‘Management is the Gate’, But to Where? Rethinking Robert McNamara’s ‘Career Lessons’

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Abstract

Career narratives could make a potentially valuable contribution to an ‘historic turn’ in management and organization studies. This paper provides an historical narrative on the career of Robert S. McNamara, former President of Ford, U.S. Secretary of Defence, and Chairman of the World Bank. Based on a thorough exposition and deconstruction of historiographical and journalistic sources the paper makes two contributions. Firstly, it argues that McNamara - a major figure in the disciplines of history, politics, and security studies – has been given a somewhat superficial treatment in *management* history despite being one of the most high-profile managers of his generation. Where McNamara appears in management literature the discussion has typically been historically inadequate, taking a simplistic line about his actions and approach, one limited to discrediting his ‘outdated’ forms of technique or management style and paying little attention to context and historiography. Secondly, the paper notes that management and organizations have in significant ways not moved beyond the McNamara approach now condemned by management writers. Many of the fundamental imperatives of commercial and governmental organizations that impacted McNamara’s career persist today, problematizing ideological prescriptions about ‘learning lessons’. The distancing of today’s ‘best practice leadership’ from the ‘bureaucratic’ forms of administration associated with McNamara in the 1960s is therefore more rhetorical than real; a typical manifestation of ahistorical business school discourse that the historic turn tries to address.

Keywords: Biography, Careers, Ford Motor Company, Historic turn, Robert McNamara, U.S. Military, Vietnam War, World Bank

Introduction

The rhetorical landscape of management and organization has, in recent decades, been radically reshaped. Management literature widely notes that the forms, goals, behaviours, techniques, ideologies, and contexts of present-day organizational life have changed drastically since the middle of the last century. For many authors – mainstream and critical, academic and ‘popular’ – the organizational terrain has shifted from one of bureaucratic order, control, stability and regularity, to one of rapid change, turbulence, agility and uncertainty (Gantman, 2005; Osterman, 2008: 26-29; Peters, 1989; Sennett, 2007). Global competitive pressures have rendered nationally-bounded organizational strategies hopelessly outdated, as firm boundaries become flexible and porous, enmeshed in complex ‘global value chains’ (Gereffi et al, 2005). The tone and technique of management has changed, from military-style forms of ‘command and control’, featuring centralized administration and managerial claims to authority based on strictness, hierarchy and elitism (Chandler, 1977; Drucker, 1955) to ‘neo-normative’ forms of control (Fleming and Spicer, 2008), whereby the tired and stuffy language of ‘administration’, ‘management’, and ‘authority’ give way to ‘leadership’, ‘vision’, ‘branding’, and ‘values’. Taken as a whole, this dramatic movement from a post-war ‘golden age of capitalism’ (Osterman, 2008) to today’s much more globally competitive and less secure phase, has been variously described as a shift from managerial to investor capitalism (Khurana, 2002: 52-61; Useem, 1996) from the second to the third ‘spirit’ of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), or from ‘organized’ to ‘disorganized’ capitalism (Gantman, 2005: 9; Lash and Urry, 1987).

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) famously argued that changes in the managerial ‘spirit’ of the times are driven by the adaptation and incorporation of critique of the prior zeitgeist or

‘spirit’. Following the call of Keulen and Kroeze (2012) for greater usage of historical narratives in organizational studies, this paper discusses how the managerial zeitgeist adapts and changes via a narrative of the extraordinary career of a man who for many embodied ‘rational’ management and the second spirit of capitalism: Robert S. McNamara. It explores the historical events, processes, and guiding principles of his managerial career, but also critically interrogates the often selective and historically contentious ways in which recent writings have portrayed, interpreted, and critiqued them. It discusses the ways in which the organizations McNamara worked in and ran – all of them key institutions of American capitalism both then and now – were shaped by, but in many ways also resisted, the imposition of McNamara’s ‘professional’ and ‘second spirit’ management culture of systems, ‘controls’ and quantitative analysis. In doing so it will critically explore the extent to which the claims of mainstream management and leadership discourse about the outdatedness of these methodologies can really represent an historically adequate account.

The paper adopts the broad approach of career narrative (Collin and Young, 1986) as well as the narrative history of management ideas (Keulen and Kroeze, 2012; Waring 1991; Yuill, 2011) in discussing and unpacking various prior and contemporary thematic currents in management thought (Gantman, 2005; Kumar, 2004) and focusing them through the lens of critical career biography (Gibson et al, 2013). It draws on secondary sources (such as biographies of McNamara or histories of the Vietnam conflict), and certain sources that might be classified as ‘grey’ literature, such as journalistic reportage and reproductions of government memos and public addresses.

A growing literature discusses the philosophy and methods of history as applied to business and management studies (e.g. Adorisio and Mutch, 2013; Decker 2013; Rowlinson et al

2014). The current paper does not claim to develop or discuss method as such. Indeed it is based on a straightforward methodology analysing only secondary sources. This involved firstly a database search for published business and management-related sources that mention McNamara, followed by a much more in-depth (and valuable) manual search of published historical writings that feature McNamara across the disciplines of business history, military history, politics, security studies and development studies. These sources were mostly books and hence beyond the range of the EBSCO database, and this latter process relied heavily on locating and reading onward references. The EBSCO search turned up 381 ‘business and management’ sources on the topic of ‘Robert McNamara’, of which 188 were in business-related magazines, 54 in trade publications, 15 in newspapers, and 53 in academic journals. A large proportion of these sources consisted of news media such as current events stories and business journalism, as well as writings or speeches by McNamara himself. Such sources were often of limited use given my aim to garner an overview of business school literature on McNamara and his methods. Sources that clearly qualified as academic business and management texts that featured McNamara tended to either: a) mention him in passing (Allcorn et al, 1996: 268; Bell and Thorpe, 2013: 71; Bennis and O’Toole, 2005: 100; Birnbaum, 2001: 34; Carter et al, 2008: 94, 139; Freedman 2012: 149-150, 501-2, Fuller 2013: 121; Mintzberg, 1996: 65; Shenhav, 1999: 7-8; Locke and Spender 2011: 15; McKinlay and Starkey, 1994: 185-7; Starkey and McKinlay, 1994: 980; Waring, 1991: 32, 38, 44, 47; Zaleznik, 1989: 102-4), or: b) treat his career story largely superficially and in isolation from literature from other disciplines, and with little or no discussion of the need for a critical and reflexive treatment of ‘history’ (Chandler and Chandler 2013: 41-66; Dodgson 2012; Grattan, 2006; Lavin, 2009; Lutz, 2013: 198-200; Peters, 2001: 83; Pinsdorf, 2000).¹

¹ Although managerialist in tone, two detailed sources that discuss McNamara *specifically as a manager* have been produced by the business journalists Byrne (1993) and Gabor (2000: 131-152). Biographies of McNamara cover many other topics beyond his abilities/failures as a manager, with Shapley (1993) the most significant and in-depth by far, and Hendrickson (1996) a sophisticated and creative narrative built through lives of others

It is widely noted that management writings are too-often historically blind (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Gibson et al 2013; Kieser, 1994; Parker and Ritson 2005; Usdigen and Kieser, 2004; Zald, 1996), in a dual sense of lacking detailed coverage and discussion of past events as well as being insensitive to profound controversies about the contested, fluid, and discursive nature of ‘history’ itself (Geyl, 1962; Gioia et al 2002; Jenkins, 1991/2003; Lowenthal, 1985; Munslow, 2010). Management literature is typically constrained by prescriptive or purportedly instructive discourses (Keulen and Kroeze, 2012; Waring, 1991: 6), and this paper attempts to make a contribution to the aim of an ‘historic turn’ in organization studies by developing a more historically-informed and conceptually-grounded narrative of a famous manager’s career biography. Rather than prescriptively commenting on the effectiveness or otherwise of management as method, the paper instead explores a varied historiography from across the fields of political and military history, business history, and indeed the intellectual history of management ideas that form such a central part of Robert McNamara’s extraordinary career story.

McNamara, of course, is most famous for his *failures* as a manager, none more so than for overseeing, as Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in 1961-8, the large-scale and ultimately disastrous escalation of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war.

McNamara was (and sometimes still is) described as one of the greatest managerial minds of his era, and was very much a product of (and indeed a shaper of) postwar management education. Yet so severe were his practical and moral failures that academics of the business school community appear reluctant to claim or even properly explore his tortured legacy.

affected by McNamara’s actions. Byrne and Shapley are considered and detailed pieces with a sense of historical context that is typically stronger than those provided in the writings on McNamara by business and management academics. On the other hand, both produce the same ‘management lessons’ narrative which implies that management best practice has moved on since McNamara, a claim that the current paper questions.

Where they have done so, they have tended to draw historically superficial ‘lessons’ that are limited to critiques of McNamara’s use of supposedly ‘outdated’ techniques such as inflexible quantitative measurements, his failure to understand organizational culture, and his inability to act according to today’s norms of moral and ethical ‘leadership’. The received wisdom reduces the complexity and indeterminacy of a highly complicated context and individual to a business school case study of a ‘good manager but poor leader’. While this straightforward picture is partially correct it is highly superficial. I argue that richer and much more enlightening narratives can also be told from this man’s career.

The paper unfolds in the following directions. Firstly it explores the formative years of McNamara’s managerial career, discussing his schooling in what were then new forms of quantitative measurement and statistical control, the development and teaching of these ideas at Harvard Business School, their application in the U.S. Army Air Forces campaign against Imperial Japan, and then subsequently at Ford Motor Company. It is important to note that McNamara and his Stat Control staff (the so-called ‘Whiz Kids’) experienced considerable successes during this era, which provides interesting counterpoints to the opprobrium heaped on McNamara and his methods since the Vietnam War. His acutely troubled time at the Pentagon is then explored, in a section discussing a very wide range of literature that is rightly deeply critical of McNamara’s behaviour, vision, strategy, and conduct. Thirdly, the paper explores his time at the World Bank. This stage of his career is especially neglected in the limited management literature on McNamara, so this section of the paper draws on writings from economic history and development studies. Discussion and conclusion sections follow in which the paper suggests the considerable potential of critical biography to contribute to the historic turn in management and organizational studies. The paper is not

intended as a defence of McNamara and his methods. Rather, it is an effort towards an historical revision of his career that pays due attention to context and historiography.

All history is to some extent ‘revisionist’ or a ‘reassessment’ (Gioia et al, 2002). A great deal of revisionist history is taking place as regards the Vietnam war, with several major new biographies of key military and civilian strategists who, like McNamara, have been derided for their practical and ethical failings (see for example Daddis (2014) on General Westmoreland, and Jones (2013) on Robert Komer). This paper provides a historically-informed reassessment of the received wisdom of the ‘lessons’ of Robert McNamara’s career from the perspective of business and management studies. It argues that there might be many ‘lessons’ to learn from McNamara’s career beyond the straightforward ones usually advanced in the limited B-school literature, and it reassesses deeper questions about the complexities of strategy, metrics, conduct, and means versus ends. It advocates a broader exploration of historiography and context, and invites us to consider more widely what exactly we might mean by ‘management’ or ‘leadership’ from historical perspectives, rather than from the ‘practical’/didactic, ‘lessons learnt’ ‘best practice’ perspectives more common in business schools.

The early years: Harvard Business School, the Army Air Forces, and Ford Motor Company

A ‘Stat Control’ Professional

Born in 1916, Robert S. McNamara grew to adulthood during the Great Depression. A native of San Francisco, he graduated from the University of California, majoring in economics and minoring in mathematics and philosophy (Borklund, 1966: 207; Twing, 1998: 146-8). In 1937 he went on to Harvard Business School, ‘soaking up nuts and bolts skills [he] figured

[he] would need to land a job' (McNamara, 1995: 7) and it was there he became deeply immersed in the techniques of 'rational' and statistics-driven forms of accounting principles, often referred to in the literature simply as 'stat control' or 'systems analysis' (Byrne, 1993: 41-9; Gibson, 1986: 14; McMaster, 1997: 2; Shapley, 1993: 21). He was also excited by strategy - in those days often going by the name 'business policy' - as taught in particular by Ed Learned (see for example Learned et al, 1969). McNamara (1995: 7) claims that Learned was one of the few B-school professors who taught that 'business leaders had a duty to serve society as well as their shareholders ... a guiding principle in my life.'

McNamara was being educated as 'managerial capitalism' (Chandler, 1977; Useem, 1996) was starting to become institutionalized in the U.S. and elsewhere; the concepts, techniques and the 'teachability' of management were becoming increasingly codified and diffused - a professionalization project for management that has taken place the world over, often with morally and practically questionable results (Gantman, 2005; Grey, 2009; Grey and Mitev, 1995; Khurana, 2007; Klikauer, 2013; Spender, 2005; Waring, 1991). McNamara's enthusiasm for (and perhaps his youthful, naivety about) this new managerial creed is perfectly captured in a comment he reportedly made to a fellow student about career aspirations. He claimed he would rather become a manager than a doctor because a doctor 'could only help one person at a time. "I want to help the largest number of people,"' (Shapley, 1993: 18). Tensions existed, however, even at this early stage. McNamara reportedly voiced criticisms about how management was taught at HBS, wanting to believe in a more idealistic conception of management than the prevailing view that profit-making was everything (Hendrickson, 1996: 87; Shapley, 1993: 20).

Upon graduation in 1939 he endured a brief and unhappy spell working for Price, Waterhouse in San Francisco before returning to HBS as an assistant professor of accounting from the summer of 1940, on an annual salary of \$1,800 (Byrne, 1993: 49; Shapley, 1993: 28). He was said to be well-liked at Harvard, not arrogant or obsessively careerist (Hendrickson, 1996: 97). He didn't fully share its commercial and political values; although a registered Republican he appears to have been one of just three faculty who voted for FDR in the 1940 Presidential election, while 98 others went for Wendell Wilkie (Hendrickson, 1996: 96; Shapley, 1993: 27).

The Second World War interrupted his fledgling academic career.² McNamara took up a prominent role in Harvard Business School's new training programme for Army Air Forces officers (Byrne 1993: 42-45). HBS became the 'West Point of capitalism' (Gabor 2000: 135) as the imperatives of the Second World War and subsequent Cold War increasingly came to frame and intersect with those of business management and management education (Cooke 1999, 2006; Cooke et al 2005; Kelley et al, 2006; Spector, 2006). Logistics in the multi-theatre conflict of the Second World War were extremely complex and the new methods of stat control and operations management were central to the war effort (Waring, 1991). McNamara became increasingly drawn away from instruction and teaching and towards operational roles, adding his numerical and analytical aptitudes to the air war against Imperial Japan. His reports on efficient resource usage influenced a change of tactics towards low-level air assault with incendiaries, leading to the wholesale destruction of Japanese cities (Frank, 1999: 57-82) despite criticisms from military professionals about the heightened risk to U.S. aircrews of low-level raids. Putting aside the moral horror of area bombing

² A fuller description of McNamara's roles in the Second World War and in the Vietnam War is beyond the scope of this paper, and will appear in (AUTHOR XXXX).

(Lindqvist, 2012), the campaign against Japan was ultimately a huge success for Stat Control and for management and accounting as scientific disciplines.

‘Car Guys vs. Bean Counters’

With the war over, these techniques were soon put to use in the commercial world. The founder of the Office of Statistical Control, Colonel Charles ‘Tex’ Thornton, was convinced that his group of Stat Control officer-managers would prove invaluable in solving organizational problems in any context. Pitching the group to Henry Ford II, Thornton selected himself and nine further individuals he considered the ablest of the Stat Control officers, and Ford hired the entire group in one go (Byrne, 1993: 86).

McNamara and his fellow Whiz Kids joined Ford when there was ‘not more than a handful’ of college graduates among the thousands of managers (McNamara, 1995: 11). McNamara did not fully fit in with Ford’s commercial environment and withdrew from the prevailing organizational culture. Eschewing industry norms and rules of thumb, he emphasized the principles of Stat Control and ‘rational’ general management that he believed could be applied to any setting. At Ford, the Whiz Kids quickly established the value of their new ‘science’ of management. In the words of the business journalist John Byrne:

‘Some would say they lobotomized business, and in truth, they drove emotion and intuition and chaos out of decision-making. They persuaded themselves and others that a professional manager can and must control everything without knowing anything about the products the company produces. Numbers became the one true moral compass, the deciding point in every decision. This methodology unbalanced business and unbalanced their lives.’

(Byrne, 1993: 7-8)

Effectively a form of Taylorism for white-collar work (Fairhead, 2013: 125; Starkey and McKinlay, 1994; Waring, 1991; Zaleznik, 1989: 102-3), McNamara’s approach had certain

strengths in that it was controlled, detailed, empirically informed, methodical, and intolerant of wastage or traditional custom and practice. But it had many drawbacks. It tended to put the needs of finance and accounting ahead of all others and caused friction between staff who felt that their professional norms were treated with disdain by outsiders who knew nothing of the industry (Byrne, 1993; Gabor, 2000; Halberstam, 1986; McKinlay and Starkey, 1994; Zaleznik, 1989). Locke (1996) claims it was ‘a managerial mystique’ that could lead organizations down dangerously irrational paths as the numbers on which these systems depend were actually not as ‘rational’ as they claimed to be (Martin, 2010). Under this regime of ‘rational’ management nothing would get done unless middle managers and engineers had ‘worked their numbers’ and come up with watertight cases written in the language recognized by the finance people (Hounshell, 1999: 202-5; Starkey and McKinlay, 1994).

Critics have widely claimed that this penny-pinching approach eventually led to disastrous reputational damage for Ford. This is the basis of the business school and business journalism critique of McNamara’s managerial legacy – the supposedly rational, technical and professional managerial approach is dysfunctional due to its formality, its emphasis on cost control, its impracticality, its capacity for self-deception, and its remoteness from realities ‘on the ground’ (Byrne, 1993; Foroohar, 2011; Gabor, 2000; Halberstam, 1986; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Rosenzweig, 2010; Zaleznik, 1989). Many claim that the imposition of these kinds of rigid statistics-driven systems are at the root of the widespread failures of U.S. business (especially in manufacturing) in the face of the supposedly ‘high-trust’ and ‘high-commitment’ Japanese management models (Halberstam, 1986; Hayes and Abernathy, 1980; Locke, 1996; Lutz, 2011; Pascale and Athos, 1986; Starkey and McKinlay 1993, 1994; Zaleznick, 1989).

Despite the criticism McNamara was undoubtedly a management success during his time at Dearborn. Commercial wins did at times accrue from his insistence on detailed, detached, abstract, and general management thinking, and not from hunches or traditions (Hounshell, 1999; Shapley, 1995: 606). The kinds of product that McNamara championed tended to be utilitarian models such as the Ford Falcon, rather than extravagant showpieces such as the Mercury Turnpike Cruiser (Byrne, 1993: 342-5). He distanced himself from the beginning from the disastrous Ford Edsel, and fought hard with the speed and power-obsessed Detroit establishment to improve passenger safety in Ford vehicles (Borklund, 1966: 209; Byrne, 1993: 256-264; Rosenzweig, 2010: 90). Although often characterized as blinded by management fads and ignorant of organizational culture, he exhibited scepticism about other forms of 'best practice' in management such as GM-style divisionalization that he felt was incompatible with Ford's industrial resources and organizational heritage (Hounshell, 1999). With sixteen years of intense work and several power struggles behind him (Halberstam 1986), McNamara had established himself as one of the country's leading executives. He was eventually appointed President of Ford Motor Company on November 9, 1960 (Shapley, 1993: 78).

The Cold War heats up: From Ford to the Pentagon

Planning, Programming, Budgeting

McNamara was President of Ford for only six weeks. On 21 January 1961 he was sworn in as Defense Secretary in John F. Kennedy's Cabinet. He was perfectly suited to a place in Kennedy's 'Camelot'; a collection of 'the best and the brightest' drawn from academia, government, military, and business (Halberstam, 1969/1992; Parmar, 2012; Shapley, 1993: 92). The Cold War climate entailed an increasing intertwining of these occupational domains. Just as he'd done at the Army Air Forces and at Ford, McNamara quickly introduced

sweeping efficiency measures and attempted to 'rationalize' Pentagon organizational behaviour, partly by bringing in a team of his own hand-picked, highly cerebral advisors and analysts (Borins, 2010: S220; Halberstam, 1969/1992: 263-306). He was the first Secretary of Defense (perhaps the only except for Donald Rumsfeld) to genuinely try to reassert civilian control over the vast and troublesome military industrial complex (Brigham, 2006: 134-5). As before, out went professional norms and rules of thumb, and in came Management By Objective, Systems Analysis, a Cost Reduction System, Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT), and the Planning, Programming Budgeting System (PPBS) (Borklund, 1967: 215-6; Chwastiak, 2001, 2006; Enthoven and Smith, 1971; Palmer, 1978; Shapley, 1993). Decisions could only be made if they were 'evidence-based' and couched in the new language of 'cost-effectiveness'. The norms and language of managerial or 'organized' capitalism came to be inscribed across the vast and competing fields of the military-industrial complex. The approach was reminiscent of Drucker's 'Organizational Effectiveness' paradigm (Talbot, 2010: 143; Waring, 1991).

Although later 'exposed' as 'a fad' (Birnbaum, 2001: 34); the rationalizing and cost-controlling PPBS was widely claimed as a success at the Pentagon and was rolled out to much of the U.S. Federal government (Borins, 2010). Working in the world's largest office building, and in charge of the world's largest organization, McNamara faced a fearsome array of problems about which he had to make rapid decisions (Herring, 1995; McNamara, 1995). These included the need to wean the military off the Eisenhower-era nuclear doctrine of 'massive retaliation' and overseeing the growth and restructuring of conventional forces across multiple theatres (Ellsberg, 2002; Halberstam 1969/1992; Palmer 1978). He had to make decisions over the commissioning or cancellation of a wide array of new weapons systems such as the highly controversial TFX programme (Art, 1968) and nuclear submarines

(Enthoven and Smith, 1971). He confronted the challenges of equal employment opportunities across the military services, instituted cost reductions (Borklund, 1966: 214-7), fought inter-service rivalry (Krepinevich, 1986: 30; McMaster, 1997), and contributed to the development of new counterinsurgency and special forces doctrines (Borklund, 1966: 228; Halberstam, 1969/1992), all the while facing continual scrutiny from Congress and the press.

Potentially world-changing crises arose that would necessitate literally working around the clock, such as the Bay of Pigs debacle and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The latter event was a triumph for Kennedy and McNamara, and for the civilian leadership's restraint over a military that recommended a far riskier offensive strategy. Squabbles between the military services were common, and McNamara's cost control and micromanagement again made him few friends. He would typically rely on analytical and evidential support that came from his newly-formed Office of Systems Analysis, thereby using 'outsider' managerialist techniques to enforce change over sceptical and resistant professionals.

'We were wrong, terribly wrong': The Vietnam Disaster

The Vietnam War, of course, shattered McNamara's hitherto stellar reputation as manager and statesman. A much more in-depth analysis of this critical period of his life is provided elsewhere (AUTHOR XXXX), and this section provides only the basics of a complex story. McNamara is one of the principal characters in the historiography of the Vietnam War, at least from the U.S.-centric perspective that dominates the literature and tends to construct the conflict as mystery and tragedy, i.e. why did the U.S. feel compelled to 'Americanize' the conflict and how on earth did it fail to win? (Bradley, 2009: 3-4) Many accounts describe him as a true believer in the Domino Theory, and secretive and manipulative in screening out

other forms of access and advice to the President (Karnow 1991; McMaster, 1997; Young et al 2002: 82-3). He gave ‘really terrible advice’ (Sorley, 2006: 10) that was often couched in impressive-sounding systems analysis and game theory, but was in actuality guesswork based on faulty reasoning and data, such as the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign that was totally ineffective in bringing Hanoi to the negotiating table. Sources from the right claim he had ‘no feel for war and its inherent wastefulness’ (Sorley, 2006: 190) and bound the U.S. military in excessive ‘self-imposed restraints’ (Moyar, 2006; Sorley, 1999), whereas the left accused him of warmongering and/or failing to seriously consider options other than escalation (Chomsky, 1996: 71-6; Gibson, 1986; Young et al 2002: 82-3).

The business school critique of McNamara is informed by both of these positions, and tends to focus especially strongly on *failings of technique* in McNamara the manager. It especially focuses on ‘the numbers’ and often highlights a semi-mythical quotation from McNamara (made ‘off the record’) to journalist Neil Sheehan in May 1962 (and years before the major deployments of ground troops). It is easy to see why, as it is a terrible yet fascinating quotation: ‘Every quantitative measurement we have shows that we’re winning this war’ (as quoted by Sheehan 1990: 290, and used – among others - by Dodgson, 2012). Taken on face value this brusque statement implies that the Secretary of Defense was blinded by the inadequacies of his own technical and abstract number-crunching. Many studies of the period note that numerical data such as body counts, weapons seized, and hamlets secured were extremely misleading, often deliberately falsified, and self-defeating overall as they were set up to produce a falsely positive picture of elusive ‘progress’ (Daddis, 2011, 2012; Kinnard, 1977; Komer, 1970, 1972, 1986; Sheehan, 1990). Means became ends. Several left-leaning histories claim that body counts even encouraged atrocities in the field such as the deliberate

targeting of civilians to boost numbers and demonstrate ‘combat effectiveness’ (Allen, 2008; Gibson, 1986; Greiner 2010; Turse, 2013).

Although clearly important, administrative ‘bean-counting’ was by no means the only reason for the dreadful failings and atrocities of the Vietnam war. The mainstream critique of McNamara mostly fails to engage with a complex historiography of the war in which McNamara is often portrayed as becoming increasingly ‘disaffected’ with the war’s aims, conduct and ‘progress’. There is little agreement on when this started in earnest, but some claim it was as early as the spring of 1965, at least privately (Shapley, 1993: 343). From that point on, ‘the numbers’ were increasingly being used by McNamara and others to highlight the *failure* of ‘search and destroy’ tactics, not to claim that the ‘crossover point’ was homing into view. McNamara and his systems analysts often argued for a change in tactics, even at times to suggest a withdrawal, although rarely publicly (Gibson, 1986: 374-8; Kinnard, 1977: 72; Krepinevich, 1986: 188-9).

Of course, none of the principals really took the prospect of withdrawal seriously, and McNamara blames himself for this in his memoirs (1995: 113; 172). ‘Looking back, I deeply regret that I did not force a probing debate’ (McNamara 1995: 261). Although many other figures were complicit in the deluded and aggressive worldview that led to intervention and expectations of infallibility, as Secretary of Defense during 1961-8, McNamara clearly shoulders considerable blame for the rationale, strategy, conduct, and outcome of the worst foreign policy disaster in U.S. history. The intense debates about the value (or otherwise) of McNamara’s memoirs and partial apology for the war are especially relevant to historical analysis around ethics, memory, and reflexivity (Herring, 1995; Rowlinson et al, 2014; Sikes, 2012; Young et al, 2002:151-153).

In the management literature the war is usually portrayed as deeply discrediting McNamara's Druckerite vision of numerically-driven management systems. But the reasons for U.S. engagement in the conflict, and the reasons why the various branches of the U.S. and SVN militaries fought so ineffectively, are only partially a result of 'the numbers' and 'attrition' (Daddis, 2014). The U.S. military has long relied on 'body counts' as measures of 'progress' (Gartner and Meyers, 1995). McNamara largely deferred to the military on matters of strategy (Daddis, 2014: 70), and '[s]ystems analysts [...] did not run the war – they wound up, at best, as peripheral kibitzers' (Betts, 1984: 10). In blaming McNamara and his 'numbers' for the Vietnam fiasco, the Harvard case study method, in its historically simplicity, fails to look beyond the man who personifies quantitative measurement and its flaws to the broader Pentagon system of warmaking that was already heavily invested in such approaches and remains so today. It also typically fails to explore the broader Cold War mindset that structured so much of the systems, practices, technologies and postures of that era (Cooke et al 2005).

The historiography on the decision-making, strategy, and politics of the Vietnam war is extremely wide and complex. Discussions of the management style and technique of the Secretary of Defense during a large part of the conflict are an interesting element but cannot really explain the critical broader context. Many argue that the Vietnam War and the hubris of its architects and administrators were a logical product of the Cold War mentality and U.S. militarism (Chomsky, 1996; Greiner, 2010; Gibson, 1986; Halberstam, 1969/1992).

Throughout, Johnson, the Joint Chiefs, and the rest of the White House inner circle were incapable of considering options that ran counter to the prevailing world view of 'containment' of communism (Daddis, 2014). They were never especially optimistic that the

U.S. and South Vietnam would 'win' the war – it was never clear what 'winning' would even mean in such a complex conflict - but they did seem to believe that they were bound to make every effort to ensure the South did not fall (Gelb and Betts, 1979; Greiner, 2010: 41-54). It took several years for McNamara to realise the true folly of the war and to try to change its conduct and direction, but by the time his disaffection came the principals could not tolerate McNamara's change of heart. His 'going doveish' on LBJ (Halberstam 1969/1992: 645) precipitated his exit to the World Bank.

And now for the World (Bank)

Vietnam cast such a shadow over his career that in the limited business and management literature on McNamara there is almost nothing that even mentions the long chapter of his life as chairman of the World Bank Group. For someone with a less stellar (or notorious) career, thirteen years at the World Bank would perhaps garner more attention. It says much about the power and status of the U.S. military that his move from DoD to the IBRD was essentially a demotion.

McNamara was appointed in April 1968 into a role he was said to have been interested in for some time (Shapley, 1993: 427). He threw himself into this new position with characteristic determination and, with 'energy levels far above normal' (Clarke, 1981: 171), made considerable progress in shaking up what was a conservative organization with a distinct insider culture and powerful professional norms (Finnemore, 1997: 213; Kapur et al, 1997: 16-17). McNamara was convinced of the need to ratchet up the Bank's 'throughput', increase the Bank's lending and borrowing, and help to accelerate the pace of economic development (Reid, 1973: 795). His managerialism turned 'a club' into 'a bureaucracy' (Finnemore, 1997: 213).

During his World Bank days, the pre-Pentagon, more idealistic McNamara persona seemed to try to re-assert itself, with 'management' presented as the key to solving global problems such as chronic poverty. In 1967, shortly before his appointment, he made an important speech at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi in which he claimed that 'management is the gate through which social, political, and economic and technological change, indeed change in every direction, is rationally and effectively spread through society' (Shapley, 1993: 527; the speech is reproduced in full in McNamara, 1967, and 1968: 107-121). Responding to counter-culture criticism of the insidious growth of 'faceless' administration in the mould of Mills' *White Collar* or Whyte's *The Organization Man*, he depicts management as indispensable both as a rational science and 'the most creative of all the arts'. Contrary to the claims of the peace movement, or to critics such as Mills or Whyte, the real threats facing society come from 'undermanagement, not from overmanagement' (McNamara, 1968: 109; Rosenzweig, 2010: 91).

McNamara's was a technocratic vision of human progress that reasserted the 'second spirit of capitalism' rather than embracing the counter-culture critique. Yet there is some evidence of a softening of his technicist approach at the World Bank. Perhaps learning from his and others' gross errors in the Vietnam conflict, he made more effort to visit the countryside in developing nations, now conscious of the risk of being hoodwinked by falsely positive information circulating capital cities (Clarke, 1981: 172). He was the driving force behind a new approach to World Bank lending, becoming convinced that a policy of 'poverty alleviation' or 'poverty lending' (Kapur et al, 1997: 233) must accompany and perhaps outgrow traditional, technocratic, large-scale 'project' lending (for hydroelectric facilities, conference centres, railways, steel plants, freeways, etc.). McNamara's 'poverty alleviation'

approach (Finnemore, 1997) focused much more attention on the ‘bottom forty per cent’ (Clarke, 1981: 172); the 700 million or so people categorized as the ‘absolute poor’ (Shapley 1993: 519), especially by increasingly authorizing zero-interest IDA loans. His approach anticipated contemporary rhetoric about the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ (see Collier, 2008) and the transformation of the IBRD into the ‘poverty bank’ (Murphy, 2008: 29). He also committed the Bank to advocating institutional reform in emerging economies (Reid, 1973:797).

Under McNamara’s watch, the size of the Bank expanded massively, as did its remit and ambitions. Its total lending grew, along with borrowing on capital markets, with the former mushrooming from 11.2 billion USD in 1969-73 to 79.2 billion USD in 1974-82 (Kapur et al, 1997: 234). The Bank also became much more interested in wider social issues such as population growth, ecology, primary healthcare and education. McNamara’s writings and speeches often reflected his concerns over nuclear proliferation (McNamara, 1986) and the challenge of creating enough wealth to accommodate the world’s likely 6 billion population by end of century (McNamara, 1973).

While always controversial, many in development circles have come to a favourable assessment of his leadership of the IBRD. Former World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz writes approvingly of his stewardship, mostly because there was far less of the widely criticized ‘market fundamentalism’ that later came to dominate World Bank strategy (Stiglitz, 2002: 13). It is another paradox of McNamara in that for a former business executive and Cold Warrior who appeared to believe in the Domino Theory and the need to project American credibility, at heart he was a public administrator strongly dedicated to the use of government authority and resources. In other words, he was never really committed to market

forces, an ideational thread traceable to his student days. Indeed the huge expansion of the World Bank under McNamara's leadership was a major reason why it has been attacked by conservatives as an outdated and unrealistically ambitious form of 'big government', that needs to streamline, downsize, focus on 'core competences' and redefine its mission. Einhorn (2001) argues for a form of 'shareholder value' restructuring, in that the Bank's shareholders (mostly donor governments) are not getting adequate returns on their investments.

Again McNamara takes criticism from multiple directions; from the left for saddling low-income countries with high levels of indebtedness and for the small scale of IDA grants, and from the right for overseeing 'World Bank mission creep' (Einhorn, 2001). A more sympathetic reading was that he dragged much more effort out of the Bank, making it more ambitious and effective at what it did. But, as before, McNamara did not always confront the fundamental problem of management's championing of means over ends (Cooke, 2006). In other words he failed to note that the limits of his managerialism would be to a large extent determined by the virtues (or lack thereof) of the organization he was managing. Further historical analysis of this stage of McNamara's career is needed, but it is clear that there is a range of viewpoints on the effectiveness of the IBRD under McNamara, and it is noticeable that the literature contains considerably fewer criticisms of his management style while running the Bank. Again, developments at the Bank since his departure can be thought of as part of a continuum of managerialist discourse. Just as in business schools, the car industry and the U.S. military, managerial technologies remain in use at the IBRD that many consider ineffective and simplistic, such as unrealistic targets and 'scorecards' (Einhorn 2001: 29); and 'logframes' (Kerr, 2008) which have persisted long after McNamara left the Bank in 1981.

Discussion

What are management scholars to make of McNamara's epic career? His historical footprint is much more prominent in history, politics, international relations, and security studies than it is in management and organization literature. His austere appearance is highly distinctive and he is an iconic figure outside of management studies, even as much of his identity is framed by his lifelong commitment to management as a profession. The management education community has not written extensively on him. Where it has, the verdict has been almost universally critical. This is perhaps because he has come to symbolize everything that is wrong with 'old line' managerial capitalism, of 'big government' and of secretive, manipulative approaches based on rational calculation and impenetrable management thinking that have been widely viewed as outdated and ineffective since the rise of 'culture-management' and leadership discourses (see Peters and Waterman, 1982, for example). Moreover, his acceptance of responsibility for some elements of the Vietnam disaster has profoundly affected his moral standing, even as he clearly grappled with his conscience for the remainder of his life.

Yet several works on McNamara portray (at least in part) a much more complex and indeterminate picture than the B-school caricature of a failed 'second spirit' manager deluded by obsolete methods. McNamara is often portrayed as more of a college professor than a manager, an intellectual, something of an outsider. Biographies show him reading Albert Camus' *The Rebel* and attending Bobby Kennedy's Hickory Hill seminars. At other times he appears to act with extremely high levels of professionalism and human dignity, such as his selection of the burial site at Arlington for John F. Kennedy (Shapley, 1993: 276). Many of his speeches contained moralising and humanistic rhetoric. The Montreal speech of 1966 (that was said to have infuriated LBJ) describes 'man' as 'part-comic, part-tragic, part-

cussed, but part-glorious' (as quoted in Shapley, 1993: 383). Trenchant critics of the war in Vietnam have at times been equivocal about McNamara. Baritz (1985/1998) describes his memoirs as 'very useful'. Rosenzweig (2010: 90), Shapley (1993), and Halberstam (1969/1992), acknowledge McNamara's selfless devotion to public office, signing away what would probably have been the highest management salary and stock options in the world when he gave up the leadership of Ford. His insistent advocacy for safety at Ford also reveals an ethical side in standing up to and defeating entrenched industry norms. Unless one accepts the 'aid as imperialism' position of critics such as Hayter (1971), McNamara's ambitions for IDA loans and poverty alleviation were at least seemingly well-intentioned.

He was clearly not just the 'faceless', 'uncaring' bureaucrat, blinded by his numbers that mainstream management literature describes him as. Indeed the conflict between his role overseeing the dreadful Vietnam conflict and his own ethical position is a source of much of the drama of the McNamara biographies (Byrne, 1993; Shapley, 1993; Trehitt, 1973). Many portray him as driven almost to the point of insanity by his Pentagon ordeal, asserting that it was not just the work pressure but the moral pressure that got to him. 'Sleeping pills help', he once noted (Shapley, 1993: 447), and a rather horrifying picture of him after leaving his post at the Pentagon is displayed at the opening of Hendrickson's book (1996); he is haggard, withdrawn, haunted, stripped of his youthful self-assurance. He was 'close to an emotional breakdown' (Karnow, 1991: 24) during the last two to three years at the Pentagon. His own son Craig became involved in the peace movement (Shapley, 1993: 483), and the moral horror of trying to manage, defend, and alter the course of the Vietnam war caused him to distance himself from his wife and family. He was spat on by anti-war protestors (Lindqvist 2012: 332; McNamara 1995: 258) and branded 'murderer' by a group of Harvard students (Hendrickson, 1996: 286). He was physically attacked by a member of the public when on a

ferry on Vineyard Sound and nearly thrown overboard (Hendrickson, 1996: 7-13). A Quaker peace protestor, Norman Morrison, burnt himself to death 'below [his] window in the Pentagon' (Hendrickson, 1996: 239). '[U]nderneath that disciplined exterior McNamara is a man filled with tense and pent-up emotion [...] so wound up he is almost out of control' (Schlesinger, 2007: 787).

The management literature that mentions McNamara engages so little with this rich and sometimes contradictory historiography, and seems content to limit itself to simplistic criticism of his use of 'outdated' management tools. The present paper argues that the problems of McNamara's career are far bigger and in many ways more disturbing than those of outmoded managerial technique. He experienced widespread success at Ford, although facing heavy criticism for that period and for the legacy he left. His deep complicity with the horrors, atrocities, and failings of the Vietnam War are historic and dreadful (Chomsky, 1996: 71-6), but even here the blame is shared among many given the intensely violent nature of the Pentagon war machine (Greiner, 2010). His room for manoeuvre was hemmed in by the doctrine of 'containment', as it was for practically the entire foreign policy establishment: 'It was McNamara's war, yes, but also Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles' war, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson's war, and Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's war. The ideology of a generation of policymakers and a flawed set of policies, more than anything else, explain why the United States intervened in Vietnam and ultimately failed.' (Herring, 1995: 158)

With the exception of Undersecretary of State George Ball, almost none of the principals, and hardly any members of Congress, consistently advised an alternative course to deep involvement. The Vietnam War dragged on for another seven years after McNamara's removal from the Pentagon. At the World Bank, the new doctrine of poverty alleviation was extremely influential and has remained so since, with many in the development industry regarding McNamara as broadly the most successful chairman the Bank has ever had. Even if

few would wish to defend McNamara, it remains important to note the range of interpretations of his actions and philosophies by recognising history as ‘discourses that are always on the move’ (Jenkins, 1991/2003: 11) and to place his career in its historical and discursive context. To write McNamara and his methods off as ‘failed’ and ‘outdated’ is to repeat a historically inaccurate stereotype, much like those made of other figures that have a much higher profile in management history and education (see for example Gibson et al, 2013; Hassard, 2012; Parker and Ritson, 2005). This is a common mistake when management education is so often historically under-informed and insufficiently reflexive. McNamara, where included at all, is included in a way that is similarly devoid of historical context or conceptual understanding of the social construction and indeterminacy of ‘history’.

Moreover, McNamara-esque, abstract, questionable, impenetrable, numbers-driven management systems are still very widely in use today under different guises. Balanced Scorecards, performance management metrics, and targets are pervasive in corporate and non-profit environments (Martin, 2010). The latest twist on this theme calls for ‘evidence-based’ management and ‘systems thinking’ which are supposedly applicable to all environments, such as policing and public administration (Guilfoyle, 2013; Seddon, 2008). Fifty years after the commencement of Operation Rolling Thunder we still live in a ‘hyper-numeric world preoccupied with quantification’ (Andreas and Greenhill, 2010: 1). ‘New Public Management’, for example, is replete with targets, metrics, and performance management (Hood, 2006; Talbot, 2010: 143), as is the international development industry (Kerr, 2008).

Criticisms of bureaucracy and the Whiz Kids’ quantifying approach were well known in McNamara’s own time (Shapley, 1993), and his public speeches and reports to Congress, and

private memos across the executive branch often took the form of counterattacks to these charges. Systems analysis has been attacked for decades in the public administration literature (Chwastiak, 2006; Hoos, 1972; Palmer, 1978). So in many ways the 1980s and 1990s 'Third Spirit of Capitalism' criticisms, such as those made by Byrne, Peters, Zaleznik (and even McNamara's biographer Shapley) were not original in their time. Similar criticisms have been made once more by Chandler and Chandler (2013), Rosenzweig (2010) and Dodgson (2012) upon McNamara's death, and by a range of other management writers, mainstream and critical. Former GM senior manager Bob Lutz, for example, asserts that 'American business needs to throw out the intellectuals and get back to business!' (Lutz, 2011: 200) Fifty years after McNamara left Ford, and twenty years after *In Search of Excellence*, management literature of various hues is still criticizing quantitative, 'rationalist' MBAs, and the 'car guys' remain at war with the 'bean counters' (Rosenzweig, 2010; Locke and Spender, 2011; Foroohar, 2011; Lutz, 2011). Even within its own narrow terms, management as a profession appears to have 'learnt' few 'lessons' partly because the lessons it wants to draw are typically so simplistic, reducing history and biography to assessments of personal values and techniques; McNamara was 'much more of a manager than a leader', or 'had no strategic *vision* of his own' (Chandler and Chandler 2013: 42, 55, emphasis in original).

This unhappy situation re-enforces the need for an historic turn in management and organization studies (Booth and Rowlinson, 2006; Clark and Rowlinson 2007). The current paper advocates the development of much more in-depth historical biography that recognizes divergence, context, uncertainty, and debate around managers' actions, as well as being sensitive to the complex and multiplicity of managers' reasoning, personality and behaviour. All too often, management literature defaults to simplistic caricatures (whether heroic or

demonic) and post-hoc rationalizations that slot nicely into pre-existing arguments and discourses. Historical biography that is: a) adequately informed by conceptual discussions of reflexivity, ethics, and social construction (Lifshitz, 1994; Rowlinson et al, 2014; Sikes 2012; Stroobants, 2005) and: b) genuinely engaged with wider existing histories from disciplines outside of business and management, could play a role in breaking this impasse.

Conclusion

With management education often reduced to bite-sized chunks (Grey and Mitev, 1995; Mintzberg, 1996: 67), there is an acute danger of history (and especially biography) being reduced to ‘kitsch or light’ history in didactic case studies (Down 2001: 47; see also Booth and Rowlinson 2006: 19). Mainstream business guru literature can be especially guilty of such superficial historical treatments. Peters and Waterman’s *In Search of Excellence* (1982) was a key early marker of the ‘third spirit of capitalism’ critique of the ‘rational model’ for business (Carroll, 1983). It was written at a time when the U.S. economy was struggling with new forms of competition, not least from the ‘miraculous’ performance of Japan, and a strong element of Peters and Waterman’s discourse circulates around the weakness, complacency, bureaucracy, elitism, remoteness, and staleness of managerial capitalism. Twenty years on, Peters claimed his writing was motivated by his being ‘pissed off at’ Peter Drucker, and being ‘supremely pissed off at Robert McNamara’, who he describes as:

‘the Peter Drucker of the Pentagon [...] [B]y the time the Vietnam War came and McNamara was secretary of defense, the systems had completely taken over. People were driven out of the equation. McNamara introduced the tyranny of the bean counters. So Robert McNamara was the enemy. [...] [U.S. corporate managers] didn’t care about the product or the people or the customers. It was all about the numbers. The numbers, the numbers, the numbers. I was fed up with the numbers.’

(Peters 2001: 83; see also Freedman 2013: 546).³

The new managerial ideology symbolized by Peters and his ilk advocated ‘liberation’ from strict organizational control and from the obsession with ‘the numbers’ rather than on products, ‘culture’ and people (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Such a view is endorsed by many analysts who associate McNamara with the ineffective and outmoded second spirit of capitalism or managerial capitalism (Byrne, 1993; Freedman, 2013; Gabor, 2000; Shapley, 1993; Zaleznick, 1989), with this critique resting on a 1960s counter-culture attack on bureaucracy and ‘the system.’ Some claim that McNamara’s failings help to show ‘how management thinking has moved forward’ from this era (Rosenzweig 2010: 92).

I have tried to show, however, that this criticism is historically limited and highly selective. It gives a partial reading of McNamara’s career and actions, which is used as part of a broad attack on the entire edifice of managerial or organized capitalism, a tactic that helps to delegitimise this approach as ‘failed’ before prescribing newer, ‘more flexible’, more ‘culture-managed’ approaches that are more ‘effective’. Not only is this view historically inaccurate, such a reading has little to say about contemporary management failures that bear similar hallmarks to those of McNamara, even when managers have (presumably) operated with the newer toolkits of management. Parallels between Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld have been widely made, and critics have often found Rumsfeld’s ‘best practice’ corporate approach to ‘transforming’ the U.S. military to be deeply controversial and problematic (Godfrey et al, 2014; Gordon and Traynor, 2006: 3-26). Organizational learning in the U.S. military has been ponderous up to the present day, with many parallels drawn from Vietnam to other highly troublesome counterinsurgency campaigns such as the second

³ A similar tirade is quoted by Carter et al (2008: 94).

war in Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (Brigham, 2006; Greentree, 2013; Lebovic, 2010; Nagl, 2005).

Furthermore, despite an entirely different ideological and rhetorical background in the shift from the second to the third 'spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Gantman, 2005: 9) the everyday practical environment of management has arguably also not changed a great deal from McNamara's time. Senior managers struggle with a time famine that remains deeply challenging, and are often remote and detached from middle management and front line roles. McNamara's memoirs report this clearly:

'One reason why the Kennedy and Johnson administrations failed to take an orderly, rational approach to the basic questions underlying Vietnam was the staggering variety and complexity of other issues we faced. Simply put, we faced a blizzard of problems, there were only twenty-four hours in a day, and we often did not have time to think straight. This predicament [...] existed then, it exists today, and it ought to be recognized and planned for when organizing a government.'

(McNamara, 1995: xvii).

Research studies of both senior (Tengblad, 2006) and middle managers (Hales, 1986; Hassard et al, 2009) from across all manner of organizations repeatedly confirm this picture.

McNamara's experience at the Pentagon was an extreme version of this position, involving long working hours, frequent conflict, questionable information upon which to make decisions, multiple issues to confront and inadequate time (Borklund, 1966; Shapley, 1993; Trehwitt, 1973). 'Everything was a crisis. Everything had a deadline' (Ellsberg, 2003: 46).

One can make the case that McNamara's business techniques – like many others before and since - were little more than an ideology, a language, or even a fiction (Gantman, 2005) and they cannot fully capture how he behaved as a manager. 'The numbers' were a language used to win political arguments, and statistical analyses were one of several forms of persuasion that he used with varied results. While gravely mistaken about Vietnam strategy in his first five years at the Pentagon, numbers were eventually a language he used to try to re-evaluate

his reasoning on the war. At other points in his life, ‘the numbers’ also played significant roles in what could arguably be considered managerial successes – at the Army Air Forces, at Ford, and at the World Bank.

All of the above suggests that senior managers and management as a discipline have not learnt the ‘lessons’ of McNamara’s career that Peters and others want to teach. Numbers-driven systems such as performance targets, KPIs, and the assumptions of decision ‘science’ are extremely pervasive in today’s organizations, almost certainly more so now than in McNamara’s day. Many are deeply unpopular, are ‘gamed’ and fictionalized, and have questionable practical value for managers, clients, customers, workers, and citizens (Andreas and Greenhill, 2010; Hood, 2006; Martin, 2010).

This is not to defend McNamara’s numbers, stats, and systems analyses. Clearly these technologies were often extremely problematic. They often remain so today. But by taking a wider historical view than is typical in management writings, these inadequate systems are perhaps best thought of as manifestations of much larger problems, especially in the context of the Cold War in general (Cooke et al 2005; Kelley et al 2006), and the Vietnam War in particular (Daddis, 2012; Gibson, 1986; Greiner, 2010). McNamara’s failings were shared by many hundreds of other like-minded individuals (Karnow, 1991; Herring, 2002) and to ascribe the Vietnam disaster largely to McNamara’s management methods is a post-hoc rationalization that usefully fits the post-1980s management zeitgeist (Keulen and Kroeze, 2012: 181-2). Just as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) and Sennett (2007) suggest, this zeitgeist was largely generated by the co-opting of critiques from the left, including those relating to McNamara’s bureaucratic ‘technowar’ (Gibson, 1986; Hendrickson, 1996;

Karnow, 1984: 82). The management and leadership rhetoric has not changed significantly since, even as technocratic, numerical systems remain pervasive in reality.

Many historical accounts of McNamara, while also largely critical of his conduct and philosophy, portray him rather differently from his public persona of unthinking numbers man. Errol Morris, director of the documentary movie *The Fog of War* (Morris, 2003), puts it perfectly: '[W]e think that people have to be one thing when, in fact, they're many things' (as quoted in Blight and Lang 2005: 188). Hendrickson (1996) fills over four hundred pages describing 'the inconsistency and paradox, the riddle and zigzag. The old McNamara story. The maddening one.' (1996: 297). The deeper one delves into the rich and varied historiography, the more contradictions and provisos emerge and a more varied picture of the man and his methods develops, one that casts significant doubt about the value of mainstream critiques of McNamara as an embodiment of an unthinking and rigid managerial capitalism. 'In career, there is no single meaning to be discovered, only an enormous range of possibilities' (Collin and Young, 1986: 849).

Taking a wider 'range of possibilities' into consideration raises interesting but sobering questions about the volume of historiography we should consider when making judgements about managerial careers. While biography always contains the dangers of superficiality or the privileging the discourses of 'great men of history' (Lifshitz, 1994; Tosh 2010: 67-9), it can, while employed critically and reflexively, potentially provide powerful insights into the complex interplay of action and structure across careers and life stories (Bujold, 1990; Gibson et al, 2013). If researchers are serious about an historic turn in organization and management studies, then much of the folk wisdom about people and corporations – and indeed about 'history' itself - is likely to be revised. Business and management writings are

often unwilling to challenge such folk wisdom (Gibson et al 2013; Hassard, 2012; Parker and Ritson, 2005), and tend to have a unilinear conception of ‘history’ as a potential source of data to input into prescriptive models (see for example Dodgson, 2011), rather than as socially-constructed discourses that can contest and unsettle received portrayals of events (Collin and Young 1987: 847-8; Jenkins, 1991/2003). Given the explosive growth of narrative methods, life histories, and oral histories in many disciplines (Goodson et al, 2012; Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995: 113; Stroobants, 2005) it is especially perplexing that biographical history has typically been so neglected in management and organizational studies.

McNamara had some considerable successes in his management career, but will always be remembered for ‘McNamara’s War’, in which he (and others) were ‘wrong, terribly wrong’ (McNamara 1995: xvi). The narrative provides us with considerable pause when discussing the value of management and management education. What limited coverage there is of him in management and business literature tends to suffer from historical blindness, in that the critique only goes so far as to criticise his technocratic failings of technique. Intellectual histories of management thought (Gantman, 2005; Waring, 1991) often suggest that prescriptive techniques of managerial ‘best practice’ are oversold, unoriginal, ahistorical, difficult to implement, and ideological.⁴ With this in mind, it is vital to think much more broadly about all of the social forces that impact on the processes of so-called ‘decision-making’. Rather than limiting our focus to prescriptive attempts to modernize and upgrade the managerial techniques of top leaders, we need to think in much broader historical terms about what precisely we think we are doing when supposedly processing through the ‘gate’ of management. The successes, failures and absurdities of McNamara’s messianic vision of

⁴ Similar conclusions tend to be drawn by writers in the Critical Management Studies field and in the large literature on management ‘fads and fashions’ (see Gantman, 2005: 153-7).

management - 'I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved' (John, 10: 9) - present several important case studies or 'lessons'. Given the multitude of contested historical interpretations in the narrative construction of McNamara's career, there are - like the Vietnam War itself - ethical risks in taking superficial or politically-contested 'lessons' from it (Bradley, 2009; Wieste and Dodge, 2010). Unpacking the wider political contexts in which 'management' as a discourse and interest group is shaped and put to use is a central task if we are to realize an historic turn in management and organization studies. Critical career biography of the characters involved could play an important role in this effort.

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