For years the popular myth surrounding the Vietnam War was that the Joint Chiefs of Staff knew what it would take to win but were consistently thwarted or ignored by the politicians in power. Now H. R. McMaster shatters this and other misconceptions about the military and Vietnam in Dereliction of Duty. Himself a West Point graduate, McMaster painstakingly waded through every memo and report concerning Vietnam from every meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to build a comprehensive picture of a house divided against itself: a president and his coterie of advisors obsessed with keeping Vietnam from becoming a political issue versus the Joint Chiefs themselves, mired in interservice rivalries and unable to reach any unified goals or conclusions about the country’s conduct in the war. McMaster stresses two elements in his discussion of America’s failure in Vietnam: the hubris of Johnson and his advisors and the weakness of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Dereliction of Duty provides both a thorough exploration of the military’s role in determining Vietnam policy and a telling portrait of the men most responsible.

Features:
* Click here to view our Condition Guide and Shipping Prices

To paraphrase Clausewitz: "War is a continuation of politics by other means." In a democracy such as ours we are ingrained with the concept of civilian control of the military. We have seen many instances where this was not the case (I recommend a highly readable book called "The Warlords" that depicts Hindenburg and Ludendorff’s command of the Imperial German Government in World War I as an example of what can happen if the military is allowed to dictate politics in wartime).
However, there has to be a balance between the military and the civilian leadership during times of international crisis -- especially when the decision is made to commit military assets and personnel. "Dereliction of Duty" is about a regrettable lapse of this balance for whom there is much blame to be passed around.

McMaster discusses how in 1961 the new Kennedy Administration quickly dismisses the national defense structure Eisenhower had installed and quickly became disillusioned with his Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). He brings in retired Army General Maxwell Taylor who circumvents the JCS. Kennedy disillusionment was displayed after the Bay of Pigs adventure and how he kept the JCS at a distance during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. His ability to avoid a nuclear war and a land war on that island convinced him the military advisers were not the experts they claimed to be.

However, the Kennedy Administration, led by SECDEF Robert McNamara, decided the lessons learned from the Cuban Missile Crisis could be similarly applied to a more complex problem -- Vietnam. I do not know if anybody really knows what would have happened if President Kennedy had not been killed -- many claim he would have pulled out of Vietnam after the 1964 elections but we will never know for sure -- but his successor inherited that problem and the bulk of this book is about how the Johnson Administration mis-managed Vietnam and mis-led the American people.

Lyndon Johnson wanted to win in a landslide in 1964 and could not afford a military solution in southeast Asia. So he and his aides conspired to keep the issue as minimal as possible. After his election he and his aides conspired to keep the issue as minimal as possible while he pushed his Great Society agenda. Eventually, though, the time came where he had to decide whether to withdraw and let South Vietnam go Communist or to stay and fight what he was convinced was an unwinnable war. We know the decision he made and the efforts taken to hide as much as possible the truth from the American people.

Of the main parties in this book -- the Kennedy Administration, the Johnson Administration, and the top military advisers -- probably the least guilty were the military advisers that made up the JCS. The JCS was also skeptical about winning in Vietnam but as the situation got worse they felt the military should be more pro-active. But in my opinion, they deserve the least blame for what happened for the least flattering of reasons. The JCS was largely ignored by the civilian leadership because they allowed themselves to be largely ignored. The JCS recognized what was happening but sabotaged their own credibility via inter-service rivalries. The JCS that should have been very much involved in the discussions and planning of Vietnam instead allowed itself to be marginalized.
The accounts depicted in this book is a must read for any student of history. This is especially true as this country, and in particular, the Democratic Party, became and is still gun shy about how to use the military and how to approach national defense. Many still believe the lessons of Vietnam failure is to stay away from foreign adventures even if our interests are at stake. But such people ignore why Vietnam was a failure. I do not believe the main characters in this book deliberately set out to fail in Vietnam but they deliberately took actions that resulted in that failure. And this country is still impacted by their actions forty plus years after the fact.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:
Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam by H. R. McMaster - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!