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Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara

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former Japanese cabinet minister, Ishihara Shintaro, is reported to have said in 1989, "The American nuclear umbrella is just an illusion as far as the Japanese people are concerned. . . . The time has come to tell the United States that we do not need American protection. Japan will protect itself with its own power and wisdom."

JOHN BEX
Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania

Shapley, Deborah. *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1993. 734pp. \$29.95

As Secretary of Defense, Robert Strange McNamara was one of the most controversial public figures of the 1960s, in particular in his role as Vietnam decision-maker. Deborah Shapley's long book on the controversial McNamara covers the entire life of the man, from his early years through the post-Defense years, most notably as president of the World Bank. Given the interests of readers of this review, as well as space limitations, my commentary will focus on his period in the Pentagon.

The author, a Washington journalist and investigative reporter, is well qualified for the task she has assumed. Her research is impressive, and the many interviews she had with McNamara are somewhat of a first. The book itself is in fact the first complete account of the subject's life, though there have been a couple of

other efforts, both more focused and less critical in tone.

McNamara was born in San Francisco in 1916 and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1937. He received a master of business administration degree at Harvard in 1939 and the following year joined the faculty there, specializing in the application of statistical analysis to management problems. During World War II he served as a commissioned officer in the Army Air Corps, working as a staff officer in statistical control. After the war he and nine other statistical control experts hired themselves out to the Ford Motor Company. He rose rapidly in the firm, and when he was elected its president in 1960, he was the first to hold that office who was not a member of the Ford family.

In that year there was also elected a new president of the United States, and he, as had been evident throughout his campaign, had a keen interest in foreign and defense policy. Like all presidents, John F. Kennedy had his own views on how these interrelated policies should be managed and the kind of persons he wanted for his chief advisers. Kennedy had offered Robert Lovett the post of either secretary of state or of defense, but he declined them both. Lovett, however, subsequently recommended Robert McNamara for Defense.

When McNamara became Secretary of Defense in January 1961, the department was more than thirteen years old and had had seven secretaries. From a loose federal arrangement in the beginning, the secretary's

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control had gradually tightened. Eisenhower's 1958 Reorganization Act provided for even greater central control, but the Act was basically untapped when McNamara was sworn in.

His imprint was made largely through his management approach. He was the watershed secretary, and the Department of Defense has never been the same since. He was the first since World War II to achieve true civilian control of the Pentagon below the presidential level.

The image that emerges from Shapley's book is the standard one, of both a good and a bad McNamara. On the good side, McNamara played a major and successful role in the development of national strategy and defense policy in the first three or four years of the tenure. He attempted, with a high degree of success, to make American military power more responsive to U.S. foreign policy and national security objectives. While rejecting a counterforce strategy, he did oversee the development of a U.S. deterrent that could survive a Soviet attack and still inflict unacceptable losses on that country. He also strengthened the command and control facilities of our strategic retaliatory forces, thus increasing the flexibility with which they could be employed.

Vietnam is another story. From 1961 on, he was Kennedy's "action officer" on Vietnam matters. To quote Shapley: "By his high profile, his statistics, flying trips, press conferences and optimism, he identified

himself with the war. McNamara gave John Kennedy's limited partnership in this remote part of the world its aura of invincible, thoroughly American success." With Kennedy's assassination and Johnson's assumption of the presidency, there was no change. The author comments that McNamara "choreographed his own public transfer of loyalty to Lyndon Johnson." In the case of Vietnam this was done with enthusiasm. As he told a reporter in 1964, "I don't mind its being called McNamara's war. In fact I'm proud to be associated with it."

As time went on McNamara became disenchanted with the possibility of winning the war, and as it dragged on he became more and more conscious of what the war was doing to the American homefront and to a generation of young people. But the failure in Vietnam was in large part a McNamara failure. There were, of course, major domestic constraints imposed on his management of the war. The Great Society dominated Johnson's thinking, and the president wanted no public debate that would jeopardize it. This meant no debate on a reserve call-up and no debate on the budget—which in turn meant that for a time there was concealment of what actual costs would eventually be. Still, McNamara cannot absolve himself for his part in getting America into the Vietnam quagmire in the manner in which he did. Except for Kennedy and Johnson, he more than anyone else led the country into that war.

Eventually he broke with Johnson, who perceived McNamara's disenchantment with the war and moved him to the World Bank. At his peak, McNamara had been a strong cabinet officer and at the same time a key presidential officer in that he accurately represented the president's views to the defense bureaucracy. In this sense, he was intensely loyal to Johnson. Perhaps he was too loyal—who knows what would have happened had he articulated his misgivings earlier?

Of course, the fault was on the military side as well as on the civilian. Had the senior military stood up to Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara and laid on the line their misgivings about such issues as failure to call up the reserves or the incremental strategy being pursued, there is no telling what the result might have been. At the least there would have been a public debate before it was too late, and at best either the war would not have been fought or it would have been fought quickly and decisively without tearing apart American society.

Shapley's final judgments on all this are somewhat ambiguous. "That is the glory and tragedy of Robert Strange McNamara: He feels he must decide and then act, whether to save South Vietnam then or to save the planet today. Cooler heads may recognize the limits of their powers and decline to change the world. They may refrain from the constant manipulation McNamara engaged in and still

does. Not he. For better or worse McNamara shaped much in today's world—and imprisoned himself."

The book is nicely written and covers an impressive number of issues. Perhaps too many—the reading is a bit tedious, and at times somewhat superficial. Though this work will probably not be the definitive biography of McNamara, it will be the best for many years, and it is well worth reading.

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Tucker, Robert C. *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. 707pp. \$29.95

Events occurring in the Soviet Union since 1985—Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika and his initiatives to end the Cold War, severe economic decline, and the centrifugal forces of national self-assertion, all accelerated by the failed coup of August 1991—have diminished the military and ideological threats to the West and, consequently, should facilitate a less biased study of Russian history during the Soviet period. As the Cold War recedes further, so too will the unnatural consensus that has existed in the Anglo-American school of Soviet studies.

One of the deficiencies of mainstream Sovietology has been its assumption that the uniquely dreadful and excessive policies hatched in the neurotic mind of Joseph Stalin