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Obama: The Next McNamara?

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Historical comparisons are always limited in scope and accuracy, but they are certainly necessary for us to understand the world we live in today. Hearing McNamara's confidence in 1964, I cannot help but be reminded of Barack Obama on the campaign trail last summer. Many of us were skeptical when Obama said repeatedly that the central front of the war against terrorists was on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. There was a concerted effort to portray U.S. aggression in Afghanistan as "the good war" and to associate failure in Iraq with the Bush administration and the Republican Party. I had hoped that these statements were merely political rhetoric. However, the Obama administration has fully owned up to its campaign promises and is ramping up the war in Afghanistan and drone attacks in Pakistan.

Robert S. McNamara, former Secretary of Defense, died earlier this month at the age of 93. In his lifetime, McNamara held positions as the president of Ford Motor Company and as president of the World Bank, but he is chiefly remembered for being the architect of the U.S. military build up and escalation of the war in Vietnam.

In a press conference in 1964, McNamara was so self-confident of his role in the conflict that he said "I don't object to its being called McNamara's war, I think it is a very important war, and I am pleased to be identified with it and do whatever I can to win it." McNamara later re-canted on his position, admitting that he and his colleagues were "wrong, terribly wrong" to pursue the war as they did. In a conversation documented by Errol Morris's 2003 film, "The Fog of War", McNamara compared his role in Viet Nam to that of Gen. Curtis LeMay, who oversaw the U.S. fire bombings during WWII:

We burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo — men, women and children. LeMay recognized that what he was doing would be thought immoral if his side had lost. If we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals. And I think he's right. He, and I'd say I, were behaving as war criminals. LeMay recognized that what he was doing would be thought immoral if his side had lost. But what makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?

Historical comparisons are always limited in scope and accuracy, but they are certainly necessary for us to understand the world we live in today. Hearing McNamara's confidence in 1964, I cannot help but be reminded of Barack Obama on the campaign trail last summer. Many of us were sceptical when Obama said repeatedly that the central front of the war against terrorists was on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. There was a concerted effort to portray U.S. aggression in Afghanistan as "the good war" and to associate failure in Iraq with the Bush administration and the Republican Party. I had hoped that these statements were merely political rhetoric. However, the Obama administration has fully owned up to its campaign promises and is ramping up the war in Afghanistan and drone attacks in Pakistan.

July 2009 was the deadliest month for NATO troops in Afghanistan since 2001. Military commanders have admitted that even with the addition of 17,500 troops that President Barack Obama has ordered to Afghanistan, more will be required to clear and hold large swaths of the country. There will be no progress of any kind in Afghanistan and Pakistan as long as disproportionate military spending and offensives continue. What is the goal here? If the Soviet Union could not pacify Afghanistan with 300,000 troops, what makes the United States think that it could "win" in Afghanistan with a troop surge, increased Marine presence, or an escalation in air strikes?

It's a popular fallacy and quick media stab at historical revisionism to suggest that the troop surge "won" the war in Iraq. The human cost of the surge has been quickly forgotten. At the height of the surge, refugees from the conflict

were pouring over the borders into Syria and Jordan at about 2,000-3,000 per day. There are over 4 million refugees total from the Iraq war and, according to the Congressional Research Service, the United States has only directed 1 billion dollars (since the beginning of the 2003 invasion) towards refugee assistance.(1.) Meanwhile, the Department of Defense is spending at least 10 billion dollars per month for the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This kind of disproportionate spending on aggression and military offensives sent a clear message to the people of Iraq. A similar message is now being sent to people in Pakistan where, over the past three months, more than 2 million people were displaced from northwestern districts of Swat and Buner.(2.) The U.S. backed this military offensive as a measure to weed out Taliban in these areas. Illegal U.S. drones attacks in Pakistan have increased exponentially since 2004. According to the Center for American Progress there have been 67 reported drone strikes since 2006, 57 of which have occurred since the summer of 2008.(3.) The Pakistani government protests that these strikes have claimed the lives of hundreds of non-combatants and that they are a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. Meanwhile, with the troop surge in Afghanistan, civilian casualties from air strikes continue to mount; a recent military investigation led the Pentagon to admit that a single air strike in western Afghanistan on May 4th may have killed as many as 86 civilians. Afghan officials put the number as high as 140.(4.)

A common theme of the war in Viet Nam was disregard for the lives of those that we were supposedly attempting to help. Operation Rolling Thunder destroyed much of Vietnam in the North and the South,(5.) and there is no debate concerning the devastating loss of life that resulted from napalm bombs, Agent Orange, and village raids conducted in the ground war. At certain stages in the conflict, Robert McNamara and others in the administration acknowledged that these policies were not working,(6.) but they continued to pursue a failed strategy. In retrospect, McNamara admitted that he knew the war and the tactics employed were wrong, yet he lacked the courage at the time to stand up and demand a different course of action.(7.)

What kind of society do we live in where criminals of war go on to hold lucrative careers at the World Bank and are free to sit around decades later to write memoirs and star in documentaries about the tragedies they orchestrated? News reports at the time of Robert McNamara's death compared President Obama's political rise to power with the "whiz kids" of the McNamara era. These arguments are not so compelling to me, but I am convinced that President Obama and those in his administration are faced with a moral dilemma similar to the one that McNamara and the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations faced during Vietnam.

It's not enough for our representatives to engage in rigid, corporate-like "policy analysis," a term and concept developed by McNamara, to judge the effectiveness of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

We must continue to bring the human cost of these wars into the spotlight and demand that alternative courses to militarism be pursued. A simple semantic shift from the "War on Terror" to the "Global Contingency Operation" does not positively affect the situation on the ground for the millions of people who have lost loved ones, their homes, and their sense of security because of American aggression.

McNamara eventually realized that it was a gross oversimplification to regard Communism as a central factor in every conflict. He later also admitted that the United States had "no mandate from on high to police the world." Today, we must search for the root causes of extremism and find ways to address these causes that do not amount to becoming a morally bankrupt global police force. We should grapple with our own extremism and pursue new options that respect international law, build trust with the global community and prioritize human needs over a corporate definition of national interest.

Now is the time for those living in the U.S. to learn from the mistakes of the Vietnam era and begin to hold our leaders, and ourselves, accountable for decisions that affect millions of lives. Let us influence the direction of history before President Obama and his administration continue further along the same course pursued by past criminals of

war.

On September 1st, Voices for Creative Non-Violence will initiate a nation-wide Peaceable Assembly Campaign to help build a strong and articulate peace movement, challenging the Obama Administration and the congress to pursue alternatives to U.S. militarism. Through education, intensive lobbying and civil disobedience, we will partner with affinity groups and organizations around the country to demand an end to the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as an end to U.S. support for the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. The campaign will focus on instructing our representatives about concrete ways that military spending can be diverted to fund the common good both internationally and domestically. To learn more about the upcoming campaign and how you can participate, email us at info at vcnv.org.

Joshua Brollier

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1.Iraqi Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons- A Deepening Humanitarian Crisis?-Congressional Research Service

2.Displaced Pakistanis face bombs, threats on returning to Swat-McClatchy News Service

3. U.S. Airstrikes in Pakistan on the Rise-Center for American Progress

4.U.S. admits Afghan airstrike may have killed 86 civilians-McClatchy News Service, U.S. Tightens Airstrike Policy in Afghanistan- New York Times

5.Released by the Office of the Historian. Foreign Relations, 1964-1968, Volume V, Vietnam 1967, Documents 222-239, Policy Decisions and the McNamara and Clifford-Taylor Missions to South Vietnam June-August, United States State Department. Accessed 22 May 2008

6.McNamara, pps. 265-271

7.In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. New York: Times Books, 1995.