

---

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-

---

opment, with neither a past nor a social life, unlike those lucky Greek gods on Olympus. He labors toward emotional maturity, unaware of his own intentions until humankind helps him discover them. Miles locates the climax of his tale in the Book of Job, where God is finally so flummoxed by his dealings with Job, the human being who forces him to confront his inner demon ("a dragon goddess of destruction"), that he falls silent for the rest of the Bible. He doesn't grow old so much as simply subside.

Miles does his best to keep aloft the balloon of his conceit, but it begins to lose air before the official landing. You hear the hiss when he resorts to filler such as "God sometimes becomes a part of the landscape rather than one of the *dramatis personae* because his character has stabilized for a while." Read instead: "The Bible is in the way of my theory." In the end, there's no getting around all those disparate books that make up the Book, composed by many hands for different purposes over hundreds of years and arranged in a couple of final orders—of which only one, the Hebrew, serves Miles's reading.

"The unity of the Bible," Miles insists, "was not imposed by clever editing after the fact. It rests ultimately on the singularity of the Bible's protagonist, the One God, the *monos theos* of monotheism." Nevertheless, the absence of a final authorial hand, such as shaped the received *Iliad* or put Hamlet through his paces, may leave a theorizing critic as winded as his readers. The Lord awaits his Boswell still, but he's found a Joyce Brothers and a Cleanth Brooks in the meantime.

**JOHN DEWEY AND THE HIGH TIDE OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM.** By Alan Ryan. Norton. 416 pp. \$30

Philosophy once mattered in America, or at least one philosopher did. John Dewey was 92 years old when he died in 1952, and for more than 60 of those years he found an attentive and responsive audience not just among his fellow academics—he was associated with Columbia University from 1905 until his death, in the philosophy depart-

ment and as a member of the education faculty—but among the larger public. This was an extraordinary achievement for a philosopher, the more so for one such as Dewey, who was not an easy or engaging writer and whose beliefs, if fully understood, might not have been expected to win wide acceptance among Americans. Born in Burlington, Vermont, and raised a Congregationalist, he lost his faith in his early twenties. But he continued throughout his life to use the language of religion—of "faith" and "belief" in democracy, the common man, and education—to argue for a worldview that was squarely at odds with religion and decisively rejected the supernatural.

Dewey called his mature philosophy "experimentalism" (the graceless word says a lot about the foursquare philosopher). "What he meant," writes Ryan, a professor of politics at Princeton University, in this splendid new contribution to the ongoing reappraisal of Dewey's thought, "was that the truth, or more broadly the value, of any belief or statement about the world is to be measured in experience. He was insistent that a thoroughgoing naturalism was the only intellectually respectable philosophy, the only approach to life, education, ethics, and politics that offered a hope of progress."

Above all, Dewey wanted the world to be governed by "intelligent action." The words were meant to suggest an agenda of informed—by science especially—and energetic purpose. And he wanted to make the scientific attitude consistent with religious, artistic, and ethical attitudes, as part of a process of trying to understand and bring order to the world.

Not everyone was persuaded. Ryan notes that Dewey has always had two kinds of readers. One group, in which Ryan situates himself, "has seen him as trying to unite the religious conviction that the world is a meaningful unity with a secular 20th-century faith in the scientific analysis of both nature and humanity." The second group takes him for "an aggressive rationalist, someone who expects 'science' to drive out faith, and a contributor to the 20th century's