PROLOGUE

CRITICAL ORAL HISTORY: Robert McNamara's Road to "The Fog of War"

Historians don't really like to deal with counterfactuals—with what might have been. They want to talk about history. "And how the hell do you know, McNamara, what might have been? Who knows?" Well, I know certain things. What I'm doing is thinking through with hindsight, but you don't have hindsight available at the time. I'm very proud of my accomplishments. And I'm very sorry that in the process of accomplishing things, I've made errors.

ROBERT S. McNAMARA, in "The Fog of War"

Errol Morris' *Academy Award®-winning documentary, "The Fog of War" confronts viewers with a singular fact about the 20th century: roughly 160 million human beings were killed by other human beings in violent conflict. It was the bloodiest century in human history. The film challenges us to look closely at that tragic century for clues as to how we might avoid a repetition of it in the 21st century.*

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 the 20th century vicariously as the filmmaker and his subject walk us through the experiences of leaders involved in these seminal events. Extensive archival footage and recently declassified tape recordings of presidential conversations help the viewer to place McNamara, who was eighty-five years old when Morris interviewed him, in the chapters of the history he discusses.

Cut from more than twenty hours of dialogue, the 107-minute film is organized around eleven distinct "lessons" which Morris distills from McNamara's experience. In this book, we focus on the five that apply most directly to U.S. foreign and defense policy.[1] *These lessons underline the importance of: (1) empathy toward one's adversary; (2) the limits of rationality in foreign policy decision-making; (3) the role of misperception and misjudgment leading to war; (4) the painful moral choices necessary in a wartime environment; and (5) the significance of remaining flexible in pursuit of any nation's most important objective—the prevention of war. We deal with these lessons in chapters, 1–5 of this book. Ultimately, the lessons are cautionary tales for future generations.*[2]

America's most eminent film critic, Roger Ebert, called "The Fog of War" a "masterpiece."[3] *Stephen Holden of The New York Times wrote: "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."*[4] *"The Fog of War" has reached an audience*

much larger than that which typically pays to see documentaries in movie theaters. Between its opening in theaters on December 19, 2003, through May 11, 2004, when the DVD of the film became available, more than one million people saw it in hundreds of theaters across North America. The film quickly came to be regarded as both an artistic triumph and a significant contribution to the public discussion of some of the most pressing issues of our time.

The film is a brilliant work of art, but it is not only a work of art. Via the lessons Morris draws from McNamara's experience, the film also offers clues as to how to prevent the kind of disasters, and near disasters, McNamara describes in the film. This is why we would expand Stephen Holden's suggested audience for the film: it should include not just political and military leaders, but also ordinary citizens, of whatever age, who seek a more peaceful world. This quest must begin, we believe, with an understanding of the foreign and defense policy of the United States of America, the world's remaining superpower, and unavoidably the proverbial "600-pound gorilla" in every discussion and action affecting global security. Errol Morris' film, "The Fog of War," contributes significantly to this understanding. We hope you find this book a worthy complement to it.

"Behind the Scenes"

In the 1980's we studied the problem of nuclear danger. Nuclear war was "unthinkable," but it was not impossible. If it was not impossible, how might it happen? One hazardous route was via a crisis between nuclear nations. The world had traveled this route only once—in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Though much research existed on the missile crisis, it seemed to us that another look—a 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 60s, human nature hadn't. And so, our question was "What was it like to be a decision-maker during the crisis, when, literally, 'the fate of the earth' hung on your decisions?" Decision-makers are the target of our research. They are the people who have a special kind of knowledge that comes from participating in an event, when it is your decisions that shape the event, and when you don't know how things will turn out. But this question—about the details of the look and feel of nuclear danger—is not a simple question either ask or to answer.

The Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard pointed out the difficulty long ago. We live life forward, groping in the dark, unaware of its ultimate outcome, yet we are forced to understand events in reverse, working our way retrospectively backward to their supposed causes. This creates a profound disconnect between lived experience and our understanding of that experience.[5] Caught in the moment—in the crisis—decision-makers often feel confused, unsure, and sometimes even afraid. But the scholarly (after the fact) study of their decision-making usually removes the confusion and fear, focusing simply on explanations of outcomes.

We developed *critical oral history* to build a bridge between the confusion of lived experience and the relatively cut-and-dried rendering of that experience. 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 men who advised President Kennedy during that crisis participated, along with eminent scholars of the crisis. Since then, we have organized five more critical oral history conferences on the missile crisis. In these conferences we broadened our inquiry to include the look and feel of nuclear danger not just in Washington, DC, but also in Moscow and Havana. Robert McNamara participated in all of them; several of his colleagues from the

Kennedy Administration, and their Russian and Cuban counterparts participated in one or more of the conferences. McNamara himself suggested applying critical oral history to the Vietnam War. He participated in three of the five critical oral history conferences that we organized.

Critical oral history often yields rich and surprising insights into what it was really like for decision-makers, then and there, thus affording more accurate analyses and applicable lessons for decision-making, here and now.[6] It can also reveal information and perspectives so startling that the participants can scarcely comprehend what they are being told. Such a moment occurred at our January 1992 conference in Havana, Cuba on the Cuban missile crisis.[7] General Anatoly Gribkov revealed that the Soviets had deployed short-range tactical nuclear warheads in Cuba, and that if the expected U.S. attack and invasion had come, the Soviet commander would probably have used them. Cuban President Fidel Castro, who also participated in the conference, added that he had urged the Soviets to do just that. Upon hearing this, several U.S. participants, led by Robert McNamara, literally went pale and temporarily speechless, their eyes wide with disbelief. The Americans knew that the attack may have been just hours away, but they did *not* know that ships carrying the invading forces would likely have been destroyed and any U.S. Marines making it to the beaches of Cuba would likely have been incinerated in nuclear fire. It was a rare moment: decision-makers on all three sides were thrown into a figurative "time machine" and the others present, including ourselves, could watch and palpably feel, as if watching an "instant replay" thirty years later, some of the horror, revulsion and despair the leaders felt at the time, as the clock seemed to tick down toward nuclear holocaust.

The decision-makers who come to the table for a critical oral history conference take risks in doing so. At any time, revelations can indicate that they were mistaken in critical respects, even that their mistakes led to tragedy. To agree to participate, their curiosity about what they might learn must overwhelm their fears about the effects possible revelations might have on their reputations. One such moment occurred in our June 1997 conference in Hanoi, Vietnam.[8] Vietnamese general Dang Vu Hiep revealed that an attack on U.S. forces in the Central Highlands at Pleiku, on February 7, 1965, was *not* ordered by Hanoi, as Americans had always believed.[9] In this short statement, General Dang Vu Hiep (who was present at the attack site in 1965) refuted the American rationale for initiating the bombing of North Vietnam, bombing that was begun in response to the Pleiku raid, and thus inadvertently forced the Americans to shoulder a greater share of the burden for the more than three million people killed in that war. U.S. leaders, including Robert McNamara (who led the U.S. delegation to the Hanoi conference) had been mistaken, and the mistake had tragic consequences.

McNamara's remarks in "The Fog of War" are inspired in large measure by the 2001 book he co-authored with James Blight, *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing and Catastrophe in the 21st Century*.[10] In *Wilson's Ghost*, McNamara and Blight outline the lessons of McNamara's experience in public life and combine them with the lessons learned in the critical oral history projects on the Cuban missile crisis and Vietnam War that we have directed.[11] Errol Morris initially approached McNamara for an interview in connection with a series he had undertaken for a cable TV show. Part of Morris' preparation for the interview was reading *Wilson's Ghost*. But during the first half hour on camera, McNamara told Morris that if the U.S. had lost the Second World War in the Pacific, he had no doubt that he and his superiors would have, and should have, been tried for crimes against humanity due to their role in the firebombing of more than sixty Japanese cities, killing an estimated one million civilians—mainly women, children and elderly men. Morris, startled by McNamara's directness and energy, immediately concluded that this topic warranted a full-length documentary. McNamara agreed, giving Morris nearly twenty-four hours of interviews, over three long sessions.[12] As Morris has often said, "The Fog of War" is in essence a conversation between two Robert

McNamaras—a forty-something decision-maker and an eighty-something scholar—about the meaning of his experience with violent conflict in the 20th century.[13]

Critical Oral History's "FAQ"

Robert McNamara's "preparation" for the interviews with Errol Morris was accomplished primarily via his participation in critical oral history projects on the Cuban missile crisis (between 1987 and 2002), and on the escalation of the Vietnam War (from 1995 to the present). Because of the centrality of this somewhat unusual research method in McNamara's evolution, it may be worthwhile dwelling momentarily on how it works, by focusing on some questions that have come up over the years—questions which may in fact have already occurred to some readers of this book, especially those familiar with the film.

The method of *critical oral history* has by now generated a more or less standard list of what is now called, on website homepages, *"FAQ"*—"frequently asked questions," along with brief answers. Underlying the FAQ of critical oral history it is possible to detect this overriding concern: how can those of us who use this method be *certain* that statements made by decision-makers are actually *true*? Why should we trust them to tell us the truth? To put the matter less charitably (as it has occasionally been put to us by skeptics): aren't we worried about being bamboozled by people who may have a long history of playing fast and loose with the truth? The shortest, truthful answer is: *yes!* We worry about it all the time.

A somewhat longer, more informative answer is that "certainty" is in most cases an unattainable historical objective, whether one uses critical oral history or any other method of inquiry into the past. What we are looking for is not certainty, but credible additions or corrections to the historical record. These may include important factual revelations such as the startling news that tactical nuclear weapons were present in Cuba by October 1962. But often our findings involve something less newsworthy, perhaps, but just as important in the long run—a thickening of the texture of the historical narrative concerning how decisions actually were made—the *look and feel* of the situations to those who actually lived through them in positions of significant responsibility. This has been especially true, in our own work, of decision-making on the "other" side—decisions made by the Russians, Cubans, or Vietnamese, for example—where much less is known than in the West, where the paper trail is often thin to nonexistent, and where even the various roles played by participants in the events in question are often unclear, at least at the outset.

Here, then, are the most frequently asked questions about our hybrid method of critical oral history, and

brief answers to each:

1. MEMORY.

Question: How can we be certain that participants recall events accurately, assuming they desire to do so?

Answer: While we can't be sure, the memories of all participants must be compared with the memories of former colleagues and adversaries, with the documentary record, and with the best guesses of participating scholars who are familiar with the record of the events.

2. AGENDAS.

Question: How can we be certain that participants don't harbor hidden agendas—for instance, to enhance the importance of their roles or to denigrate the roles of others?

Answer: While we can't be certain this won't happen, all participants are screened prior to the conferences, and their responses to our questions are compared to other sources of information on the same issues. As always, arriving at a "final" answer to the most interesting questions is an unrealistic objective. All answers, no matter how well documented, are (or should be) regarded as tentative, and the act of arriving at even tentative conclusions is more a matter of art than science.

3. HINDSIGHT.

Question: How can we be certain that we are able to disentangle retrospective hindsight from foresight during the actual events in question?

Answer: While it is theoretically possible to confuse the two, in practice it rarely happens, primarily because recollections are tightly constrained by both the documentary record and the recollections of the others present. In fact, we have noticed over the years a significant difference between oral testimony given in private interviews—which tends to mimic previous interviews on the subject by each interviewee—and interventions given in a critical oral history setting—which tend to be less defensive, more carefully documented, and more generous to those with whom one may have disagreed or mistrusted during the events under investigation.

4. POLITICS.

Question: How can we be certain we have taken adequate account of the current political context in which the dialogues about history occur?

Answer: The most important fact for Americans to keep in mind is that Americans almost invariably participate as individuals, while others—whether Russians, or Cubans or Vietnamese, in the cases we know best—often do not. Many of them may be "retired," in the sense that they are receiving pensions, no longer hold any official position, etc. But in many societies, participants constitute a "team," with fixed instructions from their government as to what can and cannot be said. A deep and detailed awareness of the particulars of the individual political situation must be obtained during the preparatory phase of a conference. The organizers' mantra must be "everything is political"—the conference agenda, the list of participants, the documentation, even the fact that the conference is occurring at all.

5. DOCUMENTS.

Question: How can we be as certain about the "other" side's statements as we are of those made by Americans, given the usually huge discrepancy in available documentation on the side of the U.S.?

Answer: Usually, we cannot. Yet it is often possible to begin to approximate information contained in the U.S. data base by combining previously published foreign sources, and in-depth interviews with participants who are especially keen to get their country's side of the story on the record in the West. We have found that such individuals exist in greater numbers than one might suppose. One must be resourceful, but the problem is usually not insurmountable.

6. PARTICIPANTS.

Question: How can we be sure that we have invited the "right" people, from among those who are available, to participate?

Answer: We can never claim, after the fact, that a better group of conference participants was not possible to assemble. Nevertheless, we try to put the teams together methodically, filling in gaps in both civilian and military positions (for example), and trying to insure that each person "at the table" is willing to do the extensive preparation necessary for full participation, and is also comfortable with the highly informal format, in which cross-questioning is to be expected. This process is made much more challenging, but also potentially much more important, in the case of meetings between former enemies. Often the non-U.S. team is designated by their government, which means that we need to have developed a working relationship with government officials, at many levels, in order to understand the possibilities and limitations posed by the identity of the participants.

7. ABSENTEES.

Question: How can we be certain that we have not been totally (though inadvertently) misled because many central figures cannot participate, simply because they have died? To put it another way: how would our outlook have been altered if John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev had been available to participate in the critical oral history of the Cuban missile crisis? Or what if Ho Chi Minh and Lyndon Johnson had been available for the Vietnam War conferences?

Answer: Here again, certainty is out of the question. Yet our experience leads us to believe that it is often important to have the chief executive absent, rather than present at the table. In an important sense, the boss will always be the boss, and this can have an inhibiting effect on the former subordinates.[14] In addition, it is usually possible to invite participants from the inner circle of those who are necessarily absent, though one should not expect them to agree in all, or even most, analyses of the decisions and actions of their former bosses.[15]

* * *

There is one remaining question which, while not falling into the "FAQ" category, is nevertheless important. In "The Fog of War," Robert McNamara says that "historians don't really like to deal with counterfactuals—with what might have been. They want to talk about history" as it occurred. McNamara is right. This in fact poses a conundrum for all who use the method of critical oral history. Former decision-makers are usually enthusiastic about trying to replay the past, looking for roads not taken, for data that were misinterpreted, for possible outcomes less disastrous than what occurred. Yet historians and other scholarly specialists on the events under investigation are typically wary of "what-ifs." They believe that once they start down the path of "what might have been," they may slide all the way down a very slippery, epistemological slope into a morass of all (supposedly) possible events—in fact, into an inquiry in which the actual constraints of history as it happened are all but forgotten, in the excitement of constructing alternative narratives.

McNamara himself states the essence of the problem in the movie, when he says, "what I'm doing is

thinking through with hindsight, but you don't have hindsight available at the time." As a former decision-maker, he 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 the kind of hindsight—"if I knew then what I know now"—that often makes history come alive to former officials. This is one reason why critical oral history was created—to bridge this gap in a way that encourages a productive conversation between officials and historians, who may have read the same documents in their briefing notebooks, but who have conflicting objectives in the inquiry. When critical oral history works well, the former decision-makers gain insight into their errors, and those of former adversaries, permitting them to draw lessons and to apply them. But at the same time, historians are often able to learn some of the previously hidden, often surprising, and sometimes fascinating history of events they may have studied for decades.

"I've Made Errors": An Outline of What McNamara Has Learned

A central concept in critical oral history is *empathy*. You will be reading a good deal about it in this book. 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 uncomplimentary (to you), or even threatening. Lesson number one in this book (chapter 1) is identical to the first lesson in the film "The Fog of War": "Empathize with your enemy." And for good reason. The absence of empathy leads straightaway to misperception, miscommunication and misjudgment—to mistakes—and thus to actions which are in turn likely to be misunderstood by an adversary. Sometimes, as in the Cuban missile crisis and the war in Vietnam, events spiral out of control, seeming to confirm each side's worst fears about the other. When one side carries out actions for defensive reasons, the other side may feel threatened, and vice-versa. When empathy is present, as it was during the climactic phase of the Cuban missile crisis—when the U.S. and Soviet Union locked onto the same wavelength just in the nick of time—a seemingly imminent and unavoidable disaster can be averted.

When critical oral history works well, a degree of empathy is present between former enemies—and sometimes even between former colleagues-that was not present at the time of the events under scrutiny. For the process to yield results, the curiosity of the former decision-makers must overwhelm their fear of entrapment by the other side. But we have found that the method works most successfully when the curiosity of former decision-makers also swamps their fear of being exposed—as having been wrong in ways that contributed to outcomes they wish they could have avoided.

In other words, *courage* is fundamental: putting yourself and your reputation at risk, to an extent, in order to get nearer to an accurate understanding of what happened, and why. Courage, in a critical oral history setting, moreover, most often takes the form of trying to empathize as fully as possible with former enemies. In so doing, participants explicitly or implicitly assume a viewpoint famously described by the radical English Puritan, Oliver Cromwell. "I beseech you," said Cromwell, "think it possible you may be mistaken." [16] Having dealt by now with hundreds of such individuals in a variety of settings over nearly two decades, it is clear that on this key dimension of courage—thinking it possible that he might be mistaken—Robert McNamara has led the way. He has taken risks, to identify mistakes, empathize with former enemies, and try to 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 altogether. "The conventional wisdom," he says, "is don't make the same mistake twice—learn from your mistakes. And we all do. Maybe we make the same mistake three times, but hopefully not four or five." True enough, but hardly news, we may think. He goes on to point out that in the event of a nuclear war, "you make one mistake and you're going to destroy nations," a statement that is connected with his long-time advocacy of abolishing nuclear weapons. That is the one mistake, as McNamara points out, that you *really* don't want to make, not even once.

It is at this point that he adds the brief comment that is easily missed, and that we want to emphasize here. "In my life," McNamara says, "I've been part of wars." Also true, of course, and (we may feel) equally unnewsworthy, *if* we fail to connect the "conventional wisdom" with his experience as having been "part of wars." But if we make the connection, we may begin to see that he is saying something quite profound. If we try to step into McNamara's shoes, we might paraphrase it somewhat as follows: I, Robert McNamara, have made some terrible mistakes in my life—mistakes that contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of my fellow human beings—mistakes that, in addition, nearly led to exactly the kind of irremediable catastrophe alluded to in the comment about the likely outcome of a nuclear war. McNamara reiterates this near the end of the film when he says, "I'm very sorry that in the process of accomplishing things, I've made errors." We should note that it is highly unusual for former officials, especially top-level officials, to admit having made significant mistakes.

Some have discounted such statements by McNamara as constituting merely an awkward public relations gimmick meant to improve his public image, perhaps even his standing among historians. We know better, however. We have been the organizers of the critical oral history projects, in the course of which McNamara, in our view, has *earned* the right (as have others—he is far from alone in this) to be taken seriously when he makes such statements. We have been present on many occasions when he has learned how profoundly he was mistaken, and how tragic were the consequences of his mistakes, with regard to both the Cuban missile crisis and the war in Vietnam. Of course, he (and we) have 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 had to bear as a lieutenant colonel in the Second World War, let alone as secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968—if we have not, as McNamara has, "been part of wars." We may instead be tempted to conclude, in effect: "Well, okay, sure: so the guy made some 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." Or something of the sort.

What's missing in such a dismissive attitude is an appreciation for the *emotion*—the feeling of overwhelming responsibility for tragedies, real and potential, the magnitude of which is almost impossible to articulate. As we have seen and heard time and again, for those who *have* been "part of wars," the discovery that one has been mistaken in crucial situations can be shattering-not just to one's reputation or presumed historical legacy, but also deeply upsetting in a very personal way.

To get a sense of why this might be the case, we list a few things that McNamara has learned over nearly two decades of his participation in the critical oral history projects—on the Cuban missile crisis and the war in Vietnam. All will be dealt with in detail later in this book. Here, however, rather than becoming immersed in the details, we hope readers will try to empathize with a person such as McNamara—try to "become" McNamara, nonjudgmentally, for a moment—as we tick off some of his mistakes in the missile crisis and Vietnam. For now, don't worry about the details or documentation, or even whether McNamara is "correct" to believe he was mistaken in the ways we describe. That comes later in the book. For now, we ask that you

try to put yourself in his place, sitting at a conference table in (say) Havana or Moscow or Hanoi, as you are bombarded with written documentation and oral testimony concerning what you got—in the phrase McNamara himself has now made famous—"wrong, terribly wrong."[17]

Here is a representative list of his mistakes, and their actual or potential consequences. Imagine that "*you* ," in each case, are (vicariously) Robert McNamara.

"It wasn't until January, 1992, . . . that I learned . . . nuclear warheads . . . were on the island at the time of this . . . crisis."

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

- *Destroying Castro's Regime*. The 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 had agreed to the deal to put nuclear missiles on the island. Yet you know no invasion was intended. So you, and your colleagues in Washington, via continuing threats to intervene and remove the Castro regime, inadvertently helped to cause the most dangerous crisis in recorded history.
- *Nuclear Danger*. You and your colleagues believed that Soviet nuclear warheads never reached Cuba; thus an airstrike and invasion of the island was unlikely to pose any danger to the American homeland. Yet you learn in Havana in January 1992 that the warheads were present, ready to be used. So the attack and invasion of Cuba, which you and your colleagues came within hours of ordering, would likely have escalated, killing millions of people, including many Americans. If that had happened—and it was mainly luck that prevented it, as McNamara emphasizes in the film—you would have borne some of the responsibility.
- *How Close Was Armageddon*? You firmly believed in October 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, that no leader of any 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 U.S., if Cuba was attacked 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, one that might well have been implemented had the crisis erupted into war. Note that *this* Cuban missile crisis is far from Kennedy's (and your) "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," you would have done just that, and been in part responsible for the worst disaster in history.

THE VIETNAM WAR

- *Casualties and Punishment*. You (you are still McNamara, don't forget) firmly believed—why would anyone not?—that some upper bound, some threshold of casualties and sheer punishment must exist, beyond which the Vietnamese communist adversaries would seek to end the war, thus ending their U.S.-inflicted misery. Yet you are told by credible interlocutors in Hanoi in June 1997 that the Vietnamese adversaries, in both North and South Vietnam, had resolved to accept a level of punishment far beyond what they actually received, including nuclear attacks and a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam. So you must conclude that all the bombing you ordered, all the troops you deployed, all the death and destruction inflicted, was pointless. Your strategy would *never* have worked.

"And no amount of bombing, no amount of U.S. pressure would ever have stopped us."

- *Civil War*. You believed that the fundamental fact of the Vietnam conflict was that it exemplified the Cold War between East and West, and that Hanoi therefore exerted tight control over its allies, the National Liberation Front (the NLF, or "Vietcong") in the South; and that Moscow and Beijing directed Hanoi's actions in a similar fashion. Yet you learn from declassified Vietnamese documents, and from discussions in Hanoi, that Hanoi exerted no such control, that the NLF in fact resisted being controlled, and that if you had only known this, it might have been clear that the U.S. need not get involved at all in Vietnam. The outcome would have likely been the same—a unified Vietnam under Hanoi's leadership. The difference? Millions of people would been spared, including nearly 60,000 Americans killed in action.
- *Missed Opportunities*. You recall that you initiated many probes of Hanoi between 1965 and 1967, each of which was a serious attempt, in your mind, to find a way to end the killing and move to a negotiated settlement. All of them failed. Hanoi blamed it on you and your colleagues, for refusing to agree to stop the bombing *first*, before talks could begin. But you learn from well-placed sources in Hanoi of detailed plans by the North Vietnamese government to respond favorably to an American overture, *if* you and your colleagues would only stop the bombing first. These sources say their government could not, as the weaker nation, risk being thought weak, ready to cave into U.S. pressure. So the war went on, year after year, unnecessarily. The Vietnamese communists had a name for the bombing campaign against North Vietnam: "the war of destruction," so-called because its purpose, as they understood it, was simply and only to destroy North

> Vietnam, its communist government, and most or all of its people, if necessary. In effect, the basic assumption was that the U.S. was willing to commit *genocide* against North Vietnam, if that's what it took to "win," a motive so repugnant, so unthinkable, that you might be inclined to regard statements to that effect as simple propaganda. Now, however, you can begin to see the logic behind their name for that war. What other purpose could the U.S. have, other than "destruction?" You remember the answers you gave at the time—stopping communists; preserving noncommunists; protecting the "Free World," etc. But these motives begin to ring very hollow, once you become convinced that you were mistaken in the ways just listed.

[You are free now to assume your actual identity.] Do you see now why former decision-makers and scholars may have very different reactions to the process of critical oral history, as it unfolds? As scholars, we are pleased to have the information, and the documentation and oral testimony supporting it, in the above listing of the errors of Robert McNamara. But if you were McNamara wouldn't you have to factor in the cost of obtaining such knowledge? In other words, extending empathy to others can be done cheaply by scholars, who had no significant responsibilities in the events in question. But for people like McNamara, empathizing with your former enemy means that you "think it possible you may be mistaken," and that your enemies may have been justified to think and act as they did, in many cases. Which means, of course, that you—Robert McNamara, say—are in some significant measure responsible for events that, at the time, you were inclined to attribute more or less completely to *them*. What's more, this insight has been obtained in a setting which, in one form or another, will yield public knowledge of what transpired. To engage in empathy of this sort, and to do so over and over again, is what we call courage. And, in critical oral history, empathy is the pivot upon which everything turns.

"The Fog of War's" Tale of Two Warriors

On Wednesday, March 19, 2003, James Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, hosted a dinner for Robert S. McNamara, who had served as the Bank's president from 1968 to 1981. Testimonials were given by many people who had worked with McNamara at the World Bank—brief speeches emphasizing his determination to move the Bank's focus from building public and private infrastructure in the developing world, toward a concern for the (often) abysmal state of its public health, and its improvement. Although we had worked with Bob McNamara for nearly twenty years—on scholarly projects on the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam War—we knew relatively little about his tenure at the World Bank, which in fact lasted nearly twice as long as his service in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations as secretary of defense (1961 to 1968). As is typical of such occasions, the praise for the guest of honor was lavish and abundant; jokes told at his expense evoked laughter, whether or not they were funny; and a congenial evening was had by all present, including ourselves.

To us, however, the most memorable comment about McNamara that evening was not given by a present or former World Bank employee. It was instead a simple, short declarative sentence spoken by Theodore C. Sorensen, President John F. Kennedy's Special Counsel, who had served with McNamara in the Kennedy administration. Sorensen asked rhetorically: how and why does Bob McNamara, a man eighty-six years old, still travel the world, working harder than most people half his age or even younger, on the problems that most concern him? What drives him to continue to seek to reduce the danger of both conventional and nuclear war, as well as continuing to tackle other aspects of U.S. foreign and defense policy?

Sorensen's explanation for McNamara's commitment and energy was this: "Bob McNamara," he said, "is a *warrior!*" Like many who have worked with McNamara, we had posed versions of Sorensen's rhetorical questions to ourselves on countless occasions, but without ever arriving at a satisfactory answer. One of our

favorite ways of shrugging off the question had been simply to assert the obvious: “Bob McNamara is a mutant—he is just different from everyone else!” While demonstrably true, this merely restated the obvious. After Sorensen’s remark, however, we looked at one another, smiling from Sorensen’s insight. A “warrior.” Of course. McNamara is as fierce and determined and controversial now, as a “warrior” for peace, as he was in the 1960s, when he was President Lyndon Johnson’s principal executive officer for the escalation of the U.S. war in Vietnam—a war, McNamara wrote in 1995 to a storm of critical controversy, that he now believes was “wrong, terribly wrong.”[18]

In “The Fog of War,” both warriors-McNamara the war-making lieutenant colonel in World War II and defense secretary in Vietnam, and McNamara the peace-seeking “retiree”—appear in the film, via archival footage from decades ago, juxtaposed with the interviews McNamara gave to Morris in 2001 and 2002. The journey McNamara has made as a warrior (from one who wages war, to one who seeks peace) places his own fallibility, even his culpability, at the center of his quest. He has admitted fundamental mistakes, drawn lessons, and attempted to apply them to the dangerous world of the 21st century. His “reward” has been attacks from the political left, the right and the center, especially (but not only) on issues related to the Vietnam War, which remains a deep wound in the American psyche that (some critics of McNamara claim) he has reopened via his very public, very personal, recent writing on Vietnam and its lessons.[19]

Above all, this journey, which we have witnessed at close range since we began working with him in 1984, has been a journey of self-discovery for Robert McNamara. In “The Fog of War,” his journey is presented to the viewer in a phenomenally compact 107 minutes of words and images that powerfully convey in outline the path traveled by McNamara. The film moves at the rate of a little more than one minute of film for every year of his long, eventful life, beginning with his witnessing the end of the First World War, at age two and a half, down to the present. (He was eighty-five when Morris interviewed him.)

This is not the place for psychological speculation about what this journey of “self-discovery” means personally to McNamara. But perhaps something of what he has been through can be gleaned from the recent commentary by British scholar Philip Dunn on the ancient Chinese treatise on strategy, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, regarded by many as the most insightful book ever written on the subject. According to Dunn’s reading of Sun Tzu, avoiding war altogether must be the primary objective. It is in this sense that Sorensen’s remark about McNamara being a “warrior” for peace is especially apt. According to Dunn:

> The peaceful warrior learns first about himself. Before all else, self-knowledge must be found, for this brings an appreciation of sensitivity and vulnerability. When you know yourself, you are automatically sensitive and vulnerable—there is no other way. When you do not know yourself, you are insensitive and living in the false belief of invulnerability—an entirely unnatural state that sooner or later brings conflict, disease and pain. . . .
>
> It is impossible to know anything real unless you have known yourself. And the only way to know yourself is to live a life of vulnerability and openness to possibilities. Don’t live in a closed cell. Don’t hide yourself behind your mind. Come out.[20]

Has any former high-ranking official ever “come out” to the extent that McNamara has? Has any former official ever made himself more vulnerable to criticism? We doubt it. He has instead become a “peaceful warrior” in Sun Tzu’s sense of the term.

We hardly need add that McNamara’s path of self-discovery bears little resemblance to any of the well-known monastic routes to self-knowledge, involving long periods of solitary contemplation and other forms of isolation from the world of war and politics. Rather, McNamara’s trajectory involves a comprehensive effort on his part to engage as fully as possible with the historical reality as it was—as he formerly helped to shape it; and with the dynamic reality that is emerging daily in the dangerous and

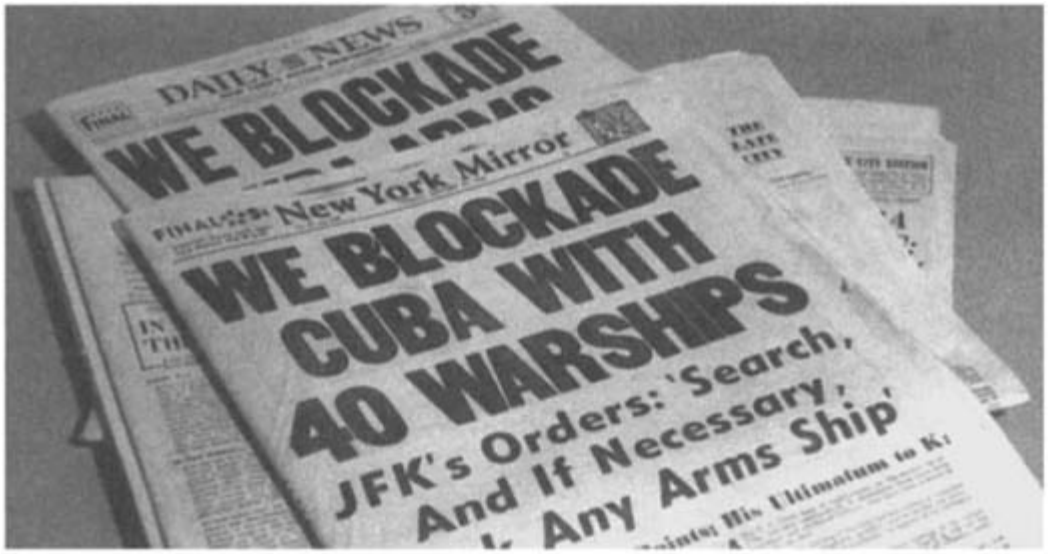
uncertain world of the 21st century. He has accomplished this via his participation in the various *critical oral history* projects alluded to in this "Prologue," and discussed in more detail throughout this book.

In essence, "The Fog of War" represents the culmination of McNamara's effort to understand the great events in which he was involved, to identify mistakes—especially his own mistakes—to draw lessons from the mistakes, and to apply the lessons so as to lower the odds of their occurring again. The film, we believe, especially when combined with this book, permits viewers/readers a considerable degree of vicarious participation in McNamara's extraordinary journey. You are thus encouraged to reach your own conclusions regarding the three seminal 20th-century events dealt with in the film and in this book: the bombing of Japan in the Second World War, the Cuban missile crisis, and the U.S. war in Vietnam.

* * *

At the conclusion of the March 19, 2003, World Bank testimonial, Bank President James Wolfensohn returned unexpectedly to the podium, after Bob McNamara had thanked the speakers for the generosity of their comments. To a suddenly hushed audience, Wolfensohn announced that the U.S. invasion of Iraq had begun earlier in the evening, during dinner—and that he had not mentioned it earlier in order to avoid the interruption of the happy occasion with such news. Seldom has a celebratory dinner ended on so somber a note. Yet the invasion of Iraq, initiating a war and occupation so reminiscent in the minds of many to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam a generation earlier, only reinforced in our own minds the need to find ways to create more "peaceful warriors," vicariously, via an examination of McNamara's journey.[21] "The Fog of War"—the film and this book—represents efforts toward that end.

The need for such a project seems to us only to have increased since March 19, 2003. As we write this "Prologue," on December 28, 2004, at least 1,324 American soldiers, and perhaps as many as 100,000 Iraqis (mainly women and children), have died as a result of the war.[22] Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, the preeminent British medical journal that published the study of Iraqi casualties, concludes his introductory editorial this way: "The evidence that we publish today must change heads as well as pierce hearts."[23] This has long been the objective of McNamara, the peaceful warrior. It was Errol Morris' overriding objective in making "The Fog of War." It is ours as well, in writing this book.



"In the Cuban Missile Crisis, at the end, I think we did put ourselves in the skin of the Soviets. In the case of Vietnam, we didn't know them well enough to empathize."