The Evasions of Robert McNamara

What's true and what's a lie in The Fog of War?

By Fred Kaplan

A great biography waits to be written about Robert Strange McNamara and the central role he played in 20th-century America, both as an actor in its historic dramas and as a symbol of the shattering of its postwar illusions in the wake of Vietnam. Errol Morris' documentary film *The Fog of War* (released in theaters today) conveys a brilliant glimmer of where that biography might go.

McNamara was the original and ultimate "Whiz Kid," who viewed the world's problems as solvable through statistical analysis. He rose to power on the buoyancy of this belief—and limped away with his beliefs in tatters. The rise took him from the Harvard Business School, where he was the youngest professor in its history; to the Army Air Forces in World War II, where he used statistics to maximize the efficiency of the bombing raids over Japan; to Ford Motor Co., where he rose to its presidency; and finally, in 1961, at age 44, to President John F. Kennedy's Cabinet, as the secretary of defense.

Running the Pentagon, McNamara applied these same statistical techniques to everything from weapons procurement to counterinsurgency tactics and nuclear-war strategy. His acumen, energy, and confidence in the rightness of his views seemed boundless.

Then, under President Lyndon B. Johnson, came the war in Vietnam. At first McNamara tried to manage the war with his usual assurance. By 1967, he was worn out; defeat seemed certain; his methods, his basic assumptions about the workings of the world, had failed him. He resigned (or got fired—it was never quite clear), received an appointment as president of the World Bank, and over the next few decades emerged periodically to advance proposals for world disarmament.

Morris (whose films include *The Thin Blue Line* [1988] and *Mr. Death* [1999]) persuaded McNamara, who is now 86, to sit before a camera and talk about his life's lessons. The results—set to music by Philip Glass—are fascinating. Disillusionment left McNamara an oddly fractured man—prone to extravagant self-delusion and denial, yet also capable of brutal self-criticism. (I interviewed him 20-odd years ago about his Pentagon years; the former traits were well on display, but not yet the latter.)

Some of the lessons he cites in this film will be astonishing to anyone who remembers his arrogance in power. The biggest eye-opener may be when McNamara says, "Rationality will not save us"—a truism to most people, but the precise opposite of what he would have contended 40 years ago. He also warns against using military power unilaterally (a point as relevant to President Bush and Donald Rumsfeld in Iraq as to McNamara himself in Vietnam). And in the film's most searing moment, he likens himself to a war criminal for the massive firebombings that he and Gen. Curtis LeMay planned during WWII; the raids over Tokyo killed 100,000 civilians in a single night.
Later in the film, McNamara refuses to discuss the responsibility he might bear for the damage wreaked in Vietnam. Nor does he want to talk about why, though he came to regret the war, he failed to speak out against it after he left office. Still, his brooding over the ravages he helped inflict in WWII—"the good war"—may suggest the scope of his later agonies; in any case, it reveals a far more introspective McNamara than we've ever seen.

Yet the film displays far more instances of McNamara's mendacity. Morris calls him on a couple of instances but gives him a free ride on the others. This is not meant as a criticism of Morris. The Fog of War, after all, is in part about a man who is still lost in that fog. It is, in any case, not primarily a film about the history of U.S. foreign policy. Still, many viewers are going to come away from this film with a distorted picture of two key chapters of history in particular—the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident. Here is a corrective.

McNamara's recollection of the Cuban Missile Crisis is a self-serving travesty. "Kennedy was trying to keep us out of war," he tells Morris. "I was trying to help him keep us out of war." Well, the first part of that statement is true. The second part is also true, at least for the first two of the crisis's 13 days. But after the second day, McNamara became an increasingly firm advocate of bombing the Soviet missile sites, which were surreptitiously being installed in Cuba, and of then invading the island of Cuba itself—even if doing so risked sparking a larger war with the USSR. (For details, click here.)

The crisis was resolved through a combination of overt pressure and covert diplomacy. On Friday, Oct. 26, 1962, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev sent Kennedy a telegram offering to remove his missiles if the United States promised never to invade Cuba. Kennedy was set to agree. But then on Saturday, Oct. 27, Khrushchev sent another telegram upping the stakes, saying he'd remove his missiles from Cuba if the United States took its own nuclear missiles out of Turkey (which bordered the USSR in much the same way that Cuba borders the United States).

For two decades, Kennedy's aides and palace historians propagated the myth that the president accepted the first telegram and simply ignored the second. However, in 1982, on the 20th anniversary of the crisis, a group of these aides—including McNamara—revealed that, in fact, Kennedy acceded to the missile trade; that he told only a handful of advisers about the deal; and that he even told the Soviets that the deal would be off if they publicized it. (During the Cold War, presidents could not politically afford to be seen as trading away military assets for the sake of peace; that would be condemned as "appeasement." Soviet threats were to be met strictly with American might.) In 1987, the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston started to release tape recordings of the ExComm sessions, the meetings that Kennedy held with his advisers during the missile crisis. (JFK, like Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon after him, secretly taped many White House conversations.) The tapes not only confirmed the revelation about the missile trade but also revealed that nearly all of Kennedy's aides—again, including McNamara—had vociferously opposed the deal at the time.

So it's bizarre to see, in this film, McNamara parroting the myth that even he long ago punctured—that Kennedy accepted Khrushchev's first telegram and ignored the second. More than that, he invents two new falsehoods. First, he mischaracterizes the second telegram as a harsh message "dictated by a bunch of hard-liners." (He says nothing about the Turkey trade.) Second, he claims
that Llewellyn "Tommy" Thompson, a former U.S. ambassador to Soviet Union, persuaded Kennedy to resolve the crisis through diplomacy, not force.

This too is misleading. A full hearing of the tapes indicates that Kennedy didn't need anybody to steer him toward negotiation. From the third day of the crisis, Kennedy was looking for a peaceful solution, pondering a way to let Khrushchev save face—and was virtually alone in doing so. A week before Khrushchev brought it up, he mused about the possibility of trading away the Turkish missiles.

In short, McNamara tries to paint himself as no less dovish than Kennedy on dealing with the Russians. Yet, as he must know on some level, the opposite was true.

McNamara's recollections of the Vietnam War are still more deceptive. Congress gave President Johnson carte blanche to go to war in August 1964 after reports that a North Vietnamese patrol boat had attacked the Maddox, a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin. McNamara concedes that it now appears this attack didn't happen, but claims that he and Johnson honestly believed that it did at the time.

Two things are wrong with his account. First, the officers on the Maddox did send cables reporting a torpedo attack. But they also sent cables a few hours later, taking it all back and attributing the confusion to a misreading of sonar signals. (Daniel Ellsberg, who later leaked the top-secret Pentagon Papers, spent his first day as a Pentagon aide watching this cable traffic and compellingly recounts the sequence of events in his recent memoir, Secrets.)

Second, McNamara fails to mention that the Maddox itself had engaged in covert attacks on the North Vietnamese coastline. The ship's sonar officers thought they saw a torpedo attack in part because they were expecting one. This covert operation, known as "Plan 34A," was designed to provoke a North Vietnamese response, which would then provide an excuse for U.S. escalation.

Even at the time, McNamara misled outsiders on this operation. When he was asked about rumors of provocation during hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he replied, "Our Navy played no part in, was not associated with, was not aware of, any South Vietnamese actions, if there were any." Notice the careful wording: "South Vietnamese actions." Technically, he was telling the truth. There were no South Vietnamese actions. The provocations were entirely American. (As McNamara says in the film, in a different context, "I learned early on … never answer the question that is asked of you. Answer the question that you wish had been asked of you. And quite frankly, I follow that rule. It's a very good rule.")

Morris plays a fragment of a secret tape-recording from February 1964—very early in the Johnson administration—in which McNamara advocates a gradual withdrawal from Vietnam, and Johnson strongly opposes it. (At the time, the U.S. presence amounted to a small number of military advisers.) This is a significant conversation and counters the widely held view that LBJ was McNamara's puppet on the war.

However, the film neglects other evidence that reveals McNamara donning combat fatigues with gusto. For instance, there is a document of May 24, 1964, signed by McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, urging Johnson to "use selected and carefully graduated military force against North Vietnam" for as long as the North's leaders refuse to back down. The words are haunting, in retrospect—"selected and carefully graduated," as if the
United States could control the pace of escalation, as if war could be mathematically calibrated. It's McNamara, the hyper-rationalist, not yet disabused.

There is also the secretly taped conversation of June 16, 1964 (nearly two months before the Gulf of Tonkin), in which Johnson says some people want him to pull out of Vietnam and McNamara says, "I just don't believe we can be pushed out of there, Mr. President. We just can't allow it to be done. You wouldn't want to go down in history as having …" Johnson interrupts, in agreement: "Not at all." (Michael Beschloss, who transcribes this conversation in his book Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964, footnotes McNamara's remarks with a description of his tone: "McNamara is pressing Johnson very hard.")

So, yes, Johnson was responsible for Vietnam. But, more than McNamara is willing to admit—and more than this film suggests—so was McNamara.

Knowing these bits of historical background doesn't undermine the film's power. To the contrary, it heightens the poignancy of McNamara's life, clarifies the true depths of his tragedy—the full psychic distress of an intellectual in power when the foundations of both his intellect and his power crumble.