

# H-Diplo

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**Benjamin Harrison and Christopher Mosher. "The Secret Diary of McNamara's Dove: The Long Lost Story of John T. McNaughton's Opposition to the Vietnam War." *Diplomatic History* 35:3 (June 2011): 505-534. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.00961.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.00961.x> .**

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR311.pdf>

Review by **Walter Hixson**, University of Akron

**B**enjamin Harrison and Christopher Mosher have successfully exploited new documentation to offer a revealing insider account of the Lyndon Johnson's White House as the United States gained momentum down the slippery slope to disaster in Vietnam. This well constructed and closely argued account is meant to remove any doubt that John T. McNaughton, despite a hawkish reputation flowing from the Pentagon Papers, was in fact a confirmed dove.

I believe the authors succeed in straightening out McNaughton's reputation with the caveat, which they acknowledge, that his role as Robert S. McNamara's top civilian adviser sometimes limited his advocacy of the dovish course. That is, first and foremost, McNaughton had to serve the secretary of defense. But there seems little doubt based on the new diary evidence that McNaughton well understood that the Johnson administration's course in escalating the Vietnam War was a certain disaster waiting to happen.

The authors argue convincingly that the diary entries show that McNaughton played a key role in moving McNamara toward his historic dissent and eventual resignation over Vietnam policy. However, despite McNaughton's efforts to nudge McNamara toward taking up his dissent more forcefully with Johnson, the defense secretary proved reluctant. Harrison and Mosher do a nice job of showing the conflicts within the Hamlet-like McNamara but also between the defense secretary and the commander and chief. The article pinpoints the emergence of the cleavage with Johnson that eventually led to McNamara's departure from the Cabinet. Along the way we find that some of the usual suspects—McGeorge Bundy, Dean Rusk, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff—remained formidably hawkish advisers squarely in the path of consideration of any alternative

policy. Unlike McNaughton, none of their reputations emerge from this article with a new shine.

McNaughton's dissent is sometimes striking in its forcefulness, a reflection of what the authors call his "consistent and persistent opposition to U.S. policy." (507) McNaughton brings to mind Senator Mike Mansfield and others, including George Ball of course, who harbored pronounced private doubts about the wisdom of the escalation. Unlike Senator J. William Fulbright, McNaughton and Ball were insiders and thus were in no position to go public with their opposition. Public confrontation with the Democratic President did not fit Majority Leader Mansfield's quiet style. Thus I would still rank Fulbright ahead of all of them in having the courage to go against his President and call the war into question in a very public forum. Those televised Senate hearings, featuring the devastating dissents of George Kennan and General James Gavin, among others, were a milestone in the growing opposition to the war, which nonetheless continued seemingly interminably under Johnson and Richard Nixon.

The political instability (to put it mildly) of "South Vietnam" seems to have struck McNaughton the hardest. Ultimately the story of the American War, as the Vietnamese call it, is quite simple: the United States never succeeded in building a viable "South Vietnam" because such a protean project was impossible to achieve in a country as ethnically and historically united as is Vietnam. By 1966 McNaughton suggested that the only course in this hopeless situation was to adopt of new policy of "disengagement" that would be justified by explaining that the South Vietnamese government was so unstable as to be beyond hope. Instead of Senator George Aiken's recipe of "declare victory and get out," McNaughton proposed, "We tried our best to defend their freedom but they are not up to the task." Here I find McNaughton unrealistic and Johnson, the consummate politician, far more politically astute. Johnson well understood that such a withdrawal and eventual defeat would result in brutal Republican and right-wing Democrat condemnation for weakness and lost ground to communism that would lead to his certain defeat in the 1968 reelection campaign. Of course, he lost that anyway by escalating the war. You could make a strong case that Johnson continually made the worst possible choices in Vietnam yet his options nonetheless were limited by the foreign policy framework in which he had no choice but to operate.

McNaughton came as close as any administration insider to grasping early on the inevitable disastrous outcome of the "Vietnam conflict." In the diary he wrote, "The eventual loss of South Vietnam was inevitable since the war was either unwinnable or winnable at too steep a price." (513) McNaughton encouraged McNamara to urge Johnson to halt the bombing and push for a ceasefire and some sort of negotiated settlement. But neither negotiations nor Vietnamization were going to work. As Ball put it, once on the tiger's back—which the United States certainly was by 1965--finding a way to dismount "with honor" was going to be virtually impossible.

Harrison and Mosher have provided us with a revealing insider account that was fascinating to read and important in setting the record straight about a determined dove whose tragic death removed him from the arena before his own grim prophecy had played out in Southeast Asia. But there was not much McNaughton, McNamara, or even Johnson could have done by 1965 and certainly not by 1966. By then the United States was all in. The time for disaster aversion through “great man” diplomacy was past if indeed it had ever existed. The nation had invested so heavily in its own mythological destiny of global leadership, and drunk so deeply of the cold war narrative of godless communism on the march, that it tried to stop the flow of history, namely the inevitable decolonization of Indochina. The results of such hubris were disastrous at the time and, moreover, they unleashed a very long list of equally tragic ensuing unforeseen consequences. Harrison and Mosher deserve praise for illuminating the futile efforts of one dedicated public servant to stop the disaster when it was already too late.

**Walter L. Hixson** is distinguished professor of history at the University of Akron. His most recent book is *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 2008). He received his Ph.D. in 1986 from the University of Colorado, where he worked with Bob Schulzinger.

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