
AT ISSUE

Listening—and Deciding

Between the intellectual and the political leader there inevitably lies a gap. The intellectual pursues truth; the politician, power. If both parties are wise, they recognize this existential situation and tolerate each other's consequent limitations. Each has his respective duties: the intellectual, to seek the truth and speak it to power; the political leader, to use the truth to help him exercise power wisely.

Alas, reality frequently falls short of the ideal. The unavoidable gap widens to become a yawning chasm, with each side harboring contempt for the other. Justified as the disdain may often be, political leaders and intellectuals need each other. A vivid reminder of how much this is so—and of how tragic for the country when the need is ignored—was provided recently by the publication of *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995), the best-selling memoir by Robert S. McNamara. The former secretary of defense (1961–68) observes that presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and their top advisers (including McNamara himself) were profoundly ignorant of Vietnam, of its history, culture, and politics. He then makes the astonishing claim that there were *no* Southeast Asia specialists in the U.S. government to whom they could turn for knowledgeable guidance. If only there had been, he gives us to understand, perhaps the disaster could have been avoided.

Why were there no such specialists? Chiefly, according to McNamara, because “the top East Asian and China experts” at Foggy Bottom—who had correctly foreseen the victory of Mao Zedong and the Communists in China—had been purged during the McCarthy era for their prescience. “Without men like these to provide sophisticated, nuanced insights,” McNamara explains, “we—certainly I—badly misread China’s objectives and mistook its bellicose rhetoric to imply a drive for regional hegemony. We also totally

underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh’s movement. We saw him first as a Communist and only second as a Vietnamese nationalist.” (Inasmuch as Ho and his forces killed, or otherwise eliminated, noncommunist nationalists, that may well have been the way he saw himself. But let that pass.)

McNamara’s claim about the want of expertise, if accepted at face value, raises an obvious question: if “sophisticated, nuanced insights” about Southeast Asia were not to be found in the upper reaches of the U.S. government, then why did Kennedy, Johnson, McNamara, and the others not turn to scholars and intellectuals *outside* the government?

Certainly, they knew the names of some.

On May 15, 1965—after the Johnson administration had begun to escalate U.S. military involvement in Vietnam—a “teach-in” on U.S. policy was held in Washington. It lasted 15½ hours, was attended by some 5,000 people, and was heard via a

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special radio hookup by more than 100,000 listeners at more than 100 college campuses. No one-sided protest against the war, the colloquy offered a serious debate between scholars such as Berkeley political scientist Robert A. Scalapino, who favored U.S. policy, and others who opposed it. Government officials and specialists also took part.

The teach-in made front-page news for two days running in the *New York Times*; two full pages were devoted to excerpts alone. McNamara and his colleagues could hardly have been in the dark about it.

The leading scholarly critics of U.S. policy at the teach-in said much the same thing that the repentant McNamara himself now says. George McT. Kahin, director of the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell, for example, declared that American officials’ “most consistent failure has been an inability both to appreciate the importance of Asian nationalism and to work with rather than against this power-

ful force. . . . Moreover, the obsession of American policy makers with what they still see as monolithic Communism has blinded them to the fact that Communism in Asia has adapted itself to nationalism. And they have confused the broad but nationally differentiated force and potential of Communism with the threat of specifically Chinese power."

Did Kahin, University of Chicago political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau, and other critics lack "sophisticated, nuanced insights" simply because they were not senior government officials? Apparently so. When journalist Charles A. Cerami once cited Morgenthau's criticism of the domino theory to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Cerami recalls in *America* (June 3, 1995), Rusk replied: "Well, if we let the professors make our policies for us, this sure would be a different place."

No one, of course, was suggesting that "the professors" be placed in charge of U.S. foreign policy. And as the 1965 teach-in showed, "the professors" were not unanimous as to what that policy should be. (Indeed, in retrospect, neither side of the debate had exclusive possession of truth and wisdom. Professor Scalapino, for instance, saw clearly—as many critics of the U.S. effort did not—that the Viet Cong were not a truly indigenous force in South Vietnam and did not command the support of the populace.) But instead of paying serious attention to the informed arguments of the dissenting intellectuals and specialists outside the government, the Johnson administration simply tried to discredit them.

Such hubris proved disastrous. As Morgenthau wrote in 1966, "The information available to the government is quantitatively but not qualitatively superior to that accessible to the general public. A case can even be made . . . that the enormous quantity of information to which the decision-makers of the government are exposed impedes sound judgment."

It was that quality—sound judgment—that seemed most wanting in the upper reaches of government, not a lack of expert knowledge. Such knowledge was available even inside the

government. Roger Hilsman, who served as assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs in 1963 and '64, recently noted that the State Department had several highly qualified specialists on China and Southeast Asia. Among them were Alan Whiting, "one of the top half-dozen China experts in the United States," Edward Rice, "a career Foreign Service officer who had spent his whole life in China," Marshall Green, "a former consul general in Hong Kong who had been specifically in charge of watching China," Paul Kattenberg, a Yale Ph.D. specializing in Southeast Asia and Vietnam, and Louis Sarris, a long-time desk officer for Vietnam.

"The problem was not that McNamara got no expert advice, as he now claims," Hilsman writes in *Foreign Affairs* (July–Aug. 1995), "but that he would not listen to it. From the beginning of the Kennedy administration, these experts piled up memo after memo. . . . All of the reasons that McNamara now gives for why the United States should not have made Vietnam an American war were repeated to him again and again—not only by the experts . . . but also by Robert F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, George Ball, and me."

The end of the war, when it finally came, did not bring an end to the need for wisdom in governance or the challenge of bringing knowledge to bear on the exercise of power. Indeed—to move abruptly forward to the less sorrowful present—it could be argued that if President-elect Bill Clinton and his advisers had paid more heed to the accumulated scholarship on presidential transitions, he and his administration, not to mention his party, might not be in the straits they are in today.

The 11 weeks between election and inaugural "are hazardous because they are so few," Harvard political scientist Richard E. Neustadt observes in *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (1990). "They leave but little time to turn a campaign into an administration, which takes office three weeks after Congress does." Before the election, the candidate and his aides are too preoccupied with winning to spend much time thinking about governing; after it, the elated and exhausted victors, intoxicated with their own success, may

find it hard to adjust swiftly to their new role and to do all that should be done. They face not only the tyranny of time but the temptation to look upon the work of the 11 weeks as just more campaigning. It isn't, as Neustadt and other scholars have pointed out.

If President-elect Clinton and his fellow campaigners read the scholarly literature on the hazards and challenges inherent in presidential transitions, they gave very little sign of having absorbed its lessons. "Astonishingly," writes journalist Elizabeth Drew in *On the Edge* (1994), "there was no real plan for what the new administration would do after it got to Washington. George Stephanopoulos said that a memo covering the first two weeks had been drawn up before the Clinton people left Little Rock. And that was it."

It was not enough. Almost immediately, with the doomed Zoe Baird nomination for attorney general and the raising of the homosexuals-in-the-military issue, the new administration began to flounder. "We just weren't ready—emotionally, intellectually, organizationally, or substantively," a senior White House official told Drew. The Clinton administration has never fully recovered from that early display of ineptitude.

Like Robert McNamara and his colleagues, President Clinton and his advisers have intelligence and good intentions in abundance. But sound judgment and wisdom are also needed. Scholars and intellectuals cannot necessarily supply those qualities, but sometimes, by drawing deeply on history and making as disinterested an analysis as possible, they can help.

Yet even the most luminous scholars and intellectuals are not infallible guides to action. Once, in response to criticism from Hans Morgenthau, President Kennedy said that the professor should sit where *he* sat. As the ever-realistic Morgenthau acknowledged, the president had a point.

The political leader is wrong to ignore what serious scholars and intellectuals have to say,

even if he is right to be skeptical of "the professors," whose professed truths are not always true and not always relevant. But ultimately, he—not they—must decide.

As was the case with Vietnam, so today with Bosnia. Elizabeth Drew tells how in May 1993, while Secretary of State Warren Christopher was in Europe trying to get U.S. allies to agree to the president's proposal to lift the arms embargo and then conduct air strikes if the Serbs took advantage of the interval before the arms reached the Muslims, he received word that Clinton, who had been reading Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, was wavering on the policy. Under Kaplan's spell, Clinton now apparently was convinced that nothing could be done about the war because it was just an upsurge of "ancient ethnic hatreds." As Noel Malcolm, author of *Bosnia: A Short History* (1994), later commented: "We can only speculate as to what the course of history might have been if, instead of reading Kaplan's book, President Clinton had read the long and critical review of it [by Malcolm himself] published in the Summer 1993 issue of *The National Interest*."

Clinton, of course, is not the first president to find it hard to make up his mind about a difficult issue. Once, after a day spent listening to his advisers argue about a tax matter, President Warren G. Harding cried out to one of his secretaries: "I listen to one side and they seem right, and then—God!—I talk to the other side and they seem just as right, and here I am where I started. . . . God! what a job!"

On the other side of the gulf that separates them, intellectuals and scholars can sympathize with the political leader as he struggles with the daunting issues of the day. They can offer analysis and advice, and the leader is foolish indeed not to listen. But then he must decide. That *is* the job. And when history comes to judge how well he did it, it will do him no good to blame his bad decisions on others. The decisions were his to make, even if now they seem to have been, in McNamara's words, "wrong, terribly wrong."

—Robert K. Landers