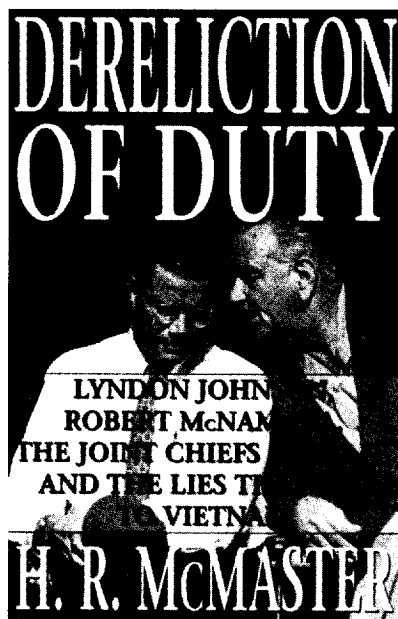


BOOKS

Ignorance and Arrogance Exposed

reviewed by LtGen Victor H. Krulak, USMC(Ret)

DERELICTION OF DUTY: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam. By H.R. McMaster. Harper Collins, New York, 1997, 464 pp., \$27.50. (Member \$24.75)



H.R. McMaster, in his book *Dereliction of Duty*, has done what other historians might have done, but didn't. He spent five years reviewing papers of key figures in the Vietnam War, archives of the Kennedy and Johnson Presidential libraries, and tapes of telephone conversations as well as conducting personal interviews with a wide array of participants. His research was thorough and organized.

McMaster's conclusions are equally impressive. At the outset, he concludes that "The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the *New York Times* or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, DC. . . ."

The truth is the war was lost in all of those places. For sure, we did not fight it right, and the media and the

campuses were defeatist almost from the start. But the principal malefactor, by many orders of magnitude, was in the Washington officialdom itself. McMasters is diligent in surfacing factual reality that the civilian leadership in Washington was severely limited by ignorance and blinded by arrogance. And then he proceeds to buttress his conclusions with an abundance of records of meetings, telephone conversations, and official documents.

As McMasters frames it, the out and away leader in the list of the guilty was Lyndon B. Johnson. Obsessed with being reelected, committed to the Great Society, deceitful, preoccupied with consensus, fearful of Russia and China, paranoid of the U.S. military, he could not have been a worse wartime leader.

Johnson's deceptiveness was monumental. In early 1965, as we slipped slowly into the quagmire of actual combat, he saw, or thought he saw, in a *New York Times* article evidence of leaks in his own Government that came nearer to telling the truth than his official position. His responsive effort to suppress the truth caused breaks between Johnson, former President Eisenhower, Hubert Humphrey, and Deputy Secretary of State Ball to whom he said, in a climax of paranoia, that he would thenceforward make all decisions by himself and "get one man alone in a room and ban all others."

Johnson never articulated a national policy regarding the Vietnam War. The nearest he ever came to being specific was frequent injunctions

to the military to "kill more Viet Cong." At the same time he sought to conceal offensive operations from the American public and the Congress. McMaster, in a simple summary, describes Johnson's behavior as "dependent on lies and obfuscation." Deceptive press releases and public statements by the President himself sought to conceal the steady increase in deployed U.S. troops, deceptions that came ultimately to be exposed by growing casualty lists.

To the end Johnson was motivated by two objectives, neither of which related to victory—politics (protection of his legislative program) and overpowering fear of China and the Soviets. There could not have been a less apt Commander-in-Chief.

Johnson's substitution of deception for reality would not have been possible without continuing support of his position by the President's subordinates. McMaster is uninhibited in his description of duplicity by Defense Secretary McNamara and his array of arrogant Ivy League assistants, who were obsessed with quantification and who considered communication rather than victory the purpose of our military action. McNamara did not trust or believe in the Joint Chiefs and, as McMaster puts it, "When the Chiefs' advice was not consistent with his own, McNamara lied in meetings of the National Security Council about the Chiefs' views."

McMasters skewers McNamara with the precise indictment that the Secretary "viewed the war as another business management problem that would ultimately succumb to his reasoned judgment." He was supported by a group of like-minded men in Defense and State—William and McGeorge Bundy, John McNaughton, Roger Hilsman, Michael Forrestal, Dean Rusk, and Averill Harriman—who all mistrusted the military and were quite willing to proceed, as McMasters says:

. . . on the basis that they had the prescience to predict with great precision what amount of force applied in Vietnam would achieve the results they desired, and that they could control the force with great precision from halfway around the world.



December 1964 at Johnson's Texas ranch. Behind McNamara and LBJ are (left to right) Gen Harold Johnson (Army Chief of Staff), Adm David McDonald (Chief of Naval Operations), Gen Curtis LeMay (Air Force Chief of Staff), Gen Earle Wheeler (JCS Chairman), Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance, and Gen Wallace Greene (Marine Corps Commandant). (Photograph and caption from book)

These were men of limited competence for the task at hand. In his first book on Vietnam David Halberstam characterized them as "the best and the brightest." They turned out to be neither one.

The question may arise at this point "Was everyone involved stupid, arrogant, or both?" No. Not at all. However, with few exceptions, those who saw the war through a clearer lens were so far down the pecking order that their views had no resonance. An example of one individual whose stature was of sufficient weight to have an effect was John McCone, the Director of Central Intelligence. He was determined that the very limited bombing of North Vietnam was fruitless, that to be effective it needed to be multiplied many fold and concentrated on the most productive targets. He addressed a strong memorandum to McNamara urging powerful action, air and ground, declaring that without a decisive expansion in the nature and scope of the war, the United States would incur "an ever increasing commitment of U.S. personnel without materially improving the chance of victory." His proposal, sound in retrospect, got no consideration because the President was fear-

ful that the action would alienate the constituencies on which his Great Society depended. McCone resigned in frustration.

One area where McMaster's analysis is less than perfect has to do with

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the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). He appears to have been conditioned philosophically against the basic JCS concept and is critical of the dissonant individual views of the Chiefs on the war. Actually, that dissonance, properly managed, is an immense source of strength, but the President and his Defense Secretary were not able—or willing—to take on the task of managing it. They preferred to criticize the Chiefs for inaction and

to cut them out of the information loop.

Never, from the very beginning, did Lyndon Johnson ever sit the JCS down and say, "Gentlemen, you have as much access to the facts as I have. My aim, plainly put, is to bring this war to an early and favorable end from the viewpoint of the United States. I give you one week to bring me a single comprehensive proposal representing your corporate view as to how to achieve that aim. Tell me what you need, and exactly how you propose to use it. And I do not want any splits or qualifications."

It never happened because the President was fearful that such a straightforward approach might compromise his political aims. And the United States suffered mightily as a result.

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>LtGen V.H. Krulak was closely involved with Vietnam policy during most of the period covered by *Dereliction of Duty*. From Feb62 to Feb64, he served the JCS as special assistant for counterinsurgency and special operations; from Mar64 until his retirement in Jun68, he was the commanding general of Fleet Marine Force Pacific.