The Fog of War – Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara

By Nick Grothaus

The Fog of War is a film about the life and times of Robert S. McNamara, the former Secretary of Defense under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The piece is a mix between historical footage and an interview with Robert McNamara by the director, Errol Morris. While allowing McNamara to tell the story from his perspective, Morris also divides the film into eleven lessons that can be taken away from McNamara’s life. What results is an inside look at one of the most important and controversial figures of 20th century American government. The film is also a candid look at the human side of the decision makers that run the United States and how their personalities can affect policy.

McNamara opens with the statement that while all military commanders make mistakes and try to learn from them, there will be no learning period with nuclear weapons. A single mistake will lead to a major catastrophe.

Lesson #1: Empathize with your enemy.

McNamara recounts the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis to illustrate how close we came to nuclear war. He says that although he and Kennedy wanted to keep the nation out of war, other elements within the White House wanted to invade Cuba.

Kennedy received two messages from Krushev during the crisis; McNamara calls one the “hard message” and the other the “soft message”. The soft message, ensuring that the U.S.S.R. will remove the missiles from Cuba if the U.S. promises not to invade, is received first. However, before Kennedy can respond the hard message is received declaring that the U.S.S.R. will respond with massive amounts of force if the U.S. does invades Cuba.

During deliberations over how to respond, the ambassador to Moscow, Tommy Thompson, recommends that Kennedy should respond to the soft message. Though Kennedy scoffs at the idea, Thompson eventually persuades the president by anticipating that Krushev would be more concerned with being able to tell the Soviet people that he saved communist Cuba from an U.S. invasion. McNamara believes this to be empathizing with your enemy.

We need to try and look more at the world through the eyes of our enemies in order to understand their opinions and thought processes.

Lesson #2: Rationality alone will not save us.

It was luck that saved us during the Cuban Missile Crisis; rational individuals nearly came to nuclear war. McNamara claims that potential for nuclear war still exists today. The message of the Cuban Missile Crisis was that the combination of nuclear weapons and human error will result in a major catastrophe.
Lesson #3: There’s something beyond one’s self.

McNamara recounts important events in his life that contributed to his policy decisions later on as Defense Secretary.

Excelling in academics and with an intense focus in philosophy, McNamara graduated from Berkley and continued to the Harvard Graduate School of Business.

He then went back to San Francisco where he began to court his wife, married her, and started a family.

As the U.S. entered WWII McNamara was an assistant professor at Harvard. Harvard received a contract with the government to start up an officer candidate school for what was then called Statistical Control in the U.S. Air Force. McNamara became an officer with the 8th Air Force where he worked on statistical analysis.

Lesson #4: Maximize efficiency.

McNamara was brought back from the 8th Air Force and assigned to the 58th Bomb Wing flying planes to the Pacific theater. It was here that he helped maximize efficiency.

McNamara worked on, and was largely responsible for, the decision to begin firebombing Japanese cities. This led to massive destruction in Japan and greatly increased the efficiency of U.S. bomber runs.

Lesson #5: Proportionality should be a guideline in war.

McNamara posses the question of whether or not it was necessary to drop two atomic bombs on Japan when they were destroying so much already with firebombing.

McNamara goes through how much of Japanese cities were being destroyed. Some of the more notable figures are: Tokyo, roughly the size of New York at that time, 51% destroyed; Toyama, the size of Chattanooga, 99% destroyed; Nagoya, the size of Los Angeles, 40% destroyed; Osaka, the size of Chicago, 35% destroyed, all of which was done before dropping the nuclear bombs.

McNamara believes that if the U.S. had lost the war they would have all been tried as war criminals. He believes that they were indeed acting as war criminals.

After the war McNamara and friends began working for Ford Motor Company in 1945 as the company was in need of leadership from people with higher educational degrees.

Lesson #6: Get the Data.

While working in an executive position at Ford, McNamara commissioned several studies aimed at getting information on everything from buyer demographics for certain vehicles to accident
reports to make cars safer. He used this information to design cars that were great successes. In July 1960 Henry Ford gave McNamara the job as president of Ford. He was the first person that was not a member of the Ford family to hold the position. Four months later he had quit the position after being offered the job of Secretary of Defense.

John F. Kennedy originally offered McNamara the position of Secretary of Treasury, which McNamara turned down. He subsequently accepted Kennedy’s offer for the position as Secretary of Defense.

The film jumps to 1963 and McNamara can be heard on tapes talking to JFK about taking out all U.S. advisors in Vietnam within two years. He then discusses the coup in South Vietnam that saw its president murdered, making it harder for the U.S. to pull out. He says he never saw JFK more upset, particularly because the U.S. was partially responsible for the coup.

The film cuts to tapes of Lyndon. B. Johnson talking to McNamara about how he always thought JFK’s considerations for pulling out of South Vietnam were foolish, believing it to be detrimental psychologically. As the tape continues, McNamara and LBJ disagree on the severity of the situation in South Vietnam. McNamara believes that if escalation is needed to improve the deteriorating condition, the American people needed to be educated on the dire circumstances of that country.

Lesson #7: Belief and seeing are both often wrong.

Through more tapes, generals are heard discussing the Gulf of Tonkin incident and whether or not it actually happened. The ending message is that an attack probably did happen. However, it is shown later that a second attack did not occur.

LBJ and McNamara discuss the possible necessity of escalating troop deployments after the confusion of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. While McNamara believes in very distinct limitations on troop commitments, the Joint Chiefs do not.

While McNamara believes that they were wrong in their decision, the determined mindset of the Joint Chiefs led to heavy repercussions.

Though the United States had put themselves in the “skin of the Soviets” during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the government failed to do so with Vietnam due to a lack of understanding of the Vietnamese’s position. The conflict in Vietnam was a civil war in the eyes of the people, not a Cold War battle that the U.S. thought it was.

Lesson #8: Be prepared to reexamine your reasoning.

McNamara states that even though we are the most powerful nation in the world today, we should not use that power unilaterally. If we cannot convince our allies and friends of the correctness of our actions then we should reexamine our reasoning.
Lesson #9: In order to do good, you may have to engage in evil.

Even though we have to engage in evil at times, we must do our best to minimize it. McNamara then discusses his sympathy with the anti-war protestors during his time as Secretary of Defense.

Lesson #10: Never say never.

McNamara holds the belief that responsibility for the Vietnam War is with the president. Though he says he loved Johnson, in the end they were “worlds apart.” He continues on to assume that if JFK had lived, the situation would not have been as bad as it was.

These tensions between LBJ and McNamara reached a boiling point resulting in McNamara stepping down from his role as Secretary of Defense. But before his resignation, LBJ awarded him with the Medal of Freedom.

Robert McNamara states that he is sorry for his errors.

Lesson #11: You can’t change human nature.

McNamara explains that ‘the fog of war’ refers to how complex war is and the inability of the human mind to fully comprehend all of those complexities at one time. He believes that human nature will make it impossible to end war any time soon, and though we are rational creatures that rationality has limits.

McNamara still refuses to explain why he did not speak out against the war after he resigned. He believes his words would appear inflammatory especially to those who misunderstand the war and misunderstand him. After prompting from the director, McNamara concedes that he is damned if he does and damned if he dose not, but he would rather be damned if he does not.

After leaving the U.S. government Robert McNamara served as president of the World Bank from 1968 to 1981.

**Bottom Line**

*The Fog of War* gives us a poignant look into the life and thought processes of perhaps the most famous U.S. Secretary of Defense thus far. This film is a wonderful view for historians and political scientists alike and, in its own way, a good companion to McNamara’s 1995 book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. By giving us a rare glimpse into the mind of a major policymaker, the piece allows us to better understand how individuals and their personalities so greatly affect the different paths that U.S. foreign policy takes.
Student Response to viewing of documentary “Fog of War” by Errol Morris:

1. Recall the most striking elements of the film. Why does this moment(s) stand out above all the other scenes?

2. Which one of McNamara’s questions or challenges is of most interest or concern to you? Why?

3. Which of the eleven lessons were most interesting and important to you? With which lessons do you disagree? Which do you think will have the most impact on the 21st century? Why?

4. What did you learn about the time periods discussed in the film? What did you learn about Robert McNamara? What impression do you have of him now that you have seen the film? What impression do you have of war and particularly the Vietnam War now that you have seen the film?

5. What do you think Tim O’Brien would say about one of these “lessons”? Speculate on a particular insight that McNamara shares and then recreate which lesson would stand out in O’Brien’s mind and what he would say about that “lesson.”