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A '60s Mr. Death explains the calculus of military slaughter

THE FOG OF WAR

Directed by Errol Morris

Sony Pictures Classics, opens December 19

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In a year distinguished by many strong documentaries, none feels more important than *The Fog of War*. Indeed, Errol Morris's new essay, a/k/a "Robert McNamara and the Ring of Power," is almost ridiculously relevant and not just because it's impossible to see McNamara's steely smile and jaunty certitude without thinking "Donald Rumsfeld."

In the deepest sense, *The Fog of War* is about the inadequacy of human intelligence. Morris's portrait of the former secretary of defense and prime architect of the Vietnam War, has been culled from over 20 hours of interviews. Elegantly annotated with archival footage and declassified White House tapes, *The Fog of War* allows this disarming 86-year-old raconteur to reveal what he was taught by the Cuban missile crisis (don't put your faith in rational behavior) and to detail his lesser-known experiences as contributor to the World War II firebombing of Japan and pioneer of the automobile seat belt.

For Morris, who, like McNamara, studied philosophy at Berkeley, the former secretary is an epistemological case study. Explaining how we landed in Vietnam, McNamara not only supports Morris's contention that "we see what we want to believe," but demonstrates the implicit hubris. The very lessons



Photograph by Claire Folger

Damned if I don't: Robert McNamara

that McNamara purports to have learned at John Kennedy's side, eyeball-to-eyeball with Nikita Khrushchev, seemed utterly forgotten once his new master, Lyndon Johnson, inherited the White House and the Indochinese quagmire.

Although McNamara was clearly and profoundly corrupted by power, he does not come across as a grandstanding prevaricator like Henry Kissinger. One may be amazed to hear this octogenarian powerhouse abruptly launch into a critique of U.S. unilateralism. But one may also well wonder how a man so obviously brilliant can claim ignorance of historical dynamics (the long-standing antipathy between Vietnam and China, for example) that would have been readily available to any moderately aware high school student in 1966. By November

1967, McNamara appears to have concluded that the war was a lost cause and contrived to have himself replaced. (Typically, he notes that, only weeks after he was replaced, LBJ also opted out.)

No matter what your opinion of McNamara, *The Fog of War* is a chastening experience. More than providing an old devil with a human face, the film offers additional evidence that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Who was ever better or brighter than Robert McNamara? Unfortunately, as the Vietnam debacle abundantly demonstrated, intelligence hardly guarantees against its own failures. McNamara supplies the movie's title—a phrase meaning that war involves variables too complex for the human mind.

The Fog of War is framed by McNamara's assertion that all military commanders make mistakes. More honest, at least in public, than his successors in acknowledging that "in order to do good you have to be willing to do evil," McNamara broaches the subject of war crimes in regard to his former commander and eventual nemesis, air force general Curtis LeMay. He hints at his own errors in judgment, but seems unwilling to accept any personal responsibility. Nor will he discuss his possible feelings of guilt.

Given his double bind, McNamara finally tells Morris, "I'd rather be damned if I don't." As the Frodologists of the '60s might have put it, he carries the Ring of Power to the rim of Mount Doom, but he won't throw it in. Asked by Morris why he didn't speak out against the war, McNamara takes refuge in his anguish: "I am not going to say any more than I have." J. HOBERMAN