

Unit V: 1968-1969 Document #5.1 Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk Assess the Tet Offensive, 1968

From the National Archives: Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara on Meet the Press, February 4, 1968

Mr. Able: Secretary McNamara, it is three years this week since we started bombing North Vietnam. It was also in '65 that we started the big buildup on the ground. What happened this week? How do you relate the ability of the Vietcong to stage as major an offensive as this one was to the efforts we have been making these past 3 years?

Secretary McNamara: Three years ago, or more exactly, 2 ½ years ago, in July of 1965, President Johnson made the decision – announced to our people the decision to move significant numbers of combat troops into South Vietnam. At that time the North Vietnamese and their associates, the Vietcong, were on the verge of cutting the country in half and of destroying the South Vietnamese Army. We said so at the time, and I think hindsight has proven that a correct appraisal. What has happened since that time, of course, is that they have suffered severe losses, they have failed in their objective to destroy the Government of South Vietnam, they have failed in their objective to take control of the country. They have continued to fight. Just four days ago I remember reading in our press that I presented a gloomy, pessimistic picture of activities in South Vietnam. I don't think it was gloomy or pessimistic; it was realistic. It said that while they had suffered severe penalties, they continued to have strength to carry out the attacks which we have seen in the last two or three days.

Mr. Able: Mr. Secretary, are you telling us the fact that the Vietcong after all these years, were able to, temporarily at least, grab control of some 20-odd Provincial capitals and the city of Saigon – are you telling us this has no military meaning at all?

Secretary McNamara: No; certainly not. I think South Vietnam is such a complex situation – one must always look at the pluses and the minuses, and I don't mean to say there haven't been any minuses for the South Vietnamese in the last several days. I think there have been, but there have been many, many pluses. The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong have not accomplished either one of their major objectives: either to ignite a general uprising or to force a diversion of the troops which the South Vietnamese and the United States have moved into the northern areas of South Vietnam, anticipating a major Vietcong and North Vietnamese offensive in that area. And beyond that, the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong have suffered very heavy penalties in terms of losses of weapons and losses of men in the past several days. They have, of course, dealt a very heavy blow to many of the cities of South Vietnam.

Mr. Frankel: Secretary Rusk, the administration has naturally been stressing the things that they think the Vietcong did not achieve in this week of attacks—didn't cause an uprising, which you say may have been one of their goals, didn't seize cities for any permanent period. But yet we have also been given to understand that the real name of this game out there is “Who can provide safety for whom?” And haven't they in a very serious way humiliated our ability in major cities all up and down this country to provide the South Vietnamese population that is listed as clearly in our control with a degree of assurance and safety that South Vietnamese forces and American forces together could give them?

Secretary Rusk: There is almost no way to prevent the other side from making a try. There is a way to prevent them from having a success. I said earlier that I thought there would be a number of South Vietnamese who would take a very grumpy view over the inability of the Government to protect them against some of the things that have happened in the last three or four days. But the net effect of the transaction is to make it clear that the Vietcong are not able to come into these Provincial capitals and seize Provincial capitals and hold them; that they are not able to announce the formation of a new committee, or a coalition or a federation and have it pick up any support in the country; that they are not able to undermine the solidarity of those who are supporting the Government.

No; I think there is a psychological factor here that we won't be able to assess until a week or two after the event, and I might say also that we know there is going to be some hard fighting ahead. We are not over this period at all. As a matter of fact, the major fighting up in the northern part of South Vietnam has not yet occurred, so there are some hard battles ahead...

Mr. Frankel: Secretary McNamara, let me take advantage of your valedictory mood. Looking back over this long conflict and especially in this rather agonized week in Vietnam, if we had to do it all over again, would you make any major changes in our--

Secretary McNamara: This is not an appropriate time for me to be talking of changes with hindsight. There is no question but what five or ten or twenty years from now the historians will find actions that might have been done differently. I am sure they will. ... I am learning more and more about Vietnam every day. There is no question I see better today than I did three years ago or five years ago what might have been done there. On balance, I feel very much the way the Asian leaders do. I think the actions that this Government has followed, policies it has followed, the objectives it has had in Vietnam, are wise. I do not by any means suggest that we have not made mistakes over the many, many years that we have been pursuing those objectives.

Mr. Frankel: you seem to suggest that we really didn't --- that none of us appreciated what we were really getting into

Secretary McNamara: I don't think that any of us predicted seven years ago or fifteen years ago the deployment of 500,000 men to Vietnam. I know I didn't.

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Student Comprehension Questions:

1. What are the “pluses and minuses” of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, according to Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara?
2. In what ways do Secretary Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk try to minimize the defeat that South Vietnam and the United States suffered in the Tet Offensive?
3. What does Mr. Frankel mean when he says “the real name of this game out there is ‘Who can provide safety for whom?’” Does Secretary Rusk’s response to this question provide confidence that the Americans are “winning the Hearts and Minds” of the Vietnamese people?