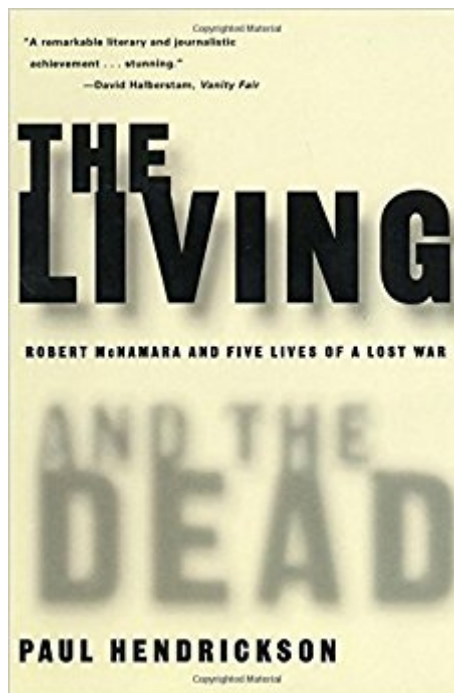




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The Living And The Dead: Robert McNamara And Five Lives Of A Lost War



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book of the Year
Finalist for the Helen Bernstein Award for Excellence in Journalism
"Meticulous in detail, epic in scope, psychologically sophisticated and spiritually rich, it ranks with *The Best and the Brightest* and *All the President's Men*." --San Francisco Chronicle
More than the two presidents he served or the 58,000 soldiers who died for his policies, Robert McNamara was the official face of Vietnam, the technocrat with steel-rimmed glasses and an ironclad faith in numbers who kept insisting that the war was winnable long after he had ceased to believe it was. This brilliantly insightful, morally devastating book tells us why he believed, how he lost faith, and what his deceptions cost five of the war's witnesses and McNamara himself. In *The Living and the Dead*, Paul Hendrickson juxtaposes McNamara's story with those of a wounded Marine, an Army nurse, a Vietnamese refugee, a Quaker who burned himself to death to protest the war, and an enraged artist who tried to kill the man he saw as the war's architect. The result is a book whose exhaustive research and imaginative power turn history into an act of reckoning, damning and profoundly sympathetic, impossible to put down and impossible to forget. "A masterpiece. . . . [Hendrickson] has a gift with language that most writers can only dream about." --Philadelphia Inquirer
"Approaches Shakespearian tragedy." --The New York Times Book Review

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Customer Reviews

Robert McNamara's career was a straight shot to the top, starting with a brilliant academic career and a stint as a statistical control officer during World War II. His next success was realized at Ford

Motors, where he rocketed to the position of president. Finally, the ideal model of the "humane technocrat" was tapped as Kennedy's Secretary of Defense. Then came the Vietnam War, for which McNamara is still remembered by many as a soulless bureaucrat who measured the war in strictly numerical terms and--even worse--pursued U.S. involvement long after he knew it was wrong. In *The Living and the Dead*, Washington Post writer Paul Hendrickson searches for McNamara's soul amidst five wrenching portraits of those whose lives were destroyed by the presence of the United States in Vietnam. --This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

In 1983, Washington Post reporter Hendrickson (*Looking for the Light*) saw Robert S. McNamara on TV and was moved to write a series of articles about the man who served as secretary of defense during the Vietnam War. Those pieces became the springboard for this exhaustively researched, probing, important contribution to the annals of American history. Using McNamara as his central, overshadowing subject, Hendrickson interweaves the stories of five others caught up in the whirlwind of the times: an artist who tried to kill McNamara by flinging him off a ferry in 1972; a Marine who fought in the war; a Quaker who immolated himself in protest against the war; a nurse who served in Vietnam; and a Saigon native who suffered horribly at the hands of the Communists. With breathtaking dexterity, Hendrickson juxtaposes insights on McNamara, whose life he describes as "a kind of postwar technocratic hubristic fable," against episodes in the lives of those over whom McNamara wielded a distant yet very real power. Hendrickson finds that McNamara "owned a significant conscience, which he struggled against and was continually willing to compromise"--above all, perhaps, in helping to escalate a war that he believed could not be won militarily. Hendrickson, who once studied for the priesthood, writes in a voice that is moral yet not preachy, and he is careful to identify his own mixed feelings about McNamara. Even the extensive endnotes--which include Hendrickson's recollection of slipping a note under the door to McNamara's hotel room, "where I thought I could hear him breathing just on the other side"--are extraordinarily informative. Passionate, incisive, expertly wrought, this is a narrative that will sweep readers along in its search for truth, a classic that will be pored over for years to come. Photos not seen by PW. 100,000 first printing; first serial to the Washington Post; simultaneous Random House Audiobook; author tour. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

ONE OF THE BEST AND FINEST REVIEW OF THE HISTORY DURING THE TIME OF LBJ..

I haven't read the book yet, but I am getting it signed by one of the people the story is written about since I know his son.

Well researched with some interesting insights. If you are fascinated by America's involvement in Vietnam then this is a must read.

The Living and the Dead is a biography of the Robert McNamara, the strangely structured Defense Secretary during the Vietnam War, but more than that, it is a sad and rueful exposition of human weakness intermixed with ambition and a belief that deceit somehow can overcome failure. McNamara was a brilliant businessman, a Ford Motor Co. President at the age of 44, who believed that numbers meant everything in the shop, and translated that philosophy to war. Realizing that the strategy in Vietnam was flawed, and unwilling or constitutionally unable to consider alternatives suggested by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he saw the war of attrition as he conceived it was failing in Southeast Asia. So rather than changing strategies, or pushing to replacing the mediocre General William Westmoreland, or even honorably resigning, he pressed on, publicly lying repeatedly as to the progress of the conflict, even while he turned privately against what he was doing. This is not a book which discusses the potential means that might have been used to win in Vietnam, such as emphasizing counterinsurgency efforts to win the psychological battle among the Vietnamese people. It is mostly an attempt, somewhat but not altogether successful, into reaching into the inner workings of the robotic McNamara. That is not the fault of Paul Hendrickson, who does as much to decipher his subject as anyone could. This is a man who came off the slopes and attended his mother's funeral in ski boots and gear. After he left office, he attended his son's wedding, but left quickly after the ceremony, choosing not to celebrate. He loved his wife, who was ill for a long time and died of cancer, but was somehow oblivious to much of life. Hendrickson, who clearly believes the war should never have been fought, and received a draft deferment when he left his Catholic seminary and entered college, faults McNamara mightily for not resigning when he could not internally support the war. But really, how many Cabinet members have resigned out of principled opposition to a president's policies? The last one in memory was Nixon's Attorney General, Elliott Richardson, who quit when Nixon fired Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox during what became known as the Saturday Night Massacre. Power is after all, a great stimulant. The entire Clinton Cabinet stayed in place when that president admitted to them he had lied to them in a prior meeting about his affair with Monica Lewinsky. Neither Madeline Albright nor anyone else retreated to their Georgetown homes in disgust. What McNamara really needs to be faulted on is his

lack of understanding of war, his egotistical view that he, and only he, could run the war, and his refusal to acknowledge that others, a hawk like Walt Rostow, or a dove, like McGeorge Bundy, might have been right. He would discuss matters with advisers one day, and in group meeting with Lyndon Johnson, it seems only his views got an airing. At the end, when he resigned in 1967 to take over the World Bank, he was close to a mental crackup, the former Whiz Kid of the auto industry forever disgraced. He was unable to rehabilitate himself with a book which was nothing more than an apologia, and was universally panned. Seminarian that he was, Hendrickson writes with a sort of gentle religiosity, especially when he discusses four other people affected by Vietnam, a Marine, a pacifist Quaker who immolated himself in front of the Pentagon to protest the war, a nurse who treated the wounded, and a Vietnamese soldier from an upper class family. But the focus is on McNamara, the worst and most deceitful member of the Johnson Administration, other than LBJ himself.

If you're familiar with Robert McNamara, you probably know that many people have some very strong feelings about the man. This includes many of the other authors who have written about the former secretary of defense. Hendrickson has managed to restore an aspect of humanity to the former secretary, and do so without making apologies for him. This is not an easy trick. If you're familiar with the usual indictments against McNamara (He's a liar, he knew the war was unwinnable but kept it going for years, he's an evil robot of a man that enjoys dropping bombs on villages, etc...) this book should be of help to you in making sense of a complicated man, and might even help you to understand him to some degree. Along with his narrative of the trials and tribulations of Robert Strange McNamara, Hendrickson tells the tales of a handful of divergent figures involved in a variety of ways with the American War in Vietnam. If you're particularly interested in this war, you'll probably recognize the tale of a conscientious objector that gave the last full measure of devotion outside McNamara's Pentagon window. The other individuals are most likely strangers to pretty much anyone, but their stories serve to enliven the narrative, and are interesting in and of themselves. Like the author, I'm not apologizing for McNamara. However, I think the man has been burned in effigy long enough, and if you still insist on hating him, you ought to at least try to understand the position he was in. 9 out of 10 McNamara haters do not. I'm not saying that McNamara did the right thing, or making any form of value judgement on the war, but I do believe that he takes an inordinate amount of the blame for the disaster in Indochina, and it's about time someone presented a reasonably fair picture of Mr. McNamara. Hendrickson gives you both sides to the McNamara coin. He calls him on a number of apparent (and a few obvious) lies, yet he also plays devil's

advocate rather well. His discussion of whether or not McNamara should have resigned when he lost faith is an excellent example of fairness in journalism. He doesn't judge him on this, but he presents the alternatives, as they must have appeared to McNamara in the mid 60s, and lets the reader decide. After you know where McNamara came from, and try to imagine what his experiences prior to becoming SecDef had taught him, you are free to throw stones. I have a strong feeling you might still be inclined to. However, I think you might be a bit less inclined to fault him for certain things, and a bit more knowledgeable about a certain war in Southeast Asia for having read this book.

I am from a post-McNamara generation and was more interested in the story of what happened rather than in whether McNamara himself was a demon or a flawed human. I happened to be attending business school when I read this book and although it was a different era, I could see what might cause a man like McNamara to adopt the thinking he did, as awful as it might have turned out. The book is very readable because it gets the essential facts across through telling human stories. McNamara does not come off as an evil person; rather he seems like most bright managers who focus so hard on completing a task by the numbers, they get severely out of touch with the world around them. Stories of several other people involved in the war or in protesting it are provided as sort of a point/ counterpoint. However, in the end the story of McNamara was the one that stayed with me, perhaps because it was better developed than some of the others or perhaps even with all his negative behaviors and qualities, he is still more relatable than, say, a person who immolates himself. The only bad thing about this book is that it might make you cry - not so much for any specific character as for the situation in general and the blindness of humanity. Let us hope and pray that we learn from the mistakes made and don't repeat them.

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