

# The Fog of War

By Betsy McLane

*"War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty."* Military

Philosopher Carl Von Clausewitz (1780-1831) quoted by Robert McNamara in

## The Fog of War

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**The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara**, released theatrically in December, 2003, was Errol Morris' seventh documentary feature. The story, about the work of (now late) Robert S. McNamara, former Secretary of Defense during the Administrations of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, takes the form of a dialogue between 85 year old McNamara, seen seated in a chair, and Morris, who is heard asking questions off screen, but is never seen on camera. Their conversation is illustrated, interrupted and expanded upon with Morris' trademark recreations, a score by renowned composer Philip Glass (in a third collaboration with Morris), and extensive use of graphs, archival photographs, film footage, and most importantly audio tapes. The film is visually striking, presenting McNamara almost exclusively in stark, bare surroundings. Morris uses obvious jump cuts as a stylistic device to unify the interview. **The Fog of War** underlines the fact that Morris' is one of the world's foremost contemporary documentary makers.

Appearing approximately two years after the 9/11 attacks, as the US was becoming mired in the increasingly unpopular Second Iraq War, **The Fog of War** felt timely, almost prescient. Its subject and filmmaking artistry commanded attention. Questions

about Weapons of Mass Destruction lies by the George W. Bush administration were compared to the disinformation of the War in Vietnam. For many, Academy Award recognition of Morris was long overdue. His work had been critically praised and highly regarded by filmmakers since his first film, **Gates of Heaven** (1978). Roger Ebert wrote of it, "I believe it is one of the greatest films ever made." Omission from Oscar nomination of Morris' widely acclaimed **The Thin Blue Line** (1988) contributed to the hue and cry that eventually led to changes in documentary nominating procedures. In 1989 the film world claimed shock when the *Los Angeles Times* reported, "at the committee screening, enough members raised their hands to have the film (**The Thin Blue Line**) stopped before it was completed." Much has changed at the Academy since then.

Errol Morris however, continues to make notably individualistic films with seeming disregard to praise or prizes. Very few filmmakers are as good at eliciting and presenting on camera interviews that appear to be straightforward and truthful. And very few filmmakers are as scrupulous as Morris in keeping a personal life private. One comes away from his films learning nothing overt about their maker, although everything about the subject seems to be revealed. Morris' background includes time as a philosophy graduate student in San Francisco, and after completing **Gates of Heaven** and **Vernon Florida** (1981), a stint as a private detective. This job may have sharpened his talent for investigating the unknown truths in a situation that seems on the surface to be obvious. He admits to being an obsessive researcher, and there is always at least one story within the story of an Errol Morris film.

Morris' earlier films present eccentric people who are willing to talk candidly with him about their rather marginalized interests. From these seemingly trivial subjects

emerge larger, often profound questions about such topics as the nature of life, death, morality, good, justice and evil. Each of his films involves at least one mystery. In **The Fog of War** the mysteries are many and far more complex and significant than in any other of his films. Even the life or death issues of miscarried justice in **The Thin Blue Line** (the only film ever to have freed a wrongly imprisoned man) are eclipsed by the enormity and weight of the universal moral questions posed in **The Fog of War**.

In this film Morris engages one of the smartest, most powerful Presidential cabinet members of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in an examination of war as prosecuted by American leaders during WWII in the Pacific, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the War in Vietnam. In part, it is loosely drawn from McNamara's own 1995 book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, but the film's voice is not McNamara's, even though he is the only person interviewed. The film is most definitely an artwork by Errol Morris, quite likely the finest he has produced. With extensive archival footage, Morris' trademark shadowy recreations (dramatically lit punch cards flip) and declassified White House tape recordings (reel to reel tape recorders turn), **The Fog of War** transforms a two-person discussion of history and war into a deeply disquieting yet beautiful film essay. Morris points out in interviews that the "eleven lessons" (#1 Empathize With Your Enemy, #2 Rationality Will Not Save Us, etc.) are his invention, not McNamara's. McNamara insisted that Morris make this distinction known whenever possible. The film is crafted from at least 20 hours of interview material. Morris was able to get this extensive length of time with McNamara only after he edited together a piece from an initial 5 hours of interview for McNamara's approval. And although McNamara very much disliked the epilogue, Morris insisted that it remain.

To many of Morris' generation Robert McNamara was the hated architect of the

War in Vietnam, and Morris admits to sharing that feeling at the outset of the interviews. The film reveals, mainly through irrefutable evidence like a 1963 White House audio recording, that McNamara was urging President Kennedy, "We need a way to get out of Vietnam. Set a date for removing all of our advisors and get out by 1965. After the '64 elections, get out." When Johnson becomes President, he is able to assert his own will, also clearly revealed in the tapes, to carry on the war. At that point, McNamara, a deep believer in the obligations of his job as Secretary of Defense, becomes ever more entangled in lies, losses of life, and eventually his own resignation, or was it dismissal, from the Secretary's post.

**The Fog of War** also deals with other aspects of McNamara. His leadership of the Ford Motor Company and the introduction of seat belts under his direction is almost touching. His own rise from very ordinary beginnings to world power is a classic American success story. There is a revelatory story about General Curtis LeMay, under whom McNamara served directly as an aide during WWII. LeMay believed that U.S. firebombing of Japan would be considered war a crime if the US lost, but that to win the war killing hundreds of thousands of civilians was an acceptable cost. At the beginning of **The Fog of War**, McNamara recalls his very first memory, age 2, when the country celebrated the end of WWI, "The War to End All Wars." Morris underlines the obvious irony of this fact with archival footage of children cheering at 1918 Armistice Day parades. War never ceases. The best we can do is to find a way to live with it in our within our own conscience. As McNamara says:

*"One of the lessons of Vietnam was that we as a people, as a nation, must learn to empathize with others in the world—particularly our opponents," he said. "Sympathy is not a synonym of empathy: Empathy means understanding; sympathy means agreeing or embracing. I don't*

*think we as a nation have learned to empathize.”*

In addition to the Oscar, **The Fog of War** was also named Best Documentary by the National Board of Review, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the Chicago Film Critics, and the Washington D.C. Area Film Critics. The film was an official selection of the Cannes Film Festival, Toronto Film Festival, Telluride Film Festival, and the Centerpiece Premiere Film of the New York Film Festival.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*