



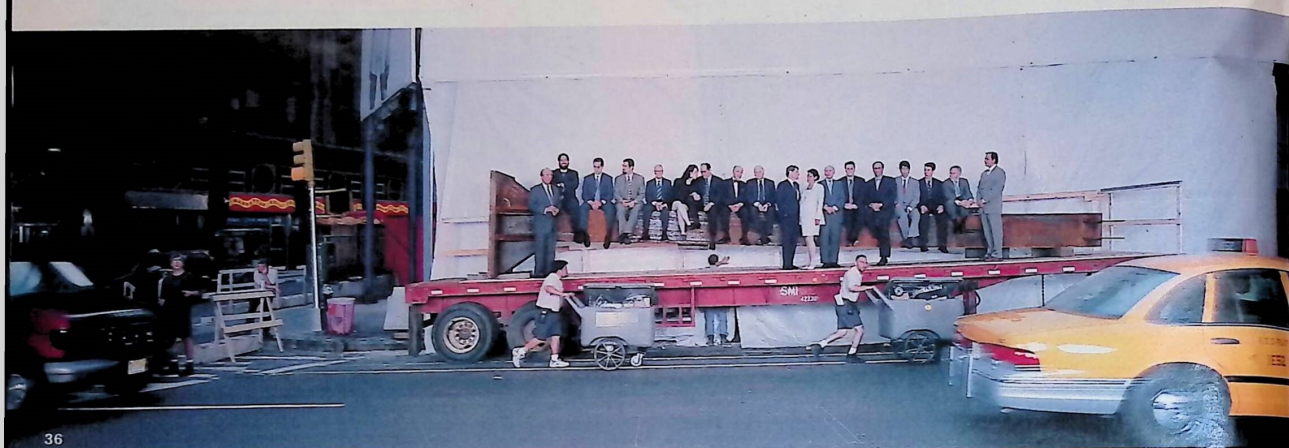
Robert McNamara Meets the Enemy

He went to Hanoi to examine the past, willing, he said, to accept blame for the war. But he also wanted the Vietnamese to admit their mistakes. Once again, he lost.

By David K. Shipler

AUGUST 10, 1997

"If grief and penance drove McNamara to Hanoi, they were carefully concealed. The way he examined his failure in Vietnam was to intellectualize it, diagnose it, figure it out. He was hoping the Vietnamese would do the same."
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Robert McNamara and

For four days this summer, American generals and policy makers and their adversaries relived the Vietnam War together, this time over a conference table. Some lessons: North Vietnam was not the agent of Soviet or Chinese Communism. There were no dominoes. Healing is easier for the victors than the vanquished. By David K. Shipler

N

ot long after dawn, Robert S. McNamara set out on a rapid walk through the half-light of Hanoi. A steamy drizzle soon soaked his dark blue jogging shorts and shirt. He stared intently ahead, barely glancing at the Vietnamese along the way as he marched in a loping stride through the city he ordered bombed some 30 years ago. He walked too quickly for the beggars or the barefoot children selling postcards to keep up with him. He did not seem to notice a boy hawking copies of "The Quiet American." He raced across currents of whizzing motorbikes and bicycles laden with impossibly huge bundles of fruit and shoes and large tin boxes, balanced as ingeniously as weapons had once been on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Peasant women in conical hats crisscrossed in front of him, moving gracefully beneath shoulder poles slung heavily with round baskets of bananas and litchi nuts. One woman squatting at the curb made an enticing gesture toward her pile of reddish litchis but got no reaction. He did not look into the faces of the people. He did not linger to gaze at their colorful wares. He was driven by another agenda, a mission he talked about incessantly as he walked.

In a few hours on this Friday in June, one of the more unusual efforts in the history of warfare was to begin. McNamara, three other former American officials, two retired generals and six historians would sit down with former North Vietnamese officials, diplomats, generals and scholars led by Nguyen Co Thach, a courtly former Foreign Minister, for a four-day discussion of what Americans call the Vietnam War and Vietnamese call the Amer-

ican War. Their main focus would be defined by McNamara's growing conviction that "each of us could have achieved our geopolitical objectives without that terrible loss of life," that both sides missed concrete chances to end the fighting during his tenure as Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968.

The thesis amounted to a confession of profound error, and this return to Vietnam — McNamara's second since the war — seemed likely to be a lonely journey into a regretful past. Despite his coterie of aging officials and younger historians, it was he above all who bore the burden. The others in the delegation had not conceived the war; they had worked at its margins, had followed orders or had tried to negotiate its end. With most of the war's key architects dead or declining to attend, McNamara stood as the only senior policy maker of the era to visit Hanoi and admit that the war should not have been fought and could not have been won. He wanted it studied as a cautionary tale for the next century. "Human beings have to examine their failures," he declared. "We've got to acquaint people with how dangerous it is for political leaders to behave the way we did."

If penance drove him to Hanoi, it was care-



Photographs by PAUL HIG

the Ghosts of Vietnam



We say Vietnam War, they say American War: McNamara, seeking understanding from a former opponent, Nguyen Co Thach.



Thach (second from right), a former Foreign Minister, led the Vietnamese delegation of scholars, diplomats and generals.

fully concealed. The way McNamara examined his failure in Vietnam was to intellectualize it, diagnose it, pinpoint the variables that might have been revised. He was hoping that the Vietnamese would do the same, but they would frustrate him again, as they had 30 years before.

ROBERT McNAMARA BELIEVES THAT American leaders acted out of honorable principles, as he argued in his 1995 book, "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam." "Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong," he wrote. "We owe it to future generations to explain why." This admission, which generated a mixture of admiration and vilification among Americans, earned him an enthusiastic welcome when he first visited Hanoi in November 1995. The quotation and his book are displayed in a museum in Ho Chi Minh City that features photographs of Americans torturing Vietnamese.

Now he had returned to Vietnam, not so much to test his thesis as to prove it. The title of the conference was a question: "Missed Opportunities?" But there was no question mark for McNamara. He was eager for Thach and the other Vietnamese to confirm what he believed he knew. The war had resulted in the reunified,

Communist Vietnam that Hanoi had desired. But Vietnam had not become the agent of Soviet and Chinese Communism that Washington had feared; Communism in Indochina had not toppled the dominoes of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and other Asian countries, as Dwight D. Eisenhower had wrongly predicted when he relinquished the Oval Office to John F. Kennedy in 1961. At that early stage, before the arrival of American combat troops in 1965, could the same ends have been realized at the bargaining table as, later, on the battlefield? Why did Hanoi repeatedly rebuff secret American attempts to open peace talks from 1965 to 1968? Why did the bombing of North Vietnam fail to force capitulation? And a key issue for McNamara: "If the United States had invaded North Vietnam, would the Chinese have intervened?" he asked. He had opposed the military chiefs' recommendations of an invasion because he feared China would enter the war; from the Vietnamese he would now seek vindication for that assessment.

McNamara talked as he walked briskly around the Lake of the Restored Sword at the heart of Hanoi. Had he known the legend of this lake in the 1600's, he would have understood the anti-Chinese thrust of Vietnam's historical devotion to independence. The story goes that in the 15th century, when the Ming Dynasty ruled Vietnam, a fisherman named Le Loi found in his net a magical sword that empowered him to lead his people in a 10-year struggle that drove the Chinese out in 1428. Le Loi be-

came Emperor. As he then offered gratitude to the spirit of the lake, a giant golden tortoise snatched the sword and restored it to the depths.

Much of what the Vietnamese would try to explain to the Americans in the coming days touched on this mystical passion to be rid of foreign domination, whether by the Chinese for a thousand years, the French colonialists for more than a century, the Japanese during World War II or the Americans after the French defeat in 1954. It was the necessity of resisting the United States, the generals and diplomats in Hanoi would say, that drove North Vietnam into a temporary, pragmatic reliance on Chinese and Soviet aid.

"The basic lesson is: understand your opponent," McNamara concluded sorrowfully as he strode along the lake. The lesson worried him. "We don't understand the Bosnians, we don't understand the Chinese and we don't really understand the Iranians."

IT WAS MORE THAN INTELLECTUAL INTEREST that brought some of McNamara's colleagues to Hanoi. Unfinished business drew Chester L. Cooper, a veteran C.I.A. analyst, White House aide and State Department adviser who had been present at practically every fork in this rough road since the French war in Indochina in the early 1950's. He had been the point man in the Johnson Administration's secret, failed diplomacy of the mid-60's, running all over the world to send offers to the North Vietnamese. "Many of the names we will be confronting

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are names that I remember being these elusive, gray, unfriendly, unfathomable people whose attention I had been trying to get for several years," Cooper said before leaving for Hanoi. And he also sought something more personal. "How do these people feel about me walking around, going back to a place after you've destroyed it? How will they feel? How will I feel?"

Feelings were not on McNamara's agenda. "That's not what I'm focusing on," he declared before the trip. "I may not tell you how I'm feeling." And he never did, even when questioned about the thoughts that were running through his head as he walked around this city, among these people. "I try to separate human emotions from the larger issues of human welfare," he replied. "Human welfare requires that we avoid conflict. I try not to let my human emotions interfere with efforts to resolve conflict." It seemed an odd dichotomy, one that recalled McNamara's inability to invest his policy making with the compassion he may have felt.

Self-revelation was not the style of these aging men, now in their 70's and 80's. The Vietnamese, meanwhile, had been ordered in writing not to give interviews. "Stone statues" was how one American described the Vietnamese after the first day's discussions — an image that mercifully broke down somewhat as time passed.

The Americans were less guarded. Cooper told the Vietnamese that he had resigned from the White House in quiet protest in 1966 and then agreed to work "on negotiations only" at the State Department until he concluded in December 1967 that the diplomatic feelers were "a charade." Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, who was Under Secretary of State from 1966 to 1969, had "some responsibility for negotiations," he said, "but there was always somebody around to sabotage them." Francis M. Bator, deputy national security adviser from 1965 to 1967, specialized in European affairs and only listened to Lyndon Johnson's anguished monologues about Vietnam. Gen. William Y. Smith, now retired from the Air Force, never served in Vietnam; as a major, he was an aide in the White House and for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The delegation's single combat veteran of the war was from the Army, Lieut. Gen. Dale Vesser, who is now retired, a sturdy man with a laconic style. From 1966 to 1971, he did two tours and several special missions in Vietnam. How did he feel being in Hanoi? "I have never had anything but respect for the people we fought," General Vesser said. "They were very good, and they were fighting for what they believed in. So being in Hanoi, other than feeling an obligation to those Americans who didn't come back, doesn't excite strong emotions."

Deciding to attend this conference brought Vesser considerable flak from colleagues in the

Army, the service most badly wounded by the war and most bitter about McNamara and his book. At least half a dozen generals declined invitations. One of them, John H. Cushman, came close to going but then pulled out. A former brigade commander, he remembered the pain of returning to old battlefields a few years ago and meeting officers from the other side. "I'm just not comfortable being seated opposite these people exploring the missed opportunities," he said. "My constituency is my brigade. I think my constituency would not quite understand why I linked up with this effort to find out what we did wrong."

Something of the same concern made the trip to Hanoi unattractive to Gen. William Westmoreland, who commanded U.S. forces in Vietnam and who, at age 83, sounds as if he were frozen in time. "We did not lose a single battle against those people," he insisted. "They defeated us psychologically. I must say, I can just imagine the attitude of my troops when they read in the paper that the old man goes to Hanoi." To do so "would suggest that we're submitting to them, because we never lost a battle," he repeated. "It would be totally inappropriate for me as having led our troops to go and make homage to the enemy."

Walt W. Rostow, President Johnson's hawkish national security adviser, did not go because he anticipated that most of the information would come from American documents and memoirs. "I don't think that Hanoi's in a mood to give us anything equivalent, like the access to American policy in this period," he predicted. "After all, they are Communists. I don't want to join in an exercise that will be 90 percent American and 10 percent Hanoi." Furthermore, he added, "we were awfully well informed about them. I know all the answers to those questions."

The skepticism also infected foundations, 13 of which turned down requests for financial support, according to James G. Blight of Brown University's Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, the American organizer of the meeting. Only the Rockefeller Foundation came through.

The doubts raised the stakes for the Hanoi meeting. The Americans, especially McNamara, were keen to prove the skeptics wrong by making sure the conference would succeed in opening up

the secretive North Vietnamese decision-making process. The aim was to persuade the Vietnamese to break with their closed tradition and provide official documents from the period as well as personal recollections. The conference organizers provided voluminous background material from newly opened archives in Moscow, Washington, Eastern Europe and even Beijing, which included, for example, Chinese minutes of conversations in the 1960's between Mao Zedong and the North Vietnamese Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong.

Only Vietnamese documents were missing, and the Vietnamese organizer — the Foreign Ministry's Institute for International Relations — pledged early on to provide archival material. When a deadline passed in April without the promised papers having appeared, McNamara pounded the table at a Washington meeting of the American team and threatened not to go to Hanoi. "They have not met this condition!" he said. "I'm very skeptical that we can add to history unless we have documentary evidence. If we can't achieve that, I don't know if the conference should go forward." But he was bluffing, and in the end, no Vietnamese papers materialized.

That failure turned out to be a telling sign that the American skepticism about the conference was being echoed in Vietnam's corridors of power. Two weeks before the sessions, Hanoi

rejected a proposal to hold daily, American-Vietnamese news briefings for fear that hardliners in the Communist Party press would use them to attack the moderates who had organized the meeting. Then, hours after the American delegation arrived in Hanoi, the Vietnamese hosts at Hanoi's Institute for International Relations reneged on a longstanding agreement to allow CNN to tape the conference.

The development soured the atmosphere at first. McNamara fretted that the mood would be too guarded for candid discussion. The American team met alone to consider canceling the conference — an empty threat with the entire delegation already in Hanoi. The Vietnamese then made a small compromise: CNN could get one of the four days on tape. And so went the negotiations about discussing 30-year-old attempts to start negotiations.

The nervousness about the TV camera re-

The Vietnamese listened closely, but they seemed truly puzzled by the American obsession with the spread of Communism. 'If the reason was to fight Communism, why did the U.S. not help China in 1949, or why did the U.S. not help the Batista regime in Cuba in 1959?' They never got an answer.

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flected the uncertain boundaries of Vietnamese political discourse. Open debate on foreign or military policy is still taboo, especially on so sacred a topic as the war.

But acerbic complaints about the economy, which is increasingly geared to private enterprise and foreign investment, are now acceptable, and the police apparatus that once conducted block-by-block monitoring of ordinary residents in the former South Vietnam has been considerably relaxed. Political jokes are popular, and real life is often funnier. An irreverent young man who spent a year in prison after trying to escape by boat in the early 1980's recently received a surprise invitation: to join the Communist Party. He was amused, and he declined.

Vietnamese in political life, adrift in crosscurrents of ambiguous guidelines, must swim skillfully. Though the former Foreign Minister, Nguyen Co Thach, championed this conference, he sought to rein in his delegation. He often answered probing questions smilingly but with enigmatic single sentences. Sometimes he bluntly put subjects off-limits. When pushed to reveal what disagreements had existed among policy makers about negotiating with Washington, he said quietly, "There were discussions, but we are not permitted to publicize them." Because of Vietnam's long history of foreign domination, "our habit is to keep secrets in order to defend ourselves," he explained. "Sometimes we cannot even get access to our own secrets, so how can we share that with others?" Thus were McNamara's principal objectives foiled. But he soldiered on without evidence of despair, obsessed by the task of flushing information out of every hiding place.

It is a tricky time, as Vietnam casts one eye warily on China and the other expectantly on the United States and its powers of investment. The museum in Ho Chi Minh City that was once called the Museum of American War Crimes became the Museum of War Crimes and is now simply the Museum of War Remnants. Inside, however, the condemnation of America remains searing. On the one hand, the victory over the United States stands as a landmark of national heroism. On the other, with half its population having been born since the end of the war, Vietnam seems poised to move on. It has

warmly welcomed Pete Peterson, the first American Ambassador to Hanoi and a former prisoner of war. In what seems apt symbolism, the prison where he was held, the "Hanoi Hilton," is being partly demolished for a luxury high-rise, with some outer walls of the prison to be retained as a monument. Peterson drives by two or three times a day, "and it doesn't bother me," he said, "which is good. It means I have healed."

Healing is usually easier for the victors than the vanquished, and the Vietnamese at the table displayed none of the Americans' anguish. As winners, they also seemed less impelled toward self-criticism. McNamara and the other Americans came to Hanoi eager to get the Vietnamese to admit that they, too, had made mistakes in failing to pursue policies that might have avoided or curtailed the war. But that would have amounted to an unimaginable confession that Vietnamese reunification and independence could have been won with less sacrifice. No national myth is shattered lightly.

THE HANOI CONFEREES MET in a bright, cool room at the French-renovated Hotel Metropole, removed from the sultry streets. Reference books and papers were stacked and strewn before the participants, who wore earphones to hear the interpreters in windowed booths. The shape of the table was not an issue: it was a

square, created from many long tables.

But there had been differences over the scope of the discussions. McNamara wanted to cover his term, 1961-68. The Vietnamese insisted on beginning in 1945, following the defeat of the Japanese in World War II. In the ensuing vacuum, they noted, Ho Chi Minh staked his claim for Vietnamese autonomy by including a passage from the American Declaration of Independence in his own declaration. They recalled his letter to President Truman — unanswered — seeking support for independence. Vietnam's most serious mistake, sardonically noted by Tran Quang Co, a former First Deputy Foreign Minister, came before 1945, when "we considered the U.S. a leading democratic country, which was opposed to colonialism," he said. "Therefore, we thought the U.S. would support our desire for independence. But we were wrong."

A quite different image of America had been

fixed in the minds of the men around the table when the United States facilitated the return of French troops to re-establish France's colonies in Indochina, then provided financial and logistical support for the French in their unsuccessful war against the Viet Minh and then refused to sign the 1954 Geneva accords that called for Vietnamese elections. This was the picture of a colonialist power with "ambitions to become master of the world," said Thach, who from 1960 to 1975 was the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry's chief specialist on the United States.

Woven into the harsh language was an instructive analysis of how misperceptions became reality. Co identified four mistaken images that shaped American behavior. First, when the 1954 accords divided Vietnam along a "provisional" line, Washington saw something more permanent, underestimating the drive for reunification. "We never had two Vietnams," Co declared. "We had only one Vietnam. But the U.S. assessed it as two Vietnams."

Second, the Americans "misjudged the nationalist character of the revolution," he said. McNamara had already made the same point, admitting that Washington "underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh's movement. We saw him first as a Communist and only second as a Vietnamese nationalist."

Third, "the nature of the struggle was not to undermine neighboring countries," Co continued. "The U.S. failed to understand the objective of our war. It was only for our own national liberation and reunification." This negated the domino theory.

And finally, Washington "misjudged the relations between Vietnam on the one hand and China and the Soviet Union on the other." Co pointed out what has become especially obvious since the demise of the Soviet Union: Vietnam was not a tool of world Communism. The theme resounded passionately throughout the conference. It meant that the central premise of the American motivation to defend South Vietnam was false. If these concepts seemed like echoes from the past, they were. Much of what the Americans were being told, and were now accepting, the antiwar movement had argued 30 years before.

In his opening statement on Friday morning, McNamara conceded that American behavior after World War II had caused the Vietnamese to form misimpressions "that the United States' principal goal in Southeast Asia was to destroy the Hanoi Government and its southern ally, the N.L.F." — the National Liberation Front, or Vietcong. But "we in the Kennedy Administration had no such view and no such aims in Vietnam," he insisted. "On the contrary, we believed our interests were being attacked all over the world by a highly organized, unified Communist movement, led by Moscow and Beijing,

The North Vietnamese had doubted the sincerity of the negotiating offers, which they saw as propaganda ploys — to present the Johnson Administration as peacemaker and Hanoi as warmonger. McNamara pounded the table and insisted that 'many, I would say most' overtures were not 'primarily' for propaganda.



McNamara appears to be "running fast so the ghosts don't catch him," one American observed.

of which we believed — I think incorrectly — that the Hanoi Government of Ho Chi Minh was a pawn." He acknowledged having underestimated the Sino-Soviet rift.

The Vietnamese listened closely, but they seemed truly puzzled by the American obsession with the spread of Communism and sought more explanation. "If the reason was to fight Communism," they asked in a list of questions submitted beforehand, "why did the U.S. not help China in 1949, or why did the U.S. not help the Batista regime in Cuba in 1959?" They never got an answer, only a litany of conflicts, including two that nearly took the superpowers to war: the Berlin and Cuban missile crises of 1961 and 1962.

"We felt beset and at risk," McNamara said. "This fear underlay the Kennedy Administration's involvement in Vietnam." (A symmetrical domino theory gripped Moscow and Beijing, the American team had been told in Washington by Chen Jian, a Chinese scholar teaching in the United States. Newly obtained Soviet and Chinese documents reflected a fear that if North Korea or North Vietnam were lost, the Communist revolution could be reversed in Manchuria and perhaps all of China as well.)

Politely but pointedly, the Americans asked the Vietnamese to take some responsibility for their image. "If you believe that another country has a misperception about what you are trying to do," asked Katzenbach, the former Under Secretary of State, "my question is, What should you do to cure that misperception?" And later, add-

ing that the domino theory was wrong but not irrational, he said: "I put myself in your place. The problem was, How would I, how would Vietnam, convince the United States that there was no domino theory?" Laughter but no answers came from the Vietnamese. Robert Brigham, an historian from Vassar, went on to point out that Chinese rhetoric in 1962 portrayed the N.L.F. as the first of many united fronts, "and nothing we saw coming out of Hanoi dissuaded us of that."

Once, Cooper turned the question around: "I would like to ask you if any mind-sets of Vietnam about the U.S. were wrong." A long silence followed. In private conversations later, the Vietnamese explained that the Foreign Ministry's sources of information on the United States had been limited to news summaries and issues of Time and Newsweek. They did not get any daily American newspapers, they said: a subscription to The New York Times was too expensive.

A couple of new facts emerged, not enough to revise the history books but sufficient for a lesson on how one side can read elaborate meaning into a coincidence and then react to the meaning rather than to the event itself. On Feb. 7, 1965, an American advisers' compound and airfield at Pleiku, South Vietnam, came under attack; eight Americans were killed and many more wounded. As Cooper explained to the Vietnamese generals across the table, Americans saw great significance in the timing. On that day, Cooper was in Saigon with McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser at the time; they had been sent by President

Johnson to assess the deteriorating military situation. Furthermore, on the same day the Soviet Premier, Aleksei Kosygin, was visiting Hanoi.

The choice of such a decisive moment to conduct the first specific attack on Americans was seen by Washington as a calculated policy move by Hanoi. In retaliation, the United States began its bombing raids on North Vietnam, which continued until the fall of 1968. Now Cooper wanted to know why Hanoi did it.

The answer came from Lieut. Gen. Dang Vu Hiep, a rotund, jolly-looking former deputy of the army's political department who was then stationed near Pleiku. "This was a spontaneous attack by the local commander" who acted under general orders to treat the South Vietnamese Army and its American advisers as equal enemies — "no discrimination," he remarked with a smile. The assault, by 30 commandos, had been planned long in advance, he explained, but the timing was coincidental. No specific instructions for the attack came from Hanoi, and "we did not know Bundy was in Saigon," he insisted. "We were just attacking, so we had no reason to criticize our people for attacking. They got first-class medals." Since the Russians were trying to restrain Hanoi from fighting in the south, Kosygin "was not pleased, but he couldn't say anything," General Hiep added during a break.

Had the role of the local commander been known at the time, Washington would have seen the incident differently, both Cooper and McNamara conceded. "I think *Continued on page 42*