# 6

# The Fall of 1963

Historians are divided as to why McNamara set in motion withdrawal plans in July 1962. On the one hand, there are those who argue that McNamara, and perhaps Kennedy as well, believed the war would effectively end by 1965 – that the insurgency could be reduced to "low-level banditry" by that time.[1] On the other, there are those who argue that Kennedy presciently understood that the United States was on a losing path in Vietnam. In fact, neither is correct. Newly available documents show that, in private, McNamara was not optimistic about US prospects in Vietnam but neither was he convinced that all intervention was doomed to failure. Instead, he saw Vietnam as a test case for a new kind of intervention that could be financially sustainable.

During the October 3 NSC meeting, Kennedy specifically pushed McNamara on his conclusion that combat operations would end by 1965. He asked his Secretary whether the withdrawal plans were based on "an assumption that it's going well" and whether this could make the administration look foolish if things turned sour. McNamara explained his two "major premises" for announcing the phaseout date: first, he believed that the "military campaign" would be "complete" by the end of 1965 and "secondly, if it extends beyond that period, we believe we can train them to take over the essential functions and withdraw the bulk of our forces." When McGeorge Bundy asked him "what's the point of doing that?" McNamara responded, "We need a way to get out of Vietnam. This is a way of doing it."[2]

However, the report's nominal co-author Maxwell Taylor was more troubled about the 1965 end date: unlike McNamara, he explained, "I think it is a major question" but reassured the President that the officers

he had spoken to largely felt it "would be ample time" to "reduce this insurgency to a little more than sporadic itching." Immediately after their exchange, McNamara again insisted on the date and explained, "I think Mr. President, we must have a means of disengaging from this area. We must show our country what that means. The only slightest difference between Max and me in this entire report is this one estimate ... I'm not entirely sure of that. But I am sure that if we don't meet those dates in the sense of ending the major military campaigns, we nonetheless can withdraw the bulk of our US forces according to the schedule we've laid, worked out, because we train the Vietnamese to do the job." For McNamara, withdrawal was not pegged to victory; instead, he was most focused on "a way to get out." For him, having forces on the ground was complicated for the Vietnamese and wasteful for the United States. When Kennedy agreed on the date, he might have been hedging: "Let's say it anyway. Then in '65 if it doesn't work out we get a new date," he told his colleagues. McNamara was far less flexible (see Figure 6.1).[3]

The *Pentagon Papers* observe that "optimism dominated official thinking" in the 1962–1963 period.[4] While this might have been true of the administration and McNamara's public pronouncements, the reality behind closed doors was more complex. In the months leading up to the July 1962 Honolulu conference, Hilsman complained that a "wave of discouragement" had hit the Pentagon, a phenomenon he found "surprising since the evidence points in quite the other direction."[5] If anything, a consensus emerged in this period that the situation in Vietnam might be approaching a stalemate; Ambassador Lodge, General Taylor, the CIA as well as USOM in Vietnam, among others, all shared the view at different moments. In the fall of 1962, the Task Force on Southeast Asia had described the situation as "basically a stand-off with no clear prospect of victory for either side," while Taylor, in assessing the difference between his visits in October 1961 and 1962, said that whereas before the "Viet Cong [had been] winning the war," by 1962, "no one clearly has the initiative."[6]

Moreover, both McNamara's October trip report and the November 1963 CPSVN focused on the danger that the programs in Vietnam had become "over-extended" or confused and that the administration needed to move to a "consolidation" phase. In addition, the trip report and the Special Group (CI) concluded that the civic action and civil programs as well as the strategic hamlets, which were all at the core of the counter-insurgency program, were "lagging."[7] To a large extent, the narrative about McNamara's optimism on Vietnam relies on his public pronouncements, which remained positive. At the end of the October NSC meetings,

FIGURE 6.1 President Kennedy with Secretary of Defense McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell D. Taylor on their return from Vietnam, October 2, 1963. Later in the day, the administration announced its intention to withdraw from the country by 1965.
(Abbie Rowe, White House Photograph Collection, JFKL.)

the press announcement read: "Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the US military task can be completed by the end of 1965."[8]

However, as McNamara's remarks during the October meetings suggest, as far as he and his planners were concerned, withdrawal could happen because the Vietnamese would be trained do the job not because there would be peace by 1965. As his trip report explained, "The US advisory effort, however, cannot assure ultimate success. This is a Vietnamese war and the country and the war must in the end, be run solely by the Vietnamese. It will impair their independence and the development of their initiative if we leave our advisers in place beyond the time they are really needed."[9]

Although McNamara's most optimistic advisors (notably General Paul D. Harkins and Thompson) first suggested the 1965 end date, only Harkins seemed to believe that there would be peace by then, having

perhaps convinced his mentor Taylor as well. There is no doubt that Harkins' reporting was unequivocally optimistic.[10] In July 1962, he told McNamara that it would take a year to train the Vietnamese;[11] a few months later he predicted "all our programs will come to fruition by the end of 1962."[12] July 1962 was a key date because it was at this time, during the Honolulu conference, that McNamara asked the JCS to begin the handover of military responsibilities to their South Vietnamese counterparts. This timing explains why many have assumed that McNamara began to plan for withdrawal on the basis of Harkins' reporting and resulting "euphoria and optimism."[13]

However, the administration did not especially value Harkins and his staff. Harkins, a man appointed largely because he was Taylor's protégé and longtime friend, had to regularly defend his staff against OSD charges that they were incompetent. He experienced a fall from grace that became particularly acute after the defeat at Ap Bac in January 1963.[14] By the October 1963 NSC meetings, when Taylor cited Harkins' comments, McNamara dismissed them with a brief and cutting quip, "He's not a strong officer."[15] McNamara's colleagues shared his impatience with Harkins. This included the President (who, according to Forrestal, "wanted to get rid of him"[16]), Senator Mansfield (because he was "too optimistic"[17]) and McGeorge Bundy (who later described Harkins as a "dope"[18]). In later years, McNamara was more diplomatic and explained that Harkins "looked and spoke exactly as a general should" but, more bitingly, that although he was "a protégé of the scholarly Max Taylor, he lacked his mentor's intellectual caliber."[19] McNamara's Deputy Gilpatric, less diplomatically remembered that his boss was "just not impressed either by Harkins' record or by the personal attributes of the man when he saw him."[20]

As of 1962, McNamara became increasingly doubtful about field reports, notably from Harkins, and had begun reaching outside traditional channels to cross-check information. This led him to conclude that the United States could not win *militarily* in the traditional sense. His trip to Vietnam in the fall of 1963 confirmed this view. As a result, he put in motion a plan to demilitarize US involvement to meet the new objective of helping the South Vietnamese help themselves. He felt that this could be accomplished within Harkins' timeline. To a large extent, in keeping with Thompson's advice, a public display of optimism was a strategy for McNamara. Projecting optimism was a way of keeping the CPSVN on track "according to the schedule [he had] laid out."[21]

In fact, Thompson's optimistic views and trajectory offer a key to understanding McNamara's. Whereas Harkins' view of victory was predicated on a training mission and on the military aspects of the war, Thompson's was political and focused on training lower-level forces and the construction of strategic hamlets.[22] As such, the decreased military presence envisaged in the withdrawal plans had less impact on his long-range plans. In addition, in his discussions with McNamara, Thompson, unlike Harkins, clearly felt that optimism was a calculated posture to avoid US domestic audiences from turning against the war and to keep the South Vietnamese motivated and confident that they were on the "winning side."

Thompson's trajectory during the July 1962–October 1963 period is informative. In the spring of 1962, Thompson reached the peak of his optimism, prompting McNamara to urge his military commanders to accelerate the withdrawal plans. Using a well-worn phrase, Thompson noted that the "tide has turned"[23] and at a meeting at Fort Bragg, confidently announced that "we definitely are winning."[24] But by the fall of 1963, a shift had occurred. Thompson produced a report that described the current path as a "collision course" and warned of a "grave risk that the only choice before us will be of losing either with or without Diem."[25] In a meeting with Lodge in September 1963, he argued that the United States should stick to Diem even though the Buddhist crisis had derailed progress (contrary to what American military advisors were saying).[26] At the same time, he reassured his American colleagues that, "If everything was to go 50% according to plan, then I would say that there could be a decisive military improvement in twelve months and certainly within two years."[27] This was exactly the time frame that McNamara imposed for the withdrawal plans.

Much of Thompson and McNamara's optimism was calculated to influence events both on the ground and in Washington. Although Thompson was not officially in Vietnam during the McNamara–Taylor visit, McNamara's notes made on the first day bear Thompson's hallmark, in particular, one remarkable phrase: "People want to be on winning side – if word gets around that we have doubts, are cutting aid, or likely to pull out, it will reduce the will of the people in the hamlets to resist."[28] These are almost exactly the same words Thompson penned in a May 1963 letter to the British High Commissioner in New Zealand about the situation in Vietnam where he wrote, "The key to the present situation is confidence. The peasants are not going to stick their necks out unless they think they will be on the winning side. Naturally

therefore I have to be optimistic if I am to influence events. You must play as if you are going to win."[29]

Herein lays the key to understanding Thompson's and McNamara's optimism: they did not necessarily believe that everything was going to plan; they were looking for a way to galvanize the troops, both at home and in the field. The idea that optimism was a means to an end was a recurring theme in Thompson's correspondence: he had previously noted that the momentum of the 1962 victories had "inspired confidence in the successful outcome of the war"[30] and that confidence "would be self-generating."[31] Considering the McNamara–Taylor report observed a "general atmosphere of watch-and-wait,"[32] McNamara made a calculated choice to be optimistic because it kept his plan on track. Without an energized South Vietnamese partner and with a Congress threatening to cut off aid, a long-drawn-out program of handing over responsibilities could not happen.

Furthermore, McNamara's tendency to consistently second-guess military advice is hardly compatible with the notion that he was uncritically accepting of Harkins' input. In an oral history, McNamara, using an analogy of factory workers at Ford, commented on "the foolhardiness of combining the intelligence function with the operating function . . . that intelligence estimates that came from the unit that was associated with operations were tainted . . . by the biases that we all have in evaluating our own operations."[33] That critical reading of intelligence estimates influenced the way McNamara received Harkins' reports and subsequently informed the Taylor–McNamara report's conclusions. Going against Harkins' assessment, the report pointed to the continuing issue of poor intelligence,[34] to the fact that the Vietcong effort had "not yet been seriously reduced in the aggregate" and commented that people were unanimous that the strategic hamlet programs was "overextended in the Delta."[35]

McNamara's notes from this trip are also instructive:[36] during a visit to a Special Forces detachment, which was at the vanguard of counterinsurgency, he concluded that "there has been progress in the Delta during the past year (have strategic hamlets, etc.) but not working as much as they claim and their plan for the future is weak." In another area, he described "clearly a miserably planned hamlet program."[37] He met with Professor Patrick J. Honey, a scholar of Vietnamese culture and history, who recognized that they were "in theory great" but "in practice: not." In the Delta, US advisors told him that "in some hamlets [there were] 20–30% VC sympathizers" and that there had been "little or no progress

in winning over the people." Within days, Vice President Tho confirmed this alarming assessment, writing that there were "not more than 20 or 30 properly defended hamlets."[38] McNamara's trip file also contained a USOM "informal appreciation" of the strategic hamlets which called it an "idealistic program" that had failed primarily for the reasons that had troubled Thompson, namely a "lack of provincial capability"; it also highlighted the Delta as an area where "communists still control most of the people."[39]

In addition, the trip's purpose was also to ascertain whether or not the Buddhist crisis had affected military progress. Although the people he met with were nearly unanimous in their appraisal that it had not, he wrote that "sympathy for the VC will build up because the devil you don't know is better than the one you do." All in all, these are not the notes of an optimistic man on the cusp of victory.

Several of McNamara's colleagues recall a decisive shift in the fall of 1963. General Krulak, who sat on the Special Group (CI) as the JCS representative and who joined McNamara on his October 1963 trip to Vietnam, expressed his "admiration" for McNamara "because he saw the truth more quickly than most, and he saw through the phoniness of what he was told when he went to Vietnam be it by the Vietnamese, or our own people." Krulak recalled that Kennedy had received "clear indications" from McNamara that the counterinsurgency operations were "not going well" and were "not implemented earnestly and this would morph into a conventional war," something Kennedy explicitly sought to avoid.[40] Forrestal and Hilsman also recall a change in September 1963, a point where McNamara realized that "he had been badly misinformed by Harkins."[41]

Ultimately, the idea that McNamara was optimistic that "victory" would be achieved by 1965 is not borne out either in his September trip notes or in his statements at the ensuing NSC meetings. Although he accepted his military advisors' timeline, he did not accept their positive assessments. He nevertheless continued to make optimistic statements "to influence events" on the ground. The South Vietnamese needed to believe they were "on the winning side" if they were to take over responsibilities in earnest; and in Washington congressional leaders needed to believe it too if he was to avoid cuts to his long-term plans for Vietnam.

The press release after the October 1963 NSC meetings that announced the administration's plans to phase out from Vietnam was not evidence of McNamara's undue optimism. Instead, the statement was

first and foremost a maneuver aimed at, among others, members of the administration who could put obstacles in the CPSVN's way.

The administration resisted making a press announcement until October 1963 because publicizing the withdrawal plans committed it to a timetable and a narrative of a war in a deescalating phase. In fact, even though NSAM 263, the summative document of the NSC meetings, instructed that "no formal announcement" should be made about the withdrawal plans, within hours Press Secretary Salinger and Secretary McNamara organized a press conference.[42] As expected, when it came, the announcement produced front-page news: the *Baltimore Sun*'s cover, for instance, was splashed with the headline "McNamara and Taylor Feel US Can Withdraw Most of Troops from Vietnam by End of 1965."[43] The *New York Times* cover featured a photo of President Kennedy listening intently to Taylor and McNamara, with the headline "Vietnam Victory by the End of '65 Envisaged by U.S."[44]

Just as McNamara had insisted on having the 1965 end date included in his trip report, he also insisted on making a public announcement because he knew that it would attract media attention. The announcement fulfilled a number of his short- and long-term objectives. In the short term, the administration hoped to goad the Diem regime into implementing much-needed and long-awaited political reforms that would "win the hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese as a prerequisite for defeating the Vietcong insurgency.[45] Crucially for McNamara, it also prepared him to counter the criticisms of Senators Fulbright and Mansfield before going to Capitol Hill for yet another MAP hearing the following week.

However, the more important objective for McNamara was a bureaucratic one: that is, to peg the whole, fractured administration to his chosen policy and to create considerable momentum against further escalation. A telling exchange during the October NSC meetings between Kennedy and Salinger speaks to this objective most clearly. When the latter indicated that "the significance of this is that this is a government-wide statement of policy which has the approval of every . . .," Kennedy cut him off to add, "And more than that. It's not only that statement . . . to obey . . . but also the report, the essence of the report, was endorsed by all."[46]

The press release actually contained two distinct announcements: a token, thousand-man withdrawal by the end of 1963 and a gradual phaseout of remaining military personnel by 1965. The thousand-man withdrawal was arguably a public relations exercise aimed primarily at appeasing the SFRC, whereas the overall phaseout was, as the *Pentagon*

*Papers* has described it, a "political-managerial"[47] move that reflected McNamara's style and priorities.

In tracing it back to its first expression, the token thousand-man withdrawal was clearly always considered separate from the overall withdrawal plans. The idea of announcing a "token withdrawal" originated in discussions with Robert Thompson and the Foreign Office in April 1962 when Thompson suggested that it could be made "when it appear [ed] reasonably certain that the tide had turned in Vietnam."[48] He argued that it was true in July 1962 and by October 1962 suggested that the token withdrawal should take place within approximately a year's time (i.e. in October 1963) and that it should be "well thought out and well-timed, so that it achieved the maximum effect without taking any of the pressure off here."[49] This suggests that the token withdrawal was, first, a public relations move (it should be "well-timed") and, second, distinct from the overall strategy (it should not "tak[e] any pressure off here"). It, therefore, provided a public backdrop against which the administration could present the withdrawal plans but did not affect the content of these plans.[50]

At the same time, the administration had to balance the different audiences in South Vietnam and in Washington. Earlier in the summer, it seemed that announcing a withdrawal achieved the administration's objectives in both settings. In a private conversation, McNamara explained to President Kennedy that "we ought to think about the possibility of pulling 1,000 men by the end of the year," that this was good "for domestic political purposes and also because of the psychological effect it would have on South Vietnam."[51] In keeping with this, MACV and CINCPAC proposed bringing the troops "home by xmas for compassionate and publicity reasons" and envisaged "statements of mutual gratitude" as well as grand ceremonies.[52]

However, after McNamara's trip when he had observed "hedging" and uncertainty on the South Vietnamese part, the decision was made to treat the withdrawal quietly and justify it on the basis that the function was either completed or the South Vietnamese could complete the job themselves.[53] President Kennedy now instructed Lodge that removing the "1,000 US advisors by December of this year should not be raised formally with Diem. Instead the action should be carried out routinely as part of our general posture of withdrawing people when they are no longer needed."[54]

For McNamara, the Senate was the more important audience. During the October meetings, Kennedy specifically asked McNamara

about the "advantage" of announcing the thousand-man withdrawal. McNamara responded,

> The advantage of taking them out is that we can say to the Congress and the people that we do have a plan for reducing the exposure of US combat personnel to the guerrilla actions in South Vietnam, actions that the people of South Vietnam should gradually develop a capability to suppress themselves. And I think this will be of great value to us in meeting the very strong views of Fulbright and others that we're bogged down in Asia and we'll be there for decades.

Kennedy agreed with McNamara and suggested that any public statement should be "run by" these congressmen.[55] Both Kennedy and McNamara were concerned about losing key allies of the administration's aid program.

For Taylor, the other author of the October 1963 report, the key audience was Diem. Before leaving for Vietnam, he had "thought it would be useful to work out a time schedule within which we expect to get this job done and to say plainly to Diem that we are not going to be able to stay beyond such and such time with such and such forces, and the war must be won in this time period." The minutes of the meeting read: "The President did not say 'yes' or 'no' to this proposal."[56] Unlike McNamara, Taylor went along with a public announcement of the policy to disengage because he hoped to influence the uncooperative regime in Saigon.

Although Robert Kennedy had first suggested that the threat of withdrawal could be used as a pressure tactic,[57] by the time of the October 1963 NSC meetings Taylor alone was pushing the idea. For Taylor, the 1965 deadline was basically arbitrary and primarily a threat designed to get Diem in line in the face of growing pressure within the administration for a coup.[58] McNamara's approach was almost exactly opposite. He lamented the lack of influence, and although the terms of reference of his trip to Vietnam had included finding ways "of influencing Diem," his notes reveal his frustration. In them, he complained, for instance, about "how little leverage we have" on the "completely unsuccessful government in Saigon."[59]

In addition, although McNamara saw the value of "creating uncertainty" in Diem,[60] he was also skeptical that such a strategy could be effective.[61] Both before and after the Taylor–McNamara trip, "pressure programs" were met with skepticism. President Kennedy "did not think that [they were] likely to be effective,"[62] while the Working Group on South Vietnam and the CIA warned that any threat even to "employ its

ultimate sanction (pulling out of South Vietnam) would almost certainly be regarded as hollow by the [Government of South Vietnam]."[63]

Ultimately, the Taylor–McNamara report itself presented this strategy not as an optimal policy but as a desperate effort. It noted that they could "increase [the regime's] obduracy," but "unless such pressures [were] exerted, they [were] almost certain to continue past patterns of behavior."[64] Also, the "Selective Pressures" that it did suggest included everything but military cuts, which it deemed especially unfeasible and counterproductive. Notably, it excluded the CPSVN.[65] "In sum," the report read, "The effect of pressures that can be carried out without detriment to the war effort is probably limited with respect to the possibility of Diem making necessary changes."[66] For McNamara, a pressure program, if it achieved anything, was designed to keep the CPSVN on track. A responsive government in South Vietnam would increase the likelihood that a self-sustaining program would be in place by 1965 when the US military withdrew.

The decision to announce the withdrawal plans on October 3, 1963, was also a bureaucratic move. While drafting the Taylor–McNamara report, Chester Cooper, William Bundy and Taylor each questioned the advisability of recommending a 1965 end date. However, McNamara insisted he was "just following orders" and that the date must stay in the report.[67] He also overrode Kennedy's reservations about committing the administration to a set date. After getting the military on board (they drafted the CPSVN), this was a way of getting the whole national security bureaucracy on board as well. By getting all the key actors involved in Vietnam policy to publicly commit to a policy of deescalation and getting Taylor, in particular, to co-own the prediction that most military operations would end by 1965, McNamara effectively neutralized bureaucratic politics.

The end point for the withdrawal plans and in the announcement was not "victory" in a traditional or unambiguous sense. Instead, as laid out in the CPSVN and in NSAM 263, it was "until the insurgency has been suppressed *or* until the national security forces of the Government of South Viet-Nam are capable of suppressing it."[68] Semantics are important here: it was not *and* but *or*. In time, the second alternative took precedence: the South Vietnamese were to fight the war themselves.

Clearly, the nuances of the policy had filtered through the administration effectively since Forrestal detailed the standing policy to Bundy a month later as follows: "The President made the point, as I remember, that our only interest was to help South Viet Nam defend itself against

subversive aggression from the North ... More recently we have added a gloss to this formula and implied (in the NSC statement of last month) that we would also withdraw the bulk of our personnel as soon as the South Vietnamese were able to cope for themselves. Secretary McNamara and General Taylor estimated that this might occur in 1965."[69] The policy also filtered to the field with Lodge reiterating to his South Vietnamese counterparts that "Americans are here to help Vietnam stand on its own feet, after which we would go home."[70] Not everyone in the administration necessarily believed that this was the final objective or outcome, but by October 1963 the administration's stated policy and the basis for military planning was that the United States was in the process of disengaging from Vietnam and transferring responsibility to the South Vietnamese.

In a revealing passage in *In Retrospect*, McNamara went into some detail about the divisions in the administration that culminated in the October meeting. Since his written notes for the first draft were relatively blunter, they are used instead. In them, he described three "factions":

> Group one believed the Training Mission had been successful and should be withdrawn. Group two believed the Mission hadn't succeeded but had been in place sufficient time to demonstrate success wasn't possible. Group three believed that additional US support, either through a Training Mission or through training supplanted by US combat forces, would be required and was justified.

As he explained, while all these "factions" agreed on the end point, they did not necessarily agree on the way to get there or how close the administration was to meeting its objective. However, a public commitment to his policy and his end date forced their hand and produced administration-wide unity.[71] Indeed, as a State Department cable explained, "We have been making serious effort in conjunction with McNamara–Taylor mission to achieve actual and visible unity within USG [United States government]."[72]

Although McNamara also described the meetings as "heated" and "controversial," in fact this was not entirely correct. His report was sufficiently ambiguous that most participants were convinced that their objectives were being met. Taylor could feel that the pressures on Diem had been raised. Hilsman, who often clashed with McNamara and was prone to making snide remarks about him, was so satisfied with McNamara's position at the October 2, 1963, meeting that he sent him a laudatory letter that read: "I want to express my admiration for a

perceptive job performed under the most difficult circumstances imaginable. I think you have brought some badly needed order to both Saigon and Washington, for which I am personally grateful."[73]

Ultimately, the October announcements served a number of important, short-term objectives for McNamara. First, he could "meet" the views of critical congressmen as he prepared to testify before them. Second, by announcing the process of withdrawal but then treating actual withdrawals in a "low-key" way, the administration could try to create uncertainty in the Diem regime without giving the Vietnamese the impression that the United States was "abandoning" them. Last, it consolidated the OSD's policy of phasing out in Vietnam and thus created a bureaucratic momentum in that direction. The latter was not, as Forrestal had suggested, primarily externally oriented "gloss"[74] but an important internal, bureaucratic maneuver.

In an oral history that he gave many years later, McNamara reflected on bureaucratic politics in a way that seems particularly on point for his October decisions. He explained, "I would point out that there is an important distinction between decisions that are a function of bureaucratic politics or decisions that are dominated by bureaucratic politics on the one hand, and, on the other, the implementation of decisions taken in the national interest – implementation which must take account of bureaucratic politics, and in a very real sense neutralize bureaucratic politics."[75]

In October 1963, McNamara hoped that a public announcement might set the policy "in concrete,"[76] but he could not have predicted the events that followed and which threw it off course. His report had sounded a note of caution that events could still create setbacks. Above all the possibility of an "unanticipated coup d'état or death of Diem" loomed. Far from being "unanticipated," McNamara's trip notes showed deep discontent and uncertainty over Diem's future and over whether the war was winnable with him.

McNamara opposed a coup against Diem, although not vehemently, primarily because it introduced uncertainty into his plans. Even before his trip, he was unconvinced that those who favored a coup within the administration, including Hilsman, Harriman, Forrestal and Lodge, knew "how we make this thing work."[77] In February 1962, Diem had survived a first coup attempt when a pair of disgruntled Air Force pilots had bombed his presidential palace. Ever since, rumors of an imminent coup and back channel contacts, notably through the CIA operative Lucien Conein, with would-be replacements to Diem had continued. These

continued when McNamara arrived in Saigon. McNamara's notes of his meeting with Professor Honey in Saigon echo his risk aversion despite his frustrations with Diem. They read: "dangerous to make a change . . . can we win with this regime, he believes we can't; then what is going to replace it – this is extremely risky."[78]

McNamara never questioned the morality of the administration's involvement in a coup to depose Diem. His only concern was minimizing risk and uncertainty, especially since he saw "no valid alternative." He presciently warned that "A military junta of the Vietnamese generals now planning a coup is not capable of running the Vietnamese government for very long."[79] On October 5, when Conein made a further contact with the plotters, McNamara was more aggressive. In addition to recommending that Conein should come home, he added, "to continue this kind of activity just strikes me as absurd," describing the efforts as "disgraceful."[80]

Ultimately, as McNamara explained to the SFRC, Diem was a prime case of "better the devil you know" and he sought to avoid any distractions or disruptions to his planning process. As a result, after the October meetings, Kennedy belatedly informed Ambassador Lodge to put a stop to communication with would-be coup plotters in Saigon.

However, by the end of November, both Presidents Diem and Kennedy were dead and, with them, McNamara's best-laid plans for Vietnam and for the Defense Department. The ambiguity of the October decisions and announcements was enough to get a very disparate group of advisors to agree to the policy as well as to eventually overturn it. In the end, Kennedy's policy might have been doomed to failure: counterinsurgency strategy with a much-reduced US presence might not have been enough to stave off the insurgency and the Kennedy administration might have been compelled to intervene under domestic pressure or out of a moral impulse that its involvement in the coup against Diem had now inextricably tied the United States to South Vietnam's fate. Moreover, the administration never really solved an underlying dilemma in the counterinsurgency strategies, namely whether security or political issues should take precedence.[81]

McNamara entered the Johnson administration as a, if not *the*, leading player on Vietnam policy. His proximity to the President and his ability to bring order to the administration's most complicated problems had thrust him into that role. However, McNamara's reforms and understanding of civil-military relations were such that he did not design strategy but instead aligned the Defense Department's resources and capabilities

with the President's chosen policies. As it happened, the Kennedy's chosen policy was to use Vietnam as a test case for his interest in counterinsurgency, to provide a case study for the "wars of national liberation" that loomed across the developing world.

Although McNamara sat at the helm of the United States' military organization, he did not necessarily favor military solutions to the problems in Vietnam; on the contrary. Instead, the administration moved to a strategy geared toward "self-help," as spelled out in Kennedy's inaugural address, and toward disengagement from Vietnam in part to preempt the trends toward militarization that troubled Kennedy's civilian advisors in 1962. McNamara chose withdrawal not out of optimism but because it was most the coherent and efficient option available to him to meet the views of advisors such as Hilsman and Thompson. Moreover, as a Secretary who spent much of his time concerned with the United States' fiscal constraints and economic concerns, the option to withdraw promised to solve his immediate budgetary problems and, in the longer term, to produce a solution to the balance of payments that had so preoccupied the now slain President. In the transition, much of this would change. The new President was less interested in counterinsurgency and, as a fervent New Dealer and savvy congressional operator, less bothered by his predecessor's economic worries.