
proaching a consensus on this question among so-called experts.

If central bankers can't fully comprehend all of what's going on in the global economy, neither can any of the rest of us. That's the important, if unsettling, message of this book.

URBAN LEVIATHAN: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century. *By Diane E. Davis.* Temple. 391 pp. \$24.95

In 1940, 1.7 million people lived in metropolitan Mexico City; today it is home to more than 16 million. What was once a charming city with a leisurely air has become, in the words of the writer Octavio Paz, "a monstrous inflated head, crushing the frail body that holds it up." What went wrong? Why has the development of Mexico City proceeded so disastrously? And what have been the consequences of its unchecked growth for the political and economic well-being of the nation? Davis, a sociologist at the New School for Social Research, provides disturbing answers.

While many observers blame Mexico's current crisis on corrupt and power-hungry politicians in the party that has ruled for more than 60 years, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Davis links it to the physical concentration of social, political, and economic resources in Mexico City, the country's capital and geographic center. According to Davis, the PRI lavished its attention on Mexico City, to the exclusion of other regions, in order to secure the loyalty of its sizable population (today, about 20 percent of all Mexicans). This strategy led to the state's long-standing protection of an uncompetitive class of Mexico City industrialists, who produced primarily for local consumption rather than for export. Their loyalty to the party was rewarded with hefty state subsidies.

Moreover, Davis maintains, the PRI's preoccupation with social and economic forces within Mexico City led it to forgo competitive democratic politics and to rely on a pact with urban labor (based mainly in Mexico City), urban industrialists, and the urban middle classes. The system worked so long as party

leaders plowed enough money back into Mexico City to keep its residents and party constituents loyal, or at least acquiescent. But when the PRI could no longer guarantee prosperity or congenial conditions in the city, Davis claims, grassroots opposition flared.

Davis's history helps to explain both the poverty and the political opposition now so evident in the other regions of Mexico, notably Chiapas, where outright rebellion erupted in 1994. If Mexico's current woes have many causes, Davis's account sheds valuable light on why the endangered PRI is now courting rural populations, advocating regional development, and scrambling to compensate for decades of provincial neglect.

IN RETROSPECT: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. *By Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark.* Random House. 414 pp. \$27.50

Last spring, after almost three decades of reticence, Robert McNamara finally issued his version of what went on in the highest government circles during the Vietnam War. Predictably, the former secretary of defense drew hot criticism from many quarters for his admission that he remained at the Pentagon even after developing grave doubts about the prosecution of that badly conceived war. Read carefully, however, his memoir is less a mea culpa, as advertised, than an often artful sharing of the blame ("We were wrong") with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his former colleagues in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Nevertheless, to the abundant historical literature he adds a useful, albeit truncated, chronicle of high-level obfuscation and strategic confusion during 1961-68, the years of growing U.S. commitment in Southeast Asia.

As the United States sought to "contain" Sino-Soviet expansionism, both Kennedy and Johnson feared being accused at home of "losing" South Vietnam to the tenacious men in Hanoi. Johnson wanted to "win," but at the lowest possible political cost lest he lose his Great Society programs. That meant no congressional declaration of war, no mobilization

of the reserves, no risky U.S. offensive strategy in Indochina. The press and Congress initially backed LBJ's approach. So did McNamara.

But the cost kept mounting: first, step-by-step expansion of the bombing of North Vietnam, then the landing of marines to protect the bomber bases in the South, then more U.S. troops (eventually 549,000) to beat back the local Viet Cong and the infiltrating North Vietnamese regular forces. Soon, the conflict became an endless "body count" war. By December 1965, only nine months after the marines landed, McNamara writes, he was convinced that no U.S. military victory was feasible. Thereafter, the secretary of defense became the prime in-house advocate of intermittent bombing pauses and (illusory) peace diplomacy, and resisted the Joint Chiefs' requests for more bombing. Privately, he lamented the war with Robert Kennedy, LBJ's rival. Publicly, he hailed allied "progress" in South Vietnam. Finally, LBJ tapped him to head the World Bank and McNamara left the Pentagon in February 1968. "I don't know whether I resigned or was fired," he writes.

McNamara may have intended his memoir as a rebuttal to an unflattering 1993 biography by Deborah Shapley. But his narrative often reads as if it were cobbled together. For example, McNamara says General William Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, had "no alternative," given Washington's constraints, to waging a war of attrition; then, oddly, he quotes Westmoreland's critics at greater length. McNamara seldom analyzes either the Indochina battlefield or the major war-fighting issues raised by the U.S. military. He brushes by the Communists' surprise 1968 Tet offensive, the last crisis of his tenure. He ignores the sacrifices (more than 300,000 dead) of the South Vietnamese and implicitly blames lackluster Saigon leaders for America's difficulties. He disingenuously lays high-level ignorance about Vietnam to a lack of U.S. experts when in fact many experts,

civilian and military, were available but unheeded.

The supermanager who came to the Pentagon from the Ford Motor Company is most convincing when he illuminates the crucial leadership failure: neither Kennedy nor Johnson ever wanted to confront what "winning" or "getting out" might truly require, just as McNamara himself failed to confront the awful consequences of his private doubt and public silence.

Philosophy & Religion

GOD: A Biography. By Jack Miles. Knopf. 446 pp. \$27.50

Clear the couch: it's God's turn for a 50-minute session. Jack Miles's "biography" of God is an ingenious conceit spun out to dizzying, and somewhat wearying, length. The author proposes "a consciously postcritical or postmodern reintegration of mythic, fictional, and historical elements in the Bible so as to allow the character of God to stand forth more clearly from the work of which he is the protagonist." Miles, a former Jesuit now on the editorial board of the *Los Angeles Times*, treats God as if he were a figure like Hamlet: it is his action and inaction, presence and absence, silence and speech that drive the Biblical narrative.

The God on Miles's couch is explicitly not the God of faith. This is a God of literary life, not ordinary life, let alone eternal life. He is profligate with personalities—more faces than Eve, fewer than Sybil—and you can read his ups and downs in the chapter headings: "creator," "destroyer," "creator/destroyer" (God's conflicted), "liberator," "lawgiver," "liege," "executioner," "wife" (yes), "counselor," "fiend," "sleeper." Indeed, God is something of an existential basket case who needs to define himself entirely through interaction with his creatures.

He's powerful enough in the beginning to create the universe, but he's also at a child's stage of emotional devel-

