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Clark Clifford in 2020

Clark Clifford was an attorney, an activist in the Democratic Party, and (almost always referred to as) a “consummate Washington insider.” In 1968, he replaced Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense. In a 2006 interview, Steve Inskeep of NPR and author David Halberstam (author of *The Best and Brightest*) discuss the circumstances of Clifford’s appointment (<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/6490307>).

Mr. HALBERSTAM: Well, he was afraid – [President Lyndon] Johnson was afraid that McNamara was unraveling under the pressure of being the principal architect of a war that was a failure. That he felt, in his own words, that McNamara had, quote, gone dovish on him. So he fired him, and Clark Clifford was brought in.

INSKEEP: Well, who was that man, Clark Clifford?

Mr. HALBERSTAM: Clark Clifford was an old-time fixer who had gone back to the Truman years. Johnson thought that he would have conventional thoughts about Vietnam. But Clifford instead, from the very beginning, thought it was a disproportionate investment - didn't work. And where some of the more senior people refused to listen to the word - the reporting coming out of the country - Clifford, from the start, began to ventilate the process and understood that it wasn't working.

INSKEEP: What did he begin to do?

Mr. HALBERSTAM: He began to try and convince the president that it couldn't be done. He began to try and turn the entire Defense Department to a recognition of the limits of what we were doing, and to convince his colleagues in the other branches of the government that it wasn't doable. And he was pretty lonely in the trenches - Clifford was - for quite awhile there.

So, what on earth does Clark Clifford (who died in 1998) have to do with COVID-19? After becoming Secretary of Defense, Clifford had a briefing with some of the military chiefs of staff, and was told that the US would have to keep a troop presence in Viet Nam for a while.

“How many?”, asked Clifford.

“About 100,000”, he was told.

“For how long”, asked Clifford.

“Thirty years”.

According to legend, Clifford marched into the President’s office and told him that he didn’t know about other people, but he (Clifford) was not going to throw away his reputation by supporting an expensive (in terms of money and lost lives), and futile endeavor. President Johnson subsequently chose not to run for another term, President Nixon was elected in November 1968, with a “secret plan” to end the war, and the US presence ended by 1975.

At this date (May 20, 2020), over 92,000 Americans have died in less than four months. We will almost certainly reach 100,000 by the end of May. We could be closer to 200,000 than to 100,000 by the end of 2020. Suppose that with

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masks, gloves, social distancing, emptied classrooms and stadiums, we settle down to a “steady state” of 30,000 – 50,000 deaths per year until a vaccine comes. President Trump and his supporters have indicated that that may be acceptable. Columnist Margaret Sullivan wrote on May 10:

“We don’t shut down our economy because tens of thousands of people die on the highways,” said Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.). “It’s a risk we accept so we can move about.” President Trump also argued that car-related deaths are “far greater than any numbers we’re talking about.” https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/trump-wants-america-to-normalize-coronavirus-deaths-its-the-medias-job-not-to-play-along/2020/05/09/72de4c32-9090-11ea-a9c0-73b93422d691_story.html

Your blogger used the identical analogy in his March 24 [entry](#). The difference is that we can quantify the benefits of time saved in leisure, travel, and delivery costs by not having a 15 MPH national speed limit. We have made that trade-off. That said, driving has become far safer in terms of deaths per passenger-mile than it was in the 1960s when your blogger got his first driver’s license.

COVID-19 is new, it is deadly, and we don’t know how to make it safer, and continue to do everything we used to do. Opening up the economy too fast will lead to more deaths. Putting full crowds into Senator Johnson’s U of W Camp Randall Stadium for football games, with the knowledge, technology and crowd control that would make America “run” again, would lead to hundreds if not thousands of deaths. We let people drive their cars, but we have speed limits, and we warn them not to drive on icy roads ... and we have police to enforce the rules.

So:

“How many COVID-19 deaths are acceptable?”, we asked.

“Maybe 30,000 – 50,000 per year”, they answered.

“For how long?”

We need a Clark Clifford, and we need him inside the White House.

Allen C. Goodman
Professor of Economics