



Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam

By H. R. McMaster

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"The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the New York Times or the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C."
—H. R. McMaster (from the Conclusion)

Dereliction Of Duty is a stunning analysis of how and why the United States became involved in an all-out and disastrous war in Southeast Asia. Fully and convincingly researched, based on transcripts and personal accounts of crucial meetings, confrontations and decisions, it is the only book that fully re-creates what happened and why. McMaster pinpoints the policies and decisions that got the United States into the morass and reveals who made these decisions and the motives behind them, disproving the published theories of other historians and excuses of the participants.

A page-turning narrative, *Dereliction Of Duty* focuses on a fascinating cast of characters: President Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, General Maxwell Taylor, McGeorge Bundy and other top aides who deliberately deceived the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. Congress and the American public.

McMaster's only book, *Dereliction of Duty* is an explosive and authoritative new look at the controversy concerning the United States involvement in Vietnam.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

For years the popular myth surrounding the Vietnam War was that the Joint Chiefs of Staff knew what it would take to win but were consistently thwarted or ignored by the politicians in power. Now H. R. McMaster shatters this and other misconceptions about the military and Vietnam in *Dereliction of Duty*. Himself a West Point graduate, McMaster painstakingly waded through every memo and report concerning Vietnam from every meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to build a comprehensive picture of a house divided against itself: a president and his coterie of advisors obsessed with keeping Vietnam from becoming a political issue versus the Joint Chiefs themselves, mired in interservice rivalries and unable to reach any unified goals or conclusions about the country's conduct in the war.

McMaster stresses two elements in his discussion of America's failure in Vietnam: the hubris of Johnson and his advisors and the weakness of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Dereliction of Duty* provides both a thorough exploration of the military's role in determining Vietnam policy and a telling portrait of the men most responsible.

From [Booklist](#)

The "error not of values and intentions but of judgment and capabilities" to which Robert McNamara admitted in *In Retrospect* (1995) leaves out his deceptions that helped plunge America into the Vietnam War. McNamara may not have remembered them in his memoir, but army officer McMaster found them in the Joint Chiefs of Staff's archives for the crucial decision-making years of 1964 and 1965. Distilled to its essence, McMaster's thesis proposes that the plans and advice on Vietnam prepared by the nation's military advisers were systematically sidetracked by McNamara. Two facts exemplify the whole dense forest of facts McMaster explores: the prediction of the Joint Chiefs of the Army and Marine Corps that "victory" would require five years and 500,000 troops only reached LBJ's ears once (he didn't listen, obviously), and the Pentagon war games of McNamara's theory of "graduated pressure" eerily ended in stalemate. McNamara suppressed all such warning signs, theorizes McMaster, because he was responding to LBJ's anxiety to keep Vietnam's "noise level" down until the 1964 election was over and the Great Society safely enacted. As damning of the civilian leaders as he is, McMaster doesn't blithely exonerate the brass. They didn't heed their own warnings and acquiesced in McNamara's incrementalist policy, in the hope of eventually getting the huge force they diffidently advised would be needed to win. Writing about an ocean of memos, meetings, and reports as he does, McMasters delivers a narrative more diligent than dramatic, but his take on pinpointing the architect(s) of the Vietnam fiasco should prove, nonetheless, of high interest. *Gilbert Taylor*

From Kirkus Reviews

An intriguing analysis that challenges the view that Cold War anticommunism was primarily responsible for American military intervention in Vietnam. In his first book, McMaster, a US Army major and Persian Gulf war veteran, and a historian who has taught at West Point, zeroes in on the actions of Lyndon Johnson and his top advisers from the time LBJ became president in November 1963 to the July 1965 decision to escalate the war drastically. The author makes a convincing case that domestic political considerations were behind the development of the failed strategy of graduated military pressure. The actions of Johnson, his top civilian advisers, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) were, moreover, characterized by "arrogance, weakness [and] lying in the pursuit of self interest." President Johnson heads McMaster's culpability list, which also includes Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, JCS head and US ambassador to South Vietnam Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Taylor's JCS successor, Gen. Earle Wheeler, and top advisers William

and McGeorge Bundy. McMaster's touchstone is the unchallenged fact that Johnson wanted to fight the war on poverty, not the war in Vietnam. McMaster interprets virtually all of LBJ's actions as chief executive in that light. From November 1963 to November 1964 Johnson's overarching goal was to win the presidential election. After that, his main concern was enacting his Great Society programs. The fact that Johnson made Vietnam policy based on domestic-policy implications, McMaster believes, was a recipe for disaster in Vietnam. David Halberstam promulgated similar arguments in *The Best and the Brightest* (1972). McMaster, using newly released transcripts and other primary source material, pays more attention to the JCS's role. Unsparing in his analysis of the chiefs, McMaster takes them severely to task for their "failure" to provide LBJ with "their best advice." A relentless, stinging indictment of the usual Johnson administration Vietnam War suspects. (illustrations, not seen) -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

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