

The Meeting That Never Was

It is 23 June 1997 in a hot and humid Hanoi. Former Defence Secretary Robert S. McNamara has been attending a four day conference in the luxurious Hotel Metropole to discuss mutual misunderstandings and missed opportunities between Washington and Hanoi during 1961–1969. Only a few hours are left until McNamara's plane is scheduled to take off. But first he, together with the rest of his US team, will be received by General Vo Nguyen Giap, the victor of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and McNamara's opposite number during the 1960s.

by Stein Tønnesson, NIAS

The meeting will take place in the Government Guest House, the former French 'Residence Superieure' where communist revolutionaries seized control for the first time on 19 August 1945. For more than a year it housed the offices of the revolutionary republic, but then the building was recaptured by heavily armed French assailants in the night of 19/20 December 1946. After Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva accords of 1954 the revolutionaries came back to stay. In the 1960s and early 1970s the building had to be evacuated during each of the US bombing campaigns, but it was never actually hit.

In the 1940s and 50s Giap was a chief actor, and remained at the centre stage throughout the whole period although he lost considerable policy influence during the 1960s. To him the colonial style facade and interior of the Government Guest House, nicely renovated in 1993, are as familiar as can be. He spent his youth in French colonial Hanoi. As a powerful adult he has received innumerable dignitaries in this building. To McNamara the Government Guest House remains a foreign place, one of those targets he prevented his own generals from destroying.

McNamara already saw Giap briefly in November 1995. Giap then confirmed that there had only been one attempt to shoot at US ships in the Tonkin Gulf in early August 1964. The alleged second attack, which prompted President Johnson to seek the Tonkin Gulf Resolution (the closest that the United States ever came to a declaration of

war), never actually took place. When McNamara learned the news from Giap, he faxed his publisher back in the States with instructions to make a last-minute change to his memoirs. *In Retrospect* was just then about to be published. (Since that time, Edwin Moise's impressive *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* has also come out.)

Now, almost two years later, and following an acrimonious discussion in the United States about the sincerity and limitations of the former defence secretary's self-criticism, McNamara is preparing for a long and frank discussion with the little but lucid Vietnamese General. However, their encounter will prove to be a 'coup de theatre', leaving the two old men at an even greater distance from each other than before. Two men with most of a war and over three million dead men and women between them. Two great calculating brains with so many choices to regret. They have so much in common, and yet no chance to get in touch.

We are some fifty people in the room, mostly Vietnamese and Americans, lining the walls, eagerly waiting to know if the two men will allow us to stay during their talk. Then there is a rush at the door. The General in his uniform walks slowly through the room in a moving circle of blitzing cameramen and -women. He smiles a perpetual smile and sits down in the host's chair, to the right of where his guest is supposed to be.

Where is McNamara? The host, according to custom, is

supposed to come in last. But in this case it has been agreed in advance that the guest will enter as the last one, and that the host will first make sure there are no journalists present. This, of course, is not known to most of us. Someone excuses the Secretary who must have been delayed. But then the tall, old man strides in, vigorously taking command of the room. In a few seconds he has advanced through the whole room, then leans his huge body down over the General in a show of secretarial might and says he would like to introduce his team.

A short embarrassing scene ensues. McNamara is gently shown where to sit down. But first he looks around and discovers that the journalists and cameras are still there, in violation of the agreement. He then proceeds to insist that they must all leave the room before the talks can begin. Amidst begrudgings most of the cameras are carried outside, and the doors are shut, but with the rest of us still inside. One person who is obviously a journalist remains, a young woman in a vulgar mini skirt with neatly sewn three-dimensional flowers along the hem. Since the outfit does not provide good camouflage in this particular place, the Secretary cannot avoid seeing her and asks that she be removed. She protests that she has the General's permission to stay, but McNamara has his way. On her way out she shouts insults to the Secretary. The doors close behind her. The rest of us are still inside. We sigh.

There is a brief pause while the two almighties compete for

control, each with the help of an interpreter. Giap has an official one from Hanoi. McNamara has brought an overseas Vietnamese from the United States. Both do a remarkable job. McNamara again wants to introduce his team, a move that could transform the scenario from a meeting between two men to a hearing where Giap is questioned by a group of US experts.

Giap says he wants to make a brief statement. He speaks quietly, retaining the same steady smile. McNamara now gives up on the introduction, but interrupts to state his desire that the conversation must at least last an hour. Yes, says Giap, that will be enough.

During the first part of Giap's brief statement, McNamara takes frantic notes, but when the statement turns out not to be brief at all, the Secretary's hands stop scribbling and instead form fists in preparation for a rapid interruption. To no avail. Giap avoids looking at the impatient American and leaves no room for interruption. He speaks softly but emphatically about the escalation of the US war from Kennedy to Johnson and the Vietnamese determination to resist. McNamara waits, and waits, but in the end he can no longer hide his impatience. First he demonstratively puts his watch down on the table, but when fails to work wonders he has to use his fist and mouth instead. Giap has just said: 'Since I'm a soldier, please let me be frank,' and leaves a rhetorical pause. McNamara breaks in: 'Yes, please be frank. And then I would like to interrupt you and move to another subject.'

Giap cannot be moved. He continues his statement in the same soft voice, like an old teacher ignoring with disdain the impatience of the young schoolboy who has not yet learned good manners. Giap never actually looks at McNamara. He looks out into space, speaks, lets his translator translate, speaks again, allows the translation, speaks ... as a rhythmic everlasting hymn. From the moment he has uttered his first words

Giap is actually in full control of the scene. McNamara is seated, and Giap can talk for as long as he wants. McNamara and the US team will sit and listen, try to interrupt every now and then, exchange glances, but remain seated as long as Giap and his interpreter continue their rhythmic oratory. Giap sings on for almost an hour, about US strengths and weaknesses during the war, about correct decisions made in Hanoi, and mainly about the will of the people to resist. 'The Vietnamese people fought and had to fight. If necessary we would have been willing to fight a hundred years. Because of our determination we achieved our national independence a hundred years early.' And 'we fought on our own account. There were no foreign voluntary troops, even though there were 500,000 foreign troops in South Vietnam.' There were, he admits, some friends who said the Vietnamese could not win against the United States. He cannot name these friends. But he himself was always convinced that the Vietnamese people could win. The United States made a strategic error when it intervened in Vietnam, leading to the greatest military defeat in US history. The winners of the war were the Vietnamese people and also all the progressive peace-loving people in the world, including the progressive, peace-loving people in the United States who opposed the war.

At one point McNamara seizes a chance to insert a question. He wants to know which of all US decisions caused the most worry in Hanoi. Giap's answer is that the word 'worry' does not exist in the Vietnamese vocabulary. Later he is asked what caused the most 'fear', but that word does not exist in Vietnamese either. After each of these interruptions the General continues his monologue along these lines: Nothing is as precious as freedom and independence. The victory of the Vietnamese people was not just a physical victory. It was also the first time a small country could break the myth of great power

domination. Nowadays, however, under different geopolitical and cultural conditions, there is nothing that stands in the way of improving Vietnamese-American relations. Normalization is in our mutual interest, particularly in view of Vietnam's geopolitical position and its cultural importance. I believe a better relationship between Vietnam and the United States will contribute to peace and stability in this region. The Vietnamese people sincerely wants to cooperate with the American people.

Finally Giap allows a few questions from the US team, letting each of them inspire a new monologue. Most of the Americans have now reached a stage where they have given up their impatience. They seem to be somewhat in awe of the little General who on this day has won yet another battle: 'General, you are certainly winning the war of words today,' McNamara exclaims during one of his last attempts to seize the initiative. 'I now see why you have become a legend in your time. You are secure in your legend,' says General Dale Vesser who never gets a chance to ask the questions he has prepared.

'No, not a legend,' the legend replies, 'but a People's General. When I stand next to a soldier. I feel like a soldier. To be commander-in-chief is an important task, but the soldier is the one who is directly in charge. Therefore I highly respect a soldier.' At one point, when Giap once again says he must make an important point, McNamara just lets him have his way: 'Go ahead'. And then, while Giap proceeds to speak, McNamara smiles a good-natured smile. His shoulders and lips relax. His energetic posture gives way to an almost good-humoured resignation. This, perhaps, is where the two men might start to look at each other, maybe even talk. It never happens. The meeting is over. Hands are shaken. Doors are opened. Cameras come back while the General and Secretary move out. For more than an hour they have been in the same room, but they have not actually met