



Road to Disaster: A New History of America's Descent into Vietnam

by Brian VanDeMark.

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Since the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, the causes, evolution, and consequences of American policy regarding Vietnam have been studied intensively.¹ The consensus of opinion is that US intervention in Vietnam was a bad idea to begin with. Direct military engagement was a worse one and the escalation thereof worst of all. Why did so many otherwise very competent people make such poor decisions? In *Road to Disaster*, historian Brian VanDeMark (US Naval Academy) answers that question by using social science theories of human behavior in a careful analysis of previously unreleased interview material gathered from President Lyndon Johnson's two Secretaries of Defense, Robert McNamara and Clark Clifford. The result is a remarkable and highly personal work that will interest a broad readership.

When VanDeMark was a graduate student at UCLA in 1987, one of his professors, Richard Holbrooke, invited him to work as his assistant in the editing of Clark Clifford's papers. This project introduced him to many of Clifford's friends and colleagues, including Robert McNamara, who subsequently asked VanDeMark to help him write his memoirs.² While recording extensive interviews and engaging in unrecorded conversations, he became friends with both men, who, in turn, encouraged their friends and colleagues to talk with him. VanDeMark also read sociological studies of human behavior in order to better explain the conduct of the principal actors in his story, above all McNamara himself, whose memoir was an honest endeavor to come to terms with his past.

Following an extended prologue describing his connections with Clifford and McNamara, VanDeMark begins his story with newly elected President John F. Kennedy's choice of cabinet members and foreign policy and national security advisors on the eve of the Bay of Pigs disaster in April 1961. Kennedy's team included men he knew well, but also others whose personal histories or characters intrigued him; many of the latter had little experience in the areas they were to take charge of. Such was the case with McNamara, an efficiency expert who had helped plan bombing operations during World War II as a mid-level officer. He had returned to civilian life and most recently had been president of the Ford Motor Company. Kennedy had inherited the brewing crisis with Cuba from President Dwight Eisenhower, who warned him not to let the Soviets extend their power there.

Fearing to seem "soft on communism," Kennedy accepted the recommendation of CIA director Allen Dulles and his assistant, Richard Bissell, to use Cuban exiles to invade the country and overthrow the government of Fidel Castro. The plan's obvious problems went unrecognized by

1. See, e.g., the classic accounts by George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (1979; 5th ed. NY: McGraw Hill, 2014), Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (NY: Viking, 1983), and John Prados's more recent *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2009).

2. Viz., *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (NY: Random House, 1995).

most of Kennedy's new team. Nor did they understand the reluctance of the military and the CIA to interfere with each other's plans. Hence, the military leaders who might have opposed the ill-conceived operation chose not to do so, leaving their boss, McNamara, and the rest of Kennedy's team to construe consent from their silence.

VanDeMark describes this predicament as a consequence of "availability bias"³—the tendency to assess uncertainties based simply on what had worked in the past. This opening example sets a pattern for the rest of VanDeMark's analyses. McNamara realized he had been misled by the CIA and the military and hence preferred his own judgments to theirs, something VanDeMark shows playing out in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962: McNamara sided with those (correctly) favoring a diplomatic solution over a military one. This widened the gap between him and the military high command and foreshadowed later problems in Vietnam.

The author follows American policy in Vietnam from 1961 to 1969, concentrating on McNamara's evolving views of the conflict as well as the actions and attitudes of other key players in both Washington and Vietnam. Much of that sad story is familiar: policymakers and military strategists, knowing little about Southeast Asia and its people, made decisions based on their own experiences of conflicts elsewhere in the world.

Gen. William Westmoreland had waged conventional warfare in World War II and in Korea, but had no sense of how best to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign, let alone persuade the South Vietnamese government to adopt policies to encourage its people to support it as opposed to simply cowing them into submission. Politicians in Washington, preoccupied with Cold War power politics, were often more concerned about their own careers and agendas than with developing practical policies in Vietnam. McNamara, with his penchant for crunching numbers, neglected the human dimension behind the "body counts" and other statistical data he used.

Like most quantitative analysts of his generation, McNamara assumed that he could correctly estimate probabilities of various outcomes or at least avoid estimating probabilities in a biased way. But empirical research has demonstrated that this is not true: the vast majority of people misjudge probabilities based on what Kahneman and Tversky called the "law of small numbers"—that is, they tend to extensively generalize from small amounts of data; they have too much faith in what they learn from a few observations; and they are prone to exaggerate the meaning and consistency of what they see. McNamara ... persuaded himself that given his intellect he could estimate probable outcomes based on ... limited data. This led him toward what Kahneman and Tversky call "the illusion of validity," a cognitive bias in which people overestimate their ability to interpret and predict outcomes.... McNamara's faith in a limited amount of questionable data was his great misestimation, not his calculus. He could get the right number, but he overestimated his ability to ask the right questions. It was not the brilliance of his mind, but how he applied it. (139-40)

Hence, McNamara's support for increased American engagement in Vietnam in 1962 is hardly surprising; he had long been a man who preferred numbers to people. By his use of psychological models, VanDeMark adds a degree of humanization. Smart people do stupid things for various reasons, and McNamara, in that sense, was all too human.

VanDeMark also taps sociological theories of how specific groups operate, the importance of learning to function within organizational cultures, and the difficulty of shifting from one culture to another. Businessman McNamara, used to giving orders, was confident the Joint Chiefs of Staff would follow his directions. But the Chiefs and the military leadership as a whole had their own way of dealing with civilian superiors. In particular, they often forbore challenging each other's

3. Referencing Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, *Choices, Values, and Frames* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2000).

ideas, as when they refrained from questioning the wisdom of the CIA's plan for the Bay of Pigs. They also expected to be catered to in ways McNamara was unfamiliar with; this limited his ability to develop workable policies or resolve problems as they arose.

VanDeMark is most compelling in relating his own experiences with McNamara and Clifford. He skillfully uses many audio recordings of LBJ's phone calls and conversations, to trace both men's changing views of the war. By 1966, McNamara was already losing faith in his original ideas about the war, but was too much an organization man to say so right away. By the time he finally began to question prevailing assumptions in 1967, the military and the president were too fully committed to their current strategy to want to hear him. Even as McNamara left office (29 Feb. 1968), Johnson came to see that he (McNamara) had been right and decided not to run for re-election. VanDeMark adds depth and nuance to this story, moving well beyond stereotypical views of the two men.

Much of *Road to Disaster* is meant to contextualize the book the author helped McNamara write. This alone makes it a significant addition to the literature in a crowded field. And the use of social science models adds a salutary sort of rigor to what might be seen as a very subjective discussion based on personal experience. Brian VanDeMark's journey is a fascinating one and worth the attention of scholars and interested non-specialists alike.