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## Searching for Bob McNamara

In 1967, Robert McNamara commissioned a study that would gather key records of the decision-making that led to the Vietnam War. By that point, McNamara was distressed with the direction of the war and the realization that his legacy would be intertwined with it. Beyond that, his motives for ordering the study are less clear. Was it “so that future historians would have access to them, could reappraise the decisions and draw lessons from them”<sup>i</sup> as he later argued? Was it for the purpose of a classified internal study or, as others have suggested, for the benefit of Robert F. Kennedy’s prospective presidential campaign? Like many of McNamara’s other decisions, scholars have few clear answers.

What we do know, however, is that McNamara was furious when, four years later, one of his former aides Daniel Ellsberg leaked the collection of documents that became known as the *Pentagon Papers*. When Ellsberg’s lawyer reached out to McNamara during the trial where his client faced the prospect of 115 years in prison, McNamara’s alleged response was to threaten to “hurt [Ellsberg] very badly.” By contrast, former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy testified that Ellsberg’s actions had not meaningfully endangered national security. McNamara, who had by then left government, experienced the publication of the *Papers* as a personal humiliation, even though close friends like Katharine Graham recalled that he supported the *New York Times* in its confrontation with the Nixon administration over the leaked documents. He had not informed President Lyndon B. Johnson or Secretary of State Dean Rusk that he had undertaken the study and it was a source of personal pain for him to be seen to have acted deceptively or disloyally towards them.

Simultaneously, his family also experienced pain that flowed from his governmental service. His wife Margaret was in the hospital after struggling for many years with what her friends called “Bob’s ulcers”. His only son Craig was living in Salvador Allende’s Chile working on a dairy farm on Easter Island at a time when many financial institutions, including the World Bank, which his father now presided, were cutting off funds to the leftist government because of its putative economic mismanagement.<sup>ii</sup> Craig had little contact with his parents at this time and heard of his father’s visit to the country through a local newspaper. In 1971, just two weeks after Ellsberg surrendered himself to the police in Boston, Craig listened to Fidel Castro address rapturous crowds in Santiago.

Although they were worlds apart in 1971, today Craig and Daniel Ellsberg are friends and live not far from each other in the Bay Area. In generational terms, Ellsberg is interesting: he is neither a member of the “greatest generation” nor a “baby boomer”. He is, in many ways, a perfect bridge for conversations across the generational divide, somewhere between Craig and his father. Although theirs is the most unlikely of friendships, it is meaningful and moving to witness.

What unites them includes Ellsberg and Craig McNamara’s engagement with social and environmental issues. Ellsberg lists Greta Thunberg as one of his heroes and has a photo of them together on his mantelpiece. Craig is an organic walnut farmer and has won awards for his work on conservation and sustainability issues. His career seems a world apart from his father’s but his physical features make the filial connection unmistakable. There is the same intensity and absence of frivolousness too. He drives a Ford pickup truck and as soon as we sit down to talk, pulls out a large yellow notepad on which he takes notes. I’ll tell him

later that some of my most revealing findings were in his father's *many* hand-scrawled notes on yellow notepad paper.

These are two of the people most eagerly engaged with the subject of my research over the last ten years: Robert McNamara. And they are, like me, troubled by the questions he left unanswered. As a historian, they move me towards the humbling realization that the questions we ask often reverberate intimately within communities of colleagues and families. There is no doubt that the Vietnam War cast a dark shadow on the children of US decision-makers, contributing even to suicides decades later. Theirs was a less obvious and hidden trauma. Ellsberg has written of his time working for McNamara in the Department of Defense, including his frustrations with his colleagues' mafia-like silence, and Craig McNamara is writing his memoirs, which will include more personal insights into the conflicts that many of the Vietnam era decision-makers experienced within their families. Both are important to understanding the mental space that US decision-makers navigated as they made, and then grappled with the consequences, of their decisions.

In many respects, Ellsberg and Craig McNamara were two casualties of Robert McNamara's *personal* weaknesses, in particular his aloofness and lack of transparency. McNamara accepted as much in his memoirs when he recalled that "there was much Marg and I and the children should have talked about, yet at moments like this I often turned inwards instead – it is a grave weakness."<sup>iii</sup> Craig speaks candidly of the "boundaries" that kept him away from his father and asks, "Why didn't he tell *me* the truth?" Likewise, Ellsberg describes the professional detachment that kept many of his Department of Defense colleagues at a distance from Robert McNamara. He was "Bob" only to the rarest of confidants.

In later years, and unlike many of his colleagues, McNamara became more introspective. His memoirs *In Retrospect*, his groundbreaking "critical oral history" work with historians such as James Blight and Robert Brigham, as well as his participation in Errol Morris's Academy Award-winning documentary *The Fog of War*, present a more reflective McNamara, a man more candid about the misgivings that hid behind his façade of confidence during the Vietnam War. While Ellsberg suspected that McNamara had doubts about the war long before the release of his memoirs and subsequent work, Craig admits to only learning of them with the release of *In Retrospect* and especially *The Fog of War*.

Perhaps what unites Craig and Ellsberg most, and what separates them from Robert McNamara just as much, is their commitment to the truth and impatience with lies. Very early on in our meeting, I waffled about "lack of candor" or some other ambiguous turn of phrase that many scholars often rely on.<sup>iv</sup> Craig interrupted me to interject, "We have a word in the English language for that: lies." Similarly, Ellsberg recalled his incredulity when his boss John McNaughton described the self-censorship that he, like McNamara, exercised to ensure that President Johnson would continue to rely on their counsel.<sup>v</sup>

In his own way, McNamara dissented with official policy: he spoke out at various points including in a speech that he delivered in Montreal in May 1966 and he used press leaks to voice his discomfort with the direction of policy and to try, ultimately with little success, to restore his image. But his dissent was always within fairly constrained limits that preserved his career as well as his social and professional standing.

Ellsberg's actions in 1971 posed a moral challenge to McNamara. In his personal archive, Ellsberg has a note on McNamara's concept of loyalty, an idea that I return to many times in my book and that drove McNamara's silence on Vietnam. In trying to explain McNamara's decades-long hostility to him, Ellsberg writes, "And less consciously, I suspect,

my example of what it was possible and perhaps right to do challenged the priority he gave to his role of protecting his boss, the president. That example exposed him potentially to the thought that in lying for the president and helping him carry out his doomed policy he was doing something he didn't "have" to do. He was making a choice; and as a result, he shares with the president responsibility for all the deaths and turmoil that resulted."<sup>vi</sup>

It is at that "less conscious" level that key questions remain. The *Fog of War* ends with a striking exchange between Morris and McNamara:

**Morris:** After you left the Johnson administration, why didn't you speak out against the Vietnam War?

**McNamara:** I'm not going to say any more than I have. These are the kinds of questions that get me in trouble. You don't know what I know about how inflammatory my words can appear. A lot of people misunderstand the war, misunderstand me. A lot of people think I'm a son of a bitch.

**Morris:** Do you feel in any way responsible for the War? Do you feel guilty?

**McNamara:** I don't want to go any further with this discussion. It just opens up more controversy. I don't want to add anything to Vietnam. It is so complex that anything I say will require additions and qualifications.

**Morris:** Is it the feeling that you're damned if you do, and if you don't, no matter what?

**McNamara:** Yeah, that's right. And I'd rather be damned if I don't.

My research has shown that McNamara doubted US prospects for victory in Vietnam far earlier than he conceded and that he resisted escalation more than most. This discovery, which was made possible through new sources including McNaughton's private diaries, is an uncomfortable one as it raises questions about McNamara's ethical failings, questions that he eschewed whenever they were asked of him, including in the terse exchange with Morris. McNamara's defensiveness with Morris shows that his self-reflection was stunted. Many historians' criticisms of *In Retrospect* hinged on his disingenuousness because for all his *ex-ante* ruminations, Robert McNamara was remarkably cagey. He apologized for failing to view the problems in Vietnam outside of a Cold War mindset but not for his personal failings that helped the war to go on as long as it did.

Ultimately, Ellsberg and Craig McNamara represent nobler parts of McNamara's legacy, aspects of his career that his mistakes on Vietnam have overshadowed. Ellsberg's moral stance on nuclear issues was paralleled in McNamara's efforts to rein in the United States' reliance on nuclear weapons.<sup>vii</sup> Craig's work with the Vietnamese artist Danh Vo who carved beautiful objects out of the wood from Craig's orchards tell another story. Craig has the human skills that his father lacked – the ability to empathize, to imagine the pain of others – but his work is driven by a sense of social and public service that also drove his father.

And, perhaps most important of all, the elder McNamara had an intellectual hunger. Repeatedly throughout his career, including in his books, at the end of the *Fog of War* and on a television interview that he gave as he left office, he returned to the same T.S. Eliot quote.<sup>viii</sup> It reads: "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time." Like Craig and Ellsberg, McNamara's personal papers and work reveal that he searched for answers, especially on Vietnam, and was animated by ethical considerations that sit uneasily with his

mistakes during the war. However, at the end of *his* exploration, he failed to look deeper into the one place Ellsberg, Craig and I returned to: himself.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert S. McNamara Oral History No. 1 by Walt W. Rostow, January 8, 1975, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, pp. 57.

<sup>ii</sup> Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Little Brown & Co., 1993), pp. 484.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 216-7.

<sup>iv</sup> With the notable exception of HR McMaster who unapologetically used “lies” in his book’s title: H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that led to Vietnam* (HarperCollins, 1997).

<sup>v</sup> John T. McNaughton was McNamara’s Assistant for International Security Affairs, his closest advisor on Vietnam.

<sup>vi</sup> “McNaughton on loyalty,” undated note, Daniel Ellsberg personal papers.

<sup>vii</sup> Daniel Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (Bloomsbury Press, 2017).

<sup>viii</sup> Henry L. Trewhitt, *McNamara: His Ordeal at the Pentagon* (Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 298.