Robert S. McNamara published an extraordinary book in 1995, a quarter of a century after his departure from the Johnson administration as secretary of defense. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* was clearly a painful exercise in retrospection. Few executives like reviewing the past and pointing to errors of judgment, individual and collective, that determined bad policy and faulty implementation. Fewer still are engaged in measuring failure in terms of human lives lost and in terms of suffering. But McNamara had a noble purpose: to learn from experience and, possibly, to prevent the recurrence of tragedy in human affairs. He might have been excessively optimistic about what his treatise would accomplish. He was probably surprised, and undoubtedly saddened, that his book received the scorn and criticism it encountered from reviewers and editorial writers.

In *The New York Times* of April 17, 1995, Anthony Lewis wrote:

On March 9, 1969, James Reston wrote in his *New York Times* column: “The art of resigning on principle from positions close to the top of the American Government has almost disappeared. Nobody quits now as Anthony Eden and Duff Cooper left Neville Chamberlain’s Cabinet with a clear and detailed explanation of why they couldn’t be identified with the policy any longer. . . . Most, at the critical period of escalation [in Vietnam], gave to the President the loyalty they owed to the country.” In that prescient comment Reston identified the real issue raised now by McNamara’s book on his role in the Vietnam War. The book is a *mea culpa* for his policy, which says he was “wrong, terribly wrong.” But Mr. McNamara expresses no regret for his greater wrong: failing to speak the truth then, when it mattered most.

Frank Rich wrote in *The New York Times* of Sunday, April 16, 1995:

Robert McNamara says that he published his book now to combat the “cynicism” threatening the relationship between Americans and their leaders. . . . But far from
ending such cynicism, his disingenuous memoir will compound it. Even as the man quotes Aeschylus and appears as a teary tragic figure in prime time, his words tell us that the contrition is a pose and that he has learned nothing.

In an editorial that appeared on Wednesday, April 12, 1995, The New York Times stated:

Comes now Robert McNamara with the announcement that he has in the fullness of time grasped the realities that seemed apparent to millions of Americans throughout the Vietnam War. At the time, he appeared to be helping an obsessed President prosecute a war of no real consequence to the security of the United States. Millions of loyal citizens concluded that the war was a militarily unnecessary and politically futile effort to prop up a corrupt Government that could neither reform nor defend itself.

Throughout all the bloody years, those were the facts as they appeared on the surface. Therefore, only one argument to be advanced to clear President Johnson and Mr. McNamara, his Secretary of Defense, of the charge of wasting lives atrociously. That was the theory that they possessed superior knowledge, not available to the public, that the collapse of South Vietnam would lead to regional and perhaps world domination by the Communists; and moreover, that their superior knowledge was so compelling it rendered unreliable and untrue the apparent fact available to even the most expert opponents of the war. With a few throwaway lines in his new book, In Retrospect, Mr. McNamara admits such knowledge never existed. Indeed, as they made the fateful first steps toward heavier fighting in late 1963 and 1964, Mr. Johnson and his Cabinet "had not truly investigated what was essentially at stake and important to us." As for testing their public position that only a wider war would avail in the circumstances, "We never stopped to explore fully whether there were other routes to our destination."

Such sentences break the heart while making clear that Mr. McNamara must not escape the lasting moral condemnation of his compatriots. . . . It is important to remember how fate dispensed rewards and punishment for Mr. McNamara’s thousands of days of error. Three million Vietnamese died. Fifty-eight thousand Americans got to come home in body bags. Mr. McNamara, while tormented by his role in the war, got a sinecure at the World Bank and summers at the Vineyard. . . . His regret cannot be huge enough to balance the books for our dead soldiers. The ghosts of those unlived lives circle close around Mr. McNamara. Surely he must in every quiet and prosperous moment hear the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry dying in the tall grass, platoon by platoon, for no purpose. What he took from them cannot be repaid by prime-time apologies and stale tears, three decades later.

Mr. McNamara says he weeps easily and has strong feelings when he visits the Vietnam Memorial. But he says he will not speak of these feelings. Yet someone must, for that black wall is wide with the names of people who died in a war that he did not, at first, carefully research or, in the end, believe to be necessary.

McNamara justified his silence from the time he left the post of secretary of defense to the time he published his book over two decades later on the grounds of loyalty to the president and constitutional obligations as a member of the cabinet. MacGeorge Bundy, who was national security advisor, likened the position of a cabinet officer to a person having been given the trust of the president but also