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# Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Von *H. R. McMaster*

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

## DERELICTION OF DUTY

Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara,  
the Joint Chiefs of Staff,  
and the Lies that Led to Vietnam



H. R. McMASTER

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Produktinformation -Verkaufsrank: #138428 in eBooksVerffentlicht am: 2011-03-01Erscheinungsdatum:  
2011-03-01File Name: B004HW7834 | File size: 26.Mb

**Von H. R. McMaster : Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

KundenrezensionenHilfreichste Kundenrezensionen5 von 5 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich. Waging War Without Consideration of Costs and ConsequencesVon Steven S. BerizziThis carefully-researched, highly-detailed study of military policymaking during the formative period of the Vietnam War focuses on events between November 1963 through July 1965, when the Johnson administration made a series of disastrous decisions leading to

the commitment of American ground troops, which resulted in over 50,000 deaths during the next decade. H.R. McMaster, a career Army officer with a Ph.D. in history who served on the faculty at the U.S. Military Academy, asserts that President Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff disagreed about policy and then lied to the American people about that policy. Using "[r]ecently declassified documents, newly opened manuscript collections, and the release of the official history of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff] during the Vietnam War," McMaster's disturbing narrative of dishonesty and intrigue casts the highest civilian and military officials of the government in a very unfavorable light. McMaster seeks to understand and explain "decisions that involved the United States in a war that it could not win at a politically acceptable level of commitment." It is an ugly picture. According to McMaster: "Under the National Security Act the Joint Chiefs of Staff were 'principal military advisers to the president, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense.'" However, McMaster writes, McNamara never had a good relationship with the Chiefs because they "were unable to respond to McNamara's demands fast enough, and their cumbersome administrative system exacerbated the administration's unfavorable opinion of them;" and "McNamara quickly lost patience with the Chiefs' unresponsiveness and squabbling." According to McMaster, although President Kennedy "was willing to send U.S. military 'advisers' into South Vietnam and mount covert operations in North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, he drew the line at U.S. combat units." McMaster writes that November 1963, when both Ngo Dinh Diem and Kennedy were assassinated, "marked a turning point in the Vietnam War." According to McMaster: "McNamara soon established himself as the most indispensable member of Johnson's cabinet." McMaster writes: "McNamara believed that "military pressure would aim to convince Hanoi to stop supporting the Viet Cong." But the Chiefs warned that McNamara's plan "would be insufficient to 'turn the tide' against the Viet Cong." In McMaster's view: "At the end of March, after the president had approved McNamara's strategy of graduated pressure, discontent within the Joint Chiefs of Staff bubbled to the surface." This may be McMaster's most damning criticism: "Each Chief's desire to further his own service's agenda hampered their collective ability to provide military advice... The Chiefs desperately needed a leader to bring them together." However, the appointment of Army General Earle Wheeler as Chairman of the J.C.S. "was immensely unpopular with many Pentagon officers, particularly those outside the Army." According to McMaster: "Differences of opinion among the Chiefs stemmed, in part, from their institutional perspectives as heads of their services. It seemed that each service, rather than attempt to determine the true nature of the war and the source of the insurgency in South Vietnam, assumed that it alone had the capacity to win the war." By the summer of 1964, according to McMaster, the JCS had been reduced to serving "more as technicians for planners in the [Office of the Secretary of Defense] than as strategic thinkers and advisers in their own right." In 1964 and early 1965, President Johnson focused on getting elected and advancing his domestic agenda. On November 1, 1964, the Viet Cong attacked the American airfield at Bien Hoa. According to McMaster, Chairman of the JCS, General Earle "Wheeler reported to McNamara that the Chiefs believed that, if the United States did not take action against North Vietnam immediately, it should withdraw all forces from South Vietnam." McMaster writes with brutal frankness: "On the first day of his four-year term, Johnson hid the truth about Vietnam for the sake of a domestic political agenda. McNamara assisted his dissembling." In late January 1965, according to McMaster, President Johnson "authorized the resumption of destroyer patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin" "[i]n hopes of provoking a North Vietnamese attack." According to McMaster: "In February 1965 President Johnson made decisions that transformed the conflict in Vietnam into an American war...[T]he president's decision, at the end of February, to introduce U.S. ground combat units into South Vietnam represented an irrevocable commitment to the war." McMaster then makes this disturbing assertion: "Although the JCS thought that the president's policy was fundamentally flawed, their actions supported and reinforced it." This is the essence of McMaster's indictment of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "The body charged with providing the president with military advice and responsible for strategic planning permitted the president to commit the United States to war without consideration of the likely costs and consequences." According to McMaster: "When the Chiefs endeavored to carry out the president's instructions [in April-May 1965], interservice differences over how to fight the war in Vietnam resurfaced.." As a result, McMaster writes: "American soldiers, airmen, and Marines went to war in Vietnam without strategy or direction." According to McMaster: "The 'five silent men' on the Joint Chiefs made possible the way the United States went to war in Vietnam." McMaster asserts: "The Joint Chiefs of Staff became accomplices in the president's deception and focused on a tactical task, killing the enemy. General Westmoreland's 'strategy' of attrition in South Vietnam was, in essence, the absence of strategy." McMaster concludes: "The war in Vietnam...was lost in Washington, D.C., even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war; indeed, even before the first American units were deployed." The Joint Chiefs' submission to civilian control of grand strategy is understandable. But their interservice rivalries were inexcusable. I agree, therefore, with McMaster's most important point: The fact that Americans were dying in Vietnam while the Chiefs engaged in high-level turf battles constituted dereliction of duty. But, as McMaster also amply and ably demonstrates, there is plenty of blame to go around. I von 1 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich. A "must-read" (especially for politicians and generals!) Von Ein Kunde Although the Vietnam Conflict stretched over a quarter-century in duration, this book is a snapshot look at the pivotal decisions made in Washington DC that changed American involvement in Vietnam from

an advisory effort to large-scale intervention. McMaster's research fully exposes the true depth of conceit and duplicity on the part of men like Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and even Maxwell Taylor and it challenges very effectively a number of the prominent misconceptions about the "inevitability" of an open-ended intervention (some of those myths continue to resurface in the reviews on this website). McMaster writes: "The movement toward war seems in retrospect to have been inexorable largely because LBJ succeeded in minimizing the participation of Congress in his decisions that escalated American military involvement in Vietnam. McNamara, reflecting on the decisions of the spring and early summer of 1965, recalled that 'we were sinking into the quicksand.' It was, however, a quicksand of his and the president's making--a quicksand of lies. The support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff would prove crucial to LBJ's and McNamara's efforts to conceal the changed nature of American involvement in Vietnam." (page 243). As I consider how American military forces have been committed to action since Vietnam (and particularly in the last ten years), I doubt if we have learned our lesson. Thomas Jefferson once wrote that "falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good dispositions." This book is an outstanding case study of why character DOES matter in our national leadership. Immediately after you finish this book, pick up "We Were Soldiers Once and Young" by Lt Gen Harold G. Moore (ret.) Joseph Galloway and see the direct, on-the-battlefield consequences, of an arrogant and reckless decision-making process.

4 von 4 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich. American Hubris Von Tom Munro This book is one of the school in looking at the Vietnam war that "America could have done things better but". Before discussing the thesis of the book lets look briefly at the war. Before the 1950's it had been easy for European Powers to conquer colonies with fairly minimal use of military power. The forces used by the Dutch, the English and the French were small although well equipped and well trained. Without going into the wrongs and the rights what went wrong in Vietnam. What happened initially was that a local communist insurgency developed in South Vietnam. North Vietnam supplied its weapons using a port in Cambodia. The South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) was for whatever reason unable to deal with this insurgency. The United States sponsored a coup to change the leadership of Vietnam. Shortly after it started to send combat troops to fight alongside the ARVN and to use its air force to bomb targets in North Vietnam. The United States thus had a strong military force, which had at all times total air superiority. It should not be forgotten that the army contributed by the United States combined with the ARVN was an enormous force which at all times had technological superiority over its opponents. Due in some degree to the success of the United States tactics and in other parts to the adventurism of the Tet Offensive the local insurgents the Viet Cong were defeated in the main by the end of the 60's. The North Vietnamese were able to keep the war going by deploying units of its regular army. The North Vietnamese regular units were able to infiltrate through Laos which at that time was in chaos and through Cambodia which was officially neutral. The casualties suffered by the North Vietnamese were staggering. The United States were not able to stem this flow despite hiring a mercenary army in Laos and sponsoring a coup in Cambodia to bring to power a government responsive to its interests. Although the United States could have won a conventional war against North Vietnam an invasion would not have been possible. It is clear that China would have intervened as they did in Korea and they could have won a conventional war against the sort of United States forces that could be deployed in this sort of adventure. The war showed that bombing was limited in what it could achieve. North Vietnam was a peasant subsistence economy. It was not a complex industrial nation and bombing would only really be effective if it was aimed at civilian targets. This would have been repellent politically. Taking all of these things into account it is hard to see in retrospect how the United States could have won the Vietnam war as long as North Vietnam was willing to pay a big price to keep the war going. This knowledge however derives from hindsight. Johnson, McNamara and the others involved in turning of this conflict into an American war would not have known the immense price the North was willing to pay to win the war. In 1964 it was clear that a bombing campaign would cause considerable damage to the North setting back its economic growth. It was also clear that the commitment of ground forces would cause enormous casualties to the insurgents. Normally that would have been enough to win such a war. Now what this book is about is a criticism of the political process that led to the war. The criticism is not one related to the morality of what happened but rather it criticizes civilian decision-makers opting for a policy of "Graduated Military Pressure". This doctrine is really a short hand description of the process that was used in the Cuban missile crisis. McNamara had played a role in this American triumph and wanted to try the same strategy. That is to make a series of demonstrations including air attacks commitments of troops till the other side gives in. McMasters suggests that the attraction of such an approach was it allowed a slight of hand by which Johnson the President could initially win office and later concentrate government resources on his Great Society Program. He suggests that an assessment by the Joint Chiefs of staff suggested that to win in South Vietnam an army of 500,000 would be needed and that it would take five years. The problem with the book is however something which comes out as an undercurrent in a lot of American foreign policy writing. That is the myth of American omnipotence. That is that if there is a loss or a set back, rather than such a thing being perhaps inevitable it is due to a mistake or a miscalculation. Thus after the take over of the communists in China in 1949 Truman was accused of losing China, when it is clear that America simply would not have been able to prevent it. This book falls into the same trap of suggesting that in the mid 60's it would be possible to make a clear prediction about the outcome of the Vietnam War and to develop a measured military policy. There simply wasn't as the critical variable the response of the North

Vietnamese and how much punishment they would be willing to take was not clear. Despite the problems with the basic thesis of the book it is an interesting work based on detailed analysis of recently available material. A must read for anyone interested in the subject.

Kurzbeschreibung "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. 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. *Pressestimmen* "Lately [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General] Shelton has been closely reading a book called *Dereliction of Duty*. Its thesis: that the Joint Chiefs of Staff lost the Vietnam War by failing to stand up to civilian leadership." -- "Newsweek