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Author(s)	Ed Halter Ed Halter
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DOCUMENTARIAN ERROL MORRIS RECONSTRUCTS THE EX-DEFENSE SECRETARY'S VIETNAM STORY 'FROM INSIDE HIS HEAD'

Being Robert McNamara

BY ED HALTER

Never one to shy away from disquieting subjects, documentarian Errol Morris has tackled topics as morbid as pet cemeteries (*Gates of Heaven*), murder investigations (*The Thin Blue Line*), and execution technology (*Mr. Death*). But nothing in his filmography matches the world-historical existential dread cutting through his latest, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (opening December 19). This feature-length interview tackles the former secretary of defense's personal involvement in both world wars, the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis, and of course, "McNamara's War"—Vietnam—and McNamara's retrospective observations about the nature of global conflict have a depressingly contemporary resonance. "If we can't persuade nations of comparable values of the merit of our cause," McNamara says of Vietnam at one point in the film, "then we'd better re-examine our reasoning."

Although Morris recognizes the already potent Vietnam-Iraq déjà vu that *Fog of War* exacerbates, he's hesitant to have his film seen only in this light. "I don't like the idea that the movie is explicitly pandering in that sense," he says, "because it wasn't meant to do that. Certainly as I worked on the movie, over the last several years, its sad relevance for the current time became more and more obvious. But I don't think it became overpowering until fairly recently. It's to the point where people do legitimately ask the question: Was this movie made with the current war in mind? It was not, but it certainly has become about the current war."

In pairing McNamara's oral accounts with archival media like newsreels and Oval Office tapes, *Fog of War* becomes an essay on history and memory, wavering between recollection, evidence, and re-enactment, and its recapitulatory nature becomes strengthened by Iraq. "In the last four or five months," Morris continues, "it's almost like this grim repetition of the Gulf of Tonkin and the beginnings of the Vietnam War. We hear that they imagined weapons of mass destruction that nobody can really find. We learn that opportunities for negotiation immediately before the war were rejected or ignored. And we see a war that was defined by our government as a clear example of the forces of good against the forces of evil become morally problematic, and far more obscure."

Morris, who protested the Vietnam War as a student, began planning the film in 1995, after reading McNamara's memoir, *In Retrospect*. In this book, he discovered an older McNamara who now viewed Vietnam as a mistake. Morris saw a means, through one-on-one interview, to capture the elder statesman's own emotional struggle with his own participation in history. It would also provide another way to retell the history of 20th-century conflicts, "to reconstruct the story from McNamara's own perspective," says Morris, "if you like, from inside his head. I like to point out to people that consciousness itself is a re-enactment. Because we are constantly reconstructing the world for ourselves."

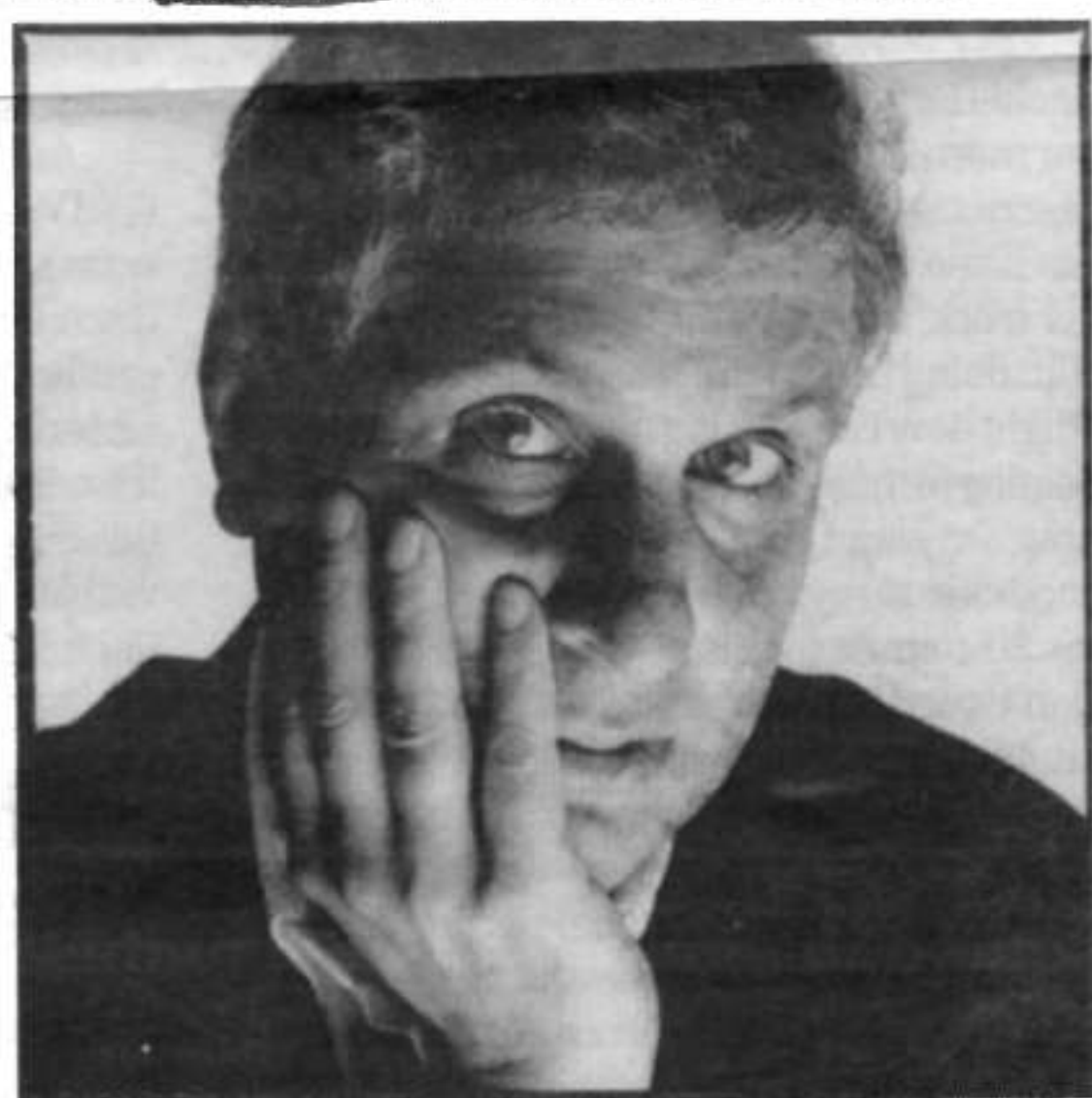
For Morris, *Fog* was an opportunity not just to re-examine 20th-century politics and warfare, but to experiment with the form of the historical documentary. "I like to think of this film as a per-

verse kind of biography and history," Morris continues. "It omits the standard things you usually see. It includes things that are incredibly subjective. This has been a dream of mine, to make a movie with one person. There's no attempt at what we consider journalistic balance. It sets up so many powerful things, the exclusion of others. You're forced into another place—you're forced inside his head. You're forced to think about that person and what he's thinking and why he's thinking it. You're forced to do things that you can normally avoid doing because you're always on the outside often being told what to think."

Now in his eighties, McNamara too is freed to imagine another world, though not in the celebratory sense that phrase usually holds. Morris notes that McNamara harbors "the regrets of a man who's near the end of his life, who's looking back on the history that he's been part of and perhaps often dreamed that it could have been different than it was." Or as McNamara puts it, when discussing a post-war meeting with his North Vietnamese counterpart, "to discuss what might have been." Historians call these thought experiments counterfactuals; they fascinate Morris because, he says, when pondering the course of their own lives, "people think about counterfactuals all the time."

But counterfactual gaming remains distinct, in Morris's view, from historical revisionism, at least in the case of Vietnam. "At no time during this process has my view of the Vietnam War changed in the slightest," he says. "I found it repellent then and I find it repellent now. I have never had a reason or occasion to change my mind about that war. I have, however, had reason to change my mind about McNamara." ▣

MORRIS: *FOG OF WAR* "IS A PERVERSE KIND OF HISTORY."



ROBIN HOLLAND

ROBERT MCNAMARA, IN HIS OWN WORDS

✦ "If we can't persuade nations with comparable values of the merit of our cause, we'd better re-examine our reasoning."

✦ "The major lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is this: The indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will destroy nations."

✦ "Any military commander who is honest with himself, or with those he's speaking to, will admit that he has made mistakes in the application of military power."

✦ "I'm not so naive or simplistic to believe we can eliminate war. We're not going to change human nature anytime soon. It isn't that we aren't rational. We are rational. But reason has limits."

✦ "How much evil must we do in order to do good? We have certain ideals, certain responsibilities. Recognize that at times you will have to engage in evil, but minimize it."