

McNamara's Ideology: Lessons Learned

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The Vietnam War was a bloody conflict that shaped the Cold War for many Americans. Vietnam was divided into two states, North Vietnam which was led by the communist leader Ho Chi Minh and South Vietnam which was involved in the western camp of the Cold War and was supported by the United States (US).¹ The American government propped up the South Vietnamese government in order to prevent the country from falling to communism.² This conflict is a part of the larger Cold War, and is an interesting conflict with its own characteristics. Robert McNamara was the American Secretary of Defence during a large period of the Vietnam War. Later in his life, a film called *The Fog of War*, which is about the career of Robert McNamara, was released. This film is thought by some, to be a manner in which McNamara assuaged his guilt and justified his actions during his time in the Office of Statistics during WWII, and as a Secretary of Defence in the Vietnam War. The ideology and motivation behind both McNamara and the American administration entering and continuing the Vietnam War is often questioned. This essay will argue that McNamara is not a classical realist but could be considered a third wave liberal internationalist, and if he had followed a theory of realism, much of the destruction of the Vietnam War would have been avoided, as realism can teach many lessons on how to examine conflict before entering.

Section 1 - Was McNamara a Realist

The first question this essay will answer is if McNamara was a realist in terms of the Vietnam War. Realism is a political theory where it is believed that states make particular decisions in order to maximize security.³ Realists warn states against sacrificing their own interests to do something they believe is ethical, and instead instruct them to take action to

¹ Robert McNamara, "Irish Perspectives on the Vietnam War," *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2003): 76, <https://doi.org/10.3318/ISIA.2003.14.1.75>.

² McNamara, "Irish Perspectives on the Vietnam War," 76.

³ John Balis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*. 8th Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 131

ensure their own security.⁴ McNamara, however, was not a realist, and this essay will argue that he was a third wave liberal internationalist. Third wave liberal internationalism is an ideological theory that believes in free trade, human rights, equality, free markets and maintains that their ideas are superior.⁵ There are three main reasons why McNamara was a liberal, not a realist; there was an ideological motivation for the war, the war did not increase US security, and the purpose of the war was to convert others to the governance systems of the west.

The first reason why McNamara was a third wave liberal internationalist, not a classical realist was because he had an ideological motivation for the Vietnam War. At the time, the domino theory was a widely held belief of the American political establishment.⁶ It was widely thought that McNamara shared a belief in the domino theory.⁷ This was a theory that if one country fell to communism, then like dominos, all countries would.⁸ This motivated the Americans to get involved in every conflict that risked a country turning to communism in order to protect all countries. This is an ideological view, as it views communism as something that is evil and threatening to the US. In comparison, realists evaluate each case on its own merits and costs, and determine if a particular country poses a threat to US security.⁹ The domino theory assumes communism as a whole is an ideological threat, and does not examine each case in a rational way. As the domino theory motivated McNamara to continue the war in Vietnam, it is demonstrated that he was not a realist, and instead was a third wave liberal internationalist.

⁴ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 132.

⁵ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 104.

⁶ Kevin Ruane, *War and Revolution in Vietnam, 1930-75*, (London: UCL, 1998), 71, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203981658>.

⁷ Deborah Shapley, "McNamara's Inner War, (Robert S. McNamara's Claims About Vietnam War)," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 51, no. 4 (1995): https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A17279640/AONE?u=ocul_thomas&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c8855e3f.

⁸ David Milne, "'Our equivalent of guerrilla warfare': Walt Rostow and the Bombing of North Vietnam, 1961-1968," *The Journal of Military History* 71, no. 1 (2007): 174, doi:10.1353/jmh.2007.0056.

⁹ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 140.

The second reason why McNamara was a third wave liberal internationalist, not a classical realist, was because the Vietnam War did not increase US security. The war was seen by the Vietnamese people very differently from the way the Americans viewed it. The Americans viewed it as necessary to protect the world from communism, whereas the Vietnamese saw it as a colonial war.¹⁰ The Vietnamese were trying to liberate themselves from colonial powers and unite the country.¹¹ If McNamara had understood this quest for liberation, and known that Vietnam was not a threat to US security, the Vietnam War may not have occurred. McNamara and much of the American administration justified going to war to protect themselves based on an alleged attack on one of their ships.¹² This attack never occurred, and if McNamara had been a realist he would have been unable to justify the war in Vietnam, as it had no basis in protecting US security.¹³ Instead, as he was a liberal, he was able to justify going to war for ideological reasons. As there was no real security threat to justify the war in Vietnam, this offers proof that McNamara was not a classical realist.

The third reason why McNamara was a third wave liberal internationalist, not a classical realist, is because in the conflict, America attempted to convert the Vietnamese to forms of liberal government. The direct goal of the US in the Vietnam War was to suppress the communist national insurgency.¹⁴ Additionally, once Ho Chi Minh was recognised as the leader of the communists by China and the Soviet Union, the Americans increased the level of violence in Vietnam.¹⁵ These two aspects show that Americans were specifically opposed to the communist

¹⁰ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. Internet Archive. (Errol Morris. Sony Pictures Classics, 2003).

¹¹ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

¹² *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

¹³ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

¹⁴ Marilyn Blatt Young and Robert Buzzanco, *A Companion to the Vietnam War*. 1st ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2002), xi.

¹⁵ Randall Bennett Woods, *Vietnam and the American Political Tradition: the Politics of Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

aspect of Vietnam and believed they had an obligation to Vietnamese freedom, phrased as freedom from the communists.¹⁶ Liberals believe ideas like democracy, freedom and private property should be spread, ideas that are diametrically opposed to communist dictatorships.¹⁷ Through their involvement in Vietnam, it can be seen that the US aimed to liberate the Vietnamese from communism, and indoctrinate them into the liberal western camp.¹⁸ Classical realists caution states against ethical motivations for conflict, and as such, realists would not engage in ideological conversions.¹⁹ In this war, there was a clear ethical motivation, and thus it is demonstrated that McNamara did not subscribe to the ideas of classical realism, and instead was following the ideas of third wave liberal internationalism.

In conclusion, McNamara and the American administrations had primarily third wave liberal international motivations, rather than classical realist motivations, for the Vietnam War. They had an ideological motivation for the war through their belief in the domino theory, there was no security based reason for going to war, and had an ethical motivation as they believed they were responsible for liberating the Vietnamese. These aspects demonstrate that the US was not driven by classical realist ideas of security for the nation, but was motivated by ideological third wave liberal internationalist motivations.

Section 2 - McNamara's Eleven Lessons

The second question this essay will answer is if McNamara's eleven lessons could have been avoided if he had taken a classical realist approach, rather than the third wave liberal internationalist approach he did take. This essay will argue that several of his eleven lessons could have been avoided. In particular, Lesson One, empathize with your enemy, Lesson Five,

¹⁶ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

¹⁷ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 105.

¹⁸ Randall Bennett Woods, *Vietnam and the American Political Tradition: the Politics of Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

¹⁹ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 132.

proportionality should be a guideline in war, and Lesson Seven, belief and seeing are often wrong could have been avoided, as the theory of realism, if applied, would have voided the situations from which the lessons are drawn.

The first lesson that will be discussed is Lesson One, empathize with your enemy. McNamara discusses this lesson with regards to the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the Soviet Union put nuclear weapons in Cuba, aimed at the US.²⁰ The Soviet Union agreed to take the missiles out, but came close to nuclear destruction.²¹ From this crisis McNamara learned the lesson of “empathize with your enemy”. He said if the US had put themselves in the shoes of the Soviets they would have understood what motivated them, and could have better come to a deal with the Soviet Union on a rational basis, both understanding each other's motivations.²² If McNamara had been a realist he would not have needed to learn this lesson. The Soviet Union was motivated by security, as they were responding to US weapons in Turkey.²³ The Soviet Union felt this move threatened their security, and retaliated through placing missiles in Cuba. If McNamara was a realist, he would have understood the Soviet Union's primary motivation as seeking to increase their security and would have understood how America's moves threatened the Soviet's sense of security. This would have facilitated an entry to negotiations ensuring nations felt secure. Thus, if McNamara was a realist, he would have avoided the need to learn Lesson One.

The second lesson that will be discussed is Lesson Five, proportionality should be a guideline in war. McNamara learned this lesson after the firebombing campaign in Japan, a part of World War Two where the US military dropped incendiary bombs on Japanese cities, killing

²⁰ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

²¹ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

²² *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

²³ Max Frankel, “Learning from the missile crisis,” *Smithsonian*. 4, <http://proxy.lib.trentu.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/learning-missile-crisis/docview/236869318/se-2?accountid=14391>.

50-90% of Japanese citizens in 67 cities.²⁴ McNamara says this was not proportional, and if the US had lost the war they would have been tried as war criminals.²⁵ While some bombing was likely proportional and would have been necessary to save American lives, the amount of bombing the Americans subjected Japan to was disproportional and unneeded.²⁶ McNamara is able to reflect that it was likely a war crime, but if he had been a realist, he would have examined what would be considered a rational level of violence to ensure security.²⁷ If McNamara and others in charge of the bombing campaigns had been realists they would have exercised more restraint in bombing, and would have bombed a rational amount, rather than the excessive amount that occurred. Thus, if McNamara was a realist, he would have avoided the need to learn Lesson Five.

The third lesson that will be discussed is Lesson Seven, belief and seeing are both often wrong. This lesson was learned by McNamara after two US military boats were allegedly attacked by the Vietnamese.²⁸ On August 2nd 1964 the US Ship Maddox reported that it had been attacked by a Vietnamese patrol boat while it had been in international waters.²⁹ Two days later, both the Maddox and the Turner Joy reported they were being attacked.³⁰ It was discovered later, that the second day of attacks had never occurred, and the reports were the result of over enthusiastic radar men.³¹ As a result of the second reported attack, Lyndon B. Johnson, the President, authorized an attack on Vietnam.³² This attack was authorized on the basis that people believed they had been attacked, and the North Vietnamese were a threat, not that these things

²⁴ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

²⁵ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

²⁶ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

²⁷ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

²⁸ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

²⁹ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

³⁰ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

³¹ *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

³² *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

were true in reality. As a result of this, McNamara created his lesson “belief and seeing are often wrong”, as a message that actions should be based on facts rather than belief. If McNamara had been a realist, he would have been better able to react to the facts of the situation, rather than believing something, and then creating facts to back up this belief. If McNamara had been a realist, he would have understood the level of threat that the Vietnamese posed to Americans, and would have been able to respond in a more proportional and rational manner. This would have avoided unnecessary escalation causing thousands of American deaths, further escalating the Cold War, and jeopardizing the security of the US. Thus, if McNamara was a realist, he would have avoided the need to learn Lesson Seven.

Overall, McNamara had to learn the lessons outlined in this film because of his third wave liberal internationalist beliefs. If he had taken a classical realist approach, these situations may have not occurred, and they likely would have been less violent if they did occur. McNamara would have been able to understand the security based motivations of the Soviet Union in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and would have been able to negotiate with them rationally. McNamara would have taken a more proportional and rational approach to the bombing of Japan, reducing the number of deaths without jeopardizing American security. McNamara would have also been able to approach the bombing of the ships from a reasoned perspective. If McNamara was a realist he would have better understood the motivation of others in conflict, and he would have been able to ensure reactions were proportionate, and founded on facts.

Section 3 - Lessons for Today

The third question that this essay will answer is what lessons can be applied to current society. The Vietnam War was very violent, and American intervention did not prevent the country from becoming communist. In the end, the Americans were forced by internal politics to

withdraw from the country and as they withdrew the country fell completely to the communists.³³ American involvement killed Vietnamese people, caused American deaths, and caused upset in an entire region. Americans have not stopped getting involved in conflicts similar to this. Recently, America withdrew from Afghanistan, another conflict where many were killed, only for the country to fall to the force the US had been opposing immediately after American withdrawal.³⁴ It is important that lessons are taken from this conflict to ensure conflicts like this do not continue to occur. The liberal internalist ideas held by McNamara and others in the American political establishment lead to the war in Vietnam, and these lessons would not have been required if they had been following the ideas of classical realism. As such, the two lessons that can be learned from classical realism and applied to future conflicts are; each case should be examined on its own merits and costs and benefits should be examined.

The first lesson classical realists could teach is to evaluate each case on its own merits. This would entail examining the country a state is considering having conflict with, determining if they are a security threat, and weighing benefits and costs of engaging in war. If this lesson had been followed prior to the Vietnam War, then the US would not have engaged in war, as the primary reason Americans were involved in Vietnam was to prevent the spread of communism, something they saw as orchestrated by the Soviet Union. Moscow was involved in Vietnam, and provided them with many weapons necessary for their eventual triumph in the war.³⁵ However, the Soviet Union was not the primary actor in Vietnam, and there is evidence that most decisions were made independently by the Vietnamese people.³⁶ If the US had been following the advice of

³³ Jeffrey Kimball, "How Wars End: The Vietnam War," *Peace & Change* 20, no. 2 (April 1995): 184. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0130.1995.tb00633.x.

³⁴ "U.S. Withdraws from Afghanistan as the Taliban Take Control," *American Journal of International Law* 115, no. 4 (2021): 745. doi:10.1017/ajil.2021.50.

³⁵ Marian Leighton, "Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet Rivalry," *Asian Affairs* 6, no. 1 (1978): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30172368>.

³⁶ J.A.S. Grenville, *History of the World from the 20th to the 21st Century*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 603.

classical realists, they would have examined the conflict in Vietnam as an individual conflict, rather than simply as part of the larger Cold War. They would have examined this conflict on its own merits, and discovered that while Vietnam was involved with the Soviet Union, this conflict was a fight for Vietnamese independence. Examining Vietnam on its own merits would have meant the US realizing their involvement was not necessary for security against the Soviets, and thus they would not have been in Vietnam. Policy makers today should learn from the mistakes of the Vietnam War. Each state is an independent actor, and the decisions they make do not necessarily align with those of similar countries. When engaging in conflict, or making agreements it is important to examine the motivations of individual states.

The second lesson classical realists could teach is that costs and benefits of a conflict should be examined before involvement. During the Vietnam War 58,200 US soldiers were killed and 300,000 were wounded.³⁷ This was a large number of casualties for the American public to bear, and after 1968 the war became increasingly unpopular.³⁸ The high death rate and unpopularity of the war eventually led to the Americans withdrawing their troops in January 1973.³⁹ The Americans had not taken into account the potential costs of the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese were incredibly determined and willing to bear tremendous loss of life in order to win the war.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the American public was not willing to bear these losses.⁴¹ If the US had been following the advice of classical realists they would have examined the potential costs of the war prior to getting involved. They would have been aware of the costs the

³⁷ Grenville, *History of the World from the 20th to the 21st Century*, 601.

³⁸ Grenville, *History of the World from the 20th to the 21st Century*, 601.

³⁹ Kimball, "How Wars End: The Vietnam War," 183.

⁴⁰ Leo McCann, "'Killing Is Our Business and Business Is Good': The Evolution of 'War Managerialism' from Body Counts to Counterinsurgency," *Organization* 24, no. 4 (2017): 497, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417693852>.

⁴¹ Benjamin Harrison and Christopher L. Mosher. "The Secret Diary of McNamara's Dove: The Long-Lost Story of John T. McNaughton's Opposition to the Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History* 35, no. 3 (2011): 507, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24916431>.

American public and the Vietnamese were willing to bear. It is important for policy makers today to learn from the mistakes made in the Vietnam War. When making any decision it is vital to examine the potential costs and determine if the state is willing to bear these costs, and if the benefits outweigh them. Before engaging in conflict states should examine if the conflict is popular, or if the security benefits outweigh the human costs before involvement.

Overall, if the Americans had followed the advice of classical realists they would not have been in Vietnam, and the losses and devastation that this conflict caused would not have occurred. The US failed to examine this case on its own merits, and thus their decision making was clouded by a fear of the Soviet Union, rather examining it as the regional war that it actually was. The US also failed to examine the costs of this war before entering into it. If the Americans had followed the advice of classical realists they would have examined the conflict that they were considering entering more carefully and rationally, and would not have been in Vietnam. While the mistakes made in Vietnam cannot be reversed, they can be learned from. Policy makers should examine each case on its own merits so that they can examine its intricacies, and come to the best conclusion. It is also important for policymakers today to examine the costs of every decision they make and determine if the costs are appropriate and bearable. The impacts of Americans being involved in Vietnam are weighty, but by learning from this conflict, and following lessons taught by classical realists, similar conflicts and mistakes could be avoided.

Conclusion

The Vietnam War was a violent and ideologically driven conflict. Americans were driven to be involved in this conflict for primarily third wave liberal internationalist reasons, rather than realist ones. They had an ideological motivation, lacked a security motivation, and had an ethical motivation. If McNamara had instead followed classical realist ideas this situation would have

gone very differently. He would have been able to understand the Soviet Union's security motivations, would have taken a more rational approach to the bombing of Japan, and a more reasoned perspective on the alleged bombing of American ships. Upon reflection, classical realists have much to teach about Vietnam, but the two lessons of examining each case on its own merits, and weighing costs before involvement, can hopefully be applied to conflicts in the future. The conflict in Vietnam shaped the Cold War period for many Americans, but if policy makers learn from the mistakes of this conflict, and listen to advice given by classical realists, future conflicts could be avoided.

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