

THE McNAMARA ASCENDANCY

1961-1965

The McNamara Ascendancy, the first of two volumes in the History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense dealing with the tenure of Robert S. McNamara, examines the dynamic, sometimes turbulent early years of his secretaryship under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Few secretaries of defense before or since entered the Pentagon with such a commanding start or left behind a more controversial legacy. Authors Lawrence Kaplan, Ronald Landa, and Edward Drea chronicle both McNamara's remarkable achievements during the pathbreaking years of the New Frontier and the disappointments and miscalculations that by 1965 had already begun to hinder his performance and diminish his reputation.

McNamara brought to the Pentagon an energy and intelligence that made him certainly the most successful manager of the department up to that time. His aggressive pursuit of economy and efficiency introduced new approaches to organizing OSD, managing the services, and linking the budget to programs—employing techniques that would have lasting impact even as his reforms incurred growing resistance from leading members of the military and Congress. In the policy realm, too, he embraced innovative ideas for strategic deterrence, collective security, military assistance, and, of paramount importance, the use and control of nuclear weapons. The search for solutions that would insure U.S. preparedness while containing the strategic arms competition was a difficult balancing act, complicated by powerful economic and political as well as strategic considerations. Here, also, he provoked controversy and resentment from key allies abroad and traditional interests and reluctant partisans within his own department.

The McNamara Ascendancy traces the determined efforts of McNamara and his band of “Whiz Kids” to cut costs and centralize the Pentagon's functions and operations against the

backdrop of successive international crises and in the broad context of national security decisionmaking involving the White House, State Department, NSC, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the intelligence agencies. Even as the secretary and the administration were able to put Berlin and Cuba behind them, the problem of how to defend South Vietnam from communist aggression threatened to overshadow McNamara's accomplishments and unravel his unfinished institutional agenda. The deepening commitment in Vietnam dominates the last year of the book, but not before, as the authors convincingly demonstrate, McNamara's seminal first four years had fundamentally transformed roles and methods and redefined relationships in the ongoing evolution of the Cold War national security establishment.

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