Regrets

By John Petrakis in the February 24, 2004 issue

Robert S. McNamara, the focus of *The Fog of War*, an Academy Award–nominated documentary directed by Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*), served as secretary of defense under the two presidents who took the U.S. into Vietnam—John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. One of "the best and the brightest" of America's leaders, he was a major figure in the war that left 58,000 Americans and 3 million Vietnamese dead.

McNamara resigned under duress in 1967, and for years was silent about his role in the Vietnam war. But in 1995 he released a memoir, *In Retrospect*, which rekindled debate about the war and McNamara's responsibility. He was both applauded for his candor and castigated for his hypocrisy on the op-ed pages of national and international newspapers. *The Fog of War* brings that discussion to the masses, most of whom are not old enough to remember when the death count in Vietnam was part of the nightly news.

The film offers a fascinating glimpse of a man who hovers on the borders of apology. McNamara is doing more than seeking forgiveness for his political sins. He is positioning himself for personal redemption by pointing the finger at himself before it is too late. (He was 85 when the film was shot, and is 87 now.) In a sense, he is trying to admit he was a small part of the war before history decides that he was a large part of it. (It's an approach that Camus tackles in *The Fall*, in which he discusses "the Just Judges," those who avoid condemnation by judging themselves before others can do the job.)

McNamara talks about Kennedy's eagerness to get out of Vietnam while the U.S. still had only advisers there, a position that McNamara claims to have supported. He discusses the confusion over the torpedo incident in the Gulf of Tonkin that led to the congressional resolution that gave legitimacy to the war (it probably never happened the way it was reported). And he cites his attempt to convince Johnson that the war was a deep pit (which Johnson seemed to realize on his own but was unwilling to do anything about).

The Fog of War is not content with hanging McNamara on the cross of Vietnam. In fact, the discussion of Vietnam is not even the most engrossing part of the film. That part goes to the tales of McNamara's role in the horrific firebombing of Japanese cities in 1945, including the night when 100,000 civilians were burned to death in Tokyo. McNamara was serving under Colonel Curtis LeMay, who was willing, even eager, to kill as many Japanese as he could in an attempt to hasten the end of World War II. This revelation leads to McNamara's assertion that if we had lost the war with Japan, he and LeMay could have been convicted as war criminals for their role as mass murderers.

The other fascinating section covers the tense days of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, and reveals how close the world came to nuclear war. (Thanks again in part to LeMay, who comes across in the film like a character from *Dr. Strangelove*.) In one of his more animated moments, McNamara claims that it was "just luck" that forced Khrushchev to back down and remove the missiles from Cuba.

This observation is part of the ongoing analysis of the "Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara," which is the co-title of the film. He uses such rules as "Empathize with Your Enemy," "Rationality Will Not Save Us," "There's Something Beyond One's Self" and "Proportionality Should Be a Guideline in War" to identify the mistakes that led the U.S. into the quagmire of Vietnam. But his other lessons—"Maximize Efficiency," "Get the Data," "Never Say Never" and "In Order to Do Good, You May Have to Engage in Evil"—suggest how he contributed to the disaster.

There are times in the film when McNamara starts to weep, most notably during his discussion of Norman Morrison, a Quaker who burned himself to death outside McNamara's office to protest the war, and when he recalls his late wife, whose early death, it is suggested, was hastened by the stress surrounding her husband's job.

The Fog of War does not come close to answering all the questions we have for and about Robert S. McNamara. (It seems fitting that his middle initial stands for Strange.) It opens him to the charge of being late with his mea culpa. At the same time, we should remember that no one else directly responsible for so many deaths has so opened himself up to scrutiny. (We shouldn't hold our breath waiting for Henry Kissinger's apology.)

As many lives as McNamara saved by introducing the seat belt during his tenure as head of the Ford Motor Company were lost during his time as secretary of defense

and in the years following, when his powerful voice raised in opposition to the war would have meant a great deal to the burgeoning peace movement. Such ironies in the McNamara story make *The Fog of War* a fascinating, grim documentary.