The War that Keeps on Teaching

Lessons in Disaster:
McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam

by Gordon M. Goldstein

Times Books and Henry Holt, 2008, 300 pages.

Reviewed by Shmuel Rosner

Gordon M. Goldstein, an expert on international relations and the author of *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, certainly deserves credit for a job well done. Not only did he write a fascinating story, not only is the story pertinent to decisions being made in Washington today, and not only has that story been passed from one administration member to the next, but Goldstein even manages to proffer what appear to be the lessons he himself has learned from the book, and which he believes President Obama ought to learn as well.

Yet Goldstein's conclusions are not always so clear-cut. That, at least, is the impression one gets from reading an article he wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* on November 12, 2009, just weeks before Obama announced his decision to send additional troops to Afghanistan and outlined his strategy for the overall campaign:

> [General] McChrystal has predicted that without more troops and resources, the war in Afghanistan "will likely result in failure" within a year. Is his prediction of collapse justified?… Can Obama deploy existing resources more effectively without substantial escalation?… Should the United States pursue a military strategy with a historically low success rate—one that in Vietnam proved to be open-ended in its duration?

Questions of this sort, claims Goldstein, are "why presidents like Obama study history": In learning the lessons of the past, they may find answers to "the core questions the commander in chief must resolve." Yet Goldstein himself has yet to find these answers. Indeed, all he provided in his *Los Angeles Times* article were further questions, to which his book adds one more: Do the lessons

McGeorge Bundy learned from America's misadventure in Vietnam, the regrets he harbors regarding his role in it, and the errors he admits to making—do all these really have any relevance for the current U.S. administration as it weighs its upcoming moves in a different country, against a different enemy, and in a very different political milieu?

McGeorge Bundy's biography will be well known to those who recall the Kennedy years or are in any way familiar with twentieth-century U.S. history. Singled out at a young age for his great academic promise, Bundy was appointed dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard at the tender age of thirty-four. Having entered the White House along with the Kennedy administration, he stood at the center of a group of academics and intellectuals who came to be known as "the best and the brightest," or Kennedy's "wise men." For five years—first under Kennedy and then, after his assassination, under Lyndon Johnson—Bundy served as America's national security adviser.

Those were undeniably turbulent years, riddled with fateful events. Most notable, of course, was the United States' gradual descent into the morass of the Vietnam War. The decisions, debates, uncertainties, and crossroads along the path to America's ill-fated campaign serve as the focal point of Goldstein's book. The questions on which he tries to shed light plague the United States to this day: How did the U.S. force in Vietnam swell from 16,000 "military advisers" during the Kennedy administration to over half a million troops during Johnson's? How did the war deteriorate from a limited armed conflict to the wholesale slaughter that claimed the lives of nearly 60,000 American soldiers by the time it was brought to its ignominious end?

The writing of *Lessons in Disaster* is a story in itself. Bundy, the book's protagonist, was originally slated to be its author as well. When the memoirs of his colleague, former defense secretary Robert McNamara, were published in 1995, Bundy decided to offer his own reassessment of the decision-making processes in which he had been involved during the early years of the war. Seeking to analyze and reevaluate his motivations, he summoned Goldstein for a long series of interviews. Unfortunately, Bundy passed away before the manuscript was complete. Goldstein then went from ghostwriter to primary author, and while he relied on their conversations and material Bundy had made available to him, the final product

bears his own decisive imprint. In the end, the book may be about Bundy, but it belongs to Goldstein.

It is easy to understand why McNamara's memoirs, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, convinced Bundy the time had come for him to write his own account of the war. The former defense secretary had caused quite a stir by divulging that already during his time in office, he realized the United States could not win in Vietnam. Nonetheless he remained in his post, continuing to dispatch forces and assign missions. In November 1965, when a demonstrator torched himself to death outside his window to protest the war, McNamara admitted that he "shared some of his thoughts." Another three years would go by before he would step down, however, and "McNamara's war," as some reporters called it, dragged on after he left office.

But Bundy does not believe that Vietnam was really McNamara's war. In his view—and herein lies one of the book's most important insights—American wars are always waged by the president. He is the one who makes the final decisions, and he is the one who seals destinies. Indeed, according to Bundy, the military campaign in Vietnam developed as it did because "Kennedy didn't want to be dumb" and Johnson "didn't want to be a coward."

If the strength of the book lies in Bundy's analysis of what took place within the White House's inner chambers, one of its main weaknesses is the impression that Bundy (and Goldstein) is determined to present Kennedy in a much more positive light than Johnson. This is a facile exercise in the use of hindsight, however, since Kennedy was assassinated before he had a chance to make any real decisions about the war, leaving the hapless Johnson to be dragged in.

The book portrays Bundy as having shared many of the defense secretary's assessments. "We failed to analyze our assumptions critically," writes McNamara, and Bundy, mulling over the months of critical decision making in 1965, describes the problem in similar terms: "We found ourselves arguing over a number and not over a use—how many troops should go in, not what they should do, not the military strategy that would govern the deployment." The consensus between the two is made explicit in a memorandum Bundy submitted to Johnson on January 27 of that year, under the heading, "Re: Basic Policy in Vietnam," paragraph six of which was to become particularly significant. "We see two alternatives," writes Bundy, referring to

McNamara and himself. "The first is to use our military power in the Far East and to force a change in communist policy. The second is to deploy all our resources along a track of negotiations aimed at salvaging what little can be preserved with no major addition to our present military risks."

Such, in the end, is the fundamental dilemma every leader faces in time of war, when he must decide whether to push for a military victory at all costs or come to terms with his gains (or losses) and seek a diplomatic exit. Recently Obama faced that same fork in the road when he struggled for months—according to his detractors, too many months—over the question of whether to send reinforcements to Afghanistan.

Many books had been written about the American involvement in Vietnam before Bundy decided to publish his memoirs—meaning that very little in the way of facts on the events of the period remains to be unearthed. Not surprisingly, then, this book contains no great revelations. It quotes the same documents that have already been quoted, discusses the same episodes that have already been discussed, mentions the same tragic heroes, the same age-old dilemmas. "What can we say is the most surprising?" Bundy wrote to himself in February 1996. Even he seems uncertain but replies nevertheless: "The endurance of the enemy." In Vietnam of 1966—as in Iraq of 2004 and Afghanistan of 2009—the enemy stubbornly refuses to surrender in accordance with the timetable allotted by the U.S. invasion force.

Indeed, in the spring of 1965 it was plain to all that North Vietnam would not be broken quickly. General William Westmoreland, commander of the American forces in Vietnam, wrote, "I see no likelihood of achieving a quick, favorable end to the war"—unless, that is, the United States resorted to nuclear weapons. Undersecretary of State George Ball wanted to withdraw American troops, based on his assessment that no U.S. force, regardless of its size, was capable of achieving victory. Bundy rejected that proposal, offering the president a choice of two escalation plans instead. According to the first, authored by Westmoreland, an additional 175,000 troops would be deployed in Vietnam; the second, authored by Bill Bundy, McGeorge Bundy's brother and assistant secretary of state, proposed a less aggressive reinforcement of just over 80,000 troops.

By July, Johnson had to reach a decision, and against the advice of

Undersecretary Ball, ordered the troop buildup. According to the book, Bundy believed, in retrospect, that the dramatic consultations of the summer of 1965 were just for show. Johnson, Bundy says, "wants to be *seen* having careful discussions," although he had already decided what his stance would be. This was largely on account of the advice he had received from former president Dwight Eisenhower, who told him, "We are not going to run out of a free country we helped to establish."

How painfully familiar this sounds forty-five years later. It should come as little surprise that so many people have been tempted to draw comparisons between the events of that time and the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In many respects, the Vietnam they see in their mind's eye is much more than the blood-soaked struggle that actually took place in Southeast Asia four decades ago; it has, rather, become a code word for a failed war, a faulty set of decisions, a distorted view of reality, and an unfounded belief in the United States' ability to defeat any and every enemy. Headlines to this effect regularly appear in the U.S. media: "Could Afghanistan become Obama's Vietnam?" asked *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, CNN, and dozens if not hundreds of other newspapers and outlets. There can be no mistaking that a question phrased in this way is meant to warn against unwanted entanglements and unending conflicts.

But the "Iraq/Afghanistan as Vietnam" narrative can be cast differently. President George W. Bush, for instance, also accepted the Iraq-Vietnam comparison, but ascribed to it a meaning that astonished, and infuriated, quite a few commentators and experts. In an August 2007 speech, he warned that "one unmistakable legacy of Vietnam is that the price of America's withdrawal was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our vocabulary new terms like 'boat people,' 'reeducation camps' and 'killing fields.'"

And it wasn't only the eventual failure in Vietnam that left divided opinions in its wake. In that same speech, Bush stated, "There is a legitimate debate about how we got into the Vietnam War and [how we] left"—a legitimate debate that some people have tried to present as illegitimate. Establishment historians, i.e., scholars associated with academic institutions (who are mostly identified with the political left), maintain that America's defeat was an inevitable result of the sin of interference in the affairs of a faraway country in the first place. Yet according to a

prevalent view in right-wing circles, the blame for the debacle of Vietnam lies rather in the lack of resolve shown by the American public and its leaders in the face of the communist challenge. Top-ranking Republican officials have adopted this line wholeheartedly, including former New York mayor and presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani, who wrote in August 2007 that

> America must remember one of the lessons of the Vietnam War. Then, as now, we fought a war with the wrong strategy for several years. And then, as now, we corrected course and began to show real progress. Many historians today believe that by about 1972 we and our South Vietnamese partners had succeeded in defeating the Vietcong insurgency and in setting South Vietnam on a path to political self-sufficiency. But America then withdrew its support, allowing the communist North to conquer the South. The consequences were dire.

While the outcome of the war remains somewhat controversial, the dispute surrounding the reasons for America's failure is far more heated. Goldstein's book has invariably been dragged into this debate and enlisted to serve the more accepted (i.e., establishment) narrative. Last November, for instance, Justice Anthony Kennedy said, "I was asking myself what book I'd want Obama to read." The answer? *The Best and the Brightest* by David Halberstam—the book that set the tone for American discourse on the war ever since its release in 1972, three years *before* the U.S. pullout from Saigon. Unfortunately, during the period that elapsed between the two books' publications, we have not learned much. Further facts have been uncovered, documents exposed, and archives opened. But the basic narrative remains the same—at least, for those who do not subscribe to Bush's and Giuliani's interpretation.

If for the United States, Afghanistan is today's Vietnam, how does Obama figure in the comparison? He is the president, of course, but which one? Two Democrats occupied the White House during the Vietnam era, one young, charismatic, handsome, and (as the first Catholic to be elected president) precedent-setting, much like Obama himself; the other was torn between his desire to implement far-reaching domestic reforms and his obligation to handle pressing foreign affairs, including a war he did not start—also just like the current president. So which of them is Obama, Kennedy or Johnson?

Goldstein's book could understandably lead Obama to conclude that he would be better off being Kennedy, if only because responsibility for the catastrophe in Vietnam

has fallen not on his shoulders, but on those of his successor. Indeed, the book exonerates Kennedy, *ex post facto*, from the mistakes the United States made while pursuing the policy he had delineated. True, he sent advisers to Vietnam and in 1961 even explained, "We have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place [to rectify that]," but he was not, according to the book, responsible for the war's major escalation. The real bloodshed began only during the Johnson administration, and it is something many, including Bundy, believe Kennedy would not have let happen.

Some evidence can be marshaled to back this claim, but its worth is uncertain. For example, at the last press conference he held before his assassination, Kennedy said, "I don't want the United States to have to put troops there." This would appear to support the case for the defense, but it, like everything else, must be placed in the proper context. As with Kennedy, Johnson, too, did not rush to send call-ups to Vietnam. He waited instead until after the 1964 elections, aware that such an announcement would cost him numerous votes. So, too, may Kennedy have had political reasons for not stepping on the gas, and like Johnson, he might have sounded and acted differently after reelection.

Clearly, political interests played a role in the White House decisions vis-à-vis Vietnam. Bundy, looking back, condemns this phenomenon—and who wouldn't? But electoral considerations can never totally be eliminated, even from those situations in which officials have to reach fateful decisions—even, for example, in a state of war. In a memo Bundy wrote in 1964, he himself noted that "the political damage to [President Harry] Truman and [Secretary of State Dean] Acheson from the fall of China [to the communists] arose because most Americans came to believe that we could and should have done more than we did to prevent it. This is exactly what would happen now if we should seem to be the first to quit in Saigon." In yet another memo, Bundy explicitly warned about the possibility of "losing an election."

Perhaps it would be wrong to reject such considerations outright. After all, there is certainly some logic to the claim that a democratic country like the United States cannot win an ongoing war without broad public support—and that achieving this support compels those in power to make certain political maneuvers. Bundy was clearly aware of this reality: In February 1965, upon his return from

a visit to Saigon, he recommended that the president bomb North Vietnam in response to a Vietcong attack that killed eight American soldiers at the air force base near Pleiku. McNamara's book mentions two of the arguments Bundy presented at the time: "In the long run, he hoped it would affect the North's will—moving them to reduce their support of the Vietcong and/or to negotiation; in the short run, he believed it would produce a 'sharp, immediate increase in optimism in… South [Vietnam].'" If McNamara's interpretation is correct, Bundy was highly sensitive to the need to influence public opinion in North and South Vietnam, just as he understood that the administration had to be attuned to the general mood of the American public. "His final paragraph stressed a major point," explains McNamara. "At its very best the struggle in Vietnam will be long. It seems to us important that this fundamental fact be made clear and our understanding of it be made clear to our own people."

Yet despite Bundy's acknowledgment of the role played by political interests in the way the war was handled, Goldstein's book fails to give them enough weight as far as Kennedy's legacy is concerned. The reason may lie in Kennedy's firm refusal, despite the pressure of his staff, to send substantial reinforcements to Vietnam. Perhaps those quoted remarks in which he recoils at the thought of military entanglement in Southeast Asia also strengthened this impression. But at times, suspicions steal into the heart of the skeptical reader. Goldstein clearly wants to depict Kennedy as a blameless leader, someone who would never have let Vietnam "happen" on his watch. He prefers to leave this American icon as white as snow.

In the December 1, 2009 speech to the American people announcing his decision to boost the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Obama made no mention of Kennedy, and certainly not of Johnson. In fact, the only president he quoted was the Republican who preceded them, Dwight Eisenhower. Nor did he select a particularly stirring quote ("Each proposal must be made in the light of a broader consideration"). In fact, he may well have deliberately chosen to cite a lackluster remark. Finding himself in the unenviable role of "war president," Obama seems to have deemed it best to steer clear of comparisons. He certainly does not want his reinforcement in Afghanistan to be gauged against Bush's surge in Iraq or Johnson's troop buildup in Vietnam. He thus told himself, and

his constituents, that this is a different kind of war altogether. "There are those who suggest that Afghanistan is another Vietnam," said the president. "They argue that it cannot be stabilized, and we're better off cutting our losses and rapidly withdrawing. I believe this argument depends on a false reading of history."

It was a speech that left Obama's listeners confused. Some pronouncements were downright contradictory—for instance, a promise to pull out by a predetermined date (July 2011) alongside a statement that withdrawal was dependent on making progress. But the core message—the decision to continue the war until victory is achieved—demonstrates that Obama has chosen to follow Johnson's path rather than act as Kennedy would have done, at least according to Goldstein's supposition.

The big question, then, is what if anything Obama has learned from the book making the rounds among his advisers. The obvious answer is the danger of sending more troops into Afghanistan, and the wisdom of withdrawing them. If Afghanistan is Obama's Vietnam, then clearly he should have put a halt to the escalation process as quickly as possible. The fact that he did the opposite points to one of two things, or perhaps both: First, the president is indeed convinced, as he declared in his speech, that Afghanistan is not today's Vietnam, and that the differences between the two military campaigns are too significant to warrant any comparison; second, despite what historians might like to think, decision makers do not often take their research into account when shaping policy.

This conclusion is likely to disappoint many people, especially those raised on the mantra that we must study the past lest we be doomed to repeat it. Indeed, Obama seems to have disregarded the lessons of Bundy's soul-searching. The more he ignores Bundy's later insights—as described by Goldstein—the more he appears inclined to adopt Bundy's earlier, real-time recommendations, such as the one that, following a visit to Vietnam in 1966, he wrote to President Johnson: "The situation in Vietnam is deteriorating… without new U.S. action, defeat appears inevitable.… Any negotiated U.S. withdrawal today would mean surrender on the installment plan."

In any case, there are many ways to read Bundy, just as there are many ways to "read" Vietnam. Perhaps, for example, Obama reads both as a call for action only within a framework of consensus—that is, as an obligation constantly to ensure that the public is with him. Obama's speech manifested

his desire for just this type of public support—much more so, for instance, than the Bush announcement of the troop surge in Iraq. The latter's decision was widely perceived as an act of defiance, a kick in the pants of the political establishment and a slap in the face of the Baker-Hamilton Commission, which presented an opposite set of recommendations. Obama's resolution, by contrast, came across as a responsible, carefully weighed, and laudably centrist move.

This contrast between Bush and Obama illustrates just how hard it can be to apply the lessons of the past to the present, not only in the case of events that took place decades ago (Vietnam), but also those that transpired much more recently (Iraq). The fact that those who led the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan saw them as part of the same campaign (Donald Rumsfeld called it a "global struggle against violent extremism," and Obama "a struggle against violent extremism") means very little in this regard. Both Bush and Obama made similar decisions under similar circumstances, but neither they nor those who analyzed their respective moves want to stress this similarity.

In many ways, the American failure in Vietnam is a sort of Rorschach test: Every commentator sees a different picture. During the Bush administration, for example, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Vice President Richard Cheney presented two diametrically opposed interpretations of what transpired during that ill-fated war. Powell, who experienced the horrors of the jungles of Southeast Asia firsthand, deduced from his personal experience the need for prudence; Cheney, on the other hand, believed the Vietnam generation drew the wrong conclusions from that war and as a result is now overly hesitant. Powell feared that Iraq would turn out to be another quagmire, while Cheney saw in the secretary of state the same lack of resolve that had led to the fall of Saigon to the communists. Hence Bush's decision to reinforce the soldiers in Iraq rather than withdraw them—as foreign policy veterans had recommended he do—was, to Cheney, nothing less than a triumph over the Vietnam syndrome at precisely the time that detractors lambasted the move as a repeat of Johnson's historical error.

Obama, apparently, did not conclude from Goldstein's book that American intervention in faraway countries necessarily ends in failure. Nor did he infer from Bundy's (and Goldstein's) musings that the United States has no chance of overcoming local guerrilla forces. He did not even seem to be alarmed by the fact that he, like Johnson, was raising the level

of U.S. action in an arena he himself had not chosen, or by the possibility that his military commanders would keep asking for more, and he would be hard-pressed to refuse.

If the path Obama has chosen does not lead to the desired outcome, future historians will surely write books discussing the lessons of yet another "failed war." And if they agree with Bundy, the blame will be laid squarely at the feet of the person who sat in the Oval Office. Unfortunately for Obama, however, it will not be the president who started the campaign who takes history's fall, but rather the one who continued and intensified it.

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