



Written by on July 7, 2009

Former Defense Chief Robert McNamara Dies

Born and raised in California, McNamara graduated from the University of California at Berkeley and earned an MBA at Harvard University in 1939. After one year toiling for a San Francisco accounting firm, he returned to Harvard as a professor. In 1943, he won appointment as a captain in the Army Air Corps and served the military as an efficiency expert until he left the service in 1946.



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After leaving the Army Air Corps, McNamara entered the Ford Motor Company as one of several former military officers who became known within Ford as the “Whiz Kids.” Named Ford President on November 9, 1960, he was the first non-Ford family member to become the company’s top official. Only a month into the job, he was asked by President-elect John Kennedy to become secretary of defense. The claim has been made that McNamara told Kennedy he didn’t know anything about government and the soon-to-be occupant of the White House responded, “I don’t know how to be president either. We can learn our jobs together.” But McNamara’s appointment had been suggested by veteran State Department official Robert Lovett, one of the creators of the sovereignty-compromising NATO alliance that became the pattern for the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), the similar alliance that hamstrung U.S. forces during the Vietnam War. Lovett, a highly placed member of the world-government-promoting Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) knew he had an ally in the man who led Ford for a mere five weeks.

Only months into his new assignment as Defense chief, McNamara and fellow CFR member Secretary of State Dean Rusk presided over the betrayal of Cuban patriots at the infamous April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. Planned, financed, and controlled by the administration, the operation included sending a force of 1,400 anti-Castro Cubans into the island nation where they were promptly abandoned, rounded



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up, and defeated. President Kennedy accepted responsibility for grounding promised air support but McNamara, whose involvement in the operation couldn't be denied, stayed at his post. He was later praised for a role in successfully defusing the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, a highly publicized event that Fidel Castro's sister, who had defected to the United States, said was a hoax because there were no Soviet missiles in Cuba. (For more information about the Bay of Pigs invasion, see "[50th Anniversary of Castro's Rise to Power in Cuba.](#)")

McNamara is most remembered for his role as the leader of America's involvement in the Vietnam debacle. After JFK's assassination in November 1963, the number of U.S. military forces fighting the Southeast Asian War grew dramatically, especially when U.S. vessels were reportedly attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964. But it was later learned that the supposed attacked never occurred, yet a resolution hurriedly approved by Congress because of it gave newly installed President Lyndon Johnson authorization to greatly expand the war effort. Soon, there were over 500,000 U.S. troops in SE Asia. Casualties escalated as the war dragged on and as potentially successful operations were countermanded from on high. Twenty years later, the McNamara "Rules of Engagement" were published revealing the incredible restrictions on all phases of the war effort that assured eventual defeat.

In their book *The Betrayers*, Phyllis Schlafly and retired Admiral Chester Ward detailed McNamara's incredibly harmful impact on U.S. military capability. They reported that he had cut U.S. nuclear strike force in half, scrapped half of our bombers, frozen the number of atomic-powered submarines, and cancelled several missile systems. All of this he accomplished in the face of protests from some in Congress and from military officials who dared speak out.

In 1994 while finishing up a book about Vietnam, he admitted publicly, "We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of our country. But we were wrong. We were terribly wrong." That 1995 book, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, contained his further admission that, by 1967, he had lost faith in the ability of U.S. forces to prevail in Vietnam.

McNamara resigned his Defense post in February 1968 and, within weeks, won appointment as the head of the UN's World Bank where he served for 12 years. His tenure there was marked by greatly expanding loans to developing countries, much of the funding supplied by U.S. taxpayers. While in Japan on one World Bank mission, he was asked if he would be visiting the U.S. embassy. His emphatic reply was that he would not because he was now "a world citizen."

After retiring from the World Bank in 1981, McNamara became an advocate of nuclear disarmament. Amazingly, President George W. Bush sought his advice about conducting the Iraq War. He passed away on July 6 at age 93.

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