

McNamara's conflicts on war, peace, morals, ethics: A polarizing figure

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When he died recently at age 93, former U.S. defense secretary Robert S. McNamara was still viewed by many with opprobrium as the chief architect of the Vietnam War. Others praised his efforts, however late in life, to publicly wrestle with his inner demons and the moral consequences of the failed war.

Few figures in the last half century were as polarizing as McNamara. In the days since his death July 6, reactions have ranged from the harsh to the mildly conciliatory to a man whose career personified the rise and promise and the subsequent troubles of the postwar U.S.

New York Times columnist Bob Herbert blasted McNamara as an “icy-veined, cold-visaged and rigidly intellectual point man for a war that sent thousands upon thousands of people (most of them young) to their utterly pointless deaths.”

Journalist Walter Pincus, meanwhile, who was a friend of McNamara, evoked McNamara’s efforts to fight global poverty during his 13 years as head of the World Bank and his opposition to nuclear weapons after he left government service.

Pincus, writing in the *Washington Post*, reported that McNamara’s last message to his wife expressed the hope that others would continue “to pursue the objectives which I have sought (very imperfectly at times) to move the world toward peace among people and nations, and to accelerate economic and social progress for the least advantaged among us.”

The competing visions of McNamara reflect a man who was defined by war but who tried to lay claim to a legacy of peace. And while he was neither a religious figure nor a particularly religious man, McNamara came to embody weighty moral issues of war and peace in one of the most emotionally charged ethical debates of the country’s recent history.

These contrasting images of McNamara were perhaps best displayed in Errol Morris's Oscar-winning 2003 documentary, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, which portrays him as a figure at one moment horrifying and at the next startlingly human.

The horror comes as McNamara reflects on his role as a military aide to General Curtis E. LeMay in the firebombing of Japan in World War II. He practically leaps into Morris's camera and loudly declares: "On [a] single night, we burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo—men, women and children."

The human, even vulnerable, moment comes with the candid acknowledgment that LeMay had later told the young McNamara, "If we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals."

"And I think he's right. He—and I'd say I—were behaving as war criminals," McNamara said. "What makes it immoral if you lose, and not immoral if you win?"

McNamara's public grappling with the dilemmas of that war, and with the Vietnam War, with which he would forever be linked, rarely had a religious element, though it occasionally did. The product of a lower-middle-class California family with a mixed Roman Catholic-Protestant heritage, McNamara was nominally a Presbyterian.

When serving as an executive of the Ford Motor Company prior to being named John F. Kennedy's Pentagon chief in 1961, McNamara became a Presbyterian elder. In her 1993 biography of McNamara, journalist Deborah Shapley noted that when McNamara was serving as defense secretary, he and his first wife occasionally attended a Presbyterian church in Washington, D.C.

At the Pentagon, McNamara was known to take an interest in moral theology, and he had at least one meeting with clergy who opposed the war. Shapley notes McNamara's heartfelt horror and shock when a Quaker antiwar activist, Norman Morrison, set himself on fire in a parking lot just below McNamara's Pentagon office in November 1965.

An understated but notable Presbyterian element emerged in 1995 when the *New York Times* attacked him in an editorial after he wrote in a memoir that the Vietnam War was "wrong, terribly wrong."

“Mr. McNamara must not escape the lasting moral condemnation of his countrymen,” the editorial said. His “regret cannot be huge enough to balance the books for our dead soldiers. The ghosts of those unlived lives circle close around Mr. McNamara.” It added: “What he took from them cannot be repaid by prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades late.”

Yet coming to McNamara’s defense was an old critic, Robert McAfee Brown, the renowned liberal Presbyterian theologian and an ardent opponent of the Vietnam War.

Brown wrote the *Times* in protest, saying that “it is a great and almost unprecedented moral achievement for a man in public life to have offered such an honest accounting of how people like himself, with initially good intentions, became enmeshed in structures of their own creation from which it was finally impossible to escape. . . . All honor, therefore, to Mr. McNamara for having set a pattern virtually unknown in our nation’s public life.”

Reflecting this week on McNamara’s life, Donald W. Shriver Jr., a Presbyterian theologian and ethicist who has written about the political dynamics of forgiveness, noted that, indeed, McNamara had expressed public remorse—a rarity for an American public official.

But it was all a bit too little, too late, Shriver said. “He came close to apologizing but didn’t quite get there,” Shriver remarked, “and he said in the ’90s what he should have said in the late ’60s.” —*Chris Herlinger, Religion News Service*