



## AMERICAN LIVES

# Robert McNamara

## *The Legacy of Vietnam*

## Section 2

*"Looking back, I clearly erred by not forcing . . . a knock-down, drag-out debate over the loose assumptions, unasked questions, and thin analyses underlying our military strategy in Vietnam."—Robert McNamara, In Retrospect (1995)*

Robert McNamara made the U.S. Defense Department more organized and efficient. Later he led an aid agency that funded programs to help poor people around the world improve their lives. However, he will probably be remembered most for his role in the Vietnam War.

McNamara (b. 1916) graduated from college with honors and attended the famous Harvard Business School. During World War II, he trained officers in the Army Air Corps in management techniques. After the war, he and a team of other managers joined the Ford Motor Company. These "Whiz Kids" led Ford out of difficulty and into new success. McNamara was named president of Ford—the first to come from outside the family. In 1961 he left that post to become President Kennedy's secretary of defense.

McNamara reformed the Defense Department and tightened control of the armed services. He joined in the planning that helped resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis. He also won Kennedy's approval of the new doctrine of "flexible response." This idea reduced the nation's heavy reliance on nuclear weapons. Instead, it based U.S. security on large conventional troop forces that could respond quickly to international crises.

The central issue of McNamara's time in office, though, was the Vietnam War. McNamara visited Vietnam in 1962, talking to leaders and American officers there. He backed the idea of using American troops as advisors and believed that with American help, the war could be over by 1965. After Kennedy was assassinated, he stayed as defense secretary under Lyndon Johnson, who came to rely on McNamara greatly.

McNamara supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave Johnson sweeping power in Vietnam. When administration planners debated whether to start bombing North Vietnam, McNamara thought it would not work, but he went along with the decision. He agreed with the policy of sending more troops.

As time went on, though, McNamara grew to

believe that the Vietnam War could not be won. In meetings with Johnson and other top advisors, he expressed these doubts. In public, however, McNamara never voiced these concerns.

He became so identified with Vietnam policy that war critics often attacked him personally. They called the fight "McNamara's war" and branded him a "baby burner" for air attacks that resulted in the deaths of children. McNamara persuaded Johnson to halt the bombing at the end of 1965, hoping for a peaceful gesture in return from the other side. There was no response. In 1966, a McNamara peace proposal was secretly sent to North Vietnam. Again, there was no response.

In 1968, McNamara felt he could not continue in the administration. He left the Defense Department to become president of an international aid agency. He served as chief of the World Bank for fifteen years. Before him, that agency concentrated on funding large industrial projects around the world. McNamara shifted the focus. Under him, the bank concentrated on funding programs that worked to help the poorest people in the world more directly.

In 1995, McNamara published his memoirs—*In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. The book revealed his earlier doubts that the war could be won. He said loyalty to Johnson prevented him from saying anything, even after he left office. Many reviewers criticized him for remaining quiet for so long and not having the courage of his convictions and speaking out at the time of the war.

### Questions

1. Would you say that McNamara was effective at leading organizations? Why or why not?
2. Why did McNamara come to believe that fighting the Vietnam War was a mistake?
3. Do you agree that McNamara should have spoken out against the war when he left the Defense Department?