BUT FIRST ...

The View from Here

How I learned to stop worrying and love Robert S. McNamara (if not the Vietnam War)

BY ERROL MORRIS

I became involved with Robert S. McNamara, the secretary of defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson who oversaw the beginning of the Vietnam War, because of a book he wrote with historian James G. Blight called *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing and Catastrophe in the 21st Century* (2001). It was not McNamara's book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995) that interested me, although I had read it. It was *Wilson's Ghost*. Why?

The book had a curious format, with commentary by Blight and transcribed interviews with McNamara, printed in an alternate typeface. It introduced me to material that was not part of *In Retrospect*. There was something about the unvarnished reflections of someone who had an immediate connection with central events in history that I found compelling. And I felt very strongly, as a proponent of first-person interviewing, that I should endeavor to get McNamara on film.

It wasn't easy. Although he agreed to an interview when I first contacted him, he called me back several days later and said that he had been investigating me and my work and had decided that it would be a very bad idea to do the interview, and so he thought he should decline. I didn't really argue with him. He went on at considerable length about why it was such a bad idea for him to be interviewed by me. After what seemed to be an excruciatingly long diatribe, he said that since he had agreed to the interview, he would do it—even though it was a bad idea. He told me he would give me five minutes.

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara with President Kennedy aboard the U.S.S. *Northampton,* early 1960s.

Everything seemed to go wrong. My cameraman, Bob Chappell, who had recently broken his leg, was hobbling about on crutches in a large plaster cast. McNamara arrived at the studio and immediately expressed skepticism about my nonstandard way of interviewing people, involving mirrors and cross-connected teleprompters. "What is *that?*" he asked with evident disdain. "Well, sir," I replied, "that's my interviewing device, the Interrotron." "I don't care what you call it," he said. "I don't like it." I decided once again not to fight it out. I offered him a seat and we proceeded to do the interview —with the Interrotron.

He gave me more than five minutes. After about 40 minutes, he said he was enjoying the interview and asked if I would mind extending the amount of time. I was happy to. We did at least three hours. And he wanted to come back the next day for more. He turned out to be one of my most extraordinary subjects: smart, insightful, a person who had clearly occupied a central position in the history of his time, both as observer and as participant.

A President "Fully on the Job"

There was a passage in *Wilson's Ghost* that I later incorporated into the film and, if I haven't already done so, I'd like to thank Blight for it. The passage involves an incident that occurred on Saturday, October 27, 1962, which many consider to be the most dangerous day of the Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy had received two messages from Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. The first was a private letter offering to resolve the crisis, expressing Khrushchev's willingness to remove the missiles from Cuba in exchange for a guarantee from Kennedy that he would not invade Cuba. The second, a public announcement, demanded that the U.S. also remove NATO missiles from Turkey, an offer that was much harder for Kennedy to accept.

McNamara recalls an assertion made by Llewellyn "Tommy" Thompson, who had been U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1957 through 1962, in a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. Thompson was not even a principal player; he was one of the lowest ranking members of the group. But he knew Khrushchev personally. He told Kennedy and the assembled ministers to ignore the second letter, that it didn't reflect Khrushchev's true intentions. I don't remember

reading this anywhere else in the annals of the Cuban missile crisis. But McNamara credits Thompson with saving the world from nuclear disaster. Here's the passage he cites from the meeting:

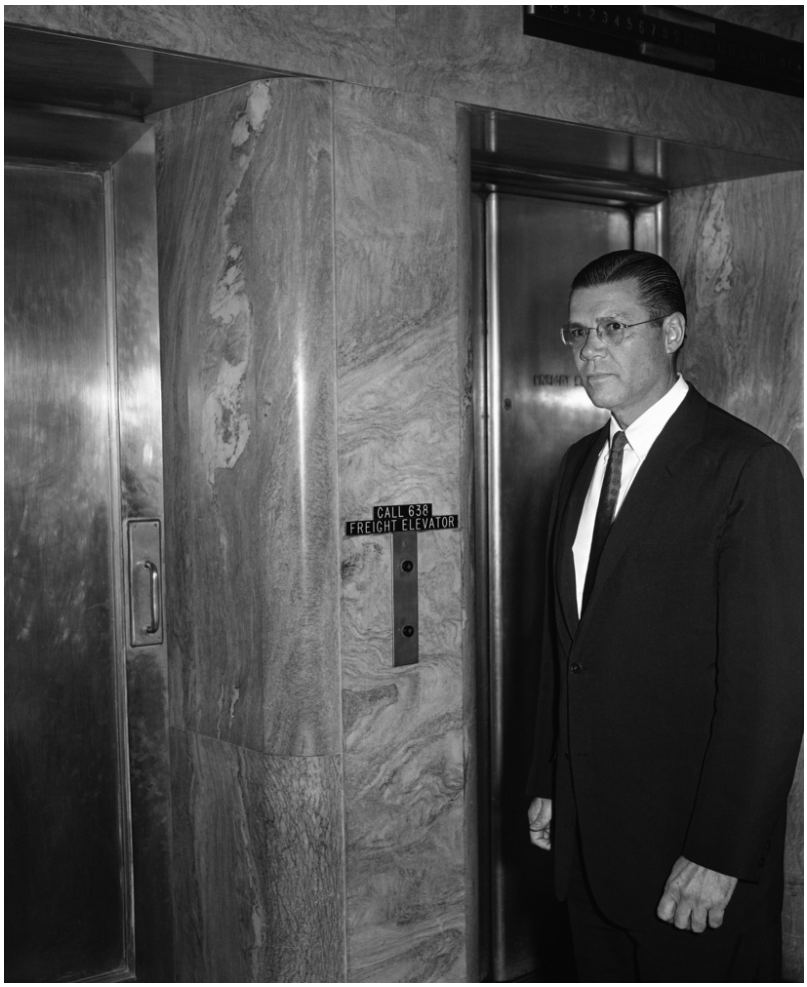
PRESIDENT KENNEDY: We're not going to get these weapons out of Cuba, probably, anyway … I mean by negotiation. … I don't think there's any doubt he's not going to retreat now that he made that public, Tommy. He's not going to take them out of Cuba.

LLEWELLYN THOMPSON: I don't agree, Mr. President. I think there's still a chance that we can get this line going.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: He'll back down?

LLEWELLYN THOMPSON: The important thing for Khrushchev, it seems to me, is to be able to say "I saved Cuba; I stopped an invasion," and he can get away with this, if he wants to, and he's had a go at this Turkey thing, and that we'll discuss later.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: All right.



McNamara at the U.S. Naval Medical Center, in Bethesda, Maryland, where Kennedy was rushed after being assassinated on November 22, 1963.

McNamara concludes, "I thank God we had a president who was, in McGeorge Bundy's phrase, 'fully on the job'—inquisitive, forceful, determined to find a way out short of war—and an adviser whose empathy with the Soviets allowed him to be, at that moment, virtually our in-house Russian. Without that president, so full of determination to avoid a Great Power conflict, and that adviser, so full of empathy for our Soviet adversary, I shudder to think what the outcome of those dangerous days might have been."

Can we even imagine such an exchange happening today?

Trapped in History

In their new book, *McNamara at War: A New History,* Philip Taubman and William Taubman do an admirable job of wrestling with the life of McNamara, who was a big part of my own life, from my early participation in demonstrations against the Vietnam War at the University of Wisconsin and at Princeton University to my film *The Fog of War* and even beyond.

It's very difficult for me to read about him because I came to love the man. Yes, I hated the Vietnam War. And I hated the role he played in escalating the war during the Johnson administration. But, as McNamara was fond of pointing out to me, most of the combat deaths in Vietnam did not occur on his watch; the war reached its grisly apex after he resigned.

The Taubmans strain to find some character flaw that could explain why, when President Lyndon Johnson asked McNamara to stay on in the role of secretary of defense after John F. Kennedy's assassination, McNamara continued to serve. I think it's really impossible for us to understand. He was a man trapped in history, like all of us. But he was trapped in history in a position of enormous power and responsibility.

The Taubman brothers conclude, as I did while making *The Fog of War,* that Vietnam was not McNamara's war. It was Lyndon Johnson's war. A great mystery for me is what McNamara knew about the Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which two U.S. boats were attacked by the North Vietnamese. Today we acknowledge that one attack happened and the other didn't. When I asked him, he claimed to be unaware that the second attack, which was supposedly the basis for Johnson's escalation of the war, was bogus. I suppose I believe him, but not without reservations.

I agree with the Taubmans—if I'm interpreting them correctly—that McNamara continued the war solely out of a sense of duty and obligation to the office of the president. Their book serves as a reminder of the tortured times following the assassination of J.F.K. To say that there was a real fear that America could lapse into complete chaos is not an overstatement.

The Ghost Ship

There was such disdain and personal disapproval of McNamara and his conduct during the Johnson administration that many film editors didn't want to have anything to do with *The Fog of War,* or its subject. Finally, Karen Schmeer, who died tragically in an accident in 2010, edited a version with me. I thought the movie was done, but she insisted that I interview McNamara one more time. I took her advice. And then I went to Washington and filmed him driving in the rain.

McNamara and General William Westmoreland receive a briefing on the military situation in Vietnam.

The final lines of *The Fog of War* came from that last interview. McNamara told me he didn't want to say anything further about Vietnam—that the issues are so complex that anything he said would require endless additions and qualifications. I asked him, "Is it the feeling that you're damned if you do and if you don't, no matter what?" He answered, "Yeah, that's right. And I'd rather be damned if I don't."

It's a very powerful line. In a way, it's the essence of him.

Ever since 1971 (and probably even before), pundits have compared McNamara to Albert Speer, Hitler's minister of armaments and war production. I've always bristled at

the comparison. Speer and McNamara may have found themselves in similar moral and practical quandaries. But until the end of his life, Speer was involved in self-justificatory exercises: *What else could I have done?* Once he placed patriotism or exigency or whatever he used to justify his decisions above the individual moral categorical imperative, he never looked back. (If you believe him, he didn't even look around well enough to perceive the horrors of the Holocaust.)

McNamara was the opposite. He rued to the end of his days his moral calculus. What's more, I never felt that his feelings of remorse came late in the game. I think they were there always, which makes him a far more interesting (and far more tortured) historical figure than Speer.

I can't claim to really understand him. I think he was an immensely complicated human being. To call him simply a technocrat is wrong. He was an extremely well-read, thoughtful man, and his motives were extraordinarily carefully considered.

My wife always described McNamara as "the Flying Dutchman," after the mythical ghost ship doomed to sail the oceans forever. The legend describes a Dutch captain who, unable to make port or get around the Cape of Good Hope during a storm, swore he would sail until Judgment Day and was cursed to do so. Like *The Flying Dutchman,* McNamara traveled the world searching for redemption without ever finding it.

People imagine that tragedy is always avoidable. If Hamlet did this, or Macbeth did that, or Othello did something else, everything would have worked out fine. But the true essence of tragedy is the ineluctable, the implacable, the unresolvable.

McNamara came to dinner at our house several times. On the last occasion, he fell and hit his head. He was bleeding profusely. My wife and I became almost hysterical, trying to convince him to get in the car so that we could take him to an emergency room. Or, if necessary, we'd call an ambulance. He refused. He got himself a cold compress, slapped it on his head, and soldiered on.

My wife and I looked at each other later and thought, If this had happened 40 years ago and we had killed McNamara, we would be seen as heroes. Now we had come to love the guy and desperately hoped he would be O.K. Thankfully, he was.

BUY THE BOOK

McNamara at War: A New History, by
Philip Taubman and William Taubman
$39.99
Norton

Errol Morris, an Oscar-winning filmmaker, is an Editor at Large at AIR MAIL

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