



The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara Discussion Guide

Director: Errol Morris

Year: 2003

Time: 95 min

You might know this director from:

The Unknown Known (2013)

Tabloid (2010)

Standard Operating Procedure (2008)

Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr. (1999)

Fast, Cheap & Out of Control (1997)

A Brief History of Time (1991)

The Thin Blue Line (1988)

Gates of Heaven (1978)

FILM SUMMARY

Decades after the fact, the Vietnam War occupies a dark space in the collective conscience. The legacy of former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara is intrinsically tied to the events of this war, and in many minds his decisions during this time define him as a war criminal. Having protested against the war, director Morris detested McNamara. So, with questions to be answered, he set out to make THE FOG OF WAR.

Faced with Morris's unique interviewing technique, the ingenious "Interroton device"—wherein the interviewee stares directly into the lens, creating the sensation of a "first person" conversation—McNamara expounds on the situations he encountered and the tough decisions he made. But rather than encountering a hardened war criminal, a belligerent know-it-all out to set the record straight, Morris met with a reflective, intellectual, teary-eyed old man.

With fresh statements from McNamara, who has given thousands of interviews over the course of his career, THE FOG OF WAR brings raw feeling and new truth to the screen. Superbly cut alongside archival war footage and confidential audio recordings between Presidents Kennedy and Johnson speaking with McNamara at crucial turning points in history, composer Phillip Glass contributes his own brilliant form of "existential dread" for the soundtrack. The resulting work of art is a moving biopic of one man's life and a substantial block of world history.

Bookmarked with 11 lessons Morris garnered from 23 hours of interviews with McNamara, THE FOG OF WAR expounds upon the shortcomings of humanity and the havoc wreaked through unhinged war. As McNamara declares, "I am very sorry that in the process of accomplishing things, I made errors," he strikes a dissonant chord of universal infallibility and leaves us all with much to contemplate.

FILM THEMES

With the benefit of hindsight and the trajectory of 85 years him, Robert S. McNamara reflects on both the good and bad, that director Errol Morris parcels out in the format of 11 life lessons.

1. EMPATHIZE WITH YOUR ENEMY

A major conflict, the Cuban Missile Crisis, was diverted through an understanding of the enemy's intentions, while the Vietnam War is sad proof that blind miscomprehension leads to irreparable destruction.

2. RATIONALITY WILL NOT SAVE US

Our rational minds take us far, and yet some of the greatest truths and mysteries that our lives revolve around exist outside of the rational.

3. THERE'S SOMETHING BEYOND ONE'S SELF

As members of society born into a global community, we have a responsibility to one another and not only to ourselves.

4. MAXIMIZE EFFICIENCY

Find the most efficient way to complete a certain task and approach it accordingly, in order to make the most of available resources.

5. PROPORTIONALITY SHOULD BE A GUIDELINE IN WAR

Killings should be proportional to a nation's objectives in times of war, and the fine balance between these two must be strictly monitored.

6. GET THE DATA

A stickler for information, McNamara spent his life collecting facts and applying them onwards, stressing the empowerment offered by data.

7. BELIEF AND SEEING ARE BOTH OFTEN WRONG

What are the factors that drive decisions? McNamara stated, "We see only half of the story at times," while Morris concluded that we only see what we want to see, and contorted sight leads to unnecessary loss.

8. BE PREPARED TO REEXAMINE YOUR REASONING

It is never too late to reverse a decision, especially when it appears to be a unilateral mission, as in the case of the U.S. War in Vietnam.

9. IN ORDER TO DO GOOD, YOU MAY HAVE TO ENGAGE IN EVIL

Opposing forces are the building blocks of existence. We cannot shy away from the evil required on our path to the greater good.

10. NEVER SAY NEVER

Sometimes the seemingly impossible option is the only one that works, and unbelievably unpredictable events rewrite the history books.

11. YOU CAN'T CHANGE HUMAN NATURE

In McNamara's mind war is a natural facet of the human experience, and he says, "I'm not so naive or simplistic to believe that we can end all war."

"My rule has been: try to learn."

Robert S. McNamara

"War is so complex, beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend all the variables. Our judgement, our understanding are not adequate, and we kill people unnecessarily."

Robert S. McNamara

"Cold War? Hell, it was a hot war."

Robert S. McNamara

FILM FACTS:

- THE FOG OF WAR had its North American premiere at the 2003 Telluride Film Festival in Colorado. It went on to collect a wide range of awards, including an Oscar for Best Documentary and a Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award. It was also nominated for many awards, including a Broadcast Film Critics Association Award and a Chlotrudis Awards.
- Philip Glass is credited with developing the musical form known as minimalism, although he prefers to call it “music with repetitive structures.” Morris asked Glass to create the music for THE FOG OF WAR as “this is a movie filled with existential dread, and no one does existential dread as well as Philip Glass.” In addition to THE FOG OF WAR, Glass has scored Morris films including “The Thin Blue Line” in 1988 and “A Brief History of Time” in 1991.
- Using the word “fog” to denote uncertainty in war is credited to Prussian military analyst Carl von Clausewit, from his book “Vom Kriege.”
- During WWI, there was strict military censorship on the information the press received and was allowed to publish. Winston Churchill referred to this as the “fog of war,” a term that has since been used by the press when writing in wartime.
- Director Morris was a staunch opponent of the Vietnam War, having participated in anti-war demonstrations when he was a student both at the University of Wisconsin and Princeton.
- Morris got the original idea for THE FOG OF WAR after reading McNamara’s book “In Retrospect” in 1995. He first approached McNamara in 2001, after his book “Wilson’s Ghost” was published. They filmed a total of 23 hours of interviews.
- Both Morris and McNamara studied at Berkeley University in California. Morris attended for 2 years as a Ph.D. student in philosophy, while McNamara graduated with a BA in economics and minors in mathematics and philosophy.
- McNamara is widely known for his involvement in the Vietnam War, while serving as U.S. Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. As of 2015, he remains the longest serving Secretary of Defense, a role he held for over 7 years. Before accepting this position he was one of the 10 “Whiz Kids,” a group of Army veterans who worked as Ford Motor executives.
- In order to capture his interviewees staring directly into the camera and not looking off to the side at him, director Morris invented the Interrotron, a system of teleprompters that superimposes his image onto the lens of the camera. This filming technique manages to capture interviewees looking directly into the eye of the audience, thus capturing a first person experience. Before creating the Interrotron, Morris sat as close to the camera as possible so that interviewees would look him in the eye.
- McNamara died at the age of 93 in D.C.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Read** “In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam,” published in 1995, to learn more about McNamara’s views on the Vietnam War and the lessons he learned.
2. **Learn** more about the 1995 Hanoi Conference, when McNamara met with Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap, in “Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy,” published in 2000.
3. **Read** up on the work of the World Bank, which aims to “end extreme poverty within a generation and boost shared prosperity” where McNamara went on to work after serving as Secretary of Defense.
4. **Delve** deeper into the work of director Errol Morris, watching one of his other fine documentaries. Visit his [website](#) to learn about his films, writings, and lectures.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

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