

McGeorge Bundy (1919–96)

For years to come, historians will be writing, musing and speculating about the origins and originators of the US descent into the quagmire of Vietnam. Prominent among "the best and the brightest" being judged and second-guessed will be McGeorge Bundy, who died in Boston of a heart attack on 16 September, at the age of 77.

For years to come, historians will also be analysing and interpreting the critical events during mankind's perilous journey through the first 50 years of the nuclear age. And once again Mac Bundy will be found among those best and brightest who dealt with nuclear issues. He was a policy adviser at critical moments of decision such as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. A brilliant scholar and prolific writer, he helped strengthen and shape public understanding, and influenced government policies on important nuclear arms control issues. I believe there will be a clear appreciation of the success of those best and brightest in creating what Tom Schelling has labelled "a tradition of non-use", lasting for 51 years.

Bundy graduated first in his class from Yale University as a mathematics major and subsequently switched to international relations as a junior fellow in the Harvard University Society of Fellows. After service in the Second World War, he became an assistant to Henry L. Stimson, who had served as secretary of war under Franklin D. Roosevelt, and collaborated in the preparation of Colonel Stimson's autobiography. This association involved close analysis of the US decision to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki — the beginning of Bundy's deep scholarly attention to matters of nuclear war and peace, danger and survival, that were an underlying theme throughout his life.

Returning to Harvard in 1949, he rose quickly to become dean of the faculty before moving to Washington in 1961 as national security adviser to John F. Kennedy. Following Kennedy's assassination in 1963, he remained in the same capacity under Lyndon Johnson until 1966.

During his years with Kennedy, two events occurred that had a lasting impact on future worldwide nuclear policy. The first was the Cuban missile crisis which brought the United States and the Soviet Union dangerously close to nuclear conflict. During the critical two-week period between discovery of the Soviet missiles in Cuba (by cameras

aboard a U2 aircraft) and their stand-down and removal by Khrushchev, Bundy was one of the small group in the Oval Office with Kennedy that stared the awesome possibility of a nuclear war straight in the eye.

As Bundy wrote 25 years later in the superb and authoritative *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First 50 Years*, "I have argued that the risk was small, given the prudence and the unchallenged final control of the two

leaders, and I think that is the right retrospective judgment. But it is one thing to observe after a crisis is over that both sides were careful, and quite another to feel free to take such prudence for granted while the crisis lasts".

Mac Bundy's subsequent scholarship and writings on the dangers and risks to survival in a nuclear armed world bear the clear stamp of his harrowing experience of the Cuban missile crisis. It is the historian's dictum to learn from the lessons of the past in order to avoid repeating mistakes in the future. In the early dawn of the nuclear era, however, there was precious little relevant history to guide nations as to how to manage the risks, and avoid escalating local conflict into a worldwide nuclear holocaust. With his keen insight as an historian, Bundy plunged deeply into the analysis of the choices that governments made on critical nuclear issues. The understanding he gained formed the basis for *Danger and Survival*, a history to guide future generations.

It was also on Mac Bundy's watch as national security adviser, in 1961, that the Soviet Union broke the Eisenhower/Khrushchev moratorium on atmospheric nuclear testing. Negotiat-

ing the delicate path from there to the limited test ban treaty of 1963 was "a good first step that was achieved primarily by world opinion", as he wrote later. After that, his was one of the most eloquent voices in support of a comprehensive test ban treaty that would end nuclear testing once and for all.

Bundy participated in an appeal for such a treaty in one of his last public appearances, in Washington on 19 June of this year. A comment he made there reveals his pragmatic philosophy and his sustained commitment: "The step-by-step approach to the process of reducing nuclear danger has served us well. It has required attention to politics. It has required steadfastness in difficult seasons. It has required and it has had the strength that comes from an increasing community of those who pay steady and continuous attention to this issue". Sadly, Bundy died eight days short of witnessing the signing of that treaty by the five declared nuclear powers, now joined by most of the world's nations, at the United Nations on 24 September.

Following his years in Washington, Bundy returned to the private sector, as president of the Ford Foundation for 14 years, as chairman of the Population Council, and as professor of history at New York University for ten years. Subsequently, he assumed chairmanship of the Commission on Reducing Nuclear Danger at the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

During all that time, Bundy put the mark of his incisive thinking and eloquence on most of the critical nuclear issues of our time. His views on the challenges and opportunities that we face in the post-Cold-War world were summarized in *Reducing Nuclear Danger*, a treatise that he co-authored in 1993 with Admiral William Crowe, currently the US ambassador in London, and me.

It was my privilege to know Mac Bundy as a collaborator whose brilliance was matched by his mastery of the English word. He had the marvellous gift of distilling the essential ideas from lengthy, and at times arcane, discussions of nuclear policy, and expressing them in a lucid literary style. It was also my great privilege and pleasure to count Mac Bundy as a friend and to enjoy his humour, warmth and wisdom.

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