

James G. Blight & Janet M. Lang

Robert McNamara: then & now

But only in time can the moment in the
rose-garden
.....
Be remembered; involved with past and
future.

– T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” (1991)¹

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A singular fact about the twentieth century is this: roughly 160 million human beings were killed by other human beings in violent conflict. It was the bloodiest century in human history. Errol Morris’s Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Fog of War*, challenges us to look closely at that tragic century for clues as to how we might avoid a repetition of it, or worse, in this century.²

The film takes the form of a one-on-one conversation between Morris (who is behind the camera) and former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara (who is on camera). The conversation traces McNamara’s experiences from the end of World War I, through the course of World War II, and the unfolding of the cold war in Cuba, Vietnam, and around the world. We are encouraged to experience pivotal moments in the twentieth century vicariously, as the filmmaker and his subject walk us through the decisions of the leaders involved in these seminal events. Archival

¹ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), 178.

² See also James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

footage and recently declassified tape recordings of presidential conversations help the viewer place McNamara, who was eighty-five years old when Morris interviewed him, in the chapters of history he discusses.

Two prerequisites made *The Fog of War* possible. The first is McNamara's central role, as U.S. secretary of defense, in two momentous events of the twentieth century: the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the escalation of the Vietnam War in the 1960s. The second is McNamara's intense involvement, over the past twenty years, in research projects involving not just former colleagues but also former *enemies* – such as the Russians, Cubans, and Vietnamese who were his counterparts at the time – as well as top scholars from the relevant countries. He has reexamined his decisions and actions as a government official to a degree and in ways that we believe are unprecedented; and he has done so by exposing himself time and again to former enemies who have not been shy about telling him exactly where they believe he was *wrong* and, therefore, why he should be held culpable for decisions and actions they and others regard as regrettable, even criminal.

At the heart of his evolution as a researcher is what we call the phenomenon of the 'two McNamaras': this peculiar spectacle of an octogenarian discovering and analyzing with the greatest intensity, often with new and compelling data from unusual sources, the mistakes – always focusing primarily on the mistakes – that he made as a public official decades earlier, and then drawing lessons from his experience for the world of the twenty-first century. Morris captured the 'two McNamaras' brilliantly in his film. As the principal organizers of the research projects within which

McNamara engaged many of his former enemies, we have become familiar with the 'two McNamaras' phenomenon.

Reviewers and audiences responded to both the performance of the 'two McNamaras' and Morris's ability as a filmmaker to render the two fully alive on the screen. However, many were not only engaged by Morris but also *enraged* by McNamara. What seemed to irritate skeptics most was not something specific that McNamara said or didn't say, but rather the mere fact of having the 'two McNamaras' confront them yet again: the black-and-white images of the supremely confident young man in power, and the color images of an elderly man admitting to mistakes made by that same young man. To these skeptics, there was and is only one McNamara – the arrogant know-it-all who appeared on the nightly news throughout his tenure as defense secretary to mislead the American public about the Vietnam War. In their view, McNamara was and remains (in the useful phrase novelist Geoffrey Wolff used to describe his father) a "duke of deception" – who in the 1960s lied about the war in Vietnam, and who now pretends to have taken an interest in identifying mistakes he made then, solely to try to rescue his tattered reputation.³

Although we have worked with Bob McNamara for twenty years, we profess no knowledge of his deep psychological processes or his allegedly 'hidden' agendas. We regard such speculation as distractions from appreciating his achievement over the past two decades. The issue of McNamara's veracity in the 1960s with regard to the war in Vietnam is both interesting and important but also, in our view, more complicated than Mc-

3 Geoffrey Wolff, *The Duke of Deception: Memoirs of My Father* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

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Namara's critics typically admit. Much remains to be said about this issue, but it is not our purpose to do so here. Suffice it to say that there are similarities and differences among the ways of evaluating the truthfulness and deceptiveness of individuals and governments. Within this context, it is possible for reasonable people to differ in their assessments of how McNamara compares with other public figures in the way he personally dealt with the inevitable trade-offs between personal belief and public responsibility.⁴

We are not going to undertake psychological analyses of McNamara's purported motive to rescue his flagging reputation. Nor will we try to refute those who for the most part, we believe, simply refuse to come to grips with his historical work at all because of their long-standing and apparently unshakeable belief that 'he lied then and so he must be lying now.' Our objective is less emotionally charged but ultimately more important. We want to provide an introduction to the research process in which McNamara has been involved. In addition, we want to summarize what the man has been up to and what he has accomplished during the past two decades, and illustrate why we need to pay attention to the results of his efforts.

We lay our own cards on the table in the form of two propositions: First, each of the 'two McNamaras' is genuine. In *The Fog of War*, an eightysomething researcher named McNamara, chastened and humbled by a good deal of what he

4 A good place to begin to evaluate McNamara's veracity is in the paperback edition of his Vietnam memoir, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1996). In an appendix, McNamara reprints many reviews of the hardback edition of the book, which range from admiringly positive to scathingly negative.

has learned about the mistakes he made while holding high office, really is interrogating a fortysomething public official, also named McNamara. Second, the phenomenon of the 'two McNamaras,' if it were emulated by other former officials, is potentially an important means – one of the few currently available – for reducing the risk of war and other disasters caused by mistaken assumptions and faulty decision making.

It may be asked: is it possible to raise the odds of human civilization surviving a twenty-first century already as bloody as, and arguably becoming even more dangerous than, the twentieth century? Many are pessimistic, and not without reason.⁵ We would personally be more optimistic if we believed more former officials might be convinced to follow McNamara's lead. The signs are not encouraging, however. But we are not ready just yet to yield to this negative line of thinking. Thus, we urge our readers to resist their own cynical proclivities as well, at least until they have explored the evolution of the 'two McNamaras' and given some thought to our conclusion: *it is desirable for more public officials to emulate the 'two McNamaras' because this process can yield tangible and useful clues to how we might reduce conflict and enhance peace.*

In the 1980s, we studied the problem of nuclear danger. Nuclear war was said to be 'unthinkable,' since (it was assumed) no sane leader would knowingly initiate a global nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. But while nuclear catastrophe might be in

5 This is a central question in Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight, *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing and Catastrophe in the 21st Century*, expanded, post-9/11 pb. ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003).

this sense ‘unthinkable,’ it was not impossible. If it was not impossible, we wondered, as did many others, how might it happen?

One hazardous route that interested us, as scholars whose background was in cognitive psychology, was a deep *crisis* between heavily armed nuclear nations. The world had traveled this route only once – during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Though a great deal had been written about the missile crisis, when we first took up the issue, many authors who were, as we were, concerned with policy issues – that is, with the reduction of nuclear risks – did not believe the crisis had much, if any, relevance to the world of the mid-1980s. The global political situation, the U.S. and Soviet weapons systems, the command and control capabilities of both Moscow and Washington – all had changed dramatically since the missile crisis. Many believed these changes rendered the missile crisis little more than an historical oddity – fascinating, maybe even a little scary, but irrelevant to the contemporary world.

On the contrary, it seemed to us that another look – from a more human angle – had the potential to yield information with contemporary policy relevance. While weapons, and command and control systems, had changed markedly since the 1960s, human nature hadn’t. And so, our principal research question was straightforwardly psychological: “What was it *like* to be a decision maker during the crisis when, literally, ‘the fate of the earth’ hung on the decisions of a few leaders in Washington, Moscow, and Havana?” Decision makers became, and remain, the focus of our research. They are the people who have a special kind of knowledge that comes from participating in an event, with significant responsibility on their shoulders and with no clear idea of the outcome.

We soon found out that this question – what does nuclear danger really look and feel like? – is more complex, and more interesting, than we initially anticipated. Kierkegaard, we discovered, understood the main outlines of the difficulty long ago. We live life forward, he wrote, groping in the dark, unaware of its ultimate outcome, yet we are forced to understand events in reverse, working our way backward from outcomes to their supposed causes. This creates a profound disconnect between lived experience and our understanding of that experience.⁶ Caught in the moment – in the riveting and scary Cuban missile crisis, for example – decision makers may feel exhausted, confused, unsure, and afraid. But in the scholarly study of decision making, as we encounter it, the confusion and fear seem to have been largely omitted. Rather than explore the experience of this and other events, scholars have tended to focus on theory-driven explanations that attribute outcomes to this or that ‘variable.’

We developed *critical oral history* to bridge the confusion and immediacy of raw experience and the relatively cut-and-dried explanations of the outcomes of that experience after the fact. It does so by combining, in structured conferences, (1) decision makers, who lived the events ‘forward,’ (2) scholars, who understand the events ‘in reverse,’ and (3) declassified documents, which provide added accuracy and authenticity to the conversation. We held our first critical oral history conference on the Cuban missile crisis in 1987. Most of the officials who advised President Kennedy

6 Kierkegaard’s perspective provides the organizational scheme for understanding nuclear danger in James G. Blight, *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1989).

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during the crisis participated, along with eminent scholars of the crisis.⁷ Since then, we have organized five more critical oral history conferences on the missile crisis, broadening our inquiry to include the look and feel of nuclear danger not just in Washington but also in Moscow and Havana. Robert McNamara participated in all of them; many of his colleagues from the Kennedy administration, and their Russian and Cuban counterparts, participated in one or more of the conferences.⁸

Encouraged by the significance of what he (and we) learned in these meetings about the missile crisis, McNamara suggested, in early 1995, that we apply the method of critical oral history to the war in Vietnam. We did, with similarly surprising and productive results, which he summarizes effectively in *The Fog of War*. McNamara participated in three of the five conferences on the war: in Vietnam (1997), Italy (1998), and the United States (1999). Former North Vietnamese officials and Vietnamese scholars participated in all these conferences as well.⁹

As a former decision maker, McNamara is interested in using historical

insight to determine whether, or how, he might have made better decisions. His interest is in comparing *then* with *now*. Historians, aided by declassified documents, generally want, on the contrary, to focus strictly on *then*, stripped of exactly the kind of hindsight – inherent in comments such as ‘if I knew then what I know now’ – that often makes history come alive to former officials. This is another reason we created critical oral history – to bridge this gap in a way that encourages a productive conversation between officials and historians and other academics, who may have read the same documents in their briefing notebooks, but who have different reasons for becoming involved in the inquiry. When critical oral history works well, the former decision makers gain insight into their mistakes and those of former adversaries, allowing them to glean lessons that we can apply to present-day issues. At the same time, historians are often able to learn some of the fascinating *unwritten* history of an event, which was previously unknown to them in spite of their having studied the event’s paper trail for years or even decades.

The central concept in critical oral history is *empathy*. Empathy is not sympathy or agreement, but the capacity to understand reality as someone else understands it – to articulate accurately the story others tell themselves, even though it may be unflattering or even threatening to you. The first lesson in the *The Fog of War* is *empathize with your enemy*. And for good reason. The absence of empathy, as McNamara has discovered via critical oral history, leads straightaway to misperception, miscommunication, and misjudgment – and to actions that, in turn, are likely to be misunderstood by an adversary, thus initiating or deepening a downward spiral into

7 This early phase of the Cuban missile crisis project is recounted in James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

8 The basic source is James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis and the Soviet Collapse*, expanded 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

9 These critical oral history conferences are presented and analyzed in Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, with Thomas J. Biersteker and Col. Herbert Y. Schandler, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999).

crisis and toward conflict. Sometimes, as in the period leading up to the Cuban missile crisis and during the escalation of the war in Vietnam, when one side carries out actions for what it believes are defensive reasons, the other side may feel threatened, believing its adversary has gone on the offensive and made a conscious decision to escalate the confrontation, crisis, or war. When empathy is present, however, as it was during the climactic phase of the Cuban missile crisis – when the United States and Soviet Union locked onto the same wavelength in the nick of time to avert war – even a seemingly imminent and unavoidable disaster can be averted.

When critical oral history works, empathy exists between former enemies – and sometimes even between former colleagues – that was not there during the events under scrutiny. But for the process to yield results, the curiosity of former decision makers must overwhelm their fear of entrapment by the other side. More importantly, it must overcome their fear of being exposed as having made mistakes that render them culpable, to some degree, for disastrous decisions and actions.

Courage is fundamental: the willingness to put yourself and your reputation at risk in order to get nearer to an accurate understanding of what happened, and why. Courage is the *sine qua non* in a critical oral history setting. It is the engine that empowers participants to empathize as fully as possible with former enemies – to explicitly or implicitly assume a viewpoint famously embodied in a comment attributed to the radical English Puritan, Oliver Cromwell. “I beseech you,” said Cromwell, “think it possible you may be mistaken.” Having dealt by now with hundreds of participants in critical oral history settings over nearly twenty years, we feel that on this

key dimension of courage – the willingness to face the possibility that you, as well as your former enemy, might have been mistaken – Robert McNamara has often led the way. He has taken risks: to identify mistakes, empathize with former enemies, and learn something from them. For people who take the process seriously, as McNamara has, critical oral history is a risky and uncertain business. Yet, as is evident in *The Fog of War* and the research on which it is based, there can be substantial rewards for those willing to take the risks.

At the beginning of *The Fog of War*, Robert McNamara says something that is so commonplace it might escape our attention. “The conventional wisdom,” he says, “is don’t make the same mistake twice – *learn from your mistakes*. And we all do.” True enough, but hardly news, we may think. He then adds another brief comment that can be easily missed and that we want to emphasize here. “In my life,” McNamara says, “*I’ve been part of wars*.” Again, while true, it is hardly newsworthy, if we fail to connect the “conventional wisdom” with his experience of having been “part of wars.” But if we make the connection, we may begin to see that he is saying something quite profound.

We have been present on many occasions when McNamara learned how deeply he was mistaken; how dangerous were the consequences of his mistakes, with regard to the Cuban missile crisis; and how his mistakes contributed significantly to the tragedy of the war in Vietnam. Of course, he (and we) learned of the mistakes of others as well – Americans, Russians, Cubans, Vietnamese. We may find it easy to dismiss such findings if we have never had anything like the responsibility that McNamara bore as secretary of defense from 1961 – 1968, if we have not, as McNamara has, been

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“part of wars” in a position of significant responsibility. We may instead be tempted to conclude: ‘The guy made mistakes, and via this critical oral history process, he discovered what they were. Good. Better that he learns late rather than not at all, I guess.’

What is missing in this cavalier attitude is an appreciation for the *emotion* – the powerful feeling of personal responsibility for events that can be very difficult even to articulate. As we have seen and heard time and again, for those who *have* been “part of wars,” the discovery that one was mistaken in crucial situations can be shattering – not just to one’s reputation or historical legacy, but also in a personal and immediate way.

Here is a rule of thumb in the conduct of critical oral history: the more significant the revelation and the greater the subsequent need to revise our understanding of history, the bigger the mistake made at the time. In confronting such revelations, scholars and former decision makers necessarily part company. What to participating scholars is often the most dramatic and exciting tends also to be, to one or more former decision makers sitting at the same table, disturbing, even devastating, as they begin to see how their mistakes became part of the causal chain leading to danger and/or disaster. In an effort to provide a sense of this process, we will summarize some things that McNamara has learned over nearly two decades of participating in the critical oral history projects on the Cuban missile crisis and the war in Vietnam.

Here we ask *you* to practice what *we* preach: we want you to empathize, in this case, with Robert McNamara. Imagine, in each case, that *you are McNamara*, as the revelations are made by former enemies. *You* are the eightysomething

participant in the critical oral history conferences, and the fortysomething decision maker who participated in the events under discussion. You oscillate, in other words, between the ‘two McNamaras.’¹⁰

Destroying Castro’s regime: Cubans and Soviets tell you in Moscow in January 1989, that, fearing an imminent invasion of Cuba following the Bay of Pigs fiasco of April 1961, they agreed to the deal to put nuclear missiles on the island. Yet you know that after the Bay of Pigs disaster, no invasion was intended. So you and your colleagues in Washington, via continuing threats to intervene and via a program of covert operations meant to destabilize modestly (in your view) the situation in Cuba, inadvertently but unmistakably were instrumental in causing the most dangerous crisis in recorded history.

Nuclear danger: You and your colleagues believed that Soviet nuclear warheads never reached Cuba; thus, a U.S. air strike and invasion of the island were unlikely to pose direct danger to the American homeland. Yet you learn in Havana in January 1992, from the Soviet general who directed the missile deployment in Cuba, that the warheads *were* present, ready to be used. So the attack and invasion of Cuba, which you and your colleagues may have come within hours of ordering, would likely have escalated immediately to nuclear war, killing millions of people, including many Americans. If that had happened – and you eventually conclude that it was mainly *luck* that prevented it, as you/McNamara emphasize in *The Fog of War* – you would have borne some of the responsibility for a tragedy so im-

10 This section is based on the documentation and oral testimony in Blight et al., *Cuba on the Brink*.

mense and horrible that it seems ripped from the pages of an apocalyptic science-fiction thriller.

How close was Armageddon?: You firmly believed in October 1962, during the crisis, that no leader of the three involved countries would seek a nuclear war under any circumstances. Yet Fidel Castro tells you, face to face in Havana in January 1992, that he did in fact ask the Soviets to launch an all-out nuclear strike on the United States, if Cuba were to be attacked and occupied by the Americans with the intent of destroying the Cuban Revolution. So now you know that you and your colleagues had so cornered Castro, so stripped him of viable options, that he believed nuclear war was his least worst option in a contingency he felt was increasingly likely. In the event of an American invasion during the crisis, there is no doubt in your mind that the Cuban leader would have done everything in his power to provoke the Soviets into launching a nuclear attack on the United States. Moreover, you also learn that the more than forty-three thousand Russians stationed in Cuba at the time, including their field commander, would have agreed completely with Castro: they would have tried to kill as many Americans as possible, using short-range nuclear-armed weapons, even though their military defeat at the hands of the Americans was virtually assured.

This Cuban missile crisis, which you are learning about twenty-five to thirty years after the event, is far from Kennedy's and your (i.e., McNamara's) 'finest hour,' as it is often portrayed in lore. In fact, you (remember: you are still in character, as McNamara) nearly participated actively, if unwittingly, in the total destruction of your society and, but for 'luck,' would have been partially responsible for the worst disaster in history. Be-

cause you/McNamara agreed to go to Moscow in January 1989 and to Havana in January 1992 to try to empathize with, by listening carefully to, Cuban and Russian officials about the events of October 1962, *this* Cuban missile crisis becomes part of your legacy to history – *this* Cuban missile crisis will help define the way future generations will remember you. Because of mistakes you and your colleagues made, the world was nearly blown up. Significant Russian and Cuban mistakes were also revealed in those conferences, but those revelations do not assuage the personal impact of what we have learned about *your* mistakes.

The June 1997 critical oral history conference in Hanoi was psychologically very difficult for, and even threatening to, the former U.S. officials who participated. It was tenser than even the January 1992 confrontation with Castro and his Russian allies. Two simple statistical facts help to explain why. First: in the missile crisis, so far as is known, one American pilot was killed, flying a U-2 spy plane over eastern Cuba. The danger to the world was without precedent, but, thankfully, the outcome was benign. Second: in the American war in Vietnam, more than two million Vietnamese and more than fifty-eight thousand Americans lost their lives. In agreeing to come to the conference table in Hanoi, the participants knew that any mistakes that might be revealed in the course of those discussions would immediately and irrevocably link those found to be in error even more closely than before to all the death, destruction, and suffering implied in this 'second fact.'¹¹

Here are three of the most significant findings:

¹¹ This section is based on McNamara et al., *Argument Without End*.

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Casualties and punishment: You (you are now back ‘in character,’ as McNamara) firmly believed that some upper bound, some threshold of casualties and sheer punishment, must exist, beyond which the Vietnamese Communist adversaries would seek to negotiate an end to the war and their U.S.-inflicted misery. Yet you are told by credible interlocutors in Hanoi in June 1997 that the Vietnamese Communists, in both North and South Vietnam, had firmly resolved to accept a level of punishment far beyond that which they actually received, including nuclear attacks and a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam. They not only resolved to accept such punishment, but they had made detailed plans (which they revealed at the conference) for surviving and fighting until they won. You must reluctantly conclude that all the bombing you ordered, all the troops you deployed, and all the death and destruction your forces inflicted on the people of Vietnam were pointless. Your strategy, you are told and told convincingly, would *never* have worked. The ‘threshold of pain’ of the Vietnamese Communists, which was much discussed by U.S. officials at the time, existed only in your minds. It had no reality whatsoever to your Vietnamese enemies.

Civil war: You believed that, fundamentally, the Vietnam conflict exemplified the cold war between East and West. Hanoi, therefore (so you had assumed), exerted tight control over its allies, the National Liberation Front (NLF, or ‘Vietcong’) in the South. You also assumed that Moscow and Beijing similarly directed Hanoi’s actions ‘like a puppet on a string.’ Yet you now learn from declassified Vietnamese documents, and from discussions with officials in Hanoi, that North Vietnam had great difficulty controlling the war in the South – that the NLF in fact often fiercely

resisted control from Hanoi. Those doing the fighting and dying in the South wanted to control their own destiny, not take orders from presumed leaders in Hanoi, who, many believed, did not understand the reality of the war being fought in the South. If you had believed this, you conclude, it would have been clear that the United States need not get involved in Vietnam. The outcome at the conclusion of this civil war in the South would have likely been the same – a unified Vietnam under Hanoi’s leadership, but without much impact on whether other so-called dominoes in the region would fall to Communism. The difference, obviously and tragically, is that millions of people would have been spared, including many of those for whom you feel especially responsible: the more than fifty-eight thousand Americans killed in action, and the more than three hundred thousand wounded.

Missed opportunities: You initiated many probes of Hanoi between 1965 and 1967, each of which was a serious attempt, in your mind, to end the killing and move to a negotiated political settlement. All of them failed. Hanoi blamed you and your colleagues for refusing to agree to stop the bombing *first* before talks could begin, whereas the U.S. position was that Hanoi must first cease supplying their allies in the South, whereupon the United States would then halt the bombing of North Vietnam. Now you learn from well-placed sources in Hanoi of detailed plans drawn up in the early 1960s by the North Vietnamese government to respond favorably to an American overture, *if* you and your colleagues would only agree to stop the bombing first. These sources say their government could not, as the militarily weaker nation, risk being thought weak, by appearing to capitulate to the American demand to halt supplies to the South

first. Ultimately, neither side 'went first,' and the war went on, year after year, unnecessarily and tragically, as you now see it.

The Vietnamese Communists had a name for what U.S. officials called the bombing 'campaign' against North Vietnam. They called it the 'war of destruction' because its purpose, as they understood it, was simply and only to destroy North Vietnam, its Communist government, and its people, if necessary. Their basic assumption was that the United States was willing to commit *genocide* against North Vietnam, if that's what it took to 'win.' When you heard statements to this effect in the 1960s, attributing such repugnant, unthinkable genocidal motives and objectives to the U.S. government in which you served, you were inclined to regard them as propaganda. Now, however, you begin to see the logic behind their name for that war. As you begin to empathize with the North Vietnamese government and people, you ask yourself: from their point of view, what other purpose could such bombing have, other than 'destruction'? It begins to seem to you that, among the North Vietnamese, only the naive would have believed the actual truth of the matter, which is that the bombing was meant to force the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table by making it too painful for them to continue to persevere on the battlefield. Back inside the 'time machine' of critical oral history, you remember the responses you gave at the time to accusations that you had undertaken a 'war of destruction.' On the contrary, you said, you were stopping Communists, upholding non-Communists, protecting the 'Free World,' and establishing the conditions for negotiating from a position of strength. But these responses begin to ring hollow to you, once you become convinced by

your Vietnamese interlocutors that you were mistaken in the ways just listed.

[*You are now free to assume your actual identity. You can exchange your 'two McNamaras' for your more unitary self.*]

Do you see now why former decision makers and scholars have different reactions to the process of critical oral history as it unfolds? As scholars, we don't have to factor in the personal cost of obtaining the knowledge. Scholars, who had no significant responsibilities in the events in question, can extend empathy to former enemies free of charge. But for former officials like McNamara, the act of empathizing with former enemies requires that you think it possible that *you* may have been mistaken, and that your enemies may therefore have been justified in thinking and acting as they did. To scholars, all the new information is interesting and some of it genuinely fascinating. To the former decision makers, it may well be interesting, but it can also be potentially incriminating. This is because every former decision maker participating is, in effect, 'two' participants: an elderly former official sitting at the conference table in front of a huge notebook full of declassified documents, on a psychological journey deep into the virtual 'time machine' of critical oral history; *and* a much younger decision maker, with the same name, who wrote and read those documents in real time.

We conclude by discussing, first, the process by which we extract from *history* an accurate understanding of why wars and conflicts have occurred in the past; and second, how we might actually reduce the risk of conflict and war now, *in real time*. Both focus on *the courage to empathize with our enemies* – something that takes more courage than one might think. Former *New York Times* journalist Sydney Schanberg noted in a review of

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The Fog of War that McNamara's decision to appear in the film took "a kind of courage, for he knew that by coming forward at all he was offering himself up for the slaughter."¹² And in a fine essay that deals in part with public reaction to the 'two McNamaras' who appear in the film, Harvard scholar Samantha Power draws this conclusion: "Since Mr. McNamara seems to have generated more scorn than those who never acknowledged error – e.g., Dean Rusk, Henry Kissinger, and three American presidents – it is unlikely that other officials will be willing to follow his example."¹³

Indeed, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, whose fabrications about his career in government are both multitudinous and well documented, but who never admits to having made mistakes, remains a much less controversial figure than McNamara. McNamara, in fact, has the dubious distinction of having alienated those on the left and those on the right of the political spectrum. On the left, the 'two McNamaras' arrived much too late to elicit admiration or even approval; on the right, the 'two McNamaras' phenomenon is an unseemly, retrospective capitulation to the enemy. Yet the way forward – the way to learning valuable lessons from the mistakes of former leaders that led to crisis, war, and tragedy – is McNamara's way, not Kissinger's.

Can we imagine witnessing, in the near future, 'two Rumsfelds,' or 'two Cheneys,' or 'two Powells,' or 'two

Bushes' coming to grips with their own deeply mistaken mind-sets regarding the so-called war on terror following the attacks of September 11, 2001? Or should we expect each to crank out the usual self-justifying memoir after leaving office – claiming not to have made any significant mistakes, thus permitting neither them nor us to learn anything useful from the exercise? If they do produce memoirs in the 'one Kissinger' vein, our understanding of how to prevent war and promote peace will not be advanced one iota. If 'one Rumsfeld,' 'one Cheney,' 'one Powell,' and 'one Bush' made no mistakes, but still the outcome was tragic, well, what more can be done? Given the growth in the number and magnitude of ways the human race has developed to inflict violence on itself, we believe the world will grow steadily more dangerous for there being few, or no, true heirs of the 'two McNamaras.'

As difficult as it is, and likely will be, to learn the lessons of history, mustering the courage to empathize with our enemies *in real time* is even more difficult. Quoting Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Fog of War*, McNamara says that officials in charge of foreign and defense policy need to ask this question each time a decision is called for: "How much evil must we do, in order to do good?" Since 9/11, it seems to us that this question, which has rarely, if ever, been a favorite mantra of foreign policymakers, is asked even less often than it was before. Empathy is in short supply these days in U.S. foreign and defense policy. The same goes for the kind of humility Niebuhr (and McNamara) believe are appropriate: it is nowhere to be found. Rather, we are subjected to endless repetitions of this message: *they* do all the evil deeds; *we* respond as we must to prevail over a thoroughly evil enemy.

12 Sydney H. Schanberg, "Soul on Ice," *The American Prospect* 14 (10) (November 2003): 61–63. Reprinted in Blight and Lang, *Fog of War*, 200–202, 201.

13 Samantha Power, "War and Never Having to Say You're Sorry," *New York Times*, December 14, 2003, Sec. 2, 1, 33. Reprinted in Blight and Lang, *Fog of War*, 208–214, 212.

Neither we, nor anyone else of whom we are aware, has an easy solution to the problem of how to encourage decision makers *now* to rally the courage to empathize with their enemies. Given the shrillness with which many have criticized the ‘two McNamaras’ of *The Fog of War* for endeavoring to do so, it is hardly surprising that, for example, neither members of the Bush administration nor their supporters or opponents in Congress have dared to do so. Lacking the power to enforce the equivalent of a twelve-step program of empathy enhancement among the world’s power brokers (beginning in Washington, where the greatest power is concentrated), we consider instead an evocative excerpt from a poem by W. H. Auden that suggests part of the process that Robert McNamara has gone through to produce the ‘two McNamaras’:

...all he did was to remember
like the old and be honest like children.

He wasn’t clever at all: he merely told
the unhappy Present to recite the
Past ...¹⁴

It is admittedly difficult to envision the emergence of ‘two Rumsfelds,’ ‘two Cheneys,’ ‘two Powells,’ or ‘two Bushes,’ any one of whom suspects that his own actions contributed to the cycle of violence in which we find ourselves. But perhaps we are being too pessimistic. For who in 1967 – 1968 – with the war in Vietnam escalating, and with Robert McNamara almost daily claiming that “we are winning” and predicting a successful conclusion to the war – would have predicted the evolution of the ‘two

14 W. H. Auden, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” in Edward Mendelson, ed., *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1976), 215 – 218, 216.

McNamaras’ through twenty years of research and their dramatic depiction in *The Fog of War*? Who would have believed that McNamara would, in the formulation of Hannah Arendt, be “drawn out of hiding” in his retirement and become, in his way, a trenchant, antiestablishment scholar and an apostle of empathy?¹⁵ Not us.

New York Times film critic Stephen Holden wrote this in October 2003, after the March U.S. invasion of Iraq but before the December release of *The Fog of War* in theaters: “If there is one movie that ought to be studied by military and civilian leaders around the world at this treacherous moment, it is *The Fog of War*, Errol Morris’s portrait of former United States Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara.”¹⁶ We agree that the ‘two McNamaras’ should be studied – by all of us. But it is far more important for military and civilian leaders to *emulate* McNamara’s example. Is this possible? Is the ‘two McNamaras’ phenomenon a fluke, never (or hardly ever) to be repeated? Or are ways available to us as scholars and as citizens by which we can raise the odds that others might be “drawn out of hiding” to identify their mistakes, so that others may learn from them without all of us having to pay such a heavy price?

15 Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, in Peter Baehr, ed., *Portable Hannah Arendt*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 414.

16 Stephen Holden, “Revisiting McNamara and the War He Headed,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2003, B9, B17, B9.

Robert McNamara:
then & now