

April 26, 1995

Hackettstown, NJ 07840

Mr. Robert McNamara
C-Span
400 North Capitol Street N.W.
Washington, DC 20001

Re: Vietman Legacy

Dear Mr. McNamara:

O-BAL

I watched a portion of your recent C- Span interview as well as many follow-up discussions on C- Span about your book.

I admire your efforts to understand the reasons for our intervention in Vietman and to educate the American public regarding U.S. policy of that period.

Enclosed is a copy of a letter I wrote to Robert MacNeil after listening to the panel discussion of your book on the MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour. Perhaps you will find it of interest.

I lived and studied in France during the period of the French-Vietnam conflict. As a result my perspective in the Vietnam War differs from that of the panelists and commentators I hear on T.V. and whose articles I read in newspapers and magazines. To properly understand the origin and dynamics behind the war, the prior history of Vietman must be studied. You are correct in stating that the Johnson Administration and its experts were uninformed about IndoChina, its history, people, customs, and the political realities of South East Asia.

Few, if any, of the participants in the programs I have listened to refer back to that history or to the French experience in Vietnam. As I write these lines, a caller on C-Span did speak of that period and Stanley Karnow fielded the questions, but even he did not see the continuity behind events before 1954 and the later U.S. intervention. I strongly suggest that you read some important studies of that period written by French scholars. Particular I recommend Philippe Devillers book "Histoire du VietNam de 1940 a 1952" and "Viet-Nam, Sociologie d'une Guerre" by Paul Mus.

Americans seem to believe that the Vietnam War and history began in 1961 when Kennedy began our more active direct engagement. As a result, their, and your interpretation of events, was, and still is flawed. The Vietnam War began and ended as the struggle of the people of Vietnam to end their colonial status, first from France, later from U.S. encroachment. This is the one most important constant throughout that whole conflict.

France was unable to subdue the Vietnamese rebellion against their colonial rulers. France reluctantly sought and got U.S. assistance but despite that the French were forced to withdraw. The U.S. then stepped in and assumed the task that France was unable to achieve. We dismissed the experience of the French as irrelevant and invented new reasons for our intervention. Ignorance of the past was an asset to formulators and apologists of our policy decisions.

You still interpret the action of the U.S. as an intervention by us to support a South Vietnamese government under the threat of communist invasion from North Vietnam, although now you do admit "nationalism" as the determining force behind North Vietnamese activities. However, the very idea that South Vietnam was a separate society from North Vietnam and that South Vietnam's government represented that society is a major mistake.

The reason we could not rebuild that society, that our effort at "nation building" failed, is because no such society existed to start with. The government of South Vietnam was a puppet created by the French, designed to further their own objectives, creating a supposed counter force to the nationalists struggle for independence. The U.S. adopted the same policy and with its enormous economic and military resources built up the puppet government. But that government despite U.S. aid and the mass of subsidiary organizations it spread throughout Vietnam never could arouse the support or "nationalism" that you introduce as your explanation of North Vietnam's successful resistance. The reason? South Vietnam never existed as a viable society.

No, our "intervention" in a "civil war" is a myth, as is the contention that our intentions were pure but misguided. The French public, when I lived in France, was not fooled by their government's propaganda. They were perfectly aware that the Vietnamese were fighting against French colonial power. The French public also was never taken in by U.S. propaganda as to the purposes of U.S. intervention. They saw it as an attempt to establish U.S. hegemony in the area.

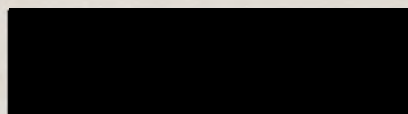
I could go on and on but I recommend that you read and study the French studies I mention above. I will finish with a quote from Philippe Devillars book:

"Elle (la guerre) apparait comme l'aboutissement logique
d'une politique coloniale insensible aux impératifs politiques
et sociaux contemporains, attachee a des formules constamment
depasses...."

He wrote that in explanation of French policy but it applies with equal cogency to U.S. policy.

I do think that you have performed a valuable service despite all the flak you are now taking.

Very truly yours,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the author.

[REDACTED]
Hackettstown, NJ 07840
April 18, 1995

Mr. Robert MacNeil
356 West 58th Street
New York, NY 10019

Re: April 17 Panel on Robert McNamara's Book

Dear Sir:

It is about time! McNamara has reopened an important issue. For that he is to be congratulated.

He finally acknowledged his, and the Johnson Administration's failure to understand the nature of the Vietnam War and the broader situations at that time. The consequences of that failure were disastrous then and continue to affect us and our Vietnamese victims now.

All regimes and people have great difficulty in recognizing their guilt and responsibility for aggressive wars and related atrocities, whether it be Japan and Germany for their role in World War II, the U.S. for its use of the atom bomb, Russia, Libya, Israel and France, for innumerable reasons....I could go on and on. Even now McNamara is being condemned for daring to expose some of the truth about that shameful episode in our history...and his confession itself is carefully hedged.

We can all applaud ~~Mc~~ McNamara's acknowledgment of the failure of America's 'Best and Brightest' to understand the conflict in Vietnam. It took courage to question even 25 years later. That is an advance, although Senator McCain has not learned a thing. Senator McCain remains stuck with the old propaganda clichés. His own heroic war record and his long painful imprisonment are no criteria or guarantee for understanding that war. In fact his own suffering hinders his ability to see clearly. His comments reflect the opinions of large numbers of Americans unwilling to face up to the truth of our policies.

Senator McGovern is a man of good-will and common sense. In the 60's and 70's he was considered to be a radical which is a telling comment about the attitudes of that period. He at least opposed our aggressive war against a small third world entity. He was quite correct in contradicting McNamara's contention that resignation from office based upon principle is not compatible with the American political system. He rightly condemned the Nixon-Kissinger policy of continuing the slaughter even though they knew that 'military' victory was not feasible--and this for domestic political gain. Compared to Nixon and his advisors, the draft resisters and war protesters were genuine American patriots.

The best informed of the panelists was Robert Scheer. Significantly he is the only one who was not, or is not a government official. He had a more complete picture of the diplomatic realities of the time and went behind the trite explanations so common then and now.

Omitted from almost all discussions of the conflict is the role of France and the period from 1945 to 1954. The origins of the U.S. participation in the war lie in the long French colonial occupation of IndoChina and the resulting struggle of the native people for their independence from colonial domination. This struggle began well before W.W. II, continued during W.W.II and after the expulsion of Japanese forces. In 1945, the rebellious Vietnamese made overtures to the U.S. for support in their efforts to liberate IndoChina from French colonialism. The U.S. refused to assist them and supported the French war to suppress the liberation movement. This fateful decision, based on cold-war calculations, determined the pattern of events for the next thirty years. Robert Scheer did mention Graham Greene's articles as witness to the real situation in the area. He could equally have cited DeGaulle's warning advice to Kennedy about Vietnam. Kennedy, with typical big power ignorance and arrogance did not listen or learn. DeGaulle at least learned from both the Vietnam and Algerian experiences.

I lived in France during the years of the French war against Vietnam's independence, as a result, I am aware of the importance of the events from 1945 to 1954. The French experience, in many respects, was to be repeated by the U.S. but few observers, then or now, even bothered to study and learn from what happened to the French. It was regarded as irrelevant. The French

supposedly were inept and did not understand that their colonialist mentality hindered a solution to the problem. We, on the other hand were supposedly anti-colonialist and could do what the inept French could not do. Again what self-deceptive arrogance on our part!

The Vietnamese conflict was a struggle for national independence from colonial domination. The political background of their leaders was communist but as McNamara says, they were also nationalists and as nationalists leading an anti-colonial struggle, they had the bulk of the Vietnamese people behind them.

The war, as I say, was one for independence. There was no civil war, as McNamara and others now claim. The so-called 'Civil War' was a deliberate strategy, used first by the French and then by the U.S., to split the loyalties of Vietnam society and weaken the forces fighting for freedom from colonial domination. The French created a puppet government which the U.S. then took over, revamped and strengthened by massive economic and military support. It was then cynically used by the U.S. to declare our intention to 'protect' that government from communist insurgency.

France did everything to defeat the Vietnamese. They were caught in a dilemma. France needed U.S. military assistance yet did not want to internationalize the war. They resisted the encroachment of the U.S. but were unable to do without U.S. economic and military aid. Eventually French national opinion and the Vietnamese resistance forced the French military to withdraw. The U.S. then took over the role abandoned by the French. We then opposed Vietnamese independence but we did it in a hypocritical fashion by declaring our efforts to be resistance to a communist takeover, a communist plot to control all South East Asia.

We can only be thankful that the brutal American military assault did fail, although the damage to Vietnam was, and remains, incalculable. The scars of U.S. aggression and its continuing vindictiveness against its victims are still at work. Just think of the difference it would have made if U.S. leaders had had the foresight to assist the Vietnamese in their struggle in 1945. The political and economic picture of Asia would be vastly different and millions of people would not have died under horrible conditions. It is to our everlasting shame that we acted in panic and fear instead of with courage and vision.

U.S. policy in Vietnam was more than just the isolated failure of a few men to accurately interpret events. These men were intelligent and well-educated but they acted within a structure of power that assumes that any policy we pursue is morally and geo-politically justified and that any opposition is evil.

That same syndrome is at work in the Middle East and is leading to the same disasters. McNamara himself has now discovered a new bogeyman in "Muslim fundamentalism"...which our own policies in the Middle East have helped to create. We created a monster in Vietnam and are now creating the same in the Middle East. Doesn't McNamara realize that we are repeating the same judgmental errors made 30 years ago in Vietnam. Powerful interests twist our perceptions and create their own monsters with all the attendant disasters and sufferings.

To restate my contention:

- The Vietnam war was the struggle of the people of Vietnam to achieve independence from a colonial power, France.

- The French war to defeat the Vietnamese was taken over by the U.S. after the French withdrew. We assumed the role of France but justified our intervention by internationalizing the conflict and interpreting it within a cold-war framework.

- The U.S. did not intervene in a Vietnamese civil war. There was no preexisting civil war. The 'Civil War' was a deliberate creation of U.S. policy, used to further our own objective to subdue the Vietnamese and dominate that country.

- The assertion that our intentions were pure but misguided is a serious misreading of our policy. This is an alibi and cover up, typical of U.S. excuses. McNamara should know that 'pure intentions' had nothing whatever to do with U.S. policy.

- The same misconceptions that led to disaster in Vietnam now prevail in our interpretation of the situation in the Middle East and will lead to disaster also.

My comments are in response to your program of April 17.

Yours very truly,

