

# War and Never Having to Say You're Sorry

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**S**OMETIME in the mid-1960's, the Vietnam War became known as "McNamara's War." In the seven years Robert S. McNamara served as Secretary of Defense for Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, the United States commitment in Vietnam soared — in a soothingly gradual fashion — from fewer than a thousand Americans to just under half a million. Mr. McNamara, in turn, went from being heralded as a whiz kid to being hounded as a war monger. In 1965, a Quaker protester set himself on fire below Mr. McNamara's Pentagon office window. In 1967, antiwar activists tried to burn down his vacation home in Aspen, Colo. And in 1972, an artist who spotted him on a ferry tried to heave him into the Atlantic Ocean.

A quarter of a century later, Mr. McNamara broke his silence, publishing "In Retrospect," his best-selling memoir. He asked how he and his fellow leaders could have pushed for a war he at last acknowledged was "wrong, terribly wrong." But after the deaths of three million Vietnamese and more than 58,000 Americans, many saw Mr. McNamara's public reckoning as, at best, incommensurate with the carnage and at worst, dishonest and self-serving. In a stinging editorial in 1995, *The New York Times* dismissed his "prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades late," contrasting the fates of the dead with that of Mr. McNamara, who, despite his torment, "got a sinecure at the World Bank and summers at the Vineyard."

The debate over Vietnam and the debate over Robert McNamara — debates that overlap, but that over the years have grown distinct — refuse to subside, partly because Mr. McNamara, now 87, refuses to go away. In "The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara," opening Friday, Errol Morris, the ingenious Cambridge-based director of such documentaries as "The Thin Blue Line" and "Mr. Death," has given Mr. McNamara a big-screen chance to reflect upon a career of watching fallible human beings like himself make decisions that imperil or extinguish human lives.

While Mr. McNamara uses the film to propagate the "lessons" of his six decades in public life, Mr. Morris has another agenda: to raise questions that are moral, timeless and rarely broached with such subtlety. How do decent men commit or abet evil acts? And once they have done so, how should they interact with their victims, live with their consciences and pass along their insights? It is the indefatigable relevance of these questions that keep Americans at once enthralled and repelled by Robert S. McNamara. And it is the long-standing aversion of American decision-makers to address past mistakes that has helped undermine the American standing around the world and has hindered our ability to learn from history.

Mr. Morris is a first-class investigator, and he has hunted down fresh and provocative material, on subjects like the firebombing of the Japanese in World War II and Kennedy's intentions regarding Vietnam. He has elicited from Mr. McNamara a number of startling admissions. And he has released the film at a time when war and quagmire are very much on the mind of Americans. Revisiting Vietnam and the images of sprightly young G.I.'s so eager to serve, one is reminded how soldiers can be led astray by reckless ideology, shoddy intelligence and liberal

hubris; how small, sequential decisions necessitate and compound one another; and how our faith in our own good intentions and our ignorance of local culture can undermine our objectives. (Among the 11 lessons Mr. Morris gleans from Mr. McNamara, Lesson No. 1 is "empathize with the enemy.")

But Mr. Morris is less interested in policy than in metaphysics. In a recent interview in New York, where he was promoting the film, he said he first became interested in Mr. McNamara because of an "endless fascination" with the extent to which "people who engage in evil believe in some real sense that they are doing good." Mr. Morris seems reflexively drawn to the gray zones of human morality. If "real Iagos" permeated the planet, the filmmaker rightly notes, life would be simpler, and in the end, probably safer. But the story gets more complicated when a man like Robert McNamara — who is not only debonair, but introspective and self-critical — comes along. "If evil is somewhat more ineluctable, it also becomes somewhat more problematic," Mr. Morris observes. "What is it? Where is it? Is it in some of us? Is it in all of us?"

And under what circumstances, he might have added, can we rationalize it? The most stirring scenes in "The Fog of War" surround America's firebombing of 67 Japanese cities in World War II, during which time Mr. McNamara was working under Gen. Curtis LeMay of the Air Force. Mr. Morris unearthed spine-curdling government reports showing the raw calculus undertaken to speed America's victory. "In order to do good," Mr. McNamara says, articulating the film's ninth lesson, "recognize that at times you will have to engage in evil." In a single bombing raid, he recalls, "We burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo — men, women and children." Some 900,000 Japanese civilians were killed overall. Was he aware this would happen? "Well, I was part of a mechanism that in a sense recommended it," Mr. McNamara tells Mr. Morris. "Lemay said, 'If we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals.' And I think he's right. He — and I'd say I — were behaving as war criminals." He asks, "What makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?" The answer, of course, is that war's winners write the history books, and, if they can help it, they avoid legal accountability.

When it came to the Vietnam War, Mr. McNamara was an early advocate of escalation but came to realize the flaws in the American approach earlier than many of his colleagues. Yet in public, he continued to defend the war. And even after he was forced out by President Johnson in 1967, he refused to air his criticisms, though the war raged on for another eight long years.

Today he declines comment on Iraq out of the same sense of bureaucratic loyalty. To the suggestion that dissent is often the highest form of loyalty, he responds, "I think it's irresponsible for an ex-secretary of defense to comment, particularly if the comments are critical — about a president who is in the midst of a war with tens of thousands of American lives at risk, and is dealing with very, very delicate issues and relationships with other nations and with the U.N., and therefore I haven't and I'm not going to."

But Mr. McNamara's views can be inferred from the film. "What makes us omniscient," he asks, rhetorically. "Have we a record of omniscience?" He concludes, "If we can't persuade nations with comparable values of the merits of our case, we better re-examine our reasoning."

Re-examining our reasoning is not something that has come naturally to American statesmen. In fact, Mr. McNamara is one of very few senior American government officials ever to admit major error without being forced to do so. In an interview last month, I asked him why. "People don't want to admit they made mistakes," he said. "This is true of the Catholic Church, it's true of companies, it's true of nongovernmental organizations and it's certainly true of political bodies. My rule has been to surface the tough problems. It's very unpleasant to argue with people you admire and associate with. But you have to force debate."

BY now, Mr. McNamara has learned how to speak about the trauma in his past in much the same way one learns to speak of the death of a loved one: by rote. In our conversation, he often repeated verbatim what he had said on camera. If a question probed tender territory, he pivoted, transitioning skillfully to one of his policy causes, like nuclear nonproliferation or the International Criminal Court. But despite all his best efforts, Mr. McNamara still broke down several times during the filming of "The Fog of War" — "a sign of weakness," he told me, embarrassed. On camera, he remains stoic as he says that his wife and son got ulcers when he was secretary of defense, and that his wife, who died in 1981, "may even ultimately have died from the stress." Mr. McNamara's emotions get the better of him when he goes on to say something he must know to be untrue. "But," he insists, waving his pen for emphasis, "they were some of the best years of our lives and" — here the tears start — "all members of my family benefited from it." He quickly masters the lump in his throat, and proclaims, unconvincingly: "It was terrific." In our interview, Mr. McNamara's eyes filled with tears at precisely the same moment. Though some politicians are known to muster tears as a ploy for sympathy, in the case of Mr. McNamara, who is famously controlling, they seemed anything but calculated; rather, they offered evidence that his public poise is outmatched by his personal demons.

Remarkably, what seems to grate at people most about Mr. McNamara these days is less his role in shaping a disastrous Vietnam policy than what many take to be his public martyrdom. While it is true that his reckoning is partial and unsatisfying, and while it is true that the book did help launch him back into the limelight, it is also true that he had a lot to lose by awakening the ghosts of Vietnam. By choosing to excavate the past, he has exposed himself to ridicule, resuscitated his lowest moments in public life and let an emotional genie out of the bottle. And since Mr. McNamara seems to have generated more scorn than those who never acknowledged error — e.g., Dean Rusk, Henry Kissinger, and three American presidents — it is unlikely that other officials will be eager to follow his example.

In the absence of full-fledged Congressional investigations, American policymakers rarely look back. They are bound by continuity and fealty across administrations and generations. With the proliferation of class-action suits and the advent of global courtrooms, American officials are now explicitly counseled to avoid public reckoning, for fear of creating legal liability (or constraining their ability to do it all over again, when it suits them). Whether regarding the Vietnam War, America's cold war assassinations or our misguided former alliance with Saddam Hussein, American officials keep their eyes fixed on the future. They rarely admit responsibility for failure, for costly meddling or for large-scale human suffering. They resist debate — internally or publicly — on how good intentions went astray. And they most certainly don't apologize to those harmed.

On those the rare occasions when American officials have expressed remorse for previous policies, they have tended to do so offhandedly. And while on these shores, such utterances were ignored or derided as insincere, in the countries grievously affected, many victims and survivors welcomed the gesture with surprising grace.

In keeping with tradition, Mr. McNamara has never apologized to the Vietnamese or the American people for the Vietnam War. But he has broken with house rules by expressing regret for mistaken policy choices. "I'm very proud of my accomplishments," he says in the film. "I'm very sorry that in the course of accomplishing something I made errors."

Errol Morris says Mr. McNamara's failure to apologize used to trouble him. But after taping 23 hours of interviews with him, and sharing many more meals and phone calls, the discomfort subsided. In truth, Mr. Morris says, he has come to like Robert McNamara, and to understand why so many of the tirades against him find fault with a "mea culpa" that he never issued. "An apology empowers us," Mr. Morris said, during our interview. "The person says, 'I'm very, very, very sorry,' and we can say, 'I accept your apology,' or we can say, 'Sorry, but saying sorry is not enough.' People so strongly wanted to say, 'I do not forgive you for what you've done' that they imagined an apology that didn't exist."

Of course, compiling the lessons of history hardly guarantees that they will be applied. Soon after Donald Rumsfeld assumed the job of secretary of defense in 2000, he actually took the unusual step of circulating a handout that distilled his 40 years of service. Mr. Rumsfeld's lessons were not dissimilar from those Mr. Morris elicited from Mr. McNamara. They include:

"It is easier to get into something than to get out of it."

"Don't divide the world into 'them' and 'us.' "

"Visit with your predecessors from previous administrations . . . Try to make original mistakes, rather than needlessly repeating theirs."

The lessons, known as "Rumsfeld's Rules," were posted on the Pentagon Web site when Mr. Rumsfeld took office. They have since been removed.

*Samantha Power's book, "A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide," won the Pulitzer Prize in general nonfiction this year.*