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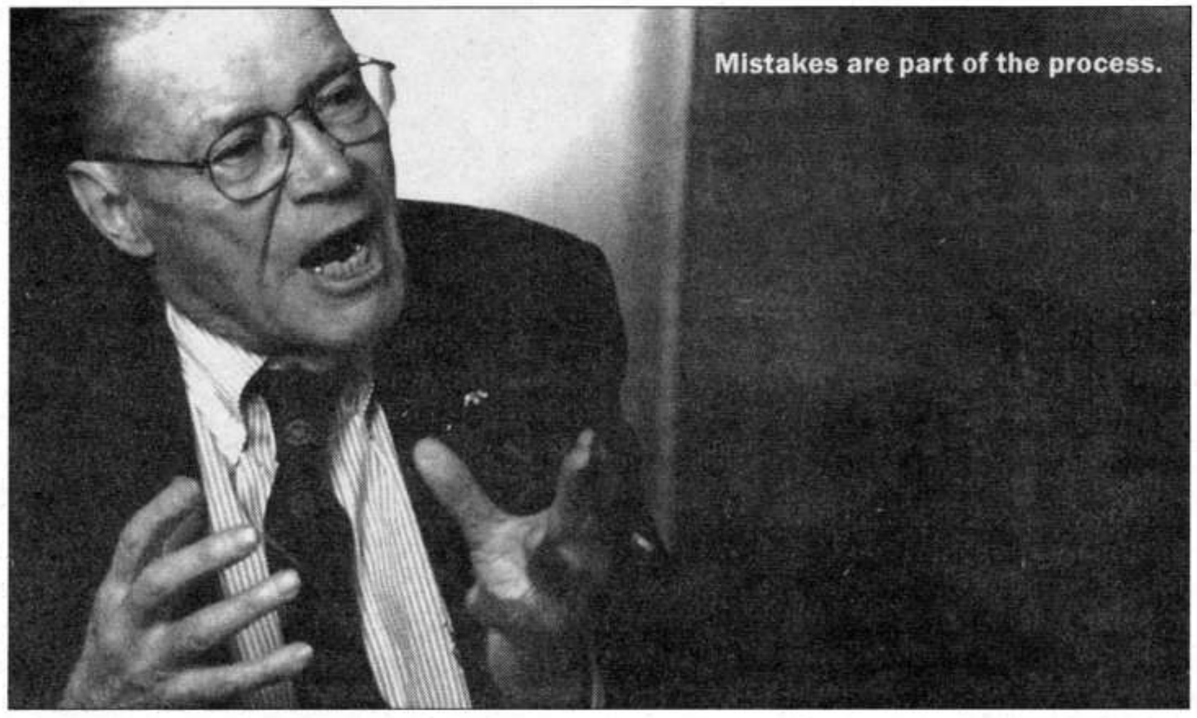
Reason Will Not Save Us


Mistakes are part of the process.

At the opening of *The Fog of War*, the brilliant new documentary from director Errol Morris, we see a composed, sharply groomed, and middle-aged Robert McNamara, preparing to brief the press on the Vietnam war. He asks two questions: First, if the chart he has set up is visible and, second, whether the cameras are ready to roll. It is a brisk and efficient reminder: McNamara is no media novice. He's been interviewed thousands of times. He knows how to evade the questions he doesn't want to answer and how to answer the questions he wishes had been asked. So now, at 85, face-to-face with one of our country's most accomplished documentarians in a feature-length interview, what will he say? And will it be new?

BY MELISSA LEVINE

What a great way to open a movie. The posing of this question frames the film with an acknowledgment of the skepticism that has to attend any examination of McNamara — a man who has been excoriated for years, both for his role in the Vietnam war and for his apparent unwillingness to own up to it. And, delightfully, this frame is merely the smart, penetrating precursor to many such choices that Morris makes in this film.

The Fog of War
Directed by Errol Morris. Featuring Robert McNamara. Opens Friday at the Act 1 & 2.

Morris comes neither to praise McNamara nor to bury him; instead, he invites the former secretary of defense to show us how things looked to him as they were happening, and how they appear to him now. It is a film, essentially, about the lessons of a single life, albeit a life that influenced the lives of many others. As a result, *The Fog of War* never falls neatly into any single or obvious camp of opinion; instead, it courts complexity, engaging the difficulties of potentially unanswerable questions with honesty, bravery, and intellectual rigor.

Meanwhile, there is news here. For the first time, McNamara discusses his relationship with General Curtis LeMay, the brutal commander responsible for firebombing 67 Japanese cities in 1945, killing nearly a million Japanese civilians and burning huge portions of their cities to the ground — *before* the atomic bombs were dropped. (On a single night, LeMay's B-29 bombers killed 100,000 people in Tokyo.) In its examination of McNamara's role in Vietnam, the film uses recently released tapes of telephone conversations between President Lyndon Johnson and McNamara, tapes that reveal ongoing attempts by McNamara to withdraw the troops and, later, to stop the bombing of North Vietnam. He may not have tipped his hand to the American people (and, the film suggests, he may have betrayed his own beliefs), but in private, as an advisor to the president, McNamara appears to have been less an irredeemable hawk than an earnest and thoughtful cabinet member determined to serve Johnson with the same loyalty that he had shown to Kennedy.

Alas, he made mistakes. And mistakes, McNamara tells us, are inevitable: "I don't know any military commander who is honest who would say he has not made a mistake." In fact, mistakes are part of the process; you often have to make a few before you get it right. And then? Well, you may still fail, because "rationality will not save us," because "belief and seeing are often wrong," and because "you can't change human nature." These are three of eleven "lessons" Morris culls from McNamara's discussion of his life, and they are the true revelations of the movie. Some of them are chilling — "Lesson Nine: In order to do good, it is sometimes necessary to do evil" — and some contradictory; others betray the limits of McNamara's vision.

In particular, McNamara seems to believe in the power of reason as the route to moral clarity, even as he constantly, almost desperately, acknowledges reason's limits. "The fog of war" is a phrase that describes the impossibility of seeing clearly in the midst of violent conflict, and McNamara's personal struggles with morality seem equally clouded. "In order to win a war," he asks, "is a nation justified in killing 100,000 civilians in one night? Would it be moral to not burn to death 100,000 Japanese civilians, but instead to lose hundreds of thousands of American lives in an invasion of Japan?" Indeed, these are vexed and gruesome moral questions; this blatant proposition throws their brutality into relief.

Early in the film, McNamara asks us to consider whether we want the 21st century to be characterized by the kind of violence seen in the 20th. Later, he laments that rationality has its limits, all but conceding that there will always be war. So if rationality can't prevent war, one wants to ask, why doesn't he look beyond it? In Vietnam, the US military claimed to want to win the "hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people"; it was an acknowledgment that feelings matter as much as thoughts. McNamara is not a heartless man; at least three times in the film, he sheds tears, just as he did at his departure from the White House. And his first lesson — the wisdom he credits with preventing nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis — is "Empathize with your enemy." Yet in McNamara's fog of reason, the idea that there might be a way of dealing with human nature by paying close attention to emotions (let alone to spirit) seems to elude him.

Meanwhile, the film is superb. As usual, Morris has teamed with composer Philip Glass, whose repetitive, keening score haunts the film with what Morris calls "existential dread." In the interview segments, Robert Chappell's camerawork is impeccable, even breathtaking. For long stretches, he places McNamara in a corner of the shot, then shifts to a different corner, shooting from slightly above or below. In this way, the camera mirrors our efforts. Like us, it is attempting to locate McNamara, to uncover him, to truly see him. Also like us, the camera is never entirely certain that it can.

In the film's epilogue, McNamara drives away from the interview while Morris plays a segment in a voice-over — a segment, not incidentally, with questions that McNamara refused to answer. During these evasions, we see McNamara's face reflected in the rearview mirror of his car. Do we see him properly? the shot asks. Can he see himself? And what has looking back accomplished? It's the perfect bookend to the movie's opening gambit, and it's a great question. ■