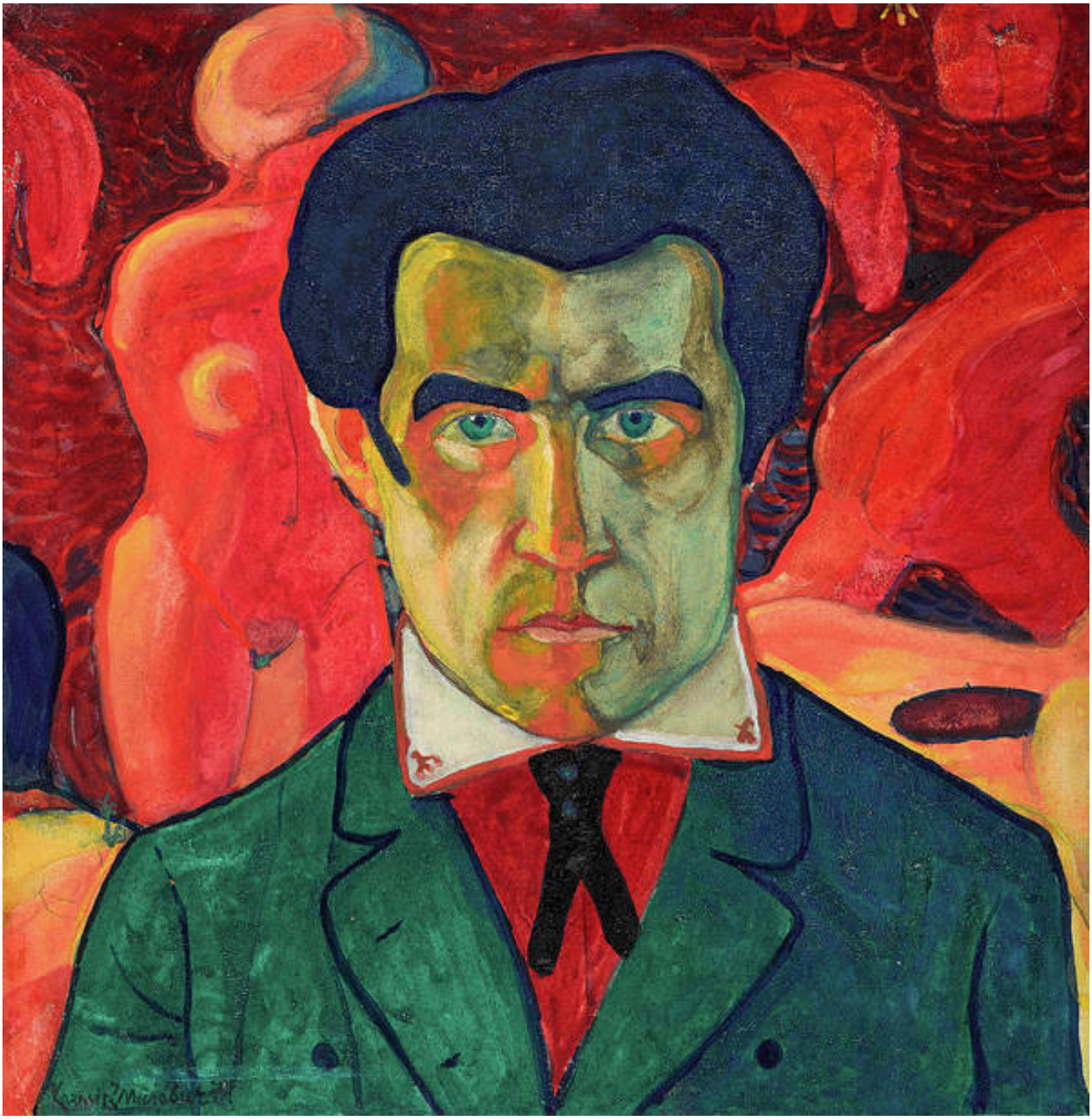
# Epitaphs of the Vietnam War: A Dead Statesman's Angry and Deluded Son

by Jeff Plude (August 2022)



*Self Portrait*, Kazimir Malevich, 1910

As I read *Because Our Fathers Lied*, a recent memoir written by Robert McNamara's only son, I couldn't help but think of a certain Marine Corps grunt who served in the Vietnam War.

I met Ned Foote nearly forty years ago, soon after I became a daily newspaper reporter and I was assigned, as the low man on the newsroom totem pole, the military beat. In those brief years between wars, that duty was mostly expected to kill time in the limbo between filing a story and the eleven p.m. deadline; it was supposed to consist mainly of typing in military announcements such as who had graduated from basic training and where they were being stationed, or who had been promoted.

Except that's not how it turned out, thanks to the unassuming but fiery president of the Adirondack Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America. He had started a campaign to install a local Vietnam veterans memorial modeled on the one in Washington, DC, which at the time was only a couple of years old.

Foote called the newspaper and was directed to me, and I turned it into a true beat. I wrote about his plans and filed regular reports on the fundraising drive. I also did stories on some of the vets themselves and their tours in Southeast Asia. One guy I interviewed insisted I use a pseudonym for him (I called him Vic—"For victory," I told him); he acted like the FBI and CIA had the paper's conference room bugged while I was interviewing him; he'd refused to tell me where he lived, much less let me visit him there. At the time he was in his mid-thirties, and it had ruined his life. He had come home from Vietnam and gotten into all kinds of trouble, had been divorced and was having problems in his second marriage, was suicidal, an alcoholic, had threatened to kill one boss with a knife (though I pressed my case, he refused to let me include most of those details). He'd been a medic in Vietnam and had tried to help young soldiers his age whose guts were blown apart, young men he desperately wanted to save but could do

nothing for. He had been diagnosed with a new condition, at least in name: post-traumatic stress disorder. But it was as old as battle itself. I even went to a meeting of a group for the wives of Vietnam vets and wrote about it, a sort of Al-Anon for the women who loved and lived with the guys and their emotional torments.

I was in my early twenties at the time, but I was a few years older than Foote was when he was drafted and living it. The local memorial seemed like a mission for him, both peaceful and warlike, and he was successful. But it would never heal the lower leg he lost in the demilitarized zone. Nearly a half century later, tourists to the DMZ, the five-mile-wide no-man's land that used to be the official border between North and South Vietnam, are advised to stay on the prescribed route—otherwise they might step on a live mine and lose a limb themselves, or their life.

At the time of Foote's battle to be officially recognized for his and his comrades' service, it had been a decade since the Vietnam War ended in disgrace for the United States, the last American personnel escaping in 1975 by helicopter from the roof of the embassy in Saigon (soon to be Ho Chi Minh City). It was now the eighties, and the ex-soldiers wanted the respect they didn't get when they were discharged. It was the decade of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*.

But in a way I had grown up with it all, the first so-called "living room war." Back then I remember seeing the map on the evening news and Walter Cronkite talking about far-flung places like Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia that might as well have been Oz or Vulcan or Alpha Centauri for all I knew. The jungle. The choppers landing in fields of wavy grass to evacuate the wounded on stretchers. Soldiers in villages with thatched huts. It was like the Apollo moon missions. Just part of my boyhood, another program about something a zillion miles away that I couldn't conceive of. In a way I still can't.

We lost the war, our first defeat. Just as Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense knew we would all along. But he never flinched.

He was the public face of the Establishment warmonger, one of Bob Dylan's "Masters of War": the imperious slicked-straight-back hair, the schoolmaster wire-rim glasses, the number-cruncher eyes. And it wasn't until decades later, in his 1995 memoir *In Retrospect*, that he publicly admitted what his data had told him in the Pentagon. But the confession had taken too long, and seemed to many like nothing more than a cynical last-ditch attempt to resuscitate his irredeemable image for posterity. Worst of all, he never apologized or expressed a drop of genuine remorse.

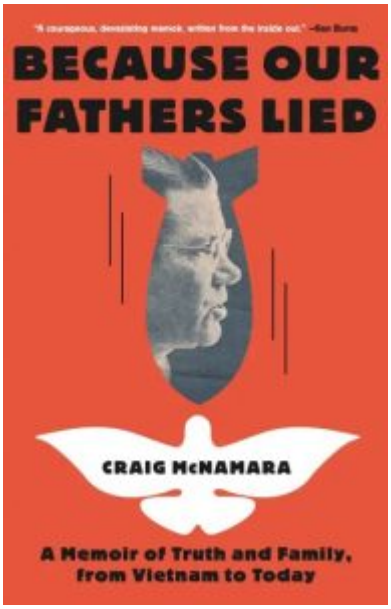
He was a bureaucrat's bureaucrat right to the end, which was, according to his son's memoir, bitter indeed.

So now Craig McNamara has written a book about himself and his father—in that order. His memoir is a sort of muddled mea culpa in absentia, which is in turn superimposed on an extended therapy session that can be summed up in Carl Jung's line about the powerful effect of the unlived life of the parent on the child (one of his father's favorite poems was "The Road Not Taken"). All that we learn about McNamara *père* is that he was as deceptive and standoffish with his only son as he was with journalists, the troops, and the whole country. So there's little if anything at all here for historians or biographers. As for the supposed hero journey of the son himself, fellow travelers may get a nostalgic contact high from it. But I can't imagine military veterans of the era, whom the author seems to be addressing at various points, like Ned Foote or Vic, would feel anything but contempt. Or maybe by now, simply resignation.

For the most part the book is a jumble of narratives and reveries of McNamara's indulgent privileged coming of age. First he's a struggling prep school student, then a protesting

nomadic hippie, and finally a semirespectable sustainable farmer. There are a few constants, besides the distant father: his identification with his self-sacrificing mother (who started the popular nonprofit Reading Is Fundamental, a response to helping him with his dyslexia), and his adoration of communist dictators, especially Fidel Castro (and his hatred of American and European capitalists like his father, who received an MBA from Harvard, was one of the post–World War II "whiz kids" of Ford Motor Company, and at forty-four became its president).

In other words, it's an old story of countercultural self-congratulation and, I think in the end, cowardice.




What's maddening is that even at the age of seventy-two the protagonist (or maybe I should say antihero) of *Because Our Fathers Lied* seems unwilling to confront his own self-contradictions, except in a stray superficial line here or there. God knows most of us have our share. But the impression, for me, is not that Craig McNamara is large and contains multitudes, but that he is lost and contains delusions.

"Craigie," as his parents called him his whole life, can be as evasive and cagey as his old man, though with much less devastating results. For starters he doesn't even say that Craig is his middle name. His first name is Robert, just like you know who. So I think he's more a chip off the old iron

block than he'd like to think.

By the time he's at Stanford (he was far from an academic standout at the elite St. Paul's prep school) it's 1969 and the antiwar movement is now full mushroom-cloud flower-power bloom over the nation. And Craigie is right there with the punishing mob in Berkeley, breaking windows of enterprising small-business owners, though he apologizes for himself by saying he tried to get his fellow protesters—rioters—to stop what they were doing before joining in himself. And he takes part in the same kind of violent orgy on campus.

But his guilt over his father, who resigned or was fired at the height of the war, one month after the disastrous Tet Offensive, is not assuaged. Some of his peacenik comrades in arms think that college deferments are classist and maybe racist. And of course they were classist—back then many working-class kids didn't go to college. So he voluntarily submits to the draft. He finds himself in front of a psychologist, and when asked if he has any condition that would prevent him from serving, he reports (truthfully) that he's had ulcers (which his mother has had too, possibly, he surmises, because of his father's job). The upshot is that the government requests he send documentation regarding his treatment by a doctor, which he also mentioned. So he calls his brother-in-law to help him get out of the draft! Later we find out that Craigie's brother-in-law is Robert Pastor, who served in the Carter administration on the National Security Council staff and under President Clinton as ambassador to Panama.

The letter finally arrives that Craigie's status is the coveted 4-F—unfit to serve. Though he points out with just the slightest hint of irony that he's fit to hike in the Sierras with his athletic father and mother, who also regularly play tennis and ski in Aspen.

Predictably Craigie drops out halfway through college, what

with his full-time activism getting in the way. So what do you do in the sixties when you drop out of one of the most expensive exclusive universities in the country? You take off on a motorcycle lark to South America, heading for Tierra del Fuego with a couple of other entitled schoolmates.

The same thing happens near the end of Part 2. Craigie, after his two-year quasi-spiritual quest (i.e., extended vacation), decides to go back to college to get a degree in soil science. His experience working on small farms in South America and Easter Island give him what he considers his life purpose. So just like that, at age twenty-five, he's back in school. Nothing lost! He always lands on his feet, or parent's lap, I should say. Still he's mad at his father, because, well, he's lying, like the title of the memoir says. Fair enough. And he won't talk about it, explain himself. But that's the thing: Craig understandably resents where his father's money comes from, but once he's of age he never hesitates to accept all the perks that come with being Secretary McNamara's son.

But in the end even the best and the brightest of Camelot must walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

The climax of *Because Our Fathers Lied* comes early in Part 3, the last act. It's the first decade of the twenty-first century, and John F. Kennedy's former cabinet secretary and top advisor is in his nineties. He's long retired from his post as head of the World Bank, where he'd fled or was forced to after vacating the Pentagon. He's remarried after the death of his beloved first wife and is living in that old folks home for the American ruling class and monument of political corruption: the Watergate. As his life is winding down the chief mouthpiece of the doomed war is surrounded by the Enemy, with no reinforcements in sight. He's on antidepressants. There's some "talk of suicide."

His father is stretched out on what became his deathbed, and Craigie is holding his hand. Robert McNamara tells Craigie

“again and again that God had abandoned him.”

No he hasn’t, the dutiful son tells him. God is blessing him.

“I’m abandoned.”

No, God wants him to let go, Craigie insists. “He wants to welcome you to Heaven.”

But it’s a lie: the son says he himself doesn’t believe in heaven (he’s unsure if his father does). Again, like father, like son after all.

As a Christian believer myself, I can say with the authority of God’s Word that it’s the other way around: it’s Robert Strange McNamara who abandoned God, whom he never seemed to display any affinity for from what I read in this muted primal scream of a memoir, though the family was nominally Presbyterian. Once souls enter the afterlife, Jesus says, he will tell those who profess to be his follower but who did not truly follow him in their earthly life: “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

Robert McNamara’s own son says he abandoned him too (and perhaps Craig’s two sisters, though he doesn’t say how they feel about it). And not only that, he abandoned the whole country. The only thing he didn’t abandon was the failed war and the powers that put him in charge of it.

From there the book limps to the end with an anticlimactic trip to Vietnam in which Craigie meets up with the youngest son of his father’s Vietnam War counterpart and opponent, General Giap. It’s the next-to-last chapter, and the fortunate but cast-off son wants desperately for it to be transcending. But it falls flat.

It’s not that a reader can’t sympathize with the aggrieved son of a cold, selfish, egomaniacal father. But I think the son is a pathetic character in his own right. A person of true moral

courage, the kind Craig laments and rages that his father lacks, would have refused financial assistance from such a source and set out to make his own way. But even on the cusp and into midlife, he lets his father bankroll his dream of buying and operating a walnut farm in northern California, then resents that the principal wants regular reports (numbers, naturally) about how his investment is faring. Craigie even regrets having to make a profit—like a capitalist.

The title for this memoir was taken from a poem by Rudyard Kipling called "Epitaphs of the War." It was written in the wake of World War I and, poignantly, after the death of Kipling's own young son in the supposed "war to end all wars." Kipling didn't refer to John directly in the poem, but he must've felt guilty for having secured for him a post in the military after he was rejected. His body was never found. So the poem was a sort of burial, a collection of thirty-four imaginary epitaphs.

However, I think the couplet "If any question why we died / Tell them, because our fathers lied" (which forms a complete stanza titled "Common Form"), may not be as apt in this case as the stanza right after it:

A Dead Statesman

*I could not dig: I dared not rob;*
*Therefore I lied to please the mob.*
*Now all my lies are proved untrue*
*And I must face the men I slew.*
*What tale shall serve me here among*
*Mine angry and defrauded young?*

With my apologies to Kipling, I might edit the last lines

slightly in relation to this memoir:

> *What tale shall serve to unburden*
> *My angry and deluded son?*

In a final galling irony, part of the defense secretary's ashes are buried at Arlington National Cemetery—with all the young boys he helped send to Vietnam and an early, and many believe, needless grave. This thoughtless final act was done by his father's second wife, Craig says, and without his children's knowledge. The stepmother also inherited all their father's personal effects—letters, books signed by famous authors, artwork that included Picassos, his and President Kennedy's Chippendale leather cabinet chairs. Craig managed to buy back at a Sotheby's auction one item that he has particularly fond memories of—a three-by-four-inch calendar from the Cuban Missile Crisis with the initials JFK and RSM on it, a present from Jackie Kennedy that Craig remembers his dad rubbing dreamily in his study while chatting with his son. It ended up costing him and his family over $100,000.

I wonder what Ned Foote would say if I told him that Robert McNamara, according to his son, used to walk the nearly five hundred feet of the black granite wall of the Vietnam Memorial at night, "a shadow in the dark, somehow going unrecognized." Could the defense secretary see the 58,000 names inscribed on it? Maybe the ex-grunt would just smile wryly, or curse. Maybe both.

**Table of Contents**

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