

VIETNAM. MEMORY

By Marian Chatfield-Taylor
350 Steiner Street
San Francisco, CA 94117
marianchatfieldtaylor@gmail.com

It's hard to explain what Vietnam did to me and my friends. It was like a tornado that tore up our lives, only in slow motion. The repercussions went on and on. In that sense, the war never ended.

Maybe I could tell about what happened years later, in Massachusetts, when I heard Robert McNamara speak (U.S. Secretary of Defense under President Kennedy)—that sinister architect of our most sinister role in Southeast Asia. Day after day, year after year Secretary McNamara crapped on, banged on (as my daughters used to say) about how we were bound to win the war, and how we needed to keep feeding young men my age into a meat-grinder and come out the other end with something he called Victory (never mind what we were doing to the Vietnamese). Victory over communism, over fate, over life itself, all the forces of decay. God knows what he thought we were doing, but on some level, I'm sure, we were fighting the ultimate American battle of Us versus Reality. We're always fighting that war: the Good Guys we imagine ourselves to be, versus everything we long to control, as if we could become, at last, the heroes of our dreams.

Decades later, McNamara wrote a book. In this pitiful volume, he confessed (or imagined himself, confessing) that he knew all along that the war had been a dreadful mistake, and now, he—an old man, immeasurably wise—I think he was almost eighty when the book came out—decided to lecture the world. Such was his

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ghastly arrogance, combined with a blunt refusal to feel anything approaching guilt or shame or to accept responsibility for his actions.

He conducted a book tour, as if he were a normal author writing about his years in government service—the manager of public parks, perhaps; or an inspired civil engineer. I read about the book in the *New York Times* and—reluctantly—bought a copy. Reluctantly, because I didn't want to add to Mr. McNamara's fame or fortune; still, I felt compelled to learn what the madman had to say. And then one day not long afterwards, I heard that McNamara was scheduled to deliver a speech at the Kennedy Center in Boston. I called the Center to buy a ticket, but they said the program was sold out. The person on the phone explained that I could purchase standing room space and take my chances for getting into the main hall on the afternoon of the event.

It was February or March, and the weather was grim, like the setting for a cheap crime novel—cold, windy and gray. I parked my small blue Volkswagen in the vast parking lot and sat hunched over the steering wheel, with the heater blasting, finishing the last chapters, waiting for the doors to open. I'd been told to arrive early. Later, I stood on line—shivering—until it turned out I was the last person allowed in, for what was, indeed, standing room. The place was packed, mostly with what appeared to be graduate students, half my age, primarily guys, disheveled and tired looking, apparently eager to hear, first hand, from the venerable author of U.S. imperial policy. McNamara was viewed by many as a kind of elder statesman, and these grad students (if that's what they were) were young

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and plotting their careers, where one day they might work for the State Department, or teach in a big university, and then they could publish an article or give a talk about how, when they were starting out, they heard, first hand, from the living legend of American involvement—the architect of our hideous role (my words, not theirs, surely)—in Southeast Asia.

I leaned against a table in the back of the room, behind hundreds of people sitting in folding chairs. They'd set up two overflow spaces, where those who couldn't get into the main theater could still observe the demon himself on closed-circuit TV. A man from the Kennedy Center introduced McNamara in worshipful terms, like he was introducing the Pope. *A man of peace*, he intoned, without irony. *A man who had learned the lessons of war. A man of justice, a scholar, a counselor.* I wanted to puke.

Everyone listened—no cat-calls, no protests—while McNamara, the ghoul—engineer of our country's most atrocious 20th century war of aggression—the living Vermin himself, delivered a sermon about all that he had learned and how much he wanted to help the world prevent future calamities. He talked in a calm, measured, detached voice—a detachment mastered, no doubt, through years of venomous self-control. He spoke with an air of benign authority, as if he were talking about public health, or optimal steel production. God knows what he thought he was saying. He spoke as if he, personally, had nothing to do with the suffering, deaths, injuries and misery that tore and gouged through people's lives, in a place where the United States spent years burning villages, poisoning jungles, massacring the people. He

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wore a silver-gray suit, very shiny, and his hair and skin seemed ultra-sleek; indeed, his skin looked transparent, and his steely gray hair was combed severely across his shiny head. Mr. McNamara was schooling the rest of us about how to avoid bloodshed, as if he had a gift for such challenges; or as if he was a renowned scholar who, in his golden years, wished to point out certain flaws in his early work. “Listen to me,” he seemed to boast. “Even though I spent decades without uttering one fucking word about the evil I committed. Even though I never repented for my sins. Even though I take zero responsibility. Even though I stand before you today as the Chief Designer of a diabolical crusade we should never have waged, still: I offer you my insights as your best, most valuable and trustworthy guide to preventing future mayhem.”

I imagined sudden splotches of blood spreading across his shiny suit. Part of me wanted to race to the podium and rip the man’s eyes out or beat him senseless with a stick; or bash him with his pitiful book, which I was holding in my hands, his immensely cold, self-serving volume.

And then, as suddenly as McNamara appeared in the room as a living, breathing human being, and not a figment of my imagination, he was finished talking. The host at the Kennedy Center said there was time for a few questions and answers, and one by one, rumpled graduate students, pale and forlorn compared to the Great Man’s shiny, well-suited grayness, shuffled to the microphones, asking for pointless clarifications about this or that date when he might have issued this or that order, and whether there could have been a discrepancy between something he wrote in

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paragraph three on page thirty-eight of his memoir and another document (now available to the general public) about a conflicting statement he may or may not have made. On and on they quacked, fat little ducklings splashing in a pond, as if they had not been granted the stunning chance to confront one of the 20th century's great villains; one of its chief war mongers; a distinguished war criminal. Here stood Mr. Vietnam, himself; King-Kong of America's rotten role in Southeast Asia, in a war that sent our country reeling, that murdered and tortured thousands—maybe millions of innocents—and not just people of all ages and abilities but wild beings—monkeys, birds, fish, insects—with consequences that continue to this day and promise to go on for generations—and here stood these foreign relations eunuchs quibbling over spelling errors and punctuation.

Among the people lined up to question Mr. McNamara were only men. Not one woman. Men, who appeared awe-struck, or at least cowed, by the great man's stature. And, I must admit, his fat ego did fill the room, as if he had sucked the oxygen out of the place, leaving the rest of us gasping.

I told myself I had to stand up, even if it was too late to speak, since the question and answer period was starting to close. I walked toward what looked like the shortest line.

I waited in agitated silence. The moderator announced that he would allow three final questions. One line had five or six men. The other, a middle-aged guy, and me.

The moderator said, “We’ll hear from these last speakers,” and he pointed to the middle-aged man, then to the fellow on my left, and then to me.

My heart dropped out of my body. My muscles tensed and my throat tightened. I tried to imagine some hideous slogan I could shout—a few ugly words. (After all, we chanted a lot of ugly sayings during the anti-war era, like “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?”) Nothing seemed adequate. Maybe I could just vomit. Suddenly I understood why people resort to violence to express outrage: because if, at that moment, I had carried a gun, I might have used it. I wanted to kill Robert McNamara. I remembered a story about a man who spotted McNamara on a ferry boat headed for Martha’s Vineyard, and how it seemed like, if he’d wanted to, he could have pushed him into the sea. I think he tried. In another account, years later, a friend of ours was skiing in Colorado, when he stopped at an overlook on an isolated slope and realized that the only other person standing on that promontory with him was Robert McNamara; and that he could have pushed him off the cliff. At that moment, I, too, imagined that I stood close enough to shoot the man in the heart, though in all my life I’d never fired or even carried a gun. I wanted to yell, “You bastard. How dare you lecture us about peace? You, of all people, after all these years...” There was something so unlikely, so incongruous, about the whole scene; as if I was dreaming; or as if I expected Zeus to start hurling thunderbolts. Or that I expected that I, myself, could strike him down.

Then came my turn. For a few seconds, I simply stared, unwilling or unable to accept where I was and what I needed to do. What words could I throw at the man

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that would cut him, like knives? I can't remember what I said, exactly. But I think what I'm about to record represents the gist of my attempted rage.

"I can't believe I'm standing in front of you," I began.

"There was a time, years back, when I would have given anything for an opportunity like this. And now I'm almost speechless. You are the man who sent my whole generation running for our lives. Running for safety. Do you remember? "You chased us down. You hunted us. You scared us to death. You altered everything we did—every decision we made. Everything we wanted to do, you interfered with—and not for the better. You interrupted all our plans. You drove us in and out of relationships. You rammed a wedge between us and our families, between us and the people we cared about. You forced us in and out of graduate schools we didn't need to attend. You drove us into exile. You made us take jobs we didn't need, and refuse jobs we might have otherwise adored. We even got married to avoid your hideous war. Remember? They called it 'McNamara's War.' And still you kept chasing people. Because you required soldiers. Warm bodies. Everyone I knew wanted to run away, to escape. We tried to warn you. You were getting people killed. Destroying their homes, burning their children, bombing their villages. And all the time you sent us scurrying for safety, we tried to make you stop. We kept saying you were wrong, that you needed to back down. We were young, and you were in charge, but we understood, and you didn't. And still, we tried to explain. We were so brave. But you were arrogant. You wouldn't listen. You never heard one word. I doubt you hear what I'm saying, even now. You've

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come to peddle your rotten book and redeem your filthy reputation. But you can't, because you're guilty. Guilty as hell. I thought you were evil back then, and I think you're evil now."

I was spitting out the words. "I have nothing to ask you, really. Except one question. After all these years, Mr. McNamara, how do you sleep at night?"

I was fighting back tears.

"How do you sleep?" I yelled, again.

After a blank silence, the room, or part of it, broke into applause. I was shaking, as if nothing held me together anymore and I was falling, in pieces, to the floor. My bones were broken. The appalling Robert McNamara stood as ever calm and erect, waiting for the uproar to settle down. It was like something bottled up in the room had been set free, and finally there was air again to breathe.

Mr. McNamara replied, as if I never had spoken word. He dismissed the notion of evil, like he was flicking dirt from his shiny suit. He almost smirked when he claimed that he did, indeed, sleep very well. He said (again) that he was trying to prevent future calamities like what we experienced in Vietnam. He seemed as secure and erect—as impervious to disruption—as if no one had ever called him a monster. As if he were not an ambassador from Hell. As if the woman talking to him just now—namely, me—hadn't nearly collapsed from the effort.

When McNamara finished, the man who introduced him to the audience when the program began returned to the microphone and thanked everyone for coming, and thanked McNamara again for his wisdom and his time. The surface of the

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shiny world in which he lived could not be torn apart, could not even be scratched. And yet, in that one unpredictable exchange, we had nearly exposed the pretense and the lies about who he was—about who all of us were—and are—as a country—and understood or at least identified a terrible truth about what we spent millions of dollars and countless lives trying to accomplish, as if we were immune from every rule about decency and shame. We had not arrested the man in the name of justice, in the name of truth—and shipped him to prison—where he belonged. Nothing I said had the power to change history. And yet, I felt relieved—as if I had nearly leapt to safety from a burning building. An old woman touched my arm, smiled gently, and thanked me on my way out, and a few people nodded, as I raced away on legs that still miraculously worked.

Outside, I limped to my car, sank behind the steering wheel and wept. All those years of rage fell on me like bricks, while the agile, adept Robert McNamara seemed to carry no weight, no burden at all—as if he were a wood sylph, singing in the trees. It was raining, and the sky turned a mottled gray. I hit my hand against the steering wheel hard, to strike away the pain, like a kid hitting her head against a wall rhythmically, to fall asleep. Or as if I knew some therapeutic trick for restoring my sense of balance, like performing Yoga; as if there was some formula for cleansing the effects of Robert McNamara from my body; from all our lives. Why had he ever been born, I asked myself. The question flew at me like a bat, and I shuddered to think that here was my consolation, this infantile self-righteousness; or was it really righteous outrage?

I sat there a long time, my head down—almost motionless, and when I looked up again the parking lot, once full, was nearly empty, and the afternoon light had drained from the sky. I thought about me and my family and friends; and I felt the effects of Mr. McNamara's ego sticking to my skin, as if I had rubbed against something toxic. And yet, I felt grateful for the chance to speak up, the only person in the audience with the means and the will to howl at that creep. It was one of those moments when fate hands you a microphone, however weak. I wiped my face with a handkerchief I found in my purse, turned on the engine, and headed South on the Interstate. I hated Robert McNamara, in a way that I have rarely hated anyone. I knew he wasn't worth hating. I knew that hatred is always corrosive. Robert McNamara had turned into a cardboard poster of a man, a well-made suit draped over a huge ego that couldn't stop shouting for attention. In spite of which, he had become irrelevant—no longer in charge of me or anyone. He was a cipher, a mouth moving on the end of a stick, a dead-man-walking. Even the murdered children of Vietnam possessed more vitality, embodied more energy than he did. I thought of those photographs--particularly the image of the child burned by napalm, that horrified us, long ago; the photograph of a naked girl, racing down a dirt road, her skin on fire. For a moment I felt sorry for Mr. McNamara, because he had come into the world, like everyone—even like that tortured child—as an innocent baby. But somehow, in his early years in school, or at home or church, or participating in this or that club, he had learned a dreadful lesson. He had learned not to give a shit. He had learned to exclude himself from the rules of decency; from the lessons

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of everyday morality. He had turned off a tap of compassion inside himself—shut it down at the source, and now he was old, and he knew he'd done something terrible, but he wasn't sure what; and still he wished to feel loved. He longed to experience redemption. But the world had walked away, as well it might, leaving him stranded, like some high-ranking Nazi official, trying to explain his lost sense of glory. What was that pebble in his shoe, that caused such grief? How had it gotten there? And yet, he had not retired to a monastery in the hills of Tennessee, or on the coast of California, to beg forgiveness. He had not fallen on his knees before a statue of The Blessed Virgin. He would never surrender. He was handing out a rational argument in favor of what we might all learn from the debacle of Vietnam. He was teaching everyone else a lesson. His lips were moving, but his heart was frozen shut, the way it must have been, years earlier, when he stopped letting himself feel anything; stopped loving or caring or wishing to understand himself or anybody else.

I drove home. I didn't feel that angry anymore. Nor did I feel relieved. Life wasn't perfect, nor was I, myself, innocent. I would wake up the next morning, ready—willing—to throw myself at some of the world's least solvable problems. I had failed in so many areas of my life, and God knows I would fail again, but I hadn't followed Robert McNamara's example. I had not turned off that delicate tap in my heart that pours out grief over other people's pain, and takes inside oneself a sense of sorrow for other people's losses. I had retained a capacity to suffer; to feel

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joy, to hope for openings in the endless quest for better times. Hallelujah. I could still dream.

I heard, years later, that McNamara, on his deathbed, uttered these desolate words: that God had abandoned him. And I felt momentarily outraged, yet again. Outraged, that even on his deathbed he imagined it was *God* who left *him*, and not the other way around; but relieved that he didn't die in peace.

I drove home that evening, certain I had closed a door I wouldn't need to re-open. I wanted to tell Robert McNamara what it was like, to live through his murderous reign, to try to raise children; to try to be a decent mother, a good person, a responsible citizen. I wanted to tell him much more than I said in that hall, with people watching—as if I had more than words with which to hammer his heart, if only I'd had more time. And yet, I said what I could. I gave him, as the cliché goes, a piece of my mind. I let him know he didn't fool me, or anyone, with his imperious manner and his grotesque impersonation of a wise counselor. I wanted to be sure he knew he looked worthless, as a man of peace or reason; and that he was, and would be, forever, in the eyes of people like me—a fraud. Worse, still: a power-broker who played with people's hearts and minds, as if no one mattered but him and his murderous schemes. I had said enough—though there was so much more to explain. I wished I could have arrested McNamara in the name of justice, in the name of peace. I wished I could have made him fall to his knees.

And still I wonder: what did I hope to accomplish? Did I want him to think that he alone was responsible?

Years later, a friend told me I could buy an electronic copy of McNamara's speech at the Kennedy Center; that I could order it, online; and I almost did. But I decided my memory was enough; was all I required; that I already took from that room everything I needed. So I gave up trying, or wanting to compare what I remembered with what really happened. The truth is, I'm no historian. Maybe I'm not even I'm a writer, since I have trouble making things up. Or maybe memory is all that anyone ever requires. Memory, like some story you keep revising, like a locksmith trying to shape or carve the right, to open a door. Or someone trying to create the perfect weapon or the right pill.

Or maybe's it's just that ancient urge to make your mark on a wall; to say you were here, once. An actual person, doing things. In the name of courage. In the name of love. Wishing, and trying.

America can't change. We're still fighting the same war in Vietnam, over and over—though we call it different names. We've pitted ourselves against the same obstacles, trying to break through a barrier, as if there was a place, somewhere, a promised land we could enter, a place to escape. As if there was space in this world for one winning entry only; one successful plan. As if reality was like a bullseye—and everyone gets one single shot: one bullet, from one gun, and either you hit the mark, or you miss, in which case you never get a second chance. That one-shot deer. The only first-prize in the contest. One correct answer. If you don't have the guts to accept failure, then you collapse, or you lie about the outcome—like McNamara did; and then, one way or another, you go on lying—forever.

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There's no way to fight the things we're trying to overcome. It's a diseased game; as if the quest for love and justice, or good versus evil were some kind of war that people win. A war for love. A war for peace. Imagine.

Somehow, we never see the possibilities, the openings. Because, in the end, it seems to me, life isn't a story about winning and losing, but just about finding a door and walking through; and letting other people follow, and sitting down together, afterwards, with our fractured dreams. Our deep romantic yearnings. And bearing the pain, and talking about new ideas, and perhaps, about working together. About breathing. About helping other people breathe. And listening. Yes, listening. Mostly listening. Where's the victory, in that? Where's the beginning, for Christ's sake; and where's the end?