

COMMENTARY
by Thomas G. Bowie, Jr.

DERELICTION OF DUTY OR THE WRONG WAR?
Learning the Lessons of Vietnam



McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1997. 446 pages. \$27.50.

Record, Jeffrey. *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998. 217 pages. \$27.95.



It has been said that the war in Vietnam was so fully photographed that it was the one war we learned the truth about. Which truth did we learn, and who learned it?" (171). The female professor and narrator in Stephanie Vaughn's "Kid MacArthur" asks these questions as she tries to come to grips with the gift of a human ear that a Vietnam veteran in her class has just handed her, and as she tries to understand the psychological undoing of her carefree brother, Kid MacArthur, after he returns from the Vietnam War. This fictional character's questions are questions we continue to confront thirty years distant from a tragic war in a far-off land, one waged with dubious honor for often suspect purposes, questions dealing with the aftermath of conflict, with the very human remains of what must always be a dehumanizing process. And they are questions that each of the stories, like "Kid MacArthur," in Donald Anderson's anthology of post-Vietnam fiction, *Aftermath*, seeks to answer in its own way. Introducing this volume of fourteen stories, Anderson remarks that

these stories are more complex than I have described them. They are about memory and love and resentment and loss and disbelief and defiance and humiliation and earnestness and blame and shame and blood and sacrifice and courage and sorrow. These are stories that, even if set in a past, seem to be written in an urgent and immortal present. Such stories are about what we must live with after any fought war, soldier or no. They identify us, these stories. *They are about us.* (xxxix)

Such stories are about us because we *are* a generation still struggling to reconcile itself with Vietnam, still examining key questions that illuminate our long-ago objectives and strategies—or lack thereof—and still troubled by the long shadow of Vietnam in every conflict we engage in overseas, from Somalia to Kosovo. Such stories are also about competing interpretations of the war—about the “blame and shame and courage and sacrifice”—about the complex meld of reactions that somehow comes to represent “the truth” we learned about Vietnam, both as individuals and as a society. To understand that senior leaders, both military and civilian, might have been derelict in their duty to our country, or that Vietnam may have well been the “wrong war,” does not dishonor the ultimate sacrifice made by the 58,000 names on a black granite wall in Washington D.C. Bearing witness to Vietnam will necessarily include assessments of blame and shame, as well as courage and sacrifice: the key is to recognize the difference. Indeed, to fail to understand the full implications of our involvement there, to ignore the lessons we must learn, to improperly assess the limits of military power in the future, would dishonor any death already considered to be in vain. For the Vietnam War, its stories and its history, is finally about us, the “survivors,” as well.

It’s understanding the complex history surrounding our plunge into Vietnam that H. R. McMaster devotes himself to in *Dereliction of Duty*. Although the title permits little doubt about McMaster’s conclusions concerning the senior leaders who took us into Vietnam, he says early that

assessing blame for the disaster in Vietnam, however, is beside the point. Much more important is to determine how and why key decisions were made, decisions that involved the United States in a war that it could not win at a politically acceptable level of commitment. (xi)

We'll return to McMaster's notion of level of commitment, but first let's pause to consider "who" learned the truth behind the how and why of key decisions that forced us into the war.

H. R. McMaster is a 1984 graduate of the Military Academy at West Point, New York. He's a decorated warrior from the Gulf War, and a careful student of American history, holding an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Major McMaster taught history at West Point from 1994-96, and recently completed the Army Command and General Staff College at Leavenworth, Kansas. A probing student and an accomplished soldier, McMaster lays siege to an overwhelming number of primary documents in his quest for the truth behind "the lies that led to Vietnam." His research is thorough and commendable. Ranging from manuscript collections at the Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston to the Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, from the Joint History Office in the Pentagon to national archives around the country, McMaster has clearly done his homework for this text. Methodically researched, carefully collated, sincerely pursued ("I thought that to better prepare myself to lead soldiers in combat it was important to learn from the experiences of others," ix), he thoroughly charts the terrain of the complex national security process that led our nation into Vietnam. From the outset, McMaster is clear about his purpose:

I wondered how and why Vietnam had become an American war— a war in which the men fought and died without a clear idea of how their actions and sacrifices were contributing to an end of the conflict. (x)

Well beyond the rhetoric of the Nixon catch-phrase, "peace with honor," McMaster desperately seeks to reclaim honor for the

thousands of soldiers who sacrificed so much in Vietnam. Yet McMaster also knows that it's not that simple, that the quest for honor is caught up in notions of duty and country as well, that civil-military interactions will govern the terms of such honor, such sacrifice. In the Epilogue, for example, he cites approvingly a course on American civil-military relations taught at West Point as a reminder that the Chiefs "must be careful not to undermine their credibility by crossing the line between advice and advocacy" (331). And McMaster's book is a cautionary tale about what happens when this line is crossed, this credibility undermined, this lesson in civil-military relations—that even cadets at West Point presumably understand—is misunderstood or ignored.

Because McMaster meticulously charts this erosion of credibility through his extensive research, his book has gained high praise from national reviewers. And such praise is well deserved. As he confesses in the Preface, his timing was just right:

Recently declassified documents, newly opened manuscript collections, and the release of the official history of the JCS during the Vietnam War shed new light on the subject. I gained access to thousands of documents that had previously been unavailable to researchers and historians. (x)

Piecing together the evidence, McMaster painstakingly maps the national security decision-making process from 1963, when Johnson becomes president, until 1965 when the US *Americanizes* the war and commits ground troops to what proves to be a hopeless cause. Although little in McMaster's text will surprise students of the conflict, the overwhelming pattern of deceit and duplicity that leads to our commitment is depressing nonetheless.

Fully aware of "the question of responsibility," and perhaps personally outraged by the blame and shame attendant to such responsibility, McMaster doggedly turns his focus "to determine how and why key decisions were made" (xi). Tellingly, the quest for how and why frequently leads McMaster back to issues of shame and blame, particularly as he assesses political acceptability and the key players who determined the parameters

of acceptability. The villains in this story are clear, and no surprise: a deceitful President Johnson, more consumed with domestic programs and his Great Society than lives lost in Southeast Asia; a slippery Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, whose *In Retrospect* notwithstanding, still must shoulder a huge burden for the senseless loss of over 58,000 American lives and some three million Vietnamese; the conniving and duplicitous Maxwell Taylor, cast successively as presidential military advisor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and finally as Ambassador to South Vietnam, yet never a trustworthy counselor in any of these positions. Of course, a number of lesser villains emerge as well, Bundy, MacNaughton, all of the Joint Chiefs, and so on.

In the end, it's a sordid tale, full of dismaying details, with a tragic plot. The following passages catch the flavor of McMaster's presentation:

McNamara was persuasive. . . . McNamara's strategy of graduated pressure seemed not only to reconcile the administration's need to intervene against Communist insurgents with its need to minimize the risk of escalation, but it also reconciled Johnson's desire to get elected with his need to address the difficult situation in South Vietnam. (78)

Issues of duty or honor seldom seem to concern key decision-makers such as McNamara, and other highly placed advisors—such as the Joint Chiefs—merely acquiesce in the politically motivated recommendations. During the congressional hearings following the Gulf of Tonkin incident (6 August 1964), the pattern is the same.

Although Wheeler [Chairman of the JCS] did not make any false statements to the senators or congressmen, by not revealing the truth he showed the president that he would go along with his and McNamara's attempts to mislead Congress and the American people. (135)

McMaster is clearly appalled by Wheeler's dishonorable conduct, barely restraining his contempt in passages such as this: "Wheeler,

dressed in his uniform, the light from the Capitol's crystal chandeliers reflecting off his brass insignia, lent indispensable credibility to his defense secretary's remarks" (135). In October of 1964, George Ball warns the president about the flaws in his strategy, cautioning that "once on the tiger's back, we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount" (qtd in McMaster, 167). McMaster laments that "although the JCS held views consistent with those of Ball, they, too, failed to press their case for reexamination. Their silence helped to impel the very strategic concept they opposed" (167). Within the growing "quicksand of lies," McMaster painfully exposes the way the JCS continued to endorse plans they knew to be misguided or flawed militarily, with the tenuous hope that some day Johnson would unleash the military might they consistently recommended he use. Describing Johnson and the JCS as "the coach and his team," McMaster examines how the US plunged into a war without direction, with shifting strategies and objectives, and with little or no hope of winning.

Yet in charging the "five silent men," the JCS "who made possible [Johnson's] deceit and manipulation of Congress and the American people" with dereliction of duty, McMaster's fine analysis makes what seems to be a fatal assumption. In short, he assumes that the JCS indeed had reasonable counsel to offer the president concerning the military conduct of the war and that Johnson and McNamara were denied such counsel. Perhaps, but the jury is still out on such a conclusion. McMaster summarizes the civilian position in this way: "based on the assumption that carefully controlled and sharply limited military actions were reversible, and therefore could be carried out at minimal risk and cost, graduated pressure allowed McNamara and Johnson to avoid confronting many of the possible consequences of military action" (326). McMaster's careful analysis argues that the JCS "were unable to articulate effectively either their objections or alternatives" because of interservice rivalry and an undaunted belief that more might would make right:

They hoped that graduated pressure would evolve over time into a fundamentally different strategy, more in keeping with their belief in the necessity of

greater force and its more resolute application.
(328)

And as McMaster leaves his book disgusted with the JCS' lack of honor, their failure to consider country above parochial service views, and their collective dereliction of duty, he too seems to believe that greater force and more resolute application might have been the answer. Indeed the closing lines of his text seem to make this case:

The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the *New York Times* or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C., even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war. (333)

Perhaps it is only natural for a decorated combat commander like McMaster to believe in a military solution to the complex tangle of Vietnam, and perhaps his lingering hope that the generals charged with tendering military advice to the president were indeed offering valid alternatives is understandable. But what if the JCS had done their duty according to McMaster's light, only to discover that more might did not make right, that military force was never a viable alternative after 1963, or 1964, or even 1965? What if the United States had entered the "wrong war" unknowingly and military officers of great character—full of duty, honor, country—had led us instead, what then?

Once again we must ask, what truth did we learn and who learned it? For although McMaster is surely right to deplore the lack of character he so convincingly prosecutes in *Dereliction of Duty*, we must be careful to understand the legitimate options available to key advisors, be they civilian or military. In 1996, Robert McNamara himself suggests "it is clear our nation has neither fully understood nor fully come to terms with Vietnam. The wounds remain unhealed and the lessons unlearned" (Preface to Vintage Edition of *In Retrospect*, 1996). Who then will teach us these lessons, who then will help heal our wounds? McNamara volunteers to teach us, but one must be wary of the tutelage of a public figure so calculatingly deceitful and so consistently

wrong during his tenure as Secretary of Defense. In his mature, thoughtful, and wide-ranging consideration of the conflict— *The Wrong War*—Jeffrey Record makes his own offer, an offer students of the war, both military and civilian, need to consider seriously.

Indeed McMaster himself calls Record's book "a rare blend of relevant personal experience and impeccable scholarship. *The Wrong War* offers trenchant, well-balanced, and compelling analysis of the most critical issues surrounding the war in Vietnam" (dust jacket). Yet one wonders if he understands how Record's impressive analysis undercuts one of his own basic assumptions. But Record is out for much bigger game than McMaster, apportioning blame liberally— and, I believe, correctly. Consider this:

Most of the blame was directed, and continues to be directed, at civilian policy-makers, the so-called "best and brightest," who made the key decisions that propelled the United States into Vietnam and set the parameters of U.S. military power's application. The military, in contrast, has more often than not been portrayed as the innocent victim of not only misguided, even malevolent, White House and Defense Department civilians, but also a hostile media and perfidious antiwar movement. (viii)

Record is out to set these misguided impressions straight. His method is heuristic, well suited to the complex issues under investigation. And he brings the sure hand of a career defense analyst (one who served as a legislative assistant to both Senator Sam Nunn and Senator Lloyd Bentsen, as a professional staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, at the Brookings and Hudson Institutes, and as a State Department civilian-military advisor in the lower Mekong Delta) to the task.

Yet Record does more than ask tough— and insightful— questions. Never one to mince words, he renders judgments that are as well reasoned as they are scathing. For example, one critic's views about the nobility of our enterprise in Vietnam are dismissed with "unfortunately, nobility of purpose does not redeem an otherwise disastrous enterprise" (ix). Later, reviewing

Nixon's claim that the US was never beaten in Vietnam, Record is equally clear:

I reject this judgment. . . . The fact remains that the United States failed to avert a communist takeover of Vietnam, and that it suffered defeat's attendant humiliation, loss of prestige, and domestic recrimination. The real questions are why the United States lost in Vietnam, who was responsible, and whether defeat was avoidable. (xii)

Record addresses these questions in the next 200 pages of lean, lucid prose.

Perhaps one of the chief virtues of this compelling text is its ability to frame clearly the central questions surrounding our involvement in Vietnam. On the issue of winning:

The war may indeed have been winnable; it was certainly within U.S. capacity to destroy the state of North Vietnam and most of its people. The real issue is whether it was winnable at an acceptable moral, material, and strategic cost. (xv)

Whether you accept Record's conclusions or not, one leaves this hard-hitting text wishing he had been advising key civilian leaders in the White House or Department of Defense rather than slogging through rice paddies during Vietnam. Virtually no one is spared Record's incisive probing:

On the matter of apportioning responsibility for defeat, I contend that, whereas the primary responsibility for the U.S. share of the war's outcome clearly rests with civilian decision-making authorities—which were, after all, Constitutionally and politically responsible—the military's accountability was significant and cannot and should not be overlooked. (xviii)

And if this weren't clear enough,

the interests of neither history nor the future formulation and implementation of foreign policy are promoted by a portrayal of the military as innocent and hapless victims of civilian perfidy. (xix)

Blame and shame enough for all, Record intelligently orchestrates the inquiry necessary to assess appropriate responsibility.

Moving astutely and rapidly through a daunting array of evidence, Record examines the reasons why the US intervened in Vietnam, the relative fighting strength of all participants, the war in the South, then in the North, the “hollow client” we chose to support in South Vietnam, the divisive war waged on the Potomac in the Pentagon, and finally the issue of how the war was lost. Pithy prose alternating with persuasive evidence gives Record’s argument force and direction, while his internal summaries cogently recap large and complex issues. Listen to his summary of the policymakers’ misunderstanding of each side’s fighting stamina:

by failing to understand the asymmetry of commitment between the United States and the Vietnamese communists, they paved the way for committing the most egregious error a country going to war can make: underestimating the adversary’s capacity to prevail while overestimating one’s own. (28)

Or on the military’s perception that more destruction would guarantee success: “the military was no less confident in its abilities. If anything, it suffered from the disease of victory, that hubris bred by repeated success on the battlefield” (48). Or this telling comment on the nature of the war:

insistence throughout the struggle in Indochina that the war was simply a case of transnational conventional military aggression did not make it so, though it certainly comforted those who wished to wage a conventional war. (61)

Throughout his text, Record goes to the heart of the matter, summarizes competing views, then leads the witness to see the problem with new eyes.

Although Record's book presents little new evidence on these compelling issues, his thoughtful presentation of the problems and insightful analysis of them brings many of the popular myths about the Vietnam War under harsh scrutiny—scrutiny long overdue. Exposing the insidious lapse McMaster makes into the myth that more military power would have been decisive is but one example of the service Record provides through *The Wrong War*. But merely exposing prevalent myths isn't enough for Record, he also refuses to allow us to supplant common myths with unproven alternatives. His consideration of potential strategies for the war in the South is illuminating:

That the MACV wrongly chose attrition does not make right the counterinsurgency alternative, although that alternative was certainly more relevant than attrition to the predominantly insurgent character of the war until the Tet Offensive. If adoption of attrition against communist military forces was boneheaded, a pacification-first strategy vis-à-vis South Vietnam's peasantry was, if more sensible, ultimately irrelevant. (96)

Or the notion that enough military pressure in North Vietnam would achieve victory once we reached their breaking point:

If Hanoi did indeed have a political "breaking point" during the Vietnam War, it was probably reachable only through an invasion of the country, or perhaps a bombing campaign aimed at the destruction of North Vietnam's agriculture or the North Vietnamese people themselves. Neither of these options, however, could pass the tests of political and moral acceptability. (115)

In light of such compelling evidence, and the systematic inquiry of potential alternatives, one leaves Record's exceptionally

readable book convinced with him that indeed the United States chose the wrong war. In short,

there is simply no convincing evidence that an earlier and less restrained American use of force in Indochina, absent the subsequent emergence of a politically and militarily viable South Vietnam, could or would have dissuaded or blocked Hanoi from successfully pursuing its goal of reunifying Vietnam under communist auspices. (183)

His argument is more nuanced and complex than I have outlined here, and in its fuller form even more compelling.

Given the long shadow of Vietnam, and the truths we supposedly learned from our devastating experience there, the time is right for compelling interpretations of our actions during and after the war. The aftermath of any war, but especially a war that seems to have been waged “at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy,” by national figures who lacked a true sense of duty or honor, is bound to be complicated, especially for those who sacrificed greatly during it. The aftermath of Vietnam, in our stories and histories, is full of “resentment and loss and disbelief and humiliation and blame and shame.” But it is also characterized by “memory and love and earnestness and courage and sorrow.” As individuals, and as a nation, we must recognize its conflicted nature, and we must embrace the conflicts. Both H. R. McMaster and Jeffrey Record, each in his own way, do so. As we continue to examine what truths we learned from Vietnam and who learned them, we are well served by their efforts. ☺

Works Cited

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