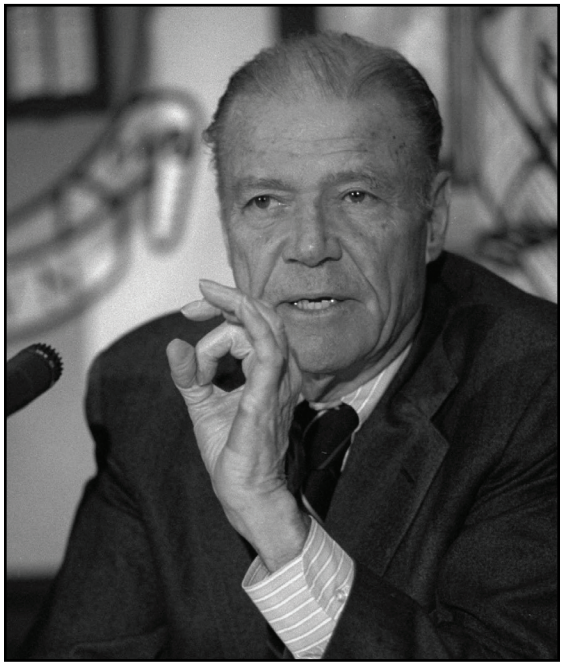
ROBERT S. MCNAMARA



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McNamara in Winter: The Quixotic Quest of an Unquiet American

> He was impregnably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance.
>
> —Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (1955)

> Sanity may be madness, but the maddest of all is to see life as it is and not as it should be.
>
> —Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote de La Mancha*

> Errol Morris: This is a movie ["The Fog of War"] with one interview, but sometimes I think there are two characters: the 85-year-old McNamara speaking to the 45-year-old McNamara.
>
> Terry Gross: Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. I mean, as a viewer, this was my impression too, yeah.
>
> —National Public Radio interview on "Fresh Air," 5 January 2004

An American Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Following Robert S. McNamara's death on 6 July 2009, at age 93, dozens of obituaries appeared, most of them telling the same basic story. McNamara was portrayed as an American variant of Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a bright and successful man but also a bad and destructive man whose pursuit of power and colossal arrogance led America and the world into the quagmire of the Vietnam War.

First, Dr. Jekyll. A quick perusal of McNamara's life seems initially to prove that the so-called "Horatio Alger Myth" is sometimes reality: rags to riches, obscurity to fame, blue collar to the corridors of power. The grandson of Irish immigrants fleeing the Great Famine, and son of a San Francisco shoe salesman whose education ended after the eighth grade, McNamara rose to positions of power and wealth while still a young man. After serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II, He became one of the 10 famous "whiz kids" hired by the Ford Motor Company (as a group) in 1946. He rose to be the first Ford president chosen from outside the Ford family. His ascension to president of Ford was interrupted almost immediately when President-elect John F. Kennedy named McNamara his secretary of defense. McNamara took

the oath of office at age 44, a year older than JFK, and served both Kennedy and then President Lyndon Johnson until 1 March 1968. On 1 April 1968, he became president of the World Bank, where he served until he retired in June 1981 at age 65.

Next, Mr. Hyde. To many commentators, McNamara seemed to be the embodiment of Lord Acton's assertion that, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." As defense secretary, McNamara commanded the most devastating military machine in history. He sent an army of more than half a million to South Vietnam, and he launched what would become the most intense bombing campaign in history against North Vietnam—all to no avail. Within and between the lines of his obituaries were variants of the question posed most directly by Mickey Kaus of *The New Republic:* "Has any single American of this [20th] century done more harm than Robert McNamara?" Many answered "no," because in their view, without McNamara's ferocious pursuit of the Vietnam War and his frequent deceptions as to who was winning and who was losing, the war would never have taken place, or at least would not have escalated to the colossal disaster it became.

A few commentaries on McNamara mentioned his activities after retiring from the World Bank (1981–2009), during which he wrote and spoke on behalf of various causes, especially issues of war and peace and the abolition of nuclear weapons. A few obits mentioned that late in life, he participated in a number of discussions with former adversaries from Russia, Cuba, and Vietnam.

A Profile in Courage: 1985–2009

During the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Robert S. McNamara was a central player in two epochal and controversial episodes in the history of U.S. foreign policy. First, during the Kennedy administration, the world was brought to the brink of nuclear catastrophe in the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Second, during the Johnson administration, McNamara was the principal architect of the U.S. war in Vietnam, which at the time was the worst disaster in the history of U.S. foreign policy. As defense secretary, Bob McNamara became one of the most controversial leaders in U.S. history—admired by some, despised by many.

These searing experiences—one a close brush with Armageddon; the other a political, military, and human tragedy of monumental proportions—constituted McNamara's raw material, his data, the complex skein of his life as a public official that he sought, in

retirement, to untangle and understand in the hope of helping to build a less dangerous, more peaceful 21st century.

We were his principal colleagues on his quixotic, 25-year quest to learn from the dangerous and tragic histories in which he had played a central role. We played, if you will, Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote. We were his set up team, his reality testers, sometimes his co-authors, and always his sounding board for projects on the Cuban missile crisis and Vietnam War—projects that took the three of us all over the United States and to Western Europe, Havana, Moscow, Hanoi, and other locations where Bob McNamara met face to face with his former enemies. His objective was to transform his personal experience into better policies, resulting in the end of the nuclear threat and less loss of blood and treasure in wars around the world.

The story of Bob McNamara's last quarter century, the period of his so-called "retirement," is the story of a former official who freely admitted making mistakes, but who also challenged others—including his former colleagues and some of his formerly most bitter enemies (the Russians, Cubans, and Vietnamese)—to re-examine history with him and reflect deeply on their own shortcomings, as well as his. It is the story of a man fighting to remain optimistic even as he ploughed ever more deeply into the heart of his own personal darkness. It is a very American story of a man driven to understand how profoundly he and others were wrong, as the basis for trying to make things right in the future. It is the story of a profile in courage.

The Cuban Missile Crisis: "We Lucked Out"

We now know that Armageddon would almost certainly have occurred in October 1962 if leaders in Washington and Moscow, led by John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, hadn't stopped in their tracks, reversed course 180 degrees, and raced away from the brink in a panic at the foreshadowed doomsday. Armageddon was also avoided because Fidel Castro agreed, with profound reluctance, to allow the Soviets to remove the strategic nuclear weapons from the island—as had been agreed to independently by Kennedy and Khrushchev, without consulting or even informing Castro. These were weapons that Castro believed constituted the Cuban Revolution's last, best hope for survival in the face of unrelenting American hostility.

In our research with Bob McNamara, we also learned that luck was essential to the great escape of October 1962. In Errol Morris's Academy Award-winning 2003 documentary film, *The Fog of War*, McNamara has this to say about the Cuban missile crisis:

> I want to say, and this is very important: at the end *we lucked out!* It was *luck* that prevented nuclear war. We came *that close* to nuclear war at the end. [Gestures by bringing thumb and forefinger of his left hand together until they almost touch.] Rational individuals—Kennedy was rational, Khrushchev was rational, Castro was rational. Rational individuals came *that close* to the total destruction of their societies. And that danger exists today.

From what we discovered in discussions between Americans, Russians, and Cubans, McNamara concluded as follows: "the major lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is this: the indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will destroy nations."

According to the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah was ordered by God to warn the people of Israel of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, their eventual capture, and their 50-year removal to Babylon that came to be called their "Babylonian captivity." Bob McNamara was the Jeremiah of the nuclear age. He did not claim to have received messages from God or anyone else, but he did claim to have looked into the nuclear abyss in the crisis, and to have special insight into the fragility of peace in the nuclear age. He learned that even a master planner like himself might be faced, unexpectedly and thus unprepared, with a situation in which the entire world was at risk. In our minds' eyes, we can still see him—a stooped octogenarian, left shoulder dropping far below the level of the right (Bob was left-handed), wearing his frayed Burberry raincoat, lugging his 60-year-old travel box with a duct-taped handle (it could not honestly be called a "bag") through some airport, on his way to some place to frighten yet another audience by connecting the dots, as he saw them, between the situational insanity of his experience in the Cuban missile crisis and the urgent necessity of moving as swiftly and safely as possible to a world with zero nuclear weapons.

Critical Oral History: Living Forwards, Understanding Backwards

We discovered in the Cuban missile crisis project, as Bob did, that it is indeed possible to learn from historical investigation things not previously known, nor even imagined. For this to be possible, the investigation must conform to specific requirements that involve three elements: (1) former officials with memories of what happened; (2) declassified documents from the relevant countries; and (3) knowledgeable scholars of the events. Memories of participants in historical events must be constrained by declassified documents and scholarly analysis. But since documents do not provide their own context, the documents must be

interpreted by officials who lived through the events in positions of significant responsibility. Oral testimony must thus constrain our understanding of the documents. The scholars, in addition, must be willing to let both oral testimony and the documents collide with whatever theories or expectations they may have brought to the exercise. In this way, the research method of *critical oral history* evolved alongside the substantive advances in our understanding of history's most dangerous moment—in October 1962.

Critical oral history is a methodological response to Kierkegaard's famous paradox: "It is perfectly true as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards." These three elements—memories of former officials, declassified documents, and scholarly expertise—became the bedrock of critical oral history, which has been called the most innovative and important methodological development in social science since World War II. McNamara's participation in critical oral history was central to its development and evolution. In fact, the development of the method is virtually inconceivable without McNamara's leadership. Often alone among his former colleagues in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Bob's curiosity—his intense interest in what the adversary was *actually* thinking and doing versus what U.S. intelligence community believed—swamped his fear of inflicting even more damage to his reputation and legacy as a U.S. secretary of defense.

One example must suffice of the discoveries we made while using critical oral history. We were sitting next to Bob McNamara, watching Fidel Castro, our host, in Havana in January 1992 when we learned about the possibility of a nuclear attack on an invading U.S. force in Cuba, a U.S. force that would not have been equipped with nuclear weapons. Bob was speechless. His jaw literally dropped. Eventually he interrupted the Russian General, Anatoly Gribkov, who was making the presentation. He asked for a re-translation of what Gribkov had said because, as he told the other participants, he couldn't believe what he had just heard. The interpreters confirmed the accuracy of the first translation. Bob was absolutely mortified.

Bob knew, as few others knew at the time, just how close President John F. Kennedy might have been to ordering the invasion of Cuba. Neither Kennedy nor McNamara wanted to invade Cuba. But the political reality was that the missiles had to be removed, and if the Russians refused to remove them, then the United States would have to remove them by force. Neither Kennedy nor McNamara imagined that a nuclear war might commence due to a nuclear counter-attack by Russian and Cuban forces on the non-nuclear-equipped U.S. invasion force. Yet, as we discovered in January 1992 around a conference table in Havana,

Cuba, a U.S invasion of Cuba would likely have first turned Cuba, then the southeastern U.S., then Europe, then the entire world, into lifeless, gray, radioactive ash—roughly the color of Bob McNamara's face when he heard General Anatoly Gribkov's presentation.

The Vietnam War: "Wrong, Terribly Wrong"

Emboldened by an enhanced appreciation for the possibilities of historical investigation, via his experience with critical oral history, McNamara (then 76 years old, in 1992) began to immerse himself in scholarly writing on the Vietnam War. He familiarized himself with the declassified documentary record, and by checking his recollections against his own memory and the memories of his surviving former colleagues. The result was his memoir, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995). The book became a worldwide best seller and reawakened in the reading public the enmity toward the McNamara they remembered, or thought they remembered (and many had hated): the man they believed had led America into the quagmire of Vietnam. The book is unique for its author's willingness to admit mistakes. He and his colleagues in the 1960s were, he wrote, "wrong, terribly wrong," in their conduct of the conflict in Southeast Asia. Admitting mistakes won him few admirers. Many regarded his stated regret as having been too little, too late—too late to redeem the lives that had been lost, as many saw it, due to his misdeeds, his mendacity, and his arrogance while secretary of defense.

The motivation behind the unprecedented bombing of North Vietnam ordered by McNamara, which began in March 1965, was to build a democracy that could resist communism. In his boundless optimism and idealism, he seemed to many to resemble Alden Pyle, the naïve, destructive protagonist in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, published in 1955, at the outset of the American experiment in nation building in South Vietnam. Many, though far from all, reviewers of *In Retrospect* thought they detected the same naïve, idealistic but misguided man they remembered from Bob's tenure as secretary of defense in the 1960s. He was characterized as foolish to believe it possible to learn lessons from history that, if applied, might create a less violent world. Some were even offended by what they regarded as the gall of McNamara, in the wake of his dark history that left 3 million dead in Vietnam, to prescribe policy for the 21st century.

After publishing his memoir, Bob McNamara became obsessed by the possibility that leaders in the 1960s may, due to misperception and misunderstanding, have missed opportunities to end the war before it became catastrophic, or even to avoid the war altogether. To address

the question of missed opportunities—to determine what may have been possible, and under what circumstances it may have been possible—he needed to understand the perspective of the Vietnamese communist enemy. Might they, he wondered, also have been "wrong, terribly wrong" about U.S. decision-making, just as McNamara had acknowledged that he and his colleagues were mistaken about the magnitude of pain and losses Hanoi was willing to absorb in its war with the Americans? The payoff for him in the Cuban missile crisis project was the discovery of mutual misperception and misunderstanding, leading to misjudgment and decisions that plunged the world into a nuclear crisis. Having already acquainted himself in *In Retrospect* with the documentary record of *U.S.* decision-making on the Vietnam War, he wanted to take the next step. He wanted to cross-examine his former adversaries in the Hanoi government in a manner comparable to the way he had investigated the Cuban missile crisis. He wanted to invite his former Vietnamese adversaries into the investigation. And he was willing, as always, to reciprocate in full: to submit to cross-examination by his former enemies.

After considerable behind-the-scenes maneuvering, we traveled with Bob McNamara to Hanoi in November 1995 to pose the question: Would former Vietnamese communist officials be interested in meeting McNamara and other U.S. officials from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in a joint search for missed opportunities to have avoided the war, or to have terminated it much earlier, before it escalated out of control in the mid-1960s? We, along with others in Bob's "advance team" organized critical oral history conferences in Vietnam, Western Europe, and the United States. Much has been written about the meetings between McNamara and his former colleagues with their former enemies in the Hanoi government, including a book co-authored by McNamara and one of us (JGB), *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (1999). It was the first book by a senior U.S. decision-maker in the war to involve major Vietnamese voices. It remains the only such book. The meetings greatly altered our view in the West of Vietnamese decision-making during the war and, in addition, played a role in U.S.-Vietnamese reconciliation.

Wilson's Ghost: "How Much Evil Must We Do in order to Do Good?"

Immediately after the publication of *Argument Without End*, McNamara told us that he wanted to pull together what he had learned in the critical oral histories of the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam War, draw lessons, and apply them to the 21st century. So began a writing project

that integrated the findings on the Cuban missile crisis with our findings on the Vietnam War and placed them in a larger philosophical and policy context. The result was a book by Bob and JGB, *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing and Catastrophe in the 21st Century* (2001; post 9/11 expanded edition, 2003).

The book distills more than 15 years of research into a set of proposals for raising the odds that the 20th century, in which more than 160 million peopled died due to violent conflict, does not become a blueprint for the 21st century. During the research and writing of the book, McNamara became acquainted for the first time with the seminal work of the great American philosopher and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, whose Lutheran background and cautious realism on foreign affairs resonated with the Presbyterian McNamara's own experience and philosophical proclivities. Now in his early 80s, McNamara's tragic experience was being framed and complemented by the tragic vision of Niebuhr and other thinkers previously unknown to McNamara, which he devoured with the energy and enthusiasm of a college freshman. Readers will be startled by the authors' account of the significance in McNamara's unquiet retirement of a single phrase taken from Niebuhr: "How much evil must we do in order to do good?"—a question that became a talisman for McNamara in his efforts to frame his own historical experience. At every stop on a tour to support the publication of *Wilson's Ghost*, Bob began his presentation with Niebuhr's question.

The Fog of War: McNamara Finds His "Boswell"

The final phase of our collaboration with Bob McNamara began unexpectedly in early 2001, just as *Wilson's Ghost* was published. The filmmaker Errol Morris sought out McNamara to interview him about the book. McNamara agreed to do the interview, which was to be brief, and appear on a cable TV channel, with which Morris had contracted to do a series of interviews with notable personalities. Morris immediately realized, however, that in McNamara he had encountered a unique phenomenon: a former official with a good command of the history in which he had participated, almost scarily energetic and focused, and willing to admit having made mistakes. Morris proposed almost immediately to McNamara that they make a film together, filmmaker and subject. McNamara's condition for agreeing to Morris' request was our inclusion as substantive advisers to both the director (Morris) and his "star" (McNamara). Thus began the project that resulted in Morris's film, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, which won the Academy Award for Best

Documentary Feature in 2004, followed by an accompanying book we wrote based on the film, also called *The Fog of War* (2005).

It is easy in retrospect to overlook the fact that McNamara, in his quixotic effort to warn and educate the public on issues of war and peace, took a huge risk in getting involved with a filmmaker like Errol Morris. His best-known film prior to *The Fog of War*, was the 1988 film *The Thin Blue Line*, in which the filmmaker reveals members of the Dallas Police Department to be biased, incompetent, and duplicitous. In the end, however, *The Fog of War* was a tremendous success. The film humanizes McNamara as he himself was never able to do—because of his history; his brusque, dismissive manner; and his scary missionary zeal to convert people to his cause. The zealot is indeed present in *The Fog of War* in nearly every frame, but he is an 85-year-old zealot who conveys a depth of feeling that surprised many when they saw the film. In addition to winning the Oscar, *The Fog of War* was seen by more than 1 million people in theaters across North America during the first five months of 2004. And it is now one of the most widely used teaching videos in circulation in U.S. colleges and secondary schools. Just as Dr. Samuel Johnson at last found his Boswell (who told Johnson's story far better than Johnson could), Bob McNamara had stumbled upon Errol Morris, who revealed the human being in McNamara that was always present but seldom seen.

Speaking Truth to Power: The 80-something to the 40-something

In April 2005, we invited Bob McNamara to speak at Brown University. It was his "last hurrah" as a public speaker. Bob thereafter retired from writing and speaking engagements. It was a painful withdrawal for a man who had been at the center of so many historic events and who had thereafter become a globetrotting historian of the events in which he had been a key decision-maker. Finally, as he turned 90, Bob at last became, in a non-ironical sense, a quiet American. He died on 6 July 2009.

We return to the question posed by Mickey Kaus in *The New Republic* regarding the 40-something McNamara: "Has any single American of this [20th] century done more harm than Robert McNamara?" However one might answer that question, another question should also be asked of the 70-something and 80-something McNamara: Has any former American leader ever showed more courage than Robert McNamara in facing his own mistakes while in office, and in pointing the way to a future that is less violent and

dangerous than the world he faced 1960s? Our answer is a resounding "no." No one else has even come close.

Bob McNamara helped reveal histories that were previously hidden behind political, cultural, and psychological biases. He provides a model for how former high-ranking officials can avoid the self-aggrandizing, narcissistic rubbish that typically fills the memoirs of former leaders. He taught us the requirements of learning from the past via critical oral history. He spoke historical truth to the power he once wielded. He faced his former enemies and his own mistakes unflinchingly. We are moved to ask: Where are the other McNamaras? Our answer is that they are nowhere to be found. Alas, his achievement has thus far been unique.

Elected 1981

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