LESSONS IN DISASTER

McGEORGE BUNDY AND THE PATH TO WAR IN VIETNAM

GORDON M. GOLDSTEIN

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T H E  E S T A B L I S H M E N T

The last time I saw McGeorge Bundy was on Wednesday, September 11, 1996. We met in midtown Manhattan for a working lunch in a private conference room of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, where Bundy was senior scholar in residence. “How are you?” he asked exuberantly as he entered the room, a stack of books and papers tucked under his arm. He seemed eager to begin our meeting.

I had been engaged in Bundy’s professional life for several years during the completion of my studies for a PhD in international relations at Columbia University. My first assignment with him was as the staff director of an international commission of diplomats and arms-control experts for which he served as chairman, leading a study on the United Nations Security Council and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. My second project with Bundy was more historical in nature. It was also far more personal.
In the spring of 1995 Bundy asked me to collaborate with him on a retrospective analysis of the American presidency and the Vietnam War during his tenure as national security adviser to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. We envisioned the book to be both a memoir of Bundy’s experience with Kennedy and Johnson as well as a reconstruction of the pivotal presidential decisions about American strategy in Vietnam between 1961 and 1965. As our collaboration progressed and we produced a shared thematic, interpretive, and organizational model of the book, I accepted Bundy’s proposal to be formally recognized as coauthor for a work to be published by Yale University Press.

In the year and a half we had worked in concert on the Vietnam project, Bundy and I had made significant substantive progress, encompassing all of the key historical inflection points and pivotal players in Vietnam policy during the Kennedy and Johnson years. Yet the actual text of the book was still inchoate, composed of scores of unique, individual passages of manuscript that Bundy had been drafting by hand. These so-called “fragments” were to be integrated with my research memoranda, outlines, and chronologies, as well as commentary extracted from the transcripts of my interviews with Bundy on a vast range of topics relating to the war. Individually these materials constituted the disassociated elements of an incomplete analytical history. Connected into a conceptual and chronological architecture, however, the fragments and research we were producing served as the foundation for what we hoped would be a meaningful contribution to the history of the Vietnam War.

As we met that afternoon, Bundy displayed an intensity that was different from what I had observed in countless hours of previous discussion. “I had quite an argument with my brother,” he announced, referring to William Bundy, who had served as a senior State Department and Pentagon official during the Vietnam era. “Now I know I’m right,” he added, with a smile of discernible but good-natured mischief. Bundy spoke with great energy and focus for more than five hours, discoursing on a wide
range of themes late into the day. There was a dramatic difference between Kennedy and Johnson on the question of Vietnam, he once more insisted, recapitulating a perspective central to our study. “Kennedy didn’t want to be dumb,” he said. “Johnson didn’t want to be a coward.” Bundy was still struggling to understand the significance of the air-strike strategy he had advocated in the winter of 1965. What were its implications? Bundy asked aloud. Did it precipitate a chain of events that dramatically accelerated the Americanization of the war? He also revisited the failure of diplomacy in Vietnam, which he described as a delusion mistakenly embraced by opponents of the war. Why, Bundy now asked, didn’t we settle the war at the negotiating table? He promptly answered his own question: After the American escalation of 1965, he declared, a diplomatic solution in Vietnam was simply not viable. On the question of Kennedy and Vietnam, Bundy instructed me to marshal the evidence once more and prepare an outline describing the choices Kennedy would have confronted in Vietnam had he lived to serve a second term. Clearly there was a great deal of work to be done to consolidate the rich but diffuse content of our collaboration.1

As the hours passed, I noted that Bundy’s cheeks were unusually pink—perhaps from the strong late summer sun at his family’s vacation home on the Massachusetts coast—or perhaps from sustained exertion. He interrupted our work session only once, to ask his devoted and attentive assistant, Georganne Brown, to schedule an appointment with his cardiologist. When the meeting ended Bundy dispatched me with a gracious but somewhat formal good-bye, shaking hands as he always did with his elbow locked in a sharp ninety-degree angle and head bowed forward ever so slightly. Five days later he died, following a massive heart attack.

A front-page obituary in the New York Times called Bundy “the very personification of what the journalist David Halberstam . . . labeled ‘The Best and the Brightest’: the well-born, confident intellectuals who led the
nation into the quagmire of Vietnam.” The *Times* noted that Bundy played a role in a range of foreign policy decisions serving two presidents, “but he is most remembered for his role in enlarging United States involvement in Vietnam.”

A similar verdict was rendered by *Time* magazine. “His laser-like intellect radiated from behind his clear-rimmed glasses with an intensity as hot as his smile was cold,” wrote the magazine’s managing editor, Walter Isaacson. “Had he been half as smart, he might have been a great man. Instead, McGeorge Bundy came to personify the hubris of an intellectual elite that marched America with a cool and confident brilliance into the quagmire of Vietnam.” Isaacson argued that the early 1960s were “a moment when meritocracy and patrician elitism enjoyed a celebrated cohabitation, the rise and then fall of which Bundy came to symbolize.” That era ended with Vietnam and men like Bundy, whom Isaacson called “the epitome of the well-intentioned arrogance” that would ultimately vitiate the Cold War foreign policy consensus. Isaacson recalled that Bundy told him once that there was no such thing as the foreign policy establishment. “If so,” he then noted, “it was Bundy as much as anyone who brought about an end of an era in which foreign policy was entrusted to a noble club of gentlemen secure in their common outlook and bonds of trust.”

In *The Color of Truth*, his exhaustively researched and judicious biography of the Bundy brothers, the historian Kai Bird would criticize McGeorge Bundy’s unwillingness to act on his growing reservations about the viability of America’s intervention in Vietnam. “Why did presidential loyalty require Bundy to continue to defend the war long after he left government in 1966? And why, when in 1969–70 it was clear that Kissinger and Nixon were prolonging the war, did both brothers fail to come out forcefully against the war and the Vietnamization policies that were prolonging it? The Bundys never answered these hard questions.” Bird’s sharpest criticism was directed not at Bundy’s performance as national security adviser, but at his silence after leaving office: “Far from protesting
the carnage, Mac quietly left the White House and continued to support the war in public. . . . This was [his] worst and most personal mistake, a failure of courage and imagination.”

There were, of course, countless other verdicts and views on Bundy’s legacy as national security adviser in the Vietnam era. Bundy had delved deeply into the voluminous literature of the war but did not live long enough to address many of the histories that were part of his study, including works by David Barrett, Larry Berman, Lloyd Gardner, Leslie Gelb, Doris Kearns Goodwin, George Herring, Stanley Karnow, Neil Sheehan, Brian VanDeMark, and Marilyn Young.6 With respect to the tough conclusions of a new generation of scholars, we will never know Bundy’s response. Andrew Preston, the author of perhaps the single most comprehensive history of Bundy’s role in Vietnam policy, dismissed the “‘Cold War context’ myth” that the global anticommunist enterprise made intervention in Vietnam inevitable. Bundy, he argued, advocated Americanization of the war “in the face of tremendous internal opposition, external pressures, and a continually failing strategy. . . . Bundy was not a warmonger, but neither was he a tragic hero, unable to escape the curse of his tragic flaw. He should have known better and often did.”

Following his death, Bundy’s loyalists tried to soften the blow, acknowledging but qualifying his identification with Vietnam. Francis Bator, a former White House colleague, praised Bundy’s accomplishments at a memorial service at St. James Church in New York, noting that a number of good things had happened under his watch. “With the one very bad thing that happened,” said Bator, “he had much less to do than the common version of the Vietnam story would have it.”8 James C. Thomson Jr., a former White House aide, argued in the New York Times that Bundy was not the unreflective hawk described by his critics. “He was a skilled adjudicator, not an advocate, especially on Vietnam,” Thomson wrote. “He tolerated and even encouraged dissent from conventional
wisdom, as long as it was expressed with brevity and evidence. He seemed
to have no firm convictions on the inherited Vietnam mess. His loyalty
was to the President and to our nation’s security.”

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a close friend and colleague of fifty years,
concluded that Bundy represented “the last hurrah of the Northeast
Establishment. . . . He was the final executor of the grand tradition of
Henry Stimson, Dean Acheson, Averell Harriman, Robert Lovett, John J.
McCloy—patricians who, combining commitment to international re-
 sponsibility with instinct for command and relish in power, served the
republic pretty well in the global crises of the twentieth century.” About
Bundy’s role in the Vietnam War, Schlesinger observed: “A single tragic
error prevented him from achieving his full promise as a statesman.”

McGeorge Bundy was born on March 30, 1919. His mother, the former
Katherine Lawrence Putnam, was the niece of A. Lawrence Lowell, the
president of Harvard University, and the poet Amy Lowell. The family’s
Boston lineage dated back to 1639 and was characterized by a deep con-
nection to Harvard University. Bundy’s father, Harvey Hollister Bundy,
was a native of Michigan who had migrated to New England for his edu-
cation, first at Yale, where he was a member of the secret society Skull and
Bones, and then at Harvard Law School and a clerkship for Supreme
Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

Growing up in Boston, McGeorge Bundy, known as Mac, enjoyed a
privileged childhood. He and his brothers attended the Dexter Lower
School, a private elementary school founded by Harvey Bundy and several
of his friends. Just ahead of Mac was another privileged boy from a promi-
nent Boston family, John F. Kennedy. Summers were spent in Manchester,
Massachusetts, where the Putnam family owned a seaside compound that
included a nineteen-bedroom “cottage.” A smaller house on the property
was deeded to Katherine, which became the Bundy family retreat.
Members of a verbally minded brood, Mac and his older brother, Bill, excelled in political debate, a ritualized feature of family life. “How well I remember our fights over the dining room table,” recalled their sister Harriet. “Mother’s sense of righteousness was very deep, and so’s Mac’s.” She added, “For her, things were black and white. It’s an outlook that descends directly from the Puritans and we all have it. But Mac has it more than the rest of us.”

In 1931 a young Mac Bundy joined his brothers, Bill and Harvey Jr., at Groton, a New England boarding school presided over by Dr. Endicott Peabody, an ordained Episcopal minister and passionate Anglophile who dreamed of replicating the elite British secondary school model in the United States. Peabody, who required compulsory cold showers before breakfast and daily chapel services, admonished his pupils that “obedience is one of the greatest of human virtues.”

Groton was distinguished by an emphasis on public service. Its motto is *Cui servire est regnare*, “To serve is to rule.” During Peabody’s tenure, Groton graduates included one U.S. president, two secretaries of state, one national security adviser, one secretary of the treasury, one secretary of the army, one secretary of the navy, six generals, and three U.S. senators. Dean Acheson, the future secretary of state, was nearly expelled for his nonconformity to Groton’s rigid culture. Others, like Franklin Roosevelt, the future president, survived but left little imprint in the school’s tight hierarchy of fewer than two hundred boys. McGeorge Bundy, however, thrived at Groton.

The legend of McGeorge Bundy—first in his class, the editor in chief of the monthly *Grotonian*, president of the drama society, and captain of the debating team—begins at Groton. “The story is told,” recounts David Halberstam, “that a group of outstanding students were asked to prepare papers on the Duke of Marlborough. The next day Bundy was called upon to read his paper in class. As he read his classmates began to giggle. The giggles continued all the way through the reading of his excellent paper.”
The next day the teacher asked one of his students for an explanation. “Didn’t you know?” said the student. “He was unprepared. He was reading from a blank piece of paper.”

There was only one college to which Bundy applied. “From Groton he went to Yale,” writes Halberstam, “where the legend grew.” As the new students arrived, the Yale dean of admissions explained that for the first time one of the 850 students in the freshman class had recorded three perfect scores on his college entrance exams. Bundy had achieved this distinction with an unorthodox strategy on the English test. Students were instructed to compose a paper on one of a few perfunctory topics in the vein of “How did you spend your summer vacation?” Bundy refused. Instead he wrote an essay attacking the questions for their banality and upbraiding the college board for choosing such insipid themes. At first penalizing Bundy for his stunt, the reviewers who graded the exam eventually decided to reward his impertinence with the highest possible score.

Bundy majored in mathematics at Yale and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, secretary of the political union and then leader of its Liberal Party, class orator, and a columnist for the Yale Daily News, which he would sometimes use as a platform for slyly inflammatory opinions, such as his proposal to abolish the football team. His classmates called him “Mahatma Bundy,” as Bird notes, “partly because he was such a Boston Brahmin, and partly because he was constantly speaking out on the issues of the day.” In his senior year Bundy wrote an essay arguing for intervention against European fascism. It was published in an anthology entitled Zero Hour: A Summons to the Free. “Let me put my whole proposition in one sentence,” Bundy wrote. “I believe in the dignity of the individual, in government by law, in respect for truth, and in a good God; those beliefs are worth my life and more; they are not shared by Adolf Hitler.”

Like his father before him Bundy was inducted into Skull and Bones, the Yale secret society whose members have included President William
Howard Taft, Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson, Governor Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of War Robert Lovett, Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart, President George H. W. Bush and his son, President George W. Bush (as well as his opponent for the presidency in 2004, Senator John F. Kerry). Bundy, who kept a ceramic skull and bones propped on the desk of his Manchester study, remained close to his fraternity of fellow Bonesmen for his entire life, receiving correspondence more than fifty years after his initiation addressed to “Odin,” Bundy’s collegiate persona, named for the Norse god of war, poetry, wisdom, and the dead.20

In 1941, a year after his graduation from Yale, Bundy made a brief and inauspicious foray into politics. Running as a Republican for what was considered a safe seat on the Boston City Council, Bundy was trounced, and he would never again seek elected office. He instead directed his energies to pursuing an academic career, accepting an appointment to a unique graduate program, Harvard’s Society of Fellows. For those awarded a coveted spot in the Society of Fellows there were no classes to attend, no PhD exams to endure, no doctoral dissertation to grind out. For three years fellows had no requirements other than to pursue a scholarly project of personal interest.

World War II would interrupt Mac Bundy’s fellowship, just as it would disrupt life for the other men of the Bundy family. Mac’s brother Bill went to England, where he served as a cryptologist with a crack code-breaking team ensconced at a secret facility at Bletchley Park. Family patriarch Harvey Bundy Sr. was reunited with a former mentor, Henry Stimson, President Roosevelt’s secretary of war. As Stimson’s top deputy, the elder Bundy was one of a tightly contained circle of men involved in America’s secret development of the atomic bomb.

Mac Bundy enlisted, circumventing the matter of his poor vision by memorizing the optometrist’s chart, and received a posting in the Signal Corps. In 1943 he was appointed as an aide to Rear Admiral Alan G. Kirk, for whom he processed intercepted German air force attack plans
and assisted in military preparations for Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of France, which he observed from the flag bridge of the USS Augusta off the coast of Normandy.21

After the war, Mac Bundy returned to his Harvard fellowship and a new opportunity. Once again it involved a family relationship with Henry Stimson. In the autumn of 1945, Stimson suffered a massive heart attack, frustrating plans to compose his memoirs. Stimson would now need the assistance of an able and energetic collaborator. The choice was obvious. Harvey Bundy’s twenty-seven-year-old son would be the ideal coauthor—trusted, discreet, prolific, and possessing a crisp and confident prose style. Moreover, Bundy’s scholarly blank check from the Society of Fellows would allow him to pursue virtually any enterprise he wished. Their book, On Active Service in Peace and War, was published in 1948 and was greeted with generous reviews. The New Republic called it a “central document of our times,” while Foreign Affairs praised it as “one of the most important biographical works of our generation.”22

With the Stimson book and his Harvard fellowship completed, Mac Bundy deliberated over the next chapter of his career. A close family friend, Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter, tried to lure Bundy—a conspicuous nongraduate of the law school—with a clerkship. Bundy considered but declined the offer. The country’s most influential newspaper columnist, Walter Lippmann, dangled the possibility of a book collaboration. Bundy toyed with the idea but ultimately passed.23 Instead he jumped into the political game as a foreign policy adviser and speechwriter to the 1948 presidential campaign of New York governor Thomas E. Dewey, the heavily favored Republican nominee.

Nearly forty years later, Bundy recalled decamping from Cambridge to Manhattan. “We sat over there in the Roosevelt Hotel and received applications for embassies from affluent Republicans,” he said. “We were too statesmen-like to get into vulgar politics.” Bundy was responsible for
drafting the candidate’s speeches on foreign affairs. The job was not a taxing one. Most of Dewey’s remarks, Bundy said, were lifted from a filing cabinet that cataloged the governor’s previous statements. Bundy’s boss was Allen Dulles, the future director of central intelligence, a familiar figure from his time working with Secretary Stimson on Long Island. Dulles “was always looking for tennis partners,” Bundy remembered.

Harry S. Truman’s stunning defeat of Dewey that November left Bundy without a ticket to Washington. So he signed on for a brief stint at the Council on Foreign Relations, directing a task force on Marshall Plan aid to Europe. The committee included Dulles and General Dwight Eisenhower, who was then the president of Columbia University. “He read a couple of papers of mine,” Bundy recalled. “Marked them with a soft pencil and persuaded me that he was one of the best editors I ever worked for.” In 1949 Bundy returned to Harvard for a teaching position in the government department, the path smoothed by Justice Frankfurter.

The Cambridge years were fruitful. Bundy’s class on the history of U.S. foreign policy had a large campus following, with his lecture on the Munich appeasement of 1938 often performed to a standing-room-only audience. “My best lecture,” remembered Bundy, “was actually the relief of General MacArthur” by President Truman in the midst of the Korean War. “It was the little guy from Missouri in the not very well-pressed grey suit taking care of the great fake! . . . Perfect hero. Perfect villain.” Bundy courted Mary Buckminster Lothrop, whose socially prominent family had accumulated a substantial fortune and was a fixture in Boston society. The couple married and went on to have four sons. And after just two years lecturing at Harvard, Bundy was recommended for tenure by the government department. “Though Bundy was a good teacher, he was not in the classic sense a great expert in foreign affairs, since he had not come up through the discipline,” Halberstam notes. “He was not particularly at ease with Ph.D. candidates, those men who might be more specialized in their knowledge than he.” But because Bundy was the rising
star of the government department, the consensus among his colleagues was to award him tenure. As Halberstam recounts, the case was presented to Harvard president James Bryant Conant, who had served as a distinguished member of the chemistry department before running the university. Was it in fact true, asked Conant, that Bundy had never taken a single undergraduate or graduate class in government?

“That’s right,” said the professor representing the government department.

Conant was puzzled. “Are you sure that’s right?” he asked.

“I’m sure,” the government professor replied.

“Well,” said Conant with a sigh, “all I can say is that it couldn’t have happened in chemistry.”

Bundy published a second book in late 1951, *The Pattern of Responsibility*, an edited anthology and commentary on the public speeches and statements of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, then under fire from Senator Joseph McCarthy for being soft on communism. Acheson was a family friend and the father-in-law of his brother Bill. “I have undertaken to prepare this book,” Bundy wrote, “not because of this connection, but in spite of it. I have done so because I really do not believe that friendship, or indirect family connection, is a bar to fair and honest defense, especially when that defense takes the form of allowing a man to speak for himself.” The book, although based on Acheson’s own public remarks, is peppered with vintage Bundyisms: “It is possible to persuade the reasonable student that there is alertness against Communism in the State Department; it is relatively easy to show that Senator McCarthy is a charlatan.” The Acheson collaboration in 1951 also foreshadowed a seminal Bundy theme, integral to his presidential counsel in the years to come. “Very near the heart of all foreign affairs,” he declared, “is the relationship between policy and military power.” How Bundy conceived of and explicitly defined that relationship in the crucible of Vietnam would, for better or worse, come to define his place in history.
In 1953, Bundy’s swift Harvard ascent reached its apogee. Nathan Pusey, the university’s newly appointed president, tapped Bundy to be dean of the faculty. He was just thirty-four years old. A Yale colleague circulated a playful limerick encapsulating the Bundy legend to date:

A proper young prig, McGeorge Bundy,
Graduated from Yale on a Monday
But he was shortly seen
As Establishment Dean
Up at Harvard the following Sunday.\(^3^3\)

“Bundy was a magnificent dean,” concludes Halberstam—a gifted tactician who, through his preternatural confidence and mastery of academic politics, “took the complex Harvard faculty—diverse, egomaniacal—and played with it, in the words of a critic, like a cat with mice.”\(^3^4\) Under Bundy’s leadership the bureaucracy was tamed, decisions were made quickly, and dynamic new faculty members were recruited, including the social scientists Erik Erikson and David Riesman, the political scientist Stanley Hoffman, and even the playwright Lillian Hellman. The government department, in particular, was a remarkable incubator of talent in the 1950s, producing three future national security advisers: Bundy, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Henry Kissinger, for whom Bundy helped secure tenure by coupling a pair of half-time appointments into a single permanent position. Nonetheless Bundy and Kissinger shared an uneasy relationship. “I thought him more sensitive and gentle than his occasionally brusque manner suggested,” Kissinger said of Bundy. “He tended to treat me with the combination of politeness and subconscious condescension that upper-class Bostonians reserve for people of, by New England standards, exotic backgrounds and excessively intense personal style.”\(^3^5\) Riesman, the influential sociologist poached from the University of Chicago, called Bundy’s management of the faculty a form of “aristocratic meritocracy.”\(^3^6\)
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During his years as dean Bundy developed a relationship with John F. Kennedy, the junior senator from Massachusetts, who was also a member of the Harvard board of overseers. That connection was cultivated in part by two high-profile Harvard personalities: John Kenneth Galbraith, the economist who had been a college tutor to Kennedy in the late 1930s and remained an adviser and friend, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., the historian who hosted a salon of sorts to introduce Kennedy to the brightest minds in Cambridge.

After Kennedy was elected president in 1960, he tapped Bundy to serve as his special assistant for national security affairs, a position that has come to be known as national security adviser. Bundy transformed what had been a post of marginal influence in the Eisenhower era into a dominant player in the management of American global strategy. The press coverage of his ascension invariably emphasized his access to power. “With his pink cheeks, sandy hair, springy step, and faintly quizical expression behind plain glasses, Bundy could easily pass for a Washington junior civil servant,” a Newsweek cover story reported. “Yet he is one of the most influential men in the U.S. Government.” According to the New York Times, the national security adviser was “one of the most influential custodians of the foreign policies of the United States, one of the very few Americans whose daily judgments directly affect the political history of the world.” As David Halberstam would later note, many who knew Bundy “thought of him as the best the country could offer, McGeorge Bundy of Boston, a legend in his time.”

Bundy would remain as national security adviser for five years, serving President Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson. The rapturous regard in which Bundy was held was captured by the columnist Joseph Kraft, who in 1965 said,

Bundy is the leading candidate, perhaps the only candidate, for the statesman’s mantle to emerge in the generation that is
coming to power—the generation which reached maturity in the war and postwar period. His capacity to read the riddle of multiple confusions, to consider a wide variety of possibilities, to develop lines of action, to articulate and execute public purposes, to impart quickened energies to men of the highest ability seems to me unmatched. To me anyhow he seems almost alone among contemporaries a figure of true consequence, a fit subject for Milton’s words:

A Pillar of State; deep on his
Front engraven
Deliberation sat and publick care;
And Princely counsel in his face.40

Even Bundy’s less than endearing qualities were exalted as proof of his superiority. In a cover story about Bundy in June 1965, Time magazine stated: “He is self-confident to the point of arrogance, intelligent to the point of intimidation.” Bundy was, in fact, willing to articulate convictions others could find impolitic or even pompous. “In the final analysis,” he proclaimed in 1965, “the United States is the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world the caboose.” Bundy’s extraordinary stature made him the logical choice to present the Johnson administration’s case for perseverance in Vietnam. “To the job of Ambassador to Academe, McGeorge Bundy brings solid-gold credentials,” Time declared, describing Bundy’s return to the Harvard campus to defend the administration’s policies to more than one thousand students and professors who packed Lowell Lecture Hall, where Bundy used to teach his hugely popular class, “The U.S. in World Politics.” Taking the lectern once more, he cautioned his audience that the collapse of South Vietnam would produce “a great weakening in the free societies in their ability to withstand communism.”
Bundy was determined to answer the administration’s critics, and in doing so he espoused grand objectives for U.S. foreign policy. “We cannot limit ourselves to one objective at a time. We, like Caesar, have all things to do at once,” Bundy professed in a May 1965 memorial speech at Franklin Roosevelt’s grave site. “And this is hard. In Vietnam today we have to share in the fighting; we have to lead in the search for peace; and we have to respond, in all that we do, to the real needs and the real hopes of the people of Vietnam.”

In early 1966, after the essential decisions in Vietnam were made but before their true costs were apparent, Bundy left government service to become president of the Ford Foundation. Under Bundy’s leadership the philanthropy initiated major advances in public broadcasting, energy conservation, public interest law, and the expansion of civil and voting rights. Yet, despite his good works the question of Vietnam remained. His friend Kingman Brewster, who had been named the president of Yale University, remarked, “Mac is going to spend the rest of his life trying to justify his mistakes on Vietnam.”

Out of office, Bundy remained adamant in his refusal to criticize the Johnson administration and was completely intolerant of former government colleagues who did. He made his conviction clear in a debate held at Harvard in March 1968, when Bundy faced off against the political scientist Stanley Hoffman, whom he had recruited to the faculty the previous decade. “Particularly when you go to work as a staff assistant, you acquire an obligation of loyalty, which tends to increase through time,” Bundy explained to a restive audience of students and faculty. “I have very little sympathy with those who write criticisms which appear over the heading ‘former White House assistant.’” Bundy described such dissent as a form of political assassination aimed at the president. “When people do that they have taken a gun provided by someone else and aimed it at him, and I’m against it.” In the audience that evening was James Thomson, an Asia expert who had worked for Bundy on the White
House staff and would soon publish a critical magazine article dissecting the anatomy of Vietnam decision making. Bundy was infuriated by Thomson’s disclosures and would refuse to speak with his former colleague for years to follow. In his talk, Bundy cited his experience working with Henry Stimson, “a great cabinet officer who worked for seven presidents in different ways, and who made it his binding rule to engage in no criticism of any of the seven while that man was still in active public life. That is my position too.”

While Bundy was prepared to defend the decisions that enlarged the war, he declined to defend himself personally—or to allow anyone else to do so for him. When the New York Times published the Pentagon Papers in 1971, rumors circulated that there were other documents, still classified, that reflected Bundy’s doubts about Vietnam. Francis Bator and Carl Kaysen, who had worked for Bundy in the White House, pushed him to disclose the information. “After Mac himself had brushed their inquiry off,” recounts Kai Bird, “they went to Mary Bundy and told her, ‘You’ve got to get Mac to publicize these memos.’ Mary listened and asked her husband about it, but he would have nothing to do with any effort to defend his record.”

That same spring, Bundy delivered three highly anticipated lectures on the Vietnam War at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Bundy said his purpose in giving the lectures was to “find instruction” from events in Vietnam “without engaging either in attack or defense.” Yet his lectures enraged many of the Council’s members, who by that time, like the broader Establishment they represented, had turned forcefully against the war.

On the basic question of the war’s justification, Bundy expressed his conviction that “it was necessary and right, in some form and by some means, to act to avoid a Communist victory by force of arms in Vietnam in 1965 and thereafter. I suppose this is not the majority view today, but it is mine, and I have to start, on these matters, from where I am.” Bundy
acknowledged the criticism that “the Johnson administration campaigned against a wider war and then promptly started one,” leading some to conclude, “this was sheer duplicity. It was not. The administration in 1964 did not know what 1965 would require in Vietnam and it preferred not to decide.”

When the turning point of 1965 finally arrived, Bundy stated, the American public should have been prepared: “Neither the possibility of bombing the North nor the prospect of a major commitment of ground combat forces to Vietnam—the two major decisions of 1965—was a secret to anyone before it happened. Both were extensively reported. If the Congress did not intrude itself in these deliberations—and it did not—it was by a clear and conscious choice.” Commenting on the 1964 Tonkin Gulf resolution, which authorized Johnson to use military force against North Vietnam, Bundy said, “The administration was almost forced to rely on the resolution and to make it carry a weight for which it was not designed.” He called this “not a crime of intentional deception, but an error of democratic decision-making.” And in the end, Bundy offered only a terse expression of regret for the course of the war. “There has been very much more cost and pain,” he said, “than most of us would have thought justified if we had perceived it as inevitable in 1965.”

In the years that followed, Bundy tended to avoid making public remarks about Vietnam. But questions about his role in the war persisted. In 1976 he accepted an invitation to address a meeting of Harvard’s Nie- man Fellows, a program administered by his former aide James Thomson, with whom Bundy had finally reconciled. After his talk, one of the fellows, a young journalist named Ron Javers, needleled Bundy about Vietnam. “Your problem, young man,” said Bundy, cutting off the exchange, “is not your intellect but your ideology.” Javers would not be dismissed. He cornered the former national security adviser during a cocktail reception.
“What about Vietnam?” Javers asked.
“I don’t understand your question,” Bundy replied.
“Mac, what about you and Vietnam?”
“I still don’t understand,” said Bundy.
“But Mac, you screwed it up, didn’t you?”
A glacial silence followed. Then Bundy suddenly smiled and replied, “Yes, I did. But I’m not going to waste the rest of my life feeling guilty about it.” Later that evening, Bundy spoke with Thomson about the encounter. “I’ll never be appointed Secretary of State,” he said with a note of resignation, “or even a university president.”

After stepping down from the Ford Foundation in 1979, Bundy became a professor of history at New York University. Twenty-four of his future faculty colleagues protested his appointment, which was nonetheless approved. Many of those who objected would later find that he was a reliable ally in department votes on academic and administrative matters.

Bundy spent his years at NYU exploring the history of nuclear weapons and strategic doctrine, culminating in the publication in 1988 of his widely praised history, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*. As Bundy was writing the book, the journalist David Talbot asked him about Vietnam. “I did have reservations about that,” Bundy replied, referring to his support for enlarging the war, “and it can be argued that I didn’t press hard enough. But I didn’t see any way of leaving Vietnam alone and simply getting out in 1965.” He added, “Oh yes, I worry about that all the time, but I’m not prepared to sort it out yet. That’s going to have to happen some years from now.”

In 1995 McGeorge Bundy finally decided to revisit the question of Vietnam. The catalyst was the publication in April of that year of *In Retrospect:...*
The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, the historical memoir by his longtime friend and colleague, former secretary of defense Robert S. McNamara. In his book, McNamara conceded, “We were wrong, terribly wrong” about Vietnam; he also acknowledged that in 1967, while still in office, he concluded that the war could not be won but nonetheless remained silent, refusing to disclose his doubts. That admission in particular stirred deep rage in some quarters and incited a national media firestorm.

The New York Times editorial page excoriated McNamara for his failure to “join the national debate over whether American troops should continue to die at the rate of hundreds per week in a war he knew to be futile.” The Times concluded that McNamara deserved to be haunted by what he had done. “Surely he must in every quiet and prosperous moment hear the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry, dying in the tall grass, platoon by platoon, for no purpose,” the editors wrote. “What he took from them cannot be repaid by prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades late.”

Prominent veterans of the war also lashed out at the former secretary of defense. “It sure would have been helpful in May of 1967, when I volunteered for Vietnam, if he had said then that the war was unwinnable,” said Max Cleland, who lost both legs and an arm in Vietnam and afterward served as head of the Veterans Administration. (He would be elected to the U.S. Senate in 1996.) “McNamara went to the World Bank, while a lot of other people went to their graves.”

McNamara’s critics claimed that if he had voiced his dissent in 1967, he could have helped to end America’s involvement in the war. “He was one of the highest ranking officials of the Johnson administration, he could have made a difference,” argued Mary McGrory of the Washington Post. “That’s what’s unpardonable, not to have tried.” According to Townsend Hoopes, who served as undersecretary of the air force during
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the Vietnam War, “A McNamara resignation in 1967 or early 1968 would have changed history.”

Other commentators welcomed McNamara’s admissions. “To condemn Robert McNamara for the arrogant lies of Vietnam is understandable,” wrote Richard Cohen of the Washington Post. “But to condemn him also for finally telling the truth—no matter how late—makes no sense.” In Newsweek, Jonathan Alter agreed. “For a major public official to admit profound error is extraordinarily rare, perhaps unprecedented, in American history,” he observed. “Anyone predicting in 1961 that Bob McNamara would one day cry publicly while admitting colossal error would have been laughed out of Washington.”

McNamara had asked Bundy to comment on early drafts of In Retrospect, and Bundy had responded with a balance of candid criticisms and warm encouragement. The first draft was not very good, Bundy wrote, but he could not explain precisely why. Perhaps, he suggested, McNamara had become preoccupied with Vietnam’s vast paper trail of documents rather than the essential problems the United States was grappling with at each stage of the war’s progression. Bundy counseled McNamara to exercise the patience required to produce the great book of which he was capable. In another letter, Bundy acknowledged McNamara’s choice not to criticize living colleagues with whom he differed, but he wondered whether McNamara might have gone too far in bestowing praise on those with whom he disagreed. Bundy seemed to anticipate the intense public interest that would be sparked by McNamara’s retrospective renunciation of the war; months before the book’s publication, he offered his friend a list of potential press questions and illustrative answers, including queries about McNamara’s reliance on quantitative data and the flaws in American military strategy.

On April 17, 1995, Bundy appeared on The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, on public television, as one of a panel of commentators invited to discuss
the fierce national argument McNamara’s book had generated. “I think Bob McNamara has tried very hard to tell it as he now understands it,” Bundy said. “It’s an honest contribution and it will be a very much valued one.”

The anchor, Jim Lehrer, asked about McNamara’s retrospective appraisal. “‘We were wrong, terribly wrong.’ Would you accept that yourself?” he asked Bundy.

“Sure,” Bundy replied, with a casual shrug. An awkward beat followed before he added: “I think it’s very unlikely that we were right looking at the evidence as we now have it.”

Another panelist, the Los Angeles Times columnist Robert Scheer, quickly seized on the significance of Bundy’s admission. “You have a guest on your program, McGeorge Bundy, who was certainly as complicit as McNamara,” he told Lehrer. “I don’t know why McNamara should take all the heat.”

The camera cut away for a reaction shot. Scheer’s attack appeared to rattle the seventy-six-year-old Bundy. His sharp blue eyes darted back and forth behind his thick glasses with the clear plastic frames, the same signature style he had worn in the Kennedy and Johnson years. When his gaze finally steadied, Bundy appeared to betray an emotion utterly inconsistent with his cool, confident Vietnam persona. It was not a look of fear, exactly, but something related to it: a thinly suppressed expression of sudden alarm. The fierce anger directed at McNamara had suddenly been focused on him, and for an instant, he appeared uncharacteristically vulnerable. Within days of his television appearance, however, I received a call from Bundy seeking my help in composing his own memoir and retrospective analysis of America’s path to war in Vietnam. Despite the enormous clamor surrounding McNamara’s book and the certainty that such residual animosity would be directed toward him, Bundy wanted to commence work as soon as possible.

Bundy’s death made the completion of the original conception of the
book an impossibility. There were simply too many narrative and historical gaps in the collected fragments to render a manuscript that would honestly reflect Bundy’s intended design, which was a proposition still very much in formation when he passed away. Yet there was a critical mass of content from our collaboration more than sufficient to present a distillation of many of his essential recollections and retrospective judgments.

With the encouragement of Mary Bundy and the generous financial support of the Carnegie Corporation, in 1997 I commenced work on an extensive edited volume based principally on the materials drawn from our collaboration. That book melded a variety of historical sources relating to Bundy with the content produced during our work together and my detailed narrative charting the progression of American strategy in Vietnam from 1961 to 1965. A pair of advisers appointed by Mrs. Bundy periodically reviewed and commented on drafts of the book. Completed in late 2001 after various delays and amid other professional obligations, a complete draft of the edited volume was formally evaluated by its prospective publisher, Yale University Press, in 2002. An independent expert committee of historians and former senior policy makers read the manuscript and unanimously recommended it for publication. However, following an extended period of discussion with Mrs. Bundy about the creative control of the manuscript and various efforts to address her concerns, she decided that she no longer wished to proceed with a posthumously published work. In 2004 Mrs. Bundy donated her late husband’s papers to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston.

The book that follows is not the Yale University Press manuscript—it is neither an annotated volume of Bundy papers nor a comprehensive history of Vietnam policy making. It has been composed without any involvement whatsoever from the Bundy family or its advisers. This is an original work that is informed by my experience with Bundy but which draws conclusions that are my own. In the chapters to come, I have attempted to distill what I believe are the pivotal lessons of Bundy’s performance as
national security adviser with respect to the vital question of American strategy in Vietnam. Some of these lessons are consistent with the retrospective analysis Bundy and I were trying to complete. Other lessons are based on what I regard as the illuminating aspects of Bundy’s conduct in office—particularly his failures—and offer conclusions he may not have supported. Throughout I have been careful to differentiate between Bundy’s retrospective views and my own commentary and conclusions. Moreover, I have attempted to be neither Bundy’s advocate nor his critic. My objective is different. I have sought to convey the essential insights of my collaboration with Bundy while also offering an independent analysis of his role in the highly complex narrative of America’s entanglement in Vietnam. The reader should therefore understand that in no way is this a book by McGeorge Bundy but rather it is a book about him.

Why did Bundy commit himself to a retrospective study of Vietnam that would inevitably revive the passions of the war? In the last years of his life I believe he labored under the weight of a powerful perceived obligation to history. I feel certain that Bundy, had he lived to complete his final work, would have attempted to address his own shortcomings during his years at the center of Vietnam strategy. As Bundy observed in one of his draft fragments: “I had a part in a great failure. I made mistakes of perception, recommendation and execution. If I have learned anything I should share it.”69 In another fragment he wrote and underscored: “You owe it to a lot of different people. Because it hurt them or their families; because it matters what lessons are learned . . . there are a lot of errors in the path of understanding.”70

Bundy explained that he had embarked on his account of the war in response to the “driving force” of a pair of questions that he had “deliberately put aside for decades”: How did the “tragedy” of the Vietnam War come to pass? And what guidance can it provide for the future?71

Bundy acknowledged a dramatic shift of perspective about Vietnam.
“One can begin, as I do, with agreement that the war was, overall, a war we should not have fought and then try to sort out from one man’s experience why it was that different judgments prevailed at the time.” In sharp contrast to his fervent public arguments in 1965 in favor of Americanizing the war, Bundy admitted that at the time and in the years that followed, “the doves were right.” He would therefore try to explain “the ways in which the executive branch continuously got that great choice wrong.”72 Finally, Bundy explained, his Vietnam inquiry would be constrained in scope and far less ambitious in historical breadth than his study of the nuclear danger because he was “too close to some of it, too far from the rest, and too old for the sheer hard work.”73

Bundy credited his choice to write about Vietnam “largely . . . to the example” of his colleague and friend Robert McNamara. “His book In Retrospect is a remarkably straightforward account,” Bundy wrote, “and I think its value for the long run will far outweigh its obvious cost in short-term anger from readers with their own strong feelings about Vietnam.”74 What he did not acknowledge—but must have known—was that like McNamara, Bundy would pay a price in public opprobrium for finally recanting his belief in a ruinous war he had in large part designed and had passionately promoted, but had not renounced for three decades.

Bundy’s decision to speak out about the war was historically significant. The accounts of all of the other central protagonists in the Vietnam drama—from the beginning of U.S. military engagement to the painful conclusion of the war—had already been added to the historical record. That literature includes works by Lyndon Johnson, William Westmoreland, Maxwell Taylor, Henry Cabot Lodge, Dean Rusk, George Ball, Walt Rostow, Clark Clifford, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and, finally, McNamara.75

“I have tried to respect the sacrifice of those who died . . . and their families,” Bundy wrote, noting that America “has learned hard lessons
from their sacrifice” that helped to ensure victory in subsequent wars. Bundy told me, was “a major and tragic event in American history and I have something to contribute to understanding it.”

“My wish now is that we had done less” in Vietnam, Bundy confided in another interview. “I wish that I had understood that more clearly. Why did I not understand it? . . . What can we learn from this episode that will help us do better in the world ahead?”