



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **McNamara's Other Debacle**

**by James Bovard**

Former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who died on July 6, was best known for ratcheting up the Vietnam War thanks to the false claims he provided to President Johnson, Congress, and the American people.

Despite his lies that vastly expanded an unnecessary conflict and cost more than a million American and Vietnamese lives, McNamara is being touted as a great man. A *New York Times* op-ed praised him as the most compassionate member of the Johnson administration's cabinet.

After McNamara resigned as defense secretary in early 1968, LBJ appointed him as president of the World Bank. A *Washington Post* tribute praised him as "a chieftain of foreign financial aid" and stressed that he "was often described as 'the conscience of the West,' for his relentless efforts to persuade the industrialized world to commit more capital to improving life in the have-not nations." World Bank lending increased twelve-fold (to \$12 billion a year) during McNamara's 13-year reign.

But rather than a boasting point, McNamara's time at the World Bank is as much his lasting infamy as his Vietnam record. A World Bank biography noted that during McNamara's tenure, "the previous Bank strictures against lending to public sector banking institutions or enterprises were relaxed." The official sketch of McNamara's presidency noted that "his reliance upon government intervention sometimes meant turning a blind eye to coercive practices ... and could lead the Bank to ignore the inefficiency and economic cost of government policies."

McNamara's favorite foreign leader was Julius Nyerere, ruler of Tanzania, which received more bank aid per capita than any other country in that decade. In the early 1970s, with World Bank aid and advice, Nyerere sent the Tanzanian army to drive the peasants off their land, burn their huts, load them onto trucks, and take them where the government thought they should live. The peasants were then ordered to build new homes "in neat rows staked out for them by government officials."

Nyerere wanted to curb his countrymen's individualist and capitalist tendencies and make them easier to control. He even outlawed people's sleeping in their gardens at night, which meant

that monkeys were free to help themselves to their crops. In many cases, the new government villages were far from the farmers' own lands, and so they simply gave up tilling the land, with the result that hunger in Tanzania soared.

McNamara's World Bank financed the brutal policies of the Vietnamese government in the late 1970s. The bank gave a \$60 million no-interest "loan" to the government of Vietnam in 1978, even after widely circulated reports in the West of massive concentration camps and brutal repression. The bank announced that the loan would finance "an irrigation project that will boost rice production." But a confidential bank report admitted that "the main effort to deal with the employment problem [in the south] consists of the creation of New Economic Zones — agricultural settlements that are intended to [forcibly] resettle 4 or 5 million people by the end of 1980." Farmers who resisted the government's "reorganization" were sent out in leaky boats, and thousands drowned in the South China Sea.

Beginning in 1976, the Bank poured hundreds of millions of dollars into a scheme by the government of Indonesia to remove — sometimes forcibly — several million people from the densely populated island of Java and resettle them on comparatively barren islands. One Australian critic noted that transmigration was largely "the Javanese version of Nazi Germany's *lebensraum*."

McNamara's profusion of aid allowed politicians in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere to seize far more power over farmers, businessmen, factory owners, and other productive individuals. The result was a profusion of state monopolies that helped destroy hope for entire generations.

As *Counterpunch* editor and author Alexander Cockburn observed, "The managerial ideal for McNamara was managerial dictatorship. World Bank loans surged to Pinochet's Chile after Allende's overthrow, to Uruguay, to Argentina, to Brazil after the military coup, to the Philippines, to Suharto after the '65 coup in Indonesia, and to the Romania of Ceausescu."

As long as McNamara could continue boosting the raw amounts of World Bank loans, he could continue pretending that he was saving the world. McNamara bankrolled socialist governments based on the same type of phony statistics that he used to justify expanding the U.S. war in Vietnam. He could strut like a vanquisher of either communism or world poverty as long as he embraced statistical hooey.

Even after laying wreckage to much of the globe, Robert McNamara was still treated by much of the mainstream media as the "best and the brightest." (The *Washington Post* appointed him to its board of directors). Citizens should be wary of those who would place halos over humanity's brutal oppressors.

James Bovard is the author of [Attention Deficit Democracy](#) [2006] as well as [The Bush Betrayal](#) [2004], [Lost Rights](#) [1994] and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace](#)

[to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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