Pentagon studying Vietnam and the tactics, and was fascinated with the place.” (Memorandum of Telecon between Mr. Bob Donovan of Herald Tribune and Mr. Hilsman, June 27, 1963, Folder: Chronological Files 6/63, Box 6, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.) Later, Kennedy’s friends and advisors David Powers and Kenneth O’Donnell suggested the President was “astonished along with rest of the Boston Irishmen on the White House staff” by Rusk’s choice but that he nonetheless approved “because the idea of getting Lodge mixed up in such a hell of a mess as the one in Vietnam was irresistible.” Early drafts of *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye*, Folder: Chapter 1, Box 12, O’Donnell Papers, JFKL.

²⁹⁴ The notes were in respect of a discussion over what to do if the coup against Diem failed. Notes from a Meeting, August 28, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, General, 11/3/63-11/5/63, CIA Reports, Box 201, NSF, Countries Series, Vietnam, JFKL.

²⁹⁵ Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 442.

²⁹⁶ There is some debate about whether Rostow’s removal was a demotion as John Newman suggests are instead a promotion to something better fitted to his background as an economic historian, as Andrew Preston suggests. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, pp. 140-141.; Preston, *The War Council*, pp. 62.

years [and] rapidly became the particular champion of the New Frontier within the State Department.”²⁹⁷

On the military side, things also changed rapidly. The Taylor-Rostow report gave added impetus to McNamara’s support for creating a command rather than the MAAG that currently existed and for expanding assistance programs. Acting on its suggestions, McNamara increased assistance programs including *Project Farm Gate*, a project aimed at using air power for guerrilla warfare, including through defoliation. Second, Rostow had also added to growing criticism of the MAAG Chief Lt. General Lionel McGarr’s ability to manage the mounting U.S. presence. He wrote to President Kennedy that he “believe[d] that all the choppers and other gadgetry we can supply South Vietnam will buy time and render their resources effective if we do not get a first class man out there to replace McGarr.”²⁹⁸ By February 1962, the MAAG and McGarr had been replaced with the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) led by General Harkins, a Maxwell Taylor protégé. McNamara pitched Harkins to Kennedy explaining that the “JCS consider him an imaginative officer, fully qualified to fill what I consider to be the most difficult job in the US Army.”²⁹⁹

“Over-militarizing” the commitment

However, Kennedy’s civilian advisors understood the risk inherent in creating MACV with a designated 4-star general at its helm and in incrementally strengthening its powers. Moreover, together with troop numbers rising from an early low of 3,000 in 1961 to over 12,000 by 1962, this organizational change could be perceived as a “theatre buildup for the entire Southeast Asia” as Admiral Felt described it.³⁰⁰ The civilian advisors feared that military commanders might see the creation of MACV as a concession towards their plans to “be ready for whatever action they may decide it necessary to

²⁹⁷ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 442-446.

²⁹⁸ Rostow to President Kennedy, December 6, 1961, Folder: Vietnam, General, 12/6/61-12/7/61, Box 195a, NSF, JFKL.

²⁹⁹ “Military Command in South Vietnam”, McNamara to President Kennedy, December 22, 1961, Folder: Vietnam, General, 12/19/61-12/23/61, Box 195a, NSF, JFKL.

³⁰⁰ “Trip Report” Weigand and Franks to DFI, April 1962, Folder: April 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

take.”³⁰¹ The Embassy in Saigon warned that that “this is essentially a political job in the broadest sense, and should be organized and run as such” and warned that the “vigor in the Department of Defense in this situation needs to be matched by equal vigor in the non-military aspects if the proper proportions are to be maintained in our total effort there.”³⁰²

The civilian advisors were also concerned that in centralizing authority under MACV, the U.S. strategy in Vietnam might shift towards a conventional military perspective. In April 1962, for instance, Robert Komer of the CIA wrote to McGeorge Bundy and Taylor questioning whether the Defense Department was well suited to take over policing functions and warned that the United States should “guard against over-militarizing our counterinsurgency effort.” He added that the military had “no greater expertise than cops recruited by AID/CIA, indeed less” and also that putting these activities under DoD control “risk[ed] the same thing that occurred in AID – the program is so small compared to the main function of the agency that it gets lost in the wash.” He concluded, “We don’t want a bunch of colonels running programs in which they have no particular expertise.”³⁰³ Rufus Phillips, the head of AID in Saigon, who was also a former CIA official in the country, had in fact threatened to resign over these concerns: he worried that DoD command produced inefficiencies, delays and impeded the necessary flexibility for counterinsurgency.³⁰⁴

However, by January 1962, it was the JCS, not McNamara, who were encouraging the introduction of ground troops and a more conventional reading of the conflict Vietnam. The JCS argued for “all actions necessary to defeat communist aggression” and warned that losing South Vietnam could lead to “communist domination of all of the Southeast Asian mainland” and that “SEATO [would] cease to exist.” Crucially, whereas he had been

³⁰¹ Hohler, Saigon to Peck, FO, February 15, 1962, Reel 14: FO 371/166700, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

³⁰² Nolting to Rusk, December 19, 1961, Folder: Vietnam, General, 12/19/61-12/23/61, Box 195a, NSF, JFKL.

³⁰³ “Should Police Programs be Transferred to DoD”, Komer to McGeorge Bundy and Taylor, April 18, 1962, Folder: Special Group (CI) - 4/6/61-6/7/62, Box 319, NSF, M&M Series, JFKL.

³⁰⁴ Janow to Phillips, May 15, 1963, Folder: AID CIF, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

receptive to ground troops requests in the past, McNamara now forwarded the recommendations to the President with a cover letter that said that he was “not prepared to endorse” it.³⁰⁵ McNamara sounded more like Komer and Phillips. In a speech delivered in February 1962, as MACV was being established, he struck a note of caution saying, “Combating guerrilla warfare demands more in ingenuity than in money or manpower.”³⁰⁶

As the next chapter describes, by early 1962, McNamara’s attention turned to counterinsurgency strategies coming from the field and Washington that promised to achieve the two objectives laid out by President Kennedy after the Taylor-Rostow report, namely limiting the U.S. government’s commitment to South Vietnam and avoiding the introduction of ground troops. As the number of troops grew, it became all the more urgent to define what exactly these troops could or could not do and what their exact objective was; in other words, to develop a strategy.

Concurrently, the administration matured in its organizational arrangements for counterinsurgency, most notably with the creation of the Special Group for Counterinsurgency in January 1962. In its first month, the Special Group received a document that Roger Hilsman, the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, had drafted which was entitled the “Strategic Concept for South Vietnam”. The paper was specifically designed to produce a counterinsurgency strategy for Vietnam as an alternative to the application of military force. Hilsman, a West Point-educated counterinsurgency expert, had been with the OSS behind enemy lines in Burma and later a speechwriter for Senator Kennedy. Together with Harriman, his mentor, who had been promoted with the “Thanksgiving Massacre”, Hilsman tried to regain State control of Vietnam policy in the early months of 1962.

³⁰⁵ JCS to President Kennedy (via Secretary of Defense McNamara), January 27, 1962, Folder: Southeast Asia, General 1/61-12/62, Box 231a, NSF, Regional Security Series, JFKL.

³⁰⁶ Robert S. McNamara, “Address to the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation Dinner” (speech, Chicago, IL, February 17, 1962),

At the OSD, ISA replaced Gilpatric in coordinating Vietnam policy, eventually overseeing each successive draft of the CPSVN from 1962 to 1963. From McNamara's bureaucratic vantage point, the administration's Vietnam policies were now beginning to work as they should: with strategic guidance coming from the State Department and the White House and ISA organizing requisite defense tools. However, since ISA was also responsible for the Department's aid program and was staffed with McNamara's most loyal advisers, his influence and economic and fiscal considerations colored their decisions.

CHAPTER 4: STRATEGIES FOR VIETNAM

1962 was a boom time for counterinsurgency intellectuals in Washington. Not only had they sparked the President's interest but, on Vietnam, they found an unlikely ally in Secretary of Defense McNamara. He embraced the opportunity to test new tools and techniques for fighting limited wars in the developing world not least because they seemed an economical alternative to conventional deployments. McNamara's concerns over the ballooning costs of Vietnam operations coalesced with the counterinsurgency concern with the militarization of field operations to produce the CPSVN in July 1962. The plan promised to refocus the United States' mission in Vietnam as the assistance forces drew down.

McNamara's calendar provides insight into the people who might have influenced his understanding of counterinsurgency theory. At the start of April 1962, he had two unusually long meetings with Robert Thompson – one meeting that lasted five hours and another for three hours.³⁰⁷ Thompson, a British counterinsurgency expert with experience suppressing the Malayan insurgency, advised the U.S. government on its policies in Vietnam through the British Advisory Mission in Vietnam (BRIAM) and became increasingly prominent as he bypassed U.S. officials in the field and consulted closely with both the Task Force for Vietnam and with Robert McNamara. McNamara described Thompson as “somewhat of a legend”³⁰⁸ while Ambassador Ormsby-Gore noted “how much weight the President attached to Mr. Thompson's views upon the situation in Viet Nam.”³⁰⁹

In the spring of 1962, both Roger Hilsman and Thompson produced plans which stressed the need to have “largely civilian rather than military”

³⁰⁷ Robert McNamara Calendar, 1962, Folder: Calendar, 1962, Box II:66, RSM Papers, LoC.

³⁰⁸ "American Position on South Viet Nam", UK Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, April 17, 1962, Reel 17: FO 371/166721, FO: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

³⁰⁹ "South Viet Nam" Ormsby-Gore to South East Department, Foreign Office, September 18, 1963. Reel 25: FO 371/170101, FO: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

advisors at the local level and a greater focus on development.³¹⁰ For Hilsman, this was explicitly designed to short-circuit what he saw as the militarization of the administration's Vietnam policy. For much of 1962, the administration refined its counterinsurgency strategies while, in July 1962, McNamara began setting an end-date for winding down the Defense Department's presence in Vietnam altogether.

The intellectual backdrop for counterinsurgency

As Hilsman noted in a footnote of his "plan" for South Vietnam, which went through a number of versions between January and March 1962, "The basic approach followed in this plan was developed by Mr. R.G.K. Thompson." The *Pentagon Papers* go further and describe his report as "an unabashed restatement of most of Thompson's major points toward which President Kennedy had, not incidentally, already expressed a favourable disposition."³¹¹ At the time, the Foreign Office came to a similar conclusion, noting that Hilsman's "basic concept owes a great deal to Thompson, with whom he had a long talk while in Saigon" also candidly pointing to the reason that McNamara didn't much care for Hilsman, namely that he was "not the most modest of men and is inclined to overrate his own abilities."³¹²

However, McNamara paid attention to Thompson and to Bernard Fall, another source of inspiration for Hilsman and one of the few people McNamara acknowledged had "educated" him on Vietnam.³¹³ In an anonymous article published in March 1962 that Hilsman widely circulated in the State and Defense Departments, Fall complained that the "United States seeks to win the struggle by mechanical means (helicopters and weed killers) forgetting all over again that a revolutionary war can be won only if the little

³¹⁰ Strategic Concept for South Vietnam, Hilsman, February 2, 1962, Folder: Vietnam, Box 3, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.; "BRIAM Report to the Vietnam Task Force", Thompson, April 14, 1962, Folder: Vietnam, Box 3, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

³¹¹ *Pentagon Paper*, Part IV B2, pp. 29.

³¹² "Roger Hilsman", Denson to Seconde, February 9, 1962, Reel 14: FO 371/166700, FO: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

³¹³ Shapley to McNamara, November 12, 1986, Folder: Shapley, Deborah, Promise and Power, Correspondence, Box II:120, RSM Papers, LoC.

people in the villages and the hills can be persuaded that they have a stake in fighting on our side.”³¹⁴

At their core, Thompson’s “Delta Pacification Plan” and Hilsman’s “Strategic Concept” shared similar recommendations though they diverged on emphasis: Hilsman focused relatively more on civic action and security while Thompson emphasized strengthening political and administrative structures.³¹⁵ Still, they did find common ground in recommending that South Vietnamese forces, and their American assistants, should focus on guerrilla rather than conventional tactics and push the strategic hamlets program.

In March 1962, with great fanfare, Diem launched *Operation Sunrise* with the strategic hamlets program at its center. As the “keystone” of the counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam, the strategic hamlets program was designed to produce secure villages where peasants could be separated from the Vietcong by applying the “oil spot” theory of expanding security on the basis of military operations designed to “clear and hold”.³¹⁶ The gist of “clear and hold” was that military forces should secure an area and extend the “safe” area outwards rather than the alternative “search and destroy”, which relied on targeted and temporary military engagements.³¹⁷ In practice, the strategic hamlets became a loosely-defined rubric where many different agencies lumped their programs.

Putting theory into practice

Both Hilsman and Thompson foresaw some of the main problems that derived by translating theories into practice. First and foremost, they complained about the lack of civilian-military coordination in Vietnam, a prerequisite for a

³¹⁴ Z, “The War in Viet-Nam: We Have Not Been Told the Whole Truth,” *The New Republic* (March 12, 1962).

³¹⁵ On the differences between Hilsman and Thompson’s approach, see especially: Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK?: Britain, the United States and the Vietnam War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 102-107.

³¹⁶ Honolulu Briefing Book (Part II), November 20, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, Honolulu Briefing Book, 11/20/62, Part II, Box 204, NSF, Countries Series, Vietnam, JFKL.

³¹⁷ Unfortunately, in a Vietnamese context, the strategic hamlets program bore an uncanny resemblance to Diem’s earlier and doomed Agrovillage Program, which many at the time noted could seem to “peasants as old wine in newly labelled bottles.” *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel ed., Vol. 2.2.

successful counterinsurgency strategy.³¹⁸ Second, Hilsman argued that American military culture was incompatible with the program in Vietnam and the military's role should therefore be reduced. "As a perusal of MAAG's Jungle Jim and military forces tend to follow tactics more appropriate to conventional, World War II situations than to guerrilla warfare," he wrote.³¹⁹ He later explained, "My major policy was to get MACV out of business, that Americans couldn't do anything but advise Diem. This is what it finally came down to."³²⁰

By the summer of 1962, the administration's counterinsurgency strategies seemed on track in Vietnam and Forrestal wrote to Kennedy that "while we cannot yet sit back in the confidence that the job is well in hand, nevertheless it does appear that we have finally developed a series of techniques which, if properly applied, do seem to produce results."³²¹ However, by December, after a flurry of official visits to Vietnam, Forrestal and Hilsman spoke about confusion in the field. In their trip report, they asked, "Is there a plan? This answer is no. There are five or six plans many of which are competing. There is consequently great confusion."³²² As a result, at the end of the year, at his American advisors' behest, Diem consolidated existing plans into a National Campaign Plan (NCP) that matched the CPSVN timetable.

Overall, as the administration moved into 1963, the signs were not good. The new year began with a humiliating defeat for the South Vietnamese forces in Ap Bac. Questions were raised about field reporting, the ability of the South Vietnamese to fight despite all the assistance that had been offered and also about the team assembled on the field. Despite these concerns, McNamara instructed the JCS to accelerate the CPSVN timetable, shortening the timetable for the handover of responsibilities to the South Vietnamese. In

³¹⁸ Memorandum for the Record, Hilsman, December 1962, Folder: Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62-1/63, Box 3, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

³¹⁹ "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam" Hilsman to Taylor, January 1962, Folder: Vietnam, General, Reports and Memos, 1/62-2/62, Box 195a, NSF, JFKL.

³²⁰ Roger Hilsman OH Interview No. 2 By Dennis J. O'Brien, August 14, 1970, JFKL.

³²¹ Forrestal to President Kennedy, September 18, 1962, Folder: September 1962: 18-28, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³²² Memorandum for the Record, Roger Hilsman, December 1962, Folder: Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62-1/63, Box 3, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

the spring of 1963, things seemed to get worse as the Catholic Diem regime began a violent crackdown against the Buddhist community provoking nationwide unrest as well as anger back in the United States. Congressional figures had begun to describe the country as a “quasi-fascist” state, yet the Diem regime seemed entirely unresponsive to the Kennedy administration’s requests for political reform.³²³ One of the first emblematic images of the Vietnam conflict emerged from the “Buddhist crisis” with the self-immolation of a protesting Buddhist monk. Still, against this backdrop, in May 1963, McNamara requested and received his second draft of the CPSVN with an even shorter time horizon.

Instead of throwing McNamara’s plans off-course, the events in South Vietnam seemed to confirm his determination to continue to centralize programs and authority under the Defense Department and to move forward with the CPSVN. By July 1963, virtually all the programs were being either run by or coordinated with MACV. In addition, he moved more aggressively to make clear that the end goals were to help the South Vietnamese fight *their* war and to continue to insist that it was an insurgency rather than a full-scale conventional war. The overarching objective of each version of the CPSVN and in the public announcement in October 1963 was to “prepare the Vietnamese to assume full responsibility by December 1965” with a “withdrawal of all U.S. special assistance units and personnel by that date.”³²⁴ What the South Vietnamese took “full responsibility” for evolved. Earlier drafts recognized a limited external threat in addition to an insurgency; later drafts identified the threat of an insurgency alone.

Defining the conflict only as an insurgency had implications for troop planning of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. As long as the conflict in Vietnam was defined as a conventional engagement where the United States had a major responsibility, engagement was inherently open-ended and produced risks of escalation as battlefield failures led to continued demands

³²³ FO to De Zalueta, September 6, 1963, TNA: PREM 11/4759, PM’s correspondence, National Archives, Kew.

³²⁴ “Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam”, Harkins to MAAG, September 8, 1962, Folder: September 1962 1-4, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

for ever-growing force deployments. By setting out clear parameters in October 1963 that the peak of U.S. strength had now been met,³²⁵ the CPSVN sought both to put a break on the escalatory momentum and to halt continued requests for troop strength increases in Vietnam.

The services and doctrinal gaps in Vietnam

Hilsman's greatest ally, whether by design or chance, was McNamara. Whether or not McNamara had concluded that U.S. military culture was "incompatible" with the situation in Vietnam, as Hilsman did, is not clear. What is clear is that he was concerned with the military's unwillingness to break out of traditional frameworks, that on Vietnam as in other areas of defense policy, he felt a large doctrinal gap between civilian and military advisers, and as a result, he became increasingly involved in dictating strategy, an area that was traditionally reserved for military commanders.

For instance, in January 1962, as if to prove Hilsman's fears, the Chiefs reported to the President that "any war in the Southeast Asia mainland will be a peninsula and island-type of campaign – a mode of warfare in which all the elements of the Armed Forces of the United States have gained a wealth of experience and in which we have excelled both in World War II and in Korea."³²⁶ Again, in March 1962, Le May disregarded McNamara's instructions to focus on clear-and-hold operations and strategic hamlets, dismissing them as "too defensive" and requesting instead that the Air Force be granted fighter aircraft.³²⁷ Similarly, in November 1962, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Wheeler made a speech where he noted: "It is fashionable in some quarters to say the problems in Southeast Asia are primarily political or economic, rather than military. I do not agree. The essence of the problem in

³²⁵ Honolulu Briefing Book (Part II), November 20, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, Honolulu Briefing Book, 11/20/62, Part II, Box 204, NSF, Countries Series, Vietnam, JFKL.

³²⁶ JCS to President Kennedy (via Secretary of Defense McNamara), January 27, 1962, Folder: Southeast Asia, General 1/61-12/62, Box 231a, NSF, Regional Security Series, JFKL.

³²⁷ Jacob Van Staaveren, *USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam: 1961-1963* (Washington, DC: USAF Historical Liaison Office, 1965), pp. 34.

Vietnam is military.”³²⁸ This could not have been more at odds with the official administration policy.³²⁹

Faced with the Chiefs “blinker pursuit of conventional objectives”³³⁰, McNamara regularly reminded them and notably Admiral Felt that they were dealing with subversion and not the conventional military threats that they felt prepared to handle.³³¹ This frustrating back-and-forth troubled Kennedy who “privately complained that everybody [...] seemed to be forgetting that our role in Vietnam should be political rather than military.”³³² Moreover, although the CPSVN specifically indicated that operations should focus on “clear and hold”, the services dragged their feet. Hilsman or one of his colleagues at INR angrily annotated one memo from CINCPAC in February 1963 with the following comment: “The number of clear and hold operations for 1962 would not exceed (and probably less than) 15, while the number of search and release operations for last year would probably exceed 100!!”³³³

Developing a country team

Aside from these conceptual differences, McNamara was also concerned that bureaucratic divisions along Service and civilian-military lines were hampering the administration’s strategy in Vietnam. As Thompson and Hilsman observed, the success of the strategy depended on successful inter-agency cooperation.

³²⁸ General Earl Wheeler, “The Design of Military Power,” (speech, Fordham University, NYC, November 7, 1962), November 1962 1-15, Box 9, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³²⁹ This speech spurred a flurry of angry memos led by Hilsman. “Extracts From General Wheeler’s Speech” Hilsman to Harriman and Forrestal, February 2, 1963, Folder: Vietnam 2/1/63-3/21/63, Box 3, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL. Wheeler was evidently slapped on the wrist for his speech because within months, in a visit to Vietnam, he made a completely different statement, emphasizing the “military actions would not be enough to win the war” and the centrality of the strategic hamlets program to this end. “Viet Nam: Summary for Week Ending January 30” UK Embassy, Saigon to FO, January 20, 1963, Reel 23: FO 371/166763, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

³³⁰ Yarmolinsky, “Civilian Control: New Perspectives for New Problems.”

³³¹ Record of a Small Meeting with Secretary McNamara in Admiral Felt’s Office, October 8, 1962, Folder: Vietnam, General 1962, Box 519, Harriman Papers, LoC.

³³² Early drafts of *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye*, Folder: Chapter 1, Box 12, O’Donnell Papers, JFKL.

³³³ CINCPAC to JCS, February 14, 1963, Folder: February 1963 9-20, Box 11, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

In May 1962, one report from the field read: “we have too many cooks busy spoiling the broth – there are military agencies: Army, Air Force and Navy as well as State Department and other civilian groups all in the area: USIA, CIA, AID, etc. There is no unified command and no comprehensive planning.”³³⁴ In his October 1963 report, McNamara concluded that MACV’s principal objective of producing a better-coordinated policy on the ground was not succeeding. Early hopes about the “unparalleled opportunities” to create a template of “functioning inter-agency and international effort” in Vietnam that could “serve as guidance in other free world struggles”³³⁵ floundered on the fact that not even Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins, who had been friends back in Massachusetts, could successfully cooperate. By November 1963, a White House meeting concluded “there is no country team in Vietnam at the present time in any real sense.”³³⁶

Service rivalries also began to emerge. In particular there were complaints that MACV was Army-dominated, mirroring charges in Washington that the administration’s new defense policies favored the Army over the other services. McNamara himself conceded that while the “primary responsibility in these areas lies with the Army”, it was important to expose other services, and especially the Marines and Air Force, to the experience as well.³³⁷ All the same, by the end of 1963, of the 16,000 troops on the field, 10,100 were Army troops; and of the five general officers in key positions, only one was from the Air Force.³³⁸ Army officials were also prone to making “derogatory comments”

³³⁴ Memorandum for the Record, Meeting of the Special Warfare Coordinating Group (Focal Point), May 4, 1962, Folder: May 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³³⁵ Cottrell to US Embassy, Saigon, April 1962, Folder: Vietnam, General, 4/1/62-4/10/62. Box 196, NSF, JFKL.

³³⁶ Memorandum for the Record of Discussion At the Daily White House Staff Meeting, Washington, November 22, 1963, 8 A.M., *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963* Vol. IV, pp. 626.

³³⁷ “Requirements for Advisory Personnel in Vietnam”, McNamara to Wheeler, December 21, 1962, Folder: Vietnam, General, 1/6/62-1/12/62, Box 195a, NSF, JFKL.

³³⁸ Van Staaveren, *USAF Plans and Policies*, pp. 27, 34.

about Air Force overtures to become involved in counterinsurgency, a field they felt “had always been primarily Army.”³³⁹

To some extent, the Army’s experience in counterinsurgency was irrelevant to Service Chiefs who believed that a conventional war was around the corner. Even General Taylor, in the spring of 1962, joined the chorus of military advisors that the “point could quickly come when the VC would come out to fight something resembling a conventional war.”³⁴⁰ The Army itself admitted in a critical report that, “We seem to be still trying to counter insurgency with tools and methods applicable to a conventional war,” though it noted that, “The Army is nonetheless considerably ahead of the Air Force. They insist on applying the wrong tools in the wrong way.”³⁴¹

Vietnam as a laboratory

Inter-service rivalries also loomed large on the use of Vietnam as a testing ground for counterinsurgency. In keeping with his interest for counterinsurgency, Kennedy viewed Vietnam as an ideal “training laboratory”³⁴² and urged the services to “expose [their] most promising officers to the experience of service there.” He “directed that the Service make [Vietnam] a laboratory both for training our people, and for learning the things that we need to know to successfully compete” in what he saw as the “future of war.”³⁴³ Rotations in Vietnam became prerequisites for Army promotions and were especially important for the Special Forces. Vietnam taught them to

³³⁹ Memorandum for the Record, Meeting of the Special Warfare Coordinating Group (Focal Point), May 4, 1962, Folder: May 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁴⁰ Memorandum of a Conference With the President, March 7, 1962, Folder: Conferences with the President, JCS - 10/61-11/62, Box 345, Clifton Series, NSF, JFKL.

³⁴¹ “ACTIVE Progress of 1 June 1963”, Rowny, US Army to Wheeler, July 9, 1963, Folder: July 1963 15-27, Box 13, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁴² The JCS produced a report entitled “Southeast Asia as a Training Laboratory” for the Special Group (CI), which specifically described Vietnam as a chance for the military to showcase their participation in counterinsurgency activities. The report suggested that “the services are receiving rich benefit from the experiences of Southeast Asia and are confident that lessons learned in that local will have applicability in other areas where insurgency may erupt.” “Military Training Related to CI Matters”, Lemnitzer, JCS to Special Group (CI), January 20, 1962, Folder: Special Group Military Training Report, 1/30/62, Box 319, NSF, M&M Series, JFKL.

³⁴³ Memorandum of a Conference with the President, December 4, 1961, Folder: Conferences with the President, JCS, 1-61-2/61, Box 345, NSF, Clifton Series, JFKL.

work in fully unconventional “wars of national liberation” contexts, precisely the kind of situation Kennedy wanted them prepared for.³⁴⁴ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff chimed in noting the importance of using “Vietnam in particular, and Southeast Asia in general, as a “laboratory” for the improvement of U.S. counterinsurgency and remote area conflict capability”, something he felt was “very much in the national interest.”³⁴⁵

In April 1961, in order to “test new techniques”, the administration also set up a Combat Development Test Center (CDTC) in South Vietnam as part of a program called *Project Agile* run out of the Defense Department’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). By January 1962, it also reported to the newly created Special Group (CI). Although the center combined military and civilian experts, it reported to the Secretary of Defense and to MACV on the military aspects alone. The center oversaw the testing of a range of more or less controversial tools from using dogs and high-powered voice amplifiers in the strategic hamlets to the more contentious use of herbicides.³⁴⁶ By September 1962, the Army set up its own test unit center and three months later, the Air Force did the same.³⁴⁷

As a result, by the end of 1962, both CINCPAC and the JCS were expressing concern “about the proliferation of such activities.” Not only were the services competing over programs but they also seemed to be bypassing CINCPAC’s authority. In keeping with Eisenhower’s reforms to command structures, MACV was meant to coordinate operations in Vietnam and report to CINCPAC who, in turn, reported to the Secretary of Defense. The services, who were no longer meant to have operational responsibility, seemed to be reasserting themselves through the backdoor under the rubric of “testing”. This was the sub-plot, so to speak, when CINCPAC expressed “concerned about the nature of the tests” that the Army was conducting, and expressed “desires to keep tight control and monitory R&D activities in South

³⁴⁴ Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, pp. 10.

³⁴⁵ “Project Agile”, Memorandum for the Record, ARPA, August 13, 1961, Box 3, RG59 Records of the Special Group (CI), NARA.

³⁴⁶ Status Report on the Presidential Program for Viet-Nam, July 10, 1961, Folder: Vietnam, General, Presidential Program Status Reports, Box 195a, NSF, JFKL.

³⁴⁷ Van Staaveren, *USAF Plans and Policies*, pp. 63.

Vietnam.”³⁴⁸ Ultimately, Admiral Felt and the JCS concluded that testing was spiraling out of control and detracting from the main objective. He recommended that it should therefore be scaled back.³⁴⁹ By October 1963, experimentation was either reduced or transferred to Thailand; and according to the CPSVN, was being phased-out altogether.³⁵⁰

Similarly, the CPSVN process addressed concerns over the proliferation of militias and paramilitary forces in South Vietnam. By 1962, MACV oversaw Civil Guard (CG) and Self-Defense Corps (SDC) and hamlet militia, which were tasked with more traditional security concerns in the villages as an adjunct to the South Vietnamese Army forces (ARVN). In addition, under the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program, Special Forces under CIA command oversaw an even greater number of forces, many of whom played on the country’s divided ethnic and religious lines. For instance, the Trailwatchers, a force that operated along the Laos and Cambodia borders, drew primarily from the Montagnards minority while other forces played on Catholic allegiances, including the Catholic Youth and the Fighting Fathers.

William Colby, the CIA Station Chief who oversaw many of these forces, complained that they lacked order, control and coherence, and that they were wasteful.³⁵¹ The CIA could not afford the costs associated to the “rapidly expanding operations”³⁵² as the number of Special Forces under his command tripled to almost 5,000 troops between 1961 and 1963.³⁵³ Moreover, the Army began to express anger that its Special Forces, “probably the most mature and best-trained in the Army [were] employed in providing basic training to Vietnamese recruits” and that they were still operating under CIA command while the Army was running its own parallel programs in

³⁴⁸ Review of GVN Situation by JCS, 17-18 December 1962, Honolulu Conference, January 4, 1963, Folder: January 1963 1-4, Box 10, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, pp. 266-270.

³⁵¹ Colby to Harriman, February 22, 1963, Folder: Defense Affairs, 1963, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

³⁵² “Operation Switchback”, Wood to U Alexis Johnson, February 7, 1963, Folder: Defense Affairs, 1963, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

³⁵³ “Military CI Progress including Civic Action since 27 December 1962”, JCS to Special Group (CI), June 25, 1963, Box 3, RG59 Records of the Special Group (CI), NARA.

Vietnam.³⁵⁴ For all these reasons, Colby welcomed the decision in July 1962, as part of the CPSVN process, to centralize paramilitary forces under MACV command as part of *Operation Switchback* and to wind down their numbers in subsequent years. Ultimately, bringing the Special Forces and their programs within the remit of MACV served first, to centralize disparate operations around the country in way that promised greater operational coherence and coordination, and second, to secure their long-term financing.

Civil-military tensions over the use of air power

Later versions of the CPSVN also wound down the use of air power on the battlefield, a victory for the counterinsurgency experts over their military counterparts and indeed over McNamara. The gap between the Chiefs and counterinsurgency experts was perhaps at its widest over the use of air power and especially defoliants in Vietnam. McNamara's position on this debate is instructive because it shows how he did not fit along neat and binary notions of hawks and doves. Although he argued for winding down the U.S. presence on the one hand, he was enthusiastic about the use of new technology, not least because it promised to be relatively cheap and because the South Vietnamese could be trained relatively quickly to use it themselves. He was less attuned to humanitarian concerns over the use of herbicides. When he did push to draw back the program it was part of a general winding down of the U.S. presence and a tightening of operations in Vietnam. In fact, McNamara's shift probably derived from Robert Thompson's change of heart on the issue.

McNamara had been an early proponent of using air power in Vietnam when the program began in earnest after the Taylor-Rostow report. One official history has suggested that his enthusiasm derived from the fact that he "could quantify results."³⁵⁵ Michael Forrestal at the NSC, who opposed the program, wrote that, "The main train of thinking was that you cannot say no to

³⁵⁴ CINFO to MACV, July 9, 1962, Folder: July 1962 6-17, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁵⁵ Kaplan et al., *The McNamara Ascendancy*, pp. 276.

your military advisors all the time and, with this I agree.”³⁵⁶ But McNamara had not had many qualms refusing his military advisors’ input in the past. He wanted to prove that the Defense Department could make a valuable contribution to the new models of war fighting. Hilsman explained that to understand the bombing program “it is probably necessary to understand the peculiar stake of the Air Force as an organization”, namely that it needed to prove its relevance for counterinsurgency.³⁵⁷ But this was also true of the Defense Department as a whole: in the aftermath of the Ap Bac battle, Earle Wheeler, the Army Chief of Staff, was dispatched to Vietnam specifically to try to identify how to “use air power in counterinsurgency operations.”³⁵⁸

While using air power in Vietnam was divisive, the defoliation program was particularly so. In the spring of 1962, the administration felt compelled to issue press guidelines to the field in the face of the “much publicized” use of herbicides. Harriman, his friend the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, Hilsman and Forrestal were especially angry about the program as was Edward Murrow at the USIA who warned that the administration would “pay dearly for [it] in terms of Asian opinion.”³⁵⁹ Faced with Harkins and Felt’s suggestion in December of 1962 to create open-fire zones along the Cambodian border, Harriman “question[ed] the use of airpower in counterinsurgency”, complaining that “we must never forget that this is a political war” and reminding his colleagues that “French experience suggests, in fact, that air interdiction is not a useful concept in this kind of warfare.”³⁶⁰ The MAAG also warned that “the indiscriminate use of firepower, regardless of caliber, type or means of delivery cannot be condoned in counterinsurgency operations”, that it “only serve[d] to push people into Viet Cong arms.”³⁶¹

Aside from public relations aspects, the program’s detractors questioned its military use. Reports from the field indicated only limited

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Hilsman, *The Politics of Policy Making*, pp. 41-44.

³⁵⁸ Van Staaveren, *USAF Plans and Policies*, pp. 54.

³⁵⁹ “Crop Destruction in Vietnam”, Forrestal to President Kennedy, September 28, 1962, Folder: September 1962 18-28, Box 9, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁶⁰ “Interdiction”, Harriman to Nolting, March 22, 1963, Folder: March 1963 19-21, Box 11, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁶¹ Eggleston, MAAG, August 27, 1962, Part I, Reel I, Westmoreland Papers, RSC.

success: one Army report bluntly noted that the “defoliation program is a failure. That’s the official view now.”³⁶² The reports circulated around Washington: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lemnitzer indicated that observations were “not impressive”³⁶³ while Harold Brown, McNamara’s Director of Defense Research and Engineering (DDR&E) who managed *Project Agile*, wrote that reporting on the success of these programs was “overoptimistic.”³⁶⁴ However, the program continued to be met with “the strong approval of Secretary McNamara, General Taylor” and “the field”, which was primarily CINCPAC.³⁶⁵ Well after he had received reports questioning the value of air operations, McNamara was still telling Kennedy that they were producing “excellent results” and recommending that he give Harkins “free reign.”³⁶⁶

By November 1962, despite continued requests from MACV, CINCPAC and McNamara, the detractors had convinced President Kennedy to cut back the program and ensure that it be “reoriented upon the original concept as soon as possible.” He also required that each operation receive prior White House, rather than OSD, approval and prove its “operational value.”³⁶⁷ By the spring of 1963, McNamara was on board and as the CPSVN planning went ahead, the air units were the first to be withdrawn. The initial 1,000-man increment included mostly air units, including a C-123 spray detachment and armed helicopters.³⁶⁸

³⁶² Review of Orientation Tour Report to South Vietnam, March 27, 1962, Folder: March 1962 27-31, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁶³ Lemnitzer to McNamara, March 30, 1962, Folder: March 1962 27-31, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁶⁴ Harold Brown to McGeorge Bundy, April 11, 1962, Folder: Vietnam, General, 4/1/62-4/10/62, Box 196, NSF, JFKL.

³⁶⁵ Forrestal to McGeorge Bundy, October 4, 1962, Folder: Miscellaneous, Box II:95, RSM Papers, LoC.

³⁶⁶ “Defoliant/Herbicide Program in South Vietnam”, McNamara to President Kennedy, November 16, 1962, Folder: November 1962 16-29, Box 10, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁶⁷ “Summary of Decisions Taken at 7th SecDef Honolulu Conference”, Joint Chiefs of Staff minutes, October 8, 1962, Folder: October 1962 1-10, Box 9, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.; Review of GVN Situation by JCS, 17-18 December 1962, Honolulu Conference, January 4, 1963, Folder: January 1963 3-4, Box 10, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁶⁸ “Revised Plan for the Republic of Vietnam”, CINCPAC to JCS, May 11, 1963, Folder: May 1963: 10-15, Box 11, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

The President's instructions might have influenced McNamara's change of heart but Thompson's trajectory on the issue of air power was also informative. Going against many field reports, in April 1962, Thompson was generally favorable to the program. He argued that the "use of air in the form of helicopters, C-123 and attack planes" was "remarkably effective" while his only reservation over crop destruction was that "foreigners should not be actively involved." At the same time, he sounded a note of a caution explaining that "many so-called Viet Cong are not fighting for Communism" but instead nationalism that could be reinforced should they see "foreigners killing Vietnamese." In large part, it was a public relations issue for Thompson, part of the "psychological and information activities" that he advocated, which recommended that foreigners should not be "at the sharp end" and instead should focus on "doctors, USOM³⁶⁹ people or Civic Action people who are handing out services or goods [who] cause no problem."³⁷⁰

However, a year later, Thompson had turned sharply and on a visit to Washington, warned President Kennedy against relying on defoliants and air power more broadly. Now he "doubted that the effort involved in defoliation was worthwhile" because of the "automatic aversion of the Asians to the use of unknown chemicals." On air power, he said that, in the long-term the "war would be won by brains and feet" rather than helicopters and was now "dead against" bombing "as this would leave an indissoluble legacy of bitterness."³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ USOM is the United States Operations Mission.

³⁷⁰ Cottrell to Harriman, April 6, 1962, Box 2, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

³⁷¹ "Situation in Viet Nam", Memorandum of a Conversation, Between President Kennedy and Ambassador Ormsby-Gore, Robert Thompson, BRIAM, April 4, 1963, Folder: Pol Affairs – RGK Thompson Visit to US – April 1963, Box 2, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

CHAPTER 5: MCNAMARA THE SCEPTIC

If Thompson's trajectory is important to understanding McNamara's changed assessment of the use of air power, it is especially important to understanding McNamara's "optimism" about the situation in Vietnam. Historians are divided as to why McNamara set in motion withdrawal plans in July 1962. On the one hand, there are those who argue that McNamara, and perhaps Kennedy as well, believed the war would effectively end by 1965 – that the insurgency could be reduced to "low-level banditry" by that time.³⁷² On the other, there are those who argue that Kennedy presciently understood that the United States was on a losing path in Vietnam. In fact, neither is correct. Newly-available documents show that, in private, McNamara was not really optimistic about U.S. prospects in Vietnam but neither was he convinced that all intervention was doomed to failure. Instead, he saw Vietnam as a test case for a new kind of intervention that did not depend on a short-term, U.S. victory in the traditional sense. Furthermore, in the medium term, as the previous chapter detailed, winding down the U.S. presence was also designed to produce greater operational coherence.

During the October 3rd NSC meeting, Kennedy specifically asked McNamara if the withdrawal plans were based on "an assumption that it's going well" and whether this could be make the administration look foolish if things turned sour. In response, McNamara stated his two "major premises" for announcing the phase-out: first, he believed that the "military campaign" would be "complete" by the end of 1965 and "secondly, if it extends beyond that period, we believe we can train them to take over the essential functions and withdraw the bulk of our forces." When McGeorge Bundy asked him "what's the point of doing that?" McNamara responded, "We need a way to

³⁷² Michael Forrestal said that "Kennedy never got too discouraged about Vietnam, and felt despite all the difficulties, we had a good chance of making." (Research Notes for *A Thousand Days*, Folder: Vietnam, Research Notes and Memoranda, Box W-15, Schlesinger Papers, Memoranda to the President, JFKL.) In an oral history, William Bundy stated: "[withdrawal] was pegged to an optimistic view of the situation and I doubt very much that it was intended to apply if the situation had been going badly." (William P. Bundy OH Interview by William W. Moss, April 25, 1972, JFKL.)

get out of Vietnam. This is a way of doing it. And to leave forces there when they're not needed, I think is wasteful and complicates both their problems and ours."³⁷³ For McNamara, withdrawal was not pegged against victory; instead, he was most interested in "a way to get out." Ultimately, for him, having forces on the ground was complicated for the Vietnamese and wasteful for the United States.

The administration's optimism

The *Pentagon Papers* observe that "optimism dominated official thinking" in the 1962-1963 period.³⁷⁴ While this might have been true of the administration and McNamara's public pronouncements, the reality behind closed doors was more complex. In fact, in the months leading up to the July 1962 Honolulu conference, Hilsman complained that a "wave of discouragement" had hit the Pentagon; a phenomenon he found "surprising since the evidence points in quite the other direction."³⁷⁵ If anything, a consensus emerged in the 1962-1963 period that the situation in Vietnam might be approaching a stalemate; Ambassador Lodge, General Taylor, the CIA as well as USOM in Vietnam among others seemed to share that view. In the fall of 1962, the Task Force on SEA had described the situation as "basically a stand-off with no clear prospect of victory for either side" while Taylor, in assessing the difference between his visits in October 1961 and 1962 said that whereas before the "Viet Cong [had been] winning the war", by 1962, "no one clearly has the initiative."³⁷⁶

³⁷³ Transcript NSC meeting, October 3, 1963: Tape 144/A49, Cassette 2/3, Folder: Fog of War, background and research materials, Box II:114, RSM Papers, LoC.

³⁷⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.B.3, pp. 9.

³⁷⁵ Although in a revealing side-note, he added that, "McCone feels that it may be that the discouragement is not about how the war is going but about the setup in the American Military setup there in Viet Nam and its relations to CINCPAC and the JCS. Memorandum for the Record, Hilsman, April 27, 1962, Folder: April 1962, Box 6, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

³⁷⁶ "Status Report on Southeast Asia, Task Force Southeast Asia", October 3, 1962, Folder: October 1962 1-10, Box 9, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL. ; "Developments in Viet-Nam Between General Taylor's Visits: Oct 1961- Oct 1962" Brubeck to McGeorge Bundy, October 8, 1962, Folder: October 1962 1-10, Box 9, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

Moreover, both McNamara's October trip report and the November 1963 CPSVN focused on the danger that programs in Vietnam had become "over-extended" or confused and that the administration needed to move to a "consolidation" phase. In addition, they and the Special Group CI concluded that the civic action and civil programs as well as the strategic hamlets, which were all at the core of the counterinsurgency program, were "lagging".³⁷⁷ To a large extent, the narrative about McNamara's optimism on Vietnam relies on his public pronouncements and posture, which remained positive. At the end of the October NSC meetings, the press announcement read that, "Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965."³⁷⁸

However, in an exchange during the October meetings, McNamara specifically addressed the idea that his projections were overly optimistic. He conceded that the 1965 timeline was the one area where he and Taylor disagreed: "the only slight difference between Max and me in this entire report is in this one estimate of whether or not we can win the war in '64 in the upper three territories and in '65 in the fourth. I'm not entirely sure of that." Yet, he concluded,

"But I am sure that if we don't meet those dates, in the sense of ending the major military campaigns, we nonetheless can withdraw the bulk of our U.S. forces, according to the schedule we have laid out because we can train the Vietnamese to do the job."³⁷⁹

In other words, as far as McNamara and his planners were concerned, withdrawal could happen because the Vietnamese would be trained to do the job not because there would be peace by 1965. As his trip report explained, "The US advisory effort, however, cannot assure ultimate success. This is a Vietnamese war and the country and the war must in the end, be run solely by the Vietnamese. It will impair their independence and the development of their

³⁷⁷ Kattenburg to the Special Group (CI), October 22, 1963, Box 3, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA; Honolulu Briefing Book (Part II), November 20, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, Honolulu Briefing Book, 11/20/62, Part II, Box 204, NSF, Countries Series, Vietnam, JFKL.

³⁷⁸ "U.S. Policy on Viet-Nam: White House Statement", October 2, 1963. Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *Mt Holyoke Documents Relating to American Foreign Policy, Vietnam*: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/state63.htm>

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

initiative if we leave our advisers in place beyond the time they are really needed.”³⁸⁰

General Harkins’ optimism

Although McNamara’s most optimistic advisers (notably General Paul D. Harkins and Thompson) first suggested the 1965 end-date, only Harkins seemed to believe that there would be peace by then. There is no doubt that Harkins’ reporting was unequivocally optimistic.³⁸¹ In July 1962, he told McNamara that it would take a year to train the Vietnamese³⁸²; a few months later he predicted “all our programs will come to fruition by the end of 1962.”³⁸³ July 1962 was a key date because it was at this time, during the Honolulu conference, that McNamara asked the JCS to begin the handover of military responsibilities to their South Vietnamese counterparts. This timing explains why many historians have assumed that McNamara began to plan for

³⁸⁰ Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 September – 1 October 1963, Folder: Vietnam, McNamara-Taylor Report, 10/1/63, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

³⁸¹ In his optimism, Harkins had a powerful ally in Admiral Felt who was the other field commander in charge of drafting the withdrawal plans. In response to an article written by David Halberstam that suggested the situation in the Delta had seriously deteriorated and in defense of Harkins, writing to the JCS in March 1963, Felt effused:

“I believe the reasons for Harkins’ optimism is: 1) the inescapably evident fact of continuing US support and military aid; 2) the obvious fact that in both military and civilian efforts the people running things are getting organized and have gained a reasonably comprehensive understanding of the problem to be solved and have actually gone to work to solve the problem. [...] My overall comment is that improvement is a daily fact, thanks to the combined efforts of the RVN and the U.S. the success of the counterinsurgency is attainable and we are confident of the outcome.” CINCPAC to JCS, March 9, 1963, Folder: February 1963 9-20, Box 11, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

Also, shortly before McNamara’s visit, Felt reported to the JCS that the foundations for a solid program in the Delta had been laid and so victory could also be carried there. McNamara’s notes from the trip pointed specifically to numerous failures and weaknesses in the Delta region. (CINCPAC to JCS, August 18, 1963, Folder: August 1963, Box 13, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.) Moreover, even after the transition to the Johnson administration when the CPSVN was quietly dropped, Felt still “stood by predictions that the war against the Vietcong will be completed successfully in three years.” US Embassy, Taipei to McGeorge Bundy December 1963, Folder: 1 Vietnam General, 1963, Box 128a, POF, JFKL.

³⁸² Robert S. McNamara Interview by Brian Vandemark for “In Retrospect”, December 7, 1993, Folder: Drafts and notes, Box II:100, RSM Papers, LOC.

³⁸³ “Report on Trip to Far East With General Taylor, August 31 – September 21, 1962”, Folder: September 1961 1, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

withdrawal on the basis of Harkins' reporting and resulting "euphoria and optimism."³⁸⁴

However, the administration did not especially value Harkins and his staff. Harkins, a man appointed largely because he was General Taylor's protégé and longtime friend, had to defend his staff against charges that they were incompetent. He experienced a fall from grace that became particularly acute after the defeat at Ap Bac in 1963.³⁸⁵ He came under criticism from Kennedy (who, according to Forrestal, "wanted to get rid of him"³⁸⁶), Senator Mansfield (because he was "too optimistic"³⁸⁷), McGeorge Bundy (who later described Harkins as a "dope"³⁸⁸) and especially McNamara. McNamara diplomatically explained that Harkins "looked and spoke exactly as a general should" and more biting, that although he was "a protégé of the scholarly Max Taylor, he lacked his mentor's intellectual caliber."³⁸⁹ McNamara's Deputy, Roswell Gilpatric, less diplomatically remembered that his boss was "just not impressed either by Harkins' record or by the personal attributes of the man when he saw him."³⁹⁰

Robert Thompson and optimism as a tactic

As of 1962, McNamara became increasingly doubtful about field reports, notably from Harkins, and had begun reaching outside traditional channels to crosscheck information. This led him to conclude that the United States could not win *militarily* in the traditional sense. His trip to Vietnam in the fall of 1963 confirmed this view. As a result, he put in motion a plan to demilitarize U.S.

³⁸⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.B4, pp. 5.

³⁸⁵ Harkins to Taylor, January 1963, Folder: January 1963 3-4, Box 10, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁸⁶ Research Notes for *A Thousand Days*, Folder: Vietnam, Research Notes and Memoranda, Box W-15, Schlesinger Papers, Memoranda to the President, JFKL.

³⁸⁷ "Discussion About Senator Mansfield's Visit to Vietnam With the Director of the Vietnam Working Group in the State Department, Mr. Wood" Forster, Washington to Williams, FO, January 25, 1963, Reel 27: FO 371/170110, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

³⁸⁸ Robert McNamara draft of "In Retrospect" with comments from McGeorge Bundy, undated, Folder: In Retrospect, Comments and Criticisms (pre-publication reviews), Box II:95, RSM Papers, LoC.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ Gilpatric left the Pentagon in January 1964 so this recollection would have been solely from impressions gleaned during the Kennedy administration. (Roswell Gilpatric OH Interview by Ted Gittinger No. 1, November 12, 1982, LBJL.)

involvement to meet the new objective of helping the South Vietnamese help themselves. He felt that this could be accomplished within Harkins' timeline. To a large extent, in keeping with Thompson's advice, a public display of optimism was a strategy for McNamara. Projecting optimism was a way of keeping the CPSVN on track.

In fact, Thompson's optimistic views and trajectory offer a key to understanding McNamara's. Whereas Harkins' view of victory was predicated on a training mission and on the military aspects of the war, Thompson's was political and focused on training lower-level forces and the construction of strategic hamlets.³⁹¹ As such, the decreased military presence envisaged in the withdrawal plans had little impact on his long-range plans. In addition, in his discussions with McNamara it is clear that Thompson, unlike Harkins, felt that optimism was a calculated posture to avoid U.S. domestic audiences from turning against the war and to keep the South Vietnamese motivated and confident that they were on the "winning side".

Thompson's trajectory during the July 1962-October 1963 period is informative. In the spring of 1962, Thompson reached the peak of his optimism spurring McNamara to urge his military commanders to accelerate the withdrawal plans. Using a well-worn phrase, Thompson noted that the "tide has turned"³⁹² and at a meeting at Fort Bragg, confidently announced that "we definitely are winning."³⁹³

But by the fall of 1963, a shift had occurred. Thompson produced a report that described the current path as a "collision course" and warned of a "grave risk that the only choice before us will be of losing either with or without Diem."³⁹⁴ In a meeting with Lodge in September 1963, he argued that the United States should stick to Diem even though the Buddhist crisis had

³⁹¹ RGK Thompson, Report on Visits to Delta Provinces to Anderson, USMC, September 21, 1963, Folder: Vietnam Trip, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

³⁹² "Vietnam: Review of United States Aid and Policy Towards Vietnam Following Senator Mansfield's Report" by Warmer, FO, April 3, 1963, Reel 27: FO 371/170110, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

³⁹³ "Thompson Visit", CINCPAC to JCS, March 26, 1963, Folder: March 1963 23-30, Box 11, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁹⁴ Revised Report from Thompson to Peck, FO, October 30, 1963, Reel 25: FO 371/170102, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

derailed progress (contrary to what American military advisors were saying).³⁹⁵ At the same time, he reassured his American colleagues that, “If everything was to go 50% according to plan, then I would say that there could be a decisive military improvement in twelve months and certainly within two years.”³⁹⁶ This was exactly the time frame that McNamara imposed for the withdrawal plans.

Much of Thompson and McNamara’s optimism was calculated to influence events both on the ground and in Washington. Although Thompson was not officially in Vietnam during the McNamara-Taylor visit, McNamara’s notes made on the first day bear Thompson’s hallmark. In particular, one remarkable phrase: “People want to be on winning side – if word gets around that we have doubts, are cutting aid, or likely to pull out, it will reduce the will of the people in the hamlets to resist.”³⁹⁷ These are almost exactly the same words Thompson penned in a letter to the British High Commissioner in New Zealand about the situation in Vietnam where he wrote that, “The key to the present situation is confidence. The peasants are not going to stick their necks out unless they think they will be on the winning side. Naturally therefore I have to be optimistic if I am to influence events. You must play as if you are going to win.”³⁹⁸

Herein lays the key to understanding Thompson’s and McNamara’s optimism: they did not necessarily believe that everything was going to plan; they were looking for a way to galvanize the troops, both at home and in the field. The idea that optimism was a means to an end was a recurring theme in Thompson’s correspondence: he had previously noted that the momentum of

³⁹⁵ Harkins and most other military officers McNamara met during his visit to Vietnam in September 1963 insisted (despite receiving contradicting reports) that the Buddhist crisis had “not had an appreciable impact on the military situation to date.” USMACV Headway Addenda to JCS Et al., July 10-17, 1963, Folder: July 1963 15-27, Box 13, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

³⁹⁶ “Report on Visits to the Delta Provinces Over the Last 3 Months, and Interview With Cabot Lodge, United States Ambassador” Thompson to FO, September 18, 1963, Reel 25: FO 371/170102, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

³⁹⁷ Handwritten Notes From Robert McNamara, Trip to South Vietnam, September 25, 1963, Folder: Trip notes, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

³⁹⁸ Peter Busch, “Killing the ‘Vietcong’: The British Advisory Mission and the Strategic Hamlet Programme,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 25:1 (2002), pp. 152.

the 1962 victories had “inspired confidence in the successful outcome of the war”³⁹⁹ and that confidence “would be self-generating.”⁴⁰⁰ Considering the McNamara-Taylor report observed a “general atmosphere of watch-and-wait”⁴⁰¹, McNamara made a calculated choice to be optimistic because it kept his plan on track. Without an energized South Vietnamese partner and with a Congress threatening to cut off aid, a long-drawn program of handing over responsibilities could not happen.

Furthermore, it is difficult to square McNamara’s tendency to be overly critical of military advice with the notion that he was uncritically accepting of Harkins’ input. In an oral history, McNamara, using an analogy of factory workers at Ford, commented on “the foolhardiness of combining the intelligence function with the operating function [...] that intelligence estimates that came from the unit that was associated with operations were tainted [...] by the biases that we all have in evaluating our own operations.”⁴⁰² That critical reading of intelligence estimates influenced the way McNamara received Harkins’ reports and subsequently informed the Taylor-McNamara report’s conclusions. Going against Harkins’ assessment, the report pointed to the continuing issue of poor intelligence⁴⁰³, to the fact that the Vietcong effort had “not yet been seriously reduced in the aggregate” and commented that people were unanimous that the strategic hamlet programs was “overextended in the Delta.”⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ “Report on Visits to the Delta Provinces Over the Last 3 Months, and Interview With Cabot Lodge, United States Ambassador” Thompson to FO, September 18, 1963, Reel 25: FO 371/170102, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

⁴⁰¹ Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 September – 1 October 1963, Folder: Vietnam, McNamara-Taylor Report, 10/1/63, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

⁴⁰² Robert S. McNamara OH Interview No. 2 by the OSD Historical Office, May 22, 1986, Folder: OSD OH 2, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁴⁰³ It saw “clear differences of opinion about the extent of GVN control” and complained that “Lodge has been told quite a different situation exists shown by MACV reports.” Handwritten Notes From Robert McNamara, Trip to South Vietnam, September 25, 1963, Folder: Trip notes, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

⁴⁰⁴ Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 September – 1 October 1963, Folder: Vietnam, McNamara-Taylor Report, 10/1/63, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

McNamara's notes from this trip are also instructive⁴⁰⁵: during a visit to a Special Forces detachment, which was at the vanguard of counterinsurgency, he concluded "there has been progress in the Delta during the past year (have strategic hamlets, etc.) but not working as much as they claim and their plan for the future is weak." In another area, he described "clearly a miserably planned hamlet program."⁴⁰⁶ He met with Professor Honey, a scholar of Vietnamese culture and history, who recognized that they were "in theory great" but "in practice: not." In the Delta, U.S. advisors told him that "in some hamlets [there were] 20-30% VC sympathizers" and that there had been "little or no progress in winning over the people." Within days, Vice President Tho confirmed this alarming assessment, writing that there were "not more than 20 or 30 properly defended hamlets."⁴⁰⁷ McNamara's trip file also contained a USOM "informal appreciation" of the strategic hamlets which called it an "idealistic program" that had failed primarily for the reasons that had troubled Thompson, namely a "lack of provincial capability"; it also highlighted the Delta as an area where "communists still control most of the people."⁴⁰⁸

In addition, the trip's purpose was also to ascertain whether or not the Buddhist crisis had affected military progress. Although the people he met with were nearly unanimous in their appraisal that it had not, he wrote "sympathy for the VC will build up because the devil you don't know is better than the one you do [...] attests how little leverage we have." All in all, these are not the notes of an optimistic man on the cusp of victory.

⁴⁰⁵ Also, McNamara's team on the trip reflected a particular perspective: William Bundy, the head of ISA also oversaw the struggling Military Assistance Program that financed operations, Forrestal had expressed anger at air power and the "militarization" of policy; Colby had worried about the proliferation of militias; Krulak had complained at the military's inability to integrate counterinsurgency theory and William Sullivan, the former Deputy Head of Mission in South Vietnam. Secretary McNamara's Instructions to Party Delivered Aboard Plane, September 23, 1963, Folder: South Vietnam Trip, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

⁴⁰⁶ Handwritten Notes From Robert McNamara, Trip to South Vietnam, September 25, 1963, Folder: Trip notes, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

⁴⁰⁷ Lodge to Rusk, September 30, 1963, Folder: South Vietnam Trip, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

⁴⁰⁸ Handwritten Notes From Robert McNamara, Trip to South Vietnam, Folder: Trip notes, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

Several of McNamara's colleagues recall a decisive shift in the fall of 1963. General Krulak, who sat on the Special Group (CI) as the JCS representative and joined McNamara on his October 1963 trip to Vietnam, expressed his "admiration" for McNamara "because he saw the truth more quickly than most, and he saw through the phoniness of what he was told when he went to Vietnam be it by the Vietnamese, or our own people." Krulak, recalled that Kennedy had received "clear indications" from McNamara that the counterinsurgency operations were "not going well" and were "not implemented earnestly and this would morph into a conventional war", something Kennedy explicitly sought to avoid.⁴⁰⁹ Forrestal and Hilsman also recall a decisive shift in September 1963, a point where McNamara realized that "he had been badly misinformed by Harkins."⁴¹⁰

Ultimately, the idea that McNamara was optimistic that "victory" would be achieved by 1965 is not borne out either in his September trip notes or in his statements at the ensuing NSC meetings. Although he accepted his military advisors' timeline, he did not accept their positive assessments. He nevertheless continued to make optimistic statements "to influence events" on the ground. The South Vietnamese needed to believe they were "on the winning side" if they were to take over responsibilities in earnest; and in Washington congressional leaders needed to believe this if he was to avoid cuts to his long-term plans for Vietnam.

Historians have highlighted the press release after the October NSC meetings that announced the administration's plans to phase out from Vietnam, to underscore McNamara's undue optimism in the fall of 1963. As the next chapter shows, rather than providing evidence of McNamara's optimism, the statement was first and foremost a maneuver aimed at, among others, members of the administration that could put obstacles in the CPSVN's way.

⁴⁰⁹ Victor H. Krulak OH Interview by William W. Moss, November 19, 1970, JFKL.

⁴¹⁰ Research Notes for *A Thousand Days*, Folder: Vietnam, Research Notes and Memoranda, Box W-15, Schlesinger Papers, Memoranda to the President, JFKL.

CHAPTER 6: THE MANY PURPOSES OF THE OCTOBER ANNOUNCEMENT

The administration resisted making a press announcement until October 1963 because publicizing the withdrawal plans committed it to a timetable and a narrative of a war in a de-escalating phase. In fact, even though NSAM 263, the summative document of the NSC meetings, instructed that “no formal announcement” should be made about the withdrawal plans, within hours Press Secretary Salinger and Secretary McNamara organized a press conference.⁴¹¹ As expected, when it came, the announcement produced front-page news: the *Baltimore Sun*’s cover, for instance, was splashed with the headline “McNamara and Taylor Feel U.S. Can Withdraw Most Of Troops From Vietnam By End of 1965”.⁴¹² The *New York Times* cover featured a photo of President Kennedy listening intently to Taylor and McNamara with the headline “Vietnam Victory by the End of ’65 Envisaged by U.S.”.⁴¹³

Just as McNamara had insisted on having the 1965 end-date in his trip report, he also insisted on making a public announcement, knowing that it would attract media attention. The announcement fulfilled a number of his short and long-term objectives. In the short-term, the administration hoped to goad the Diem regime into implementing much-needed and long-awaited political reforms that would “win the hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese as a prerequisite for defeating the Vietcong insurgency.⁴¹⁴ Crucially for McNamara, it also prepared him to counter the criticisms of Senators Fulbright and Mansfield before going to Capitol Hill the following week, and in so doing, to delay possible cuts in aid funding.

⁴¹¹ *Pentagon Paper*, Part IV.B.4, pp. 42.

⁴¹² William Knighton Jr., “McNamara and Taylor Feel U.S. Can Withdraw Most Of Troops From Vietnam By End Of 1965,” *The Baltimore Sun* (October 3, 1963).

⁴¹³ Tad Szulc, “Vietnam Victory by the End of ’65 Envisaged by U.S.”; “Officials Say War May be Won if Political Crisis Does Not Hamstring Effort” *New York Times* (October 3, 1963), pp. 1.; “Text of Statement on Vietnam,” *New York Times* (October 3, 1963), pp. 4.

⁴¹⁴ Logevall, for instance, has written that these plans were “primarily to pressure Diem.” Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 69.

However, the more important objective for McNamara was a bureaucratic one: that is to peg the whole, fractured administration to his chosen policy and to create considerable momentum against further escalation. A telling exchange during the October NSC meetings between Kennedy and his Press Secretary Pierre Salinger speaks to this objective most clearly. When Salinger indicated that “the significance of this is that this is a government-wide statement of policy which has the approval of every”, Kennedy cut him off to add, “And more than that. It’s not only that statement [...] to obey [...] but also the report, the essence of the report, was endorsed by all.”⁴¹⁵

Moreover, the press release actually contained two distinct announcements: a token, thousand-man withdrawal by the end of 1963 and, in addition, a gradual phase-out of remaining military personnel by 1965. The thousand-man withdrawal was arguably a public relations exercise aimed primarily at appeasing the SFRC whereas the overall phase-out was, as the Pentagon Papers has described it, a “political-managerial”⁴¹⁶ move that reflected McNamara’s style and priorities.

The October announcements as public relations

In tracing the token 1,000-man withdrawal back to its first expression, it is all the more clear that it was always distinct from the overall withdrawal plans. The idea of announcing a “token withdrawal” originated in discussions with Robert Thompson and the Foreign Office in April 1962 when Thompson suggested that it could be made “when it appear[ed] reasonably certain that the tide had turned in Vietnam.”⁴¹⁷ He argued that it was true in July 1962 and by October 1962 suggested that the token withdrawal should take place within approximately a year’s time (i.e. in October 1963) and that it should be “well thought out and well-timed, so that it achieved the maximum effect without

⁴¹⁵ Tape 144: Cassette 3, October 2, 1963, 6:05 pm meeting, Presidential Tapes, JFKL.

⁴¹⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.B.4, pp. 5.

⁴¹⁷ Ledward, Washington to Warmer, FO, April 8, 1962, Reel 19: FO 371/166733, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975.

taking any of the pressure off here.”⁴¹⁸ This suggests that the token withdrawal was first, a public relations move (it should be “well-timed”) and second, distinct from the overall strategy (it should not “tak[e] any pressure off here”). The token withdrawal provided a public backdrop against which the administration could present the withdrawal plans but did not affect the content of these plans.⁴¹⁹

At the same time, the administration had to balance different audiences in South Vietnam and in Washington DC. Earlier in the summer, it seemed that announcing a withdrawal achieved the administration’s objectives in both settings. In a private conversation, McNamara explained to President Kennedy that “we ought to think about the possibility of pulling 1000 men by the end of the year”, that this was good “for domestic political purposes and also because of the psychological effect it would have on South Vietnam.”⁴²⁰ In keeping with this, MACV and CINCPAC proposed bringing the troops “home by xmas [sic] for compassionate and publicity reasons” and envisaged “statements of mutual gratitude” as well as grand ceremonies.⁴²¹

However, after McNamara’s trip when he had observed “hedging” and uncertainty from the South Vietnamese part, the decision was made to treat the withdrawal quietly and justify it on the basis that the function was either completed or the South Vietnamese could complete the job themselves.⁴²² President Kennedy now instructed Lodge that removing the “1,000 US advisors by December of this year should not be raised formally with Diem. Instead the action should be carried out routinely as part of our general posture of withdrawing people when they are no longer needed.”⁴²³

⁴¹⁸ “Record of a Meeting With General Maxwell Taylor on September 12” Thompson to Warner, FO, October 9, 1962, Reel 17: FO 371/166723, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

⁴¹⁹ “Mr. Thompson’s Visit to Washington to Consult With US Officials: Report on His Discussions” Ledward, Washington, April 6, 1963, Reel 27: FO 371/170111, TNA: FO Files: The USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

⁴²⁰ Tape 85, May 7, 1963, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

⁴²¹ “Public Affairs Plan for Reduction in Force”, MACV to CINCPAC, September 15, 1963, Folder: September 1963 13-15, Box 14, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁴²² JCS to CINCPAC and MACV, October 5, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, General, September-November 1963, Box 519, Harriman Papers, LoC.

⁴²³ Memorandum for the Files of a Conference with the President, October 5, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Vol 4, Doc. 179.

For McNamara, the Senate was the more important audience. During the October meetings, Kennedy specifically asked McNamara about the “advantage” of announcing the thousand-man withdrawal. McNamara responded that,

“The advantage of taking them out is that we can say to the Congress and the people that we do have a plan for reducing the exposure of U.S. combat personnel to the guerrilla actions in South Vietnam, actions that the people of South Vietnam should gradually develop a capability to suppress themselves. And I think this will be of great value to us in meeting the very strong views of Fulbright and others that we’re bogged down in Asia and we’ll be there for decades.”

Kennedy agreed with McNamara and suggested that any public statement should be “run by” these congressmen.⁴²⁴ Both Kennedy and McNamara were concerned about losing key allies of the administration’s aid program.

For Taylor, the other author of the October 1963 report, the more important audience was Diem. Before leaving for Vietnam, he had “thought it would be useful to work out a time schedule within which we expect to get this job done and to say plainly to Diem that we are not going to be able to stay beyond such and such time with such and such forces, and the war must be won in this time period.” The minutes of the meeting read that, “The President did not say “yes” or “no” to this proposal.”⁴²⁵ Unlike McNamara, Taylor went along with a public announcement of the policy to disengage because he hoped to influence the uncooperative regime in Saigon.

Although Robert Kennedy had first suggested that the threat of withdrawal could be used as a pressure tactic⁴²⁶, by the time of the October 1963 NSC meetings Taylor alone was pushing the idea. For Taylor, the 1965 deadline was basically arbitrary and primarily a threat designed to get Diem in

⁴²⁴ Transcript NSC meeting, October 3, 1963: Tape 144/A49, Cassette 2/3, Folder: Fog of War, background and research materials, Box II:114, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁴²⁵ Memorandum for the Record, Meeting on McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, September 23, 1963, Folder: September 1963 21-25, Box 15, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁴²⁶ Memorandum of Conference With the President, September 11, 1963, Folder: meetings on Vietnam, 9/11/63-9/12/63, Box 316, NSF, M&M Series, JFKL.

line in the face of growing pressure within the administration for a coup.⁴²⁷

McNamara's approach was almost exactly opposite. He lamented the lack of influence and although the terms of reference of his trip to Vietnam had included finding ways "of influencing Diem", his notes reveal his frustration. In them, he complained, for instance, about "how little leverage we have" on the "completely unsuccessful government in Saigon."⁴²⁸

In addition, although McNamara saw the value of "creating uncertainty" in Diem⁴²⁹, he was also skeptical that such a strategy could be effective.⁴³⁰ Both before and after the Taylor-McNamara trip, "pressure programs" were met with skepticism: President Kennedy "did not think that [they were] likely to be effective"⁴³¹ while the Working Group on South Vietnam and the CIA warned that any threat even to "employ its ultimate sanction (pulling out of South Vietnam) would almost certainly be regarded as hollow by the [Government of South Vietnam]."⁴³²

Ultimately, the Taylor-McNamara report itself presented this strategy not as an optimal policy but as a desperate effort: it noted that they could "increase [the regime's] obduracy" but "unless such pressures [were] exerted, they [were] almost certain to continue past patterns of behavior."⁴³³ Also, the

⁴²⁷ Memorandum for the Record, Meeting on McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, September 23, 1963, Folder: September 1963 21-25, Box 15, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁴²⁸ Handwritten Notes From Robert McNamara, Trip to South Vietnam, September 25, 1963, Folder: Trip notes, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

⁴²⁹ Minutes of a Meeting in the Situation Room (Without the President), October 3, 1963, Folder: October 1963 2-3, Box 15, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL. Hilsman and Rufus Philips were pushing the idea of a "psychological warfare campaign" was most aggressively. Coming out the NSC meetings, Hilsman wrote that the policy that had been "agreed upon" was "a policy of graduated pressure on the GVN." Neupert to Hilsman, October 18, 1963, Folder: Vietnam 10/6/63-10/31/63, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

⁴³⁰ Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 September – 1 October 1963, Folder: Vietnam, McNamara-Taylor Report, 10/1/63, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

⁴³¹ Memorandum for the Record, Meeting on McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, September 23, 1963, Folder: September 1963 21-25, Box 15, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁴³² Proposal for a Memorandum from the South Vietnam Working Group to the Director of the CIA, September 30, 1963, Folder: Vietnam III, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

⁴³³ Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 September – 1 October 1963, Folder: Vietnam, McNamara-Taylor Report, 10/1/63, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

“Selective Pressures” that it did suggest included everything but military cuts which it deemed especially unfeasible and counterproductive. Notably it excluded the CPSVN.⁴³⁴ “In sum,” the report read, “The effect of pressures that can be carried out without detriment to the war effort is probably limited with respect to the possibility of Diem making necessary changes.”⁴³⁵ For McNamara, a pressure program, if it achieved anything, was designed to keep the CPSVN on track: a responsive government in South Vietnam would increase the likelihood that a self-sustaining program would be in place by 1965 when the U.S. military withdrew.

The press statement as a bureaucratic move

The decision to announce the withdrawal plans on October 3rd 1963 was also a bureaucratic move. While drafting the Taylor-McNamara report, Chester Cooper, William Bundy and General Taylor each questioned the advisability of recommending a 1965 end-date. However, McNamara insisted he was “just following orders” and that the date must stay in the report.⁴³⁶ He also overrode Kennedy’s reservations about committing the administration to a set date. After getting the military on board (they drafted the CPSVN), this was a way of getting the whole national security bureaucracy on board as well. By getting all the key actors involved in Vietnam policy to publicly commit to a policy of de-escalation and getting Taylor especially to co-own the prediction that most military operations would end by 1965, McNamara effectively neutralized bureaucratic politics.

The end-point for the withdrawal plans and in the announcement was not “victory” in a traditional or unambiguous sense. Instead, as laid out in the CPSVN and in NSAM 263, it was: “until the insurgency has been suppressed or until the national security forces of the Government of South Viet-Nam are capable of suppressing it.”⁴³⁷ Semantics are important here: it was not *and* but

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Dodd, Meade & Co, 1970), pp. 215-216.

⁴³⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.B.4, pp. 42.

or. In time, the second alternative took precedence: the South Vietnamese were to fight the war themselves.

Clearly, the nuances of the policy had filtered through the administration effectively since Forrestal detailed the standing policy to Bundy a month later as follows: "The President made the point, as I remember, that our only interest was to help South Viet Nam defend itself against subversive aggression from the North. [...] More recently we have added a gloss to this formula and implied (in the NSC statement of last month) that we would also withdrawal the bulk of our personnel as soon as the South Vietnamese were able to cope for themselves. Secretary McNamara and General Taylor estimated that this might occur in 1965."⁴³⁸ The policy also filtered to the field with Lodge reiterating to his South Vietnamese counterparts that: "Americans are here to help Vietnam stand on its own feet, after which we would go home."⁴³⁹ Not everyone in the administration necessarily believed that this was the final objective or outcome, but by October 1963 the administration's stated policy and the basis for military planning was that the United States was in the process of disengaging from Vietnam and transferring responsibility to the South Vietnamese.

In a revealing passage in *In Retrospect*, McNamara went into some detail about the divisions in the administration that culminated in the October meeting.⁴⁴⁰ Since his written notes for the first draft were relatively blunter, they are used instead. In them, he described three "factions":

"Group one believed the Training Mission had been successful and should be withdrawn. Group two believed the Mission hadn't succeeded but had been in place sufficient time to demonstrate success wasn't possible. Group three believed that additional US support, either through a Training Mission or through training supplanted by US combat forces, would be required and was justified."

⁴³⁸ Forrestal to McGeorge Bundy, November 7, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, General, 11/6/63-11/15/63, Memos and Miscellaneous, Box 202, NSF, JFKL.

⁴³⁹ US Embassy, Saigon to Rusk, November 7, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, General 11/3/63-11/5/63, State Cables, Box 201, NSF, Countries Series, Vietnam, JFKL.

⁴⁴⁰ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, pp. 79-80.

As he explained, while all these “factions” agreed on the end-point, they did not necessarily agree on the way to get there or how close the administration was to meeting its objective. However, a public commitment to his policy and his end-date forced their hand and produced administration-wide unity. Indeed, as a State Department cable explained, “We have been making serious effort in conjunction with McNamara-Taylor mission to achieve actual and visible unity within USG.”⁴⁴¹

Although McNamara also described the meetings as “heated” and “controversial”, in fact this was not entirely correct. His report was sufficiently ambiguous that most participants were convinced that their objectives were being met. Taylor could feel that the pressures on Diem had been raised. Hilsman, who often clashed with McNamara and was prone to making snide remarks about him, was so satisfied with McNamara’s position at the October 2nd 1963 meeting that he sent him a laudatory letter that read: “I want to express my admiration for a perceptive job performed under the most difficult circumstances imaginable. I think you have brought some badly needed order to both Saigon and Washington, for which I am personally grateful.”⁴⁴²

Ultimately, the October announcements served a number of important, short-term objectives for McNamara. First, he could “meet” the views of critical congressmen as he prepared to meet with them. Second, by announcing the process of withdrawal but then treating actual withdrawals in a “low-key” way, the administration could try to create uncertainty in the Diem regime without giving the Vietnamese the impression that the U.S was “abandoning” them. Lastly, it consolidated the OSD’s policy of phasing out of Vietnam and thus created a bureaucratic momentum in that direction. The latter was not, as Forrestal had suggested, primarily externally-oriented “gloss”⁴⁴³ but an important internal, bureaucratic maneuver.

⁴⁴¹ State Department to US Embassy, Saigon, October 4, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, Top Secret Cables, 10/63, Box 204, NSF, Countries Series, Vietnam, JFKL.

⁴⁴² Hilsman to McNamara, October 3, 1963, Folder: October 1963, Box 6, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

⁴⁴³ Forrestal to McGeorge Bundy, November 7, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, General, 11/6/63-11/15/63, Memos and Miscellaneous, Box 202, NSF, JFKL.

In an oral history that he gave many years later, McNamara reflected on bureaucratic politics in a way that seems particularly relevant to his October decisions. He explained, “I would point out that there is an important distinction between decisions that are a function of bureaucratic politics or decisions that are dominated by bureaucratic politics on the one hand, and, on the other, the implementation of decisions taken in the national interest – implementation which must take account of bureaucratic politics, and in a very real sense neutralize bureaucratic politics.”⁴⁴⁴

November 1963

McNamara hoped that a public announcement might set the policy “in concrete”⁴⁴⁵ but he could not have predicted the events that followed and which threw it off course. His report had sounded a note of caution that events could still create setbacks. Above all there was the possibility of an “unanticipated coup d’état or death of Diem.” Far from being “unanticipated”, McNamara’s trip notes showed deep discontent and uncertainty over Diem’s future and over whether the war was winnable with him.

McNamara opposed the coup, although not vehemently, primarily because it introduced uncertainty into his plans. Even before his trip, he was unconvinced that coup plotters within the administration knew “how we make this thing work.”⁴⁴⁶ His notes of his meeting with Professor Patrick Honey in Saigon, a man he would continue to consult throughout the war, echo McNamara’s risk aversion despite his frustrations with Diem. They read: “dangerous to make a change [...] can we win with this regime, he believes we can’t; then what is going to replace it – this is extremely risky.”⁴⁴⁷

Ultimately, as McNamara explained to the SFRC, Diem was a prime case of “better the devil you know” and he sought to avoid any distractions or

⁴⁴⁴ Robert S. McNamara OH Interview No. 1 by Walt Rostow, January 8, 1975, LBJL.

⁴⁴⁵ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, pp. 80.

⁴⁴⁶ On this, see especially the following collection of recently declassified materials: John Prados (ed.), “The Diem Coup After 50 Years,” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book* 444 (November 1, 2013). Retrieved online December 13, 2014: <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB444/>

⁴⁴⁷ “Notes of a meeting with Professor Honey”, September 25, 1963, Folder: Trip notes, Box 63, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

disruptions to his planning process. As a result, after the October meetings, Kennedy belatedly informed Ambassador Lodge to put a stop to communication with would-be coup-plotters in Saigon.

However, by the end of November, both Prime Minister Diem and President Kennedy were dead and, with them, McNamara's best-laid plans for Vietnam and for the Defense Department. The ambiguity of the October decisions and announcements was enough to get a very disparate group of advisors to agree to the policy as well as eventually to overturn it. In the end, Kennedy's policy might have been doomed to failure: counterinsurgency strategy with a much-reduced U.S. presence might not have been enough to stave off the insurgency and the Kennedy administration might have been compelled to intervene under domestic pressure. On a deeper level, the administration never really solved an underlying dilemma of counterinsurgency strategy, namely whether security or development issues should take precedence. In any case, counterfactual reasoning is fraught with problems and can be left to others.⁴⁴⁸

Conclusion

The first part of this thesis has described the reforms effected by McNamara at the OSD and his efforts to align the Defense Department's resources and capabilities to the President's chosen policies and specifically on Vietnam. McNamara was projected into a leading role on Vietnam because of his proximity to the President and because of his ability to bring order to the administration's most complicated problems. As it happened, the President's chosen policy was to use Vietnam as a test case for his interest in counterinsurgency, to provide a case study for the "wars of national liberation" that loomed across the developing world.

Although McNamara sat at the helm of the United States' military organization, he did not necessarily favor military solutions to the problems in Vietnam, on the contrary. Instead, the administration moved to a strategy

⁴⁴⁸ For a relevant example of counterfactual reasoning on the Kennedy administration, see: James G. Blight et al., *Virtual JFK*.

geared towards “self-help”, as spelled out in Kennedy’s inaugural address, and towards disengagement from Vietnam in part to pre-empt the trends towards militarization that troubled Kennedy’s civilian advisors in 1962. McNamara chose withdrawal not out of optimism but because it was most the coherent and efficient option available to him to meet the views of advisors such as Hilsman and Thompson. From a bureaucratic perspective, and according to McNamara’s understanding of civil-military relations, which was shaped by the Eisenhower administration’s legacy, policy was now working as it should.

Nevertheless, the economic dimensions of withdrawal are fundamental to understanding McNamara’s enthusiasm for counterinsurgency and for the chosen policies. If he gave the plans added urgency and pressed on his military advisors to accelerate their phased withdrawal plans, it was also because of his preoccupation with fiscal and economic concerns. The latter are treated in the second part of this thesis and connect to the second dimension of civilian control as it was laid out in the introduction, namely that civilian control of the military also implied that the OSD should define the appropriate fiscal commitment to military requirements balancing them against domestic and economic concerns.

PART II:
THE OSD AS A BRIDGE: THE ECONOMIC
IMPLICATIONS OF DEFENSE AND OF VIETNAM

CHAPTER 7: CIVILIAN CONTROL OF THE DEFENSE
BUDGET

Since its inception, the OSD had played a steadily growing role in designing defense policy. Whereas in 1947, the role of the OSD had been limited to coordinating war plans that were produced in the separate services, by 1962, the military services had little input on setting strategy in Vietnam or indeed elsewhere. On the budgetary side, the evolution was more fitful. Since 1947, each successive administration had tried to reinforce civilian control of the budgetary process but with only limited success. The 1958 Defense Reorganization Act asked that the OSD “provide more effective, efficient, and economical administration in the Department of Defense” and McNamara’s immediate successor, Thomas Gates, defined the outlines of an action plan to this end but without substantially acting upon it.

As the Prologue described, McNamara’s predecessors were divided between those who were great economizers such as Eisenhower’s Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson who put a primacy on fiscal balance and those who were “defense-firsters” such as Truman’s last Secretary, Robert Lovett. In 1961, the incumbent President seemed to fall into the latter group: a central theme of his campaign was that Eisenhower had been dangerously concerned with budgetary balance and thus had allowed a “missile gap” to emerge. Moreover, Kennedy reached out to figurehead “big spenders” in the transition including Stuart Symington and Lovett. He tried to bring Lovett into his administration, offering him either his old job or the Treasury Secretaryship. However, despite the campaign rhetoric and after Lovett turned

down the offers, Kennedy filled both positions with men rooted in the Republican Party and in more conservative attitudes towards the budget.

As Secretary of Defense, McNamara erred on the side of fiscal prudence and developed a reputation for cost-cutting while he recognized, and at times was alarmed with, the pressures to increase spending on defense projects. The pressures were those that had troubled his immediate predecessors, namely the services defending their budgets and congressional leaders defending the services or jobs in their constituencies. At the same time, with a Congress that dragged its feet on most of the administration's attempts at social programs, McNamara and his colleagues recognized the Keynesian potential of the defense budget and pushed through programs, including the civil defense program, that were as much defense projects as they were about upgrading civilian infrastructure.

Ultimately, McNamara's core "revolution" on implementing civilian control came to the budgetary process, principally in the shape of Systems Analysis and Planning, Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS). More than the changes to the reporting lines that were described in the preceding sections, these changes became a "substitute for unification of the services and the establishment of a single chief of staff" as they forced the services to produce one overarching budget in keeping with national, shared objectives.⁴⁴⁹ In addition to the analytic rigor they brought to defining the United States' goals and aligning resources to those ends, they gave McNamara a privileged overview of the Department's economic impact.

The Comptroller's Office and the defense budget

McNamara's vision for the Defense Department emphasized cost-cutting and rational analysis. Having been given a free hand to hire the team he desired⁴⁵⁰, McNamara brought in his "whiz kids", primarily analysts from RAND or other security intellectuals many of whom had a background in

⁴⁴⁹ Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy*, pp. 189.

⁴⁵⁰ The only exception was Undersecretary of the Navy, Paul B. Fay, an old friend of the John F. Kennedy's. Robert McNamara OH Interview by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OSD OH 1, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

economics, to radically overhaul what they saw as the archaic way of running national defense. They brought a culture of “rational” thought from RAND to existing “irrational planning and budgeting practices.”⁴⁵¹

The key office for this agenda was the Comptroller where McNamara put Charles Hitch; their first meeting “was reported to be ‘love at first sight’.”⁴⁵² Before coming into government, Hitch had been the Head of the Economics Division at RAND and, together with his colleague Roland McKean, had written the “bible of defense economics”⁴⁵³, *Economics of Defense in the Nuclear Age*, which spelled out PPBS, his main innovation in office.⁴⁵⁴ As his Deputy Alain Enthoven later wrote in an obituary for his mentor, “‘Hitchcraft,’” as it was affectionately known, was the most important advance in public administration of our time.”⁴⁵⁵ While Hitch was known as the “father of defense economics” and of PPBS in its precise form, similar ideas had circulated both in and outside of the U.S. Defense Department. Hitch’s ideas ultimately reflected a bipartisan consensus that the defense budget, as it drew on a growing share of federal resources, should become more transparent and accountable.

First applied to the 1963 budget, PPBS was essentially a planning tool to define national security objectives and to break these objectives into missions and functional areas (through so-called Draft Presidential Memoranda or DPMs). Before, the budget had been allocated on a yearly basis and according to service-specific inputs, for instance personnel or logistics costs. Under the new system, services budgets were allocated according to their ability to achieve the stated objectives in the most cost-efficient way and were calculated over a five-year period in order to capture the total cost of programs, which invariably spread over many years. When McNamara presented his first budget in the spring of 1962, newspaper headlines recognized the transformative nature of the changes and

⁴⁵¹ Bell to McGeorge Bundy and McNamara, January 30, 1961, Folder: Defense budget, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁴⁵² Alain C. Enthoven, “Tribute to Charles J. Hitch,” *OR/MS Today* 22:6 (December 1995).

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ Hitch and McKean, *The Economics of Defense*.

⁴⁵⁵ Enthoven, “Tribute to Charles J. Hitch.”

announced “Kennedy Fights the Generals” while the stories underneath noted that McNamara had “virtually abolished separate budgets and it was he and not the Joint Chiefs of Staff who explained the new military strategy to Congress.”⁴⁵⁶

By placing ultimate budgetary authority in the hands of civilian agencies of the Defense Department, namely with the Comptroller, rather than the services, PPBS eroded the services’ power. PPBS required that each service submit its budget through its Chief rather than its Secretary, which *de facto* stripped the Service Secretary positions of their power and made them organizationally redundant. As a result, Service Secretary positions became “parking lot” positions for Kennedy’s friends: Secretary of the Navy Fay, for instance, was mostly remembered for his time on the golf course.⁴⁵⁷ When he left, he was replaced with Paul Nitze as a way of short-circuiting Nitze’s long-term ambitions to replace Gilpatric as Deputy Secretary of Defense.⁴⁵⁸

In principle, under PPBS, the budget was open-ended and not bound by the set budgetary ceilings that had capped the budgets of McNamara’s predecessors’. In practice, the reforms were designed with a cost-cutting agenda at their core and forced civilian authorities, mainly the President, to be more modest in setting strategies and national ambitions. Enthoven and Smith explained, “A frequently stated but mistaken view of setting strategy and force requirements is that the process is one of starting at the top with broad national objectives and then successively deriving a strategy, force requirements, and a budget. It is mistaken because costs must be considered from the very outset in choosing strategies and objectives.”⁴⁵⁹

The whole system of forward planning and budgeting was designed to align the Defense Department’s resources and planning more effectively with

⁴⁵⁶ Brandon, Henry, “Kennedy Fights the Generals,” *The Sunday Times* (May 27, 1962).

⁴⁵⁷ Chief of Naval Operations Arleigh Burke’s oral history remembers Paul Fay as a “nice guy, very pleasant” but a “dead bee”, someone who “needed to be worked around. [...] He never worked very hard and he never knew what was going on.” Arleigh A. Burke OH Interview by Joseph E. O’Connor, January 20, 1967, JFKL.

⁴⁵⁸ Paul Nitze OH Interview by Dorothy Fosdick, May 22, 1964, Folder: 6, Box 118, Nitze Papers, LoC.

⁴⁵⁹ Enthoven, and Smith, *How Much is Enough?*, pp. 160.

the rest of government. As a result, the budgetary process was coordinated with the Bureau of Budget whose director not surprisingly praised the first budget, noting that it made “enormous advances in concept, clarity and logic” that were “literally revolutionary” although “there is much more to be done, as Secretary McNamara knows better than any of us, but the improvement in the degree of rationality which can be applied to military planning and budgeting is already tremendous.”⁴⁶⁰

However, as they were implemented further, the steps to rationalize and reduce defense expenditures ruffled many feathers not least in the services. The services were the principal target of cuts and the reforms challenged their authority most. The State Department was also often unresponsive. Looking back on this period, Paul Nitze asserted that if McNamara’s “belief in forward planning, in particular time phased logistic and financial planning was close to absolute”, it also sometimes lacked “tactical and broad judgmental vision.”⁴⁶¹

For the services and the Defense Department, cost-cutting first came in the shape of the 1962 Defense Department Cost Reduction Program, which included standardizing logistics and procurement and especially military base closures.⁴⁶² To support his effort, McNamara created a set of dedicated offices within the OSD, notably the Defense Supply Agency, which was responsible for procurement and the Defense Contract Audit Agency. Base closures were especially complicated politically because many of the Senators in the SASC, which was ultimately responsible for allocating the defense budget, were also from states that hosted major bases and defense-related operations and so, if nothing else, base closures involved job losses for their constituents.

⁴⁶⁰ “FY1963 Defense Budget Issues”, Bell to President Kennedy, November 13, 1961, Folder: Defense Budget, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁴⁶¹ Nitze to Norris in preparation for his article “Robert S. McNamara: Pentagon Genius,” *Giants in Management*, January 10, 1978, Folder: Articles & Misc. Writings, Box II:89, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁴⁶² Kaplan et al., *The McNamara Ascendancy*, Chapter 17.

Congress and the Iron Triangle

From the start, McNamara's relations with the congressional Armed Services Committees were ambivalent. On the one hand, the conservative Democrat Chairman of the SASC Richard Russell had pushed through the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 and thus welcomed the reforms that McNamara promised to implement. On the other, like many on his committee, he was prone to adding wasteful projects to the defense budget for political, rather than operational, reasons.

In an oral history, McNamara described some of the tensions that blighted his congressional relationships. He explained that the members of the Armed Services Committees in the House and Senate at the time "were not representative of the people" and "were disproportionately Southerners", where many military installations were located. He added, "Southerners, as we all know, have had a different view of the military requirements of the nation and the national security of the nation, and how it might best be achieved, than have the rest of the people." Moreover, the committees were "dominated by reserve officers" who were "spokesmen for military interests as opposed to the national interest. They saw things through the narrow parochial views of the military." He ended on one of the main points of contention in his congressional relations, namely how they got in the way of his cost reduction programs: "There was at that time a situation difficult for many people to imagine today: a desire in the Congress to spend far more than the Secretary of Defense and the President wished to spend on defense."⁴⁶³

McNamara's remarks raised many issues but especially Eisenhower's concern in his now-famous farewell address about the "iron triangle" between industry, the military and congressional leaders or what the President called the "military-industrial complex". Ironically, Eisenhower's remarks were also a reaction to Kennedy and Symington's accusations during the campaign that

⁴⁶³ Robert S. McNamara OH Interview No. 1 by Walt W. Rostow, August 1, 1975, LBJL.

he had been “weak on defense”⁴⁶⁴ and reflected not just on the failures of congressional oversight but also on the novelty of a major military establishment in the U.S. experience. In later years, Yarmolinsky echoed Eisenhower’s views and complained about the “military-industrial-labor-congressional complex”. He argued that Congress “since World War II” had “to a considerable extent abdicated” its oversight role of the armed services in part because of the growing complexity of military issues and programs but also because of “self-interest in major contracts” which produced “wasteful development and procurement procedures.”⁴⁶⁵

All the same, from McNamara’s vantage point, PPBS and his sheer strength of character could be enough to short-circuit congressional manipulations that would undermine an efficient allocation of federal resources to clear defense purposes. He claimed not to “share Eisenhower’s concerns” suggesting that the “influences” could only affect national security policy “to the extent that the President and/or Secretary of Defense wants to be influenced.”⁴⁶⁶ In office, he did not shy away from following through with the logic of PPBS and overruling the services’ military judgment on costly procurement decisions for new weapon systems, precisely the kind of program their allies in Congress tended to defend.

However, this led to acrimonious arguments between the OSD and the Senate and services, most notably over the so-called TFX fighter jet. The Air Force and Navy were meant to jointly procure and operate the TFX fighter. Despite both services’ reservations, the OSD pushed the program in an effort to pool resources, encourage inter-Service cooperation and, in so doing, cut costs. The OSD also chose General Dynamics over Boeing to build the jet, a choice that overruled the services’ recommendations. The whole program became even more controversial as cost overruns dented McNamara’s effort

⁴⁶⁴ James Fallows, Douglas Brinkley and Ralph Williams debate (National Public Radio, January 8, 2003). Retrieved online November 2, 2014: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=907187>.

⁴⁶⁵ Adam Yarmolinsky, *The Military Establishment: Its Impacts on American Society*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 418-419.

⁴⁶⁶ The CEA included Gardner Ackley, Kermit Gordon, Walter Heller, Joseph Pechman, Paul Samuelson and James Tobin. See Council of Economic Advisors OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph Pechman, August 1, 1964, JFKL.

to showcase its cost-efficiency logic and when the Senate openly challenged McNamara's competence by initiating an investigation into his decision.

The TFX incident was emblematic of relations between McNamara and the services and their allies in Senate and highlighted their resistance to McNamara's reforms. Within the OSD it also crystallized a confrontational attitude towards the Chiefs and the Senate and contributed to the deterioration of trust and goodwill between the two. Writing about the incident to Sorenson, Gilpatric was angry:

"The only feasible method of handling this situation as far as the Defense Department is concerned is to shift the basis for the debate. Every effort must be made, of course, to establish the fact. But this will not do the job that must be done. Somehow, the debate must be shifted from a question of merits (which the public is incapable of deciding) to a question of whether the military, in conjunction with large weapons systems producers, will be able to dominate the responsible officials of our Government who, under our Constitution, are supposed to be in charge. [...] What we are really dealing with in the TFX investigation is the spectacle of a large corporation, backed by Air Force Generals, using the investigatory powers of Congress to intimidate civilian officials just because it lost out on a contract."⁴⁶⁷

Gilpatric's letter betrays both the extent to which the OSD, by 1963, was in a confrontational relationship with the services and their friends in the Congress, but also the extent to which McNamara and his colleagues saw themselves as serving the public interest in spite of, if not against, them.

The battle lines in this confrontation were actually between the executive, through the President's advisors, and the military and legislative branches of government. In the short-term term, the confrontation hinged on the latter's resistance to any cuts in the defense budget. In the longer term, it reflected a deeper rift over McNamara's attempts to break through their entrenched interests in the *status quo* and more broadly, his efforts to move

⁴⁶⁷ Gilpatric to Sorenson, March 11, 1963, Folder: Defense Department, Subject Files 1961-64, Box 31, Sorenson Papers, JFKL.

foreign and defense policy making into civilian and specifically the President's hands.

The defense budget and Keynesianism

While the Armed Services Committee was relatively spendthrift, the same was not true across Congress especially after 1962 when Kennedy announced his intention to pass a personal and corporate tax cut to kick-start the ailing economy. In the wake of the Berlin Crisis in 1961, Kennedy had planned on proposing a tax increase to match increases in defense spending but his economic advisors, including Sorensen and Walter Heller, the Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, convinced him otherwise. By the summer of 1962, when Kennedy finally settled on the tax cut, he met with almost immediate resistance from Republicans in the House and conservative Democrats in the Senate who wanted to force the administration to match the proposed tax cuts with cuts to federal expenditures.⁴⁶⁸

The administration's decision to push for a tax cut and increases in defense spending rather than spend directly on social programs, as Kennedy's more Keynesian advisors would have preferred, hinged on issues of political feasibility. Kennedy concluded that it was, "probably easier, given the mood of Congress and the country, to obtain the necessary economic stimulus through tax reduction than through expenditure increases."⁴⁶⁹

Similarly, given the relative invulnerability of the defense budget to cuts, the Kennedy administration concluded that "spending for national security, with its remarkable sanctity from attack by pressure groups, including business [should take] the place of massive public works."⁴⁷⁰

Whereas Eisenhower had added 7 billion to federal spending between 1953 and 1961, Kennedy added 17 billion in three years. Three quarters was

⁴⁶⁸ Among the more vocal opponents was Richard M. Nixon: the members of Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisors recalled that the President exclaimed, "God, look at what Nixon is doing to me on this whole question of fiscal responsibility!" Council of Economic Advisors OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph Pechman, August 1, 1964, JFKL, pp. 217.

⁴⁶⁹ C. Douglas Dillon OH Interview No. 7 by Harvey Brazer, September 22, 1964, JFKL.

⁴⁷⁰ Jim F. Heath, *John F. Kennedy and the Business Community* (London, UK: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 30.

allocated to defense⁴⁷¹ but the Defense Department's funds were also used for social purposes: in addition to creating jobs, the ill-fated civil defense program morphed into a civilian infrastructure project and McNamara spearheaded civil rights issues in the Defense Department specifically to compensate for the lack of congressional action.⁴⁷² McNamara also used the Department's clout over industry to intervene in the domestic economy. For instance, when in 1961 steel companies flouted the administration's suggested price guidelines that were designed to stem inflation, McNamara threatened to switch the Department's steel providers forcing them to back down. Overall, Kennedy's liberal critics failed to appreciate the way the defense budget was used, albeit as a second-best option, to influence the domestic economy and to push social spending through a resistant congress.

Fiscal conservatism

At the same time, Kennedy's liberal critics were correct in their suspicion that he was more fiscally conservative than they would have liked. Even before his decision to pass the tax cut, Kennedy sought to balance the budget. In fact, the CEA remembered his "bombshell" just after the inauguration when he agreed with leaders of the Democratic Party in both houses to balance his budget as soon as feasible. He would have achieved a balanced budget as early as FY63 were it not for weak economic indicators in 1962.⁴⁷³

Moreover, he chose Republicans to fill two of the most important positions for federal spending, namely Treasury and Defense. C. Douglas Dillon, with his background in finance at his father's investment bank, Dillon, Read & Co. where the late James Forrestal had also begun his career, and McNamara were both nominal Republicans disposed to balanced budgets. The Council of Economic Advisors, which was filled with Keynesian

⁴⁷¹ Harris, *Economics of the Kennedy Years*, pp. 27.

⁴⁷² See, for instance, Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1985), Chapter 20.

⁴⁷³ Council of Economic Advisors OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph Pechman, August 1, 1964, JFKL, pp. 175.

economists, complained about Dillon's influence on the President.⁴⁷⁴ Although Dillon later explained that in Kennedy's view the Treasury and Defense positions should be apolitical, he also described himself as Kennedy's "Chief Financial Officer" and accepted that he usually had the last word on most economic issues.⁴⁷⁵

In addition, Kennedy gave both Dillon and McNamara operational control of his attempts to limit federal spending. In an attempt to reduce expenditures across the board and on defense in particular, Kennedy charged Dillon with a government-wide cost-cutting effort. Dillon's principal ally in this campaign was McNamara who enthusiastically supported the agenda against both the State Department and services' advice. As one of McGeorge Bundy's principal advisors Carl Kaysen observed at the time, McNamara used "the pressures Dillon [...] generated as a means for pushing through various reorganizations that he had in mind in any event."⁴⁷⁶

McNamara enthusiastically jumped on Dillon's bandwagon for a number of reasons but especially because Defense Department expenditures had increased exponentially since the end of the Second World War and were at the heart of expanding federal expenditures. One of the President's notes on the budget and debt from January 1963 put it simply: in response to "what causes the budget deficit?" it answered "first, the cost of national security."⁴⁷⁷ According to official estimates, by 1963 the defense budget represented approximately 50% the federal budget⁴⁷⁸ but national security expenditures generally, including space, raised that number to over 70%.⁴⁷⁹ In other words, if the administration was going to cut federal expenditures and especially

⁴⁷⁴ Robert Kennedy later named one of his children after Dillon and Averell Harriman: Douglas Harriman Kennedy.

⁴⁷⁵ C. Douglas Dillon OH Interview No. 2 by Dixon Donnelley, November 10, 1964, JFKL, pp. 26.

⁴⁷⁶ Kaysen to McGeorge Bundy, June 4, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments and Gold General, Box 291a, NSF, Subjects, Balance of Payments, JFKL.

⁴⁷⁷ Facts About the Budget and Debt, January 1963, Folder: Budget Federal, Box 29, Subject Files 1961-64, Sorensen Papers, JFKL.

⁴⁷⁸ US Balance of Payments Chart, 1962, Folder: Balance of Payments, 1961-62, Box 29, Subject Files 1961-64, Sorensen Papers, JFKL.

⁴⁷⁹ Facts About the Budget and Debt, January 1963, Folder: Budget Federal, Box 29, Subject Files 1961-64, Sorensen Papers, JFKL.

expenditures abroad, the first and most obvious place to begin was the Defense Department.

Conclusion

Kennedy had campaigned on a platform that suggested that he would overturn Eisenhower's fiscal conservatism, both in respect of the federal budget and of the defense budget in particular. However, much to the chagrin of his more liberal advisers, he was far more fiscally conservative than they had anticipated and chose Republicans for both the Treasury and Defense positions. Even if defense expenditures increased in absolute terms in the short-term, McNamara's reforms were geared towards economies in the longer-term. To a large extent, his professional reputation at the OSD was built on his abilities as a cost-cutter.

Part I of this thesis explained how McNamara sought to align Defense Department resources to civilian objectives and strategies but this was also true in the economic sense. As envisaged in the Defense Reorganization Act, McNamara's major reforms, including PPBS, were aimed at matching the Department's resources in the most cost-efficient way possible and with domestic, economic concerns in mind. At the same time, McNamara confronted entrenched interests in the *status quo*, including from the services and Congress, which made defense spending easier to access. As a result, the administration drew on the defense budget to support programs that were only tangentially relevant to it, for instance on civilian infrastructure projects and eventually in Vietnam.

The two conflicting types of pressures played a part in McNamara's policies for Vietnam. On the one hand, the ready availability of resources propelled McNamara and his Department into a leading role on Vietnam. On the other, the President, Dillon and McNamara's fiscal conservatism as well as McNamara's concerns about the costs associated with Vietnam explain why he favored a more modest commitment and eventually withdrawal.

CHAPTER 8 – ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

A central but overlooked part of Kennedy's foreign policy and, in turn, of his defense policy was that other countries needed to bear a greater share of the burden for their security.⁴⁸⁰ Although Kennedy had criticized Eisenhower for "putting fiscal security ahead of national security"⁴⁸¹ during the election campaign, once in office, he too was concerned that the United States' international responsibilities were beginning to weaken its economic foundations. The Second World War and the ensuing Cold War spawned new treaty obligations and defense installations across the world that, in turn, produced the United States' persistent balance of payments deficit.

McNamara may have been, as David Halberstam described, the "can-do man in the can-do society in the can-do era"⁴⁸², by 1962, he and Kennedy were also more modest. Their experiences in the Bay of Pigs, the Berlin standoff and the Cuban missile crisis had had a sobering effect and brought home the United States' vulnerabilities, not least in its economic foundations.⁴⁸³ Part of this vulnerability stemmed from slow growth in the U.S. economy and nagging unemployment figures that coincided with Premier Khrushchev's own economic plan that promised to overtake the U.S. economy by 1970.⁴⁸⁴ But especially it came from the balance of payments problem and the threat it posed to the dollar as the international reserve currency. As Kennedy's economic advisor Seymour Harris explained, "We

⁴⁸⁰ For recent scholarship on the relationship between the balance of payments deficit, gold outflow and the Kennedy administration's foreign policy, see especially: Gavin, *Gold, dollars, and power* and Francis J. Gavin, "The Gold Battles Within the Cold War: American Monetary Policy and the Defense of Europe," *Diplomatic History* 26:1 (2002), pp. 61-94.

⁴⁸¹ Ball to Dillon, July 9, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments and Gold General, Box 291a, NSF, Subjects, Balance of Payments, JFKL.

⁴⁸² Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, pp. 215.

⁴⁸³ President Kennedy's first State of the Union address was almost entirely devoted to the problems confronting the country, and especially its economic woes. John F. Kennedy, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union" (speech, Washington, DC, January 30, 1961). Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *American Presidency Project*: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8045>

⁴⁸⁴ Council of Economic Advisors OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph Pechman, August 1, 1964, JFKL, pp. 372.

have now become like all other nations- a nation that has to watch its balance of payments. We were free of that particular responsibility for a long time.”⁴⁸⁵

The benefit of hindsight has arguably colored both diplomatic historians’ reading of McNamara’s early contributions on Vietnam, and economic historians’ assessment of the Kennedy administration. Diplomatic and military historians have depicted an upward trajectory in U.S. involvement in Vietnam and in McNamara’s hawkish recommendations in the early 1960s; many economic historians have glossed over the fiscal and economic constraints facing the Kennedy administration with a retrospective judgment that balance of payments and gold outflow concerns only became salient later in the decade. However, from the vantage point of the early 1960s, neither was true and economic constraints determined the timing and shape of the CPSVN in the 1962-1963 period. McNamara’s calendar for the 1962 period offers insight about people who may have influenced his understanding of the economic impact of commitments such as that in Vietnam, in particular the economist John Kenneth Galbraith.

The balance of payments and gold

Confirming Francis Gavin’s work, and contrary to the conventional wisdom that the balance of payments and gold outflow would not surface as an issue until much later in the decade, the economic historian Barry Eichengreen used data mined from official documents to show that balance of payments concerns had a greater level of saliency in the 1962-1963 period than at any other point including the “crisis years” of 1968 and 1971 when the Bretton-Woods system eventually collapsed. Figure 1 in Appendix 1 illustrates his results and quantifies references to terms such as “gold outflows” and “balance of payments” in key documents throughout the 1959-1971 period.⁴⁸⁶

Eichengreen has also shown that the first dollar crisis occurred not at the end of the decade as scholars have traditionally assumed, but at the end of 1960 just as the Kennedy administration prepared to take office. Two

⁴⁸⁵ Douglas Dillon OH Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, June 29, 1969, LBJL, pp. 165.

⁴⁸⁶ Eichengreen, “From Benign Neglect.”

related trends converged to undermine the dollar at that moment. First, in that year, the traded value of an ounce of gold on the open markets shot up to \$40 whereas the dollar converted at \$35, a moment the Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisers later described as "the gold flutter".⁴⁸⁷ Galbraith wrote to Kennedy in October of that year that the increase had been "unprecedented" and that the "counterpart of this is a weakening of the dollar", which could precipitate a devaluation of the dollar.⁴⁸⁸ Second, the period of 1958 to 1960 was the first period since 1945 during which the United States experienced a balance of payments deficit, which would persist for the remainder of the decade, and a gold outflow of 1.7 billion in 1960 alone. As a result, 1960 was the first year where dollar claims exceeded the United States' gold reserves. As foreign holders of U.S. dollars, primarily Western Europeans, began to trade in their dollars for gold, fears about an eventual run on the dollar spread.

The recollections of Kennedy's colleagues suggest that gold loss issues were not just salient across government but had a special impact on President Kennedy who feared that by undermining the role of the U.S. dollar as a reserve currency, gold losses posed a direct threat to U.S. power. According to Carl Kaysen, who was the main point-man on these issues in the NSC staff, "The President was occupied, and in the judgment of some of his professionally knowledgeable advisors, over-occupied with the problem of balance of payments and gold for the whole of his term in office."⁴⁸⁹ Similarly, Paul Nitze, from the vantage point of the Defense Department, recalled that: "President Kennedy [...] felt that this was one of the most important things that had to be controlled; that if we didn't control this gold outflow, there could be a run on the dollar and this would be a disaster, forcing us to currency control and all kinds of things which were unattractive."⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁷ The Council of Economic Advisors recalled that the surge in gold was also connected to polls in October 1960 showing Kennedy in the lead, which had troubled the business community at home and abroad. Council of Economic Advisors OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph Pechman, August 1, 1964, JFKL, pp. 94.

⁴⁸⁸ Galbraith to President Kennedy, October 20, 1960. John Kenneth Galbraith, *Letters to Kennedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 29.

⁴⁸⁹ Carl Kaysen OH Interview No. 1 By Joseph E. O'Connor, July 11, 1966, JFKL.

⁴⁹⁰ Paul Nitze OH Interview by Dorothy Fosdick, July 11, 1964, JFKL.

For many, the specter of the 1933 Banking Crisis loomed large: facing similar circumstances, the Democrat Roosevelt administration was forced to devalue amidst a major financial crisis that many blamed on a lack of clear government policy.⁴⁹¹ Kennedy's first State of the Union made it clear that the administration would not devalue and that it would address the deficit head-on. He explained: "This Administration will not distort the value of the dollar in any fashion. And this is a commitment. Prudence and good sense do require, however, that new steps be taken to ease the payments deficit and prevent any gold crisis. Our success in world affairs has long depended in part upon foreign confidence in our ability to pay."⁴⁹²

Dillon and the business community

Secretary Dillon's recollections are also interesting because they explain the nature of Kennedy's concern just as they elucidate why he might have selected Republicans as Secretaries of Defense and Treasury. In addition to his background in finance, Dillon had served as Eisenhower's Ambassador to France at a time when France was disengaging from Indochina and offloading the war's costs onto its ally, the United States. Following his Paris posting, Dillon moved to the State Department where, as Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs, he oversaw the administration's aid program. In addition, as a member of the establishment, Dillon was a close personal friend of John D. Rockefeller and many others in the business world, which gave him valuable access for a Democratic administration.

Dillon explained Kennedy's "particular" concern over the balance of payments and the offer of the Treasury position: "He was afraid that there was a lack of confidence in the U.S. and that nobody knew what the new policies would be. He said that I could render substantial assistance because I was known in Europe and was known to believe in the maintenance of the value of

⁴⁹¹ Gary Richardson, Alejandro Komai and Michael Gou, "Roosevelt's Gold Program," *Federal Reserve History* (2003). Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *Federal Reserve History Resources*: <http://www.federalreservehistory.org/Events/DetailView/24>.

⁴⁹² "Message to the Congress on the State of the Union" (speech, Washington, DC, January 30, 1961). Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *American Presidency Project*: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8045>

the dollar and in a sound dollar, which he very much believed in himself.”⁴⁹³ In and of itself, a balance of payments deficit was not a problem and as the administration itself explained in a press release in February 1961, “early deficits in our balance of payments were, in fact, favorable in their world effect” since they had spurred growth and thus new markets, especially in Europe.⁴⁹⁴ The danger came if dollars were converted into gold, which would threaten the stability of the dollar as the international monetary system’s reserve currency.

From the outset, the administration was alerted to “speculative fears concerning the future of the dollar”⁴⁹⁵ and especially, as Galbraith suggested to Kennedy, the risk that “Republican bankers” might seek to “embarrass the administration” by provoking a run on the dollar.⁴⁹⁶ Since devaluation was not an option for a President who had pledged to “maintain the value of the dollar”, Kennedy chose to reassure those who might initiate a speculative attack.⁴⁹⁷

As a result, Dillon became the administration’s envoy to the business community whose confidence was needed and which was suspicious of an administration considered too liberal and intellectual for its liking. The administration had “started afoul” with business clashing in 1961 over steel prices and making staffing choices that accentuated fears: in the Eisenhower administration, 36% of appointments were from the business community, in Kennedy’s, only 6% were.⁴⁹⁸

Dillon reached out, among others, to his friend Rockefeller whose advice to the new President was that “the only way to achieve a solid solution to our balance of payments problem [...] is through time honored methods”, namely an expansion of exports, manipulating interest rates and, crucially,

⁴⁹³ C. Douglas Dillon OH History Interview No. 1 by Dixon Donnelley, July 30, 1964, JFKL, pp. 3.

⁴⁹⁴ Press Release, February 6, 1961, Folder: Message on the Balance of Payments, Box 535, Galbraith Papers, WH Files, JFKL.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ “The politics of the payments balance,” Galbraith to President Kennedy, September 18, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments [General] 1963, Box 535, Galbraith Papers, WH Files, JFKL.

⁴⁹⁷ C. Douglas Dillon OH Interview No. 8 by Seymour Harris, August 18, 1964, JFKL, pp. 155.

⁴⁹⁸ Harris, *Economics of the Kennedy Years*, pp. 50.

“through maintaining confidence (both here and abroad) in the soundness and integrity of the dollar.” He ended by explaining to the President that confidence could be encouraged with “more effective control of expenditures and a determined and vigorous attempt to balance the budget.”⁴⁹⁹

Rockefeller’s letter suggests that the administration’s fiscal prudence was not just an intellectual preference but also the product of real and perceived constraints, not least the specter that the U.S. business community could use underlying economic weaknesses to embarrass it.

The perfect storm of 1962

By July 1962, at the same time as McNamara initiated his withdrawal plans from Vietnam, the balance of payments situation became particularly alarming: as Dillon informed the President, “Whereas in 1961 only about one-third of our over-all deficit was reflected in a gold loss, so far in 1962 almost 60 percent of our deficit has been reflected in a gold losses.”⁵⁰⁰ Moreover, these developments coincided with a weak domestic economic picture. In June 1962, in the second largest financial crash on record, the U.S. stock market had lost a quarter of its value against the backdrop of an economy just beginning to recover from a lingering recession that kept unemployment figures around the 6% mark.

For the Kennedy administration, this looked like a perfect storm. As Rockefeller had suggested the “time honored” and easy method to get claimants to hold their dollars would have been to increase interest rates but this was not possible for an administration that had pledged to kick start the economy in the face of a recession.⁵⁰¹ In 1961, the Treasury introduced a gimmick that reconciled competing interest rate needs. It was called *Operation Twist*. As the name suggests, it twisted the interest rates to keep

⁴⁹⁹ John D. Rockefeller letter to President Kennedy, June 6, 1962, Folder: Balance of Payments, 1961-62, 11/2/61-9/20/62, Box 29, Sorensen Papers, Subject Files 1961-64, JFKL.

⁵⁰⁰ Memorandum for the President, Cabinet Committee on Balance of Payments, July 27, 1962, Folder: Balance of Payments – Gold 5/5/62-7/31/62, Box 29, Sorensen Papers, Subject Files 1961-64, JFKL.

⁵⁰¹ For more information on the domestic economics, especially the Kennedy tax cut and the gold outflow problem, see: George L. Perry et al. *Economic Events, Ideas and Policies: The 1960s and After*, (Washington, D.C.: Brooking Institution Press, 2000).

long-term interest rates low but short-term interest rates high. On gold, Dillon used his clout as someone “known in Europe” to create the London Gold Pool at the end of 1961 whereby the United States, together with seven European countries, agreed to collaborate on a joint gold pool to prevent prices from going up as they had during the “gold flutter of 1960”. In addition, in July 1963, the administration passed the Interest Equalization Tax, which essentially taxed U.S. investments in foreign countries. Combined with other “buy American” programs, by 1963 the administration seemed to have created a comprehensive program to address its economic concerns.

However, all of these steps and Rockefeller’s other suggestion that the administration should boost trade, could not ultimately compensate for the fact that it was not trade but defense installations abroad that drove the balance of payments deficit. In fact, trade had expanded as European economies recovered in the preceding decade and the United States ran a “very substantial, unusually large, export surplus.”⁵⁰² Services drove the deficit. As a Federal Reserve report at the time concluded, over 38% of the deficit could be traced back to “services in connection with the maintenance of installations abroad.”⁵⁰³

Similarly, during the presidential campaign, in a speech given in Philadelphia in October 1960 on the balance of payments, then Senator Kennedy had explained that the “first” contributor to the balance of payments was the “heavy commitments abroad for military and economic aid, and for the support of our own overseas military forces.”⁵⁰⁴ Newspapers at the time echoed his remarks and warned that “the cost of preserving American’s world-wide defense commitments, particularly the lavish establishment in Europe, has been a major cause of the outflow of gold and foreign currency, now threatening the stability of the dollar.”⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰² C. Douglas Dillon OH Interview No. 8 by Seymour Harris, August 18, 1964, JFKL, pp. 152.

⁵⁰³ Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, “The United States Balance of Payments 1946-1960,” *Monthly Review* 43:3 (March 1961), pp. 4.

⁵⁰⁴ Senator John F. Kennedy, “Statement on the Balance of Payments” (speech, Philadelphia, PA, October 31, 1960). Retrieved online January 10, 2014, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=74301>.

⁵⁰⁵ “Guns and Butter,” *The Observer* (London: August 25, 1962).

Given McNamara's background as an economist and his focus on economical defense as well as his efforts to align defense resources and capabilities to national priorities, he turned to the issue of the balance of payments with renewed vigor. It shaped his approach to ruthless cost cutting in all operations abroad and especially on Vietnam.

John Kenneth Galbraith

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith's letters to Kennedy offer further insight into the type of considerations that informed McNamara's proposed solutions and primarily his decision to begin troop withdrawals, including in Vietnam. In April 1962, McNamara met with John Kenneth Galbraith for three hours, a long time for someone who customarily scheduled, at most, 40 minutes for his meetings. They knew each other well having met while McNamara was teaching at Harvard University and later collaborated on a book on corporate structures when McNamara was at the Ford Motor Company. (The only longer meeting during this period was with Robert Thompson, the British counterinsurgency expert.)⁵⁰⁶ Whereas historians have tended to focus on Galbraith's dovish influence or lack thereof on President Kennedy, his thinking filtered more clearly into McNamara's decisions and dovetailed with a strategy that depended on Vietnamese self-help and counterinsurgency.

After his meeting with McNamara, Galbraith wrote to President Kennedy that they were in "basic agreement" over Vietnam. Galbraith and his friend the now Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs Harriman were part of a vocal minority of civilian advisors who argued that the United States was entering into a continuum of external aggression in Vietnam that was doomed to fail.⁵⁰⁷ Although McNamara shied away from making this kind of sweeping

⁵⁰⁶ Robert McNamara Calendar, Folder: Calendar, 1962, Box II:66, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁵⁰⁷ Harriman was more ambivalent than Galbraith on Vietnam. While he, like Galbraith, argued "against the value of the introduction of American troops to strengthen morale" because this could produce a "certain adverse political reaction, particularly when a country has just emerged from colonial rule," he did not argue for disengagement either. For instance, in October 1963, in trying to make the case that intervention in South Vietnam was more viable than it had been in Laos, he explained to Arthur Schlesinger, "South Vietnam is quite different [to Laos] as the logistics are in our favor and that country is of enormous political, strategic and economic importance." Harriman to Schlesinger, October 17, 1963, Folder: 2 Vietnam Security, 1961, Box 128a, POF, JFKL.

geopolitical judgment, he knew and respected Galbraith's judgment and would have agreed with another letter where Galbraith warned:

“Our present deployment is based on tradition, accident, the mystique of conventional force, and the recurrent feeling that, in the absence of any other feasible lines of action, the movement of troops might help. (I hasten to allow for rational factors as well.) On the whole dollars have not entered the calculation at least until lately. It is much better that they enter as a consideration now than on some subsequent day when we run out. At least why not have a high-powered team draw up a deployment strategy designed to minimize the dollar outlays. The logistical framework and small forces would remain forward. Behind our dollar account would be the troops (and their families) with great emphasis on mobility and air-lift. We might, as compared for example with the sterile commitment in Korea, find it a lot better.”

In the same letter, Galbraith also attacked the aid program to Formosa and Korea and wondered how “economical” these were and whether the United States was funding “excessively expensive military establishments.”⁵⁰⁸

Returning to the dollar and gold outflow problem, he cautioned, “We should remind ourselves that our commitments here were established when dollars were plentiful. A dollar shortage would have been good for Mr. Dulles.”⁵⁰⁹

Reshaping US presences around the world

Faced with a “dollar shortage”, or at least a perceived one, Kennedy did what Galbraith suggested and on June 22, 1962 created a “high-powered team”, the Cabinet Committee on Balance of Payments with Douglas Dillon as its Chairman and McNamara as the driving bureaucratic force behind it. Not only were these two men among the most “high-powered” in the administration,

⁵⁰⁸ As General Harkins explained to his Vietnamese counterparts as well, the tendency among the Chiefs to build up forces that mirrored their own in partner countries was “extremely expensive in both funds and troop support” whereas advisory missions on the lower-end of the security spectrum could be more affordable and thus sustainable. Harkins to Thuan, June 28, 1963, Folder: June 1963: 21-28, Box 12, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁵⁰⁹ Galbraith to President Kennedy, May 31, 1962. Galbraith, *Letters to Kennedy*, pp. 48.

they were also the only members of the Cabinet that interacted with Kennedy socially, who were “friends” whom he trusted.

Within a month and with his habitual application, McNamara suggested a list of steps to reduce the Defense Department’s impact on the balance of payments. These included encouraging the sale of U.S. military equipment primarily to Europeans, coordinating in-country programs with AID, and working towards removing any redundancies or inefficiencies in the field especially by urging regional countries (such as Japan) to shoulder a greater burden of the costs. In Vietnam, his recommendations coincided with *Operation Switchback* and the Defense Department’s absorption of many of AID’s programs as well as the first draft of the CPSVN.

McNamara’s reassessment of troop deployments ran in parallel to the CPSVN and accelerated at the same time as did the CPSVN. In July 1962, McNamara instructed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to produce a five-year deployment plan, an audit of sorts of existing bases abroad “with a view to eliminating all non-essential units” and asked that “this plan should be developed by country, by service, by unit, and fiscal year.”⁵¹⁰ This came five days after he had asked for a first draft for the CPSVN. Later, in March 1963, Kennedy asked his advisors to “bring our accounts into balance in a shorter period of time” and that all AID and Defense programs abroad should be examined on an urgent basis.⁵¹¹ By April 1963, McNamara asked the JCS to further shorten the CPSVN’s phase-out timeline while he also produced a new report for the Cabinet Committee where he described measures aimed out “thinning out our deployments.”⁵¹²

In Vietnam as elsewhere, McNamara rationalized many of the troop withdrawals using Galbraith’s exact logic, namely that the administration’s heavy investments in air and sea-lift had removed the need for massive

⁵¹⁰ Memorandum for the President, Cabinet Committee on Balance of Payments, July 27, 1962, Folder: Balance of Payments – Gold 5/5/62-7/31/62, Box 29, Sorensen Papers, Subject Files 1961-64, JFKL.

⁵¹¹ Memorandum for the President, Cabinet Committee on Balance of Payments, March 2, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payment – Gold General: 6/62-3/63, Box 291a, NSF, Subjects – Balance of Payments, JFKL.

⁵¹² Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on the Balance of Payments, April 18, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments and Gold Committee Report, Box 291a, NSF, Subjects – Balance of Payments, JFKL.

forward positioning of troops. As he explained to Kennedy: “I do not believe the proposed force redeployments will weaken significantly our ability to respond to Communist aggression. The increase in the procurement of Army equipment, airlift aircraft, and the increase in the ferry range of such aircraft have greatly increased our ability to deploy both air and ground forces from the U.S. to theaters of operation within a period of strategic warning.”⁵¹³ In the wake of the Berlin Crisis, McNamara had stepped up investments in strategic lift capabilities and initiated a series of exercises culminating in the *Big Lift* exercise in the fall of 1963 whose purpose was “to test our system” but also to “demonstrate dramatically our redeployment capabilities to our Allies and to the Soviets.”⁵¹⁴ In other words, the exercises were designed to reassure Allies that technological advances, which would allow for the rapid deployment of troops in the event of a crisis, could offset troop withdrawals. As a result, by the end of 1963, following the logic of cost-cutting the Comptroller projected a worldwide troop reduction of 15% over two calendar years.⁵¹⁵

Reconsidering US presences in Europe and in Asia

As Francis Gavin has shown, in Europe the underlying rationale for troop withdrawals was essentially one of fairness: that Europeans should shoulder a greater share of the burden for their own security especially given the new defense policy of flexible response. Kennedy was particularly harsh with European Allies. In notes from a December 1961 meeting with the JCS in Palm Beach, Kennedy predicted that the administration would “face the question in 1963” but maintained that he “always felt we could force the Europeans to do more by pulling some of our forces out.”⁵¹⁶ In the absence of real movement on that front, Kennedy returned to his criticism of European countries in 1963. Hilsman’s notes of a private meeting read that Kennedy

⁵¹³ Draft memorandum, McNamara to President Kennedy, September 19, 1963, *FRUS Foreign Economic Policy*, Vol. 9, Doc. 36.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ Diego Ruiz-Palmer, “Big Lift,” *AirFan: Le magazine de l’aéronautique militaire internationale*. 419 (October 2013).

⁵¹⁶ Handwritten Notes by McNamara, JCS Meeting with President Kennedy in Palm Beach, December 27, 1961, Folder: Palm Beach Notes, Box 28, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operation, NARA.

complained that, “We have to make Europe pick up their burden. Ridiculous that they are not doing their part. We have pursued a very generous policy in the past. We have to get tougher about this. We must keep our economic house in order.”⁵¹⁷

On the other hand, European states – especially Western Germany and France – also had significant leverage over the United States as they were major holders of dollar reserves.⁵¹⁸ Throughout 1962, going hand in hand with negotiations on troop withdrawals, McNamara accelerated a program of military equipment sales to European countries designed to “offset” the balance of payments deficit.⁵¹⁹ He launched a “buy American” program, reducing local purchases at the defense installations abroad, and he repatriated dependents or support staff in many of the bloated defense installations. These programs were especially successful in Germany and Italy: by 1963, by spending on U.S. military equipment and services, the cost of the U.S. presence in these countries had almost entirely been offset.⁵²⁰

In Asia, the dynamic was different: here, in the preceding decade “Mr. Dulles” had fixed the United States to a number of expensive and “sterile commitments”, which Dillon and McNamara argued were more expensive than needed. Therefore, McNamara’s priority was to unstick open-ended and growing commitments and to favor instead a greater burden-sharing arrangement that presaged what would become the Guam Doctrine in the Nixon administration. Paradoxically, although the historiography is richer on the impact of the balance of payments in Europe, it was in Asia that Galbraith and McNamara’s criticisms were particularly acute.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁷ Meeting of the NSC meeting with the President, Roger Hilsman minutes, January 22, 1963, Folder: Memoranda of Conversations, Box 6, Hilsman Papers, JFKL.

⁵¹⁸ Gavin, “The Gold Battles,” pp. 61-94.

⁵¹⁹ During the Eisenhower administration, Douglas Dillon had been the principal envoy to Germany to try to negotiate “offset” arrangements. Gavin, *Gold, dollars, and power*, pp. 47.

⁵²⁰ McNamara to President Kennedy, July 16, 1963, Folder: Reading File, July 1963, Box 118, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

⁵²¹ Victor Cha has shown that it was under the pressure of reduced economic assistance to South Korea and Japan that both countries moved towards a normalization of relations in 1965 and points to the Nixon Doctrine as a culminating point in a long-standing policy in the United States of encouraging the two countries to cooperate in order to allow for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Victor D. Cha, *Alignment despite antagonism: The US-Korea-Japan Security Triangle*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

For both Galbraith and McNamara, the commitment to Korea was the most outdated and disproportionately expensive. Whereas by 1963 Japan had transitioned to an economic state where the administration could reasonably conclude that it “must depend more on its own self-defense capabilities in the future”⁵²², Korea appeared to be stuck in a position of dependence. By June 1963, McNamara wrote to Kennedy: “I believe we should prepare plans for a time-phased reduction of U.S. Army forces in the ROK from 52,400 to about 17,000 by the end of CY65 and a reduction in ROK ground forces from 536,000 to 450,000 by the end of CY67. If this reduction were accomplished, the MAP for Korea could be reduced from the \$200 million level programmed for FY64 to an annual level of no more than \$150 million by FY68.”⁵²³ He noted that that with a programmed increase in airlift capability of 300%, troops could be redeployed quickly from the West Coast. All in all, for McNamara, these changes made sense not only from a balance of payments perspective but also for the military assistance program discussed in later chapters. Moreover, he justified a reduction of the military presence “in view of the Sino-Soviet split and the resulting picture of somewhat deteriorating Chinese Communist capabilities”, presumably a euphemistic reference to the Great Leap Forward’s devastation.⁵²⁴

State Department and JCS objections

However, whether in Europe or Asia, the State Department and Joint Chiefs of Staff stymied McNamara’s efforts. They argued that they were too politically explosive and that they potentially undermined the credibility of U.S. commitments around the world. Even McNamara’s more modest suggestion to remove dependents from overseas bases riled the Chiefs who “consider[ed] this entirely unacceptable” and worried that it would strike a “mortal blow to recruiting and would be viewed as the last unbearable step in

⁵²² McNamara to Armed Services Secretaries, July 16, 1963, Folder: Reading File, July 1963, Box 118, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

⁵²³ CY is Calendar Year. “Force Reductions in Korea”, McNamara to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Taylor, November 6, 1963, Folder: Reading File, November 1963, Box 119, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

the subordination of military to civilian needs, with predictable consequences in Congressional outrage.”⁵²⁵

Paul Nitze, the Secretary of the Navy, who had played a part in the buildup in Korea as Head of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department from 1950 to 1953, argued that troop withdrawals were “simply impossible”, especially in the Far East and Germany.⁵²⁶ In part, his concern stemmed from a fear that troop reductions “would make it necessary for us to commit ourselves to an immediate nuclear response in the event of any serious threat in Korea and probably elsewhere in the Far East.”⁵²⁷ In other words, echoing Rusk’s arguments against troop withdrawals in Europe, a confrontation could quickly become a nuclear exchange in the absence of another credible deterrent.⁵²⁸

Meanwhile, George Ball, the Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs, angrily wrote to his predecessor Dillon that publicly announcing redeployments for balance of payments reasons would be seen “as a sign of weakness” and warned of “grave dangers” in these “matters of life or death.” More pointedly, he reminded Dillon that it would “be particularly unbecoming for the Kennedy administration to announce that it was adjusting its defense arrangement for balance of payments reasons, since the President played a leading role in ’58 in chastising the Eisenhower administration for – as he put it – placing “fiscal security ahead of national security.””⁵²⁹

On the same day, October 3rd 1963, that the administration announced its phase-out plan from Vietnam, Rusk expressed his concerns about troop withdrawals to President Kennedy in dramatic terms. While he accepted that some withdrawals would be necessary, he argued that McNamara’s plans for

⁵²⁵ Status Report on the Department of Defense and the Balance of Payments”, Kaysen to McGeorge Bundy, May 20, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments, Box 291a, NSF, Subjects – Balance of Payments, JFKL.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ On the issue the “tripwire”, that removing conventional troops could lower the nuclear threshold, see Gavin’s work referenced above as well as Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: the United States, race and nuclear weapons in Asia, 1945-1965* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵²⁹ Ball to Dillon, July 9, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments and Cabinet Committee, Box 291a, NSF, Subjects – Balance of Payments, JFKL.

Korea and Japan as well as Europe would create “immense political problems which no amount of effectively devised and assiduously implemented diplomacy and public relations will be able to contravene.” He ended ominously: “I would be derelict in my responsibility to you if I did not advise you that, in my considered judgment, the implementation of the DoD proposals [...] would be the gravest sort of mistake, fraught with adverse political and psychological consequences, perhaps out of all proportion to the intrinsic military significance but, nevertheless, carrying a real danger of jeopardizing our entire national security posture.”⁵³⁰

Rusk’s “firm[ness] in his unwillingness to accept any major force reductions”⁵³¹ had some impact: they stalled withdrawals from Korea and may have spurred the efforts of European Allies to offset U.S. expenditures.⁵³² Also, in keeping with the State Department’s objections, McNamara conceded that it was “entirely acceptable” to him that withdrawals, when they happened, should “not be presented as a “package” implying U.S. withdrawal from its commitment to maintain the integrity and freedom of the Free World” and that they should be done in a discrete fashion in order to give countries “no basis for believing that the program is forced upon us by our balance of payments position.”⁵³³ In November 1963, he instructed the JCS that while the plan was still to cut overseas deployments by 15% in the next two years, “wherever possible action of low visibility should be taken without public announcement.”⁵³⁴

⁵³⁰ “Department of Defense Proposals for Further Reductions in Balance of Payments Drain”, Rusk to President Kennedy, October 3, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments, 1963, Box 292, NSF, Subjects – Balance of Payments, JFKL.

⁵³¹ “Status Report on the Department of Defense and the Balance of Payments”, Kaysen to McGeorge Bundy, May 20, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments, Box 291a, NSF, Subjects – Balance of Payments, JFKL.

⁵³² McNamara to President Kennedy, June 4, 1963, Folder: Reading File, June 1963, Box 118, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.; McNamara to Armed Services Secretaries, July 16, 1963, Folder: Reading File, July 1963, Box 118, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

⁵³³ McNamara to President Kennedy, July 16, 1963, Folder: Reading File, July 1963, Box 118, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

⁵³⁴ McNamara to Armed Services Secretaries, JCS and key agencies Department of Defense, November 11, 1963, Folder: Reading File, November 1963, Box 119, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

Vietnam as a variable cost

The OSD's planned troop withdrawals played an important part in the timing and scope of the withdrawal plans for Vietnam. In July 1963, as McNamara reviewed the "concerted effort during the past two years to reduce the net adverse balance of the Department of Defense transactions entering the international balance of payments" he could proudly point to impressive achievements and statistics, for instance that "gross expenditures overseas less receipts, was reduced by approximately \$850 million - from 2,334 million to 1,477." However, he also acknowledged that "political constraints" got in the way of even greater "successes".⁵³⁵ One of the main producers of those constraints, George Ball, later reflected on McNamara's efforts: "Because Bob was prepared to distort any kind of policy in order to achieve some temporary alleviation to the balance of payments, which again to my mind was a function of his preoccupation with quantification."⁵³⁶

With the bureaucracy firmly against him, McNamara considered that the troop deployments in Europe and Korea had effectively become "fixed costs" for the time being and turned to controlling those, like Vietnam, that could still be considered "variable costs". Balance of payments issues were on McNamara's mind both before and after his key trip to Vietnam in October 1963. During the October 1963 NSC meetings, when National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy asked McNamara "what [was] the point" of announcing a phase-out, McNamara responded, "We need a way to get out of Vietnam. This is a way of doing it. And to leave forces there when they're not needed, I think is wasteful and complicates both their problems and ours."⁵³⁷ For McNamara, the "waste" and "complications" related, in the short-term, primarily to the beleaguered Military Assistance Program that financed Vietnam operations, and more broadly to the balance of payments deficit.

The day before McNamara left for Vietnam in September 1963, during a White House meeting on the balance of payments, he agreed that the DoD

⁵³⁵ McNamara to President Kennedy, July 16, 1963, Folder: Reading File, July 1963, Box 118, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

⁵³⁶ OH Interview of George Ball No. 1 by Paige E. Mulhollan, July 8, 1971, LBJL, pp. 2.

⁵³⁷ Transcript NSC meeting, October 3, 1963: Tape 144/A49, Cassette 2/3, Folder: Fog of War, background and research materials, Box II:114, RSM Papers, LoC.

would develop “specific, detailed country proposals for reductions” the timing and tactics of which would be coordinated with State.⁵³⁸ Although these reductions were primarily aimed at Europe, it is difficult to imagine that McNamara would not have applied the same cost-cutting logic to Vietnam on the eve of his departure especially since he had always applied broader fiscal considerations to U.S. policy in Vietnam. Ultimately, troop withdrawals in Vietnam and in other places reflected McNamara’s sentiment that the OSD “should ruthlessly eliminate all activities, the cost of which is not commensurate with their contribution to our national defense.”⁵³⁹

In addition, as the next chapter shows, troop withdrawals from Vietnam specifically chimed with a more economical strategy aimed at getting Allies to assume a greater share of the responsibilities for their defense, or in his words, a strategy that recognized that the “proper support of indigenous forces on the scene would give a greater return to collective defense than additional U.S. military forces.”⁵⁴⁰ Where this thesis has treated military strategy and its economic dimensions separately, in practice, McNamara’s supported a strategy of counterinsurgency and self-help because it promised an economically sustainable model for U.S. leadership at a time when its responsibilities around the world were proliferating.

⁵³⁸ Memorandum for the Record, McGeorge Bundy, September 23, 1963, Folder: Balance of Payments, Box 292, NSF, Subjects - Balance of Payments, JFKL.

⁵³⁹ US Balance of Payments Chart, 1962, Folder: Balance of Payments, 1961-62, Box 29, Subject Files 1961-64, Sorensen Papers, JFKL.

⁵⁴⁰ Robert McNamara and General Taylor, 87th Congress, “Briefing presented at the Foreign Assistance Act of 1963” (Senate Committee on Foreign Relation) (1st Session, June 13, 1963).Hearing ID: HRG-1963-FOR-0027, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

CHAPTER 9: THE ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF THE VIETNAM STRATEGY

The economic backdrop facing the administration casts McNamara's support for withdrawal and the October 3, 1963 press announcement in a different light. The administration's defense policy reflected its economic priorities and constraints. In Vietnam specifically, the chosen strategy reflected a sense of modesty born of a confrontation with new threats and challenges, rather than the omnipotence and optimism that historians typically ascribe to McNamara and the Kennedy administration. Strategies that hinged on counterinsurgency were *de facto* cheaper as they did not rely on the same amount of logistical support as conventional deployments and because they presupposed self-help on the part of the countries battling the insurgency, that is, it was the South Vietnamese themselves who would do the fighting.

As a result, McNamara led efforts in the administration to redefine the problem in Vietnam in a way that could ensure a more limited commitment: as long as it was an internal, insurgency problem, it would not require the type of support and long-term commitment that he had inherited at the Defense Department for Korea. As Gilpatric remembered, counterinsurgency was not necessarily McNamara's "dish of tea"⁵⁴¹ but he welcomed its economic implications as a more sustainable model for U.S. leadership internationally and for the Defense Department specifically. It leveraged the Department's new investments, notably in air and sea-lift capabilities and in the Special Forces, without demanding the type of permanent stations abroad that drove the balance of payments deficit.

As he did with the Korea commitment, McNamara argued that new air and sealift capabilities removed the need for massive pre-positioning of troops in Vietnam. Following Alain Enthoven's advice, which was subsequently

⁵⁴¹ Roswell Gilpatric OH Interview No. 2 by Dennis J. O'Brien, May 27, 1970, JFKL.

confirmed in a RAND report⁵⁴², he held discussions to concentrate the Army's forces in "hubs" in Thailand and in the Philippines from which, if necessary, the United States could intervene in the case of outright aggression, in other words a conventional invasion of North Vietnamese forces.⁵⁴³ The forces need not be in Vietnam; they could intervene from these "hubs".

Modesty rather than omnipotence

In November 1961, at precisely the same time as he was receiving the Taylor-Rostow mission's recommendations to introduce ground troops into Vietnam, which garnered the support of most of his advisors including McNamara, President Kennedy took up another more modest theme in both his public and private pronouncements. In a speech delivered on November 16 at the centennial celebrations of the University of Washington, Kennedy said, "We must face the fact, that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient – that we are only 6 per cent of the world's population - that we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 per cent of mankind – that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity – and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every problem." He warned against those who "urge upon us what I regard to be the pathway to war. [...] If their view had prevailed, we would be at war today, and in more places than one." Also, he refused the polarizing tendency whereby "each side sees only "hard" and "soft" nations, hard and soft policies, hard and soft men. Neither side admits its path will lead to disaster – but neither can tell us how or where to draw the line once we descend the slippery slopes of either appeasement or intervention."⁵⁴⁴

While it is plausible that Kennedy's speech spoke to other issues or situations than the one in Vietnam, Arthur Schlesinger used the speech to

⁵⁴² RAND Corporation, *Limited War Patterns, Southeast Asia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1962). Folder: Southeast Asia General, RAND Report, 7/62, Box 231a, NSF, Regional Security Series, JFKL.

⁵⁴³ "Analyses of Division Deployment Times and Associated Costs in SE Asia", Summary Sheet to the Army Chief of Staff, November 1962, Folder: November 1962, Box 9, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁵⁴⁴ President John F. Kennedy "Address at the University of Washington 100th Anniversary Program" (Seattle, WA: November 16, 1961). Retrieved online November 2, 2014 on *JFKL website*: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Aw3MwwJMf0631R6JLmAprQ.aspx>

subsequently explain that, “he thought, and often said, that we were “overcommitted” in Southeast Asia” and that he was “quite prepared to cut losses and never felt that he had to prove his manhood by irrational bellicosity.”⁵⁴⁵ Crucially, it was the views of advisors such as Sorensen’s that prevailed on Vietnam strategy. Quoting directly from the University of Washington speech to make his case, on November 24, 1961, a week after the speech was delivered, Sorensen wrote to Kennedy: “this battle must be won at the village level; and thus only the Vietnamese can defeat the VC, we cannot do it for them. Troops of a different country, color and culture are not as suitable and effective.” As for the U.S. role, “we can supply the weapons, training and financing – no more should be needed” and, in a line straight from the speech, he warned that “we are not omnipotent or omniscient” and there “cannot be an American solution to every world problem.”⁵⁴⁶

Throughout his time in office, from the inaugural address onwards, Kennedy returned to the idea that the United States, like all countries, faced constraints on what it could hope to achieve. In an interview in December 1962, in which he assessed his first two years in office, Kennedy described what he had learned about power and responsibility. He remarked: “In the first place, I think the problems are more difficult than I imagined they were. Secondly, there is a limitation upon the ability of the United States to solve these problems. [...] There are greater limitations on our ability to bring about a favorable result than I had imagined there would be. And I think that’s probably true of anyone who becomes President.”⁵⁴⁷

When military problems become financial problems

Although Sorensen may have perceived the problems in Vietnam as military or political problems, in reality, they were inextricably linked to economic realities. As the Defense Department’s Comptroller Hitch had written, “All

⁵⁴⁵ Schlesinger to Joseph S. Clark, January 5, 1971. Schlesinger, *The Letters of Arthur Schlesinger*, pp. 403.

⁵⁴⁶ Sorensen to President Kennedy, November 24, 1961, Folder: Vietnam November 1961, Box 55, Sorensen Papers, Subject Files 1961-64, JFKL.

⁵⁴⁷ President John F. Kennedy, “After Two Years: A Conversation With the President,” *ARC Identifier 52813*, *USIA* (1963). Retrieved online on November 2, 2014: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9W9CpLK7I1c>.

military problems are, in one of their aspects, economic problems in the efficient allocation and use of resources.”⁵⁴⁸ When McNamara referred to “waste” in Vietnam or when Galbraith spoke about the French precedent, they viewed the problem through their own lens, an economic one.

In Galbraith’s letter to Kennedy after meeting and being in “basic agreement” with McNamara in April 1962, he wrote: “There is a consequent danger we shall replace the French as the colonial force in the area and bleed as the French did. [...] We should measurably reduce our commitment [...] [and] resist all steps which commit American troops to combat action and impress upon all concerned the importance of keeping American forces out of actual combat commitment. [...] Americans in their various roles should be as invisible as the situation permits.”⁵⁴⁹ His reflections speak to military strategy and specifically to preventing militarizing the U.S. commitment but what Galbraith, an economist, meant when he wrote “bleed as the French” could presumably just as well have been an economic point.

As men like Galbraith and especially Dillon recalled, economic realities and decisions in the Treasury compelled the French withdrawal (and resulting American involvement) from Indochina. Echoing Hitch’s remarks, Pierre Mendes-France, who as Prime Minister of France oversaw the country’s withdrawal from Indochina, remarked that, “Every problem eventually becomes a financial problem. Such was the situation in Indochina: it got off on the wrong foot politically, militarily and morally but its problems became especially acute on a budgetary level.”⁵⁵⁰ In the period of 1945 to 1954 when France eventually abandoned its colonial ambitions in Indochina, the war swallowed up over 10% of all state expenditures and Mendes-France explicitly presented withdrawal as a way of getting French finances in order.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁸ Hitch and McKean, *The Economics of Defense*, pp. 3.

⁵⁴⁹ Galbraith to President Kennedy, April 4, 1962, Folder: April 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Material, JFKL.

⁵⁵⁰ In French, “Tout problème n’est pas financier mais le devient un jour. Ainsi de l’affaire d’Indochine: mal engagée politiquement, militairement et moralement, précisait-il, elle tournait plus mal encore sur le plan budgétaire.” Hugues Tertrais, *Le piastre et le fusil: le coût de la guerre d’Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris, FR: 2002), pp. 23.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Moreover, successive French governments had sought cost-cutting measures in Indochina by introducing very similar steps to those McNamara now encouraged. These included attempts to internationalize the war, using Special Force-type forces to train ethnic and religious minorities, and pursuing a policy of “self-help”. The policy that later became known as Vietnamization had a precursor in the French policy of *jaunissement* or “yellowing”, which shifted fighting responsibilities to local and regional troops. Moreover, France built up and trained national armies in each of the countries of Indochina as an alternative to deploying troops from continental France.⁵⁵²

Self-help and counterinsurgency as economical defense

Disengagement from Vietnam was part of a general trend that encouraged “self-help” in countries. In many ways, this policy of self-help or relying on local forces presaged what later became the Nixon Doctrine with Vietnamization as its flagship program. During the Kennedy administration, a policy of self-help in the developing world was a way of reconciling the existing economic constraints with the administration’s interest in guerrilla warfare and wars of national liberation. The policy recalled Kennedy’s inaugural address where he indicated that the administration would prioritize aid programs designed to help “people in the huts and villages of half the globe [...] help them help themselves.” Also, as McNamara explained while preparing his first budget, “The main responsibility against subversion and guerrilla warfare must rest on indigenous populations and forces, but given the great likelihood and seriousness of this threat, we must be prepared to make a substantial contribution in the form of forces trained in this type of warfare.”⁵⁵³

A report on the administration’s military assistance program explained how training geared towards self-help could fulfill a force multiplying function: “Through military assistance, we have sought to strengthen the will and

⁵⁵² Ibid., pp 119 for detailed statistics.

⁵⁵³ “Report to the President on FY1962 Budget by Secretary McNamara”, February 20, 1961, Folder: FY1962 Budget, Box 10, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

capacity of recipient countries to resist Communist aggression. We have pursued this objective largely by developing local forces for self-defense. And, by linking many of these forces in a system of regional alliances with U.S. participation or pledged support, we have attempted to augment strength through joint defense activities.” For guerrilla wars, the report further described that, “A strong case can be made that internal security programs are cheaper and more effective where major a guerrilla threat does not already exist.”⁵⁵⁴

In theory, the idea that local forces could be tied into regional networks was promising; in practice, it had limited success. Nevertheless, it formed the bedrock of the administration’s policy for Southeast Asia. In a letter to Prime Minister Diem in October 1962, Kennedy wrote: “As Viet-Nam gains its victory over adversity and aggression, it will be in a position increasingly to devote its energies to achieving closer cooperation among the community of free Southeast Asian states. Each of these nations has its unique character and philosophy. In common they are confronted not only by grasping Communism but also by the chance to develop together. By sharing the development of their individual capacities they can multiply their mutual strength. The task is as difficult as it is necessary.”⁵⁵⁵

While placing the onus on local and smaller forces made sense from a strategic point of view for an administration that was interested in counterinsurgency, it also made economic sense for a President and Secretary of Defense who were concerned with the costs of the United States’ international obligations. McNamara defended the military assistance program in Vietnam by using similar cost-efficiency logic. He explained, “One of the main conclusions we draw [...] is that proper support of indigenous forces on the scene would give a greater return to collective defense than additional US

⁵⁵⁴ “Report of the Military Assistance Steering Group Report”, December 12, 1961, Folder: MAP – Six Country Studies, Dec 1961-Jan 1962, Box 9, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, 1961-67, NARA.

⁵⁵⁵ President Kennedy to President Diem, October 24, 1962, Folder: 10: Vietnam General, 1962, Box 128, POF, JFKL.

military forces.”⁵⁵⁶ Moreover, the administration justified a training program geared towards policing-type operations, rather than military ones, specifically with the issue of costs in mind. Conventional military deployments necessarily came with an “extensive staff and logistic support”⁵⁵⁷: in Vietnam, in later years, only about 35% of the forces in the field were involved in actual combat.⁵⁵⁸

Ultimately, the strain from the balance of payments deficit produced a shift towards a policy of self-help but the counterinsurgency thinking reinforced this strategic reorientation. In a classified oral history, McNamara described the CPSVN as specifically falling within this understanding of guerrilla war. In his words:

“I believed that to the extent that we could train those forces, we should do so, and having done it, we should get out. [...] I believed we should not introduce our military forces in support of the South Vietnamese, even if they were going to be “defeated”. Consistent with that belief, some time in the latter part of 1963, following my return from a trip to South Vietnam, I recommended to President Kennedy that we announce a plan to begin the removal of our training forces. [...] I believed that we had done all the training we could, and whether the South Vietnamese were qualified or not to turn back the North Vietnamese, I was certain that if they weren’t, it wasn’t for lack of our training. More training wouldn’t strengthen them; therefore we should get out. The President agreed.”⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁶ Robert McNamara and General Taylor, 87th Congress, “Briefing presented at the Foreign Assistance Act of 1963” (Senate Committee on Foreign Relation) (1st Session, June 13, 1963).Hearing ID: HRG-1963-FOR-0027, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

⁵⁵⁷ Interdepartmental Seminar on the Problems of Development and Internal Defense, Fourth Session, February 1963, Folder: Defense Affairs, 1963, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

⁵⁵⁸ For a detailed account of historical trends in “tooth-to-tail” ratios, namely the proportion of fighting forces to the support forces, see: John J. McGrath, *The Other End of the Spear: The Tooth-to-Tail Ratio (T3R) in Modern Military Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007).

⁵⁵⁹ Robert McNamara OH Interview No. 3 by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, July 24, 1986, OSD OHs, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

McNamara's explanation for the CPSVN in the remarkably candid interview was also prominent in his and Taylor's October 1963 report. One of its conclusions read that the advisory effort "cannot assure ultimate success"; this was a "Vietnamese war" which could "be run solely by the Vietnamese."⁵⁶⁰

McNamara redefines the problem in Vietnam

In order to justify a policy of training, and training alone, the administration had to define the war as "their war" and had to downgrade the relative importance of Vietnam to the struggle against international communism. By 1962, both Harriman and McNamara led the administration-wide effort to redefine the situation in Vietnam along these lines.⁵⁶¹ McNamara's assistant for public affairs Sylvester reminded returning officers that in their speaking engagements they should insist that the "U.S. is not fighting this war – it is their war."⁵⁶² Harriman repeated this advice to CINCPAC the following month. He insisted that it could not "be overstressed" in the "conduct and utterances in public and private of all US personnel" that the war was "Viet-Nam's war with the Viet-Cong" and that "the responsibility remains with the GVN."⁵⁶³

That ceiling on U.S. responsibility to Vietnam also became prominent in the administration's communications with Diem. In a July 1962 letter, Kennedy reminded Diem that "the struggle is Vietnamese at its center, not American"⁵⁶⁴,

⁵⁶⁰ Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 September – 1 October 1963, Folder: Vietnam, McNamara-Taylor Report, 10/1/63, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

⁵⁶¹ Both Thompson and Harriman had expressed concern in the spring of 1962 that the United States was "losing sight of this." Thompson had reported back to the Foreign Office that he detected "a tendency amongst Americans to lose sight of the fact that it is Diem's own war" with the concomitant risk that "the game [would] be taken out of the minor league and promoted to the major league." ("Need for a General Review of the Situation With the United States", Warner, FO, March 19, 1962, FO 371/166702, Reel 14, FO Files, USA: Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975.) In a memo to McGeorge Bundy, Harriman had suggested adopting the "same posture in Vietnam as did in Greece, i.e. this is not a U.S. war – it will be won or lost by the Vietnamese." (Forrestal to McGeorge Bundy, May 5, 1962, Folder: May 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.)

⁵⁶² Sylvester to All Services, March 1962, Folder: Vietnam, General, 3/29/62-3/31/62, Box 196, NSF, JFKL.

⁵⁶³ Harriman to US Embassy, Saigon and CINCPAC, April 4, 1962, Folder: April 1962 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁵⁶⁴ Draft Letter From President Kennedy to President Diem, undated, Folder: Vietnam, General, 12/11/61 - 12/13/61, Box 195a, NSF, JFKL.

an idea that was repeated in a subsequent draft letter in September 1963.⁵⁶⁵ In its final form, the September 1963 letter left out a key phrase “this is a Vietnamese conflict and all the United States can do is help.” McNamara communicated this in person to Diem during his trip.⁵⁶⁶

In addition, McNamara’s strategy required defining the problem as internal to South Vietnam as opposed to external (i.e. North Vietnamese aggression) which would imply a host of international obligations under the 1954 Geneva Accords and the United Nations Charter. In the fall of 1961, as part of efforts to encourage the introduction of ground troops, the State Department had commissioned the so-called “Jordan Report” that described the situation in Vietnam as one of aggression from the North. As Rostow explained, “The object of all this, as I have indicated, would be to seize the international community of this problem, develop our case, and lay the basis for the actions that we ourselves may have to take.”⁵⁶⁷

By contrast, from 1962 onwards, both in private and in public, McNamara described the situation in South Vietnam as mostly “indigenous”.⁵⁶⁸ In a March 1962 press conference, he tellingly spoke about being “very much encouraged” by the South Vietnamese Government improvements to its “own forces” and described the conflict as a “classic guerrilla fight” not an external threat but rather a “threat to their internal stability.”⁵⁶⁹ In January 1963, before Congress, he reiterated that the program in Vietnam was one of “training only” and that the country faced “no direct aggression.”⁵⁷⁰ In June 1963, he explained that, “The emphasis is on internal

⁵⁶⁵ State to Embassy Saigon, September 24, 1963, *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Vol 4, pp. 287-90.

⁵⁶⁶ Memorandum of a Conversation, Gia Long Palace, Saigon, September 29, 1963. *FRUS Vietnam August-December 1963*, Vol. 4, pp. 311-21.

⁵⁶⁷ “Contingency Planning for Southeast Asia”, Memorandum from Rostow to U Alexis Johnson, September 29, 1961, Folder: Southeast Asia, General, Box 231, NSF, Regional Security Files, JFKL.

⁵⁶⁸ Tape 85, 5/7/63, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

⁵⁶⁹ Press briefing by Secretary McNamara, March 27, 1962, Folder: News Conference and Press Briefings, 1962, Box 182, RG200, RSM Papers, Unclassified Records of News Conferences and Public Statements, 1961-67, NARA.

⁵⁷⁰ Secretary McNamara Statement to Congress on FY1964 Budget, Jan 21, 1963, Folder: FY1964 Statement to Congress, Box 22, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, 1961-67, NARA.

guerrilla warfare and subversion in Vietnam.”⁵⁷¹ That conclusion was at odds with many in the bureaucracy including the State Department and NSC staff.

In terms of downgrading the relative importance of Vietnam or distinguishing between what Senator Mansfield had called “marginal” and “essential” interests, this was more difficult to do publicly at a time when the domino theory still held sway.⁵⁷² Kennedy’s interview with CBS in the fall of 1963, which many historians have treated as evidence that he would not withdraw, in fact included a very ambiguous statement. On the one hand, he insisted that, “In the final analysis it is the people and the government [of South Vietnam] who have to win or lose this struggle. All we can do is help.” On the other hand, he also said that he did not agree with those “who say we should withdraw” characterizing this as a “great mistake”.⁵⁷³

McNamara’s statements were much less ambivalent. During the Appropriations Hearings in the Senate when Vietnam was discussed, he shrewdly quoted Mansfield’s report at length, reciting that U.S. interests were “best serviced by a policy which helps to bring about internal peace in Vietnam but maintains, scrupulously, our advisory capacity.” He noted that, “This is exactly our objective.”⁵⁷⁴ Indeed, the administration’s objective, just as Mansfield had suggested upon his return from Vietnam in February 1962, had shifted from protecting the South Vietnamese at all costs to leaving the “primary responsibility [...] with the South Vietnamese.”⁵⁷⁵ By co-opting congressional language, he effectively protected the administration.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷¹ Robert McNamara and General Taylor, 87th Congress, “Briefing presented at the Foreign Assistance Act of 1963” (Senate Committee on Foreign Relation) (1st Session, June 13, 1963). Hearing ID: HRG-1963-FOR-0027, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

⁵⁷² *Pentagon Papers*, Part V.A.1C, pp. 26.

⁵⁷³ “Interview With the President, Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, September 2, 1963 on CBS” *FRUS* Vol. 4, Vietnam August - December 1963, pp. 93-95.

⁵⁷⁴ Robert S. McNamara Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, 88th Congress, May 14-15, 1963, pp. 92, Folder: Background and Research Material, Chapter 3, Box II:89, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁵⁷⁵ “Senator Mansfield’s Report on Viet Nam” Orsmy-Gore to FO, February 27, 1962, Reel 27: FO 371/170110, FO: The USA. Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

⁵⁷⁶ This episode is also intriguing because several of Kennedy’s advisors have suggested that Mansfield’s report had a powerful impact on Kennedy and that it was on the basis of this report that he began the process of phased withdrawal. O’Donnell et al., *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, pp. 16.

Implicit in this redefinition was the view that Vietnam was not of paramount importance to the United States. McNamara's edits to the October 1963 report are telling in this regard.⁵⁷⁷ In addition to insisting that the end date of 1965 remain in the report – implying that these were the President's instructions⁵⁷⁸ – one key line was edited three times: “the security of South Vietnam remains *important* to U.S. security” [emphasis added]. William Bundy, the principal drafter had initially described South Vietnam's security as “vital”, another advisor had crossed this out to read “crucial” but McNamara insisted on the rather more ambiguous “important”.⁵⁷⁹

The balance of payments deficit was a core issue for both President Kennedy and McNamara. It was also the backdrop against which the Kennedy administration adapted its defense policy and sought new models for intervention that relied relatively more on local “self-help” capabilities. In many ways, the counterinsurgency doctrine was a cost-cutting strategy, which, the administration rationalized, would be expensive in terms of aid and training in the short-term but would provide a more economically viable strategy for dealing with conflicts in the developing world in the longer-term.

⁵⁷⁷ Similarly, McNamara made telling edits to a draft speech on Vietnam in December 1962: he removed any indication that the U.S. was leading the effort in the country, replaced the word Communist “aggression” with “attacks” and the description of a “Communist direct military threat” with a “drive for domination of the country” Also, contrary to his well-known frustrations, he indicated that the South Vietnamese government “has become more cooperative” rather than “is becoming”. Proposed remarks for Secretary McNamara for Mutual Broadcasting System Program Dealing With South VN, December 4, 1962, Folder: News and Press Briefings, 1962, Box 182, RG200, RSM Papers, Unclassified Records of News Conferences and Public Statements, 1961-67, NARA.

⁵⁷⁸ William P. Bundy OH Interview No. 3 by Elspeth Rostow, November 12, 1964, JFKL. Also, Chester Cooper, in his Memoirs writes at length about being “surprised and outraged” at the 1965 end-date. He recounts an interaction with William Bundy: “Finally, in utter exasperation Bill said, “Look, I’m under instructions!” In Washington that closes any argument, unless recourse is taken by tackling the Instructor. Mac called Secretary McNamara, but was unable to persuade him to change his mind. McNamara seemed to have been trapped too; the sentence may have been worked out privately with Kennedy and therefore imbedded in concrete. The words remained and McNamara and the Administration were to pay a heavy price for them. They were not ignored by the waiting press.” Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, pp. 215-216.

⁵⁷⁹ Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 September – 1 October 1963, Folder: Vietnam, McNamara-Taylor Report, 10/1/63, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations, JFKL.

Bureaucratically, McNamara's leading part in addressing the balance of payments made a lot of sense. McNamara's PPBS and other budgetary systems had always been designed to match strategic ambitions spelled out in the White House, NSC and State Department with appropriate capabilities and within economic constraints. McNamara's long conversations with economist John Kenneth Galbraith in the spring of 1962 hinged especially on the economic costs inherent to the Chiefs' tendency to favor conventional responses to crises and conflict.

In the shorter-term, the administration also faced a congressional onslaught against its military assistance program especially in Asia. This had the dual effect of spurring the OSD to press MACV and the Chiefs for accelerated CPSVN plans and in the second instance, to seek alternative funding sources for operations in Vietnam. The latter would have fateful consequences in the transition into the Johnson administration. If the military problems were economic problems in the long-term, they were also budgetary problems in the shorter-term.

CHAPTER 10 - VIETNAM AS A BUDGETARY PROBLEM

In 1962, as McNamara reflected upon the planning for his defense budget and Vietnam, he recognized Mendes-France's observation that every military problem eventually becomes a budgetary problem. If counterinsurgency promised to alleviate some of the pressures on the balance of payments and provide a more economically sustainable model for intervention in the developing world, it did not solve McNamara's more immediate budgetary concerns. By contrast, a policy of phasing-out, as envisaged in the CPSVN, could reduce the more urgent pressures on the Military Assistance Program (MAP), which financed the bulk of operation in Vietnam and which, by early 1963, had come under attack from the SFRC that appropriated that part of the defense budget and that threatened to apply a "meat ax" cut to it.⁵⁸⁰

For McNamara, the lesson from the Korean commitment was also a budgetary one and provided the lens through which he perceived the growing commitment in Vietnam. When he tried to reduce troops or aid to the Republic of Korea because of balance of payments concerns, Secretary Rusk argued that any troop withdrawals would need to be offset by additional aid "without which the Korean economy could not survive."⁵⁸¹ In effect, the immovable commitment to Korea weighted down the MAP. Ultimately, it was ISA, the office that was created to oversee the MAP, that also oversaw the CPSVN plans and the pressures it applied on military planners to accelerate the CPSVN between the spring of 1962 and the fall of 1963 were driven as much, if not more, by budgetary concerns as they were by realities on the ground.

Operation Switchback

⁵⁸⁰ "Statement by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara", 88th Congress 1 (May 15, 1963) (Subcommittee on Foreign Operations Appropriation), pp. 93. Hearing ID: HRG-1963-HAP-0043, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

⁵⁸¹ "Department of Defense Proposals for Further Reductions in Balance of Payments Drain", Rusk to President Kennedy, October 3, 1963, Folder: Defense Department, Box 292, NSF, Subjects – Balance of Payments, JFKL.

Operation Switchback, the process by which the Defense Department restructured operations in Vietnam under its command between 1962 and 1963, was also at its core a funding story. As earlier chapters described, many in the administration were concerned about CIA operations in Vietnam, including the Special Forces' training the CIDG forces. On one level, the concerns were about bringing order and control: Gilpatric, who oversaw the Task Force on Vietnam until 1962, recalled that the CIA "was really operating as a quasi-military organization" without proper oversight.⁵⁸² The CIA representatives echoed this sentiment explaining that "in principal I am favour of getting CIA out of this business as much as possible" but that the problems in the past were "largely [about] funding procedures."⁵⁸³ On another level, therefore, the problems were about funding: the Defense Department had ready access to a greater pool of funds.

The CPSVN detailed the rationale behind transferring the irregular forces to the Defense Department: "To the extent that it is possible to do so, the functions now performed by irregular forces should be assumed by regularly constituted military forces which are appropriately responsive to normal channels of command and which are provided US advice and US assistance through normal MAP channels."⁵⁸⁴ Transferring CIA programs to the Defense Department was part of a general process, with CPSVN at its core, designed to streamline and "normalize" both budgetary and organizational procedures in Vietnam in order to eventually phase them out. In practice, the Defense Department had been financing most of the paramilitary programs from the start but only indirectly by providing a budget line item that ambiguously indicated that the funds were for joint CIA programs and later just "Operation Switchback" programs. The Department of the Army had paid

⁵⁸² Roswell Gilpatric OH Interview No. 2 by Dennis J. O'Brien, May 27, 1970, JFKL.

⁵⁸³ Heavner to Harriman, March 22, 1963, Folder: Defense Affairs, 1963, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

⁵⁸⁴ Honolulu Briefing Book (Part II) including Comprehensive Plan – Vietnam, November 20, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, Honolulu Briefing Book, 11/20/62 – Part II, Box 204, NSF, Country Series, JFKL.

the Special Forces' salary and equipment costs; the MAP covered training costs.⁵⁸⁵

Despite the advantages of providing order and clearer budgetary processes, many of Kennedy's advisors recognized that there were trade-offs to Defense Department control even from a cost-limitation perspective. The CIA Station and State Department officials in Washington, and at times General Harkins himself, were concerned that integrating the paramilitary forces into the DoD would make the programs "overly formalized" and thus more expensive and that they would extend the "stay of U.S. advisers and trainers in Viet-Nam."⁵⁸⁶ However, even if the DoD was more cumbersome and could end up increasing the costs of these programs, the CIA could not afford them anymore.⁵⁸⁷

The CIA's concerns echoed similar complaints from the USOM office, the AID program in Vietnam that also financed "information campaigns" and other programs within the strategic hamlets. Although AID expressed unease with the militarization of programs in Vietnam, they also felt "no issue be made of [it] now because of much more pressing and immediate problems which require resolution."⁵⁸⁸ These "more pressing problems" were the broader attack on AID and DoD's offer to take over budgetary authority for AID programs that had a military application.⁵⁸⁹ In the end, both agencies could not afford a large-scale counterinsurgency program even if this program was supposed to have a civilian rather than military focus.

At the same time, even if the Defense Department's budget was more open-ended than either the AID or CIA's, it was also constrained, not least by

⁵⁸⁵ Lansdale to Gilaptric, November 9, 1961, Folder: Laos, 1961-69 (7), Box 7, NSA, Info C&C, GFL.

⁵⁸⁶ "Hamlet Militia", Wood to Trueheart, May 22, 1963, Folder: Defense Affairs, 1963, Box 1, RG59 Working Group, NARA.

⁵⁸⁷ On the CIA's early role in South Vietnam, see especially the recently declassified CIA histories. Thomas Jr. Ahern, *CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam.*; Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification.*; Thomas J.r Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo.* Each retrieved online November 2, 2014: <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/vietnam-histories>.

⁵⁸⁸ "Aid Submission, November 18, 1963", Folder: Vietnam, General 11/16/63-11/22/63, State Cables, Box 202, NSF, Country Series, Vietnam, JFKL.

⁵⁸⁹ Extracts From the Pentagon Papers (Vol. II) on the 6th Honolulu Conference. Folder: Background and research material, Chapter 3, Box II:89, RSM Papers, LoC.

its relative transparency. As Gilpatric's successor on the Vietnam Working Group, Chalmers Wood, concluded, "CIA does not have the personnel to carry on this rapidly expanding operation", but "DoD does not have the funds and its own regulations hamper its flexibility in using funds to carry on this unorthodox work."⁵⁹⁰ As a result, the CIA retained only the most limited number of "non-Switchback" forces, forces it could financially sustain for the long-term and which the Defense Department could not absorb for political reasons, primarily because they involved operations outside of South Vietnam's legal borders.

Congress and funding limits

While funding from the Department of Defense seemed relatively more secure, by 1963 it too came under pressure. The pressure increased in the spring when planning began for FY64, an election year, and when a number of trends converged to make Vietnam operations especially vulnerable. First, the administration's competing aims of getting the tax cut while maintaining a degree of fiscal balance produced inevitable strains on the budget. In May, McNamara told Kennedy that he "fear[ed] next year, a campaign year", a "wide deficit" was "likely a problem" and that the defense budget could rise by \$1 billion "with no increase in programs."⁵⁹¹ The AID mission in Vietnam also felt the pinch and worried that "questions and concerns are probably going to be worse this year because of the proposed tax cut and a very large deficit has been budgeted for."⁵⁹²

The second and more important trend was what Kennedy called "the worst attack on foreign aid that we have seen since the beginning of the Marshall Plan", which had direct implications for Vietnam.⁵⁹³ During the Kennedy administration, Vietnam operations were largely financed through the MAP. The program had its origins in World War II but was formalized in

⁵⁹⁰ "Operation Switchback", Wood to Johnson, February 7, 1963, Folder: Defense Affairs, 1963, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

⁵⁹¹ Tape 85, May 7, 1963, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

⁵⁹² USAM/Viet-Nam Director's Staff Meeting, March 19, 1963, Folder: AID-7 Program Operations, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

⁵⁹³ President John F. Kennedy (press conference, Washington, DC, November 14, 1963), Box 140, McGeorge Bundy Papers, NYU Research and Reference Files, JFKL.

the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which consolidated existing government aid programs. In particular, it set up the USAID program for purely economic programs and created the MAP for defense-related programs.

Unlike the other OSD programs that were confirmed through the SASC, the SFRC appropriated the MAP. The latter included liberal Senators, including Senators Fulbright, Mansfield and Morse who were the most virulent critics of U.S. operations in Asia and in Vietnam especially. For instance, after one hearing, McNamara noted that Senator Fulbright was “very critical of the massive aid programs to Vietnam, Taiwan and Korea”: Fulbright complained that the United States had “not accomplished a thing in Korea with all of our aid,” suggesting “that if we gave the 500 million-odd program for Korea and spread it around Africa, Latin America, India and Egypt, it would do much more good.”⁵⁹⁴

Another Committee member, Senator Mansfield, the Irish-American Senate Majority Leader and former professor of Far Eastern history, published a scathing report following his visit to Vietnam in February 1962.⁵⁹⁵ Like Kennedy during his Senate years, Mansfield had been an early supporter of Ngo Dinh Diem but now found it, “Most disturbing [...] that Viet Nam now appears to be only at the beginning of a beginning in coping with its grave inner problems. All the current difficulties existed in 1955, along with hope and energy to meet them. But it is seven years later and \$2 billion of United States aid later.”⁵⁹⁶

The Senators were also concerned with the size of the defense budget. Morse, for instance, used the hearings to argue for cutting back the defense

⁵⁹⁴ Notes for Senate Foreign Relations Committee Military Assistance Hearings, June 14, 1962, Folder: MAP Hearings, Box 15, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, NARA.

⁵⁹⁵ In their biography of President Kennedy, Kenneth O'Donnell and David Powers claim that Mansfield's criticism made a profound impression on Kennedy who turned to a policy of disengagement from Vietnam after their meeting. This research has not found any evidence of this claim although Mansfield's views chimed with others within the administration at that time. Kenneth P. O'Donnell et al., *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁹⁶ “Senator Mansfield's Report on Viet Nam” Orsmy-Gore to FO, February 27, 1962, Reel 27: FO 371/170110, FO: The USA. Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

budget at a minimum by 15%.⁵⁹⁷ McNamara played on Morse's criticism, suggesting in his hearings that if it was "essential for some reason to cut the total defense budget, it should cut those portions other than the military assistance portion because the military assistance program is the tightest portion of the entire budget", although the SFRC had no appropriative authority over the rest of his budget.⁵⁹⁸ Although, for the most part, these Senators were favorable to the administration's aid program, with the power of the purse on their side, they used the MAP hearings as an opportunity to voice their criticism of what they saw as overbearing role of Defense Department in U.S. foreign policy and sought to curtail the administration's programs in countries like Vietnam.

Furthermore, the Senators used balance of payments concerns to justify cutting back the MAP program. In response, McNamara and the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lyman Lemnitzer and later Maxwell Taylor insisted that the MAP was a cost-effective program and that while "military efforts" abroad did contribute to the deficit, the MAP "*per se* does not contribute to our adverse balance of payments" but instead could have a favorable impact on the balance through military equipment sales.⁵⁹⁹ Speaking to Morse's criticism, McNamara insisted, "dollar for dollar, these programs [for countries on the periphery] contribute more to the security of the free world than corresponding expenditures in our defense appropriations."⁶⁰⁰

The Clay Committee

The issue of reducing the MAP program came to a head in 1963 with the publication in March of the Committee to Strengthen the Security of the Free World's report (most commonly referred to as the "Clay Committee"). In December 1962, hoping to achieve bipartisan support for the MAP program and thus to meet the SFRC's objections, Kennedy charged the former Military

⁵⁹⁷ "Statement by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara", 88th Congress 1 (May 15, 1963) (Subcommittee on Foreign Operations Appropriation). Hearing ID: HRG-1963-HAP-0043, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 96.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁰ This was a direct quote from the Clay Committee's Report. *Ibid.*

Governor of West Germany and a prominent “Eisenhower Republican”, General Lucius Clay with reviewing the administration’s foreign aid strategy.

The Committee was asked to investigate the administration’s repeated arguments that aid produced a sound investment for U.S. security, or as its mission statement read: “to determine whether [the military and economic assistance programs] were contributing the optimum security of the United States and the economic and political stability of the free world.”⁶⁰¹ Although Kennedy recognized that the Committee was heavily weighted with Republicans, he hoped that this might help him garner bipartisan support and that it “would somehow get respectable people who would bring pressure to bear on Congress and middle of the road people to do what his experts told him really ought to be done, but which the country didn’t seem ready to do.”⁶⁰²

Instead of producing a policy that helped the administration, the Clay Committee’s “miserable document” as one official described it⁶⁰³, called for major reform of aid and especially of the MAP where it suggested a “substantial tightening up and sharpened objectives in terms of our national interests.” Although the report echoed McNamara’s statements that aid provided a sound investment in the United States and its Allies’ security, it was nevertheless scathing in its assessment of the program and echoed many of the SFRC’s criticisms, some of which were particularly relevant for Vietnam.

While the Clay Committee welcomed the reforms to the aid program, it also argued that, contrary to McNamara’s suggestions, the aid program was contributing to the balance of payments crisis, which, it warned, undermined the United States’ “role of political, economic and financial leadership in the free world.” Moreover, its criticisms of recipient countries were particularly biting. For instance, it cautioned that, “many of the countries which have

⁶⁰¹ “Report to the President of the United States From the Committee to Strengthen the Security of the Free World”, March 20, 1963. Folder: National Security S and O, Box 11, Neustadt Papers, JFKL.

⁶⁰² Paul Samuleson quoted in Council of Economic Advisors OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph Pechman, August 1, 1964, JFKL, pp. 255.; On the bipartisan aspects of the Clay Committee, see also General Lucius D. Clay OH Interview by Richard Scammon, July 1, 1964, JFKL.

⁶⁰³ In an indication of how badly this exercise backfired, Kennedy himself apparently said “That son of a bitch Clay. I should have known better...” Carl Kaysen OH Interview No. 1 by Joseph E. O’Connor, July 11, 1966, JFKL.

received our aid have not fully performed their part of the assistance bargain”, namely by showing “an internal expression of will and discipline.” Also, in a way that echoed McNamara’s qualms about the OSD on Vietnam, it complained that aid programs were particularly weak in countries plagued “by the absence of trained manpower and adequate local institutions.”⁶⁰⁴

Crucially, in keeping with its recommendation for “tightening up” the MAP program, the report also called for a budget ceiling of \$1 billion by no later than fiscal year FY68.⁶⁰⁵ FY68 was also the cut-off date for the final CPSVN phase-out.⁶⁰⁶ The link between the withdrawal plans and the MAP became so clear that MACV submitted a revised version of the CPSVN to CINPCAC in January 1963 with an introduction that advised that: “In view of the close relationship between the plan and the Military Assistance Plan, they should not continue to be treated as separate entities.”⁶⁰⁷ Figure 2 in Appendix 1 shows the overall MAP program and Vietnam’s relative share according to the CPSVN. The orange dotted line denotes Clay Report’s suggested the \$1 billion cap, which Senate leaders supported as did McNamara in the aid hearings and Dillon in planning for the FY64 budget.⁶⁰⁸

McNamara explicitly used the SFRC’s pressures to accelerate the CPSVN process. Whereas in September 1962, MACV had suggested that “previous MAP ceilings don’t apply”, by December 1962 there had been a *volte face* and now planning was being made with “funding limitations” in

⁶⁰⁴ “Report to the President of the United States From the Committee to Strengthen the Security of the Free World”, March 20, 1963. Folder: National Security S and O, Box 11, Neustadt Papers, JFKL.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁶ Although even colleagues at ISA raised questions about this assumption suggesting, “There is no experience to show that mopping up in a CI situation is appreciably cheaper than building up. The GVN may have to keep large number of forces in being for 5-10 years.” “Proposed FY65-69 MAP Projection for Far East”, Rear Admiral Heiz to ISA, December 28, 1962, Folder: December 1962, 7-31, Box 10, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶⁰⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, Vol.IV.B.4.

⁶⁰⁸ In fact, Dillon, who had worked on aid issues in the Eisenhower administration, suggested a \$1 billion mark as early as February 1962, almost a year before the Clay Committee’s Report. To Rusk, he wrote, “I also told the President my view which I mentioned in our meeting last week that the overall balance of payments impact of foreign aid operations including our contribution to the Inter-American Bank, the International Development Association, as well as AID and military assistance expenditures should not exceed a billion dollars annually as compared to last year’s level of about a billion and two hundred million.” Dillon to Rusk February 20, 1962, Douglas Dillon OH Interview No. 2 by Dixon Donnelley, November 10, 1964, JFKL, pp. 149.

mind.⁶⁰⁹ Also, whereas some training functions had been initially scheduled to continue until 1971, by May 1963, CINCPAC recognized that all programs, including training programs, should be accelerated to end by 1968. In his hearings in front of the SFRC, McNamara proudly explained the steps his office had taken to implement Clay's recommendations especially on Vietnam. He told the Senators, "As a matter of fact, Admiral Felt came in the day before yesterday from the Pacific and brought with him new estimates of the requirements for South Vietnam. [...] I told [him] I doubted very much that funds would be available to support a program that large and urged him to reconsider, which he agreed to."⁶¹⁰

The Korean analogy as a budgetary lesson

For both McNamara and the SFRC Senators, their experience with the Korean commitment colored their concerns about the MAP program for Vietnam, namely that the United States was stuck with an expensive and open-ended commitment in Korea.⁶¹¹ Moreover, whereas the MAP program was designed as a cost-efficient tool to deal with situations around the world, it was dominated by expensive commitments in Asia.

The commitment in Korea and its impact on McNamara's motivation for the CPSVN, was obvious. In a recording of a private conversation with Kennedy in May 1963, McNamara explained the CPSVN as follows:

"I calculate that we can get it under control, it may take two years, three years possibly but we should now be looking at a time when we'll have a normal military program there. Instead they're proposing a fantastic military assistance program. [...] And if you're looking toward a normal relationship so we don't build up another Korea. When I look at what's

⁶⁰⁹ "Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam", Harkins to MAAG, September 8, 1962, Folder: September 1962 1-14, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶¹⁰ "Statement by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara", 88th Congress 1 (May 15, 1963) (Subcommittee on Foreign Operations Appropriation), pp. 83. Hearing ID: HRG-1963-HAP-0043, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

⁶¹¹ See footnote 20 for the different meanings of the "Korean analogy". The focus here is relatively more on the legacy of the Korean War, in terms of the commitment to the ROK, rather than the experience of the Truman administration with the Korean War. Which is not to say that the latter did not have an impact, notably on advisors such as George Ball. For additional details, see especially: Khong, *Analogies at War*.

happened in Korea and the way the U.S. aid is, and how difficult it's going to be to scale that aid down, we certainly don't want another Korea developing in South Vietnam and we're well on our way to doing that."⁶¹²

McNamara had applied his five-year budget planning to the MAP and found that Vietnam would have a "fantastic" effect on the overall budget if current growth trends were maintained.⁶¹³ As the Figure 3 in Appendix 1 shows, McNamara's calculations in preparation for the Senate hearing on the MAP program showed that the Vietnam program was getting very close to equaling Korea's share of the MAP program.

In addition, it was William Bundy at ISA who wrote much of the October 1963 Taylor-McNamara report and who was responsible for overseeing the Vietnam program's implications for MAP and for coordinating policy with AID.⁶¹⁴ In the preceding months, together with the Deputy Director for Military Assistance William Leffingwell, Bundy sent McNamara a number of reports describing the impact of the "Southeast Asia emergency" on total MAP costs. According to their forecasts, these would rise to \$965 million out of a total program budget of \$2.5 billion in FY62 and 875 million out of \$2.2 billion in FY64.⁶¹⁵ By FY63, the Far East (which also included Korea and Taiwan) accounted for over 44% of the total MAP program.⁶¹⁶ As a result, a joint State-Defense program recommended that programs be geared towards "self-help"⁶¹⁷; nowhere was this trend clearer than the October 1963 recommendations for Vietnam.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹² Tape 85, May 7, 1963, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

⁶¹³ McNamara to William Bundy, September 4, 1963, Folder: Reading File, September 1963, Box 118, RG200, RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

⁶¹⁴ Record of a Small Meeting with Secretary McNamara in Admiral Felt's Office, October 8, 1962, Folder: Vietnam, General 1962, Box 519, Harriman Papers, LoC.

⁶¹⁵ Leffingwell to McNamara, March 8, 1961, Folder: MAP FY162-1966, Box 14, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, 1961-67, NARA.

⁶¹⁶ Kaplan et al., *The McNamara Ascendancy*, pp. 429-431.

⁶¹⁷ Report of the Military Assistance Steering Group Report, December 12, 1961, Folder: MAP - Six Country Studies, December 1961-January 1962, Box 9, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, 1961-67, NARA.

⁶¹⁸ Although McNamara knew the SFRC was highly critical of the dominant role of Asia on the MAP, in his testimony, he put the number even higher: he indicated that 70% of the FY64 MAP program went to 9 countries in South Asia, the Far East and Near East and he

South Vietnamese funding

In endorsing the Clay Committee's recommendations as both "desirable and feasible", the SFRC reminded the administration that each MAP should be "temporary and extraordinary" and should be terminated as soon as possible or when the "recipient country develops the economic capacity to sustain its own defense."⁶¹⁹ In other words, all MAP programs must have a cut-off date. Thereafter, financial support for operations should come from the recipient country or from elsewhere in government. McNamara argued that the Vietnam costs were "temporary" by putting them in a long-term context, noting that they had reached a "peak and [would] start to level off."⁶²⁰

According to the CPSVN, there would be a Defense Department-financed delimited surge in funding from 1963 to 1965 and then as U.S. forces withdrew by FY67, the South Vietnamese government would fund its military; the AID station (through USOM) and the CIA would take over funding for much of the reduced number of paramilitary forces⁶²¹ as they gradually merged into the National Police Force. The process effectively reduced the conflict in Vietnam to an internal security problem. Moreover, to preempt any further delays from the services, by September 1963 the OSD indicated that further funding for Vietnam operations would come from "non-MAP sources", namely the services budgets themselves for instance in the handover of materiel that was already in the country.⁶²²

mentioned Vietnam first among those countries, even if it was not the largest recipient of MAP aid.

⁶¹⁹ "Statement by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara", 88th Congress 1 (May 15, 1963) (Subcommittee on Foreign Operations Appropriation). Hearing ID: HRG-1963-HAP-0043, US Congressional Hearings Digital Collection Historical Archives, 1824-2003.

⁶²⁰ "McNamara Says Aid to Saigon is At Peak and Will Level Off," *New York Times* (1962), Folder: May 1962, 1-9, Box 8, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶²¹ The OSD was clearly impatient with AID by December 1962 and suggested that they too should begin planning for long-term funding arrangements for these forces with the South Vietnamese Ministry of the Interior. Comprehensive Plan for SVN, December 7, 1962 Harkins to Felt, Folder: December 1962 1-4, Box 10, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL. Also, the AID station in Vietnam was concerned about these budgetary assumptions ("not prepared at present time to concur with these changes") but "suggest[ed] that no issue be made of them now because of much more pressing and immediate problems which require[d] cooperative resolution." "Outline for Discussion at Inter-Agency Review of Economic Aid Program for FY1965 for Vietnam", September 3, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, General, 11/16/63-11/12/63, State Cables, Box 202, NSF, JFKL.

⁶²² Information Brief "Comprehensive Plan for South VN (CPSVN)", August 27, 1963, Folder: August 1963 25-27, Box 13, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

The configuration of South Vietnamese forces also evolved to reflect these budgetary concerns and the focus on counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam. As General Harkins explained to his Vietnamese counterparts, the tendency among the Chiefs to build up “excessively expensive military establishments” that mirrored their own in partner countries was “extremely expensive in both funds and troop support” whereas advisory missions on the lower-end of the security spectrum could be more affordable and thus sustainable.⁶²³ A few months earlier, McNamara had rejected the January 1963 draft of the CPSVN on the basis that it “too large for the GVN to support.”⁶²⁴

As a result, whereas in earlier drafts the South Vietnamese manning levels for each of the services were roughly equal, by the last version in November 1963 planned troop strengths for a South Vietnamese Navy especially but also Air Force had been drastically cut and a greater onus placed on the Army and the paramilitary Civil Guard and Self-Defense Forces. The latter were smaller units associated to the strategic hamlet program. In absolute terms, the overall manning levels for all forces, including most paramilitary groups, were more than halved.

The reduction in forces reflected South Vietnam’s dual problems of funding and recruitment: as the December 1962 draft of the CPSVN explained, the South Vietnamese government did not necessarily have the ability to “recruit officers and technical staff without damaging the economy.”⁶²⁵ Both MACV and the OSD were concerned about the absence of officers trained to take on more skill-intensive roles envisaged under earlier plans. As a result, the plans were designed to redefine the problem in Vietnam as one of fighting an insurgency and policing. This was relatively cheaper, easier to train for and required smaller force levels.

⁶²³ Harkins to Thuan, June 28, 1963, Folder: June 1963 21-28, Box 12, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶²⁴ Information Brief “Comprehensive Plan for South VN (CPSVN)”, August 27, 1963, Folder: August 1963 25-27, Box 13, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶²⁵ Comprehensive Plan for SVN, December 7, 1962 Harkins to Felt, Folder: December 1962 1-4, Box 10, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

As for transferring the costs to the South Vietnamese government in the long-term, it was not clear that it could finance the various units as the phase-out took hold especially in the face of MAP cuts.⁶²⁶ The Director of USOM in Vietnam, Joseph Brent, commented on an earlier version of the CPSVN that “the force levels being contemplated after 1966, when the insurgency will have supposedly been contained, will result in either an intolerable deficit or an impractically high aid level.”⁶²⁷

Another report concluded gloomily that: “Vietnam is essentially in the same position as Korea, in that the country is not presently viable and that the U.S. aid program essentially makes up the current account deficit through grants.”⁶²⁸ The Embassy in Saigon raised similar concerns, noting that it was “hardly surprising that the GVN is overwhelmed with its budgetary problem” considering that “about 18% of GNP” for 1962 was allocated for “security.” “In the US,” the telegram read, “This would be comparable to about \$100 billion for defense, or approximately double our present budget.”⁶²⁹

McNamara’s experience and frustrations with untangling the “sterile commitment” in Korea explain his impatience with rolling back the United States’ commitment to Vietnam before it became what the Foreign Office called a “normality” which would make it “more difficult for the Vietnamese [...] to achieve true independence.”⁶³⁰ This is what McNamara meant when he told

⁶²⁶ A Federal Reserve Board study commissioned by the State Department in April 1963 questioned the South Vietnamese government’s ability to cope with a reduction of U.S. assistance and urged greater “self-help” and “buy American” measures to reduce the balance of payments impact of operations there. It was highly critical of AID and the government of South Vietnam; as a result, the State Department tried to have it reclassified. (General Terms of Reference for Your Assignment in Vietnam, Stoneman to Kaufman (Federal Reserve Board), April 17, 1963, Folder: AID-7 Program Operations, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

⁶²⁷ Still his colleagues “felt the best course to follow would be to make an all-out effort between now and the end of the 1965, and then in 1966 work at stabilizing the economic situation.” USAM/Viet-Nam Director’s Staff Meeting, May 15, 1963, Folder: AID-7 Program Operations, Box 1, RG59 Vietnam Working Group, NARA.

⁶²⁸ “Economic Effects of Potential Decrease in Military Expenditures in Certain Selected Countries”, Gordon to Kaysen, July 11, 1962, Folder: 1962, Box 362, NSF, Kaysen Papers, JFKL.

⁶²⁹ Trueheart, Saigon to Hilsman and Janow, May 28, 1963, Folder: June 1963 1-2, Box 11, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶³⁰ “Annual Report For 1962” Hohler, Saigon to Home, January 2, 1963, Reel 23: FO 371/166763. TNA: FO Files: The USA. Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

the NSC that, “To leave forces there when they’re not needed, I think is wasteful and complicates both their problems and ours.”⁶³¹ It would “complicate” Vietnamese self-reliance and would “waste” finite MAP resources.

Military services’ funding

In the short term, as the Clay Committee first recommended, the OSD looked into transferring some of Vietnam’s costs to the services.⁶³² In moves that presaged McNamara’s later manipulations to the defense budget during the war, he sought ways to transfer costs or hide their full effect. For instance, in May 1963, he asked that military planners “turn over material in place at no cost to the country MAP program”⁶³³ in effect burying materiel costs in the services’ budgets.

McNamara also recommended that ISA explore transferring all the costs of Vietnam operations to the services’ budget as he anticipated substantial cuts in FY64. He suggested that this would have a “highly desirable tactical effect” as it could help reduce overall MAP to the \$800 million mark (under Clay’s recommended \$1 billion) by FY65.⁶³⁴ William Bundy tentatively reached out to Senator Richard Russell⁶³⁵ to see whether he would support such a move but pre-empted any criticism by saying that

⁶³¹ Transcript NSC meeting, October 3, 1963: Tape 144/A49, Cassette 2/3, Folder: Fog of War, background and research materials, Box II:114, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁶³² General Clay testimony in front of Senate Foreign Affairs Select Committee, April 25, 1963, Folder: President’s Message, Rusk Statement & Legislation, 1963, Box 29, RG200, RSM Papers, Defense Programs and Operations, 1961-67, NARA.

⁶³³ “FY65-69 MAP Plan for Republic of Vietnam”, CINCPAC to Director of Military Assistance, OSD, July 31, 1963, Folder: July 1963 15-27, Box 13, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶³⁴ “Revisions in the Military Assistance Program Budget Presentation”, McNamara to President Johnson, December 3, 1963, Folder: Defense Budget 1/2, Box 45, Sorensen Papers, Subject Files 1961-64, JFKL.

⁶³⁵ In a letter to State and AID, McNamara wrote that the “legal and practical feasibility of these transfers has not yet been fully considered with the Department of Defense.” McNamara to Department of State/AID Administrator Bell, November 14, 1963, Folder: Reading File, October 1963, Box 119, RG200 RSM Papers, Reading Files, NARA.

this would be an “exception to the general rule.”⁶³⁶ He wrote to the Chairman of the SASC,

“The fundamental reason for these changes is our belief that military assistance is an essential element of our total national defense effort and should be considered as a part of the budget of the Department of Defense itself. [...] We believe on balance that it would be sound to transfer this funding responsibility to the DoD budget. A secondary factor is that this would give General Harkins and the field command somewhat greater administrative ease in calling the items they believe are required to produce success.”⁶³⁷

However, the temporary expedient of shifting the costs for Vietnam onto the services had far-reaching consequences. By removing the MAP program for Vietnam away from SFRC oversight, McNamara also lost much of the rationale for cutting back costs on operations in Vietnam in the short-term, and in the long-term, *de facto* removed one of the biggest sources of “push-back” on U.S. operations in the country. Moreover, as George Ball suggested, by moving the MAP program in Vietnam away from a coordinated platform with State, it also opened the door for the program in Vietnam to increasingly ignore the AID program and instead follow military imperatives.

The paradox of the Kennedy’s administration’s predilection for fighting “new” wars, namely counterinsurgencies that relied heavily on “self-help” models was that they were designed to be cheaper and thus economically more sustainable in light of the United States’ growing list of commitments and the resultant balance of payments deficit. However, since they relied on MAP funding as well, they also drew on a much tighter budget line, one where an activist SFRC was determined to cut back commitments altogether. The SFRC’s activism eventually pushed McNamara and the OSD to seek continued funding for Vietnam elsewhere, namely in the military budget, and in so doing inadvertently produced pressures to militarize operations in

⁶³⁶ “Realignment of the MAP Program for FY1965”, William Bundy to Bureau of Budget, State, AID, White House, November 22, 1963, Folder: Defense Budget 1/2, Box 45, Sorensen Papers, Subject Files 1961-64, JFKL.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

Vietnam. Just as the OSD taking on a leading role in Vietnam under *Operation Switchback* swamped out the AID program, putting the financing for the Vietnam program increasingly under the services' budget raised their role in policy-formulation.

Throughout this period, McNamara saw the Vietnam conflict through its fiscal impact on the MAP program and its economic impact. McNamara was never really concerned with designing strategy for Vietnam but the counterinsurgency strategies fit neatly with his cost-cutting agenda. His reforms at the OSD, especially the PPBS, were about control and about bridging ambitions and strategy laid out in the White House or the State Department with existing limitations of which economic limitations were at the forefront.

Conclusion

McNamara was a mathematical man, more concerned with budgetary issues than with geopolitics. His particular mindset and his very personal definition of his "job" as Secretary of Defense explain why he led the withdrawal plans from Vietnam under the Kennedy administration as aggressively as he did. Although it was Kennedy and his counterinsurgency advisors who provided the overall strategy for Vietnam, McNamara welcomed its corollaries. Specifically, that the strategy would significantly reduce the military role of the United States in Vietnam (i.e. the costs for the DoD) especially at a time when the Senate was squeezing the relevant budgetary allocation, the MAP. In so doing, it could forestall "another Korea" which for McNamara was a budgetary nightmare: a situation that required significant financial outlays and from which it was almost impossible to extricate his Department. As McNamara saw it, the United States' responsibilities in places such as Korea were undermining the United States economically. Understanding the importance of these economic issues is central to understanding the credibility of the withdrawal plans.

McNamara's evaluation of the budgetary impact of Vietnam drove his support from the CPSVN from July 1962 onwards and his insistence that the

administration publicize the plans in October 1963. The public relations aspects of the October 1963 announcements, specifically the 1,000-man troop withdrawal, were important: they addressed congressional pressures on the MAP and sent a message to the Vietnamese that they should take greater responsibility for the war. However, other long-term concerns drove the larger issue of withdrawal and the CPSVN. In particular, the CPSVN reflected Kennedy's counterinsurgency advisors' pessimistic reading of the unfolding situation in Vietnam and their concerns that U.S. involvement had become over-militarized. In turn, this strategy dovetailed with the OSD's institutional, primarily economic concerns.

PART III: AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 11: MCNAMARA'S TRANSITION INTO THE JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION

John Lewis Gaddis has written that, “Our responsibility as historians is as much to show there were paths *not* taken as it is to explain the ones that were.”⁶³⁸ That is precisely this chapter’s objective: to identify how and why the path to continue with the CPSVN was not taken. Despite public assertions, President Johnson understood the Vietnam policy that he had inherited from Kennedy, and the presidential tapes make clear that McNamara had informed him of the rationale behind the policy of phasing out the U.S. presence in Vietnam. When the administration strayed from that policy, key advisors including Roger Hilsman loudly remonstrated and finally, like most of the counterinsurgency experts from the Kennedy administration, left.

President Johnson knowingly changed U.S. policy on Vietnam in the early months of his administration. This chapter focuses on this period and particularly the period leading into the spring of 1964 when the administration set itself on a course where, to use Andrew Preston’s terminology, escalation became probable rather than just possible.⁶³⁹ Johnson played a key role in pushing the withdrawal plans aside. Already during his first meeting on Vietnam on November 24, 1963, the new President framed the issue in far starker and more traditionally military terms than Kennedy had been inclined to do. Moreover, he publicly committed the United States to the survival of South Vietnam; something his predecessor had been more ambiguous and ambivalent about.

In the months that followed, Johnson virtually dictated many of McNamara’s memoranda to him. This was especially true of McNamara’s

⁶³⁸ Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, pp. 141.

⁶³⁹ Preston, “The Soft Hawks’ Dilemma in Vietnam,” pp. 66.

March 1964 report, which historians often point to as a turning point in the escalatory momentum towards a military solution to the situation in Vietnam. Johnson's bullish, if not bullying, personality and search for a consensus also influenced McNamara's disinclination to do more than imply reservations about the administration's policy.

Johnson also had an effect on the underlying economic rationale that had underpinned the CPSVN. Responding to changed economic conditions as well as his own philosophical bent, within days of becoming President, Johnson made it clear to his advisers that he was less bothered by the balance of payments than Kennedy had been and more committed to Keynesian economics. Many of Kennedy's advisers had complained that he was overly concerned with the gold outflow and insufficiently Keynesian, and thus applauded the new President as he launched the Great Society programs. Faced with new domestic commitments that stretched the administration's resources, McNamara started down a slippery slope of manipulating budgetary figures to underplay the costs of conflict on Vietnam while also, in recognition of the changed nature of the United States' commitment to Vietnam, transferring budgetary oversight away from the MAP and the SFRC to the SASC. This further encouraged the trend toward military solutions to the problems in Vietnam.

As well, Johnson's influence on the decisions to escalate in Vietnam was indirect. This was particularly true of the way that he shaped decision-making in his administration: he avoided open debate around core issues and relied on a different set of advisers to inform his Vietnam policy. Specifically, he was more inclined to receive the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and allowed Secretary of State Rusk to play a leading role on Vietnam policy where, during the Kennedy years, both had been largely excluded. In addition, key counterinsurgency experts, most notably Roger Hilsman, were pushed aside.⁶⁴⁰

⁶⁴⁰ For a detailed analysis of Johnson's decision-making style, his search for consensus, and the way it influenced the JCS recommendations to him, see especially: H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*.

Ultimately, if on the surface and in public, McNamara became responsible for the war, behind the scenes his role was remarkably consistent across the two administrations: he did not articulate strategy *per se*; he implemented policy and he acted as a bridge between the strategy and ambitions determined by the White House and State Department and existing capabilities and constraints. The constraints that most troubled him were, as always, economic and budgetary ones but more surprisingly, given that he became the face of the administration's "credibility gap", the need to be more transparent in order to garner public support as the administration escalated its role in Vietnam. In spite of his private concerns, McNamara produced the key documents that made escalation in Vietnam more likely and slid into the role of scapegoat for a policy that he, sooner than most, considered flawed.

The existing narrative on the transition

The traditional narrative of McNamara's role in the Johnson administration and specifically his contribution to the administration's decisions to escalate in the period between 1964 and 1965 relies on a particular interpretation of his position in the Kennedy administration and on a tendency to minimize the importance of the CPSVN plans. Within this historiography, the withdrawal plans are usually described as either secret, tentative or the product of Kennedy's vision alone; a mere blip in the otherwise inevitable upward trajectory of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.⁶⁴¹ However, this view conveniently ignores the complicating fact that McNamara led Kennedy's withdrawal plans and that they were publicized, budgeted for and set within an intellectual framework, a strategy of sorts, even if that strategy was doomed to fail as the situation in Vietnam unraveled.

McNamara himself appeared to confirm the orthodox interpretation of his role in escalating the war in Vietnam in his memoirs, *In Retrospect*. However, earlier drafts of the memoirs suggest that the published text

⁶⁴¹ George Herring in his seminal book on Vietnam, for instance, wrote: "The extent to which Kennedy was committed to withdrawal remains quite unclear, and there is not a shred of evidence to support the notion of a secret plan for extrication." Herring, *America's Longest War*, pp. 114.

reflected Brian VanDeMark's perspective more than McNamara's. A prominent historian of the Vietnam War, VanDeMark removed key passages that would have recast the CPSVN in a way that was less consistent with his existing work. In particular, in his first draft McNamara explained that publicly announcing a timetable for disengagement from Vietnam in October 1963 had been controversial and added that, "I recognized the possibility that the decision could be overturned. I urged that the decision be publicly announced, thereby setting it in concrete."⁶⁴² This disproves VanDeMark's assertion in *Into the Quagmire* that Johnson "consciously continued his predecessor's Vietnam policy [...] to demonstrate his resolve by standing firm in Vietnam"⁶⁴³ or Larry Berman's assertion that "Johnson never heard of the secret plans for getting out."⁶⁴⁴

A comparison of McNamara's first comments on the transition for *In Retrospect* with the eventual published text reveals that it is precisely the issue of withdrawal and the premises for withdrawal that were most heavily edited by VanDeMark.⁶⁴⁵ In his first drafts, McNamara emphasized that Kennedy believed that a successful intervention in Vietnam relied on having a strong South Vietnamese political base and, in the absence of a reliable partner, moved towards a policy of withdrawal. McNamara identified a number of occasions during the Johnson administration – particularly, November 1964 and most of 1965 – when withdrawal could have been considered on the same premise.

In their discussions and interviews, VanDeMark nudged McNamara to highlight certain variables in the decision to escalate in Vietnam more than he was initially inclined to. These included McNamara's change of heart at the

⁶⁴² In *Retrospect* first draft, Folder: In *Retrospect* Drafts & Notes, 1993-1994, Box II:100, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁶⁴³ VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, pp. 7.

⁶⁴⁴ Berman, *Planning a tragedy*, pp. 30.

⁶⁴⁵ Although Adam Yarmolinsky, McNamara's Special Assistant and his confidant warned VanDeMark that there would be nothing of value in the official memoranda, that he should look at the presidential recordings instead, VanDeMark's research was primarily limited to the *FRUS* volumes on the basis of which he explained to McNamara that there was no documentary evidence to support his more controversial claims, especially on the issue of withdrawal. Interview between Brian VanDeMark and Adam Yarmolinsky, April 1, 1993, Folder: Yarmolinsky 1993, Box II:104, RSM Papers, LoC.

end of 1963 rather than the influence of President Johnson's views on Vietnam; the significance of the Chiefs' repeated appeals to introduce troops which had existed before Johnson came to power; and the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. None of these factors would have been given as much importance as they received in the final draft of *In Retrospect* if VanDeMark had focused, as McNamara's had suggested, on his conviction that the issue of having a sound political base mattered first and foremost in Kennedy's strategy in Vietnam.⁶⁴⁶

Continuing Kennedy's policy

The suggestion that Johnson deliberately continued Kennedy's policy relies on an inaccurate reading of the Kennedy administration's policy. The end-point for U.S. involvement as laid out in final draft of the CPSVN, in NSAM 263 as well as in the press statement that emerged from the October 1963 NSC meetings, would come when: "the insurgency has been suppressed *or* until the national security forces of the Government of South Viet-Nam are capable of suppressing it."⁶⁴⁷ Johnson knew that the objective was *or* not *and*. He also knew that McNamara had led efforts to make the second objective the pre-eminent one, that is, that he supported a movement towards self-help and felt that this was a war that could only be won by the South Vietnamese themselves.

In January 1964, an exchange of letters between Senator Mansfield and Johnson spurred a discussion within the administration about the limits of the United States' commitment to Vietnam. Echoing the same arguments McNamara had made in the preceding months, Mansfield addressed the danger of "another China in Vietnam" and noted, "Neither do we want another Korea. It would seem that a key (but often overlooked) factor in both situations was a tendency to bite off more than we can chew. We tended to talk ourselves out on a limb with overstatements of our purpose and commitment." He ended by warning the President that "there ought to be less official talk of our

⁶⁴⁶ Robert McNamara, interview by Brian VanDeMark, September 10, 1963, Folder: In Retrospect First Draft, Ch. 5-8, Box II:100, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁶⁴⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.B.4, pp. 42.

responsibility in Vietnam and more emphasis on the responsibilities of the Vietnamese themselves.”⁶⁴⁸

When Johnson forwarded this memo to McGeorge Bundy and McNamara for comment, the former spoke about the “catastrophic impact” it would have across the region while the latter used language and arguments that were both entirely new to his repertoire and completely at odds with what he said before and after. At first, McNamara responded in a relatively consistent manner, noting that “we should certainly stress that the war is essentially a Vietnamese responsibility, and this we have repeatedly done, particularly in our announced policy on US troop withdrawal.” However, he then added that “we cannot disengage US prestige to any significant degree” because “the whole history of support of South Vietnam going back to 1954 makes it inevitable that the US is deeply involved, and this would have been true even if we had not made the decision to intervene on a substantial scale in the fall of 1961.” He ended by writing that “important security interests [...] unquestionably call for holding the line against further Communist gains. And, I am confident that the American people are by and large in favor of a policy of firmness and strength in such situations.”⁶⁴⁹ Rarely had McNamara sounded so little like himself and so much like Johnson.

However, one presidential recording of a conversation between Johnson and McNamara on February 25, 1964 makes clear that McNamara had communicated the standing policy on Vietnam to Johnson, in detail, and that he continued to lean towards the policy recommended by Mansfield. In the exchange, which is worth quoting at length, Johnson, like a good student, reiterated “what [McNamara] said to [him]” and revealed his particular lens and points of view. On the policy of self-help, Johnson explained:

“And it’s their war, it’s their men, and we’re willing to train them, and we have found that, over a period of time that we kept the Communists from spreading like we did in Greece and Turkey with the Truman

⁶⁴⁸ “Vietnamese Situation”, Mansfield to President Johnson, January 6, 1964, Folder: Vietnam, 10/2/63 – 1/14/64, Subject Files 1961-64: Box 55, Sorensen Papers, JFKL.

⁶⁴⁹ McNamara to President Johnson, January 7, 1964, Folder: Vietnam, 10/2/63 – 1/14/64, Subject Files 1961-64: Box 55, Sorensen Papers, JFKL.

Doctrine. [...] We've done it there by advising; we haven't done it by going off dropping bombs, we haven't done it by going out and sending men to fight and we have no such commitment there. But we do have a commitment to help the Vietnamese defend themselves. And we're there for training and that's what we've done."

Later in the conversation, he added, "All right then the next question comes is how in the hell does McNamara think, when he's losing a war, that he can pull men out of there. Well McNamara's not fighting a war, he's training men to fight a war and when he gets them through High School, they will have graduated from High School. [...] And if he trains them to fight and they won't fight, he can't do anything about it." Johnson understood that Kennedy and McNamara's policy was one of training and training alone.⁶⁵⁰

Meanwhile, in public and before Congress, McNamara continued to defend the validity of his policy arguing that it was still on track. He explained, "I don't believe we should leave our men there to substitute for Vietnamese men who are qualified to carry out the task, and this is really the heart of the proposal. I think it was a sound proposal then and I think so now."⁶⁵¹

At about the same time, other key advisers including Theodore Sorensen and Roger Hilsman, were reminding Johnson in writing about both the limited character of the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam and, for Hilsman's part, the counterinsurgency aspects of the strategy there. In January 1964, for instance, Sorensen suggested that "you can continue to emphasize that the South Vietnamese have the primary responsibility for winning the war – so that if during the next four months the new government fails to take the necessary political, economic, social and military actions, it will be their choice and not our betrayal or weakness that loses the area."⁶⁵² Hilsman complained bitterly that the administration was straying from the strategic concept for South Vietnam because he believed that "if we can ever

⁶⁵⁰ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: February 25, 1964, WH 6402.21, Conversation 2191.

⁶⁵¹ *Pentagon Papers*, IV B.4.

⁶⁵² Sorensen to President Johnson, January 14, 1964, Folder: Vietnam, 10/2/63 – 1/14/64, Subject Files 1961-64: Box 55, Sorensen Papers, JFKL.

manage to have it implemented fully and with vigor, the result will be a victory.”⁶⁵³

Changed circumstances in Vietnam

Even if Johnson recognized that he was changing Kennedy’s policy, historians have suggested that he was merely responding to new intelligence and to changed circumstances on the ground. The period that followed Diem’s assassination produced a particularly heightened sense that South Vietnam was on the verge of collapse and that projects, notably the strategic hamlets program, were falling short of their aims. As McNamara had feared in the summer and fall of 1963, the coup leaders had not “made this thing work” and instead almost immediately descended into acrimonious divisions over the assassinations of Diem and his brother Nhu.⁶⁵⁴ The gamble had not paid off and each of the problems that had undermined existing programs in South Vietnam throughout 1962 and 1963 – the country’s shaky economic viability, leadership, military focus and coherence as well as its “will to win” - worsened.

This situation would have unsettled any administration’s plans to disengage from Vietnam. In December 1963, following his first trip back to Vietnam after the assassinations of President Diem and Kennedy, McNamara found the situation “very disturbing” and warned that “current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely a Communist-controlled state.”⁶⁵⁵ In his private notes from the trip he worried that the “greatest weakness is an indecisive, drifting government”

⁶⁵³ “Last Will and Testament: South Viet-Nam and Southeast Asia”, Hilsman to Secretary of State Rusk, March 10, 1964, Folder: Chronological File – 1/64-3/64, Memoranda of Conversations, Box 6, Hilsman Papers, JFKL.

⁶⁵⁴ William Colby and Ellen Hammer, in particular, have emphasized Diem’s leadership qualities as a nationalist leader who, if the United States had continued to support him, could have provided the stability and unity that was needed to “win” in South Vietnam. Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: American in Vietnam, 1963* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988).; William C. Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books, 1989), Chapter 10 especially. For more recent scholarship, see also: Gary R. Hess et al. “Jessica Chapman. Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam,” *H-Diplo Roundtable Review* 15:12 (November 2013).

⁶⁵⁵ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Memorandum for the President, “Vietnam Situation,” 21 December 1963. *Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition: Vol. 4*, pp. 494-96.

while “a second major weakness is a country team which lacks leadership, is poorly informed and is not working to a common plan.”⁶⁵⁶

At about the same time, John McCone, the Director for the CIA who travelled to Vietnam with McNamara, wrote that, “It is abundantly clear that statistics received over the past year or more from the GVN officers and reported by the US mission on which we gauged the trend of the war were grossly in error.” In reference to the Delta region that had disturbed McNamara only two months earlier, McCone wrote, “Conditions in the delta and in the areas immediately north of Saigon are more serious now than expected and were probably never as good as reported.”⁶⁵⁷

However, concerns about Vietnamese leadership, the lack of cooperation in the U.S. country team, the overextension of the strategic hamlet program or poor intelligence, even while they may have been heightened in the aftermath of Diem’s assassination, were not new. By way of a reminder, during the October 1963 NSC meetings, President Kennedy’s “only reservation” with announcing the planned phase-out in Vietnam was that “if the war doesn’t continue to go well, it will look like we were overly optimistic.”⁶⁵⁸ McNamara responded to Kennedy’s reservation by saying “I’m not entirely sure” that the insurgency could be brought under control by 1965 “but I am sure that if we don’t meet those dates in the sense of ending the major military campaign, we nonetheless can withdraw the bulk of our U.S. forces according to the schedule we’ve laid out, worked out, because we can train the Vietnamese to do the job.”⁶⁵⁹

There were two aspects of the NSC October 1963 meetings that could have kept the CPSVN on track regardless of the situation on the ground. First, that the objective continued to be to help the South Vietnamese fight the insurgency themselves and, as a corollary to this, that the United States

⁶⁵⁶ Handwritten notes by Secretary McNamara, South Vietnam Visit, December 22, 1963, Folder: South Vietnam trip, Defense Programs and Operations, Box 63, RSM Papers, RG200, NARA.

⁶⁵⁷ Highlights of Discussions in Saigon, December 18-20, 1963, Folder: South Vietnam trip, Defense Programs and Operations, Box 63, RSM Papers, RG200, NARA.

⁶⁵⁸ Transcript NSC meeting, October 3, 1963: Tape 144/A49, Cassette 2/3, Folder: Fog of War, background and research materials, Box II:114, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

government resisted the urge to take on a greater role in fighting the insurgency itself despite repeated recommendations in Washington and from the field missions to do so. One field report in October 1963 for instance had warned that, “The current war in Vietnam is too important a business to leave to the Vietnamese politicians particularly in view of the fact that it is being waged at the expense of the U.S. taxpayer.”⁶⁶⁰ Despite an expanded assistance mission, the administration had set a red line that, “In the final analysis it is the people and the government [of South Vietnam] who have to win or lose this struggle.”⁶⁶¹

Second, the NSC October 1963 meetings and the subsequent press statement had been designed to create bureaucratic momentum behind a policy of disengagement with the hope that it would prove irreversible. At the time, while McNamara accepted that “there may be shades of difference”, President Kennedy reasoned, “I think it ties it all down” or, as McGeorge Bundy explained: “by God we hang everybody in every department on to it.” McNamara was adamant about and succeeded in having a press statement out in order to “peg” everyone behind a policy of disengagement.⁶⁶²

As McNamara scribbled in his first notes for *In Retrospect*: “[Kennedy] was willing to supply limited support – in the form of logistics and US military trainers and advisors to help the Vietnamese help themselves with the clear objective of withdrawing that support after it had been long enough to help the Vietnamese develop a capability to help themselves if they were capable of doing so. By July-October 1963, he and I agreed that time had come.”⁶⁶³ As

⁶⁶⁰ Wilson (MAAG) to Harkins (MACV), October 17, 1963, Folder: October 1963, Box 16, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶⁶¹ “Interview With the President, Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, September 2, 1963 on CBS” *FRUS* Vol. 4, Vietnam August - December 1963, pp. 93-95.

⁶⁶² Transcript NSC meeting, October 3, 1963: Tape 144/A49, Cassette 2/3, Folder: Fog of War, background and research materials, Box II:114, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁶⁶³ Which is not to say that this was a position shared by the entire administration. The sentence continues with “It is also clear however that the elements of his position that a) the loss of SVN might not result in the loss of all SEA and the credibility of US guarantees elsewhere or b) if it would, after a reasonable effort, we could not be accused of preventing it at reasonable cost, had ever been explicitly countered and debated at the highest levels of government. Even today, among the serving senior members of the Kennedy administration, I believe that there are strong differences of opinion on many of these events.” Handwritten notes by Robert S. McNamara for “In Retrospect”, Folder: 1993, Box II:100, RSM Papers, LoC.

the preceding chapter explained, the October 1963 announcement of a phased withdrawal was not premised on an optimistic reading of the situation in Vietnam but rather it hinged on a number of variables, notably the Kennedy administration's interest in counterinsurgency. McNamara's suggestion in the final draft *In Retrospect* that it was only in December 1963 that he realized that "earlier reports of military progress had been inflated" was, at best, disingenuous.

President Johnson's leadership style

On one level, the decision to escalate U.S. involvement in South Vietnam as the situation there unraveled was a product of bureaucratic machinery rather than an individual's decision. Yet, as Larry Berman has written, "The dominant variable of any advisory system is the personality of the President."⁶⁶⁴ Given McNamara's strict conceptions of loyalty, the President was in fact "the" determining variable in understanding his shift. And while it may be unfair to caricature Johnson's approach to Vietnam as less sophisticated than Kennedy's, this was precisely McNamara's assessment. In an interview with Brian VanDeMark, he explained that Johnson had removed key qualifiers to the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, notably a strong political base and the ability of the South Vietnamese to win the war themselves. He added, "In that sense, I think his view was what I termed more simplist [sic]. I don't like the term but, for the minute, it conveys my thought."⁶⁶⁵

President Johnson's rather more "simplistic" understanding of Vietnam shaped the terms of the debate and the scope of the recommendations that McNamara presented to him. In one telling exchange with McNamara on March 2, 1964, Johnson instructed McNamara: "I want you to dictate to me a memorandum of a couple of pages, uh four letter words and short sentences and several paragraphs so I can read it and study it and commit to memory

⁶⁶⁴ Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, pp. 4.

⁶⁶⁵ VanDeMark Interview of Robert S. McNamara, September 10, 1993, Folder: In Retrospect First Draft, Ch. 5-8, Box II:100, RSM Papers, LoC.

[...] the Vietnam picture if you had to put in 600 words or maybe a thousand words if you have to go that long. But just like you'd talk."⁶⁶⁶

Often the presidential recordings of conversations between President Johnson and McNamara reveal a hierarchical relationship confirming McNamara's Special Assistant Adam Yarmolinsky's view that if McNamara's relationship with Kennedy had been one of "real mutual trust and affection", Johnson "was his boss, and he was Johnson's most useful servant."⁶⁶⁷ Whereas McNamara often interrupted Kennedy and at times dominated their conversations, Johnson lectured and dictated, instructing McNamara that, "I'll tell you what I'd say about it." In exchanges that sometimes appeared excessive, Johnson complimented McNamara, calling him "McCan-do-man" or his "executive VP", somebody he valued because "I need to issue instructions and see that they're carried out."⁶⁶⁸ McNamara's old colleagues and friends, particularly Robert Kennedy, were "outraged by McNamara's servility" and the "humiliations" he endured "out of deference to Johnson or his office."⁶⁶⁹ Ultimately, McNamara's relationship to Johnson reflected his ambivalent depiction of Johnson as someone who was "by turns open and devious, loving and mean, compassionate and tough, gentle and cruel [...] a towering, powerful, paradoxical figure."⁶⁷⁰ Their relationship also explains McNamara's role during the transition.

In spite of his flattering remarks, Johnson allowed and even encouraged McNamara to become the public face of escalation in Vietnam. In the key period of the spring of 1964, Senator Morse first designated the war in Vietnam as "McNamara's war", a moniker President Johnson reveled in. The presidential recordings are replete with references to Johnson's amusement with the notion: he laughed that it was unfair that it was "only McNamara's war"⁶⁷¹ or described the situation as "your war in Vietnam."⁶⁷² For his part,

⁶⁶⁶ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: March 2, 1964, WH 6403.01, Conversation 2301.

⁶⁶⁷ Interview Between Brian VanDeMark and Adam Yarmolinsky, April 1, 1993, Folder: Yarmolinsky 1993, Box II:104, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁶⁶⁸ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: January 6, 1964, WH 6401.06, Conversation 1195 and August 1, 1964, WH 6408.01, Conversation 4601.

⁶⁶⁹ Shapley, *Promise and Power*, pp. 278-9.

⁶⁷⁰ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, pp. 98.

⁶⁷¹ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: April 9, 1964, WH 6404.06, Conversation 2961.

McNamara in his loyal servant role took responsibility for the complicated situation because it would “take a lot of heat off of you Mr. President.”⁶⁷³ When, in September 1964, press reports first started pointing the finger at Johnson for the administration’s policy in Vietnam, he teased McNamara that it “looks to me that John Connally, the two of you got together and transferred it from McNamara’s war to Johnson’s war”, that he had “never heard a word about Johnson’s war until the two of you got together”, and mused that “I kind of enjoyed Goldwater’s talk about McNamara’s war.”⁶⁷⁴ Ultimately, just as Kennedy had made McNamara the public face of the withdrawal plans and charged him with the organization of a policy for Vietnam, Johnson ensured that McNamara was also identified with the decision to escalate.

Johnson had defined the parameters of the discussion on Vietnam with his almost immediate commitment to “win” in Vietnam.⁶⁷⁵ McNamara wrote that, “President Johnson made clear to Lodge on November 24 [1963] that he wanted to win the war, and that, at least in the short run, he wanted priority given to military operations over “so-called” social reforms. He felt the United States had spent too much time and energy trying to shape other countries in its own image. Win the war! That was his message.”⁶⁷⁶ Although in an interview with CBS in the wake of that meeting, Ambassador Lodge, stated that “policy [was] unchanged and that “it was not a decision-making type meeting”, Johnson’s “message” influenced the shape of policy in the ensuing months.⁶⁷⁷

Within weeks, Johnson wrote to General Taylor that, “The more I look at it, the more it is clear to me that South Vietnam is our most critical *military*

⁶⁷² MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: April 27, 1964: WH6404.13, Conversation 3140.

⁶⁷³ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: March 21, 1964, WH 6403.13, Conversation 2584.

⁶⁷⁴ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: September 24, 1964: WH 6409.15, Conversation 5686.

⁶⁷⁵ CIA Director McCone’s notes from the meeting chime with McNamara’s on this meeting. Quoting Johnson, he wrote, “All too often when we engaged in the affairs of a foreign country we wanted to immediately transform that country into our image, and this, in [Johnson’s] opinion was a mistake. [...] was anxious to get along, win the war – he didn’t want as much effort placed on social reforms.” Shapley. *Promise and Power*, pp. 292.

⁶⁷⁶ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, pp. 102.

⁶⁷⁷ CBS, November 24, 1963: online live coverage of President Kennedy’s assassination on 50th anniversary: <http://tinyurl.com/gg49yjp>. Retrieved November 24, 2013.

area right now” [emphasis added].⁶⁷⁸ In turn, this fed into the type of advice he demanded from McNamara. During McNamara’s first trip back to Vietnam in December 1963, his team’s terms of reference as he communicated them to Ambassador Lodge were to plan for “varying levels of pressure all designed to make clear to the North Vietnamese that the US will not accept a communist victory in South Vietnam and that we will escalate the conflict to whatever level is required to insure defeat.”⁶⁷⁹

In the same February 25, 1964 tape where Johnson spelled out the Kennedy/McNamara policy, he also revealed his distinctive perspective and biases. For instance, he told McNamara, “We have a commitment to Vietnamese freedom. Now, we could pull out of there, the dominos would fall, that part of the world would go Communist.” This was a stronger commitment than McNamara had allowed in his October 1963 report.⁶⁸⁰ It was also the only exchange where Johnson directly addressed the withdrawal plans and his remarks challenge the idea that he chose to continue Kennedy’s policy in Vietnam. He said: “I always thought it was foolish to make any statements about withdrawing. I thought it was bad psychologically. But you and the President thought otherwise and I just sat silent.”⁶⁸¹

During his “silent” years as Vice President, and on the rare occasions when he was consulted, Johnson had encouraged “tougher” responses. Famously, during a trip to South Vietnam in May 1961, in which he called Diem the “Churchill of Asia”, he promised that the United States would stand “shoulder to shoulder” with South Vietnam and in a seemingly unprompted way asked Diem if he needed U.S. or SEATO intervention.⁶⁸² In his trip report, he reiterated the domino theory and argued that, “The failure to act vigorously

⁶⁷⁸ President Johnson to Taylor, December 2, 1963, Folder: December 1963 1-5, Box 17, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶⁷⁹ McNamara to Ambassador Lodge, US Embassy, Saigon, December 12, 1963, Folder: December 1963 9-16, Box 18, Newman Papers, Research Materials, JFKL.

⁶⁸⁰ “Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 September – 1 October 1963”, Folder: Viet Nam McNamara-Taylor report, 10/1/63, Memoranda of Conversations, Box 4, Hilsman Papers, JFKL.

⁶⁸¹ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: February 25, 1964, WH 6402.21, Conversation 2191.

⁶⁸² There is a debate about whether Johnson went on a limb here as John Newman contends (Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, pp. 89-92.) or “obviously acting on instructions” as the *Pentagon Papers* say (*Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition 2*, Chapter 1, pp. 9.).

to stop the killing now in Viet Nam may well be paid for later with the lives of Americans all over Asia.”⁶⁸³ Even while he recognized the dangers of finding the United States embroiled in a “jungle war”, he argued for a substantial increase in economic aid and a more active military role. He ended his report to the President ominously: “There is a chance for success in Viet Nam but there is not a moment to lose. We need to move along the above lines and we need to begin now, today, to move.”⁶⁸⁴ Kennedy and McNamara largely ignored the Vice President’s warnings and recommendations.

McNamara reassesses Vietnam

The documentary record supports the notion that McNamara became a leading force behind the Johnson administration’s decision to escalate in Vietnam. At the same time that McNamara was insisting on the limited character of Kennedy’s commitment to Vietnam, his memoranda encouraged aggressive policies that represented a clear break with the policies he had supported until then. As early as December 1963, armed with his negative appraisal of the situation in Vietnam, McNamara recommended that the administration should be “preparing for more forceful moves.”⁶⁸⁵ By March 1964, in his first joint trip back to South Vietnam with Maxwell Taylor, his already pessimistic appraisal of the situation darkened further and he came out even more forcefully in favor of the very same military response that he had resisted during the Kennedy administration.

His trip report was riddled with contradictions and reflected the same bureaucratic conflicts that had existed during the Kennedy years. McNamara wrote that the policy of phased withdrawal and of considering the conflict as one for which “the South Vietnamese must win and take ultimate responsibility” was “still sound.” At the same time, he inferred that this was no longer a substitute for victory in the traditional sense. Now he wrote, “The U.S. at all levels must continue to make emphatically clear that we are prepared to

⁶⁸³ Paper prepared by the Vice President, undated, *FRUS, Vietnam 1961*, Vol. 1., Doc. 59.

⁶⁸⁴ Report by the Vice President, undated, *FRUS, Vietnam 1961*, Vol. 1., Doc. 60.

⁶⁸⁵ “Vietnam Situation,” Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to President Johnson, December 21, 1963. *Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition*: Vol. 4, pp. 494-96.

furnish assistance and support for as long as it takes to bring the insurgency under control.”⁶⁸⁶

Ten days after his return from Vietnam, in a speech delivered in Washington DC, McNamara reiterated this shift towards a more open-ended commitment. Whereas the October 1963 announcement promised a commitment until “the insurgency has been suppressed or until the national security forces of the Government of South Viet-Nam are capable of suppressing it”, he now pledged a U.S. commitment for “as long as it takes.”⁶⁸⁷

The March report’s suggested policy directions were equally contradictory. On the one hand, it stated the “so-called ‘oil spot’ theory is excellent” and reiterated the key role for pacification and counterinsurgency programs. On the other, it recommended preparing for graduated “air pressure” over North Vietnam.⁶⁸⁸ Until this point, the counterinsurgency strategy had been designed as a substitute to conventional force and precluded a bombing program. Even if the report made due reference to neutralization and withdrawal, it just as quickly rejected them as viable policy options. As a result, within ten days of submitting the report, planning for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam was formally, though not publicly, terminated.⁶⁸⁹ When the 1,000-man withdrawal did go ahead, it was done on the basis of “efficiencies” rather than as part of a larger program of phasing out.

However, David Ormsby-Gore’s notes from a dinner with McNamara the night before he departed on this March trip, suggest that even while McNamara was publicly expanding the commitment to South Vietnam and proposing policy options that would extend “American military commitments”, in private, he still held on to a policy he later ascribed to Kennedy, namely that there

⁶⁸⁶ McNamara to President Johnson, March 16, 1964, *FRUS, Vol. 1, Vietnam 1964*, Doc. 84.

⁶⁸⁷ William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: executive and legislative roles and relationships, Part II* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1986), pp. 244.

⁶⁸⁸ "South Vietnam," McNamara to President Johnson, March 16, 1964. *Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition: Vol. 3*, pp. 496-99.

⁶⁸⁹ Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part II*, pp. 244.

would be no point in expanding the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam without a viable political base in the country. The Ambassador found McNamara “more despondent about the situation there than I have ever seen him” and very concerned about South Vietnam’s new leadership’s ability to “restore moral and achieve growing popular support.” Later, he wrote: “He was not in a belligerent mood and although he has spoken to me previously about examining the possibilities of hurting the North Vietnamese, I gained the strong impression that unless he came back feeling that there was a reasonable chance of pulling the situation round in South Vietnam, there would be no value in risking a further extension of American military commitments in the area such as would result from trying to carry the conflict over the border into the North.”⁶⁹⁰

Instead, as William Bundy recalled, as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs and with help from his colleagues in the State Department and White House, he had written most of the March report and McNamara’s subsequent speech in Washington before the latter had even left for Saigon.⁶⁹¹ In a particularly revealing presidential tape recorded just days before the trip, Johnson basically dictated what would eventually become the report’s policy suggestions: “I’d like you to say that there are several courses that could be followed.” These were: sending in troops, neutralization that would result in “Commies [...] swallow[ing] up South Vietnam”, pulling out which would result in dominos falling throughout the region or continuing training.⁶⁹² In other words, the crucial March 1964 report was not so much a reflection of McNamara’s views as it was what Johnson said he’d “like [McNamara] to say.”

As such, the mood that Ormsby-Gore had observed on the eve of the trip was likely less a reflection of McNamara’s concerns about what he might

⁶⁹⁰ Ormsby-Gore to Caccia, March 6, 1964, Prime Minister’s correspondence, PREM 11/4759, UK National Archives, Kew.

⁶⁹¹ Shapley, *Promise and Power*, pp. 298.

⁶⁹² MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: March 2, 1964, WH 6403.01, Conversation 2301.

find in South Vietnam and more about the momentum he could see was gathering in Washington around the option of using military force.⁶⁹³

By May 1964, when McNamara returned again to Vietnam, he told MACV that the main priority was winning the war and that they would have everything they needed to achieve that objective. Meanwhile, in Washington, a bureaucratic consensus around bombing North Vietnam emerged. Even if McNamara had been inclined to support bombing to support counterinsurgency operations in South Vietnam until 1963, the new policy shift was not his: it did not originate within the Defense Department but in the White House and the services. A recording on April 30, 1964 is particularly revealing in this regard. Before McNamara's trip to Vietnam, Johnson indicated that, "What I want is somebody that can lay up some plans to trap these guys and whoop hell out of them, kill some of them, that's what I want to do," to which McNamara responded, "I'll try to bring something back that'll meet that objective."⁶⁹⁴

In May 1961 and again in May 1964, for Johnson "winning" could only be achieved by the use of traditional military means; something neither McNamara nor even Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor recommended.⁶⁹⁵ Even though he described the Chiefs as "fools"⁶⁹⁶, in April 1964, Johnson asked McNamara if he had "anybody [who] has a military mind that can give us a military plan for winning that war?" This represented a break in policy on Vietnam because until this point the Chiefs had very little say in designing policy.⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹³ Shapley, *Promise and Power*, pp. 298.

⁶⁹⁴ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: April 30, 1964: WH640.4.16, Conversation 3220.

⁶⁹⁵ Robert Caro, in particular, has made a significant contribution to understanding Johnson's views on masculinity and how this contributed to him favoring "strong" positions on Vietnam but also during the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the Cuban Missile Crisis and throughout his career, Johnson regularly criticized President Kennedy specifically for his "weakness". In one particularly harsh line from their Senator days, Caro quotes Johnson as describing Kennedy as "weak and pallid – a scrawny man with a bad back, a weak and indecisive politician, a nice man, a gentle man, but not a man's man." Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), pp. 33.

⁶⁹⁶ In a tape dated September 8, 1964, President Johnson quipped, "If there are any bigger fools than damn military men, I don't know who." MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: September 8, 1964, WH 6409.08, Conversation 5533.

⁶⁹⁷ As early as February 1964, Johnson was considering "send[ing] the Marines in there" and suggested that McNamara bring David Shoup, the Commander of the Marine Corps, with him

Johnson appeared to fall into the trap Galbraith had warned of in the spring of 1962, namely “the mystique of conventional force, and the recurrent feeling that, in the absence of any other feasible lines of action, the movement of troops might help.”⁶⁹⁸ Despite lacking an overarching strategy, McNamara’s May 1964 report and the NSC discussion that followed set the administration on a path to conventional war against North Vietnam. In reference to the overall objective to “win”, McNamara’s trip report warned that, “We are continuing to lose. Nothing we are now doing will win.”⁶⁹⁹ However, in the NSC discussions, it was McCone (“we should go in hard and not limit our actions to pinpricks”) and McGeorge Bundy who argued most vehemently for planning a bombing program against the North.⁷⁰⁰ In the next days, Bundy reiterated his conviction that military planning should move forward within a “larger framework – the U.S. national interest and the future of Southeast Asia – that I hope we will all be thinking as the discussion goes on.”⁷⁰¹

With this framework in mind, and at Johnson’s request to have “a military mind” give “a military plan for winning the war”, McNamara led a meeting in Honolulu in June 1964 with CINCPAC and MACV commanders where the full range of military plans and contingencies were considered. These included the use of tactical nuclear weapons. At that meeting, McNamara agreed to begin planning for the graduated escalation bombing program that became known as *Operation Rolling Thunder*.⁷⁰²

McNamara agreed to this even if the presidential recordings, even more than the written record, reveal that he questioned its effectiveness and bemoaned the Army’s Chief of Staff Earl Wheeler’s emphasis on “planes”. He explained to Johnson: “And the planes, Max Taylor agrees, are not the

to Vietnam and to the hearings in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He indicated that this would have value “from a psychological standpoint and from a political standpoint”, that Shoup was “worth a dozen Averell Harrimans.” MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: February 25, 1964, WH 6402.21, Conversation 2191.

⁶⁹⁸ Galbraith to President Kennedy, May 31, 1962. Galbraith, *Letters to Kennedy*, pp. 48.

⁶⁹⁹ Draft memorandum DoD to President, May 24, 1964, *FRUS, Vietnam 1964*, Vol. 1., Doc. 171.

⁷⁰⁰ Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting, May 24, 1964, *FRUS, Vietnam 1964*, Vol. 1., Doc. 172.

⁷⁰¹ McGeorge Bundy to President Johnson, May 26, 1964. *FRUS, Vietnam 1964*, Vol. 1., Doc. 179.

⁷⁰² Shapley, *Promise and Power*, pp. 300.

answer to the problem. Whether we should have more planes is another question but it's not going to make any difference in the short-term, that's for certain." In a further indication of Johnson's increased inclination to involve the Joint Chiefs of Staff in designing strategy or at least tactics for Vietnam, Johnson replied, "Well let's give him more of something. Because I'm going to have a heart attack if you don't give him more of something."⁷⁰³

The difference of views held by President Johnson and McNamara about the proper role of military authorities was particularly evident where staffing in South Vietnam was concerned. In June 1964, when Westmoreland replaced General Harkins, discussions turned to replacing Ambassador Lodge who had been widely criticized within the administration for his failure to manage the country team in South Vietnam. President Johnson favored Maxwell Taylor, suggesting, "Taylor can give us the cover we need with country, conservatives and Congress." McNamara tried repeatedly to stall Taylor's selection by suggesting George Ball as his "first choice." He also proposed Roswell Gilpatric, McGeorge Bundy and even himself. Echoing complaints that had followed the creation of MACV in the spring of 1962, McNamara worried that Taylor's selection would spark criticism that the administration was "putting [Vietnam policy] in the hands of the military" and that there were inherent "problems with a military man." Rather than respond to the substance of McNamara's criticism, Johnson curtly dismissed it saying "well that's what it is."⁷⁰⁴

Changes in Washington

The change in President during the transition was a *critical* variable. Johnson framed the terms of the debate on U.S. policy towards Vietnam and at times dictated the recommendations so that he limited McNamara's scope for influence. Just as the October 1963 policy and the CPSVN flowed from a

⁷⁰³ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: April 30, 1964. WH 6404.16, Conversation 3220. This is a recurring theme in the tapes. For instance, on the eve of the decision to send Marine forces to Da Nang, Johnson told McNamara to involve General Wheeler and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, adding, "I believe we haven't had enough of them and I'm worried that they're going to feel left out." MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: February 26, 195, WH 650.2.06, Conversation 6887.

⁷⁰⁴ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: June 18, 64, WH 6406.10, Conversation 3767.

policy framework set out by President Kennedy, McNamara's increasingly hawkish recommendations in the spring of 1964 flowed from Johnson. In addition, Johnson's reorganization of national security decision-making had an indirect influence on policy outcomes: not only did he want more military advisors involved in decision-making, he thrust Secretary of State Dean Rusk into a key role on Vietnam policy to the detriment of key counterinsurgency experts, including Roger Hilsman.

In the October 1963 NSC meetings, when the Kennedy administration agreed on an administration-wide policy for Vietnam and committed itself publicly to a policy of disengagement, Hilsman and Harriman, not Rusk, represented the State Department. In fact Rusk was in Europe at a NATO summit at the time. Not only was he absent from the key NSC meetings, he was only brought up to speed on the policy after the public announcement had been made. Since the strategy that underpinned McNamara's withdrawal plans stemmed from advisors like Roger Hilsman rather than Rusk, their subsequent removal from decision-making on Vietnam was also a variable even if it was only indirectly affected by the change in President.

The changes in personnel at the less visible levels of government are also significant from a historiographical perspective because, in part, the idea that Johnson continued Kennedy's policy has relied on stressing the continuity of personnel. The reality is that key advisors were quickly sidelined including Robert Kennedy who had led the Special Group on Counterinsurgency and Averell Harriman who was made roving Ambassador for African Affairs. Other advisors like Theodore Sorensen, Michael Forrestal and Roger Hilsman, who had signaled early on to Johnson that the administration was not keeping to the Kennedy administration's policy, were also set aside.

Theodore Sorensen, who had alerted Johnson to the limits of Kennedy's commitment and who had suggested ways of disengaging from Vietnam in a way that would not endanger U.S. credibility, was the first to go. Sorensen had been particularly affected by Kennedy's assassination and in January indicated that he "didn't want to come back" to the White House,

which he described as a “very sad place.”⁷⁰⁵ In private, he spoke harshly about Johnson: “to me he personified the kind of hyperbole and hypocrisy that defined the worst aspects of politics in my eyes.”⁷⁰⁶ These comments suggest that his reasons for leaving were personal.⁷⁰⁷

Michael Forrestal was also sidelined. He eventually left. In the early days of the transition, Forrestal had gone along with the administration’s escalatory moves: at McGeorge Bundy’s behest, he produced an economic and political program to match McNamara’s planning for graduated escalation. However, he was ambivalent about the administration’s proclivity to define the conflict in increasingly conventional military terms. By the spring of 1964, he broke with McGeorge Bundy and wrote, “What we are dealing with is social revolution by illegal means, infected by the cancer of Communism.” He also went back on his suggestion that physical security achieved through military means was a prerequisite for the other social and economic programs, and now said that: “I believed this, too, until after the third or fourth trip to Vietnam. But the problems are not separable. The Viet Cong know this. It is why they are winning. To the extent we manage our economic assistance, our military action, and our political advice so as to perpetuate a social and economic structure which gave rise to the very problem we are fighting, we will fail to solve the problem.” Ultimately, by January 1965, he too left the administration, disillusioned and depressed.⁷⁰⁸

As for Roger Hilsman, under the new administration he reaped the consequences of his antagonistic relationship with both the military and his boss, Dean Rusk, whom he had continuously circumvented in the past. Although Hilsman was a Texan and felt that he and President Johnson “should have gotten along”, he became isolated in the new administration as

⁷⁰⁵ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: January 6, 1964, WH 6401.06, Conversation 1195.

⁷⁰⁶ Caro, *The Passage of Power*, pp. 413.

⁷⁰⁷ In a further indication of the animosity some of Kennedy’s closest advisors felt towards Johnson almost immediately, he explained his decision to stay and help with Johnson’s first state of the union by saying: “I wanted to help commit LBJ to carrying on Kennedy’s program for 1964, and Kennedy’s legacy for the ages; and I wanted him to invoke these policies and words specifically as well as the late President’s name.” Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸ Preston, “The Soft Hawks’ Dilemma in Vietnam”.; Bird, *The Color of Truth*, pp. 278-80.

the protection that President Kennedy had given him was removed.⁷⁰⁹ Rusk later said, “I fired him because he talked too much at Georgetown cocktail parties.”⁷¹⁰ General Taylor explained that Hilsman was dismissed because he had antagonized military advisors by second-guessing their recommendations – “it just shows what happens when you put a West Pointer in the State Department” – and because he “drove McNamara mad.”⁷¹¹ In an effort to avoid a noisy departure, he was offered the Ambassadorship in the Philippines where he had spent part of his childhood. He chose instead to resign.⁷¹² Despite the administration’s attempts to contain the news of his resignation, it made the front page of the *New York Times* of February 25, 1964 where he insisted, “I am not quarreling with policy” and praised Johnson for his “vigor and sureness.”⁷¹³

Change in strategy

Not one to keep his opinions to himself, Hilsman protested loudly within corridors of power that the administration was not continuing Kennedy’s policy and he continued to voice this opinion after he left government.⁷¹⁴ In a

⁷⁰⁹ Roger Hilsman OH Interview No. 1 by Paige E. Mulhollan, May 15, 1969, LBJL.

⁷¹⁰ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Inside Report: Intellectuals’ War Criticism Roils Rusk.” *The Milwaukee Sentinel* (October 13, 1967), pp. 9.

⁷¹¹ Maxwell Taylor OH Interview No. 1 by Elspeth Rostow, Robert F. Kennedy OH Collection, October 22, 1969, JFKL.

⁷¹² Roger Hilsman, “Vietnam: The Decisions to Intervene” in Jonathan R. Adelman (ed.) *Superpowers and Revolution* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1986).

⁷¹³ “Hilsman Resigns Key Policy Post: U.S. Advisor on Far East Plans Academic Career” *New York Times* (February 25, 1964), pp. 1.

⁷¹⁴ In September 1965, seven months into *Operation Rolling Thunder*, the administration’s bombing campaign, Hilsman who was then Professor of Government at Columbia University, criticized the administration deeming the decision to bomb North Vietnam “tragic”. On Johnson’s instructions, McGeorge Bundy “read the riot act” to Hilsman and then proudly told Johnson that he “arranged to have the same tune played at him hard by people he respects, beginning with Averell Harriman and Adam Yarmolinsky.” (“Roger Hilsman's Crimes”, McGeorge Bundy to President Johnson, September 30, 1965. Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *Texas Tech University Center and Archive*: <http://tinyurl.com/n2ldfk4>.)

Whether or not Yarmolinsky followed Bundy’s orders, he continued to correspond with Hilsman who in November 1965, sent an article by Bernard Fall that was highly critical of the bombing program and its “confidence in total material superiority”, arguing that the administration was inextricably tying its credibility to a doomed and “fundamentally weak” South Vietnamese government, noting that the “bomber can’t do anything about that.” While Yarmolinsky patronized Hilsman’s “academic uneasiness in an uneasy world”, he nonetheless forwarded both Hilsman’s letter and the Fall article to McNamara and John McNaughton, adding “I think this is probably worth your reading in its entirety, and perhaps assigning for analysis.” (Hilsman to Yarmolinsky, November 18, 1965, Folder:

document entitled “Last Will and Testament: South Viet-Nam and Southeast Asia”, which he sent to Secretary Rusk on March 10, 1964, Hilsman reacted to the administration’s gradual move away from the counterinsurgency strategy he had helped to design. He reminded his former boss that the strategy rested on the “Strategic Concept for South Vietnam”, though he did not mention that the “Strategic Concept” was his work. He described the strategy as still “basically sound” even while he acknowledged its failings on the field. He also responded to the administration’s choice to consider more traditional, military tools and wrote: “In sum, I think we can win in Viet-Nam with a number of provisos. The first is that we do not over-militarize the war – that we concentrate not on killing the Vietcong and the conventional means of warfare, but on an effective program for extending the areas of security gradually, systematically and thoroughly. This will require better team work in Saigon than we have had in the past and considerably more emphasis on clear and hold operations and on policy work than we ourselves have given to the Vietnamese.”⁷¹⁵

Echoing views he had expressed in 1962, Hilsman cautioned that a counterinsurgency strategy called “for using military forces in a different way than orthodox, conventional war.” Both McNamara and Taylor buttressed this claim by arguing that ground troops might not work for the type of conflict in Vietnam even after Johnson had decided to send in the Marines. Although the Marines had landed in Da Nang on the 8th of March, in a conversation on March 30th, McNamara warned the President against the recommendations coming from the Chiefs to send additional forces. He explained that Taylor believed that ground troops would have “great difficulty” in a “counterinsurgency role” and concluded that, “Our troops, while admirably trained, are poorly trained as counter-guerrilla.”⁷¹⁶

Correspondence 1965, Box 66, Yarmolinsky Papers, JFKL.; Yarmolinsky to Hilsman, Folder: Correspondence 1965, November 13, 1965, Box 66, Yarmolinsky Papers, JFKL.)

⁷¹⁵ “Last Will and Testament: South Viet-Nam and Southeast Asia”, Hilsman to Secretary of State Rusk, March 10, 1964, Folder: Chronological File – 1/64-3/64, Memoranda of Conversations, Box 6, Hilsman Papers, JFKL.

⁷¹⁶ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: March 30, 1965, WH 6503.15, Conversation 7182.

However, despite these recommendations, the President and Dean Rusk showed little interest in counterinsurgency. In the field, where many irregular forces had already been subsumed under military command, the “conventionalization” of forces began in earnest: one Special Forces history explained how “very few hamlet militia were trained after November 1963, almost none after April 1964.”⁷¹⁷

The administration’s other prominent counterinsurgency expert, Robert Thompson, sought in vain to revive the strategic hamlet program into the first months of 1964. By May 1964, he was forced to acknowledge that the new administration was no longer listening to him and that “his usefulness had come to an end.” The British advisory mission closed at the end of 1964 by which time Thompson had concluded that the war was no longer winnable and the administration should move to negotiations.⁷¹⁸ In a scathing analysis of the Johnson administration, he explained how, in the early months of 1964, in part because the new President relied “too much” on military advisors and “tradition” rather than advisors like him, the “original position, in which the United States was merely helping the South Vietnamese to win its own war, was gradually changed, to one in which it had to interfere in South Vietnam.”⁷¹⁹

Ultimately, all the key individuals who questioned the administration’s decisions on Vietnam or provided the intellectual rationale for a counterinsurgency strategy were pushed out. McNamara, who could have kept their voices alive within national security decision-making chose to be loyal to the President. By March 1965, after the introduction of the first troops and the initiation of *Operation Rolling Thunder*, McNamara reassured Johnson that the administration was in general agreement and that leaks to the press were less likely now. He noted, “There’s been more unity both beneath and above surface on Vietnam in the last few months than at any

⁷¹⁷ Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, pp. 48.

⁷¹⁸ Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK: Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 169-170.

⁷¹⁹ Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York, NY: David McKay Co., 1969), pp. 29.

time in the last several years. And more unity in the upper levels than you did, let's say in the Hilsman/CIA/Defense Department wrangle."⁷²⁰

President Johnson's economic priorities

The administration's move towards a more open-ended commitment to Vietnam had important repercussions on the fiscal and economic issues that had also underpinned the CPSVN. The counterinsurgency strategy had dovetailed with McNamara's efforts to tackle the balance of payments deficit; the CPSVN addressed the SFRC's onslaught against the MAP as well as the Kennedy administration's general tendency toward fiscal restraint. By contrast, Johnson embraced Keynesian economics and was willing to run large deficits. Even while the administration moved to a more "forceful" program in Vietnam that no longer fell within the limited purview of a traditional military assistance program, Johnson encouraged McNamara to cut costs and especially to undervalue costs for Vietnam lest they scuttle his domestic ambitions by provoking a congressional debate over his ambition to have both "guns and butter". Given his bridging role at the OSD, McNamara recognized sooner than most the tensions inherent in the White House's competing ambitions.

The administration's widening and increasingly military commitment to Vietnam had important budgetary repercussions, not least that it resulted in shifting the budgetary responsibility for the war to the service Chiefs and under the supervision of the SASC. In so doing, a major constraint on funding for Vietnam was removed. On March 1, 1965, just under a year after planning for withdrawal had been suspended and, with it, pressures to decrease funds allocated to Vietnam, McNamara wrote to the Service Chiefs: "Occasionally, instances come to my attention indicating that some in the Department feel restraint imposed by limitations of funds. I want it clearly understood that there is an unlimited appropriation available for financing aid to Vietnam. Under no circumstance is lack of money to stand in the way of aid to that nation."⁷²¹ In

⁷²⁰ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: March 31, 65 WH6503.16, Conversation 7194.

⁷²¹ McNamara to Service Secretaries, March 1, 1965, quoted in General Leonard B. Taylor, *Financial Management of the Vietnam Conflict, 1962-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of

addition, in recognition of the fact that operations on Vietnam were shifting from a training mission to a more conventional military engagement, McNamara began to remove most Vietnam funding from the MAP, officially completing the process on March 25, 1966.⁷²²

McNamara remained reluctant, however, to call the situation in Vietnam a “war”. By keeping the Defense Department’s peacetime accounting, it was relatively easier for him to underestimate the true costs of the war. In the first months of the administration, Johnson’s instructed McNamara to underestimate his annual budget requests for the Department and for Vietnam specifically. McNamara submitted the budget to Congress in the fall knowing full well that he would submit a supplementary request in the spring. Even while he had suggested this technique to President Johnson, already by December 1963 McNamara was concerned that it might “screw up the integrity of the budgeting process here.”⁷²³ Both the supplementary requests and his creation of an “Emergency Fund, SEA” in 1965⁷²⁴ were within his authority as Secretary of Defense. However, they eventually became focal points for congressional anger over the administration’s policies in Vietnam because they had blurred the costs of operations in Vietnam.

The SASC also quickly understood that the budget was undervalued and that it relied on problematic assumptions. In his testimony to the SASC, McNamara admitted that he used “somewhat arbitrary assumptions regarding the duration of the conflict in Southeast Asia”, namely that the rate of activity

the 1974), Preface. Retrieved online December 16, 2014, *US Army Center of Military History*: <http://tinyurl.com/kmkcqzc>.

⁷²² Later in the war, in FY1968, virtually all of the AID programs in Vietnam were also absorbed into the Defense budget. When the Chairman of the SASC Richard Russell complained that McNamara was trying to pass economic programs under the military budget, knowing that no one there would oppose military assistance to Vietnam, McNamara explained that the conflict in Vietnam could not be easily separated into problems of an economic or military character. Still, this shift too reflected the reality that it was far easier to garner financial support for operations in Vietnam through that committee, a reality reflected in the ballooning expenditures for the same programs AID had run: from 50.4 million in FY1968 to 78.7 in FY1969, with a brief decline to 64.5 in FY1970 and back up to 80.9 in FY1971. *Ibid.*

⁷²³ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: December 10, 1963, K6312.06.

⁷²⁴ The first supplemental request specifically for Vietnam was passed in May 1965 for 13.1 billion, most of which McNamara knew he would need when he first submitted the FY1965 budget while his request for the Emergency Fund, SEA was submitted in August 1965 and confirmed in March 1966. Richard M. Miller, *Funding Extended Conflicts: Korea, Vietnam and the War on Terror* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), pp. 45.

in the field would be constant and that the war would end by June 30 of the given fiscal year. In a further manipulation of the budgetary process, McNamara used a “reimbursement” technique within the services: he would avoid stockpiling equipment as had been done during the Korean War and instead rely on existing services’ stocks. Using this technique to provide support to forces in the field allowed many of the costs of operations in Vietnam to appear to be coming out of the services normal operating budgets.⁷²⁵

Although McNamara had worried that manipulations of this sort might “screw up” his accounting, he nevertheless went ahead with them. His change of heart on budgetary issues is explicable when set against the backdrop of the administration’s broader economic policies. Unlike Kennedy, who erred on the side of fiscal conservatism and, in so doing, angered his liberal economic advisors, Johnson was applauded for his willingness to embrace Keynesianism. He proceeded with Kennedy’s planned tax cut in 1964 even as he significantly increased federal spending on social programs as part of his Great Society. To Walter Heller, the Chairman of the CEA, he explained that he was a “Roosevelt New Dealer” and “to tell you the truth, John F. Kennedy was a little too conservative to suit my taste.”⁷²⁶ While Kennedy had ruled out the possibility of expanding spending on the back of the balance of payments deficit and faced greater resistance from the business community as well as Congress, Johnson was relatively unbothered by these constraints.⁷²⁷

Paradoxically, the business community seemed reassured by President Johnson and, as some of the offset programs with European allies and a “buy American” program within the Defense Department began to take effect, the balance of payments crisis seemed to have subsided by 1964. Also, as Secretary Dillon, who stayed on for the first year of the Johnson administration recalled, “Now Mr. Johnson had plenty of other things to do

⁷²⁵ McNamara began this manipulation in the last month of the Kennedy administration. It would also add fodder for a Republican attack against the administration in the late 1960s with accusations that the administration had allowed troops and stock to be depleted around the world. Anthony S. Campagna, *The Economic Consequences of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1991), pp. 32.

⁷²⁶ Caro, *The Passage of Power*, pp. 397.

⁷²⁷ Harris, *Economics of the Kennedy Years*, pp. 234.

and he didn't have this sort of interest. He knew it was important. He supported our effort in helping international monetary cooperation – and later on I think he developed a real interest in it when we had more time. But that came, I guess, after I'd left.”⁷²⁸

Dillon, who had benefited from an unusually close relationship with President Kennedy and encouraged him to err on the side of fiscal prudence saw his influence wane in the transition and recalled a President who “wasn't interested in what was going on” on the economic front.⁷²⁹ In December 1963, he tried in vain to attract the new President's attention to defense outlays overseas and was irritated when Johnson went further than his predecessor in promising to keep six divisions in Europe “so long as they are needed” adding “and under present circumstances there is no doubt that they will continue to be needed.” He warned the President that the Republicans could use the need to reduce overseas deployments, not least for balance of payments reasons, as a campaign issue and that it was time for substantial troop reductions especially in Europe.⁷³⁰

Johnson promised Senator Byrd, the Senate Finance Committee's Chairman, a reduction in federal expenditures to below the \$100 billion mark in exchange for the passage of the Kennedy tax cut.⁷³¹ Although this reduction had largely been agreed upon between Secretary Dillon and President Kennedy, it allowed Johnson to “appear even more conservative in cutting expenditures than maybe he really was.”⁷³² In order to keep expenditures down while moving ahead with the costly Great Society programs, Johnson had to cut back elsewhere, notably on the defense

⁷²⁸ C. Douglas Dillon OH Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, June 29, 1969, LBJL, pp. 7.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14.

⁷³⁰ Report on the Balance of Payments to President Johnson, December 2, 1963, Folder: 2 of 2, November – December 1963, Box 35, Dillon Papers, JFKL.

⁷³¹ On November 25, 1963, in a meeting with his top economic aides, the new president made clear that he wanted to reduce federal expenditures to around \$100 billion. As the official OSD history notes, “Had he lived, Kennedy probably would have done the same. Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon had reached an understanding with Kennedy that the budget would be under \$100 billion, although Dillon thought that \$99.5 billion was as low as it could go.” On January 21, 1964, in his budget message to Congress, Johnson was able to announce planned federal expenditures for \$97.9 billion for FY1965. Kaplan et al, *The McNamara Ascendancy*, pp. 479-481. See also Caro, *The Passage of Power*, pp. 393-397.

⁷³² C. Douglas Dillon OH Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, June 29, 1969, LBJL, pp. 10.

budget. Although the PPBS program was explicitly designed not to have budgetary ceilings in mind *de facto*, McNamara reintroduced them to fit Johnson's guidelines: as he explained to Johnson in a private discussion about the FY1964 budget, the JCS wouldn't "know that I set the dollar limit first."⁷³³

Kennedy's liberal critics praised the "spectacular savings" made to the defense budget and what they saw as the reallocation of funds to welfare spending. They also applauded Johnson's "great skill in dealing with Congress."⁷³⁴ The published numbers were impressive: McNamara cut the defense budget by almost 2.5bn in FY1964 and a further 1.2 billion in both FY1965 and FY1966. He achieved these cuts by moving ahead with his base closure and cost reduction programs both initiated under the Kennedy administration, but more problematically by delaying procurement decisions.⁷³⁵

McNamara's work in cutting the defense budget and in keeping Vietnam off the radar by eschewing a congressional debate on the administration's policies, allowed Johnson to move ahead with his Great Society. However, McNamara's manipulations were inherently risky, something he recognized earlier than most. As McNamara's special assistant Adam Yarmolinsky later explained, by expanding the commitment to Vietnam while moving forward with the Great Society, Johnson "launched the American economy on the first wave of inflationary surge" not to speak of its effect on the balance of payments deficit that was just beginning to improve.⁷³⁶ That

⁷³³ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: December 7, 1963, K6312.05. The Defense department's FY1965 budget, coming in an election year was particularly acrimonious with Democrats seeking to cut defense spending further and Republicans leveling a similar charge that Kennedy had against Eisenhower, namely that the administration was putting fiscal concerns ahead of national security. On this, Kaplan et al, *The McNamara Ascendancy*, pp. 487-489.

⁷³⁴ Harris, *Economics of the Kennedy Years*, pp. 234.

⁷³⁵ Going against his CEA's Keynesian economic advice, Dillon recalled that Kennedy feared the inflationary pressures that might come with a tax cut and increased expenditures and that defense expenditures, that had formed the bulk of federal expenditure rises in the Kennedy administration, were due to level off by FY64 and then reduce moving into FY65. C. Douglas Dillon OH Interview No. 7 by Harvey Brazer, September 22, 1964, JFKL.; Kaplan et al, *The McNamara Ascendancy*, pp. 460. Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford and the Burdens of Vietnam: 1965-1969* (Washington, DC: Historical Office OSD, 2011), pp. 2.

⁷³⁶ Adam Yarmolinsky and Gregory D. Foster, *Paradoxes of Power: The Military Establishment in the Eighties* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 62.

said, for a time, the manipulations seemed to work: in June 1965, the Great Society legislation passed as did a further tax cut. Within months however, even Johnson's liberal Council of Economic Advisors worried that the administration could not push through with the Great Society programs, the war in Vietnam and keep inflation down without a tax increase.⁷³⁷

McNamara's creative bookkeeping was inevitably a short-term solution. It could only be sustained if the war was brought to a swift end or if the budget was adapted to the reality that the United States was in fact fighting a "war" in Vietnam. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that he repeatedly recommended a little more candor from the administration, especially in its dealings with Congress. In the key May 1964 discussions, McNamara argued that any planning for a bombing program should also involve an information program for the public and Congress; Rusk argued that doing this could put the President in a "precarious position."⁷³⁸ Again in June 1964, McNamara suggested to Johnson that, "many of us agree" that "if we're going to go up the escalating chain, then we're going to have to educate the people Mr. President and we haven't done so yet." Johnson refused, remarking, "They're going to be calling you a warmonger."⁷³⁹

McNamara as Secretary of Defense

The documentary record largely validates Johnson's prediction that McNamara would be judged to be a "warmonger" and since this record is the main source of material for historians, the historiography has constructed a narrative about McNamara's pre-eminent role in the escalation of war in

⁷³⁷ Although economic indicators remained fairly strong into 1966, with unemployment down to 4%, GDP growing at 5.4%, a housing crisis and ensuing credit crunch in 1966 changed the picture altogether. Now, Treasury Secretary Martin openly questioned the impact of the administration's spending program on inflation and the balance of payments deficit, and increase interest rates. Campagna, *The Economic Consequences of the Vietnam War*, pp. 34-38.

⁷³⁸ Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting, May 24, 1964, *FRUS, Vietnam 1964*, Vol 1., Doc. 172.

⁷³⁹ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: June 9, 1964, WH 6406.04, Conversation 3663. More tellingly, when the decision was made to send in Marines to Da Nang, Johnson initially suggest that McNamara might announce that they were a "security battalion" or something equally innocuous: McNamara resisted saying that the administration would be "accused of falsifying the story." MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: March 6, 1965, WH6503.03, Conversation 7028.

Vietnam. When Brian VanDeMark began his work on *In Retrospect*, Adam Yarmolinsky warned him that: “The written record [...] tends to be defensive, and it provides rationalizations rather than reasons [...] so that it could never be said that there was disagreement between the Pentagon or the Secretary and the President. Well, of course, there was disagreement.”⁷⁴⁰ Daniel Ellsberg explained that memoranda in the OSD were written, and often misleadingly marked as “drafts”, on the understanding that “other people could see them; that they could be leaked”, that they primarily were designed to provide “talking points” or rationalizations even if the drafter thought it was “terrible idea.”⁷⁴¹ Given these inherent problems with the written record, the Johnson Library tapes are invaluable and cast a very different light on the period of escalation and especially on the nature of McNamara’s eventual disillusionment with the war. The oral record is crucial when examining the Kennedy and Johnson administrations just as it is when considering McNamara. This is also true of sources such as McNaughton’s diaries; one of McNamara’s few advisers that was not “kept in the dark” are important.⁷⁴²

Historians have suggested that McNamara was wildly optimistic in announcing a plan for phasing out from Vietnam in October 1963 and for believing in 1964 that a bombing program could achieve U.S. objectives in Vietnam. But this interpretation fails to acknowledge that it was McNamara’s job to defend the policy just as it was his responsibility to ensure that the administration’s decision to intervene in Vietnam cost as little as possible. In other words, as he defined it, it was his job to concern himself with tactics and with organizing for the execution of policy, not to design strategy itself. McNamara’s narrow definition of his function precluded a role in articulating strategy: PPBS, DPMS and all of his innovations at the OSD were explicitly designed to plan for force requirements in support of a strategy articulated in the White House or the State Department.

⁷⁴⁰ Adam Yarmolinsky, interview by Brian VanDeMark, April 1, 1993, Folder: Yarmolinsky 1993, Box II:104, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁷⁴¹ Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, phone interview by author, January 11, 2013.

⁷⁴² In defending himself against the charge that leaks might come out of the OSD, McNamara prided himself that he kept virtually everyone in his department “in the dark” over key decisions in Vietnam. MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: March 1, 1965, WH6503.01, Conversation 7002.

In other words, from a bureaucratic perspective, if strategy is the broader articulation of the objectives to be achieved by the application of military force, a theory on the use of those forces, according to McNamara's view of the bureaucratic process, should have come from the State Department and White House. His role as Secretary of Defense was to think about tactics, namely translating strategy into a series of military exchanges in the cheapest possible way. As he explained in an oral history for the OSD, the Secretary of Defense's role was only to "comment on the military implications."⁷⁴³

As such, it is not surprising that his eventual, overt disillusionment with the war and falling out with the administration hinged on what he saw as a lack of an overarching strategy that could justify escalating costs within his Department with a clearer end-point. In March 1965, while Johnson praised the "psychological impact" of sending the Marines rather than the "Sunday school stuff" that had preceded it, McNamara complained that the administration needed a clearer plan. He urged McGeorge Bundy to launch more forceful efforts aimed at beginning negotiations than Dean Rusk was inclined to, saying, "We need to be less rigid about talks." To Johnson, he explained, "My sense is that we're drifting from day to day and we ought to have inside government what we're going to say tomorrow and then next week."⁷⁴⁴ Throughout 1965, as the bombing program, which he supported in public and in official documents accelerated, he complained about the lack of strategy. In September, he expressed concern about the Chiefs bombing program, lamenting, "This shows the kind of pressure that is building up. And I think irrationality."⁷⁴⁵

As troop numbers and air sorties increased throughout 1965, he returned to the ideas of the Kennedy administration and suggested that a program in Vietnam might involve alternatives to military force. In December

⁷⁴³ Robert McNamara OH Interview 1 by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, April 23, 1986, Folder: OH 1 for OSD, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁷⁴⁴ MC LBJ Presidential Recordings: March 6, 1965. WH 6503.03, Conversation 7028.

⁷⁴⁵ September 12, 1965 presidential recording transcript, Folder: The Fog of War Background and research material, Presidential tapes transcripts, 1963-1965, Box II:114, RSM Papers, LoC.

1965, he told Johnson: “I am more and more convinced that we ought to think of some action other than military action as the only program here. I think if we do that by itself, it's suicide. I think pushing out 300,000, 400,000 Americans out there without being able to guarantee what it will do is a terrible risk and a terrible cost.”⁷⁴⁶

Furthermore, although McNaughton’s private diaries speak to the period of 1966 to 1967 when McNamara’s disillusionment with the war became more acute and increasingly public and eventually led to his dismissal, they also speak to the roots and antecedents of his disenchantment. To McNaughton and Cyrus Vance, two of his rare confidants, he spoke about “the Kennedy policy”. On February 11, 1966 when McNaughton transcribed a particularly on-point comment, McNamara explained, “I am prepared to say that the United States should not, in the case of covert insurgencies, do more than provide advice and material help to a country.”⁷⁴⁷ Two weeks later, he added “we’ve made mistakes in Vietnam...I’ve made mistakes. But the mistakes I made are not the ones they say I made.” I said, “I know.” The fact is that he believes we never should have gotten into the combat role out there.”⁷⁴⁸

McNamara reflected on the inability of the administration to produce a strategy or a policy that relied on the purposeful application of military force or

⁷⁴⁶ December 2, 19 65 presidential recording transcript, Folder: The Fog of War Background and research material, Presidential tapes transcripts, 1963-1965, Box II:114, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁷⁴⁷ Diary entry Friday February 11, 1966, unclassified personal diary of John T. McNaughton, transcribed by Asheley Smith in 2003. The full diary entry reads: “2/11/66 Fri. McNamara this morning, while talking with Cy and me, said that “there is not piece of paper—no record—showing when we changed from an advisory effort to a combat rôle in Vietnam. I am prepared to say that the United States should not, in the case of covert insurgencies, do more than provide advice and material help to a country. That we should either go to the source of the trouble, like bombing North Vietnam or take it to an international tribunal.” He said that that was the Kennedy policy. I said that the decision was made each time we estimated the odds that we could “pull it off.” I would put the odds at 30%, he at 50% and others at 70%. “Each time we lost and had to double our bets to stay on the table.” I argued that we have almost the same choice open to us today. Cy said the present “Y” in the road is quite different from the “Y” when we moved from advice to combat.

What we need is a theory that will limit our role.

I pointed out that bombing NVN or taking the matter to a tribunal would be “waving in the breeze” so far as changing the course of events was concerned. Bob agreed, but said it would permit us to shove out with less loss of prestige and effectiveness elsewhere.”

⁷⁴⁸ Diary entry February 28, 1966, McNaughton diary.

alternatives to military force. He maintained that, “What we need is a theory that will limit our role”, that bombing had relied on a gamble that “we could pull it off” rather than a strategy *per se*.⁷⁴⁹ In a later official history for the OSD, he added to this theme by saying that he did not believe bombing in Vietnam could achieve political objectives, that “I don’t think I ever believed that a military victory, in the normal sense of the words, was achievable.” In an equally revealing statement that followed immediately after his unexpected confession of doubt, he asked for assurances that the oral history would remain classified.⁷⁵⁰

McNamara’s mistakes in Vietnam were not that he was the pre-eminent “hawk”, the key advisor pressuring President Johnson to escalate in Vietnam with air power and troops, but arguably that he had a far too narrow definition of his job and a too strict concept of loyalty to the President. As the official OSD history explains, “McNamara had promised an efficient and affordable defense. Vietnam ruined those goals.”⁷⁵¹ Given this, perhaps he should have spoken out for his own office as well as for the administration, if not for the country, as he had been quicker than most to assess the economic costs and the strategic weaknesses underpinning Johnson’s chosen policy for Vietnam. Under a President who valued consensus, he was too quick to parrot Johnson’s instincts on Vietnam and did not take seriously, as perhaps he could have, Johnson’s remark that: “I don’t think anything will be as bad as losing and I don’t see any way of winning but I would sure want to feel that everyone person who had an idea, that his suggestion was fully explored.”⁷⁵² Too often, as the tapes described in this chapter have shown, McNamara’s reservations were implicit and hidden from most advisors, if not the President himself.

⁷⁴⁹ Diary entry Friday February 11, 1966, unclassified personal diary of John T. McNaughton, transcribed by Asheley Smith in 2003.

⁷⁵⁰ Robert McNamara OH Interview by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, July 24, 1986, Folder: OH 3 for OSD Historical Office, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁷⁵¹ Drea, *McNamara, Clifford and the Burdens of Vietnam*, pp. 538.

⁷⁵² MC LBJ presidential recordings: February 26, 1965, WH6502.06 Conversation 6887.

Ultimately, McNamara was torn between his private views about the weaknesses of the administration's policy and his conception of loyalty to the Commander-in-Chief and of the role as Secretary of Defense. During the crucial period of transition from November 1963 to the spring of 1964, as his withdrawal plans were cast aside, he seemed skeptical about the chosen strategy for Vietnam but still fostered a sense of alarm as the situation in South Vietnam seemed to unravel.

Given his privileged vantage point, he understood that if the war continued its economic costs could not be hidden indefinitely and could scuttle his objectives at the Defense Department as well as the administration's economic agenda. And yet he could not get past his loyalty to the office of the President. As he explained in an interview given after he was fired, "Around Washington, there is this concept of higher loyalty. I think it's a heretical concept, this idea that there's a duty to serve the nation above the duty to serve the President, and that you're justified in doing so. It will destroy democracy if it's followed. You have to subordinate a part of yourself, a part of your views."⁷⁵³

⁷⁵³Brock Brower, "Robert S. McNamara Interview," *Life Magazine* (May 10, 1968), Folder: Interview, Misc., Box I:108, RSM Papers, LoC.

CHAPTER 12 - CONCLUSION

When McNamara did eventually speak out against the war, both to Johnson and in a speech delivered on May 18, 1966 in Montreal, it ultimately led to his dismissal. Montreal marked a breaking point in McNamara's relationship with the President and the war: it was spurred on by yet another hearing in front of the SFRC to defend the MAP program just as expenditures for South Vietnam were taken off the MAP balance sheet and, for budgetary purposes, operations formally became a military problem. After the hearing, which took place in April 1966, McNamara turned to two of his closest colleagues at ISA to draft the Montreal speech: Adam Yarmolinsky and John McNaughton. McNaughton scribbled a note to Yarmolinsky that read: "RSM will need a good speech in May. He intends to dictate a draft this weekend. Would like you to work on it. He will be "thinking big" if he can get away with it!"⁷⁵⁴

McNamara may not have "gotten away with it" as it produced consternation amongst observers and an irreconcilable rift with his boss, but it did spell out his grand vision for "security in the contemporary world". That vision both challenged the administration's stated policies and inferred what he may have considered to be his mistakes as the nation's eighth Secretary of Defense. He questioned the assumption that a planned communist master plan drove conflicts in the developing world, and argued instead that development was vital. Speaking not far from the Canadian-American border, he said: "We still tend to conceive of national security almost solely as a state of armed readiness: a vast, awesome arsenal of weaponry. We still tend to assume that it is primarily this purely military ingredient that creates security. We are still haunted by this concept of military hardware. But how limited a concept this actually is becomes apparent when one ponders the kind of peace that exists between the United States and Canada."

Challenging each of the assumptions and received ideas in turn, he added, "Security is not military hardware, though it may include it. Security is

⁷⁵⁴ McNaughton to Yarmolinsky, April 22, 1966, Folder: Draft speeches 1966, Box 31, Yarmolinsky Papers, JFKL.

not military force, though it may involve it. Security is not traditional military activity, though it may encompass it. Security is development. Without development, there can be no security.” Returning to the policy he had publicly advocated for Vietnam until 1963, he remarked, “Experience confirms what human nature suggests: that in most instances of internal violence the local people themselves are best able to deal directly with the situation within the framework of their own traditions.”⁷⁵⁵

He ended the speech on a measured note; the man who had been the spokesperson for “rationality” in government policy now reflected on “Man” asking, “Is he a rational animal?” Answering his own question, McNamara concluded that, “All the evidence of history suggests that man is indeed a rational animal but with a near infinite capacity for folly. His history seems largely a halting, but persistent, effort to raise his reason above his animality. He draws blueprints for utopia. But never quite gets it built. In the end he plugs away obstinately with the only building material really ever at hand his own part-comic, part-tragic, part-cussed, but part-glorious nature.”⁷⁵⁶ After more than six years “plugging away” in office, McNamara may have been reflecting on his failed “blueprints”.

A measure of just how far apart McNamara and Johnson’s views on Vietnam specifically and on military policy more broadly had become, was illustrated just the day before McNamara made his speech. Johnson delivered a speech in Chicago and in sharp contrast to McNamara, he noted the lessons from World War II were that “the road to peace is not the road of concession and retreat,” that in Vietnam as elsewhere, “The failure to meet aggression means war, not peace.” He complained about “Nervous Nellies” who could become “frustrated and bothered and break ranks under the strain, and some will turn on their leaders, and on their country, and our own fighting men.” He ended with a line that could not have differed more from McNamara’s view: “The men who fight for us out there tonight in Vietnam –

⁷⁵⁵ Robert S. McNamara, “Security in the Contemporary World” (speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Montreal, Canada, May 18, 1966). Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *Old Colorado City Communications*: <http://tinyurl.com/l9xmpz3>

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

they are trying to find a way to peace. But they know – and I don't understand why we don't all recognize that we can't get peace just for wishing for it. We must get on with the job until these men come marching home.”⁷⁵⁷

A year later, in November 1967, during his infamous visit to Harvard and in a closed meeting with Harvard faculty, McNamara explained the rationale behind his Montreal speech: “I got so goddam frustrated that I had to have some release. [...] Montreal was an immature act. My responsibility is not to build my image but to manage a department. In those terms, Montreal was a luxury. You don't inspire men to obey commands by casting doubt on a central doctrine of their reason for being; that is, that security equals military power.” When he was asked about the role the speech may have had in changing the terms of the debate on Vietnam within the administration, McNamara made a telling remark: “That's not really my problem. What I have to worry about is keeping the lid on Vietnam and in that battle, Montreal cost me plenty. I'm not sorry that I made it.”⁷⁵⁸

McNamara's frustrations, as articulated in Montreal, speak to “lessons” McNamara and his colleagues' drew from their experience working on Vietnam that differ from those that were included *In Retrospect*. For them, the lessons were rooted in bureaucracy and in the process of policy-making, namely that military solutions were more readily available and funded and thus the Defense Department produced centrifugal tendencies. Paradoxically, because McNamara was so efficient as a manager, and despite his personal reluctance to define problems as primarily military, he made it easier for the President to do just that.

As Part I showed, the militarization of policy in Vietnam was by no means inevitable. Organizationally, McNamara had built on Eisenhower's reforms to align the Defense Department with a strategy set out by the White House and State Department. Groups such as the Special Group CI and

⁷⁵⁷ President Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at a Democratic Party Dinner” (speech, Chicago, IL, May 17, 1966). Retrieved online November 2, 2014, *The America Presidency Project*: <http://tinyurl.com/kajp2ca>

⁷⁵⁸ Richard Neustadt to Institute of Politics Members, Faculty Associates and Fellows, undated (November 1966), Folder: RSM Visit, Box 53, Yarmolinsky Papers, JFKL.

individuals that included President Kennedy, Roger Hilsman and Robert Thompson, favored a strategy premised on “clear and hold”, civic action, self-help and the strategic hamlets program at the center of the administration’s policy for Vietnam. Drawing on new material, especially McNamara’s calendar, this thesis shows just how heavily Thompson’s views in particular weighed on McNamara as he turned towards planning for the CPSVN and as he made public the administration’s plans to disengage from Vietnam in October 1963.

Part II of the thesis illustrates that McNamara embraced counterinsurgency for economic reasons. Even if they are treated separately in the thesis, strategy and economics are intrinsically connected. Economic realities facing the Kennedy administration, and especially the balance of payments and threats to the MAP program, had a direct bearing on the strategy that McNamara favored and pushed through the bureaucracy.

To conclude, six points are worth restating.

American vulnerability not omnipotence

First and foremost, this thesis challenges the idea that the Kennedy administration saw itself as being at the apex of U.S. power and militancy. It disputes the argument that under Kennedy “optimistic America answered the summons of the trumpet and went to war in Vietnam”⁷⁵⁹ and a related point: that McNamara advocated or even favored military solutions for Vietnam. It suggests the value of a bureaucratic lens to understand McNamara’s choices and policies for Vietnam because a bureaucratic level of analysis highlights the budgetary forces that shaped policy and, for the Kennedy administration in particular, shows that getting the right balance between civilian and military tools for the purpose of counterinsurgency was as much a bureaucratic challenge as it was a strategic one.

The Kennedy administration chose a limited strategy that was contingent on self-help for Vietnam in part because of what Kennedy

⁷⁵⁹ Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, pp. 2.

perceived as “limitations on the ability of the United States” to “bring about a favorable result” there.⁷⁶⁰ By the spring of 1962, the Kennedy administration as a whole was humbled by the international crises it had encountered from Laos to Berlin to Cuba. However, in many respects, the administration’s more modest approach to South Vietnam predated these crises and instead reaffirmed the central idea of Kennedy’s inaugural address, which was less a “clarion call” for U.S. militancy and more a call for people in the United States and abroad to become agents in their own future or in the words of the address, “to help them help themselves.”⁷⁶¹

By 1962, refocusing U.S. foreign policy on the notion of self-help had gained added urgency with a jump in the balance of payments deficit and the gold outflow that resulted. The problem obsessed President Kennedy. Just as Eisenhower had before him, Kennedy worried that an unstable economic base and international monetary system could undermine every aspect of the U.S. power.⁷⁶² Together with Secretary Dillon, McNamara led efforts to redress the deficit. McNamara played a leading part on the balance of payments because the Defense Department overseas operations largely drove the deficit and because his cost-saving reputation, the quality that distinguished him most, was at stake. As a result, the CPSVN timetable directly matched the timing and pace of McNamara’s efforts to address the balance of payments outflow.

The limits of military weapons

In a revealing exchange in preparation for *In Retrospect*, Brian VanDeMark asked Adam Yarmolinsky, one of McNamara’s confidants as well as the author of the Montreal speech, “What’s not in the written record that a biographer of McNamara should know?” Yarmolinsky replied, “Probably

⁷⁶⁰ Kennedy, “After Two Years”.

⁷⁶¹ President John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address” (speech, Washington, DC, January 20, 1961). Retrieved online on November 2, 2014, *JFKL*: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/BqXIEM9F4024ntFI7SVAjA.aspx>.

⁷⁶² This thesis suggests the concern was rather more inward-looking, that Kennedy was relatively more preoccupied with domestic economics than the hegemonic aspects of the international monetary system that Ludestad or Gavin have emphasized. See: Gavin, *Gold, dollars, and power.*; Geir Ludestad, *The United States and Western Europe since 1945: from “empire” by invitation to transatlantic drift* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

everything. Almost everything. My own view – and I don't know that this goes to the written record – my own view is that if McNamara is remembered at all by history, he will not be remembered as a manager, he will not be remembered as the “architect of Vietnam“ although he may be remembered unhappily that way, even though I think, in some ways, I'm afraid for him. But I think he'll be remembered as the person who was, really, the first and most effective educator of the American people on the true nature of military weapons.”⁷⁶³ Certainly, for McNamara, it was a concern about the limitations of military power, and overconfidence about its use in the United States, that inspired both the CPSVN and his Montreal speech.

Robert Kennedy's papers, when they are fully available to researchers, should shed light on his possible influence or confluence with McNamara's disillusionment with the pre-eminence of military tools to deal with the situation in Vietnam. A few months after the Montreal speech, McNaughton recorded, “Today—after what must have been a work-out at the Kennedy compound on the Cape last night—Bob remarked that we seem to be muscle bound in our foreign policy—in VN, Europe, Japan, etc.”⁷⁶⁴ Daniel Ellsberg contends that Johnson fired McNamara and assigned him to the World Bank because it would prevent him from involvement in domestic politics and specifically from accepting Robert Kennedy's offer to be his Vice-Presidential running mate in a eventual rival campaign to Johnson's.⁷⁶⁵ Whether or not McNamara entertained ambitions to join Kennedy's campaign, which seems unlikely before Johnson withdrew from the race, he did echo the former Attorney General's views in his private conversations. As early as May 1965, Robert Kennedy was complaining to Arthur Schlesinger that he “has found himself increasingly unhappy about our Vietnam policy, where he thinks we

⁷⁶³ Adam Yarmolinsky, interview by Brian Vandemark, April 1, 1993, Folder: Yarmolinsky 1993, Box II:104, RSM Papers, LoC.

⁷⁶⁴ Diary entry July 9, 1966, McNaughton diary.

⁷⁶⁵ Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, phone interview by author, January 11, 2013. FBI Director Hoover also fed Johnson's fears of a rapprochement between Robert Kennedy and McNamara. Robbyn Swan to McNamara, November 9, 1990, Folder: Misc. 1988-1995, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

have construed as a military problem what is primarily a political and diplomatic problem.”⁷⁶⁶

As the transition chapter in particular highlighted, the record and the telephone recordings especially do not support the notion that McNamara believed and championed the idea that military tools could achieve what were ultimately political objectives in South Vietnam. In a recently declassified oral history, McNamara makes a remarkable admission for someone who, on the written record, planned for increased levels of military force: “I don’t think I ever believed that a military victory, in the normal sense of the words, was achievable.”⁷⁶⁷ Because military approaches were easier to fund and the Defense Department was better configured to organize complex operations, they produced what Yarmolinsky called “centrifugal tendencies”. Ultimately, as operations in Vietnam became more extensive and therefore, expensive, the more likely it became that responsibility for them would be shifted to the Defense Department. Moreover, with a MAP and AID program under attack and the CIA unable to fund Special Forces operations as they expanded, the budget shifted more and more to the services. This bureaucratic dimension was at the heart of McNamara’s comments in Montreal.

The State Department and centrifugal forces

By understanding how McNamara conceived of the OSD in relation to the making of strategy, the responsibility for choosing the right or wrong strategy shifts away from the Defense Department and towards the State Department and White House. In McNamara’s schema, his job was to “comment on the military implications” and to organize military tools in the service of a chosen strategy set elsewhere, even if he preferred and encouraged one strategy over another.

Ultimately, the decisions to escalate militarily in 1965 did not come from either the services or the OSD but from the civilian leaders in the State Department and the White House. As Roger Hilsman suggested, the

⁷⁶⁶ Schlesinger, *The Letters of Arthur Schlesinger*, pp. 295.

⁷⁶⁷ Robert McNamara OH Interview 3 by the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, July 24, 1986, Folder: OSD OHs, Box I:109, RSM Papers, LoC.

responsibility of the White House and especially the State Department was to “leverage political aspects”⁷⁶⁸; something they did not do. In part, as Yarmolinsky noted, this was the case because, contrary to Huntington’s concerns in *The Soldier and the State*, civilians had “allow[ed] themselves to become militarized”⁷⁶⁹: President Johnson’s suggestion that McNamara should “lay up the plans to whoop the hell” out of adversaries in South Vietnam speaks to this. Moreover, civilian leaders in the State Department failed to represent non-military alternatives forcefully. As CINCPAC put it, “State waffles and evades.”⁷⁷⁰ Another commentator at the time correctly assessed that Montreal was also an expression of McNamara’s “dissatisfaction with the unimaginative and inflexible policies in the State Department.”⁷⁷¹

Yarmolinsky’s “lessons” from Vietnam are interesting because they are situated at the bureaucratic level and speak to additional, structural reasons why the Defense Department came to play such a pre-eminent role in Vietnam. Faced with “built-in deadlines” that are inherent to crises, Presidents, he argued, turned to “what they can do best” which, in the U.S. system, was invariably military solutions. With President Johnson particularly, military options promised a degree of short-term success to a politician who wanted quick-fix solutions that were easily deployable. As an agency that was set up to prepare for contingencies and to deal with “large organizational problems”, the Defense Department, Yarmolinsky argued, “out-perform[ed] State” each time.⁷⁷² McNamara took over the problems in Vietnam in 1962 because his department could more easily absorb the costs involved and because he and his staff promised to bring order where other agencies, especially the State Department, had failed.

⁷⁶⁸ Hilsman, *The Politics of Policy Making*, pp. 54, 158.

⁷⁶⁹ Adam Yarmolinsky, “The Military Establishment (Or How Political Problems Become Military Problems),” *Foreign Policy* (January 1, 1971). Retrieved online December 16, 2014: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/03/the-military-establishment-or-how-political-problems-become-military-problems/>.

⁷⁷⁰ CINCPAC to JCS, March 1962, Folder: Vietnam, General, 2/1/62-3/12/62, Box 196, NSF Files, JFKL

⁷⁷¹ “The Real McNamara,” *The New Republic*, 154:23, Issue 2689 (June 4, 1966), pp. 5-7.

⁷⁷² Yarmolinsky, “The Military Establishment (Or How Political Problems Become Military Problems).”

Both Hilsman and Yarmolinsky suggested that the underlying problem was that resources were consistently siphoned to the Defense Department rather than to State in the first place, because it was “harder to galvanize people” around the State Department that lacked “the constituency or natural allies in industry or Congress” that the Pentagon had.⁷⁷³ For Yarmolinsky, “flexible response” had actually made the problem worse. Rather than “demilitarizing the process”, McNamara’s reforms had “only prun[ed] the branches of the military tree. It continued to flourish, stunting the growth of the civilian organisms that grew in its shadow.”⁷⁷⁴ Flexible response had made the Department of Defense even more ubiquitous by making it at least nominally applicable to an even greater range of conflict scenarios. The services first became involved in Vietnam precisely because they were encouraged to use it as a laboratory for their new responsibilities under flexible response.

Yarmolinsky wrote that, “So long as the present military means are available, situations like Vietnam are going to recur”: without a more wholesale reform of the policy process, military solutions would always be favored. Only “political leadership that exercises superhuman qualities” could prevent it.⁷⁷⁵ Ultimately, by investing and producing a well-run department, the United States had reduced its flexibility in its interactions with the world and had produced a Maslow’s hammer scenario. As Maslow warned, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool that you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”⁷⁷⁶ Put simply, from a structural point of view, a bureaucratic and budgetary one, it was easier to treat Vietnam as a military problem.

Organizing for counterinsurgency

As Part I detailed, the Kennedy administration tried to do something new in Vietnam. In practice, policy on Vietnam was a product of compromise and adaptations to what was organizationally possible in Washington and Saigon.

⁷⁷³ Hilsman, *The Politics of Policy Making*, pp. 45.

⁷⁷⁴ Yarmolinsky, “The Military Establishment (Or How Political Problems Become Military Problems).”

⁷⁷⁵ Adam Yarmolinsky in Pfeffer, *No More Vietnams?*, pp. 102.

⁷⁷⁶ Abraham H. Maslow, *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance* (Google ebook), pp. 15. Retrieved online November 2, 2014: <http://goo.gl/XgyKp>.

In 1962, the British Foreign Office representatives in Saigon pointedly observed,

“The American idea of government is to define and divide responsibilities and then to rely upon the various holders to fight an issue out between them. The object is to lay down a “policy” and the more protracted and tenacious the fight, the sounder (or so the American argument runs) is likely to be the resulting policy. Once adopted, it then governs the decisions of all individuals involved in its execution until such time as new circumstances have arisen to render the policy no longer applicable. The business of reaching agreement on a policy is such an undertaking that everyone is anxious to avoid a repetition for as long as possible: hence American reluctance until disaster threatens to abandon policies even when manifestly out of date. [...] One of the by-products of this system is that each service or agency attaches supreme importance to defining clearly its own sphere of activity and refusing to step outside of it, on the understanding that the other will do the same.”⁷⁷⁷

The October 1963 announcements fulfilled precisely the objective of gluing everyone to one policy after a protracted battle. As well, the counterinsurgency strategy, which the CPSVN was premised on, struggled from the outset because of bureaucratic battles between the military services and across military-civilian lines.

Although the Kennedy administration made some leeway in terms of organizing for counterinsurgency in new, more civilianized ways – for instance through the Special Group (CI) – Hilsman and his colleagues always worried about the ability of the U.S. government and its fragmented pieces, to work together coherently in the field. In November 1963, as the CPSVN took hold in Vietnam, Hilsman worried that “once the MACV/CINCPAC/JCS channel was set up, it would inevitably become formal, requiring JCS action and Special Group action for every move, thus getting us into a somewhat rigid position

⁷⁷⁷ Stewart, Saigon to Petersen, FO, May 26, 1961. Reel 8: FO371/160111, FO Files: the USA, Series Two: Vietnam 1959-1975, National Archives, Kew.

that would make timing to fit the political situation difficult.”⁷⁷⁸ Although the CPSVN brought order and a degree of secured funding for Hilsman’s preferred program, it also removed the flexibility and informality that his program required operationally.

Decision-makers quarreled and struggled to find the right balance of responsibility across the different government agencies each step of the way in the early years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. When USAID’s programs were taken over by the Defense Department under *Operation Switchback* in 1962, field officers complained but were silenced as their bosses weighed up the budgetary advantages. When the counterinsurgency program was gradually dropped in the transition to the Johnson administration, Kennedy’s erstwhile counterinsurgency advisors in the NSC and State Department complained. They were impotent faced with a President and Secretary of State uninterested in their ideas. In each instance, bureaucrats, with the possible exception of Roger Hilsman⁷⁷⁹, did not want to shake the boat too aggressively and held on to the hope that existing bureaucratic arrangements, even if they were less than ideal, might work.

Neither a hawk nor a dove

The final line of the British Foreign Office’s statement about avoiding “stepping outside” a set “sphere of activity” is especially relevant for McNamara. McNamara’s “refus[al] to step outside” his personal vision for the job led to contradictory outcomes, neither hawkish nor dovish. The contradictions were inherent to his office. On the one hand, not least because of his domineering personality, the OSD and Defense Department had produced centrifugal forces, which tended to produce military solutions. On the other hand, as an office that looked inwards at budgetary and economic realities since it weighed so heavily on both, the OSD fulfilled a useful checks

⁷⁷⁸ Hilsman to Rusk, November 18, 1963, Folder: Vietnam, General, 11/16/63-11/12/63, Memos and Miscellaneous, Box 202, NSF Files, JFKL.

⁷⁷⁹ Although there is an argument to be made that Hilsman was silenced along bureaucratic lines too, that he had overplayed his hand during the loose decision-making arrangements under Kennedy and was punished for it, notably in side-stepping his boss Dean Rusk and second guessing military advisors such as Maxwell Taylor.

and balances function, something Eisenhower had intended in his reforms. Given this dual outlook, McNamara was among the first to see that over-ambitious programs in Vietnam could stretch the country's resources, especially its economic ones. McNamara favored the self-help program because of its favorable impact on the balance of payments deficit. Later when he suggested to Johnson that he should raise taxes if he was going to choose escalation, it too was for budgetary reasons.

Although McNamara became the public face of the war as it escalated and knowingly accepted, if not encouraged, the label that Vietnam was "McNamara's war", behind the scenes, it was at the OSD, and at ISA specifically, that dissent was the strongest. In some respects, ISA was the logical place for dissent as it bridged the capabilities of the Defense Department and the strategy, or lack thereof, of civilians at the State Department. The most virulent complaints emerged at ISA even if they rarely went beyond its walls.⁷⁸⁰ Ultimately, it was at ISA under McNamara that the policy of Vietnamization emerged, a policy that eventually provided the basis for the eventual U.S. disengagement from Vietnam. Paul Warnke, who played a leading part in designing Vietnamization, stayed on to serve both of McNamara's successors, Clark Clifford and President Nixon's Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird.

While these "checks and balances" characteristics, especially insofar as they led to McNamara's support for withdrawal, could qualify McNamara as a "dove" on Vietnam, his unrepentant defense of using technology throughout the war could easily be described as "hawkish". From the outset, he encouraged defoliation programs and applied similar statistical models to the bombing campaign in Vietnam as he had done during the Second World War.

If by April 1966, he had decidedly turned against the war and exclaimed, "'I want to give the order to our troops to get out of there so bad that I can hardly stand it,"⁷⁸¹ just three months earlier he was defending the idea of building a barrier between North and South Vietnam. McNaughton's

⁷⁸⁰ On this, see especially Freedman, "Vietnam and the Disillusioned Strategist," pp. 133-151.

⁷⁸¹ Diary entry April 8, 1966. McNaughton diary.

diaries recount a revealing exchange: “I asked him if he thought North Vietnamese ingenuity would be able to defeat a barrier. He surprised me with a “no.” Before long he was bouncing around the room, looking at maps of SEA and of Europe (to compare the Iron Curtain). He said, “Give me \$2 billion and I’ll build a barrier no one can get through. I’d get Edgar Kaiser and George Brown and ‘six companies’ and we’d build it.” As for the problem of splitting Laos, he said he could build a wall north to China for “six billion.” I suspect that he will talk about it, maybe with Bobby Kennedy and perhaps others and we’ll be off on a serious study of the proposition soon.”⁷⁸²

McNamara muffled his and his colleague’s dissent in order to fulfill his professional obligations to the President as he narrowly defined them. McNaughton observed, “So much in government depends upon subordinates taking hints and carrying out the mood of the President. Also, under Kennedy and in the early Johnson days, I sensed a semi-conspiratorial relationship with McNamara—in which things were accomplished despite bureaucratic hurdles (State Dept., JCS, AEC, Congress, etc.). Now I sense that the President is on the “hard” side of Bob—e.g., on Vietnam, in Europe, regarding Anti-Ballistic missiles, etc. Bob (and I) is much less effective if the President is really trusting the Chiefs, for example. Such a shift in outlook makes quite a difference in the “power” one (ISA) has—whether he is listened to, gets his way, etc. We’ll see how things go.”⁷⁸³ In other words, as he correctly assessed, as soon as McNamara stopped parroting the views he knew the President wanted to hear, he was sidelined.

Reinterpreting McNamara

As far as McNamara, the main focus of the thesis, is concerned, two points emerge: one methodological and the other substantive. First, by extending the research on Vietnam to bring together other bodies of literature, for instance economic or bureaucratic histories, another interpretation of McNamara is possible. Moreover, new sources, in particular transcripts of the Kennedy and

⁷⁸² Diary entry Sunday, January 29, 1966, McNaughton diary.

⁷⁸³ Diary entry March, 25, 1966, McNaughton diary.

Johnson tapes, especially of the October 1963 NSC meetings, McNamara's trip notes to Vietnam in September 1963, his calendar, Yarmolinsky's papers and McNaughton's diaries shed a different light on McNamara's role on Vietnam and provide invaluable evidence that the gap between McNamara's public and private persona, and views on the war were wider than was heretofore acknowledged.

Understanding McNamara's strict codes of loyalty are fundamentally important to grasp how someone who played such a crucial part in trying to keep the United States out of Vietnam could also be held responsible for the war. In many respects, he was the perfect "fall guy", someone who held his reservations and concerns quiet notwithstanding his comments in Montreal.

Although he considered leaving the Johnson administration as early as the fall of 1965, he nevertheless stayed on until February 1968.⁷⁸⁴ So why did he stay so long? Was it as he explained in the Harvard faculty meeting that his job was "keeping the lid on Vietnam" or as Errol Morris put it, that he was like a "Dutch boy with his finger in the dike"? Or did he stay until the threat of nuclear holocaust receded?⁷⁸⁵ In his letter accepting the job of Secretary of Defense, he had indicated that he would stay on for as long as he had the "closest possible, personal working relationship with the President" and for as long as he "receive[d] the President's full backing and support."⁷⁸⁶ Had he concluded that his relations with Johnson had degenerated to the point that this was no longer true? In many ways, the question remains open and McNamara never satisfactorily answered it. However, just as on the basis of new evidence this thesis hopefully provides a new interpretation of McNamara's early contributions to the Vietnam War, perhaps future studies will answer the question of why he remained at his post until 1968.

Ultimately, McNamara emerges from this history as a man who does not comfortably fall within a hawk-dove dichotomy and who was perhaps more

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁵ Errol Morris, interview by author, London, UK, March 18, 2014.; Richard Neustadt to Institute of Politics Members, Faculty Associates and Fellows, undated (November 1966), Folder: RSM Visit, Box 53, Yarmolinsky Papers, JFKL.

⁷⁸⁶ McNamara to Senator Kennedy, December 12, 1960, Folder: Secretary of Defense letter of acceptance, 1960, Box II:46, RSM Papers, LoC.

reflexive than conventional interpretations allow. As he acknowledged in conversations with McNaughton, “We’ve made mistakes in Vietnam...I’ve made mistakes. But the mistakes I made are not the ones they say I made. [...] The fact is that [McNamara] believes we never should have gotten into the combat role out there.”⁷⁸⁷ This thesis may contribute to posing the question about whether McNamara ever believed combat troops were the solution to Vietnam’s problems.

⁷⁸⁷ Diary entry for Monday February 28, 1966, unclassified personal diary of John T. McNaughton, transcribed by Asheley Smith in 2003.

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Appendix 1: Charts and figures

Figure 1: References to Balance of Payments Considerations in Federal Reserve’s Statements⁷⁸⁸

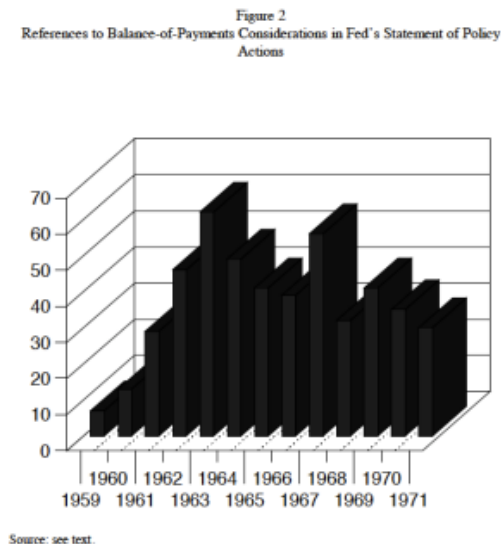
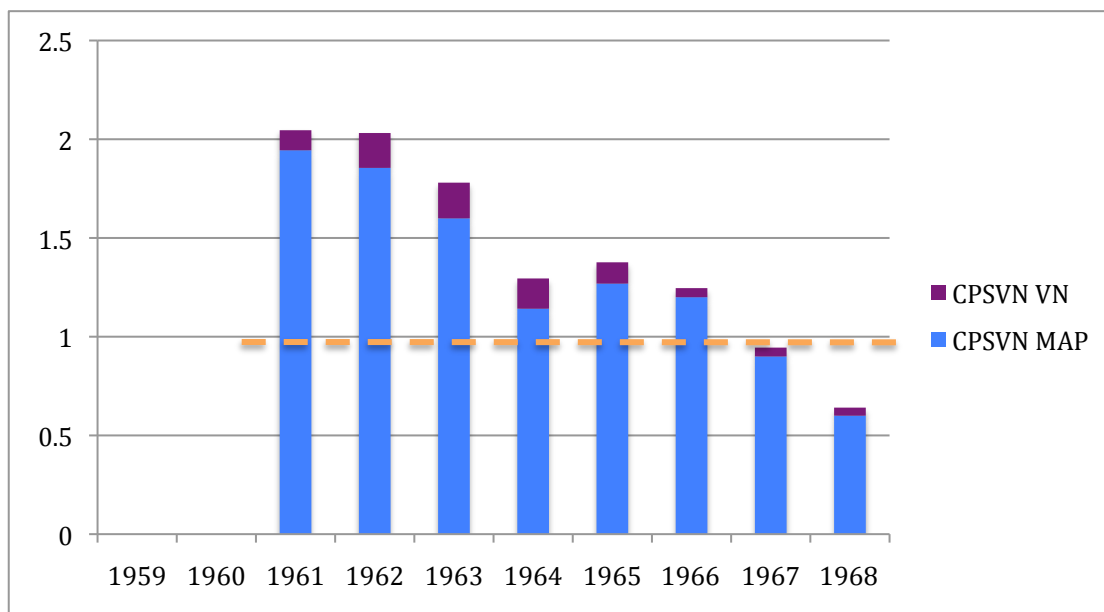
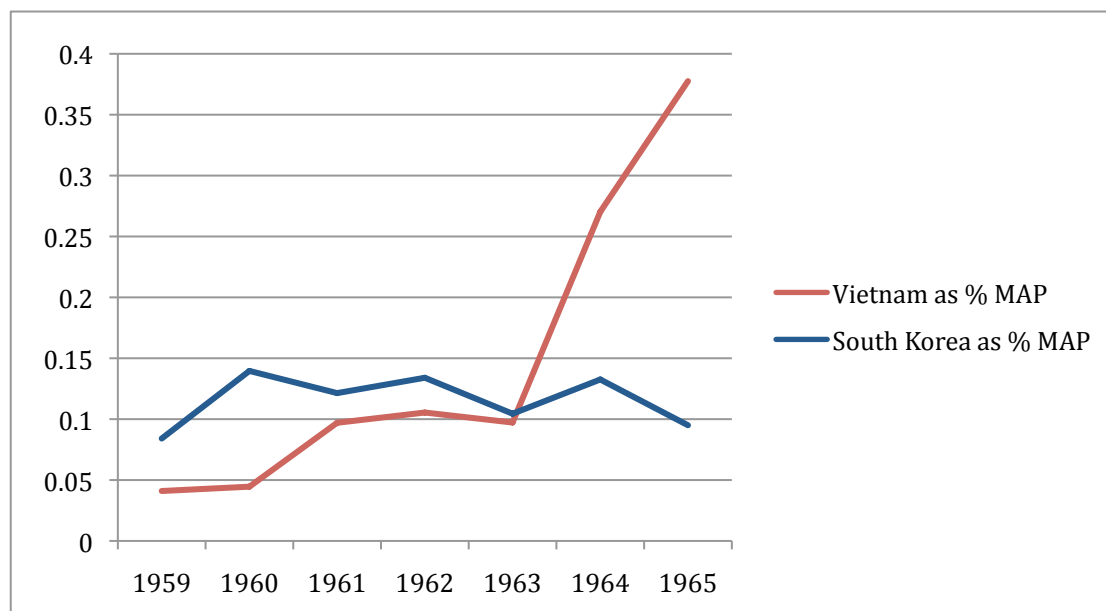


Figure 2: South Vietnam’s share of the MAP program according to the CPSVN



⁷⁸⁸ Through text mining, the chart describes references in the “Record of Policy Actions” of the Federal Open Market Committee to key terms, such as “gold outflows,” “trade deficits,” and “balance of payments”. Eichengreen, “From Benign Neglect,” pp. 57.

Figure 3: Vietnam and South Korea's share of the MAP program (in %)⁷⁸⁹



⁷⁸⁹ Arguably, the traditional narrative on the U.S. in Vietnam has looked at this chart and minimized the importance of the financial commitment to Vietnam in the years up to 1963 relative to later years. However, the important part is that from the vantage point of 1963, the financial commitment was coming close to equaling that in Korea and that already seemed alarming.