



The Politics of Tragedy and Democratic Citizenship

Robert C. Pirro



THE POLITICS OF TRAGEDY AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

By
Robert C. Pirro



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Acknowledgments

This book culminates a twenty-five year intellectual journey. An encounter with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* in the summer after my junior year in college first got me to think about the links between tragedy and politics. By then, I had already read, and puzzled over, the closing passage of Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*, in which tragic choral verse (in Greek script, no less) serves as the coda to a work on modern revolution. What had originally seemed to me merely to be a poetic flourish would become, under the influence of Nietzsche's iconoclastic work, the foremost piece of evidence for my later claim that Arendt's understanding of the nature and significance of politics was shaped by a theory of the political significance of tragedy. In the years after I tried to vindicate that claim in my book, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Tragedy* (2001), I could no longer pass over without a second thought the many allusions to tragedy or ordinary language uses of "tragedy" to be found in scholarly works, news articles and broadcasts, and personal conversations. This book explores the significance of these allusions and examples of usage in the works of some contemporary political thinkers, activists, and creative artists and maps out the larger significance of selected instances of the politics of tragedy, laying a claim for a new sort of democratic political theory founded on an appreciation of the multifaceted legacy of the oldest sort of democratic political theory.

The various debts I have incurred over the years of working on this project are too numerous and varied for me completely to list, or even fully to remember. Let me single out a portion of them. For their making themselves available (in person or via email) as valued interlocutors and critical readers over the years it has taken for this project to find its final form, I would like to thank William Astore and Josef Chytry. For their thoughtful comments on parts of this book manuscript as well as their valued suggestions about getting the manuscript to press, I thank John McGowan and Louis Ruprecht, Jr. I am also grateful to Dan Latimer and Allen Dunn for making space in the journals they respectively edit, *Southern Humanities Review* and *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, for small parts of this project. Thomas Greven kindly arranged an opportunity for me to present a paper on the politics of tragedy in comparative German-American perspective in his Politics Research Colloquium at the Free University's John-F-Kennedy Institute in Berlin, for which I thank him. Rich Pacelle's commitment as chair of Georgia Southern University's Department of Political Science to foster faculty scholarship is also much appreciated, as is the friendship of fellow theorist and faculty member, Steve Engel. My wife, Julia Schmidt, has been an invaluable partner in this project, offering intellectual fellowship, emotional support, and patient encouragement. I can only hope to be as helpful to her scholarly activity as she has been to mine. This book is dedicated to her and to our two boys (another shared project to which we have devoted a bit of our time and energy).

Sources

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CHAPTER 1

The Politics of Tragedy: An Introduction and Overview

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times. My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." (Robert Kennedy, after receiving news of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.)

On April 4, 1968, Robert Kennedy was scheduled to address a campaign rally in a Black neighborhood at what his semi-official biographer would later describe as "the heart of the Indianapolis ghetto."¹ Organized by civil rights leader John Lewis, the event was intended formally to kick off Kennedy's campaign to win Indiana's Democratic Party presidential primary. He had announced his candidacy two-and-a-half weeks earlier in the midst of a presidential election season roiled by contention over President Johnson's war policy and rocked by antiwar candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy's unexpectedly strong performance against the incumbent in the New Hampshire primary. Notified of King's shooting as he boarded a plane in Muncie, Kennedy learned of King's death upon his arrival in Indianapolis. Rejecting the advice of the city's mayor and police officials to cancel the out-of-doors event, Kennedy proceeded to the rally.

Lacking the polish and rhetorical ease of his brother John, Robert Kennedy was a speaker capable of greater emotional self-exposure who was usually at his best in extemporaneous settings. Improvised at the last minute, Kennedy's speech from the back of a flatbed truck to the predominantly Black crowd on that windswept Indianapolis lot was, by all accounts, one of his best. Ordinarily very reticent about his brother's assassination, Kennedy chose this night to evoke that painful memory and establish a bond of shared suffering with his listeners, who had, only seconds earlier, let go cries of affliction upon hearing Kennedy's report of King's death. (Later, at his hotel, when Kennedy was confronted with weeping campaign staffers, it may have been that same memory that reportedly led him to say to one of his top aides, in an apparent tone of rebuke, "After all, it's not the greatest tragedy in the history of the Republic."²) Kennedy followed up his quotation of Aeschylus with a call for

understanding and compassion across racial lines. Asking his listeners to return home and pray for King's family and for the country, Kennedy concluded his speech: "Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world. Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people."

To anyone who was not an intimate, Kennedy's evocations of the tragic wisdom of ancient Greece might have seemed puzzling additions to a speech fashioned at the last minute and under the pressure of terrible events. In fact, Kennedy, whose achievements as a student in prep school and at college were far from illustrious, had made the Greek tragedies and, in particular, the verse from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, intellectual and emotional mainstays in the time since his brother's assassination. (Aeschylus's words would eventually serve as one of the two epitaphs on the marble slab positioned across from his grave at Arlington National Cemetery.³) His reliance on the Greeks for spiritual sustenance began during a stay at a Kennedy family friend's Caribbean vacation home in the early part of 1964. Jackie Kennedy had brought along a copy of classicist Edith Hamilton's, *The Greek Way*, a masterful survey of classical Greek literature, written for non-specialists, in which lessons about the dignity and tragic limits of human agency are powerfully evoked through the stories and words of Aeschylus, Thucydides, and other canonical Greek writers of tragedy and history. While his sister-in-law and her family and friends mustered what good cheer they could, Kennedy mostly remained in his room, poring over Hamilton's narrative and underlining passages of special interest (including the Aeschylean verse from *Agamemnon*, which appears twice in her book).

The encounter with *The Greek Way* marked the beginning of a self-directed program of intense study of the classics, particularly the Greek tragedies, as well as other works by Hamilton. Deriving comfort from the tragic wisdom of the Greeks, Kennedy kept their works close at hand and transcribed many of their consoling passages into his daybook. Senate aides recalled how he would often recite tragic verse from memory.⁴ The effect of this intellectual immersion on his temperament was so marked that his sister, Jean, told Arthur Schlesinger that, "after 1963 he found consolation in Greek tragedy rather than religion; this was the expression of his character."⁵ The depth of Kennedy's engagement with Greek tragic wisdom was also clear to Maxwell Taylor Kennedy decades later when he compiled a book of passages from his father's writings and from the words that his father chose to record in his daybook. Included in the work are many allusions to the Greek spirit and quotations from the works of the Greek tragedians. Especially significant are the Greek touches from Kennedy's April 4 speech, which are the sources for the book's title, *Make Gentle the Life of This World*,⁶ and for M. T. Kennedy's characterization of his father as the kind of person who "would quote Aeschylus when he spoke to the poorest audiences that a presidential candidate had ever bothered with, and they cheered."⁷

The claim about the audience's cheering response to Kennedy's recitation of Aeschylean verse raises questions about the meaning and impact of his engagement with Greek tragedy. Without a doubt, this engagement was highly meaningful for

him as he confronted the devastating loss of his brother and the premature end of the Kennedy Administration. Aside from the terrible shock and sadness that follows upon the violent death of a close family member, Kennedy had to deal with a shattering blow to his sense of purpose. Having devoted himself as campaign manager to winning the White House for his brother and then becoming a mainstay in his brother's administration as attorney general and White House confidante and factotum, Robert Kennedy felt especially adrift in the wake of the assassination. Burdening Kennedy as well may have been a sense that the murder of his brother was payback for Kennedy Administration policies, including the assassination efforts against Castro that Robert Kennedy had been urging on the CIA, as well as his investigation and prosecution of Mafia bosses, some of whom were connected to the anti-Castro CIA campaign. Edith Hamilton's encomium to the classical Greek spirit of striving in the face of life's harsh and sometimes self-inflicted blows—"All arrogance will reap a rich harvest of tears," was a phrase from Aeschylus he had underlined. "God calls men to a heavy reckoning for overweening pride"⁸—introduced him to a literature of redemptive poetry in which the ironies of action and the devastation of loss is fully acknowledged, that acknowledgment then becoming a spur to renewed, if also chastened, effort.

For the people gathered before Kennedy on that cold April evening, unwilling recipients of the news of Martin Luther King Jr's assassination, what meaning might Aeschylus's words have held? One cannot know for sure, although Kennedy's biographers almost universally credit his six-and-half minute speech with helping to maintain peace in Indianapolis on a night that saw rioting break out in most American cities. Baring his most terrible pain, Kennedy can be seen as offering to his audience what, years earlier, his first reading of *The Greek Way* had so compellingly promised him—a form of solace grounded in a belief that great suffering could bring forth a larger wisdom. That this sort of offering, articulated as it was in the language of tragedy, could find receptive ears at a campaign rally in "the heart of the Indianapolis ghetto" may not be as farfetched as it might sound. For, according to a line of thought pursued by public intellectual and critic Cornel West, it would precisely be in an audience composed of underprivileged African Americans that one ought to expect to find the most heightened American receptivity to an appeal based on tragic wisdom.

A rare figure in American intellectual life for his longstanding engagement with notions of the tragic and for his linking of the prospects for advances in social justice to the wider diffusion of a tragic sensibility throughout American society, West has counted tragic wisdom as one of African Americans' most valuable spiritual resources. As he describes it, exposure to the physical terrors, psychological traumas, and material deprivations of slavery, recurrent mob violence, and pervasive discrimination led New World Africans and their descendants to develop forms of cultural resistance and resilience, among which he includes a "black sense of the tragic." To be sure, this sensibility was primarily grounded not in any encounter with Greek tragedy but in New World Africans' engagement with American Christianity and

their transformation of it into “a kind of ‘Good Friday’ state of existence in which one is seemingly forever on the cross . . . yet sustained by a hope for a potential and possible triumphant state of affairs.”⁹ In fact, West has gone so far as completely to dismiss the relevance of Greek tragedy to democratic aspirations: “The Greeks had no notion of tragedy as it applied to ordinary people . . . Tragedy was reserved for the highbrow and upper class.”¹⁰ Attentive reading of the texts of Greek tragedy and a familiarity with the large scholarly literature arguing for the central role of Greek tragedy in educating the citizens of Athens’ fledgling democracy cautions against any offhanded judgments of Greek tragedy’s irrelevance to democratic struggles and achievements. (Also worth considering is Lee Breuer and Bob Telson’s artistic marriage of the idioms of Black Pentecostalism and Greek tragedy in *The Gospel at Colonus* [1985], the artistic success of which at least suggests a significant degree of affinity between the two cultural forms of tragic expression based on, among other things, their shared reliance on choral singing.)

To the extent that the moment of connection achieved by Kennedy and his Black audience on a vacant Indianapolis lot the night of April 4 can be attributed to a shared tragic sensibility, that sensibility runs counter to a conventional view of Americans as altogether lacking any serious cultural engagement with the tragic nature of life. Typically, European literati have lamented the American “distaste for tragedy” and connected it to American deficiencies in intellectual or emotional depth and complexity as compared with Europeans.¹¹ This spirit of complaint has been articulated as well by American literati, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, who once wrote of the United States as, “a country where there was no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight.” Of course, a degree of artistic license must be conceded to Hawthorne, whose pronouncement on the *untragic* nature of the American past occurs in the preface to a romance, *The Marble Faun* (1859). As a Massachusetts native not too many generations removed from the first arrival of English settlers, he was fully aware of the colony’s early campaigns of religious persecution and the judicial killings resulting from the Salem “witch” trials (in both of which processes his family forbears took leading roles) as well as the campaigns of slaughter conducted during the so-called King Philip’s War.

If the American past has included its share of suffering and brutality, prevailing social and ideological conditions, including the relatively broad diffusion of material prosperity to the descendants of some immigrant groups and the relentless promulgation by mainstream institutions of an ethos of individual achievement, have conspired to give wide credence to the view that, “Americans have always been unequivocally optimistic and bereft of a sense of the tragic.”¹² A highly conspicuous product of an upwardly mobile Irish-American clan and a firm believer in the ethos of individualist striving, Kennedy nevertheless did not suffer from a deficit of tragic sensibility. His intensive reading in the literature of tragedy left its imprint on his temperament, arguably helping to foster an emotional resilience that allowed him to

expose himself so profoundly to the suffering of others and not be driven by this exposure either to a fatalistic retreat from a robust agenda for change or to a resentment-driven attack on the basic premises of the so-called American dream. In characterizing the contribution of a “Romantic” sensibility to Kennedy’s approach as policy maker, Jack Newfield placed emphasis on his unusually pronounced capacity to empathize with the people whose very difficult conditions of life were to be subject to decisions taken by politicians and bureaucrats. “What his romanticism did was provide emotional ballast for his pragmatism, to give it a humanist political thrust. It was what made him different from more detached and conservative friends, like Robert McNamara, Byron White, or Theodore Sorensen. Kennedy identified with people, not data, or institutions, or theories.”¹³ The contrast Newfield draws between the abstracted Olympian pragmatism of the men of the New Frontier and Kennedy’s particularistic and personalistic approach is noteworthy, especially in light of Robert McNamara’s later, unexpected public emergence (in several books and the 2004 Errol Morris documentary, *The Fog Of War*) as a foreign policy thinker for whom the notion of tragedy is of no small importance. Let us briefly consider his uses of tragedy and the extent to which they are continuous with Kennedy’s.

Appointed by John F. Kennedy to head the Department of Defense and retained by Lyndon Johnson, McNamara presided over, and became the main administrative defender of, the escalation of U.S. military commitments in Vietnam from a few tens of thousands of advisors in 1964 to over a half a million ground troops and a major bombing campaign against the North by the close of 1967. By the time he was moved out of his position as defense secretary in November 1967, the rising rate of U.S. casualties, the effective resistance of North Vietnam against all forms of U.S. military escalation, and growing domestic opposition to the war had made him highly skeptical about the viability of the Johnson Administration’s war policy. Since he kept his doubts mainly to himself and continued to act as a vocal advocate of the policy of escalation, McNamara left government service widely and passionately derided by antiwar activists as the callous bureaucratic draftsman of an immoral and catastrophic war policy. Many years after the end of his government service, McNamara returned to the public eye ready to express in public his earlier reservations about the war, analyze the mistakes he made, and draw some lessons from those mistakes.

In such publications as *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995) and *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (2000), McNamara has made the case that the war was the outcome of mistakes, “an error not of values and intentions but of judgment and capabilities.” Offering an account of the processes of Vietnam-era decision-making in which he had had a significant role as Secretary of Defense, McNamara focuses in his 1995 book on his own and his colleagues’ mistakes. “We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. . . . Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong.”¹⁴ Far from being an antiquarian exercise, McNamara’s 1995 *mea culpa* is intended, he

goes on to suggest, as a lesson for contemporary and future U.S. citizens and policy makers on how to avoid repeating the costly errors of the past:

I want Americans to understand why we made the mistakes we did, and to learn from them. I hope to say, "Here is something we can take away from Vietnam that is constructive and applicable to the world of today and tomorrow." That is the only way our nation can ever hope to leave the past behind. The ancient Greek dramatist Aeschylus wrote, "The reward of suffering is experience." Let this be the lasting legacy of Vietnam.¹⁵

Among the errors or mistakes identified by McNamara as occurring under his watch were the failures of Washington policy makers to inform themselves adequately about the motives and aims of North Vietnam's leaders, to free themselves of an exaggerated fear of what negative consequences might result from the collapse of the U.S.-supported government of South Vietnam, and, finally, to consider fully either the scale of American military commitments needed or the likely costs of such commitments. For example, a January 7, 1964, memorandum to the president arguing against military disengagement from the conflict in South Vietnam, quoted at length by McNamara, demonstrates, "how limited and shallow our analysis and discussion of the alternatives to our existing policy in Vietnam . . . had been." McNamara's memo came at a critical juncture in the development of the Johnson Administration's thinking about Vietnam—"we tilted gradually—almost imperceptibly—toward approving the direct application of U.S. military force." In hindsight, McNamara concludes, "we were at the beginning of a slide down a tragic and slippery slope."¹⁶

In his later work, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy*, McNamara seems intent on persuading his North Vietnamese counterparts to join him in acknowledging the role that errors and mistakes on both sides played in causing what he insists were the war's unnecessary suffering and deaths. "I hoped to examine a hypothesis that . . . both Washington and Hanoi had missed opportunities to achieve our geopolitical objectives without the terrible loss of life suffered by each of our countries. . . . Were there such opportunities? If so, why were they missed? What lessons can we draw to avoid such tragedies in the future?"¹⁷

The book juxtaposes historical analyses of United States and North Vietnamese policy making with transcriptions of direct exchanges between some of the major governmental players that took place during six meetings in Hanoi organized by McNamara from 1995 to 1998 and at a 1998 conference held in Bellagio, Italy. In describing the unconventional organization of this book, McNamara notes that, "The discussions were frank and tough, as befits the first-ever discussion by former enemies of this tragic war. Had this dialogue occurred in real time, rather than in retrospect, I believe the tragedy could have been prevented."¹⁸

If McNamara is not the first or only U.S. writer on the war in Vietnam to make use of the rhetoric of tragedy,¹⁹ he may be one of the few for whom the term functions as more than a generic description of a painful or burdensome event. One knows that

his use of “tragedy” is well-considered and strategic not only from his choices of book titles but also from the frequency with which the rhetoric of tragedy is invoked within each book’s pages as well as the substantive role played by a particular notion of tragedy that operates within each of his narratives. To be sure, there are instances in which McNamara’s use of “tragedy” or “tragic” accords with the sort of ordinary usage to which newscasters are prone when they report on fatal car accidents or house fires. So, for example, in the course of describing a project of document collection he instigated for the purpose of building an archive to be used by future scholars studying the evolution of U.S. policy toward South and North Vietnam (the so-called Pentagon Papers), McNamara reports that the assistant secretary for international security affairs who had been charged with this task died unexpectedly: “The document collecting started on June 17, 1967,—one month before McNaughton’s tragic death in an air accident.”²⁰ Here, use of the cognate is plainly intended simply to refer to an unexpectedly fatal event.

In the majority of references, however, a more complex sense of tragedy is at play for McNamara. Citing Aeschylus’s famous formulation, *pathei mathos*, “the reward of suffering is experience,”²¹ he appears to advance a notion of tragedy as an experience of suffering that has educative value. There are, in other words, “lessons” to be drawn from one’s participation in an unexpectedly fatal or extraordinarily painful event. (The subtitle of his earlier book encapsulates how the notion of education or learning is implied by his use of “tragedy.” After all, “*The Catastrophe and Lessons of Vietnam*” or “*The Disaster and Lessons of Vietnam*” do not have the idiomatic punch that “*The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*” does.)

McNamara’s use of “tragedy” also encompasses a sense that the suffering that follows upon a train of decisions and actions was not intended or foreseen by the relevant actors. That is, negative outcomes are a consequence of errors in judgment or mistakes due to ignorance rather than bad will or evil intentions. (One might think here of Oedipus, who, far from intending to kill his father and sleep with his mother took steps to avoid precisely those outcomes.) The overall picture of U.S. policy makers and administrators McNamara’s notion of tragedy therefore helps to paint is of men who were well-intentioned, who identified with worthy values, but who nevertheless made very costly mistakes because their information was false or distorted and their judgment was clouded. If any vice can be attributed to them, on this view, it would be laziness (in gathering the relevant data and correctly assessing it) rather than cruelty or arrogance. Thus, even as McNamara’s gesture of self-examination, of looking back upon his role in escalating U.S. military involvement, has the appearance of a *mea culpa*, his resort to a notion of tragedy can be seen as having an exculpatory effect, as relieving him of his just portion of personal responsibility for the needless suffering and death brought about by U.S. policies in Vietnam. Such a conclusion might be easily be reached on a reading of *The Best and the Brightest*, David Halberstam’s depiction of the White House policy discussions and bureaucratic maneuvering that resulted in U.S. military escalation in Vietnam.

In Halberstam's book, McNamara appears as the self-assured quantitative analyst, effective policy-debater and can-do bureaucrat; "the mark of him in government, his imprimatur, was his capacity to say that something could be done, understood, mastered, accomplished." The tragic flaw of this McNamara found expression not only in a susceptibility to errors of judgment or in an ignorance of the relevant facts but also in his willful overlooking of contrary facts and his denigrating of critical points of view merely for the sake of winning policy arguments. The elements of McNamara's "overall style" included, "the total belief in what he was doing, the willingness to knock down anything that stood in his way, the relentless quality, so that other men, sometimes wiser, more restrained, would be pushed aside." In his many conspicuous missions to Vietnam, this McNamara "epitomized booming American technological success . . . looking for what he wanted to see . . . never s[eeing] nor smell[ing] nor fe[eling] what was really there, right in front of him." Back at the White House, he would not hesitate to "lie, dissemble . . . in high level meetings" though "always for the good of the cause, always for the right reasons, always to serve the Office of the President."²²

According to Halberstam's account, McNamara at the end of the 1960s was already, in conversations with friends, trying out the argument about tragic mistakes that he would commit to print decades later (and which, already then, seemed unconvincing to Halberstam).

When he did (convert to dovishness), he went through a personal crisis. He would confide to friends that if they had only known more about the enemy, more about the society, if there had only been more information, more intelligence about the other side, perhaps it never would have happened, though of course one reason that there was so little knowledge about the enemy and the other side was that no one was as forceful as he was in blocking its entrance into debates.²³

Not wanting to have information is a different (and more blameworthy) lapse than not having information. Actively trying to stifle inconvenient information is a different (and more blameworthy) vice than lacking the initiative to seek out contrary information. "For all his idealism," Halberstam writes, "he was no better and perhaps in his hubris a little worse than the institution he headed." This allusion to hubris invites the reader to see the evolution of American policy toward Vietnam through the prism of classical Greek tragedy, a perspective Halberstam seemingly endorses in his book's final pages, when he rhetorically asks, "What was it about the men, their attitudes, the country, its institutions and above all the era which had allowed this tragedy to take place?"²⁴ (Halberstam's resort to the rhetoric of tragedy found at least one detractor in Mary McCarthy who criticizes his "determination to view Vietnam as an American tragedy," which "means that the outcome is ineluctable, foreordained." Lamenting the fatalistically toned grammatical construction of the book—"the dominant Future Past [tense], which persuades the listener that nothing could have been done otherwise, since fate had written its tale in advance,"

McCarthy argues that, “Vietnam is too disagreeably close to us . . . to serve as the source material for tragic art, even in the hands of a gifted dramatic poet” and finds the notion of writing the Vietnam War as an *American* tragedy, as a story about Lyndon Johnson agonizing over tragic policy decisions, “distasteful” given the tremendous suffering and loss of the people of Vietnam.)²⁵

As one might expect, it occurred also to Robert Kennedy to see the unfolding of events in Vietnam in terms of tragedy. During his inaugural presidential campaign speech at Kansas State University, and in what one witness characterized as a “confession of error for his role in shaping the early Vietnam policy,” Kennedy explicitly evokes the wisdom of ancient Greek tragedy:

I am willing to bear my share of the responsibility, before history and before my fellow citizens. But past error is no excuse for its own perpetuation. Tragedy is a tool for the living to gain wisdom, not a guide by which to live. Now as ever, we do ourselves best justice when we measure ourselves against ancient tests, as in the *Antigone* of Sophocles: “All men make mistakes, but a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong, and repairs the evil. The only sin is pride.”²⁶

Vigilance against pride, not concern with miscalculation, is the lesson Kennedy would have tragedy teach about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. (His Oedipus, one might speculate, would be the vigorous and headstrong young hero who does not give way at the fatal crossroads before a man old enough to be his father and who does not hesitate to become consort to a queen old enough to be his mother.)

McNamara, who so insistently and frequently employs the terms, tragedy and tragic, in his narratives and in the exchanges on the war he conducted with his North Vietnamese counterparts, employs a notion of tragedy that limits the causes of wrongdoing to ignorance. This may explain why, in one of the more contentious of those exchanges, with chief war strategist and top commander of North Vietnamese military forces, General Vo Nguyen Giap, “tragedy” is the word on which Giap keys.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap: Excuse me, but we *correctly* understood you—what you were doing in the Tonkin Gulf. You were carrying out sabotage activities to create a pretext that would allow you to take over the war from the Saigon government, which was incompetent.

Robert McNamara: That is totally wrong, General. I assure you: There was no such intent. None. But this is why we need to reexamine each other’s misunderstandings—for two reasons. First, we need to identify missed opportunities; and second, we need to draw lessons which will allow us to avoid such tragedies in the future.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap: Lessons are important. I agree. However, you are wrong to call the war a “tragedy”—to say that it came from missed opportunities. Maybe it was a tragedy for you, because yours was a war of aggression, in the neocolonialist “style” or fashion, of the day for the Americans. You wanted to replace the

French; you failed; men died; so, yes, it was tragic, because they died for a bad cause. But for us, the war against you was a noble sacrifice. We did not want to fight the U.S. We did not. But you gave us no choice. Our people sacrificed tremendously for our cause of freedom and independence. There were no missed opportunities for us. We did what we had to do . . . to drive you and your puppets out. So I agree that *you* missed opportunities and that *you* need to draw lessons. But us? I think we would do nothing different, under the circumstances.²⁷

Objecting to McNamara's attempt to spread or share blame for the suffering of the war in Vietnam, Giap in effect redefines tragedy as an occasion of failure whose burdensome consequences follow from the pursuit of bad or blameworthy ends rather than a painful event caused by inadvertence. In seeming accord with Halberstam's depiction of the character of McNamara's participation in White House policy debates during the period of escalation, McNamara budes neither from his position nor his rhetoric during his encounters with his erstwhile North Vietnamese foes. In fact, the significance he places on "tragedy" is such that, as he recounts several years later in the course of being interviewed by Errol Morris for his documentary, he continued pressing his Vietnamese counterparts to accept the term as the appropriate *Vietnamese* designation for the conflict. So, for example, as he sat down with conference participants to a meal during a break in their formal discussions, he responded to one Vietnamese official's assertions—"You're totally wrong. We were fighting for our independence. You were fighting to enslave us."—as follows:

Do you mean to say it was *not* a tragedy for you, when you lost 3,400,000 Vietnamese killed?! What did you accomplish?! You didn't get anymore than we were willing to give you at the beginning of the war! You could have had the whole damn thing! Independence! Unification!²⁸

Putting aside the obvious disingenuousness of McNamara's claim about American readiness to make concessions in the lead-up to the war, let us focus on the apparently large importance McNamara conspicuously and consistently places on notions of tragedy in his effort to come to terms with, and elicit worthwhile lessons from, his involvement in the Vietnam conflict. This high level of intellectual and emotional investment invites us to consider the nature of the relationship between McNamara and Robert Kennedy. To what extent, if any, were McNamara's uses of tragedy influenced by the example of Robert Kennedy?

One cannot discount the possibility that Robert Kennedy's deeply personal engagement with tragedy had an influence upon McNamara. As a member of John F. Kennedy's presidential cabinet, McNamara became an admirer of Robert Kennedy in recognition of the latter's crucial role in bringing about a successful conclusion to the Cuban Missile Crisis.²⁹ McNamara was a regular visitor to the so-called Hickory Hill seminars, informal monthly lectures presented by visiting literati