

Saving Robert McNamara

Stephen B. Young, '67

One day in November 1966, Barney Frank called me up asking for help. Barney was a friend and had very kindly “tutored” me in private sessions on American politics. He was then as he is today brilliant and practical so for several reasons I was very predisposed towards helping him out. Barney was then working for the new Institute of Politics in what would become the Kennedy School of Government.

He said Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was coming to the Institute to speak but that the Harvard Chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had asked for a public discussion with him on the Vietnam War. The rules of the Institute were for off-the-record discussions only and Barney did not want to make an exception and cause difficulties with McNamara. The head of the Institute, Prof. Richard Neustadt, was coincidentally my Dad’s best friend so I felt family ties also pushing me to help Barney out.

Barney said my role would be to sit as decoy for McNamara in a car leaving the Master’s garage in Quincy House. On November 7, there would be a session for McNamara at the Master’s apartment on the top floor of Quincy House. Quincy was my house so Barney had thought of me to help with his scheme. I would sit as McNamara in the car’s back seat and be driven away, attracting the attention of the SDS demonstrators gathered in front of the garage. While I was holding the attention of the demonstrators, McNamara would exit Quincy House by the back door of Old Quincy on Mill Street across from Old Leverett, get in a car there, and be driven off un-noticed.

It didn’t work.

As the garage door went up and we pulled out, I was recognized by some friends in SDS. "It's Steve, not McNamara," they shouted. The crowd quickly broke up to run around and look for McNamara elsewhere.

As we drove down DeWolfe Street and came to the intersection with Mill, I happened to look out the right rear window where I was sitting. I saw a lone demonstrator standing in front of the old car in which McNamara was sitting. I told the driver – it was graduate student Graham Allison I think, later Dean of the Kennedy School – to stop the car. I jumped out and ran over to where McNamara was sitting in his car. The car drove off.

As I ran up, I saw the frightened face of an older Harvard security officer sitting behind the wheel frozen in indecision. One student was standing quietly by the car's front bumper. McNamara rolled down his back seat window. I looked in and said, "Mr. Secretary, may I be of help?" He had no answer. At that moment I saw a few SDS students turning the corner from Plympton Street into Mill running towards us. Among them was Hal Benenson, a senior SDS organizer I had known from the Civil Rights Movement. I walked over to Hal and asked, "What do you want?"

He replied nicely, "We just want to ask the Secretary some questions about the war in Vietnam, that's all."

I turned back to McNamara and asked, "Mr. Secretary, would you mind answering some questions from the students?"

He said, "OK."

I then proposed to Hal who had a megaphone that McNamara and I get up on top of the car and I would field questions for Hal to repeat on the megaphone. We were now surrounded by several hundred students. McNamara agreed to the format. He and I got up on the car's roof via the lid of the trunk.

McNamara spoke first, saying something along the lines of, "When I was your age I was twice as tough and patriotic."

I thought to myself: “Oh, Mr. Secretary, bad start. There are two of us and several hundred of them. Bad odds if you rile them too much.”

We took the first question and maybe a second. I had no Plan B to get out of the situation with grace for all parties.

Then what seemed to be a rushing wall of blue came up at McNamara and me and pushed us off the car’s roof towards Leverett House. We were caught on the back side of the car and rushed, surrounded by 3 or 4 policemen, into the lobby of the Mill Street door of Leverett.

The Cambridge cops had arrived, worked their way through the crowd, and rescued the Secretary of Defense and me.

Standing in the vestibule of the Leverett entrance surrounded by the cops, the Sergeant commanding turned to me and asked, “What do we do now?”

I thought, “You’re asking me? I’m just a civilian and student to boot.”

Behind him was a door opening to stairs leading down to the tunnels running from the central kitchen to all dining rooms in the old houses. Also down underground were heating tunnels and other dark passageways. I recognized the door because my roommate Ned Fetcher, ’67, worked in one of the kitchens and knew the tunnel system.

More importantly, Ned was a rock climber and explorer. He had not only taken me up the tower of Memorial Hall – via the external walls rock-climbing like - to leave some pumpkins spiked on the gargoyles one Halloween but he had led me through the tunnels on some quirky underground tours.

I had an idea. I asked McNamara where his next meeting was. He pulled out his schedule from his right breast coat pocket and found an address. I said fine.

I proposed to the Sergeant that I would take the Secretary through the tunnels to the Central Kitchen in Kirkland House and a cab should meet him there on Boylston Street to take him to his next appointment.

The Sergeant looked uneasy but had no other idea. So I led the US Secretary of Defense and two Cambridge cops through the tunnels to the Central kitchen.

When we got there, I found the door to the delivery dock and opened it slightly. No SDS students were in sight and I saw a taxi waiting at the curb. So I walked McNamara over to the taxi with the cops behind us. He got in and closed the door and gave the address to the driver.

He didn't ask my name and he didn't say thank you.

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