

In Retrospect:

The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam

By
Robert S. McNamara
with Brian VanDeMark

Times Books, 1995
414 pages, \$25 (HB)

Vietnam veterans and war protesters alike have vilified former Secretary of Defense McNamara for not apologizing in this book. Unfortunately, they seem to have missed the point. McNamara appears not to have written this book to apologize, but rather to explain. He describes in detail the difficulties he and other policy makers in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations experienced as they tried to decide what to do in Vietnam.

He describes the climate of a United States that had just suffered WW II, the Korean conflict and the rise of Soviet and Chinese communism.

Many veteran diplomats subscribed to the "Domino Theory" and honestly believed that if Vietnam fell to communism, then Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and the Philippines would also fall. They believed wholeheartedly that by stopping the communists in Vietnam they could save the world for democracy.

McNamara describes how he, then Secretary of State Dean Rusk and others agonized over how best to defeat the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. He also tells us that as early as 1963 he and others started to feel that they could not win the war and started instead to worry about *how not to lose the war*.

McNamara gives us insight into the questions he, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Dean Rusk and other policy makers tried to answer. With the benefit of over 25 years of hindsight, he also tells us the questions and issues that they either ignored or didn't even both-

er to consider. He also shows us that we must consider these same issues and questions in this post-Cold War world.

McNamara readily admits the mistakes he and others made from 1963 to 1968. Moreover, he doesn't rationalize the mistakes but details the way those mistakes could have been

avoided. He may not have apologized, but he *is* accepting responsibility. He also vividly reminds us that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Let us hope that we use his account to help us learn. ■

MSG R. C. Oberlender

Show—don't tell! That's what a practical soldier demands in his day-to-day life and that's precisely what is found in William Bainbridge's down-to-earth, plain-spoken autobiography. To understand the enlisted Army, the most effective memoir is one that creates a lasting mental likeness of the NCO. Authors Bainbridge and Cragg largely succeed in painting a vivid and revealing portrait. This narrative takes its place among those histories that really picture, not just describe, the exceptional lives of ostensibly common men.

Born in Knox County, IL, in 1925, the man who would become the longest-tenured sergeant major of the Army worked on a farm. Bainbridge seems to be the personification of Norman Rockwell's rural America. WWII introduced young Bill to the art of soldiering and traditions that would, with few interruptions, last 31 years with the Army.

Bainbridge fought in Europe, was captured by the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge and endured the privations of the prisoner of war until liberated on Good Friday, 1945.

"I went into captivity weighing about 140 pounds and came out weighing only 89 pounds," he recalls. He returned to life on a Midwestern farm until the Korean War "compelled" him back to service. In retrospect, he writes, "...it was the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

The Army developed Bainbridge into the perfect NCO: *the utilitarian*

pragmatist. The way the author saw it, his duty was to "fix things at the source, before the company commander had to take action. This is just what any good sergeant does..." From one base assignment to the next, the education of a soldier prepared Bainbridge for the moral convulsions and self-doubt imposed on the Army during the Vietnam War.

This valuable chapter — "Vietnam" — concludes with the classic harangue that if the military had been allowed to run the campaign as a war and not a political holding action, "the final outcome would have been different."

After selection as sergeant major of the Army by a board of general officers, Bainbridge obtained improved professional NCO training, fur-

thered the acceptance of the enlisted corps as co-partners in the military mission with officers and other reforms. His view of women in the military shows through when he unabashedly declares, "I have absolutely no problem with women in combat units." He goes on to write that, "The idea that women can't make good soldiers is a mindset, not an incontrovertible fact."

As SMA, Bainbridge sought respect for NCOs with a show-don't-tell simplicity that supported his leadership while simultaneously intimating to his commanders that "Officers command the Army but NCOs run it." ■

J. Michael Brower

Top Sergeant:

The Life and Times of Sergeant Major William G. Bainbridge

By
SMA William G. Bainbridge (Ret)
and Dan Cragg

Ballentine Books, 1995
368 pages, \$23 (HB)